

Bhagavad gita

The Global Dharma
for the Third Millennium

(complete edition)

Translation and commentaries
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Introduction

satyam eva jayate

This edition of *Srimad Bhagavad gita* is aimed at washing off centuries of confusing cultural superimpositions that have been enforced in a systematic way over the original Vedic knowledge by the influence of invading hostile cultures.

It is compiled at a particular time in history when Hindustan (India) and its original culture (Hinduism) are facing the unique opportunity of regaining their legitimate cultural and spiritual leadership role at global level, after a very long period of oblivion and impotence. For the first time since the early invasions of Arab Muslim marauders into the Greater Indian territory not long after Islam was founded, and over 50 years after the British Raj left India, Hinduism does not need to modify and adapt its culture and knowledge in order to please the foreign invaders and thus enable its survival, because at global level there is a growing interest and support specifically for those very ideals and ideas that characterized India's original culture and knowledge in the purest form.

It is the time of the Hindu Awakening movement.

True Hinduism has the intrinsic power to be the Global Dharma for the new Millennium, because it is open, inclusive, tolerant, and incredibly deep in meaning and knowledge, capable of reconciling all theoretical differences and absorbing many different perspectives in a most harmonious non-dualistic way, into a complete, consistent and logical wider picture, favoring cultural diversity and a great variety in iconography and hagiography, and thus allowing the greatest possible freedom of religion. It offers a personalized access and progressive programs, addressing and accommodating each degree of personal development and field of interest for each individual.

It is the most suitable ideology for today's world because it teaches a healthy wholistic approach to life, sustainable development, respect for women and children, respect for animals and nature, and true social cooperation. Its modernity and the scientific value of its scriptures have been recognized with awe and admiration by the greatest scientists and researchers of this contemporary age and have made it extremely popular among the intellectual elites of Western countries.

Unfortunately, the invasion and domination by foreign cultures that were explicitly hostile to the original Hindu tradition have greatly damaged the cultural and spiritual infrastructure of Indian society, even infiltrating deeply into the collective subconscious and creating serious and dangerous misconceptions that unfortunately have come to be considered as an integral part of the Hindu/Indian tradition and culture.

Practically all the problems lamented in Hindu society are in fact due to the cultural superimposition of alien concepts and beliefs, and can be solved automatically by returning to the original knowledge presented by the genuine Vedic literature, and separating it from the detrimental and incompatible foreign ideas that have accumulated in the centuries, hiding the true radiance of Sanatana Dharma.

Because although Hinduism welcomes into its fold all good and auspicious ideas irrespective of their provenance (*aa no bhadrah kratavo yantu visvatah, Rig Veda 1.1.89*), these need to be compatible with the universal and eternal principles of *dharma* - truthfulness, compassion, cleanliness, self-control, tolerance, personal progress, cooperation, and so on. All these principles are described in *Gita* as *sat* ("good") as opposed to *asat* ("bad"). The original compilers of Vedic literature had very clear ideas about what is good and what is bad, and expressed their direct vision in a great wealth of texts that are all perfectly compatible to each other, and with any other text or teaching that expresses the universal and eternal principles of good.

Thus the choice should not be between *desi* ("national") and *videsi* ("foreign"), but between good and bad - *sat* and *asat*. To become able to make this choice, we need first of all to understand the difference between *sat* and *asat*: this is precisely the subject discussed in *Bhagavad gita*, also called the *sadhana prasthanas*, the most practical of the *prasthanas traya* - the three most important reference authorities on Sanatana Dharma.

When we are able to recognize *asat* concepts, thanks to the precise descriptions and explanations of *Gita*, we can localize them in the general beliefs of the people (*laukika sraddha*), explore their origin and trace the history of how they became superimposed to the *sat* concepts, to be able to make the proper choices in life.

This process is called *viveka*, the work of discriminating intelligence.

The commentaries of this edition of the *Bhagavad gita* is characterized by a comparative study of religions on the particular concepts expressed in the text. The original Vedic approach expressed in *Gita* is thus compared to the general beliefs created over a long period of abrahamic influence either directly or indirectly - that is, either according to the abrahamic dogma enforced on society or as a reaction against them, but working on the same faulty paradigms.

The ideologies directly in pursuance of the abrahamic dogma are (in historical order) Zionism, the various Christian churches, and the Islamist movements. They are called abrahamic because they all recognize Abraham as their founder, and share the same basic concepts and beliefs: exclusive political and clerical monotheism, special privileges for a chosen people against all others, domination over nature and resources, patriarchalism, and so on.

The ideologies that developed as a reaction against the three abrahamic sects are Communism, Atheism, Scientism, Consumerism, etc. Although apparently opposite to the abrahamic system of beliefs, they are based on the same fundamental assumptions and therefore their approach is also similarly flawed. As it is said, it is not possible to solve a problem by applying the same concepts that caused the problem in the first place.

We immediately need to clarify that our purpose is not to create bad sentiments against the people who are considered Christians, Muslims or Jews. Rather, we want to make a distinction in order to properly understand the different ideologies, their absolute and universal value in terms of the ethical principles of *sat* and *asat*, and their compatibility with the Vedic approach.

Strict adherence to ideologies in theory and practice is called fundamentalism, but strict adherence to one's principles is not a bad thing, provided the principles are not contrary to ethics. Should a honest person be afraid to be considered a "honesty fundamentalist" if he stands on his principles by refusing to steal, bribe, cheat or tell lies? And even more important, will the choices of such individual be favorable or unfavorable to social harmony and progress?

On the other hand, will social harmony be favored by the "political correct" silence on the negative results of the choices of individuals following an opposite ideology - an ideology based on *asat* ideals?

These are the questions that each one of us needs to ponder on.

Our proposition is that the problem with fundamentalism is when the ideology is unethical, so the more one is faithful to it, the more dangerous he becomes for society.

The majority of the people that are considered Christians, Muslims and Jews are "moderate" or we should rather say, non-politicized. They identify with these definitions mainly because they were born in those communities, but they simply concern themselves with the maintenance of their families and their honest professional occupation, and have no problems in getting along well with their neighbors - irrespective of their creed, caste, color etc.

Some may even be good and sincere people that honestly try to improve their own character and life by developing love for their fellow human beings and for God as the creator of everything and everybody. These people often believe that their duty is to help others out of selfless charity, and they painstakingly work to make a world a better place. From the teachings of their religion, they pick only what is compatible with their good conscience and natural sense of ethics, and they do not care about the rest - or believe it's somehow "symbolic" and it should not be interpreted literally.

So what's the problem with the abrahamic ideology?

Unfortunately, such moderate Christians, Muslims and Jews are not the ones that become recognized as the official authorities and spokespersons for the religion they belong to, and are generally considered "non-practicing" members or "laymen".

It is the fundamentalists that naturally take power within these religious structures by their determination and aggressiveness, by manipulating and exploiting the good sentiments of more lukewarm members who supply funds and votes in elections, as well as a general support to the faulty basic concepts they have been educated to consider valid, true and normal. Any progressive or ethical movement in the opinion of such moderate abrahamics is actually irrelevant in regard to the dogma and policies, of which they are usually more or less unaware or uninformed. For example, the concept of reincarnation is today embraced by a majority of the population in western countries - traditionally influenced by Christianity - yet the official position of Christian theology has always been very contrary to it, to the point of persecuting it very actively as a blasphemy with the capital punishment when the Church had sufficient power on the State.

But while a majority of people in the abrahamic-influenced countries are now taking their distance from the official religious dogma thanks to the development of literacy and higher ideals of free thinking, the religious hierarchies and their fundamentalist followers are becoming more determined to enforce their ideologies by all means, even against basic ethical consideration. There are many examples we could quote from the public declarations of officially recognized religious authorities in the abrahamic traditions, and even from their canonic (i.e. officially recognized) scriptures, but that is not the purpose of this book. The purpose of this book is to study and understand what *Bhagavad gita* really says, and to help its student to put its teachings into practice: the need of the hour.

Chapter 1

Arjuna vishada yoga

The yoga of Arjuna's grief

Usually the first chapter of *Gita* is rather overlooked by scholars, who consider it a mere introduction to the actual teachings explained by Krishna in the subsequent chapters. Sometimes the title of the chapter is even changed into something less "depressing", such as "Observing the armies on the battlefield". However, an attentive reading of this chapter will help us to understand the crucial difference between material compassion and spiritual compassion, and to facilitate the application of *Gita* to our personal life - thus going from philosophy to experience, from theory to practice, from speculation to experience.

Frustration in materialistic life is not a bad thing: rather it is a symptom of intelligence, because material possessions, positions and identifications cannot really give full happiness and satisfaction. Materialists are typically always trying to get more possessions, and as soon as they obtain an object they coveted, they lose interest in it and start desiring something else. Of course there is a minimum level of material facilities that we all need in order to maintain our bodies and minds in a healthy and functional state, and Vedic society normally guarantees this level to all members, but people are trained to get their happiness and satisfaction in life from the proper performance of their duties rather than from the amount of sense gratification or material properties or control over others.

In the Vedic system, one's duty is called both *karma* and *dharma*, because it unites the individual effort and willpower that performs the proper action with one's natural function in the greater order of things - one's true and perfect place in the universe. An individual who has the natural talents and tendencies to protect society will only feel happy and satisfied when he can work in that capacity, and so will a teacher, an entrepreneur, an artisan, and an artist. If an individual is in the proper *varna* and *ashrama*, he will be happy with just doing his

job, and he will need no other motivations to such as profit, fame, adoration, etc. The gradual accomplishment of duties in one's life culminates with the highest duty, that is the realization of one's eternal nature of Atman/ Brahman, and the service to the Transcendental Supreme, of which one is part and parcel. Just like our temporary material identification can find satisfaction in functioning in the service of society, our eternal transcendental identity will find satisfaction at the transcendental level, in the spiritual service to God.

This material world, like a school, has been specifically and perfectly engineered to help each individual progress and develop along higher and wider levels of awareness, up to the greatest possible realization: God realization. A particular position in school is not meant to be one's permanent residence, and this is why students constantly get new teachings and tests by which they can advance to higher levels, and ultimately graduate from the school altogether. For this reason, life in the material world has been made difficult and unstable (*dukhalayam asasvatam*, *Gita*, 8.15), so that we do not get ourselves too comfortable in it, but keep striving to seek something that can fulfill our aspiration to perfect *sat* (eternity, permanence), *cit* (knowledge, awareness) and *ananda* (happiness), the basic characteristics of spiritual or transcendental existence.

So, one who understands that in this material world it is not possible to find the perfection of *sat*, *cit* and *ananda*, and out of this virtuous frustration tries to understand what else exists beyond this level of imperfection and impermanence, is taking the first step in the journey of Self realization. Unevolved people just tread on in life like animals do - only concerning themselves about eating, sleeping, mating, defending themselves and their families, procuring comforts, possessions and social power. They experience joys and sorrows but they are unable to rise above them.

The transcendental presence and guidance of Krishna transforms grief and frustration into a powerful vehicle to seek and obtain the proper knowledge of Reality that will liberate us from the cycle of births and deaths. Everyone of us stands on the battlefield of life, inside the chariot constituted by our body, and like Arjuna we should turn to our dearest friend, the Antaryami Paramatman, for instruction and guidance. The Kauravas represent the bad tendencies of human beings (our own and those of the people around us), centered around material identification and attachments - the arrogant and selfish Duryodhana - and always try to usurp our good understanding and motivations, represented by the Pandavas.

धृतराष्ट्र उवाच ।

dhṛtarāṣṭra uvāca ।

धर्मक्षेत्रे कुरुक्षेत्रे समवेता युयुत्सवः ।

मामकाः पाण्डवाश्चैव किमकुर्वत सञ्जय ॥ १-१ ॥

dharmakṣetre kurukṣetre samaveta yuyutsavaḥ | māmakaḥ pāṇḍavāścaiva kimakurvata sañjaya || 1-1 ||

dhritarashtra: Dhritarastra; *uvaca*: said; *dharma-kshetre*: in the place/ field of *dharma*; *kuru-kshetre*: in the place/ field of Kuru (Kurukshetra); *samaveta*: assembled; *yuyutsavaḥ*: desiring to fight; *mamakah*: mine (my people); *pandavah*: the Pandavas (the people of Pandu); *ca*: and; *eva*: certainly; *kim*: what; *akurvata*: did; *sañjaya*: o Sanjaya.

Dhritarastra said: "O Sanjaya, what did my sons and Pandu's sons (my people/ supporters and the people/ supporters of Pandu) do, after they assembled in the sacred place of Dharma, the battlefield of Kurukshetra, ready to fight?"

Dhritarastra is the old regent king of Hastinapura, father of Duryodhana; he is sitting in his palace and asks Sanjaya to describe to him what is happening on the battlefield. Thus *Bhagavad gita* is narrated by Sanjaya to Dhritarastra in the form of a dialog. Sanjaya, son of the charioteer Gavalgama, is Dhritarastra's *mantri* just like Vidura, who is Dhritarastra's blood brother. The definition of *mantri* as usually translated as "minister", but actually refers to a secondary position in the government, not occupied by *kshatriyas* or rulers. The job description usually includes a mixture of secretary, advisor, charioteer and messenger, and in the Vedic system of government a *mantri* is the trusted supporter, assistant or servant of a *kshatriya* of the royal order. There are different levels of *mantris* because there are different functions in the service of the king: *sudras* or servants can execute some of them, such as driving a chariot or delivering an ordinary message, and *brahmanas* are more suited to advisory functions, especially on ethics, religion and spirituality. In the present context of political democracies, the ministers are the assistants to the elected representatives of the people (*democracy* literally means "governed by the people"), who take the place of the king, often without honoring the responsibilities that come with the position.

Dharma kshetra is not only a place of pilgrimage but also a place where one performs one's religious duty (*dharma*). For a *kshatriya*, a battlefield is the *dharma kshetra* because it is his religious duty to protect the kingdom and its inhabitants (*praja*, including also the animals) from those who can harm them. *Kshetra* means "field" or "land" and specifically applies to the territory protected by a *kshatriya* or *kshetra-pa*, a definition from which the ancient Persian word "Satrap" derived.

Mamakah pandavah caiva: already in the first verse we clearly see the reason why the battle needs to be fought. Dhritarastra is seriously afflicted by a fundamental dualistic delusion that he has transmitted to his sons. For him and his "evil-minded" (*durbuddheh*, 1.23) son Duryodhana, who deliberately caused the conflict, it's all about *aham mama*, "me and mine", or the *ahankara* and *mamatva*, the root causes of ignorance and suffering.

For Dhritarastra the throne is just a personal possession, the instrument of his selfishness and egotism, by which he and "his own people" can best exploit the subjects and the resources of the kingdom for their own gratification and vainglory, without any consideration for the welfare of the people. This mentality is clearly described as *asuric* (demoniac) in *Gita* (16.13-15). No king has the right to consider the kingdom as his own property, to do whatever he wants with it. Actually, a king should sacrifice everything he has - including his own personal family - for the benefit of the kingdom and the *prajas*.

The events narrated in the *Mahabharata* show that Dhritarastra is blind not only physically, but also ethically and spiritually, and it is clear from this verse that because of the intrinsic dharmic influence of the place where the armies are assembled, Dhritarastra is afraid that his son Duryodhana might become inclined to relent from his evil schemes and agree to share the kingdom with the Pandavas.

On a symbolic level in the story of the *Mahabharata*, Dhritarastra represents the material calculation for selfish benefits that is blind to *dharma* and spiritual identity; after losing everything he finally understands that material attachment is illusion and dies away. Dhritarastra's wife, Gandhari, represents the material attachment to family and society that makes itself blind, too, because it becomes subservient to the pursuance of selfish benefits.

Duryodhana (the name meaning is "cruel in fighting") is considered a partial incarnation of the age of Kali, and symbolically represents quarrel. His younger brothers represent the various defects and bad tendencies of the conditioned soul, especially Duhsasana, who represents lust. In the war of Kurukshetra, Bhima (who is an *amsa* of Shiva Mahadeva like the other Pandavas, and represents Kala Bhairava) kills Duhsasana and drinks his blood, signifying that lust can be channeled, sanctified and made harmless through the tantric path. The sister of Duryodhana, Duhsala, symbolizes bad advice; she married Jayadratha the king of Sindhu and became the mother of Suradha, who got a heart attack when he heard that Arjuna had come for the Rajasuya with the sacrificial horse entering his kingdom.

At another level of a symbolic interpretation of the story, Duryodhana is the conditioned soul (the king of the city of the nine gates) who, observing the variety of arrangements exemplified by the Pandavas (symbolizing the religious persons and spiritual traditions in this world), directly approaches a teacher for guidance. Although Vedic scriptures have various levels of interpretation (including very subtle ones), the literal meaning also remains valid.

सञ्जय उवाच ।

sañjaya uvāca ।

दृष्ट्वा तु पाण्डवानीकं व्यूढं दुर्योधनस्तदा ।

आचार्यमुपसंगम्य राजा वचनमब्रवीत् ॥ १-२ ॥

dr̥ṣṭvā tu paṇḍavānīkaṁ vyūḍhaṁ duryodhanastadā । ācāryamupasaṅgamyā rājā vacanamabravīt ॥ 1-2 ॥

sanjayah: Sanjaya; *uvaca*: said; *drishtva*: seeing; *tu*: but; *pandavanikam*: of the Pandavas; *vyudham*: the deployment of troops; *duryodhanah*: Duryodhana; *tada*: then; *acaryam*: the teacher; *upasangamyā*: approaching; *raja*: the king; *vacanam*: speech; *abravit*: spoke.

Sanjaya said: After observing the Pandava army arranged in a strategic position for the battle, the king (Duryodhana) approached the acharya (Drona, the teacher of military arts) and spoke to him as follows:

Duryodhana is the eldest son of Dhritarastra, appointed by his father as the king of the Kuru dynasty. The word *raja* ("king") used here indicates that Duryodhana has already advanced his claim to the throne; however Yudhisthira and Dhritarastra are called *raja*, too.

Drona was appointed by Bhishma as the teacher of weaponry who trained all the Kuru princes, not only the sons of Dhritarastra but also the five sons of Pandu. He was a student of Parasurama, like Bhishma. *Drona* means "water pot" (or "test tube" if we like): this refers to the fact that Drona was born from the sperm of Bharadvaja Rishi, that was collected in a pot. During his childhood days Drona had become friends with Drupada, the heir to the throne of Panchala. Later, after his marriage with Kripi and the birth of their son Asvatthama, Drona found himself in financial difficulties and went to see his old friend to ask for his help. However, Drupada had recently become king and was still inebriated by his new position, so he treated him offensively. Drona swore to take revenge and decided to train one extraordinary student who would humiliate Drupada - and for this, he first needed to become the military Guru of the most powerful royal family of his times, the Kuru dynasty. Pleased by his favorite pupil's progress, Drona asked Arjuna to repay him for the teachings he had received, and as *guru dakshina* he ordered him to defeat king Drupada and bring him to his presence as a prisoner. Brooding revenge against Drona, Drupada returned home and started a sacrifice ritual for the birth of Dhristadyumna and Draupadi.

Acharya: this title is given to the best teachers, who oversee the other *brahmanas*; with time and the degradation of the *varnas* into castes, this title came to be passed on like a family name without consideration for actual qualifications, just like Gosvami, Pandita or Panda, Vairagi, Dvivedi, Trivedi, Chaturvedi, etc. It is interesting to note that still today, the family name is called "title" by most Indians.

We should not become confused by the application of the terms *acharya*, *guru* and *brahmana* to a person who shows traits that are opposite to the character of a *brahmana*. *Gita* (18.42) states: *samo damas tapah saucam ksantir arjavam eva ca, jnanam vijnanam astikyam brahma-karma svabhava-jam*, "Peacefulness, self-control, austerity, purity, tolerance, honesty, knowledge, wisdom and religiousness - these are the natural qualities determining the duties of the *brahmana*."

Again in the *Mahabharata* (Vana Parva chapter 180) we find: *satyam danam ksama-silam anrsyamsam tapo ghrna, drsyante yatra nagendra sa brahmana iti smrtah*, "A persons who is truthful, charitable, forgiving, sober, kind, austere and free from hatred is called *brahmana*."

It sometimes happens that the unqualified descendent of *brahmanas* is also called a *brahmana* out of respect for his family and as a form of encouragement (positive affirmations often inspire people to actually live up to the expressed expectations of others), unless of course he goes too far into adharmic behaviors; in such case he will be called *brahma bandhu* ("relative of *brahmanas*) or *brahma atma-ja* ("son of a *brahmana*") as demonstrated by Krishna in the *Bhagavata Purana* to refer to Asvatthama the son of Drona (1.7.19, 1.7.35)

पश्यैतां पाण्डुपुत्राणामाचार्य महतीं चमूम् । व्यूढां द्रुपदपुत्रेण तव शिष्येण धीमता ॥ १-३ ॥

paśyaitāṃ pāṇḍuputrāṇāmācārya mahatīm camūm | vyūḍhāṃ drupadaputreṇa tava śiṣyena dhimatā || 1-3|

pasya: look; *etam:* this; *pandu-putranam:* of the sons of Pandu; *acharya:* o teacher; *mahatim:* great; *chamum:* army; *vyudham:* strategic arrangement; *drupada-putrena:* by the son of Drupada; *tava:* your; *sishyena:* (by) disciple; *dhimata:* intelligent/ wise.

"O acharya, look at this strategic arrangement of the great army of the sons of Pandu, organized by your very intelligent and wise disciple, the son of Drupada."

The intelligent disciple of Drona mentioned in this verse is Dhristadyumna, brother in law and ally of Arjuna. We may remember here that Dhristadyumna, like his sister Draupadi, was born from the sacrificial fire of king Drupada, who wanted to obtain a progeny that would bring about the destruction of his enemy Drona. From Duryodhana's words we can see that he is actually scared and angry about the impressive arrangement of the Pandavas' army, and he blames Drona for it, subtly accusing him of having lavished his best teachings on Dhristadyumna, who is now turning his knowledge and expertise against him. In the eyes of a politician like Duryodhana, this is an unforgivable mistake, but in the eyes of a *brahmana* it is a commendable choice of selflessness and straightforwardness, that might even have been an indirect act of atonement for his own rash and arrogant behavior that originally antagonized Drupada, or a hidden message about his deep motivations for it. By favoring Drupada's son with his teachings, Drona was showing that his decision to humiliate Drupada was not a personal vendetta, but an important teaching to the royal class about the unwise choice of disrespecting *brahmanas* and betraying their trust.

A *vyuha* is a strategic arrangement of troops used in *kshatriya* warfare; many *vyuhas* of different shapes are recorded in the Vedic literature. Specifically, the *vyuha* chosen by Dhristadyumna for the beginning of the battle is the one called Vajra, "the lightning", in response to the Garuda or "eagle" formation of the Kauravas. In the Vajra *vyuha*, where swiftness of attack is paramount, the front line is armed with short-range weapons while the archers come in the second line. In the Garuda *vyuha*, the kings marched at the head, the horsemen protected the wings, and the elephants formed the outer line of the body. Bhishma rode his chariot in the middle of the formation, as if seated on the eagle. This verse suggests that the proper use of intelligence/ intellect and foresight has a paramount importance in the understanding of life - both material and spiritual levels - because without the proper application of *dhi* (thinking), everything becomes difficult. There are three basic principles in practical life and work: 1. information, 2. communication, 3. strategy (or planning). These apply to all enterprises, from daily household chores to professional and business ventures, to the highest level of exchanges with the spiritual teacher about transcendental realizations.

अत्र शूरा महेष्वासा भीमार्जुनसमा युधि । युयुधानो विराटश्च द्रुपदश्च महारथः ॥ १-४ ॥

atra śūrā maheṣvāsā bhīmārjunasamā yudhi | yuyudhāno virāṭaśca drupadaśca mahārathaḥ || 1-4| |

atra: there; *sura:* hero; *maha ishu asa:* very great archers; *bhima arjuna-sama:* equal to Bhima and Arjuna; *yudhi:* in the battle; *yuyudhanah:* Yuyudhana; *viratah:* Virata; *ca:* also; *drupadah:* Drupada; *ca:* and; *maha-rathah:* the great *maharatha* warrior.

"There are great warriors (*maha-ratha*) who are extremely skilled bowmen (*maheshvasa*), of the same valor in battle as Bhima and Arjuna, such as Yuyudhana, Virata, and Drupada."

Bhima and Arjuna are the two most powerful among the five sons of Pandu; Arjuna is the friend of Krishna, the protagonist of the *Bhagavad gita*.

Yuyudhana, also called Satyaki, is a member of Krishna's family; in Dvaraka he is Krishna's charioteer and a very famous archer and warrior, who learned archery from Arjuna. King Virata is Arjuna's ally and the father of Uttara, the wife of Abhimanyu, Arjuna's son. He brought an entire *akshauhini* of warriors and was killed by Drona during the battle. Drupada is the king of Panchala, sometimes called Yajnasena. He had a quarrel with his old childhood friend Drona, so he performed a *homa* with the purpose of getting progeny that could avenge the offenses he had received from Drona. From the sacrificial fire both Draupadi and Dhristadyumna were born, and both were instrumental in the destruction of Drona and the Kurus.

Maha-ratha is a particular title of honor conferred on *kshatriya* warriors, meaning they are so proficient and valiant in battle that they can engage or direct 10,000 ordinary warriors, or their valor is 10,000 times greater than ordinary warriors. The name of the ancient Maratha or Maratta kingdom, that was defeated in rather recent times by the British army, derives from such title. Similarly, an *atiratha* is a warrior that can fight alone against an unlimited number of warriors. On the opposite side of the scale, a *yoddha* is an ordinary warrior, and an *ardharathi* is a less skilled warrior who can only assist others but is unable to tackle an opponent on his own.

धृष्टकेतुश्चेकितानः काशिराजश्च वीर्यवान् । पुरुजित्कुन्तिभोजश्च शैब्यश्च नरपुंगवः ॥ १-५ ॥

dhṛṣṭaketuścekitaṇaḥ kāśirājaśca vīryavān | purujitkuntibhojaśca śaibyaśca narapuṅgavaḥ || 1-5| |

dhristaketuh: Dhristaketu; *cekitanah:* Chekitana; *kasirajah:* the king of Kashi; *ca:* and; *viryavan:* great heroes; *purujit:* Purujit; *kuntibhojah:* Kuntibhoja; *ca:* and; *saibyah:* the king of Sibi; *ca:* and; *nara-pungavah:* great leaders of men.

"There are also other great heroes and great leaders of men such as Dhristaketu, Chekitana, the king of Kashi, Purujit, Kuntibhoja and the king of Sibi."

Duryodhana has already mentioned most of the generals that command the 7 *akshauhinis* of the Pandava army: Drupada, Virata, Dhristadyumna, Shikhandi, Satyaki (Yuyudhana), Chekitana and Bhima. He now names some of the other great warriors in the Pandava alliance. Dhristaketu is son of Dhristadyumna, nephew of Draupadi and Arjuna, grandson of Drupada. He will be killed by Drona. Another

Dhristaketu was also present on the battlefield, the son of Sisupala king of the Chedis and friend of the Pandavas, who brought an *akshauhini* battalion to Kurukshetra; after the war his sister married Nakula. Chekitana is a member of Krishna's family, a famous archer in the Yadus' army.

The king of Kashi: Kashi is another name of Varanasi or Benares. This king must have been the successor of Sudakshina, who had been killed in his war against Dvaraka, Krishna's kingdom. The enmity of Sudakshina against Krishna had originated when Sudakshina's father had taken sides with Paundraka, the king of Karusha, when Paundraka had challenged Krishna to battle claiming that he, and not Krishna, was an *avatara* of Vishnu. In the battle that had ensued, both Paundraka and Sudakshina's father had been killed. Kuntibhoja is the foster father of Kunti and maternal grandfather of the Pandavas, he was fighting on their side. Purujit is Kuntibhoja's brother.

Saibya (the king of Sibi), is king Govasana, the father of Devika, second wife of Yudhisthira. The kingdom of Sibi or Sivi was the present Baluchistan, north of river Kabul, known until recently as Sivistan. Its inhabitants were described by Alexander's historians as fierce warriors fighting with clubs, wearing animal skins and shaved heads, worshipers of Shiva, much similar to the people of the Kamboja kingdom.

युधामन्युश्च विक्रान्त उत्तमौजाश्च वीर्यवान् । सौभद्रो द्रौपदेयाश्च सर्व एव महारथाः ॥ १-६ ॥

yudhāmanyuśca vikrānta uttamaujāśca vīryavān | saubhadro draupadeyāśca sarva eva mahārathāḥ || 1-6 ||

yudhamanyuh: Yudhamanyu; *ca*: and; *vikrantah*: mighty; *uttamaujah*: Uttamauja; *ca*: and; *viryan*: heroic; *saubhadrah*: the son of Subhadra; *draupadeyah*: the sons of Draupadi; *ca*: and; *sarva*: all; *eva*: *maha-rathah*: great chariot warriors.

"There are also the mighty Yudhamanyu, the heroic Uttamauja, the son of Subhadra and the sons of Draupadi. All these are maharatha warriors (fighting from their own personal chariots)."

Yudhamanyu and Uttamauja are both sons of Drupada and famous generals in his army. The entire family of Draupadi participated in the war: Drupada the king of Panchala and his sons Dhrstadyumna, Sikhandi(ni) who had been adopted, and Dhristaketu, Yudhamanyu, Satyajit and Uttamauja.

Saubhadra ("son of Subhadra") is Abhimanyu. Subhadra is wife to Arjuna, sister to Krishna and foster daughter to Vasudeva. She is actually the daughter of Yasoda and Nanda in Gokula, and Vasudeva carried her back to Mathura into Kamsa's prison when he exchanged baby Krishna, leaving him in Gokula in her place. As Rohini, another wife of Vasudeva, was in Gokula at that time in the house of Nanda for shelter and protection, it is sometimes said that Subhadra was actually born from Rohini like Balarama, and not from Yasoda. Subhadra was married by Arjuna with Krishna's help and against the will of Balarama, who had arranged her marriage with Sisupala. Arjuna kidnapped Subhadra while she was visiting a temple before proceeding to her marriage. Actually Subhadra had fallen in love with Arjuna already when for four months Arjuna had stayed incognito in the Yadus' palace disguised as a *samyasi*, and he had long and affectionate interactions with Subhadra, to whom he had disclosed his real identity.

The Draupadeyas are the sons of Draupadi, one from each of the five Pandavas: Prativindhya, Srutakirti, Srutasoma, Satanika and Srutasena. All the five sons of Draupadi were killed by Asvatthama in their sleep after the end of the Kurukshetra war; for this dastardly act Krishna proclaimed him to be a non-*brahmana* but merely a *brahma-bandhu* (relative of a *brahmana*) and sentenced him to be disgraced for eternity – it is said Asvatthama is still alive.

Draupadi is also a very symbolic character, whose story contains a lot of esoteric meanings. She is worshiped in many places of India as Durga, because she marries Shiva taking a particular form to suit each of the various forms of Shiva; in the court of Virata she is the maidservant of the queen, symbolizing the various secondary forms of the Mother Goddess represented by the Yoginis. In the *Mahabharata*, Draupadi is described as the daughter of king Drupada of Panchala, and therefore she is also called Panchali. While they were in exile incognito, Arjuna went to the *svayamvara* of Draupadi and was the one who came up winner in the very difficult archery test. When he returned home with Draupadi, his mother Kunti thought that the "wonderful jewel" Arjuna had brought home was some golden ornament, and told him he had to share that treasure with his brothers. So it was that Draupadi became the wife of all five Pandavas.

The expression *sarva eva* includes "all these others" and hints that Duryodhana might even be slightly panicking after contemplating the many powerful warriors of the Pandavas' army.

अस्माकं तु विशिष्टा ये तान्निबोध द्विजोत्तम नायका मम सैन्यस्य संज्ञार्थं तान्ब्रवीमि ते ॥ १-७ ॥

asmākaṁ tu viśiṣṭā ye tānnibodha dvijottama | nāyakā mama sainyasya sañjārtham tānbravīmi te || 1-7 ||

asmakam: our; *tu*: but; *visishtah*: various; *ye*: those; *tan*: them; *nibodha*: please know/ understand; *dvijottama*: o high among the twice born; *nayakah*: captains; *mama*: my; *sainyasya*: of the army; *samjnartham*: to perfectly understand; *tan*: them; *bravimi*: I explain; *te*: to you.

"O illustrious twice-born, I am now going to tell you about the various great generals that lead the warriors in our army."

The title of "twice born" (*dvija*) refers to a person who has been recognized as specifically trained and sufficiently qualified to belong to one of the three higher *varnas*, i.e. *brahmana*, *kshatriya* or *vaisya*. The "second birth" is given by Guru and Vedic knowledge, while the "first birth" is given by one's seminal parents.

The "first birth" by itself is not sufficient in regard to one's qualifications to belong to a particular *varna*, therefore a "second birth" is required; without such "second birth" one simply remains a *sudra*, or a non-qualified laborer at the service of more qualified members of society.

Vedic scriptures quote this universally recognized and very clear statement by Atri Rishi: *janmana jayate sudra*, "by birth, everyone is born a *sudra*", *samskarad dvijah ucyate*, "through *samskara* (ritual purification) one becomes a twice born", *veda-pathad bhaved viprah*, "by reading the *Vedas* one becomes a *vipra* (scholar)", and *brahma janati iti brahmanah*, "*brahmana* is one who knows Brahman".

भवान्भीष्मश्च कर्णश्च कृपश्च समितिञ्जयः । अश्वत्थामा विकर्णश्च सौमदत्तिस्तथैव च ॥ १-८ ॥

bhavānbhīṣmaśca karnaśca kṛpaśca samitiñjayaḥ | aśvatthāmā vikarnaśca saumadattistathaiva ca || 1-8 ||

bhavan: your grace; *bhishmah*: Bhishma; *ca*: and; *karnah*: Karna; *ca*: and; *kripah*: Kripa; *ca*: and; *samitinjayah*: unvanquished; *asvatthama*: Ashvatthama; *vikarnah*: Vikarna; *ca*: and; *saumadattih*: the son of Somadatta; *tatha*: also; *eva*: certainly; *ca*: and.

"Besides your grace there are Bhishma, Karna and Kripa, never vanquished in battle, as well as Ashvatthama, Vikarna and the son of Somadatta."

Bhishma, originally called Devavrata, was the only surviving son of Santanu and Ganga. The name Bhishma means "terrible" and refers to the vow he took to facilitate his father's second marriage. When Ganga left Santanu, the king fell in love with Satyawati, the daughter of a fisherman, who agreed to the marriage only on the condition that the eldest son of the king would never claim the throne for himself or for his own descendants. Still the greedy fisherman was not happy with such a promise, and he suggested that maybe Devavrata's descendants would not accept to honor such agreement, so Devavrata vowed never to marry and never to have children. For a powerful *kshatriya* of Devavrata's caliber this was a terrible vow not only for his own personal life, but for the benefit of the kingdom as well - and in fact it had terrible consequences. Although Bhishma never married nor had any child, he is considered the Grandsire of the Kurus due to the care and affection he gave to all the descendants of his brothers, to the point of showing undue leniency for the mischievous plans and activities of Duryodhana and his brothers.

Karna, the greatest warrior on the battlefield and the staunchest ally of Duryodhana, is the great tragic hero of the *Mahabharata*. At the symbolic level, the five Pandavas represent the five main aspects of Shiva as Mahakala (Yudhishthira, who is a manifestation of Dharma or Yama), Bhairava or Bhimashankara (Bhima, a manifestation of Vayu/ Agni), Lokanatha or Mallikarjuna (Arjuna, a manifestation of Indra), and Vaidyanatha (Nakula and Sahadeva, manifestations of the Asvini kumaras). In this context, Karna (a manifestation of Surya) can be connected to the Hari-Hara or Surya Narayana form that is half Vishnu and half Shiva. In the holy city of Jagannatha Puri, the five main Shiva temples - Yamesvara, Markandesvara, Lokanatha, Nilakantha and Kapalamochana - are called "the five Pandavas", while just outside the city we find the famous Konarak temple, dedicated to Surya Narayana. Unlike the other main elements of the universe - death, wind, the Devas and healing - the Sun is sometimes visible and sometimes not visible to the eyes of the people, and similarly Karna is the "secret" Pandava. Karna was born from the Sun God Surya and Kunti before her marriage and his mother abandoned him, keeping the secret about his birth. He was raised by a chariot maker and his wife, Adiratha and Radha, who took him for their own son, but in spite of his affection for them, Karna was like a young royal eagle raised in a family of ordinary chickens. Duryodhana was the only one who offered him help and consideration, raising him to the rank of *kshatriya* royalty by appointing him as the king of Anga (a territory including Bengal, Orissa, Madras) when during the *svayamvara* of Draupadi Karna was declared ineligible to participate because of his family background. This determined the direction of his life, making him the loyal supporter of Duryodhana and the sworn enemy of the Pandavas, and also had a strong influence on the general events, as without Karna's support, Duryodhana might not have had the guts to declare open war against the Pandavas.

Kripa was the "test-tube" son of Saradvana Rishi and the Apsara Janapadi. His twin sister Kripi married Drona, who was also born in a similar way. Kripa survived Kurukshetra and became the preceptor of Parikshit. Ashvatthama is the son of Drona and Kripi. Duryodhana cleverly mentions Kripa and Asvatthama, close relatives of Drona, in a place of pride within his list of the warriors, hoping to bank on Drona's material attachments. Vikarna is one of the sons of Dhritarastra. He was the only one who spoke in defense of Draupadi when she was insulted in the assembly of the Kurus; however, when it was time to get into battle, he stood by his brother's side.

Soumadatti is Bhurishrava, the son of Somadatta. Somadatta was a relative of the Kurus (being the son of Bahlika, brother of Santanu) and took the side of Duryodhana in the war, while his son took the side of the Pandavas. King Pratipa, the descendant of Kuru, had three sons: Devapi (who could not ascend the throne because of a serious skin disease; he went on to become a Rishi), Bahlika (who renounced the throne and went to his maternal grandfather's kingdom) and Santanu (who became king).

The several kingdoms of Bahlika ("external provinces") were famous for their horses and because their inhabitants did not follow the Vedic rules. Several non-Vedic kingdoms participated to the war of Kurukshetra, such as the Nishadas, Pulindas, Andhakas, Khasas, Sakas, Tanganas, Kambhojas, Yavanas, Paradas, Kalingas, Amvasthas, Pishachas, Barbaras, Mlecchas, Trigartas, Sauviras, Daradas, Malavas and Salvas. Within the Bahlika regions were the two non-Vedic kingdoms of Madra and Anga. Shalya (brother of Madri the second wife of Pandu) was the king of Madra and Karna was made king of Anga by Duryodhana.

अन्ये च बहवः शूरा मदर्थे त्यक्तजीविताः । नानाशस्त्रप्रहरणाः सर्वे युद्धविशारदाः ॥ १-९ ॥

anye ca bahavaḥ śūrā madarthe tyaktajīvitāḥ | nānāśastrapraharaṇāḥ sarve yuddhaviśāradaḥ || 1-9 ||

anye: others; *ca*: and; *bahavah*: many; *surah*: heroes; *mad*: of me; *arthe*: for my gain; *tyakta*: have left; *jivitah*: lives; *nana*: various; *sastra*: weapons; *praharanah*: equipped; *sarve*: all; *yuddha*: in battle; *visaradah*: experienced.

"Many other heroes are here, all ready to sacrifice their life in battle for my sake. They are well equipped with many different weapons and they are all expert in combat."

Here Duryodhana clearly expresses his ideas about the reasons why he and his allies entered the war - as well as the ideals on which his entire life is built. *Mad arthe* means "for my gain": there is no doubt that Duryodhana is only motivated by his personal gain, by selfish

considerations of *aham mama* ("I and mine") or *ahankara* (false material identification) and *mamatva* (material attachment), that are the very roots of ignorance and delusion. The same mentality was expressed by Dhritarastra in the very beginning of the chapter, so that now we know where Duryodhana learned it. Duryodhana does not fight for the benefit of the kingdom, to defend and protect the *prajas*. He has no concern about *dharma*. He only fights for his own sake, to obtain more power and advantages for himself, and similarly he surmises that all the heroes who are fighting on his side are only interested to help him getting more personal power by eliminating the virtuous Pandavas. Such action will be performed by the sheer use of material force, weaponry and military skills.

The expression *tyakta jivita* indicates that all warriors enter the battlefield with the clear awareness of the possibility of their death and totally concentrate their attention on the imminent fight, putting aside all other duties as well as concerns and attachments. Only by focusing exclusively and intensely on the task ahead it is possible to achieve success: it is said that a good archer only sees the target and nothing else. However, in this particular context Duryodhana's words could be considered as a bad omen, as in his fear and anger he seems to contemplate the total destruction of his army, as if it had already happened. But Duryodhana is not concerned for their lives and does not feel any compassion or remorse: he is only worried that the destruction of his army may bring about his own defeat.

The fact that all these great heroes have prepared themselves to lay down their own lives for his sake only makes him even more arrogant. He sees them as mere instruments for his lust for power, to be gambled and carelessly sacrificed on the battlefield in pursuance of his personal victory.

अपर्याप्तं तदस्माकं बलं भीष्माभिरक्षितम् । पर्याप्तं त्विदमेतेषां बलं भीमाभिरक्षितम् ॥ १-१० ॥

aparyāptam tadasmākaṁ balaṁ bhīṣmābhirakṣitam | paryāptam tvīdameteṣāṁ balaṁ bhīmābhirakṣitam || 1-10 |

aparyāptam: without measure/ not fully qualified; *tad*: that; *asmakam*: our; *balam*: forces; *bhishma*: by Bhishma; *abhirakshitam*: well protected; *paryāptam*: limited/ competent; *tu*: but; *idam*: this; *etesham*: of these; *balam*: forces; *bhima*: by Bhima; *abhirakshitam*: well protected.

"Our forces are immensely numerous and perfectly protected by Bhishma, while the army of these others (the Pandavas) are limited and well protected by Bhima."

Bhima (not to be confused with Bhishma) is the second of the five Pandava brothers, born from Vayu and Kunti; in the *Mahabharata* he talks to Hanuman who calls him "brother". Bhima married Draupadi like his other brothers, but he also married the *rakshasi* called Hidimbi and Sisupala's sister Kali. These two marriages are an interesting feature because they connect Bhima with a fierce and savage aspect that reminds us of the terrifying all-devouring aspect of Shiva (Kala Bhairava) worshiped by various non-aryan populations. *Rakshasas* are certainly non-aryans, but also the people of the kingdom of Chedi are non-aryans following tribal traditions. Hidimbi's son Ghatotkacha used his *rakshasa* powers to support the Pandava army at Kurukshetra, and Kali's son Sarabha later became the king of Chedi.

Duryodhana's army is described as consisting of 11 *akshauhinis*, while the Pandavas had only 7 *akshauhinis*. Each of such *akshauhinis* is said to consist of 21,870 chariots carrying *maharatha*, *atiratha* and *ratha* warriors, plus the same number of war elephants, 65,610 horsemen and 109,350 foot soldiers. It is calculated that the total number of the combatants at Kurukshetra was around 4 millions.

There is a certain disagreement among commentators about the meaning of *paryāptam*; *pari* means "full, complete, counted, perfect", and therefore the compound word could mean both "perfect", "full" or "limited" (as by counting). We know that Duryodhana's army was greater than the Pandavas', but his fear suggests that he might be thinking about the competence of the single generals, too.

अयनेषु च सर्वेषु यथाभागमवस्थिताः । भीष्ममेवाभिरक्षन्तु भवन्तः सर्व एव हि ॥ १-११ ॥

ayaneṣu ca sarveṣu yathābhāgamavasthitaḥ | bhīṣmamevābhirakṣantu bhavantaḥ sarva eva hi || 1-11 |

ayaneshu: in the various strategic positions; *ca*: and; *sarveshu*: all; *yatha-bhagam*: as assigned; *avasthita*: positioned; *bhishmam*: Bhishma; *evabhirakshantu*: should protect; *bhavanta*: your good selves; *sarva*: all; *eva*: certainly; *hi*: however.

"Now all of you, from your respective strategic positions, should certainly give protection and support to Bhishma, from all sides."

In a battle formation, the general in command is always supposed to remain in the center, while the other generals are positioned in the various relative directions called *ayanas*, such as east, west, south, north, from which they support the center.

Duryodhana's diplomatic and political abilities are evident in this verse. He is always trying to manipulate people, banking on their emotions, weaknesses and attachments, pitting one against the other, flattering and stinging them in turn, all the time calculating how he could use everyone for his own selfish advantage. This is the clearest evidence that he is not at all fit to sit on the throne and therefore he should not have power over the kingdom. The protection of *dharma* requires his elimination.

Sometimes foolish misinformed people say that the war of Kurukshetra was not different from the Islamic "holy war" or the Christian crusades because it was a *dharma yuddha*, a "war fought for the sake of *dharma*". Such people have no idea what *dharma* really is about.

On a symbolic level, this verse highlights the need to properly understand one's priorities in life, and to center all other concerns around the primary duty of self realization.

तस्य सञ्जनयन्हर्षं कुरुवृद्धः पितामहः । सिंहनादं विनद्योच्चैः शङ्खं दध्मौ प्रतापवान् ॥ १-१२ ॥

tasya sañjanayanharṣam kuruvṛddhaḥ pitāmahaḥ | siṁhanādaṁ vinadyoccaiḥ śaṅkhaṁ dadhmau pratāpavān || 1-12 |

tasya: his; *sañjayanam*: increasing; *harsham*: the emotion; *kuru*: of the Kurus; *vridhdah*: the eldest; *pitamahah*: grandfather; *simha*: lion (like); *nadam*: sound; *vinadya*: vibrating; *uccaih*: loudly; *sankham*: the conchshell; *dadhmau*: blew; *pratapavan*: the powerful.

The elder of the Kurus, the valiant grandfather (Bhishma), blew his conchshell that vibrated very loudly like the roaring of a lion, giving joy to Duryodhana.

The blowing of conchshells invokes Sri (auspiciousness and beauty), as well as Vijaya (victory), Bhuti (power), Dhruva (determination) and Niti (morality), while it drives away all bad things and bad influences. For a *kshatriya*, his *sankha-nada*, the sound of his war conch, announces the beginning of his sacred duty of standing up in battle to defend *dharma*. Blowing conchshells in Vedic culture is considered an announcement of some important event, such as the beginning of an *arati* or ritual ceremony or worship in the temple, etc. This same tradition was found in other non-abrahamic cultures having access to seas or oceans; in fact the conch can be considered the simplest and most natural form of musical instrument, mystically uniting the various elements of the universe - water from its origin, earth because of its hardness and weight, air and ether because of its penetrating sound, whose echo seems to remain permanently inside its fold.

Conches are also used to contain consecrated water for the bathing of the Deities, especially Vishnu. However, the conchshell is not used to bathe Shiva. The conch in itself, and more specifically the type found in the Indian ocean, called *Turbinella pyrum*, is considered a very auspicious symbol representing Lakshmi or Sri, the Mother Goddess of beauty, wealth, and good fortune - due to its beauty, natural luster, purity, strength and inalterability, and to its association with water. It is said that Lakshmi was born from the ocean, like the conchshell.

The term *harsham* indicates excitement, as in *roma harshana*, the standing of the hair on the body when some strong emotion is felt. Bhishma blows his war conch to reassure his grandson of his support, as he could understand from Duryodhana's speech to Drona that the prince was uncertain about the result of the war and therefore he was trying to use all its diplomacy to goad his supporters into battle.

Bhishma wants Duryodhana to know that he is not offended by what he said, because Drona's silence in front of Duryodhana's increasingly arrogant speech does not bode well. Bhishma is also concerned that the other generals in their army might become offended or doubtful about the battle, so he blows his conchshell to bring back everyone's mind on the task at hand. The blowing of the conchshells is the signal for battle: by initiating the attack, Bhishma takes upon himself the responsibility of the aggression against the Pandavas.

ततः शङ्खाश्च भेर्यश्च पणवानकगोमुखाः । सहसैवाभ्यहन्यन्त स शब्दस्तुमुलोऽभवत् ॥ १-१३ ॥

tataḥ śaṅkhāśca bheryaśca paṇavānakagomukhāḥ | sahasaivābhyahanyanta sa śabdastumulo'bhavat || 1-13 ||

tatah: then; *sankhah*: conchshells; *ca*: and; *bheryah*: large drums; *ca*: and; *panava*: smaller drums; *anaka*: smaller drums; *go-mukhah*: large trumpets; *sahasa*: together; *eva*: certainly; *abhyahanyanta*: were sounded; *sah*: that; *śabdah*: sound; *tumulah*: tumultuous; *abhavat*: became.

Then there was a tumultuous sound from the simultaneous playing of *sankha* (conchshells), *bherya* (large drums), *panava anaka* (smaller drums) and *go-mukha* (trumpets).

Besides the conchshells, various other musical instruments were adding to the tumultuous sound announcing the imminent battle. A *bherya* is a very large one-sided drum, with an iron body on which a buffalo skin is stretched. A *panava* is a smaller drum, double-sided; it has a body made of iron or wood, and goat or sheep skin at both ends. The *anaka* (also called *mridanga*) is still smaller, barrel-shaped and double-sided (one side is smaller than the other); the body is made of baked clay or wood (preferably jackfruit wood), with multiple layers of goat skin at both ends, with a rim of stronger buffalo skin. A *go-mukha* is a kind of trumpet/ horn shaped like the face of a cow, resembling a kind of short funnel; at present its use has become very rare.

ततः श्वेतैर्हयैर्युक्ते महति स्यन्दने स्थितौ । माधवः पाण्डवश्चैव दिव्यौ शङ्खौ प्रदध्मतुः ॥ १-१४ ॥

tataḥ śvetairhayairyukte mahati syandane sthitau | mādavaḥ paṇḍavaścaiva divyau śaṅkhau pradadhmauḥ || 1-14 ||

tatah: then; *svetaih*: white; *hayaih*: horses; *yukte*: yoked; *mahati*: great; *syandane*: chariot; *sthitau*: situated; *madhavaḥ*: Krishna; *pandavaḥ*: Arjuna; *ca*: and; *eva*: certainly; *divyau*: divine; *sankhau*: conchshells; *pradadhmauḥ*: sounded.

At that time Madhava (Krishna, the husband of the Mother Goddess) and Pandava (Arjuna, the son of Pandu) also sounded their divine conchshells, from their great chariot pulled by white horses.

Madhava is one of the names of Krishna, meaning “the husband of Mother”, intended as the Mother Goddess. Pandava is one of the names of Arjuna, meaning “the son of Pandu”.

This great chariot described in the verse was given to Arjuna by Agni. The *Mahabharata* explains that as Duryodhana was not willing to give up the capital of the kingdom Indraprastha, the Pandavas decided to make a capital of their own and were allotted Khandava, a wild forest at a certain distance from the populated region. Arjuna dedicated the forest to Agni, the personification of fire, and pleased by this act of devotion, Agni presented him with the wonderful chariot and with special horses that would never become tired or be wounded by ordinary weapons.

The color of the horses (white) symbolizes *sattva*. These four white horses are called Balahak, Megha, Shaibya and Sugriva. On the same occasion, Agni personally asked Varuna for the Gandiva bow and presented this, too, to Arjuna. On the cleared land of Khandavaprastha, the Pandavas built a magnificent city with the help of Maya Danava and with the wealth donated by the many kings who accepted Yudhishthira as the lawful emperor and supported the Pandavas. Crazed with envy, Duryodhana plotted the famous dice game in such a way that Yudhishthira could not refuse to participate, and by treachery he caused the Pandavas to lose everything. Sometimes people criticize Yudhishthira for gambling his capital city and even his own freedom and the freedom of his wife and brothers, saying that it was immoral to

gamble his wife like chattel. Thus they compare him to the ordinary degraded *sudra* gamblers who are ready to stake everything for the mere excitement of the game because they are addicted to the adrenaline rush and to the illusion of easy money. Such foolish and superficial critics, being *sudras* themselves, are unable to understand the mind of a genuine *kshatriya* - who only lives for the protection of the *prajas*.

A *kshatriya* is constantly ready to stake his own life and indirectly his family in every battle, every day of his life, and his family know this very well. Yudhisthira, the son of Dharmaraja, chose to stake his own person first, and then his own family, in the bloodless attempt to eliminate the danger posed by Duryodhana to the entire kingdom. If Yudhisthira had won the match, Duryodhana would have been forced to back down and acknowledge defeat, just like in an ordinary clash on the battlefield - only with less traumatic consequences for the kingdom. The *kshatriya* spirit is manifested as bravery in the face of a challenge. Arjuna and the other Pandavas had tried everything to avoid this war, but the determination of Duryodhana and his father Dhritarashtra thwarted all their efforts. Duryodhana even had the audacity to try to make Krishna a prisoner when he volunteered to go to Indraprastha to negotiate a peace agreement. To the request of the Pandavas to have at least one village where the citizens could take shelter in their protection, Duryodhana scornfully replied that he would not allow them even the land sufficient to plant a needle. Now that the military encounter has become inevitable, Arjuna and Krishna blow in their conchshells to show that they are not scared by the tumultuous noise made by the Kaurava army. But there is a difference: the conchshells of Arjuna and Krishna are called divine, whereas Bhishma's conchshell is an ordinary one, and so are the other conchshells of the Kauravas. Some unfortunate people believe that the Pandavas are the villains of the *Mahabharata* or at least ordinary individuals, but with such judgment these critics demonstrate their total lack of understanding for *dharma*, as well as their ignorance of what Vyasa wrote in this very text.

पाञ्चजन्यं हृषीकेशो देवदत्तं धनञ्जयः । पौण्ड्रं दध्मौ महाशङ्खं भीमकर्मा वृकोदरः ॥ १-१५ ॥

pāñcajanyaṁ ḥṛṣīkeśo devadattaṁ dhanañjayaḥ | pauṇḍraṁ dadhmau mahāśaṅkhaṁ bhīmakarmā vṛkodaraḥ || 1-15 ||

pancajanyaṁ: Panchajanya; *hrishikesah*: Hrishikesha; *devadattam*: Devadatta; *dhananjayah*: Dhananjaya; *paundram*: Paundram; *dadhmau*: blew; *maha*: great; *sankham*: conchshell; *bhima*: fierce; *karma*: activities; *vrika*: wolf; *udarah*: bellied.

Hrishikesha (Krishna) blew into (his conchshell) Panchajanya, Dhananjaya (Arjuna) (blew) into (his conchshell) Devadatta, and the wolf-bellied (Bhimasena) the hero of formidable deeds (blew), into the huge (conchshell) Paundram.

Hrishikesha is one of the names of Krishna, meaning "the Lord of the senses". Not to be confused with Rishikesha, of "the Lord of the female Rishis", that is one of the names of Shiva Mahadeva, after whom the city of Rishikesha, in the Himalayan foothills, is named.

Dhananjaya is one of the names of Arjuna, meaning "conqueror of wealth"; the name refers to the campaign by which Arjuna traveled in various regions to collect funds from allies in order to build their new capital Khandavaprastha and perform the Rajasuya yajna.

The description *bhima-karma vrikodarah* refers to Bhima or Bhimasena the son of Pandu, who was famous for his insatiable hunger, his powerfully built body and his formidable deeds. The word *bhima* means "fierce, terrible, powerful, formidable". Among the five Pandavas, Bhimasena is considered the wildest and is associated with non-aryan traditions.

The Panchajanya conchshell has a very interesting story. According to *Hari vamsa* (89:15-17) Krishna killed an *asura* named Panchajanya who had taken the form of a whale, and from the bones of this *asura* all the conchshells were created: *pancha-jane daitya-visishe bhavah pancha-janyah, pancha-jano nama daityah samudre timira-rupa asit*. It seems that this *lila* was performed by Krishna at the completion of his education in the Gurukula; when it was time to offer the *guru dakshina* to Sandipani, the Muni asked for the return of his son, who had disappeared into the ocean. Varuna (the Deva of the ocean) informed Krishna that the boy had been devoured by the *asura*, and therefore Krishna killed it; afterwards Krishna went to reclaim the boy from Yama, and returned him to his parents. Panchajanya is also a name given to a particular type of conchshell that naturally contains a smaller one; the one worshiped in the Chamundesvari temple in Mysore contains two more. According to the *Skanda-purana* the best conchshells are found in Kusa-sthalis such as Rameshvaram, Sri Lanka, Chennai, and Jagannatha Puri. The other conchshells mentioned in connection to the Pandavas are also characteristically found in holy pilgrimage places: the Deva datta is found near the Tamraparni river (Sangamesvara temple), the Paundra is found where the river Kaveri joins the sea, the Ananta vijaya near Dvaraka (Somanatha temple), the Su ghosha in the Sankha tirtha on the banks of the Yamuna (Vrajamandala), and the Mani pushpa in Agni tirtha in south India (Rameshvaram). These are all sacred conchshells, worthy of being worshiped.

अनन्तविजयं राजा कुन्तीपुत्रो युधिष्ठिरः । नकुलः सहदेवश्च सुघोषमणिपुष्पकौ ॥ १-१६ ॥

anantavijayaṁ rājā kuntīputro yudhiṣṭhiraḥ | nakulaḥ sahadevaśca sughoṣamaṇipuṣpakau || 1-16 ||

ananta: endless; *vijayam*: victories; *rajah*: the king; *kunti*: of Kunti; *putrah*: son; *yudhisthirah*: Yudhisthira; *nakulah*: Nakula; *sahadevah*: Sahadeva; *ca*: and; *su*: good; *ghosha*: sound; *mani*: jewel; *pushpakau*: blossoming.

King Yudhisthira, the son of Kunti, (sounded his conchshell) Anantavijaya, and Nakula and Sahadeva (sounded their conchshells) Sughosha and Manipushpaka.

Yudhisthira means "one who remains firm in battle". Yudhisthira is the eldest of the five Pandava brothers, born from Kunti and Dharmaraja (Yamaraja). In Vedic civilization, seminal birth is not considered more valid than adoption - both the material type and the spiritual type. The spiritual type of adoption is discipleship, by which a person chooses to enter the *kula* ("family") of a Guru. In India there is still a legal option in court and identity documents for one to use his/her spiritual name as legitimate legal identity and to state "disciple of" instead of "son of".

Kunti, too, was an adopted child. Her father Surasena (who was also father of Vasudeva, the husband of Devaki and father of Krishna) gave her in adoption to his dear friend Kuntibhoja who was childless. So she became known as Kunti, although she is also treated by Krishna as his respected aunt; Krishna often addresses Arjuna as Kunti-putra, "son of Kunti". The name *putra* means "son" and is said to refer to the traditional duty of sons (and daughters, hence *putri*) to offer oblations to their departed ancestors so that their souls can obtain benefits. Sometimes the comparison is made with a similar word, *mutra*, that means "urine". The *shastras* say that there is a great difference between *putra* and *mutra*, although they appear to come from one's body in a similar way. To be a real *putra* one must be worthy of such definition.

Yudhisthira is called *raja*, "king", because he successfully performed the Rajasuya yajna and was recognized as such by a great number of people, not only by the kings and other great *kshatriyas* who became allies and paid him tribute, but also by great numbers of subjects who flocked to Khandavaprastha abandoning Indraprastha because of the bad governance of Duryodhana.

काश्यश्च परमेष्वासः शिखण्डी च महारथः । धृष्टद्युम्नो विराटश्च सात्यकिश्चापराजितः ॥ १-१७ ॥

kāśyaśca parameṣvāsaḥ śikhāṇḍī ca mahārathaḥ | dhṛṣṭadyumno virāṭaśca sātyakiścāparājitaḥ || 1-17 ||

kasyah: (king) of Kashi; *ca*: and; *parama*: great; *ishu asah*: archer; *sikhandi*: Sikhandi; *ca*: and; *maha*: great; *rathah*: chariot; *dhristadyumnah*: Drishtadyumna; *viratah*: Virata; *ca*: and; *satyaki*: Satyaki; *ca*: and; *apara*: by no others; *jitah*: vanquished.

The great archer the king of Kashi, Maharatha Sikhandi, Drishtadyumna, Virata and Satyaki who was never vanquished in battle,

Maharatha Sikhandi is the adopted son/ daughter of Drupada. The story of Sikhandi is very interesting. Originally called Amba, she was the daughter of the king of Kashi and sister of Ambika and Ambalika, who became the wives of Vicitravirya, the brother of Bhishma. When Bhishma took the terrible vow renouncing the *kshatriya* duty of marrying and having heirs who could take care of the kingdom, neither his step mother Satyawati nor his father Santanu expected that the future children born of the new marriage would be unable to give a descendant to the dynasty. Chitrangada (also called Chitraratha) was killed when he was still very young and Vichitravirya also died young, soon after his marriage and before being able to beget sons. It is said he was afflicted by tuberculosis and a weak heart, so it is possible he was impotent, too. As Vicitravirya was not fit to win himself a wife through the traditional *svayamvara* system, intended to test the valor and strength of the aspirant, it was decided that Bhishma would go in his stead to represent the dynasty. The powerful and radiant Bhishma won all the three daughters of the king of Varanasi (Kashi), but during the journey to Indraprastha the princesses came to know that they were not going to marry their hero Bhishma, but his weakling brother Vicitravirya. Ambika and Ambalika somehow digested the news as there was no other option but accepting their fate, but Amba had previously been attracted to Salva, one of the *kshatriya* kings that had participated to the *svayamvara* and had been defeated by Bhishma.

With Bhishma's permission, Amba ran off to marry Salva, but the proud *kshatriya* could not bear the idea of being "second choice" or forget having been defeated by Bhishma in public, so he sent Amba back to the hero who had won her. Amba then pleaded with Bhishma to marry her and save her from the shame of having to return unmarried to her father's house, but Bhishma had taken the terrible vow.

Amba went to Bhishma's teacher Parasurama begging for help and Parasurama instructed Bhishma to marry Amba, as a *kshatriya's dharma* demands that he gives shelter to anyone who asks for it. Bhishma chose to honor truthfulness over all other considerations, and Amba started on a desperate revenge mission, going to each and every *kshatriya* of the land, begging them to avenge her honor by killing Bhishma, but nobody dared to challenge the powerful hero. Finally, Amba approached Shiva Mahadeva. After a long and severe penance, she obtained the boon of becoming a great warrior herself, able to personally kill Bhishma to avenge herself. Shiva instructed her to become the son of king Drupada, and she did.

It is likely that she did not take another seminal birth but she was rather accepted in adoption by Drupada and started to dress, behave and train like a man, because when she finally faces Bhishma in the battle, Bhishma will refuse to fight against her "because she is a woman". Not that women warriors could not fight on battlefields at those times - but certainly Bhishma remembered the anguish of young Amba and the circumstances where her hatred had developed. He felt a deep sense of compassion and sympathy for her and personal guilt for having caused so much pain, so the idea of hurting or even killing her in a fight was intolerable for him.

Dhristadyumna is the son of Drupada and brother of Draupadi; both were born from the sacrificial fire in the ritual performed by Drupada to get a descendant that could destroy Drona. Virata is the father in law of Arjuna's son Abhimanyu. The Pandavas remained incognito at his court for one year, during which Arjuna taught dance and other arts to princess Uttara, the young daughter of Virata, developing a deep relationship of friendship and trust with her. At the end of the incognito period, Arjuna resumed his normal identity as a powerful *kshatriya* warrior and Virata asked him to marry his daughter, but as Arjuna had a parental and friendly relationship with the very young Uttara, Arjuna suggested that she married his own son, Abhimanyu. Satyaki, also called Yuyudhana, is a famous warrior from the family of Krishna. He accompanied Krishna in the fight against Banasura and also on the occasion when Krishna went to Indraloka to get a Parijata plant for his wife Satyabhama.

A-para-jitah means "not vanquished by others".

द्रुपदो द्रौपदेयाश्च सर्वशः पृथिवीपते । सौभद्रश्च महाबाहुः शङ्खान्दध्मुः पृथक्पृथक् ॥ १-१८ ॥

drupado draupadeyāśca sarvaśaḥ pṛthivīpate | saubhadraśca mahābāhuḥ śaṅkhāndadhmuḥ pṛthakpṛthak || 1-18 ||

drupadah: Drupada; *draupadeyah*: the sons of Draupadi; *ca*: and; *sarvasah*: all; *prithivi*: of the earth; *pate*: protector; *saubhadrah*: the son of Subhadra; *ca*: and; *maha*: great; *bahuh*: armed; *sankhan*: conchshells; *dadhmu*: blew; *prithak*: separately; *prithak*: separately.

Drupada and the sons of Draupadi, and the mighty-armed son of Subhadra – all of them, o Lord of the Earth, blew into their own conchshells.

Also the other great warriors of the Pandava army proceed to announce their presence on the battlefield and their willingness to stand by the side of their allies. Three generations of warriors are present on the battlefield - from king Drupada to his grandsons, the sons of his daughter Draupadi. The sons of Draupadi are the direct heirs to the throne, as Draupadi is the queen recognized by the *rajasuya yajna*. Subhadra is Krishna's sister. Abhimanyu, the son of Subhadra and Arjuna, is mentioned together with the highest ranks of royalty on the Pandavas' side. In fact, the son of Abhimanyu, Parikshit, will ascend the throne when the Pandavas retire. The expression *prithivi pate* means "o protector of the Earth", and is meant to remind Dhritarashtra that a king's only concern should be the protection of the kingdom and the Earth in general.

स घोषो धार्तराष्ट्राणां हृदयानि व्यदारयत् । नभश्च पृथिवीं चैव तुमुलोऽभ्यनुनादयन् ॥ १-१९ ॥

sa ghoṣo dhārtaraṣṭrāṇāṃ hṛdayāni vyadārayat | nabhaśca pṛthivīm caiva tumulo'bhyanunādayan || 1-19 ||

sah: that; *ghoshah:* sound; *dhartarashtranam:* of the (sons/ supporters/ allies) of Dhritarashtra; *hridayani:* the hearts; *vyadarayat:* shook; *nabhah:* the sky; *ca:* and; *prithivim:* the earth; *ca:* and; *eva:* certainly; *tumulah:* tumultuous; *abhyanutadayan:* resounded.

That tumultuous vibration shook the hearts of the sons of Dhritarashtra, reverberating into the sky and upon the earth.

Here we see that only Dhritarashtra's supporters are affected by the mighty sounds of the conchshells and other musical instruments. In spite of their superior numerical strength, they are clearly afraid because their cause is wrong. *Gita* will explain how freedom from the fear related to material identification and attachments and from karmic bondage can be attained only by those who act out of duty only, to serve *dharma* by supporting the progress of the universe - protecting good people, destroying evil doers, and establishing the ethical principles that constitute the eternal norm of the universe.

From Sanjaya's description in these verses, it is evident that he too disapproves Dhritarashtra's and Duryodhana's plans that led to the war, and that all his respect and admiration go to the divine personalities of Sri Krishna and Arjuna, and the virtuous Pandavas. Those ignorant fools who believe that the Pandavas are the villains of the *Mahabharata* have lost all their intelligence and common sense because of offenses they have committed.

अथ व्यवस्थितान्दृष्ट्वा धार्तराष्ट्रान् कपिध्वजः । प्रवृत्ते शस्त्रसम्पाते धनुरुद्यम्य पाण्डवः ॥ १-२० ॥

atha vyavasthitāndṛṣṭvā dhārtaraṣṭrān kapidhvajaḥ | pravṛtṭe śastrasampāte dhanurudyamya pāṇḍavaḥ || 1-20 ||

atha: then; *vyavasthitan:* positioned; *dṛṣṭva:* seeing; *dhartarashtran:* the (supporters) of Dhritarashtra; *kapi:* the ape; *dhwajah:* the flag; *pravritte:* getting ready; *sastra:* weapon; *sampate:* to launch; *dhanuh:* the bow; *udyamya:* taking up; *pandavah:* the son of Pandu.

O king, positioned in his chariot bearing the flag of Hanuman, the son of Pandu (Arjuna) saw the sons and supporters of Dhritarashtra. He readied his weapons for battle and picked up his bow, then he spoke these words to Hrishikesha (Krishna).

Kapi-dhwaja is one of Arjuna's many names, as his banner bears the effigy of Hanuman, the great Vanara warrior that fought at Rama's service. There is a story about this fact: just like Bhima, Arjuna too met Hanuman (who is also a manifestation of Shiva). On that occasion, Arjuna mentioned that Rama could have built a bridge made of arrows instead of stones, and demonstrated his skills by creating an arrow bridge across the river, invoking the support of Krishna. When Hanuman tested the strength of the construction, he was surprised to find his Lord Rama under the bridge, supporting it personally. Recognizing the identity of Rama and Krishna, Hanuman pledged his help to Arjuna during the upcoming battle.

It is important to understand that the definition of "monkey" here does not refer here to an ordinary monkey, because Hanuman is not an ordinary monkey, just like Garuda is not an ordinary bird and Sesha is not an ordinary snake. The greatest warriors carried a flag with their personal emblem, so that they could be easily recognizable and only people who were on the same level of skills and strength, or were well aware about the possible outcome of the clash, would face them in the fight. This ethical sense of warfare is the characteristic of the dharmic *kshatriyas*, who only fight against willing and suitable opponents.

Hrishikesha, the particular name by which Krishna is called in this verse, means "he who can control the senses", and at a more symbolic level refers to the Paramatma, the "soul of the soul", whose direction should drive the white horses of our purified senses to pull the chariot of our body on the battlefield of life.

The chariot itself is a powerful symbol, with the horses, the wheels, and its various parts, representing the vehicle constituted by our material body, of which Krishna will speak in the next chapter.

अर्जुन उवाच ।

arjuna uvāca |

हृषीकेशं तदा वाक्यमिदमाह महीपते । सेनयोरुभयोर्मध्ये रथं स्थापय मेऽच्युत ॥ १-२१ ॥

hrīśīkeśaṃ tadā vākyaṃ idamāha mahīpate | senayorubhayormadhye ratham sthāpaya me'acyuta || 1-21 ||

hrishikesam: to Hrishikesha; *tada:* then; *vakyam:* speech; *idam:* this; *aha:* said; *mahi:* of the Earth; *pate:* o Lord; *arjunah:* Arjuna; *uvaca:* said; *senayoh:* the armies; *ubhayoh:* the two; *madhye:* in the middle; *ratham:* chariot; *sthapaya:* position; *me:* for me; *acyuta:* Achyuta.

then he spoke these words to Hrishikesha (Krishna). Arjuna said: “O Achyuta (Krishna), please station the chariot (in the middle of the battlefield) between the two armies,”

Achyuta literally means "infallible", or "one who does not fall down", "one who is not affected by time, space and circumstance" and refers to the Lord, who never falls into illusion and ignorance even when he appears in this world to execute his mission. Similarly, all those who take shelter in the Lord, accepting him as their all in all, become *achyuta*, part of the transcendental "family" or *gotra* of the Lord, beyond all material identifications of birth or social position. One who treats the members of the "Acyutra gotra" with disrespect actually becomes an offender to the lotus feet of the Lord and loses all his own *punya*.

Arjuna is asking Krishna to take the chariot in front of the two armies in order to assess the situation and face the inevitable clash. Krishna accepted the position of Arjuna's charioteer to help his friend when the war was declared. On that day both Duryodhana and Arjuna had gone to see Krishna to ask for his assistance; Duryodhana had reached first and as Krishna was sleeping, he had sat at his bed head. More humbly, Arjuna chose to sit at the feet of Krishna's bed, so when Krishna opened his eyes, he saw Arjuna first and asked him what he wished to get from him for the upcoming war - either the powerful army of Dvaraka or Krishna himself, who would not be carrying weapons or engaging in the fight. Duryodhana was worried because the first choice was offered to Arjuna, but with immense relief he saw that Arjuna chose Krishna, so Duryodhana could secure Krishna's mighty army for himself. Thus Krishna became Partha-sa-rathi, the charioteer of Arjuna.

यावदेतान्निरिक्षेऽहं योद्धुकामानवस्थितान् । कैर्मया सह योद्धव्यमस्मिन् रणसमुद्यमे ॥ १-२२ ॥

yāvadetānnirikṣe'haṁ yoddhukāmānavasthitān | kairmayā saha yoddhavyamasmin raṇasamudyame || 1-22 ||

yavad: as far as; *etan*: these; *nirikṣe*: I will look at; *aham*: I; *yoddhu*: to fight; *kaman*: desiring; *avasthitān*: gathered/ arrayed; *kair*: with whom; *maya*: me; *saha*: with; *yoddhavyam*: I am to fight; *asmin*: in this; *rana*: battle; *samyudame*: in the strife.

"so that I can see these people who have taken position here desiring the war, the persons against whom I will have to fight in this battle."

The word *yavad* means "up to", "as far as", "as long as", both in terms of space and time. Arjuna is clearly specifying in his request the purpose of the move, so that the chariot can be directed in the most precise way. Arjuna's request expresses a lingering disbelief at the idea that so many people had openly taken the side of *adharma* in the impending war, to the point of desiring to fight against him and the Pandavas on the battlefield. So he wants to look in their eyes to find out for himself how determined they are, and how much passionate they are for a fight that has the only purpose of serving the selfish and arrogant schemes of Duryodhana. Good people always expect others to have the same ethical mentality, especially when they think of their own family members, friends and teachers. When we find out that they have actually chosen *adharma* - for one reason or another - it is a great shock.

The word *kaman*, "desirous", is plural, and hints at the great number of the fighters. According to the ethical code of the *kshatriya* warriors, a battle can be engaged only with eager combatants, who are of similar valor and strength and carry similar weapons and are on the same situation - both fighters should be on chariots, or on horses, on elephants, or on foot.

A victory obtained by attacking an enemy that is in an inferior position, who is distracted, unprepared to fight, would be as disgraceful as losing the fight. With this quick inspection of the armies, Arjuna is thus mentally preparing a list of the people he will have to face in the battle, to kill them or to be killed by them.

योत्स्यमानानवेक्षेऽहं य एतेऽत्र समागताः । धार्तराष्ट्रस्य दुर्बुद्धेयुद्धे प्रियचिकीर्षवः ॥ १-२३ ॥

yotsyamānānavekṣe'haṁ ya ete'tra samāgatāḥ | dhārtaraṣṭrasya durbuddheryuddhe priyacikīrṣavaḥ || 1-23 ||

yotsyamanan: those who will fight; *avekṣe*: I see; *aham*: I; *ye*: them; *ete*: these; *atra*: here; *samagataḥ*: gathered; *dhartaraṣṭra-sya*: of Dhritarastra; *durbuddheh*: the evil-minded; *yuddhe*: in the fight; *priya*: affection/ pleasure; *cikirsavaḥ*: who wish.

"I understand that those who have assembled here are determined to participate to this war and will fight to please the evil-minded son of Dhritarastra."

Dhritarastra was Pandu's elder brother, but as he was born blind he was considered unable to take care of the kingdom, so Pandu ascended the throne. Physical blindness does not automatically disqualify one completely from all activities; one can have eyesight problems or other physical handicaps and yet be knowledgeable, wise, and capable of performing some kind of useful work to earn a livelihood instead of relying on charitable assistance from others. But a king's job requires the full functionality of all senses and a bodily strength and dexterity that is greater than the average, in order to successfully counteract all internal and external threats to the well being, safety and progress of the *prajas*. If it is unwise to grant a car driving license to a blind person, just imagine how much more dangerous it would be to have a blind person driving an entire government, an entire country. Unfortunately, shortly after he ascended the throne, Pandu had a hunting accident in which he involuntarily killed a Rishi, and he was cursed to die without being able to generate an heir. Therefore he retired to the forest with his two wives Kunti and Madri, determined to engage in severe austerities to expiate his crime, hoping that in such a way he might be able to counteract the curse. Pandu's absence certainly gave Dhritarastra the chance to get some power, with the help of Bhishma and others, who initially must have been mostly concerned about keeping the kingdom in working order until a really qualified heir was produced. Pandu's hopes rose again as Kunti was able to have five good sons by a powerful *mantra* that called great Devas (Yama, Vayu, Indra, and the Asvini Kumaras) to father children for her husband. Dhritarastra's wife Gandhari also became pregnant at the same time of Kunti. Gandhari's brother Shakuni was probably the one who most encouraged Dhritarastra's hopes of getting his own son on the throne, especially if he could be born before Pandu's first son. When Kunti gave birth first, Gandhari's dream of attaining the prestigious and powerful position of the Emperor's mother vanished. In terrible frustration and anger, she beat her own belly so hard that she had a miscarriage and the fetus came out prematurely as a shapeless lump of flesh. This was certainly not a good sign - the mother

evidently had some psychological problems and the general atmosphere in the household was not exactly dharmic and conducive for the proper training of a selfless protector of the kingdom.

Family attachments came into play again and Vyasa was called in to save the poor aborted baby and to fulfill a prophecy by which Gandhari would have 100 sons. So the lump of flesh was expertly divided into several containers and 100 test-tube babies were born. The great patience and leniency of their elders led Dhritarastra and Gandhari to think that it was fully legitimate for them to cut all kinds of corners and even go against the laws of nature and ethics in order to fulfill all their selfish ambitions. It was at that time that Dhritarastra decided that his eldest son Duryodhana would become the king, no matter what it would take. Dhritarastra had hoped that the sons of Pandu would remain in the forest and out of Duryodhana's way, so when Pandu died and the boys came to Indraprastha with their mother Kunti, a long series of evil schemes was hatched to kill the young Pandavas before they became adults. All assassination attempts failed, but the only person who helped the Pandavas at that time was Vidura, and even so he had to do it secretly, because the entire court was expected to support Dhritarastra's schemes.

It is not difficult to believe that the main plotters remained devoid of any sense of justice or compassion towards the innocent young Pandavas, but not even Bhishma raised a finger to stop the mischief, simply because he was too materially affectionate to the poor blind Dhritarastra and his very spoiled son. There was no consideration for the benefit of the kingdom in the entire story, just material affection based on bodily identification and ties, as well as sentimental favoritism. This tendency is also visible today in many people and even in governments that sentimentally choose to give preference and priority to disabled persons or persons of backward origin just because of their handicaps, rather than helping capable, dedicated and qualified candidates that would deserve a better opportunity on consideration of actual merit and for the greatest benefit for society at large.

सञ्जय उवाच ।

sañjaya uvāca ।

एवमुक्तो हृषीकेशो गुडाकेशेन भारत । सेनयोरुभयोर्मध्ये स्थापयित्वा रथोत्तमम् ॥ १-२४ ॥

evamukto hr̥ṣīkeśo guḍākeśena bhārata । senayorubhayormadhye sthāpayitvā rathottamam ॥ 1-24 ॥

sanjayah: Sanjaya; *uvaca*: said; *evam*: thus; *uktah*: spoken; *hrishikesah*: Hrishikesha; *gudakesena*: by Gudakesa; *bharata*: o descendant of Bharata; *senayoh*: the armies; *ubhayoh*: the two; *madhye*: in the middle; *sthapayitva*: placing; *ratha*: chariot; *uttamam*: excellent.

Sanjaya said: O descendant of Bharata, hearing those words from Gudakesha (Arjuna), Hrishikesha (Krishna) took the wonderful chariot between the two armies.

In this verse Sanjaya addresses Dhritarastra as "descendant of Bharata", hinting that in order to be worthy of his illustrious ancestor, Dhritarastra should have behaved much better. Bharata was a great king, after whom ancient India was named.

Arjuna and Krishna are eternal companions and always travel together - just like they are now sitting on the same beautiful chariot. They are the Supreme Guru and the Supreme Personality of Godhead, also known as Nara and Narayana. One is called Gudakesha ("master of sleep") and the other is called Hrishikesha ("master of the senses"), to illustrate the importance of conquering laziness and inertia in the process of attaining control over the senses. Many people think that in order to control the senses and to eliminate material identifications and attachments, one should stop working altogether, give up all activities and duties, as in a sort of endless vacation where the valuable opportunity of human life is wasted without any material or spiritual benefit. Krishna will clearly and abundantly explain that this is not the proper way to perfection.

Material *sattva guna* that is not supported by active and selfless work and by a truly transcendental consciousness will inevitably slide into *tamas*. Therefore mere abstention from work just makes one a parasite of society and leads to conscious or subconscious engagement in detrimental activities, such as gossiping, talking about irrelevant topics, meddling into other people's affairs and lives, playing politics and power games at various levels, and pursuing subtle or not-so-subtle sense gratification.

A mendicant *sadhu*, a *sannyasi*, does not engage in ritual worship or other ordinary duties, but this does not mean that he is free from all responsibilities. On the contrary, one should renounce ordinary duties only to be able to engage fully and selflessly in the active service to the Supreme and Universal Good.

भीष्मद्रोणप्रमुखतः सर्वेषां च महीक्षिताम् । उवाच पार्थ पश्यैतान्समवेतान्कुरुनिति ॥ १-२५ ॥

bhīṣmadroṇapramukhataḥ sarveṣāṃ ca mahīkṣitām । uvāca pārtha paśyaitānsamavetaṅkurūniti ॥ 1-25 ॥

bhishmah: Bhishma; *dronah*: Drona; *pramukhataḥ* in front of; *sarvesham*: all; *ca*: and; *mahi*: of the Earth; *kshitam*: chieftains; *uvaca*: said; *partha*: o son of Pritha (Arjuna); *paśyaitan*: observed; *samavetan*: gathered; *kurun*: the Kurus; *iti*: thus.

In front of Bhishma, Drona and all the chieftains of the Earth, he said, "O son of Pritha (Arjuna), all the Kurus that you have observed are assembled here".

The wonderful conversation between Krishna and Arjuna that constitutes *Bhagavad gita* is purposefully spoken in the middle of the two armies so that not only Arjuna, but also Bhishma, Drona and all the chieftains who were assembled there will be able to hear Krishna's meaningful instructions. Arjuna and the Pandavas consider Bhishma and Drona are their most respectable elders, worthy of worship. Such is the respect commanded by Bhishma, that at the beginning of the battle Yudhisthira will calmly remove his own weapons and armor and walk fearlessly to the opposite front with folded hands to offer his homage to the Grandsire and ask his permission to engage in the battle.

Bhishma is the eldest member of the dynasty, the Grandsire that has single-handedly taken care both of the family and of the kingdom without ever attempting to enjoy the privileges of kingship for himself. He has clearly shown that he is extremely renounced, as well as

immensely powerful in personal strength and valor. Bhishma is also not an ordinary person, even if he plays that part in the particular *lila* of the *Mahabharata*. In fact he is one of the 12 *mahajanas*, the greatest spiritual authorities in the history of the universe, together with Brahma, Narada, Shiva, Yama, Kumara, Kapila, Svayambhuva Manu, Prahlada, Janaka, Bali and Vyasa (*Bhagavata Purana*, 6.3.20).

Drona is the Guru who taught martial arts to all the royal princes - both the Pandavas and the sons of Dhritarastra - therefore Arjuna owes him total obedience and respect. According to etiquette, in the presence of such elders one is expected to be submissive and humble, accepting whatever order they may decide to give, but here both Bhishma and Drona are standing between Arjuna and Dharma, defending the evil schemes of Duryodhana and his father. Krishna already knows what bothers Arjuna, and does not hesitate to take the position of the teacher even in front of such great personalities that apparently are his elders, too. So he calls Arjuna "son of Pritha" (Kunti) to remind him that they are cousins, close relatives and not just friends of the same age, and that Arjuna should make his mother proud by behaving bravely and in accordance to *dharma*.

By choosing to use the expression "the Kurus" to refer to the supporters of Dhritarastra and Duryodhana, Krishna is making an ironic remark. Both the sons of Pandu and the sons of Dhritarastra are descendants of the famous king Kuru, but Dhritarastra has chosen to claim such great ancestry exclusively for himself and his sons, on the false pretext that Pandu was not the "real father" of the Pandavas, although in Vedic society there is absolutely no difference between a seminally generated child and an adopted one. With this verbal jugglery Dhritarastra was attempting to deny the legitimate rights of the Pandavas to the throne, but Krishna turns the joke back against him. Dhritarastra's sons may be descendants of Kuru, but the Pandavas are much more than that: they are the valiant sons of whom Pandu was extremely proud, but they are also manifestations of the most powerful Devas of the universe.

तत्रापश्यत्स्थितान्पार्थः पितृनथ पितामहान् । आचार्यान्मातुलान्भ्रातृन्पुत्रान्पौत्रान्सखींस्तथा ॥ १-२६ ॥

tatrāpaśyatsthītānpārthah pitṛnatha pitāmahān | ācāryānmatulānbhrātr̥nputrānpautrānsakhīṁstathā || 1-26 ||

tatra: there; *apasyat*: he saw; *sthitan*: standing; *parthah*: the son of Pritha (Arjuna); *pitrin*: fathers; *atha*: as well as; *pitamahan*: grandfathers; *acaryan*: teachers; *matulan*: maternal uncles; *bhratrin*: brothers; *putran*: sons; *pautran*: grandsons; *sakhin*: friends; *tatha*: as well.

The son of Pritha (Arjuna), saw there standing (on the battlefield) fathers, as well as grandfathers, teachers, uncles, brothers, sons, nephews, friends,

Vedic civilization gives great importance to family as the building block of society, because it is in the family that a child is nurtured with love and affection, constant care, and the emotional feelings that will determine his/her future perspective on him/herself, others, the world and life itself. The first period of one's childhood, starting with conception and pregnancy, is usually the most influential - both in a positive and negative sense - for absorbing the basic foundations of ethical behavior, personal motivations, the general understanding of knowledge and reality, and the life example of those who live around us and become our role models.

Matulah is the maternal uncle. Contrarily to what some people think, traditionally mother's family members and especially mother's brothers, have a great importance in the life of a child. The relationship between brothers and sisters used to be very strong, and it is still celebrated in the popular festival called *raksha-bandhan*, by which the brother solemnly takes the responsibility to protect his sister from all dangers.

Bhratrin or "brothers" also includes cousins, as the Vedic family mentality tends to have all children living together without discriminations about who is the father or mother of each single child. On the other hand, seniority is considered extremely important; so a first born has more responsibilities towards his/her siblings, and therefore is entitled to more respect. Arjuna's concern is not just about his own relationship with the people he sees, because in that case he would not mention "fathers" or "grandfathers", as neither Pandu nor Vasudeva or Surasena (or even Vidura or Dhritarastra) were present.

Therefore we cannot say that Arjuna's sadness comes from his own material identification and attachments: what horrifies him is not the imminent loss of his dear kith and kin, but the extent of the madness and damage for the entire kingdom and for the entire planet that Duryodhana has brought about because of his stubborn selfishness and arrogance.

All the warriors positioned on the battlefield in both armies for that fratricidal war were related to each other by friendship or family ties, and Arjuna understands that their hostility is due not to personal reasons or incompatibility of interests, but is simply caused by the determination of Dhritarastra's son, who has manipulated them in a way or another to force them into such a deadly predicament. All those people were just instruments that would have to clash against each other because of someone else's choices, and they were not really responsible for the disaster they will cause and suffer.

The worst thing that one can do is taking action without understanding the import of the future consequences of such action, for oneself and for others, and for the entire world as well. Foolish people think that their responsibility ends with the completion of the action they have decided to take - getting the job done, whether it is securing an income for their family, putting food on the table, cleaning up their own house, taking a vacation, or purchasing some consumers' goods.

They prefer not to think about the exploitation and destruction of resources or the various other types of damages caused by the company that employs them, for the sufferings of the innocent animals that are killed in the process, for the pollution and degradation of the environment, for the destruction of cultures, or any other disaster that will be triggered by the consequences of consequences - such as global warming, widespread psychological imbalances, and a general rise of Adharma. But the price will have to be paid, sooner or later.

In this verse and in the next, Arjuna is called "son of Pritha" and "son of Kunti" to emphasize the fact that he considers himself one of the many children of Mother Earth (Pritihvi), who is affectionate to all her progeny. Just like the Lord is the father of all creatures, Earth/Nature is their mother.

श्वशुरान्सुहृदश्चैव सेनयोरुभयोरपि । तान्समीक्ष्य स कौन्तेयः सर्वान्बन्धूनवस्थितान् ॥ १-२७ ॥

śvaśurānsuhṛdaścaiva senayorubhayorapi | tānsamīkṣya sa kaunteyaḥ sarvānbandhūnavasthitān | | 1-27 | |

svasuran: fathers in law; *suhridah*: well wishers; *ca*: and; *eva*: certainly; *senayoh*: the armies; *ubhayoh*: the two; *api*: also; *tan*: them; *samikshya*: seeing; *sah*: he; *kaunteyah*: the son of Kunti (Arjuna); *sarvan*: all; *bandhun*: tied to each other; *avasthitan*: placed.

fathers in law and well-wishers (facing each other) in the two armies. The son of Kunti (Arjuna) saw all those people tied to one another by ties of affection, positioned there (for the battle).

The word *suhridah* is usually translated as "well wisher", in its most literal sense, because it refers to a person who has very good sentiments for us in his/her heart and wants us to be blessed with all good things, even if s/he is not our relative or friend in the ordinary sense. The word *bandhu* refers to loving ties, to a close relationship that unites people intimately, either on the level of friendship or on the level of family relations. In either case, there is a strong and sincere affection involved, and not just some superficial kinship based on social obligations and conventions. Not all family relationships can be categorized as such. Sharing the same blood is not a guarantee that two people will have true affection for each other, or even just understand or like each other. History and stories from all cultures witness to that, and in addition, the bad influence of Kali yuga, the age of quarrel and falsity, can only make things worse.

Of course we can still have affection and care for a friend or relative that has different qualities and inclinations from us, even considerably. Love and affection depend on emotions, and can be shared between people who are very different from each other. Husband and wife, for example, may not be able or inclined to engage in the same type of activities, but they find happiness in each other's company anyway just because they love and care for each other. Similarly, a parent will love his or her children, even when they are babies and they have not manifested any qualities yet. However, these emotional ties can somehow be missing, especially in case of persons who have a bad nature and are incapable of loving - persons who prefer to hate, envy, despise or fear others, or are so selfish that they have no concern for others and see everyone just as an instrument to be manipulated and exploited in order to get some personal benefit and gratification for oneself. This can be found even in the most intimate relationships - parents towards children, children towards parents, husband towards wife, wife towards husband, and a sibling towards another, and even more so among general relatives and kinsmen. In this case, according to the Vedic tradition, we are not expected to remain faithful to such relationships if they lead us away from *dharma* and into a state of degradation and misuse of the opportunity of human life. Of course everybody has defects and everybody can make mistakes, so we should allow ample opportunities to our next of kin so that they can understand things better and reform themselves. We should not abandon a person who depends on us just because of some disagreement or even some occasional fighting, and especially we should not blame others for not being what we imagined and expected them to be.

कृपया पर्याविष्टो विषीदन्निदमब्रवीत् ।

kṛpayā parayāviṣṭo viśīdannidamabravit |

अर्जुन उवाच ।

arjuna uvāca |

दृष्ट्वेमं स्वजनं कृष्ण युयुत्सुं समुपस्थितम् ॥ १-२८ ॥

dr̥ṣṭvemaṁ svajanaṁ kṛṣṇa yuyutsuṁ samupasthitam | | 1-28 | |

kripaya: by compassion; *para*: supreme/ transcendental; *ayavishtah*: pervaded; *vishidan*: lamenting; *idam*: this; *abravit*: said; *arjunah*: Arjuna; *uvaca*: said; *drishtva*: seeing; *imam*: these; *sva*: own; *janam*: people; *krishna*: o Krishna; *yuyutsum*: in a fighting spirit; *samupasthitam*: present.

was overwhelmed by a great compassion, and spoke these pained words. Arjuna said: "O Krishna, after seeing all these kinsmen, assembled here ready to fight against each other (in this fratricidal war),"

Arjuna's compassion is called *kripa para*, "a transcendental compassion", because he is aware of all the results of the impending disaster, not only in this life but also in future lives. His compassion is not merely material, but spiritual as well. Also, he is not only concerned about the fate of the warriors that are present on the battlefield, but about the future of their families, of society and the kingdom, and the world in general, too.

Vishada, or lamentation, gives the name to the first chapter of *Bhagavad gita*: *Arjuna vishada yoga*. Some commentators dislike this title, arguing that "lamentation" has nothing to do with *yoga* - otherwise all the people in the world, including the less evolved and uncultured, would have to be considered very advanced *yogis*. Such reasoning shows a serious lack of understanding, not to speak of the lack of respect demonstrated towards the *shastra*. A truly intelligent person is humble and always questions his/her own understanding first, whenever contradictions or irrelevant points seem to appear in the genuine *shastra*.

The first step in the journey of spiritual realization starts with the understanding of the reality of sorrow in life: this material world has been designed to be temporary, plagued by ignorance and sufferings, so that the frustration generated by the friction between its characteristic nature and the soul's aspirations for eternity, knowledge and bliss can cause a crisis of consciousness. This is why suffering has been engineered as the main ingredient of this world - as caused by one's own body and mind (*adhyatmika klesa*), by other living entities (*adhibhautika klesa*) and by the natural forces controlled by the archetypal personifications (*adhidaivika klesa*). There is no escaping these threefold sufferings, no matter how hard one tries, because they are inherent in material nature.

Evolution is always triggered by a crisis. When everything is well, people tend to slack down and become complacent and lazy, while challenges and tests help us to learn and improve ourselves. Some students hate and dread the time when exams come, but the crisis of the impending trial spurs them to put an extra effort in their studies, especially in the earliest stages of one's education, when the spontaneous

taste for knowledge has not developed yet. In his compassion, Arjuna is teaching us by playing the role of the conditioned soul who is overwhelmed by lamentation and confusion, but we should not think that he is really under the power of ignorance. Whenever a great transcendental personality descends in this world, a drama is organized to illustrate the teachings that need to be imparted on mankind. Another famous *avatara*, the Buddha, centered his entire teaching plan on the understanding of suffering, by explaining the Four Noble Truths:

1. the Truth of suffering: the world is full of sufferings; life that is not free from passion and desire is always heavy with sufferings because in this world everything is temporary and imperfect,
2. the Truth of the cause of suffering: undoubtedly the cause of suffering is found in the desires of the body and in the illusions of the mind,
3. the Truth of cessation of suffering: if we can eliminate the attachment to desires and passions, suffering automatically ceases,
4. the Truth of the cessation of the cause of suffering: in order to attain this level of detachment from desires and passion, one must follow the Noble Eightfold Path: Right vision, Right thinking, Right speaking, Right behavior, Right livelihood, Right effort, Right awareness, Right dedication.

Which, in other words, means serving *dharma* as taught in *Gita*.

सीदन्ति मम गात्राणि मुखं च परिशुष्यति । वेपथुश्च शरीरे मे रोमहर्षश्च जायते ॥ १-२९ ॥

śīdanti mama gātrāṇi mukhaṁ ca pariśuṣyati | vepathuśca śarīre me romaharṣaśca jāyate || 1-29 ||

śīdanti: faint; *mama*: my; *gātrāṇi*: limbs; *mukhaṁ*: mouth; *ca*: and; *pariśuṣyati*: is drying completely; *vepathuś*: trembling; *ca*: and; *śarīre*: body; *me*: my; *roma harṣah*: hair standing on end; *ca*: and; *jāyate*: becomes.

"I feel my limbs losing their strength and my mouth drying up. My body is trembling and my hair is standing on end."

In this verse we find the clear description of a very powerful emotion that causes visible physical symptoms. There are many negative and positive emotions that have such an effect, both on the material and the spiritual level - including the highest level of transcendental ecstasy known as *mahabhava*. An apparently pitiable condition in devotional service may appear to be distressing to the inexperienced student, but the feelings of the devotee in this condition are actually ecstatic. Because of the agitation of the *pranas* in the body, normal breathing is disrupted (temporarily suspended, slowed down, or fastened considerably), the energy drains from the limbs sometimes to the point of losing external consciousness, hairs stand on end and the skin can get goose pimples or rashes and eruptions, the eyes and/or the mouth widen uncontrollably, the muscles contract to the point of partially retracting limbs into the body, the voice falters or babbles or disappears altogether. There can be a sudden fever, cold or hot tears (respectively for joy or anger/sorrow), hot or cold perspiration (respectively for relief or fear), a change in the color of the face and sometimes even of the body and hair, reddening and itching sensation in the eyes, and in some cases, foam at the mouth. These are expressed in 31 emotions as disappointment, lamentation, humility, guilt, fatigue, intoxication, pride, doubt, apprehension or fear, intense feelings of attraction, madness, forgetfulness, disease, confusion, death, laziness, inertness, bashfulness, concealment, remembrance, argumentativeness, anxiety, thoughtfulness or moroseness, endurance, happiness or jubilation, eagerness, haughtiness, envy, impudence, dizziness and alertness. The feelings of disappointment are caused by inner conflict when one is forced to behave in a way that is contrary to one's desires and expectations - specifically, to perform an action that is perceived as unethical, detestable, forbidden, or dishonorable.

Lamentation (as in Arjuna's case) is a stronger feeling and is experienced in a very difficult situation, especially when one's purpose of life is questioned or endangered, when there is no way out of an impending disaster, or when one feels guilty in some way. Fear is certainly one of the emotions that can cause such symptoms, but in Arjuna's case it is not fear for himself, but rather fear for the far-reaching consequences of the war for the kingdom and the entire world. It is fear for the global disaster, a virtuous fear born from the compassion for the immense amount of sufferings that could have been avoided if Duryodhana had been more reasonable. There is not one single word, in the original text of *Gita*, from which we can draw the conclusion that Arjuna's mind is disturbed by the fear of losing his own life. The previous verses have clearly expressed his horror for a very unjust situation where people were forced to fight against their dearest friends and relatives, and no mention was made about Arjuna's own personal danger.

The next verses will repeat the same concerns. Arjuna does not see any good coming from this war, where people who are supposed to be affectionate to each other and to cooperate for the progress of society, will instead kill each other. In fact, Arjuna clearly and repeatedly states that he prefers to sacrifice his own life, to die without even trying to defend himself, rather than becoming responsible for such a disastrous massacre. Verses 37 and 38 of this chapter clearly say that Arjuna knows that the assembled warriors are not aware of the consequences of the battle for their own families and for society in general.

Some commentators offensively argue that Arjuna has sunk so deeply in his hysterical fears and delusion that he is saying exactly the opposite of what he really thinks. If this were true, Krishna at least would have detected the lie and corrected Arjuna, telling him very clearly that he was actually just fearing for his own life. On the contrary, in verses 35 and 36 of the second chapter Krishna clearly states that only superficial and envious people would think or insinuate that Arjuna is a coward. Showing fear for one's own life while facing a battle is the greatest disgrace for a *kshatriya* and demonstrates his total lack of qualification, and this is obviously not Arjuna's case. The subsequent instructions offered by Krishna to Arjuna are also in accordance with the nature of Arjuna's feelings as clearly expressed by him.

गाण्डीवं स्रंसते हस्तात्त्वक्चैव परिदह्यते । न च शक्नोम्यवस्थातुं भ्रमतीव च मे मनः ॥ १-३० ॥

gāṇḍīvaṁ sraṁsate hastāttvakcaiva paridahyate | na ca śakṇomyavasthātum bhramatīva ca me manaḥ || 1-30 ||

gāṇḍīvaṁ: Gandiva (the bow); *sraṁsate*: slips; *hastat*: from the hand; *tvak*: the skin; *ca*: and; *eva*: certainly; *paridahyate*: is burning; *na*:

not; *ca*: and; *saknomy*: I am able; *avasthatum*: to remain; *bhramati*: is confused; *eva*: certainly; *ca*: and; *me*: my; *manah*: mind.

(my bow) Gandiva slips from my hand and (I feel) my skin burning. I cannot keep my stand any more and my mind is confused."

Gandiva is the name of Arjuna's famous bow. It is said it was made by Brahma himself and gifted to Arjuna by Agni the Deva of fire, as a token of gratitude when Arjuna offered him the Khandava forest, full of medicinal herbs. On that occasion, Agni also offered the famous Chakra to Krishna.

In this verse, Arjuna mentions some more of the physical symptoms of his strong emotions. The burning sensation of the skin seems to be particularly important, because it shows that the temperature of his body has risen - more likely a result of anguish and anger than of fear, that usually tends to lower the body's temperature, as *raja* heats the body while *tamas* creates coldness.

Arjuna is not ashamed to confess that his mind is confused and doubtful, and that the inner conflict is sapping his energies. Confusion is generated when the mind is contemplating a choice between two possible courses of action but is unable to decide which way to go. Both options appear to be equally unfeasible or painful, or leading to very similar consequences. In this situation, simultaneous impulses pull the will power in opposite directions, creating a tension that can become unbearable; the stress can be much more exhausting than any hard work, even if nothing is accomplished in the process.

निमित्तानि च पश्यामि विपरीतानि केशव । न च श्रेयोऽनुपश्यामि हत्वा स्वजनमाहवे ॥ १-३१ ॥

nimittāni ca paśyāmi viparītāni keśava । na ca śreyo'nupaśyāmi hatvā svajanamāhave ॥ 1-31 ॥

nimittani: cause (of suffering)/ instrument; *ca*: and; *paśyami*: I see; *viparitani*: opposite; *kesava*: O Keshava; *na*: not; *ca*: and; *sreyah*: good result; *anupaśyami*: I see; *hatva*: by killing; *sva-janam*: one's own (family and friends); *ahave*: in battle.

"O Keshava (Arjuna), I see (great) cause of sufferings in front (of us) /mere instruments turned one against the other. I do not foresee any good coming from killing one's own (friends and relatives) in a war."

In this verse Krishna is called Keshava, "the killer of the Keshi demon", to indicate that he can destroy the demons of doubt and confusion. Keshi was one of the *asuras* who became allies of Kamsa and went to Gokula Vrindavana to try to kill Krishna in his childhood. Another meaning of Keshava is given as follows: *Ka* refers to Brahma, *Isha* refers to Shiva, and *van* or *vati* means "that gives power to", indicating that Krishna is none other than Vishnu himself. Depending on the context, the name Ka is sometimes used also to indicate Vishnu, Yama, Garuda, or the Atman (which, incidentally, reminds us of the *ka* of the ancient Egyptian religion). In this way, the name Keshava can come to convey a great number of meanings.

The words *nimittani viparitani* may be interpreted in two different ways: a) cause of suffering and b) instruments turned against each other. In this verse the two meanings reinforce each other beautifully, creating a *double-entendre*.

What really troubles Arjuna is the fact that the warriors on the battlefield are forced to fight against each other, forgetting their mutual affection. In the *kshatriya* code of honor, fighting is a religious duty when it is aimed at protecting oneself and one's dependents from the attack of evil aggressors. It is said that, after death, the warriors killed in a righteous battle attain the same exalted position of the *sannyasis* who engaged in *yoga*. However, the act of killing does not give the same result of being killed: even the righteous killing of aggressors in a fair battle involves a sinful reaction, therefore the *kshatriyas* must perform purification rituals and distribute charity and do other good deeds. If killing a criminal that is engaged in a violent act and a hostile invader is a sin, how more serious will be the karmic consequences of killing people who are fundamentally good, and have been forced to gather on the battlefield in a way or another, against their will and interest.

Svajanam or "one's own people" indicates the natural hesitation that a good person feels about fighting against his own people – members of one's family, one's lineage, one's community, one's country, one's culture, one's ideology, one's religious tradition. In ordinary circumstances, loyalty to these forms of kinship is advisable because it fosters mutual support, encouragement and cooperation, but such considerations are relative and not absolute. We should never forget our real nature and purpose of life, because when we forget them, we become prisoners of the temporary material perception. Identification and attachment with such groups are considered expanded forms of selfishness and delusion and one should not hesitate to give them up for the defense of *dharma*. Krishna calls this hesitation and material identification as "weakness of the heart".

न काङ्क्षे विजयं कृष्ण न च राज्यं सुखानि च । किं नो राज्येन गोविन्द किं भोगैर्जीवितेन वा ॥ १-३२ ॥

na kāṅkṣe vijayaṁ kṛṣṇa na ca rājyaṁ sukhāni ca । kiṁ no rājyena govinda kiṁ bhogairjīvitena vā ॥ 1-32 ॥

na: not; *kankshe*: I desire; *vijayam*: victory; *krishna*: o Krishna; *na*: not; *ca*: and; *rajyam*: the kingdom; *sukhani*: the joys; *ca*: and; *kim*: what; *no*: to us; *rajyena*: with a kingdom; *govinda*: o Govinda; *kim*: what; *bhogair*: with the pleasures; *jivitena*: with life; *va*: even.

"O Krishna, I do not desire victory, nor the joys of/or a kingdom. O Govinda (Krishna), what is a kingdom to us, what are the pleasures of/or life itself,

The name Krishna is explained as having different meanings. One is "black", and refers to the dark complexion of Krishna's body, compared to a blue lotus. Another is "attractive", as deriving from the root *karsh*.

In the previous verses, Krishna has been addressed with a series of meaningful names:

- * Madhava (14, 37), to mean that he is the consort of the Mother Goddess
- * Hrishiksha (15, 21, 24), to mean that he perfectly controls the senses
- * Acyuta (21), to mean that he is never diminished by any position

* Keshava (31), to mean that he can destroy the demon of doubt

In this verse Krishna is called Govinda, "he who knows and protects earth, the cows and the senses of the living beings" - as the word *go* has all these meanings.

This name refers to the healthy and dharmic enjoyment of the pleasures of this world, as opposed to the greedy and adharmic lust for possession and domination that leads man to commit heinous crimes and cause the degradation of society and unnecessary sufferings to everyone. Similarly, in verses 36, 39 and 44 Krishna will be called Janardana, "he who animates the people", to associate the healthy pleasures of life with life itself and the pursuit of happiness. Another implication of the use of this name consists in remembering that Krishna is he who inspires people into action.

The name Madhava, used in verse 14 and again in verse 37, implies that being the husband of the Mother Goddess, Krishna is the father of all living beings and therefore he cares for their happiness and protection, because they are his family. The name Madhusudana, used in verse 35, means "the slayer of demon Madhu", and also implies the idea that Krishna can destroy all inauspiciousness.

In this verse, Arjuna clearly states that he is not interested in any personal benefit that may come from victory in the battle - not even in victory itself. So many times he has already demonstrated that he is fully renounced, although he is faithfully committed to performing all his duties - to the family, to the kingdom, to society at large. He has come to the battlefield because that his duty is to protect the kingdom and the people - but what will the benefit be, if everybody gets killed?

येषामर्थे काङ्क्षितं नो राज्यं भोगाः सुखानि च । त इमेऽवस्थिता युद्धे प्राणांस्त्यक्त्वा धनानि च ॥ १-३३ ॥

yeṣāmarthe kāṅkṣitam no rājyaṁ bhogaḥ sukhāni ca | ta ime'vasthita yuddhe prāṇāṁstyaktvā dhanāni ca || 1-33 ||

yesham: of them; *arthe*: for the sake; *kankshitam*: is desired; *nah*: by us; *rajyam*: kingdom; *bhogah*: pleasure; *sukhani*: joys; *ca*: and; *te*: them; *ime*: these; *avasthita*: situated; *yuddhe*: in battle; *pranan*: the life; *tyaktva*: giving up; *dhanani*: the riches; *ca*: and.

when those for whose sake we desire (such good things as) kingdom, pleasures and happiness, all these (people) who are positioned here are going to sacrifice their life and possessions, the teachers, the fathers, the sons, as well as grandfathers,

Vedic civilization is organized according to the principle of *para upakara*, or "living/ working for the benefit of others". In this way all individuals work to sustain one another, generating a positive sense of cooperation, affection and support - the fundamental principle that is also called *dharma*.

The natural tendency of the soul is to serve, to do something for others - either as a social occupation, or in one's personal dealings especially with family, friends, etc. The underlying principle is reciprocation - the recognition of the care and affection that other people have lavished upon us since birth, and of our debt towards them and our duty towards the next generations. This ensures that each individual is very well taken care of, because all the members of society and family can do much more for each individual much more than what s/he would be able to do for him/herself. For this purpose, a role in society is assigned according to the *guna* and *karma* of the individual's body and mind. However, excessive identification with one's material body and mind (*ahankara*) creates self-centeredness and selfishness - where the "self" is mistakenly perceived as the material body and mind. Then the natural tendency to serve is transferred to what is perceived as the benefit of one's material body and mind, with the endless pursuit of one's own sense gratification at the gross and subtle levels. In this way all individuals work against one another, generating a negative sense of competition, envy and hostility - that are the opposite of the fundamental principle called Dharma, and are therefore called Adharma. A folkloristic story of rather recent origin within the New Age movement gives a similar message by offering an explanation about the difference of "heaven" and "hell". A man is visiting both, and he notices that in both cases there are lots of people sitting at a banquet, with a great table filled with all types of wonderful foods. And in both cases, people have very long spoons that it is impossible to use to feed oneself.

The difference is that in heaven people enjoy by feeding each other across the table, while in hell people insist in trying to get the spoon each into their own mouth and they quarrel among them, snatching one another's spoon to try and see if the neighbor's spoon will work better than one's own. Now, we need to go one step beyond this, because this image of heaven and hell is nothing more than the conditions of human society in this universe, because of the different perception of the meaning of "self".

In a hellish society, the "self" is believed to be the material body and mind. In a heavenly society, the "self" is perceived as a healthy and active worker (*karmachari*) in the system of *varnashrama dharma*, who performs his/her duties without concern for one's personal advantage but as a natural service to the Virat Purusha, the Universal Form of God described in the *Purusha sukta*, and whose bodily limbs constitute the different members of society. At the transcendental level, the "self" is realized as the Supreme Brahman, of whom all the *jivatmas* are parts and parcels. This vision raises us beyond the duality of this world and integrates our vision of all existences in the greater understanding of things, both material and spiritual. For the practical purposes of living in this universe, we need to move from the hellish mentality to the heavenly mentality in order to support the maintenance of the universe, but in order to attain liberation we need to situate ourselves on the level of transcendental awareness.

The term *tyaktva*, "giving up" as referred to the life and possessions of the warriors gathered on the battlefield, obviously does not mean that they are already dead or fallen into extreme poverty. However, it is a fact that a true *kshatriya* must go into the battle in a spirit of total renunciation, giving up all attachments to one's wealth and even to one's life, otherwise the thoughts about these will create the fear of losing them, and fear is the last thing that a *kshatriya* can entertain while on the battlefield, and not only out of considerations of personal honor. Fear distracts, paralyzes and robs one of all intelligence, strength and wisdom, and triggers foolish actions that will seriously endanger not only the success of the battle but even one's very own life for which one fears.

आचार्याः पितरः पुत्रास्तथैव च पितामहाः । मातुलाः श्वशुराः पौत्राः श्यालाः सम्बन्धिनस्तथा ॥ १-३४ ॥

ācāryāḥ pitarāḥ putrāstathaiva ca pitāmahāḥ | mātulāḥ śvasurāḥ pautrāḥ śyālāḥ sambandhinastathā || 1-34 ||

acaryah: teachers; *pitarah*: fathers; *putrah*: sons; *tatha*: also; *eva*: certainly; *ca*: and; *pitamahah*: grandfathers; *matulah*: maternal uncles; *svasurah*: fathers in law; *pautrah*: grandchildren; *syalah*: brothers in law; *sambandhinah*: bound by ties (of affection); *tatha*: also.

teachers, fathers, sons, as well as grandfathers, uncles, fathers in law, nephews, brothers in law, relatives and friends bound by reciprocal relationships,

Family is certainly very important for the progressive development of the individual and of society as well. The school of life is all about relationships, how we deal with each other, how we relate with each other, and how we love and support each other, how we learn to sacrifice ourselves for the greater good and to give up our selfish attachments. However, this applies to the ideal family life, that is governed by dharmic principles. On the other hand, the materialistic tendency towards *adharmā* that is found in conditioned souls can easily transform family life into a dark hellish hole (*andha kupa*), as explained by Prahlada in *Bhagavata Purana* (7.5.5). The sense of bodily identification and material attachment grows from the physical attraction between man and woman - called *hridaya granthi*, the "knot of the heart" (*pumsah striya mithuni-bhavam etam tayor mitho hridaya-granthih ahuh*, 5.5.8).

As explained by many great souls, including Kapila (3.26.2) and Rishabhadeva (5.5.14), this knot must be cut by applying knowledge. In the absence of proper knowledge, ignorance thrives, and ignorance causes people to mistake *dharma* for *adharmā*, and *adharmā* for *dharma* (18.32). Thus, instead of becoming a support for the progress of the individual and society, family can become the cause for disaster.

Many people seem to believe that the highest religious principle in Hinduism consists in being attached to family relationships and social conventions beyond all other considerations. For these people, even the basic principles of religion - truthfulness, compassion, cleanliness, justice, etc and the teachings of the genuine *shastra* - are expected to take a back seat to favor blind obedience and respect for one's family elders and for teachers or social authorities, no matter how senile, ignorant or degraded they are. *Gita* certainly does not support such a vision. Rather Krishna will scold Arjuna for contemplating this very idea. The same reasoning applies to the "family of the *guru*", or *gurukula* - loyalty to one's spiritual lineage is certainly good, but it should never become more important than loyalty to *dharma* and the proper cultivation of knowledge.

Another important point is that we should realize that our affinities for relatives are... "*relative*" and only pertain to the gross body. Physical DNA has no relevance in the matter of intellectual, moral, cultural, or spiritual affinity, and although it is true that the environment and the stimulation received within the family can greatly influence a mind, we can easily verify that sometimes people from a same family are really too different from one another, and there is nothing that can be done to bridge the gap even between different children of the same two parents.

एतान्न हन्तुमिच्छामि घ्नतोऽपि मधुसूदन । अपि त्रैलोक्यराज्यस्य हेतोः किं नु महीकृते ॥ १-३५ ॥

etānna hantumicchāmi ghnato'pi madhusūdana | api trailokyarājyasya hetoḥ kiṁ nu mahīkṛte || 1-35 ||

etan: these; *na*: not; *hantum*: to kill; *icchami*: I desire; *ghnatah*: being killed; *api*: even; *madhusudana*: o killer of Madhu; *api*: even; *trailokya*: the three worlds; *rajyasya*: of the kingdom; *hetoh*: cause; *kim nu*: what (to speak of); *mahi krite*: for the earth.

"O Madhusudana (Krishna), for all of them I can never wish the fate of killing or being killed, even for the purpose of the crown of all the three worlds, what to speak of this planet only."

Madhusudana means "killer of Madhu". Madhu was an *asura* (a demoniac personality) that appeared at the beginning of creation and attacked Brahma, thus threatening to disrupt the proper development and progress of the universe. Awakened by Brahma from his creative sleep, Vishnu solved the problem by killing the *asura*. In this verse, Arjuna mentions the name of Madhusudana to express his mixed feelings. It is true that Vishnu, the supreme Dharma, killed the *asura* that constituted an obstacle to the path of progress of the universe - but the warriors gathered on the battlefield at Kurukshetra are not *asuras* or demons: they are just confused and misguided family people. On the other hand, the *asura* Madhu is considered a personification of the negative influence of doubt and confusion, therefore indirectly Arjuna is already asking Krishna to kill his doubts and confusion.

Ichhami means "I desire/ wish". Arjuna is clearly saying that, if he could have it his way, he would like everyone to live peacefully and progressively, cooperating and working for the benefit of the kingdom, without any need to kill or be killed. The incredibly valuable opportunity of the human form of life is not meant to be thrown away because of some stupid attachment to things that are very temporary anyway - properties, position, power to control, and so on. The purpose of human life is to progress from ignorance to knowledge - from the material to the spiritual, from the temporary to the permanent, from the illusory to the real, from darkness to light, from death to immortality: *asato ma sad gamaya, tamaso ma jyotir gamaya, mrtyor ma amrtam gamaya* (*Bṛhad aranyaka Upanishad*, 1.3.28).

This can be done by seeking the knowledge of Brahma: *athato brahma jijnasa* (*Vedanta sutras*, 1). When we have such an important and urgent task in front of us, why should we waste our greatest opportunity by playing war and trying to control kingdoms? Even worse than that, the warriors supporting Duryodhana and Dhritrashtra are fighting against *dharma*, therefore they are not only making the huge mistake of throwing away their own valuable lives, but they are also accumulating bad *karma*, and this will certainly jeopardize or delay their future progress. Some foolish people think that Arjuna was scared about losing his own life or losing the battle to a numerically superior enemy, but the situation is much more serious. He clearly said - and he will say again - that he is ready to die at any time, but his heart is heavy with the compassion of seeing all these people who have forgotten the real purpose of life.

निहत्य धार्तराष्ट्रान्नः का प्रीतिः स्याज्जनार्दन । पापमेवाश्रयेदस्मान्हत्वैतानाततायिनः ॥ १-३६ ॥

nihatya dhārtarāṣṭrānnaḥ kā prītiḥ syājjanārdana । pāpamevāśrayedasmānhatvaitānātāyinaḥ ।। 1-36 ।।

nihatya: killing; *dhartarastran*: the (supporters of) Dhritarastra; *nah*: our; *ka*: what; *prītiḥ*: benefit/ pleasure; *syat*: (there) will be; *janardana*: o Janardana; *papam*: sin; *eva*: certainly; *asrayet*: will accept; *asman*: us; *hatva*: killing; *etan*: these; *atatayinah*: aggressors.

"O Janardana (Krishna), the killing of the sons of Dhritarastra would not give us any pleasure or benefit/ if the sons of Dhritarastra are killed, we would not find any pleasure in the world any more. We will be stained by sin if we accept the killing of these (people, although they are) aggressors,

Arjuna's words in this verse can be interpreted at two different levels. The most immediate meaning is that Arjuna has no resentment or hatred towards the people fighting to support Dhritarastra, and therefore he will not be happy to see them killed. He has already clarified that he is not interested in winning the kingdom, so there would not be any benefit from such deaths either. Another level of meaning lays in Arjuna's deep compassion and sense of responsibility - that makes him think that the death of all these people will devastate his sensitive consciousness so much that he would never be able to find pleasure in anything again.

Atatayina means "aggressor". The *Artha shastra* teaches: *agnido garadas caiva sastra-panir dhanapahah, kshetra darapahari ca shadete atatayinah*, "One who attacks with fire, with poison, or holding weapons in hands, one who takes away (someone else's) wealth/ possessions, land or wife: these are the six types of criminal aggressors."

In Vedic society everyone is implicitly authorized to defend himself and his family, subordinates and property from such aggressors. Therefore there is no need for jails, lawyers or even judges or police like in the present faulty system that is very prone to judicial mistakes and abuses, unable to prevent aggressions, and likely to produce even more degradation and violence as convicts are locked up in a very unhealthy and non-progressive situation - because the idea of the sentence is "punishment" by deprivation and mistreatment. The people who work in jails also develop a very unhealthy mentality.

On the other hand, we know that prevention is the best cure, and most cases of violent aggressions are easily avoided when the criminal fears that the intended victim could be able to fight back effectively. The principle of non-violence teaches that one should not attack others for one's own greed or lust or hatred, but makes provisions for legitimate defense that include not only one's self but also one's family and subordinates, home, possessions and land. Legitimate defense must be proportionate in the use of force, but anyone who attacks with dangerous weapons deserves to be killed in combat. Also, one who attacks others with poison or fire should be stopped at all costs even if this means killing the culprit caught in the act. A thief, a kidnapper or a rapist is also an aggressor and the use of force - even lethal force - against such criminals is implicitly approved by Vedic *dharma*.

Contemporary non-Vedic societies try to defend the "human rights" of criminals by limiting the provisions for individual self-defense and giving more powers to "professional police", but the system can easily be manipulated by clever, ruthless and cynical people and end up punishing the victims instead of the aggressors.

Kshatriyas have the duty to help those people who do not have sufficient strength or skill to defend themselves. Ideally, this is supposed to be the job of policemen, but according to the Vedic system a *kshatriya* is directly responsible for the protection and well being of the *prajas* of the land he surveys, and is also entitled to directly enjoy the service and respect of such *prajas*. The centralized system of police-judges-courts-government officers inevitably becomes overcomplicated, politicized, impersonal and unjust, favoring corrupt and manipulative people rather than honest, responsible and brave people. And in extreme situations, it favors the development of "alternative government organizations" such as the various kinds of mafia, where the "boss" replaces the king.

According to the Vedic system, every village or neighborhood should have a king that is capable of protecting the *prajas*. A king needs to constantly patrol the kingdom and to be readily accessible to all the subjects who have any complaints. This becomes possible when there is a sufficient number of local kings, as it was the norm in Vedic times. The role of the emperor, or "king of kings" was to help the local *rajās* or kings who accepted his protection, not to appoint or demote them or interfere with local governments in any way, unless of course a local king would become *adharmic* and his subjects approached the emperor for protection.

The word *papam* is translated as "sin", but it does not have the exact same meaning of the English word, that is influenced by Christian semantics. The Vedic meaning is more about feelings of responsibility for a bad action, expecting bad consequences, and contamination of the consciousness.

तस्मान्नाहं वयं हन्तुं धार्तराष्ट्रान्स्वबान्धवान् । स्वजनं हि कथं हत्वा सुखिनः स्याम माधव ॥ १-३७ ॥

tasmānnāhā vayam hantum dhārtarāṣṭrānsvabāndhavan । svajanaṁ hi katham hatvā sukhiṇaḥ syāma mādharma ।। 1-37 ।।

tasmāt: therefore; *na*: not; *arha*: is befitting; *vayam*: to us; *hantum*: to kill; *dhartarastran*: the (supporters) of Dhritarastra; *sa-bandhavan*: together with their (dear) relatives; *sva-janam*: one's own people; *hi*: certainly; *katham*: how; *hatva*: by killing; *sukhinah*: happy; *syama*: we will be; *madhava*: o husband of the Mother.

Therefore it is not befitting for us (to cause) the killing of the supporters of Dhritarastra along with their friends and relatives. O Krishna, how it is possible to find happiness when friends and relatives are killed?"

The word *arha*, "befitting", conveys a meaning of honor and nobility, moral superiority, compassion and benevolence, and is often used in prayers when addressing a divine personality to beg for forgiveness or help. People who have a saintly character and a compassionate heart are always ready to forgive and sometimes even to forget, or even tolerate the bad behavior of others without taking offense. After all, each and every person in this world is a child of the Mother Goddess, and children are easily forgiven because they do not easily understand the

bad consequences of their actions. Sometimes parents have to be a little hard with their children when circumstances require it, but they are never happy about that, and before thinking about a punishment, they should extensively try all other options. As always, prevention is better than cure. Arjuna is still hoping against hope that the supporters of Dhritarastra could be made to see reason and convinced to change their minds on their disastrous decision to fight.

The expression *sva-janam* does not refer only to Arjuna's relatives, but also to the relatives of Dhritarastra's supporters, who will kill their own people or be killed by their own people - such a horrible act, that the mighty warrior Arjuna, who faced so many battles and bravely stared in death's face so many times, cannot tolerate the very idea.

यद्यप्येते न पश्यन्ति लोभोपहतचेतसः । कुलक्षयकृतं दोषं मित्रद्रोहे च पातकम् ॥ १-३८ ॥

yadyapyete na paśyanti lobhopahatacetaṣaḥ | kulakṣayakṛtaṁ doṣaṁ mitradrohe ca pātakam || 1-38 ||

yadi: if; api: even; ete: these; na: not; paśyanti: see; lobha: by greed; apahata: stolen; cetasaḥ: consciousness; kula: family; kshaya: destroying; kritam: action; doṣam: fault; mitra: friends; drohe: becoming hostile; ca: and; patakam: sin.

"Even if these (people) cannot see (such fault) because their mind is confused by greed, it is (still) a grave mistake to destroy one's own family, is a sin to turn against one's friends."

Arjuna knows that the supporters of Dhritarastra are temporarily blinded by greed (their own greed or the greed of their lieges) and therefore remain unable to realize the extent of their disastrous mistake. More explanation about this mechanism will be given by Krishna later (2.62-64) and again (3.36-43) on the request of Arjuna: "what compels a person to commit sins, even without desiring it?"

The key factors for sin is described by Krishna as *kama* and *krodha*: *dhyayato visayan pumsah sangas tesupajayate sagat sanjayate kamah, kamat krodho bhijayate*. *Kama* is desire for possession and enjoyment of the objects of the senses, while *lobha* is the addiction to such desire, that creates an increasing insatiable need for this feeling of possession and enjoyment. Since it is insatiable, frustration naturally ensues, and from frustration, a blinding anger arises. Arjuna is a good-natured, sensible and self-disciplined person, who has been well trained to honor *dharma*, and knows how to regulate himself in the matter of *kama* and *krodha*. Therefore he can objectively observe the behavior of Dhritarastra and his sons, and correctly put the finger on the root of the problem. Realizing that these people are blinded by greed and lust, he rejoices in the fact that he is not suffering from the same disease, and he reasons that those who have a clear vision should not commit the same mistake of those who are blind.

The term *droha*, "turning against", is used to describe the ungrateful behavior of one who becomes unjustly hostile towards persons who have benefited him in the past - such as loving parents, benevolent relatives, expert and sincere teachers, and so on. Arjuna is mostly thinking about Bhishma and Drona, who have been affectionate and benevolent to him as a child, and that, by their aggressive attitude on the battlefield, seem to have totally forgotten about *dharma* and common sense. By forcing him to fight against them, Bhishma and Drona are implicitly stating that they approve Arjuna's fighting against them and even killing them in battle - something that is against ethics as well as against the sacred bond of gratefulness. Again, it is important to understand that the concept of "sin" mentioned here (*patakam*) is very different from the Christian concept.

कथं न ज्ञेयमस्माभिः पापादस्मान्निवर्तितुम् । कुलक्षयकृतं दोषं प्रपश्यद्भिर्जनार्दन ॥ १-३९ ॥

katham na jñeyamasmaḥbhīḥ pāpādasmanñivartitum | kulakṣayakṛtaṁ doṣaṁ prapaśyadbhirjanārdana || 1-39 ||

katham: how; na: not; jneyam: known; asmabhiḥ: by us; papat: from crime; asmat: these; nivartitum: to stop; kula: family; kshaya: destruction; kritam: action; doṣam: faulty; prapasyadbhiḥ: by those who see; janardana: o Janardana.

"O Janardana (Krishna), how could we, who see (things as they are), not know how to stop these (people) from (committing) the horrible action of destroying their families?"

Arjuna's despair goes very deep, and takes him to questioning Krishna himself and his mission. The word *asmabhiḥ*, "by us", in fact includes Krishna who is sitting with him on the chariot, also ready for the battle.

Many intelligent people become atheists or agnostics after observing all the injustice and sufferings that characterize life in this world, and argue that, if God is there, and he is omnipotent and benevolent to his creatures, he should not allow such things to happen. This, however, is mainly due to the incorrect idea of God that has been presented by the abrahamic faiths on the basis of the texts they consider their sacred scriptures and of the direct and consistent example of their religious leaders in history. Contrarily to the abrahamic system, questioning the existence of God or God's ways is not considered as blasphemy or offense in the Vedic mentality. In the Vedic vision, clearly expressed in *Gita*, God does not judge anyone and does not punish anyone, does not favor anyone and does not expect any sectarian allegiance from anyone. The same opportunities are offered to all living beings, who are responsible for their own evolution along a great number of reincarnations, in which they can learn how to deal with the basic rules of the game - action and reaction, *dharma* and *adharmā*, progress and degradation. Believing or not believing in God does not make any difference for the effect of one's actions. One can become free from *karma* not by "believing in God" but by becoming selfless and dutiful, and by observing the fundamental and universal principles of *dharma*: truthfulness/ honesty/ sincerity, compassion/ benevolence, cleanliness/ purity of heart/ detachment, and self-discipline. So what is God's role in the universe? Why does the Divine incarnate and descend into this world? Later on (4.8) Krishna will explain that the Divine mission in this world is to protect good people, destroy evil doers, and establish the correct information about the universal principles of *dharma*. Arjuna already knows that, because he is an eternal companion/ emanation of God, and therefore he wants Krishna to explain why such a mission could not be accomplished without causing so much suffering to people who are fundamentally good or innocent, like the children of the families that are going to be destroyed in this war. Why couldn't Krishna stop the war in some other way? Why didn't he change the minds of Dhritarastra and Duryodhana, making them see sense?

कुलक्षये प्रणश्यन्ति कुलधर्माः सनातनाः । धर्मे नष्टे कुलं कृत्स्नमधर्मोऽभिभवत्युत ॥ १-४० ॥

kulakṣaye praṇaśyanti kuladharmāḥ sanātanaḥ | dharme naṣṭe kulam kṛtsnamadharmo'bhभवत्युत ॥ 1-40 ॥

kula: family; *kshaye*: in the destruction; *pranasyanti*: become destroyed; *kula*: the family; *dharmah*: the (traditions of) ethical principles; *sanatanah*: eternal; *dharme*: in the *dharma*; *naste*: destroyed; *kulam*: the family; *kritsnam*: completed; *adharmah*: *adharma*; *abhभवति*: becomes; *uta*: it is said.

"When a family is destroyed, the eternal religious principles of the family are destroyed (too), and when *dharma* is destroyed, the entire tradition goes lost and turns into *adharma*."

The *sanatana dharma* of the *kula* or family does not refer to the occupational duties in society (that are always called *sva-dharma*) but to the eternal, universal and fundamental religious principles such as truthfulness, compassion, cleanliness and self-control. It also refers to those religious and ritualistic duties - such as *samskaras* and *karmas* - that help all the family members to keep their consciousness on the sattvic level, and that must be performed continuously. Such activities require the direct and indirect cooperation of all family members, and especially of the bread-winners of the house who must collect the required materials for the rituals as well as the necessities for the entire family so that they can continue to live in a virtuous way.

A fratricidal war like the one that is going to start at Kurukshetra will deprive many families of all active males, leaving their women and children unprotected to fend and care for themselves. This creates a very awkward situation because women are forced to carry a very heavy burden - the demanding duties of motherhood and the basic chores of daily life - materially and spiritually, as they also must take care of the daily house rituals - plus the responsibility of earning a livelihood for themselves and their children and ensuring protection from external threats as well, which ordinarily should fall on the males in the family. Such burden can become intolerable especially for those women called *sadhya vadhu*, i.e. ordinary girls who simply aspired to marry and settle as housewives and mothers.

When the task of following the universal and eternal principles of *dharma* becomes problematic due to very difficult circumstances and unfortunate compromises are forced on people who must resort to questionable actions just to survive, *adharma* gradually becomes prominent until it is considered the norm in the family and then in society. This particularly applies to women, who in normal times are protected and cared for, without being required to fend for themselves or to face hardships.

Women are the guardians of *dharma* in the family just like the *brahmanas* are the guardians of *dharma* in society, precisely because and when they are respected and protected, and all their needs are taken care of. *Brahmanas*, too, can easily fall and become degraded when they are not properly protected and supported, and when they are forced to fend and care for themselves and to protect themselves.

Women by nature are very inclined to religion and *dharma*, as well as to religious rituals and celebrations as social functions, and they are the first natural teachers for all human beings in society. All teachings – spiritual and religious as well as ethical and practical – received in early childhood are critical for a person's subsequent education and training, therefore women should also be facilitated in the study of scriptures and philosophy as much as they are able and willing to learn, also with the aid of the stories (*Puranas* and *Itihasas*) that were specifically compiled to facilitate this learning.

अधर्माभिभवात्कृष्ण प्रदुष्यन्ति कुलस्त्रियः । स्त्रीषु दुष्टासु वार्ष्णेय जायते वर्णसङ्करः ॥ १-४१ ॥

adharmābhibhavātkṛṣṇa praduṣyanti kulastriyaḥ | strīṣu duṣṭāsu vārṣṇeya jāyate varṇasaṅkaraḥ ॥ 1-41 ॥

adharmah: *adharma*; *abhभवति*: becomes; *krishna*: o Krishna; *pradushyanti*: become faulty; *kula*: family; *striyah*: the women; *strisu*: in the women; *dushtasu*: bad; *varshneya*: o descendant of Vrishni; *jayate*: is born; *varna*: *varna*; *sankarah*: confused.

"O Krishna, when *adharma* becomes predominant, the women of the family become compromised, and when the women become bad, O descendant of Vrishni (Krishna), an unqualified progeny is born."

When the eternal and universal principles of religion become weaker and compromised in a family or tradition because of the disappearance of the protectors and providers, women (like *brahmanas* in society) become the easiest target for exploitation and their degradation and sufferings can create a new generation that is not capable, willing or ready to uphold *dharma*. The definition *dushta stri* or "bad woman" is often misunderstood in a society that does not respect women, to mean a woman who does not submissively accept the adharmic behaviors, teachings or orders of degraded males. In a male-dominated society, women become mere objects of exploitation or possession, and are denied all authority and space for action about *dharma*, although by nature they are more inclined to *dharma*, religion and spirituality than men. When religious/ spiritual knowledge and all the religious rituals are properly taught and observed, the women of the family do not become corrupt or "bad".

The definition *varna sankara* does not refer to illegitimate children begotten outside the conventional marriage or in "mixed caste" marriages, but includes all children who take birth in an unfavorable environment where women are not protected, respected and supported appropriately, and who therefore grow up insecure, scared and confused. In the early stages of life – from conception to adolescence – children consider themselves and are considered by others as an expansion of their mothers. If their mothers suffer from low self-esteem, ignorance, meanness or a narrow mentality, the children will inevitably develop similar subconscious characteristics. Such psychological problems may aggregate to cause serious inferiority complexes that may also manifest as false superiority complexes, as in the case of the smallest dogs who feel the need to bark the loudest. Individual psychological imbalances also spread into the community and society at large, creating a hellish way of life. When women suffer anxiety, doubt, and concern for their safety and the safety of their children, they can become ruthless and forget the principles or religion in order to ensure their personal survival and benefit at the cost of the sufferings of others. Children born from such mothers are more vulnerable in their ethical and spiritual principles, and when they become ruthless, too, they turn family and society into a hellish place where *adharma* feeds itself in a vicious circle. Arjuna calls Krishna "descendant of Vrishni" to highlight the fact that Krishna himself honored the ancestors and dharmic tradition of his family.

सङ्करो नरकायैव कुलघ्नानां कुलस्य च । पतन्ति पितरो ह्येषां लुप्तपिण्डोदकक्रियाः ॥ १-४२ ॥

saṅkaro narakāyaiva kulaghñānām kulasya ca | patanti pitaro hyeṣām luptapiṇḍodakakriyāḥ || 1-42 ||

sankarah: confused (progeny); *narakaya*: hellish; *eva*: certainly; *kula*: family; *ghnanam*: the killers; *kulasya*: of the family; *ca*: and; *patanti*: fall down; *pitarah*: the ancestors; *hi*: certainly; *esham*: of them; *luptah*: abandoned; *pinda*: pinda; *udaka*: water; *kriyah*: the duty.

"These confused (descendants) create a hellish situation both for the family and for those who have destroyed the family. Also the forefathers suffer, because the offerings of food and water are neglected."

According to the *karma kanda* of the *smriti*, the descendants of a family have the duty to remember their ancestors during their daily rituals and to offer them oblations of consecrated food and water so that they can remain in the higher planets called Pitriloka to enjoy a heavenly life, or at least obtain a good reincarnation. *Pinda* means "lump/ ball" and is a type of food consisting in balls of cooked rice that must be prepared by the wife of the head of the family or obtained from a Vishnu temple. This traditional ritual is called *Sraddha* and it is performed on three occasions:

1. in the period immediately after the death of the family member, and specifically on the 10th, 11th and 12th day after death
2. every year on the anniversary day of death, and
3. every year during the Pitri paksha, especially the 13th and the 14th day called Mahalaya

Some commentators believe that this verse disqualifies "illegitimate children" born of mixed caste marriages from offering oblations to the ancestors, but they forget that in Vedic culture there is no such thing as "illegitimate child", as there are several types of marriage and they are all considered lawful.

The distinction usually made about *anuloma* and *pratiloma* marriages, by which the union of a man of a lower *varna* with a woman of a higher *varna* is considered inauspicious, is also only a relative indication and it should not be taken as an iron rule. It is a fact that a woman who is more qualified than her husband can feel frustrated and diminished in performing duties and living in an environment that are below her level, but it is also said that women are a category to themselves, and do not belong to any specific *varna*.

Another observation is that traditionally oblations can be legitimately offered also by adopted children and by other family members such as nephews or grandchildren. Also, the idea of "mixed caste" does not make much sense because it confuses caste (a false racist concept introduced by adharmic invaders of India) with *varna*, the actual Vedic concept. What is more important, such classification into castes gives no consideration to *guna* (personal qualities), *karma* (performance of duties, both social/ occupational and religious) and *samskara*, but is simply based on birth in a particular genetic line.

Even more important, such commentators disregard the meaning of the word *luptah* in the present verse, that is not compatible with their explanations. *Luptah* means that the oblations (*pinda* and *udaka*) are neglected or stopped, not that they are performed by unqualified persons: this means that the family members do not care any more for the traditional rituals, because the new generations are confused about *sanatana dharma* and neglect or totally give up the *samskaras* and *karmas*. The reason of such neglect is directly connected to the destruction of the family, or the absence of capable and responsible men who care for, provide for and protect the women and children of the family through a *dharmic* occupation. In such circumstances, the traditional and prescribed rituals are neglected because of the pressing needs of mere survival. This unfortunate situation can actually be observed even within the so-called high castes of traditional Hindus, who have no knowledge of the *shastra*, do not perform the traditional rituals as prescribed, and hardly remember the names of their ancestors for whom they are expected to offer oblations. They may even have become "*nastika hindus*", literally "agnostic/ atheistic people of Indian religion" (if anyone can admit such an oxymoron) who consider themselves as Hindu only because they have taken birth in an Indian family, but have no faith in the knowledge of Vedic scriptures and have rejected the purpose and the values of *dharma*.

दोषैरतैः कुलघ्नानां वर्णसङ्करकारकैः । उत्साद्यन्ते जातिधर्माः कुलधर्माश्च शाश्वताः ॥ १-४३ ॥

doṣairataiḥ kulaghñānām varṇasaṅkarakāraikaiḥ | utsādyante jātidharmāḥ kuladharmāśca śāśvatāḥ || 1-43 ||

doshaih: by faults; *etaih*: by these; *kula*: family; *ghnanam*: killer; *varna-sankara*: generation of unqualified children; *karakaih*: those who make; *utsadyante*: are devastated; *jati-dharmah*: the *dharma* of birth; *kula-dharmas*: the *dharma* of the family; *ca*: and; *sasvatah*: always.

"The wrong actions of those who kill the family create a generation of confused/ unqualified persons, and this devastates the continuity of the family dharma, inherited by birth and tradition."

The adult males of a family are expected to provide and protect, and to offer by their example a direct living reference for the proper execution of the duties of the family and of the community - and this applies to all professional occupations. The training of an individual for his duties and responsibilities, as well as for the general understanding of the purpose of his activities, starts from early childhood. Each individual naturally has particular tendencies and capabilities, but much can be improved by training and education, and especially with the emotional motivation that comes from the encouragement and support from family members.

The expression *varna sankara* means "confusion of *varnas*". Contrarily to the opinion of some commentators, it does not refer to the "intermingling of castes". In fact, all the *varnas* are meant to be very much united, just like the various parts of one's body, and closely cooperating and interacting with one another. When there is no unity and proper cooperation between the various parts of one's body, there can be no life. Hack a body to pieces, and see how perfectly it can work and function and facilitate social prosperity and happiness. There can be no segregation of *varnas* in a civilized society. Segregation can only apply to those groups of people who do not accept to live in a civilized society and do not follow the prescribed rules for the general population, so by their unclean or aggressive way of living they can become a nuisance or a danger to civilized persons. These particular groups of people are called *chandalas* and *mlecchas*, and they are considered to be outside the *varna* system because they eat everything and anything without any consideration of cleanliness or

compassion, do not take bath or clean their clothes and houses regularly, produce foul smells due to their life habits, get up and sleep at improper times, make excessive noise and disturbances without caring for the peace of others, and have other unpleasant, aggressive and unhealthy habits. Such persons are not expected to work for the benefit of the social body, and therefore are considered "foreign objects" in the body. The concept of *foreign* does not refer to the geographical place where one was born, but to the lack of cooperation and harmony with the social body in general because of the difference in values and interests. On the other hand, the four *varnas* - *sudras*, *vaisyas*, *kshatriyas* and *brahmanas* - need to live side by side and work together constantly - something that we could certainly call "intermingling". The head cannot function without being closely connected to the arms, the stomach and the legs. In fact, the *brahmanas* are expected to be the guides, teachers and purifiers of all the other *varnas* - if they do not "intermingle" with them, how will this guiding, teaching and purification take place?

When ignorance creates confusion, one becomes unable to understand the difference between the functions of the head and the functions of the arms, the functions of the belly and the functions of the legs. Then, for example, we will have arrogant, ignorant and foolish "*brahmanas*" who have no idea of what Brahman is - they rather believe that bodily identification is the highest principle of religion, and see no problem in compromising on ethical principles for the sake of a salary or income. Or "*kshatriyas*" who never expose themselves to any danger on the battlefield, but rather drop bombs on innocent civilians by pushing a button, take pleasure in torturing and exploiting defenseless people, and have no idea of how to tell innocent people from criminals.

This happens because the correct understanding of the duties, characteristics and qualifications of each *varna* has become confused, and because the *samskaras* and *karmas* are neglected. Then the entire society inevitably becomes populated by *sudras* - unqualified and irresponsible people who always try to work as little as possible but want more money - higher salaries, pensions etc - as well as special benefits, name, fame, and social position. *Sudras* can easily be recognized because they need to be constantly told what to do and be taken care of by employers, otherwise they will only be able to make a mess of everything. It is particularly interesting to note the explicit distinction presented in this verse between *jati dharma* and *kula dharma*, indicating respectively the duties of a person born in a particular family and the duties of a person who joins a particular family (in the sense of tradition). These two are specifically defined as different from the *varna dharma*.

In the Vedic logic there is not much difference between a child generated seminally and a child or adult that is adopted into the family, or even a disciple who is accepted in the family of the Guru (*guru kula*). The only difference is that a child seminally born in a good family has received more benefits from the *samskaras* that begin even before birth, and therefore he has more duties/responsibilities towards the *kula*.

Of course, this consideration comes to naught when the traditional purification rituals of the life cycle (*samskaras*) and the other regular religious *karmas* (Deity worship, observance of festivals, *homa*, study of scriptures, charity, purification of the food, offerings to the ancestors, honest and productive work within one's occupational duties, etc) are not performed properly, regularly and with the required understanding and consciousness. This is why it is said that in Kali yuga everybody is born a *sudra*. Even among the staunchest defenders of the orthodox *karma kanda* tradition, it is very difficult to find someone who is actually following the system as they should.

In conclusion, as Arjuna says, the key to a happy and progressive family life is the proper level of consciousness of the women. When women are properly respected and protected, and all the religious rituals are properly observed, very good souls will be attracted to take birth in the family and even ordinarily good souls who may take birth there will be educated and purified according to the scientific process of psychological imprinting (*samskara*). These qualified children are a real asset to society, whether they were physically born in the family or they were adopted later, or spontaneously joined the family later out of natural attraction to the good qualities and values manifested by the family members.

उत्सन्नकुलधर्माणां मनुष्याणां जनार्दन । नरके नियतं वासो भवतीत्यनुसुश्रुम ॥ १-४४ ॥

utsannakuladharmāṇāṃ manuṣyāṇāṃ janārdana | narake niyatam vāso bhavatītyanusūśruma || 1-44 |

utsanna: spoiled; *kula-dharmanam*: the *dharma* of the family; *manushyanam*: of the human beings; *janardana*: o Janardana; *narake*: in hell; *niyatam*: always; *vasah*: reside; *bhavati*: becomes; *iti*: thus; *anu*: always; *susruma*: we have heard.

"O Janardana (Krishna), we have always been told that those men who cause the degradation of the family values end up living in hellish conditions forever."

The expression *anu susruma* is a reinforced form of *susruma* ("we have heard") and conveys the concept of a repetition of an important teaching.

We need to understand that the concept of *naraka*, usually translated as "hell", is quite different from the apparently similar concept in the abrahamic perspective. Abrahamics believe that God takes pleasure in punishing those who fail to blindly obey his orders and the orders of his priests, and that such punishment must be as painful, cruel and humiliating as possible, and extended forever in time. Such eternal hell is pictured as situated in a particular place in space, although nobody seems to know exactly where. Some believe it is deep underground within this planet, others believe it could be in some other dimension, but in any case they all agree that it is a place where "sinners" are tortured mercilessly.

In our daily experience we see that sometimes mild physical punishment may be useful in correcting a bad habit that has proved impervious to all other solutions, when an individual (animal or human) is too stupid, stubborn or degraded to understand reason, but since in the abrahamic concept there is no second chance and no possibility of eventually getting out of hell, such tortures do not have any usefulness because they are not aimed at teaching or reforming and there is no hope of improvement or redemption. So it's just endless torture for the mere sake of inflicting pain - sadistic cruelty.

On the contrary, according to the Vedic system the idea of *naraka* is not eternal and does not involve any deliberate torture as punishment - it simply refers to a very unpleasant condition of life, that can indeed be experienced on this planet itself and in this lifetime. The purpose of such difficult life conditions is to help the individual to understand the sufferings he has inflicted on others so that he will not repeat the

same mistake. Ultimately the goal is to become detached from material identification and from the idea of possession and enjoyment on the material level, so that it becomes possible to turn one's mind and aspirations towards the *sattvic* and then the transcendental level.

Similarly, the Vedic concept of *prayascitta* is originally different from the abrahamic idea of penance in atonement for one's sins. While abrahamic believe in the intrinsic value of suffering in itself, and prescribe the mortification of the human nature, Vedic culture considers suffering as something bad to be avoided, and celebrates the human body as a gift and a temple of the divine. Therefore *prayascitta* is all about positive actions of purification, charity, and personal evolution that can counteract the mistakes committed in the past. Unfortunately, during abrahamic dominations and invasions of India in the last few centuries, many non-Vedic ideas have percolated into the collective Indian mind and now may even be considered by some as original Hindu beliefs. In some cases even the scriptural texts may have been tampered with and manipulated, usually by non-Hindu scholars who were deliberately trying to destroy Vedic culture.

The teaching of "Indology" in Europe was originally established with the precise purpose to preach Christianity "among the pagans". William Carey (1761-1834), the founder of the Baptist Missionary Society, was the pioneer of the Christian missionary scholarship in oriental studies. Max Mueller was commissioned by the East India Company to translate the *Rig Veda* into English by misinterpreting the Vedic literatures. He wrote: "India has been conquered once, but India must be conquered again and that second conquest should be a conquest by education."

Sir Monier Monier-Williams (1819-1899), author of a Sanskrit-English dictionary that is still extremely popular, stated in his address at Oxford University where he was Boden Professor of Sanskrit: "so as ...to proceed in the conversion of the natives of India to the Christian religion... Brahmanism must die out. When the walls of the mighty fortress of Brahmanism are encircled, undermined, and finally stormed by the soldiers of the cross, the victory of Christianity must be signal and complete."

It is now up to us to undo all this damage and restore the proper understanding of Vedic knowledge and civilization.

अहो बत महत्पापं कर्तुं व्यवसिता वयम् । यद्राज्यसुखलोभेन हन्तुं स्वजनमुद्यताः ॥ १-४५ ॥

aho bata mahatpāpam kartum vyavasitā vayam | yadrājyasukhalobhena hantum svajanamudyatāḥ || 1-45 ||

aho: alas; *bata*: how weird; *mahat*: great; *papam*: sin; *kartum*: to do; *vyavasitah*: are determined; *vayam*: us; *yad*: due to; *rajya*: kingdom; *sukha*: happiness; *lobhena*: greed; *hantum*: to kill; *sva-janam*: one's own people; *udyatah*: trying.

"Alas, how shocking! We are going to commit such a great sin ourselves, trying to kill our own friends and relatives, out of greed for the happiness of the kingdom."

Sukha means "happiness" as well as "well being".

Arjuna has already stated very clearly that he has no desire to gain the kingdom, so this new statement can seem contradictory. In fact it is not, because there are two levels of meanings in this verse. The happiness of the kingdom, *rajya sukha*, is not simply the happiness and well-being one gets from ruling over the kingdom, but it is the happiness and well-being of the subjects as well.

Certainly Dhritarastra and his supporters are motivated by the gross and selfish greed for owning and controlling the kingdom to derive personal gratification from it, and they demonstrate the ordinary meaning of the statement of this verse. However, Arjuna's mind is much deeper and the perception of the future sufferings is pushing him to a more critical and extensive examination of the action and its consequences. So even the second and deeper meaning of *rajya sukha*, referring to the happiness of the subjects in the kingdom, carries negative consequences in front of the death of so many family men.

Procuring happiness and well-being to a group of living entities by creating sufferings for another group of living entities is considered an uncivilized way of life, comparable to the lifestyle of hunters and dacoits. The more society is able to work on a win-win situation for all the living entities concerned, the more civilized and advanced it is considered. A good example is a non-violent agricultural society where the diet of the general people consists of fruits, leaves, milk (obtained through non-violent methods) and grains/ seeds dropped by the plants after attaining maturity. Even so, Vedic civilization is so deeply ethical and considerate that it recognizes all levels of responsibility, including the mild and unavoidable violence that is inherent even in a vegan and raw food diet and in the simple acts of walking and cleaning and lighting a fire, because all these basic requirements for life involve a certain degree of suffering for plants and insects, and even for other living entities who will be left without the food that we consume.

Rather than choosing a denial of life, like those who believe that it is meritorious to starve oneself to death or pluck out one's hair to keep lice from harm, Vedic civilization teaches that by accepting one's rightful share of the good things of life one contracts a debt towards the universe, and such debt must be repaid by actively and selflessly working for the benefit of all creatures. This is the basis of the concept of *dharma*: active cooperation in "supporting" society, the community of all living entities, the planet and the universe at large.

यदि मामप्रतीकारमशस्त्रं शस्त्रपाणयः । धार्तराष्ट्रा रणे हन्युस्तन्मे क्षेमतरं भवेत् ॥ १-४६ ॥

yadi māmapratīkāramaśastram śastrapāṇayah | dhārtarāṣṭrā raṇe hanyustanme kṣemataram bhavet || 1-46 ||

yadi: if; *mam*: me; *apratikaram*: without opposing; *asastram*: without weapons; *sastra-panayah*: holding weapons in hand; *dhartarashtra*: the (sons/ supporters) of Dhritarastra; *rane*: in the battle; *hanyus*: they may kill; *tan*: they; *me*: me; *kshemataram*: better; *bhavet*: it will be.

"If I was going to die unarmed and without fighting back, killed in battle by the (sons/ supporters) of Dhritarastra who yield weapons, that would be better for me."

Arjuna's despair in front of the imminent disaster of the war has reached the deepest possible point. He is ready to offer himself as a willing victim to the blood lust of Dhritarastra and his supporters, if this could somehow satisfy them and convince them to call off the battle.

An important factor in the determination of Dhritarastra and his supporters in pursuing the war is the personal hatred of Duryodhana for the Pandavas and especially for Arjuna. Such hatred has no legitimate or justifiable reason, but it is just due to envy and frustration because in spite of all the assassination attempts and the other forms of persecution that Duryodhana tried to destroy the Pandavas, they still lived and prospered because of their personal qualities and character.

Therefore Arjuna hopes that by offering himself as the sacrificial victim to such hatred, the determination of Duryodhana and his supporters may weaken and he may feel happy enough to let everybody else go. Again, this verse is the evidence that Arjuna is not scared at all by the impending battle and he does not fear for his life - on the contrary, he is ready to have himself slaughtered and humiliated in public, if this can save so many lives.

सञ्जय उवाच ।

sañjaya uvāca ।

एवमुत्तवार्जुनः सङ्ख्ये रथोपस्थ उपाविशत् । विसृज्य सशरं चापं शोकसंविग्नमानसः ॥ १-४७ ॥

evamuktvarjunaḥ sañkhye rathopastha upāviśat । visriḡya saśaraṃ cāpaṃ śokasaṃvignaṃānaśaḥ ॥ 1-47 ॥

sanjayah: Sanjaya; *uvaca*: said; *evam*: like this; *uktva*: said; *arjunah*: Arjuna; *sankhye*: on the battlefield; *ratha*: the chariot; *upastha*: the seat; *upavisat*: sat back; *visriḡya*: abandoning; *sa-saram*: with the arrows; *capam*: the bow; *soka*: lamentation; *samvigna*: distressed; *manasah*: mind.

Sanjaya said: After speaking these words, Arjuna who was on his chariot on the battlefield fell back on his seat abandoning his bow and arrows, his mind overwhelmed by anxiety and sorrow.

Soka samvigna manasah refers to the lamentation and distress of the *manas*, the conscious mind that constitutes the lower self, and with which most people identify. A self-realized person like Arjuna knows that the mind and the body are just instruments that we use to perform our duties in this world, yet he feels the suffering and anxiety of the mind. It is not that a liberated person does not feel any more pain or anxiety: he is simply not vanquished by them, and because he does not yield to the temptation of solving a problem by applying some unethical remedy (that would create more bad consequences for the future) his sufferings will soon come to an end.

Therefore Krishna will say later (2.14) that sufferings are temporary and that one should face them by applying tolerance. This does not mean that we should stop trying to solve problems - it means that a dharmic solution should be applied, and that boils down to doing one's duty. For example, the protection and care of one's body according to ethical principles constitutes one of the basic duties of the living entity, but such protection might become contrary to the ethical principles, as in the case of a *kshatriya* who neglects the protection of the *prajas* in order to save his own skin. Of course, people who identify with the mind and the body perceive the sufferings of body and mind in a much overwhelming way, because they do not see anything else, and their suffering also creates a great fear.

The word *visada* (depression) is another synonym, that gives the title to the first chapter of *Gita*. Actually a crisis like the depression faced by Arjuna before the battle of Kurukshetra constitutes a very good opportunity and an inspiration to seek the answers to the great questions in life, therefore *visada* is actually a part of the process of *yoga*. A crisis may be necessary to push a person to enter a process of re-evaluation of his/her life and values. We know that when everything goes well, people are not inclined to think about the purpose of life, as they automatically surmise that life is meant to enjoy, be happy, and just forget about everything else.

On the other hand when things get tough, when there is imminent danger, loss or suffering, people start questioning themselves about the purpose of life, real priorities, right choices and the best thing to do. One starts to think about the future, life after death, and the higher realities, and can find the determination to make the required changes in his habits and behaviors. We do not need to create a crisis in order to progress in life and self realization: such crisis will come by itself.

Chapter 2

Sankhya yoga

The yoga of analysis and enumeration

The second chapter of *Gita* constitutes a brief summary of the entire discourse between Krishna and Arjuna, and enumerates a number of approaches for the purpose of showing that they are actually all parts of the great science of *yoga*. Specifically, Krishna connects the idea of action with the ideas of devotion and renunciation, offering the key to the proper understanding of *dharma* and *yoga*.

The indologists' view, heavily influenced by the western academic mentality, presents a relativistic scenario of different schools of thought as if they were in competition to each other and not aimed at integrating each other in the Greater Picture. So we sometimes see people claiming they are following "Raja yoga" or "Kriya yoga", or "Bhakti yoga", as if they were different products on the market vying for the endorsement of the consumers, or different political parties demanding exclusive ideological allegiance from their members. A student of Philosophy in mainstream western academia is presented with a so-called objective history of "the evolution of human thought", or we should say, of human speculation, as opposed to the dogma enforced by Christianity for several centuries on the entire western society. Inevitably, the student develops a cynical vision and the belief that Reality does not exist or at least it cannot be known.

This cannot satisfy a sincere seeker, who aspires to actually understand Reality as it is.

Sankhya is the analysis of Reality to establish the various categories or factors, such as *atman*, *brahman*, *shakti*, *maya*, etc. Without this basic power of discrimination (*viveka*) it is very difficult to understand what *dharma* is. We can overcome duality only after we have understood what duality is... For example, before learning in algebra that you can actually subtract 5 from 1, you need to learn in elementary arithmetic that it is not possible to subtract 5 from 1. Similarly, before learning how to see beyond good and bad on the level of Transcendence, we need to learn to distinguish between *sat* and *asat*.

In connection to Sankhya, Buddhi Yoga constitutes the "second step" by which we begin to transcend the categories and duality itself. To the knowledge and experience offered by Sankhya, we add the memory or the natural awareness of our real Self, that does not need to be acquired from outside.

सञ्जय उवाच ।

sañjaya uvāca ।

तं तथा कृपयाविष्टमश्रुपूर्णाकुलेक्षणम् । विषीदन्तमिदं वाक्यमुवाच मधुसूदनः ॥ २-१ ॥

taṁ tathā kṛpayāviṣṭamaśrupūrṇākulekṣaṇam । viśīdantamidaṁ vākyaṁuvāca madhusūdanaḥ ॥ 2-1 ॥

sanjayah: Sanjaya; *uvaca*: said; *tam*: to him; *tatha*: then; *kripaya*: by compassion; *avistam*: overwhelmed; *asru*: tears; *purna*: full; *akula*: swelling; *ikshanam*: eyes; *visidantam*: lamenting; *idam*: this; *vakyam*: speech; *uvaca*: said; *madhu*: Madhu; *sudanaḥ*: the killer.

Sanjaya said: Madhusudana (Krishna) thus spoke to him (Arjuna), who was overwhelmed by compassion, depressed and with eyes filled with tears.

As we have seen in first chapter (1.29), depression is usually caused by a sense of horror, fear or guilt in front of a very difficult situation, especially when one is not sure about the course of action to be chosen. Arjuna has amply explained that he is unable to see a good solution to the crisis.

He has come to the battlefield to do his duty and defend the kingdom from the evil government of Dhritarashtra and Duryodhana, but the price to pay seems too high. Even considering that only willing fighters will be involved in the war - unlike modern conflicts, nothing outside the battlefield will be touched, no civilians will be harmed, no properties and no resources will be destroyed - still the extent of the loss of valuable lives and its consequences on society is devastating, and Arjuna's compassion is taking away all his energy. In such a dilemma, when no clear path is visible, it is natural to feel confused and to refrain from action until a proper solution is found.

Madhusudana: this name of Krishna, "killer of Madhu", refers to the destruction of doubts that create confusion and prevent from the proper performance of one's duties. On another level of meaning, Sanjaya chooses to refer to Krishna with this name because it indicates the divine and righteous action of killing the asuric and adharmic elements that constitute an obstacle to the happiness and progress of the entire society.

In this way Sanjaya is reminding Dhritarashtra that he should not keep his hopes too high: Arjuna is a compassionate and reasonable person and he does not wish to fight for his own egotistic advantage (like Duryodhana does) but nevertheless Krishna will convince him to fight to eliminate the causes of disruption in the kingdom and to protect the *prajas*. Here Krishna responds to Arjuna's sorrow and starts to clear his mind.

श्रीभगवानुवाच ।

śrībhagavānuvāca ।

कुतस्त्वा कश्मलमिदं विषमे समुपस्थितम् । अनार्यजुष्टमस्वर्ग्यमकीर्तिकरमर्जुन ॥ २-२ ॥

kutastvā kaśmalamidaṁ viṣame samupasthitam । anāryajusṭamasvargyamakīrtikaramarjuna ॥ 2-2 ॥

sri: divine; *bhagavan*: Lord; *uvaca*: said; *kutah*: from where; *tva*: you; *kashmalam*: impurity; *idam*: this; *vishame*: in (this) dangerous (time); *samupasthitam*: arrived; *anarya*: non civilized; *jushtam*: followed; *asvargyam*: not leading to Svarga; *akirti*: infamy; *karam*: making; *arjuna*: o Arjuna.

The Lord said: "O Arjuna, from where such contamination is coming to cover your consciousness at this critical time? It is unworthy of an *arya*: it does not lead to the higher planets but is the cause of infamy."

The correct definition of "*arya*" is fundamental for a proper understanding of the teachings of *Gita*. It means "civilized person" and refers to any person who has the proper knowledge of the rules of dharmic society and follows them loyally.

The misleading Aryan Invasion Theory, formulated by the colonial regime ideologue Max Muller, distorted the actual Vedic concept of *arya* by giving it a completely artificial racial meaning to justify the colonial oppressive and exploitative domination and the intrinsic racial superiority of white people over people of darker complexion, and hoping to create a new half-breed Indian-born middle class who would support the white domination. This absurd theory claimed that a race of nomadic marauders with "Caucasian" racial features like white skin, blue eyes and blond hair, descended from the Caucasus into India massacring and enslaving the original and primitive black populations and "civilizing" India. According to this theory, the white invaders introduced Sanskrit and the *Vedas*, iron and horses, as well as the birth caste system based on various genetic mixtures, where a proportionally higher percentage of the aryan DNA was found in the higher castes, while the *sudras* were the enslaved black dravidian natives of India. Writing for the *Anthropological Review* in 1870, Mueller classified the human species into seven categories on an ascending scale - with the black Aborigines on the lowest rung and the "Aryan" race type supreme. He also fixed the date of the Aryan invasion and subsequent "civilization" of India in 1500 BCE, using the Christian Bible references that stated that the entire universe had been created precisely on 23 October 4004 BCE.

This theory, later utilized by the German Nazi regime to justify "racial cleansing", has long since been proven wrong. Vedic culture was not brought to India by the so-called "Aryan invasion", as the colonialist scholars affirmed. In fact by reading Vedic literature we can easily see that the Aryan peoples of Vedic civilization had never been "nomadic" at all. Vedic peoples had great cities filled with palaces and temples, permanent villages and hermitages, a very prosperous system of permanent agriculture, and a very refined way of life. Something that better fits the picture of the Sarasvati and Sindhu civilization.

The mainstream academic establishment has at least partially recognized the historical findings at Mohenjo Daro, Harappa and many other archaeological sites in the Sarasvati and Sindhu valleys, that reveal an extremely rich, advanced and refined culture that flourished over 5000 years ago. These were large cities with a complex sewage system that ran under the streets and served all houses with private bathrooms, rounded street corners to facilitate the turning of fast vehicles, systematic street lighting, swimming pools, and so forth. Among the seals found in Harappa, one features an image of the earth globe, with lines that clearly represent latitude and longitude lines on the planet.

Vedic literatures also speak of airplanes, nuclear weapons and other weapons that still remain mysterious (based on the properties of sound, on weather control etc), electricity, calculation of atomic time, biotechnology, and especially of the immense potential of the human mind and body... and a careful and honest translation by open minded scholars will reveal many more wonders that are now becoming understandable to modern people thanks to the simultaneous progress of mainstream science.

Apart from this gross manipulation of history, we need to debunk the pseudo-scientific myth of the white race as being more "genetically evolved" than races with a different skin color. There cannot be an "Aryan race" because the genetic patrimony of the human race only refers to physiological traits and can never determine an individual's development on the ethical, social, spiritual or professional level. Of course there are limitations caused by diseases or malformations impairing the physiological functions of the brain and nervous system, but this is found in individuals of all different races and it depends more on environmental and dietetic factors than on the skin color. All human beings become civilized by education and training only.

In this verse Sanjaya reports the words of Krishna that will definitely crush Dhritarashtra's hopes for an easy victory due to Arjuna's compassion and detachment. In fact, Krishna is not speaking only for the benefit of Arjuna, but he has made sure his speech can be heard by the other warriors on the battlefield, by Dhritarashtra, and by us as well.

क्लैब्यं मा स्म गमः पार्थ नैतत्त्वय्युपपद्यते । क्षुद्रं हृदयदौर्बल्यं त्यक्तवोत्तिष्ठ परन्तप ॥ २-३ ॥

klaibyam mā sma gamaḥ pārtha naitattvayyupapadyate | kṣudraṁ hṛdayadaurbalyam tyaktvottiṣṭha parantapa || 2-3 ||

klaibyam: impotence; *ma*: not; *asma*: there be; *gamaḥ*: taken; *partha*: o son of Pritha; *na*: not; *etat*: this; *tvayi*: to you; *upapadyate*: is befitting; *kshudram*: petty; *hridaya*: heart; *daurbalyam*: weakness; *tyaktva*: giving up; *uttishtha*: rise; *parantapa*: o scorcher of the enemy.

"O son of Pritha (Arjuna), do not allow yourself to fall into (such as state of) impotence, because such state is not befitting you. Give up such petty weakness of heart and get up, o Parantapa."

Krishna is surprised to see Arjuna's behavior because Arjuna has always demonstrated a very strong and brave mind in front of all the personal difficulties that he and his family had to face. In the previous verse, Krishna already dismissed Arjuna's confusion as *kashmalam*, an "impurity" that would only bring him infamy, something that is unworthy of a wise person who knows the purpose of life.

The first point in Krishna's analysis is that the time for second thoughts and for seeking alternatives is over. The battle has already started, and there is no way to go back: Arjuna cannot think about making other choices now, because Duryodhana has already chosen for him and for everyone else, and that's final. The critical time is the moment when the battle is going to start: making the wrong choice at this time can have disastrous consequences for the kingdom. Arjuna cannot afford to become distracted or confused, especially at this time. This is a time when extreme measures are called for. The usual requirements of respect for the elders and support for family members become secondary in front of their criminal aggression against the kingdom.

The *Dharma sutras* explain that there is a provision for "emergency *dharma*" (*apat kal dharma*) that overrules the "ordinary *dharma*". In times of great danger, distress or calamity, the usual concerns become secondary and the wisdom of the lesser evil remains the only reference. This is why we need wise people (the genuine *brahmanas*) to guide society in understanding the science of *dharma* in all its different levels. For example, truthfulness and honesty are the basic principle of *dharma*, but they can be temporarily overruled in a situation of emergency, as when a small lie to a wicked criminal who has violent plans can enable us to save the life of a good and innocent person, or to avert a major disaster for the entire society.

The second consideration offered by Krishna is that we need to widen our perspective on life and include the next world as well: human beings who are faithful supporters of *dharma* in this world become qualified to enter the exclusive group of the powerful beings who are in charge of governing the universe - the denizens of Svargaloka. It is said, *yatobhyudaya nisreyas siddhih sa dharmah*: "Dharma is that from which you progress in life both materially and spiritually and not only now but also lifetime after lifetime."

If Arjuna leaves the battlefield now, the supporters of Dhritarashtra will continue to create great sufferings for the innocent subjects, thereby accumulating bad karmic reactions they will have to suffer in a next life; by stopping them now Arjuna will actually protect them from a disastrous situation in the future.

The third point raised by Krishna is *akirti*, "infamy", that is the opposite of *kirti* or "glory". The so-called non-violence that allows criminals to continue undisturbed in their degrading and disastrous activities is certainly not glorious. When the situation so requires, one should be ready to save a family by giving up a family member that is opposed to *dharma*, and similarly one should be ready to expel one bad family in order to save a village, or to lose a village when the safety of the entire kingdom is at stake.

Now Krishna continues this sharp analysis, clearly telling Arjuna that a *kshatriya*'s duty is to stand firm and fight to protect the kingdom. He cannot fail such duty out of compassion for the families of the criminals, because that would be weakness of heart only. Arjuna is not

going to kill, harm or persecute such families, and he is not touched by the consequences of the bad choices of the criminals: they are actually responsible for the maintenance and protection of their own families, and they have chosen to put their women and children at risk with their own adharmic choices. So the *kshatriya's* duty is just to fight the criminals on the battlefield, not to bask in his own compassionate feelings about their wives and children. Such compassion would be misinterpreted as sentimentalistic weakness by society and by the criminals as well, who would certainly take advantage of it to increase their bad activities - in this way we will become responsible for the sufferings of their victims.

Parantapa, the name by which Krishna calls Arjuna, suggests that a certain amount of violence and suffering is inevitable when we face aggressors in battle.

अर्जुन उवाच ।

arjuna uvāca ।

कथं भीष्ममहं सङ्ख्ये द्रोणं च मधुसूदन ।

इषुभिः प्रतियोत्स्यामि पूजार्हावरिसूदन ॥ २-४ ॥

katham bhīṣmanamaḥ saṅkhye droṇaṁ ca madhusūdana । iṣubhiḥ pratiyotsyāmi pūjārhāvarisūdana ॥ 2-4 ॥

arjunah: Arjuna; *uvaca:* said; *katham:* how; *bhishmam:* Bhishma; *aham:* I; *sankhye:* in the fight; *dronam:* Drona; *ca:* and; *madhusudana:* o Madhusudana; *ishubhih:* by arrows; *pratiyotsyami:* I will counterattack; *puja:* of worship; *arhau:* worthy; *ari:* enemy; *sudana:* killer.

Arjuna said: "O Madhusudana, o Arisudana, how will I engage in fighting against Bhishma and Drona, throwing arrows against them, who are rather to be worshiped by me?"

Apart from the compassion that he feels for all the families and subjects of those warriors who are about to die on the battlefield in this fratricidal war, Arjuna is concerned about the sinful action of physically attacking those very personalities that he has come to deeply revere for their greatness. Bhishma and Drona are not simply Arjuna's elders, but they have demonstrated extraordinary generosity, compassion, selflessness, wisdom and goodness, besides their immense knowledge, skill and expertise in the matters of governance. He has always considered them as his benefactors and protectors, and they have taught him everything he knows. Arjuna is not only compassionate, but grateful too - and this is another trait that dramatically distinguishes him from Duryodhana, who keeps accusing these same great personalities of not being partial enough to his own cause.

The action called *guru droha*, "becoming the enemy of one's *guru*", is considered a very serious sin, and a symptom of a demonic mentality. Even Indra had to suffer greatly because of his disrespect towards Brihaspati and even more so for his violent action against Visvarupa, who had taught him the Narayana kavacha. Even if one detaches him/ herself from his/ her *guru* because of the *guru's* faults, one should always try to avoid directly attacking him/ her or becoming his/ her enemy, because that amount to treason and betrayal against the principle of gratefulness. The legitimacy of abandoning a "fallen *guru*" is described in the *Mahabharata (Udyoga parva 179.25)* as *guror apy avaliptasya karyakaryam ajanatah utpatha-pratipannasya parityago vidhiyate*: "One should know that it is proper to abandon a teacher that is engaging in immoral activities, who does not understand or know what should be done and what should not be done, and who is going against what has been established by the scriptures."

However, this does not mean that one is entitled to turn against one's *guru* or superiors and commit violence against them. One should always remember the good things s/he has received from such *guru* and be grateful for them: this is a basic moral value. But this particular situation is different and it does not leave Arjuna any choice. Arjuna is not attacking Bhishma and Drona out of envy or resentment, or to usurp their position: he is defending the kingdom from their attack, because they have come to the battlefield to fight in support of the evil Duryodhana. Both Bhishma and Drona will later recognize their mistake and repent for it, and all along the battle they will continue to respect the fact that Arjuna is fighting to defend *dharma* and has no ill feelings against them, even if he is opposing them with weapons on the battlefield.

Sometimes stupid and arrogant people say that because we are fighting against *adharm*a - against ignorance, injustice and falsity - we are doing so because of some resentment, personal grudge or frustration, or envy. Sometimes these manipulative people even come to the point of saying that we are "mentally imbalanced". But Truth has no agenda, and it does not need one.

The name Madhusudana, "killer of Madhu", refers to the destruction of demons, whose nefarious activities will be clearly described later in *Gita (16.7-19)*: "Taking shelter of insatiable lust and greed, deluded by arrogance, pride and false prestige, they are attached to what is impermanent, and sworn to dirty actions. They are always full of schemes and fears and prone to destruction. They consider greed and sense gratification to be the supreme goal of life. They are always making endless plans based on lust and anger, and accumulating wealth illegally for the purpose of their own enjoyment. A demonic person thinks, 'I have so much wealth today, and I will get more according to my planning. All this belongs to me now, and my possessions will increase always. I have killed that enemy of mine, and I will also kill others. I am the controller, I am the enjoyer. I am perfect, I am powerful, I am happy, I am wealthy and I have many followers. Who can be compared to me? I shall perform rituals and I shall distribute charity for my own pleasure and benefit.'"

From this description we find that, in the Vedic perspective, a demon is not characterized by horns, protruding fangs, different body color or race, or other strange physical features or tribal apparel; in fact he may even make a show of religious and charitable activities to foster his own plans aimed at expanding his power, possessions and control over others. A very important point here is that the *asura* is eager to kill his "enemies", i.e. those who might obstruct his arrogant plans of domination and power games, so in his perspective they are somehow standing in his way.

Arisudana: this name of Krishna means "killer of the enemy".

It is extremely important to understand this verse correctly, because foolish and ignorant people can easily be misled by clever manipulators who present demons as good people or even as saints, criminals as victims, friends as enemies, and the other way around. For

those who are afflicted by a materialistic vision, the enemy is simply someone who seems not to belong to their camp: "he who is not with us, is against us."

This perspective gives no space for consideration of *dharma*, justice, or even decency or common sense. For example, for a hardened rapist, the "enemy" will be a child who finds the courage to subtract him/ herself from his predatory clutches, and who might expose his violent habits - therefore in the distorted mind of the criminal, the child "should be eliminated". Anyone else who may protect the child from him will also become his "enemy".

Similarly, a witness to a heinous crime will be considered as an enemy by a mafia boss, and in totalitarian regimes anyone who does not subscribe to the government dogma becomes an "enemy of the State" by that very reason, even if he does not take any aggressive action. Can the mere fact of existing independently be considered an aggressive crime punishable by death? Can asking questions about obviously incorrect actions and conclusions be considered an aggressive crime? Can the mere fact of having different religious/ spiritual beliefs be considered a crime punishable by death? Or in other words, is freedom of thought a crime?

According to the demoniac mentality, it is. According to the divine mentality, it is not. An opinion is dangerous only when it presents violent aggression as a legitimate (or the only legitimate) way of life. Bad actions must be counteracted by prevention and forceful opposition, but bad opinions must be counteracted by opinions only - by discussion and debate, preferably public.

This is the Vedic system. In this regard, out of humility one could feel hesitant in entering such a debate against great personalities - heads of famous religious institutions, teachers with many followers, or powerful social figures. But if these people are taking an adharmic position, no matter what their reasons are, they must be fearlessly challenged and opposed in debate.

गुरून्हत्वा हि महानुभावान् श्रेयो भोक्तुं भैक्ष्यमपीह लोके ।

gurūnahatvā hi mahānubhāvān śreyo bhoktum bhaikṣyamapīha lōke ।

हत्वार्थकामांस्तु गुरूनिहैव भुञ्जीय भोगान् रुधिरप्रदिग्धान् ॥ २-५ ॥

hatvārthakāmānstu gurūnihaiva bhunjiya bhogān rudhirapradigdhān ॥ 2-5 ॥

gurun: teachers; *ahatva:* not killing; *hi:* certainly; *maha:* great; *anubhavan:* personalities; *sreyah:* better; *bhoktum:* to eat; *bhaikshyam:* by begging; *api:* even; *iha:* this; *loke:* in the world; *hatva:* by killing; *artha:* benefit; *kaman:* desired (things); *tu:* but; *gurun:* teachers; *iha:* here; *eva:* certainly; *bhunjiya:* it should be enjoyed; *bhogan:* pleasures; *rudhira:* by blood; *pradigdhan:* tainted.

"Killing teachers, who are such great personalities! It would be better to maintain myself by becoming a mendicant in this world. Even if they are victims of blood lust/ they are ready to kill to get what they want, they are still my teachers, and any benefit or pleasure from this (killing) will be tainted with blood."

Guru means "teacher". The definition generally applies to all those who have learned or realized something and are able to pass it to others - it could be music or dance, or mathematics, yoga or any other subject, in the material and in the spiritual fields. There are many levels of teachers, but all of them are extremely important for the progress of human society, and they should all be respected for their role and their knowledge and skills. The qualification for a genuine *guru* is explained as, *adhigata tattvah, sisya hitaya udyatah satatam*, "One who has personally realized the goal/ truth, and who is always acting for the benefit of the disciple". So even if the teacher's knowledge and understanding are limited, if s/he is honest and sincerely transmits whatever s/he has actually learned and realized (without pretending to be what he is not), and is always motivated only by the benefit of the disciple (not by selfish desire for personal benefits of any kind or by political/institutional motivations), s/he is worthy of respect. and gratitude.

A Sat Guru, however, is something more than an ordinary *guru*. *Sat* means "spiritual, eternal" and refers to a teacher who has attained the level of liberation (*moksha*) while still in a body (*jivan mukta*) and is able to take his/her students to the same level (*brahma bhuta*). The parameters to recognize a liberated person are clearly described in the scriptures, and have nothing to do with institutional certification or number of followers, or with similar considerations.

A Sat Guru does not need to be a *brahmana* by occupation. The position of a *brahmana* requires a particular set of official ritualistic activities and a number of duties towards family and society, some of which are performed daily and others on special occasions. A *brahmana* is not just a teacher (of whatever subject he chooses to teach, even in the material field such as martial arts etc), but a priest as well. On the other hand, a Sat Guru could be a *sannyasi* (who has no duties to family or society), an *avadhuta* (who has no duties or rules to follow) or even be engaged in a more modest social occupation, down to the position of *sudra*.

The only true necessary qualification is having realized what s/he is supposed to teach - i.e. that we are Atman/ Brahman and not the material body we live in, and its relations in this world. In other words, s/he must be completely free from *ahankara* and *mamatva*. He considers himself simply the servant of the Supreme Guru Tattva, Antaryami.

Anyone, even a teacher, may commit mistakes or temporarily fall into illusion or confusion: we should not allow one of such mistakes committed by a great personality to make us forget all the good things he has done for society, and the good things he can still do if he improves his act and reforms himself. A teacher or a *brahmana*, or even a relative of a *brahmana* who is not (yet) qualified, should not be killed if that can be avoided. Of course if he commits some disgraceful action or spreads false or immoral teachings he should be stopped and exposed, so that he will not be able to confuse and mislead the general public with wrong conclusions and a bad example, but he should never be sentenced to death or corporal punishment. This can only be faced with the appropriate weapons in self defense if he becomes a violent aggressor as per previous description. This particularly applies to one's teachers, one's elders and superiors, who should be respected for the sincere help and support they have given us so that we could progress in life. Even if their understanding and behavior are not perfect, or if they make mistakes or fall into delusion or degradation, they can still reform themselves and they are entitled to our gratitude as Arjuna is explaining in this verse. Ungratefulness towards those who have selflessly and lovingly worked for our benefit is a very great sin.

However, protecting the kingdom from criminals has nothing to do with one's personal relationships or the benefits we personally received in the past or we could receive in the future from a particular person. We should be ready to oppose even our own teachers, friends and family members if they become criminals and their actions endanger the peace, progress and prosperity of the *prajas*, the persons entrusted to us.

न चैतद्विद्मः कतरन्नो गरीयो यद्वा जयेम यदि वा नो जयेयुः ।

na caitadvidmaḥ kataranno garīyo yadvā jayema yadi vā no jayeyuḥ ।

यानेव हत्वा न जिजीविषामः तेऽवस्थिताः प्रमुखे धार्तराष्ट्राः ॥ २-६ ॥

yāneva hatvā na jijīviṣāmaḥ te'avasthitāḥ pramukhe dhārtarāṣṭrāḥ ॥ 2-6 ॥

na: not; *ca*: and; *etad*: this; *vidmaḥ*: we know; *katarat*: which; *nah*: for us; *garīyah*: better; *yat va*: or rather; *jayema*: we should win; *yadi*: if; *va*: or; *nah*: us; *jayeyuḥ*: they will win; *yan*: they; *eva*: certainly; *hatva*: killing; *na*: not; *jijivishamah*: we will desire to live; *te*: they; *avasthitah*: are situated; *pramukhe*: in front (of us); *dhartarashtra*: the (supporters) of Dhritarashtra.

"We do not know which is better, whether to win over them or to let them win over us. We should not desire to live after killing these followers of Dhritarashtra, who are standing in front of us."

Arjuna's mind is attacked by depression, and doubts creep and grow and expand at various levels, so he is even starting to feel uncertain about the possible outcome of the battle. What if, after a fierce battle where so many people will be killed - with the consequences that he has already contemplated? Dhritarashtra's side will win anyway, and the kingdom will continue to be oppressed by his bad governance. It would be a total loss.

It is true that a *kshatriya* should not flee from the battlefield out of fear, but it is also true that he should be wise and only engage in battles that offer a reasonable chance for success. Desperate battles are justified only as a last stand, when there is no hope for another opportunity in the future, otherwise it is advisable to withdraw strategically and live to fight another day.

The two armies are not of equal force, and Arjuna is now starting to think that maybe the battle could have been postponed until the chances for success were better. Maybe in the meantime things would change and more lives could be spared.

Arjuna wants to be reasonable and to analyze all the possibilities before venturing into an action from which he will not be able to get out, once started. A *kshatriya* is a very responsible and wise person, not a war mongering gangster, a violent and mindless hooligan, a fanatic marauder fueled by sectarian hatred or anger, or a trigger-happy madman who just likes to kill people. For a genuine *kshatriya*, war is not a mercenary business career with pleasurable perks, an exciting game, or an opportunity to vent his personal emotional imbalance, frustrations and unresolved inner conflicts, or to get some adrenaline stimulation. In order to create *kshatriyas* it is not sufficient to give weapons to immature or psychotic people, or to indoctrinate them with inflammatory rhetoric on the greatness of a religious or cultural tradition, or fuel their fear and prejudice against those who are perceived as different.

In the traditional *gurukula*, a *kshatriya* boy needs to study and train just a little less than a *brahmana*, learning to use his brain properly, acquiring the proper self-control and discipline, exploring the subtleties of strategy and politics, and especially understanding the science of *dharma* and its applications. Unless he has truly become proficient in all this, as well as in physical training, he must not be endorsed as a qualified *kshatriya* by the Guru.

कार्पण्यदोषोपहतस्वभावः पृच्छामि त्वां धर्मसम्मूढचेताः ।

kārpaṇyadoṣopahatasvabhāvaḥ pṛcchāmi tvāṁ dharmasammūḍhacetāḥ ।

यच्छ्रेयः स्यान्निश्चितं ब्रूहि तन्मे शिष्यस्तेऽहं शाधि मां त्वां प्रपन्नम् ॥ २-७ ॥

yacchreyaḥ syānniścitaṁ brūhi tanme śiṣyaste'haṁ śādhi māṁ tvāṁ prapannam ॥ 2-7 ॥

karpanya: of pettiness; *dosha*: defect; *upahata*: afflicted; *svabhavaḥ*: natural inclination; *pṛcchami*: I am asking; *tvam*: you; *dharma*: *dharma*; *sammudha*: confused; *cetaḥ*: consciousness; *yat*: that; *sreyah*: (real) good; *syat*: would be; *niscitam*: without any doubt; *bruhi*: tell; *tat*: that; *me*: to me; *sisyah*: disciple; *te*: to you; *aham*: I; *sadhi*: instruct; *maḥ*: me; *tvam*: you; *prapannam*: surrendered.

"My nature is now afflicted by weakness. (Therefore) I am asking you (to clarify) the confusion of my mind about dharma, to tell me without a doubt what is the best thing to do. I am your disciple and I take shelter in you: (please) instruct me."

A *kripāna* is a narrow-minded person who identifies with the body. The *Bhagavata Purana* (1.13.25) says, *deho 'yam kṛpanasya jijivishoh*, "desiring to continue life in this body", (4.28.6) *kṛpanah vishaya-atmakah*, "attached/ identified to the objects of sense gratification" (6.9.49), *na veda kṛpanah sreyah*, "he does not know the real benefit (of human life)" (7.9.45), *yan maithunadi grihamedhi-sukham ... kṛpanah*, "(attached) to all types of family pleasures, starting from sex life" (11.21.27).

This does not refer to the selfless love and dutiful service that one should give to the members of one's family: it's about the attachment to the idea of getting pleasure from them. Ignorant people who are attached to the lust of sense gratification, exploitation, possession and domination usually condemn genuine love and affection relationships, mistaking *dharma* for *adharmā*, and *adharmā* for *dharma*. In fact *Gita* (9.49) pinpoints the description of the *kripāna* by saying that he acts selfishly, with the purpose of getting a personal benefit: *phala-hetavah*.

Another famous quote about the meaning of *kripāna* comes from *Brhad aranyaka Upanishad* (3.8.10): *yo va etad aksaram gargy aviditvasmal lokat praiti sa kṛpanah*, "O Gargi, a *kripāna* is one who leaves this world without knowing Brahman (that which never changes)".

Svabhava means "natural inclination", and more specifically it refers to the natural *guna* and *karma* of each individual by which he is instinctively attracted to some activity as he has the natural talent to perform it. Arjuna is a *kshatriya* by nature, therefore his *svabhava* is to protect the kingdom and the subject from *adharma*. But what is dharmic in a circumstance can be adharmic in another, so things are not so easy.

Arjuna recognizes that his previous arguments were faulty, poor and narrow minded, and he wants Krishna to dispel his doubts for him, and explain the actual meaning of *dharma*.

The concept of *dharma* is often translated as "religion", but this can be misleading because the mainstream western concept of religion is shaped on the abrahamic mentality, where blind allegiance to an exclusive system of belief is the only thing that matters. Abrahamic religions do not give any importance to objective ethical considerations, individual responsibility, personal evolution, or reconciliation of apparent differences or opposites into a greater picture of Reality.

The word *dharma* comes from the root *dhr*, meaning "to support", and it refers to the intrinsic, characteristic and positive quality of being that supports existence. So just like the fire's intrinsic quality is to radiate heat and light, the *kshatriya's* intrinsic quality is to defend society from aggressors and support its progress.

In this way, each human being directly participates to the divine activities of creation, maintenance and dissolution of the world, and constitutes a cell in the body of the Universal Person, the Virat Purusha. However, sometimes the consciousness of the human being can become confused due to various factors, and therefore his natural duty can be covered by other considerations.

Niscitam means "beyond all doubts". It is true that doubt is a function of intelligence, but they are only meant to make us think thoroughly and verify things before making a choice. They are never intended to keep us from doing what is right and necessary, therefore after clarifying them we need to move on.

The word *sishya* means "disciple": here Arjuna recognizes that Krishna knows better than him, and he surrenders himself as a humble disciple, ready to accept instructions and to follow orders. The word *sreya* ("best thing to do") is the opposite of *preya* ("pleasurable thing to do"). They could be defined also as the "hard but right thing" and the "easy but wrong thing" to do.

न हि प्रपश्यामि ममापनुद्याद् यच्छोकमुच्छोषणमिन्द्रियाणाम् ।
na hi prapaśyāmi mamāpanudyād yacchokamucchoṣaṇamindriyāṇām ।
अवाप्य भूमावसपत्नमृद्धं राज्यं सुराणामपि चाधिपत्यम् ॥ २-८ ॥
avāpya bhūmāvasapatnamṛddhaṁ rājyaṁ surāṇāmapī cādhipatyam ॥ 2-8 ॥

na: not; *hi*: certainly; *prapasyami*: I can see; *mama*: my; *apanudyat*: can send away; *yat*: that; *sokam*: depression; *ucchoshanam*: that dries up; *indriyanam*: the senses; *avapya*: obtaining; *bhumau*: on earth; *asapatnam*: without equal; *riddham*: prosperous; *rajyam*: kingdom; *suranam*: of the Devas; *api*: even; *ca*: and; *adhipatyam*: supreme control.

"I do not see how I could dispel this sadness that is drying up my senses, even if I achieved, on this earth itself, the unchallenged position of a prosperous ruler over the heavenly planets."

The word *sokam* indicates the feeling of depression, that is expressed as sadness and lamentation, and that takes away any interest, happiness and enthusiasm in life. Arjuna has come to the point where one is fed up with the complications and difficulties of life, with the uncertainty of the outcome of his activities, no matter what choices he makes. In a previous verse (2.2) Krishna mentioned that weakness and sentimentalism that distract from the duty of defending society from criminals will not take one to Svarga, the heavenly planets that are the residence of the virtuous and godly administrators of the universe. In this verse, Arjuna is clearly replying that he is not interested to go there - not even if he could obtain such heavenly position without having to leave his present body, while continuing to live on this planet.

Abrahamic faiths teach that the highest possible destination for a human being is paradise or heaven, a place characterized by prolonged and lavish sensual pleasures that belong to the same materialistic category of the pleasures of this world - food, drink, sex, beautiful clothing and ornaments, nice housing, gardens, flowers, music and dance, etc. However, such position is still material. Even the heavenly beings who live in paradise (Svarga) have a material body, and although it is a beautiful and very powerful body, and will continue to exist for a very long time (making them almost immortal), still at the time of the dissolution of the universe, at the end of the cycle of the cosmic manifestation, such position will be destroyed.

The *suras* are constantly fighting against the *asuras*: the entire universe is their kingdom and they are also responsible for the protection and progress of their *prajas* that are periodically threatened by evil aggressors who have a demoniac mentality. Even Brahma, the highest and most powerful living entity of this universe, is subject to such harassment. Besides, he only lives for 100 of his years, and at the end of his life the entire universe (including heavens) is withdrawn into the non-manifested state. Here Arjuna says that he will not find happiness in such a condition, because true happiness can be found only on another and higher level of reality, that is truly eternal, and he wants Krishna to talk about that.

The transcendental level of Brahman, called *akshara* ("not subject to change") is the real eternal existence. Such level is also called Vaikuntha, "free from anxiety", and it is described as the spiritual world where Sadashiva Vishnu exists eternally. Anyone who attains the liberated stage, the Self realization of Atman, Brahman, Paramatma and Bhagavan, will instantly be established on that transcendental level - that will not be disturbed or touched at the time of the dissolution of this universe. Krishna will therefore explain *Gita* to clarify this all-important knowledge of Atman, Brahman, Paramatma and Bhagavan. By this knowledge, one will attain a level that is much higher, permanent and happier than paradise.

सञ्जय उवाच ।

sañjaya uvāca ।

एवमुक्त्वा हृषीकेशं गुडाकेशः परन्तपः । न चोत्स्य इति गोविन्दमुत्तवा तूष्णीं बभूव ह ॥ २-९ ॥

evamuktva hr̥ṣīkeśaṁ guḍākeśaḥ parantapaḥ । na yotsya iti govindamuktva tūṣṇīm babhūva ha ॥ 2-9 ॥

sanjaya: Sanjaya; *uvaca*: said; *evam*: like this; *uktva*: having said; *hrishikesam*: to Hrishikesha, "the master of the senses"; *gudakesah*: Gudakesha, "the master of sleep"; *parantapah*: Parantapa, "who burns his opponents"; *na*: not; *yotsya*: I will fight; *iti*: this; *govindam*: Govinda, "who gives pleasure to the senses, the earth and cows"; *uktva*: having said; *tushnim*: silent; *babhava*: became; *ha*: certainly.

Sanjaya said: After thus speaking to Hrishikesha (Krishna), Gudakesha Parantapa (Arjuna) said, "O Govinda, I will not engage in battle", and then became silent.

Arjuna has already presented himself to Krishna as an obedient disciple, ready to be instructed. This, however, does not mean he should stop thinking, or presenting his views or problems. The first duty of the Guru is to listen to the disciple, so that s/he can get a clear picture of the actual position of the disciple and offer the appropriate and personalized instructions. Although everyone is on the same path, each individual has a different story, different qualities and tendencies, different problems, different realizations, and different capabilities. Such differences do not pertain only to the material level, but also extend to the spiritual sphere, creating a wonderful variety of *rasas* or transcendental sentiments and service moods, that multiplied into the great number of different Personalities of Godhead - who have unlimited names, forms, qualities and activities - constitute the amazingly immense and varied world of *bhakti*.

Some foolish people, in the name of being "personalists", totally disregard the actual *guna* and *karma* of the individual as well as his/ her particular sentiment (*rasa*) that awaits to be developed, his/ her attraction towards a particular form of the Godhead, and the specific potential s/he can develop in the area of devotional service. All their followers are therefore expected to become blank slates, washed clean of all previous individuality and personality, rejecting all their memories and capabilities including the spiritual realizations or aspirations they may have had before "being initiated". They are told that all such previous things are *maya*, "illusion" or material lies: anything that existed before the moment of "joining the movement" is unreal and intrinsically bad and dangerous.

Even later, communication remains one-way only for these people: the "Guru" speaks, and the disciple can only listen. The disciple is expected to turn into an impersonal lump to be shaped into the only type of standardized personality that is acceptable for the institution. Everyone is expected to develop the same type of *rasa* for the same form of the Personality of Godhead, to follow exactly the same process, to develop the same abilities, tastes, and mannerism in speaking, walking, moving, etc. Thinking and questioning are strongly discouraged, and the result is some kind of trance-like sleep in which one remains unable to see the facts as they are. Sometimes this process is described as "brainwashing".

On the contrary, in this verse Arjuna is called Gudakesha: one who has vanquished sleep and therefore is very alert. He is speaking to Hrishikesha, whose mastership over the senses leaves ample space to the exercise of the individual's free will and personal evolution. Another meaning of the name Gudakesha is "who has knotted hair", referring to the practical way of tying up one's hair when preparing for battle.

The two names Parantapa and Govinda are also poetically juxtaposed in the verse: Arjuna's nature, or *svabhava*, is to fight *adharma* with great determination, skill and power, opposing even the greatest enemies on the battlefield, while Govinda is the source of pleasure and progress for the senses of all beings and for the Earth, too. These two apparently opposite necessities perfectly summarize Arjuna's dilemma. It is to be noted, however, that after presenting all the proper information and discussion with the teacher, the student should become silent and listen carefully at the teacher. This is precisely what Arjuna is doing here: after fully expressing what he had to say, he becomes silent and ready to listen to what Krishna has to say.

तमुवाच हृषीकेशः प्रहसन्निव भारत । सेनयोरुभयोर्मध्ये विषीदन्तमिदं वचः ॥ २-१० ॥

tamuvāca hr̥ṣīkeśaḥ prahasanniva bhārata । senayorubhayormadhye viṣīdantamidaṁ vacaḥ ॥ 2-10 ॥

tam: him; *uvaca*: said; *hrishikesah*: Hrishikesha; *prahasan*: smiling; *iva*: like; *bharata*: o descendant of Bharata; *senayoh*: the two armies; *ubhayoh*: both; *madhye*: in the middle; *vishidantam*: to him who was depressed; *idam*: this; *vacah*: speech.

"O Bharata, Hrishikesha smiled and spoke these words to him, the depressed (Arjuna), while they were between the two armies."

The word *hasan*, "smiling", shows that Krishna is not worried by Arjuna's display of despair and dejection. Krishna has all the right answers, and he is soon going to present them for the benefit of all those who will hear the wonderful conversation between the two friends on the battlefield. This also includes us, of course.

The second chapter of *Gita* is called Sankhya or Samkhya Yoga.

Sometimes the term *sankhya* is translated as "enumeration", or "analysis" of the various components of Reality. However, *sankhya* or *samyak* also refers to the correct understanding of the Knowledge that reveals (*khyayate*) Reality.

This second chapter is a general overview on the contents of the entire *Gita*, including Jnana (11-46), Karma (47-60), Bhakti (61-70) and Sannyasa (71-72). These are all integral parts of the process of Self realization, that is aimed at understanding and living our real nature of spiritual souls, temporarily encased within a material body.

Of course when we have fully realized our real identity and nature we can still engage in playing the roles that are required in society and to fulfill our duties, but with a huge difference - we will not be confused and afflicted by illusion and suffering. This is precisely the

definition of "lila": like God, all truly self-realized souls engage in a dramatized story, playing a role required by the plot, but they never become attached to it, and they never really suffer or become confused. Arjuna is only pretending to be confused, and that's why Krishna is smiling: he is greatly enjoying the play.

Of course, we can also interpret Krishna's smile at many other levels: it is first of all a smile of love and compassion, as Arjuna is offering him the opportunity to benefit all the confused conditioned souls and help them out of their sufferings. So Krishna feels love and affection for Arjuna, who is his eternal friend and companion and as such is cooperating with him in this great mission. Krishna also feels love and affection for all those who will benefit from such teachings.

Another reason why Krishna is smiling is that he wants to show to Arjuna, and to us as well, that he does not disapprove of Arjuna's arguments, and he is not upset because of his statements.

श्रीभगवानुवाच ।

śribhagavanuvāca ।

अशोच्यानन्वशोचस्त्वं प्रज्ञावादांश्च भाषसे । गतासूनगतासूंश्च नानुशोचन्ति पण्डिताः ॥ २-११ ॥

aśocyānanvaśocastvaṁ prajñāvādāṁśca bhāṣase । gatāsūnagatāsūṁśca nānuśocanti paṇḍitāḥ ॥ 2-11 ॥

sri: glorious; *bhagavan*: Lord; *uvaca*: said; *asocyan*: not worthy of lamentation; *anvasocah*: you are lamenting; *tvam*: you; *prajna*: wise; *vadan*: words; *ca*: and; *bhashase*: you speak; *gatasun*: those who have gone; *agatasun*: those who have not gone; *ca*: and; *na*: not; *anusocanti*: they lament; *panditah*: the learned (persons).

The glorious Lord said: "Although you speak wisely, you are lamenting for something that should not make you sad. Those who really know the truth do not grieve for the dead or for the living."

This is the first verse that opens Krishna's teachings to Arjuna and all of us, and it is dense with meaning and worthy of being learned by heart. It would be very nice to memorize all the verses of the entire *Gita*, but since not many people are able to do so, it is advisable to memorize at least a collection of the most famous verses.

As we focus our attention on the glorious Lord Krishna, we may spend some time on meditating on the word "*sri*" that always accompanies his name. Sri is the Mother Goddess, the personification of glory, beauty, opulence, and perfection. There is no "Bhagavan" without "Sri", as Bhagavan means "one who has *bhaga*", where *bhaga* specifically means "opulence" or "fortune" - and all forms of opulence or fortune are personified in Sri, or Lakshmi, the Mother Goddess.

Traditionally, such opulences are listed as six: beauty, wealth, strength, fame, knowledge and detachment. The theological meaning of the name Bhagavan thus implies a form and attributes, and a personality including sentiments, feelings, thoughts, desires and intentions. Therefore it is said that Bhagavan is the "personal" aspect of the Godhead, while Paramatma is the "localized" aspect of the Godhead that is present within the heart of all living beings (and within each atom of the creation as well) and Brahman is the "impersonal" aspect of the Godhead, that is all pervading.

Bhagavata purana (1.2.11) clearly explains that these three aspects of the Godhead are one and the same: *vadanti tat tattva vidad tattvam yaj jnanam advayam, brahmeti paramatmeti bhagavan iti sadyate*.

However, one can really understand Bhagavan only after realizing Brahman and Paramatma - otherwise one's *bhakti* would just be materialistic devotion, a sentimentalistic affection that can only encourage the devotee towards a preliminary attraction for the Lord. Such realization of Brahman and Paramatma, of course, is not subject to the official approval or certification by some institution or religious lineage.

Brahman realization simply consists in actually realizing the spiritual nature that is the true identity of God and of the individual soul as well. As long as we remain deeply convinced that we are the material body/ mind and we are defined by its attributes - in terms of race, nationality, gender, caste, etc - we will only be able to see God as a statue made of material elements, or as a historical figure born in a particular period.

Paramatma realization simply consists in actually feeling the presence of God in our heart, and realizing that we are nothing but emanations of the Godhead, therefore our only function is to relate to the Godhead in a positive sentiment. Without this realization, our actions will remain disconnected from the universal plan and plagued by selfishness - even if such selfishness expands beyond the limits of the single individual to identify one with one's family, one's community, one's nation, or one's particular cultural or religious tradition, and therefore make him exclusively attached to them. Thus, *pandita* or "knowledgeable and wise", is a person who has overcome the bodily identification and attachments. We will see more of this definition later in the text. On the other hand, *prajna* means "aware, conscious, conscientious".

Krishna observes that Arjuna is speaking sagely about the protection of *dharma* within the family, and the effects that family degradation can have on society, and he praises him for that. This clarifies that Krishna does not reject Arjuna's previous arguments *per se*: they were perfectly dharmic and appropriate, but they only constituted a level of *dharma* that is intended to be followed in normal circumstances.

Another interesting point is that Krishna says that knowledgeable persons do not "grieve either for the dead or for the living", implying that often carrying on with life in certain circumstances can be more difficult than dying. Bhishma, Drona and the other great personalities are not to be pitied because they will simply obtain the result of their own choices and activities, just like everybody else.

न त्वेवाहं जातु नासं न त्वं नेमे जनाधिपाः । न चैव न भविष्यामः सर्वे वयमतः परम् ॥ २-१२ ॥

na tvevāhaṁ jātu nāsaṁ na tvam neme janādhipāḥ | na caiva na bhaviṣyāmaḥ sarve vayamataḥ param || 2-12 ||

na: not; *tu*: but; *eva*: certainly; *aham*: I; *jatu*: at any time; *na*: not; *asam*: exist; *na*: not/neither; *tvam*: you; *na*: not; *ime*: these; *jana*: of people; *adhipah*: leaders; *na*: not; *ca*: and; *eva*: certainly; *na*: not; *bhaviṣyamah*: we will be; *sarve*: all; *vayam*: us; *atah*: now; *param*: after.

"Certainly there was never a time when I did not exist, and you and all these chieftains of men have always existed as well. Also, none of us will cease to exist in the future."

In the previous verse Krishna has stated that there is no need to grieve for those who are dead, and in this verse he explains why: because we never actually die. We disappear from the eyes of the people around us because we leave the body, and after that the material form that we manifested is no longer visible, as the atoms composing it will disperse.

All material bodies are composed of atoms of matter that aggregate and disaggregate constantly, so much that every 7 years all the cells/atoms of our body have been replaced by new ones. During one lifetime the "magnet" of the material consciousness called *ahankara* keeps attracting material atoms and the disaggregation is a slow process by which fresh atoms are attracted through food etc and old atoms are lost through the biological functions. At the time of death the disaggregation process becomes more dramatic as the *ahankara* "magnet" becomes completely detached from that particular body and this does not attract any fresh atoms - so only the decay and dispersion of the old atoms is visible. In subsequent verses Krishna will explain this process more specifically.

In this verse Krishna includes himself (*aham*), as well as Arjuna (*tvam*) and the other warriors (*jana adhipah*), in the eternal and transcendental category of spirit. This verse states the inconceivable individual nature of Brahman, the Atman, that is simultaneously One and Many. The *aham* and *tvam*, the individual nature and consciousness, continues also after liberation from material identification, just like each molecule of water continues to exist individually with a precise shape and nature even after the droplet has dissolved into the ocean. What disappears is just the temporary shape of the drop, not the inherent nature of water (H₂O).

Some commentators state that this verse refers only to the bodies and not to the Atman, but such an idea is clearly rejected in the subsequent verses of *Gita*, where Krishna explains how the body is never eternal, while the soul is. So when Krishna says that "none of us will ever cease to be" he cannot possibly be speaking about the bodies.

The misunderstanding is probably caused by the intermediate level of identification of the embodied soul - the subtle body or mind, that is also material - that continues to exist from one lifetime to the next, carrying the karmic seeds and the root of material identification (the *ahankara*). But that is not eternal, either, because it will dissolve at the time of liberation. If we consider that Krishna is on a transcendental, liberated level, we cannot think that he is talking about the subtle material body - the material mind characterized by material bodily identification.

The eternal individuality of which Krishna is speaking refers to the Atman/ Brahman, and is therefore on the pure transcendental level. It is a fact that in the process of spiritual evolution in this world, the material mind is gradually substituted by spiritual intelligence, as the spiritual body (*siddha deha*, or *sva-rupa*) grows and manifests more and more in our personality. Such spiritual body or spiritual form is the natural expansion of the *anu-atman*, and is developed in the association of the spiritual form of the Godhead and everything that is divine in nature - the transcendental names, qualities, activities, teachings, companions, abodes, etc of the Godhead.

The living entity emanates from the Godhead as a seed (*bija*), an atomic (*anu atman*) spark of the Fire, as a minuscule cell of the body of the Parama Purusha, but it contains the "spiritual DNA" (so to speak) by which he will be able to perfectly develop into a fully fledged spiritual form and personality like Bhagavan. This is also called *sarupya mukti*, the liberation that consists in developing the same form of the Lord. When we recognize that Vishnu is transcendental and not material, then his names, qualities, activities, teachings, companions, abodes, etc must also be transcendental. And in order to be able to approach Vishnu for worship and service, we also need to develop a transcendental body, that will gradually manifest in this world in the course of our *sadhana* and will be perfectly self-sufficient at the time at death when we leave our material body.

देहिनोऽस्मिन्यथा देहे कौमारं यौवनं जरा । तथा देहान्तरप्राप्तिर्धिरस्तत्र न मुह्यति ॥ २-१३ ॥

dehino'sminyathā dehe kaumāraṁ yauvanam jarā | tathā dehāntaraprāptirdhīrastatra na muhyati || 2-13 ||

dehinah: one has a (material) body; *asmin*: in this (world); *yatha*: as is; *dehe*: in the body; *kaumaram*: in childhood; *yauvanam*: in youth; *jara*: in old age; *tatha*: like that; *deha*: of the body; *antara*: end; *prapiti*: attained; *dhirah*: one who is sober; *tatra*: there; *na*: not; *muhyati*: is confused.

"The embodied soul who lives in this body (passes from one form to the other) as from childhood to youth to old age, and similarly at the end of this body (he passes on). A wise person is not confused by this (passage)."

Each person knows there is a continuity of individual existence through childhood, youth and old age, although the body undergoes great changes, to the point we could say those are totally different bodies. To understand this point, it is sufficient to see a number of photos of the same person taken at 7 to 10 years intervals from each other. It is said that almost all the cells of our body are naturally replaced in a cycle of 7 years. We can compare the spirit soul to a magnet that can modulate its power of attraction according to the particular identification. When the Atman identifies with the transcendental nature he becomes instantly attracted to it, but when he identifies with the material existence he remains stuck there. The magnetic power continues to exist, but the attraction mode changes.

The material elements can be compared to iron dust that becomes attracted and sticks to the magnet. Due to the inherent nature of iron, the particles of iron will oxidize and become rusty, thus losing the power to stick to the magnet. As they fall off, fresh iron particles are

attracted and replace the old ones, although the fresh iron becomes oxidized more quickly because of the presence of already rusting particles around the magnet: this is called old age. Eventually the entire crust of variously rusted iron particles can be broken apart easily, especially because of some strong shock, and then the magnet rolls away towards a more suitable stock of fresh material and again starts attracting particles to form a new body. However, there is continuity of consciousness for the owner of the body. The *aham* ("I") has no doubt about his own progressive identity.

But material identification plays tricks and creates confusion. Who am I? Am I a child, a young man or woman, or a "senior citizen"? So as soon as he becomes convinced of the new specific material identification pertaining to that present material form, the embodied soul forgets his previous specific material identification - a young man or woman will say "I am not a child (any more)", and an old man or woman will say "I am not young (any more)".

In this confusion, the embodied soul tends to attach itself more anxiously to other identifications that appear to be more permanent - such as the gender (male/ female), the race, the caste, the social position, the religious affiliation, the political views, the job/ occupation, personal interests or even liking and disliking such as wearing a particular type of clothes and ornaments, a passion for gourmet food, for camping or hiking, for practicing a sport, health and fitness practices, and so on. Some of such identifications may seem more reliable and other flimsier and more subject to change due to external circumstances (such as the loss of a job, a reverse of fortunes that destroys one's social position, an accident that leaves us handicapped, etc), but the more one is afraid of evolving, the more s/he will be attached to such definitions of one's identity. This is why many people feel threatened in their own self-identification by seeing others who change religious affiliation, gender identification, nationality, social identification, or other conventions based on external appearances such as the way of dressing etc. These attached people will be the ones who suffer most when the inevitable changes of material nature will force them to let go of their attachments - for example, when they become old, or when they die. These people are not sober as they are plagued by endless anxieties and fears, that manifest as greed and lust and anger, but they pretend to be the only sober or "normal" people around because they think of themselves as the "defenders of the permanent" since they desperately try to oppose change. But as change is the nature of the world, they can only be defeated.

Old age and death are the greatest fears for these so-called "guardians of normality". Thus they try to create an artificial world where old age and death are not visible and therefore they can delude themselves into thinking they have prevailed over change. Death becomes a taboo topic, a disgrace to be avoided at all costs, or at least to be hidden and forgotten, something unjust and cruel that does not make any sense. Society conventions also condemn old age and all the bodily modifications that generally accompany it - such as wrinkles, white hair, reduced sexual activity, changes of shape in the body, complexion irregularities, slower metabolism, etc.

People who do not "keep fit" are treated with contempt or victimized, made the subject of spiteful jokes, or forced out of sight. If they want to go around freely they must lose or gain weight, go to a gym, follow a diet, undergo plastic surgery, dye their hair, dress in a flattering way, and even take medication against menopause and other normal symptoms of aging. All this is intended to defend the "last stand" of bodily identification against the inevitable changes of nature that harbingers death, the final and irreversible change.

मात्रास्पर्शास्तु कौन्तेय शीतोष्णसुखदुःखदाः । आगमापयिनोऽनित्यास्तास्तितिक्षस्व भारत ॥ २-१४ ॥

mātrāsparsāstu kaunteya śītoṣṇasukhaduḥkhadhāḥ | āgamāpāyino' nityāstāstītikṣasva bhārata || 2-14 ||

matra: instrument; *sparsah*: touch; *tu*: but; *kaunteya*: o son of Kunti (Arjuna); *sita*: winter; *ushna*: summer; *sukha*: joy; *duhkha*: distress; *dah*: that give; *agama*: coming; *apayinah*: disappearing; *anityah*: temporary; *tan*: them; *titikshasva*: you should tolerate; *bharata*: o descendant of Bharata (Arjuna).

"O son of Kunti, the contact of the senses (with the sense objects) causes joy and distress just like (cold in) winter and (heat in) summer. Such feelings are temporary: they come and go, o descendant of Bharata, and you should just try to tolerate them (without being confused and distracted from your duty)."

It is always important to study a concept within its proper context, and Krishna's teachings to Arjuna should also be considered as a discussion that follows a logical thread, and not as a random collection of aphorisms that have no connection with each other. In the previous verses Krishna answered Arjuna's doubts, saying that one should not be distracted from his duty by the idea of death, because the Atman is eternal. Each *jivatma* exists eternally, passing from one body to another in the course of one lifetime and also from one life to another. Now Krishna is saying that such passages or changes are part of the natural cycle of life, like the seasons of the year, and they are just as temporary. Birth, life in a material body and death are temporary conditions, and it is this impermanence that disturbs the attached mind. But how do we notice such changes? Through the information that is supplied to our mind by the five senses of knowledge acquisition.

How can we ascertain whether a man is dead or alive? By looking at him, by listening to his breathing or other sounds he may produce, by touching his body, and so on. Our senses enable us to carry on the desired interactions with the people we are attached to, and when we cannot perceive the face or the voice or the touch of a loved person, we feel something is missing: we miss his/ her presence.

The contact between our senses of perception and the *tanmatra* relative to the bodies of a person we are attached to produces pleasure, while the lack of such contact produces suffering. The example offered by Krishna is thus particularly appropriate: the pleasure of the presence of a person we are attached to "warms" our heart, while his/ her absence produces a sense of coldness and solitude.

When the attachment is strong enough, the presence or absence of such *tanmatra* can produce respectively a fire of passion that is as hot as any torrid summer, and a freezing despair that is as cold as any Himalayan winter. However, it is impossible to remain always in the physical presence of our near and dear ones, because we have duties to perform. A child will have to leave his mother to go to school, a husband will have to leave his wife to go to work, a parent will have leave his grown-up children and grandchildren in order to embrace the renounced order of life, and ultimately we all have to leave each other when life or death forces separation on us.

Matra is "something that can be measured". The sense objects are measured by the senses to evaluate the various types and levels of pleasure or suffering that the contact with such objects can give.

There is a difference between *matra* and *vishaya*: both terms apply to the "objects of the senses", but *matra* is the subtle matrix of sense perception that remains within the subtle body of the perceiver, while the *vishaya* are the objects that are perceived externally. Thus the *pancha tanmatra* are the modes of sense perception, or the matrices of the five objects of the senses: the *sabda tanmatra* is the sound vibration, the *sparsa tanmatra* is the touch, the *rupa tanmatra* is the form, the *rasa tanmatra* is the flavor, and the *gandha tanmatra* is the smell.

We should be careful not to confuse the *matra* or *vishaya* with the actual person whose body's form, sound, or touch we contemplate as *matra* or *vishaya*. Foolish people are in the habit of blaming the sense objects for their own lust or disappointment, but that is only due to ignorance.

The word *sparsa* can refer to the contact or to the object that is contacted. The meaning of the verse is that the contact between the organs and the objects produces the feelings we know as heat and cold, joy and sorrow, etc in their various measures. Sometimes cold produces pleasure and sometimes it produces suffering, depending on various factors, and even within the same category of feeling, heat and cold, joy and sorrow can be milder or stronger depending on various factors. For example: people pay top money to get a sauna treatment in the winter, but during the summer they can hardly tolerate the same temperature and humidity in their bedroom when they are trying to sleep.

Naturally all the changes of the material body - birth, growth during childhood, the passage through adolescence, the process of aging, and death itself - cause a various mixture of joy and sorrow, because they imply the association or separation between bodies and between the bodies and the material things and surroundings. The real cause of such joys and sorrows is the contact or lack of contact between the senses and the objects of the senses. Normally the embodied being runs after joys and away from sorrows, but no matter how far we try to run, we will always meet with joys and sorrows, because we are carrying them around in our subtle body as *matra*. So the real solution to the problems of existence is to perform our proper duty: doing the right thing without being confused or deterred by selfish considerations.

Both joy and sorrow need to be tolerated in the discharge of our duty. Krishna does not say that one should not experience joy or sorrow, but simply that we need to tolerate them as mere temporary disturbances, like excessive cold in winter and excessive heat in summer. As long as we have a material body we will feel them.

The names Kaunteya and Bharata are significant here. Krishna wants to remind Arjuna that he is the descendant of great personalities, who tolerated much in their lives without ever neglecting their duties.

यं हि न व्यथयन्त्येते पुरुषं पुरुषर्षभ । समदुःखसुखं धीरं सोऽमृतत्वाय कल्पते ॥ २-१५ ॥

yaṁ hi na vyathayantye te puruṣaṁ puruṣarṣabha | samaduḥkhasukhaṁ dhīraṁ so'mṛtatvāya kalpate || 2-15 ||

yam: one who; *hi*: certainly; *na*: not; *vyathayanty*: are causing disturbance; *ete*: these; *puruṣam*: a person; *puruṣa-rṣabha*: o best among persons; *sama*: equal; *duḥkha*: suffering; *sukham*: joy; *dhīram*: sober; *sah*: he; *amṛtatvāya*: for immortality; *kalpate*: thinks about.

"O best among men, one who is not distracted by all these (feelings) and is always equally balanced in suffering and in joy, is a sober person and he can aspire to immortality."

Krishna has been speaking about the death of the body and the immortality of the soul, and how the joys and sorrows connected to the changes of the material body are due to the contact with the objects of the senses. The attachment to the joys and sorrows originating from the contact with the sense objects is the real cause of death and rebirth.

What is death? It is the force that separates us from the sense objects to which we are attached. Since we are still attached to the sense objects, rebirth is inevitable because we need another material body to contact them again. As death only refers to the material body, it must only apply to what is pertaining to the material body - precisely the joys and sorrows created by the contact of the material senses with the material objects of the senses. Once a person overcomes the identification with the material senses and the attachment to the material objects of the senses, death disappears. In fact, death does not really exist because, as Krishna has already explained, the embodied being constantly passes from one body to another but remains always the same in spite of all such passages.

Amṛtatva means "immortality" and is a synonym for *moksha* or liberation. Many people have strange and confused ideas about liberation: they tend to believe that *moksha* is some kind of ticket for a journey from a particular place (the "material world") to another particular place (the "spiritual world"), that can be won in a lottery, purchased or received as a gift, or through bribery. This idea mostly comes from the abrahamic concept of "salvation" (a word that is sometimes incorrectly used to translate the Sanskrit term *moksha*), in which allegiance to a particular religious affiliation gives the immediate and automatic right to "go to heaven" even to the most unevolved and gross materialist. But such an idea is very foolish, and those who entertain it are in the terrible danger of wasting the valuable opportunity of the human birth, because they will refuse to make any effort in personal development, believing that they are already "saved".

The true facts are very different. As *Gita* (8.6) clearly explains, at the time of death we will only be able to attain whatever level of consciousness we have actually developed during this lifetime. If we do not live the realization that we are already in the spiritual world now, in this very body, there will be no divine airplane coming to take us to Vaikuntha at the time of death. We cannot pay or bribe, beg, trick or sneak our way to liberation, because liberation is just about our own consciousness – our being able to remain on the transcendental level without being deluded and confused by material identification, attachment and conditions of life. This is only possible if we become truly *dhīra*, or "sober".

The word *kalpana* means "desire, intention, determination", and as such it is used during rituals to describe the declaration of intents for the ceremony. By using the word *kalpate* in this verse, Krishna is saying that liberation can be achieved by a sober (unattached) person who is steady in determination: this makes him/ her fit or eligible for immortality. Some commentators link this verse with the need for the formal acceptance of the order of *sannyasa*, by which one officially detaches himself/ herself from the pursuance of sense enjoyment. This is all very good when the *sannyasi* or *sannyasini* has already attained the level of self realization and utilizes the position to give a good example to the society in general, but it can be disastrous when the candidate is not ready and follows the very adharmic and stupid principle of "fake it till you make it".

In later chapters (3.6, 6.1) Krishna will very clearly explain that a person who simply restrains his senses but has still some attachment for the senses objects in his mind is a fool and a cheater, and that real *sannyasa* is not about rules and regulations but about performing one's duties selflessly. In Kali yuga there is no need to take formal *sannyasa*. *Brahma vaivarta purana* says, *asvamedham gavalambham sannyasam pala pairkam devarena sutotpattim kalau pancha vivarjayet*: "In the age of Kali five acts should be avoided: the *asvamedha yajna*, the *gomedha yajna*, the acceptance of the order of *sannyasa*, the offering of oblations to the forefathers, and a man's begetting children in his brother's wife."

Later on Krishna will clearly explain that the real *sannyasa* is about renouncing the selfish attachment and identification with the actions, not renouncing action itself.

नासतो विद्यते भावो नाभावो विद्यते सतः । उभयोरपि दृष्टोऽन्तस्त्वनयोस्तत्त्वदर्शिभिः ॥ २-१६ ॥

nāsato vidyate bhāvo nābhāvo vidyate sataḥ | ubhayorapi dr̥ṣṭo'ntastvanayostattvadarsībhiḥ || 2-16 ||

na: not; *asatah*: of what is *asat*; *vidyate*: is known; *bhavah*: existence; *na*: not; *abhavah*: non-existence; *vidyate*: is known; *satah*: of what is *sat*; *ubhayoh*: of the two; *api*: certainly; *drishyah*: seen; *antah*: the conclusion; *tu*: but; *anayoh*: either of them; *tattva*: of *tattva* (truth); *darshibhih*: those who see.

"Those who see the truth know that what is illusory/ temporary/ bad will not (continue to) be, while what is real/ eternal/ good will never be destroyed. They have carefully observed both things and reached this conclusion."

Krishna is still speaking about the constant changing of the body and the impermanent nature of the contact of the senses with the sense objects. *Sat* and its contrary *asat* are extremely important concepts in the philosophy of *Gita*. *Sat* means "existence, reality, goodness, permanence, spirit", or in its adjective form means "actual, real, true, good, right, eternal, spiritual, transcendental". Its opposite *asat* therefore means "non-existent, illusory, false, wrong, impermanent or temporary, material".

All these definitions can applied to this verse to expand its layers of meanings. The general picture we get from the combination of all such meanings is that even the material world is a manifestation of the compassion of God, and everything "bad" is simply a temporary and illusory experience, similar to a vivid dream or virtual reality, meant to help us in our learning and development. Anxiety (*kunta*) dissipates when we actually realize that illusion cannot last long, while what is real is never subject to change as it exists beyond transformation. However, we need to carefully understand that *asat* as "non-existent" or "false" is a relative meaning, as it refers to the transformation and not to the void. There is no void or *sunya* anywhere in this universe. What appears to be void is actually full of invisible particles... molecules of various gases in the air or of cosmic dust in space, atoms of elements, photons of light and other radiations, and especially the omnipresent existence of the energy of Brahman. The example is often given of water. On our planet water is everywhere, even in the deserts: there is no place on earth where there is 0% moisture in the air. The percentage may be very low, but still it is not absolute zero. Invisible to our eyes, this moisture rises up in the atmosphere and condensates in clouds, that are more or less visible, then it precipitates as rain or snow, that is very much visible.

Rain and snow feed streams and rivers, that are even more permanently visible than rain, and rivers flow down to the oceans, that are even more permanently visible than rivers, although even oceans are not eternally manifested and can disappear, too. From there, molecules of water evaporate again and are carried around by the air in a constant cycle. Clouds and rain are the most temporary form of water, yet their temporary manifestation enables the growth of the bodies of plants and animals and human beings as well. And the human body affords the priceless opportunity of striving for liberation or immortality. Contemporary science is now helping our understanding by showing that solid matter is actually nothing but vibrating energy - matter does not exist... in the sense that it is not what it seems. However, a ton of bricks falling on your head certainly have the tangible and real effect to destroy your human opportunity, although the contact between your senses and the bricks as objects of your senses will be very temporary.

A *tattva darshi* is "one who sees Reality", a person who has the direct and real perception and experience of truth - not because he "heard" about it or because he "chose to believe" it. A *darshana* is a perspective or vision of Reality - both in knowledge (as in the *Sat darshana* - Vedanta, Karma, Yoga, Sankhya, Nyaya, Vaishesika) and in worship (as in the *darshana* of the Deities in the temple). The concept of *darshana* is different from "opinion", because an opinion is simply a mental elaboration that may be right or wrong and therefore it needs verification, while a *darshana* is the genuine, true and clear experience of a consistent vision. Between the two there is the same difference that separates hearing the description of an elephant and actually seeing the elephant in the flesh.

The word *Tat* is a *sarvanama* or pronoun, meaning "that", the same *Tat* of the *mahavakyas* such as *Tat tvam asi*, *Om Tat sat*, etc. There is also a grammatical explanation of the absolute meaning of the word, as *sarvanama* ("pronoun") is "a name that applies to everyone" (or everything), and that is precisely what Brahman or Reality is: everything and everyone.

अविनाशि तु तद्विद्धि येन सर्वमिदं ततम् । विनाशमव्ययस्यास्य न कश्चित्कर्तुमर्हति ॥ २-१७ ॥

avināṣi tu tadviddhi yena sarvamidaṁ tatam | vināśamavyayasyāsyā na kaścitkartumarhati || 2-17 ||

avinasi: that cannot be destroyed; *tu*: but; *tat*: that; *viddhi*: know; *yena*: by him; *sarvam*: all; *idam*: this; *tatam*: pervaded; *vinasam*: destruction; *avyayasyasya*: of what is imperishable; *na*: not; *kascit*: any; *kartum*: to do; *arhati*: can.

"Know that it is an imperishable (spirit) that pervades all this (universe of bodies). And no one will be able to destroy what is imperishable."

Krishna has been speaking about *Tat*, or *Tattva*, the Reality that is always existing (Brahman/ Atman) as opposed to the temporary and illusory relative non-existence of the material body. The word *viddhi*, "know", is particularly important in the verse, indicating that the purpose of knowledge is the experience of the imperishable Brahman. This is also the open invitation of the *Vedanta sutra* (1.1.1): *athato*

brahma jijñasa, "now is the time to search the knowledge of Brahman". Brahman is eternal and imperishable, but our human form of life is not, so we should take full opportunity of this small window of time. Now, without any further hesitation or delay.

Here spirit is stated to be present in all bodies and in the entire universe, as the expression *sarvam idam tatam* ("pervading all this") can be applied at various levels - the body, the sum total of all *prana*, the universe, the entire reality. Even bodies that may appear dead are actually teeming with life in the form of micro-organisms that break down the organic matter by eating and digesting it. Microscopic living entities are found in water, in air and in earth, and there are also souls that carry a body made of subtler material elements that can be seen or perceived only through subtle senses.

As cutting-edge contemporary science has already shown, the parameters of life on this planet among the species we know may become stretched by different conditions where life can develop in completely different ways that may appear alien to our daily experience and may even not be easily recognized as such.

Krishna is speaking of the "*aham*", or individual consciousness, and therefore the description specifically applies to the individual aspect of Brahman called Atman. The simultaneous oneness and individuality of the Brahman and Atman is said to be inconceivable, therefore when we hear people speaking about different perspectives - called monism, dualism, etc - we need to understand that they are just indicative suggestions of the One Reality and not sectarian dogmas that are competing against each other. Trying to ascertain which perspective is "the correct one" over the others is foolish and just demonstrates that one is not a *tattva-darshi*. One who can directly see the Great Picture of Reality immediately understands how apparent opposites are reconciled: this is called *prakasha*, or "illumination".

Also indicative are the "dimensions of the soul" mentioned in the *Svetasvatara Upanishad* (5.9) as "one ten-thousandth of the tip of a hair". The spiritual soul has no material limitations in time or space, and the indication of its atomic "size" is only intended to give us the idea that souls are everywhere, even in the tiniest bodies of microbes. Yet, the power of the soul expands and pervades even huge bodies, such as those of whales.

It is also said that the soul is situated in the heart of the body of a living entity: this is also an indication only, as the spirit soul is transcendental to the gross matter and is not tied to an internal organ. For example, in the case of heart transplant, we should not think that the soul of the donor passes into the body of the person who receives the organ.

The *Mundaka Upanishad* also explains that the presence of Brahman/ Atman is carried in this world by *prana*: in the human body *prana* takes the 5 forms of *prana*, *apana*, *vyana*, *samana*, *udana* - the five heads of the Kundalini snake. But *prana* does not exist only within the human body: it exists in water, in air, in the sunshine, even in the apparently empty space. What is *prana*? *Prana* is simply "energy", therefore applies both to Atman and Brahman. Another definition of *prana* is *prabha* or "power". Just like the sunshine particles or rays are the *prabha* of the Sun, the *prana* in our body is the *prabha* of the Atman manifested at the material level.

अन्तवन्त इमे देहा नित्यस्योक्ताः शरीरिणः । अनाशिनोऽप्रमेयस्य तस्माद्युध्यस्व भारत ॥ २-१८ ॥

antavanta ime dehā nityasyoktāḥ śarīriṇaḥ | anaśīno'prameyasya tasmādyudhyasva bhārata || 2-18 ||

antavanta: that will have an end; *ime*: all these; *dehah*: bodies; *nityasya*: of the eternal; *uktah*: said; *śaririnah*: of he who owns the bodies; *anasinah*: that will not be destroyed; *aprameyasya*: that cannot be measured; *tasmāt*: therefore; *yudhyasva*: engage in battle; *bharata*: o descendant of Bharata.

"All these (material) bodies are destined to end, while he who is in these bodies is said to be eternal, because he cannot be destroyed or measured (materially). Therefore, o descendant of Bharata, you should fight."

The logic here is crystal clear: all bodies are temporary, so they should be used in the best possible way, for the progress of the eternal soul. Sacrificing or utilizing one's body for the benefit of the soul is actually a good bargain, the proper purpose for which it was created in the first place. The apparent contradiction of the need for progress and evolution for the soul, that is described as unchangeable and untouched by temporary conditions, can be reconciled when we understand that the individual soul is *anu atma* (atomic soul) at the beginning of its evolution. It already contains all the "spiritual DNA" for its full perfection because it is an *amsa*, or "part" ("cell") in the spiritual body of God – a spiritual blueprint comparable, on the material level, to the "stem cells" of the human body that will eventually differentiate and grow into the different limbs of a fully developed body.

The *anu atma* is already *sat-cit-ananda*, or "made of" eternal existence, conscious knowledge and perfect happiness, but it is very small and as such it can be blown around by the mighty wind of Mahamaya. When covered by the *ahamkara* or identification with matter it is called conditioned, while it becomes liberated when such covering is dissolved. Although unchangeable in nature, and eternally made of knowledge and bliss, the soul grows, evolves and develops through learning, experience and realization towards a perfect form called *siddha deha*, a spiritual body that is not subject to the limitations of gross or subtle matter.

During this process of evolution the soul retains its subtle body through the repeated passages from birth to death to rebirth in many lifetimes, with a continuity of conscious existence that gradually expands into all the layers of the mind, including the superficial level. At that point, with the full realization of one's eternal and transcendental nature, the subtle body also dissolves and only the spiritual body remains. The support for the growth of the sapling becomes unnecessary when the plant is strong enough.

Another interesting thought about the concept of *avyaya* or *avinasi* ("imperishable, indestructible") is that the imperishable does not always and necessarily continue to exist in a visible form for the practical purposes of people who have a material body. The Sanatana Dharma will never cease to exist, but it is very much possible that its correct understanding and practice will become lost or invisible in human society, and even that it will be made illegal and persecuted by adharmic governments and powers. It is even possible that the temples and sacred places in the world will be destroyed and/or covered by other buildings, or even by garbage dumps. In this universe, the manifestation, preservation and dissolution continue to follow each other, and this also applies to the visible manifestations of Sanatana Dharma in human society. The Devas are those who constantly work to protect Dharma, while the Asuras are those who constantly oppose it. At times the Devas win, at other times the Asuras win, albeit for a relatively short time...

य एनं वेत्ति हन्तारं यश्चैनं मन्यते हतम् उभौ तौ न विजानीतो नायं हन्ति न हन्यते ॥ २-१९ ॥

ya enam vetti hantāraṁ yaścainaṁ manyate hatam ubhau tau na vijānīto nāyaṁ hanti na hanyate ॥ 2-19 ॥

yah: s/he; enam: this; vetti: knows; hantaram: one who kills; yah: s/he; ca: and; enam: this; manyate: thinks; hatam: killed; ubhau: both; tau: they; na: do not; vijānītaḥ: knower; na: not; ayam: this; hanti: kills; na: not; hanyate: is killed.

"One who knows this (Atman/Brahman) does not consider himself to be killing or being killed, in both (positions) he knows that one does neither truly kill nor is truly killed."

The words *enam/ ayam* in this verse refer to Atman/ Brahman, that in previous verses was described as *Tat* ("that"). On another level, *enam/ ayam* also refer to the knowledge of Atman/ Brahman, to the spiritual consciousness and identification.

In fact, Knowledge/ Consciousness is non-different from Atman/ Brahman, because awareness is the fundamental symptom of the spirit soul as opposed to the material bodies. When the body is inhabited by the Atman, there is awareness - knowledge, perception, consciousness - and when the Atman moves out, awareness disappears. The pointless controversy of the "personalists" against the "impersonalists" aims at demonstrating that Atman is eternally individual, but it is misguided because there is no contradiction in Atman and Brahman being simultaneously one and distinct (*bheda-abheda tattva*). So when we speak of *Tat* (or *enam/ ayam* as in this verse) we refer to Brahman as the Soul of all individual souls.

Aggressive "personalists" may end up embarrassing themselves in trying to demonstrate that God's spiritual body (constituted by the *jīvas*, who are parts and parcel of God) is different from God - precisely the offensive mentality they ascribe to the "impersonalists". In reality there is never separation between Atman and Brahman: the variations of consciousness/ awareness are only due to the particular variation of the power of consciousness - Shakti, also called Maya. Aggressive "personalists" offensively use the term "Mayavadi" to refer to Advaitins, but they forget they are also expected to worship Maya/ Shakti in the form of Yogamaya.

Some might misinterpret these verses to mean that one could indiscriminately kill anyone else legitimately without any consequence, claiming that in any case all bodies are illusory (or "vanity") and people would eventually have to die. This is not a good conclusion. All actions have consequences. It is true that all bodies are ultimately meant to die, but in the course of their manifestation they are meant to offer the opportunity for the evolution of the Jivatman, just like rainclouds and rain are temporary but their action on the land and on the bodies of plants, animals and human beings is instrumental for the perpetuation of the cycle of life. All actions, omissions, words and thoughts have consequences that reach far beyond the time and space where they manifest, and we have, through our actions, the power to increase or decrease the joys and sorrows we will have to experience in the future. Since joys and sorrows are the inevitable consequence of our past good and bad deeds, by increasing our good deeds (*punya*) and decreasing our bad deeds (*papa*) today we are building a better future for ourselves and for everybody else, even if we need to sacrifice bodies for it. Generally living entities maintain their bodies by consuming the bodies of other living entities – carnivores kill animals, while vegetarians and herbivores kill plants. Even someone who chooses to eat animals or plants that had already died of natural causes, will have to recognize that there are living micro-organisms and living cells in such bodies, although the level of their awareness is extremely low, and they suffer almost no pain.

Any life that we take for the survival of our own body is a debt we contract and that we will have to pay eventually, so we should move around in this world with the least possible negative impact, creating as much positive impact as possible.

The ideal diet, observed generally during the fasting periods, consists of the less violent foods, such as filtered water, leaves fallen from plants, the flesh of fruits fallen from plants, and the surplus milk of a cow treated affectionately like a grateful child treats a mother. Very advanced *yogis* are able to subsist on air, sunlight, or just on the *prana* that pervades the entire universe, without even breathing. However, it is unlikely that all the members of human society will be able or willing to restrict their diet to the above mentioned totally non-violent foods, therefore for more ordinary people there is a license to kill a reasonable number of vegetal living entities, either in the form of seeds or as entire plants. In ordinary circumstances, a vegetarian diet is more acceptable than a non-vegetarian diet for several reasons: first of all, for health reasons, because it is the most suitable for the human body and mind. There is ample scientific literature that shows how the digestive system, teeth, and general bodily structure and functions of human beings are engineered for a "fuel" consisting of fruits, vegetables and grains.

The mind - that is, the subtle body of the human being - also finds greater benefits from fresh, clean, luscious, sweet-smelling, pure and attractive vegetarian foods. On the other hand, non-vegetarian foods are nothing but corpses and therefore they need to be disguised by a lot of cooking and other ingredients in order to become attractive, and even so they become quickly putrefied and toxic for the body and mind of those who consume them.

However, it is important to understand that even plants have life, and life should be taken only when strictly necessary and without selfish motivations. We have the right and duty to maintain our bodies with the share that has been allotted to us, as long as we pay back our debt by working with selflessness and dedication for the benefit of the entire universe. This dutiful consciousness in playing one's allotted role in the administration of the universe elevates the human being to a level of affinity with the Devas, but if we want to achieve liberation - that is even more elevated than the heavenly planets - we need to situate ourselves on the level of Brahman consciousness. According to Krishna (18.54) attaining such *brahma bhuta* is the platform from which one can develop true *bhakti* rather than the delusional and childish sentimentalism based on mental fantasies that is sometimes passed for genuine devotion to the Supreme Lord.

This means that we should always remember our true nature and remain above the material level of nature - where a body requires food and kills another body to procure it, as confirmed by *Bhagavata purana* (1.13.47). Later in *Gita* (5.8-9), Krishna will clearly confirm that a self-realized soul remains untouched by these natural activities of the body, because the consciousness is always fixed on the pure spiritual nature.

न जायते म्रियते वा कदाचिन् नायं भूत्वा भविता वा न भूयः ।
na jāyate mriyate vā kadācin nāyaṁ bhūtvā bhavitā vā na bhūyaḥ ।

अजो नित्यः शाश्वतोऽयं पुराणो न हन्यते हन्यमाने शरीरे ॥ २-२० ॥

ajo nityaḥ śāśvato'yaṁ purāṇo na hanyate hanyamāne śarīre ॥ 2-20 ॥

na: not; jayate: takes birth; mriyate: dies; va: or; kadacit: any time; na: not; ayam: this; bhutva: once having been; bhavita: will become; va: or; na: not; bhuyah: again to become; ajah: unborn; nityah: eternal; sasvato: permanent; ayam: this; puranah: ancient; na: not; hanyate: kills; hanyamane: is killed; sarire: in the body.

"(The soul) never takes birth and never dies at any time. It eternally exists, without beginning or end. This (soul) that is in the body is unborn, eternal, imperishable, immensely ancient, and cannot kill or be killed."

Krishna is still talking about the soul - *jivatma*, *atman*, *brahman*. These three concepts are inconceivably one and different from each other, as we have already mentioned, and they are defined by the term *ayam* or "this" as in this verse, or *tat* or "that" as in the famous *mahavakhya* "*tat tvam asi*". This verse specifically refers to the six changes of the body - that takes birth, grows, lives for some time, produces offshoots (offspring or byproducts), dwindles and dies. The soul is not really affected by such changes, although in its conditioned state it certainly goes through all of them and identifies with them because of ignorance and illusion. So when Krishna says that the soul does not take birth, this means that the soul exists before the birth of the body. Saying that it never dies means that it continues to exist after the death of the body. However, we know that the *anu atma* becomes manifested (*bhutva*) at the beginning of its evolutionary journey. *Bhutva* means "having once been". Here the apparent beginning of the existence of the *jiva* is simply its manifestation from the spiritual body of God, where it exists eternally. When we speak of something that is eternal and beginningless, and yet has a beginning, logic and words become insufficient as instruments: this will be clearly confirmed by Krishna later (2.29). However, this is not a justification for avoiding all efforts to understand and help others to understand Reality, as much as intellect and words can grasp it.

Another level of explanation that can help us understand the subject is the distinction between *anu atma* and *vibhu atma*: they are both *atma*, but the *anu* is "atomic", while the *vibhu* is "powerful". Of course a *jivatma* will never be able to become the Supreme Lord Narayana - no matter how much effort or realization he can muster - but even among *jivatmas* there are differences depending on the degree of evolution or development that the *atma* has attained.

The word *sasvata* means "not decaying and not subject to change", while *purana* means "ancient" - not new or recent. Yet, the soul has no past, present or future, because it is not limited by time and space. The issue of the eternity of the individual soul as inconceivably compatible with its beginning in existence, when it is generated by Sadashiva Mahavishnu, has been debated rather hotly in some groups, so for those who wish to analyze it in greater depth, it is advisable to refer to those writings.

वेदाविनाशिनं नित्यं य एनमजमव्ययम् । कथं स पुरुषः पार्थ कं घातयति हन्ति कम् ॥ २-२१ ॥

vedāvināśinaṁ nityaṁ ya enamajamavyayam । katham sa puruṣaḥ pārtha kaṁ ghātayati hanti kam ॥ 2-21 ॥

veda: knows; avinasinam: of the indestructible; nityam: eternal; yah: s/he; enam: this; ajam: unborn; avyayam: imperishable; katham: how; sah: s/he; purushah: a person; partha: o son of Pritha; kam: whom; ghatayati: causes to be killed; hanti: kills; kam: who.

"O son of Pritha, when one knows that this (soul) is imperishable and eternal, unborn and unchangeable, how (one can kill another) and who will kill whom?"

The description of *enam* ("this") continues. This verse introduces the concept of *purusha*, "a person", meaning the active principle of Atman/ Brahman - in a sense, the "masculine" side of Being. Later in *Gita* (15.7) Krishna will say that the *jivatmas* are eternal particles of the Parama Purusha that are situated within Prakriti. But in 7.5, Krishna also says that the *jivas* are Prakriti - a form of Prakriti that is superior to the manifestation of the inert matter of the bodies. Is there a contradiction? Is the *jivatman purusha* or *prakriti*, male or female? In fact it is both, and continues to be, irrespective of the material body it is wearing... so even "women" in this world are actually *purushas*, and even "men" in this world are actually *prakriti*.

The nature of the *jiva* as "child of God", includes both the nature of *prakriti* and the nature of *purusha*. We may give the example of the "genes" a child receives from both parents and that remain within the DNA even if only one of the characteristics, either male or female, will be apparent externally. In fact each human being has both a male and female side, not only on the subtle level of the mind (characterized respectively by logic and intuition, or practicality and emotionality etc) but also at a physical level. The question posed by this verse is also interesting and it can be studied at several levels. For example, the use of the name Partha, "son of Pritha", reminds us that as children of Mother Earth (Prithvi) we should understand the way she deals with all her children - sometimes even killing them when it is necessary for the greater good. The use of force, even up to lethal levels, should never be confused with violence, exactly like a necessary surgical operation properly performed by a skilled and ethically motivated doctor cannot be described as a crime. Another level of meaning of this verse goes beyond the act of killing, and includes all kinds of actions. Later on Krishna will extensively speak about Karma yoga, or the union with the Absolute through the art of Action, but this verse already introduces the topic. The crux of the discussion is the apparent difference between the path of ritualistic duties on one side, and the path of renunciation on the opposite side. But if we carefully examine both we find out they are actually not opposed: this will be clearly revealed later in *Gita* (6.1). This particular issue has been subject to many debates and questioning. Some have even suggested that the verse refers to a dead person, i.e. one who does not have a material body, or that the inconceivable position of the soul is beyond the scope of knowledge. Such ideas have been amply refuted by the traditional commentators.

वासंसि जीर्णानि यथा विहाय नवानि गृह्णाति नरोऽपराणि ।
 vāsāmsi jīrṇāni yathā vihāya navāni gṛhṇāti naro'parāṇi ।
 तथा शरीराणि विहाय जीर्णान्यन्यानि संयाति नवानि देही ॥ २-२२ ॥
 tathā śarīrāṇi vihāya jīrṇā- nyanyāni saṁyāti navāni dehī ॥ 2-22 ॥

vasamsi: clothes; *jirnani*: torn/ worn out; *yatha*: just like; *vihaya*: after leaving; *navani*: new; *grihnati*: accepts/ takes; *narah*: a man; *aparani*: other; *tatha*: similarly; *sarirani*: bodies; *vihaya*: giving up; *jirnani*: torn/ worn out; *anyani*: different; *samyati*: unites; *navani*: new; *dehi*: the embodied (living entity).

"Just like a man abandons clothes that have become torn or worn out and acquires other and new clothes, in the same way one leaves a damaged body and accepts another new body."

This metaphor is particularly suitable as the embodied soul is covered by a number of layers of identification, just like a person can wear various layers of garments. The *anandamaya* core is covered by *jnanamaya* or intellect, *manomaya* or mind, *pranamaya* or energy body, and *annamaya* or gross physical body.

In this verse the word *jirnani* is particularly important. Death occurs because the material body is torn or worn out, or in other words either because of a violent injury or because of old age. In certain cases and by certain practices we can delay the death of the body but we cannot avoid it completely, because the body itself is engineered in such a way that it must decay, in order to push the conditioned soul in the direction of evolution.

Another important word in the verse is *samyati*, "unites", indicating a connection that is stronger than the mere "wearing" of a dress: it seems more appropriate to some kind of prosthetic limb, or an interactive device as in virtual reality computer games. In fact the material body of the human being is infinitely more complex and wonderful than any dress we may have seen in ordinary life. It grows and diversifies according to the need, has a limited ability to fix itself, and interacts with the identification of its owner through the complex "software" that comes together with it. We can compare the gross material body to the hardware of a computer, while the mind is comparable to a very advanced software system that can be programmed and reprogrammed if we learn to. The Atman is the computer operator: the more knowledgeable and skilled he is, the better the system will work. This example can help us to better understand the idea of "uniting" with the body: a computer must be properly "connected" in order to function. In fact, the comparison of the body/ mind with a computer could go even further beyond the present technological complexity and functionality of computers as we know them, into a field that many could see as science fiction.

The word *dehi* is used in this verse to specifically qualify the *jiva* that "unites" with the material body/ mind: it is a conditioned living entity, one that identifies with a body and therefore needs to get a new one when he loses the old one. A computer operator cannot remain without a machine as long as he identifies himself with the activity of working on a computer. Sometimes we get so accustomed to using machines that we become unable to make simple additions without using the electronic calculator. Similarly, an "embodied living entity" cannot remain without a material body for a long time, even when he is forced out by death.

नैनं छिन्दन्ति शस्त्राणि नैनं दहति पावकः । न चैनं क्लेदयन्त्यापो न शोषयति मारुतः ॥ २-२३ ॥
 nainam chindanti śastrāṇi nainam dahati pāvakah | na cainam kledayantyāpo na śoṣayati marutaḥ ॥ 2-23 ॥

na: not; *enam*: this; *chindanti*: cut; *sastrani*: weapons; *na*: not; *enam*: this; *dahati*: burns; *pavakah*: fire; *na*: not; *enam*: this; *kledayanti*: moisten/ soak; *apah*: the waters; *na*: not; *soshayati*: dries; *marutah*: the wind.

"This (soul who is in the body) cannot be cut by any weapon, or burned by fire, moistened/ soaked by liquids or dried by the wind."

The nature of the soul is spiritual and transcendental, therefore it cannot be killed or even affected in its essence by anything material.

In this world, we have the constant experience of things being dissolved by water, burned by fire and dried or ripped apart by the wind. Actually the inherent power in these elements can also be channeled and used in very sophisticated weapons, according to an ancient knowledge that was taught to the *kshatriyas* of the Vedic times. For example, today the great majority of the people have heard about the laser, that is a very concentrated form of light capable of cutting through hard and dense materials.

Similarly, sound can be modulated and concentrated in order to modify matter in dramatic ways. All the ancient Vedic weapons were based on *mantras*, that are sound vibrations combined with the magnetic field created by the mind. In particular circumstances such specific *mantras* acted on fire, water or wind, creating exceptional weaponry that could destroy the bodies of the enemies. But they were never able to destroy the soul.

Water (in the sense of liquidity) has the power of dissolving earth and therefore also all the solid elements that are derivations of the earth element. The ancient art of alchemy was based on dissolving materials into liquid, heating them with fire, purifying/ evaporating through air by distillation etc. The process was not only practical for the discovery of many important and useful chemical products, such as gunpowder, solvents, extracts, etc, but it was also highly symbolical because it trained the mind in the search of the "quintessence" that could not be dissolved in water, burned by fire, or dried by air - the representation of the soul itself. At a more symbolical level, water is separation or detachment, air is knowledge or inspiration, and fire is the passion that can both condensate and expand. All these elements of *sadhana* are utilized to purify the soul from the material contamination.

The topic of the soul that cannot be cut to pieces has also been discussed with reference to the separation or non-separation of the individual soul from the Supreme Soul. The debate again leads to the *dvaita/ advaita* controversy, and it should be solved in the same light we have explained before. Vedic scriptures offer the example of a spark that emanates from fire, or a drop of water from the ocean. Now on the material level a spark can be separated from the fire, although it will become extinguished or create another fire if it falls on suitable

materials, and a drop of water can remain very far from the ocean for an extremely long time - possibly, even forever. This is because the fire and the ocean have a precise and limited position in space. A fire or an ocean are not everywhere. However, we know that God is omnipresent and eternally residing within the heart of the living entity as well. How can the soul ever be separated from God then? It is not possible.

The Atman is separated from the Brahman only in the confused perception of the *jiva*. Such confusion can be material - as due to Mahamaya - or spiritual - as due to Yogamaya. In the first instance, it helps the living entity to forget God and the divine reality to become immersed in material identification and attachment, while in the second instance it helps the living entity to better connect with God through a more intimate and deeper feeling and relationship. Such separation it is not factual. Yet, at the same time each individual soul remains an individual eternally, as Krishna has already clearly established in 2.12. In this way each individual soul can offer a personal relationship of love and devotion to the Supreme and interact with other individual souls on the transcendental platform. In fact, individuality even exists among the Personalities of Godhead that are direct emanations or *svamsas*, such as the different forms of Vishnu. If there were no spiritual individuality, the entire concept of *lila* would be meaningless, and so would the concept of *bhakti*.

अच्छेद्योऽयमदाह्योऽयमक्लेद्योऽशोष्य एव च । नित्यः सर्वगतः स्थाणुरचलोऽयं सनातनः ॥ २-२४ ॥

acchedyo'yamadāhyo'yamakledyo'soṣya eva ca । nityaḥ sarvagataḥ sthāṇuracalo'yaṁ sanātanaḥ ।। 2-24 ।।

acchedyah: that cannot be broken or cut; *ayam*: this; *adahyah*: that cannot be burned; *ayam*: this; *akledyo*: that cannot be dissolved; *asoshyah*: that cannot be dried; *eva*: certainly; *ca*: and; *nityah*: eternal; *sarva-gatah*: omnipresent; *sthanur*: fixed; *acalah*: that does not move; *ayam*: this; *sanatanah*: eternal.

"This (spirit) cannot be hacked to pieces or burned, or desiccated. Actually it is eternal, omnipresent, permanent, and does not go away. It is everlasting."

In Vedic culture the repetition of a concept indicates its great importance, so instead of skipping the verses that seem boringly repetitive, we should take the opportunity to exercise some humility and put greater attention in their study. Krishna is talking of the weapons that will be used on the battlefield, but the same considerations apply to the basic elements that we can encounter in daily life and at the dissolution of the universe as well. At the time of the cyclic destruction of the world, the planets are consumed by fire, submerged by a cosmic flood and battered by violent winds. Still the individual souls are not destroyed, rather they are re-absorbed into the transcendental body of Sadashiva Mahavishnu, where they remain inactive, immersed in a blissful state of sleep called *brahmananda*, until the next cycle of manifestation.

We have already mentioned that Atman/ Brahman is omnipresent, beyond time and space. Here the concept is confirmed and expanded, with the addition of new information: the Atman/ Brahman does not move, because it is already everywhere and thus there is no "other place" to go. This also applies to the time of dissolution and to the time of liberation or *moksha*. The body of Mahavishnu and the spiritual world Vaikuntha are not "places" or in a place, because they are transcendental to time and space. They are states of consciousness, and as such they can be instantly attained anywhere and at any time, without having to "go somewhere".

Another meaning of the expression *sarva-gatah* indicates that living entities can survive in all conditions within the universe, even in places where mainstream scientists believe that life is not possible. Actually modern science has only a limited understanding of life, and its beliefs are shaken again and again by unexpected discoveries. Living entities can survive and prosper in air, in water, in earth and even in fire. Some microbes and viruses are killed by high temperatures, but that does not mean that all micro-organisms will. Absence of proof is not proof of absence. It is very much possible that the serious limitations of the present instruments of research make it impossible for modern scientists to perceive what is beyond them. After all, even the most sophisticated and advanced instruments of science - electronic microscopes and telescopes, etc - are nothing but powerful extensions of the fundamental senses of human beings, and have the same conceptual flaws. For example, human beings do not have a sense that enables them to deeply investigate what is in fire, except seeing the light and heat that it emanates, so modern scientists have only been able to find out the existence of infrared rays within the spectrum of light and measure the intensity of heat. Even so, the present instruments to observe infrared radiations are very primitive as they are used generally to detect moderate temperatures such as the body warmth of human beings and animals. Above a certain temperature, infrared goggles and cameras only see a "bright light".

अव्यक्तोऽयमचिन्त्योऽयमविकार्योऽयमुच्यते । तस्मादेवं विदित्वैनं नानुशोचितुमर्हसि ॥ २-२५ ॥

avyakto'yamacintyo'yamavikāryo'yamucyate । tasmādevaṁ viditvainaṁ nānuśocitumarhasi ।। 2-25 ।।

avyaktah: non-manifested; *ayam*: this; *acintyah*: inconceivable; *ayam*: this; *avikaryah*: unchangeable; *ayam*: this; *ucyate*: is said (to be); *tasmat*: therefore; *evam*: like this; *viditva*: knowing well; *enam*: this; *na*: not; *anusocitum*: to worry; *arhasi*: you should.

"It is said that this (soul) is invisible to material eyes, inconceivable to material intellect, and not affected by change. Therefore, knowing this (soul), you should not worry."

Krishna has already stated these characteristics of the soul, but the repetition highlights their importance. The definition *avyakta* means "non-manifest" or "invisible". The technically advanced microscopes of modern science are able to see atoms, yet they are not able to see the soul because by its nature, the soul is not manifest to the material eyes. It is not merely a matter of size. The *Upanishads* compare the "atomic size" of the soul to 1/10,000 of tip of a hair, but considering an average thickness of hair (about 100 microns, or 1/10 of a millimeter), the size of the soul should be about 1/100,000 of a millimeter. Modern scanning tunneling and atomic force microscopes allow scientists to see atomic particles that are measured in picometers (1/1,000,000,000 of a millimeter), and that are used in nanotechnology. If the calculation of the *Upanishads* were to be taken literally, such objects would be 100 million times smaller than the soul, but still they are visible to material microscopes.

This apparent imprecision should not discourage our faith in the knowledge offered by the *shastra*: we just need to make some extra effort to understand its meaning and purpose. In this particular case, the measurement offered by the *Upanishads* is merely an indicative example, just like the statement (11.12) that says that the radiance of the universal Form, the Virat Rupa, is comparable to hundreds of thousands of suns. Similarly, the radiance of the *jiva* is compared to a similar number of suns. Observing even one single sun for a brief period with a naked eye is sufficient to damage our retina, what to speak of a light that is hundreds of thousands of times stronger. If the soul could be observed through the material senses of perception and their extensions, the instruments of perception used by modern scientists, we would be blinded constantly because souls are everywhere - and many of them moving around as ghosts are not even shielded by a thick covering of gross matter. Yet, with so many wandering disembodied souls going around in the night, we still need street lighting and flashlights...

In fact, Krishna confirms that our material eyes will never be able to see spirit: for that, we need divine eyes (11.8) because such souls are in another dimension, the spiritual dimension. Each individual soul is capable of such divine or transcendental eyesight: it only requires the proper consciousness disposition. At times, this may happen in particular circumstances, such as in NDE or Near Death Experiences, or during some types of meditation, in which bright "lights" are seen.

अथ चैनं नित्यजातं नित्यं वा मन्यसे मृतम् । तथापि त्वं महाबाहो नैवं शोचितुमर्हसि ॥ २-२६ ॥

atha cainam nityajātam nityam vā manyase mṛtam | tathāpi tvam mahābāho naivam śocitumarhasi || 2-26 ||

atha: if; *ca*: and; *enam*: this; *nitya*: eternally; *jatam*: born; *nityam*: eternally; *va*: or; *manyase*: you think; *mṛtam*: dead; *tatha*: then; *api*: even; *tvam*: you; *maha-baho*: o mighty armed; *na*: not; *enam*: this; *socitum*: to worry; *arhasi*: you should.

"Even if you think that this (soul) always continues to take birth and to die, in any case you still should not be aggrieved, o mighty-armed (Arjuna).

One may object that, although the soul is always untouched by material circumstances, the body and the mind still suffer, so we should avoid creating such sufferings. This is a very good point, but we need to understand that the only true way to avoid creating sufferings is to act in accordance to Dharma, even if it seems that such action will cause sufferings. The fact is that birth and death are inevitable due to the inherent temporary nature of the material world, and all joys and sorrows come to us as a consequence of our own past actions. We should not allow these temporary considerations to stop us from doing the right thing.

The expression *maha-baho*, "o mighty armed", is offered jokingly, as the inevitability of death and rebirth cannot be kept at distance by the strength of bodily arms - in fact it is actually the opposite: the more focused we are on the material body, the more likely we are to remain tied in the cycle of births and deaths.

This verse demonstrates one of the main differences between the ideology of *Gita* and the abrahamic ideological system. Krishna has very clearly and repeatedly stated the facts, and illustrated them with examples and other logical processes, but in the end, the matter of believing or not believing is something that is totally left to the individual. God does not get upset if we do not believe him, if we do not love or respect him, or even if we do not listen to him. God is not revengeful and jealous: those are very bad qualities that characterize a demoniac mentality, not a godly mentality. God does not send people to hell because they are atheists and materialists, and does not punish them for their "offenses". Actually God is happy to allow everybody to have their own beliefs. There is no mention of "crimes of opinion" in God's law books.

Each living entity reaps the good and bad results of his own good and bad actions, but that refers to the benefits and damages that he has caused to other living entities, not to his faith in God or in some particular dogma. In fact in this verse Krishna even uses the arguments of atheists and materialists to console Arjuna, saying that even if we consider that the soul is actually subject to birth and death (at each body's birth and death or in a greater cycle of manifestation and final dissolution of the individuality), or even if there is no soul and life is simply a combination of chemicals, there is still no cause for sorrow or worries, because it is an inevitable cycle just the life and death of plants and the passing of seasons. It's the nature of life.

जातस्य हि ध्रुवो मृत्युर्ध्रुवं जन्म मृतस्य च । तस्मादपरिहार्येऽर्थे न त्वं शोचितुमर्हसि ॥ २-२७ ॥

jātasya hi dhruvo mṛtyurdhruvaṁ janma mṛtasya ca | tasmādaparihārye'rthe na tvam śocitumarhasi || 2-27 ||

jatasya: of (one) who has taken birth; *hi*: certainly; *dhruvah*: established/ determined; *mṛtyuh*: death; *dhruvam*: established/ determined; *janma*: birth; *mṛtasya*: of one who has died; *ca*: and; *tasmā*: therefore; *aparihārye*: in what is unavoidable; *arthe*: for the purpose; *na*: not; *tvam*: you; *socitum*: to worry; *arhasi*: you should.

"Because one who has taken birth must necessarily die, and one who has died will again be reborn. There is no point in despairing over something that is inevitable."

Not many people have the correct information or vision on the mechanism of death and rebirth. Some people believe that only a few "special" people get the opportunity to reincarnate, or that one can become the receptacle for another person altogether (thus losing one's own identity or "soul"), or that when we take a new birth we become a totally different person. Actually, the basic principle is very simple. As Krishna has already explained very clearly, all the embodied souls constantly reincarnate through childhood, maturity and old age. The key to understanding this mechanism is identification.

When we identify with a material body - any material body - we need to have one. The natural tendency of the body is to grow old and decay, so the conditioned soul gradually identifies as a child, a young person, and then as an old person. There is a trauma at the passage into a totally different body through death and rebirth, because for a relatively short time the conditioned soul remains in a disembodied state, and this causes a serious disorientation, leaving a relatively "blank slate" on the conscious level of identification.

The sum total of the karmic results and mental impressions, desires, attachments, and unfulfilled tasks determines the circumstances of the next birth of the conditioned soul, and from the time of birth one starts building again his/ her material identification at the conscious level. However, all the previous identifications and memories remain at the subconscious level to be accessed, consulted and utilized to foster one's evolutionary progress.

So we can see how death and rebirth are actually a very important and useful part of the process, because they create a hiatus where material identification can be modified in the learning and evolution process of the soul. If there were no death and rebirth, one's material identification with a particular body (or apparently uninterrupted growth of one body) would become sclerotic and stop the evolutionary progress of the soul. As a result, the individual would become unable to learn new things, to change his self-perception - only getting more and more tired and cynical and desperate because of the feeling of being trapped as if in a prison cell.

Probably the greatest disservice that abrahamic faiths have done to the global culture was outlawing the concept of evolutionary reincarnation, which was previously normally accepted as a fact of life by all cultures. Active persecution against this knowledge, carried on by the church for centuries, was sided by the enforcement of the nonsensical dogma of an eternal paradise/ hell earned during the very short time allotted to human life, generally in very unequal and unjust conditions.

For example, a hopeless child born in a destitute family of thieves and robbers, who had no other option but resorting to the same activities, if killed at a young age after a few miserable years of degraded life would be condemned to eternal torture in hell, while a truly evil person born in a rich and powerful family would take advantage of plenty of opportunities to cause sufferings and damage to countless innocent and helpless people, indulge in extravagant and selfish sense gratification, and still "go to heaven" by the paid blessings of a greedy priest. The purpose of the dogma enforcement was clear: taking away the individuals' personal power and putting them at the mercy of the church, that presented itself as the sole representative of God, "legally authorized" by the government to change the sentence at their convenience.

Contrarily to what one may think, the knowledge of the cycle of death and rebirth does not support unnecessary murder, slaughter and war. In fact, it gives the utmost importance to life because every moment is considered a valuable opportunity for evolution, through self-improvement and dharmic choices in properly performing one's duty.

On the other hand, rejection/ banning of such knowledge has historically created unnecessary murder, slaughter and war in unprecedented measure, because human life on this earth came to be considered a trifle compared to the eternal existence in paradise promised to anyone who is willing to sacrifice his own life and the life of others for the aggrandizement of the religious hierarchy itself.

We can still observe this mechanism in the mentality of the suicide bombers who call themselves martyrs.

अव्यक्तादीनि भूतानि व्यक्तमध्यानि भारत । अव्यक्तनिधनान्येव तत्र का परिदेवना ॥ २-२८ ॥

avyaktāḍīni bhūtāni vyaktamadyāni bhārata | avyaktanidhanānyeva tatra kā paridevanā || 2-28 ||

avyakta: non manifested; *adini*: originally; *bhutani*: the (living) beings; *vyakta*: manifested; *madhyani*: in their intermediate stage; *bharata*: o descendant of Bharata; *avyakta*: non-manifested; *nidhanani*: at destruction; *eva*: therefore; *tatra*: in that; *ka*: what; *paridevana*: lamentation.

"O descendent of Bharata, all the living entities/ states of being are initially non-manifested, then they become visible in an intermediate stage and then again disappear in the end. What is the point of lamenting about that?"

Krishna has already clearly and definitively established that the Atman is eternal, while the bodies are destined to die. The word *bhuta* literally means "being", and thus applies both to the individual living entities in their conditioned state of life, as well as to the "state of being" that defines the conditions of his life. Such circumstances constantly change too, like the seasons of the years that follow each other (2.14), and are detected only through the contact of the senses with the sense objects. The human condition is defined by a particular set of senses and objects that are perceived by the senses, and the same applies to the conditions of life in the various other species - each of the many different animal bodies, the plant species, as well as the superhuman species such as the Devas, Rakshasas, Gandharvas etc.

The sense objects that are suitable for a human form of life are governed by a mixture of *sattva* (goodness) and *rajas* (passion). This applies to food, clothing, living environment, life habits, interactions with other individuals, way of earning a livelihood and so on. These are different, for example, from the sense objects of a dog or a pig, who have different tastes, habits and different dietary needs.

The degrading influence of the age in which we live tends to drag the human beings towards lower states of being, and therefore it is possible that during their lifetime, men can develop tastes and habits that are more suitable to animals or plants. In that case, at the time of death the conditioned soul will be naturally attracted to the particular situation where he will be able to create a body that is best suited for the tastes and habits in which he previously indulged. For example, a human body can have only a moderate number of sexual intercourses, due to natural biological limitations. Such limitations can be artificially stretched through medication or other methods, but that is not suitable for a good psycho-physical balance and health. If a human being becomes overly attached or addicted to sex, in order to better enjoy such tendency he should develop the body of a rabbit or a rat, who can have sex almost continuously in a natural way. If a human being becomes overly attached to an irresponsible behavior he can develop a dog's body, that is better equipped for a wandering life, with a keener sense of smell, a sense of hearing that can even perceive ultrasounds, and a spontaneous tendency for social interactions.

Similarly, if a human being becomes overly attached to eating all sorts of foods, with a preference for tamasic tastes, he will have the opportunity to develop a pig's body, whose ability to perceive and enjoy these is much greater than a human being's. After fully enjoying such pleasures without the heavy responsibilities that come with the human body "package", the soul will have the opportunity to resume his evolution, because in any case all states of being are temporary. This particular perspective is confirmed by an alternative reading to the original text, *karya-karana-sanghata*, "due to association/ contact with the cause/ origin of the duties to be performed".

आश्चर्यवत्पश्यति कश्चिदेनम् आश्चर्यवद्भवति तथैव चान्यः ।
 āścaryavatpaśyati kaścidenam iścaryavadvadati tathaiva cānyaḥ ।
 आश्चर्यवच्चैनमन्यः शृणोति श्रुत्वाप्येनं वेद न चैव कश्चित् ॥ २-२९ ॥
 āścaryavaccainamanyaḥ śṛṇoti śrutvāpyenaṁ veda na caiva kaścit ।। 2-29 ।।

ascarya-vat: amazing; *pasyati*: sees; *kascit*: someone; *enam*: this; *ascarya-vat*: amazing; *vadati*: speaks; *tatha*: also; *eva*: certainly; *ca*: and; *anyah*: another/ someone else; *ascarya-vat*: amazing; *ca*: and; *enam*: this; *anyah*: another; *srinoti*: hears/ listens; *srutva*: having heard; *api*: even; *enam*: this; *veda*: knows; *na*: not; *ca*: and; *eva*: certainly; *kascit*: someone.

"Some see this (Atman) as amazing, some others describe it as amazing. Some hear (of it) as amazing, and some remain unable to understand it even after hearing about it."

This verse is also very famous and should be memorized.

The search for the knowledge and realization of the Atman/ Brahman is the most important pursuit in life, because it puts everything else into perspective, clarifying our priorities and the meaning of our existence. In Vedic civilization, this study was central to the education of the individual, while in contemporary global academia it is sorely neglected, or even worse, when it is studied through the history of philosophy, it is presented as a hopeless series of theoretical mental speculations on something that cannot even to be proven to exist. As an alternative, contemporary academia offers theological "divinity" studies, presenting the dogma of Christianity as indisputable yet constantly changing according to the political needs of the Church. And in the end, such doctorates still remain unable to explain how an all-merciful, all-loving, omniscient and omnipotent God needs to have his only son tortured and killed to pay for the mindless sins of countless generations of his creatures who can therefore continue with their meaningless lives.

Catechism taught to children in Sunday schools is not much better, as it consists of a series of definitions that students are discouraged to probe through open discussion. Difficult questions are liquidated with the "mystery of faith" label, or with overt or covert persecution of the "heretic tendencies" of the students who dare to express them. On contrary, the study of the divine science in Vedic civilization is based on a process of open and free discussion, and questions are considered not only legitimate, but are encouraged as well. It is also important to understand that the real qualification to understand the Atman/ Brahman is not academic study. It is not about a curriculum requirement with a credit value calculated on quiz-type exams in which the student only needs to please the personal or institutional beliefs of the teachers. It is not a theoretical pastime for armchair philosophers. It is a deep personal quest for one's true identity, and success is measured by the individual's change of priorities in life.

Another danger in the exploration of the spiritual science is the tendency to sensationalism, that transforms self realization and religion into some form of entertainment. Of course the entertainment component is important when trying to attract the interest of the simple-minded masses who can't handle deep philosophical concepts, but that's just the sugar coating on the pill: it should not be the only ingredient in the medication. Traditionally people gather to hear stories from the *Itihasas* and *Puranas* - especially the *Bhagavata Purana*, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* - but at these gatherings very few people actually listen, follow or understand what is being narrated. The general idea is that the mere superficial recitation will do, because the *mahatmya* or *phalasruti* (glorification of the results of the act of listening) promise great benefits. However, mere mechanical recitation and hearing can be compared to eating only the sugar from the pills coating and throwing away the actual medicinal principle. We need to become sincere enough to let our misconceptions go, to renounce our material identifications and attachments. This is the real difference between the beautiful and inspiring stories of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* or *Puranas* on one side, and equally beautiful and inspiring stories created by the fantasy of fictional writers - for example, the adventures of Harry Potter, Luke Skywalker, or Frodo Baggins the Hobbit.

देही नित्यमवधयोऽयं देहे सर्वस्य भारत । तस्मात्सर्वाणि भूतानि न त्वं शोचितुमर्हसि ॥ २-३० ॥
 dehī nityamavadhyo'yaṁ dehe sarvasya bhārata । tasmātsarvāṇi bhūtāni na tvam śocitumarhasi ।। 2-30 ।।

dehi: the (soul that lives in the) body; *nityam*: eternal; *avadhyo*: immortal; *ayam*: this; *dehe*: in the body; *sarvasya*: of all/ everyone; *bharata*: o descendant of Bharata; *tasmāt*: therefore; *sarvani*: all; *bhutani*: beings; *na*: not; *tvam*: you; *socitum*: to worry; *arhasi*: should.

"O descendant of Bharata, this eternal (soul) that lives in the body can not be killed and is present in all bodies. Therefore you should not be aggrieved for all these living beings."

In the previous verse Krishna stated that the Atman/ Brahman is a wonderful topic for discussion, very important and also very difficult to penetrate. Here the oneness of Atman and Brahman, present in all bodies, is highlighted by the use of the singular pronoun *ayam* ("this"), equivalent to the *tat* ("that") that is used more often in Vedic literature. Each *jivatma* or individual soul cannot be present simultaneously in all bodies, although he can tap into the collective consciousness and God's consciousness to perceive the other *jivatmas*. However, the *jivatma* or Atman is part and parcel of the Brahman, the transcendental spiritual Reality that is present everywhere, in all bodies and in all atoms. This is the meaning of omnipresent.

Another interpretation of the expression "*dehe sarvasya*" is that there is a *jivatma* in each one of all the bodies of the innumerable living entities in the universe. Another interpretation is that the Brahman, or the sum total of the individual souls present in the universe, constitutes the spiritual component of the universe, as *jagat* is a synonym of "*sarva*" referred to the Virat Rupa, the universal or cosmic form.

At all these levels, the fundamental meaning remains the same: the bodies are subject to change and dissolution, while the spiritual presence within them is immortal. Therefore there is nothing to worry about. We, as spirit souls, can never be killed (*nityam avadhyah*) in any circumstance. Therefore there is nothing that can really stop us from properly performing our dharmic duties or from progressing towards perfection. They can be difficulties and delays, there can be adjustments of plans, but the journey will continue. One of man's greatest fears is the idea of total dissolution and nothingness, that implies the futility of life and action. This fear prompts people to do many stupid things that in their minds are intended to "leave a mark" on this world, even if it means to do something very bad, or pushes them into the depths of hopelessness and ignorance through intoxication, cynical materialism or existential nihilism.

Bhagavad gita radiates like a beacon of light in the darkness, assuring us that we will all continue to exist, and that loss is only a temporary change that makes space for better things to come.

स्वधर्ममपि चावेक्ष्य न विकम्पितुमर्हसि । धर्म्याद्धि युद्धाच्छ्रेयोऽन्यत्क्षत्रियस्य न विद्यते ॥ २-३१ ॥

svadharmamapi cāvekṣya na vikampitumarhasi | dharmyāddhi yuddhācchreyo'nyatkṣatriyasya na vidyate || 2-31 ||

sva: one's own; *dharmam*: duty; *api*: also; *ca*: and; *avekshya*: considering; *na*: not; *vikampitum*: to hesitate; *arhasi*: you should; *dharmyat*: according to *dharma*; *hi*: indeed; *yuddhat*: in the battle; *sreyah*: better; *anyat*: other; *kshatriyasya*: of a *kshatriya*; *na*: not; *vidyate*: is known.

"Considering your own dharmic duty, you should not hesitate, because for a *kshatriya* there is nothing better than fighting a dharmic battle."

Often *dharma* is translated as "religion" and thus mistakenly assimilated to the concept of exclusivist theocratic monotheism, characteristic of the Abrahamic faiths.

But *dharma* has nothing to do with personal beliefs, faith, devotions and religious practices, or with the choice of the name and form or non-form of the Divine that one worships. One's personal beliefs and religious/ spiritual practices are a private matter, of course as long as the choices made in one's personal lives do not violate the freedom or dignity of someone else. *Dharma* is not about any racial or ethnic identification or family tradition, nationality, or any other sectarian allegiance that opposes a group of persons against the rest of the world.

Dharma is not even about professionalism, social requirements or conventions. *Dharma* is about the universal principles of religion and ethics – truthfulness, compassion, cleanliness, justice, goodness, enlightenment and cooperation among all to support society and the universe. Thus one's specific *dharmā*, or *sva-dharma*, consists in doing one's duty in the best possible way according to one's abilities and particular position in time and space.

The definition of *kshatriya dharmā* is the protection of the *prajas* and the kingdom to guarantee the proper environment for material and spiritual progress. When there is a need to fight to ensure this protection, the *kshatriya* has the opportunity to fully utilize his particular skills, qualities and tendencies: he is like a perfectly honed instrument that finally engages in a highly specialized task. His fighting aggressors - external or internal enemies - is the climax of all his existence, his proper place in the order of things, not unlike a planet that is properly running within its right orbit. We could really say that he has all reasons to be happy, because he has attained the perfection of his particular nature. It may be useful to remember here that Arjuna is not on the battlefield to conquer a kingdom for himself or for his family or kinsmen or race, to convert people to a particular faith/ ideology or way of life, or to eliminate rivals or opponents. Like any other *kshatriya*, Arjuna needs to sacrifice himself to his duty in protecting the people from a bad ruler (Duryodhana) who has repeatedly demonstrated his disrespect for ethical principles and his callousness to the subjects' well being and to the benefit of the kingdom.

A *dharmā yuddha* is a battle conducted according to strict ethical rules of engagement and with the purpose to protect the good, harmless and innocent people from the attack of aggressors and evil doers. It is purely defensive, never offensive or imperialistic, colonialistic or exploitative in any other way. Therefore it should never be confused with the idea of "holy war" or "crusade" intended to subjugate people or nations in order to impose a particular type of belief, religious tradition, mode of worship, culture, values, legislation, or to acquire the control of resources for selfish purposes, by taking them away from other people.

यदृच्छया चोपपन्नं स्वर्गद्वारमपावृतम् । सुखिनः क्षत्रियाः पार्थ लभन्ते युद्धमीदृशम् ॥ २-३२ ॥

yadṛcchayā copapannaṁ svargadvāramapāvṛtam | sukhinaḥ kṣatriyāḥ pārtha labhante yuddhamīdṛśam || 2-32 ||

yadricchaya: by its own accord; *ca*: and; *upapannam*: obtained; *svarga-dvaram*: the door to the heavenly planets; *apavritam*: opened; *sukhinah*: happy; *kshatriyah*: the *kshatriyas*; *partha*: o son of Pritha; *labhante*: attain; *yuddham*: battle; *idrisam*: like this.

"O son of Pritha, happy are the *kshatriyas* to whom such opportunity comes unsought. For a warrior, engaging in such a battle is like having the doors of heaven open in front of him."

The word *yadricchaya* ("that has come by itself") further clarifies that a *dharmā yuddha* is never a war of aggression, invasion or occupation. A *kshatriya* is not a war-mongering brawler eagerly searching for the opportunity to pick a fight or even creating such opportunity by attacking innocent and harmless people who are just engaged in their own honest and harmless business. A *kshatriya* is called to defend his land (*kshetra*) and the creatures of his land (*prajas*) from all attacks: this is the dharmic fight.

The rules of engagement for a dharmic warrior are clear: only aggressors can be targeted, and even an enemy must be spared if he surrenders and renounces his aggressive ways. In a dharmic society there are no jails or corporal punishments of unharmed prisoners, no courts, judges or lawyers and no judicial errors. The genuine *kshatriyas* are capable and active enough to catch a criminal red-handed and either kill him in battle or see him out of the kingdom to be banished forever if he does not accept to reform himself sincerely, atone and repay his victims suitably. The only other dharmic opportunity for a fight is a challenge coming from another *kshatriya* warrior, to establish who is stronger and more skilled in battle, and therefore more capable of defending the *prajas* from potential aggressors.

In this regard, we need to understand the tradition of the Rajasuya/ Asvamedha yajna celebrated by a king who wishes to rise to the level of "emperor". The concept of empire in the Vedic tradition has only administrative purposes, aimed at strengthening communication and cooperation between regions through building roads, encouraging trade, creating a common front against outside invaders and aggressors, and providing emergency support to tributary kingdoms in case of need – famine, natural disasters, etc.

The aspiring emperor celebrated the Rajasuya yajna to verify the qualifications of the local kings and rulers; if they accepted his superiority, they would offer some gifts as tribute. A local ruler admitting defeat was not killed or replaced by the emperor or by the emperor's men, and did not have to change his personal or tribal/ social beliefs or way of life. He would continue to rule his own *prajas* as always, but he knew that there was a man greater and more powerful than him, to whom he could turn for help in times of need. This verse states that a good *kshatriya* will attain the heavenly planets. Such a statement may appear to be similar to the promise of the pleasures of paradise for those abrahamic men who engage in the "holy war" of eliminating or subduing those who are considered "infidels", but there is a radical difference. The concept of *svarga* is substantially different from the idea of paradise. The Devas who live in *svarga* may also have great opportunities to enjoy life, but their main occupation is to manage the universe and ensure that all living beings are properly taken care of. The Devas are the equivalent of the *kshatriyas* on Earth, only on a cosmic scale. Whenever the balance and the progress of the universe are threatened by the Asuras, the Devas do not hesitate to leave their beautiful residences to get into battle to protect their *prajas*. Therefore a good and honest *kshatriya* that properly executes his duty in fighting against aggressors who endanger the *prajas* is automatically qualified to become a Deva. He does not get paradise as a reward for his loyalty or faith, for his allegiance to a particular sectarianism, or because he has destroyed the holy places and scriptures of other peoples: he gets paradise because he has demonstrated he is a good ruler.

अथ चेत्त्वमिमं धर्म्यं संग्रामं न करिष्यसि । ततः स्वधर्मं कीर्तिं च हित्वा पापमवाप्स्यसि ॥ २-३३ ॥

atha cettvamimam dharmyam saṅgrāmaṁ na kariṣyasi | tataḥ svadharmam kīrtim ca hitvā pāpamavāpsyasi || 2-33 ||

atha: therefore; *cet*: if; *tvam*: you; *imam*: this; *dharmyam*: duty to support the universe; *saṅgramam*: engaged; *na*: not; *kariṣyasi*: you will do; *tataḥ*: then; *sva-dharmam*: the particular duty (based on *guna* and *karma*); *kirtim*: good reputation; *ca*: and; *hitva*: giving up; *papam*: sinfulness; *avapsyasi*: you will get.

"Therefore, if you do not engage in this dharmic (action), you will lose your good name of *kshatriya*. (What) you will obtain (is) *papam* (the stain of sin)."

The word *papa* is often translated as "sin" but its meaning is quite different from its counterpart in the Abrahamic religions, that do not accept the idea of reincarnation. Rather than a transgression against God's orders (that constitutes sin in the Abrahamic faiths), *papa* is the karmic burden of a selfish choice that goes against the basic ethical principles (*dharmam*) that support the universe. It is a failure, a symptom of imperfection, a stain on one's character, a contamination, but it does not condemn the individual to eternal hell. Sometimes in Puranic literature we find some mention of paradise and hell, and those who do not have a deep understanding of the Vedic civilization may remain confused and superimpose similar concepts they have acquired from the abrahamic stories, that developed many centuries after the compilation of the Vedic literature and its corresponding versions in other pre-abrahamic civilizations. Abrahamic mythology picked some elements here and there, and added the particular Jewish and Christian or Islamic dogma, producing descriptions that had the specific objective of emotionally controlling the masses and subjugating them to the institutional authority. In the Vedic perspective, hell - like heaven - is a temporary condition of life where a conditioned soul may remain in his/her evolutionary journey, in order to learn some specific lessons. However, each individual is expected to learn and progress in a personal path of development or evolution, where committing mistakes is part of the process, so *papa* can be purified and counteracted.

In this verse the word *kirtim*, "fame, reputation, good name" refers to Arjuna's immaculate record in performing his dharmic duties as a *kshatriya* and to his personal behavior as a human being, but also to the extraordinary recognition and blessings he received from great personalities, such as Shiva Mahadeva and Indra. Fame and good reputation are considered useful assets, because they are needed in order to properly perform one's duty in society. Losing one's good name - because of actually committing some misdeeds or just being defamed by envious people - may even disrupt one's occupational duties in a very serious way, thus causing distress and damage to the entire society that becomes deprived of our good service. There is a clear line between such legitimate desire for a good name and the vainglory of false identification with a material position - also called "false ego". It is called "false" in opposition to the real ego, that is self-realization of Atman/ Brahman in a sentiment of service to the Supreme. We should not think that this verse of *Gita* is encouraging *ahankara* and *abhimana*. *Gita's* teachings, just like the teachings of all other Vedic scriptures, focus on giving up one's material identification and attachments and attain the level of Brahman realization. Later on Krishna will clearly say that only fools are caught in the trap of *ahankara*.

आचार्याः पितरः पुत्रास्तथैव च पितामहाः । मातुलाः श्वशुराः पौत्राः श्यालाः सम्बन्धिनस्तथा ॥ १-३४ ॥

ācāryāḥ pitaraḥ putrāstathaiva ca pitāmahāḥ | mātulāḥ śvaśurāḥ pautrāḥ śyālāḥ sambandhinastathā || 1-34 ||

akirtim: bad reputation; *ca*: and; *api*: also; *bhūṭani*: all people (living entities); *kathayishyanti*: will speak; *te*: of you; *avyayam*: eternally; *sambhavitasya*: of a respectable person; *ca*: and; *akirtir*: bad name; *maranat*: than death; *atiricyate*: is more.

"Everybody will speak of your infamy forever. For a respectable person, a bad name is worse than death."

This verse further elaborates on the problems caused by a bad reputation, especially when it is not based on factual reality. The next two verses will clearly bring up the issue of slandering, both as the bad reputation created by uninformed people who foolishly misinterpreted our actions, as well as by the deliberate calumny and rumors circulated by enemies.

Krishna is clearly telling Arjuna that for a *kshatriya* it is better to die on the battlefield, on the line of duty of protecting society from evil doers, than to take the dubious path of so-called non-violence or passive resistance, often presented in the name of "being positive", "being a better person", and "opposing love to hatred".

Such abstentionism is an incorrect understanding of the principle of non-violence. *Ahimsa* means "absence of hatred", and applies to the level of self-realized consciousness in which we see all beings as non-different from our own selves. This means that we should work for the benefit of all beings as a whole, compared to a body: when an infection appears in the body, refusing to take the appropriate action in the name of non-violence and love is simply stupid. However, action must be appropriate and intelligent, aiming at achieving a specific and precise purpose, and performed according to the required dharmic /ethical modalities. This means that we must engage in battle only against combatants, and not against innocent and non-harmful people, even if these are easier to target. The purpose of fighting is not about retaliation or revenge or venting one's own anger, but about stopping an attack and protecting the innocent and good people.

If our application of the dharmic principles of protective fight is not sufficient to carry us to victory, it is better for us to die on the battlefield, serving society through our death, because we will get another, and better, opportunity in a next life. When we sacrifice ourselves to a greater good, we obtain a greater reward, in this life or in the next.

A respectable person is a person who one who has earned the respect of people through impeccable performance of his/ her duties, good character and qualifications. Such a person is naturally playing an important role in society, because of the example s/he sets for the rest of the people, and the support s/he can rally for good causes.

भयाद्रणादुपरतं मंस्यन्ते त्वां महारथाः । येषां च त्वं बहुमतो भूत्वा यास्यसि लाघवम् ॥ २-३५ ॥

bhayādrāṇādūparataṁ maṁsyante tvāṁ mahārathāḥ । yeṣāṁ ca tvāṁ bahumato bhūtvā yāsyasi lāghavam ।। 2-35 ।।

bhayad: out of fear; *ranad*: from the battle; *uparatam*: given up; *mamsyante*: they will think; *tvam*: you; *maha-rathah*: the great generals; *yesham*: them; *ca*: and; *tvam*: you; *bahu-mato*: highly respected; *bhutva*: having been; *yasyasi*: you will become; *laghavam*: of much less weight.

"The great generals will think that you have left the battlefield out of fear; those who used to keep you in such a high esteem will not take you seriously any more."

Arjuna has always been deeply respected and loved by many great personalities and by the general people as well. Many times he has demonstrated his great valor, courage, spirit of self-sacrifice, loyalty, and endurance, so naturally he is held in great esteem by all the elders, starting with Shiva Mahadeva who personally wrestled with him to test his valor, and king Indra of the heavenly planets, who honored him as his worthy son. He is Drona's favorite disciple. Bhishma, at the end of the fight, will declare that for him it is an honor to die by the hand of Arjuna. Draupadi's father honors Arjuna above all the Pandavas, and everybody feels that King Yudhisthira owes his glory and power to Arjuna only, because it was Arjuna who followed the horse of the *rajasuya* sacrifice as his champion and gained vassals and tributes to the King. It was Arjuna who, helped by Bhima, rescued Duryodhana from the hands of the Gandharvas, and it was Arjuna who defended Virata's palace from the attack of all the Kauravas, as he was the only one present at that time.

Yet, if Arjuna leaves the battlefield now, some people may still think that he has become weak and fearful due to some mysterious reason, and that his days as a famous warrior are over, and might even be forgotten and doubted. Arjuna's spiritual realization may have carried him to the level where he does not identify with his social role as a *kshatriya*, but that does not mean that he can refuse to fight a dharmic battle. Krishna will explain very clearly that we should renounce the enjoyment of the fruits of the action, not the action itself, because proper action is our duty.

Some people may question whether we should care about what other people say, since we are supposed to be situated on a transcendental level, and we should always be humble and tolerant. However, there is a difference between being personally humble and tolerant (which is good) and allowing humiliation towards one's duty or service (which is bad). Actually our duty or service is not about ourselves, but about society and to Supreme, so when an offense is made against our duty or service, it is not done to us and therefore there is no scope in being humble about it. Showing one's "personal humility and tolerance" in front of offenses made against society - against *dharma*, against the service to the Supreme - is merely cowardice.

अवाच्यवादांश्च बहून्वदिष्यन्ति तवाहिताः । निन्दन्तस्तव सामर्थ्यं ततो दुःखतरं नु किम् ॥ २-३६ ॥

avācyavādāṁśca bahūnvadiṣyanti tavāhitāḥ । nindantastava sāmartyhaṁ tato duḥkhataraṁ nu kim ।। 2-36 ।।

avacya: indecent; *vadam*: speeches; *ca*: and; *bahun*: many; *vadisyaniti*: they will tell; *tava*: your; *hitah*: enemies; *nindantah*: offensive; *tava*: your; *samarthyam*: value; *tatah*: than that; *duhkhataram*: more painful; *nu*: surely; *kim*: what (can there be).

"Your enemies will circulate many bad rumors about you, offensively demeaning your valor. What could be more painful for you?"

Avacya means "something that should not be said", and plainly refers to gross insults, falsities and vulgar allusions, stuff that decent people should never utter or repeat. It is regularly observed that low-class and unqualified people, who do not care for *dharma*, easily become envious of the success and good reputation earned by more qualified persons, and being unable to prove their greater value through positive and constructive action, resort to gross and vulgar or even obscene slandering, venting their own frustration and anger in the only way they can. Unfortunately, there are many who will listen to them, as they are hungry for garbage and eager to find a target for their own personal frustrations, too. This type of behavior is very widespread among politicians, for example. Instead of focusing on the real issues of policies, ideologies, and legislation, they try to cast aspersions on their enemies' birth or private lives - in matters that have absolutely nothing to do with governance.

However, when dharmic or even just decent people come across vulgar slandering about a person, they will neither utter nor listen to such garbage. If someone has actually committed some crime or bad action, let it be properly investigated and ascertained, and let the repercussions on society be evaluated objectively and counteracted with appropriate measures. Vulgar gossiping is unworthy of decent people.

Hitah, or “enemy”, literally means “one who hates”, and comes from the same root of *himsa*. A hateful person breeds intentions of unnecessary and unprovoked violence, and schemes on how to cause sufferings to others. It is important to make a distinction between the application of force (necessary) and violence (unnecessary), as the first is motivated by an objective defensive purpose and the second by negative subjective sentiments such as selfishness, greed, lust, envy and hatred.

हतो वा प्राप्स्यसि स्वर्गं जित्वा वा भोक्ष्यसे महीम् । तस्मादुत्तिष्ठ कौन्तेय युद्धाय कृतनिश्चयः ॥ २-३७ ॥

hato vā prāpsyasi svargaṁ jitvā vā bhokṣyase mahīm | tasmāduttiṣṭha kaunteya yuddhāya kṛtaniścayaḥ || 2-37 ||

hatah: being killed; *va*: or; *prapsyasi*: you will obtain; *svargam*: Svargaloka; *jitva*: being victorious; *va*: or; *bhokshyase*: you will enjoy; *mahim*: the Earth; *tasmad*: therefore; *uttistha*: rise; *kaunteya*: o son of Kunti; *yuddhaya*: in the battle; *kritah*: determined; *niscayah*: without doubts.

"If you are killed (in battle) you will attain the higher planets, and if you win the battle you will enjoy the pleasures of this world. Therefore get up, o son of Kuntī, and abandoning all doubts, fix your mind on the battle."

The higher planetary system in this universe, called Svarga or Svargaloka, is sometimes defined as “heaven” or “paradise”, but the Vedic concept is quite different from the Abrahamic concept, and the two should not be superimposed as such artificial identification would create confusion and misunderstanding. Svarga is still within this immanent universe although the residents there live much longer and enjoy a much higher quality of life and pleasure than the people of the earthly planets. But it is not the final destination of the liberated soul, it is not the spiritual world. Even in Svarga, bodies are temporary and eventually they have to die. Paradise is therefore not "eternal", just like hell. Both are simply temporary positions where individual souls can obtain joys and sufferings that exceed the range of the human condition. Svarga will eventually be destroyed at the time of the annihilation of the universe, and it will become manifested again at the beginning of a new cycle.

सुखदुःखे समे कृत्वा लाभालाभौ जयाजयौ । ततो युद्धाय युज्यस्व नैवं पापमवाप्स्यसि ॥ २-३८ ॥

sukhaduḥkhe same kṛtvā lābhalābhau jayajayau | tato yuddhāya yujyasva naivaṁ pāpamavāpsyasi || 2-38 ||

sukha: in happiness; *duhkhe*: in sorrow; *same*: equally (balanced); *kritva*: making; *labha*: in obtaining, *alabhau*: in not obtaining; *jaya*: in winning; *ajayau*: in not winning; *tatah*: there; *yuddhaya*: in the battle; *yujyasva*: engage; *na*: not; *evam*: (like) this; *papam*: sinful result; *avapsyasi*: you will get.

"If you fight this battle while remaining equally disposed (unattached and prepared) to joy and sadness, gain and loss, victory and defeat, you will never be touched by sin."

This is one of the most important verses in *Gita*, where Krishna starts explaining the new topic of *karma yoga*, or proper action. In fact, this is the logical development of the discourse: after explaining that we are all eternal spirit souls and not the material body, it is logical to understand that we should not identify with our specific position in society (determined by the qualities, tendencies, skills and abilities afforded by our body-mind). So an intelligent student would certainly ask what the meaning of duty in such context is, considering that Krishna is goading Arjuna into battle by appealing to his sense of duty as a *kshatriya*.

The great commentator of *Gita*, Adi Shankara Acharya, explained that this is an "incidental instruction", and in fact it makes perfect sense. "Incidental" refers to the particular external situation in which a person finds himself at a given time, and "incidental instruction" brilliantly conveys the idea of a temporary duty that does not apply to the inner identity but to one's temporary position in society, that is also very important. This concept is repeated innumerable times all along the *Gita*, expressed from all possible angles of perspective. We have also seen Krishna very clearly encouraging Arjuna to perform his duty as *kshatriya* faithfully and without hesitation: such idea will be repeated again and again in the subsequent chapters in unequivocal terms. Some foolish people, however, have misinterpreted this idea of "incidental instruction" and stated that Krishna's instruction in this verse is not about combining spiritual knowledge with active work in the world. In their illusory contemplation of illusion, they claim that Krishna is not really encouraging Arjuna to properly perform his duty, but he is just talking about "the realization of the Supreme Reality"... something that in their clouded mind implies that such pursuit has nothing to do with properly performing one's duty in society under the guidance of spiritual and material knowledge. These people may truly be called "*mayavadis*" because they claim that everything is illusory and therefore unworthy of our attention, so that as soon as a person attains the proper spiritual knowledge and realization, he should stop all actions in this world. Such an idea is openly and clearly condemned by Krishna in many passages of *Gita*, but these foolish people claim that Krishna means to say exactly the opposite of what he is clearly and repeatedly stating. Unfortunately such faulty interpretation has created generations of useless, lazy and irresponsible people who falsely pass themselves off as religious or spiritual teachers and leaders, causing social disasters at many levels. It is because of these people's delusional ramblings encouraging pathological withdrawal, that India was invaded and conquered - while those who were supposed to act as the teachers and guides of the entire society kept repeating that everything is illusory, and that Knowledge is necessarily opposed to Action. They believe and preach that "those who know, do not speak, and those who speak, do not know"... and yet they all keep speaking and writing volumes, and more recently cluttering bandwidth on the Net, too. They should show some consistency with their own ideology: if they believe that speaking is useless, they should stop speaking altogether and spare us their nonsense. If they want people to withdraw from action, they should give the example and get out of the way instead of trying to manipulate others for their own aggrandizement, fame, position, profit and material power. It is true that intellect and speech are not sufficient to understand Transcendence, but these should not be dismissed or underestimated, otherwise there would be no meaning and no use for the vast expanse of the Vedic literature and the extensive preaching of the genuine self-realized *acharyas*, from Vyasa to Adi Shankara.

Another trend of commentaries, mainly Vaishnavas, focus on "God's order" as the basis for the instruction given in this verse; according to this logic, whatever we do "in the name of God" does not entail any bad reaction and cannot be considered a sin. The devotee is expected to submit completely and surrender everything - including his intelligence, ethical sense, common sense, duties to society and to family -

and this will free him from all obligations or responsibilities. This is all well when one is actually following God's direct instructions through the medium of a genuine spiritual guide, because most people may have misconceptions or some confusion about the actual meaning of intelligence, ethical sense, common sense and duties to society and to family, so in spite of their best intentions, their judgment might be faulty.

However, this "total surrender" approach can also be misinterpreted by unqualified and unrealized people to support deviations into *adharma* similar to those applied by the abrahamic ideologies, when sincere but clueless people who want to engage in genuine selfless service to God become manipulated by ruthless and cynical cheaters who claim to be the sole representatives of God, empowered to speak in God's name and give instructions to his devotees. *Bhagavad gita* is the best guidance in this dilemma, because Krishna is explaining everything very, very clearly and thoroughly.

In this verse Krishna does not say that one who has knowledge should not act, or that one should act only on God's orders: he says that one should act selflessly, out of duty. We should listen to Krishna first, and only by keeping his actual words very clear in our mind, we can expand our study by reading commentaries. Guru is not 100% God: a Guru who wants you to worship him only, neglecting the worship to God, is a fake and a cheater.

esha: this; *te*: to you; *abhihita*: explained; *sankhye*: by analysis; *buddhih*: intelligence/ wisdom; *yoge*: by engagement; *tu*: but; *imam*: this;

एषा तेऽभिहिता साङ्ख्ये बुद्धियोगे त्विमां शृणु बुद्ध्या युक्तो यथा पार्थ कर्मबन्धं प्रहास्यसि ॥ २-३९ ॥

eṣā te'bhīhitā sāṅkhye buddhiryoge tvimāṁ śṛṇu | buddhyā yukto yathā pārtha karmabandham prahāsyasi || 2-39 |

srinu: listen; *buddhya*: by intelligence; *yuktah*: engaged; *yaya*: by which; *partha*: o Partha (son of Pritha); *karma*: of action; *bandham*: bondage; *prahasyasi*: you will be liberated.

"I have explained this (point) to you by the (analytical method of examination called) Sankhya. Now listen to this (concept) as (observed from the perspective of) (the practice of intelligence, called) Buddhi Yoga. O Partha, through this Buddhi Yoga (application of intelligence and correct understanding) you will be released from the bondage of karma (actions and reactions)."

In this verse Krishna introduces the distinction between Sankhya and Buddhi Yoga. The divisive mentality of westernized academia presents the various "philosophies" as relative truths facing each other in a sort of competition to be "right" instead of "wrong", and in the process it gets so confused that students end up concluding that there is no real truth, or that the real truth is whatever one believes, or whatever the majority of the people believe. The implicit conclusion is that all truths are only hypothetical theories devoid of intrinsic value. This is called "relativism" and is considered the height of free thinking, because it is opposed to the dogmatic approach of abrahamic ideologies, according to which the only acceptable truth is whatever the religious authority officially says from time to time. Such dogma are, by definition, not subject to questioning or discussion, and whoever cannot in good conscience believe they represent the absolute truth, is punished or persecuted. The "faithful" are required to pledge blind allegiance to the dogma in order to be "right" and "saved", or "in good standing".

Both approaches are faulty because of their partiality. They cannot integrate a healthy and working vision of Reality and enable different people to communicate and understand each other, and cooperate for the benefit of the entire society. The solution to the dilemma is extremely simple, but it requires a broad mind (*mahatma*) to understand it, because it is about becoming able to see the Great Picture, in a multi-dimensional vision that goes beyond the dualistic and sectarian approach. For example, we may travel around a great mountain and take pictures of its beautiful slopes and valleys from various localities. All the pictures are portraying the same mountain, but they appear to be "different" from each other. Which photo is the "right" image of the mountain? Usually the one we like best. Are all the other photos "wrong"? Certainly not. Should we try to get a "complete picture" of the mountain, by superimposing transparencies of all the pictures, we will just get a confused mess, because we keep thinking in two dimensions, while the mountain has three dimensions. What we need is a paradigm shift that will enable us to see Reality in a much better way. Similarly, the various approaches presented in *Gita - sankhya, karma, jnana, bhakti, buddhi, dhyana*, etc - are not theories opposed to each other, but distinct dimensions or perspectives from which we can contemplate the same Absolute Truth. They complement each other, they are all required to understand Truth. *Bhakti* (devotion) without *jnana* (knowledge) and *karma* (action) is empty and foolish sentimentalism. *Jnana* without *karma* and *bhakti* is useless, dry theoretical academicism. *Karma* without *jnana* and *bhakti* is a waste of time, energy and resources.

One who wants to be exclusive and rigid in following a particular yoga cult as opposed to other limbs of yoga is as stupid as a man trying to use only his hands, or head, or feet in daily life to perform his activities. No wonder they remain impotent in attaining the results of Yoga, and they only make a mockery of it. The dimension mentioned by Krishna most often is Buddhi Yoga: the engagement of intelligence and wisdom. This Yoga is not very popular with institutional "religious authorities" because it helps people to see Reality from a place of wisdom that is already within the heart of each human being. The other perspectives can somehow be controlled by external agents, but Buddhi Yoga is a natural, spontaneous and independent function, that enables each one of us to actually see the facts beyond the trumped up appearances and the political propaganda. As the definition of Buddhi Yoga itself is rarely reflected in the various translations of *Gita*, it appears that many "masters" are not interested to talk about Buddhi, as they might feel that it may be a hindrance to the exclusiveness in the practice of their school of thought (names, labels, paths and organizations)... yet this is the definition used most frequently by Krishna, and the conclusive teaching in the text of *Gita*.

Sankhya ("counting, enumerating") scientifically describes the categories of Reality, distinguishing the characteristics of matter and spirit, darkness and light, ignorance and knowledge. By exclusively following this approach, one may fall into the illusion of ontological dualism, and therefore Krishna brilliantly introduces the next perspective to broaden our vision.

The word *karma* applies simultaneously to action and reaction, and to the connection between action and reaction. Some people may conclude that the purpose of Knowledge is to become free from action, in the sense that they may stop performing their duties, but this is a mistake.

नेहाभिक्रमनाशोऽस्ति प्रत्यवायो न विद्यते । स्वल्पमप्यस्य धर्मस्य त्रायते महतो भयात् ॥ २-४० ॥

nehābhikramanāśo'sti pratyavāyo na vidyate | svalpamapyasya dharmasya trāyate mahato bhayāt || 2-40 ||

na: not; *iha*: here; *abhikrama*: effort; *nasah*: loss; *asti*: there is; *pratyavayah*: diminution/ harm/ bad effects/ opposition; *na*: not; *vidyate*: is known; *su-alpam*: very little; *api*: although; *asya*: of this; *dharmasya*: of *dharma*; *trayate*: liberates/ protects; *mahatah*: great; *bhayat*: from the fear.

"On this (path) no effort goes to loss and there is no failure/ harm. Even a little (effort) in the direction of this *dharma* liberates one from the greatest fear."

The path of *Buddhi Yoga*, the *Yoga* of action enlightened by intelligence and wisdom, is perfect. Even a small effort in this direction is eternally valuable, because it stimulates the personal growth of the individual on a deeper level. The journey of self realization is transcendental, and continues on a subconscious level when our conscious mind is not ready to follow it through properly. As Krishna will explain later in the text, whatever progress one has made on this path will remain to his credit, even if he falls from the practice of *Yoga*: whenever he will be ready to resume the journey, in this or in a next lifetime, the fallen *Yogi* will bank on the results of his previous work, obtaining better facilities and breezing through the lessons that he had already learned. The work done in self-realization is always beneficial. There are no bad side-effects. Some other ventures may require one to sacrifice and renounce one's family life, health, resources, social position, or other valuable assets, but *Buddhi Yoga* is about engaging one's intelligence and wisdom in the performance of proper action, so it can be applied to all aspects of life and in all circumstances. Arjuna does not have to renounce his duties as a *kshatriya*, husband or father: he just needs to act with wisdom, supported by the knowledge and consciousness of the true transcendental nature of Brahman, and detached from the fruits of his actions.

Another level of meaning is that through intelligence and wisdom engaged in the search for self realization, even loss and failure become opportunities and pillars of future success. It is said that experience is always worth the price we pay, even if it was very expensive. The actual purpose of *Buddhi Yoga* is the individual's spiritual growth, so even if from the material perspective one's efforts have not produced much visible result, the learning process will create a higher level of consciousness and a wider view of the purpose of life. The entire text of the *Gita* will explain how.

The word *pratyavayah* has many layers of meaning, and each of these meanings offers the basis for a different angle in meditating on the extraordinary characteristics of *Buddhi Yoga*. Here Krishna equates *Buddhi Yoga* with *dharma*: this is a very important concept, because intelligence without ethical principles can be extremely dangerous. Even a small step in support of *dharma* is eternally valuable, because it will follow us lifetime after lifetime and create even more and better opportunities, while temporary material things such as money, property, relations, and social position, will inevitably be lost - if not during this lifetime, at its end. What is the greatest fear? Having misused and wasted the valuable opportunity of a human life.

व्यवसायात्मिका बुद्धिरेकेह कुरुनन्दन । बहुशाखा ह्यनन्ताश्च बुद्धयोऽव्यवसायिनाम् ॥ २-४१ ॥

vyavasāyātmikā buddhirekeha kurunandana | bahusākhā hyanantāśca buddhayo'vyavasāyinām || 2-41 ||

vyavasaya: determined; *atmika*: with the self; *buddhih*: intelligence; *eka*: one; *iha*: here; *kuru nandana*: o son/ descendant of Kuru; *bahu*: many; *sakha*: branches; *hi*: certainly; *anantah*: endless; *ca*: and; *buddhayah*: of the intelligence; *avyavasayinam*: of those who are not determined.

"O beloved descendant of Kuru, the intelligence/ understanding that is constantly focused on the Atman is the only true one in this (world). Those who do not concentrate (on the soul) disperse their intelligence in innumerable minor ramifications."

Like other passages of *Gita*, this verse offers many layers of meanings. The most immediate meaning is that, in order to be able to achieve a goal, one needs to seriously concentrate on it and follow through with determination, enthusiasm and patience, and making the necessary sacrifices of time and energy. The search for Self realization is not a hobby, something that one does in leisure time, to enjoy a sense of personal value, or to kill time after retirement.

It is not a practice to improve relaxation and digestion, to become fit and trim to better enjoy material pleasures. And neither is it an academic pursuit to get a doctorate, a teaching job, social prestige, or some mental stimulation, like one does with a crossword puzzle. This path must be walked with both feet, with all one's heart and soul, controlling one's mind to keep everything else in the back seat or better, properly engaged in the main mission of life. Otherwise, the process will stretch in time and the desired results will be delayed, possibly to a next lifetime. Of course, as Krishna just said in the previous verse, there is no loss even if one does not succeed as quickly as expected, but why should we linger in ignorance and suffering?

Another level of meaning is that we must accept the idea that our understanding of Reality could need improvement. Many people are very attached to their own theories and opinions, which are endless. An old proverb says, "so many heads, so many opinions"... innumerable branches, endless ramifications.

This happens because of the attachment to one's false ego - *ahankara* and *abhimana*. We "like" an idea and we become attached to it, as if it were the truth, and we fight over it with other people who are similarly attached to their ideas, or the second-hand ideas (originally formulated by someone else) they have decided to espouse for some reason. Such an approach is encouraged by the westernized mainstream academic system, that aims to divide "schools of thought" as mere theories on an abstract object of speculation.

But Knowledge and Reality are not relative, they do not depend on anyone's opinion.

There is a famous story in this regard, involving an elephant and a number of men who were born blind - and therefore had never had a direct visual experience of the animal. The blind men were brought to the presence of the elephant and asked to describe it. Of course they

could only touch the body of the animal, and as they did not expect it to be very large, each one of them groped a particular part of the body, getting a different impression. So the one who grasped the tail said the elephant was "something like a big rope", while the one who found a leg said the elephant was "like a tree trunk". Different opinions were given by those who had touched the belly, or the ear, or the tusk... and they were so engrossed in their personal opinions that they started to fight and beat each other over who "was right" and who "was wrong". So our intelligence or understanding must be "single", strongly focused on Reality itself and not on our attachment to theories. There is no place for sectarianism here, no place for institutional loyalty or political allegiances. As long as we fail to put Reality and the Supreme Self in the focus of our entire life, we will not achieve the goal. This is why we need to get Knowledge from the proper source - the original scriptures, the genuinely Self realized *acharya* who does not see real differences between the various genuine paths.

It is only from the peak of the mountain, when we have reached our goal, that we can all get the same view of the slopes and valleys below. Only a person who has a direct vision of the Absolute (*tattva darshi*) can instruct us on how to get up there.

यामिमां पुष्पितां वाचं प्रवदन्त्यविपश्चितः । वेदवादरताः पार्थ नान्यदस्तीति वादिनः ॥ २-४२ ॥

yāmimāṃ puṣpitaṃ vācaṃ pravadantya vipaśchitāḥ | vedavādaratāḥ pārtha nānyadastīti vādināḥ || 2-42 ||

yam: that; *imam:* this; *puspitam:* flowery; *vacam:* speeches; *pravadanty:* preach/ recite; *avipascitah:* those who have less understanding; *veda:* the Knowledge of *Vedas*; *vada:* followers/ reciters; *ratah:* attached; *partha:* o Partha (son of Pritha); *na:* not; *anyad:* other; *asti:* there is; *iti:* like this; *vadinah:* those who follow/ recite.

"O son of Pritha, those who do not have a full understanding preach/ recite about these things with many flowery words, and those who are attached to the letter of the Vedas are unable to recognize anything else."

Vedic scriptures present Knowledge in a well-designed way, with a deep sense of poetry and symbolism that is meant to attract the minds of educated people and give full intellectual satisfaction. We need to remember, though, that education and intellectual power do not equate with Self realization: they are just a preliminary platform from which one must further progress.

According to the texts themselves and to the universally accepted tradition, the present version of the *Vedas* was compiled about 5,000 years ago - around the time of Krishna's appearance - to be utilized by the people of Kali yuga, the present age that is characterized by a decrease in mental power, longevity, and good fortune. This miserable age started gradually and became more and more degraded to an intolerable level, developing just like the seasons on Earth.

In India, summer starts with slightly warmer days and nights after the pleasant spring weather, then the heat increases gradually, sometimes in waves, and finally there is no respite even during the coolest hours of the night. When the situation has become extreme, the natural cycle of life moves the masses of air of different temperatures and rain clouds are formed. A cyclonic storm breaks out, with lightning and thunder and strong winds, and the summer heat is broken. The dust and the garbage are swept away by sudden floods, and while most of the small plants are killed and rot in the fields, the great trees with deepest roots survive for the next season. Similarly, when the Kali yuga becomes intolerable and there is no more place for *dharma*, destruction will come to sweep away the debris. Then a new compilation of Vedic knowledge will be in order, to suit the understanding and the requirements of the renewed human kind.

For the time being, however, the present compilation is our basis of reference and we should use it. Vedic scriptures are meant to train human beings to become *aryas*, "civilized people", and this is done by scientifically cultivating and regulating the useful and progressive natural talents and inclinations (*guna*) of each individual. Intellectuals, warriors, entrepreneurs and unskilled laborers exist in all societies, but in Vedic society they are carefully trained to understand and practice their respective rights and duties (*karma*).

The three most intelligent categories of society (intellectuals, warriors and entrepreneurs) are also trained in personal life requirements, so that they can become perfect and progressive human beings, achieving full success in the four goals of human life: *dharma* (ethical living), *artha* (acquisition of valuable assets), *kama* (satisfaction of sense gratification) and *moksha* (liberation from conditioned attachments and identifications).

In this verse Krishna explains that the Knowledge he has been speaking about - the spiritual nature of the living entity as Atman (rather than the temporary material body) and the science of action guided by intelligence and awareness - is contained in Vedic scriptures, but in a very elaborated, symbolic and poetic way (*pushpita vacah*). This *corpus* of elaborated knowledge is sometimes called *karma kanda*, or "section about action", and comprises the four *Vedas* - *Rig*, *Yajus*, *Sama* and *Atharva* (called *Samhitas* or "collections") as well as their *Brahmanas* or ritualistic commentaries, explaining the meditation that goes with the *mantras*, the story of the ritualistic version of the knowledge and the reason to perform the sacrifices, and the requirements for the priests who conduct the sacrifice. Other extremely important parts of the core Vedic scriptures (called *sruti*) are the *Aranyakas* and *Upanishads*, explaining the innermost meaning of Vedic instructions. Later in the text of *Gita*, Krishna will explain the meaning of sacrifice (*yajna*), that is certainly not limited to the ritualistic offerings to the fire - the *agnihotra* being just a symbol for the sacrifices ("sacred actions") that a civilized human being is expected to perform. However, those who study, apply and especially teach Vedic knowledge need to be highly intelligent and evolved human beings - the *brahmanas*, those who "know Brahman" and "live as Brahman".

Less intelligent and less educated human beings, who are not *brahmanas* but *brahma bandhus* or even *mlecchas* (those who do not follow the Vedic rules), are doomed to remain "outside the door" of the actual meaning of Vedic literature. These unqualified persons are described by Krishna as *apaviscitah*, "devoid of sufficient understanding", and therefore unable to actually grasp the meaning and purpose of the Vedic system. Like a person who is incapable of opening the lid of a honey jar and can merely lick the glass outside, these incapable people remain attached to the mere superficial recitation of Vedic *mantras*, "as if there were nothing else" to get from them. In Kali yuga, such recitation is often done with very little understanding, sometimes even without the basic meaning of the verses or without recognizing the names of the Deities invoked. Of course less qualified people become attached to such a practice, because it gives them some appearance of nobility. In fact they do not know any better, and when trying to pass themselves off as genuine *brahmanas* they may even preach that there is nothing else to be gained by Vedic *shastra* except for the habit of muttering a litany nobody can understand and burning some *ghi* and grains in the fire.

Some commentators, presenting themselves as followers of Adi Shankara, argue that this verse wholly condemns the ritualistic aspects of Vedic knowledge, and teaches to renounce its worldly karmic pursuits in favor of the theoretical cultivation of philosophy, but this is not the real point. It is true that Adi Shankara criticized the degraded brahmins of his times, but he never dismissed the authority of Vedic scriptures - quite the contrary, he came to restore the authority of the *Vedas*. The reform brought about by Adi Shankara was meant to bring back the original and deeper meaning of Vedic knowledge, as explained in this verse by Krishna: to shift from the attachment (*rati*) of the mere external recitation (*vada*) of *Vedas* and come to the platform of real understanding of their inner meaning.

कामात्मानः स्वर्गपरा जन्मकर्मफलप्रदाम् । क्रियाविशेषबहुलां भोगैश्वर्यगतिं प्रति ॥ २-४३ ॥

kāmātmānaḥ svargaparā janmakarmaphalapradaṁ | kriyāviśeṣabahulāṁ bhogaiśvaryaḡatim̄ prati | | 2-43 | |

kama: lust; *atmanah*: self (mind/ identification); *svarga*: heaven; *para*: aspiring/ focusing; *janma*: birth; *karma*: action; *phala*: fruits; *pradam*: giving; *kriya*: duties/ procedures/ rituals; *visesa*: different; *bahulam*: many; *bhoga*: sense gratification; *aisvarya*: domination; *gatim*: destination/ goal; *prati*: towards.

"They aspire to the pleasures of the higher planets (considering them as the most desirable purpose) and to the fruits of their actions to be reaped in a next lifetime, therefore they perform a great variety of complicated rituals to achieve the purpose of a high position and sense gratification."

In the previous verse Krishna criticized those who remain attached to the mere recitation of the Vedic *mantras*, thus forgetting their true purpose, i.e. the realization of the true spiritual nature of the Self and the science of action guided by intelligence.

The flowery words that accompany such supreme Knowledge are the bait to attract people, and the most attractive part of all is known as the *phala sruti*, the final stanzas that accompany most important *stutis*, and that promise all sorts of material benefits to the reciter, including fulfillment of desires in this world, absolution from the consequences of bad actions, acquisition of good qualities, a better birth for the next life, and even liberation (*moksha*). For this reason, some people get the impression that *moksha* is a kind of valuable asset offered as a blessing by God to "good people", or that it can be automatically achieved through the celebration of some ritual, or for the intercession (or blessing) of some saint, without any extra effort from the part of the candidate. In fact, liberation is the most valuable goal of human life, but it is not something that can be acquired like a property or a title. It is a personal and intimate realization of one's real spiritual nature, and the detachment from all material identifications, desires and attachments. Therefore people who still have a lusty mentality (*kama-atmah*) remain totally unable to even start to understand what it is, just like people who insist to remain in a dark cave instead of going out in the daylight cannot even begin to understand what the Sun looks like. No amounts of pious acts or good wishes or rituals or blessings will show the Sun to these people: they just have to get up and walk out of the cave into the sunlight, leaving behind all the rest.

Vedic knowledge has a universal character, therefore it describes different planetary systems, especially those called Svarga, or heaven, where life is much pleasurable than on this planet. It comes to no surprise that among the goals desired by materialists, access to Svarga constitutes the highest and the most popular. Most of the rituals described in the *sruti* and in their commentaries, the *smriti*, are meant to form a personal relation between the worshiper and the Devas, thus developing a strong affinity and familiarity that will take him to the abode of the Devas at the time of death. In that position, the worshiper will have a greater dominion (*aisvarya*) over sense gratification (*bhoga*) - exactly the opposite of what we need when we are seeking for liberation. In a sense, it is true that we can achieve liberation also through the path of sense gratification, exhausting the desires and realizing that the satisfaction of material senses does not really give that happiness we were looking for. But this is possible only for intelligent people, for those who have been thoroughly trained in healthy sense gratification. Unhealthy sense gratification, that does not follow the dharmic principles, is so dangerous that it can eat away our intelligence, good qualities and intentions, and throw us into a hellish existence, to the level of demoniac beings, animals and plants. Certainly this is not the *kama* described by the *Vedas* as a major goal of human life.

Smriti scriptures were compiled by great personalities such as Yajnavalkya, Parasara, Brihaspati, Daksha, Gautama, Kanada, Bharata, Yama, Angira, Pracheta, Yogeshvara, Atri, Jaimini, Panini, Kautiliya, Nandi etc, and include instructions about the correct pronunciation of *mantras*, the intonation and metrics, and the practical proceedings of the rituals both for public and private purposes. This accounts for the *kriya visesa bahulam*, or "many different procedures" mentioned in this verse, all described for the same purpose of achieving some material benefit. The trick here is that in order to properly perform all these different and complicated procedures, a human being needs to constantly exercise his intellect and understanding, self-discipline (and therefore detachment from sense gratification and laziness), cleanliness (and therefore purity of mind), determination in following through a difficult task, and so on - elevating him to the enlightened platform of *sattva guna*. These qualities will gradually take him to a platform, called *visuddha sattva* ("pure *sattva*") where he will become able to understand the transcendental Knowledge for its actual meaning and purpose.

The drinking of the *soma rasa* is probably the most famous ritual practice for the worshiper to gain a place among the residents of the higher planets. Unfortunately, due to bad biased translations produced by anti-Hindu propagandists during the British colonial period, many people have come to believe that *soma rasa* is nothing more than an alcoholic fermented beverage similar to wine or beer, and they use this idea to justify their lust for ordinary booze - intoxicating beverages that are connected to the degrading lower *gunas* of *rajas* and *tamas* and are definitely not conducive to the basic ability to drive a vehicle or walk straight, what to speak of an increased longevity or the contemplation of the highest and subtlest truths of the transcendental science. This interpretation of *soma rasa* goes against the very purpose of the Vedic system. In fact, the *soma rasa* was not a fermented alcoholic beverage but a fresh herbal juice that boosted brain power and general health: an ancient version of the endless range of "health drinks" that people buy and consume to keep themselves going today in "civilized" societies. Otherwise it would not be associated with "immortality", a definition that should at least imply some good health and longer life expectancy.

The texts of Ayurvedic medicine have never stopped identifying the Soma Lata with the ubiquitous genus *Ephedra*, known not only in India (in its variety *Ephedra gerardiana*) but also in Asia and Europe as well as in America, where it is called Mormon Tea or Squaw Tea.

Ephedra is also used as an extract for a number of food supplements and tonic preparations because it contains a mildly stimulant alkaloid called Ephedrine, comparable to the "good caffeine" contained in the south American plants known as Guaranà and Yerba Matè. Ephedra has been used all over the world for thousands of years to treat headaches, asthma, hay fever, rashes of allergic origin, and rheumatism. It is described as stomachic and diuretic, and useful to counteract hypotension associated with anesthesia. It is also famous for its properties as energy booster at mental, physical and even sexual levels, and therefore has been cataloged by FDA in the USA as enhancer of athletic performances, as a concentration help for students under exams and even as stimulant of metabolism for those who want to lose excess weight. Such qualities and uses clearly set Soma very much apart from all sorts of alcoholic beverages that are universally known to have precisely the opposite effects, just like poison compared to nectar.

भोगैश्वर्यप्रसक्तानां तयापहृतचेतसाम् । व्यवसायात्मिका बुद्धिः समाधौ न विधीयते ॥ २-४४ ॥
bhogaishvarya prasaktānām tayāpahṛtacetasām | vyavasāyātmikā buddhiḥ samādhau na vidhīyate || 2-44 ||

bhoga: sense pleasure; *aisvarya*: domination; *prasaktanam*: those who are attached to; *taya*: by these; *apahrta*: covered; *cetasam*: consciousness; *vyavasaya*: focused; *atmika*: mind/ self; *buddhih*: intelligence; *samadhai*: in the *samadhi*; *na*: not; *vidhiyate*: becomes.

"Because they are attached to pleasure and a high position (of power and opulence), and their minds are confused by such things, they remain unable to focus their understanding on the Self and to attain *samadhi* (balanced consciousness)."

This verse clarifies that sense gratification and control are not bad in themselves: it is the attachment to them that confuses the mind, and distracts one from the actual mission of human life. These two causes of confusion - *bhoga* and *aisvarya* - can be transformed into valuable instruments for one's true progress by applying Krishna's instructions on Sankhya and Buddhi Yoga, that is, constantly remembering one's true spiritual transcendental nature, and working sincerely in a selfless service spirit.

Bhoga, or sense gratification, is necessary for the body and mind to function properly, but should not be pursued as the goal of life, to satisfy the innermost craving for true happiness - because such deep happiness is not found in the body or in the mind. Only the strictly necessary amount of sense gratification, obtained through dharmic means, should be applied to keep the body and mind functioning properly. It is said that sense gratification is like salt: a small pinch is required for health and to give a good taste to food, but if we start to increase the quantity because we like the taste, it creates addiction and we end up using too much, to the point that we become sick.

Similarly, *aisvarya*, the sense of control and domination, can be properly used to get things done properly in the rightful performance of our duties. We need to keep our body and mind under control, and survey the extensions of our body and mind - our working instruments, our personal effects such as clothing and eating utensils, and our living quarters. We must be responsible for their proper upkeep and orderly functioning, and this is done through the principle of *aisvarya* - control and domination. When required and legitimate for our occupational duties, this control can extend to plants, animals and human beings who need to be directed and supervised in their work in order to function properly: for example, young children and unskilled laborers. Again, such control must be strictly limited to what is required for the smooth performance of one's occupational responsibilities, and not pursued for the sake of its taste, otherwise it will create addiction and we end up trying to control too much, to the point that we become sick with power hunger. In both cases, when we become attached to *bhoga* and *aisvarya*, we lose sight of their actual purpose and especially of the mission of human life, that is attaining Self realization. The word *samadhi* appears many times in *Bhagavad gita* and is a very important concept in the practice of all types of *yoga*. It means "balanced consciousness", "constant intelligence", and "constant meditation". Such level is the purpose of Yoga and can be attained through any genuine Yoga method under the guidance of a person, or persons, who must have already achieved that level. Another meaning of the word *samadhi* in this context is applied to the constant preoccupation of the conditioned soul to procure sense pleasure and dominion over things or others, thus changing the translation of the verse into "Because they are attached to pleasure and a high position (of power and opulence), and their minds are confused by such things, constantly thinking of them, they remain unable to focus their understanding on the Self."

त्रैगुण्यविषया वेदा निस्त्रैगुण्यो भवार्जुन । निर्वन्द्वो नित्यसत्त्वस्थो निर्योगक्षेम आत्मवान् ॥ २-४५ ॥
traiguṇyaviṣayā vedā nistraiguṇyo bhavārjuna | nirdvandvo nityasattvastho niryogakṣema ātmavān || 2-45 ||

traigunya: of the three *gunas* (qualities) (of the material world); *vishaya*: in the matter; *vedah*: the *Vedas*; *nistraigunyah*: without the three *gunas*; *bhava*: become; *arjuna*: o Arjuna; *nirdvandvah*: without duality; *nitya*: constantly; *sattva*: in *sattva*; *stah*: situated; *niryoga*: free from connection; *kshema*: and protection; *atman*: one who is (focused on) the Self."

"The *Vedas* (books of knowledge) deal with the various manifestations of the three *gunas*. O Arjuna, you should rather become detached from (all) these three *gunas*, and situate yourself in that pure goodness that is not subject to changes. One who knows the Atman becomes free from all dualities and finds protection in detachment."

The four main *Vedas* deal mainly with the knowledge of this universe, its archetypal principles, its cosmology, and the proper way to live and work in it, establishing a mutually beneficial relationship of cooperation among the residents of the various planets. This is the realm of the three *gunas*: all of them interact together to produce results to cyclically create, maintain and destroy the material manifestation.

Rajas brings about creation, *sattva* preserves and maintains, and *tamas* dissolves. Although the Devas are situated in *sattva*, as long as one remains in the material identification and attachment, *sattva* can not remain pure and is therefore subject to become mixed with the other two *gunas* - *rajas* and *tamas*. For example, we can see that the influence of *sattva* brings peace and contentment, but our bodies and minds regularly need food and care, thereby pushing us out of peace and contentment, either into the *rajas* (the active search for the food and care we need) or even worse, into *tamas*, the lazy oblivion of starvation, inertia and uncleanness leading to destruction. Sometimes *tamas* is mistaken for *sattva*, because the two opposites may look similar to the eyes of a person who does not have the proper knowledge.

We see that even the residents of the heavenly planets sometimes become confused by *rajas* and *tamas* - arrogance, anger, lust, delusion, fear, loss, lamentation - and eventually die, losing their position and having to take another birth. The mission of human life is to rise above the play of the *gunas* and to become situated in *nitya sattva* or *suddha sattva*, the level of goodness that remains constantly pure because it does not see any separation or duality between the Self and Reality, and it does not depend on anything external.

In this context, *yoga* refers to the union or connection between persons, and is mentioned together with *kshema*, "protection". The need for connection, company or love and protection is a natural feeling for the conditioned soul that still sees oneself and the world in terms of duality. Connection or relationship and protection make sense only when there is a distinction between persons, when there is something to seek "outside the Self". Similarly, in this context *yoga* can also mean "acquisition", to indicate the natural impulse to acquire and achieve, to leave one's mark on the world, to give a meaning of fulfillment to one's life. At various levels, this can be as basic as the animal needs of eating, sleeping, protection, pleasure and perpetuation of the species, as distorted as the endless accumulation of material possessions, or as lofty as the highest intellectual and scholarly pursuits. The Self realized soul finds all its necessities, including achievement, protection (both to protect oneself and protect his possessions and relationships), love and company within the Self (*atma*). But such Self is not about the lower material identification, that is illusory and can only create a delusional sense of egotistic arrogance and selfishness.

A healthy amount of self-reliance and self-esteem is required to perform our duties in society, but these remain healthy only when they are used as instruments and do not become a goal in themselves, just like sense gratification and the sense of control. The teachings of Sankhya and Buddhi Yoga explained by Krishna show that there is a big difference between the Self and the ego,

Another level of meaning of the expression *niryoga-kshema* is that detachment itself, or lack of selfish attachment, is the best protection. Everything in this world is temporary, and bound to be lost sooner or later, therefore attachment is foolish and hopeless in any case.

This does not mean that one should reject everything or abstain from all relationships and activities; rather it means that in all relationships and activities we should be acting out of duty and not for our personal *bhoga* and *aisvarya*, or sense gratification and sense of dominion and ownership. The most wonderful thing is that this approach is also the most conducive to a healthy life of good relationships and a successful career, because attachment to one's selfish pleasure and power hunger inevitably create havoc in our lives, dooming all our attempts to failure.

यावानर्थ उदपाने सर्वतः सम्प्लुतोदके । तावान्सर्वेषु वेदेषु ब्राह्मणस्य विजानतः ॥ २-४६ ॥

yāvānartha udapāne sarvataḥ samplutodake | tāvānsarveṣu vedeṣu brāhmaṇasya vijānataḥ || 2-46| |

yavan: whatever; *artha:* value/ benefit/ purpose; *udapane:* in a small water reservoir; *sarvataḥ:* everywhere; *samplutodake:* a large expanse of water; *tavan:* that same (value/ purpose); *sarveshu:* in all; *vedeshu:* *Vedas*; *brahmanasya:* of the (genuine) *brahmana*; *vijanataḥ:* who has the complete/ realized knowledge (of Brahman).

"Whatever value is found in a pond is also found, for all purposes, also in a large lake, and similarly whatever is contained in the all the *Vedas* can be found in a person who has realized the knowledge of Brahman."

In this verse Krishna continues to explain that Vedic knowledge is meant to lead us to fully realize the Supreme Reality, Brahman. All the elaborate rituals aim at attracting us towards the level of *sattva*, from which we become able to understand Transcendence. A good birth, good intelligence, wealth, health, and whatever we need to live happily in this world, are simply instruments that help us to attain Self realization. It is very difficult to engage in transcendental studies and practices when we struggle with the basic necessities of life for ourselves and our family, therefore all the material blessings offered by the Vedic rituals are special facilities to help us in the task.

There is no need to give up the basic comforts of life to pursue Self realization: the only thing we need to give up is attachment to them, and this is done by training ourselves in *dharma*. Therefore the Vedic system starts the training and education of the individual even before his birth, with the *samskaras* performed by the responsible men of society. When a child is ready, he is sent to the Gurukula to be trained in *dharma* first and foremost, and also in all the duties and principles, practices and skills that he will need in his adult life as a member of the *varna* for which he has manifested a natural talent and inclination.

A rigorous dharmic training, both in the family of origin and in the family of the Guru, ensures that the individual becomes able to pursue *artha*, or the acquisition of valuable assets, in an ethical way and without becoming a victim of material attachment and identification. With the proper acquisition of *artha*, it becomes possible to pursue dharmic *kama*, or sense gratification. After a regulated life of healthy and ethical sense gratification, the individual enters the phase of old age, when the senses become more peaceful and it is easier to let go of everything that belongs to the mundane platform. At this point the individual is able to totally devote himself to *moksha*, or liberation from material conditionings. This is the beneficial and stress-free path traced by Vedic scriptures for the conditioned soul that takes birth in this world under the strong desire of enjoying and controlling it. Unfortunately, in Kali yuga there is a strong tendency to mess up with everything. Unqualified people can fail to understand the civilized - i.e. intelligent, scientific, comfortable and pleasurable - Vedic system and misuse it, creating unnecessary sufferings and confusion at the individual and collective level.

Krishna knows that Kali yuga is going to start soon, and therefore he is clearly stating the purpose of the entire system, to help us remain focused on what is really important. We can make the example of a train station or airport, where you can find so many useful facilities - from comfortable sitting lounges to bathrooms to snack bars and restaurants, to a number of shops that sell items that may make your journey more comfortable... reading material, mosquito repellent creams, inflatable pillows, etc. Some may even have private rooms for sleeping, public TV screens, post office counters, bank counters, internet centers, specialized bookshops, apparel shops, gift shops, souvenir shops, and so many other things to entertain the transiting travelers while they are waiting between one train and another, or one flight and another, to continue their journey to destination.

However, the entire purpose of all these facilities and even of the train station or airport, is for you to catch the train or airplane you need to go from this place to the next. If you forget the actual reason why you have come to the railway station or airport in the first place, you may have a lot of fun for some time but you will not attain your actual destination - something that will actually cause you a lot of problems.

A truly realized *brahmana* is a sober person who is able to remain focused on the actual purpose of the various facilities offered by the Vedic system, and has the all-important duty to guide the other travelers. By definition, "*brahmana*" is one who actually knows Brahman, who has realized Brahman and acts as Brahman (transcendental spiritual consciousness).

A person who does not fulfill such requisites cannot be called *brahmana*; attempting to present an unqualified person as a *brahmana* is as disastrous as presenting an unqualified person as a surgeon. This has absolutely nothing to do with DNA: the foolish son of a great surgeon cannot be allowed to operate if he has not undergone the proper training and does not possess the proper knowledge of anatomy and medicine. His favorable birth is just an opportunity, not a qualification in itself. To foolish people, the work of a surgeon can seem easy: get a scalpel and cut through the skin and flesh of a patient to extract something that hurts. Similarly, to foolish people the work of a *brahmana* can seem easy: sit and eat, mumble some litany and burn some clarified butter and grains in the fire. But don't expect any good results from the procedures!

The key word in this verse is *artha*: it means valuable asset, valuable result. A superficial imitation of the real thing will have no real value, because it will not give the desired results. Superficial and ignorant people will think that you just need to go through the external moves, like a simpleton will believe that switching the computer on like a TV set is all you need to do to get the full operating value of a very sophisticated machine.

Another important word in this verse is *vijanata*, that belongs to the same root of *vijnana*. Theoretical knowledge, or *jnana*, is merely a preliminary step towards applied knowledge or *vijnana*.

कर्मण्येवाधिकारस्ते मा फलेषु कदाचन । मा कर्मफलहेतुर्भूर्मा ते सङ्गोऽस्त्वकर्मणि ॥ २-४७ ॥

karmanyevādhikāraṣṭe mā phaleṣu kadācana । mā karmaphalāheturbhūrmā te saṅgo'stvakarmaṇi ॥ 2-47 ॥

karmani: in the actions; *eva*: certainly; *adhikarah*: legitimate (legal/ moral) right; *te*: of you; *ma*: not; *phaleshu*: in the fruits; *kadacana*: never; *ma*: not; *karma*: (of the) action; *phala*: result; *hetuh*: cause; *bhuh*: become; *ma*: not; *te*: of you; *sangah*: attachment; *astu*: there should be; *akarmani*: abstaining from action.

"You certainly have the right to perform actions but never (the right) to enjoy the fruits of your actions. Do not (try to) become the cause of the fruits of the action, but do not become attached to inaction."

This is one of the most famous verses of *Gita*, summarizing its entire message.

In the previous verse Krishna explained that one should remain fully aware of the ultimate purpose of all the various teachings of Vedic scriptures, in order to achieve their *artha*, or the valuable asset that constitutes their aim and objective. Here Krishna further defines the subtle balance between action and non-action: we need to keep in mind the result, but out of duty only, not because we want to enjoy the fruits of our work. The natural tendency of uncivilized people is to act only when they see a personal benefit coming from the action - money, possession, sense gratification, or even just a sense of pride and accomplishment. The Vedic system is quite different: the observance of *dharma* requires totally selfless action performed out of duty only. Each member of society works to benefit the entire social body, just like the limbs of our body work selflessly to benefit the entire system. The most wonderful thing is that this is the only working way to ensure that everyone is properly taken care of. Granted, the Vedic system is designed for progressive people and in Kali yuga it is difficult to follow it in the proper way, to the point that it can become a very degraded and disastrous mockery of itself. However, its principles remain most effective and progressive, when they are followed properly. Such responsibility lies squarely on the shoulders of the leaders of society - as Krishna will declare later (3.21, etc) - who must teach and practice the genuine method, and organize society in that direction.

By applying the instruction of this verse, we will ensure that each position in society will be occupied only by a genuinely qualified person. Contrarily to what ignorant people believe, the higher one is in a social position, the less rights and the more duties he has. In uncivilized societies, those who are in the higher classes do not hesitate to take personal advantage of their influence on society, and accumulate money and properties and other benefits for themselves and their associates, neglecting their actual duties and responsibilities.

In the genuine Vedic system the highest *varnas* are trained in the utmost selflessness and nobody can amass material wealth beyond their strict functional/ occupational needs. A *brahmana* lives in a very modest and simple manner, without any luxury and ostentation, and without saving wealth "for the future", because he knows (and needs to show others by his personal example) that the real value of life is not about materialism and sense enjoyment. He does not charge for his teaching or consultancy, either, because he is just performing his duty - rather, he takes the maintenance of his students as his responsibility. When a student enters the Gurukula, he factually becomes a son in the family of the Guru, and is treated exactly as such. A *brahmana* can enjoy a comfortable livelihood that will keep his body and mind fit for his work by using the spontaneous gifts of *kshatriyas* and *vaisyas* who appreciate his good work. In case of need, he can even approach them to ask for donations to support himself and his family, but he must always remain independent and detached.

A *kshatriya* can amass wealth by accepting tributes from vassal kings and taxes from the *vaisyas* who prosper under his good administration, but he knows he is only a fiduciary for the people: he must distribute this wealth in charity to the needy and meritorious (who can easily approach him directly every day) and sacrifice his own comfort and even his own life in the line of duty. He can enjoy a comfortable livelihood that will keep his body and mind fit for his work, but he must at all times be ready to leave everything behind or even give everything up, whenever his protection and help are required by the *prajas*.

A *vaisya's* job requires him to pay taxes to the *kshatriyas* and finance the religious and educational work of the *brahmanas*. He must also take care to properly feed all his dependents - family and workers, household animals as well as beggars and even stray animals - before he sits at his meals. The task of the *vaisya* is to generate wealth, not to accumulate it or freeze it in a non-productive way. He can enjoy a comfortable livelihood that will keep his body and mind fit for his work by utilizing a reasonable portion of the wealth he produces, but he should never try to gain power in society, influence *kshatriyas* or *brahmanas* with his gifts, or directly usurp their position in society, because that is considered sinful.

Of course, in Kali yuga it is difficult to find a qualified and capable *vaisya*, what to speak of qualified and capable *kshatriyas* and *brahmanas*, so we are in a permanent state of social emergency and anyone, from any background, should try to fulfill such higher duties in society if he is willing to work in that capacity, even without being fully qualified. In Vedic society a *sudra* has no duties or responsibilities other than sincerely and honestly executing the work he is asked to do by his dharmic employer. In exchange, he has the absolute and lifelong right to get everything he needs to live a comfortable life for himself and his own family - abundance of good food, clothing and ornaments, free decent housing, medical care, opportunities for education and social mobility for his children, and is regularly entertained in the religious and cultural festivals financed by *vaisyas* and *kshatriyas* and conducted by *brahmanas* on the numerous holiday occasions afforded by the calendar. In short, he gets whatever the present-day mass of people would love to get from a job - and he cannot be fired, as he is considered a member of the family that employs him. Even when he becomes unable to work due to sickness or old age, he is still taken care of in the same way. In Vedic society there are no homeless people - nobody starves, nobody goes without proper medical assistance, nobody is neglected, especially the *sudras*.

This system was difficult to understand for the early indologists, that confused the position of a *sudra* with the apparently similar position of a slave, who had no rights whatsoever and could not leave the family or establishment where he was working. In Vedic society a *sudra* is free to leave at any time if he wants to find a different employer and he can certainly take his family with him to the new place, although he should not whimsically desert his employer and suddenly leave him in difficult times without help. A *sudra* certainly has more rights than duties: he can eat and drink whatever he likes and whenever he likes, while *brahmanas* must follow a very strict diet and lifestyle rules, *kshatriyas* must keep fit and trim, and *vaisyas* must take care of all others first. A *sudra* can happily spend or waste whatever money or valuable property he gets, to enjoy whatever sense gratification he wants and to live carefree from day to day. He pays no taxes and does not need to "save money" for his future, because he knows he will be properly taken care of, no matter what happens.

योगस्थः कुरु कर्माणि सङ्गं त्यक्त्वा धनञ्जय । सिद्धयसिद्धयोः समो भूत्वा समत्वं योग उच्यते ॥ २-४८ ॥

yogasthah kuru karmāṇi saṅgaṁ tyaktvā dhananājaya | siddhyasiddhyoḥ samo bhūtvā samatvaṁ yoga ucyate | | 2-48 | |

yoga: in Yoga; *stah*: situated; *kuru*: do; *karmani*: in the actions; *sangam*: attachment; *tyaktva*: giving up; *dhananjaya*: o Dhananjaya ("conqueror of wealth"); *siddhi*: in perfection/ success; *asiddhyoḥ*: in imperfection/ failure; *samah*: equally (balanced); *bhutva*: becoming; *samatvam*: equanimity; *yoga*: Yoga; *ucyate*: is called.

"Firmly situated in Yoga, perform the (required) activities giving up the attachment/ connection to them. This equanimity in success and failure is called Yoga."

It is very difficult to achieve actual perfection in one's actions in this world. In fact, this should not even be our purpose. Contrarily to what most people believe, our purpose in life is not to become the perfect king or teacher or entrepreneur, husband/ wife or son/ daughter or parent, or achieve excellence in whatever we do. The purpose of life in this world is to attain Self realization, to understand Reality and to progress to the next level.

Life is a school: the purpose of a school is not to get high marks, but to learn and become able to properly understand things, so that we can progress to the next stage - real life. Yoga is here described as the *Buddhi*, the knowledge, wisdom and intelligence that enable us to remain equally balanced in all circumstances, because we constantly remain aware of our duty. And what is this duty? It is the service to the Supreme, the action performed for pleasing God in all the various forms and manifestations, from the *Virat purusha* embodying the social structure (see *Purusha sukta*) to God's representatives as the king and the teacher, to the *Antaryami Paramatma* that resides in everybody's heart and guides us with the voice of our conscience, to the *Isvara* form of the Supreme Brahman that offers us guidance through the *shastra* and is the actual proprietor and beneficiary of the entire universe (5.29).

The word *karmani* includes all activities and actions, but it particularly refers to the duties towards society and ritual performances, because these are the prescribed actions. The definition of *karma* applies to prescribed, useful and beneficial actions, while *vikarma* refers to prohibited, destructive and negative actions in general.

The word *siddhi* has several meanings, including perfection, success, powers, benefits, results, even proper understanding. Each of these meanings gives a fresh perspective on the overall significance of the verse. Thus, we learn that the purpose of Yoga is not about achieving the mystic *siddhis*, and the purpose of embarking into an enterprise is not to acquire money or benefits, or even to successfully complete it. And, most intriguing of all, that we should try our best to perform our duties, even if we do not have a complete understanding of the procedure and purpose of it all.

This is exactly what happens in a school: a student learning the multiplication table does not need to question its purpose, value or origin in order to be able to apply it properly, and the problems he faces in his studies are just intended as a practice. A student's solving (or not solving) a particular mathematical problem is not likely to affect society, and similarly the success or failure of a particular enterprise - a factory, a service organization, the building of a house, or even the building of an empire - will not have a permanent effect on Life. It will be important only if, through its success or failure, it will change the consciousness of people, thereby helping them in the true mission of existence.

Another interesting definition used in this verse is *sanga*, that includes the meanings of attachment, proprietorship, identification, as well as the basic meaning of "association". *Sanga* can be of two types - *sat* and *asat*. *Sat sanga* is the "eternal, true, good, virtuous" association that is characterized by the quality of *sattva*, or even better, *visuddha sattva*, or transcendental goodness. *Sat sanga* liberates us from the narrow-minded material attachment and identification, because it offers us a higher taste and attachment to our spiritual and eternal identification. *Asat sanga* is whatever temporary and material association takes us away from *sat*; usually it is divisive, selfish, and concerned about pursuing delusional temporary objectives.

It is also important to understand the meaning of *samatva* - equanimity or balance. This definition does not imply indifference or neglect in the performance of one's duties; it is about being equally ready to face any situation, good or bad, with the same good will, sincere work, ethical behavior, loyalty, and honesty. Even if success in a very difficult but necessary enterprise seems unlikely, we should do our duty

anyway: some battles deserve to be fought even if there is no hope for victory, because the results of our sacrifice will build the foundations for our successors to complete the task.

Krishna here calls Arjuna by the name Dhananjaya, "conqueror of wealth": a title that had brought Arjuna glory and fame when he had conducted the Rajasuya campaign collecting tributes for his brother Yudhishthira. This is not intended as sarcasm: Krishna is Arjuna's dear friend and he is just teasing him a little bit, to help him understand that no matter how successful one may have been in his efforts, still the purpose of the action is higher than mere material acquirement.

Also, on a more serious level, Krishna is confirming to Arjuna that the success of an enterprise is indeed a good thing, and should still be pursued - not for selfish reasons, but for the benefit of the entire society. There is nothing wrong in becoming successful.

दूरेण ह्यवरं कर्म बुद्धियोगाद्धनञ्जय ।

बुद्धौ शरणमन्विच्छ कृपणाः फलहेतवः ॥ २-४९ ॥

dūreṇa hyavaraṁ karma buddhiyogāddhanañjaya | buddhau śaraṇamanviccha kṛpaṇāḥ phalaHetavaḥ || 2-49 ||

durena: far distance; *hi*: therefore; *avaram*: inferior/ abominable; *karma*: actions; *buddhi-yogat*: from the engagement of intelligence; *dhananjaya*: o Dhananjaya (Arjuna); *buddhau*: in (this) intelligence; *saranam*: shelter; *anviccha*: reaching for; *kripānaḥ*: pitiable people; *phala*: the fruits; *hetavaḥ*: because of.

"Therefore, o Dhananjaya, keep far away from all bad activities by engaging in Buddhi Yoga. (Always) take shelter in this intelligence. Those who work because they are interested in the fruits of the action are pitiable."

The expression *avaram karma* includes all bad actions, the low and mean or abominable activities as well as those that do not have real value or importance. All such actions constitute a waste of valuable time and energy that should rather be utilized for the proper purpose of life. Further light on the parameters to evaluate actions is offered by the second part of the verse, that clarifies that all actions performed for the sake of one's profit (personal or collective) should be considered bad actions. Selfishness or miserliness may be restricted to one's immediate personal advantage or extended to the advantage of a particular group of beings with whom we personally identify – family, community, nation etc. But no matter how much we expand the concept of selfishness, as long as it is based on dualistic/ divisive considerations, it remains a symptom of miserliness. An inferior or abominable action is any action that is contrary to the principles of *dharma*, i.e. truthfulness or honesty, compassion, cleanliness and self-control, and similar ethical principles. Such an action is not truly beneficial to society, and although it may appear to bring some material advantage to its performer, it creates bad reactions that will ultimately outweigh any short term gain. Narrow-minded people will perform such bad action anyway, because they are only interested in their immediate and selfish benefit, even if it damages others and society in general, and certainly does not enable them to progress spiritually towards the realization of the true Self. A *kripāna* is a miserable and ignorant person who should be pitied. It does not matter if he has amassed fabulous wealth or possessions in this life: he will have to leave all such properties behind at the time of death, but he will have to pay for what he has illegally taken for himself, and for his bad actions and choices. It may seem that he pulled off the trick and evaded the punishment in this world, but he is not really going anywhere: death is the gate that everyone has to face, just like the cashier's counter at a supermarket, where shop lifters are stopped by the security guards. Another meaning of the word *kripāna* is "miser", one who does not know the actual value and purpose of what he has, and therefore misuses it or fails to use it in the proper way. Such a person can only be pitied, because in spite of possessing great wealth, he lives in very poor conditions, often suffering unnecessarily. Again, here Arjuna is called Dhananjaya to reaffirm the validity of work intended to procure wealth for the proper functioning of society, especially if such wealth is collected by acting within the parameters of *dharma*. In a deeper sense, *kripāna* refers to ignorant materialistic people, who see nothing but the objects of the senses - *na veda karpaṇaḥ sreyā atmano guṇa vastu drik*: a *kripāna* is one who does not know anything better than the material objects composed by the *gunas* (*Bhagavata Purana* 6.9.49), and therefore does not see any reason why he should control his senses (*kripāno ya ajitendriyah*, *Bhagavata purana* 11.19.44). Such people miss the real meaning of life and waste the valuable opportunity of the human birth: *yo va etad aksharam gargy avidvasmal lokat praiti sa kripānaḥ*, "O Gargi, a *kripāna* is one who leaves this world without knowing Transcendence (*Brihad Aranyaka Upanishad* 3.8.10).

The expression *buddhau saranam anviccha*, "strive to take shelter in this intelligence", suggest that sometimes this is a difficult or painful choice to make. Rarely the right thing to do is the easiest thing to do. Nonetheless, we need to stick to what is right and beneficial for everyone, and find consolation and shelter in the proper vision of things.

It is said that *dharma* will protect those who protect it, and destroy those who are bent on destroying it. This is because *dharma* is the universal and eternal law of the universe, that goes beyond the immediate circumstances. Any action that goes against *dharma* creates a reaction, a ripple in the smooth functioning of the universe that will eventually come back with its negative results, even if it is not immediately visible in the apparent field of time and space.

बुद्धियुक्तो जहातीह उभे सुकृतदुष्कृते । तस्माद्योगाय युज्यस्व योगः कर्मसु कौशलम् ॥ २-५० ॥

buddhiyukto jahātiha ubhe sukṛtaduṣkṛte | tasmādyogāya yujyasva yogaḥ karmasu kauśalam || 2-50 ||

buddhi: intelligence; *yuktah*: engaged through; *jahati*: becomes free; *iha*: here; *ubhe*: in both; *sukṛita*: good action; *dushkṛite*: bad action; *tasmāt*: therefore; *yogaya*: in the Yoga; *yujyasva*: become engaged; *yogaḥ*: Yoga; *karmasu*: in actions; *kausalam*: the most beneficial way.

"Through Buddhi Yoga one can become free already in this life from both bad and good (actions/ reactions). Therefore you should engage in yoga, which is the best way to deal with actions."

The word *kausala* includes a variety of meanings, such as "well-being, welfare, good fortune, prosperity, skillfulness, cleverness, experience, respectful salutation". When the verse explains that *yoga* is the *kausala* in all activities, it implies all these intrinsic benefits and good qualities.

In this verse, Krishna introduces another and subtler point: sometimes in the performance of one's selfless duty it may be necessary to do things that superficially can appear to be bad. For example, a *kshatriya* needs to use physical force to stop aggressors, something that can cause pain and even death. Also, the aggressor may not have been totally responsible for the attack - for example, a tiger is compelled by hunger to attack its prey, and a human being that is endangering the life or possessions of others may not be in good mental health or aware of the results of his actions, so we may say that killing these living entities is a bad action.

However, the *kshatriya's* primary duty is to stop the aggression, no matter what circumstances motivated it. When the immediate danger has been averted, the *kshatriya* can investigate into the matter and redress any wrongdoing that may have originally caused the problem, but order and security must be addressed first.

When this duty is performed without personal attachment or selfish motivation, there is no karmic involvement and one becomes free from the bondage to the action itself and its reactions. This, however, does not mean that in the course of one's life one will not get joys or sorrows, happiness or distress, because these are inevitable. Simply, it means that one will remain detached from such joys and sorrows, and experience them merely as temporary distractions related to the body and mind, and not to the real self - the platform from which the dutiful decision is made. So at the time of death one is not bound to take another birth to follow such reactions and the consequent actions and reactions in the endless cycle of *samsara*.

It is foolish to presume that at the time of death we will automatically attain liberation and be transferred to the "spiritual world" if we have not attained liberation and the spiritual world of transcendental consciousness and identification already in this lifetime. If we still maintain material attachments and identifications, these will inevitably pull us back to take another birth in this world, no matter what *sadhana* we have practiced, what rituals we have performed, what pilgrimages or pious actions we have executed, or what assurances we have obtained from religious institutions or leaders.

Death is a crucial moment: it is the time when the door opens to a new stage of our journey of existence. If we are ready and determined to proceed, and we are qualified to access the destination we aspire to, all is good. But if we have not qualified ourselves suitably during life in this body, we will simply not be able to enter the proper gate and will have to content ourselves with something that is more accessible from our particular position.

कर्मजं बुद्धियुक्ता हि फलं त्यक्त्वा मनीषिणः । जन्मबन्धविनिर्मुक्ताः पदं गच्छन्त्यनामयम् ॥ २-५१ ॥

karmajam buddhiyuktā hi phalam tyaktvā manīṣiṇaḥ | janmabandhaviniirmuktaḥ padam gacchantyanamayam || 2-51 ||

karma: from the action; *jam*: born; *buddhi-yuktah*: engaged through intelligence; *hi*: therefore; *phalam*: fruits; *tyaktva*: giving up; *manishinah*: thoughtful/ wise personalities; *janma*: birth; *bandha*: bondage; *vinirmuktaḥ*: completely liberated; *padam*: position; *gacchanti*: go; *anamayam*: without misery.

"The wise people give up the fruit born from their actions by engaging in this Buddhi Yoga and thus become free from the bondage of rebirth, attaining a position that is free from all sufferings."

In this verse the word *tyaktva* is particularly significant. As we have mentioned, joys and sorrows, or the results of actions, continue to present themselves in our daily life as long as we have a material body, and in turn become the cause of our future developing a next material body if we have some identification and attachment with them. The body itself is the incarnation of the *karma-phala*, the fruits of actions, both desirable and undesirable. It is not possible to avoid such results by abstaining from action, because the avoidance of a particular action is also a karmic choice that will give its good or bad results in due time.

A Self-realized person, who is engaged in Buddhi Yoga, does not expect to live a perfect life full of joys and success, free from any cloud of sorrow or disappointment, because this is not possible as long as we have a material body and we live in the material world. Rather, such a liberated person remains neutral - neither attracted nor repulsed - in front of such events, and faces them like one tolerates the various weather conditions, such as storms and sunny days, the heat of summer and the cold of winter (2.14). We naturally understand that the seasons change and there is nothing we can do about it, even if we wanted.

Of course we can create small environments such as buildings and gardens where to take shelter from the excessive temperatures and meteorological precipitations, and adjust our clothing to make it more suitable to the season, but we cannot stop the rain from falling, or the wind from blowing, or the sun from heating up the atmosphere. We know that all such manifestations are temporary. Similarly, a wise person knows that all joys and sorrows are temporary in nature, and if we let them go without remaining attached to them, their effects will fade away. Deluded people always try to run after joys and escape from sorrows by artificial means, sometimes even by adharmic means, but this attempt is futile and often brings exactly the opposite of what one wants to obtain. The fact is that, from the highest to the lowest planet (*Gita* 8.16), this universe is subject to the temporary nature of all acquisitions and joys because of the endless cycle of births and deaths. There is no position in this world, even on the higher planets, that is really and completely safe and free from danger and sufferings, as even Brahma eventually dies when the cosmic manifestation is dissolved. This very temporary nature of material bodies creates the condition for illusion and misery; we can attain the platform of *anamayam*, "without illusion or misery" only when we are free from such conditions. This eternal position of unclouded bliss is called *paramam padam*, the supreme position, and is identified as the abode of Vishnu, the transcendental Lord.

Another meaning of the verse indicates that Buddhi Yoga gives freedom from the results of the action, and at the same time it is an achievement that results from the proper actions, performed out of duty and without attachment. From the liberated level afforded by Buddhi Yoga, one can realize the supreme Position (*Gita* 18.54).

यदा ते मोहकलिलं बुद्धिर्व्यतितरिष्यति । तदा गन्तासि निर्वेदं श्रोतव्यस्य श्रुतस्य च ॥ २-५२ ॥

yadā te mohakalilam buddhirvyatitarishyati | tadā gantāsi nirvedam śrotavyasya śrutasya ca || 2-52 ||

yada: when; *te*: your; *moha*: illusion; *kalilam*: muddy waters; *buddhih*: intelligence /wisdom; *vyatitarishyati*: surpasses/ overcomes; *tada*: then; *ganta asi*: you will acquire; *nirvedam*: lack of care; *srotavyasya*: what remains to be heard; *srutasya*: what has been heard; *ca*: and.

"When (this) intelligence/ wisdom will lead you out of the dense swamp of illusion, you will come to a point where you will be indifferent to whatever has been heard or will remain to be heard."

The definition *nirvedam* could be translated as "not-knowledge", and here it refers to the dispassion and detachment towards theoretical discussions, opposed to *Buddhi* as the direct and clear perception of reality (*prakasa* or *darshana*) that surpasses whatever theoretical information we may acquire from other sources.

The teachings of Krishna in *Gita* on the science of Yoga are not a dogmatic ideology, and they do not constitute a body of beliefs or observances to be followed in order to be accepted as faithful members of a community or a tradition. Rather they encourage us to become Self-realized individuals, capable of seeing things as they are, without being confused by temporary and relative conditions. It is the same difference that we can observe between slavery and freedom, between blindness and clear vision, between mindlessness and wisdom - and it rises from the deeply constructive and positive approach towards the inherent nature of the individual, as a spiritual being made of eternity, awareness and bliss, rather than a miserable sinner in need of being rescued as we find in the approaches influenced by abrahamic ideologies.

Here we are not asked to simply have faith and believe on the word of some authority: rather we are encouraged to develop a maturity of discrimination and a direct experience that is more valuable than any amount of theory. Scriptures, the instructions of the Guru, and the consensus among the learned traditionally constitute the system of cross-references recommended in order to better understand the deep and complex corpus of Vedic knowledge.

However, these remain as simply indications of the path that each one of us has to walk in the journey of Self realization. They should not be considered as absolute, because in this world there is always the danger that they may have been contaminated by the muddy waters of illusion - either by our own illusion and by the limitations of our own senses and intelligence, or by the illusion and limitations of other people who transmit such information. This does not apply merely to the ritualistic ceremonies, but to all fields of knowledge and understanding.

Westernized academy enforces a vision based on a linear evolution and progress of thought in the history of humanity, thereby assigning different time frames for the original composition of the various scriptures, but this is a faulty and incomplete perspective, supported by a dishonest and biased presentation of archeology, anthropology and paleontology. During the 20th century, on this planet we simultaneously had nuclear and space scientists as well as tribals that lived on a level of technology that is usually described as characteristic of the Paleolithic age, as well as a number of groups in intermediate positions on the apparent ladder of human progress - for example, subsistence farmers that used the same methods and tools for many hundreds or thousands of years.

All levels of human evolution and progress can exist simultaneously, and therefore we need all types and levels of instructions from sacred scriptures to suit the needs of each and every individual. The historical dating of a particular copy of a text is not a proof of the progressive development of a particular philosophical perspective, because there might very well have been earlier compilations that have been destroyed, by accident or by deliberate plan. Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.

This is confirmed by the Vedic tradition, clearly stating that the present version of the *Vedas* was simply compiled at the beginning of this particular Kali yuga, but existed previously and was mostly transmitted aurally from teacher to disciple. Curiously, quite contrarily to the opinion of mainstream academics, this passage from aural transmission to the written compilation of scriptures is considered as a symptom of degradation and not of progress, since in previous times human beings had better memory and did not need to write a lot of stuff down.

श्रुतिविप्रतिपन्ना ते यदा स्थास्यति निश्चला । समाधावचला बुद्धिस्तदा योगमवाप्स्यसि ॥ २-५३ ॥

śrutivipratipannā te yadā sthāsyati niścālā | samādhāvachalā buddhistadā yogamavāpsyasi || 2-53 ||

sruti: of heard knowledge (in the Vedic scriptures); *vipratipanna*: confused by apparent contradictions; *te*: your; *yada*: when; *sthasyati*: remains situated; *niscala*: without moving; *samadhai*: in *samadhi* (constant meditation); *acalah*: unflinching; *buddhih*: intelligence/ wisdom; *tada*: then; *yogam*: Yoga; *avapsyasi*: you will attain.

"When you are stable in your consciousness without being confused by what has been heard, then you will achieve the yoga where the intelligence does not waver from *samadhi*."

The expression *sruti-vipratipanna* ("confused/ agitated by what has been heard") also applies to a literal reference to the scriptures (traditionally called *sruti* because they are spoken to the student by the teacher), where people lacking in direct self-realization can see apparent contradictions, because different scriptures observe Reality from different perspectives and are meant for people at different degrees of evolution.

For example, it is said that the Supreme has no qualities, and at the same time it is also said that the Supreme has unlimited qualities. Also, it is said that Spirit has no personality, and at the same time it is also said that the Supreme has many personalities - or that it is very small and very big, or very near and very far.

By rising above the limited understanding of material experience, we can understand that there is no real contradiction between these concepts - just like after reaching the peak of a mountain we are able to see that actually all the different paths that lead there are going in

the same right direction, although at the foot of the mountain they seemed totally opposite to each other. One who has crossed over the difficult region of illusion and duality is not confused by these apparent contradictions but is able to see the Big Picture where everything is perfectly reconciled – including the knowledge that we do not have yet, but will be revealed in the future. In this sense, a truly realized soul always remains open and able to integrate everything further from different perspectives, constantly remaining in a balanced consciousness.

The definitions of *samadhi* and *sthita-prajna* are found many times in *Gita* as the indication of the purpose to be attained through Yoga. Both words carry the meaning of "constant intelligence/ understanding", a sober level of consciousness where one is not confused by the constantly turbulent stream of contrasting impressions created by the environment, by others and by one's own mind.

It is important to understand that the definitions *niscalā* and *acalā* ("not moving") do not refer to the stubbornness of those who choose to remain in ignorance, attached to their own prejudice or to the second-hand prejudices they received from others. It is rather the firmness and determination, the steadfastness that holds the helm of our boat to keep it on the proper course while we travel through life. It is a sort of dynamic immobility, like finding a permanent center of balance that will sustain us even when we are walking or running, enabling us to make sense of everything at all times.

अर्जुन उवाच ।

arjuna uvāca ।

स्थितप्रज्ञस्य का भाषा समाधिस्थस्य केशव । स्थितधीः किं प्रभाषेत किमासीत् ब्रजेत किम् ॥ २-५४ ॥

sthītaprajñāsya kā bhāṣā samādhisthasya keśava । sthītadhīḥ kim prabhāṣeta kimāsīta vrajeta kim ।। 2-54 ।।

arjuna: Arjuna; *uvaca*: said; *sthita*: established; *prajnasya*: of one who really knows; *ka*: what; *bhasha*: language/ description; *samadhi-sthasya*: of one who is fixed in *samadhi*; *kesava*: o Keshava (killer of the Keshi demon); *sthita-dhih*: firm intelligence/ meditation; *kim*: how; *prabhasheta*: speaks; *kim*: how; *asita*: remains sitting/ still; *vrajeta*: goes about; *kim*: how.

Arjuna said: "O Keshava, a person who is firmly established in the consciousness of meditation is said to be in *samadhi*. How does he speak, and what does he say? How does he move, and how does he stay?"

In the previous verses, Krishna has emphasized the importance of direct, personal realization of the Self over the second-hand information one can derive from hearing. Such firm vision has been described as the purpose of Yoga, the intelligence that enables us to act adequately in this world without remaining entangled in the results of action.

This concept is further highlighted here, by explicitly assimilating the expressions *sthita-prajna*, *samadhi* and *sthita-dhi*. Arjuna calls Krishna by the name of Keshava, indicating that he can kill the demon of doubt, that like the asuric horse Keshi carries the mind impetuously here and there, following various ideas and interpretations. Doubt is a function of intelligence, because when we are faced with some new information or concept it is a good idea to explore it deeply, raising doubts and questions on its meaning and expanse so that we can make sure we have actually understood it correctly. Asking questions is a very important part of the process of learning (*Gita* 4.34): when a teacher does not accept questions, it is definitely not a good sign.

The student asks questions from his/ her particular perspective, and this offers the double benefit to allow the teacher to evaluate the actual position or level of progress of the student, and to dynamically contemplate the complete picture of Reality by temporarily moving to that particular perspective and describing its view. When a teacher refuses to work in this way, it is either because of lack of personal realization (he simply can't see the multidimensional picture and therefore is unable to describe the object from a different perspective) or because of a lack of sincerity in caring for the student's needs. In either case, such teacher is not qualified to take the student to the desired goal, and he is just a pretender and a cheater.

Since so much depends on actual personal realization, on the effective guidance of a genuine teacher, we must equip ourselves with the instruments that are necessary to recognize such a genuine teacher and thus avoid the double trap of following a cheater and committing offenses towards a great soul. What are these instruments? Since a student is, by definition, not sufficiently qualified to verify the theoretical validity of the teachings he receives by mere exposition, s/he needs to learn how to ask questions first. The answers you receive are only as good as the questions you make. Besides the extensive questioning about the knowledge itself, a student needs to conduct a critical observation and analysis of what the teacher talks about and how s/he behaves in daily life, what moves him/her and what are his/her interests.

By definition, a person who has a direct and integrated multi-dimensional perception/vision of Reality sees beyond dualities and is able to connect all aspects of his/ her life to the service of Reality. Separating theoretical knowledge from its practical application leads to the disaster well illustrated by the saying, "those who can, do, and those who can't, teach". Who wants to be guided in the performance of surgical operations by a person who is not a skilled surgeon himself? Only a fool.

A teacher is not supposed to have much of a private life, and although it is disrespectful to intrude into all details of a teacher's personal intimate life, by living in the family of the Guru (*gurukula*) a student gets plenty of legitimate opportunities to observe the symptoms described in the verse - what the teacher likes to talk about, and how s/he is able to connect everything to the "unified field of consciousness" and explain how to reconcile apparent contradictions. Also, it is very instructive to observe how the teacher chooses to invest his/her own personal energy, by pursuing or not pursuing activities or interests - in other words, going or not going to places, i.e. sitting or moving.

श्रीभगवानुवाच ।

śrībhagavānuvāca ।

प्रजहाति यदा कामान्सर्वान्पार्थ मनोगतान् । आत्मन्येवात्मना तुष्टः स्थितप्रज्ञस्तदोच्यते ॥ २-५५ ॥

prajahāti yadā kāmānsarvānpārtha manogatān | ātmanyevātmanā tuṣṭaḥ sthitaprajñastadocyate || 2-55 | |

sri: the glorious; *bhagavan:* Lord; *uvaca:* said; *prajahati:* gives up; *yada:* when; *kaman:* the desires; *sarvan:* all; *partha:* o son of Pritha (Arjuna); *mano:* of the mind; *gatan:* entered; *atmani:* in the *atman*; *eva:* certainly; *atmana:* with the self; *tushtah:* satisfied; *sthita-prajnah:* of firm understanding; *tada:* then; *ucyate:* is said.

The Lord said: "O Partha, when someone gives up all the desires that flow into the mind, and remains satisfied in the *atman*, he is said to be firmly situated in the (correct) understanding."

The word *atman* is the basis for the concept of "self-realization". *Atman* means "self" in the sense of spiritual self, but sometimes according to the context it also applies to the mind or the senses, so the meaning can be expanded accordingly.

Kama, or desire, is an external impression that enters our mind. It is not something that comes from our own self... not from the soul, not from the mind, and not even from our body. It is a suggestion that attracts us outside, to run after so many things and ideas. There is a basic difference between need and desire. A need is a factual requirement, while a desire is a fantasy for pleasure and happiness. For example: when we are hungry we need some food, but we may desire to eat a particular dish rather than another, although our nutritional requirements could be equally met by a simple preparation or by an elaborate one.

We cannot give up our genuine needs, but we can learn to recognize whether an impulse contemplated by the mind is worthy of being fulfilled, and in which way. When we repress a genuine need, it will pop up again, stronger and stronger, while when we let a desire slide away, it will be substituted by others in the constant flow of distractions that enter the mind. Also, we should not seek our real happiness in what others expect from us, or what others say or do about us. Projecting or blaming our shortcomings, failures, or difficulties on others or on the environment is not going to help us at all, either.

Fulfilling a need is a very basic action, by which we can obtain some natural pleasure; however, we can never find true happiness by continuing to indulge in the same action even after our real need was met. For example, if we are hungry we may eat a nice bowl of rice and vegetables, but if our mind is not satisfied we may be tempted by the desire to eat more even if we have had enough food. Sometimes we eat not because we are really hungry, but because we feel consciously or subconsciously that the pleasure we derive from the taste of the foods will make us happy. This is a fine line, because our mind has needs, too, and they are as real as the needs of our body. So the best course of action consists in soberly recognizing the actual and reasonable needs of our body and mind, and allowing the extravagant whimsical desires to flow out unattended just like they had flown in unsolicited.

The key to solve the problem lies in understanding what is the nature of the happiness that we still crave even when the genuine and reasonable needs of our body and mind have been fulfilled. Such intimate happiness belongs to a different level and can be attained only in Self realization - by focusing on the *atman/ brahman*, the source of everything, because it is the only Reality that never changes. Only spiritual Reality remains unchanged, constantly filled with happiness, awareness and eternity/ truth, while everything in the material manifestation comes and goes in cycles and therefore distracts our mind with the absence of what we like and the presence of what we do not like.

दुःखेष्वनुद्विग्नमनाः सुखेषु विगतस्पृहः । वीतरागभयक्रोधः स्थितधीर्मुनिरुच्यते ॥ २-५६ ॥

duḥkheṣvanudvignamanāḥ sukheṣu vigatasprāḥ | vītarāgabhayakrodhaḥ sthitadhīrmunirucyate || 2-56 | |

duhkheshu: in the sufferings; *anudvigna:* not destroyed/ disturbed; *manah:* the mind; *sukheshu:* in joys; *vigata:* not attracted; *sprihah:* touched; *vita:* without; *raga:* attachment; *bhaya:* fear; *krodhah:* anger; *sthita:* steadfast; *dhih:* understanding; *muni:* a *muni* (wise/ thoughtful person); *ucyate:* is said.

"A person whose mind is not distracted by sufferings or joys and remains detached, free from attraction, fear and anger, is called a Muni who is able to maintain a steadfast meditation."

The word *muni* means "thoughtful person", someone who does not talk unnecessarily because he is focused in contemplation of Reality.

From the same root, we have the word *mauna*, meaning "silence" and referring to a very popular practice in a beginner's *sadhana*, when the student learns to remain quiet and let the useless chatter of the mind fade away. Superficial people usually have a lot of trouble observing the vow of silence, and tend to cheat by engaging in almost mute conversations by signs, writing, and other means of communication, like dumb or deaf people usually do. When there is nobody else around to engage, they may watch TV or listen to the radio, but this is not a real *mauna vrata*. The genuine practice of *mauna* is aimed at attaining inner quiet, where the mind becomes like the clear water of an undisturbed pond. Then we become able to see what is at the bottom of the pond.

When the external chattering stops, we can become aware of the internal chattering of the mind. When we succeed in stopping the internal chattering of the mind, only the blissful awareness of the soul remains, and the voice of the conscience - the Paramatma, the Supreme and Original Guru - can be heard without interference. This divine voice has the characteristic of stillness or eternity. It flows from a place of stability and comfort, where we can take shelter without fear of ever losing that protection.

This is what can give us real stability in a world that is constantly changing, and make us able to go through sorrows and joys without being distracted by them, and without deviating from our purpose and duty. Again, this verse confirms that sorrow and joys will always

come and go, but when our mind is firmly standing on a center of balance that is not shifting, we become able to see each sorrow and joy at its face value, without being touched deeply by them.

When we are able to let go of each temporary joy or sorrow, we do not develop attachment for objects or conditions, and therefore we are not afraid to lose what we want or to get what we do not want. Fear generates anger, which can manifest in one way or another, depending on the character of the individual and the environment conditions. The worst type of anger is repressed anger, that festers in the mind and in the heart and creates a lot of negative feelings and thoughts, poisoning our existence and obstructing our progress because we may even convince ourselves that we are not "angry" persons. It is very important to properly understand the meaning of *krodha*, "anger", because just like *himsa*, "violence", it can be interpreted in a misleading way to confuse the superficial people.

A qualified *kshatriya* warrior fights and kills the aggressors without being touched by *krodha* and *himsa*, because his actions are not dictated by personal motivations. He is not venting his personal problems and frustrations, and he is not seeking any personal advantage in the fight - revenge, elimination of rivals, acquisition of a better status. He is just stopping the aggression and protecting the *prajas*. Thus a dharmic fight always remains on the level of *sattva* or *visuddha sattva* even if it becomes "violent" or "angry". Shouting, throwing weapons, or even cutting bodies to pieces are not necessarily a proof of anger or violence, and they should certainly be employed when the circumstances require it for the protection of the good and the innocent.

Sometimes, a nice smile and gentle words are sufficient; sometimes they are not, and could even be interpreted as weakness and uncertainty. There is nothing commendable in hypocritically hiding one's anger and envy, in putting up a false face and pretending to be very advanced persons, while in truth we are nurturing hatred and making clever plans to cause trouble and sufferings to others.

In Kali yuga hypocrisy becomes a social virtue, and many believe that one should keep a meek and gentle attitude externally, to better achieve success in the most devious and cruel plans. For such people, a criminal is only one who gets caught and punished - even if he has not done anything wrong. This view is contrary to the basic dharmic principle of truthfulness: in fact, it is better to straightforwardly express our opinion and protest and take action when something is wrong, because through communication and proactive interaction we can solve problems.

यः सर्वत्रानभिस्नेहस्तत्तत्प्राप्य शुभाशुभम् । नाभिनन्दति न द्वेष्टि तस्य प्रज्ञा प्रतिष्ठिता ॥ २-५७ ॥

yah sarvatrānabhisnehastattatprāpya śubhāśubham | nābhinandati na dveṣṭi tasya prajñā pratiṣṭhitā || 2-57 ||

yah: one who; *sarvatra*: everywhere; *anabhi snehah*: without affection/ attachment; *tat tat*: that that/ whatever; *prapya*: attaining; *subha*: auspicious /good; *asubham*: inauspicious/ bad; *na*: not; *abhinandati*: praises/ welcomes; *na*: not; *dveshti*: recriminates/ rejects; *tasya*: of this; *prajna*: full knowledge; *pratishtita*: established.

"A person who is detached from all situations/ places, who does not become elated in favorable circumstances or spiteful in unfavorable circumstances, is firmly situated in wisdom."

Again, Krishna confirms that a person who is *sthita prajna*, or *prajna sthita*, is free from attachment to temporary things, such as a particular place or a particular type of circumstances - to anything anywhere. This is because he has no material identification to begin with. A *sthita prajna* has no problem moving to different places, because he has no attachment to his birthplace or to the place of his ancestors - all considerations based only on the material body. He does not become elated or dejected when during his journey in life he reaches or crosses over (*prapya*) good or bad circumstances. Of course, he takes advantage of the good circumstances to perform his work, and he tolerates bad circumstances that slow him down or obstruct his work. Some people believe that a detached and renounced person abstains from all actions, but this has already been clarified in verse 2.47, that states that one should not become attached to inaction, either. The two extremes of *raga* and *dvesha* are both defined as attachments: one is about liking and the other about disliking, but they are not different from each other. When you hear someone who keeps harping against something that is neutral in nature, it means that he has a negative attachment against it.

Again, there is a fine line between the proper discrimination born from intelligence, that helps us to choose *sat* rather than *asat*, and the unjustified discrimination born from prejudice and attachment. To better understand where the line is, we need the expert guidance of a Self-realized and dharmic person.

यदा संहरते चायं कूर्मोऽङ्गानीव सर्वशः । इन्द्रियाणीन्द्रियार्थेभ्यस्तस्य प्रज्ञा प्रतिष्ठिता ॥ २-५८ ॥

yadā samharate cāyam kūrmo'ṅgānīva sarvaśaḥ | indriyāṇīndriyārthebhyastasya prajñā pratiṣṭhitā || 2-58 ||

yada: when; *samharate*: withdraws; *ca*: and; *ayam*: this; *kurmah*: tortoise/ turtle; *angani*: the limbs; *iva*: like; *sarvasah*: all; *indriyani*: the senses; *indriya*: of the senses; *arthebhyah*: from the pursuit; *tasya*: of him; *prajna*: perfect knowledge; *pratishtita*: established.

"A person who completely withdraws the senses from the sense objects, like a tortoise/ turtle withdraws all its limbs (inside the shell), is firmly situated in wisdom."

Krishna obviously considers this point as so important that he keeps explaining from all possible perspectives. He is not simply wasting his time and ours, so we should give each of these verses our full attention and respect. The key word in this verse is *artha*, here used in a slightly different meaning. We have seen that *artha* means "value, asset, purpose, aim, pursuit", generally with a positive sense. Besides, Krishna has already explained that one should engage in the proper prescribed action in the best possible way, but without attachment to the fruits of action, and we know that action requires the utilization of the senses, as well as of the mind.

A tortoise stretches his limbs out of the shell when it is required for the proper activities, and withdraws them again when he perceives a danger, or when it is time to preserve energies. It would be foolish or even impossible for the tortoise to keep his limbs inside the shell at all times, because each living entity has to act or work (*Gita* 3.4, 5, 6) to keep the body alive and functioning. Therefore the senses should be used dutifully in the performance of one's duty. What we need to withdraw from, is the faulty belief that the objects of the senses are the

actual *artha*, or the purpose of life. We have already mentioned that a dharmic training makes the individual able to acquire *artha*, and then to satisfy *kama*, on the road to *moksha*. In fact, the *artha* we acquire is not a purpose in itself, but only a means to an end, an instrument that must be used and then discarded.

विषया विनिवर्तन्ते निराहारस्य देहिनाः । रसवर्जं रसोऽप्यस्य परं दृष्ट्वा निवर्तते ॥ २-५९ ॥

viṣayaḥ vinivartante nirahārasya dehinaḥ | rasavarjaṁ raso'pyasya paraṁ dr̥ṣṭvā nivartate || 2-59 ||

vishaya: objects of senses; *vinivartante*: go away from; *niraharasya*: of one who does not consume; *dehinah*: one who is embodied; *rasa*: taste; *varjam*: giving up; *rasah*: taste; *api*: although; *asya*: of him; *param*: much better; *drishtva*: by seeing; *nivartate*: gives up.

"The embodied soul may keep the sense objects at a distance and reject them, but he can give up the taste (for such objects) when he sees/ finds the Supreme/ something that has a higher/ better taste."

The word *vishaya* refers to the objects of the senses; not to the objects in themselves, but to the sensual projection that we perceive of them in our mind. For example, we can abstain from the object of taste even while we are eating food, if we are just consuming the food without noticing how it tastes. Usually this happens when our mind is occupied with something that we consider more important or more attractive - for example, a thrilling film we are watching, or the prospect of an important meeting, or something similar.

The word *nirahara* means "not accepting, not eating, not tasting" and here it specifically applies to abstention or abstinence from a particular object of sense gratification. This can be practiced successfully to a certain measure, because the body and the mind can adapt to almost every condition. One can survive on very little sense gratification, even for long periods of time, either voluntary or forcibly, by choice or by the strength of circumstances. However, mere external abstinence does not mean that the desire for the sense object has died away. In fact, in some cases, abstinence can aggravate the desire to the point of damaging the mental balance, like the steam trapped in a pressure cooker builds up and can explode dangerously. As long as we have a body (*dehinah*), we have senses, and our senses must be engaged somehow for the survival and functioning of the body. So, is sense gratification good or bad? Can it be avoided, can we really withdraw from it, like a tortoise withdraws his limbs? Only when it is dangerous, when it is detrimental, or in other words, when it is pursued for its own sake, when we are trying to get from it the deep and permanent happiness we all aspire to.

The need for *rasa*, or "taste" is an intrinsic quality of the soul and cannot be eliminated or removed. When artificially suppressed, it will find its way and surface again usually in distorted and more dangerous forms, such as the obsession for power, fame, or even masochistic, sadistic or otherwise psychotic practices. The verse warns us about artificial renunciation, that may create serious psychological problems especially in Kali yuga, when the influences of passion and ignorance are stronger than in other periods.

What is the solution? Finding a higher taste, a *param rasa*, that can engage our minds and senses in a pursuit that is worthy of being entertained. This higher taste is spiritual realization and the union in selfless service to the Supreme.

यततो ह्यपि कौन्तेय पुरुषस्य विपश्चितः । इन्द्रियाणि प्रमाथीनि हरन्ति प्रसभं मनः ॥ २-६० ॥

yatato hyapi kaunteya puruṣasya vipaścitaḥ | indriyāṇi pramāthīni haranti prasabhaṁ manaḥ || 2-60 ||

yatato: trying; *hi*: certainly; *api*: although; *kaunteya*: o son of Kunti (Arjuna); *puruṣasya*: of the *purusha*; *vipascitah*: with discriminating knowledge; *indriyani*: the senses; *pramathini*: agitating; *haranti*: take away; *prasabham*: forcibly; *manah*: the mind.

"O son of Kunti, the senses are so troublesome that they can forcibly carry away the mind even of a man who is wise and strives to control them."

The word *purusha* is usually considered as meaning "man" as in "male", but in the transcendental science it refers to the "enjoyer", to the active and affirmative principle in the soul that seeks pleasure and happiness.

Thus, it naturally includes both men and women, because the conditioned souls that have taken a female body also seek and pursue pleasure and happiness. Some even say that women are "many times lustier" than men.

The *purusha* principle is a characteristic of the spirit, and finds its purest manifestation in the Parama Purusha, Isvara or Param Atman - the Supreme Lord. The English definition, too, expresses this principle, the tendency to "lord it over", or to enjoy, possess and dominate. It is not a bad tendency in itself, provided the *purusha* is capable and willing to perform the duties of such position, and not just try to claim the rights. The Supreme Lord is perfectly able to give shelter to anyone and everyone, to fulfill all desires and needs of all living entities, and living in their hearts he is also always perfectly aware of their feelings and thought processes. In this way he reciprocates with every living entity, at the same time allowing them full freedom to choose whatever action they want, and without ever exploiting or mistreating them.

On the other hand, the individual soul (*jivatma*) is much less powerful and therefore he needs to subordinate his enjoyment to the enjoyment of the Supreme, just like a cell in our body can only subordinate its individual enjoyment to the enjoyment of the entire body. When all the cells or the limbs of a body cooperate properly to nourish the body and to keep it in good health, they can automatically obtain the enjoyment and well being they naturally aspire to.

The key to understanding the nature of the *jivatma* is the fact that it is constituted by both the *purusha* principle and the *prakriti* principle: each individual living being is both male and female at the same time. The perfect balance of these two principles, that enjoy and support each other within the individual soul, mind and body, is the secret of the *hatha yoga* and of all the similar sciences that existed in the world, such as alchemy, or the Mysteries of ancient Egypt and Greece, the Divine Marriage, and other secret doctrines and practices that were revealed only to a small group of initiates. This elitarian approach is required because it can only be understood by persons who have attained a subtler level of consciousness, overcoming the immediate identification with the gross material body. When the awareness of the individual has been refined to the point that s/he can perceive and act at the level of energies (*prana maya kosha*), it becomes possible to unite the *purusha* and the *prakriti* principles within the Self, and attain the perfect balance and happiness.

Men and women seek each other to "find their better half", in an exchange of energy that makes them feel complete. This is because the *purusha* principle in each one of them is reaching out to enjoy the *prakriti* through his senses. Such attraction is not found only between two bodies of different gender, but also between the *purusha* principle in a living entity and the *prakriti* in inanimate sense objects, such as the *prakriti* energy of foods, etc. It is the most primeval force in the universe, found in all the living beings including animals and plants, but in human beings it attains a platform where it can be sublimated and trigger higher realizations. Krishna confirms here that such a powerful primeval force should not be underestimated or neglected, because it can sweep us away even if we realize that we are headed towards disaster.

तानि सर्वाणि संयम्य युक्त आसीत् मत्परः । वशे हि यस्येन्द्रियाणि तस्य प्रज्ञा प्रतिष्ठिता ॥ २-६१ ॥

tāni sarvaṇi saṁyamya yukta āsīt matparaḥ | vaśe hi yasyendriyaṇi tasya prajñā pratiṣṭhita || 2-61 ||

tani: those; *sarvani*: all; *saṁyamya*: controlling; *yukta*: engaged; *asita*: should remain fixed; *mat-parah*: focused on me; *vase*: in full control; *hi*: certainly; *yasya*: of him; *indriyani*: the senses; *tasya*: of him; *prajna*: perfect knowledge; *pratiṣṭhita*: firmly situated.

"A person who keeps all these (senses) properly controlled/ regulated and engaged in a constant consciousness of me, has certainly mastered them and is firmly situated in wisdom."

Although it is extremely difficult to control the senses, it is still possible to achieve this extraordinary success by focusing on the Supreme, through the multi-dimensional approach of Yoga. Krishna has already explained the principle of Yoga as the equanimity in front of joys and sorrows, and the action that is performed dutifully and selflessly without attachment to the personal enjoyment of the results.

In this verse Krishna starts to introduce the basic techniques of Yoga, the practices that will enable us to attain the proper results in our daily life. All the genuine branches of Yoga - *hatha*, *kriya*, *bhakti*, *jnana*, *karma* etc - are constituted by eight basic steps that support our progress. These are: *yama* (abstentions), *niyama* (prescriptions), *asana* (control of the body), *pranayama* (control of the breathing and body energy), *pratyahara* (disconnecting the senses from the external sense objects), *dharana* (focusing the attention), *dhyana* (meditation) and *samadhi* (constant awareness). The word *saṁyamya* in this verse stresses the observance of the basic regulatory process known in yoga as *yama* and *niyama*. The system of rules and regulations prescribed in the practice of yoga is meant to facilitate the *sadhaka* in training his mind and senses in the proper direction and creating positive impressions and habits in the subtle body. *Yama* includes *ahimsa* (absence of hostility), *satya* (truthfulness), *asteya* (honesty), *brahmacharya* (sexual abstinence) and *aparigraha* (simplicity). *Niyama* includes *saucha* (cleanliness), *santosa* (inner satisfaction), *tapas* (austerity), *svadhyaya* (study of the scriptures) and *isvara pranidhana* (devotion/ surrender to God). All these principles need to be applied on the levels of body (*saririka*), speech (*vachika*) and mind (*baudhika*).

At the level of the body - the easiest and first step for beginners - this naturally involves some control on one's diet, as eating is the most elementary way we relate to the environment and to other living entities. So *ahimsa*, *saucha* and *tapas* suggest a pure vegetarian diet consisting of clean, fresh and healthy ingredients, such as grains, fruits, and vegetables: foods belonging to the influence of *sattva*. Besides, it is wise to abstain from the so-called recreational substances that have a negative influence on the consciousness.

Brahmacharya also suggests avoiding the contemplation of sexual materials, as well as the unnecessary association with potential sexual partners, the excessive care for one's body, down to the basic tendency to see people as the material bodies they wear. In fact, *brahma acharya* means "behaving as Brahman", on the platform where we identify ourselves and other people as spirit souls, without giving undue importance to bodily features such as gender etc. It is also interesting to note that all the forms of Yoga require the study of the scriptures and devotion/ surrender to God, highlighted here specifically by the expression *mat-parah*.

Many people and groups have been trying to separate Yoga from its spiritual identity, to turn it into some type of physical exercise, gymnastics or competitive sport. All such groups and individuals carefully keep silent about *yama* and *niyama* and just focus their practice on *asana* or at most on *pranayama*, because they know that by presenting the entire picture truthfully, they would lose a lot of customers who are simply interested in some trendy fitness practice, to get slim and trim to better engage in sense gratification, or to cope with stress in their frantic lives. Of course the practice of *yoga* is an integrated approach and does not neglect the health of the body and mind, teaching excellent exercises that are effective on such levels even when used separately from the pursuance of the actual purpose of Yoga. But this is comparable to ripping apart a rare painting of immense value in order to take the nice frame and use it as a toilet seat.

ध्यायतो विषयान्पुंसः सङ्गस्तेषूपजायते । सङ्गात्सञ्जायते कामः कामात्क्रोधोऽभिजायते ॥ २-६२ ॥

dhyāyato viśayānpuṁsaḥ saṅgasteṣūpajāyate | saṅgātsañjāyate kāmaḥ kāmātkrodho'bhijāyate || 2-62 ||

dhyayata: contemplated/ meditated on; *vishayan*: the sense objects; *pumsah*: a *purusha*; *sangah*: association/ attachment; *teshu*: in them; *upajayate*: appears; *sangat*: from the attachment; *sanjayate*: grows; *kamah*: lust; *kamat*: from lust; *krodhah*: anger; *abhijayate*: is born.

"By thinking about the objects of the senses, a person associates with them, by association desire develops, and from (unfulfilled) desire anger arises."

This verse and the next, usually quoted together, describe the consequences of the bad choice of contemplating the sense objects instead of letting them flow away withdrawing our senses from them. The power of pleasure is so strong that our senses can even engage in enjoying the simple mental perception of the sense object, without coming in physical contact with it. *Dhyana* means "meditation", and *dhyayate* means "meditates". Meditation is the ability to concentrate on a subject, consider it, channel energy into it, and bring it from the subtle platform (non-manifested) to the visible and perceivable platform (manifested). It is actually a natural practice and tendency of the mind: everyone is capable of doing it. Without this faculty, it would not be possible to perform even the most fundamental tasks of life: working, studying, solving practical problems, making choices. Physically, the mental activity in our brain is performed by low voltage electrical currents which are carried through the nerve cells. The brain is a quite large mass of nervous cells, where electrical impulses circulate by

specific paths which are created by habit. So by thinking about a particular thing for a sufficient time, we create preferential paths that are then followed automatically even without a conscious effort. This mechanism of meditation is an instrument that can be used to elevate our consciousness or to degrade it - depending on the object we are contemplating.

As we have mentioned, contemplation/ meditation is an effective method to associate with the object of our meditation on the subtle level. In fact, when the meditation is strong enough, the actual object of our meditation will feel the energy of our attraction and a physical connection will be established, first on the subtle level and then gradually on the gross level, too. This mechanism is utilized in the various methods of "positive affirmation", by which it is possible to attract good things, good people and good opportunities into our life by regularly meditating on them through visualization.

This association or contact (*sanga*) through contemplation or meditation produces a type of familiarity, and through identification, this produces attachment. It is important here to remember that *purusha* does not refer merely to a human being with a male body, but is used to indicate the living entity in general, in its capacity of "enjoyer". Due to the natural tendency of the *purusha*, the senses will be attracted to enjoy such sense object and to possess it on the subtle level and eventually on the gross level, too: this is called lust (*kama*). Unfortunately, this lusty desire to enjoy and possess material sense objects of gratification is doomed to disappoint us, because as individual souls we do not really have any control over the sense objects. As all situations are temporary, sometimes we may get contact with a sense object, and sometimes it will elude us; this uncertainty produces fear, and fear in turn produces frustration and anger.

क्रोधाद्भवति सम्मोहः सम्मोहात्स्मृतिविभ्रमः । स्मृतिभ्रंशाद् बुद्धिनाशो बुद्धिनाशात्प्रणश्यति ॥ २-६३ ॥

krodhādbhavati sammohah sammohātsmṛtīvibhramah | smṛtibhramśād buddhinaśo buddhinaśātpṛaṇasyati || 2-63 ||

krodhat: from anger; *bhavati*: becomes; *sammohah*: confusion; *sammohat*: from confusion; *smṛiti*: memory; *vibhramah*: error; *smṛtibhramśad*: from the loss of memory; *buddhi*: of the intelligence; *naśah*: destruction; *buddhi-nasat*: from the destruction of intelligence/ understanding; *pranasyati*: one falls down.

"Anger becomes confusion, and confusion (becomes) failing memory. Because of the loss of memory, intelligence is lost, and when intelligence is lost, one falls from his position."

The anger produced by fear and frustration in the absence of the enjoyment of the sense objects is a blinding emotion that soon turns into confusion. We have seen that such development is inevitable because we have no real control over the sense objects and their enjoyment, that appear and disappear in their due course independently from our will. In the previous verses, Krishna had recommended that we should engage in work without being attached to the enjoyment of the fruits of the action: now he is graphically illustrating what happens to those who decide otherwise.

Contrarily to what many people think, God is not concerned with punishing those who disobey his orders, and his instructions are not whimsical and based on exacting some kind of allegiance from us. Like the most affectionate parent, God is simply explaining in a clear, reasonable and scientific way what is the result of each action, and then leaving us the freedom to choose according to our intelligence.

God wants us to use our power of understanding to get a clear picture of all the causes and effects in this world, so that we can better manage ourselves and achieve our desired goals. If we insist to make the wrong choice, he is not going to stop us: it is our privilege to try to make things work in a different way from what they were designed for. We also learn by falling down and picking ourselves up again to continue our journey.

The system is planned perfectly: nothing is ever really lost in this learning process, and no bad experience is so bad that we cannot recover from it - in the same lifetime or in a next one. Even pain is useful to soften our understanding without crushing our spirit; if we want to avoid it, we just need to learn how to handle the knife by holding the handle instead of the blade.

रागद्वेषविमुक्तैस्तु विषयानिन्द्रियैश्चरन् आत्मवश्यैर्विधेयात्मा प्रसादमधिगच्छति ॥ २-६४ ॥

rāgadveṣavimuktaistu viṣayānīndriyaiścaran ātmavaśyairvidheyātmā prasādamadhiḡacchati || 2-64 ||

raga: attraction; *dvesha*: repulsion; *vimuktaih*: completely free; *tu*: but; *vishayan*: the sense objects; *indriyaih*: by the senses; *caran*: going; *atma*: self; *vasyaih*: controlled; *vidheya*: regulated; *atma*: self; *prasadam*: mercy; *adhigacchati*: attains.

"A person who has become free from the attraction and repulsion for the objects of the senses, maintains the control of himself in his actions and regulates himself (in body, mind and senses) obtains satisfaction/ the blessing (of the Lord)."

Not only God does not want to punish us for pursuing sense gratification against his instructions, he is showing us special mercy by offering this same sense gratification on the condition that we enjoy it in a regulated way. The word *prasadam*, "blessing" or "mercy", means that a yogi accepts as *prasadam*, or blessing, whatever s/he receives from the Lord as a manifestation of the divine kindness. Enjoying such divine gifts is perfectly legitimate and gives the senses their proper engagement, without guilt or attachment, and trains the mind to surrender more and more to the unlimited blessings of the Divine.

In practice, this concept of *prasadam* is applied by consuming the food that has been offered to the Deity. According to tradition, the system of worship of the Deity in the temple or in one's home requires the presentation of a number of items to the installed image of the Deity, of which the most important is the offering of food (*naivedya*). The basic worship ritual includes, beside the food, also a lamp (*dipa*), flowers (*pushpa*), perfume (*gandha*) and incense (*dhupa*). A more complex version of the *puja* ritual also adds offering a seat of honor (*asana*), water to bathe (*snana*) and wash hands and feet (*achamana* and *padya*), a refreshing drink made with yogurt and honey (*madhuparka*), fresh clothing consisting of a lower (*vastra*) and an upper garment (*uttariya*), sandalwood paste (*chandana*), a sacred thread (*upavita*), nice ornaments (*alankara* or *abharana*), flower garlands (*mala*), prayers (*stuti*), and even entertainment consisting of

songs and dances (*gita* and *nritya*), fanning with *chamara* and decorated fans (*vyajana*), shoes (*paduka*), a mirror (*darpana*) and a ceremonial umbrella (*chatra*), a royal bed for resting (*beharana*), a symbolic sum of money (*pranami*), etc. However, the offering of food remains the most important part of the ritual. It can be as simple as a fruit and some water, or as elaborate as thousands of different preparations.

By regularly consuming this consecrated food, the *yogi* easily and happily learns to control his/her senses, because s/he does not know what the cook has prepared to offer to the Deity, and since *prasadam* is not ordinary food, it cannot be disrespected according to material considerations of liking and disliking. Also, it is a fact that the food consecrated by a ritual offering takes a special wonderful taste that a sensitive person can immediately recognize. Another important advantage is that only purely sattvic foods can be offered to the Deities: this automatically protects us from the temptation to eat the wrong and unhealthy types of foods. Sattvic foods - grains, seeds, vegetables, fruits, etc - are the healthiest sources of nutrients, on which our body is designed to function, from the shape of our teeth to the length of our intestine, to the ability of our system to get rid of toxins. Such natural fresh food is best suited for our proper maintenance and enjoyment, and even more important, it is easy to find/ collect without too much work, and without creating too much suffering to other living entities, something that definitely weighs on the efficiency balance. Further, the distribution of *prasadam* is done in a regulated way according to a precise schedule; every day at established times, a particular number and type of preparations. This is hinted by the word *vidheya*, that comes from *vidhi*, "regulated process".

Later in *Gita*, Krishna will repeat this concept, recommending to consume the *yajna sisa* or the "leftovers of the sacrifice" (3.13) and to offer to God whatever we eat (*yad asnasi*) (9.27). The tradition of *prasadam* distribution is extremely ancient and universal in all genuine religious traditions; in fact *Gita* (17.13) says that a *yajna*, or sacrifice, that does not include the distribution of *ashrista annam*, the food grains remaining after the completion of the ceremony, is to be considered as ignorant (*tamasam*).

Anything offered to the Lord becomes *prasadam*, and anything received from the Lord is *prasadam* as well - the ritual is not strictly necessary, but it is useful to help our consciousness focus in that direction.

प्रसादे सर्वदुःखानां हानिरस्योपजायते । प्रसन्नचेतसो ह्याशु बुद्धिः पर्यवतिष्ठते ॥ २-६५ ॥

prasāde sarvaduhkhānām hānirasyopajāyate | prasannacetaso hyāśu buddhiḥ paryavatiṣṭhate || 2-65 ||

prasade: in (this) *prasadam*; *sarva*: all; *dukhhanam*: sufferings; *hanih*: are destroyed; *asya*: of him; *upajayate*: appears; *prasanna*: satisfied; *cetasah*: consciousness; *hi*: certainly; *asu*: very soon; *buddhih*: intelligence; *pari*: completely; *avatishtate*: becomes firmly established.

"This *prasadam* (blessing) brings about the destruction of all sufferings, gives satisfaction to the mind, and (by it) the proper intelligence/ understanding is quickly established."

The word *prasadam* includes the meanings of blessing, favor, mercy, satisfaction, contentment, serenity, peace, and pleasure. From the same root we have the word *prasida*, an invocation often used to address a Deity in prayer, invoking his/her benevolence towards the worshiper.

We have then at least two meanings in this verse: one is focused on the contentment attained by the *yogi* who has genuinely come to control his senses by giving up both attraction and repulsion, and therefore only accepts what comes spontaneously for the proper maintenance of the body. The other meaning - of *prasadam* as the sacred food that has been offered to the Deity - is more focused on *bhakti*, on the personal relationship between the *bhakta* or devotee and the *ista devata*, the Divine Personality that the devotee worships. This meaning is much sweeter and very attractive, constituting the easiest and quickest path to attain the higher taste that our soul is always seeking. Later in *Gita* and especially as its conclusion, Krishna will confirm that *bhakti*, or the loving relationship between the devotee and the Personality of Godhead, is the supreme modality of Yoga (*Gita* 6.47, 18.55, 9.34, 18.65 etc.). However, it would be foolish to believe that one of these two interpretations is right and the other is wrong, or that the two are incompatible and meant to be followed separately by different factions of religionists. We need to integrate the two visions in order to get the actual picture.

Bhakti is the supreme form of Yoga only when it is firmly established in spiritual realization (*Gita* 18.54), otherwise it cannot take us very far. Without the proper knowledge and detachment, and without the realization of the transcendental identity of the Atman/ Brahman, devotion remains a sentimentalistic attitude that can only grow materially into bigotry and fanaticism.

The devotional attitude must become free from material identifications and attachments (*upadhi*), from duality, from sentimentalism, from ignorance and misconceptions, and even from the desire to receive reciprocation from God. This is called *suddha bhakti*, pure devotion, described beautifully in the eight verses of the *Sikshastaka*, personally composed by Chaitanya to summarize his teachings. It is very interesting to see how Chaitanya's preaching mission was focused on the recitation of the names, qualities and activities of the Lord, as well as on the distribution of consecrated spiritual food that had been offered to the Lord. Chaitanya chose to spend the greatest and last part of his life in the holy *dhama* of Jagannatha Puri, where the offering of foods to the Deity in the temple is considered the most characteristic aspect of the rituals, and the consecrated food, called *mahaprasadam*, is considered a direct manifestation of God.

नास्ति बुद्धिरयुक्तस्य न चायुक्तस्य भावना । न चाभावयतः शान्तिरशान्तस्य कुतः सुखम् ॥ २-६६ ॥

nāsti buddhirayuktasya na cāyuktasya bhāvanā | na cābhavayataḥ śāntiraśāntasya kutah sukham || 2-66 ||

na: not; *asti*: there is; *buddhih*: intelligence; *ayuktasya*: of one who is not connected/ engaged; *na*: not; *ca*: and; *ayuktasya*: of one who is not connected/ engaged; *bhavana*: focused mind; *na*: not; *ca*: and; *abhavayatah*: one who is not established; *santih*: peace; *asantasya*: of one who is not peaceful; *kutah*: where; *sukham*: happiness.

"A person who is not connected/ engaged (in Yoga) cannot have the (proper) intelligence/ understanding. A person who is not engaged (in Yoga) cannot get any good results, or be able to attain peace. And how can there be happiness without peace?"

This verse continues to elaborate on the practical way to become established in the constant higher awareness called *samadhi*, where the consciousness is not distracted by joys or sorrows, and we act out of selfless duty only, constantly remembering our true nature as *atman*, the transcendental and universal spirit that inhabits the body. Krishna has already explained that this intelligence is called Yoga, and in this verse he highlights the fundamental meaning of the definition as "connection", that gives contentment, peace and happiness to the individual in its proper place within the greater Reality.

This is also the fundamental meaning of the word "religion", that derives from the Latin *religare*, or "to connect". Religion is what connects the individual to God - to his/ her purpose in life, to the environment where s/he lives, to the others, to the Self. Knowing one's place in the universe and being properly engaged in a functional service to the higher good is the key to a feeling of contentment, peace and happiness.

In this sense, the definition can be applied to practically all ideologies that regulate the behavior of the human beings in connection to a greater reality, as each human being can have a particular concept of God according to many factors. For example, a communist atheist also has a religion: he worships the State (an idea that is not much different from the concept expressed in the *Purusha sukta*) and the communist ideology as the greater reality he is connected to. His behavior, choices and priorities are all dictated by such ideology, and when he is properly situated within the community, working sincerely and selflessly and being adequately taken care of, he feels at peace and happy.

Ironically, in its institutionalized and totalitarian (fundamentalist) form, the communist ideology is rather similarly to the ideology it was born to fight - it even has its saints and apostles, its priests and priestly hierarchy, its worship rituals, holy places and shrines, festival observances, sacred books, dogma, and even a kind of inquisition or "ideological police" that is meant to subdue, punish or persecute ideological dissidents - i.e. anyone who questions the dogma, even in terms of ethics or morality or basic human rights.

On the other hand, there are some ideologies that are generally considered as religions but allow plenty of freedom to their followers, both in regard to beliefs and in daily life choices. Not only Hinduism (in its original form), but all the non-exclusivist ideologies known as Animism, Shamanism, Taoism, Jainism and Buddhism are also officially considered religions, although radically different from the abrahamic model that is generally used as a reference pattern by academia. For example, Buddhism does not concern itself with God and has no hierarchical religious institutions or even a fixed doctrine except for the four Basic Truths of the sufferings of this world and the Eightfold Path of right behavior, that is basically about ethics.

Buddhism does not focus on a next world - in fact it considers it an illusion just like this one - and it speaks of *karma* as a scientific law of physics: every action has a reaction. Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism worships Buddha as the embodiment of Divinity, but this idea of Divinity is vague, something like the idea of Jesus in Christianity, but minus its personal character (everybody can be Buddha - just realize your "buddhahood" and you are there), and especially without God, the church, the bible, heaven or hell, salvation, baptism, etc, that have no equivalent in Buddhism. In a sense, Buddhism is an upgrade of ordinary human ethics, that through detachment takes one to the peace of "nothingness", but deeply and intrinsically values ethical conduct in this world as a visible and natural symptom of such detachment.

In abrahamic religions the only real point of ideology is faith - the need to believe in God's word (orders) and ideally secure absolute political power for the religious leaders, to convert or subjugate everyone and wipe out all other ideologies/ faiths. The information about God, the soul, etc, is very scarce, often contradictory, and must be applied according to the dictates of the religious leaders that constitute the ultimate and undisputable authority on God's orders.

Those who consider themselves as Christians, Muslims or Jews but do not recognize themselves in such ideology are considered as "not very religious" or even "heretics" by their own religious authorities.

The science of Yoga described in *Gita*, on the other hand, can be applied universally. It is perfectly compatible with any ethical ideology, because it accommodates both personal and impersonal views about Divinity, as well as any of the innumerable forms and names of God. We could say that Yoga is the foundation for all forms of religion, as well as for all the progressive ideologies that aim at improving the balanced and happy functioning of the individual and the society. According to the Yoga taught by Krishna in *Gita*, we need to connect everything to the purpose of life, Self realization, and the service to the Supreme Reality. This connection to the Supreme requires the engagement of our senses, mind and intelligence in the performance of dutiful and selfless service, that will give us peacefulness and ultimately that very happiness that everybody is seeking.

Another meaning of this verse is stressing the importance of pacifying the mind and withdrawing/ controlling the senses in order to achieve a level of clarity of vision that is called *buddhi* or intelligence. *Buddhi* (intelligence), *shanti* (peacefulness) and *sukha* (happiness) are here strictly connected, just like previously (62, 63) *dhyana* (contemplation) was strictly connected to *sanga* (association/ attachment), *kama* (desire), etc. While the previous chain reaction was a vicious circle, this verse presents a virtuous circle by which one can become liberated from all sufferings and delusions. In this case, too, Krishna is explaining the simple scientific facts of life, so that we can better understand the choice that lies in front of us.

The word *bhavana* can also be translated as "desire, longing", but is radically different from the lusty desire of enjoyment, possession and exploitation that is *kama*.

इन्द्रियाणां हि चरतां यन्मनोऽनुविधीयते । तदस्य हरति प्रज्ञां वायुर्नावमिवाम्भसि ॥ २-६७ ॥

indriyaṇāṃ hi caratāṃ yaṇmano'nuvidhiyate | tadasya harati prajñāṃ vāyurnāvamivāmbhasi || 2-67 | |

indriyanam: of the senses; *hi*: certainly; *caratam*: roaming around; *yan*: those; *manah*: the mind; *anuvihyate*: is constantly engaged; *tad*: that; *asya*: of him; *harati*: takes away; *prajnam*: wisdom/ understanding; *vayuh*: the wind; *navam*: a boat; *iva*: like; *ambhasi*: on the water.

"A mind that follows the senses becomes subservient to them, and takes away the wisdom of that (person) like the wind sweeps a boat on water."

In all ethical ideologies, the individual needs to control his senses and mind in order to execute his duties selflessly, for the greater benefit of the supreme Reality to which he belongs and which he is supposed to serve. Yoga gives the perfect scientific approach to this need, detailing all the mechanisms of cause and effect, the steps in the process, the pitfalls and the best way to avoid them.

This verse is directly connected to verse 60 of this same chapter - but while verse 60 stated that the senses are so turbulent that they can drag away the mind of a person who is trying to control them, this verse speaks about a person who decides to actually follow the senses. Like the word *vipascitah* in verse 60, the word *prajnam* used in the verse suggests that even those who had already attained the level of proper understanding/ realization/ wisdom can fall in this trap, and get swept away in the storm of uncontrolled mind just like anybody else. There is no room for complacency: as long as one has a material body and senses, the danger is present.

It is all a question of engagement. Either we engage ourselves in Yoga - the science of selfless action that utilizes our senses and mind for the service to the higher good - or we follow an uncontrolled mind that is engaged in the service of the senses. People who claim that they do not want to follow Yoga or any ethical ideology because it limits their freedom - by telling them what they should or should not eat etc - are actually deluded by illusion, because they are never free. They are actually following the orders of their senses and mind - such ruthless masters that they do not care at all for the bad consequences of our actions on our well-being, health, or other important aspects of our life. They do not even care for our actual physical and mental needs: in fact they often go against the natural instinct that is meant to safeguard our health and well-being, as we can see for example in the pathological eating disorders. A mind that is dedicated to following the requests of the senses can get us in a lot of troubles and it can even kill us, destroy our relationships, send us bankrupt, or land us in serious legal difficulties... all situations where we will be forced to remain without the very same sense gratification that led us to that troubled condition in the first place.

We could ask ourselves how free is a man who subordinates all his choices to the whimsical requests of his own senses and mind, or to the whimsical requests of the senses and mind of his family or friends, to the expectations of people in general (as society or community, nation, cultural tradition etc), or to the need of working at a job he does not like but offers money to pursue his sense gratification or pay for his credit card debts. At some point he is just slaving on just to pay the bills, the rent and the basic food supplies - whose cost is manipulated by the System to keep him constantly under pressure.

The System holds him a prisoner through the commercial advertisements, the opinion-making media, peer pressure, and the myth of sense gratification itself. He cannot take time for himself even when his body and mind are getting near to collapse, so he has to buy medication to "keep going" in his absurdly demanding engagements, and when he gets a vacation he usually wastes it away in a sense gratification *tour de force*, running from an expensive and exhausting "fun activity" to the other. Sometimes such "fun activities" effectively short-circuit his chances for well-being and happiness with sports accidents, traffic wrecks, terrorist attacks or other unexpected disasters, such as being cheated by some scam travel agency, mugged in a foreign city, etc. What to speak of ordinary small troubles such as mosquito bites, ants in the park meadow, sunburns, blisters on the feet, hangovers, or some minor gastro-enteric infection.

Eventually, the so-called free man becomes totally confused and frustrated, deeply dissatisfied, trapped in the consequences of his own foolish actions, and yet he cannot see any way out, because he keeps looking in the wrong direction.

तस्माद्यस्य महाबाहो निग्रहीतानि सर्वशः । इन्द्रियाणीन्द्रियार्थेभ्यस्तस्य प्रज्ञा प्रतिष्ठिता ॥ २-६८ ॥

tas mādyasya mahābāho nigrahītāni sarvaśah | indriyāṇīndriyārthebhyastasya prajāṅ pratisṭhitā | | 2-68 | |

tasmad: therefore; *yasya*: of him/ her; *maha-baho*: o mighty armed (Arjuna); *nigrihitani*: dominated; *sarvasah*: everywhere; *indriyani*: the senses; *indriya*: of the senses; *arthebyah*: in the purpose; *tasya*: of him/ her; *prajna*: wisdom; *pratisṭhita*: firmly situated.

"Therefore, o mighty armed (hero), one who practices restraint in all activities while engaging the senses in the objects of the senses, is firmly situated in wisdom."

The prescription offered by *Gita* is simple and amounts to good old common sense: just use restraint. There is no need to stop engaging the senses and the mind, as some people try to do in their frustration. What is common sense, if not natural, logical wisdom? It is the intrinsic intelligence of the soul, the voice of conscience, that is promptly and freely available to anyone who is willing to sincerely listen to it. It does not need to be acquired externally, because this voice speaks from within our own heart: what greater freedom could we wish for?

In this verse, Krishna half-jokingly calls Arjuna by the epithet *maha-baho*, "mighty armed", implying that the greatest battle is the daily engagement in controlling one's mind and senses, something that requires strength, skills, and intelligence. In the Vedic system, children were trained in these combat skills starting from an early age. The first training is through the good example of his/ her elders and family members, who are the natural role models for all children. The good example of parents who act selflessly to perform their duties and live honestly in observance with the principles of *dharma* is the single greatest blessing that one can receive in life, because it establishes a fundamental imprint on which all other gathered knowledge and experiences are grafted. A bad example from one's parents is comparable to weak foundations in the building of a house, something that makes higher construction rather dangerous. When a child reaches a certain age, he begins to speak and understand the language, so s/he is also offered important teachings in the form of precepts, stories, answers and explanations to his/her questions. Eventually, when the child starts to develop social skills, s/he is required to observe some degree of discipline or self control, in preparation for the training s/he will receive at school.

Of course there are exceptions - souls that have already evolved to a certain level but need to further strengthen themselves by sticking to their principles and realizations even when exposed to negative influences from the earliest childhood, or, on the opposite side, degraded souls that take birth in a good family to test their patience and discrimination or to exact the payment of some ancient karmic debt. However, in both situations there is a clear sense of incompatibility that soon causes a healthy separation from the family of origin. In fact, the earlier this separation occurs, the better it is for everyone.

The second environment where children are supposed to be trained by example and precept is the school. In the Vedic system school teachers are expected to be very qualified not only in regard to theoretical knowledge, but also in personal behavior and ethical principles, and especially in the science of Self realization. A *brahmana*, by definition, has deeply realized Brahman and acts from that platform only. In the genuine system, all the examples and precepts that a child receives from family, elders and school resonate on the same principles and knowledge that every individual obtains from the natural wisdom that speaks from his heart with the voice of the conscience.

चा निशा सर्वभूतानां तस्यां जागर्ति संयमी । यस्यां जाग्रति भूतानि सा निशा पश्यतो मुनेः ॥ २-६९ ॥

ya nisā sarvabhūtanām tasyām jāgarti samyami | yasyām jāgrati bhūtāni sā nisā paśyato muneḥ || 2-69 |

yah: s/he; *nisah*: night; *sarva*: all; *bhutanam*: of the living entities; *tasyam*: him/ her; *jagarti*: remains awake; *samyami*: one who is self-controlled; *yasyam*: in which; *jagrati*: keeps awake; *bhutani*: all living entities; *sah*: s/he; *nisah*: the night; *paśyatah*: who sees; *muneḥ*: the wise.

"For such a wise person, what is night for all creatures becomes the opportunity for regulated awakening, and the time when the creatures remain awake is night for him."

There are various levels of meanings for this verse – from the most literal, recommending that the *yogi* takes proper advantage of the quiet hours of very early morning when everybody else is sleeping, to the most symbolic, implying that the needs, interests, pursuits and logic of materialistic people are totally unnecessary for a *yogi*.

The time for waking and sleeping is one of the basic lifestyle habits that need to be regulated by the sincere and dedicated student of Yoga. We have seen that food habits, and especially the choice of sattvic food offered to God, can greatly help one's progress in Self realization, because they help the senses and the mind to engage in pleasure in a healthily regulated way. A similar consideration applies to the sleep pattern.

In all ashrams, temples and in the homes of civilized people in the Vedic tradition, the day starts very early. Rising early is a good habit based on a scientifically verified fact: about one hour before sunrise, the movement of liquids on our planet changes in what we can macroscopically observe in the ocean tides. In the microcosm of the human body, this change of movement in the liquid substances stimulates the elimination of urine and stool, as well as mucus in the respiratory passages. If we get up early in the morning, we can easily go to the bathroom and get rid of these materials, that are loaded with toxins and other substances that need to be expelled from our body. If we miss this early morning opportunity because we are still sleeping deeply, the toxins and other rejected substances remain blocked in the system and risk being slowly re-absorbed into the blood stream. So the healthiest thing is to get up, go to the bathroom, brush our teeth, clean our tongue and clear our throat, then finally take a full shower and put on fresh clothes. In cold climates and during the winter, the pre-dawn hour can be too cold to afford a full bath and it may be possible to postpone the shower a few hours, but still it is always recommendable to get up early and clean up as much as we can.

In the magic and powerful hour that precedes sunrise, nature stirs and its basic energies meet, creating a moment of balance. This is called *sandhya*, the union between the night and the day, and it is similar to the other two *sandhyas* in the day, i.e. midday and sunset. At these times, the play between the masculine and the feminine energies attains a moment of balance, in which both the brain hemispheres work together and the consciousness can find exceptional realizations. Just make a simple experiment: check the activity of both nostrils during the different times of the day. You will notice that around sunrise, midday and sunset both nostrils are working simultaneously, while at other times only one nostril is active. In advanced *yogis*, the balance between the two brain hemispheres becomes more common and steady, so the breathing occurs naturally through both nostrils more often, or even all the time. *Pranayama* is one of the basic steps of *yoga*, because through breathing we can greatly help our work in controlling the senses and the mind, and in regulating the physical functions of the body. Performing *pranayama* at *sandhya*, with a clean body, and at the auspicious time of the tide change, is extremely effective.

What about going to sleep? Different creatures have different habits, and some predators are most active in the night, but in general the daytime sunlight is needed to normally perform the basic activities of life. The various periods of the day and night are subject to the influence of the three *gunas*. It is said that *sattva guna* predominates from the *brahma muhurta* - about one hour before sunrise - to midday. This is the best time to study, plan, and organize our work for the rest of the day, and get most of our duties completed.

When we get up early in the morning we have a lot more hours for our productive pursuits. After midday *rajas guna*, the influence of passion, becomes predominant and we become restless for food and other sense gratification, such as private phone calls, social interactions etc. Usually the afternoon hours are less productive at work, unless we had previously planned our actions carefully. At some point, around sunset, we become tired even if we did not work much during the daytime, and the need for entertainment and gratification gets stronger. We have dinner, and we feel that we are entitled to have some fun; unfortunately the tendency is to engage in tamasic activities such as drinking alcohol or taking recreational drugs, passively sliding into a stupor at the movies or in front of the TV screen, or engaging in similar activities that put intelligence and wisdom to sleep.

On a deeper level of interpretation, the wise *sadhaka* stays awake in the dark night of ignorance, because that is the time of strictly following the regulations and disciplined duties that keep us on track. After the sun of realization has risen, there is less need for rules and regulations because one is spontaneously attracted by what is transcendental and real, so the wise *sadhaka* can let go of the strict control of the mind and let the natural feelings of the soul take over.

This is called *raganuga bhakti*. Its powerful emotions can absorb our consciousness in such a total way that we may lose the awareness of the external world, just like a person who is sleeping. Others call this blissful ecstasy with the names of *nirvana* ("cessation of the wind" of the mind) or *turiya*, the fourth state of consciousness where the mind is totally silent, in deep awe for the contemplation of Reality. Some commentators argue that the night of the wise *sadhaka*, or *sannyasi*, indicates that his consciousness is not encumbered by the multitude of

ritualistic performances and social duties that keep ordinary people awake during the day. So in this sense he just sleeps in regard to such duties, and wakes up only in the subtle contemplation of abstract things, that for some people may seem to be dreams. In fact, we see that *sannyasis* are not required to perform the usual ceremonies or to engage in a social occupation or job, because he needs to be free to perform whatever preaching activity is required by his mission.

However, we must be careful because *sattva* always need to be engaged in itself by utilizing *rajas*. When such engagement is suspended, *sattva* may become tainted with *tamas* or ignorance, and it drags the *sadhaka* lower and lower into a delusion of higher realization, while in fact the so called *sannyasi* remains in a lazy idleness or starts pursuing sense gratification, material power, a social position etc.

आपूर्यमाणमचलप्रतिष्ठं समुद्रमापः प्रविशन्ति यद्वत् ।
 āpūryamāṇamacalapratiṣṭham samudramāpaḥ praviśanti yadvat ।
 तद्वत्कामा यं प्रविशन्ति सर्वे स शान्तिमाप्नोति न कामकामी ॥ २-७० ॥
 tadvatkāma yaṁ praviśanti sarve sa śāntimāpnoti na kāmakāmī ॥ 2-70 ॥

apuryamanam: constantly filled; *acala*: without moving; *pratiṣṭham*: steady; *samudram*: the ocean; *apah*: waters; *pravisanti*: enter; *yadvat*: similarly; *tadvat*: in the same way; *kamah*: the desires; *yam*: him/ her; *pravisanti*: enter; *sarve*: all; *sah*: that person; *santim*: peacefulness; *apnoti*: achieves; *na*: not; *kama-kami*: one who desires desires.

"The ocean does not move from its position, no matter how much water enters to fill it. A person who similarly (withstands the flow) of desires entering (his mind) achieves a peace that is not (achieved) by one who wants (to cultivate) desires."

This beautiful image of the ocean, constantly filled by hundreds of rivers and streams and yet remaining within its boundaries, contains a number of levels of meanings. The most immediate meaning is that the ocean is so great that it cannot be disturbed by the waters that keep flowing into it. The mind of the *mahatma* is also so great and boundless that it is not agitated like the small and narrow minds of the materialists. A realized spiritualist does not give much importance to the myriad of desires, thoughts, and other pieces of information that rain down and flow like rivers into the mind of everyone. It is not that the spiritualist does not get any input from the world. Trying to solve the problem by artificially separating oneself from the world is not a very good idea. True, in the beginning stages of the *yoga* practice a *sadhaka* needs to have a quiet environment to start the training. However, when the willpower has become a little stronger and the mind is relatively subdued, it is better to learn the practice of dynamic meditation, by which one is able to face the external world and still remain undisturbed and focused. It is impossible to remain forever isolated from the external world, and even if one has not had any experience of sense gratification in his entire life, still the natural tendency of the senses remains.

There is a famous story about a *yogi* who, to better control his senses, went to meditate under the water in a cool lake, where nobody could go to disturb him. Unfortunately there were fish in the lake, and one day the *yogi* opened his eyes and was offered the "indecent" spectacle of two small aquatic creatures dancing in the joy of mating. The bottled up desires for sense gratification exploded in the mind of the poor man, and he had to hasten out of the water and among ordinary people to find himself a wife - and quickly. In Kali yuga things are even more difficult, because we are running short of undisturbed locations on top of mountains or in the middle of forests where a *yogi* can withdraw from the world. The Himalayas have become a popular tourist destination and are littered with empty drink cans and other stuff left by visitors, and the jungles have been auctioned to the mining industry or are being cut down for coal, or thinned down to accommodate the demographic expansion, with the blasting loudspeakers entertaining the sparse villagers with Bollywood music. The method offered by Krishna in *Gita* is rather less dramatic and much more effective: just engage the senses properly, in selfless activities for the benefit of all, and patiently tolerate the inflow of desires without remaining attached to them or running after them. This will be sufficient.

The expression *kama kami* is particularly interesting, as it indicates a person who is eager to have desires: this vividly illustrates the tendency of contemporary society to push people towards extreme consumerism and sense gratification even in their advanced age, when the senses become more quiet and the body does not demand much any more. By deeply studying the example of the ocean, we can find out a lot of other interesting and beautiful concepts. For example, we know that the ocean can remain within its boundaries because of the evaporation of the water under the sun rays. Similarly, the heat of our passion for the service of the Supreme can evaporate all desires in the offering of a sacrifice that will be beneficial to everyone, since the fruits of such service like clouds will bring rain to the parched lands and enable the healthy growth of all creatures.

विहाय कामान्यः सर्वान्पुमांश्चरति निःस्पृहः । निर्ममो निरहङ्कारः स शान्तिमधिगच्छति ॥ २-७१ ॥
 vihāya kāmānyaḥ sarvānpumāṁścarati niḥspr̥haḥ । nirmamo nirahaṅkāraḥ sa śāntimadhigacchati ॥ 2-71 ॥

vihaya: giving up/ letting go; *kaman*: desires; *yah*: s/he; *sarvan*: all; *puman*: a person (*purusha*); *carati*: walks around; *niḥsprīhah*: untouched; *nirmamah*: without sense of proprietorship/ belonging/ affinity; *nirahankarah*: without material identification; *sah*: s/he; *santim*: peace; *adhigacchati*: really attains.

"By abandoning all desires, a person moves freely without attachments and because he does not consider himself the owner or doer of anything, he attains peace."

When we let go of desires, they flow away without too much trouble because of their temporary nature. Desires only remain stuck to our mind if we grasp at them and nurture them in our mind, carrying them around as luggage even from one lifetime to the other.

All this luggage makes our journey very difficult and longer than actually required, and restricts our freedom to move around. Besides the whimsical desires that are fancied by the mind, there are two other huge pieces of luggage that make our life difficult and prevent us from breaking free from material conditioned existence: they are technically called *mamatva* and *ahankara*.

Mamatva is the "mine-ness", or sense of proprietorship, belonging, or affinity that creates a bondage for the individual; it can apply to inert objects such as clothes, ornaments, vehicles, buildings, homes, relationships, countries, to living entities, or even to concepts as in the case of political parties, ideologies etc. This feeling of possession turns both into the desire for exploitation and the need of servitude towards the object of our possession, and conditions our happiness to the flimsy satisfaction we can derive from such temporary objects.

Ahankara is a composite word, from *aham*, "I", and *kara*, "do". This concept is sometimes translated as "material identification" or "false ego", or more literally but rather incomprehensibly, "doership" or "authorship". To properly understand the definition we need to connect it with the previous instruction of remaining detached from the fruits of the action. When one performs an activity, it is logical to expect the fruits of the action if we believe we are the doer, the author of the action that has full responsibility for it. By introducing this concept of *ahankara* in his speech, Krishna is taking us deeper into the science of action, Karma Yoga, that will be the subject of the next chapter.

As Krishna will clearly explain later in the text, the individual is not supposed to be fully responsible for his actions, because he is not supposed to act independently. If he does so, he will be accountable for the good or bad results and will have to accept the consequences, binding him to the cycle of *karma* and *samsara*.

Let's make an example: a bank employee works handling money on behalf of the bank and its customers. Every day huge amounts of money pass through his hands, as he moves the funds from one account to the other, but he is not acting independently and therefore he is not responsible for the results of such actions, and he is not expecting to gain or lose any money personally in the transactions. He just needs to do his work properly, in the best possible way, and remain detached from the money he works with.

If by any chance the bank employee starts to develop a sense of *mamatva* and *ahankara* towards his actions, he immediately gets into troubles because he will try to appropriate and enjoy the money he handles. As a consequence, automatically he will be held responsible for the missing funds and he will have to pay for that. Of course, if he independently takes money from the bank and invests it gainfully on his personal responsibility, he will also have to accept the fruits of his action and become attached to the wealth he has accumulated. However, since bank employees are not supposed to conduct this kind of activities independently, he will have to pay back the initial capital to the bank and he will lose his job, thus finding himself in a difficult position in spite of his extra income.

Now, if the bank employee has a talent for investments and development of assets, and wants to take a leading position, he does not really need to independently siphon off funds for his risky ventures without the sanction of the higher authorities. There is a better way to engage his tendencies and qualities: he can work more closely with the general manager, learning more about the market and whatever other information may be required or useful, and then he can work in a more responsible capacity within the bank organization. In this way he will still be protected and taken care of, he will have his expenses covered by the bank with a better salary, and he will not break any law or regulation. If the investment goes wrong, he will not have to pay from his own pocket.

In the greater organization of the universe, God is the real owner of everything and has a very good plan for all of us. Such divine plan also includes equipping each individual with a certain amount of intelligence, talents, instruments and opportunities, so we should not have the impression we are just cogs in a machine or puppets on strings. But we need to learn the importance of cooperation and service to the greater good, because every time we are trying to "take care of our own business" without considering our duties, we are going for unnecessary trouble.

By connecting ourselves to the greater Reality, finding our progressive place in the universe, and working sincerely in selfless and dutiful service, we can actually achieve the peacefulness that is the basis for happiness. In this verse, peacefulness is called *shanti*; one of its synonyms is *nirvana*, as the cessation of the agitating winds of desires in the mind.

एषा ब्राह्मी स्थितिः पार्थ नैनां प्राप्य विमुह्यति । स्थित्वास्यामन्तकालेऽपि ब्रह्मनिर्वाणमृच्छति ॥ २-७२ ॥

eṣā brāhmī sthitiḥ pārtha naināṃ prāpya vimuhyati | sthityāsyāmantakāle'pi brahmanirvāṇamṛcchati | | 2-72 | |

esha: this; *brahmi*: spiritual/ transcendental; *sthitih*: position; *partha*: o son of Pritha (Arjuna); *na*: not; *enam*: this; *prapya*: obtaining; *vimuhyati*: becomes confused; *sthitva*: being situated; *asyam*: in this; *anta-kale*: in the final moment; *api*: even; *brahma*: spiritual; *nirvanam*: cessation of agitation; *ricchati*: attains.

"O son of Pritha, this is the spiritual level. A person who has attained this level never becomes confused, and by remaining in that position, he attains spiritual liberation at the end of his time."

The last verse of the chapter presents detachment and freedom from desires, *mamatva* and *ahankara* as the transcendental position of Brahman, the natural and permanent identity of the soul or Atman. When the *jiva atman*, the individual soul, attains this transcendental consciousness he finds his original freedom (*moksha*) from all ties and karmic consequences, and is not conditioned by attraction and repulsion any more. Thus, at the final moment - the death of this material body or the destruction of the universe or both - he will not suffer the crisis of confusion caused by the disappearance of the objects of material identification and possession, and he will be really free.

Nirvana is a word that has become famous through the Buddhist preaching, but it is not characteristic of Buddhism only. Unfortunately, some prejudiced and sectarian people who consider themselves Vaishnavas or devotees of Krishna express a negative or even hostile attitude towards this concept of *nirvana*, considering it "impersonalistic" or "nichilistic".

This is because they have not read *Bhagavad gita*, and therefore they have not noticed how many times Krishna (the supreme authority they claim to worship, follow or even represent) clearly and explicitly mentions *nirvana* as the level of transcendental realization that we are expected to attain.

We sincerely hope that our humble efforts in this translation and commentary will help to fill up the gaps in their understanding of Krishna and his teachings.

Brahmi sthitih, or the "position related to Brahman" is *brahma nirvanam*, in the sense that the consciousness/ awareness of our real nature is permanent, stable, and it is not disturbed by external circumstances - it does not waver like a flame that moves in a gush of wind. This is the meaning of "*nirvana*", a composite word constituted by the negative prefix *nir* and the word *vata*, "wind".

Later in *Bhagavad gita* Krishna will also associate the transcendental level with the definition *nitya sattva*, or *suddha sattva*, the eternal and pure form of goodness (*sattva*) that characterizes spiritual existence/ reality (*sat*). This level is the genuine realization of our true nature/ identity, and it is above the material *gunas*.

We can come close to it by following a *sattvic* lifestyle, yet eventually we will have to go beyond *sattva*, too, by overcoming the identification and attachment to the benefits that one can get from *sattva*.

Nitya sattva is thus equated with *brahma nirvana*, because as long as *sattva* remain material, it will soon drag the individual back into *tamas* and *rajas* - therefore it cannot be called *nitya*.

And what is eternal and pure existence if not the spirit - *atman*, *brahman*?

Chapter 3 Karma yoga The yoga of action

After explaining the difference between matter and spirit, and the overall concept of Yoga as the balance given by intelligence, Krishna will now elaborate about the science of action or Karma.

The first and foremost meaning of *karma* in Hindu tradition refers to the ritualistic ceremonies that constitute the duty of the *brahmanas*. A fiery controversy has raged for centuries on the two apparent positions, i.e. the *smarta* brahmanism based on *karma kanda*, the ritualistic path presented by the Vedas, and the *sannyasi* "monasticism" based on renunciation and a more philosophical interpretation of Vedic knowledge. Such controversy, we need to state, is totally unnecessary and was not the purpose of the original expounders of the two apparently contradicting systems of *Purva mimamsa* and *Uttara mimamsa*.

Adi Shankara established the system of Mathas, founded temples for the worship of the Deities and radically reformed the institution of *sannyasa* as a necessary step to counteract the degradation of the brahmanic tradition, that had been hijacked by unqualified people motivated by arrogance, greed and an unbridled lust for sense gratification.

Before Adi Shankara's appearance, there had already been a reaction against this sad state of things, through the successful spreading of Buddhism and Jainism - two doctrines that denied the authority of Vedic scriptures, the need for worship to appease the various gods and goddesses and for all ritualistic ceremonies as well, including the fire sacrifice. Buddhism demolished all social barriers, giving no importance to the difference between occupations, family of origin and gender, accepting anyone and everyone to live together in monasteries, to study the sacred texts and write commentaries, to preach and teach to the greater mass of people, and to accept disciples into its active fold.

On the other hand, early Buddhism offered a sterling example of selflessness, seriousness and honesty, demanding total renunciation to sense gratification and an exemplary moral behavior from all its monks, as well as the greatest compassion towards all living entities (including the animals) and a friendly and accommodating approach to all groups of people and needs. Buddhism was not rigid at all, and easily adapted to very different mentalities, leaving everyone free to pursue their previous beliefs and practices - just adding a strictly dharmic behavior, detachment, truthfulness, nonviolence and compassion.

However, in the period when Adi Shankara appeared, the Buddhist tradition, too, had become degraded in various ways. Those who had taken up Buddhism as a reaction against the abuse perpetrated by the brahmins (we use the word "brahmin" to indicate a non-qualified person who has usurped the position of *brahmana* in society) were sometimes carried away by their personal grudges to the detriment of the very same basic Buddhist principles of nonviolence and friendliness to everyone, so they actively attacked Hinduism and Hindus - more or less like it has been happening in Sri Lanka for the past several decades.

Many people believe that Hinduism was hostile to Buddhism and therefore Buddhists had to escape out of India, but the diaspora of Buddhism towards the periphery of Akhanda Bharata or "greater India" (that in ancient times extended as far as Singapore) was in fact caused by the Muslim invasions that plagued India since the earliest waves of invading marauders.

It was the Muslims who destroyed the famous Buddhism universities, centers of knowledge in all its branches attracting hundreds of thousands of students from the entire ancient world - universities that had stood and prospered immensely under the benevolent rule of Hindu kings and the cooperation of Hindu communities.

In fact, by the time Adi Shankara appeared, Buddhism had become much more powerful than brahmanism, and the faith of people in Vedic tradition had dwindled almost to zero. Adi Shankara revived that faith in the Vedic way - not by persecuting the Buddhists and kicking them out of India, but by introducing suitable reforms into Hinduism itself to bring it back to its pure purpose, at the same time making it much stronger and more attractive for the masses.

However, Adi Shankara was not afraid of going against the "age-old tradition": he introduced new traditions that were totally unprecedented and appeared to be directly at odds with the previous interpretation.

The institution of Mathas, or "monasteries", designed on the Buddhist model, was certainly the most revolutionary action, with its corollaries of *sannyasis* living together in a fixed residence and teaching *brahmacharis*, installing and worshiping Deities that could be visited by the general public, collecting and managing funds for the maintenance of the Matha and temple, organizing preaching functions to the public etc - all occupations that had been the natural and undisputed rights of *grihastha brahmanas*, including the highly transcendental ones such as the Rishis living in their remote *ashramas* in the forests.

The concept of *sannyasa* had been there all along, but at an individual level only, as by the old definition a *sannyasi* gives up all social interactions and responsibilities and even social relevance.

Jabala Upanishad (4.1) explains that *brahmacharya* is followed by *grihastha*, *vanaprastha* and *sannyasa*, but that one can also accept the order of *sannyasa* directly from the *brahmacharya* position or from any other subsequent position. Taking *sannyasa* had never been obligatory, but it had been recommended for *brahmanas*. However, it was totally against the aspirations of the later generations of degraded brahmins because it actually required total renunciation (*sannyasa* precisely means "renunciation") and a materialistic person cannot give up the attachment to family or society.

A *sannyasi* cannot have any possession, any fixed residence, or any opportunity for self gratification. He cannot accept disciples, he cannot teach or even mix with other people except for the brief time a householder needs to milk a cow to feed a beggar. A *sannyasi* would not be invited for meals into the house, but was just given alms in his *kamandalu* or *uttariya*, (water pot and upper cloth respectively) generally in the form of rice, fruits, vegetables, and especially milk - considered the most appropriate food for them. A *sannyasi* was not supposed to cook his food, but he was expected to eat raw unseasoned food just to keep the body barely alive, without any concession to taste.

To avoid the possibility of the *sannyasi* becoming too complacent with his means of living, a precise and explicit rule stated that *sannyasis* could never come near women or wealthy or powerful people in society. This observance was also helped by the fact that *sannyasis* were expected to totally disregard the care of their own bodies and clothing, even roaming around naked or scantily covered by rags. They could not use shoes, umbrellas, or vehicles of any kind, and in general they were expected to do nothing else but just prepare themselves to death through total detachment from all material identification and belongings.

Adi Shankara and his followers changed all that, to the point that a *sannyasi* became a much respected member of society, and was able to use all material facilities to accept great numbers of disciples.

Unfortunately, because as Krishna explains in *Gita* time destroys everything included the genuine religious traditions (4.2), the followers of Adi Shankara messed up, too, and the original purpose of the great *acharya* was lost, leaving both baffled camps engaged in the foolish attempt to prove their rivals wrong. This embarrassing situation confused and weakened Indian society, causing the degradation of the other *varnas*, starting from the royal *kshatriya* order, who became unable to defend their kingdoms.

Several centuries later, the reform process was resumed by the great Vaishnava acharyas such as Madhva and Ramanuja, who also appropriated the Matha system with its reformed *sannyasa* rules, establishing temples and Deity worship for the masses, and creating the idea that a Vaishnava, just like a *sannyasi*, was above the system of *varnas*, that was already transforming into the prejudiced birth caste system.

Specifically, fighting against this caste prejudice problem and the arrogant elitism of brahmins was Ramananda's main reason to break away from the Ramanuja sect, and created the next great wave of reform in Sanatana dharma - the *bhakti* revolution - with famous exponents such as Chaitanya, Mirabai, the Alvars, Tukaram, Namadeva, Kabir, Sura Das, Jnanesvara, and so on.

अर्जुन उवाच ।

arjuna uvāca ।

ज्यायसी चेतकर्मणस्ते मता बुद्धिर्जनार्दन । तत्किं कर्मणि घोरे मां नियोजयसि केशव ॥ ३-१ ॥

jyāyasī cetkarmanaste matā buddhirjanārdana tatkiṁ karmaṇi ghore māṁ niyojayasi keśava ॥ 3-1 ॥

arjuna: Arjuna; *uvaca*: said; *jyasasi*: is better; *cet*: if; *karmanah*: actions; *te*: your; *mata*: opinion; *buddhih*: intelligence; *janardana*: o Janardana (Krishna); *tat*: that; *kim*: why; *karmani*: actions; *ghore*: in horrible; *mam*: me; *niyojayasi*: are engaging; *kesava*: o Keshava (Krishna).

Arjuna said: "O Janardana, O Keshava, if in your opinion Buddhi (intelligence) is superior to Karma (work), why do you (want to) engage me in this horrible action?"

Krishna has already explained about the nature of the soul as distinct from the material body, and about Yoga as the proper intelligent way to act without being enmeshed in the results of the action. In this chapter, named Karma Yoga, he will explain more about the science of action. Here Arjuna calls Krishna "Janardana" ("he who animates/ inspires people into action") as he had done in the first chapter, to strengthen his question as why Krishna is pushing him towards the ghastly fighting that will ensue in the battle.

Arjuna has followed Krishna's speech attentively, and has understood that Yoga is the science of acting with intelligence, detached from the results. Now he is arguing that the action awaiting him does not look like a very intelligent action at all: only a madman would want to cause such a wholesale slaughtering of so many active and qualified members of society, who in their death will not be able to continue to perform their proper duties or even pursue the transcendental knowledge by which they could attain liberation.

The teachings of this chapter have been at the center of a bitter controversy between the exponents of *smarta* brahmanism, based on the ritualistic *karma kanda* path, and the shankarite *sannyasis* who follow the path of renunciation and a more philosophical interpretation of Vedic knowledge. By carefully studying *Gita*, we will find the end of the unnecessary and confusing controversies about the superiority of one method over the other, because we will see that all paths are perfectly compatible and actually they complement each other.

व्यामिश्रेणेव वाक्येन बुद्धिं मोहयसीव मे । तदेकं वद निश्चित्य येन श्रेयोऽहमाप्नुयाम् ॥ ३-२ ॥

vyāmīśreṇeva vākyaena buddhiṁ mohayasīva me | tadekaṁ vada niścitya yena śreyo'hamāpnuyām || 3-2 ||

vyamisrena: contradictory; *iva*: certainly; *vakyena*: by words; *buddhim*: intelligence; *mohayasi*: you are confusing; *iva*: certainly; *me*: to me; *tad*: that; *ekam*: one only; *vada*: conclusion (to be followed); *niscitya*: without any doubts; *yena*: by which; *sreyah*: the highest good; *aham*: I; *apnuyam*: can achieve.

"My intelligence is confused by your (apparently) contradicting words. (Please give me) one instruction only, that will not create doubts, and by which I will obtain the best result."

When we see some contradictions, we should never hesitate to question and discuss them, as Arjuna is demonstrating with his very good example here in this verse. Arjuna had already questioned Krishna's order at the beginning of the second chapter (4, 5, 6, 7, 8), when he had been clearly told that it was his duty to engage in the battle. Later in *Gita* (4.34) Krishna will recommend that a student should not hesitate in asking all necessary questions (*pariprasnena*) from the teacher in order to properly understand the subject. With all the false teachers and cheaters that mushroom everywhere in Kali yuga, one can never be careful enough.

Contradictions appear because of the dualistic nature of this world, and the limited range of the human senses, mind and intellect. We are not able to see the sun in the night, therefore we make distinctions between light and darkness. However, the sun always exists and radiates light all the time: it is only our particular position that makes it impossible for our defective eyes to see it. Similarly, Reality contains all relative truths and a multi-dimensional vision can comprehend them all, including the lack of vision that we call ignorance. We must not confuse the phenomenon of apparent contradictions between relative visions with the actual order of things that requires discrimination between the various levels of Reality.

Absolute Reality is the core existence we call Brahman - the omnipresent, eternal, unchangeable, and unlimited awareness. Brahman manifests all other realities, starting from the divine couple that creates motion by a temporary dualism male/ female, two halves of the same One, that engage in the blissful play of union.

This is the transcendental level where *bhava* or emotion produces *rasas* or tastes. To enhance the taste, the male and female principles produce a transcendental offspring in the form of the *jivatmas*, the infinitesimal living souls that enter the divine play, either on the transcendental level or on the material level.

The material dimension is then created by the divine couple through the manifestation of the *gunas* and the products of their interactions. The material play of the *gunas* creates a ladder network on which we can either ascend or descend by choosing *sat* or *asat*, the eternal or the temporary, knowledge or ignorance, light or darkness.

The concept of simultaneous duality and non-duality might be confusing, and this is the reason why we need a strong clear guidance from a realized soul that is able to directly see the greater picture.

The word *sreya* means "better, best" and refers to the proper choice to attain the real benefit. The definition is often mentioned with its opposite *preya*, meaning "what is pleasurable".

It is not difficult to see that people who are attached to the fruits of their actions prefer to choose an action that looks pleasurable rather than another that may bring benefits in some distant future. However, generally this is not a wise choice.

श्रीभगवानुवाच ।

śrībhagavānuvāca |

लोकेऽस्मिन् द्विविधा निष्ठा पुरा प्रोक्ता मयानघ । ज्ञानयोगेन साङ्ख्यानां कर्मयोगेन योगिनाम् ॥ ३-३ ॥

loke'smin dvividhā niṣṭhā purā proktā mayānagha | jñānayogena sāṅkhyānāṁ karmayogena yoginām || 3-3 ||

sri bhagavan: the Lord; *uvaca*: said; *loke*: world/ people; *asmin*: this; *dvi*: two; *vidha*: types; *nistha*: faith/ belief/ chosen path; *pura*: before; *prokta*: said; *maya*: by me; *anagha*: o sinless/ spotless; *jnana*: knowledge; *yogena*: by the engagement; *sankhyanam*: of the followers of Sankhya; *karma*: action; *yogena*: by the engagement; *yoginam*: of the followers of yoga.

The Lord said: "O sinless (Arjuna), as I have already explained to you, in this world there are two types of beliefs: those who follow Sankhya are connected through knowledge, while yogis are connected through action."

In this verse Krishna begins by emphasizing the apparent contradiction mentioned by Arjuna. It is interesting to see, however, that he equates the definition of Buddhi (Yoga) with Karma (Yoga). This reinforces the concept that a *yoga sadhaka* should not be a schizophrenic fool that chooses devotion and throws away intelligence, knowledge, and the sense of responsibility in the performance of one's duty.

Those who preach a separation and rejection of these integral parts of the path of Yoga can only be ignorant fools or dangerous cheaters, because they propagate the idea that a devotee of God can legitimately be a fanatical blind and brainless follower that gives no value to ethical sense, common sense, intelligence, decency, and duties to family and society. Things get even worse when "pure and exclusive *bhakti*" is presented as "far superior" to intelligence and ethical sense, and that in order to achieve spiritual perfection, or any results at all in one's spiritual progress, one needs to abandon intelligence and ethical sense, and simply "take shelter" in devotional bigotry and blind allegiance to a particular sect, that breeds offensive intolerance towards any other opinion. Of course, this mentality has been hammered into the global population for the last 2000 years, so it's difficult to overcome it.

Arjuna is here called *anagha*, that means "sinless" or "spotless". Just like its synonym *papa*, the word *agha* does not correspond exactly to the English "sin", because it is not based on the same abrahamic ideology. In the Vedic logic, *agha* or *papa* is a black spot on one's character caused by a bad choice, a mistake, an act of weakness, selfishness or ignorance that needs to be counteracted and purified by positive actions.

The word *loka* means "world" in the sense of "people", as a world is mainly made by its inhabitants. It refers eminently to the material world, where people have opinions and relative visions determined by their particular approach and position of perspective.

Another translation of this verse goes as follows: "O sinless (Arjuna), in ancient times I have expounded this (object of) faith/ belief in two different ways - the Sankhya yoga to those who are attracted to the analytical method of philosophy, and the Karma yoga to those who are more favorable to engaging in action." This is, in a nutshell, how the famous controversy between *karma kanda brahmanas* and the *sannyasi* philosophers started. Krishna clearly explains here that both approaches are aimed at describing the same Reality to two different categories of people who are attached to their *relative* mentalities.

Here the word *yoga* is associated with three main concepts: *nistha* (faith, belief, chosen path), *jnana* (knowledge) of Sankhya, and *karma* (action) in *yoga*. Of the three concepts, *karma* is presented as the very essence of *yoga*, as the method through which "the yogis proper" connect to the purpose, as opposed to the followers of Sankhya. This implies a superiority of *karma* in relation to *jnana* - which after all is still just theoretical knowledge, not having attained the higher level called *vijnana*, or applied knowledge. *Jnana* or knowledge is the preliminary step to *buddhi* or understanding; *buddhi* becomes relevant when it turns into practical application or action - *karma*. *Jnana* without *karma* is arid speculation; *karma* without *jnana* is a foolish waste of energy.

However, we should not lose sight of the importance of *nistha*. One should study *Gita* seriously and apply its teachings faithfully, even if only experimentally, otherwise it will be impossible to obtain the true benefits of this path. This requirement does not require blind and fanatical following, but the reasonable measure of trust and faith, that is invested in all the serious and valuable activities everyone performs.

For example, if you want to travel by airplane from Delhi to Bangalore, you need to trust your travel agent and airline company enough to pay for your ticket before reaching your destination, and even before boarding the plane. This requires a good deal of faith: you must implicitly trust the travel agent to have actually booked a seat for you on the proper day and paid the airlines, and trust the airlines to know where the airplane is going and at what time it is taking off and landing, and so on. If you don't invest this reasonable amount of faith in the proceedings, you will never reach your destination.

Similarly, agnostics and atheists who pride themselves in choosing not to believe in anything, remain totally unable to understand the meaning of *Gita*, Yoga, or Vedic scriptures, therefore they reduce the Hindu religion to a superficial folkloristic and ethnic (i.e. racist) concern, that has no actual meaning, but to which anyone can give any meaning they like.

न कर्मणामनारम्भान्नैष्कर्म्यं पुरुषोऽश्नुते ।

न च संन्यसनादेव सिद्धिं समधिगच्छति ॥ ३-४ ॥

na karmaṇāmanārambhānnaishkarmyam puruṣo'śnute | na ca sannyasanādeva siddhim samadhiḡacchati || 3-4 ||

na: not; *karmanam*: of the (prescribed) actions; *anarambhan*: not starting; *naishkarmyam*: non-action; *puruṣah*: a person; *asnute*: achieves; *na*: not; *ca*: and; *sannyasanat*: from renunciation; *eva*: only; *siddhim*: perfection; *samadhi*: *samadhi*; *acchati*: attains.

"A person cannot achieve freedom from karma by abstaining from the (prescribed) action, just like perfection cannot be achieved simply through sannyasa (renunciation)."

Krishna now moves on to demolishing the walls that divide the two perspectives of Reality and create the illusion of contradiction. The word *arambha* is very appropriately mentioned here to refer specifically to the ritualistic action, as it is used at the beginning of the ceremonies in the invocation of auspiciousness. However, it is a definition that can be applied to all types of prescribed action. This verse contains a few interesting expressions that require a little more explanation: *naishkarmya*, *karmanam arambha*, *siddhi*, *sannyasa*.

The word *karma* has entered the vocabulary of many languages. In English it is generally interpreted as "fate", "the force generated by a person's actions to perpetuate transmigration and in its ethical consequences to determine his destiny in his next existence". However, a more technical meaning of the word (usually escaping Western analysts) concerns the "prescribed actions" or "duty" that each individual is required to perform within the *varnashrama dharma* system, and includes both one's occupational job in society and the religious observances of a particular tradition.

Naishkarmya implies the freedom from the consequences of action, and is the essential requisite to become liberated from the cycle of repeated births and deaths. However, such freedom can not be achieved by abstaining from action as some people believe.

Siddhi means "perfection" and defines the goal of Yoga – and the goal of life. There are various levels of *siddhi*, from the extraordinary powers of control over matter, to the liberation from all material conditionings. Used together with the word *samadhi*, it reinforces the concept of the perfection of life, acquiring a permanent quality of stable consciousness.

Sannyasa is the renounced order of life, where one prepares for death through austerities and detachment from everything – family, social position, comforts, financial security, material pleasures – begging alms for his basic necessities. According to the traditional rules, a *sannyasi* cannot engage in politics, trade, business or any material activity to maintain himself. He has no house or permanent residence, no assets, no bank account, no pride and no expectations, no personal servant, no personal vehicle, no good clothes (being allowed only a cheap loincloth) or shoes, no personal properties except a walking stick and a small water pot. He even gives up his name and fame as a great scholar or spiritualist. But this renunciation alone is not sufficient: without the proper knowledge and spiritual realization, a so-called *sannyasi* is no better than any impoverished drunkard, madman or lazy bum. Foolish people are impressed by the externals and therefore can be easily cheated because they do not care about verifying the actual realization of a so-called *sadhu* or *sannyasi*.

We may here mention the case of Jada Bharata, who had chosen a life of total renunciation and neglect (as *avadhuta*) to avoid developing any material attachment and identification, and therefore externally appeared as a madman or lazy bum. This is why the servants of king Rahugana employed him to carry the palanquin of the Maharaja. However, when questioned about the reason of his irregular walking, Jada Bharata manifested his true depth of realization by expounding the science of the transcendental Self, and immediately the king accepted him as his Sat Guru, as a respectable elder.

A superficial evaluation based on external appearances should never be considered as factual evidence.

न हि कश्चित्क्षणमपि जातु तिष्ठत्यकर्मकृत् । कायते ह्यवशः कर्म सर्वः प्रकृतिजैर्गुणैः ॥ ३-५ ॥

na hi kaścitkṣaṇamapi jātu tiṣṭhatyakarmakṛt | kāryate hyavaśaḥ karma sarvaḥ prakṛtijairguṇaiḥ | | 3-5 | |

na: not; hi: certainly; kascit: any; kshanam: one moment; api: also; jatu: at any time; tisthati: remains; akarma: non-action; krit: doing; karyate: he does; hi: certainly; avasah: helpless; karma: action; sarvah: all; prakriti: of nature; jaih: created; gunaih: by the gunas (qualities).

"Never, at any time, can (a person) remain without acting even for one moment, because (he) is forced to into action by all the gunas (tendencies) born from prakriti (nature)."

Krishna continues to explain why action is superior to mere theoretical knowledge: here he states the simple fact that nobody can abstain from action even for one moment, so there can be action without knowledge, but never knowledge without action.

It is important to understand the meaning of the definition of *karma*, action. It does not merely refer to ritualistic performances or activities intended to obtain some gain, but it also applies to the different types of sacrifice (*Gta* 4.23-33) and even to the transcendental actions in divine devotional service to the Supreme.

Guna means "quality" as well as "tendency" and *prakriti* is "nature" or "energy". The three *gunas* are *sattva* (goodness), *rajas* (passion) and *tamas* (ignorance), but the word can be applied to spiritual qualities as well, both referred to the Lord and to the individual soul.

Similarly, "nature" can be considered *apara* (material) or *para* (spiritual) depending on the level of consciousness it manifests. This means that action is a fundamental characteristic of quality and nature, both at the material and at the spiritual levels. At the spiritual level, both the individual souls and the different manifestations or personalities of Godhead are characterized by particular qualities that create opportunities for loving exchanges and service. In both cases, such particular characteristics are manifested or created by *prakriti* or *shakti*.

However, in the case of the personality of Godhead and the relationship with the devotee, *Prakriti* or *Shakti* acts in the spiritual or transcendental capacity of *Yoga Maya*, while in the case of the individual soul acting on the material level with the purpose to enjoy his senses and exploit matter, *Prakriti* or *Shakti* acts in the material or delusional capacity of *Maha Maya*.

In both cases, the individual soul is helpless (*avasah*), because it can only engage in action under the control of *Prakriti* or *Shakti*.

कर्मेन्द्रियाणि संयम्य य आस्ते मनसा स्मरन् । इन्द्रियार्थान्विमूढात्मा मिथ्याचारः स उच्यते ॥ ३-६ ॥

karmendriyāṇi saṁyamya ya āste manasā smaran | indriyārthānvimūḍhātmā mithyācāraḥ sa ucyate | | 3-6 | |

karma: action; indriyani: senses; samyamya: by controlling; yah: s/he; aste: remains; manasa: by the mind; smaran: remembering; indriya: senses; arthan: objects/ purposes; vimudha: foolish; atma: self; mithya: false; acarah: who has a behavior; sah: s/he; ucyate: is said.

"One who controls the senses of action but continues to remain attached to the memory of the sense objects, is called a fool and a hypocrite."

Why such a person is a fool and a liar? Because he thinks about himself as the enjoyer, and that out of his great renunciation he is abstaining from enjoying what is supposed to be his rightful pleasure. It is not sufficient to abstain from engaging our action senses in pleasure: we must realize that we are not the rightful enjoyers. It is not sufficient to decide not to enjoy women: we must come to the platform of seeing women as spirit souls and servants of the Lord.

The word *smaran* does not indicate simply remembering, but also thinking. It is a thinking pattern. A man who is thinking of women as bodies, as objects of enjoyment (even if unfavorably, with scorn, hate or cruelty) will naturally take a new birth as a woman in the material world. It is inevitable, even for those who delude themselves into thinking that they are on the level of "transcendental realization" due to so-called exclusive pure *bhakti* or to a political position in some religious organization.

This verse continues the logical thread from the previous ones: action is superior to mere theoretical knowledge because everybody must act. Abstaining from action in the name of renunciation or knowledge is not only foolish: it is downright impossible. Some people believe that simply accepting the order of *sannyasa* or any other religious dress, one can automatically become qualified and transcendental, but this is a dangerous delusion. "Fake it till you make it" is a sure recipe for disaster, because it is based on a cheating adharmic logic, that Krishna calls stupid. By "faking it" long enough, the only result you attain is to fool yourself into the delusional belief that you have actually "made it". If you only listen to people who agree with you, and accuse everybody else of being offensive and an enemy of God, your delusion can only become more and more serious.

Vimudhatma is literally "a very stupid person" (*mudha* means "stupid"), who can even fool himself into rationalizing the "legitimacy" of his attachments and desires into some type of excuse or pretext.

Mithyachara is one who "acts falsely", indulging in sensual pleasures under some pretext or excuse, while externally condemning sense gratification. Usually the more ardently and viciously he rants against such pleasures, the more secretly attached he is. As we can see, Krishna is not trimming words or making the pill any sweeter. It is said, *satyam bruyat priyam bruyat*, "one should tell the truth in a palatable manner", but obviously there are some limits to the application of a delicately courteous approach. It is never an offense to call spade a spade. People may become upset because they are attached to a particular identification or perception of themselves and their actions, but ultimately all illusions must come to an end - the sooner, the better. Especially when an illusion is very dangerous, and failing to realize and solve the problem can cost us dearly, as in the famous example of a man who is sleeping in a house that is on fire. In such a case, there is not sufficient time to embellish the facts or to take a slow and soft approach.

We should actually be grateful when a person points out a real and serious problem for us, as it is usually easier to see things from the outside, because there is no self-identification. Of course, there is also the possibility that our critic is the one who is under some measure of illusion or delusion and is just projecting his or her own prejudice or mentality, so the final decision about our life and choices lies in the hands of each and every one of us. Nobody can be held responsible for the actions of another individual.

The *karma indriya* are the "senses of action" or the sense organs – tongue, eyes, nose, ears, and skin – that seek the contact with the sense objects in order to experience pleasure. It is important to understand that the *indriya arthan*, or sense objects, are not responsible for one's attachments or desires, as sometimes people believe. The actions that constitute our prescribed duties are performed through one's senses, mind and body, so when we are planning to perform our duties, including the ritualistic ceremonies, we need to manage our senses and engage them properly. This automatically produces a certain amount of pleasure or suffering, according to the circumstances we are facing. As we have seen in the previous chapter, we should continue to act in our prescribed duties in both cases, not allowing the pleasures or sufferings to distract our attention.

Another important observation is that according to this verse, the simple memory of the sense object is sufficient to confuse the consciousness, even if there is no expression of lust for possession and enjoyment even on the subtle level in the thought process. Such memory is a problem even when the sense object is remembered in a negative feeling - loathing, hatred, repulsion, etc. There is a famous story about two *sannyasis* who were traveling together; on the way they met a young lady who needed to cross a river in spate to get back home, but was unable to negotiate the strong current. The younger *sannyasi* kindly helped her through, actually carrying her, to the scandalized surprise of the other. The young lady took leave from the two *sadhus* and they proceeded on their own way. After a few hours of walking silently and brooding over his unexpressed thoughts, the elder *sannyasi* finally blurted out his criticism against his companion, accusing him of having violated the *sannyasa* rules according to which they were not supposed to associate with women. "My dear brother," replied the younger *sannyasi*, "I have carried that woman briefly and for the compassionate purpose of helping her get back home safely, but you have been carrying her all these hours, and with no honorable purpose."

यस्त्विन्द्रियाणि मनसा नियम्यारभतेऽर्जुन । कर्मेन्द्रियैः कर्मयोगमसक्तः स विशिष्यते ॥ ३-७ ॥

yastvindriyāṇi manasā niyamārabhate'rjuna | karmendriyaiḥ karmayogamasaktaḥ sa viśiṣyate || 3-7 ||

yah: s/he; *tu*: but; *indriyani*: the senses; *manasa*: by the mind; *niyamya*: regulating through (*yama* and) *niyama*; *arambhate*: begins (the action); *arjuna*: o Arjuna; *karma*: action; *indriyaiḥ*: senses; *karma-yogam*; the *yoga* of action; *asaktaḥ*: detached; *sa*: s/he; *visiṣyate*: is much better.

"But one who regulates the senses through the mind, engaging the senses of action through *karma yoga* without attachment, is much better, o Arjuna."

Another nail in the coffin of the theory that theoretical knowledge is superior to, and not compatible with, action: here Krishna squarely condemns the fake *sannyasis* and states that a person who lives honestly and unassumingly in family and society but performs the prescribed duties without attachment for his/her own sense gratification, is much better positioned.

An important factor in the process is the sense of responsibility, to which every individual should be trained from childhood itself. Taking *sannyasa* or any other type of religious order or dress is not a free ticket out of a difficult material situation that we have created by making wrong choices. We can't use it to bail out from some situation we are unable to make work, to avoid paying the required maintenance to one's wife and children, to escape from creditors, to be pardoned by the judiciary system or to dodge some other basic responsibility.

It is also unhealthy to take *sannyasa* out of sheer frustration towards material life, because "the grapes were too sour anyway". If one takes the vows of renunciation for this reason, it is very likely that he will fall down or at least suffer a lot when the first real opportunity for sense gratification naturally presents itself, and he risks making fools of himself by ultimately renounce renunciation and become a *vantasi*, one who "eats his own vomit".

In fact, it is said that in Kali yuga the acceptance of *sannyasa* is not recommended if not directly forbidden: *asvamedham gavalambham sannyasam pala paitrkam, devarena sutotpattim kalau panca vivarjayet*, "In this age of Kali, five acts are forbidden: the offering of a horse in sacrifice, the offering of a cow in sacrifice, the acceptance of the order of *sannyasa*, the offering of oblations of flesh to the forefathers, and a man's begetting children in his brother's wife." This verse is quoted from *Brahma vaivarta Purana*.

The problem with the false renunciate is that he cannot conceive action without attachment or relationship without lust and exploitation, because he has a material vision and considers himself the actual *purusha* (enjoyer) of the action. By simply abstaining from what he values as pleasures through the temporary performance of penance, the false renunciate imagines himself to be the supreme Lord in his perfection of renunciation, and thus he falls victim to the last snare of illusion.

The sense gratification the *sannyasi* formally renounces revolves around sex, the greatest energy and pleasure in the material world. Sexual attraction and attachment are a natural instinct found in all living beings, and in civilized human society this instinct is regulated by rules and prescriptions, *samskaras* and duties, involving both the family and society to earn a proper livelihood. Obviously all these responsibilities are a burden, but they are required to maintain the proper selfless consciousness in all the members of the family and society at large, so that the life of each human being can be progressive.

A lazy bum who chooses to artificially accept the order of *sannyasa* in order to escape such responsibilities is actually making a very serious mistake, because the enjoyment propensity does not disappear automatically just because we want it to. Rather, it either becomes secretive and leads to illicit and hypocritical sexual relationships or casual encounters, it creates a distorted psychotic need for sadistic or masochistic practices (usually passed off as "austerities") or it turns into the subtle sex forms of name, fame, power, adoration, prestige, profit and position, usually dragging the *sannyasi* into politics of various types and transforming a Godman or a Godbrother into a mafia-style Godfather.

Sadhus in the renounced order of life (belonging to any religious or spiritual tradition) should be real saints, persons who have attained the platform of *brahma bhuta*, and whose association is the most valuable, blessed and pure treasure any human being can find in this world. Such persons do not see other people as males or females, but simply as spirit souls, parts and parcels of the Supreme and spiritual servants of the only true Purusha, the Personality of Godhead. These great souls are perfectly satisfied in themselves and do not need, expect or ask anything for themselves; they need no sense gratification because they are already situated in the unlimited happiness of Self realization.

नियतं कुरु कर्म त्वं कर्म ज्यायो ह्यकर्मणः । शरीरयात्रापि च ते न प्रसिद्धयेदकर्मणः ॥ ३-८ ॥

niyatam kuru karma tvam karma jyāyo hyakarmanah | śarīrayātrāpi ca te na prasiddhyedakarmanah || 3-8 ||

niyatam: prescribed; *kuru*: do; *karma*: action; *tvam*: you; *karma*: work/ duty; *jyayah*: better; *hi*: certainly; *akarmanah*: than not working; *sarira*: the body; *yatra*: maintenance; *api*: even; *ca*: and; *te*: your; *na*: not; *prasiddhyet*: for the perfection; *akarmanah*: without action/work.

"You (should) perform the dutiful actions, because action is better than non-action. Without performing one's duties, it is even impossible to maintain the body, that is the vehicle (of the Self)."

Krishna states very clearly, here and in many other passages of *Gita*, including its conclusion (18.5) that prescribed actions should never be stopped or given up. What is prescribed action? It is a dharmic activity that is supported by proper knowledge and that supports the universe, performed selflessly and in a spirit of loving service to the Supreme. Incidentally, according to Krishna, this selfless action is the real symptom of a true *sannyasi* (6.1). The entire 5th chapter of *Gita* will be dedicated to the discussion on *sannyasa* or renunciation.

In this verse Krishna exposes and shames the false spiritualists and religionists who would try to make us believe that they are free from all obligations simply because they refuse to get a job and honestly earn their livelihood, and by being "free" they automatically get the right to be maintained by others. However, this is not an automatic right. There is no such thing as a free meal in this material world, and everybody needs to earn their maintenance by making themselves useful to the social body in some way or other.

Like wild and stray animals, beggars receive leftovers or rely on what Mother Nature sends on their way in the form of forest fruits they pick directly from spontaneous trees that are not cultivated by anyone. Any other food is the product of the work of someone - and by taking it without reciprocating in some way constitutes a theft. In fact, even a *tapasvi* who lives only on wild fruits and leaves should thank Mother Earth and the Devas for such gifts, and offer some prayers and gratefulness in return.

A responsible human being understands that he has many debts to repay - to the Devas that provide the basic facilities of life like fire, water, etc, to his parents and ancestors that created a safe and loving environment to take care of him/ her in childhood, to human society and the good administrators of society that protect him/ her from aggressions and dangers and afford him/ her to work and live in prosperity, to the ancient sages that compiled collections of knowledge s/he can benefit from, etc. We even become indebted to animals, because we inevitably harm or kill some of them in the course of our daily activities for our maintenance, through ordinary agricultural work, cooking, grinding grains into flour, cleaning house, starting a fire, taking water from a well or pond, cutting wood etc. Repaying such debts is not difficult: one simply needs to protect the gifts we have received and do his/her part to contribute to the prosperity and progress of society. This also entitles him/ her to a decent maintenance in accordance to his/ her particular needs, as it is also confirmed by *Sri Isopanishad* (1.1).

The celebration of *yajnas* perfectly responds to this requirement, because during such ceremonies the performer distributes food and gifts to everyone, as well as offering the opportunity for spiritual progress to all the participants through the worship to the Personality of Godhead and the recitation of the *shastra*. It is also important to notice that the food and other resources engaged in this sacrifice must be earned legitimately through one's occupational duties. If someone offers worship or sacrifice by using stolen wealth (flowers, food etc) or by creating problems to others (obstructing a passageway, etc), such worship will become totally useless. It is better to offer even one grain of rice, or an ordinary leaf freely available to the public, rather than trying to make a grand offering to God with stolen or ill-acquired goods.

In this verse Krishna also recognizes the true and great importance of the body as the vehicle of the Self. Mistreating the body is not a genuine practice of austerity. Several groups that developed since the beginning of Kali yuga believe and preach that this body should be "punished", "mortified", or even given up as a bad thing. On the opposite side, there are those who strongly identify with the body and believe that a healthy, strong and fit body is the symptom of a healthy mind and an evolved soul, and that a person who has a body that is below their standard ideal cannot be spiritually advanced or mentally healthy. Of course both groups are totally off the mark. The body is a valuable vehicle - a wonderful vehicle - but just a vehicle nonetheless.

यज्ञार्थात्कर्मणोऽन्यत्र लोकोऽयं कर्मबन्धनः । तदर्थं कर्म कौन्तेय मुक्तसङ्गः समाचर ॥ ३-९ ॥

yajñārthātkarmano'nyatra loko'yaṁ karmabandhanaḥ | tadartham karma kaunteya muktasangah samācara || 3-9 ||

yajña: sacrifice; *arthat*: for the purpose; *karmanah*: actions/ duties; *anyatra*: otherwise; *loka*: world/ society; *ayam*: this; *karma*: action; *bandhanah*: bondage; *tad*: that; *artham*: purpose; *karma*: action; *kaunteya*: o son of Kunti (Arjuna); *mukta*: liberated; *sangah*: from association/ affiliation; *samacara*: perform.

"Actions must be performed as sacrifice, otherwise in this world they cause bondage (and further) actions. Therefore, o son of Kunti, you should perform your activities for that (purpose of sacrifice), remaining free from (material) association."

In this famous verse, Krishna introduces another important concept: *yajna*, or "sacrifice". This definition is normally used to refer to the traditional ritualistic ceremonies, and particularly to the fire sacrifice, also called *homa*. "Sacrifice" literally means "making sacred". By offering something to the Divine or to a higher purpose, we make it sacred and we purify it from any fault, transforming it into a beneficial factor of progress at both individual and collective levels.

As we will see later in the text, there are many layers of meaning in the concept of sacrifice and Krishna will elaborate on several of them. Keeping in mind the previous explanations offered by Krishna on selfless action as Buddhi Yoga and Karma Yoga, we should add that knowledge to the concept of sacrifice, too.

Yajna is also a name of Vishnu as the personification of Sacred Action. As Vishnu or Narayana is the transcendental One from whom every other reality emanates, worship to Vishnu is required in all religious ceremonies and auspicious activities, even for those who are attracted to a different Personality of Godhead as their *ista deva*. It is important to understand that the nature of Vishnu is totally transcendental to the material concept of duality; he is not in competition or even separated from any other Personality of Godhead.

Mukta sanga literally means "free from association" or also "in the association of the liberated", where *mukta*, "liberated", applies to everything that is not identified or attached to the material platform. *Sanga* refers to the position of one's body (*anga*) in relationship with other bodies/ persons, activities or environments, but even more so to being part (*anga*) of something, as in "affiliation" or "membership" of a group, an organization or an institution, community, lineage or tradition. All such denominations (*upadhi*) must be "liberated" (i.e. free from material identification, duality, or sectarianism) otherwise one must become "liberated" from them.

Another translation of the verse gives *lokah* the singular meaning of "one individual"; therefore *ayam* ("this") becomes applied to the person who was described in the previous verses as one who refuses to work in the name of fake renunciation but, compelled by nature, is forced to act. Such action is under the influence of ignorance, therefore this individual becomes bound by actions because he does not offers his actions to the Supreme, Vishnu, here indicated by the name *Yajna*. Here is the consequent rendition of the verse: "This person becomes bound by actions that are not meant to (worship/ serve) *Yajna*. O son of Kunti, engage in work without attachment, to attain him (*Yajna*)."

सहयज्ञाः प्रजाः सृष्ट्वा पुरोवाच प्रजापतिः । अनेन प्रसविष्यध्वमेष वोऽस्त्विष्टकामधुक् ॥ ३-१० ॥

sahayajñāḥ prajāḥ sṛṣṭvā purovāca prajāpatiḥ | anena prasaviṣyadhvameṣa vo'stviṣṭakāmadhuk || 3-10 ||

saha: together with; *yajnah*: sacrifice/ sacred action; *prajah*: generations; *srishtva*: creating; *pura*: in ancient times; *uvaca*: said; *prajapatiḥ*: the Lord of creatures; *anena*: by this; *prasaviṣyadhvam*: grow and prosper; *esha*: this; *vah*: your (plural); *astu*: let it be; *ishta*: desired; *kama*: pleasure; *dhuk*: giver.

"The Prajapati originally manifested the *prajas* (creatures) together with the *yajna* (the sacred action), and said, 'By these (sacred actions) you will become more and more prosperous; these (sacred actions) will supply you with whatever you desire.'"

Prajapati means "the lord/ protector of the creatures" and usually refers to Brahma, who manifests this particular universe and the bodies for all living entities taking birth in it, but can also be applied to all the other great personalities who generate creatures or become their protectors. Of course it refers to Vishnu, too, who is the root cause of creation and manifests again and again in this world to offer his valuable instructions to the human beings.

Praja means "one who has been generated"; by the simple fact of being born, all living entities become part of the "family" of the *pati* or "protector" of a particular *kshetra* or land. It is interesting to see that here the creator offers the gift of *yajna* to all the *prajas* as his descendants. Some people afflicted by casteist prejudice try to make us believe that they are the only progeny of Brahma and the great personalities such as Manu, Kardama etc, and they have "their blood in their veins". This is quite funny, because according to the scriptures' version all human beings and even the non-human beings descend directly from Brahma as his children through the generations from his various sons. But then again, these casteist people do not care much for what is actually written in the *shastra*, as they believe that their own blood is the highest authority and entitles them to believe and teach whatever they want.

The word *prasava* has the meaning of "growing, prospering" and includes the idea of multiplication, because in the beginning of creation the first generations had a lot of resources they could utilize and space to expand. The material world is created precisely for the purpose of accommodating the *jivatmas* who need to evolve through the various levels of life and ultimately qualify for liberation. So the idea "go forth and multiply" is not a wrong concept in itself - it's only when such multiplying generations breed and spread destructively, without a dharmic conscience, that they become a burden on Mother Earth.

It is said that our planet could easily carry more than seven billion peaceful vegetarians in a sustainable development lifestyle, recycling resources and utilizing renewable energy; on the other hand even smaller numbers of war-mongering exploiters who have no respect for nature soon become a cancer that creates immense sufferings for themselves, for others and for Mother Earth.

As we have already mentioned, the civilized and comfortable path of progress described in the Vedic scriptures and tradition starts from *dharma* then develops through dharmic *artha* to dharmic *kama* and then to *moksha*.

The expression *kama dhuk* implies that *kama* or sense gratification is a legitimate benefit – one of the four above mentioned *arthas* of human life and a divine blessing as well. However, later on (3.37) *Gita* also describes *kama* (together with *krodha*) as the greatest enemy: how to reconcile these two apparently opposite meanings? The answer is given by *Gita* (7.11): the *kama* that is not contrary to *dharma*, to the principles of religion (that support society and the cosmic order), and is received as *prasada* or gift from God is not only perfectly acceptable but divine in nature, while the *kama* that is deliberately and systematically pursued on the behest of *ahankara* and *mamatva* is the door to a hellish existence.

We can see the example of the Kamadhenu, Mother Cow who is supplying all necessities as per our desires and taste: we can enjoy the healthy pleasures of cow's milk as long as we accept it as a gift in a moderate amount, without trying to impose our artificial domination and selfish profit at the cost of the sufferings of innocent creatures.

देवान्भावयतानेन ते देवा भावयन्तु वः । परस्परं भावयन्तः श्रेयः परमवाप्स्यथ ॥ ३-११ ॥

devānbhāvayatānena te devā bhāvayantu vaḥ | parasparam bhāvayantaḥ śreyaḥ paramavāpsyatha || 3-11 ||

devan: the *devas*; *bhāvayata:* having been fed/ pleased; *anena:* by this; *te:* your; *deva:* the Devas; *bhāvayantu:* will feed/ please; *vaḥ:* you (plural); *parasparam:* each other; *bhāvayantaḥ:* will become nourished/ pleased; *śreyaḥ:* ultimate benefit; *param:* supreme; *avapsyatha:* will obtain.

"The Devas will be pleased/ fed by you through these (sacred actions), and they (the Devas) will bless/ feed you (in return); in this way both sides will reciprocate in a positive way and you all will attain the highest benefit."

The particular process mentioned in this verse is reflected precisely by the ritual of fire sacrifice still performed in present days by *brahmanas*. A sacred fire is kindled in a sanctified place (altar) with pure firewood and clarified butter, then it is worshiped as the personification of Agni, who carries the offerings to the various personalities of Godhead.

Then all such personalities are called, one after the other, and to each one of them the oblation of clarified butter and food grains is poured with the appropriate *mantras*. In this way, the performer of the sacrifice becomes directly acquainted, and develops a personal relationship, with the Devas or higher entities that manage the universe. If you are thrilled at the idea of having the President of your nation for lunch, just imagine how wonderful it is to offer lunch to the President of the universe and all his staff. This creates a personal bond between the performer of the sacrifice and the Devas, as the gift of food is the most basic and intimate exchange, on which all personal relationships are built, beginning from the mother-child bond. The fire sacrifice is an authentic method to offer food to the Devas through the intermediary of Agni, the fire energy, who delivers the offerings to each one of them. This tradition has been present in many cultures since the very beginning of time - as confirmed in this verse - and it is still valid today just like many thousands of years ago.

The word *devas* mentioned in this verse refers to all the higher personalities who represent the supreme Personality of Godhead in the administration of the universe, and certainly includes Vishnu himself because we know that the fire sacrifice is not complete without the offerings (*ahuti*) poured directly to Vishnu.

Some commentators translate *deva* with the word "demigod", introduced by the Macaulayan education imposed on Indians with the purpose of demeaning the Hindu tradition and the Vedic knowledge as opposed to the "true religion" of Christianity that worshiped the "only real God" with a capital G. In the definition of the western academia a demigod (*demi* meaning "half" in French) was actually a half-god, or the product of the sexual union of a god (with a small "g") with a mortal, like the great heroes of the sacred stories of ancient Greece (such as Heracles, or Achilles etc) and even the "giants" mentioned in the Bible as the progeny of the "sons of God" and the "daughters of men".

According to this understanding, the "demigods" in Vedic tradition would be somebody like the Pandavas - sons of Kunti conceived with divine personalities such as Surya, Yama, Vayu, Indra and the Asvini kumaras. Now we see that no oblations are offered in the fire sacrifice for the Pandavas, so we can rest assured that the Devas mentioned in this and the following verses are not "demigods". Rather, the Devas worshiped in the *yajna* are Vishnu first and foremost, then his manifestation in this material world known as Shiva Mahadeva, Vishnu's *guna avatara* Brahma (the creator of this particular universe), Surya (also known as Surya Narayana), and the various archetypal personifications of the powers in the universe - from Agni (Fire) to Bhumi (Mother Earth) to Vayu, Indra, etc, all intimate associates of the transcendental Lord Vishnu. And certainly not "demigods". Rather, the scriptures describe them as "limbs" or "arms" of the Personality of Godhead: *bahavo loka-palanam (Bhagavata Purana 1.11.26)*, *indrayo bahava ahur usrah (Bhagavata Purana 2.1.29)*

We should be extremely careful not to disrespect any of such great personalities of Godhead, because it would be a terrible mistake - such offense would break the positive and constructive cooperation that brings all blessings on human society, the basic necessities for human life and progress, and ultimately the purification of all activities and the consciousness of all the participants towards the supreme goal of liberation, the real ultimate benefit - *śreyaḥ*.

इष्टान्भोगान् हि वो देवा दास्यन्ते यज्ञभाविताः । तैर्दत्तानप्रदायैभ्यो यो भुङ्क्ते स्तेन एव सः ॥ ३-१२ ॥

iṣṭānbhogān hi vo devā dāsyante yajñabhāvitaḥ | tairdattānapradāyaibhyo yo bhun̄kte stena eva saḥ || 3-12 ||

iṣṭan: desired; *bhogan:* pleasures/ necessities; *hi:* certainly; *vaḥ:* for you all; *devah:* the Devas; *dasyante:* will give; *yajna:* by the sacrifice; *bhavitah:* pleased/ nourished; *taih:* by them; *dattan:* given; *apradaya:* without giving; *ebhyah:* to these; *yah:* he who; *bhunkte:* enjoys/ eats; *stenah:* thief; *eva:* certainly; *sah:* he.

"Satisfied by *yajna* (sacred action), the Devas will give you whatever pleasures you desire. One who eats what is given by them without offering anything in return is just a thief."

Without the blessings of the Personalities of Godhead, we would not be able to achieve success in our enterprises or even obtain the basic necessities in life. Even if we put in a lot of hard work, we would never be able to create food without depending on the archetypal energies of the universe - like the sun, earth, rain, fire, and so on. Recognizing this debt towards these powers in the universe is the first step towards sanity, because a human being who understands this basic fact and is grateful and respectful towards the powers of nature will work constructively rather than destructively as we have seen from the results of the non-sustainable model, born from the abrahamic misconception of nature as a lowly and sinful thing to be exploited and dominated like a slave that is considered just as a property, devoid of any personal rights.

Of course sometimes we hear or see people from such abrahamic beliefs appreciating nature as the creation of God and wishing to preserve it instead of sacrificing its resources to the greed of consumerism and corporate profit, but still their purpose is to enjoy nature, not to worship and serve it respectfully and gratefully. Non-abrahamic cultures, especially those who remained more closely connected to the original respect for nature, often remain(ed) very perplexed when faced with the disrespectful and exploitative mentality of the

"colonizers": how can someone possess land or water to the point of claiming the right to destroy and kill them? These native cultures are most environment-friendly, often matriarchal, sometimes with open marriages, and affording full freedom and respect to all their members along the line of natural ethics and behaviors, by which everyone is intrinsically entitled to take whatever they need but not more than that. Even their relationships with animals and plants are based with a deep respect that does not interfere with the natural needs of the human beings such as eating vegetable or animal foods. In the Vedic tradition, these peoples are known as *vanavasis*, "forest dwellers".

Vedic culture is more urbanized and relies on a more complex and regulated system, where the ethical norms are more demanding because of a greater amount of responsibilities for each member of society. In a sense, we could say that while the *vanavasis* live happily like children who are cared for and protected by Mother Nature, the members of Vedic society are more like dutiful adult sons who take charge of caring for, nurturing and protecting Mother Nature according to the specific orders they have been given, in close cooperation with the higher managerial staff of the universe - the Devas. Small children feel love and respect for Mother, but adult sons develop a deeper understanding, they are grateful and eager to reciprocate and help. They feel it is wrong to just accept the bountiful gifts of nature without offering anything in return. If Hindus were able and willing to actually put such wonderful knowledge and ideals into practice, they would be the greatest asset for the planet. Unfortunately, for the great majority of Hindus, it's all about theory and nothing about practice. In this verse the word *bhogan* refers to the healthy pleasure that fulfills a real need - such as food. This same definition is normally used for the food offerings presented to the Deities in the temple.

यज्ञशिष्टाशिनः सन्तो मुच्यन्ते सर्वकिल्बिषैः । भुञ्जते ते त्वघं पापा ये पचन्त्यात्मकारणात् ॥ ३-१३ ॥

yajñāśiṣṭāśinaḥ santo mucyante sarvakilbiṣaiḥ । bhunjate te tvaghaṁ pāpā ye pacantyātma-kāraṇāt ॥ 3-13 ॥

yajña: sacrifice; *sishta*: leftovers; *asinaḥ*: who eat; *santah*: good people/ by being; *mucyante*: become liberated; *sarva*: from all; *kilbishaih*: contamination/ sin; *bhunjate*: enjoy/ eat; *te*: they; *tu*: but; *agham*: sin/ guilt; *papah*: sinful people/ criminals; *ye*: those; *pacanty*: cook; *atma-karanat*: for themselves.

"The good people who subsist on the leftovers from the sacrifice/ sacred action are liberated from all consequences, while those who cook for selfish purposes are eating/ enjoying sinful (substances)."

Yajna sishta defines the leftovers or byproducts of *yajna*, the sacred action. On one level, they are the food grains and the other foodstuff that remain at the end of a ritual worship, that always includes a *bhoga* offering consisting of fruits and even cooked preparations, such as the spiceless boiled rice *havisyanna* ("the grains for the *havi*" or fire sacrifice), sweet rice and milk pudding, and so on.

At another level, they are the rightful share of maintenance that we can accept after performing our social duty – the *sudra* is entitled to full maintenance from his employer/ master, the *vaisya* is entitled to enjoying a part of the wealth he produces, the *kshatriya* is entitled to the facilities required to perform his work (both at the muscular/ physical level and at the mental and social levels), the *brahmana* is entitled to a share or *dakshina* in the celebration of religious rituals and activities and as a gesture of gratitude from the students. On yet another level, the appropriate food that we take to sustain our body and mind in our progressive life aimed at Self realization is considered *yajna sishta*, as such pursuit is also considered *yajna* or sacred action.

The dharmic diet is vegetarian – a means of livelihood that causes the least amount of unnecessary sufferings and complications, and even more important, it perfectly fulfills our nutritional requirements. *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 understanding. When understanding and memory are strong, all the knots of the heart become dissolved." However, plants, too, are living entities and killing them also entails a karmic consequence that we should not take lightly. We are entitled to our adequate share of maintenance but only as long as we work sincerely for the benefit of the entire universe, as long as we do not simply live for our own sake and to enjoy sense gratification. Again, it is important to understand that this verse does not condemn the natural need for wholesome and pleasurable supplies to the proper maintenance of our body and mind. Sometimes people come to believe that sense gratification is the greatest enemy, and therefore suffering or deprivation must be good things in themselves, so they should be pursued for the sake of one's spiritual progress. This idea is generally connected to the idea of austerity or *tapasya*, and often extends to other painful or self-damaging or generally repulsive practices that are believed to earn merits and blessings to those who follow them, sometimes in blind imitation of famous ascetics of the past. The proper understanding of the issue requires the consideration of some important factors. First of all, the focus of the Vedic system, and especially of the *Gita*, is not about condemning sense gratification but about becoming self-controlled so that we will not become distracted from our proper performance of duties by the pleasure caused by sense gratification or by the sorrow caused by its absence.

Secondly, the search for sense gratification is a natural instinct in all living entities, and it is aimed at the survival of the individual and the collectivity. At the human level, the living entity learns to find pleasure and happiness not only at the physical and mental levels (as plants and animals are able to do) but at the spiritual level as well, so the focus should shift to a progressive direction, and the individual should become able to renounce some sense gratification in order to achieve a greater purpose. Another very important point is the "demonstration mission". Sometimes, unevolved people have difficulties in believing that there can be something beyond immediate sense gratification, so it might be necessary to shock them out of that complacency by offering an example of extreme renunciation, as in the case of the Aghoris, a particular group of ascetics. However, these practices are only intended as a wake up call for the sleeping souls, and not as the very purpose of spiritual life. Insisting on extreme and shocking renunciation in the practice of austerities is actually condemned by *Gita* (17.14-19). Particularly, verse 19 declares that penance performed through self-torture belongs to ignorance and does not bring good results in the long run.

From the stories told in the Vedic literature we find that such extreme penances are characteristic of *asuras* who are determined to acquire a greater material power, usually to dominate and oppress others, or even to fight against God and *dharma*. While it is a fact that such practices can help the individual develop their personal charisma and power in this world, out of a sort of "bank balancing" of *karma*, they are not recommended for those who want to progress spiritually or even obtain a long lasting material benefit.

Asuras are usually slain by an incarnation of God after a relatively short career. Ideologies based on asuric ideals have made a cult out of suffering and torture - both self-torture and inflicting pain on others. We should be very careful not to fall into this misconception.

अन्नाद्भवन्ति भूतानि पर्जन्यादन्नसम्भवः । यज्ञाद्भवति पर्जन्यो यज्ञः कर्मसमुद्भवः ॥ ३-१४ ॥

annādbhavanti bhūtāni parjanyaḍannasambhavaḥ | yajñādbhavati parjanya yajñaḥ karmasamudbhavaḥ || 3-14 ||

annat: from the food/ grains; *bhavanti*: come to existence; *bhutani*: all living entities/ types of life; *parjanya*: from the rains; *anna-sambhavaḥ*: all the foods; *yajnat*: from the sacrifice; *bhavati*: comes to existence; *parjanya*: rain; *yajnat*: from sacrifice; *karma*: from action/ work; *samudbhavaḥ*: born.

"(All) creatures come to being thanks to (food) grains, and (food) grains come into being thanks to rain. Rain comes thanks to the performance of sacrifice, and sacrifice comes to being through work."

This verse carries much more meaning than it would seem at first sight. Everybody can see that all living entities subsist on food, and cannot even start to develop their new bodies without food, from the very beginning of their existence. This applies not only to human beings but to all animals and even to plants - each seed being naturally equipped with a sufficient supply of nutrients that will enable it to sprout and grow until it can get its food from the external world. *Anna* is often translated as "food grains" or "rice" but it is a general term that we can apply to all substantial vegetarian foods. Actually even non-vegetarian foods derive from plant foods, because meat is the flesh of an animal that grew up and lived on such vegetable nutrients. The next fundamental ingredient for life is rain, or water. Plant food can be grown only with the help of rains - we see that in desert regions, where rainfall is very scarce, growing food is extremely difficult. Again, even water extracted from deep wells in places where it hardly even rains, ultimately ended up there in the aquifer because it was collected from the rains that blessed other regions.

The next link of the chain of life - rains coming from sacrifice - may be a little less evident than the previous two (food and water), but it is nonetheless true and important, as all ancient cultures believed. Still in the collective subconscious western cultures carry the idea of the King who is the consort of Earth and makes it prosper by his self-sacrifice, causing adequate rains and timely good weather so that abundant food can be produced for all. The Vedic approach to this concept is more complex and even more glorious, as each and every civilized human being becomes, through the performance of his sacred professional duty, a working link in the chain of life that supports the entire universe, in close cooperation with his colleagues and superiors, the Devas that work in the highest jobs of universal administration and maintenance.

In this verse, the last causal link of the mechanism that sustains life consists in the close connection between *yajna* and *karma*, sacrifice and work according to one's social duties. *Karma*, or prescribed action, is not limited to mere ritualistic ceremonies, but must include the performance of one's occupational duties within society as described for the various *varnas*. Celebrating a *homa* - no matter how grandiose or complicated - with resources stolen from others, obtained without working adequately, or gathered through other illicit means, can never be considered a true sacrifice or *yajna*, and it will not have the desired results. The Devas will not even accept the offerings: they are not bound to.

The Smṛiti explains that the oblations poured into the fire and accepted by the Devas reach the sun and sustain its work in evaporating the clouds and causing them to fall down again on the land as rain. It may seem childish to think that our small fire can give energy to the sun, but yet again, it is the sentiment that counts, and we are indeed like small children compared to God. When a small child offers some food to his mother or father, nobody will think that such small offering is required to sustain the parents' life and livelihood; it is rather the other way around, as by definition, the child is fed and sustained by the parents, who take care of his needs. But when a parent accepts such loving gift, there is an inspiration and a bonding created in the parents' minds that go much beyond the actual nutritional value of the food offered. Exclusive devotees of a particular Personality of Godhead - usually devotees of Vishnu or Krishna - sometimes have problems in accepting the idea of offering something to the Devas, because they feel that all their energy should be focused on Vishnu or Krishna only, and that by seeking such exclusive relationship they will not need to care about anything anybody else, including the Devas. Such an idea is valid in principle, as Vishnu is the original source of all other Personalities of Godhead that manifest in this world, and therefore a devotee situated on the transcendental platform does not need to concern himself about anything else. He knows that Vishnu - or Krishna, the most intimate form among the many forms of Vishnu - will take care of him under all aspects. However, we need to warn superficial people against trying to apply this principle with the wrong motivations and without having actually attained the transcendental level, because the effects will be disastrous. Piloting a high-speed airplane is all good and wonderful if you are actually able and qualified to do that, if you do it for the proper purpose (as a useful job that benefits the community) and if you do it in the air - totally detached from the earth. If you try to drive an airplane around the city streets at high speed for the purpose of feeling superior to others (who can merely drive a car) or to impress others, but without being able or willing to let go of the earthly surface and its comforts, you become a serious danger to yourself and to society.

A pure exclusive devotee of Krishna, who refuses to care about the Devas or anybody else, should not try to take anything from the Devas or from anybody else. He should just wait until Krishna sends him food unsolicited. If he claims that only Krishna exists for him, let him show that nice theory in practice and retire from all other engagements in the acquisition of material power and exploitation of the resources that are supplied by the Devas and other people. Otherwise, he remains a vulgar thief, even if he is claiming he is "stealing for Krishna", because Krishna's instructions are very different, as we can see from this verse.

कर्म ब्रह्मोद्भवं विद्धि ब्रह्माक्षरसमुद्भवम् । तस्मात्सर्वगतं ब्रह्म नित्यं यज्ञे प्रतिष्ठितम् ॥ ३-१५ ॥

karma brahmodbhavaṁ viddhi brahmākṣarasamudbhavam | tasmātsarvagataṁ brahma nityaṁ yajñe pratiṣṭhitam || 3-15 ||

karma: work; *brahma*: from Brahma; *udbhavam*: born (from); *viddhi*: know (that); *brahma*: spirit/ Brahma the creator; *akshara*:

Imperishable; *samudbhavam*: born (from); *tasmat*: therefore; *sarva-gatam*: omnipresent; *brahma*: Brahman; *nityam*: eternal; *yajne*: in the *yajna*; *pratishtitam*: is residing/ based.

"Know that work comes from Brahma, and Brahma comes from the Imperishable, therefore the all-pervading Brahman eternally resides in sacred action."

One of the most peculiar characteristics of the Sanskrit language is a greater number of letters as compared to the Latin-based alphabet; this makes transliteration a difficult job unless special diacritic marks are used to distinguish for example a "short *a*" from a "long *a*" as in this case. As the word *brahma* in this verse is twice entwined in a *sandhi* that could carry either a short *a* or a long *a*, we must conclude that both meanings can be applicable, at different levels of understanding... and even the first *brahma* mentioned should be considered as a representative of the *brahma* mentioned second in the verse.

The word *brahma* ending with a "short *a*" means is synonym with Brahman, and refers to the spiritual principle, that unchangeable, eternal, and transcendental existence that continues on the non-manifested level.

The same word with a "long *a*" is the name of that subordinate personality of Godhead who is known as the *guna avatara* for passion and the creator/ demiurge of each particular universe. This Brahma (with "long *a*") is born from the lotus flower sprouting from the navel of Garbhodakashayi Vishnu at the beginning of each cycle of creation; he lives 100 of his years (equivalent to one entire cycle of the universe) on the highest planet of this universe, called Brahmaloaka or Satyaloka, and then becomes reabsorbed into the body of Vishnu at the time of dissolution. As he is the first created being, he receives from Vishnu the knowledge required to develop and manage this particular universe, and a head for each of its dimensions. Our universe has four dimensions, so our Brahma is portrayed as having four heads; other universes may have more dimensions and therefore their respective Brahmas may have an adequate number of heads (symbolically speaking). Accordingly, Brahma proceeds to speak the *Vedas* - the eternal and universal knowledge both material and spiritual, that will guide all on the path of progress. In this sense, Brahma is identified as the personified form of the *Vedas* themselves.

From the sound vibration, Brahma manifests all the various aspects of the universe and the species of life. From his mind he generates a number of children, including a sequence of Manus and their respective wives/ feminine counterparts. In turn, these *prajapatis* produce all the generations of living entities that populate all the planets in the universe. Being the ancestor, teacher, creator and administrator of all the living entities in the universe, this Brahma can very well be described as the one who spells the duties and work activities for all. However, Brahma is a mere administrator, a representative for the real owner of the establishment - the Imperishable, the Brahman, or Vishnu/ Narayana. The word *Brahman* in this verse indicates the supreme and all-pervading existence and consciousness of which we are all parts. As cells of the immense body of the *virat purusha* (Param Brahman) we have the duty to properly perform our functions – work, duty, or *karma*. This Param Brahman or Personality of Godhead is called *akshara*, "imperishable", or in other words, transcendental and unchangeable, but from this *akshara* the entire reality of the spiritual and material universes is emanated through constant activity. As part of the Brahman, the Atman or individual soul is also active and by performing his proper duty he participates of the active divinity of God.

From this verse, we get yet another confirmation about the fact that one's prescribed duty is non-different from worship when it is performed in a spirit of service to the Supreme.

एवं प्रवर्तितं चक्रं नानुवर्तयतीह यः ।

अघायुरिन्द्रियारामो मोघं पार्थ स जीवति ॥ ३-१६ ॥

evam pravartitam cakram nanuvaratayatiha yah | aghayurindriyaramo mogham partha sa jivati || 3-16 ||

evam: thus; *pravartitam*: established; *cakram*: wheel/ cycle; *na*: not; *nuvartayati*: takes up; *iha*: in this world/ life; *yah*: one who; *agha*: sin/ crime; *ayuh*: duration of life; *indriya*: the senses; *aramah*: seeking happiness; *mogham*: without benefit; *partha*: o son of Pritha (Arjuna); *sah*: he (this person); *jivati*: lives.

"O son of Pritha, one who does not accept to follow this established cycle (of action) is enjoying his senses through a sinful longevity, and his life is useless."

The word *chakram* means "wheel". A wheel, a circle, is a cycle that has no beginning or end, like the orbit of a planet around its star. The entire universe revolves in cycles, as this is the nature of the material manifestation - always existing, always changing. Each cycle affords opportunities for progress and action, as well as for liberation: it is the best possible plan.

As Krishna has explained in the previous verses, according to the universal law, the human beings and the Devas sustain and nurture one another in a constant cycle that produces sacred activities, preserves the natural order of nature through the seasons and rains, creates resources and especially food supplies, and enables the progressive life for all living entities.

Life is a cycle. It can be meaningful and supportive for the universe when we perform our duty selflessly, or it can be meaningless if we keep uselessly wheeling around without going anywhere when we are just seeking our selfish pleasure. In a non-progressive society, at a certain level of personal evolution one starts feeling that he is "living for nothing" – surviving to keep a job so that he can work to pay the bills to keep himself in a position to be able to keep the job. Usually such jobs appear totally meaningless as industrialized societies have broken occupational duties down to tiny bits of over-specialization, transforming the human being into a mere insignificant cog in a huge machinery and thus killing the sense of purpose, the sense of completion in the activity, the pride for one's work, intellectual stimulation, as well as creativity, imagination, intelligence and personal progress. The result is a deep sense of dissatisfaction and unhappiness that is engineered by the advertisement industry to create false "substitution" needs through compulsive consumerism based on real or imagined sense gratification, sense of possession, material identification and attachment. We can escape this vicious circle that binds us to an endless repetition of births and deaths by offering our actions in the virtuous cycle of reciprocal support with the entire creation through dharmic action. *Ayur* means "life, health, energy, longevity". The food and the other pleasures we obtain to maintain our life and health should be engaged in the higher mission of working for *dharma*. If they are not, then our duration of life, our good health, the energies and resources that we enjoy and consume are not properly paid for, so life becomes useless and pointless, and even a culpable waste of resources and opportunities.

यस्त्वात्मरतिरेव स्यादात्मतृप्तश्च मानवः । आत्मन्येव च सन्तुष्टस्तस्य कार्यं न विद्यते ॥ ३-१७ ॥

yastvātmaratīreva syādātmatṛptaśca mānavaḥ | ātmanyeva ca santuṣṭastasya kāryam na vidyate || 3-17||

yah: one who; *tu*: but; *atma*: in the *atman* (the Self); *ratih*: attachment/ love; *eva*: only; *syat*: remains; *atma*: in the *atman*; *triptah*: satisfied; *ca*: and; *manavaḥ*: a human being; *atmani*: in the *atman* (Self); *eva*: only; *ca*: and; *santushtah*: contented; *tasya*: of him; *karyam*: duty; *na*: not; *vidyate*: is known/ there is.

"A human being who loves the Self certainly becomes satisfied in the Self and peaceful within the Self: for such a person there is no need to perform any action."

As we were mentioning previously, a person who is fully situated on the transcendental level of consciousness, in the constant contemplation of the One Reality (called Brahman, Paramatma, Bhagavan) does not have any duties to perform because he is not interested in obtaining sense gratification or any other achievement. He is simply happy and satisfied whatever happens. However, it is very important to understand that this verse does not approve inaction, as it will become evident in the next verses. The person who is situated on the transcendental level does not have any duties to perform because he is already fully engaged in working in transcendental service out of a spontaneous desire to assist the plan of the Supreme Personality of Godhead.

We could say that he is not engaged in a job any more because he has graduated from the position of an employee to that of a son of the owner of the enterprise. For him there is no question of salary or holidays, working hours verification or similar concerns, because his life has become totally devoted to the enterprise. He does not need a salary because all his needs are automatically met by living in the wealthiest family, and he does not need vacations because he simply rests when he is tired and when circumstances afford it, but he is ready to perform the required actions whenever it is necessary.

What is the difference between a job and a hobby? Many people like cooking or gardening as a hobby. Others work as carpenters or weavers or potters in their leisure time, others write novels or teach as a voluntary community service after their working hours at their day job. On the other hand, some people have apparently unusual jobs, such as those who test videogames, or taste ice cream, or travel in wonderful locations and luxury hotels to rate them, or watch movies to write critiques. Where is the line between hard work and enjoyment? Usually the difference is that you must work at your job even when you do not feel like engaging in that activity, while a hobby is only a pleasure pursuit - but then again, what to speak of those who choose martial arts or sports as hobbies? If they train only when they like, they will never become good at what they do. Voluntary social workers who offer their leisure time for the care of the underprivileged will easily find out that such engagement is not always pleasurable and easy, but also requires a lot of spirit of self sacrifice. Even a hobby like carpentry requires some effort and sacrifice, otherwise one will remain unable to finish any project.

So basically the point is that a job is a mentality - a level of consciousness - where our work is characterized by the desire to obtain some personal benefits that would not be available to us if we did not put sufficient hard work in the deal. It is not a matter of love and passion, of finding contentment and happiness in the action itself. The job mentality is the characteristic of the unqualified *sudra*, who is lazy, greedy and exploitative, trying to get as much as possible while giving as little as possible. Therefore he needs to be pushed around and watched constantly even to accomplish very little, because he does not like to work. He does not work out of passion or love.

On the other hand, an evolved human being - even a good *sudra* who is preparing to evolve into a *vaisya* - finds satisfaction in his work and acts more out of a service spirit than to get something for himself. We can make the examples of painters, musicians, craftspeople and other artists, barbers and hairdressers, tailors, or even personal servants who take pride and satisfaction in serving their masters well. As *sudras*, they need patrons or employers who tell them what to do and regularly take care of their needs, because they are unable to develop some fruitful enterprise on their own and manage their wealth. They simply work with their own hands and not with their brains, but still they can attain perfection and become very useful members of society if they find contentment and pride in performing their duties well.

From that level, another small step, consisting in a greater sense of responsibility, will enable them to graduate as *vaisyas* or entrepreneurs, who are able to market their work successfully and sell a good finished product without depending on the instructions of others.

The three definitions of *rati*, *tripti* and *santoshā* apply to different types of satisfaction. *Rati* indicates attachment or love, *tripti* is the happiness derived from the contact with the object of one's attachment or love, and *santoshā* is the happiness and contentment that is perceived in oneself.

नैव तस्य कृतेनार्थो नाकृतेनेह कश्चन । न चास्य सर्वभूतेषु कश्चिदर्थव्यपाश्रयः ॥ ३-१८ ॥

naiva tasya kṛtenārtho nākṛteneha kaścana | na cāsya sarvabhūteṣu kaścīdarthavyapāśrayaḥ || 3-18||

na: not; *eva*: certainly; *tasya*: of him; *kritena*: by performing a duty; *arthah*: a purpose/ value; *na*: not; *akritena*: by not performing a duty; *iha*: in this world/ life/ body; *kascana*: whatever; *na*: not; *ca*: and; *asya*: of him; *sarva-bhuteshu*: in all the living beings; *kascid*: anything; *artha*: purpose; *vyapasrayah*: taking shelter of/ depending on.

"This (person) does not have any reason to abstain from activities/ from the prescribed duty, just like he does not have any reason to perform any duty. In this world he does not depend on any other creature/ situation/ object for any purpose."

When a person is truly detached, such renunciation applies not only to the selfish action but also to the selfish abstention from action. Krishna has already stated very clearly that in this world (*iha*) one constantly needs to act, even if only to procure one's basic bodily maintenance. This concept is repeated and confirmed in this verse by the word *iha*.

A person who just takes benefits from others without giving adequate and useful reciprocation is just a parasite - a position that is unworthy of the dignity of a human being. It is foolish and dishonest to claim that we do not have any duties to perform because we are on

the transcendental level of pure Krishna bhakti - and then demand or expect maintenance from other people. On the other hand, when the host gets some benefit from the presence of the guest, we can speak of a mutual cooperation and symbiosis: the reciprocation in the "wheel" that Krishna was talking about in the previous verses. Therefore in this verse Krishna clarifies that a person who is situated on the transcendental level does not live at the expenses of any other being, either Devas or human beings or animals or plants. A parasite takes shelter in the body of the host in order to find its food and enjoyment, but it does not contribute anything positive and rather it can create diseases and other problems, therefore it should be avoided and eliminated.

A *sannyasi* can only beg alms for his food. He cannot demand anything, and certainly not luxuries such as first class flight seats, status symbol gadgets, or any other special material facility. Contrarily to what many people believe, the *sannyasa* vows impose even greater duties and sacrifices than those connected to married life. If one wishes not to marry and engage in family duties because he does not need the opportunities for sense gratification afforded by family life, it is possible to remain unmarried even without formally taking the order of *sannyasa*. The followers of Chaitanya, for example, traditionally did not take *sannyasa* until the reform introduced by Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati and the creation of the Gaudiya Matha. Even without being *sannyasis*, those *babajis* could fully dedicate themselves to spiritual realization and pure devotion, and they often gave a great example of renunciation and simplicity of lifestyle. On the other hand, those who take *sannyasa* simply to escape responsibilities and duties and to live a free independent life of sense gratification based on selfish considerations should certainly not be respected as great advanced personalities.

According to the Vedic tradition, one needs to pay one's debts to the ancestors by marrying and generating at least one child - this is considered a precise duty for each man. Furthermore, marriage can be very beneficial and practical: one's social occupation often requires a considerable amount of time and effort to give the proper results, so marriage affords a synergy of mutual support between husband and wife, where the wife takes care of the daily home maintenance chores such as cooking etc. and often assists the husband in his occupation according to the particular *varna* he belongs to, but with the possibility of taking all the necessary time to care for the children and for herself. In a balanced marriage of two responsible and proactive persons, there is still sufficient freedom and certainly there are many opportunities to practice renunciation and simplicity in lifestyle, as well as spiritual and devotional progress.

As the word *bhuta* also applies to a state of being - a condition of life or situation - we can easily understand that a person who is situated in Transcendence is not taking shelter in any particular state of being, or in other words he does not identify with any position or condition, and remains detached from the pleasures and sufferings afforded by the various situations. Such a person does not see an intrinsic value in any particular situation, because he knows that they will all come and go as temporary phenomena.

तस्मादसक्तः सततं कार्यं कर्म समाचर । असक्तो ह्याचरन्कर्म परमाप्नोति पूरुषः ॥ ३-१९ ॥

tasmādasaktaḥ satataṁ kāryaṁ karma samācara | asakto hyācarankarma paramāpnoti pūruṣaḥ || 3-19 |

tasmat: therefore; *asaktah*: without attachment; *satatam*: always; *karyam*: duties; *karma*: action/ work; *samacara*: perform; *asaktah*: detached; *hi*: certainly; *acaran*: acting /putting in practice; *karma*: work/ action; *param*: better/ supreme; *apnoti*: obtains; *purushah*: a person.

"Therefore you should always perform your activities in the proper way but without attachment, because by performing selfless work a man achieves the Supreme."

Krishna has already stated several times that action should be performed out of selfless duty only, without personal attachment. He is again repeating this concept here, because it is an extremely important concept. In Vedic tradition, repetition is a sign of great importance and should not be underestimated as boring or redundant. One should perform one's duty even when it requires difficult or painful actions, or it brings us losses or problems of some type. A *kshatriya* has the duty to confront the aggressor without being attached to the idea of being a good compassionate or nonviolent man, and similarly each human being faces similar difficulties in the proper performance of one's duties. The feeling of cleanliness is a good thing and helps us become situated on the level of *sattva*, but we should not remain attached to it to the point that we cannot engage in cleaning our dirty clothes or in other similar duties. A *brahmana* who refuses to do his normal cleaning work because of his "sattvic position" only becomes a dirty person, just like someone who claims that he never needs to take a bath or wash up because he is "clean by nature" or "genetically clean".

In this verse the word *param* means "superior", and it can be applied to the Supreme Reality - Brahman or the direct service to the Supreme Personality of Godhead - or simply to something better, more beneficial, more valuable. Even at this ordinary level, the instruction contained in the verse makes perfect sense - without giving up the inferior object, it is very difficult to obtain a superior one. We need to make space in our lives for better things by letting go of the inferior things that cannot really help us in our progress. Many people like to accumulate objects and end up cluttering their homes and their lives with a lot of useless things, sometimes even useless relationships or engagements or situations. The natural cycle of life requires us to clear up the space in our existence, so that we can welcome better things.

Of course this consideration should not be used as a cheap pretext to escape one's responsibilities - trying to get rid of a burdensome relationship when we have finished exploiting it. A relationship has not exhausted itself unless we have paid our karmic debts in full. If we try to take a "shortcut" we will simply find ourselves in exactly the same situation in the future, in this or in other lifetimes, and we will have to pay until our debts are settled. It is not very difficult to see when a relationship or a situation has come to the end line: usually the other person who is the object of the relationship wants to leave, or to change the terms of the connection. From our side, we gradually develop the feeling that the relationship is unbalanced or it is not going anywhere, it is not helping us to grow and to improve ourselves. We may also have the feeling that we have "given enough" without getting appropriate appreciation or reciprocation, or that the situation is suffocating us like a prison cell. In such situations, we need to move on. We will certainly find better things.

कर्मणैव हि संसिद्धिमास्थिता जनकादयः । लोकसंग्रहमेवापि सम्पश्यन्कर्तुमर्हसि ॥ ३-२० ॥

karmaṇaiva hi samsiddhimāsthitā janakādayaḥ । lokasaṅgrahamevāpi sampasyankartumarhasi ।। 3-20 ।।

karmana: by working; *eva:* also; *hi:* certainly; *samsiddhim:* full perfection; *asthitah:* situated; *janaka:* Janaka; *adayah:* and others; *loka:* world/ people; *sangraham:* in general; *eva:* also; *api:* even; *sampasyan:* considering; *kartum:* to do; *arhasi:* you should.

"Janaka and others (like him) became situated in perfection through the performance of activities. Also, you should consider the benefit of the general people."

This verse introduces the concept of teaching and inspiring society by our good example, by continuing to work sincerely in this world for the benefit of all, even if we really do not have any duty to perform because we are perfectly satisfied in the Self and we do not wish to obtain anything for ourselves or our associates.

Teaching by example is the best way of teaching, and should always support the presentation of precepts. If you have a bad habit - for example smoking - you can never be effective in telling people that smoking is bad and they should not smoke, because your credibility will be very scarce. When you resort to material forceful means to make sure that you remain the only authority in spite of such serious shortcomings, the general people will be confused and will lose the sense of truthfulness and reality, and you will be the cause of disaster in society. However, even when you are behaving consistently with what you teach, it is always better to avoid situations where the general people may not be able to correctly understand your actions, because ignorant people have the tendency to observe superficially, misinterpret and utilize such wrong interpretation to justify their own misconduct even when controversial actions were totally uncalled for. It does not take much to convince lazy bums to follow the example of someone who is apparently not doing anything, even if they just observe their "role model" for the only 10 minutes in the day when he is having a break from an extremely active and tiresome day, even if he has just completed a 100 km running marathon. The lazy bums will take those 10 minutes and stretch them into hours and days and weeks and months and years, showing you the photo of their "role model" lying down asleep on a sofa, and justifying their own bad habit of regularly sleeping 14 to 16 hours a day, without doing any work even in the remaining hours.

There is a famous story about a very expert veterinarian, who was approached by a young man that wished to become his apprentice. The young man watched the veterinarian and saw him giving some white powder to a cow. Then the vet was called to treat a horse: he just took a mallet and smashed the lump in his throat; the horse was instantly cured. The young apprentice decided he had seen enough: he stole the medicine bag from his mentor, ran away and started advertising himself as a great veterinarian.

First he was called to help a difficult calf delivery: he gave the cow the white powder in the bag, not knowing that it was a medicine to prevent miscarriage and premature birth, so instead of facilitating the delivery he effectively prevented it, and both the cow and the calf died. Next he was called by a farmer whose horse had developed a tumor in his throat: the young man took the mallet and tried to smash the lump, effectively killing the poor animal. He did not know that the horse originally treated by the real doctor had simply swallowed an entire watermelon that had become stuck in his throat creating breathing difficulties, so when the watermelon was skillfully shattered, its pieces were dislodged and moved to the stomach, clearing his windpipes. The ignorant apprentice had no idea that there is a big difference between a small watermelon and a large encysted tumor, because he was convinced that only the external action was significant: he was just an imitator. We need to remember that the world is full of similarly ignorant people.

The Janaka mentioned in the verse is considered to be king Janaka, the father of Sita and father in law of Sri Ramachandra. He is listed as one of the twelve *mahajanas*, or great authorities on *dharma*, together with Shiva Mahadeva, Yamaraja, Brahma, Narada, the Kumaras (considered as one), Kapila, Manu, Prahlada, Bali Maharaja and Sukadeva the son of Vyasa. Janaka was recognized as *rajarishi*, a saintly king who was very expert in all sorts of knowledge, both material and spiritual. At his court great *rishis* and sages such as Yajnavalkya, Astavakra etc assembled for profound discussions about many subjects; such discussions are narrated in authoritative texts such as *Mahabharata*, *Brihad aranyaka upanishad*, *Maha upanishad*, and *Astavakra gita*.

There is a famous story about king Janaka. It is said that one day Narada was visiting Narayana and they were discussing about the perfection of human life, whether it could be attained from any stage of life in the *varnashrama* system. Narayana declared that it was certainly possible, and he mentioned the example of king Janaka, suggesting Narada to go and see him. When Narada arrived at the court of Janaka, he found the king apparently immersed in sense gratification - surrounded by beautiful objects and people, in a very luxurious palace, enjoying the best in food and drinks and entertainment. Suddenly a palace servant rushed into the hall, informing the king about an emergency to be addressed in the kingdom, and Janaka leapt instantly to his feet, completely lucid and alert, running to his duties without the least hesitation, totally forgetting about his own pleasure or well being. This kind of consciousness is what is required from each and everyone of us. Whatever attachment one can develop in any particular condition of life - not only those damaging and degrading attachments influenced by ignorance and passion, but also the sattvic attachment to peaceful and quiet life, simplicity, renunciation, cleanliness, etc - must be instantly dropped, without a moment of hesitation, when duty calls. This requires a very sharp, alert and stable consciousness, and the constant vision and remembrance of what is really important. If we remain on this level of consciousness, at the time of death we will be able to leave the entire material manifestation behind and attain the supreme destination without any extra effort.

यद्यदाचरति श्रेष्ठस्तत्तदेवेतरो जनः । स यत्प्रमाणं कुरुते लोकस्तदनुवर्तते ॥ ३-२१ ॥

yadyadācarati śreṣṭhastattadevetaro janaḥ । sa yatpramāṇam kurute lokastadanuvartate ।। 3-21 ।।

yat yat: whatever; *acharati:* he does/ shows by example; *sresthah:* a leader/ a superior; *tat tat:* that same (thing); *eva:* certainly; *itarah:* another (common); *janah:* the world/ the people/ a person; *sah:* he/ she; *yat:* what; *pramanam:* proof/ evidence/ authority; *kurute:* does; *lokah:* the world/ the people/ a person; *tat:* that; *anuvartate:* follows.

"Whatever the best (person) does, the general common people follow (the example) as his activities are (implicitly) accepted as the (authoritative) standard by the public."

In the previous verse Krishna explained that a liberated person should continue to work in this world by properly performing the duties connected to the particular position he occupies, just to give a good example to the general population. Here the instruction is expanded to encourage Arjuna (and all of us who are reading the *Gita*) to become leaders of society by giving the good example of working hard and selflessly.

All societies need leaders. Such leaders do not need to occupy a particular professional position or to have enforcing powers in order to have a positive influence on people: anyone can become a leader just by inspiring others with good deeds, consistency, compassion, wisdom, knowledge, and a dharmic behavior in general. However, the proper functioning of the social order absolutely requires that the individuals that occupy a position of authority must incarnate a perfect example by their personal behavior in private life as well as by the performance of their administrative or teaching duties. It is not a matter of "can", but a matter of "must". An ignorant and superficial teacher will be the public evidence that schooling is not about acquiring knowledge or understanding. A priest who does not have devotion for God, knowledge of the scriptures or personal spiritual realizations will become the proof that all religion is a farce. A corrupt magistrate will be the living demonstration that justice and good governance are nothing but illusions. Thus the devastating effect of their crimes will be much deeper.

The need for good dharmic leadership starts from the highest position of authority in society - the *brahmana* class of intellectuals, teachers (whatever subject they teach, in the fields of science or religion or history etc), counselors, advisors, consultants, preachers, scholars, researchers, scientists, writers and all those who contribute to shape the public opinion about the values and the ideals to be pursued by the mass of people. The *kshatriya* ruling class leads a very public life, too, and to the eyes of the simple-minded, government people seem to have even greater authority than the wise souls who have realized Brahman and possess the full spiritual and material knowledge. Therefore all government servants and representatives, from the king to the last tax officer, are naturally considered the leaders and authorities of society and their personal example determines the manner in which the general mass of people judge and follow legality, legitimacy, success and ethical ideals, as well as small everyday actions and choices.

The mass of people always tends to make role models out of those who are considered leaders or successful individuals, not only in their professional activities but also in their personal lifestyle and even in apparently irrelevant details, such as walking gait, facial expressions, and so on. Such imitation is often done blindly and foolishly, especially by ignorant people that do not have access to the proper and relevant information or do not have the discrimination to understand the many factors of a choice - such time, place and circumstance, as we have already mentioned. Even worse, if the imitation is done by those who have a personal selfish agenda to pursue. Thus, a bad man who wants to abandon his faithful wife may bring the example of Sri Rama who sent Sita away even if she was innocent. Or a cowardly and weak man who is unable to effectively fight the actual enemy will justify a campaign of secret assassinations of dissenters by bringing the example of Sri Rama who killed Vali from hiding behind a tree. A chronic liar who totally disregards truthfulness will justify himself by saying that Krishna ordered Yudhisthira to tell a lie during the battle of Kurukshetra. It does not matter to them that Rama and Krishna taught and demonstrated strict adherence to dharmic behavior in millions of other instances: bad people will pick one single event that could be misunderstood, they will take it out of context, misrepresent it to prove their faulty theory right, and use it to justify their very wrong behavior.

Two words are particularly important in this verse: *acharati* and *pramanam*. The word *acharati* stems from the same root of *acharya*, "one who teaches by example", normally used to describe the highest level of religious authority. In the ritualistic tradition of *karma kanda*, the *acharya* is the most expert and realized *brahmana* that is meant to verify the proper work of the other three officiating priests, as well as the general performance of the sacrifice. Since the times of Adi Shankara, the title of *acharya* has been used to address founders of religious/ philosophical movements, great innovative preachers of the Knowledge contained in the scriptures, and those who are educating the masses. The word *pramana* is normally used to refer to the authority of the scriptures or any authoritative evidence, including the direct perception of facts.

The words *janah* and *lokah* are both used in the singular to refer to a group of people or even to a single individual. In this verse, either interpretation may be used to get a correct understanding. This verse demonstrates that Krishna does not support at all those so-called *bhaktas* who make a show of being transcendental and detached because of their exclusive and pure "*rasika*" devotion, as a pretext for not properly performing their duties and attending to their responsibilities. If they really were such great devotees of Krishna, they would follow his very clear instructions instead of putting up some false pretense of sentimentalistic sainthood for the sake of gaining followers, fame, adoration and profit.

न मे पार्थास्ति कर्तव्यं त्रिषु लोकेषु किञ्चन । नानवाप्तमवाप्तव्यं वर्त एव च कर्माणि ॥ ३-२२ ॥

na me pārthāsti kartavyam triṣu lokeṣu kiñcana | nānavāptamavāptavyam varta eva ca karmaṇi || 3-22 |

na: not; *me*: of me; *partha*: o son of Pritha (Arjuna); *asti*: there is; *kartavyam*: (action to be performed out of) duty; *trishu*: in the three; *lokeshu*: worlds; *kinchana*: any; *na*: not; *anavaptam*: that has not been obtained; *avaptavyam*: that should be obtained; *varte*: I am engaged; *eva*: certainly; *ca*: and (yet); *karmaṇi*: in work.

"O son of Pritha, in all the three worlds there is (absolutely) nothing that I need to do or that I want to obtain, yet I also engage in (proper) activities."

The word *kartavya* means "duty", or "action that should be performed (out of duty)".

Krishna offers himself as a direct example of liberated soul still directly engaged in working in the world: the perfect demonstration of *acharya* - just to make sure that the false *bhaktas* do not try to claim their "higher level of realization" to wriggle out of the tight spot in which the previous verse nailed them. Should they be considered as more highly realized than Krishna?

The words *anavaptam* and *avaptavyam* are also interesting - meaning respectively "something that has not been obtained (yet)" or the residual karmic consequences of previous activities, and "something that is to be obtained", indicating a further desire that will generate fruitive action and future karmic consequences. In other words, Krishna has no handicap to overcome and no aspirations to be fulfilled.

Different groups of people who read the *Gita* have different perceptions of Krishna, according to the ideal they personally aspire to attain - but in all cases, whoever recognizes the authority of Krishna's teachings in this famous scripture is worshiping him with their intelligence (*Gita* 18.70). This is the common platform we should focus on. What difference does it really make, if someone sees Krishna just as a genuinely great teacher that has given up all material identifications, rather than the Supreme Lord himself, as long as Krishna's instructions are understood and followed sincerely?

In fact, there is no contradiction between all these various perspectives because the Supreme Lord is the greatest teacher, and has no material identification. There is nothing that an ordinary *jiva* can do, that the Supreme Lord is unable to do, because even if there is an "excess of qualification" in the case of the Lord, among his perfections we also find the perfect renunciation and humility, so he has no problem in taking an apparently humble role. This exercise will help us in the all-important task of becoming free from the material limitations that condition our way of thinking. Whatever limitation we try to impose on the Personality of Godhead is illusory, even if it is dictated by our affection and respect, by the projection of our own ideals and aspirations - because the Lord is way beyond that. He has no limits.

The expression *tri-loka* is the best demonstration of the collective meaning of the word *loka* as "world" or "people". Traditionally, Vedic cosmology considers three planetary systems or groups of worlds in our universe: the lower planets from Patala to Atala (influenced by ignorance), then the middle planets around Mahatala or Mahitala or Earth (influenced by passion), and then the higher planets up to Satyaloka, the abode of Brahma (influenced by goodness). We do not need to grab our telescope to identify each of these planetary systems with the physical celestial bodies that are visible from Earth, because some of them are not visible to our eyes or instruments, and some do not appear to be suitable to sustain life as we know it on this planet - their inhabitants don't find this a problem at all, because they have bodies made of different elements, although they are classified among the 400,000 human species.

The Vedic perspective is not very concerned with the composition of the material body: it is focused on the level of consciousness, on the mentality, determined by a specific mixture of the three *gunas*.

The three *lokas* mentioned in this verse are characterized by different levels of human consciousness, exemplified in the microcosm of the human body by the various *chakras*: besides the basic 7 *chakras* that go from the bottom of the spine to the crown of the head, there are 7 lower *chakras* from the thighs, the knees, the shanks, the calves, the ankles, the toes and the soles of the feet. Similarly, the subtle body that can be developed above the head level also contain 7 higher *chakras*, usually depicted by the tall conic crowns or "towering" hairstyle of Devas, Rishis, and the other great personalities of traditional iconography.

यदि ह्यहं न वर्तेयं जातु कर्मण्यतन्द्रितः । मम वर्तमानुवर्तन्ते मनुष्याः पार्थ सर्वशः ॥ ३-२३ ॥

yadi hyaham na varteyam jātu karmaṇyatandritaḥ | mama vartmānuvartante manuṣyāḥ pārtha sarvaśaḥ || 3-23 |

yadi: if; hi: certainly; aham: I; na: not; vartevyam: engaged dutifully; jatu: ever; karmani: in actions; atandrita: very attentive; mama: my; vartma: manner of engagement; anuvartante: they follow; manusyah: human beings; partha: o son of Pritha (Arjuna); sarvasah: all.

"O Partha, if I ever chose to abstain from the proper activity, all the human beings would follow my example."

Following the logical thread of the previous verses, Krishna explains that up to the highest level of consciousness in this world - including the divine *avatars* - everybody must engage heartily in working activities that are useful to society, especially those who wish to be recognized as teachers or leaders. It does not matter exactly what type of work it is: even meditation, when it is done properly, practically and with the right consciousness, actively contributes to the well-being and proper functioning of society, no more and no less than the careful and intelligent work that takes care of garbage disposal, for example.

Krishna's mission will be described early in the next chapter (*Gita* 4.8) as "protecting the good people, destroying the evil doers, and establishing the principles of *dharma*". We are all meant to follow Krishna's example, each one of us in their specific capacity: we should do our best to protect the good and the innocent, oppose and undo the schemes of the evil doers, and give the proper example of dharmic behavior. These three things must go together. We cannot take upon ourselves the task of destroying the evil doers if we are unable or unwilling to act according to *dharma* and to protect the good and the innocent - or even we are unable or unwilling to tell the difference between good people and evil doers.

Too many people have a wrong idea of "evil doers" - they usually identify them as "the others", or "the enemies", without actually bothering to examine whether such "evil doers" are actually engaged in detrimental and adharmic acts or not. The "good guys" and the "bad guys" are too often defined by biased considerations dictated by politics and sectarianism, which are definitely not the parameters taught by Krishna in *Gita* or anywhere else. "Kill them all: God will know his own" is a typically cynical and mindless approach of abrahamic imperialism and tyranny, that we should never try to imitate.

Bhagavad gita contains all the necessary knowledge to understand how to work at our mission in this world, assisting God's mission in whatever capacity we are able to fill. Logically following the thread of the discussion, it ensues that Krishna's giving a personal example of active engagement means that he also performed *yajnas* and ritual ceremonies as well as the duties connected to a professional occupation. This is confirmed by the *Puranas* and *Itihasas*.

The idea of God and his mode of intervention in the administration of the universe has always been a core issue in the study of theology. Abrahamic faiths present God as an enlarged figure of father/ master/ king, who is preeminently interested in enforcing his arbitrary will over the human beings through rewards and punishments, which include the normal activities of nature such as earthquakes, cyclones etc.

Although, strangely enough, that seems to apply only in a one-way street: when such disasters strike "the faithful" (and they do at least as often as they strike all others), it's not a punishment but a "test". This mentality stretches further to include war and other disasters brought

about by the activities of man, especially of men who claim to be representatives of God and therefore "authorized" to enforce punishment on "the unfaithful".

The Vedic view is very different. Creation and destructions are not seen as arbitrary acts of reward or punishment, but as totally natural and neutral events that are engineered in the physical laws of the universe themselves. Just like all bodies are born and die, all the material manifestations we see are created and destroyed in the course of time, and there is no question of considering such destruction as a punishment. There is no space for fearful superstition when science understands and explains the laws of nature, including the law of *karma*.

उत्सीदेयुरिमे लोका न कुर्या कर्म चेदहम् । सङ्करस्य च कर्ता स्यामुपहन्यामिमाः प्रजाः ॥ ३-२४ ॥

utsīdeyurime lokā na kuryāṁ karma cedaham | saṅkarasya ca kartā syāmuṣpahanyāmimāḥ prajāḥ || 3-24 ||

utsīdeyuh: would become ruined; *ime:* these; *lokah:* worlds/ peoples; *na:* not; *kuryam:* I do not perform; *karma:* work/ duty; *cet:* if; *aham:* I; *sankarasya:* of confused population; *ca:* and; *karta:* the doer/ responsible; *syam:* I would be; *upahanyam:* destroyed; *imah:* these; *prajah:* living entities.

"If I did not engage in my work, these people/ worlds would suffer a disaster, I would be the cause of degradation in society and of the destruction of these creatures."

This verse mentions the same *sankara* or "confused population" that was described previously (1.41, 42, 43). Some commentators insist that the definition applies to the "intermingling of castes", but in this verse such interpretation appears even more absurd than it did in the first chapter.

How is Krishna's lack of dutiful engagement in actions in his incarnation supposed to cause the "intermingling of castes"? By mixed caste marriages? By extra-marital sexual relationships? Certainly not. Krishna is not engaged in "morality police raids" or *shaadi* (arranged marriages) organization, or even in caste segregation. He has never been, either in his incarnation 5,000 years ago or even in his capacity as the Supreme Lord. The idea of "caste" segregation to avoid *varna sankara* is totally bogus, and it is never found in any scripture or in the teachings of any genuine *acharya*. It is not even reasonable in the least.

According to such logic, to better avoid such "intermingling" we should have separate cities and regions exclusively inhabited by *brahmanas*, others exclusively inhabited by *kshatriyas*, others exclusively inhabited by *vaishyas*, and others exclusively inhabited by *sudras*. This would be the only way to safely be "segregated" without any chance of ever meeting and interacting. So the only place where you can find food would be the regions inhabited by *vaishyas* (who produce it), while in all the other regions people would have to quickly starve to death because they are not meant to "intermingle" with merchants and agricultural entrepreneurs... Should the *brahmanas* only teach to *brahmanas*? Should the *kshatriyas* only engage in interaction with *kshatriyas* - never coming in contact with *brahmanas*, *vaishyas*, *sudras* or even external aggressors? Certainly not. And how would the "intermingling of castes" cause the destruction of the *prajas*?

It is like saying that having the feet, the hands, the stomach and the head communicating and cooperating together as one functional body is the cause of the destruction of the body itself - while strict segregation of these limbs by separating them from each other is the proper way to have society working and all creatures protected and prospering. This "bad mix-up" is actually more in the mind of these deluded commentators than anywhere else, and the evidence of such confusion is in the pitiable conditions of the followers of such commentators in the present Hindu society, characterized by utter lack of clarity even on the most basic concepts, desperate denial of the actual facts, ignorance of *shastra* (and everything else) to the point of elevating ignorance to the position of ideal to be followed and enforced, stubborn blind prejudice, gross material bodily identification, cruel mistreatment of women and children, neglect towards Mother Earth and Mother Cow, pollution of sacred rivers and *tirthas*, and horrible public image all around.

It is high time to wash away all such stupid misconceptions and return to the genuine and original understanding of the vedic system. As the father of all living beings, Krishna sees them all as *prajas*, "creatures"; he does not make artificial discriminations based on prejudice.

What is Krishna's work, in which he says he is constantly engaged for the benefit of all living entities and the preservation of all the worlds? Protecting the good people (including the innocent animals), undoing the evil doers, and teaching (establishing) the principles of ethics such as correct knowledge, social cooperation, selflessness, progressive life aiming at Self realization, etc. Of course there are aspects of the work of the *avatars* that make it impossible to imitate, such as being able to drink poison like Shiva or to lift Govardhana like Krishna, but if we understand the motivation behind such actions we can follow in their footsteps, each according to our actual individual capacity.

This verse responds to Arjuna's objections in 1.41, referred to the fact that the battle would mean death for a great number of men who were responsible for the protection and support of their families, societies and kingdoms. Such deaths would cause great problems to their subordinates and therefore create confusion and degradation in society. Here Krishna objects, stating that family and society actually become degraded and a confused population is created when individuals choose not to perform their dharmic duty, thus establishing a very bad example for their successors and subordinates.

If the man of the family dies for a higher cause, his wife and children will have to face some difficulties in life but they will be inspired by his sacrifice, but if the man abandons his duties due to fear or lack of responsibility, his family member will become bitter and cynical. And if such duties and responsibilities are dumped in the name of a superficial and sentimentalistic "transcendental devotion to God", the results on society will be even worse.

सक्ताः कर्मण्यविद्वांसो यथा कुर्वन्ति भारत । कुर्याद्विद्वांस्तथासक्तश्चिकीर्षुर्लोकसंग्रहम् ॥ ३-२५ ॥

saktāḥ karmaṇyavidvāṁso yathā kurvanti bhārata | kuryādvidvāṁstathāsaktaśchikīrṣurlokasaṅgraham || 3-25 ||

saktah: attached; *karmani*: to the actions; *avidvamsah*: those who are without knowledge; *yatha*: like; *kurvanti*: they do; *bharata*: o descendant of Bharata (Arjuna); *kuryat*: should do; *vidvan*: one who has knowledge; *tatha*: like; *asaktah*: free from attachments; *chikīrshuh*: that wants to lead; *loka*: the people; *sangraham*: the mass.

"O Bharata (Arjuna), just like the ignorant people who are attached to (the results of) actions engage in work, a person who has knowledge should work (conscientiously) but without attachment, for the (benefit of) people in general."

This verse offers another confirmation that action and knowledge are supposed to be united and not separated in the life and precepts of the enlightened and liberated soul who is free from material attachments. Those who fail to follow this path are flatly called by Krishna "ignorant people". So, there is no excuse possible for those who try to escape from their duties by claiming that they are "renounced" or "transcendental". Even more than that, we find that not only the person of knowledge (who is detached from the enjoyment of the results) should engage in work, but s/he should work with the same determination, enthusiasm and patience that are shown by people who are very attached to enjoying the fruits of their labor. Again, this verse presents the gist of the social ethos of genuine Hinduism: working selflessly for the collective benefit. This simple precept is the most effective method to ensure perfect harmony, progress and prosperity in any society. When extended beyond the limits of sectarianism and even beyond the circle of human society, this ethical principle is the answer to the present crisis of the planet. We do not need to squeeze our tiny brains to find "new" complicated solutions besides this golden teaching, because anything that goes against this ethical principle will simply delay or shift the problem, or even aggravate it.

न बुद्धिभेदं जनयेदज्ञानां कर्मसङ्गिनाम् । जोषयेत्सर्वकर्माणि विद्वान्युक्तः समाचरन् ॥ ३-२६ ॥

na buddhibhedam janayedajñānāṁ karmasaṅginām | joṣayetsarvakarmāṇi vidvānyuktaḥ samācharan || 3-26 ||

na: not; *buddhi*: intelligence/ understanding; *bhedam*: difference; *janayet*: he should cause; *ajnanam*: of those who are ignorant/ foolish; *karma-sanginam*: of those who attached to the (results of) actions; *joshayet*: he should engage; *sarva-karmani*: in all actions; *vidvan*: one who has knowledge; *yuktah*: engaged; *samacaran*: showing by practice.

"A person who has knowledge should not confuse the understanding of the ignorant who are attached to their actions, but should rather (help them to) engage in all activities in a spirit of cooperation, giving a good example personally."

It is a human tendency to try to convince others about the better value of our own opinion and ideals. However, this course of action rarely brings good results, and rather it can become a terrible waste of time and energy. Even worse, when the concept of democracy is applied without ensuring the proper foundations of knowledge and ethics, it is very likely that the wrong conclusions will be enforced, because the majority of the people is not necessarily constituted by the most intelligent and wisest individuals.

Here Krishna gives us the solution: rather than trying to convince others that they are not situated on the "highest platform", it is much better to help them progress gradually according to their personal inclinations. Of course, this does not apply to the basic distinction between *dharma* and *adharma*, that must be clearly established from the very beginning of everybody's training.

The proper discrimination between *sat* and *asat* is not a matter of opinion - actually *Gita* (18.29-32) will explain that the understanding that cannot discriminate between what should be done and what should not be done (such as saying that all opinions are equally valid) is influenced by ignorance, and the relativistic choice between one opinion and another based on one's personal convenience or material benefit is influenced by passion. The "difference of opinion" described in this verse is rather about the two paths of philosophical search and ritualistic action, and about the various approaches of *yoga* such as *bhakti*, *karma*, *jnana*, *kriya*, etc, or even about the choice of one's *ista devata* - the particular form of God that one worships and loves. Discussing about which one of such paths is "the best" is foolish and futile, because different people have different qualities and inclinations, and the supreme goal can be attained by each path - because in the end, all such genuine paths ultimately become one.

The word *yuktah* refers to this proper engagement in a genuine path that has been traced by the original scriptures and by the actual *acharyas* who are truly Self-realized souls. The history of Vedic tradition offers a great number of examples of such Self-realized souls, and at any particular moment in time there is always one of such Self-realized souls available on the planet. By following their personal behavior and precepts, we can gradually become Self-realized, too, and achieve perfection as described in *Gita*.

प्रकृतेः क्रियमाणानि गुणैः कर्माणि सर्वशः । अहङ्कारविमूढात्मा कर्ताहमिति मन्यते ॥ ३-२७ ॥

prakṛteḥ kriyamāṇāni guṇaiḥ karmāṇi sarvaśaḥ | ahaṅkāravimūḍhātmā kartāhamiti manyate || 3-27 ||

prakriteh: of nature; *kriyamanani*: are performed; *gunaih*: by the qualities; *karmani*: actions; *sarvasah*: all; *ahankara*: by the *ahankara* (false identification); *vimudha*: very foolish/ confused; *atma*: self; *karta*: the doer; *aham*: I (am); *iti*: like this; *manyate*: thinks/ believes.

"All activities are (actually) performed by the qualities of nature, but a foolish person who is confused by egotism thinks 'I am doing'."

As we have seen already, all genuine paths ultimately become one, just like the various paths that lead to a mountain peak will ultimately converge in one place. The differences between genuine paths are only apparent, and they are determined by the various possible mixtures

of the fundamental qualities of nature. Such differences are inevitable at a certain neophyte stage, when we have not yet established ourselves on the transcendental level of *visuddha sattva*, where *sattva* (goodness) is free from all material attachments and identifications. But the mixture of the *gunas* can and should be changed.

Here Krishna describes such attachments and identifications as foolish - *vimudha*. This is not the only time in *Gita* when Krishna calls spade a spade, as some behaviors can only be described by clear-cut words such as foolishness, ignorance, delusion, cheating, or demonic activities and mentality. It is true that one should tell the truth by trying to choose palatable expressions (*satyam bruyat priyam bruyat*) but there is a limit to that. A delicate and soft speech will go totally wasted on those who are too thick to appreciate subtleties: you do not need a sledgehammer to break a thin sheet of paper or glass, but you will have to use it when there is a thick concrete wall to be torn down.

The idiot mentioned in this verse is any individual who falls in the delusional trap of trying to put one's tiny material personality (and whatever identification is attached to it) in the center of the universe as opposed to all the other personalities or groups. In Kali yuga, the vast majority of people belong to this description (*Bhagavata Purana* 1.1.10).

The words *ahankara* (*aham*, "I" and *kara*, "do") and *kartaham* (*karta*, "the doer", *aham*, "I") have the exact same meaning: "I am the doer". This precisely describes the delusion of the conditioned soul that falsely identifies with its material position, and develops a vain pride and attachment for the results of action. As a consequence, the conditioned soul experiences both joys and sorrows.

On the other side, a person that performs his duty sincerely in the best possible way, but understanding his material limitations as due to the interaction of the *gunas*, remains sober and happy in all circumstances. Of course, we must be very careful to avoid the cheating mentality that tries to justify adharmic and damaging selfish activities by claiming "I am not the doer - my actions are performed by the *gunas* and Nature".

The *gunas* are always an important factor in every action, whether we want to get the credit and the fruits or not, but we are not meant to be helpless puppets in the hands of the *gunas*: we can and should learn how to work with them and utilize them properly in the performance of our duty. An entire chapter (14) of *Gita* will be dedicated precisely to this subject.

तत्त्ववित्तु महाबाहो गुणकर्मविभागयोः । गुणा गुणेषु वर्तन्त इति मत्वा न सज्जते ॥ ३-२८ ॥

tattvavittu mahābāho guṇakarmavibhāgayoḥ | guṇā guṇeṣu vartanta iti matvā na sajjate || 3-28 ||

tattva: (factual) truth; *vit*: one who knows; *tu*: but; *maha-baho*: (you who have) mighty arms; *guna-karma-vibhagayoh*: the varieties of qualities and activities; *gunah*: the *gunas*; *guneshu*: in the *gunas*; *vartanta*: let them remain; *iti*: like this; *matva*: being aware; *na*: not; *sajjate*: becomes attached/ affected.

"O mighty-armed (Arjuna), one who knows things as they really are (is able to understand) the various qualities and activities, and therefore he engages the qualities/ tendencies in the interaction with the appropriate qualities/ tendencies: this awareness keeps him free from attachment."

Pradhana, or the total aggregate of the material Nature (*prakriti*), manifests the three modes called *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*. These are called *gunas*, or "qualities", and their characteristics and functions will be explained in detail later in the *Gita*. Here Krishna is simply indicating that the Self-realized soul, who knows the truth of Atman/ Brahman, should not identify with the play of the *gunas* that compose the material world, including our material body and mind. Rather, such knowledgeable person should allow the senses to engage in the sense activities but remaining detached from such actions, just like a grown-up and mentally mature baby sitter is able to direct and facilitate the childish playing of toddlers without getting attached to their games or toys.

Once we have become firmly established in the awareness of our true identity of Atman/ Brahman as opposed to the false identity of *ahankara*, we will become able to better work with the *gunas* without getting hopelessly tied up by them. As long as we identify with the body and mind it will be extremely difficult to control them, just like a person who identifies with the car he drives will not be able to utilize the vehicle in the proper way, or - even more important - to soberly extricate himself from the vehicle when it is no longer useful. *Guna gunesu vartanta*: engaging the *gunas* in the *gunas* is a very interesting expression. Like everything else in the universe, our body, senses and mind are composed of a mixture of *gunas*, the basic components of material nature. The activities in this world and the objects of the senses are also composed of a mixture of *gunas*, and so are the results of the actions. We naturally need to engage our senses with the sense objects in order to perform our duties and even to maintain our body, but we should always be aware of the mechanism, without getting caught up in the cogs of the wheels.

Some commentators translate this verse as meaning that one should not engage in sense gratification but only work in devotional service: this is fundamentally a good concept, although it is not precisely what Krishna is saying in the verse. It is an interpretation, not a translation.

Furthermore, such a controversial idea can easily be misunderstood and distorted by people who have an abrahamic background to mean that we should abstain from all pleasures (including the legitimate, healthy and useful ones) and only engage in penance for the necessary purification of our inherently sinful nature. This misinterpretation can lead to extremely dangerous and delusional conclusions, by which suffering in itself (imposed on others or on one's self) comes to be considered an absolute and independent spiritual merit. In fact, in both cases (when imposed on others or on oneself) such penances become a very strong type of sense gratification - the worst kind because it is perverted and distorted - and lead to mental diseases such as sadism and masochism, as well as to the morbid obsession for material power and domination. Therefore it is better to stick to the text of *Bhagavad gita* as it really is, and "engage the *gunas* in the *gunas*" in the proper performance of one's duties, without remaining attached either to the pleasure or to the suffering. By learning to discriminate and to properly utilize each component of material nature, we can live in this world in the best possible way and ultimately become free from material conditionings. The important thing is to remember that we are spirit souls, Brahman, and therefore we are not directly involved in such activities, objects and qualities, just like a human being remains distinct from his car and never identifies with it, although he needs to learn about its functioning, take care of its maintenance and provide the proper fuel, and drive it in the proper direction through the suitable route.

In this verse Arjuna is called *maha baho*, "mighty armed" to indicate that physical strength and strenuous effort are not the only factor for success: we need to channel our energy with the utmost attention and awareness, and supported by very solid knowledge.

प्रकृतेर्गुणसम्मूढाः सज्जन्ते गुणकर्मसु । तानकृत्स्नविदो मन्दांकृत्स्नविन्न विचालयेत् ॥ ३-२९ ॥

prakṛterguṇasammūdhāḥ sajjante guṇakarmasu | tānakṛtsnavido mandānkṛtsnavinna vicālayet || 3-29 ||

prakriteh: of nature; *guna*: by the qualities; *sammudhah*: delusional/ confused; *sajjante*: become attached; *guna karmasu*: to the qualities (and) to the actions/ to the activities of the qualities (*gunas*); *tan*: they; *akritsna-vidah*: those whose knowledge is insufficient; *mandan*: dull/ stupid; *kritsna-vit*: one who has sufficient knowledge; *na*: not; *vicalayet*: should unsettle/ dislodge/ agitate.

"Those who are confused by the qualities of nature remain attached to the qualities and the activities/ to the activities of the *gunas*. A person who has the clear knowledge of action should not unsettle the minds of the foolish people who do not have the same understanding."

Here Krishna repeats the instruction of verse 26, where he stated, *na buddhi-bhedam janayed ajnanam karma-sanginam joshayet sarva-karmani vidvan yuktah samacaran*, "A person who has knowledge should not confuse the understanding of the ignorant who are attached to their actions, but should rather (help them to) engage in all activities in a spirit of cooperation, giving a good example personally."

Whenever we find a repetition in the scriptures, we should understand that it is meant to highlight the special importance of a teaching. It is not a literary weakness, or a boring waste of time and paper. There are no "inferior duties" or "superior duties". There are different duties that are prescribed for people who are in different situations and need to work with the *gunas* in different ways. Defining such different tasks as inferior or superior will easily confuse the conditioned soul in trying to perform a task for which he is not properly equipped, or in developing resentment for the task for which he is actually qualified: both situations are very detrimental for the individual and for society at large, on the material and on the spiritual level as well. On the other hand, the person who believes himself to be situated in a "superior duty" might become self-righteous, arrogant, and blind to the actual facts, causing himself to slide down into those very "inferior" *gunas* he is despising in others.

This verse takes us to a different platform. Just like a teacher carefully engages in the elementary exercises of writing the alphabets on the blackboard not because he wants to get good grades or a golden star, but in order to instruct and help his students, a self realized soul continues to perform the ordinary duties and activities of this world without attachment. Most students need to be inspired and even goaded forward by the idea of a reward, thinking about the enjoyment that will come from the result of the activity. If we take away this hope and interest, they will simply become lazy and neglectful, and that is not what we want. So we need to be patient and personalize the teaching according to the particular position and abilities of each individual, while at the same time we need to realize that performing one's duty properly should not be done out of desire for a reward, but it has an absolute and independent value in itself.

This is even more important and true when we deal with people who are not our students, and will not be ready to actually listen to what we want to tell them, but will simply read our advice as an aggression to their own identifications and attachments even if we are simply stating the facts. The more they are attached and identified with their particular mixture of *gunas*, the more dangerous it will be to try to help them. So shouldn't we take some risk in the performance of our mission - assisting the Lord's mission in protecting the good people, destroying the evil doers and establishing the principles of *dharma*? Of course we should. Only we need to know how to do it.

मयि सर्वाणि कर्माणि संन्यस्याध्यात्मचेतसा । निराशीर्निर्ममो भूत्वा युध्यस्व विगतज्वरः ॥ ३-३० ॥

mayi sarvāṇi karmāṇi sannyasyādhyātmacetasā | nirāśīrnirmamo bhūtvā yudhyasva vigatajvaraḥ || 3-30 ||

mayi: to me; *sarvani*: all; *karmani*: actions; *sannyasya*: by renouncing; *adhyatma*: of the *atman*; *chetasa*: in the consciousness; *nirasih*: without desire; *nirmamo*: without sense of possession or belonging; *bhutva*: being; *yudhyasva*: you should fight; *vigata*: free from; *jvarah*: fever.

"You should fight (this battle) in the consciousness of surrendering all your actions to me, without selfish desires or sense of possessiveness, and without lethargy/ delirious delusions."

In this verse, Krishna introduces the concept of the personal relationship in devotional service, a powerful personal motivation that is more effective than logic, the sense of duty, and detached wisdom. It is common knowledge that emotion is much more powerful than intellect, and it surpasses all logic and all other considerations. Thus, just like the uncontrolled emotion of lust and attachment can sweep our mind and senses away from our duty and good understanding, we can reverse the process into a virtuous circle and channel our emotions towards love and devotion, so that our mind and senses will be irresistibly attracted to that same duty, but perceived as a loving service to our true Lord and Master. The propensity to service is present in all living entities. The more selfless it becomes, the more purely it manifests in our actions, from the smallest gestures to the greatest choices in life. This selflessness is also called love.

When we speak about relationships, there is a big difference between attachment and love. Attachment means that we want to get something from the person who is the object of our emotion - pleasure, benefits, satisfaction of some kind - while love means that we only want to give everything, including ourselves, to the person who is the object of our emotion. Attachment is selfish, love is selfless. Attachment imprisons, love liberates. This spontaneous tendency to love and service is the true nature of the soul, and constantly seeks engagement on various levels according to our particular identification and affinity.

When we identify with our body, we tend to try to love and serve bodies. When we identify mostly with our mind, our love and service become channeled on a subtler level and open the doors to a wider awareness of the desires of the object of our sentiment. Ultimately, when our identification is established on the spiritual level, we become able to see and appreciate, to love and to serve, the spiritual essence/ identity of the person who is the object of our sentiment, including the Supreme Soul, the *param atma*, the soul of all souls. This

is the highest and deepest meaning of *adhyatma cetasa*, "the consciousness of the soul", that becomes "the consciousness of God". On a more prosaic level, this verse also applies to the perception of Krishna as the authority, the director, or even the military commander. Arjuna has already presented himself as a disciple and student of Krishna (*Gita* 2.7), so it makes perfect sense for Krishna to ask him to simply follow his instructions and to act in his service, dedicating all activities to him.

The expression *sannyasya*, "renouncing", directly refers to the practical mechanism of selfless action: when we renounce something, we offer its enjoyment to someone else, or we make it available to someone else. Krishna does not tell Arjuna to renounce the kingdom by offering it to Duryodhana - he must renounce the kingdom by offering it to a higher purpose and principle: the service to God and society (described as God's body) through the performance of the proper duty. There is not much merit in renouncing something under the pressure of some bully or highway robber, simply because we find ourselves in a weaker position. True renunciation consists in continuing to take the best possible care of the object, but engaging it in the service of God rather than in our own service.

In this verse the word *jvara* (literally "fever") is sometimes translated as "lethargy", because fever takes away strength of mind and body and leaves the patient in a lethargic state. However, since the previous verses expressed the concepts of illusion, confusion, and foolishness, we should remember that fever also affects the perception of the world and the clarity of the mind and senses, creating hallucinations and a delirious attitude that are typical to the people attached to the fruits of the action. On the other side, a person who is attached to the selfish enjoyment of the fruits of the action will become lazy and lethargic when there is little or no personal benefit to be gained from work. Thus both the meanings are applicable.

ये मे मतमिदं नित्यमनुतिष्ठन्ति मानवाः । श्रद्धावन्तोऽनसूयन्तो मुच्यन्ते तेऽपि कर्मभिः ॥ ३-३१ ॥

ye me matamidam nityamanutiṣṭhanti mānavāḥ | śraddhāvanto'anasūyanto mucyante te'pi karmabhiḥ || 3-31 ||

ye: those; me: my; matam: teaching; idam: this; nityam: always; anutiṣṭhanti: regularly follow/ situate (themselves) in; manavah: human beings; śraddhāvantah: those who are faithful/ have faith; anasūyantah: those who are free from envy; mucyante: become free; te: they; api: even; karmabhiḥ: from the activities (and their consequences).

"Those human beings who always follow this teaching of mine, thanks to their faith and lack of envy, become free from the consequences of actions."

It will be useful to analyze the meaning of *śraddha*, "faith" and *anasūyata*, "freedom from envy". Faith means being willing to believe something. It does not need to be a blind faith, the determination to unquestioningly believe whatever we are told, something that is unreasonable and should not be demanded of anyone or by anyone. Reasonable faith is rather the opening of our minds and hearts to the possibility of acquiring something good. Everything requires a measure of faith, from the basic education we get in primary school to purchasing packed goods, or making a flight reservation. We are entitled to make thorough preliminary inquiries about the trustworthiness of the recipient of our faith, but ultimately there are things we need to believe without trying to verify them first, because verification can be done only by experiencing them. For example, when we purchase a packaged product, we can verify the quality of its contents only after having paid its price. When we make a reservation for a flight, we can verify if the travel agency was trustworthy only after we have actually completed our journey.

Envy means finding fault where there is none. It means being unable to appreciate the actual qualifications and merits of others, and desiring to have the same position or a higher/ more powerful position than them. A synonym of envy is malice, or the desire to denigrate and cause damage to others especially if more qualified or successful than us. A person who is envious will never be able to appreciate the objective value of others - including the good things done by others or the good teachings presented by others.

The word *matam* in this verse literally means "opinion", but certainly Krishna's opinion is much more than an ordinary perspective as we find in common people, who can just speculate but do not have a clear and direct perception of Reality. Thus rather than wasting time discussing the personal opinions of this or that conditioned soul, we should get the "opinion" of those liberated souls who can directly see (*darshi*) Reality (*tattva*). This will also be clearly stated in verse 4.34 and other passages.

In the previous verses (3.26, 29) Krishna clearly said that we should not try to oppose opinion to opinion or to change the minds of others by pulling them away from their particular attachments. In this verse he expands the previous explanation, stating that a person who is attached to his own opinion based on identification and possession will not listen with faith to another's opinion, but rather he will find reason to become envious and hostile - especially if the opinion of the other seems to be better than his own. It may be difficult for a conditioned soul to forgive people for having been wrong, but it is much more difficult to forgive people for having been right: this is the meaning of envy.

Unfortunately this envy and lack of faith can also be directed towards liberated souls and even towards the Supreme Lord. For this reason, Krishna will tell Arjuna that this highest knowledge can only be appreciated by those who are free from envy (4.3, 18.64, 67, 71 etc). Even if in the beginning following Krishna's instructions in *Gita* could be difficult, if we have faith and become/ remain free from envy we will eventually succeed. Here this success is described as being liberated from the cycle of *karma*.

Some commentators interpret the word *anasūya* as "free from the tendency to fault-finding", and exploit this verse to claim legitimacy for their own adharmic conclusions and practices. In other words, in their opinion anyone who can see their inconsistencies and damaging conclusions and behaviors must be branded as a "fault-finder" and an "offender", that must be considered unqualified to understand and follow the teachings of Krishna in *Bhagavad gita*. The chances of misinterpretation grow exponentially when the students are induced to forget what is exactly the teaching that Krishna is talking about: that everyone - including the most transcendently realized and highly situated, including God himself - must perform their duties properly and behave according to the rules of *dharma* or ethical conduct in any case, so that the general mass of the people will be inspired by such good behavior. So, when we actually observe a really serious criminal and irresponsible behavior in someone who is passing off as a great transcendentalist, can we be considered unable to understand Krishna's teachings because we are envious as we have "found fault" with a cheater that is giving a very bad example to society at large?

ये त्वेतदभ्यसूयन्तो नानुतिष्ठन्ति मे मतम् । सर्वज्ञानविमूढांस्तान्विद्धि नशानचेतसः ॥ ३-३२ ॥

ye tvetadabhyasūyanto nānutiṣṭhanti me matam | sarvajñānavimūḍhāṁstānviddhi naśānacetasah || 3-32 ||

ye: those who; tu: but; etat: this; abhyasuyantah: (because they are) envious; na: not; anutishthanti: follow; me: my; matam: teaching; sarva: all; jnana: knowledge; vimudhan: completely foolish/ confused; tan: they; viddhi: (you should) know; nashtan: destroyed/ lost; acetasah: without awareness.

"However, those who do not follow my teachings because of envy/ malice, are confused in whatever they know. Know that they will (ultimately) meet with destruction because they do not have the proper understanding."

So Krishna clarifies in this verse that the envious people are not those who can tell the difference between *dharma* and *adharma*, but those who do not follow his teachings to perform one's duty properly in order to give a good example to the general public. However, what will happen to the envious people who refuse to follow God's orders? They simply continue on their way until they develop a better understanding.

God is not interested in punishing us if we fail to follow his orders or to show loyalty to him: this idea of forced, exclusive and blind allegiance is typical of the abrahamic faiths, and if we do not remove it from our frame of reference, it will distort our perception of the teachings of the *Gita*. Here Krishna is not threatening the "non-believers", "unfaithful" or "heretics" with brimstone and hell fire, or with abject slavery and extermination.

He is not a terrorist, he does not want to rule by fear. Rather, he is saying that envy and malice will prevent a person from actually understanding the reality of facts. Someone who lives in denial of reality will certainly have problems, but these are not enforced by a revengeful tyrant as a punishment: they are simply the universal effects of the neutral laws of Nature. Anyone who is envious will behave like a fool and fall prey to confusion, and ultimately cause damage to others and to himself: it does not matter whether he considers himself a faithful believer in the Supreme God or not.

In fact, sometimes envious and foolish people (who see faults where there are none and cannot tolerate to see others live happily and peacefully) refuse to listen to very good teachings, claiming they cannot allow anything that is not authorized by their own religious tradition. They consider their own behavior as a demonstration of loyalty to God, while in fact it is exactly the opposite. God has given us intelligence, a conscience, a natural sense of ethics to help our understanding, and if we do not use them to understand good teachings, we are actually despising God's gifts.

Besides, it is very easy for clever manipulators to present their own faulty, absurd, cruel, destructive and even demonic conclusions and plans as if they were orders coming directly and personally from God. They just need a sufficient number of followers (procured through whatever means, moral or immoral) to enforce their orders materially. What is the proof that such orders have really come from God? To avoid this embarrassing question, they introduce the concept of blasphemy (i.e. dissent) and heresy (i.e. freedom of thought) as crimes that can and must be persecuted by law. Such an idea of religion is barbaric and totally contrary to the teachings of *Gita*.

सदृशं चेष्टते स्वस्याः प्रकृतेर्ज्ञानवानपि । प्रकृतिं यान्ति भूतानि निग्रहः किं करिष्यति ॥ ३-३३ ॥

sadṛśam ceṣṭate svasyāḥ prakṛterjñānavānapi | prakṛtiṁ yānti bhūtāni nigrahaḥ kiṁ kariṣyati || 3-33 ||

sadrisam: in accordance; cestate: makes efforts; svasyah: by his own; prakriteh: nature; jnanavan: one who has the knowledge; api: even; prakritim: nature; yanti: go (following); bhutani: living beings/ situations in life; nigrahaḥ: restraint/ repression; kim: what; karishyati: one can do.

"Even a person who has the (proper) knowledge must engage in actions according to his own nature. All embodied beings must follow their nature: what can repression accomplish? "

In the previous verses, the definition of *jnani*, "a person of knowledge", has been used to indicate one who knows the difference between the temporary material objects and the eternal and transcendental nature of the spirit.

The word *prakriti* applies both to the material nature and to the spiritual nature of the *jiva*, because even after liberation each particular spark of the all-pervading Brahman retains an individual personality that will be expressed in the *siddha deha* or *rasa* of his relationship with God. Such individual taste of the *jiva*'s personality is considered the center of the philosophical approach called "personalism" as opposed to the view called "impersonalism". Therefore, the supporters of the personalistic view should not limit the meaning of this verse to the conditioned level of life. Of course, theoretical knowledge alone is not sufficient: the proper knowledge needs to be applied in practice, through the proper performance of one's duties, free from selfish attachments and material identifications. Nobody should give up his duties to society and family, even if he considers himself (or is considered by others) as situated on the transcendental level of divine consciousness, because as Krishna has just said a few verses ago, even a perfectly liberated soul, even Krishna himself, continues to carefully perform the prescribed duties - in the very least, to give the good example to the mass of people. Such duties must continue to be assigned according to one's particular natural qualities (both material and spiritual) that are inherent to each individual, because repression and denial are at best useless and at worst very dangerous and damaging. What an irony, to see so-called personalist spiritualists stubbornly try to artificially enforce duties or renunciation to duties, or even spiritual *bhakti rasas* on the mass of people, with the pretext of transcendental consciousness!

Each individual *jiva* already has a natural personality that should be respected and carefully cultivated in a favorable way. It is absurd and hypocritical to attempt to impose a different spiritual sentiment or *ista devata* on people, treating them as blank slates to be used to write anything on, or even trying to wipe them clean of their natural inclinations. The Guru gives the "second birth" to the disciple through

initiation, but that does not mean that the disciple's soul (including his natural relationship with God) did not exist before that. Only people who do not really understand reincarnation and spirit (because of their material vision, identification and attachments) can fall in such a foolish trap.

इन्द्रियस्येन्द्रियस्यार्थे रागद्वेषौ व्यवस्थितौ । तयोर्न वशमागच्छेत्तौ ह्यस्य परिपन्थिनौ ॥ ३-३४ ॥

indriyasyendriyasyārthe rāgadveṣau vyavasthitau | tayorna vaśamāgacchettau hyasya paripanthināu || 3-34 ||

indriyasya: of the senses; *indriyasya*: of the senses; *arthe*: in the purpose/ object (of the senses); *raga*: attraction; *dvesau*: aversion/ repulsion; *vyavasthitau*: in the interaction/ as ordained; *tayoh*: of them; *na*: not; *vasam*: control; *agacchet*: should go; *tau*: both of them; *hi*: certainly; *asya*: of him; *paripanthināu*: obstacles/ adversaries.

"Attraction and aversion are ordained/ meant (to result) from the interaction of the senses with the objects of the senses; one should not fall under the control of either of them, because they are both (to be considered as) obstacles (on the path of the performance of duty)."

The senses and the sense objects were created for the purpose of mutual interaction, and this continues also after one has reached the level of liberation, as long as we have a material body. This process, however, continues even in the spiritual world in the spiritual body (*siddha deha*) with spiritual senses. Without utilizing the senses, how is it possible to perform one's duty, or to engage in devotional service to God? It is impossible. In fact, one of the most famous definitions of *bhakti* is: *hrisikesha hrisikena sevnam bhaktir uvate*, "to engage the senses in the service of the Lord of the senses" (*Narada Pancaratra*, quoted in *Bhakti rasamrita sindhu*, 1.1.12). Senses, mind and body do not necessarily have to be material: they have a spiritual counterpart, too, as it is found in the manifestations of God and his direct associates.

It is true that especially in the beginning of the practice of *yoga*, one should train the senses to withdraw from the sense objects, just like a tortoise withdraws its limbs within the shell (*Gita* 2.58), but this is supposed to be a temporary stage. So just like the tortoise cannot even maintain its life if it constantly keeps its limbs within the shell, we need to work in this world - even just to maintain our body. All types of work require the utilization of one's senses, and consequently attraction and repulsion are sure to occur. However, we must continue our work performing our prescribed duties without allowing attraction and repulsion to obstruct our activity. Many people believe that renunciation and detachment should only be directed against the modality of attraction between the senses and the sense objects, while repulsion or aversion are a positive asset that facilitates proper renunciation. To make an example, some people believe that a man who hates women or talks about women in a despising or offensive way will be a good *sannyasi*. This is not a fact. Rather, this idea is extremely dangerous both for the individual and for society at large. A real *sannyasi* is a person who has realized the spiritual nature of all living entities, does not identify people with their bodies, and remains neutral towards all.

This verse gives the key to the problem: we should not allow attraction or repulsion to control our choices. In other words, we should engage our senses not for our own personal pleasure, but for the proper performance of the action. It is certainly difficult, but it is possible, with constant practice and detachment, when the mind and senses are controlled. The practice of *yoga* is precisely the training that will enable us to control our mind and senses. It starts with the rules and regulations called *yama* and *niyama*, principles that must be followed in all the various disciplines of *yoga*.

However we need to remember that *yama* and *niyama* are just principles of engagement, not taboo laws like in some other traditions. Rules are not established whimsically under considerations of loyalty to a particular group, and must be applied carefully according to time, place, circumstances and person. Even rules and regulations can become obstacles on the path of progress, both because they may stop us from engaging in an activity that is actually favorable to *dharma*, and conversely because sometimes even sattvic legitimate gratification (allowed by the rules) can become an obstacle, when we become attached to material *sattva* or goodness. Therefore we need to cultivate intelligence.

श्रेयान्स्वधर्मो विगुणः परधर्मात्स्वनुष्ठितात् । स्वधर्मे निधनं श्रेयः परधर्मो भयावहः ॥ ३-३५ ॥

śreyānsvadharmo viguṇaḥ paradharmātsvanuṣṭhitāt | svadharṁe nidhanaṁ śreyāḥ paradharmo bhayāvahaḥ || 3-35 ||

śreyan: better; *sva*: one's own; *dharmah*: natural ethical engagement; *viguṇah*: defective/ without (the proper) qualities; *para*: of others; *dharmat*: from the natural ethical engagement; *su*: very well; *anuṣṭhitat*: well accomplished; *sva-dharṁe*: in one's *dharma*; *nidhanam*: destruction/ death; *śreyah*: better; *para-dharmah*: the *dharma* of others; *bhaya*: fear; *avahah*: bringing.

"It is better to perform one's own duty even with some imperfections or mistakes, or even if this means meeting with death or destruction, rather than successfully engaging in the duties of others – which is a dangerous choice."

The principle illustrated in this verse can be understood correctly only in the light of the constant process of progress and evolution inherent in human life, based on learning and becoming more qualified. The message of *Gita* and all the genuine Vedic teachings are aimed at leading each individual to develop and evolve - from the darkness to the light, from mortality to immortality, from material consciousness to spiritual consciousness.

It is difficult to perform one's actual duty, both at the material and at the spiritual level, because it requires us to make a progressive effort, while something that can be performed very easily is certainly below our real potential. By following this principle of striving for progress the individual and society are benefited. It is the same principle of a study course in school, where the students are faced with "difficult" tests and problems as soon as they have come to execute smoothly and perfectly the tests and problems of the previous school years. Thus, it is better to engage in the tasks specifically assigned to us by a competent authority, even if the result is poor, because it means that we

are learning and progressing. On the other hand, engaging in a task that is below our potential will easily bring perfect results: every time that life becomes too easy, we know that we are not advancing. We are wasting time, something that constitutes the greatest possible fear: the valuable opportunity of a human birth is not something that we can afford to squander by leading a complacent and easy life.

Some people misinterpret this verse to mean that one should insist to engage in the job or social occupation (prescribed duties) of one's ancestors or family of birth even without possessing the actual qualities, tendencies or abilities, or at the cost of wasting one's real good potential and moral integrity, and without caring about the disastrous results of such artificial engagement.

Such interpretation can only bring degradation both for the individual and for the society, because it is based on the cultivation of ignorance and inertia, a quality that confuses the intelligence of people, causing them to mistake *dharma* for *adharma* and vice versa (*Gita* 18.32). The commentators propounding such disastrous interpretation sometimes even go as far as referring to *bhaya* ("fear") in this verse as the fear of hell, or God's punishment for "breaking the social order" of caste prejudice. This misinterpretation is obviously dictated by their heavy abrahamic cultural superimposition, as many of such scholars were educated in Christian mission schools. When a similar misunderstanding is applied to the word *dharma* (often mistranslated as "religion", as in loyalty or affiliation to a particular faith or belief) the results become even more destructive, because people develop the idea that they should remain faithful to the beliefs practiced by their fathers, even if such beliefs are faulty and nonsensical. This idea is offensive because it implies that *dharma* can in fact be something that is faulty, unethical, damaging to society and nonsensical - not just because we perceive it as such, due to our limited understanding, but because it was so ordained by God. Of course this interpretation ends up completely distorting the meaning of *dharma*, because many beliefs, practices and occupations that can be found in the world have very little to do with ethics or they may even be totally unethical. Can there be a criminal *dharma*? Should the son of a thief, a rapist, a fraudster, a bank robber, consider himself bound by divine laws to continue in the degrading, destructive, demoniac occupations of his father? The casteist interpreters practically claim he should. By following such a faulty logic, for example, Prahlada the son of the demoniac king Hiranyakasipu would have violated *dharma* by becoming a devotee of Vishnu and a *mahajana*, a great authority on transcendental knowledge.

On the opposite side, the "transcendentalist" commentators try to openly disprove Krishna's clear statements by saying that the instruction contained in this verse only applies to the material platform, but when one is declared (or declares himself) a "transcendentally liberated soul", he is free to do whatever he wants, so a *brahmana* can act as a *kshatriya*, or a *kshatriya* can act as a *brahmana* etc. This could be seriously misinterpreted, too, causing great disasters both at individual and at social level. It is true that a liberated soul does not identify with any particular position and will be ready to take up any ethical activity when required for assisting the mission of the Lord. But then there is no more question of *brahmanas* and *kshatriyas*, or *vaisyas* or *sudras* or *mlecchas* - one is merely the servant of God.

When there is still some material identification, the idea of pretending to be "transcendental" can easily appear very convenient, because it can be used as a justification for accepting all the rights of all positions in society and escaping all the relevant duties, often jumping from one position to another and back again, to escape responsibilities, duties and consequences, and run after material benefits and advantages.

The examples of Visvamitra and Parasurama are ill chosen to prove this faulty conclusion, because Visvamitra deliberately left his *kshatriya* identification, position and activities to progress to the natural next stage of *brahmana*, through a very intense self-training, so much that he actually became a qualified *brahmana* - recognized even by the great authority Vasistha. He was not a *kshatriya* "transcendentally" acting as a *brahmana*. On the other hand, Parasurama never left the position and duties of a *brahmana* even when he engaged in his 21 military campaigns to exterminate the degraded *kshatriyas*, because it is a precise duty of the *brahmanas* to directly remove the bad kings when there is no other option.

And it is interesting to notice that Parasurama never claimed any throne or governing position for himself, as any *kshatriya* would and should have done, because his task was not about the military protection of the *prajas*. We need to understand that traditionally the *brahmanas* are responsible for the behavior of the *kshatriyas* and have the right and the power to remove them if they become really damaging for the kingdom. Parasurama was truly a *brahmana*.

अर्जुन उवाच ।

arjuna uvāca ।

अथ केन प्रयुक्तोऽयं पापं चरति पूरुषः । अनिच्छन्नपि वार्ष्णेय बलादिव नियोजितः ॥ ३-३६ ॥

atha kena prayukto'yaṁ pāpaṁ carati pūruṣaḥ । anicchannapi vārṣṇeya balādiva niyojitaḥ ॥ 3-36 ॥

arjuna: Arjuna; *uvaca*: said; *atha*: then; *kena*: by what; *prayuktah*: impelled; *ayam*: this; *papam*: sin/ guilty action; *carati*: does; *purushah*: a *purusha* (enjoyer); *anicchan*: without desiring; *api*: even; *varshneya*: o (scion) of Vrishni; *balat*: by force; *iva*: like; *niyojitah*: constrained.

Arjuna said: "O scion of Vrishni (Krishna), what (power) then pushes a man to perform sinful/ negative actions, even without his conscious choice, as if compelled by force?"

Even the best people may commit a mistake. In one moment of weakness or distraction, an ordinarily good person can destroy his entire life, and afterwards bitterly wonder why on earth he has done such a stupid thing. This happens because the individual soul (*jiva atman*) has the propensity to enjoy (*purusha* - both with male and female bodies) but only possesses a very small amount of power compared to the Supreme, so when he tries to dominate Maya he inevitably falls under Maya's strict control.

This also applies to those hopefuls who want to "declare war to Maya" by castigating all expressions of healthy pleasures and freedom of thought, and consider themselves as the "stalwart generals" of a war they cannot possibly win - comparable to the war waged by moths against a roaring fire. In spite of the glorious vision they have of themselves, they are nothing but upstart little children who are trying to rebel against Mother to impose their own will against hers.

In their patriarchal arrogance and foolishness, they believe that, by fighting against Mother, they are actually doing Father a favor. They project on God their own defects and failures in the field of relationships and conclude that when a woman has power, the man must be "henpecked" and in a disgraceful position.

So they take upon themselves the task of "emancipating themselves" from Mother's control and "making things right" in the balance of power in the universe, by exclusively worshiping the Father and attacking Mother in all her forms. Mother may humor them for a short time, but only to keep them even more strictly under her control. Later in *Gita* (7.14) Krishna will give very clear instructions on this subject, describing Maya as "his divine power", and recommending that one simply surrenders to him (rather than stupidly trying to fight against Maya).

Arjuna's question should be examined from the perspective created by the previous verses in a logical thread. Krishna has explained that one should engage the senses, mind and body in the proper activities that constitute one's prescribed duty, and such prescribed duty is determined by one's natural inclinations. These actions will not only be effective for maintaining one's body and ensuring one's livelihood, but they will also serve as a training for one's personal progress and evolution, up to the point of liberation.

Is it therefore natural to wonder why so many people fail to proceed on this beneficial path and stray far from it, even causing great sufferings to themselves, and even without really choosing to pursue degradation. With all these facilities and this perfect plan, how can someone fail, and slide down into disgrace? Krishna will reply in the next verses.

श्रीभगवानुवाच ।

śrībhagavānuvāca ।

काम एष क्रोध एष रजोगुणसमुद्भवः । महाशनो महापाप्मा विद्ध्येनमिह वैरिणम् ॥ ३-३७ ॥

kāma eṣa krodha eṣa rajoḡuṇasamudbhavaḥ । mahāśano mahāpāpmā viddhyenamihā vairiṇam ॥ 3-37 ॥

sri: wonderful; *bhagavan:* Lord; *uvaca:* said; *kama:* lust; *esha:* this; *krodha:* anger; *esha:* this; *rajah:* passion; *guna:* quality; *samudbhavah:* born of; *maha:* great; *asanah:* devourer; *maha:* great; *papma:* source of sin; *viddhi:* (you should) know; *enam:* this; *iha:* here; *vairinam:* enemy.

The Lord said: "This (power) is (constituted by) desire and anger, and it is born from the quality of passion. Know that it is all-devouring, the cause of great sins, and the (greatest) enemy in this world."

The fundamental power in this material world, as well as in the spiritual world, is Shakti, also called Maya. In the material world she is called Maha Maya and is the origin of the three material qualities or *gunas* known as *sattva* (goodness), *rajas* (passion), *tamas* (ignorance). In the spiritual world she is called Yoga Maya and is the origin of the three spiritual qualities known as *sat* (eternity), *cit* (consciousness) and *ananda* (happiness).

Power is not bad in itself, just like we cannot blame electricity if we get electrocuted by touching in our rashness and ignorance what we are not supposed to meddle with. Electricity itself can form a fail-safe circuit to protect us from such danger, if we properly follow the instructions. Also, electricity can manifest as heat or cold, movement or sound or even the ability to process data - for example in water heaters, refrigerators, electric motors, radios, TVs and computers. We can compare the three material *gunas* to three different frequencies or modes of power - *sattva* helps us to evolve and become better persons, *rajas* endlessly pushes us to pursue success, pleasure and control, and *tamas* dulls our consciousness down into laziness, delusion and madness. Later on Krishna will elaborate more on this specific topic of the *gunas*, because it is extremely important to understand it.

In this verse, Krishna specifies that the *kama* and *krodha* that impel the conditioned soul into bad actions are expressed by a specific mode: *rajas* or passion. Naturally *rajas* or passion excites material desires for enjoyment and possession, and when such selfish desire is not fulfilled, it turns into anger or rage. This process has already been explained in verses 2.62 and 2.63. This great enemy of progress is called "great devourer" because it is never satiated: the desire for enjoyment and possession has no limits, when it is followed for its own sake and not in the proper performance of one's ethical duties. One who possesses a bicycle will want a motorcycle, one who possesses a motorcycle will want a car, one who possesses a car will want two cars, and one who possesses two cars will want to get more expensive and luxury cars. Even a man who possesses hundreds of luxury cars, like some Arab sheiks do, is not satisfied and he keeps scheming to get more and more.

Possessing hundreds of very expensive, stylish superfast cars is obviously not a real necessity, but rather an exercise of base lust. One single person can only use one car at the time, and the necessary speed for normal journeys can be achieved by any average decent vehicle; for longer journeys it is better to use more efficient public transportation.

Now, *kama* and *krodha* can also manifest in the modes of *sattva*, when they are properly channeled in the performance of our duty and they do not violate the fundamental principles of *dharma* (truthfulness, compassion, cleanliness, self-control). This manifestation of *kama* and *krodha* is actually desirable because it helps us better perform our duties to family and society, and ultimately in devotional service to the Supreme.

Some commentators give the example of the difference between love and lust, and explain that the soul's original love for God (and all creatures as parts and parcels of God) is transformed into lust by the contact with material nature, like milk is transformed into cheese curds by an acid substance. So by engaging our senses in service or duty to the Supreme, we can transform lust and rage back into pure love. This is a very good explanation, but it is not sufficient.

A warrior cannot just work on transcendental love; he needs to feel some sattvic rage that is not born out of the frustration of his selfish personal desires but out of legitimate indignation against the aggressors of innocent and good people. Similarly, later in the text (7.11) Krishna will clearly say that lust in the mode of *sattva* or even in the transcendental mode is actually not an enemy, but a very good thing.

धूमेनाव्रियते वह्निर्यथादर्शो मलेन च । यथोल्बेनावृतो गर्भस्तथा तेनेदमावृतम् ॥ ३-३८ ॥

dhūmenāvriyate vahniryathādarśo malena ca | yatholbenāvṛto garbhastathā tenedamāvṛtam || 3-38 |

dhumena: by smoke; *avriyate*: is covered; *vahniḥ*: fire; *yatha*: like; *adarsah*: a mirror; *malena*: by dust; *ca*: and; *yatha*: similarly; *ulbena*: by the womb; *avritah*: covered; *garbhah*: the embryo; *tatha*: similarly; *tena*: by them; *idam*: this; *avritam*: covered.

"Like fire is covered by smoke, like a mirror is covered by dirt and like the embryo is covered by the womb, similarly this (consciousness) is covered by these (anger and lust)."

The three examples in this verse refer to the various degrees of angry lust and their effects on the consciousness of the soul. It is said that the fire covered by smoke represents the human form of life, in which lust and rage can actually be easily manipulated to get the fire blazing even more brightly. Smoke is usually seen at the beginning of the development of fire, when it is kindled. The more the fire burns, the drier the firewood gets and the less smoke will be produced. Sometimes fire does not give any smoke at all.

The mirror covered by dirt is compared to the condition of animal life, in which the soul's radiance is hidden by layers of immediate material concerns such as eating, sleeping, mating, protecting oneself and one's family, developing social relationships, and so on. The embryo covered by the womb is compared to the dull life of plants and more elementary organisms, such as microbes etc; in such a situation the living entity is totally blind and unable to do anything else but sucking nutrients and growing. The more lust and anger we develop in our search for sense gratification, the more dangerous and destructive we become, and the more we lose our freedom, ending up by concentrating only on the feeling of "acquisition", with no other concern. Animals are certainly more concentrated on acquisition than human beings: they usually spend all the waking hours trying to find some food, with only a limited time reserved for relationships and other concerns. Plants and microbes are even more obsessed, as they feed constantly, day and night, and in fact they do not do anything else. Some commentators interpret all the three examples to refer to human life; the fire covered by smoke is then the person who has already progressed through the process of self realization and is almost free from material identification and attachments. Just a little breeze is sufficient to sweep away the smoke and let the fire shine fully. The example of the mirror indicates the ordinary human being, who is usually covered by different concerns in life besides lust and anger, while the foolish and degraded people who live in darkness, ignorance and selfishness are compared to the undeveloped embryo.

आवृतं ज्ञानमेतेन ज्ञानिनो नित्यवैरिणा । कामरूपेण कौन्तेय दुष्पूरेणानलेन च ॥ ३-३९ ॥

āvṛtaṁ jñānametena jñānino nityavairiṇā | kāmārūpeṇa kaunteya duṣpūreṇānalena ca || 3-39 ||

avritam: covered; *jnanam*: knowledge; *etena*: by these; *jnaninah*: of one who knows; *nitya*: constant; *vairina*: by the enemy; *kama*: lust; *rupena*: by the form of; *kaunteya*: o son of Kunti (Arjuna); *dushpurena*: never satisfied; *analena*: by the fire; *ca*: and.

"O son of Kunti (Arjuna), these (lust and anger) cover (even) the knowledge of the wise persons. These are a perpetual enemy, an all-consuming fire."

Here the insatiable desire of enjoyment for the sake of pleasure itself is called "the enemy of the wise", because the fools consider it a friend that will bestow all sorts of good things; they can understand its destructive power only after they have become wiser. Wisdom teaches us that it is not good to play with fire carelessly, allowing ourselves to be overcome by its fascination. Those who fall under the control of the desire to possess the fire lose their lives, just like moths become fatally attracted by the heat and light radiated by the fire and end up burning into it. Yet, fire is a very good thing. It is necessary to cook our foods, to heat our bodies and homes in the winter, to bring light in the dark hours, and even to carry our devotional offerings to God. As the firemen know, the wise application of fire (together with the deep knowledge of the wind and other factors) is even used to stop wild fires by counteracting them. There is a big difference between a genuine need and the whimsical lustful desires that are generated by an uncontrolled mind.

The hunger for sense gratification and domination for their own sake can never be satisfied, just like it is not possible to quench a fire by regularly adding fuel. On the other hand, the genuine need for sense gratification can be satiated by a reasonable and healthy amount of the pleasures that are beneficial and required for the maintenance of the body and mind. Again, the real point here is not about shunning all sense gratification, but about not allowing it to devour our consciousness and become the most important thing in our life.

Another interpretation of this verse is that *jnana*, as theoretical knowledge, is not sufficient by itself to face the danger of passionate lust and anger: therefore we need to engage our emotions in *bhakti*, and our energies in *karma yoga*. This will harness *rajas* in the service of *visuddha sattva* and thus control it effectively, rather than letting it control the activities of the living entity and drag him into *tamas*. *Raja guna*, the mode of passion and activity, is a great force that, like all forces, is neutral in itself and can be used for the bad or the good.

इन्द्रियाणि मनो बुद्धिरस्याधिष्ठानमुच्यते । एतैर्विमोहयत्येष ज्ञानमावृत्य देहिनम् ॥ ३-४० ॥

indriyāṇi mano buddhirasyādhiṣṭhānamucyate | etairvimohayatyeṣa jñānamāvṛtya dehinam || 3-40 ||

indriyani: the senses; *manah*: the mind; *buddhiḥ*: the intellect; *asya*: of this; *adhishtanam*: residence; *ucyate*: it is said; *etaih*: by (all) these; *vimohayati*: confuses (in many ways); *esha*: this; *jnanam*: the knowledge; *avriya*: covering; *dehinam*: of the embodied (soul).

"It is said that the senses, the mind and the intelligence are the seats of this (angry lust), as this (angry lust) confuses and covers the knowledge of the embodied beings."

All those who have a material body (*dehinam*) have senses, mind and intelligence, that are normally fueled by *rajas* or passion. This fuel is required to keep the body in action (out of the lethargy of *tamas*), but as with all combustible substances, its use inevitably exposes us to the dangers of uncontrolled fire.

As we have seen, desire is not bad in itself, but it becomes noxious when it takes an angry quality, when it does not content itself with the *prasadam*, whatever is sent by the kindness of God. Then it becomes the unhealthy center and purpose of life rather than a healthy support to give us strength to continue in our duties. Angry lust pollutes the senses, the mind and the intelligence, distracting them from the real purpose of life and creating a sort of toxic addiction that requires more and more gratification just to keep going and stealing all energy.

Again, the solution to the problem is to focus the consciousness in *sattva* or *visuddha sattva*, the pure transcendental quality of goodness, as it had already been recommended clearly in 2.45. The sober vision, clarity and enlightenment characteristic of *sattva* will certainly help us to engage *rajas* in a constructive and progressive way.

It is important to understand that lust is not only in the senses or in the physical body: it arises in the mind and keeps the intelligence engaged in the pursuit of sense gratification, possession and domination, and the rage that rises from their frustration. Castigating the body with severe and unhealthy penance is not the correct answer, because as Krishna has already stated, one who abstains from sense gratification but still retains the memory of the sense objects is a foolish cheater (3.7). The solution lies much deeper, in the greater power of the soul that can control the intellect and the mind, as Krishna will clearly state in the next verses.

तस्मात्त्वमिन्द्रियाण्यादौ नियम्य भरतर्षभ । पाप्मानं प्रजहि ह्येनं ज्ञानविज्ञाननाशनम् ॥ ३-४१ ॥

tasmāttvamindriyaṅyādau niyamya bharatarṣabha । pāpmānaṁ prajahi hyenaṁ jñānavijñānanāśanam ॥ 3-41 ॥

tasmat: therefore; *tvam*: you; *indriyani*: the senses; *adau*: from the beginning; *niyamya*: by regulating (through *yama* and *niyama*); *bharatarṣabha*: o best of the descendants of Bharata (Arjuna); *paṁmanam*: the cause of sin; *prajahi*: give up/ vanquish; *hi*: certainly; *enam*: this; *jñana*: theoretical knowledge; *vijnana*: applied knowledge; *nasanam*: the destroyer.

"Therefore, o best of the Bharatas (Arjuna), you (should) engage the senses in a regulated way first/ from the very beginning, and then totally abandon/ in order to vanquish this great cause of sinful actions, that can destroy knowledge and wisdom."

One meaning of this verse is that one should first (*adau*) practice control of the senses and the mind and then ultimately develop complete renunciation. Another meaning of the word *adau* in this verse is "from the beginning of one's life".

As also confirmed by many passages of *shastra*, the training in *dharma* and *yoga* should start from an early age, directly from childhood, so that the individual does not have the opportunity to develop bad habits. This is why young children are sent to the Gurukula to become *brahmachari* students.

The civilized system of Vedic society is also called *varnashrama* because it is composed by four *varnas* or occupational categories and by four *ashramas* or stages of life. The four *varnas* are *brahmanas* (intellectuals), *kshatriyas* (administrators), *vaisyas* (entrepreneurs) and *sudra* (laborers). The four *ashramas* are *brahmacharya* (student life), *grihastha* (family life), *vanaprastha* (retired life) and *sannyasa* (renunciation).

The four *ashramas* are meant to be applied as follows: all the members of the four *varnas* should attend the Gurukula and receive some training as *brahmacharis*; those who are unable to complete the course of studies successfully because of insufficient qualities and inclination are categorized as *sudras* and they are not required to undertake any religious or material responsibility in society. They may marry and have a family, but they are not required to follow all the rules and regulations and perform all the rituals that are prescribed for *grihasthas*. They can participate to public functions and get the help of *brahmanas* if they want to have auspicious ceremonies in their homes, but this is not compulsory for them.

Students that qualify on the further level, either as *vaisyas*, *kshatriyas* or *brahmanas* receive the *diksha* (initiation) and the sacred thread (*upavita*) that symbolizes that they are competent to perform the ritual ceremonies. They undergo the marriage *samskara* and the subsequent *samskaras* for their children, but only the *kshatriyas* and *brahmanas* are duty-bound to enter the order of *vanaprastha* at the age of 50, to dedicate fully in the pursuit of religious activities.

Vaisyas have the tendency to remain engaged in their family and even social occupation for as long as they are able to according their physical and mental health; when they become too old and invalid they retire from work but remain in family to be taken care by their adult children.

Kshatriyas and *brahmanas*, on the other hand, are required to leave their family and go to the forest (*panchasordhvam vanam vrajet*) to perform austerities, live very simply on fruits, roots and forest produce, and avoid social interactions. In alternative, they should travel frequently to pilgrimage places in order to purify themselves from attachments and material identifications. Some people believe that the *vanaprastha ashram* is meant to "accumulate wealth", but this is exactly the opposite of what the *shastras* teach. A *brahmana* or *kshatriya* is supposed to be more evolved and therefore detached from material possessions, so when old age approaches he leaves the house and professional occupation to his adult son and gets serious about preparing for death. The order of *vanaprastha* is open both to husband and wife, and they can continue to live together, but practicing self control and gradual renunciation.

However, only the *brahmana* has the duty to renounce everything and dedicate the last years of his life to great austerities with the purpose of teaching and inspiring society as a *sannyasi*. The order of complete renunciation (*sannyasa*) is generally taken by men at the age of 75, after spending 25 years (from 50 to 75) in the stage of *vanaprastha*. The wife can either become a *sannyasini sadhvi* and live alone just like male *sannyasis* do, or go back to live comfortably but modestly with her grown up children until she dies. Women - like *sudras* - are not required to perform severe austerities, although there is no prohibition in that sense. This is the perfectly scientific way to practice control over sense gratification. However, it is never too late to start controlling the senses in a regulated way - "from the beginning" also means that one can do any time as soon as he realizes the need to do so.

इन्द्रियाणि पराण्याहुरिन्द्रियेभ्यः परं मनः । मनसस्तु परा बुद्धिर्यो बुद्धेः परतस्तु सः ॥ ३-४२ ॥

indriyāṇi parāṇyāhurindriyebhyaḥ param manah | manasastu parā buddhiryo buddheḥ paratastu saḥ || 3-42 ||

indriyani: the senses; *parani*: superior; *ahuh*: are said; *indriyebhyaḥ*: than the senses; *param*: superior; *manah*: the mind; *manasah*: than the mind; *tu*: but; *para*: superior; *buddhih*: intelligence; *yah*: that; *buddheh*: than intelligence/ intellect; *paratah*: superior; *tu*: but; *sah*: he (the *atman/ purusha*).

"The senses are superior (to this angry lust/ to dull matter), and the mind is superior to the senses. Intelligence is superior to the mind, and he (the soul) is superior to the intellect."

Some commentators explain the first term of comparison in the verse as dull matter, but in the previous verses Krishna has been talking about the "enemy of the wise", the lust and anger born from the *guna* of passion. In both cases, the senses have the power to engage or not to engage both the material object and the desire, so they are superior to both.

The concept of superiority (*para*) expressed here is not artificial or arbitrary; it is not a mysterious dogma coming from some obscure theological categories that cannot be verified by practical experience. Vedic knowledge is deeply scientific. The *atman* is the pure identity of the individual, the "I" that remains the same in spite of the constant change of body and situations. Everything else disappears, but the true identity of the living being never changes. We say "my body" and "my mind", because we instinctively perceive a distinct difference between the subject (the "I") and the object (the "mine"). We, as *atman*, have the intrinsic power to control our mind and body, therefore we are superior to them. If we do not control them, it's just because of lack of training and practice. The *atman* can control the mind by using the intelligence or intellect. The difference between mind and intellect is that the intellect is able to discern between a bad idea and a good idea, while the mind elaborates on everything that is supplied by the senses or contained in its memory files. However, the mind is superior to the senses because it can think and doubt, accepting or rejecting the impressions supplied by the senses with the functions called *sankalpa* (volition, intention, thought, reflection, imagination) and *vikalpa* (doubt, indecision, error etc).

We can make the example of a computer: the *atman* is the operator, the intellect is the root system, the mind is composed by all the various software programs, the ten senses are the connections between the computer and the external world - monitor, keyboard, mouse, printer, modem etc - which have both software (subtle) and hardware (gross) components. The body is constituted by the hardware proper. The operator of the computer has the power to give commands to the entire machine. The root system accepts or rejects the software and runs it as required, and the software operates the various connections. The operator can exist without the machine, and similarly the basic system can exist without this or that software. The ten senses are the passive senses of perception (vision, hearing, taste, smell and touch) and the active organs of action (speech, hands, feet, anus and genitals).

एवं बुद्धेः परं बुद्ध्वा संस्तभ्यात्मानमात्मना । जहि शत्रुं महाबाहो कामरूपं दुरासदम् ॥ ३-४३ ॥

evam buddheḥ param buddhvā samstabhyaātmanamātmanā | jahi śatruṁ mahābāho kāmarūpaṁ durāsadam || 3-43 ||

evam: thus; *buddheh*: than intellect; *param*: superior; *buddhva*: understanding; *samstabhya*: establishing firmly; *atmanam*: the self; *atmana*: with the self/ with the mind; *jahi*: vanquish; *śatrum*: the enemy; *maha-baho*: o mighty armed; *kama-rupam*: in the form of desire; *durasadam*: formidable.

"O mighty-armed (Arjuna), thus knowing that (you are/ which is) superior to the intelligence, make yourself stable by your own effort/ focus the mind on the self, and conquer that enemy (that is) the formidable lust."

After scientifically explaining the nature of uncontrolled desire and its negative effects on the consciousness, and offering the solution to the problem, Krishna encourages Arjuna to follow the best course of action, not because he demands obedience, but simply because it is the best thing to do. Similarly, at the conclusion of *Gita* (18.63), he will clearly tell Arjuna, "I have explained you this knowledge: think about it carefully, and then do what you wish". Krishna gives great importance to intelligence, encouraging Arjuna (and us as well) to engage it to win the battle of life against uncontrolled lust for enjoyment, possession and domination. Apart from the image of the battle, that is a familiar example to a *kshatriya* like Arjuna, Krishna often mentions the metaphor of the storm, comparing this enemy of uncontrolled desires to a strong wind that sweeps away the mind and senses. In both examples, we can attain success by firmly standing our ground or staying our course with intelligence, without allowing distractions to sweep us away. This obviously highlights the importance of strengthening our own determined intelligence so that it can control the mind and senses. The idea of focusing the Self on the Self (*atmanam atmana*), in its different hues of meanings, certainly gives a clear message in this direction.

This empowerment of the individual does not take anything away from the concept of surrendering to the Divine Plan and tolerating the constant changes of material nature such as joys and sorrows. Some people misinterpret the meaning of surrender and tolerance, presenting them a sort of passive fatalism, a blind and resigned acceptance of whatever destiny is dishing out. This kind of idea is wrong and creates a serious danger, because it can fool people into falling under the control of unscrupulous and ruthless exploiters who falsely present themselves as "God's representatives" and demand that we surrender to them, renouncing our God given intelligence and personal power.

Chapter 4
Jnana yoga
The yoga of knowledge

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.

श्रीभगवानुवाच ।

śrībhagavānuvāca ।

इमं विवस्वते योगं प्रोक्तवानहमव्ययम् । विवस्वान्मनवे प्राह मनुरिक्ष्वाकवेऽब्रवीत् ॥ ४-१ ॥

imaṁ vivasvate yogam proktavānahamavyayam । 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; *abavit:* 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 *raakshasa*). 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 *somasara* during the *yajna*. Saryati had 3 sons: Uttanabarhi, Anarta and Bhurisen. 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 *somasara*. 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 descendence 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 Manu), Ajita (Cakshusha Manu), Sraddhadaveva (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).

एवं परम्पराप्राप्तमिमं राजर्षयो विदुः । स कालेनेह महता योगो नष्टः परन्तप ॥ ४-२ ॥

evam paramparāprāptamimam rajarṣayo viduḥ | 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; *viduḥ*: they understood; *sah*: this (knowledge of *yoga*); *kaleneha*: with time; *mahata*: a lot of; *yogah*: (the knowledge of) *yoga*; *naṣṭah*: 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.

स एवायं मया तेऽद्य योगः प्रोक्तः पुरातनः । भक्तोऽसि मे सखा चेति रहस्यं ह्येतदुत्तमम् ॥ ४-३ ॥

sa evāyaṁ mayā te'dya yogaḥ proktaḥ purātanah | bhakto'si me sakhā ceti rahasyam hyetaduttamam || 4-3 ||

sah: that (same); *eva*: certainly; *ayam*: this; *maya*: by me; *te*: to you; *adya*: today; *yogah*: 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 *prakṛita saḥajyas* that is usually also called “devotion”. Genuine *bhakti* is supported by deep and solid knowledge and renunciation – *jñana* 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, *sakhyā* 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.

अर्जुन उवाच ।

arjuna uvāca ।

अपरं भवतो जन्म परं जन्म विवस्वतः । कथमेतद्विजानीयां त्वमादौ प्रोक्तवानिति ॥ ४-४ ॥

aparaṁ bhavato janma paraṁ janma vivasvataḥ । kathametadvijānīyāṁ tvamādau proktavāniti ॥ 4-4 ॥

arjuna: Arjuna; *uvaca*: said; *aparam*: inferior/ junior; *bhavataḥ*: your; *janma*: birth; *param*: superior/ senior; *janma*: birth; *vivasvataḥ*: of Vivasvan; *katham*: how; *etat*: this; *vijānīyam*: I am to understand; *tvam*: you; *adāu*: 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.

श्रीभगवानुवाच ।

śrībhagavānuvāca ।

बहूनि मे व्यतीतानि जन्मानि तव चार्जुन । तान्यहं वेद सर्वाणि न त्वं वेत्थ परन्तप ॥ ४-५ ॥

bahūni me vyatītāni janmāni tava cārjuna । tānyahaṁ 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.

अजोऽपि सन्नव्ययात्मा भूतानामीश्वरोऽपि सन् । प्रकृतिं स्वामधिष्ठाय सम्भवाम्यात्ममायया ॥ ४-६ ॥

ajo'pi sannavyayātmā bhūtānāmīśvaro'pi san । 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.

यदा यदा हि धर्मस्य ग्लानिर्भवति भारत । अभ्युत्थानमधर्मस्य तदात्मानं सृजाम्यहम् ॥ ४-७ ॥

yadā yadā hi dharmasya glānirbhavati bhārata । abhyutthānamadharmasya tadātmānam 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") *avatars* while indirect manifestations are called *vibhinnamsa* ("separated parts") or *shaktyavesa* ("invested with power") *avatars*. 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.

परित्राणाय साधूनां विनाशाय च दुष्कृताम् । धर्मसंस्थापनार्थाय सम्भवामि युगे युगे ॥ ४-८ ॥

paritrāṇāya sādḥūnām vināśāya ca duṣkṛtām । dharmasamsthāpanārthāya sambhavāmi yuge yuge ॥ 4-8 ॥

paritrāṇāya: for the protection/ deliverance; *sādḥūnam*: of the good people; *vināśāya*: for the destruction; *ca*: and; *duṣkṛtam*: of the evil doers; *dharmā*: of *dharmā*; *samsthāpana*: the full establishment; *arthāya*: for the purpose of; *sambhavāmi*: 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 *dharmā*."

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 *sādhu*, *duṣkṛta*, and *dharmā*.

Sādhu 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.

Duṣkṛta literally means "evil doers", and obviously refers to the people who commit evil deeds. The word *kṛta* 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 *duṣkṛta* 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 *dharmā* as a particular established/ institutionalized religion, self-righteous conventional moralism, ideological dogma, or even birth prejudice as "caste", and therefore the words *sādhu* and *duṣkṛta* become accordingly distorted. So *sādhu* is translated as a "pious man" or a "devotee" (in a very bigoted sense), and *duṣkṛta* 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 *paritrāṇāya* and *vināśāya* are very interesting, too. *Paritrā* 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.

Vināśāya 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.

जन्म कर्म च मे दिव्यमेवं यो वेत्ति तत्त्वतः । त्यक्त्वा देहं पुनर्जन्म नैति मामेति सोऽर्जुन ॥ ४-९ ॥

janma karma ca me divyamevaṁ yo veti tattvataḥ | tyaktvā dehaṁ punarjanma naiti māmeti so'ṛjuna || 4-9 ||

janma: birth; *karma*: activities; *ca*: and; *me*: my; *divyam*: divine; *evam*: thus; *yah*: s/he; *veti*: 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*.

वीतरागभयक्रोधा मन्मया मामुपाश्रिताः । बहवो ज्ञानतपसा पूता मद्भावमागताः ॥ ४-१० ॥

vītarāgabhayakrodhā manmayā māmupāśritāḥ | 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; *jñana 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 adharmaic 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 sentimental level.

ये यथा मां प्रपद्यन्ते तांस्तथैव भजाम्यहम् । मम वर्तमानुवर्तन्ते मनुष्याः पार्थ सर्वशः ॥ ४-११ ॥

ye yathā māṁ prapadyante tāṁstathaiva bhajāmyaham | 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.

काङ्क्षन्तः कर्मणां सिद्धिं यजन्त इह देवताः । क्षिप्रं हि मानुषे लोके सिद्धिर्भवति कर्मजा ॥ ४-१२ ॥

kāṅkṣantaḥ karmaṇāṃ siddhiṃ yajanta iha devatāḥ | kṣipraṃ 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 worshipping 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.

चातुर्वर्ण्यं मया सृष्टं गुणकर्मविभागशः । तस्य कर्तारमपि मां विद्ध्यकर्तारमव्ययम् ॥ ४-१३ ॥

cāturvarṇyaṁ mayā sṛṣṭaṁ guṇakarmavibhagaśaḥ | tasya kartāramapi māṁ vidhyakartāramavyayam | 4-13 |

catur: 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*, "a *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.

न मां कर्माणि लिम्पन्ति न मे कर्मफले स्पृहा । इति मां योऽभिजानाति कर्मभिर्न स बध्यते ॥ ४-१४ ॥

na māṁ karmāṇi limpanti na me karmaphale sprhā | iti māṁ 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; *spraha*: 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.

एवं ज्ञात्वा कृतं कर्म पूर्वैरपि मुमुक्षुभिः । कुरु कर्मैव तस्मात्त्वं पूर्वैः पूर्वतरं कृतम् ॥ ४-१५ ॥

evaṁ jñātvā kṛtaṁ karma pūrvairapi mumukṣubhiḥ | kuru karmaiva tasmāttvaṁ pūrvaiḥ pūrvataraṁ kṛtam || 4-15 ||

evam: thus; *jnatva*: knowing; *kritam*: performed; *karma*: action/ work/ duties; *purvaiḥ*: previously; *api*: even; *mumukshubhih*: those who desired liberation; *kuru*: do; *karma*: work/ duty/ action; *eva*: certainly; *tasmat*: 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.

किं कर्म किमकर्मेति कवयोऽप्यत्र मोहिताः । तत्ते कर्म प्रवक्ष्यामि यज्ज्ञात्वा मोक्षयसेऽशुभात् ॥ ४-१६ ॥

kiṁ karma kimakarmeti kavayo'pyatra mohitāḥ | 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; *ashubhat*: 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 *ashubha* respectively indicate the good/ favorable/ auspicious results/ reactions and the bad /unfavorable/ inauspicious results/ reactions.

कर्मणो ह्यपि बोद्धव्यं बोद्धव्यं च विकर्मणः ।

अकर्मणश्च बोद्धव्यं गहना कर्मणो गतिः ॥ ४-१७ ॥

karmaṇo hyapi boddhavyaṁ boddhavyaṁ ca vikarmaṇaḥ | 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; *vikarmaṇah*: of bad action; *akarmaṇah*: of non-action; *ca*: and; *boddhavyam*: to be understood; *gahana*: very difficult; *karmanah*: of the actions; *gatiḥ*: 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.

कर्मण्यकर्म यः पश्येदकर्माणि च कर्म यः ।

स बुद्धिमान्मनुष्येषु स युक्तः कृत्स्नकर्मकृत् ॥ ४-१८ ॥

karmanyakarma yaḥ paśyedakarmaṇi ca karma yaḥ | sa buddhimānmanuṣyeṣu sa yuktaḥ kṛtsnakarmakṛt || 4-18 ||

karmani: (in) the actions; *akarma*: non-action; *yaḥ*: one who; *paśyet*: sees/ finds; *akarmaṇi*: (in) non-actions; *ca*: and; *karma*: (as) action; *yaḥ*: s/he; *sah*: s/he; *buddhiman*: intelligent; *manuṣyesu*: among human beings; *sah*: s/he; *yuktah*: engaged (in Yoga); *kṛtsna-karma-kṛit*: 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.

यस्य सर्वे समारम्भाः कामसङ्कल्पवर्जिताः । ज्ञानाग्निदग्धकर्माणं तमाहुः पण्डितं बुधाः ॥ ४-१९ ॥

yasya sarve samārambhāḥ kāmasaṅkalpavarjitāḥ | jñānāgnidagdhakarmanam 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; *panḍitam*: 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*.

त्यक्त्वा कर्मफलासङ्गं नित्यतृप्तो निराश्रयः । कर्मण्यभिप्रवृत्तोऽपि नैव किञ्चित्करोति सः ॥ ४-२० ॥

tyaktvā karmaphalāsaṅgam nityatṛpto nirāśrayaḥ | 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; *ashrayah*: shelter; *karmani*: in work; *abhi-pravrittah*: 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.

निराशीर्यतचित्तात्मा त्यक्तसर्वपरिग्रहः । शरीरं केवलं कर्म कुर्वन्नाप्नोति किञ्चिषम् ॥ ४-२१ ॥

nirāśiryatacittātmā tyaktasarvaparigrahaḥ | śarīraṁ kevalam 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).

यदृच्छालाभसन्तुष्टो द्वन्द्वतीतो विमत्सरः । समः सिद्धावसिद्धौ च कृत्वापि न निबध्यते ॥ ४-२२ ॥

yadṛcchālābhasantuṣṭo dvandvātīto vimatsarah | samah siddhāvasiddhau ca kṛtvāpi na nibadhyate || 4-22 |

yadriccha: of its own accord; *labha*: obtained; *santustah*: satisfied; *dvandva*: duality; *atitah*: gone beyond; *vimatsarah*: free from envy; *samah*: equally stable; *siddhau*: in success; *asiddhau*: in failure; *ca*: and; *kritva*: 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.

गतसङ्गस्य मुक्तस्य ज्ञानावस्थितचेतसः । यज्ञायाचरतः कर्म समग्रं प्रविलीयते ॥ ४-२३ ॥

gataśaṅgasya muktasya jñānāvasthitacetasaḥ | 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; *cetasah*: whose consciousness; *yajna*: to Yajna (Vishnu)/ to the sacrifice; *acaratah*: 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.

ब्रह्मार्पणं ब्रह्म हविर्ब्रह्माग्नौ ब्रह्मणा हुतम् । ब्रह्मैव तेन गन्तव्यं ब्रह्मकर्मसमाधिना ॥ ४-२४ ॥

brahmārpaṇaṁ brahma havirbrahmāgnau brahmaṇā hutam | brahmaiva tena gantavyaṁ 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.

दैवमेवापरे यज्ञं योगिनः पर्युपासते । ब्रह्माग्नावपरे यज्ञं यज्ञेनैवोपजुह्वति ॥ ४-२५ ॥

daivamevāpare yajñam yoginaḥ paryupāsate | 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; *opajuhvati*: 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.

श्रोत्रादीनीन्द्रियाण्यन्ये संयमाग्निषु जुह्वति । शब्दादीन्विषयानन्य इन्द्रियाग्निषु जुह्वति ॥ ४-२६ ॥

śrotrādīnīndriyaṅanye saṁyamāgniṣu juhvati | śabdādīnviṣayānanya indriyāgniṣu juhvati || 4-26 |

śrotra: the hearing power; *adīni*: and so on; *indriyani*: the senses; *anye*: others; *samyama*: of restraint/ control; *agnishu*: in the fires; *juhvati*: offers; *śabda*: the sound; *adīn*: and so on; *viṣayan*: 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 *pūja* 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 *agnishu* ("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.

सर्वाणीन्द्रियकर्माणि प्राणकर्माणि चापरे । आत्मसंयमयोगाग्नौ जुह्वति ज्ञानदीपिते ॥ ४-२७ ॥

sarvāṇīndriyakarmāṇi prāṇakarmāṇi cāpare | ātmasaṁyamayogāgnau juhvati jñānadipite || 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.

द्रव्ययज्ञास्तपोयज्ञा योगयज्ञास्तथापरे । स्वाध्यायज्ञानयज्ञाश्च यतयः संशितव्रताः ॥ ४-२८ ॥

dravyayajñāstapoyajñā yogayajñāstathāpare | svādhyāyajñānāyajñāśca yatayah samsitavratāḥ || 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*.

अपाने जुह्वति प्राणं प्राणेऽपानं तथापरे । प्राणापानगती रुद्ध्वा प्राणायामपरायणाः ॥ ४-२९ ॥

apāne juhvati prāṇam prāṇe'pānam tathāpare | 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.

श्रद्धावाँल्लभते ज्ञानं तत्परः संयतेन्द्रियः । ज्ञानं लब्ध्वा परां शान्तिमचिरेणाधिगच्छति ॥ ४-३९ ॥

śraddhāvāṅllabhate jñānaṁ tatparaḥ saṁyatendriyaḥ | jñānaṁ labdhvā parāṁ śāntimacireṇādhigacchati || 4-39 ||

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.

यज्ञशिष्टामृतभुजो यान्ति ब्रह्म सनातनम् । नायं लोकोऽस्त्ययज्ञस्य कुतोऽन्यः कुरुसत्तम ॥ ४-३१ ॥

yajñaśiṣṭāmṛtabhujo yānti brahma sanātanam | 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 sista 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.

एवं बहुविधा यज्ञा वितता ब्रह्मणो मुखे । कर्मजान्विद्धि तान्सर्वानिवं ज्ञात्वा विमोक्ष्यसे ॥ ४-३२ ॥

evam bahuvidhā yajñā vitatā brahmaṇo mukhe | karmajānviddhi tānsarvānevam 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 desertic areas. 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.

श्रेयान्द्रव्यमयाद्यज्ञाज्ज्ञानयज्ञः परन्तप । सर्वं कर्माखिलं पार्थ ज्ञाने परिसमाप्यते ॥ ४-३३ ॥

śreyāndravymayādyajñāñāyajñāḥ parantapa | 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.

तद्विद्धि प्राणिपातेन परिप्रश्नेन सेवया । उपदेक्ष्यन्ति ते ज्ञानं ज्ञानिनस्तत्त्वदर्शिनः ॥ ४-३४ ॥

tadviddhi praṇipātena paripraśnena sevayā | upadekṣyanti te jñānam 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.

यज्ज्ञात्वा न पुनर्मोहमेवं यास्यसि पाण्डव । येन भूतान्यशेषाणि द्रक्ष्यस्यात्मन्यथो मयि ॥ ४-३५ ॥

yajjñātvā na punarmohamevaṁ yāsyasi paṇḍava | yena bhūtānyaśeṣāṇi drakṣyasyātmanyatho mayi || 4-35 ||

yat: this (knowledge); *jnatva*: knowing; *na*: not; *punah*: again; *moham*: illusion; *evam*: like this; *yasyasi*: you shall come; *paṇḍava*: 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 *drakshyasi 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.

अपि चेदसि पापेभ्यः सर्वेभ्यः पापकृत्तमः । सर्वं ज्ञानप्लवेनैव वृजिनं सन्तरिष्यसि ॥ ४-३६ ॥

api cedasi pāpebhyaḥ sarvebhyaḥ pāpakṛttamaḥ | 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 plavana*) 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.

यथैधांसि समिद्धोऽग्निर्भस्मसात्कुरुतेऽर्जुन । ज्ञानाग्निः सर्वकर्माणि भस्मसात्कुरुते तथा ॥ ४-३७ ॥

yathaidhāṁsi samiddho'gnirbhasmasātkurute'rjuna | 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.

न हि ज्ञानेन सदृशं पवित्रमिह विद्यते । तत्स्वयं योगसंसिद्धः कालेनात्मनि विन्दति ॥ ४-३८ ॥

na hi jñānena sadṛśaṁ pavitramiha vidyate | tatsvayaṁ yogasaṁsiddhaḥ kālenātmani vindati || 4-38 ||

na: not; *hi*: certainly; *jnana*: 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.

श्रद्धावाँल्लभते ज्ञानं तत्परः संयतेन्द्रियः । ज्ञानं लब्ध्वा परां शान्तिमचिरेणाधिगच्छति ॥ ४-३९ ॥

śraddhāvāṅllabhate jñānaṁ tatparaḥ saṁyatendriyaḥ | jñānaṁ labdhvā parāṁ śāntimacireṇādhiḡacchati || 4-39 ||

śraddha-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 (*śraddha*), 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: *śraddha* and *nistha*. *Śraddha* 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 śraddha, 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.

अज्ञश्चाश्रद्धधानश्च संशयात्मा विनश्यति । नायं लोकोऽस्ति न परो न सुखं संशयात्मनः ॥ ४-४० ॥

ajñāścāśraddadhānaśca saṁśayātmā vinaśyati | 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; *vinaśyati*: perishes/ is (engaged in) self-destruction; *na*: not; *ayam*: in this; *lokaḥ*: 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.

योगसंन्यस्तकर्माणं ज्ञानसञ्चिन्नसंशयम् । आत्मवन्तं न कर्माणि निबध्नन्ति धनञ्जय ॥ ४-४१ ॥

yogasannyastakarmāṇaṁ jñānasañchinnaśāyam | ātmavantaṁ 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; *dhanañjaya*: 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 prompt 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*.

तस्मादज्ञानसम्भूतं हृत्स्थं ज्ञानासिनात्मनः । छित्त्वेन संशयं योगमातिष्ठोत्तिष्ठ भारत ॥ ४-४२ ॥

tasmādaññānasambhūtaṁ hṛtsthāṁ jñānāsinaātmanah | chittvainaṁ saṁśayaṁ yogamātiṣṭhotttiṣṭha bhārata || 4-42 ||

tasmat: therefore; *ajñana-sambhutam*: created by ignorance; *hrit-stham*: settled in the heart; *jñana-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. Which 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 *athista* and *utthista* are very interesting. *Athista* means "situating himself on a strong basis" and *utthista* 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.

Chapter 5

Sannyasa Yoga

The yoga of renunciation

This chapter speaks clearly about two extremely difficult and misunderstood subjects - *sannyasa* and *yoga* - explaining what actual renunciation is, and what is the true purpose of *yoga*. We will see how the teachings of this chapter do not contradict the teachings of previous chapters but rather they integrate them and make them easier to understand.

The order of *sannyasa* is the fourth stage of life or *ashrama* for civilized people (*aryas*). In the previous chapter, Krishna has explained the system of *varnas* as a categorization of social duties according to one's qualities/ tendencies and activities/ abilities (*guna* and *karma*), that is part of the greater system called *varnashrama*, including both *varnas* and *ashramas* and detailing their duties to ensure the gradual progress of the entire society. Quite the opposite of the present degraded caste system based on birth prejudice and disregard for real personal qualities and duties, the *varnashrama* system is meant to support and stimulate the individual's training for progress and development, by setting duties and responsibilities that are progressively more demanding just like the higher classes in school are set lessons and tests that become increasingly difficult and demanding. The general direction leads from the lower *gunas* (qualities) of *tamas* (ignorance) and *rajas* (passion) towards *sattva* (virtue/ goodness), that is characterized by selflessness, sense of responsibility and duty, simplicity of life, peacefulness, cultivation of knowledge, cultivation of detachment/ renunciation, wisdom, internal and external cleanliness, and inner happiness and satisfaction that radiates in every aspect of life. Later Krishna will explain more about the three *gunas* (modes or qualities) of material nature, especially in chapter 14, that is specifically entitled *guna traya vibhaga yoga*, or "the *yoga* of

differentiating between the *gunas*". However, already in 2.45 (*nitya-sattva stho*) he had said that one should always remain situated in *sattva*, because the purification of the mind and body and the cultivation of knowledge are the purpose of all the *karmas* and *yajnas*, or dutiful activities and religious rituals

Among the 8 categories of the *varnashrama dharma*, the *brahmana* (for the *varnas*) and the *sannyasi* (for the *ashramas*) are expected to be the highest and most qualified among the human beings; the *brahmana* is one who knows Brahman in theory and practice, while the *sannyasi* has completely renounced all material identifications, associations and attachments. Thus they exemplify the highest level of *jnana* (knowledge) and *vairagya* (detachment), the two main qualities/ practices that enable spiritual and material progress.

Just like it is not sufficient for a man to wear a sacred thread to be considered a *brahmana* if he does not possess the qualities and does not perform the duties as per descriptions in the *shastra*, it is not sufficient for a man to wear saffron colored clothes to be considered a *sannyasi* if he does not possess the qualities and does not perform the duties as per descriptions in the *shastra*. The instructions for *sannyasis* are found especially in the *Upanishads*, many of which are specifically dedicated to that purpose: *Aruneya Upanishad*, *Avadhuta Upanishad*, *Bhikshuka Upanishad*, *Brahma Upanishad*, *Jabala Upanishad*, *Katha rudra Upanishad*, *Kundika Upanishad*, *Maitreya Upanishad*, *Narada parivrajaka Upanishad*, *Nirvana Upanishad*, *Para brahma Upanishad*, *Paramahansa Upanishad*, *Paramahansa parivrajaka Upanishad*, *Sannyasa Upanishad*, *Satyayani Upanishad*, *Teja bindu Upanishad*, *Turiyatita Upanishad*, *Varaha Upanishad*, and *Yajnavalkya Upanishad*.

Formally entering the order of *sannyasa* has never been obligatory, but it had been recommended for *brahmanas* to set an example of higher aspirations among the general population. However, with the onset of Kali yuga the social body became increasingly afflicted by degradation and thus the order of *sannyasa* has mostly become a mockery of itself. According to the original *shastras*, a *sannyasi* cannot have any possession, any fixed residence, any opportunity for self gratification. He cannot accept disciples, he cannot teach or even mix with other people, except for the brief span of time a householder needs to milk a cow to feed a beggar. A *sannyasi* would not be invited for meals into the house, but was just given alms in his *kamandalu* (water pot) or *uttariya* (upper cloth), generally in the form of rice, fruits, vegetables, and especially milk - considered the most suitable food. A *sannyasi* was not supposed to cook his food, but he was expected to eat raw unseasoned food just to keep the body barely alive, without any concession to taste.

To avoid the possibility of the *sannyasi* becoming too complacent with his means of living, a precise and explicit rule stated that *sannyasis* could never come near women or wealthy or powerful people in society. This observance was also helped by the fact that *sannyasis* were expected to totally disregard the care of their own bodies and clothing, even roaming around naked or scantily covered by rags. They could not use shoes, umbrellas, or vehicles of any kind, and in general they were expected to do nothing else but simply prepare themselves to death through total detachment from all material identification and belongings.

Since the rules of *sannyasa* are so strict, it is better to humbly remain in an apparently ordinary position as a *vanaprastha* or *grihastha* or *brahmachari*, rather than venturing into the order of *sannyasa* and then falling from that position. A person who leaves the order of *sannyasa* to engage again in material life - family, society, business etc - is called a *vantasi*, "one who eats his own vomit" (*Bhagavata Purana* 7.15.36), and a person who behaves in a way that disgraces the name of *sannyasa* is called a *dharma-ha*, "one who kills *dharma*" (*Bhagavata Purana* 11.18.40-41).

अर्जुन उवाच ।

arjuna uvāca ।

संन्यासं कर्मणां कृष्ण पुनर्योगं च शंससि ।

यच्छ्रेय एतयोरेकं तन्मे ब्रूहि सुनिश्चितम् ॥ ५-१ ॥

sannyāsam karmāṇāṁ kṛṣṇa punaryogaṁ ca śaṁsasi । yacchreya etayorekaṁ tanme brūhi suniścitam ।। 5-1 ।।

arjuna: Arjuna; *uvaca*: said; *sannyasam*: *sannyasa*; *karmanam*: of the activities/ duties; *krishna*: o Krishna; *punah*: again; *yogam*: yoga; *ca*: and; *samsasi*: you are praising; *yat*: that; *sreya*: the higher benefit; *etayoh*: of the two; *ekam*: one; *tat*: that; *me*: to me; *bruhi*: tell; *suniscitam*: absolutely without doubt.

Arjuna said: "O Krishna, you have praised *sannyasa* (renunciation to all actions) and then (you praised) *yoga* (conscious engagement in action). Please tell me which one of these two will, without any doubt, be the best."

In this verse, the definition of *yoga* is opposed to the concept of *sannyasa* as "renunciation to action", highlighting the fact that *yoga* means "engagement in action". The difficulty of understanding expressed by Arjuna is common to everyone, especially when one finds himself in difficult circumstances. Good theories need to be put on the test of practical application in life - there are so many armchair philosophers and week-end *bhaktas* who like to spend a lazy afternoon in hefty talks or ponderous tomes, but when difficulties arise, all their nice talking and reading is forgotten and they act in very opposite ways, "because this is real life".

The difference between a person who acts out of selfish interest and a person who acts in a transcendently renounced consciousness is not always apparent, because they both engage wholeheartedly and painstakingly in the dutiful action, investing their intelligence, their will power, and the effort of their bodies. Krishna also says that one should never renounce the performance of one's dharmic duty, yet the position of a *sannyasi* - who has given up all ties to family and society and does not perform any duties - is considered exalted and transcendental. This is the main focus of *Gita*, and we should not think that the repetition of this concept is boring, because repetition is aimed at stressing the importance of the teaching, and engraving it into the student's mind, so that it becomes part of his mental structure. Krishna will repeat this point again and again.

See 6.1: "The real *sannyasi* and the real *yogi* is one who selflessly performs all his duties in society and takes the proper actions where required, without any attachment to enjoy the fruits of his activities - not one who escapes from action in the name of some rules of renunciation."

And 18.2: "Actual renunciation or *sannyasa* consists in giving up the desire for selfish activities. In fact, one should renounce the fruits of all activities: this is defined as renunciation."

And 18.5: "Sacrifice (sacred action), charity and austerity, and one's duties, should never be given up, but must always be performed. Certainly these - sacrifice, charity and austerity - can purify even the wise."

And 18.7-8: "*Sannyasa* is never about giving up prescribed duties. Those who abandon their prescribed duties (with the idea of renunciation) are said to be under the influence of *tamas* (ignorance)", "One who is unhappy about his duties, and gives them up out of fear of physical difficulties, is renouncing under the influence of *rajas* (passion), and certainly does not obtain the (expected) fruits of renunciation".

The answer is that there is no duality between *sannyasa* and *yoga*.

The real *yogi* is also the real *sannyasi*. This is the statement that will open the next chapter (6): "One who performs the (ritual and social) activities constituting his/ her duties without depending on the results of the action is the real *sannyasi* (renouncer) and *yogi*, not one who does not kindle the (sacred) fire and does not engage in activities."

The word *tat* in this verse is very interesting, because with it Arjuna subtly shows that he knows the ultimate purpose to be attained: *tat* ("That"), Transcendence, is the purpose of *sannyasa* and *yoga*.

श्रीभगवानुवाच ।

śrībhagavānuvāca ।

संन्यासः कर्मयोगश्च निःश्रेयसकरावुभौ । तयोस्तु कर्मसंन्यासात्कर्मयोगो विशिष्यते ॥ ५-२ ॥

sannyāsaḥ karmayogaśca niḥśreyasakarāvubhau । tayostu karmasannyāsāt karmayogo viśiṣyate ॥ 5-2 ॥

sri: the wonderful; *bhagavan*: Lord; *uvaca*: said; *sannyasaḥ*: *sannyasa*; *karma-yogaḥ*: *karma yoga*; *ca*: and; *niḥśreyasa*: of the highest benefit; *karau*: making/ leading to; *ubhau*: both of them; *tayoh*: of the two; *tu*: but; *karma-sannyasat*: than renunciation to activities; *karma-yogaḥ*: engagement of action (in transcendental consciousness); *visiṣyate*: is better.

The Lord said: "Both these (paths), the *sannyasa* (renunciation) and the *karma yoga* (the *yoga* of action) will bring the best benefit, but the *karma yoga* (the *yoga* of action) is better than the *karma sannyasa* (renunciation to action)."

The best benefit is indicated by the word *niḥśreya*, a strengthened form of the word *sreya*. We have seen previously that *sreya* is the real ultimate and permanent benefit, while *preya* is the immediate gratification, the apparent material benefit. So *niḥśreya* defines the epitome of the ultimate benefit: liberation from material conditionings and the attainment of the transcendental level of consciousness.

Both aspects of *sadhana* (spiritual practice) - *sannyasa* and *karma yoga* - are perfectly compatible with each other, and in fact they are both required to achieve the desired success (*sreya*). As we have seen in the other quotes from *Gita*, real *sannyasa* consists in renouncing the selfish motivation of the activities, rather than abstaining from activities themselves. However, the simple act of renunciation to the fruits of the activities is not sufficient to attain perfection, because it is a "negative" concept. We need to eliminate misconceptions in order to properly understand the *tattva*, but the mere elimination of misconceptions is not sufficient to actually understand the subject. Therefore we need to proceed with a proactive plan, a constructive plan, by which we engage our body, senses, mind and intelligence in positive action that is free from selfish motivations. To make an example: when we want to cultivate a field, we first need to clear away all the garbage and stones and weeds, and prepare the soil properly, making it level and aerating the superficial layer, and adding the fertilizing substances that are most suitable for that particular cultivation.

This preliminary work will ensure that the plants will grow healthy and strong, and the harvest will be done smoothly and without damages. But that is only the beginning of the work: we then need to spread the seeds, cover them with some soil and irrigate the land. When the plants have sprouted, we need to continue the cleaning work we have done in preparation - cleaning out the garbage and the weeds, and taking care of the pests that might be attracted to the nutritious and tasty stuff that the plants bear.

Similarly, before we start the process of *sadhana* proper we need to understand the difference between a weed and the useful plant we are growing, and how to keep our grounds clean. But the proper care of the harvest remains our main concern. What is the harvest here? Service to the Supreme. A *bhakta* could also translate *karma yoga* as "devotional service", because that is the purpose of the action when one is free from selfish motivations. However, we need to weed out a few misconceptions from this definition.

Devotional service, described more appropriately as *bhakti yoga* (rather than *karma yoga*), requires the proper understanding and realization of what the Divine is, and what are the basic parameters that define the service to the Divine.

When we translate *karma yoga* as "devotional service" we imply that all our regular activities, all our duties to family, society, and the universe, must be performed selflessly in a spirit of service to the All.

It does not mean that we can jump from family life to *sannyasa* and back, or to some strange and new position between them, whenever it is more convenient for us to enjoy something or to escape from something else, or to enjoy the advantages of both positions under the pretext of being "transcendental".

ज्ञेयः स नित्यसंन्यासी यो न द्वेष्टि न काङ्क्षति । निर्वन्द्वो हि महाबाहो सुखं बन्धात्प्रमुच्यते ॥ ५-३ ॥

jñeyah sa nityasannyāsī yo na dveṣṭi na kāṅkṣati । nīrvandvo hi mahābāho sukhaṁ bandhātpramucyate ॥ 5-3 ॥

jneyah: it should be known; *sah*: he/ she; *nitya*: always; *sannyasi*: *sannyasi*; *yah*: he/ she; *na*: (does) not; *dveshti*: hates; *na*: not; *kankshati*: aspires to; *nīrvandvah*: non-duality; *hi*: indeed; *maha-baho*: o Mahabaho ("mighty armed"); *sukham*: easily; *bandhat*: from the bondage; *pramucyate*: becomes completely liberated.

"It should be known that the (real) *sannyasi* (who remains in) permanent (renunciation) does not hate nor aspires to (anything), and/ because is certainly (always) free from duality. O mighty-armed (Arjuna), (such a person) becomes completely liberated from (all) ties very easily."

The expression *nitya sannyasi* implies that the official vow of permanent renunciation should not be taken lightly. In fact in Kali yuga such official vows are not prescribed because most of the degraded people of this age are unable to follow the strict rules of this *ashrama* and usually they end up making a superficial show of sanctity in order to obtain some material benefits from the gullible public.

A temporary practice of *sannyasa* may be taken up by anyone, as an exercise in renunciation and simplicity of life especially during *vratas* (periods of special austerities) or pilgrimages to holy places, but the permanent acceptance of the order of *sannyasa* requires a remarkable level of personal evolution. Only a person who has attained the transcendental level of Brahman realization will be able to overcome duality and remain undisturbed in front of the many favorable and unfavorable circumstances of life.

A *sannyasi* has no likes or dislikes, is not attracted or repulsed by anything and sees all living entities just as souls and parts of God, without being distracted by their bodily appearance or even by their behavior. He does not pursue sense gratification but he is always ready to engage everything and everyone in the service to the Divine, without ever being confused by external conditions of the body such as gender, caste, age, race and color. However, to be a *sannyasi* one does not need to leave one's family or job, or dress in a saffron-colored loincloth or stop wearing shoes. Many times, Krishna repeats that a true *sannyasi* continues to perform the prescribed duties - to one's family, one's professional occupation, etc - but without the selfish motivation of getting a personal benefit, such an increase in profits, name and fame, a high position, etc. So one who merely changes the external dress and social position in order to avoid the hurdles that come with the proper selfless performance of duties, and to enjoy a total lack of responsibilities, is acting under the influence of the lower modes of material nature.

The expression *sukham bandhat* is very interesting because it contains several meanings. *Sukham* means "easily", in the sense "with ease, comfortably, smoothly, without problems". According to this meaning, the verse upholds the gradual system of *purusharthas* described in Vedic literature - *dharma*, *artha*, *kama* and *moksha* - that enable the individual to experiment all the opportunities of human life in this world, without remaining entangled in the related activities and their results.

Happiness and ease are not condemned by *Gita*, however, one should not become attached to them, either. In fact attachment to one's happiness and comfort is also a form of bondage, albeit under the influence of material *sattva*. For example, a person who has developed a strong habit of cleanliness may feel repulsion at the idea of executing some work involving contact with dirty or contaminated things, but this is a conditioning, too.

साङ्ख्ययोगौ पृथग्वालाः प्रवदन्ति न पण्डिताः । एकमप्यास्थितः सम्यग्भयोर्विन्दते फलम् ॥ ५-४ ॥

sāṅkhyayogau pṛthagbālāḥ pravadanti na paṇḍitāḥ | ekamapyāsthitaḥ samyagubhayorvindate phalam || 5-4 ||

sankhya: the Sankhya; *yogau*: and the Yoga; *prithak*: different; *balah*: childish; *pravadanti*: they say/ declare; *na*: not/ never; *paṇḍitah*: the *paṇḍits* ("expert in learning"); *ekam*: in one; *api*: although; *asthitah*: situated; *samyak*: complete; *ubhayoh*: of the two; *vindate*: enjoys; *phalam*: the results.

"Only childish people, and not *paṇḍitas*, speak of Sankhya and Yoga as two different paths. In fact one who is firmly situated on either of these attains the final purpose of both."

After clarifying that *sannyasa* and *karma* are one and the same path, Krishna here states that *sankhya* and *yoga*, too, are one and the same path. This means that the path of spiritual realization, called Yoga, must be integrated by all the genuine techniques offered by the scriptures - Sankhya, Karma, Jnana, Sannyasa, Hatha, Dhyana, Kriya, Bhakti, and Buddhi. All these methods are simply ingredients of the one and only path of Yoga: if one is missing, we will not achieve the expected result. This is directly opposing the mainstream ignorant notion that there are "different" paths in the Vedic system, and one who chooses one path cannot choose another at the same time. The only real difference taught by Vedic knowledge is between *sat* and *asat*, *dharma* and *adharma*, *sura* and *asura*, *vidya* and *avidya*. Otherwise, all genuine dharmic methods are not only compatible, but also complementary, just like the "different" limbs of one single body cannot be detached from the body without losing their purpose. Let's examine the meaning of the various limbs of the dharmic path of Yoga presented in *Bhagavad gita*.

Sankhya is the knowledge of the difference between spirit and matter, that cleans the field from misconceptions. *Karma* is the practical engagement in active life in the performance of one's duties, that creates merits or *punya*, increasing *sattva* and therefore the intelligence and ability to achieve success in Self realization. *Jnana* is the transcendental knowledge and wisdom that keep us in the proper consciousness; it is also called *svadhyaya*, or study of the scriptures. *Sannyasa* is the renunciation to the *ahankara* and *matatva* - the identification with the material body/ mind (position, etc) and the attachment to material things and relationship (possession, belonging, affiliation etc).

Hatha is the balancing of the two energies of the body and mind - masculine and feminine - that enables us to transcend both and become situated in Transcendental identification. *Kriya* is the practice of *sadhana*, the regulated activities that train us in the personal association of the Divine consciousness. *Dhyana* is the meditation on the Absolute that includes all realities; it only becomes possible after we have acquired the proper knowledge and consciousness. *Bhakti* is the sentiment of love and devotion to the Lord, or *isvara pranidhana*. *Buddhi* is the intelligent discrimination that enables us to apply each and every ingredient in the appropriate way.

Recently some clever business people have come up with imaginative definitions such as the "Yoga of laughing" (Hasa Yoga), or the "Yoga of sleeping" (Nidra Yoga), and some people have even patented "Yoga systems" under their own personal names. They have invented Yoga for pregnancy, Yoga dance, Sauna Yoga, sex Yoga, antigravity Yoga, and who knows what else. There is even a special Yoga for dogs that has been (ridiculously) called "Doga". All this bogus stuff has distorted the original concept of Yoga and has no foundation whatsoever in the original scriptures, although most of these speculations claim to get their authoritative from the ancient Tradition. If we want to really understand Yoga, we need to go to the source.

यत्साङ्ख्यैः प्राप्यते स्थानं तद्योगैरपि गम्यते । एकं साङ्ख्यं च योगं च यः पश्यति स पश्यति ॥ ५-५ ॥

yatsāṅkhyaiḥ prāpyate sthānaṁ tadyogairapi gamyate | ekaṁ sāṅkhyam ca yogam ca yaḥ paśyati sa paśyati || 5-5 |

yat: what; *sāṅkhyaiḥ*: by the Sankhya; *prāpyate*: is obtained; *sthānam*: position; *tat*: that; *yogaiḥ*: by Yoga; *api*: even; *gamyate*: can be obtained; *ekam*: one only; *sāṅkhyam*: Sankhya; *ca*: and; *yogam*: Yoga; *ca*: and; *yaḥ*: he/ she; *paśyati*: sees; *sah*: he/ she; *paśyati*: sees (correctly).

"The (same) purpose/ position/ place that is attained through Sankhya is also attained through Yoga. One who sees Sankhya and Yoga as the same one thing, is (really) seeing (correctly)."

In this verse, Krishna unequivocally condemns the "different schools" concept taught by mainstream academia and by sectarian "religious" organizations entangled in material politics.

Sankhya is described as the analytical study of Reality, that distinguishes the various categories of existence, and specifically highlights the difference between the material elements of *prakṛiti* and the conscious being called *puruṣa*. Yoga is described as the science of action in transcendental consciousness, which consists in the pure awareness of one's own identity as *atman*, and the detached observation and utilization of the material elements that compose the body and the mind.

Therefore, Sankhya and Yoga are not different at all from each other. Sankhya philosophy is not opposed to the Bhagavata philosophy as some may believe, as the knowledge of the categories of Reality can not be opposed to the knowledge of the Supreme Reality. In fact, by knowing the glories that Bhagavan Isvara manifests in this world, we will become able to appreciate the deep meaning of the nature of Bhagavan - otherwise, our *bhakti* will remain only superficial. This genuine method of study is exemplified in the *Bhagavata Purana* as well as in later chapters of *Gīta*, and especially in chapters 11, 13, 14, 15, 16 and 17.

Dismissing the knowledge of the universe as unnecessary or even opposed to the knowledge of the Supreme Personality of Godhead is a dangerous and foolish choice that puts us in the fatal risk of increasing our false ego and arrogance, making us believe that we are too "elevated" for this kind of topics. Without understanding that we are not the material body - the first and foremost teaching of Krishna in *Gīta* - there is no point in fantasizing about being transcendently engaged in so many activities in devotional service or even contemplating so-called intimate *līlas*, because all such activities will simply boil down to politics and sentimentalistic cheating. It is true that mere theoretical scholarship will not take us to the transcendental level, but that applies to all philosophical/ theological schools; the same applies to philanthropic activities, to Deity worship, etc. The real difference is in the consciousness, not in the official allegiance to one institution or "school" or another.

In the previous verses, *niskama karma*, or action in selfless service, was declared as better than mere *sannyasa* or renunciation; *sāṅkhyā* on the other hand is based on the fundamental knowledge that governs renunciation and action at the same time.

The word *sthānam*, "permanent position, place" mentioned in the verse refers to the liberated position, the platform on which one has transcended material identifications and attachments, and acts from the pure consciousness of the Self, or *atman*. It is a stable and solid position, from which one does not falter or fall into ignorance and delusion. The words *sah* and *yaḥ* are personal pronouns but do not contain any reference to masculine or feminine gender; they can be translated either or both as "he" and "she".

संन्यासस्तु महाबाहो दुःखमाप्तुमयोगतः । योगयुक्तो मुनिर्ब्रह्म नचिरेणाधिगच्छति ॥ ५-६ ॥

sannyāsastu mahābāho duḥkhamāptumayogataḥ | yogayukto munirbrahma nacireṇādhiḡacchati || 5-6 |

sannyasah: *sannyasa*; *tu*: but; *maha-baho*: o Mahabaho ("mighty armed"); *duḥkham*: suffering; *aptum*: afflicts; *ayogataḥ*: without yoga; *yoga-yukto*: engaged in yoga; *munih*: the wise; *brahma*: Brahman; *na*: no; *cirena*: delay; *adhiḡacchati*: attains.

"O mighty-armed (Arjuna), *sannyasa* (renunciation) without yoga (proper engagement) only produces misery/ is attained with difficulty; one who is engaged in yoga is a *muni* (a wise person) and quickly attains Brahman."

The word *muni* describes a wise person, who remains silent and quiet because s/he is not afraid of silence and solitude. Such a person is focused on inner happiness and detached from external circumstances. This happy state of being is possible only with *yoga*, the proper engagement of the consciousness.

The concept of *sannyasa*, renunciation, is not sufficient in itself to liberate the individual from material identifications and attachments, because the *sannyasi* may still think that he has become a great personality because he has chosen to abstain from pleasures that legitimately belonged to him, and that such sacrifice is putting him above all other human beings, so he is entitled to extra respect and service from the general people. Krishna has already said (3.6): "One who controls the senses of action but continues to remain attached to the memory of the sense objects, is called a fool and a hypocrite". A person who restrains the senses but still maintains the concept of sense enjoyment and sense objects as connected to his personal gratification (either positive or negative) is a pretender.

In this verse Krishna adds that such a person is also inevitably destined to suffer, because his mind, senses and body miss the pleasures and comforts that he has left behind. The reason was explained in 2.59: the taste for the sense objects remains in the mind, senses and body of a person who still identifies with the material body - the only way to overcome this problem is to be engaged in something better (*param drstva nivartate*). Such engagement is called *yoga*, the art and science of action (2.50), by which one can work happily without being tied by the results of the activities, and thus attain liberation (Brahman).

This result is not obtained simply by showing one's esophagus' movements in public, or by increasing the oxygen intake with deeper and faster breathing - or even getting a fit and trim body and a relaxed mind. All the physical benefits of *asana* and *pranayama*, *mudras*, *kriyas* etc are simply a side effect, not the purpose of Yoga - that otherwise would not be much different from Pilates or jogging, that have the effect of increasing one's bodily identification rather than enabling us to break away from it.

योगयुक्तो विशुद्धात्मा विजितात्मा जितेन्द्रियः । सर्वभूतात्मभूतात्मा कुर्वन्नपि न लिप्यते ॥ ५-७ ॥

yogayukto viśuddhātmā vijitātmā jitendriyaḥ | sarvabhūtātmabhūtātmā kurvannapi na lipyate || 5-7 ||

yoga-yuktah: engaged in *yoga*; *visuddha-atma*: (having) purified one's self; *vijita-atma*: (having) controlled one's self; *jita-indriyah*: (having) conquered the senses; *sarva-bhuta-atma*: the self of all living entities; *bhuta-atma*: the self of existences; *kurvan*: making; *api*: even; *na*: not; *lipyate*: is affected.

"A person who has purified him/ herself through the engagement in *yoga*, conquering the self and controlling the senses, considers him/herself as the *atman* that is the same *atman*/ existence of all living entities. Although engaged (in activities), s/he is never affected (by them)."

The three stages of *yoga* are hereby described in descending order as *visuddhatma*, "purified mind", *vijitmatma*, "controlled mind" and *jitendriya*, "controlling the senses". At first we must learn to control the senses - starting with one's tongue, both in speech and eating. In a wider sense, this "faculty of speech" and "faculty of nutrition" expand to the expression of the mind through writing and other means, and to the subtle food we give to your senses and to our mind. So it is very important to control what our senses acquire from the external world and also what our senses transmit to the external world. As we have seen also in other verses, the word *atman* means "self". According to the particular context, it can refer to the spirit soul or *jivatman*, or to the identification of the living entity, a concept that may extend to the mind. The expression *visuddha atma* in this verse specifically refers to the identification of the *atman*, because by purifying one's identification - establishing one's identification as pure *atman* - also our mind, senses and body automatically become purified because of the fire of Knowledge and transcendental consciousness.

The expression *sarva-bhutatma-bhutatma* may seem redundant, but we know that Krishna is not speaking unnecessarily. It is a mysterious definition that obviously includes different layers of meanings. We have already seen that the word *bhuta* means both "being" (in the sense of "entity") and "existence", and in fact even the two meanings have a deep connection in English language. A being is something that exists, a state of existence of the consciousness or *atman*. When the *atman* incarnates in this world, it becomes a "*bhuta*", or "being", as the definition implies a manifestation, a state of existence that has come to be. The beginning of such manifestation can be traced at the beginning of the cycle of creation, while the existence of the *atman* has no beginning. This is the difference between *atman* and *bhuta*.

The expression *bhuta atman* connects the two meanings, resulting in "the Self of all beings"; when repeated twice, the meaning is expanded in the other direction, including the sense that the Supreme Self is the foundation for all beings. Later in *Gita* (7.7) we will find the same concept expressed even more clearly: "There is nothing greater than me, as everything is strung on me like pearls on a thread."

Moving this wonderful metaphor on the level of ontological reality, we can see that the Self of all beings is at the same time the foundation for all states of existence - the two concepts actually expressed in the very same words.

By meditating on this interesting fact, we are blessed with yet another opportunity to understand and realize the true nature of the *Atman*/ *Brahman*, and by understanding and realizing *Brahman* we are never affected by any material circumstance.

नैव किञ्चित्करोमीति युक्तो मन्येत तत्त्ववित् । पश्यञ्श्रुण्वन्स्पृशञ्छिघ्नन्नश्नन्गच्छन्स्वपञ्चसन् ॥ ५-८ ॥

naiva kiñcītkaromīti yukto manyeta tattvavit | paśyañśruṇvanspṛśañjighrannaśnangacchansvapañśvasan || 5-8 ||

na: not; *eva*: certainly; *kincit*: anything; *karomi*: I do; *iti*: like this; *yuktah*: engaged; *manyeta*: he/ she thinks/ should think; *tattva-vit*: one who knows reality; *pasyan*: seeing; *srinvan*: hearing; *sprisan*: touching; *jighran*: smelling; *asnan*: eating; *gacchan*: going; *svapan*: dreaming/ sleeping; *svasan*: breathing.

"One who is a *yogi* thinks/ should think, 'I am not the doer of anything'. One who knows the truth (engages in the activities of) seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, eating, going, dreaming, breathing,

This verse and the next are usually studied together since they constitute a list of activities normally performed in ordinary life, as Krishna has already stated clearly (3.8) that everyone must work, at least to maintain one's body.

Seeing, hearing, touching or using one's hands, smelling, eating, walking or moving, dreaming and breathing are fundamental activities for everyone's bodily survival. The first 5 items on the list directly refer to the sense activities - sight, sound, touch, smell and taste. These fundamental functions of the body enable us to work to provide for our own maintenance, offer the opportunity to enjoy the pleasures of life, and enable us to engage in divine service as well. These activities are considered natural duties - *nitya* (regular) and *naimittika* (specifically required by circumstances or needed in order to achieve a particular goal) as well as *kamyā* (chosen according to one's personal inclination and abilities).

Even the most basic and daily activities are seriously obstructed by the lack of eyesight, but at times it is difficult to control the eyes because the sense of vision is always attracted by beautiful forms and even by terrifying forms, and the connection between the eyes and the brain is the most direct among all the senses in the body. The sense of hearing is only marginally less important than eyesight; a deaf person can manage almost all normal activities and take care about a job and a family. However, it is through sound that we are warned of dangers and other events that are happening outside our view's range, and even during sleep, when our eyes are closed. Without the sense of hearing it is extremely difficult to acquire knowledge of those things that are beyond the gross bodily level. A person with a healthy sense of hearing is naturally attracted by nice sounds - the voices of his dear loved ones, the melody of music and song, interesting stories, information on the world, and the acquisition of knowledge.

The sense of touch is not connected simply with the perception of heat and cold, softness or hardness, etc, but it is essential in order to execute any work. It is through touch that our hands manipulate matter and our feet move our body around. In the course of such work, the sense of touch procures pleasure and pain that the *Yogi* faces bravely without being confused by them.

The sense of smell also carries pleasures and pains on a daily basis, and it is closely connected with our mind's emotions. A bad smell causes depression and irritability, and even a tendency to ignorance and delusion, while a good smell can calm our mind, elevate our thoughts, and even drastically improve our health, as demonstrated by the studies in aromatherapy. The sense of taste is here represented by the word *asnan*, "eating". In fact, this is the only good sattvic utilization of the sense of taste: to nourish the body and mind with healthy, clean and tasty foods that are a crucial factor in maintaining and improving our health and happiness of mind.

The word *gacchan*, "going", is listed separately from the activities of the basic senses because it can apply to methods of traveling that do not depend on our feet only. A person can and should utilize this faculty both for daily maintenance and for the performance of higher duties, such as traveling to holy places of pilgrimage, going to preach and teach where required, and acquire knowledge.

The activity of sleeping and dreaming may seem less fundamental if compared to the other basic engagements of the senses of this list, but sleep is required to maintain a healthy mind balance, and even dreams are an important part of a person's life. The dreams we experience during our ordinary sleep are required to balance and cleanse our mind from the debris of the day's events - problems, emotions, interactions with other people. The dreams we experience during our waking time are also useful because they keep our mind open to new things and allow us to perceive subtle realities: it is a natural and elementary form of meditation that can and should be developed into real meditation through the knowledgeable practice of *yoga*.

The activity of breathing is here listed last, as a function that can be both conscious and unconscious, and greatly influences our state of mind, more than all the other sense activities. All the activities listed in these 2 verses are performed by the body, the senses and the mind, and not by the actual *atman*, because the *atman* is not concerned by such needs. Sometimes we find that our senses are automatically engaged even without our conscious choice, so we could inadvertently see, hear, touch, eat something bad that is cause of contamination, or even arrive in a bad place, have a bad dream, or suffer breathing difficulties. But as long as our consciousness remains fixed on the transcendental level or *yoga*, the awareness of Atman/ Brahman, such disturbances will disappear without causing too much damage. However, the body and the mind need to perform these activities in order to remain functional and facilitate our work in Self realization.

The *yogi* has left all identification with the body and mind, and is simply using them like a vehicle. In this verse, the definition of *yogi* is "one who knows Reality", or Atman/ Brahman: this is the only genuine and authoritative requirement for a person to be called a true *yogi*. The word *manyeta* includes the meaning of "thinking, considering, remembering, being aware of", and the particular grammatical form of the verb suggest that such thinking is expected or characteristic of the *yogi*.

प्रलपन्विसृजन्गृह्णन्निमिषन्निमिषन्नपि । इन्द्रियाणीन्द्रियार्थेषु वर्तन्त इति धारयन् ॥ ५-९ ॥

pralapanvisrjangangrhannunmishannimishannapi | indriyanāṇīndriyārtheṣu vartanta iti dhārayan || 5-9 ||

pralapan: talking; *visrijan*: leaving; *grihnan*: accepting/ taking; *unmishan*: opening; *nimishan*: closing (one's eyes); *api*: although; *indriyani*: the senses; *indriya-artheshu*: in the objects/ the purposes of the senses; *varante*: let them be; *iti*: like this; *dharayan*: meditating.

talking, leaving/ abandoning, accepting/ taking, opening and closing (one's eyes), but s/he meditates that the senses should naturally be engaged in the sense objects (and s/he does not identify with them)."

This verse continues the list of the ordinary activities of the senses that are required in order to properly maintain one's body and progress in life, materially and spiritually. Talking is a very important function, that can further our progress to the highest levels through the recitation of the scriptures and the beneficial discussions that help ourselves and others to improve the quality of our consciousness. However, the tongue is the most difficult sense to control, and sometimes we find ourselves talking more than necessary, or engaging in discussions that are not really beneficial, or having to tell off people for the purpose of correcting them. What we talk about, just like what we hear, can have an enormous influence of our consciousness, identifications, attachments, desires, and concerns.

The work *visrijan*, "giving up", can also be translated as "evacuating", as this physiological function is also connected to our sense of attachment and possession - often people who suffer from constipation are afraid of letting go or losing something. Similarly, *grihnan*, "accepting", "taking", "holding", can have a variety of meanings in daily life, which includes praise and insult, gain and loss, pleasures and pains of many types. A *yogi* is not afflicted by false ego, therefore he can take a lot from life without being really disturbed. However, this does not mean that a *yogi* should accept or take anything and everything - there are limits to what one's mind, senses and body can manage, so although he remains undisturbed internally, he should still watch out, just like he remains careful about what he is watching, listening to, touching, sniffing, eating, where he is going, what fantasies he allows his mind to wander in, what he talks about and so on.

The words *mishan* and *nimishan* refer to the opening and closing of one's eyes, which is not exactly the same as *svapan*, sleeping or dreaming as mentioned in the previous verse, or the *visrijan* and *grihnan*, rejecting and accepting, mentioned earlier in this verse. We open and close our eyes as a choice to become directly involved in what is happening around us, in the world - injustice, ignorance, happiness and distress of others, the beauty and the horror, anger, fear, cruelty, emotions, attachments, and all the phantasmagoria of the immense theme park that is the universe in which we live.

A *yogi* does not necessarily remove himself from the world, except for the time when he needs quiet and silence to train himself in meditation. When he has progressed to a stable level of consciousness, the *yogi* can maintain his meditation in more difficult circumstances, that offer the opportunity for performing a useful service to the Supreme. In this regard, the word *dharayan* is particularly important. We know that *dharana* is the first step in actual meditation, a crucial part of the practice of *yoga* (*yama*, *niyama*, *asana*, *pranayama*, *pratyahara*, *dharana*, *dhyana*, *samadhi*). The *dharana* mentioned in this verse concerns the awareness of one's true identity as Atman/ Brahman, detached from the natural activities of the senses.

Another important point made in this verse is that the *yogi* does not stop or abstain from the activities of the senses - something that would only bring suffering, as just stated in verse 6 - but he allows such functions to continue in a way that is useful and beneficial.

ब्रह्मण्याधाय कर्माणि सङ्गं त्यक्त्वा करोति यः । लिप्यते न स पापेन पद्मपत्रमिवाम्भसा ॥ ५-१० ॥

brahmaṇyādhāya karmāṇi saṅgaṁ tyaktvā karoti yaḥ | lipyate na sa pāpēna padmapatramivāmbhasā || 5-10 ||

brahmani: in Brahman; *adhaya*: surrendering; *karmani*: all activities/ duties; *sangam*: association/ affiliation/ attachment; *tyaktva*: abandoning; *karoti*: makes; *yaḥ*: he/ she; *lipyate*: becomes affected; *na*: not; *sah*: he/ she; *pāpēna*: by forbidden actions; *padma-patram*: the leaf of the lotus; *iva*: like; *ambhasa*: by the water.

"Surrendering/ connecting/ dovetailing all activities to the Brahman, giving up all (identification and) association, one is never affected by the negative consequences/ sin of bad action, just like a lotus leaf is never affected by water."

Can we translate "Brahman" as "Krishna consciousness" in this verse? Of course yes, provided that "Krishna consciousness" is based on the constant awareness of one's transcendental identity as spirit soul (rather than the material body) - the very first concept that Krishna has chosen to clearly establish in his teachings in *Gita*. However, if we believe that "*aham brahmasmi*" is an "impersonalist speculation" and that "*sankhya*" (as taught by Krishna in the second chapter of *Gita*) is "opposed to *bhakti*", then we have a serious problem. Couldn't we just call "Brahman" as "Brahman" instead?

By really studying and presenting *Bhagavad gita* as it is, we will be able to achieve the results Krishna is promising. As long as one believes (on which grounds and on whose authority, it is not clear) that Brahman realization (the overcoming of the false ego or identification with the material body) is opposed or detrimental to the realization and service of Bhagavan, the only result will be a foolish fanatical and superficial sentimentalism motivated by partisan and sectarian affiliation and allegiance.

More trouble than benefit, according to the great *bhakti* authority Rupa Gosvami (*Bhakti rasamrita sindhu*, 1.2.101): *sruti smriti puranadi pancharatra vidhim vina, aikantiki harer bhaktir utpatayaiva kalpate*, "Exclusive devotion to Lord Hari (Krishna) that ignores the teachings of *sruti*, *smriti*, *Puranas* and other Vedic scriptures, as well as *Pancharatra*, is simply a fantasy and an unnecessary disturbance in society."

To tell who is actually "Krishna conscious" in the proper sense (18.66), we need to see who puts the actual teachings of Krishna above the stupid and false matters of bodily identification and categorization, social position, political allegiance, and divisive sectarian speculation and advantage.

Another extremely important word in the verse is *sangam* ("association/ affiliation/ attachment"). Krishna clearly states that we should abandon (*tyaktva*) all association, attachment or affiliation, because these are limiting our identification, by turning it into a material designation. This is also the very same meaning of *bhakti*, according to the famous *bhakti* authority Narada Muni in his *Narada pancharatra* (the very same *Pancharatra* mentioned in Rupa Gosvami's verse together with *sruti* and *smriti*): *sarvopadhi vinirmuktam tat paratvena nirmalam (hrishikena hrishikena sevanam) bhaktir ucyate*, "*Bhakti* is defined as (serving the Lord of the senses through the actions of the senses) in a manner that is totally free from all designations, in the pure dedication to the Transcendence (*tat*)".

Krishna has already warned very clearly about the danger of defining oneself and working in terms of *sangam*, in 3.9, "Actions must be performed as sacrifice, otherwise in this world they cause bondage (and further) actions. Therefore, o son of Kunti, you should perform your activities for that (purpose of sacrifice), remaining free from (material) association."

In the commentary to that verse we mentioned that "*sanga* refers to the position of one's body (*anga*) in relationship with other bodies/ persons, activities or environments, but even more so to being a part (*anga*) of something, as in 'affiliation' or 'membership' of a group, an organization or an institution, community, lineage or tradition. All such denominations (*upadhi*) must be 'liberated' (i.e. free from material identification, duality, or sectarianism) otherwise one must become 'liberated' from them."

Krishna repeats this extremely important instruction also in 4.23, "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."

Our commentary to that verse was, "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, 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."

Only this freedom from sticky limiting identifications will enable our consciousness to remain always pure, just like a lotus leaf never becomes wet because water simply rolls away from its surface. It has no affinity with muddy water.

कायेन मनसा बुद्ध्या केवलैरिन्द्रियैरपि । योगिनः कर्म कुर्वन्ति सङ्गं त्यक्त्वात्मशुद्धये ॥ ५-११ ॥

kāyena manasā buddhyā kevalairindriyairapi | yoginaḥ karma kurvanti saṅgaṁ tyaktvātmaśuddhaye || 5-11 ||

kayena: with the body; *manasa*: with the mind; *buddhya*: with the intelligence; *kevalaih*: only; *indriyaih*: with the sense organs; *api*: also; *yoginah*: the *yogis*; *karma*: duties/ activities; *kurvanti*: they do; *sangam*: association/ affiliation/ attachment; *tyaktva*: giving up; *atma-suddhaye*: for the purification of oneself.

"The yogis perform activities with their body, mind, intelligence and senses only, and purify themselves by giving up identification/ association/ attachment."

The three factors defined by *kayena*, *manasa*, *buddhya* are all required for any activity to be successful, on the material and on the spiritual level. When things are done mechanically, with the body only, without the proper engagement of the attentive mind and the awakened intelligence, we just get the empty wrappings of whatever we want to achieve. However, this verse states that such factors are limited, by

saying *kevala*, "only". What else is there, beyond the body, the mind and intelligence, that is not engaged in the dutiful action? The Atman, whose consciousness rises above the activities of this world.

The word *sanga* is also correctly translated as "attachment". But what is attachment?

It is the belief that we have been the authors of the action, and therefore we are entitled to the enjoyment of its fruits - whether it comes to eating a cake we have baked, or accruing the merit of our welfare work to ourselves as individuals (thus earning social respect, gratitude from the beneficiaries, and/ or a reward in our next life) or as the collective designation we belong to (thus earning political advantages for the institution or group).

But who is really acting? Is it the *atman*, or it is merely the "material package" composed by body, mind, intelligence and senses? If we believe we are the author of the action, the "doer", we identify with these material elements - body, mind, intelligence and senses - that are engaged in the activities by the power and play of the *gunas* or modes of the material nature (*sattva, rajas, tamas*).

The actual Self is never acting, because all the activities and duties relate to the body and mind only. Most people remain unable to even imagine what the Self is - because once you have excluded the body, mind, senses and intelligence, they can't think of anything else.

The Self as Atman is of the same nature of the Supreme Self as Brahman - a nature called *sat-cid-ananda*, eternity, knowledge and happiness. The Supreme Brahman does not perform any work, but channels his energies to do this work, while remaining in the blissful transcendental awareness. Similarly, the Atman engages his energies - body, mind, senses, intelligence - in the required activities in this world, and in the pure state of awareness, free from the dark cloud of *ahankara* and *mamatva*, remains in the same blissful transcendental awareness of the Brahman.

This *ahankara* and *mamatva* are also called *kartri-bhoktri-bhava*, or the "feeling of being the doer and the enjoyer". They can be dissipated when we turn our attention to the *atman/ brahman*, by "looking within", beyond the intelligence, the senses, the mind and the body that constitute the external appearance.

As Krishna will clearly state at the conclusion of *Gita* (18.54), it is precisely at this point that we can start talking about real *bhakti*. Only when we have overcome the material identification and attachments, and our awareness is as transcendental as the awareness of the Supreme, we can really connect at a personal level and develop a devotional relationship. We do not need to "evolve" our soul: this evolution of the consciousness consists in dissipating the ignorance and illusion that is clouding our perception. In this way we become constantly conscious of our original and eternal nature. As Krishna explained very clearly in the second chapter of *Gita* (from verse 17 onwards, and especially in verses 24 and 25), the *atman* is impervious to any change or transformation. The *atman* is never touched by material contamination: it only appears covered and obscured, just like the sun in a cloudy sky. Therefore when the cloud of material identification dissipates, we become able to see the *atman* in its original and eternal glory of perfect knowledge and happiness. While remaining on this transcendental consciousness, the *yogi* simply observes the activities of the body, mind, senses and intelligence, and offers them as a sacrifice to the Supreme.

The important expression *sangam tyaktva* can be interpreted in two ways that are completing each other: a) being liberated from (bad) association and (material identification), and b) associating with liberated people and identifying with the (liberated) pure *atman/ brahman*. Both choices and practices are essential in order to achieve success.

युक्तः कर्मफलं त्यक्त्वा शान्तिमाप्नोति नैष्ठिकीम् । अयुक्तः कामकारेण फले सक्तो निबध्यते ॥ ५-१२ ॥

yuktaḥ karmaphalaṁ tyaktvā śāntimāpnoti naiṣṭhikīm | ayuktaḥ kāmakāreṇa phale saktō nibadhyate || 5-12 ||

yuktaḥ: one who is engaged (in *yoga*); *karma-phalam*: the fruits of the activities/ duties; *tyaktva*: giving up; *santim*: peace; *apnoti*: achieves; *naiṣṭhikīm*: permanent; *ayuktaḥ*: one who is not engaged (in *yoga*); *kama-karena*: motivated by the desire (of pleasure); *phale*: in the fruits; *saktaḥ*: attached; *nibadhyate*: becomes bound.

"A *yogi* gives up the results of activity and (therefore) attains permanent peace. One who is not a *yogi* becomes tied by the results of the action that s/he desired (to obtain) through work."

We have seen that by becoming free from *ahankara* and *mamatva*, the *yogi* remains situated on the level of transcendental consciousness, where the activities are performed by the body, the mind, the senses and the intelligence. This detachment from the material identification of the "doer of the action" needs to be understood carefully. Krishna has already explained, and will repeat again in the course of *Gita*, that renouncing the fruits of one's actions does not mean that we should become sloppy, foolish and careless in our duties, or that we should become lazy and avoid performing our duties altogether. Rather, it means that we engage our body/ mind/ senses/ intelligence sincerely, to do the best job possible, because we consider it as our sacred duty. Similarly, giving up the results or the fruits of the activity does not mean that we refuse to accept money or other benefits that may derive from the performance of such duties, or that we throw them away as if they were garbage. Krishna has already explained this point very clearly, and introduced the concept of *prasadam*, the pleasure and nourishment that we accept as a divine blessing, a pure and sacred manifestation of the love and compassion of the Divine. So a *Yogi* can and should continue to perform his proper duty as per his *guna* and *karma*, and according to the circumstances, without calculating the profit that he may get or the loss that he may suffer. The word *kara* comes from the same root of *karana*, "cause", and indicates that the motivation of the action is the really important point.

In a Vedic society, this selfless performance of one's duties is much easier because money does not exist like in the present industrialized system. However, people may possess valuable objects such as ornaments and various objects made with gold, silver and precious stones, and may even sell them in case of emergency to obtain food, clothing or other essential requirements. Especially *kshatriyas* are expected to wear such valuable items to increase their strength, health and mental power, but they are periodically required to part company with such wealth in order to celebrate sacrifices and distribute charity according to the circumstances. *Vaisya* merchants and traders also use rare and valuable items (such as jewels etc) in their profession, especially when traveling over long distances in their search for goods that are not readily available in the area where they live. But in their case, too, they are expected to give up such wealth in order to acquire the commodities that people need back home.

Brahmanas never accumulate gold or jewels, but utilize all the wealth they may receive to support their work for the spiritual and material development of society. A *brahmana* never takes a salary from anyone, and especially not from the *kshatriyas*, as such arrangement would put him in the position of a dog that depends on a master and has no freedom. A *brahmana* that depends financially from the government will be forced to compromise on *dharma* and calculate what to say and what not to say due to political considerations, and this will be his destruction.

Sudras do not accumulate gold or jewels either, because they tend to spend or lose whatever valuable things they acquire; they do not receive a salary from their employers, but all their needs are met adequately - food, lodging, clothing, etc - so they do not need to worry about anything. However, even in the present industrialized society we can still apply the principles taught in *Bhagavad gita*. Even if we receive a salary for our work, or if we need to earn some money through our professional activities in order to maintain ourselves and our families, we can still be selfless and remain in the pure and transcendental consciousness of performing our duties as a sacred offering to the Supreme.

सर्वकर्माणि मनसा संन्यस्यास्ते सुखं वशी । नवद्वारे पुरे देही नैव कुर्वन्न कारयन् ॥ ५-१३ ॥

sarvakarmāṇi manasā sannasyāste sukhaṁ vaśī | navadvāre pure dehī naitva kurvanna kārayan || 5-13 |

sarva-karmani: all the activities/ duties; *manasa*: with the mind; *sannyasya*: by renouncing; *aste*: remains; *sukham*: easily/ happily; *vasi*: one who controls; *nava-dvare*: of the nine gates; *pure*: in the city; *dehi*: one who has a body; *na*: not; *eva*: certainly; *kurvan*: while doing; *na karayan*: does not cause to be done.

"One who has consistently renounced to all the (various) actions in his/her mind remains in happiness in the city of the nine gates that is his body; s/he does not do anything nor causes anything to be done/ never becomes the direct or indirect cause of action."

The expression *manasa sannasya*, "renouncing within the mind", is very useful for understanding the nature, quality and modality of this renunciation. External renunciation is not important and may not even be required or practical, especially in Kali yuga - the era of hypocrisy - when so many people make a big show of external renunciation precisely with the purpose of obtaining more material facilities and benefits, a higher social position and even luxury and political power without engaging in honest and useful work for the society. Real renunciation is manifested in one's consciousness, in the perception of oneself, of the world and of others - we could say, within our mind. That is because our mind is firmly fixed in the transcendental meditation on the Supreme, who is the beneficiary of all sacred actions, the owner of all planets, and the most intimate friend of all living beings (5.29). This is also called "Krishna consciousness" and has nothing to do with historical affiliations or political allegiances, sectarian dogma or religious hierarchies, endorsement by vote or institutional interests, or any other external concern that still thrives in the minds of people that are still in the bodily concept of life.

The activities that must be renounced in one's mind cover the entire range of duties - the normal duties, the special enterprises aimed at some specific goal for the benefit of society - as well as the activities chosen according to one's liking and of course the forbidden activities. Although one should continue to externally perform those duties that are intended to give a good example to the mass of the people (3.18-26), carefully avoiding all forbidden and selfish activities, Krishna says that in his mind, the *yogi* renounces proprietorship of all activities and duties, including the vedic rituals of the *karma kanda*.

This constant selfless consciousness requires a constant control, because in this world at every step we find the opportunity to fall back into the bodily consciousness of *ahankara* and *mamatva*. Even the compassion and love that a true *yogi* feels for the poor suffering conditioned souls may slide into personal attachment and identification, as exemplified in the story of Bharata. That powerful emperor renounced his kingdom and royal family to retire into the forest and focus on Self realization, but unwittingly developed an affectionate attachment for a baby deer he happened to rescue, and subsequently had to take another birth as a deer himself because of it. Thus in this verse the word *vasi*, "one who controls" can apply both to controlling one's mind activities and to controlling the gates of the body - the eyes that connect us to beautiful forms, the ears that tie us to attractive sounds, the mouth that desires good food, the nostrils that catch fascinating scents. By carefully controlling our mind and senses, we can direct them into the engagement with sattvic forms, sounds, foods and scents, connecting them to the Supreme and purifying our sense activities in this sacred act, in a spirit of renunciation and humble acceptance of God's kind gifts.

The expression *na karayan*, "does not cause (action) to be done", can also refer to a person that does not act personally but gives orders to others to perform a particular activity, or to the individual consciousness that observes the body, the senses, the mind and the intelligence acting on his behalf. The next verse will further elaborate on this point.

न कर्तृत्वं न कर्माणि लोकस्य सृजति प्रभुः । न कर्मफलसंयोगं स्वभावस्तु प्रवर्तते ॥ ५-१४ ॥

na kartṛtvam na karmāṇi lokasya sṛjati prabhuḥ | na karmaphalasamyogam svabhāvastu pravartate || 5-14 ||

na: not; *kartritvam*: doership/ agentship; *na*: not; *karmani*: activities; *lokasya*: of the people; *srijati*: manifests/ creates; *prabhuḥ*: the lord; *na*: not; *karma-phala-samyogam*: connection with the fruits of the activities; *svabhavaḥ*: one's own nature; *tu*: but; *pravartate*: acts.

"The lord/ master (of the city of the nine gates, i.e. the body) does not create/ manifest the idea of being the cause of the actions performed by (other) people. Thus s/he is not engaged by the results of activities. It is only his/ her nature that acts."

In the previous verse Krishna stated that a person can continue to live in the body and yet remain untouched by the activities of the body, senses, mind and intelligence, provided his consciousness remains on the level of Transcendence - the genuine Brahman realization - renouncing the false egotism called *ahankara* and *mamatva*, i.e. bodily identification and sense of possession or belonging.

Here Krishna further elaborates, saying that such renunciation enables the Atman to control the body and mind and at the same time to clearly remember that the results of the activities and the activities themselves are carried on by material nature, its laws and influences, its

natural tendencies and abilities. This also applies to the activities and the results of the activities performed by other people and by the agents of nature, that bring us pleasures and sufferings of various types, gain or loss, victory or defeat, honor or infamy, and so on.

The *yogi* clearly realizes that all these experiences only concern the body and mind and their qualities and natural activities, so he detaches himself from them, tolerating them as one tolerates the heat during the summer and the cold in winter (2.14). Still, the Self is called *prabhu*, "lord, master", because he needs to control his subjects - the mind, the senses, the organs of action etc.

We should also understand that the word "*prabhu*" is normally used to address the Supreme Personality of Godhead, and it should not be taken lightly. This concept of transcendental detachment from action and its consequences is very tricky and must be understood carefully, because there are many traps on the way, that have been already indicated by Krishna. Some immature people may be glad to find a good pretext to give up their proper duties under the garb of detachment or transcendental consciousness, abandoning their responsibilities and thus causing great damage to society, family and to themselves. We must always remember that the entire *Gita* was explained by Krishna to Arjuna with the precise purpose of convincing him to engage in the great battle of Kurukshetra, and to oppose his desire to give up the fight and retire from the kingdom's responsibility to choose an ascetic life in the forest.

Some historians claim that India was invaded and conquered by alien forces - the Islamists and the British colonialist, as well as the Portuguese and the French albeit in smaller measure - because the teachings of Krishna in *Gita* and later the teachings of Adi Shankara and the great *bhakti acharyas* (including Chaitanya) had lured many men of great valor into giving up the active responsibilities in society and especially the protection of the kingdoms, to choose a meditative and renounced lifestyle focused on transcendence. Such an idea is incorrect. Of course there might have been many foolish and irresponsible people who consciously or unconsciously distorted the teachings of Krishna and Chaitanya (and others) and took the formal order of *sannyasa* or the *babaji vesh*a to escape their responsibilities, pretending they had become "transcendental". But these have been aberrations due precisely to ignorance and gross misunderstanding of the actual path of Transcendence. Only by sincerely studying the *Bhagavad gita* we will be able to clarify such misconceptions.

नादत्ते कस्यचित्पापं न चैव सुकृतं विभुः । अज्ञानेनावृतं ज्ञानं तेन मुह्यन्ति जन्तवः ॥ ५-१५ ॥

nādatte kasyacitpāpam na caiva sukṛtam vibhuḥ | ajñānenāvṛtam jñānam tena muhyanti jantavaḥ || 5-15 ||

na: not; *adatte*: accepts; *kasyacit*: anyone's; *papam*: demerits/ sins/ guilt; *na*: not; *ca*: and; *eva*: certainly; *sukritam*: merits/ virtues/ credits; *vibhuḥ*: the powerful (Lord); *ajnanena*: by ignorance; *avritam*: covered; *jnanam*: knowledge; *tena*: by that; *muhyanti*: they become confused; *jantavaḥ*: the people.

"The (all) powerful (Lord) does not accept/ consider the merits or demerits of anyone. It (the problem) is (only due to) the living entities, that are confused because their knowledge is covered by ignorance."

Na adatte means that God is not interested in punishing the sins, mistakes or imperfections of anyone, or in rewarding those who try to please him by virtuous actions. *Karma* is not a punishment or reward by God. It is simply a natural physical law of the universe, like gravity etc. God does not have a "chosen people" and certainly does not order the annihilation or persecution or punishment of those who worship him in "wrong" ways or do not worship him at all. All the mess in human history that is ascribed to "religious differences" is actually created merely by confused and ignorant human beings - as confirmed by the word *muhyanti*, derived from *moha*, "confusion", "illusion". Such confusion can be cleared not by engaging in "religious wars" but simply by making sufficient knowledge (*jnana*) available to the people in general. So whenever you find someone who wants to "eliminate" the "wrong spiritual or ideological conclusions" by taking physical action against persons or books etc, you know that they are certainly not following Krishna's instructions. Physical action is only justified against a physical attack by aggressors - and not for any other reason.

All human beings have the same tendencies, and in different traditions we can find different levels of personal inner growth and development. The lowest level of understanding of religion - the "connection with the Divine" - is shaped around the ordinary relationships of this world, and God is seen as a bigger and more powerful person not unlike the big and powerful persons we may meet in our daily life. This understanding of God is nothing but the projection of a gigantic version of a regular conditioned soul with a material form, material qualities, and a dualistic approach in relationships. Simple-minded people usually go to worship in their designated cult place, pray and present their offerings and follow the religious rules, because they hope for a reward and fear a punishment. For such people, worship of the image of the Deity is very important because it helps the mind to gradually overcome such limitations.

Public functions and festivals, ritual and ceremonies, pilgrimages etc are also very beneficial, because they help the mind of unevolved people to focus on the concept of Transcendence and religion in a positive way. Whenever such visible engagements are reduced or removed, out of an ill-advised attempt to "purify the faith", people lose the understanding of the Transcendence and slide into moralism, taboos, or gross materialism, that are much worse than the sticky sentimentalism of the simpletons. Some "Vedic" religious organizations condemn and oppose the worship of the Deities in the temples, using the very same offensive vocabulary ("idols") introduced by abrahamics. In this way they are deluding themselves into thinking that they are "purifying" and "reforming" Hinduism, but they are simply alienating and dividing people, and confusing the minds of the public. No wonder they also offensively reject *Bhagavad gita*, together with the *Puranas* and *Itihasas* and even the *Upanishads*, claiming to follow "only the original four *Vedas*", of which they obviously do not understand anything. The results of this irresponsible and foolish preaching can be seen in the present conditions of Hindu society. This approach might have been useful to please the abrahamic invaders that dominated India at the times when such organizations were founded, but today they are the ones who need to be reformed and purified from their colonial servilism.

Krishna instructs us in *Gita* (3.26) not to confuse the minds of the unevolved people by trying to artificially push them to a "higher level" by "forbidding a lower level", otherwise these *kanistha adhikaris* could be overwhelmed by destructive doubts: "If God is not interested in the sins and virtues of people, why should one abstain from performing bad actions and make efforts to perform good actions? What is the purpose of worship, sacrifice, pilgrimage to the holy places, prayer, and making efforts to improve oneself? What is the idea of devotional service?"

Higher than this level of *kanistha adhikari*, or "neophyte worshiper", we find the *madhyama adhikari*, the "intermediate worshiper", that is able to understand the omnipresence of God, in the heart of all living beings and everywhere in the universe and in all circumstances - as expressed in this verse by the definition *vibhu*, "powerful", also translated as "omnipresent". The intermediate student of Transcendence has understood the scriptures and the teachings of the genuine *acharyas* and is making an effort to serve the mission of the Divine simply because it is the right thing to do, and not because he aspires to a reward or is afraid of a punishment. He has a clear perception of the difference between the *sadhu karma* ("good actions") and the *asadhu karma* ("bad actions"), he knows that each action he chooses can elevate or degrade him in his journey, and tries his best to purify his consciousness and to progress in his evolution through experience. He understands that the Param Atman, the Divine that resides in the heart of each living entity, is helping everyone to achieve what they need or want, but that the ultimate purpose of all the experiences of life is to attain the realization of the Self.

Someone might also wonder why God is not interested in the merits and demerits of the individual human beings. Is that because he does not care? Quite the opposite. God loves each and every living entity (*suhridam sarva bhutanam*, 5.29) and is the father of them all (*aham bija pradah pitah*, 14.4). A good father loves all his children, no matter how qualified or unqualified they may be. As we can see with several verses of *Gita*, this particular verse finds a very similar version in *Bhagavata Purana* (6.16.11)

ज्ञानेन तु तदज्ञानं येषां नाशितमात्मनः । तेषामादित्यवज्ज्ञानं प्रकाशयति तत्परम् ॥ ५-१६ ॥

jñānena tu tadajñānaṁ yeṣāṁ nāśitamātmanah | teṣāmādityavajjñānaṁ prakāśayati tatparam || 5-16| |

jnanena: by knowledge; *tu*: but; *tat*: that; *ajnanam*: lack of knowledge; *yesam*: of those (people); *nasitam*: is destroyed; *atmanah*: of the atman; *tesham*: of them; *aditya-vat*: like the Sun; *jnanam*: the knowledge; *prakasayati*: manifests/ shows directly; *tat*: That; *param*: Supreme.

"For those in whom *ajnana* (ignorance) is destroyed in the (perception of the) self by *jnana* (knowledge), that Knowledge, similar to the (radiant) Sun, reveals that highest (consciousness/ identity/ reality)."

This verse repeats yet again the importance of transcendental Knowledge, the theoretical and practical realization of the Atman that destroys the ignorance of material identification. The two terms of comparison in the verse are *tat ajnanam*, "that ignorance", and *tat param (jnanam)*, "that Supreme (knowledge)".

Jnana or knowledge is the opposite of *ajnana* or ignorance, but this is not a duality proper. *Ajnana* literally means "lack of knowledge", which is the precise definition of "ignorance". Ignorance itself has no real separate existence: it is nothing but the absence of knowledge, just like darkness has no existence of its own but is simply the absence of light, and evil has no existence of its own but is simply the absence of good. This is the correct perspective from which we become able to understand that this apparent duality is not duality at all. There is no "bad God" (i.e. Satan) opposed to a "good God": this is a divisive dualistic idea that has created a lot of unnecessary problems in human society, especially creating the concept of "otherness" that is necessarily evil and condemned simply because it is "different" (irrespective of the actual ideologies and behaviors of the two concerned parties). Already the conditioned mind is affected by the delusion of duality, but a path that consecrates duality as the only possible truth is seriously dangerous for the proper progress and evolution of the individual and society. The proper solution is to make a positive and proactive effort towards *dharma* ("ethical values"), *vidya* ("knowledge"), *sat* ("good").

There is no point trying to fight evil with equally evil policies, or to fight ignorance by banning knowledge, just like it is not possible to bring more sunlight in our world by building walls that block our vision of the sun rays. The knowledge of the Atman is compared here to the light of the Sun that automatically reveals everything: the Sun itself, the world, and even those who are observing. Only when one has realized the true transcendental nature of the Self or Atman, s/he will be able to realize the Supreme Self or Param Atman.

Some people are afraid that the Brahman and Paramatma realization will somehow "distract" the mind of the devotee from "devotional service", fueling instead the conceited arrogance that makes one think he has become God himself. This is a foolish fear, created by ignorance and immaturity. Actually, the genuine knowledge and realization of Brahman and Paramatma is the only protection we have against the temptations of megalomania, because it naturally and directly dissipates the darkness of ignorance and illusion that consists in material identification or false ego.

There is a distinction between *jivatma* and *paramatma*, between *prabhu* and *vibhu*, but it is definitely not a difference in nature. Both the Self and the Supreme Self are *sat-cit-ananda*, inconceivable through material parameters, and not subject to any material limitation. One who has a material concept of the Self will never be able to understand the Supreme.

तद्बुद्धयस्तदात्मानस्तन्निष्ठास्तत्परायणाः । गच्छन्त्यपुनरावृत्तिं ज्ञाननिर्धूतकल्मषाः ॥ ५-१७ ॥

tadbuddhayastadātmanāstanniṣṭhāstaparaṇāḥ | gacchantyapunarāvṛttim jñānanirdhūtakalmaṣāḥ || 5-17| |

tat: That (Atman/ Brahman); *buddhayah*: those who have such intelligence; *tat-atmanah*: those who identify with That; *tat-nishthah*: those who have faith in That; *tat-parayanah*: those who are dedicated/ devoted to That; *gacchanti*: they go; *apunah-avrittim*: they do not fall back; *jnana*: by knowledge; *nirdhuta*: destroyed/ removed; *kalmashah*: impurities/ contamination.

"Those who understand/ realize That (Transcendence), identify with That, remain faithful to That, and fully dedicate themselves to That, attain that liberation from which one never falls back, because their impurities have been cleansed by Knowledge."

The word *tat*, "That", is one of the most recurrent definitions for Transcendence, especially in expressions such as *tat tvam asi*, "you are That" and *om tat sat*, "That Transcendence is eternal". It refers both to Tattva and Para Tattva, i.e. to Atman and Brahman.

Gita also uses this definition of Transcendence in many important verses such as 2.17 (*tat viddhi*), 3.19 (*tat artham*), 4.39 (*tat parah*), 5.5 (*tat yogaih gamyate*), 5.16 (*tat param*), 7.1 (*tat srinu*), 8.21 (*tat dhama paramam*), 10.39 (*tat aham*), 11.37 (*tat param*), 13.13 (*tat*

pravakshyami), 13.14 (*tat sarvatah*), 13.16 (*tat avijneyam*), 13.17 (*tat jneyam*), 13.18 (*tat jyotih*), 15.4 (*tat parimargitavyam*), 15.5 (*tat padam avyayam*), 15.6 (*tat dhama paramam*), 15.12 (*tat tejah*), 17.23 (*om tat sat*), 17.27 (*tat arthiyam*), 18.5 (*tat yajnam danam tapah*), 18.20 (*tat jnanam*), 18.55 (*tat anantaram*), 18.62 (*tat prasadat*), 18.77 (*tat samsritya*).

Tat is the root for the word *Tattva*, or Reality. The concept of Transcendence, *Tat* or *Tattva*, is described as Brahman, Paramatma and Bhagavan: *vadanti tat tattva vidas tattvam yaj jnanam advayam, brahmeti paramatmeti bhagavan iti sabyate*, "Those who know Reality say that Transcendence is Reality, the non-dualistic Knowledge that is called Brahman, Paramatma and Bhagavan" (*Bhagavata purana*, 1.2.11). The supreme importance of this knowledge, the realization of Transcendence, is stressed again in this verse as the most important factor in the purification of the consciousness and the attainment of the perfection of life.

The expression *apunah avrittim* is very important, as it gives assurance about the permanent nature of the purification and liberation promised as a result of the attainment of Transcendental realization. There are two types of liberation: one is temporary, and the other is permanent. Temporary liberation is obtained at the end of a cycle - the duration of one's body or the duration of Brahma's body, that consists in the entire universe. When the material body ceases to exist because its allotted time has expired, we become free from its limitations and sufferings, and we experience a state of existence that is very difficult to understand for those who are still identified with their gross bodies. However, the conditioned soul still remains with the subtle body that is composed of ego, mind and intelligence, and contains the seeds of material incarnation in the form of material desires and identifications - the *karana* body - that are described in this verse as *kalmashah* - impurities. During the time of the maintenance of the universe, this *karana* body becomes attracted to the particular circumstances where it can manifest its qualities and tendencies (*guna* and *karma*), and there it starts to develop another gross body. The interval between the death of the previous body and the birth of the new body may vary according to several factors, but it is usually short.

When the entire universe dies at the end of Brahma's life, the *karana* bodies of the conditioned souls do not have the opportunity to express their *guna* and *karma* in a new material vehicle, so all the subtle bodies of the living entities are absorbed into the Karana Ocean, into the Karanodakasayi Vishnu or Narayana, where they remain in the blissful state of passive *brahmananda* ("spiritual happiness") until the next cycle of manifestation of the universe. Such *brahmananda* is however temporary, because the conditioned souls still have some impurities that need to be removed through the process of Self realization.

विद्याविनयसम्पन्ने ब्राह्मणे गवि हस्तिनि । शुनि चैव श्वपाके च पण्डिताः समदर्शिनः ॥ ५-१८ ॥

vidyāvīnayasampanne brāhmaṇe gavi hastini | śuni caiva śvapāke ca paṇḍitāḥ samadarśināḥ || 5-18 ||

vidya: with divine knowledge; *vinaya*: and with gentleness/ humility/ lack of arrogance; *sampanne*: endowed; *brahmane*: in the *brahmana*; *gavi*: in the cow; *hastini*: in the elephant; *suni*: in the dog; *ca*: and; *eva*: certainly; *sva-pake*: in the dog-eater; *ca*: and; *paṇḍitah*: learned persons; *sama-darsinah*: see equally.

"The *pandits* (wise learned persons) look with equal (friendliness) to the *brahmana* who is learned and gentle, to the cow and the elephant, as well as to the dog and to the (uncivilized) dog eater."

The expression *sama darsinah* is the key to this verse, and contains several layers of meanings, making this verse one of the most important ones in *Bhagavad gita*.

The first and foremost meaning, that naturally appears from the context of the discussion in the previous verses, applies to the nature of Atman/ Brahman, that is exactly the same in all living entities, no matter what their body and even what their behavior is. A true *pandita* or *panda* perceives himself and others as Atman/ Brahman, therefore he does not disrespect anyone and he does not mistreat anyone. When he offers respect and friendship to other living entities, it is because he sees the many cells of God's bodily limbs in the various components of the universal society, and at the same time s/he sees the Atman as the pure Self on an educational journey of incarnations, and the Paramatman within every single body as the most intimate and dearest friend of all living beings (5.29).

The "equal vision" of the true *pandita* is free from prejudice as well as from separatism, because it is not based on bodily identifications and evaluations - it is based on the same perspective and consciousness that the Supreme Personality of Godhead has. A true *pandita* is only contemplating the question of how s/he can work for the benefit of everyone, because s/he sees every living entity as a cell in the Body of God. Each single cell has a different function in the body, but all cells need to be treasured, protected and nurtured according to their specific needs. This practical consideration of different engagements and requirements, however, is not based on prejudice, but on actual observation of the true potential of each individual.

There are great differences between a human being, a cow, an elephant and a dog, as these bodies really belong to different genetic programs. For example, a cow has four stomachs, an elephant can crush down a big tree just by pushing it, a dog sweats through its tongue only, and a human being is capable of complex and articulated speech. Their actual abilities really set them apart, therefore the *pandita* will not try to milk the *brahmana* or ask philosophical questions from a dog, and will not expect the elephant to be content with the amount of food a human being requires.

However, this verse distinguishes the two examples of human beings - the qualified *brahmana* and the uncivilized person - not on the basis of birth, but on the basis of actual behavior. Recognizing a cow from an elephant or from a dog is not difficult, but all human beings have the same genetic potential; there are some minor differences due to the various races but such ethnic genetic differences have no relevance in regard to the behavior of the individuals. Just like a dog is always a dog - no matter what breed or color he is, he will always go after a dog treat and lick his own butt - all human beings have the natural capacity to overcome the material identification and attain Transcendence. Krishna will clearly confirm this later (9.32), saying that not only *brahmanas* and saintly kings have the potential to attain the highest perfection in Transcendental realization (*param gatim*), but also women, *vaisyas*, *sudras*, as well as all those who were born in sinful or uncivilized circumstances or degraded families (*papa yonayah*, and even *sva pakah*). This effectively covers all types and levels of human beings, none excluded.

However, the inherent potential of the human form of life must be put to good use. It is not sufficient to be able to do something in order to get the credit for having done it: we must actually perform the action. Therefore this verse clarifies a definite functional difference between

the learned and gentle *brahmana* on one side and the dog-eater (literally, "one who cooks dogs") on the other side, almost as if they belonged to different species of life, because they have very different behaviors. On the other hand, a so-called *brahmana* that is not learned and humble is actually an uncivilized person, especially if his food habits are not regulated by the dharmic considerations of compassion and cleanliness - or in other words, if he is not a vegetarian. The criteria to classify human beings into functional categories are here stated as: 1) knowledge, 2) kindness/ freedom from arrogance, 3) food habits. In fact, these are the three major factors intelligent people consider when evaluating the possible engagement of an individual.

The *pandita* is well aware of the practical qualities and activities (*guna* and *karma*) of each individual being, and is capable of engaging each and every individual being in the service of the Supreme in the best possible way. But because these different circumstances are not evaluated in terms of the personal benefit that the *pandita* could get from the various individuals, he sees no real fundamental difference between them.

इहैव तैर्जितः सर्गो येषां साम्ये स्थितं मनः । निर्दोषं हि समं ब्रह्म तस्माद् ब्रह्मणि ते स्थिताः ॥ ५-१९ ॥

ihaiva tairjitaḥ sargo yeṣāṁ sāmye sthitaṁ manaḥ | nirdoṣaṁ hi samaṁ brahma tasmād brahmaṇi te sthitaḥ || 5-19 ||

iha: here; *eva*: certainly; *taiḥ*: by them; *jitaḥ*: conquered; *sargah*: rebirth; *yesham*: of them; *samyeh*: in equanimity; *sthitam*: established; *manah*: the mind; *nirdosham*: without defect; *hi*: certainly; *samam*: equanimity; *brahma*: Brahman; *tasmad*: therefore; *brahmani*: in the Brahman; *te*: them; *sthitah*: established.

"Those who, in this very life/ body, have vanquished rebirth, have a mind that is established in equanimity. This equal vision is certainly pure/ free from all defects, because the same (pure) Brahman is (in all that exists). Thus they are (firmly) established in Brahman."

The word *iha* means "here", and can be applied to the particular body where one is residing, as well as this world where we live. A derivate meaning is "in this lifetime", and indicates that one does not need to take another and more qualified birth in order to attain the perfection of Brahman realization. Sometimes we hear Indian materialists stating that one needs to be born in a so-called high caste, or in a male body, in order to become able or qualified to engage in the pursuit of Transcendental realization. This is really a stupid idea, and finds no confirmation in any *shastra* or by any genuine *acharya*. All human beings are equally entitled to directly pursue this crucial purpose of life, as Krishna clearly states in *Gita* (9.32).

The word *sargah* means rebirth as well as creation or manifestation; it comes from the same family of the word *srijami*, "I manifest myself" (4.7). A new body where we take birth is the manifestation or creation of the subtle desires and material identification that we carry in our *karana* body. As the previous verses explain, when such subtle body has been purified from all contamination, there is no need to take another material body - and therefore we can say we have conquered rebirth.

A person that has attained this level of pure transcendental consciousness can be equally benevolent towards all living entities, because s/he does not evaluate them in terms of the personal attraction or repulsion (pleasure or displeasure) s/he can get from their bodies, but s/he sees the Supreme Soul in every heart, and each Atman as an equally powerful and glorious spark of Brahman.

This verse refers to a *yogi* that has already attained the Transcendental realization and has therefore gone beyond the early need to isolate himself from the world in order to train his mind in steady meditation. The intermediate and advanced stages of *yoga* shift from the passive meditation called *dharana* to the active meditation called *dhyana*, and the best way to carry on this *dhyana sadhana* consists in going among innocent and sincere people and engaging them in discussions about Transcendental knowledge and realization, and in loving service of Transcendence. In the course of this transcendental and sacred activity, the *yogi* has the opportunity to manifest his equanimity towards all the living entities he meets.

न प्रहृष्येत्प्रियं प्राप्य नोद्विजेत्प्राप्य चाप्रियम् । स्थिरबुद्धिरसम्मूढो ब्रह्मविद् ब्रह्मणि स्थितः ॥ ५-२० ॥

na prahr̥ṣyetpriyaṁ prāpya nodvijetprāpya cāpriyam | sthira-buddhirasammūḍho brahma-vid brahmaṇi sthitaḥ || 5-20 ||

na: not; *prahrishyet*: rejoices; *priyam*: what he likes; *prapya*: by obtaining; *na*: not; *udvijet*: becomes disturbed; *prapya*: by obtaining; *ca*: and; *apriyam*: what he does not like; *sthira-buddhiḥ*: steady intelligence; *asammudhah*: free from confusion; *brahma-vit*: one who knows Brahman; *brahmani*: in Brahman; *sthitah*: situated.

"A *brahma-vit* (one who knows the Brahman) does not become elated in obtaining what is pleasing/ desirable and does not become agitated in obtaining what is unpleasant/ undesirable. S/he has a steady intelligence and is free from illusion, because s/he is firmly situated in Brahman."

It is normal and legitimate that the body and mind will feel joy or sorrow because of the circumstances they face, because this is a natural consequence of the contact between the senses and the objects of the senses. Krishna has clearly said (2.14) that we should simply tolerate them. He does not say we should stop feeling them, or suppress our emotions and fall into denial of our problems. He does not say that one who feels joys and sorrows is a fallen materialist. Rather, he says that we should not be confused by these joys and sorrows to the point that we lose consciousness of our real nature.

The word *prahrishyet* indicates elation, a feeling of overwhelming joy that leaves our mind confused and unable to see things clearly. On the opposite end of the emotional range, the word *udvijet* indicates a disturbed state of mind that is too busy trying to cope with suffering, and therefore creates confusion and a feeling of illusion. In this case, too, our excessive emotions constitute an obstacle to the proper function of our mind. It is perfectly possible to control one's emotions and though processes by channeling them in the proper useful direction and letting them flow away without remaining attached to them or even cultivating them. The important thing is to learn how to observe such emotions in a detached and objective way, without becoming identified in them: this happens normally when we are firmly situated in the transcendental consciousness, but it is also possible simply with some steady intelligence. After all, joys and sorrows are temporary feelings, and can disappear very quickly. Pleasant and unpleasant are extremely relative concepts, because what is *priyam* or

"dear" to someone may not be "dear" to someone else, or to the same person in different circumstances. Cold water, for example, can be very pleasing to drink when the weather is very hot, and very unpleasant if thrown at us in the middle of winter. This concept will be repeated again in later verses.

बाह्यस्पर्शेष्वसक्तात्मा विन्दत्यात्मनि यत्सुखम् । स ब्रह्मयोगयुक्तात्मा सुखमक्षयमश्नुते ॥ ५-२१ ॥

bāhyaśparśeṣvasaktātmā vindatyātmani yatsukham | sa brahmayogayuktātmā sukhamakṣayamaśnute || 5-21 ||

bahya-sparseshu: in external contacts; *asakta-atma*: one who is not attached; *vindati*: finds pleasure; *atmani*: in the *atman*; *yat*: that; *sukham*: happiness; *sah*: s/he; *brahma-yoga*: by the Brahma Yoga; *yukta-atma*: connected himself; *sukham*: happiness; *akshayam*: permanent/ inexhaustible; *asnute*: experiences.

"Unattached to the contact with the external (things), s/he finds happiness in the pleasure of the Self. Such a person is engaged in Brahma yoga, and enjoys inexhaustible happiness."

What is Brahma Yoga? It is simply the "engagement in Brahman consciousness".

Everyone wants to be happy: it is a natural and legitimate aspiration, as well as the actual true nature of the Self. However, in order to find happiness, we need to know where to seek it.

Materialists, or people who are conditioned by external circumstances, try to find happiness in the contact of the senses with the objects of the senses, because they identify with the senses and with the body. Unfortunately, such pleasure or happiness is illusory because it quickly turns into suffering.

We can make the example of a very thirsty man that comes to the ocean and, seeing all that water, drinks his fill. The effect will be exactly the opposite of what he was trying to obtain, and his thirst will increase because of the salt contained in the water. No matter how much sea water he will drink, he will remain thirsty. The salt in sea water could be compared to the material identification and attachment that confuses the mind and leads one to believe that it is possible to find real happiness in material sense gratification.

On the other hand, the inner happiness we find in the Atman is like fresh and pure water that comes from an inexhaustible source, and can give us the healthy satisfaction we long for. Once our deep thirst for happiness is quenched with the pure and holy water that springs from the feet of the Supreme Brahman, our intelligence becomes clear and our consciousness steady, and we become able to experience the contact with the external things in a more balanced and sober manner. A good vegetable soup can be described as "salted water", but it can be beneficial when taken in the small amount necessary for the proper maintenance of our body and mind; in the same way we can utilize sense gratification prepared in the proper way and purified from harmful components, and consume it in the required amounts only. As we have already explained earlier in the text, *Gita* does not condemn healthy sense experiences or pleasures, because as long as we have a material body we will also have senses (and a mind, that is sometimes called the sixth sense) and we will need to take care of them. The important thing is to remember that such sensory experiences will be temporary and strictly functional to facilitate and support our work in this body, and that they do not constitute the real source of our happiness.

We can make another example: many people dream about getting a car, but their purpose is not to acquire a useful vehicle that enables them to get from home to their workplace in a reasonable time and without unnecessary complications and efforts. Rather, they dream that the possession of such status symbol will reinforce their identification as successful individuals, and will make them truly happy. So they get the best automobile they can afford according to their financial condition. After the initial enthusiasm, they realize that they are not really happy, and instead of understanding that happiness cannot be found in material objects themselves, they conclude that they got the wrong type of car: what they need to become really happy is a particular type of automobile - a red Ferrari, or some latest model luxury car. So they beg, borrow or steal, and in the end they get the car of their dreams. Again, the pleasure lasts for a brief time, then sooner or later they feel dissatisfied. Even if they do not try to acquire a new and even more expensive vehicle, some day their car will start giving mechanical problems or will be stolen, or crashed, or lost in some other way, and then they will be devastated because they invested too many expectations of happiness in the wrong place - a temporary material object.

The same thing applies to those who seek happiness in intimate relationships with others, in the good health and good looks of their own bodies, or in some other temporary material situation. Sooner or later the fun will be spoiled by the inevitable decay or loss, and the suffering will begin.

The correct approach is to utilize whatever comes to us, but remaining detached from the sense of identification and possession that could derive from such things - either gross objects or subtle objects. As the French saying of popular wisdom goes: *tout passe, tout lasse, tout casse, tout se remplace...* "everything ends, everything becomes boring, everything breaks, and everything can be replaced".

The only inexhaustible thing, the only unlimited source of happiness is the Atman/ Brahman, that is eternal and unchangeable. Therefore by practicing Brahma Yoga, the active meditation on Transcendence, we can become really happy in all conditions of life.

ये हि संस्पर्शजा भोगा दुःखयोनय एव ते । आद्यन्तवन्तः कौन्तेय न तेषु रमते बुधः ॥ ५-२२ ॥

ye hi saṁsparśajā bhogā duḥkhayonaya eva te | ādyantavantaḥ kaunteya na teṣu ramate budhaḥ || 5-22 ||

ye: those; *hi*: certainly; *saṁsparśa-jah*: born from the contact (of the senses with the sense objects); *bhogah*: pleasures; *dukhya-yonayah*: the matrix of suffering; *eva*: certainly; *te*: them; *adi-antavantaḥ*: having a beginning and an end; *kaunteya*: o Kaunteya (son of Kunti); *na*: not; *teshu*: in them; *ramate*: rejoices; *budhah*: one who is intelligent.

"Those pleasures that derive from contact with (the sense objects) are the cause for future sorrow because they have a beginning and an end. Therefore, o son of Kunti, an intelligent person does not seek happiness in them."

In this verse the concept of contact between the senses and the sense object is repeated, to distinguish material pleasure from transcendental pleasure. The happiness of Brahman is natural and spontaneous and does not require a physical contact, because Brahman is

everywhere. On the other hand, material pleasure requires sensory contact (and we should remember that the mind is included in the senses). This important point had already been presented by Krishna in the very beginning of his instructions (2.14).

The expression *dukha yonaya*, "the origin of sufferings", can be interpreted at many levels. The word *yoni*, or "matrix", suggests that in order to enjoy the pleasures procured by the contact of bodily senses with a gross object, one needs to take birth in a gross material body, with all its limitations and conditionings and problems. This, in itself, is the root cause of all material suffering.

Another meaning is related to the science of the *gunas* explained in *Gita*. Desire for sense gratification is born from passion, *rajo guna*, and it is a scientific fact that suffering is the inevitable result of all endeavors based on *rajas* as a value in itself. Later (*Gita* 14.16) Krishna will clearly say that *rajas* fructifies in sufferings (*rajasas tu phalam duhkham*). Such is the nature of this world that only detached and dutiful action performed in the proper enlightened and attentive consciousness (*sattva*) can actually bring happiness.

Another meaning of this verse is that the sexual pleasure that drives the natural instincts of all living entities is actually a flimsy delusional surrogate to the actual pleasure and contentment that derives from the union between the two components of our own individual being - *purusha* and *prakriti* - the male and female energies, or the two hemispheres of our brain. The internal union between the two halves of our Self does not require any *sparsa* ("touching"), but its counterpart on the gross physical level does, and that is where suffering is created.

In any case, the main point of the verse is that material pleasure cannot be trusted because it is temporary and illusory. Trying to build our happiness over it would be like trying to build a permanent house on temporary foundations - a very foolish attempt that is naturally destined to failure, sooner or later. On temporary foundations we can only build a temporary shelter that is solely aimed at a temporary functional purpose - and from which we can detach ourselves easily and without pain or sense of loss when the purpose has been served and the temporary construction is not necessary any more because we are moving on.

The word *ramate*, "rejoices", indicates the feeling of delight that one seeks to fulfill one's own desires and aspirations. The best place to seek for such happiness is the transcendental nature of the Atman (*atma rama*) and the transcendental relationship with the transcendental Supreme Brahman (Rama), that is the actual source of all happiness for everyone.

शक्नोतीहैव यः सोढुं प्राक्शरीरविमोक्षणात् । कामक्रोधोद्भवं वेगं स युक्तः स सुखी नरः ॥ ५-२३ ॥

śaknotīhaiva yaḥ soḍhum prākśarīravimokṣaṇāt | kāmakrodhodbhavaṁ vegaṁ sa yuktaḥ sa sukhī naraḥ | | 5-23 | |

saknoti: is capable; *iha eva*: even here; *yaḥ*: he; *soḍhum*: to tolerate/ to withstand; *prak*: before; *sarira-vimokshanat*: being liberated from the body; *kama-krodhah*: of lust and anger; *udbhavam*: generated by; *vegam*: the impulse; *sah*: he; *yuktah*: a yogi; *sah*: he; *sukhi*: happy; *narah*: human being.

"One who here (in this life/ body), before becoming liberated from the body, is capable of withstanding the onslaughts of lust and anger, is a yogi and a happy human being."

The key expression in this verse is *iha eva*: already in this lifetime, in this body. The characteristics of *kama* and *krodha* have already been described in detail in 3.37: "This (power that pushes a man to perform sinful/negative actions) is (constituted by) desire and anger, and it is born from the quality of passion. Know that it is all-devouring, the cause of great sins, and the (greatest) enemy in this world."

The impulse of *kama* in the body is observed as enthusiasm, attraction, a strong emotion that can make one's hair stand, or cause tears, blushing, widening of the eyes and/or the smile, a slight dropping of the jaw, shivering of the limbs, a feeling of weakness similar to fainting, temporary speech impairment, confusion of the mind, an outburst of shouting or exclamation, and modification of the breathing pattern

The impulse of *krodha* in the body can have similar symptoms, especially the modification of the breath pattern, temporary speech impairment, confusion of the mind, an outburst of shouting or exclamation, and even tears, but also perspiration, change of color of the face due to modification in blood circulation (not only blushing, but becoming pale as well), reddening of the eyes, and trembling of the limbs. Already in 2.62 Krishna had shown the connection between sense perception and the emotions of lust and anger: "By thinking about the objects of the senses, a person associates with them, by association desire develops, and from (unfulfilled) desire anger arises."

In the previous verses we have seen that the material joys and sorrows created by the contact between the senses and the sense objects are characteristic of the material body, and that the dissolution that the body gives a temporary relief from such problems, while the overcoming of the material identification - the root cause of the creation of the material body - takes one to the permanent liberation and pure undisturbed transcendental happiness. This verse further explains that anyone who has a material body will inevitably experience these sense activities, and the natural consequences of such pleasant and unpleasant contacts between senses and sense objects will create the impulses of desire and anger.

The difference between a *yogi* and a non-*yogi* is that a *yogi* remains detached (i.e. non-identified) from these natural functions of the body and mind, and thus develops a higher level of sense control and tolerance towards the sensory experiences. Such detachment created by the power of transcendental consciousness is wholesome and substantial, and does not depend on external circumstances or supplies, unlike the artificial and temporary detachment achieved by consuming intoxicating substances, drugs or medication.

Someone could think that since the cessation of the allotted period in a particular body offers a respite in the form of a temporary liberation, it is better to commit suicide and thus shorten the "jail term" that one has to spend in the prison of an ailing material body, tormented by desires and anger. Unfortunately, this is not a good solution. Every particular lifetime constitutes a "course" in life's school, where we are supposed to learn some lessons and repay some debts. If we try to escape before completing the scheduled program, leaving unfinished jobs behind, it is very likely we will remain trapped in an intermediate dimension that is variously perceived and interpreted by different cultures. Some call it a "limbo", some call it the "ghost dimension" or *pretaloka*, some call it Bardo, but everyone agrees it is not a pleasant experience because the subtle body still identifies with the previous material body - position, relationships, possessions - and still feels desires, lust, thirst, hunger, anger etc, but is unable to act them out or relieve them without a gross body. This verse also warns that it is not wise to wait until the time of death to start thinking about spiritual realization. Liberation from conditionings must be attained before the time of death, otherwise it won't be attained at all.

योऽन्तःसुखोऽन्तरारामस्तथान्तर्ज्योतिरेव यः । स योगी ब्रह्मनिर्वाणं ब्रह्मभूतोऽधिगच्छति ॥ ५-२४ ॥

yo'ntahsukho'ntararamastathantarjyotireva yah | sa yogi brahmanirvanam brahmabhuto'dhigacchati || 5-24 ||

yah: he; antah-sukhah: happy inside; antah aramah: finding pleasure inside; tatha: as well as; antah-jyotih: whose light is inside; eva: certainly; yah: he; sah: s/he; yogi: a yogi; brahma-nirvanam: the peacefulness of Transcendence; brahma-bhuta: the position of Brahman; adhigacchati: attains.

"One who is happy within (the self), who finds pleasure within (the self), who finds enlightenment/ the light within (the self) is a yogi who attains the Brahma Nirvana and the existence/ realization of Brahman."

Brahma nirvana and *brahma bhuta* are two interesting expressions. Sometimes uninformed people believe that *nirvana* (the cessation of material agitation) is a characteristic Buddhist concept, or an "impersonalistic" idea that needs to be opposed, but we find that Krishna speaks of *nirvana* as genuine spiritual realization (5.24, 25, 26, 6.5) and the very purpose of *yoga*. So if we claim to recognize the authority of Krishna and *Gita*, we should respect his teachings and accept the validity of the definitions he presents.

The word *nirvana* literally means "without wind" and defines the state of consciousness that is firmly radiant and undisturbed like a flame sheltered from the wind. A synonym for *nirvana* is *nirvikalpa samadhi*. Of course this *nirvana* is not a void, an absence of all activities and thoughts. The state of quiescence it refers to applies to the constant and unnecessary chattering of the mind, that prevents us from actually concentrating on what is important. A flame without the wind does not cease to exist, or to burn, or to radiate light - on the contrary, it burns better, with a brighter light, and is much more useful. Similarly, *brahma bhuta*, or the "existence/ being of Brahman" applies to the transcendental consciousness that is free from material identifications/ attachments. Such consciousness is the first preliminary step for any further exploration of the Divine: the final instruction of *Gita* (18.54) states that only from this level of consciousness one can develop true *bhakti*. We must therefore understand that the level of Brahman, the transcendental spiritual consciousness, is not something we should despise or fear, but rather the goal we need to concentrate on.

The word *aramah*, "finding pleasure", contains a dynamic aspect, indicating the idea of sporting, doing something for the pure pleasure of it. It is closely connected to the concept of *lila*, "playing", that applies to the transcendental activities manifested by Bhagavan.

The expression *antah jyoti* indicates that the *yogi* attains the level where does not depend on external sensory perception to acquire knowledge and enlightenment, because of the direct contact with the Param Atman. Once the chattering of the mind and ego have ceased, and the intelligence is steady like a flame undisturbed by wind, the natural radiance of the Atman and the Param Atman will be revealed from within.

लभन्ते ब्रह्मनिर्वाणमृषयः क्षीणकल्मषाः । चिन्नद्वैधा यतात्मानः सर्वभूतहिते रताः ॥ ५-२५ ॥

labhante brahmanirvanamrshayah kshinakalmaṣāḥ | chinnavaidhā yatātmanāḥ sarvabhūtahite rataḥ || 5-25 ||

labhante: they obtain; brahma-nirvanam: the Brahma nirvana; rishayah: the Rishis; kshina-kalmashah: cleansed from impurities; chinnavaidha: having cut off doubts; yata-atmanah: having controlled themselves; sarva-bhuta: for all living beings; hite: in beneficial work/ to the benefit; ratah: engaged/ dedicated/ attached.

"The (wise) seers (of Reality) attain the brahma nirvana (because) have been purified from (all) sins/ faults and have cut off (all) doubts (dualistic illusions), engaging themselves in (work for) the benefit of all living beings."

We have seen in previous verses the definition of the word *muni*, used by Krishna as a synonym for *yogi*. This verse offers the definition Rishi, "those who see (Reality)", a synonym for the definition *tattva darshi* we found in verse 4.34. In vedic tradition, the Rishis are wise men that directly realized the Knowledge of Transcendence and expressed it in the various scriptural texts they compiled. This definition can apply both to men and to women: the feminine form of the noun is Rishika, from which the name of the city Rishikesh derives, "Lord of the Rishikas", being dedicated to Mahesvara Shiva.

Some people believe that such Rishis were special because of their noble birth and ancestry, but this is not the actual point; in fact in the history of Vedic knowledge there were some Rishis that came from ordinary or degraded families. One famous example is Satyakama Jabala, whose story is described in the *Chandogya Upanisad* (4.4.1-5). He was the son of a single mother who worked as a maidservant for many different people and had no idea who the father of the boy was (generally maidservants also moonlighted as prostitutes). Another famous example is Valmiki Rishi, the compiler of the *Ramayana*, who came from a family of street robbers. What to speak of Veda Vyasa, who was born out of wedlock from a woman from the fishermen community. However, to be considered a Rishi one needs to fit the description given in this verse: become purified from all sins and faults, cut off all doubts and dualities, and engage sincerely in working for the benefit of all. Such great souls deserve all respect, whatever was their birth.

The expression *kshina* means "diminished, reduced", and indicates the process of gradual purification called *anartha nivritti*, by which one strengthens the influence of *sattva* and then rises to the level of *visuddha sattva*, or transcendental purity.

The expression *dvaiddha*, "doubt", conveys the meaning of a dualistic illusion, by which one is torn between two opposite positions and does not know which one is the true or good one. Krishna has already stated in chapter 4 (40, 41, 42) that chronic doubts prevent all progress: "For one who is plagued by uncertainty there is no happiness in this world or in the next... cut through all doubts by (the sword of) knowledge... using the sword of knowledge to slash off all these doubts that were born from ignorance and are infesting the heart."

The expression *sarva-bhuta-hite ratah* refers to all activities that are performed for the benefit of all the living beings; real welfare work should not create unnecessary sufferings to one category or groups of beings for the purpose of facilitating the pleasure and profit of another category or group. There is always a better way to work for the benefit of all, and we need to carefully consider all the factors, and keep in mind the permanent benefit or *sreya*, that is more important than the temporary benefit called *preya*.

कामक्रोधवियुक्तानां यतीनां यतचेतसाम् । अभितो ब्रह्मनिर्वाणं वतते विदितात्मनाम् ॥ ५-२६ ॥

kāmakrodhaviyuktānām yatīnām yatacetasām | abhito brahmanirvāṇam vartate viditātmanām || 5-26 ||

kama-krodha-vimuktanam: of those who are completely free from lust and anger; *yatinam*: of those who are renounced/ regulated; *yata-cetasam*: who control their consciousness; *abhitaḥ*: guaranteed; *brahma-nirvanam*: the peacefulness of Transcendence; *vartate*: is there; *vidita-atmanam*: of those who have known/ realized the *atman*.

"The saintly persons who are completely free from lust and anger and have their consciousness steadily fixed (in Brahman), who have realized the Self: (for them) there is *brahma nirvana* very soon/ in whatever way."

The word *yati* is a synonym for *sannyasi*, a person who has become completely free from *ahankara* and *mamatva* - material identification and sense of possession or belonging - and therefore is beyond all scope of lust and anger. Since *krodha*, anger, is generated from *kama*, lust, and *kama* arises from the desire of possessing a sense object for the gratification of the material body and mind, the only way to completely uproot this enemy of peaceful and happy life is to move on a higher platform, already amply described by Krishna in the previous chapters, where such lust cannot arise. We have already seen that a renounced person humbly accepts as *prasadam*, for the maintenance of his body and mind, whatever sense gratification he receives without too much effort. This is the idea of regulating one's sense gratification: be satisfied with what comes on its own accord in the course of the performance of one's proper duties.

Those who have formally accepted the *sannyasa* order of life must practically demonstrate this concept in its extreme form, by renouncing all possessions and social position, including their name and home, and survive from day to day by begging alms for their food, traveling constantly so that they do not develop a depending relationship with any particular place or people. A *sannyasi* cannot have a permanent address or a bank account, movable or immovable properties, or even valuables he could sell in case of emergency. His clothing consists of a simple *kaupina* or loincloth and a shawl made from discarded rags picked from the street, and his ornaments consist of a *kanthi mala* or *japa mala* (string of beads) made from the wood of *tulasi* or the seeds of *rudraksha*, and the *tilaka* made from clay or ashes. No Sony, Seiko or Samsonite are contemplated in the characteristic equipment of a *sannyasi*. A *sannyasi* should not even wear shoes or carry an umbrella - what to speak of traveling executive class in airplanes and having diamond jewelry on silken clothes, or employing a personal cook or masseur (or masseuse). He can never engage in politics, trade or any type of business or relationship with people who are engaged in such fields.

Of course, this formal acceptance of the rigid rules of *sannyasa* is not intended for the degraded and weak people of Kali yuga. In fact it is strongly discouraged if not forbidden, as clearly stated in *Brahma vaivarta purana*: *asvamedham gavalambham sannyasam pala patrkam devarena sutotpattim kalau panca vivarjayet*, "In the age of Kali, five acts are not to be performed: the horse sacrifice, the cow sacrifice, the acceptance of the order of *sannyasa*, the offering of oblations of flesh to the forefathers, and a man's begetting children in his brother's wife." We can therefore safely assume that there are very few genuine *sannyasis* - if any at all - and that for the most part, the people that are considered *sannyasis* are simply spiritual practitioners that do not engage in family life but live in some *ashrama* or *matha*, depending on some religious institution for their maintenance and working more or less diligently or effectively for the propagation of spiritual activities and functions. They do not get a salary but their basic maintenance needs and their work instruments are provided by the *matha*.

Unfortunately not all such people are actually sincere: the fraud mentality can exist in many degrees and at various levels. Some are just looking for easy food, quiet sleep, little work, sufficient respect from the society and sometimes good opportunities for sense gratification, with no responsibilities and liabilities. In time they can become frustrated, dry, cruel, insensitive, rough, proud and engage in institutional politics and power games, and some may even become cynical hypocrites, who simply take advantage of their artificial dress to shamelessly exploit innocent and ignorant people for their personal sense gratification and profit, and when they do not obtain money, facilities or adoration (which they think is due to them simply because of their dress), they get angry and revengeful. This is why this verse specifies *yata cetasam*, putting the emphasis on the fact that the definition of "renounced person" has nothing to do with the externals, but everything to do with the level or mode of consciousness or awareness.

Other interesting expressions in the verse are *abhitaḥ* - meaning "guaranteed, very soon, in one way or another" - and *vidita*, "those who know", coming from same root as *vit* and *veda*.

स्पर्शान्कृत्वा बहिर्बाह्यांश्चक्षुश्चैवान्तरे भ्रुवोः । प्राणापानौ समौ कृत्वा नासाभ्यन्तरचारिणौ ॥ ५-२७ ॥

sparsāṅkṛtvā bahirbāhyāṁścakṣuścaivāntare bhruvoḥ | prāṇāpānau samau kṛtvā nāsābhyantaracāriṇau || 5-27 ||

sparsan: sense objects; *kṛtvā*: making; *bahih*: externally; *bahyan*: external; *cakshuh*: the eyes; *ca*: and; *eva*: certainly; *antare*: inside; *bhruvoh*: of the eyebrows; *prana-apanau*: the *prana* and the *apana*; *samau*: balance; *kṛtvā*: doing; *nasa-abhyantara*: inside the nostrils; *carinau*: that are moving.

"Keeping outside (his/her concern/ attention) the external (objects/ concerns) and fixing one's eyes to the internal space between the eyebrows, balancing the *prana* and *apana*, controlling the breathing within the nose,

The previous verses described a *yati*, a *sannyasi*, that has completely overcome all material identification and sense of possess, and is striving only for permanent liberation from the prison of the body. In other words, a *sannyasi*'s only concern is about preparing himself for death. Of course, this approach and purpose does not correspond with the mentality and activities of the so-called *sannyasis* of Kali yuga, that are actually monks who simply live in a monastery, not unlike their Christian counterparts. In fact, this sad state of affairs has created among many people the general idea that in fact a *sannyasi* is nothing more than a Christian monk or friar.

Unfortunately all along history Christian monasteries have set an extremely low standard of spiritual realization and behavior, and this cultural superimposition has vastly contributed to the degradation of Hindu standards as well.

It was Adi Shankara who established the system of *mathas*, radically reforming the institution of *sannyasa* as a necessary step to counteract the degradation of the brahmanic tradition, and incorporating the new concept of "monastery" introduced by Buddhism. In this system *sannyasis* started living together in a fixed residence and training *brahmacharis* as "new/ apprentice monks", collecting and managing funds for the maintenance of the *matha*, organizing preaching functions to the public etc - all occupations that had previously been the natural and undisputed rights of *grihastha brahmanas*, including the highly transcendental ones such as the Rishis living in their remote *ashramas* in the forests.

We should not forget that the *sannyasi* described by Krishna in *Gita* is not the monk-type religionist who lives in a *matha*, but a real *sannyasi* who lives alone without shelter - a very important point, that will be repeated several times later on. Without understanding this crucial point, the instructions given in the next chapter on the practice of the Yoga of meditation will be horribly distorted, creating a fantasy of sense gratification that is a mixture of luxury monastery and fitness spa, where monks dedicate all their time to the care and improvement of their material bodies, through physical well being and fitness exercise techniques, eating expensive and rare biodynamic foods in a trendy diet prepared by expert cooks, sleeping on specially made futons and orthopedic beds, and so on.

When the concept of meditation enters this golden fantasy of Beverly Hills Yoga, it becomes a series of relaxation techniques to delude the mind into believing that this material world is actually a place of happiness and peace, that the purpose of life is to feel good inside one's material body, and that the best time of the day is when we can dream about the fairy-tale sunlit meadows full of flowers and the rosy clouds at dawn on the ocean beach that we are told to visualize in our minds to improve our "spiritual well-being".

Such practice of "yoga and meditation" is as much as a *sadhana* as watching any of the many fantasy films produced by Hollywood studios. It's a mental movie, nothing but a mental projection, that belongs to *tamas* rather than *sattva*, even if the room where we spend our fantasizing time is well-aerated and lit, the floor is clean and there are perfumed incense sticks burning in some artistic incense holder.

If we wash away the fancy misconceptions and come back to the solid reality described in *Gita*, we will find an unkempt elderly man, who lives in the open without any shelter like any homeless bum and eats whatever scarce food he can obtain by begging, and whose only concern is to carry his awareness beyond the material level so that he can leave his body without having to take another birth. Another extremely important clue in this regard is the description offered by Krishna in this verse about the *pratyahara* and *pranayama* of the ancient science of Kriya yoga. *Pratyahara* means withdrawing one's attention internally, excluding all external disturbances from one's consciousness and even the memory of external objects. So, we are not supposed to meditate on meadows, forests or beaches. But what does it mean to focus one's attention "internally"? Should we visualize our bodily organs - lungs, brain, blood in the veins? Certainly not. Those are external things, too, as the material body is just the outer covering of the Atman. What should we meditate on, then? On the Atman, or even better, on the Param Atman, that is the inner soul of our soul.

Pranayama means equalization of breathing: controlling breathing until all breathing stops. It is not meant to increase the oxygen flow to the brain so that we can become more brilliant at our managerial careers, or to quicken the metabolism so that we can eat more caloric food without gaining pounds of anti-aesthetic weight - all with the purpose of getting more and better opportunities for sexual relationships.

We have already mentioned the two brain hemispheres - the male and the female - that control each one side of the body, and respectively the logical and emotional faculties.

The particular practice of *pranayama* described in this verse is aimed at having both nostrils work simultaneously, something that only happens spontaneously at times of great balance between the two hemispheres. When the male energy and the female energy within a single body are perfectly balanced, the individual becomes free from the sexual attraction and impulses, and the awareness remains stable and undisturbed, able to properly focus on Self realization.

यतेन्द्रियमनोबुद्धिर्मुनिर्मोक्षपरायणः । विगतेच्छाभयक्रोधो यः सदा मुक्त एव सः ॥ ५-२८ ॥
 yatendriyamanobuddhirmunirmokṣaparāyaṇaḥ | vigatecchābhayakrodho yaḥ sadā mukta eva saḥ || 5-28 ||

yata-indriya-manah-buddhih: having controlled the senses, the mind and the intelligence; *munih*: the Muni; *moksha-parayanah*: (fully) dedicated to liberation; *vigata-iccha-bhaya-krodhah*: having gone beyond (all) desire, fear and anger; *yah*: he; *sada*: always; *muktah*: liberated; *eva*: certainly; *sah*: he.

controlling the senses, the mind and intelligence, the muni (the silent sage) who is fully dedicated to moksha (liberation), free from all desires, fear and anger, is certainly always liberated."

A *muni* is the "silent sage" that has lost all interest and concerns for the external world. Therefore he is free from desires and hopes, fear and anger, and his senses, mind and intelligence are perfectly undisturbed and under control. The practice of silence (*mauna vrata*) is one of the most fundamental exercises, especially for beginners in Yoga, because without restraining the speech it is very difficult to restrain the mind. Everything first appears in the mind, and when it is expressed by speech it becomes "objectivized", taking up a stronger sense of reality. This is also the reason why the practice of *mantra japa* is so important.

There is a difference between a *muni* and a dumb person who would like to speak but is unable to. Using sign language or making inarticulate sounds in imitation of ordinary speech is not admissible in the practice of *mauna*, either, as the silence should also include the activities of the mind. A merely external show of silence, that is not subordinated to the meditation on the Supreme Self, will simply create a tamasic sense of inertia and ignorance, and if the "practitioner" ever wakes up from this slumber, the spark of *rajas* will create frustration and clashes with other people. There are several examples of "*mauni babas*" in India who made a big name for themselves by remaining silent for years, and ended their silence by getting angry with followers over trifles, or by breaking their continence vows, or with similar acts that revealed how their lack of actual realization and inner peace. In a previous verse (3.6) Krishna had already described such people as *vimudha* (fools) and *mithyacara* (pretenders).

What the *muni* seeks is simply *moksha*, permanent liberation - not followers, not name and fame, not a career in politics, not large donations, not palatial temples or *ashramas*, not the credit of being able to do welfare work, not government recognition. Because he has

finished with the material world, when the emaciated and neglected body fails him, he will not call an ambulance to be carried to the hospital and beg the doctors to "save his life". And nobody else will call the ambulance for him because he lives alone, far from human habitation, according to the specific instructions given by Krishna in *Gita* in the next chapters.

If we want to bring the authority of the Vedic scriptures, and especially the *prasthanā traya*, and especially the *Gita*, to build credibility for what we are doing, then our first priority should be to carefully study the *Gita* and understand the actual system. However, since the vast masses of people are abysmally ignorant about the actual *shastra*, and in fact most do not have any interest in reading them, it is easy for cynical cheaters and charlatans to take advantage of the vague and distorted information of the general population and claim to "represent Hindu orthodoxy" in their unauthorized conclusions and behaviors. Anyone who has the correct vision of the ethics of actual Hindu orthodoxy, i.e. the genuine teachings of *shastra* and original *acharyas*, has the duty to speak up and do his part to save society from going to hell in the name of religion.

भोक्तारं यज्ञतपसां सर्वलोकमहेश्वरम् ।

सुहृदं सर्वभूतानां ज्ञात्वा मां शान्तिमृच्छति ॥ ५-२९ ॥

bhoktāraṁ yajñatapasāṁ sarvalokamaheśvaram | suhṛdaṁ sarvabhūtānāṁ jñātvā māṁ śāntimṛcchati || 5-29 ||

bhoktaram: the beneficiary; *yajna-tapasam*: of sacrifices and austerities; *sarva-loka-mahesvaram*: the great Lord of all the worlds; *suhridam*: the close friend; *sarva-bhutanam*: of all living beings; *jnatva*: knowing; *mam*: me (as); *santim*: peace; *ricchati*: attains.

"(One who) knows me as the enjoyer/ beneficiary of *yajna* (sacrifice) and *tapas* (austerity), the great Lord of all the worlds /all people, and the dearest friend of all beings, attains peace."

Here is another extremely famous verse of *Gita*, that one great commentator called "the peace formula", capable of bringing real and lasting peace to individuals and societies as well.

Usually people fight over benefits and glory, domination, material possessions or relationships, out of greed for position and property, for jealousy, revenge, and similar reasons. So if everyone agrees that *ahankara* and *mamatva* are impurities to be abandoned, and that we should treat everything and everyone respectfully as property and relations of God, the usual reasons for fighting dissolve into irrelevance. After all, we are all working for the same Boss, who is a very nice person and wants everybody to be happy. It is not possible to obtain peace through adharmic solutions, simply by substituting one bad and selfish ruler with another bad and selfish ruler, one defective ideology with another defective ideology. If we examine them, all ideologies claim to be aimed at bringing prosperity and happiness to society, and peace is often the reason presented as the motivation for ruthless wars.

On the other hand, by recognizing that Param Atman is the actual beneficiary of all sacred actions and sacrifices, the creator and proprietor of everything (not only on this planet but in the entire universe) and the best well-wishing friend of all beings, people become more peaceful. Unfortunately, in Kali yuga there are many greedy and egotistic people who claim to be the representatives (or worse, the sole representatives) of God, and they are authorized to "dominate, own and collect tribute" in the name of the Lord of all planets and beneficiary of all actions. This inevitably leads to endless conflicts, oppression and sufferings, because it places faulty human beings in the position of God, even in the name of serving God. Each of the groups believes and claims that they are the (only) qualified and authorized "true representatives" of God, and of course since God himself cannot be called to appear in a court of law to make a declaration in the usually legal way in front of a judge and a court, and since there is no fax or courier service between this world and heaven, they expect that any document presented to substantiate these claims of monopoly over transmitting God's orders should be taken as unquestionably valid, merely on the word of the "representatives" themselves.

Those who refuse to blindly accept such unsubstantiated claim are accused to be offenders, non-believers, heretics, etc. The general method used by these delusional and tyrannical "theocracies" relies on material power - political, military, financial, etc. In Kali yuga, most people will believe that might is right, so the entire purpose of religious consciousness as presented in this verse becomes horribly distorted into a totalitarian oppression. What is the difference between someone who oppresses people and enforces adharmic actions and laws by claiming that he is directly God, and someone who oppresses people and enforces adharmic actions and laws by claiming that he is the sole representative of God? No difference.

God is one, but the theocratical leaders are many, and usually each of them believes he has the monopoly on the understanding of God's orders. Sometimes these deluded people even come to the conclusion that their God is the only good one, and there are "other gods" that are bad and should therefore be persecuted and eliminated by the followers of the "good God". The history of the last 2500 years is the proof that such delusional doctrines are extremely dangerous and destructive. How to solve the problem? Vedic knowledge, Vedic civilization, offers the answer to the dilemma: the genuine representatives of God never claim any material power on society - no political power, no military power, no legislative power, no law enforcement power, even no financial power. *Brahmanas* can only act as advisors and teachers, and can never have any material power on society, what to speak of *sannyasis*, who have absolutely no social position or relevance.

All religious persons should only concern themselves about giving good advice to people - all people, not only the rulers - on how to progress in their own personal spiritual lives, about the universal principles of *dharma* (properly called *sanatana dharma* because they apply to all, at any time in history and in any place) and about what is written in the genuine *shastra*. Nothing else. Each individual will have to apply the teachings in his/ her own life, never to the lives of others. The government powers reside in the King only, and the king has no power over the religious beliefs and practices of the subjects. The only difference between an ordinary *raja* and a *rajarishi* is that a *rajarishi*, a saintly king, personally gives the perfect example of a Self-realized person and always behaves according to the ethical principles of *dharma*. No king would ever tell people what form or non-form of God they are supposed to worship, and how. In the history of India, there have been many good kings that gave the same protection and patronage to different dharmic religious traditions, within Hinduism and even outside it, as for Buddhism and Jainism. A king is supposed to protect all religious people, without making any ideological discrimination.

The only concern of *kshatriyas* is to protect the *prajas* and the kingdom from aggressors, from the criminals that try to commit violence against others. In this work, there is no need for many laws - good people will behave properly without being forced by laws, and bad people will always try to get around the laws to commit their crimes. The only principle that the King needs to apply is to stop aggressors. Not even punishing them, as in the Vedic system there are no prisons or courts or lawyers: if the criminal surrenders and repents, he is either pardoned or banned, depending on the seriousness of his crime.

It does not matter what these aggressors profess to believe, even if they think that God has ordered them to rape and murder innocent people and pillage or steal properties, the *kshatriya* is only concerned about the act in itself, the rape and the murder and the stealing. The king has the duty to stop aggressions and violence, and he does that without leaving much space to the rationalization that the criminals may try to offer to justify their bad actions.

Chapter 6

Dhyana Yoga

The yoga of meditation

Dhyana yoga means "the *yoga* of meditation", and offers instructions that people usually connect with Hatha Yoga or Kriya Yoga, and some people call Astanga Yoga. Krishna, on the other hand, describes it as *dhyana* or meditation because the only purpose of the *asana*, *pranayama* and *pratyahara* is to facilitate *dhyana* or meditation. What is meditation? Meditation is the ability to control one's mind and engage it in a beneficial and purposeful way. Most of the problems people face everyday are due to a lack of control of one's mind.

Loneliness, depression, difficult or unhealthy personal or social relationships, fears, worries, phobias, hatred, jealousy, failures in enterprises, addictions of all kinds, stress, anxiety, aggressiveness, confusion, resentment, guilt, regret, envy, lust, self-loathing, insecurity, and even unethical behaviors can be solved simply by learning how to operate one's mind. Of course, controlling our own mind can influence the minds of other people only marginally, therefore when other people refuse to do their own part for the benefit of everyone even if our requests are reasonable, we can remove ourselves from the situation, choosing to speak up about the reasons, or to avoid unnecessarily conflict by remaining silent. In any case, a person who has controlled his/ her mind is acting consciously, deliberately and responsibly, making a choice in full awareness of the consequences of his/ her actions, therefore s/he remains the master of his/ her own life.

The general mass of conditioned people, who do not control their minds, become easily prey of those who want to control the minds of others, or in any case they remain the slaves of their own whimsical mind and senses, victimized by their tyranny and oppression, and besides the inevitable sufferings that are inherent in the things of the material world, they are unnecessarily tortured by their own mind and senses.

All these problems can be solved by properly learning meditation. Everyone is capable of meditation. Without this faculty, it would not be possible to perform even the most fundamental tasks of life: working, studying, solving practical problems, making choices. That's what people usually mean when they say, "switch your brain on"... and we could add, "when the brain is functioning, keep it going in the proper direction". Whenever we get a machine or appliance, before trying to utilize it we should understand its functions and proper operation, otherwise we will not get the perfect result in our job, and the machine can also get damaged in the process. Our mind is the most complex and wonderful machine, therefore it is essential to understand how it works and how we can use it in the best way.

Although meditation is an instinctive process, like breathing, moving, walking, talking, eating etc, we can learn its science and art, and use it in the best possible way to transform our lives and attain success in all enterprises. Like any muscle, the mind must be trained properly and exercised with intelligence and regularity, so that it can become able to perform its intended work. Those who do not control their minds through the practice of meditation cannot progress in life, either materially or spiritually.

In the last decades there has been some incorrect information and ideas circulating in the name of meditation, so that many people have come to confuse various concepts. Meditation is not daydreaming, fantasy, relaxation, creative visualization, or mechanical repetition of some affirmations, although these are all good exercises for the mind and may be useful for one's mental balance and health.

Actual meditation in the practice of *yoga*, called *dhyana*, is the focused concentration of the mind on the Transcendental Reality, by which all other movements of the mind are dissolved in the contemplation of the Atman/ Brahman, the eternal existence of knowledge and happiness. It is supported by the preliminary requisites such as *yama* and *niyama* (life habits), *asana* (control of the body), *pranayama* (control of breathing) and *pratyahara* (withdrawal of attention from external objects). When the external objects are excluded from the attention of the mind, it is possible to really focus on the object of meditation: this stage is called *dharana*, "holding the focus", or "getting the mind under control". The next step consists in driving the mind in the proper direction, contemplating Reality without the veils of illusion and distraction, and coming to the point of realizing it, understanding it deeply: this stage is called *dhyana*.

By constant practice, this deep meditation and state of awareness becomes spontaneous and uninterrupted - a position that is also called *sthita prajna*, "solid knowledge" - and thus it is called *samadhi*, "constant meditation".

श्रीभगवानुवाच ।

śrībhagavānuvāca ।

अनाश्रितः कर्मफलं कार्यं कर्म करोति यः । स संन्यासी च योगी च न निरग्निर्न चाक्रियः ॥ ६-१ ॥

anāśritaḥ karmaphalaṁ kāryaṁ karma karoti yaḥ । sa sannyāsī ca yogī ca na niragnirna cākriyaḥ ॥ 6-1 ॥

sri-bhagavan: the wonderful Lord; *uvaca*: said; *anasritah*: without depending on; *karma-phalam*: the results of work; *karyam*: duties; *karma*: activities; *karoti*: he does; *yaḥ sa*: he is; *sannyasi*: a (true) *sannyasi*; *ca*: and; *yogi*: a (true) *yogi*; *ca*: and; *na*: not; *nir-agnih*: one who does not have (contact with) fire; *na*: not; *ca*: and; *akriyah*: one who does not engage in duties.

The Lord said, "One who performs the (ritual and social) activities constituting his/ her duties without depending on the results of the action is the real *sannyasi* (renouncer) and *yogi*, not one who does not kindle the (sacred) fire and does not engage in dutiful activities."

The true *sannyasi* and the true *yogi* is one who selflessly performs all his/ her duties in society and all the suitable actions when they are required, without any attachment to the enjoyment of the fruits or results of his/ her activities. One who refuses to perform the needed actions by claiming he is following the rules of renunciation is a fake. Similarly, one who dutifully performs, according to the fundamental principles of *dharma*, the appropriate ritual and social activities as required by the time, place and circumstances, without being attached to the results or the identification as the author of the action, is the true *sannyasi* and the true *yogi*, not one who merely abstains from lighting the sacred fire and engaging in honest practical work.

This is another very famous verse, often partially quoted (especially the first part). We have already seen that *asritah* means "depending". A devotee depends on the Lord, not on the results of his own activities.

Sometimes *ashritah* is translated as "taking shelter", and *asraya* is translated as "shelter", but it is an expression that can be confusing. When we think of "shelter", we associate the idea with the image of a building where we will be protected from rain and wind, heat and cold, wild animals and other dangers. However, this kind of shelter is only temporary, and we normally get out of it to go about doing our business. On the other hand, when one depends on someone or something, it is a permanent concern, to which all one's actions are subordinated.

The expression *karyam karma* refers to the dutiful actions, that a person is required to perform according to his position in society and family: the *brahmachari*, the *grihastha* and the *vanaprastha* are supposed to regularly perform the *homa* or fire sacrifice, and keep a sacred fire (*vaishnava agni*) from which the kitchen fires are lit. No *homa*, no cooked food. The expression *niragnih* indicates that persons engaged in renunciation from family and social life (*sannyasa*) do not keep a fire; they do not perform the fire sacrifice rituals because they do not have the financial means to support them, and they do not cook because they subsist on the food leftovers he obtains by begging alms from the homes of householders. Usually such alms consist in food that has already been cooked, or that does not need to be cooked, like rice flakes (*chuda*), fruits, milk, etc.

The word *akriya* refers to someone who is not bound to perform any actions, rituals, work, etc, because he has no more responsibilities towards family and society, and has lost all desires to gain personal benefits, either for this lifetime or for the next.

Because he has renounced all plans and desires, and simply depends on God, he does not need to make separate efforts to acquire anything: *yas tv atma-ratir eva syad atma-triptas ca manavah, atmany eva ca santushtas tasya karyam na vidyate, naiva tasya kriterartho nakriteneha kascana, na casya sarva-bhuteshu kascid artha-vyapasrayah*, "A human being who loves the Self certainly becomes satisfied in the Self and peaceful within the Self: for such a person there is no need to perform any action. This person does not have any reason to abstain from activities, just like he does not have any reason to perform any duty. In this world he does not depend on any other for any purpose." (*Gita* 3.17, 18).

The *karya karma* mentioned in the verse are the *nitya karmas* that must be performed regularly, like the *homa* (fire sacrifice) and the occupational duties according to the *varnas*, as well as the *naimittika karmas* or the particular rituals and activities that are performed to obtain a particular religious purpose, like the birth of a son etc. In the beginning of *Gita*, Arjuna had expressed the desire to renounce his position as a *kshatriya* and retire to the forest as a *sannyasi*: in the previous chapter Krishna has vividly illustrated the real practice and purpose of *sannyasa* to clarify all misconceptions, and here he concludes that there is no need for the externals of *sannyasa* in order to attain the ultimate purpose of life.

यं संन्यासमिति प्राहुर्योगं तं विद्धि पाण्डव । न ह्यसंन्यस्तसङ्कल्पो योगी भवति कश्चन ॥ ६-२ ॥

yaṁ sannyāsamiti prāhuryogaṁ taṁ viddhi pāṇḍava । na hyasannyastasaṅkalpo yogī bhavati kaścana ॥ 6-2 ॥

yam: that (which is); *sannyasam*: *sannyasa*; *iti*: like this; *prahuh*: they say; *yogam*: *yoga*; *taṁ*: that (is); *viddhi*: you should know; *pandava*: O Arjuna (son of Pandu); *na*: not; *hi*: certainly; *asannyasta-sankalpah*: without giving up expectations; *yogi*: a *yogi*; *bhavati*: becomes; *kascana*: nobody.

"O son of Pandu (Arjuna), (you should) know that what is called *sannyasa* (renunciation) is actually *yoga*, because no one can ever become a *yogi* without giving up all expectations."

After establishing that there is actually no need to take the formal vows of *sannyasa* and retire from active life, and that *yoga* (Karma Yoga) is superior to *Sannyasa Yoga*, Krishna repeats that the only true renunciation consists in not depending on expectations. Such renunciation is not based on the lack of opportunities, because in that case renunciation disappears as soon as the opportunity for sense gratification arises. In other words, it is possible to distinguish a true *sannyasi* from an ordinary beggar that is under financial stricture, by observing his reactions when he is offered some money.

The expression *asannyasta-sankalpa* can mean "without giving up expectation" and also "without deciding to remain renounced", and "while remaining determined not to give up (attachment and material identification)". This variety of meanings can be applied to the different degrees of determination by which a *sadhaka* is pursuing the practice of Yoga.

In his *Yoga sutras*, Patanjali says in this regard: *drishthanushravika-vishaya vitrishnasya vashikara-sanjna vairagyam*, "Renunciation is the consciousness in which one steadily controls the thirst for the objects that are seen or heard" (1.15). And again: *tivra-samveganam asannah, mridu-madhyadhimatratvat tato 'pi visheshah*, "An intense desire will quickly take (the *sadhaka* to success), but (such desire for success in *yoga*) can be differently described as soft, medium or strong" (1.21, 22)

Vairagya is a synonym for *sannyasa*, and *sankalpa* is the act of determination or will power that gives permission to the mind, the intellect and senses to develop a desire for the sense objects.

The definition of *sankalpa* was also given in 4.19 as "determination" and will be repeated again in verses 6.4 and 24. A synonym is *arambhah*, that we find in verse 12.16 used in a very similar context.

आरुरुक्षोमुनेर्योगं कर्म कारणमुच्यते । योगारूढस्य तस्यैव शमः कारणमुच्यते ॥ ६-३ ॥

ārurukṣormuneryogaṁ karma kāraṇamucyate | yogārūḍhasya tasyaiva śamaḥ kāraṇamucyate || 6-3 ||

arurukshoh: one who wants to climb up; *muneh*: the *muni*; *yogam*: *yoga*; *karma*: action/ duty; *karanam*: the means; *ucyate*: it is said; *yoga*: *yoga*; *arudhasya*: of one who has climbed up; *tasya*: of him; *eva*: certainly; *samah*: equal disposition (to all types of activities); *karanam*: the means; *ucyate*: it is said.

"For a *muni* who has just begun the practice of *yoga*, activity is said to be the means. For one who has ascended the staircase of *yoga*, equanimity is said to be the means."

What is medicine for someone is often unhealthy for someone else who is in a different condition. In the beginning of the *yoga* practice, the mind and senses need constant engagement in beneficial activities to avoid sliding into inertia, callousness, neglect and laziness, and into the development of bad habits such as gossiping, etc. On the other hand, a person who has developed the second nature of positive engagement through constant practice needs to turn one's attention to the inner activity, exploring the transcendental consciousness of the Self without being distracted by the external temporary circumstances.

Another meaning is that in the beginning of one's spiritual journey we need to have accumulated sufficient *punya*, or "good *karma*", because a person that is devoid of good merits will usually find lots of difficulties in the process of self-growth. However, at a certain stage the good material merits take a back seat in comparison to the direct exploration of the inner Self, while insisting in engaging in materially meritorious activities can have the opposite and detrimental effect of distracting one's attention from the actual goal and reinforcing one's ego instead of overcoming it.

In this verse *yoga* is compared to a staircase that is gradually climbed in different stages of practice, and with different sets of rules. However, it is very interesting to notice that the beginner or neophyte in the practice of *yoga* is called a *muni*, "a silent sage". One would tend to think that it is not possible to engage in activities while following the strict rules of the *sadhana* of silence. Therefore, we need to understand that such recommended activities are not ordinary work, and that the meditative silence is not the ordinary abstention from speech. A beginner that is starting to climb the staircase of *yoga* must concentrate on the specific *kriyas* or activities, given by the Teacher in order to train his consciousness in the proper way.

Such *kriyas* are not merely physical exercises such as *asanas* or *mudras*, but include active engagement in the normal duties of life - to earn a livelihood and maintain one's body must also become an integral part of our *yoga* practice, and similarly our relationships with other people and circumstances must be strictly controlled under the category of engaging in activities. Silence thus becomes a mental attitude more than merely restraining the speech. It means learning to shift one's attention from the endless opportunities of egotistic engagement and mind chattering, and rather focusing on the true purpose of life and the spiritual object of our meditation, even while we are engaged in apparently trivial occupations.

This training requires constant vigilance and an expert guidance. A Yoga Teacher is not simply someone who shows you how to bend and stretch your body or breathe in a deeper way - this would be a gym teacher only. A true Yoga Teacher has the responsibility to assist each student in the deep transformation of their lives and awareness, up to the point of liberation from all material identifications, attachments and conditionings: the cessation of all material activities. If he is unable to fulfill this role, he should not usurp the definition and content himself of being called physical trainer. The word *karanam* is translated as "means" or "cause", in the sense that it indicates the cause of success in that particular attempt as well as the motivation for embarking into it.

यदा हि नेन्द्रियार्थेषु न कर्मस्वनुषजते । सर्वसङ्कल्पसंन्यासी योगारूढस्तदोच्यते ॥ ६-४ ॥

yadā hi nendriyārtheṣu na karmasvanuṣajjate | sarvasaṅkalpasannyāsī yogārūḍhastadocyate || 6-4 ||

yada: when; *hi*: certainly; *na*: not; *indriya-artheshu*: in the sense objects; *na*: not; *karmasu*: in the activities; *anushajjate*: engages/ is attached; *sarva-sankalpa*: all desires/ imagination/ intentions; *sannyasi*: one who has renounced; *yogarudhah*: on the top stairs of *yoga*/ established in *yoga*; *tada*: then; *ucyate*: he is said.

"Indeed, when one does not become attached to the objects of the senses or to the activities, and renounces all expectations, s/he is said to be advanced in *yoga*."

The gradual process of *yoga* is aimed at dissolving the bondage of ego, the identification with the material body and position, and even with the merits of good pious activities. Such pious activities are mainly performed with the purpose of obtaining some benefit - either the

material benefit of attaining the heavenly planets, or the spiritual benefit of becoming able to actually engage in the spiritual journey. All these fall into the category of *sankalpa*, or "intention, expectation, purpose".

The performance of *karmas* and *kriyas* is essential in the first stages of human progress because without the sincere performance of one's duties and religious activities and rituals, a human being remains focused on the mere animal propensities, such as sense gratification, eating, sleeping, mating, taking care of family, getting a place in society, protecting oneself and one's kith and kin, accumulating wealth to provide for the future, playing and having fun, and expressing artistic tendencies. All these activities are found in various degrees in animals and even in plants. So, what's the real difference between an animal and a human being? Religion. Unfortunately, the idea of "religion" has become burdened with a lot of negative semantic luggage, especially connected with the oppressive nature of dogmatic and intolerant faiths that are aimed at controlling the people for political or otherwise material purposes, and are often cause of stupidity and ignorance, remarkable cruelty and unnecessary sufferings. This is the reason why many people have become "allergic" to the very idea of religion, sometimes declaring themselves atheists or agnostics, or becoming followers of some other non-religious ideology such as materialism, scientism, communism, capitalism, nationalism, feminism, or "cultural manifestations" such as performing or figurative arts, music, literature and philosophical speculation, sports, gastronomy, pet care, sexual/ romantic experimentation, tourism, folklore, and so on. Although such pursuits have nothing wrong or bad intrinsically, they do not constitute the actual purpose of human life, and when cultivated as the center of one's life and interest, they distract us from the very valuable opportunity that we have been offered: Self realization. The word "religion" comes from the Latin *religare*, "to connect, to unite", which is the very same meaning of the word "yoga". All the pursuits we have listed above come under the category of *sankalpa*, or "imaginative path to achieve happiness", but we cannot find true happiness unless we find our own Self and we connect with our deep, original and pure nature of *sat-cit-ananda*. This is the only pursuit that really distinguishes human beings from animals, and that offers the extremely valuable opportunity for liberation, of freedom from material conditionings. No cultural manifestation or "way of life" can offer us such exceptional blessing: materialism, scientism, communism, capitalism, nationalism, feminism, performing or figurative arts, music, literature and philosophical speculation, sports, gastronomy, pet care, sexual/ romantic experimentation, tourism and folklore will simply give us a temporary satisfaction, but they will tie us to material identification and attachments, thus condemning us to the continuation of the cycle of birth and deaths. They can only become beneficial when they are harnessed into the proper direction, i.e. development of a sattvic mentality and life style, which in turn will lead us to awareness of our real nature and Self realization. They are simply means, while *yoga* is the end.

उद्धरेदात्मनात्मानं नात्मानमवसादयेत् । आत्मैव ह्यात्मनो बन्धुरात्मैव रिपुरात्मनः ॥ ६-५ ॥

uddharedātmanātmānaṁ nātmanamavasādayet | ātmaiva hyātmano bandhurātmaiva ripurātmanaḥ || 6-5 ||

uddhared: one should save; *atmana*: by himself; *atmanam*: himself; *na*: not; *atmanam*: oneself; *avasadayet*: one should degrade; *atma*: oneself; *eva*: certainly; *hi*: indeed; *atmanah*: oneself; *bandhuh*: friend; *atma*: oneself/ one's mind; *eva*: certainly; *ripuh*: enemy; *atmanah*: oneself.

"One should raise him/ herself by his/her own effort, and not degrade him/ herself. Certainly one could be one's own friend or one's own enemy."

In this verse, as in most other contexts, the word *atman* can mean "oneself", "the sense of identification (ego)", "the mind" or even "the soul". Each individual should be the best friend of him/ herself. We need to learn to understand and know ourselves, to be loving and supporting with ourselves, to respect, appreciate and trust ourselves first - because whatever we are seeking in others is already within ourselves. If we do not like our selves, if we do not live happily with our own selves, it will be impossible to find sufficient validation, support and happiness in or from others.

When we become enemies of our own selves, life becomes extremely dangerous, degrading and even intolerably painful, because we can never leave our own company at any time. One can really become one's worst enemy, because of a mistaken sense of one's identity and an uncontrolled mind, and this will perpetuate suffering and imprisonment practically without end, and with incredible sufferings.

It is due to lack of self-esteem and self-acceptance, and distorted sense of guilt and self-punishment, that one becomes constantly negative and refuses to accept even legitimate good things that come his way - praise, encouragement, and happiness. The worst hell is within one's own mind. Even any other enemies that we may have are such only because we have made them enemies, consciously or unconsciously, directly or indirectly.

This verse highlights the great importance of the sense of responsibility and power over one's own life - what we could also call self-esteem, self-reliance, or self-empowerment. Many confused people have come to believe that religion or spiritual life entails "abandoning" oneself to a higher power, in a sort of passive surrender in which one renounces all responsibilities and personal power, and always depends on someone else, delegating one's life and choices on others - usually seen as some "authority", especially "religious authority", "*guru*", or some imaginative projection they call "God" or "destiny".

This is not what Krishna is teaching. Spiritual progress cannot be delegated to anyone else: it is our personal responsibility only. When we choose a spiritual master, we must make a responsible choice, and we must make sure that the teachings of such master are genuine and beneficial. A *guru* may take responsibility to guide the disciple, and pay the consequences if he does not perform his duties properly, but ultimately each and every individual must make the effort for spiritual progress. At school, no student can learn passively without making any effort, or expect someone else to learn for him. Similarly, spiritual realization is a very personal journey, and each one of us needs to develop the proper knowledge, realizations, and good behavior. The idea that one only needs to accept a *guru* or a "savior" in order to attain spiritual perfection, without making any personal effort to improve one's Self realization is a dangerous fantasy that might cost us the valuable opportunity of a human life.

बन्धुरात्मात्मनस्तस्य येनात्मैवात्मना जितः । अनात्मनस्तु शत्रुत्वे वर्तेतात्मैव शत्रुवत् ॥ ६-६ ॥

bandhurātmātmanastasya yenātmaivātmanā jitaḥ | anātmnastu śatruṭve vartetātmaiva śatruvat || 6-6 ||

bandhuh: friend; *atma*: oneself; *atmanah*: of oneself; *tasya*: of him; *yena*: by him; *atma*: oneself; *eva*: certainly; *atmana*: by oneself; *jitaḥ*: conquered; *anatmanah*: one who has not (conquered) oneself; *tu*: but; *śatruṭve*: out of enmity; *varteta*: behaves/ acts; *atma*: oneself; *eva*: certainly; *śatru-vat*: like an enemy.

"One is his/ her own friend when s/he has conquered oneself, but one who is not self-controlled behaves as his own enemy."

The purpose of controlling one's identification is to improve oneself and cultivate the best qualities and habits, not to torture and deprive oneself of legitimate happiness and peace.

When we speak about the difference between friend and enemy, the most important factor is considering whether the behavior of the person is favorable or unfavorable towards us. Therefore we recognize a friend because he is helping us to progress in life, supporting us in difficult times, offering good advice and gifts, inspiration and encouragement, and good company. The problem with whimsical material identification and an untrained mind is that they demand our allegiance and service even to our risk and detriment, without caring for our real benefit, and even remaining callous to our sufferings. However, when we have overcome material identification and trained our mind properly, we can organize, integrate and harmonize our assets and utilize them for our material and spiritual progress. Thus we behave as our best friend.

The concept of *jitaḥ*, "conquered", implies that one who conquers should know what he has conquered and should be able to use it properly. It is a positive conquest, much like conquering the heart of someone and developing a loving relationship. It should not be a hostile takeover, an oppressive colonialist or totalitarian regime - rather, it should be the benevolent government of a virtuous, just and affectionate king that considers his subjects as his beloved *prajas*, or children.

We should never forget that we are supposed to make friends with oneself, that is with one's mind. In this process, we cannot ignore the power of one's subconscious mind. Our conscious mind is only a small part of the totality of our identification - some have calculated that it is not more than 10% of our entire subtle body. Just like an iceberg is submerged for the greatest part of its mass, and only the tip is visible above the water, similarly our subconscious mind remains submerged under the waters of awareness, but it constitutes the largest part of our identification, including all the memories of our past lifetimes.

On the physical level, it is common knowledge that only a small percentage of the brain is generally used in ordinary life, while 70% up to 85% of the brain remains inactive in most people. Vedic knowledge, and especially the scientific texts of *yoga* teach that the human mind is actually capable of doing extraordinary things, when properly trained - including manipulating the structure of matter and traveling through space and time.

The "self" that we need to conquer and harmonize includes the body and the senses, the "lower self" that constitutes a valuable vehicle and instrument for our material and spiritual progress. Mind, senses and body can be compared to a tiger that we can ride, but only after having tamed her and made her into a good friend. This requires great care and balance. As Krishna already explained, we need to keep the tiger reasonably fed and rested, and in good spirits. We cannot hope for success in such a difficult and dangerous enterprise if we starve the tiger or torment her denying her the proper rest and other basic necessities. Verses 6.16 and 17 say, "O Arjuna, *yoga* is not (possible) for one who eats too much or does not eat at all, or for one who sleeps too much or does not sleep at all. For one who consciously controls his food intake, who is balanced in moving around, who makes controlled efforts in working/ performing one's duties, and is regulated in sleeping/ dreaming and keeping vigil, *yoga* becomes the destroyer of sufferings."

जितात्मनः प्रशान्तस्य परमात्मा समाहितः । शीतोष्णसुखदुःखेषु तथा मानापमानयोः ॥ ६-७ ॥

jītātmanah praśāntasya paramātmā samāhitaḥ | śītoṣṇasukhaduḥkheṣu tathā mānāpamānayoḥ || 6-7 ||

jita-atmanah: one who has conquered himself; *prasantasya*: one who is peaceful; *parama-atma*: the Supreme Self; *samahitah*: has become manifest; *sita-ushna*: cold and heat; *sukha-duhkeshu*: in happiness and distress; *tatha*: as well as; *mana*: in being respected; *apamanayoh*: in being disrespected.

"The Paramatma/ Supreme Self manifests in/ is accessible to one who has controlled himself and has attained peace/ is contented in heat and cold, in happiness and in distress, and in honor/ adoration and dishonor/ spite as well."

The first part of *Bhagavad gita* (chapters 2 to 4) focused on the realization of Brahman - telling the difference between matter and spirit, realizing the *jiva's* eternal spiritual nature, the transcendental knowledge of Atman/ Brahman, and the renunciation to material identification and attachments. In chapter 6 we move from the realization of Brahman to the realization of Paramatma, that will be explored at length in chapters 6 to 11, with a growing emphasis on *bhakti*. Chapters 12 to 18 will focus on the realization of Bhagavan and the development of a personal relationship between the devotee and the Lord.

Continuing the conversation thread from the previous verses, Krishna tells Arjuna that a *yogi* is peaceful and happy because he turns his attention to the inner Self and is detached from external concerns and dualities. The problem of dualistic mentality will be elaborated all along the *Gita* as a cause of confusion and disturbance that could distract the *yogi* from his meditation on the Supreme Transcendental Reality.

Such feeling of duality is due to the limited perception of the senses and the mind, that try to come to terms with the constant transformation of the material world. Just like the cycle of seasons brings heat and cold, the maturation of the seeds of our past choices and actions brings temporary joys and sufferings (5.22) that are due to the contact of the senses with the sense objects: "Those pleasures that

derive from contact with (the sense objects) are the cause for future sorrow because they have a beginning and an end. Therefore, o son of Kunti, an intelligent person does not seek happiness in them."

At the very beginning of Krishna's teachings to Arjuna (2.14) we found a very similar verse: "O son of Kunti, the contact of the senses (with the sense objects) causes joy and distress just like (cold in) winter and (heat in) summer. Such feelings are temporary: they come and go, o descendant of Bharata, and you should just try to tolerate them (without being confused and distracted from your duty)." Also in 2.38 the same concept was reinforced: "If you fight this battle while remaining equally disposed (unattached and prepared) to joy and sadness, gain and loss, victory and defeat, you will never be touched by sin."

ज्ञानविज्ञानतृप्तात्मा कूटस्थो विजितेन्द्रियः । युक्त इत्युच्यते योगी समलोष्टाश्मकाञ्चनः ॥ ६-८ ॥

jñānavijñānatṛptātmā kūṭastho vijitendriyah | yukta ityucyate yogī samaloṣṭāśmakāñcanaḥ || 6-8 ||

jnana: knowledge; *vijnana*: wisdom (applied knowledge); *tripta*: satisfied; *atma*: oneself; *kuta-sthah*: one who is firmly situated; *vijita-indriyah*: one who has conquered the senses; *yuktah*: engaged (in *yoga*); *iti*: like this; *ucyate*: it is said; *yogi*: a *yogi*; *sama*: equally; *loshtra*: a lump of soil; *asma*: stone; *kancanah*: gold.

"A person who finds satisfaction in the theory and practice of knowledge remains stable and unmoved (because) s/he has controlled his/ her senses. This person is connected (with the Supreme) and is called a *yogi*. S/he is impartial to clay, stone and gold."

The definitions *jnana* and *vijnana* refer to theoretical and practical/ applied knowledge respectively. As we have already seen, mere theory is not really going to help much. We need to individually develop the actual realization of knowledge and experience it in practice, making it an integral part of our own life and mentality. This direct realization of knowledge remains undisturbed in the various circumstances of life, because it gives greater satisfaction than the ordinary material sense gratification. The pleasure we find within the Self (5.24, *antah sukham, antah aramah*, 5. 21, *vindati atmani yat sukham*) is the supreme pleasure described in 2.59 (*param drstva*) by which we become able to give up the temporary and limited joys of the material world. A peaceful and satisfied mind has no reason to run here and there after the *vruttis*, the modifications of the thoughts, emotions and desires, and therefore remains stable (*kuta-stha*) in Knowledge.

This stability in Knowledge has been described as *acalah* (not moving) in verse 2.53, *sthita dhiih* (firm meditation) in 2.56, and *prajna pratishthita* (established in wisdom) in 2.57, 58, 61.

Such stability is been compared (6.19) to a flame that is not disturbed by the wind, also described as *nirvana* ("without wind") in 5.24, 25, 26 and 6.15 (*sa yogi brahma nirvanam, labhante brahma nirvanam, abhito brahma nirvanam, santim nirvana paramam*). Another synonym of the word *nirvana* is *nirvikalpa samadhi*.

This stability of the transcendental consciousness in detachment from material activities and dualities is also described in other verses, such as: *brahma bhuta prasannatma* (18.54), *nirdvandvo hi maha baho* (5.3), *sarva karmani manasa sannyasya* (5.13), *na kartritvam na karmani* (5.14), *nirdosam hi samam brahma* (5.19), *sthira buddhir asammudho* (5.20), *sa brahma yoga yuktatma* (5.21), *vigateccha bhaya krodho* (5.28), *iccha dvesa samutthena* (7.27), *te dvandva moha nirmukta* (7.28), *visanti yad yatayo vita ragah* (8.11), *iccha dvesah sukham dukham* (13.7).

The most famous definition of Yoga in Patanjali's *Yoga sutras* is "the cessation of the fluctuations of the mind": *yogah citta-vritti-nirodhah*, by which the perception is established in its true *svarupa* (inherent form): *tada drastuh svarupe avasthanam*.

It is not easy to understand this transcendental consciousness, because the people who are accustomed to thinking in material terms tend to confuse it with the tamasic or ignorant indifference or the rajasic selfish cynicism. Impartiality to clay, stone and gold means that each and every thing should be engaged properly in *yoga* without prejudice - just like verse 5.18 explained that every person/ living being should be engaged properly without prejudice: "The *panditas* (wise learned persons) look with equal (friendliness) to the *brahmana* who is learned and gentle, to the cow and the elephant, as well as to the dog and to the (uncivilized) dog eater."

In this regard, it is important to notice that the Deities of the Godhead can be sculpted either in clay, stone or gold, and the results of the worship of the Deity will be the same, irrespective of the material in which the *vigraha* was fashioned. Only a foolish and ignorant materialist will give more value to a divine *vigraha* made of gold than to a divine *vigraha* made of stone or clay. Sometimes we see that artisans tend to put more effort and care in working with expensive materials - such as gold or rare wood - and they do not give any attention when they work with inexpensive and readily available materials such as clay or bamboo, but this betrays a self-defeating mentality that is afflicted with laziness, spite and foolishness. What really matters is the use that we make of things, the effort by which we perform our duties - no matter how humble - in the best possible way. This will really make us perfect persons.

सुहृन्मित्रार्युदासीनमध्यस्थद्वेष्यबन्धुषु । साधुष्वपि च पापेषु समबुद्धिर्विशिष्यते ॥ ६-९ ॥

suhṛṇmitrāryudāsīnamadhyasthadveṣyabandhuṣu | sādhuṣvapi ca pāpeṣu samabuddhirviśiṣyate || 6-9 ||

su-hrit: well wishers; *mitra*: friends; *ari*: enemies; *udasina*: neutral people; *madhya-stha*: intermediaries/ mediators; *dveshya*: the envious/ hateful; *bandhushu*: the relatives; *sadhushu*: to the good people; *api*: even; *ca*: and; *papesu*: to the bad people; *sama*: equal; *buddhih*: intelligence; *visishyate*: he is the best.

"The highest (*yogi*) is one who is impartial/ unprejudiced towards a benefactor, a friend, an enemy, a neutral person, a mediator, an envious person, a relative, a good person and a sinner."

Just like we should be able to remain equally friendly towards a gentle and learned *brahmana*, a cow, an elephant, a dog and a dog-eater, and to recognize the proper value of clay, stone and gold, we should become able to look beyond the temporary confusion and illusion of those who see the world and others in terms of duality.

A person who is deluded by *maya*, or "that which is not (what it seems)", evaluates people in terms of the pleasures and displeasures he can obtain from them, and therefore creates the concept of friends and enemies. Such concept is illusory because it is temporary and it relates only to the material identifications and attachments. This does not mean that friendliness and enmity are non-existent. Duality and illusion actually exist and have an effect on our activities: they produce results and in turn such results bring joys and sorrows, creating the circumstances in which a deluded person makes more materially-oriented choices and perpetuating the cycle of birth and deaths.

Sometimes the word *maya* is translated as "that which is not", and this translation conveys the idea of a mere projection of images that has no substance and effects. For example, a mirage in the desert shows us the presence of water where in fact there is none - it is simply the movement of hot air that trembles and reflects the light imitating the movement and reflection of a water surface. There is no moisture in that place. However, the actions and the identifications of human beings actually create consequences, albeit temporary - we can compare them to a cloud, that collects humidity from the land and the water reservoirs and then precipitates it in the form of rain.

After a rain shower, the clouds disappear and therefore we can say that their existence was illusory, but the rainfall reaches the soil and imbibes it, stimulating the growth of vegetation, which in turn will feed the animals and the human beings.

Similarly, the Atman is the real person or Self in all the people we see and meet. The Atman has no friends or enemies, relatives or position in society, and is never touched by material relationships. In one lifetime, two people can be sworn enemies and in a next lifetime they can become friends, lovers or siblings or family members - in fact this is usually the system by which they can learn to understand the reality of life.

Life is a school where we are supposed to learn about how to progress and become perfect persons, and the most difficult lessons concern personal relationships. A negative relationship with someone is a test for us to develop good qualities and realizations, and become detached, compassionate and benevolent towards all - because all living beings are merely parts and parcels of the Supreme Personality of Godhead. This gradual evolution of the consciousness through the Knowledge of *yoga* takes us from the platform called *kanistha adhikari* (neophyte worshiper), on which we are still plagued by duality, material identifications and attachments, to the platform called *madhyama adhikari* (intermediate worshiper), on which we become able to recognize the intentions and behaviors of people, using our intelligence to serve the divine mission.

Beyond this level, a Self realized *yogi* who is firmly established in the transcendental vision is able to see the eternal *atman*, and understands that enmity and affection are temporary circumstances. Thus the *uttama adhikari* (advanced worshiper) is able to tolerate and forgive more easily, and remains always free from resentments - that are also attachments, albeit in a negative mode.

Of course, this does not mean that he is stupid or that he likes to be cheated or attacked or mistreated. An *uttama adhikari* is not a masochist dedicated to martyrdom; he will not choose to remain exposed to mistreatment but will take the proper distance from ill-motivated people, as soon as he has verified what the real situation is. He may offer opportunities, because he wants to help people to improve themselves, but such windows of opportunities will not remain open forever and without conditions. Also, he will forgive, but not forget, because forgetting is an act of ignorance that would expose him to more unnecessary sufferings and damages.

He will concentrate his awareness on positive thinking and proactive choices, all focused on the true value of life and action - that is the sacred offering in service of the Supreme - without wasting his time and energy in brooding or blaming, but he will not delude himself into thinking that a venomous scorpion can become a good room-mate, if only you are nice to him. Feeding snakes with milk and bananas only increases their poison.

It is interesting to study the specific meaning of the various definitions offered by Krishna in this verse about the behaviors and intentions of people. The expression *su hrit* means "having good heart" (i.e. sentiments) towards someone. It is often translated as "well wisher", but such translation is not exactly precise. The word *mitra*, "friend", indicates affection, companionship and a feeling of positive relationship. This sentiment is the recommended attitude towards all living beings - that are *jivatmas* on the very same journey we are going through. The expression *madhya stha* refers to someone who takes a position in the middle, who would like to bring peace and harmony between factions. This sentiment or attitude is possible only when one has become detached from his own personal identifications and attachments, and can see and act in a selfless way. When influenced by *tamas* or *rajas* rather than by *sattva*, this attitude can be a blind and foolish stubbornness that refuses to take sides out of a wrong notion of "impartiality" that chooses to ignore the consequences of bad actions, or by the fear of retaliation from the "bad guys" or by the attachment if the "bad guys" happen to be their family members or friends or allies. However, these neutral people should know that refusing to take the proper action in defense of *dharma* is also an action that will bring them consequences.

The word *bandhu* means "relative", or "kith and kin" - in other words, it indicates a person that has some natural ties with us due to attachment or affinity. It generally applies to family members and clan members, either by birth or by adoption or marriage.

In this sense it is particularly appropriate when kindly referring to those unqualified people who have taken birth in a good family, such as the *brahma bandhus* or *kshatra bandhus*, "relatives" of *brahmanas* or *kshatriyas*. The two words used to indicate hostile persons are *ari* (one who stabs you in the back) and *dvesyah* (one who is openly hateful).

A Self realized *yogi* is not blind or stupid, and can see the true character of a person, just like he is able to recognize a scorpion, but he is not interested in investing energy or time into hatred and resentment.

योगी युञ्जीत सततमात्मानं रहसि स्थितः । एकाकी यतचित्तात्मा निराशीरपरिग्रहः ॥ ६-१० ॥

yogi yuñjīta satatamātmānaṁ rahasi sthitaḥ | ekākī yatacittātma niraśīraparigrahaḥ || 6-10 ||

yogi: the *yogi*; *yuñjita*: should engage (in *sadhana*); *satatam*: constantly; *atmanam*: on the Atman; *rahasi*: in a secluded /isolated place; *sthitah*: settling/ staying; *ekaki*: alone; *yata*: controlled; *citta-atma*: the consciousness of the self; *nirasih*: without desiring anything; *aparigrahaḥ*: without possessing anything.

"A *yogi* should constantly practice (meditation) on the Self by living alone in a secluded place, carefully keeping the mind and the consciousness under control, free from expectations and from attachments (to material acquisitions)."

The previous verses clearly stated that the perfection of *yoga* is about overcoming the temporary and superficial vision based on material identifications and attachments that present a dualistic evaluation - friend or enemy, good or bad, dirt or gold. True, the realized *yogi* is equally benevolent towards those who are good people and those who are bad people, but he prefers to avoid all of them. He likes to stay in the company of the Atman only. Krishna stresses the fact that one can remain in such a transcendental vision only by living alone in a secluded place, giving up all sense of exclusive belonging and association. This point is not easy to understand and to accept, because the conditioned mind needs support and nurturing from friends, and protection from enemies. When an ordinary person thinks about living alone, without identification or attachment or association, his mind is attacked by the fear of loneliness and abandonment. A non-evolved person constantly needs the validation and reassurance supplied by the "clan" to which he belongs, and the noise of the crowd that gives him a pretext not to listen to his own conscience. Most ordinary people are terrorized by silence and solitude, because they cannot bear facing the emptiness and dissatisfaction of a materialistic life. Rajasic or passionate people live in large cities just like ants and bees live in large colonies, preoccupied only by the animal requirements for survival and pleasure, by the instinct of accumulating, building, keeping themselves busy and having fun. Life in a metropolis is a constant battle, and street-savvy city people soon learn to fight to survive - to get a good seat on a crowded bus, to avoid being run down by speeding taxis and other vehicles while crossing chaotic roads, to get the best bargain on the market or in the mall, to secure the best and most lucrative and prestigious job, to avoid areas infested by muggers and drug addicts, to elude corrupt and aggressive policemen, and so on.

Starting from the earliest childhood, a "city boy" (or girl) learns how to defend himself and survive in the asphalt jungle, and such skills are often sustained by the consumption of stimulants such as coffee or tea or stronger drugs, that give the "extra edge" to remain ahead of the others in the rat race. As they are over-excited by passion, city people also feel the need to consume substances that help them relax and sleep, from harmless herbal teas to strong liquors or Valium or other legal or illegal drugs. All this exacts a heavy toll on the body and mind of city folks, and creates a lot of sufferings and numbness.

A sattvic person may prefer to live in a quiet place, away from the disturbance of ignorant and noisy people, and choose a residence in a natural environment decorated by nice and useful trees and plants, reservoirs of clear water, and the pleasurable chirping of the birds. He likes spacious, well lit and well aerated houses, preferably with gardens of sweet-scented flowers, where he can enjoy life in a civilized way together with his family and friends. However, *Gita* teaches that attachment to *sattva* binds the human being to material happiness through material conditions and arrangements, and therefore to rebirth in the material world.

The level of *suddha sattva* does not depend on external circumstances but focuses on the inexhaustible inner happiness of the true Self, and therefore the *yogi* prefers to live alone, in order to avoid all negative and even positive disturbances to his deep meditation. When living alone, one only needs to be concerned about one's own mind, while when living among others, one needs to be always wary of the minds of others as well.

Ekaki, or "living alone", is an important rule in the practice of *yoga* that will be repeated again in *Gita* (13.11, 18.52). When a particular instruction is repeated three times, it is considered an extremely important point. This will come as a surprise to many people, who believe that *ashramas* and *mathas* are the ideal places to practice *yoga*, or even the "only possible/ authorized" places, and that *yoga* cannot be legitimately practiced anywhere else. In fact, the "gregarious" practice of *yoga* tends to lose its original purpose and meaning, and to shift the focus towards the "pecking order" in the chicken pen - establishing the social position and influence, or political power of each individual within the Institution or group, and to the constant comparison between one's own "performance" and the performance of other inmates that live or practice in the same group. Thus the entire situation becomes a farce, a mockery of the actual genuine spiritual life.

Granted, in Kali yuga the genuine practice of *yoga* is not easy, as Arjuna himself will declare in the next verses (6.33, 34). Living alone and without the support and protection of like-minded people requires a tremendous control of one's mind, that is almost impossible to attain for an ordinary person and sometimes even for advanced spiritualists. We should remember that this practice of Kriya Yoga or Dhyana Yoga is the path chosen by a *sanmyasi* that is preparing to leave his body and therefore retires into the forest to perform austerities. Going to live into the forest means living alone, without the benefits of the support and protection and supplies that we can get in urban or semi-urban settlements.

Krishna has stated at the beginning of the chapter (6.1) that the true Sannyasi and the true Yogi does not need to stick to the external trappings and rules of the description, but is characterized by the genuine renunciation that comes from the dissolution of material identifications and attachments. We can apply the same principle here. In this overcrowded world, where the demographic explosion is gradually turning forests into cities and there are hardly any isolated places any more, we can attain genuine solitude within ourselves, by dissolving our identifications and attachments to family, clan, community, nationality, and so on.

शुचौ देशे प्रतिष्ठाप्य स्थिरमासनमात्मनः । नात्युच्छ्रितं नातिनीचं चैलाजिनकुशोत्तरम् ॥ ६-११ ॥

śucau deśe pratiṣṭhāpya sthīramāsanamātmanah | nātyucchritam nātinīcam cailājīnakuśottaram || 6-11 ||

śucau: in a clean; *deśe*: place/ land; *pratiṣṭhāpya*: settling; *sthīram*: permanently/ firmly; *āsanam*: sitting place/ residence; *atmanah*: oneself; *na ati*: not too much; *ucchritam*: elevated/ high; *na ati*: not too much; *nicam*: low/ under; *caila*: soft cloth; *ajina*: (deer) skin; *kusa*: *kusa* grass/ straw; *uttaram*: on top.

"Having established his/ her residence in a clean/ pure place, s/he should settle firmly on a seat that is neither too high nor too low, with (layers) of cloth, deerskin and kusa grass."

Śucau deśe means "pure place" and applies to the environment, that must be clean and pure, characterized at least by *sattva guna*, if not by *suddha sattva*. It is extremely difficult to practice *yoga* among neighbors who are dirty (physically and/ or mentally) and/ or in a country where the government does not value purity and cleanliness. Big cities are not a very congenial place to practice *yoga* because they are necessarily dirty because of the dust, smoke, garbage and sewage produced by the daily activities aimed at physical survival. People must

eat and therefore they must use toilets. The drainage from such toilets is also accompanied by the dirty water used for cleaning bodies, clothes, cooking pots, floors, streets, commercial and industrial places etc. The simple act of walking around or traveling in vehicles raises dust and circulates various kinds of pollutants and contaminants that end in the streets - such the droppings and other bodily excretions of animals of all kinds, from birds to rats, if not of larger animals. Cooking and eliminating biodegradable garbage - such as vegetable peels, rotten or dry leaves, etc - also creates fumes, smoke and dust, and non-biodegradable garbage becomes even more persistent and noxious when we try to eliminate it. However, the production of all this garbage is inevitable and becomes more and more overwhelming when the density of the population increases. We can certainly improve the situation by applying wise policies, such as recycling and purification installations, an effective garbage disposal service, proper plumbing, de-centralization etc, but the mere number of people in any city presents a serious challenge to the purity of the place.

The need for cleanliness also applies to subtler factors, such as noise pollution (very loud noise), visual pollution (unpleasant views), and electro-magnetic pollution (excessive radiation from electrical and electronic devices and transmission lines). Social pollution consists of the presence of bad people, who have a materialistic, lusty, hostile, greedy and/ or criminally inclined mentality, that creates a negative feeling in the neighborhood. Such negative mentality also manifests in the form of prejudice, self-righteousness, arrogance, selfishness, excessive curiosity and interfering tendencies, and even other manifestations that sometimes are mistakenly considered symptoms of a "good neighborhood".

All these forms of pollution depend in great measure on the type of government and civil administration of the area, as the general mass of people naturally follow the example established by the leaders (3.21). Usually in a degraded place, the government people are the most corrupt of all. A clean and pure place is where our mind can easily find peace and contentment, without feeling constantly threatened. Sacred places or places of pilgrimage are naturally surcharged with positive feelings and energy, because the people living or traveling there are inclined to a spiritual consciousness and benevolence towards all living beings. They are always graced by sacred rivers or large reservoirs that ensure sufficient clean water for the purification of the body and the mind, and usually by forests or groves where a *yogi* can find some peaceful solitude for meditation. This is why the stage of life where one leaves home and family to travel to holy places is called *vanaprastha*. This verse recommends that the *asana* should be comfortable and safe, so that the body will not distract us with any disturbing sensation. Again, we need to understand that the physical exercises of *yoga* are meant to train the body to become as inactive as possible, so that we can focus our meditation on Transcendence, which is the true purpose of *yoga*. The place where we are sitting should be firm and stout, so that there will be no danger of tottering or falling down. If it is too high or too low, we will also be distracted. In another sense, this can also refer to one's self-perception, meaning that we need to remain balanced and sober and not think of ourselves as too good or too bad, too high or too low, since the word *asana* has several meanings, including "position", "place" or "residence", although the primary meaning indicates the sitting place and the body posture.

The animal skin mentioned in *Gita* and shown in traditional iconography of Yogeshvara Mahadeva, for example, has the purpose to keep insects and snakes away. Such skin can be obtained from any sizeable animal - deer, tiger, lion etc - that died naturally in the forest or was killed by *kshatriyas* during hunting expeditions. A *yogi* does not need to kill anyone. An active *kshatriya* goes hunting for the purpose of controlling the population of dangerous wild animals that might attack people and damage the crops.

तत्रैकाग्रं मनः कृत्वा यतचित्तेन्द्रियक्रियः । उपविश्यासने युञ्ज्याद्योगमात्मविशुद्धये ॥ ६-१२ ॥

tatraikāgram manaḥ kṛtvā yatacittendriyakriyaḥ | upaviśyāsane yuñjyādyogamātmaviśuddhaye || 6-12 ||

tatra: there; *eka-agram*: strongly focusing one's attention; *manah*: the mind; *kṛtvā*: making; *yata-citta-indriya-kriyah*: practicing renunciation in one's consciousness, senses and activities/ controlling the activities of the consciousness and the senses; *upaviśya*: sitting; *asane*: in the residence/ seat/ in the body posture; *yuñjyat*: one should engage; *yogam*: in *yoga*; *atma-visuddhaye*: for the purification of oneself.

"Sitting there, s/he should carefully focus her/ his mind on the practices required for the control of the consciousness, engaging in *yoga* for the purification of the self."

Again, the true purpose of *yoga* is stated very clearly in this verse: the practice of *yoga* must be performed with the sole aim of purifying oneself from the contamination of material identification and attachments, through the control of the consciousness, the mind and the senses. Not once in *Gita* or in the genuine *yoga* literature it is said that *yoga* has the purpose of relaxing the mind or to acquire health or physical well-being.

The practices required to control the mind and focus it on the meditation on the Supreme can be chosen according to the capabilities of the *sadhaka*. There is not one practice "one size fits all". Just as each *sadhaka* will feel attracted to a particular form of the Supreme - called *ista deva* or "desired (form of) God" - there are also specific practices that are most suitable for the particular situation, inclination and inspiration of each *sadhaka*.

The expression *eka-agram* clearly indicates that we must forget all other concerns and purposes (*sankalpa*, 4.19, 6.3) and abstain from all other activities. The degree of concentration of our mind will determine the swiftness and ease by which we will attain the desires result in *yoga*. Actually, if we want to get any good result, *yoga* must be a full-time occupation.

In 2.41 Krishna had already warned that one should not try to think about too many things at once, because concentration will become dispersed. This especially applies to spiritual *sadhana*: we should concentrate on one *mantra* at a time, on one *ista-deva* at the time, on one *rasa* or devotional sentiment at a time.

Sometimes people are afraid of neglecting some form of Godhead in favor of another, so they fill their home altars with dozens of Deities, they chant *japa* with many different *mantras*, read different *shastras* and recite different *stutis* to different Personalities of Godhead. This is not bad in itself, but the danger is to disperse one's attention and devotion by diluting them into a rather superficial homage, without actually developing a true attraction or personal relationship with any form of the Godhead.

This is why Adi Shankara sang, *ekam sastram devaki-putra-gitam, eko devo devaki-putra eva, eko mantras tasya namani yani, karmapy ekam tasya devasya seva* - "Let there be one scripture (for all): the *Gita* of Krishna (the son of Devaki); let there be one Lord (for all): Krishna (the son of Devaki); let there be one *mantra* (for all): his (many) names; let there be one duty (for all): service to him."

Probably the most universally popular form of the Lord is Jagannatha - that appears accompanied by Balabhadra, Subhadra and Sudarshana. This form manifests the main aspects of the Godhead - Vishnu/ Krishna, Shiva and the Mother Goddess - and therefore is called the "Lord of everyone", because everyone is happy to worship Jagannatha. According to one's personal inclination, one can worship other forms or Personalities of the Godhead, even in different periods of one's lifetime, and there is no contradiction because all forms are ultimately One.

As Krishna will explain in 9.23, all the various forms of *ista devatas* are actually different manifestations of Krishna, and not opposite or competitive Gods. To avoid the dangers of sectarianism, Adi Shankara Acharya preached that everyone should respectfully meditate on the five main forms of the Godhead - Vishnu, Shiva, Durga, Surya and Ganesha - keeping in mind that they are all strictly connected to each other. Vishnu or Narayana is the transcendental Parama Purusha that exists eternally beyond the cycles of manifestation of the material universes. Shiva is Vishnu when he descends into the material world to interact with Mother Nature. Surya is the manifestation of Vishnu/ Shiva that is visible before the eyes of everyone in this world. Adi Shakti, the Mother Goddess, takes various forms, names and activities for different purposes, and she is known respectively as Durga, Mahalakshmi, Mahasarasvati, Mahakali, Gayatri, Lalita, Lakshmi, Sarasvati, Kali, Chandi, Parvati, Bhairavi, Annapurna, Matangi, Bhumi, Siddhi, Santoshi, Sita, Radha, etc. Ganesha is the son of Shiva and Parvati, the "son of God" that represents the progress that develops from divine intervention in the world, and therefore he is remembered at the beginning of all activities, to remove the obstacles and bring auspiciousness.

This *pancha devata puja*, however, does not require a person to perform the same worship for all these forms of the Godhead; it is rather a dutiful act of paying respect to these great Personalities before engaging in the worship and service to one's *ista devata*. Thus there is no contradiction between the prescription of *pancha devata puja* and the exclusive devotion to Krishna shown by Adi Shankara in his famous verses: in fact, this is the true form of exclusive devotion to Krishna, because it is free from foolish offenses as it does not disrespect the other Personalities of Godhead.

समं कायशिरोग्रीवं धारयन्नचलं स्थिरः । सम्प्रेक्ष्य नासिकाग्रं स्वं दिशश्चानवलोकयन् ॥ ६-१३ ॥

samam kāyaśirogrīvaṁ dhārayannacalam sthiraḥ | samprekṣya nāsikāgram svaṁ diśaścānavalokayan || 6-13 ||

samam: equally balanced/ straight/on the same line; *kaya*: the torso of the body; *siro*: the head; *grivam*: the neck; *dharayan*: keeping; *acalam*: without moving; *sthiraḥ*: firmly; *samprekshya*: looking/ fixing the eyes; *nasika-agram*: in front of the nose; *svam*: one's own; *disah*: (all) directions; *ca*: and; *anavalokayan*: not looking (here and there).

"Keeping the body, the head and the neck in a straight line, one should remain still, focusing one's attention in front of one's nose, without looking in any (other) direction."

The expression *nasikagram* does not suggest that one should twist one's eyes to try to see the tip of one's own nose or even the root of one's nose, but simply that one should avoid looking around or even watching anything that moves. The gaze should remain fixed just in front of us, either on the form that is the object of our meditation (such as a *yantra*, a *murti*, etc) or by turning our attention towards the inner contemplation.

The sense of sight/ vision is a very restless instrument, and tends to jump here and there, pulling the mind behind it. If you notice, very few people have a straight gaze: most people tend to move their eyes a lot, and this usually indicates a very short attention span. By unfocusing one's gaze, the attention is removed from the contemplation of the external objects and of anything that may happen in front of oneself. This is another description of the practice called *pratyahara*, "withdrawing the senses from the sense objects".

Keeping head, neck and back in a straight line helps the circulation of energy within the body, easing the breathing, balancing the weight of the head and avoiding excessive strain on the spine and other bones and muscles. This enables the *sadhaka* to remain still for a longer time without feeling discomfort.

Sitting in the *padmasana* ("lotus position") or *sukhasana* ("easy position") is the best choice for meditation, but if for some reason sitting up is problematic, one may also choose the *savasana* ("corpse position") that simply consists in lying down on the back, supported by a level surface that can keep head, neck and back on a straight line. In fact, this position is excellent to keep the entire body on a straight line, as mentioned in the verse. When we sit, only the torso can remain straight, while the legs and arms are necessarily bent at some degree. For a beginner or for a person who has physical problems this may slow the process of meditation because it is still a relative unstable position and the weight of the body parts can create a tension. However, when we are lying down in the *savasana*, gravity works in our favor, anchoring all our body parts to the ground, making relaxation easier. This position is particularly useful for astral traveling, or "out-of-body-experiences".

The word *achalam*, "without moving", is important because one can overcome the feeling of bodily identification more easily when the body is not attracting any attention from the mind. Bodily movements are distracting the mind as much as the feelings of discomfort, therefore they must be stopped.

Ultimately, the *atman* consciousness must become easily detached from the bodily consciousness so that the *sadhaka* experiences the real nature of the Self.

प्रशान्तात्मा विगतभीर्ब्रह्मचारिव्रते स्थितः । मनः संयम्य मच्चित्तो युक्त आसीत् मत्परः ॥ ६-१४ ॥

praśāntātmā vigatabhīrbrahmacārivrate sthitaḥ | manaḥ saṁyamya maccitto yukta āsita matparaḥ || 6-14 |

prasanta-atma: satisfied in oneself/ in the *atman*; *vigata*: gone; *bhīh*: fear; *brahmachari-vrate*: in the vow of *brahmacharya*; *sthitaḥ*: firmly; *manah*: the mind; *samyama*: controlling/ conquering; *mat-cittah*: the consciousness focused on me; *yuktah*: engaged; *asita*: should remain/ sit; *mat-parah*: dedicated to me/ devoted to me.

"Conquering fear and practicing contentment, firmly established in the *brahmacharya*, controlling/ engaging the mind, (one should) sit/ remain (still), connecting the consciousness with me, and contemplating me (as the goal)."

It is impossible to avoid looking here and there (*disas anavalokayan*) unless one has completely conquered fear, lust and greed. On the other hand, when one has realized the pure eternal existence of Brahman, and the presence of Paramatma in the hearts of all living beings and in all situations, the mind is satisfied in itself because it finds all happiness in the Atman. Thus the eyes do not feel the need to wander here and there, and the consciousness remains undisturbed and peaceful.

The *brahmachari vrata*, the "vow of acting as Brahman", requires a complete paradigm shift, from the bodily identification to the transcendental identity of the Atman that is exactly the same in all beings. The meaning of *brahmacharya* is something more than simply controlling or abstaining from sex life - it really means being able to see persons instead of men or women. It means thinking and acting on the level of Brahman, the position of transcendental spiritual realization, where all living entities are seen equally as eternal spirit souls, and we understand that their bodies are simply an outer temporary covering. When one considers all *jivatmas* - oneself included - as pure spirit souls, glorious and perfect manifestations of Brahman, and finds happiness in the Atman/ Brahman, there is no question of seeking sexual identification, sexual relationships or sexual pleasure. *Baudhika brahmacharya* (celibacy of the intellect) is a way of thinking and seeing people, considering them and treating them as the transcendental Brahman. Besides, a person who is situated on the level of Brahman realization also understands that matter (including bodies) is a product of Brahman, energy of the Supreme Lord and therefore sacred. The Lord resides in the heart of all living entities, and this makes every body a temple of the Divine.

Vacika brahmacharya (celibacy of speech) means abstaining from vulgar or sexual expressions, sexual stories, allusive remarks etc. Success in *saririka brahmacharya* (celibacy of body) and control of sexual energy and desire is helped by avoiding foods prepared or cooked by people who are engrossed in sex life or negative thinking or behavior, avoiding rajasic or tamasic foods (i.e. spices, excess sugar, stimulants, onion, garlic etc) and avoiding the company of materialistic people. One should also bathe regularly, wear clean clothes, and practice some specific *yoga asana*, *pranayama* and *bandha* exercises. Still, the *sadhaka* needs to work constantly to keep the mind under control (*samyama*) by engaging it in positive meditation on transcendental and divine forms, names, activities etc. The root of the word *samyama* is the same of the words *yama* and *niyama* (the abstentions and prescriptions that constitute the first step in *yoga* practice), but with the added meaning of "engagement", that is also intrinsic in the very definition of *yoga* ("union").

The expressions *mat-cittah* and *mat-parah* clearly affirm that the purpose of meditation is to concentrate one's attention on the Supreme Personality of Godhead, the "me" to whom Krishna refers. The *sadhaka* has now graduated from the Brahman realization to the Paramatma realization, and is realizing that Paramatma is indeed Bhagavan. *Cittah* indicates the consciousness or awareness, while *parah* indicates the dedication or priority in life. A true *yogi* is conscious/ aware of Krishna (as *brahman*, *paramatma* and *bhagavan*) and puts Krishna at the top of his priorities in life.

युञ्जन्नेवं सदात्मानं योगी नियतमानसः । शान्तिं निर्वाणपरमां मत्संस्थामधिगच्छति ॥ ६-१५ ॥

yuñjannevaṁ sadātmānaṁ yogī niyatamānaśaḥ | śāntim nirvāṇaparamāṁ matsaṁsthāmadhigacchati || 6-15 |

yunjan: engaging; *evam*: like this; *sada*: always; *atmanam*: oneself; *yogi*: the *yogi*; *niyata-manasah*: having controlled the mind; *santim*: peace; *nirvana-paramam*: the supreme *nirvana*; *mat-samstham*: situated in me; *adhigacchati*: attains.

"Practicing/ engaged in this way (focusing) on the Atman, the *yogi* that has controlled/ engaged the mind attains the peace of the supreme Nirvana, abiding in me."

After indicating the consciousness of the Supreme Personality of Godhead as the goal and purpose of *yoga* meditation, Krishna is defining this stable consciousness as *nirvana paramam*, "the supreme *nirvana*", where the mind remains undisturbed and perfectly balanced. This balance does not need to be static: it can very well be dynamic, and in fact dynamic meditation is the next step in the *yoga sadhana*.

The *sadhaka* has realized the values of *yama* and *niyama*, assimilating them through practice and habit into his regular nature. He has mastered and overcome the body through the practice of the postures and the awareness of his true identity as *atman*, and has regulated his breathing and his emotions through the practice of *pranayama*. He has learned how to detach and withdraw his senses from the sense objects through the practice of *pratyahara*, and to focus his attention unswervingly on the transcendental object of meditation through the practice of *dharana*, or passive meditation.

It is now time to attain perfection in the practice of *dhyana*, or active meditation, that consists in raising the consciousness on a purely transcendental level, where all activities eternally exist and unfold in an unlimited present. It is common knowledge that the spiritual world, also called Vaikuntha ("without anxiety") is not subject to the limitations of time and space, but not many people have a clear realization of what this beautiful concept actually means.

Vaikuntha is not a geographical place that one reaches from going from "here" to "there". There is no need for vehicles, there is even no journey required because there is no distance to cover. It's already everywhere. Similarly, its existence is not subjected to the passing of time. There is no past and no future, but only an eternal present that contains everything simultaneously. Transcendental forms are not subject to birth, growth, decay, old age, disease or death: they exist eternally and their manifestation always contains all the unlimited possible variations simultaneously.

The word *yunjan* means "engaging, concentrating", and is from the same root of *yoga*. *Nirvana paramam* is the "supreme Nirvana", the liberated state of deep meditation on the Supreme Self that can be attained when the mind is pacified and controlled. This supreme peace is also called *moksha*, or liberation. Some uninformed people translate *moksha* with "salvation", not realizing that such word expresses a Christian concept that is profoundly different from the Vedic concept.

The expression *mat-samsthan*, "situated in me", refers both to the peace and *nirvana*, and to the consciousness of the *yogi*. It is a continuation of the thread *mat cittah, mat parah, mat sthanam*, that Krishna has described in the previous verses. But who is the "me" that Krishna is talking about? The next chapters will offer the answer to this very important question.

Some people believe that *nirvana* is a negative concept, that should not be used in the *bhakti* context, but obviously they do not give sufficient value to this verse and the other verses in *Gita* where Krishna teaches that *nirvana* is the purpose of life and equates it with Krishna Consciousness.

नात्यश्नतस्तु योगोऽस्ति न चैकान्तमनश्नतः । न चातिस्वप्नशीलस्य जाग्रतो नैव चार्जुन ॥ ६-१६ ॥

nātyaśnatastu yogo'sti na caikāntamaśnataḥ | na cātiśvapnaśīlasya jāgrato naiva cārjuna || 6-16 ||

na-ati: not too much; *asnatah*: one who eats; *tu*: but; *yogah*: *yoga*; *asti*: there is; *na*: not; *ca*: and; *ekantam*: even once; *anasnatah*: one who does not eat; *na*: not; *ca*: and; *ati-svapna*: sleeping too much; *silasya*: one who has the habit; *jagratah*: one who does not sleep; *na*: not; *eva*: certainly; *ca*: and; *arjuna*: o Arjuna.

"O Arjuna, yoga is not (possible) for one who eats too much or does not eat at all, or for one who sleeps too much or does not sleep at all."

Krishna has gone a great length to clarify that the *yogi* must constantly meditate on the transcendental Self, Atman/ Brahman, and become detached from the body, sense organs and mind. He has also recommended the control of mind and senses, and this requires the regulation of diet and sleep as well as other life habits. However, as long as one has a material mind, senses and body, it is necessary to take care of them with adequate food and rest, especially in the earliest stages of the practice of *yoga*. The mind and senses are like tigers: starving or mistreating them will not help us in the taming process, but will rather create a tension that will cause more problems. We need to understand the difference between an actual need and a whimsical desire: we should not run after whimsical desires, but we should not neglect actual needs either, because a neglected need becomes repressed and inevitably transforms into some kind of obsession, that is much more dangerous especially because it usually takes different misleading and pathological forms.

Eating is the basic need for all those who have a material body - including the plants and the micro-organisms. A *yogi* should eat to live, not live to eat, and choose sattvic foods that are favorable to the process of *yoga* - simple foods that are healthy, fresh, nutritious and tasty, but cheap and easy to collect.

These qualities can be found in a good vegetarian diet, especially in a society where the production of food is properly organized by applying the concepts of local subsistency farming, environmental biodiversity for cultivations, gentle organic methods for fertilizing and defending crops against pests, multiculture or permaculture, respectful and compassionate dairy farming, natural and small scale methods for food processing and preservation, and sustainable development in general.

Since the practice of *pranayama* is meant to slow down metabolism, the *yogi* needs less food, but fasting should only be to decrease one's ego, not to increase it. The process of fasting helps to minimize one's needs and detach oneself from the body, and on the physical level it can be very beneficial for the purification and healing of all those diseases that are created by the accumulation of undigested food and toxins. There are many different types of fasting, and one needs to properly understand the situation of his/ her own body and mind to apply the various rules.

Some people take fasting to the extreme and even abstain from swallowing the saliva produced by their own mouth. Since it can certainly impress simple-minded people, this practice can be used to encourage the general population by demonstrating that it is actually possible to control the senses and the mind. However, such staunch performance should be handled carefully, to avoid the risk of *abhimana* and *ahankara* spoiling its results, and also to avoid the risk of artificially imposing it on persons whose body and mind are not suited for strict austerities. Forced fasting can create serious problems because the individual becomes weak physically and mentally, and can be victimized by negative emotions and thoughts. Another dangerous practice is strict fasting suddenly followed by large feasts, usually with a lot of heavy fried foods and sweets: this creates a very bad reaction both physically and mentally, and is the cause of many serious diseases.

Too much eating means eating not for the proper maintenance of body and mind, but for the pleasure of eating, a form of lust that can never be really satisfied because the mind always demands more. In today's society, food has become loaded with too much emotional and social luggage, including the artificial obsession for "good bodily shape and health". Ironically, the more one focuses on this obsession, the more the bodily identification creates negative emotions in the personality, and the more unbalanced one becomes in connection with food consumption. This also causes other and worse problems with drinking, smoking, intoxicating substances etc.

All eating disorders, from bulimia to anorexia, that is from the obsession with eating to the rejection of eating, come from the same basic distortion that charges the act of eating and the image of food with misplaced and damaging emotions, covering a wide range of issues from low self-esteem to the feeling of rejection, passive aggressiveness, emotional manipulation, self-torture, guilt, fear, etc. A *yogi* should never fall in such traps: as Krishna has already said in 3.27 and 5.8-9, all the activities of the body and the senses should be brought back to their basic meaning only, and not given too much importance, either positive or negative.

Similar considerations apply to the practice of *jagran*, a particular form of austerity that consists in keeping awake, sometimes for the entire night - a very popular tradition especially on the occasion of the celebration of Maha Shiva ratri. This "fasting from sleep" should be used carefully and sparingly, and always remembering that its purpose is the purification of the consciousness and the development of a devotional sentiment towards Isvara. Remaining awake through the night and meditating on the radiance of the Brahman, symbolized by

the *dipa* (*ghi* lamp), brings the light of Knowledge into the darkness of material consciousness, and enables us to experience the feeling of freedom from the bodily limitations. This purpose is best served by actively engaging body, senses and mind in a favorable service to God - by singing *bhajans*, by watching religious re-enactments, by making garlands for the Deity, by performing active worship, by cooking food to be offered as *prasada*, and so on.

युक्ताहारविहारस्य युक्तचेष्टस्य कर्मसु । युक्तस्वप्नावबोधस्य योगो भवति दुःखहा ॥ ६-१७ ॥

yuktāhāravihārasya yuktaceṣṭasya karmasu | yuktasvapnāvabodhasya yogo bhavati duḥkhahā || 6-17 ||

yukta-ahara: (one who) eats according to the *yoga*; *viharasya*: one who moves around; *yukta-cestasva*: one who makes regulated efforts; *karmasu*: in activities/ duties; *yukta-svapna-avabodhasya*: one who is regulated in sleeping and keeping awake; *yogah*: *yoga*; *bhavati*: becomes; *duhkha-ha*: destroying sufferings.

"For one who consciously controls his food intake, who is controlled in moving around, who makes controlled efforts in working/ performing one's duties, and is regulated in sleeping/ dreaming and keeping vigil, *yoga* becomes the destroyer of sufferings."

The key word in this verse is *yukta*, "connected". All our actions should be performed in connection to the practice of *yoga*, with consideration for the higher purpose of the human opportunity of life. This means that intelligence, or the proper awareness, should govern all our activities and choices. Eating, moving around, working and sleeping are basic activities that cannot be neglected, because they are required to maintain one's body (3.8). Other activities, such as mating and defending, that are instinctive and prominent in the lower species of life, can be minimized on the level of the human form of life and especially through the practice of *yoga*. In fact, a *yogi* that has realized Brahman and Paramatma becomes situated on a higher level of awareness, where mating and defending are not required any more and even appear to be delusional behaviors. However, eating remains a basic need and manifests in many ways, including the need for water, air, solar light, and even food for thought and food for the soul. A *yogi* can shift the focus of the act of eating towards sattvic and transcendental (*prasadam*) foods, or even towards subtler dimensions such as the absorption of pranic energy or spiritual energy. However, this act of nourishment remains a necessity.

The word *viharasya*, that refers to the "moving around" of the *sadhaka*, is sometimes translated as "recreation" as in the natural desire to enjoy pleasant walks or journeys to beautiful and interesting places. One may travel for pleasure or for business, or decide to move to some other place for a better life, or to embark in a knowledge quest, or to engage in a teaching/ preaching tour. However everybody needs to move around - from the commuting worker in the industrialized metro city to the tourist seeking an exciting experience in places never seen before, from the homeless vagabond to the traveling salesman, from the political refugee to the exchange student, from the *sannyasi* that wanders to collect alms for mere survival, to the *rishi* that walks through the virtuous forest to gather fruits and flowers for the worship of God. Whether such traveling covers thousands of kilometers or just few meters from a bed to a computer desk, or even switching from one TV channel to another, this "moving around" implies a choice, an impetus for action, a need for change.

The subsequent word, *cestasya*, that refers to "making efforts", is strictly connected to the idea of "moving around". All progressive actions require an effort, therefore we should consider this definition as referring to *karmasu*, "in the actions", covering all positive, useful and dutiful activities (*karma* as opposed to *vikarma*).

One should therefore make sincere efforts to perform one's duties according to one's particular position, whether these apply to the daily care of one's body and its extensions (clothing, personal items, living quarters, family, etc), to the sacred service to society and occupational responsibilities, to the higher engagement in personal growth and self-improvement, to the acquisition of knowledge, or to the overcoming of material conditionings and identifications. All such efforts must be balanced and consciously monitored so that they can harmoniously and effectively support our own progress and the progress of others - always remembering the actual purpose of life and work.

As we have already elaborated, the regulation of sleeping and dreaming is also required. A *yogi* has learned to control the mind, and this enables him to enjoy timely and peaceful sleep, for the purpose of restoring the proper functionality of body and mind. Both excessive sleep and sleeplessness are caused by the improper engagement of the mind that remains connected to the wrong thoughts and emotions, such as fear, anxiety, agitation, depression, etc. In all his/ her activities and choices, a *yogi* is always conscious and careful, and makes sure that the valuable opportunity of human life is utilized in the best possible way - for even one minute of time is extremely important. This *avyartha kalatvam*, the utmost attention to every single action and every single moment, is the key to the progress in consciousness.

यदा विनियतं चित्तमात्मन्येवावतिष्ठते । निःस्पृहः सर्वकामेभ्यो युक्त इत्युच्यते तदा ॥ ६-१८ ॥

yadā viniyatam cittamātmanyevāvaṭiṣṭhate | niḥsṛṣṭhaḥ sarvakāmebhyo yukta ityucyate tadā || 6-18 ||

yada: when; *vinitayam*: controlled; *cittam*: consciousness; *atmani*: on the Atman; *eva*: certainly/ only; *avatisthate*: remains; *nisprīhah*: devoid/ detached; *sarva-kamebhyah*: for all desired things; *yuktah*: engaged (in *yoga*); *iti*: like this; *ucyate*: it is said; *tada*: then.

"When the consciousness is trained to focus firmly on the Atman, free from the desire for the various types of sense pleasures, it is said to be (properly) engaged (in *yoga*)."

This verse describes the ultimate step in the practice of *yoga*, called *samadhi* or "constant spiritual awareness". When the consciousness (*citta*) is actually fixed in the supreme Nirvana, it becomes completely detached from the sense objects that continue to revolve in the material world. This is the true position of a *yogi*. Anyone who claims to be teaching *yoga* must be instantly recognizable for his/ her constant concentration and awareness of the Transcendental Reality, as *Gita* has been explaining in all these chapters. A *yogi* - what to speak of a *yoga* teacher - must treat all living beings as Atman/ Brahman, without making any distinctions on the basis of the body such as color, family of origin, nationality, financial situation, position in society etc.

The intelligence, mind and senses of the genuine *yogi* are deeply immersed in the contemplation of transcendental happiness and therefore have no interest in pursuing any other *sankalpa* or determination to act to obtain some personal result. There is no more *karta*, no more *arambhah*, no more *sankalpa*, no more duality related to time and space and separation, which are all illusions of *maya*. The only reality is the permanent nature of the Atman/ Brahman, and the harmonization of the Atman with the Brahman, the individual intelligence with the supreme intelligence. The body continues to perform the required duties assigned on the basis of qualities and tendencies and position, but their routine performance is automatic, especially when the subconscious has been properly integrated and harmonized with the conscious and superconscious for the attainment of the main purpose of life.

The proper performance of duties is not necessarily impaired by this different awareness and shift of priorities; rather it may even be improved because of the absence of selfish motivations and inner conflicts. The best practical example is offered by the behavior of the *gopis* of Vrindavana that were ecstatically in love with the wonderful Krishna. Day and night they kept thinking about him, but because their sweet love was a private secret, externally they were very careful to perform all their duties properly, so that nobody suspected something else was going on. We should not think that the *gopis'* relationship with Krishna is/ was a merely material romantic affair - in fact it is highly symbolic of this most intimate meditation of the *jivatma* that contemplates the *param atman* at the highest level of *yoga*.

यथा दीपो निवातस्थो नेङ्गते सोपमा स्मृता । योगिनो यतचित्तस्य युञ्जतो योगमात्मनः ॥ ६-१९ ॥

yathā dīpo nivāstho neṅgate sopamā smṛtā | yogino yatacittasya yuñjato yogamātmanah || 6-19 ||

yatha: just like; *dipah*: a lamp; *nivata-sthah*: remaining/ in a place without wind; *na*: not; *ingate*: waver/ flicker; *sa*: that; *upama*: comparison; *smrita*: remembered/ considered; *yoginah*: a *yogi*; *yata-cittasya*: one who has controlled the mind/ whose mind is renounced; *yunjatah*: engaged; *yogam*: in *yoga*; *atmanah*: the Atman/ Self.

"Just like the flame of a lamp remains stable when there is no wind, the controlled mind of the *yogi* does not flicker - this is the comparison given for one who is engaged in the meditation on the Atman."

This verse contains the most famous definition of *nirvana*, the state of mind where all restlessness and fluctuations have been calmed down and the radiant light of the Atman can illuminate the consciousness without distraction or obstruction. *Nivata* is the attribute of the position, while *nirvana* is the position itself. In the absence of wind, the flame of the lamp does not stop burning, rather it burns better, in a steadier and more radiant way.

Another famous example is the crystal clear water of a small lake or pond, where there is no disturbance and therefore all the mud and sand has settled to the bottom, allowing a perfect purity and vision. Patanjali's *Yoga sutras* also define this blissful and enlightened state in the first verses of the *samadhi pada* (1.2, 3): *yogah citta-vritti-nirodhah* ("Yoga is the cessation of the fluctuations in the mind") and *tada drastuh svarupe avasthanam* ("then the seer is established in his real form/nature"). Again, the purpose of *yoga* is highlighted here as the pure and firm contemplation of the Supreme Self as Transcendental Reality through a controlled mind. Without any doubt, *Bhagavad gita* is the most authoritative and specific text about *yoga*, also considering that this definition appears in the original verses a great number of times.

Some people believe that *nirvikalpa samadhi* means that one should meditate on a void. This is incorrect. There is no point in meditating on a void, especially considering that a void does not exist, by definition. There is not a single spot in the entire universe, or in the spiritual world, where we can find a "void". We can find ethereal space, we can find planetary space (*antariksha*), but there is no void. By definition, a void is something that does not exist, the absence of all existence. It is impossible to "meditate" on nothingness.

The misconception of "void meditation" derives from some half-baked and badly digested concept of Brahman that is described as devoid of material qualities. Naturally a person who can only think in terms of material existence will conclude that something without material qualities simply does not exist, and therefore it is "a void". But this is not confirmed in any scripture. Rather, Brahman is the supreme existence (18.54), the source of all existences and qualities, characterized by perfect *sat* (eternity), *cit* (consciousness) and *ananda* (happiness). How can something like that be "a void"? Nonsense.

Therefore the traditional scriptures state that only a *brahmana*, "one who actually knows Brahman" (*brahmana brahma janati*), is qualified and authorized to teach and guide others on the path of *yoga* and spiritual realization.

यत्रोपरमते चित्तं निरुद्धं योगसेवया । यत्र चैवात्मनात्मानं पश्यन्नात्मनि तुष्यति ॥ ६-२० ॥

yatroparamate cittam niruddham yogasevayā | yatra caivātmanātmanam paśyannātmani tuṣyati || 6-20 ||

yatra: there/ in that situation/ when; *uparamate*: becomes withdrawn; *cittam*: consciousness/ awareness; *niruddham*: restrained; *yoga-sevaya*: by engaging in the service of *yoga*; *yatra*: there; *ca*: and; *eva*: certainly; *atmana*: by oneself; *atmanam*: the Atman; *paśyan*: seeing; *atmani*: in the self; *tushyati*: becomes satisfied.

"When the consciousness becomes quiet because of the cessation (of the wavering) by engagement/ service in *yoga*, then one becomes satisfied in the Self by contemplating the Atman within the self."

Krishna continues to describe the stage of *samadhi*, or steady contemplation that becomes natural and spontaneous to the *yogi*. The expression *yatra eva* means "just then", and draws the line between the preparatory training and the actual constant position of *yoga*. It is said that there are two types of *samadhi* - called *samprajnata* or "endowed with knowledge, reasoning, discrimination" and *asamprajnata*, where we find the cessation of all mental activities and the transcendental consciousness that is beyond the mental level. It is said that in this chapter, verses from 1 to 20 describe the *samprajnata samadhi*, while verses from 20 to 25 speak of the *asamprajnata samadhi*. We must be very careful to understand this point properly. Many people mistakenly think that "cessation of all mental activities" implies the mindless behavior typical of the fools, by which one acts whimsically and stupidly, often under the manipulation of others. This is still the

mental level, as all whims, even the unconscious ones, are created by the restlessness of the mind. There is still a lot of mental activity going on: simply, the consciousness remains unaware of it, because it is clouded by the darkness of ignorance.

The human beings that live on this planet, called *martyaloka*, are generally characterized by the influence of passion or *rajas*. They have strong desires and work to satisfy the impulses of their mind and senses, and as already described by Krishna (2.61-63, 3.36, 3.38, 5.23, 5.26) such lusty and greedy activities are also accompanied by the anger rising from personal frustration. Especially in Kali yuga, the general tendency of the human beings is to slide down from *rajas* to *tamas*, when frustration and depression follow the discharge of selfish anger. *Tamas* is characterized by a state of ignorance and oblivion, in which the mind is not functioning properly, and that is demonstrated in practice by the innumerable individuals that we call fools or idiots. In a sense, this is also a state of mindlessness, but the apparent bliss that results from such stillness of the mind is degrading the individual towards the lower species of life, such as animals, plants and even less intelligent creatures.

Through one's sincere efforts and under the expert guidance of a qualified teacher, an individual can rise from *rajas* to the platform of *sattva*, where the restlessness of the mind is pacified with a totally different type of happiness, enlightened by knowledge and understanding of the true nature of the world. On this platform of *sattva*, the mind works beautifully and for the benefit of the individual and the collectivity, producing beneficial and pleasing creations that inspire noble thoughts and emotions. When this happy and luminous state of material *sattva* has purified the consciousness and is sustaining the individual's search for the transcendental knowledge, the actual realization of the transcendental nature of the Self raises the awareness beyond the mind, taking it to the level of direct perception of Reality that is described as *darshana*. This is the level suggested in this verse by the word *pasyan* - "seeing, having direct experience" as in *darshana*. The Rishis are those who "see" directly the *tattva*, through the transcendental spiritual intelligence, and therefore the knowledge they explain can correctly be described as "revealed".

Again, we should be very careful about cultural superimpositions. Abrahamic faiths claim to be "revealed religions" in the sense that their prophets say they have received their scriptures directly and personally from God, who chose them specifically as his representatives and gave them the monopoly on religion.

The Revelation in the dharmic tradition is a totally different concept. Anyone can and should aspire to individual Revelation, through the purification of the consciousness from material identifications and attachments, and the contemplation of the inherent divine nature of the Self. The teacher is not a "savior", but only a guide, and each individual is responsible of his/ her own Self realization and enlightenment. This same concept is found also in the original Buddhism. Enlightenment or revelation is something that is completely natural and pre-existing in all human beings. We do not need to "be saved from our negative nature" by some exclusive divine intervention, and therefore there is no question of allegiance to a particular religious hierarchy or even to a particular form of God.

The expression *yoga sevaya* in this verse is interesting because it introduces the concept of transcendental service in the practice of *yoga*. One should become a worshiper and servant of *yoga* as the expression of the highest consciousness of Reality. Considering *yoga* as a method to be "utilized" like an instrument to attain some selfish material goal is therefore condemned.

सुखमात्यन्तिकं यत्तद् बुद्धिग्राह्यमतीन्द्रियम् । वेत्ति यत्र न चैवायं स्थितश्चलति तत्त्वतः ॥ ६-२१ ॥

sukhamātyantikam yattad buddhigrāhyamatīndriyam | vetti yatra na caivāyam sthitaścalati tattvataḥ || 6-21 ||

sukham: happiness; *atyantikam*: endless/ unlimited; *yat*: which; *tat*: that; *buddhi-grahyam*: can be grasped by intelligence; *atindriyam*: beyond the senses; *vetti*: you should know; *yatra*: there/ at that time/ in that situation; *na*: not; *ca*: and; *eva*: certainly; *ayam*: that; *sthitah*: situated; *calati*: moves; *tattvatah*: truly.

"In this absolute state of happiness that can be grasped by the intellect but is beyond the reach of the senses, one certainly knows that he is firmly situated in the truth and does not move away."

This verse continues to elaborate on the need to rise above the mental platform, to the transcendental state of consciousness known as *nirvana*.

In this verse, one of the most important words is *calati*, that means "moves away, move astray"; the expression is *na eva calati*, "certainly does not move away". The soul's awareness does not move any more because it has finally found the perfection of happiness and engagement that everybody is seeking, a perfection that is not disturbed by external circumstances. Also, the genuine realization of Atman/Brahman dissipates the illusory limitations of time and space, and therefore there is really no place or time to "go away" to, there is no other reality to observe, there is no other purpose to attain.

Another very important word is *atindriyam*, "beyond the senses". By definition, Transcendence is what is beyond the gross material existence, and therefore it cannot be perceived by the material senses, including the mind (usually considered the "sixth sense"). However, it is possible for us to perceive Transcendence or *Tattva* by using our intelligence. *Buddhi*, intelligence, is a bridge between the material world and the spiritual world, and from the very beginning Krishna has already amply recommended (2.39, 2.44, 2.49-53, 2.65-66, 3.1, 4.18, 5.20) that we should engage in *Buddhi Yoga*, employing our intelligence to comprehend the spiritual nature of Transcendence. Again in the next chapters Krishna will reiterate the concept.

In verse 3.42 we learned that "the senses are superior (to this angry lust/ to dull matter), and the mind is superior to the senses. Intelligence is superior to the mind, and he (the soul) is superior to the intellect."

In our daily experience we see that what cannot be perceived by the senses can still be perceived by intelligence through the observation of its symptoms. For example we can perceive the existence of the air by watching the leaves of a tree move in the breeze, or the dust raised by a windstorm.

We do not see the air or the wind itself, but we can perceive its existence and movements by its results. Similarly, our senses cannot perceive the mind - even our own mind - but our intelligence can directly show us its existence and functions in the form of thoughts and emotions and impressions or feelings.

When it has been sufficiently purified, intelligence can even perceive the soul or Atman/ Brahman, and the functions of this Transcendental Existence, observed as *sat cit* and *ananda*, "eternal existence, awareness and happiness". These three functions are ultimately the conscious or unconscious goal of all living beings: everyone wants to continue existing forever, everybody wants to know or to be aware, and everybody wants to be happy. While our senses and mind may try to convince us to pursue these three supreme functions through the contact with material objects, intelligence can lead us beyond this delusional idea and enable us to perceive the true Reality, where the real happiness is found.

यं लब्ध्वा चापरं लाभं मन्यते नाधिकं ततः । यस्मिन्स्थितो न दुःखेन गुरुणापि विचाल्यते ॥ ६-२२ ॥

yaṁ labdhvā cāparaṁ lābhaṁ manyate nādhikāṁ tataḥ | yasminsthito na duḥkhena guruṇāpi vicālyate || 6-22 ||

yam: that which; *labdhva*: by obtaining; *ca*: and; *aparam*: something else; *labham*: attainment; *manyate*: thinks/ considers; *na*: not; *adhikam*: other; *tataḥ*: than that; *yasmin*: in which; *sthitah*: situated; *na*: not; *dukhena*: by sufferings; *guruna*: very heavy/ great; *api*: even; *vicalyate*: is moved/ disturbed.

"One who has obtained this (position) does not take into consideration/ feel the need for any further acquisition, and once established there, he does not become shaken even by severe sufferings."

As we were mentioning in the previous verse, the consciousness that has found the unlimited and inexhaustible happiness of the Atman/ Brahman does not move away or astray because intelligence shows that there is nothing that remains to be attained. Krishna had already explained this perfect state of happiness and contentment in the Self while speaking of himself and of the elf-realized soul in general. The verses in this regard are the following: *na me parthasti kartavyam trishu lokeshu kiñcana, nanavapaam avaptavyam varta eva ca karmani*, "O son of Pritha, in all the three worlds there is nothing that I need to do or that I want to obtain, yet I also engage in activities" (3.22) and *yaś tv atma-ratir eva syad atma-triptas ca manavaḥ, atmany eva ca santushtas tasya karyam na vidyate*, "A human being who loves the Self certainly becomes satisfied in the Self and peaceful within the Self: for such a person there is no need to perform any action"(3.17).

Krishna has also stated that Self realization gives the highest pleasure: "In this world there is nothing as pure as knowledge. One who achieves perfection in *yoga* comes to find full happiness in the Self in the course of time" (4.38), "Unattached to the contact with the external things, s/he finds happiness in the pleasure of the Self. Such a person is engaged in Brahma yoga, and enjoys inexhaustible happiness. One who here (in this life/ body), before becoming liberated from the body, is capable of withstanding the onslaughts of lust and anger, is a *yogi* and a happy human being" (5.21, 23). For one who has attained this state of being, nothing else remains to be attained. This verse repeats that a liberated soul that has obtained the awareness of Transcendence is not disturbed or shaken by external circumstances, even in case of extreme difficulties or sufferings. Naturally, the body and the mind will perceive the suffering and may even become seriously impaired by it, but the pure consciousness always remains fixed on the contemplation of Reality, and does not move away from the perfection of realization. In the next chapters Krishna will continue to explain that such transcendental position of consciousness is never lost, and the liberated soul will never return again to the material delusion.

तं विद्याद् दुःखसंयोगवियोगं योगसंज्ञितम् । स निश्चयेन योक्तव्यो योगोऽनिर्विण्णचेतसा ॥ ६-२३ ॥

taṁ vidyād duḥkhasaṁyogaviyogaṁ yogasañjñitam | sa niścayena yuktavyo yogo'nirviṇṇacetasā || 6-23 ||

tam: that; *vidyat*: you should know; *duhkha*: suffering; *samyoga*: contact; *viyogam*: absence of contact; *yoga-samjñitam*: understanding of *yoga*; *sah*: he; *niscayena*: with perseverance; *yuktavyah*: should engage in; *yogah*: *yoga*; *anirvinna*: not depressed; *chetasa*: consciousness.

"This should be known as the absorption in *yoga* that liberates from all contacts with suffering; that is undoubtedly the *yoga* system that must be practiced without deviation/ without getting discouraged."

In verse 5.22 Krishna explained that the source of suffering is due to the contact with the material sense objects that are limited by time and transformation, and therefore can only give a temporary pleasure. The applied science of *yoga* enables us to become detached from such illusion, and to perceive the true satisfaction and happiness that derives from the Atman, or spiritual Self. So, to continue the thread of discussion from the previous verse, a *yogi* that finds himself in the face of material difficulties is not confused, and by remaining detached he can quickly find relief and enjoy real freedom from all conditionings. Physical diseases and difficulties can only affect the body and the mind, not the original consciousness of the soul. When the consciousness is correctly identified with the soul, it remains constantly focused, beyond the states that appear in the ordinary mind: the state of wakefulness, the state of dreaming and the state of deep sleep. Beyond these, there is a "super-conscious" state called *turiya* that is our real nature. Joys and sorrows come and go like the seasons (2.14) and the *yogi* learns to tolerate them, knowing that they will soon disappear. Therefore the *yogi* remains free from depression (*anirvinna*) even when attacked by sorrows and sadness and various kinds of problems. This is the true understanding (*samjñitam*) of *yoga*. Some people interpret this verse to mean that the physical practice of *asana* and *pranayama*, and the relaxation of the mind they call "meditation", are meant to prevent and eliminate all the sufferings caused by diseases, old age and death in order to engage in sense gratification without interruption or obstacles, but this is not possible. Of course it is possible to improve one's health and slow down the process of aging, but it is not possible to stop disease and death completely, and an increased attachment to the material body will create more sufferings in the next lifetime. The purpose of *yoga* is to detach ourselves from the body.

सङ्कल्पप्रभवान्कामांस्त्यक्त्वा सर्वानशेषतः । मनसैवेन्द्रियग्रामं विनियम्य समन्ततः ॥ ६-२४ ॥

saṅkalpaprabhavāṅkāmaṁstyaktvā sarvānaśeṣataḥ | manasaivendriyagrāmaṁ viniyamya samantataḥ || 6-24 ||

sankalpa: imagination; *prabhavan*: generated by; *kama*: desires; *tyaktva*: giving up; *sarvan*: all; *aseshatah*: completely; *manasa*: by the mind; *eva*: certainly; *indriya-gramam*: all the senses; *viniyamya*: regulating; *samantatah*: from all sides.

"Completely abandoning all the desires/ plans arisen from the mental processes, (one should) control the mind and all the senses by regulating them from every side."

A very important word in this verse is *sankalpa*. In verses 4.19 and 6.4 we have already seen that the *yogi* needs to overcome and bandon all *sankalpa*, or intentions, plans and desires. This does not mean that his professional duties, family duties or religious duties should be performed haphazardly or mindlessly, without the proper planning and organization. It means that the Self-realized *yogi* does not identify with the *ahankara* and *mamatva* any more, and therefore he is ready to follow God's plan and to accept whatever comes his way. He knows that the Supreme Purusha is the supreme consciousness and the supreme intelligence, and that everything that happens has a part in the greater plan. A materialist is always full of selfish plans. He wants to expand his ego and achieve material happiness through the mirage of success in this world, and his mind is constantly elaborating and scheming, teeming with so many different purposes. On the other hand, a *yogi* simply performs his duties according to the capabilities - *guna* and *karma* - of his present body and mind, and follows the prescribed methods that have been explained in the scriptures and by the great *acharyas*. Both the knowledge of the material world and the knowledge of the spiritual world have already been presented by the great *rishis*, and there is ample information and description that we can effectively utilize for the benefit of the individual and society at large. We do not need to reinvent the wheel every morning. This does not mean that we should not try to study and understand reality through a direct observation and research. It means that we should first study the information and explanations that have been compiled by the great personalities of the past, before venturing into unnecessary new mental speculations.

For example: everybody can understand that, in order to become a good mathematician, one needs to go to school, starting from the primary classes, and learn whatever knowledge has already been explained and collected by previous mathematicians. Only after having learned correctly all the existing material, we can start creating new equations and theorems, expand and elaborate on the previous ones, and so on.

Some people believe that spirituality or metaphysics are abstract and subjective ideas, and therefore all opinions are valid. This is really foolish. Metaphysics or spirituality is a precise science that can and should be verified objectively. Some people interpret this verse to state the necessity of the passage from the *samprajnata samadhi* ("meditation with mental processes") also called *savichara* and *savitarka*, to the *asamprajnata samadhi* ("meditation without mental processes"), where *vichara* ("research") and *vitarka* ("discussion") are absent. However, we need to make a distinction between what is required for our own mind at an initial or intermediate stage of meditation, and what is required for our preaching mission.

Without this distinction, we would never have received any teachings from Krishna or the great *acharyas* or the Vedic scriptures (including Patanjali etc) - or we would be expected to believe that Krishna, the great *acharyas* and the great *Rishis* were merely situated on the "inferior" level of *samprajnata samadhi*.

शनैः शनैरुपरमेद् बुद्ध्या धृतिगृहीतया । आत्मसंस्थं मनः कृत्वा न किञ्चिदपि चिन्तयेत् ॥ ६-२५ ॥

śanaih śanairuparamed buddhyā dhṛtigrīhitayā | ātmasaṁsthaṁ manaḥ kṛtvā na kiñcidapi cintayet || 6-25 ||

sanaih: gradually; *sanaih*: gradually; *uparomet*: one should withdraw/ abstain; *buddhya*: by the intelligence; *dhṛiti*: with steadiness; *grihitaya*: accepting; *atma-samstham*: situated in the Atman; *manah*: the mind; *kṛtvā*: doing; *na*: not; *kiñcid*: anything; *api*: even; *cintayet*: should think/ worry about.

"Gradually withdrawing (from external things) by the use of intelligence, with a determined effort, one should fix the mind in the Self/ Atman and stop worrying/ thinking about everything else."

The use of intelligence is a key factor in the proper practice of *yoga*. Blind following of rules or methods, or even concepts, is not the proper way to proceed. In all circumstances, we must allow ourselves to be guided in our choices and actions by the superior power of intelligence and good sense that comes directly from the soul and the Supreme Soul. The first application of intelligence is to understand that we must proceed gradually. Gradually does not necessarily mean slow. We can also proceed quickly, but things must be done gradually, as in all new exercises. When we start some physical training, intelligence tells us that we must first attempt easy and brief exercises, then upgrade to some exercises that require a little more effort and strength, and so on. If on the first day of our jogging training we attempt to run a marathon of many kilometers within a short span of time, we will unnecessarily face great difficulties and almost invariably we will fail. We may even suffer physical damage that will prevent us from actually engaging in a proper training for a long time.

Withdrawing from external things should be done gradually, in a natural and spontaneous way, without artificially forcing the mind, the senses and the body into premature renunciation. *Yoga* is not about following strict rules of abstinence or making efforts to practice difficult exercises, but about training the mind, the senses and the body to become regulated and controlled. *Dhṛiti*, determination, should also be controlled and engaged by intelligence. Without intelligence, it becomes blind stubbornness, obstinate resistance to progress, and foolish prejudice.

The expression *atma samsthan manah kṛtvā* indicates a conscious effort to keep the mind focused on the Atman. Of course intelligence will tell us that this Atman or self is not the material identification, the separatist selfishness and egotism that motivates the ignorant and foolish people.

Again, *na kiñcid api cintayet* ("never worry about anything") is a basic rule that must be applied with intelligence. A realized *yogi* is always aware that everything happens according to a divine plan, under the direction of the supreme intelligence, and that all opportunities can be utilized for progress.

This certainly does not mean that he will carelessly neglect the considerations about cause and effect - he will still look both sides when he is going to cross a road, and pick up the umbrella if the sky becomes cloudy. But this is not worrying, it is responsible thinking.

यतो यतो निश्चरति मनश्चञ्चलमस्थिरम् । ततस्ततो नियम्यैतदात्मन्येव वशं नयेत् ॥ ६-२६ ॥

yato yato niścarati manaścañcalamasthiram | tatastato niyamya itadātmanyeva vaśam nayet || 6-26 ||

yatah yatah: due to whatever/ wherever/ whenever; *niscalati*: it strays; *manah*: the mind; *cancelam*: restless; *asthiram*: unsteady; *tatah tatah*: there/ then; *niyamya*: by regulating; *etat*: this; *atmani*: in the Atman; *eva*: certainly; *vasam*: under control; *nayet*: must bring.

"The mind is unsteady and impatient to wander around. Every time/ wherever it runs off, one should bring it back under control, and regulate it so that it remains controlled in/ by the Self/ Atman."

Controlling the senses might be relatively easy, but controlling the mind is much more difficult. The nature of the mind is very restless, as Arjuna will clearly say later in the chapter (6.34, *cancelam hi manah krsnah*). This is why the process of *yoga* requires patience, enthusiasm and determination. Controlling one's mind is not much different from controlling one's small children: a young child is naturally restless and curious about everything, often asking for things - even impossible or non-beneficial things - and jumping from one interest to another when it becomes bored.

We cannot fulfill all the requests of small children, yet we should not become angry or mistreat them. Every time they run off in a playful and curious spirit, we need to watch over them and go get them back when they start getting into trouble, before things become serious. Gently but firmly, we need to attract their attention again and again on the task they need to perform for their training, such as doing their homework, eating the proper food, taking bath, etc. Similarly, we need to take care of our mind with the patient, tolerant but firm attitude of a good parent. Our "inner child" needs to play sometimes, but every time it engages in dangerous activities we need to bring it back to a safe place and offer a better engagement, that will give greater happiness (*param drstva nivartate*, 2.59).

Some believe that small children should be punished - beaten with a stick in the morning and with a shoe in the night - but this drastic action should be applied only when the mind has become spoiled and arrogant, especially the mind that has developed the false ego of being a great *guru*, a great devotee, a great scholar, a great brahmin, a great leader etc. When the mind is sweet and humble, and innocently desires a little fun and pleasure, beating it with a stick and with a shoe will turn it into a repressed psychotic pervert, that distorts the healthy and natural attraction for happiness and love into a hunger for power and even into cruelty and callousness. Not much of a spiritual progress.

प्रशान्तमनसं ह्येनं योगिनं सुखमुत्तमम् । उपैति शान्तरजसं ब्रह्मभूतमकल्मषम् ॥ ६-२७ ॥

prasāntamanasaṁ hyenaṁ yoginaṁ sukhamuttamam | upaiti śāntarajasam brahmabhūtamakalmaṣam || 6-27 ||

prasanta: peaceful; *manasam*: in the mind; *hi*: certainly; *enam*: this; *yoginam*: among the *yogis*; *sukham*: happiness; *uttamam*: supreme; *upaiti*: attains; *santa-rajasam*: having pacified the passion; *brahma-bhutam*: the existence of Brahman; *akalmasham*: free from all contamination.

"Certainly s/he among the *yogis* who has perfectly pacified the mind can attain the highest happiness. (Thus) having attained the pacification of passion, s/he becomes situated on the transcendental existence and becomes (totally) purified."

The expression *hi enam yoginam*, "only this (among) the *yogis*" suggests that many people practice *yoga* on various levels and with different degrees of success. Later on in *Gita* (7.3) Krishna will state, "Out of many thousands of human beings, only a few strive for perfection, and among all those who are engaged (on this path) and have achieved perfection, only a few know me in truth."

A peaceful mind, that finds satisfaction in the Atman/ Brahman, is the greatest wealth a human being can attain, and gives true happiness - that kind of happiness that is unlimited, inexhaustible and undisturbed by any circumstance. What needs to be pacified within the mind? The restlessness of the mind is due to the *guna* or material mode of passion, called *rajas*. When this natural tendency of the mind has been pacified by the predominance of the *guna* or material mode of goodness, called *sattva*, the mind becomes able to remain peaceful long enough to contemplate and realize the Transcendental Reality. At this point the material *guna* of *sattva* becomes purified and spiritualized, and is called *suddha sattva*. How to bring the predominance of *sattva* over *rajas* in your mind? By following the *yama* and *niyama* prescriptions that constitute the preliminary foundations of *yoga* that refer to food consumption and other basic life habits. In later chapters, especially in chapter 14, Krishna will speak more about the characteristics of the various *gunas* and how to utilize them.

The expression *brahma bhuta* means "the existence/ condition/ being of Brahman" and refers to the direct awareness of the transcendental nature of our existence that has already been called *brahma nirvanam* (2.72, 5.24-26). This state of transcendental awareness will be presented again at the conclusion of Krishna's teachings in *Gita* (18.54, *brahma bhuta prasannatma*) to highlight, yet again, the fundamental importance of Brahman realization, on which true *bhakti* can be built. Again, as we have already mentioned, we need to repeat that one cannot realize Bhagavan without having truly understood and realized Brahman.

The word *akalmasham* refers to the contamination consisting of material identifications, attachment and desires. Life on the level of pure Brahman realization (*brahma bhuta*) is naturally free from all contaminations and material impurities.

युञ्जन्नेवं सदात्मानं योगी विगतकल्मषः । सुखेन ब्रह्मसंस्पर्शमत्यन्तं सुखमश्नुते ॥ ६-२८ ॥

yuñjannevaṁ sadātmanam yogi vigatakalmaṣaḥ | sukheṇ brahmasaṁsparśamatyantam sukhamasṅnute || 6-28 ||

yunjan: engaging; *evam*: like this; *sada*: always; *atmanam*: in the Atman; *yogi*: the *yogi*; *vigata-kalmashah*: all contamination gone; *sukheṇ*: in happiness/ easily; *brahma-samsparśam*: in contact with Brahman; *atyantam*: unlimited; *sukham*: happiness; *asṅnute*: attains.

"Concentrating always on the Atman/ Self, the *yogi* who has become free from all contaminations attains the highest happiness because s/he easily remains in contact/ connected with the Brahman."

This verse repeats the message of the previous two verses. Krishna wants to make sure that the crucially important point is well understood: the true purpose of *yoga* is life on the level of pure transcendental awareness, free from all contaminations, characterized by the supreme happiness and satisfaction. The happiness of Brahman, also called *brahmananda*, is different from the pleasure or happiness on the material level that is based on the contact between the senses and the sense objects.

Brahmananda is experienced in the contact with Brahman, and since Brahman is everywhere - we are Brahman, too - it cannot be interrupted at any time. The word *samsparśam*, "in contact with", is used here as the alternative to the *sparsa*, or "contact" that according to materialists is supposed to give happiness by touching the objects of the sense with the senses. Since Brahman is spiritual and transcendental, such contact belongs to a category that is completely different from gross sense gratification. Again, here the most important point is the consciousness. A Self-realized soul perceives the Brahman in himself and in all other things, without dualistic distinctions based on the body, on time and space, and therefore the happiness of contact is never interrupted.

सर्वभूतस्थमात्मानं सर्वभूतानि चात्मनि । ईक्षते योगयुक्तात्मा सर्वत्र समदर्शनः ॥ ६-२९ ॥

sarvabhūta-sthamātmānaṁ sarvabhūtāni cātmani | īkṣate yogayuktātmā sarvatra samadarśanaḥ || 6-29 ||

sarva-bhuta-stham: that remains in all living beings/ in all existences; *atmanam*: the *atman*; *sarva-bhutani*: all living beings/ all existences; *ca*: and; *atmani*: in the *atman*; *ikṣyate*: sees; *yoga-yukta-atma*: one who is engaged in *yoga*; *sarvatra*: everywhere; *sama-darsanaḥ*: with equanimity.

"One who is connected through *yoga* contemplates the Atman that is situated in all living entities/ states of existence and all the living entities/ existences as situated in the Atman, therefore s/he is equally disposed towards everyone/ everything."

The Atman or Self engaged in *yoga* (*yoga-yukta-atma*) is connected to the entire Reality that is gradually realized as Brahman, Paramatma and Bhagavan. When we speak of "engagement" or "connection", that is the basic meaning of the word *yoga*, this concept necessarily implies a greater Reality to which we are connected, and to whose service we are engaged. The meaning of this verse is confirmed in other passages of *Gita*, for example in 5.18 (*vidya vinaya sampanne*), 15.15 (*sarvasya caham hridi sannivisto*) and 18.61 (*isvarah sarva bhutanam hrd dese 'rjuna tisthati*).

The expression *sarva bhuta* means "all the states of being", referring not only to "all the living entities" but also to all forms of existence, including the various types of situations that we can experience in our life. This confirms that genuine spiritual realization can never be hampered by any external circumstance.

We could say that this verse is rather esoteric, and not so easy to understand. Most of the verses of *Gita* are very direct and clear, and express logical, simple and fundamental truths that anybody can understand, especially if he has sufficient intelligence and common sense. Granted, a few of these truths are to be accepted with faith, as in the beginning the student does not have the instruments and the experience required to verify them, because they go beyond the perception of the material senses and the ordinary course of material life. Also, the simple and clear instructions given by Krishna may not be so easy to put into practice, but it is just a matter of making a personal effort into improving oneself and purifying one's consciousness. They are not vague or mysterious statements, and when sincerely studied in their original form, they do not leave much space for interpretation.

However, Krishna is gradually introducing very deep concepts that penetrate the core of Reality, into a dimension that is highly symbolic and relates to the activity of consciousness more than to the activities of the mind and senses - in other words, he talks of transcendental Reality, that by definition is considered too great to be expressed by words or thoughts. This is the inherent challenge of all genuine paths of spirituality and religion: they need to use words to express what is said to be beyond the scope of words.

Therefore all genuine religions utilize the divine language of symbols that is embedded as a sort of "universal dictionary" into the subconscious of every human being, irrespective of the culture s/he was born and brought up in. In the last century the study of archetypes has developed under the patronage of non-religious researchers in the field of psychology, and this path has led rigorously scientific psychologists to trans-personal psychology to the threshold of spirituality - from Carl Gustav Jung to Roberto Assagioli and beyond - just like the most advanced research in nuclear and particle physics has led scientists to a perspective that is strikingly similar to the vision of the *rishis* of the ancient Vedic tradition.

Usually religious scriptures contain a certain amount of good advice on ethics, moral life, duties, rituals, purification etc, and the recommendation that human beings should worship God and recognize the greatness of divine power, wisdom, compassion, and glory. *Bhagavad gita* contains all this and much more, because it also offers the opportunity of exploring the realm of transcendence to help the human being in his/ her natural and legitimate quest for Self realization, as a divine spark of that same supreme power and glory that is God. Neither the Bible or the Koran, or other similar popularly known scripture offer this supreme knowledge, as they are destined for the masses of ordinary people that are unevolved and immature in their understanding and aspirations, not much different from animals, and therefore need to be controlled by a class of priests in some sort of theocracy. But that is not the purpose of genuine spirituality or even of human life. *Vedanta sutras* clearly state, *athato brahma jijnasa*, "this (human lifetime) is the opportunity to learn about Transcendence", and Krishna is kindly, patiently and expertly guiding us, step after step, into that supreme Science.

In ancient times, this Science was known all over the planet, but it was considered a great secret (*raja vidya*, *raja guhyam*) as Krishna will also confirm in 9.2, and was passed down from master to disciple in a restricted circle of initiates "to the mysteries", to ensure that the proper understanding of the immense glory of this Science would not be lost.

Krishna will also recommend at the end of *Gita* (18.67) as a final instruction, that this Science should not be given indiscriminately to the ignorant masses, to those who are not austere, who do not have love for God, who are not interested to hear it or are envious or hateful.

Today, at the dawn of the Third Millennium, we find ourselves in a new situation. Humankind in general has come to the threshold of a major evolutionary step in consciousness, and each and every human being on the planet is faced with the choice of making the required effort to rise to the Transcendental consciousness, and offered the opportunity to understand the level of existence that s/he can attain in that way.

Today *Bhagavad gita* is amply available to almost everyone on the planet - except in those places where intolerant and ignorant so-called religions are afraid of its liberating science, and therefore they forbid its circulation. We should all take advantage of this extraordinary opportunity and make a sincere effort to study and understand it.

यो मां पश्यति सर्वत्र सर्वं च मयि पश्यति । तस्याहं न प्रणश्यामि स च मे न प्रणश्यति ॥ ६-३० ॥

yo māṁ paśyati sarvatra sarvaṁ ca mayi paśyati | tasyāhaṁ na praṇaśyāmi sa ca me na praṇaśyati || 6-30 ||

yah: one who; *mam*: me; *pasyati*: sees; *sarvatra*: everywhere/ in all things; *sarvam*: all; *ca*: and; *mayi*: in me; *pasyati*: sees; *tasya*: of him; *aham*: I; *na*: not; *pranasyami*: (I) become lost; *sah*: he; *ca*: and; *me*: to me; *na*: not; *pranasyati*: (he) becomes lost.

"One who sees me everywhere and sees everything in me never loses (sight of) me, and is never lost for me."

The word *pranasyati*, "becomes lost", refers to being "lost to the vision", or forgotten. Here we find the strong confirmation of a personal relationship between the Atman and the Brahman, that is based on the awareness of unity, on devotional service and on loving exchanges.

In this verse Krishna continues to offer himself as the perfect example of Brahman consciousness - this will become more and more prominent in the verses of *Gita*, as we proceed to study it. After the science of differentiation between physics and metaphysics, the science of proper action, the science of acquisition of knowledge, the science of renouncing delusional ideas, and the science of meditation to control one's own mind, we will proceed to the other aspects of the Transcendental Science, including *bhakti yoga* and *purushottama yoga*. These more personal aspects can be studied and understood properly only after we have genuinely studied and understood the previous instructions, and assimilated the realizations that they offer. If we do not become free from the materialistic illusion of identification with the body, we will remain unable to appreciate the personal aspect of the transcendental science, and there will be the risk of becoming consciously or unconsciously envious of this personality that speaks of himself in such glorious terms.

Conscious envy is relatively easy to recognize, because it generally shows in the behavior of the envious person, mostly in the form of joy in front of the sufferings, defamation, losses and problems of others, and moroseness or anger in front of the happiness or glorification of those persons. An envious man/ woman cannot tolerate to see the happiness of others, especially of the person that is the object of his/ her envy.

Of course when the object of envy is a very powerful person, the envious must be very careful about showing their real feelings, and therefore they may make special effort to pretend they have favorable feelings towards the object of their envy - such as respect, appreciation, and even love or devotion. In the effort to be more credible, they may even go to the extreme and behave externally as they have become fanatical supporters or followers or devotees. There is a famous proverb saying, *ati bhakti chori lakshana*, "too much devotion is the symptom of a thief".

For a superficial observer it is not easy to distinguish a genuine devotee from one of such envious pretenders, and some ignorant people may even be led to believe that the envious pretender is actually a greater devotee than the real followers, who may be more dignified in their external behavior and prefer to serve humbly rather than making a big show of emotions in public. Usually such envious pretenders are more easily found in the closest and most intimate circle around the great personality, because that is where their dramatic performance can have the strongest effect, and where their actual aspirations can find a way to success. For example, from that position they can sabotage the relationship of the great personality with other, more sincere, people, and create a void around him so that nobody will be able to help him in the time of need. Also, a position in the "inner circle" or "core group of followers" can offer the opportunity to eliminate the great personality and take his place, or simply to enjoy his property and usurp his glory and authority.

When we apply these consideration to the greatest personality of all, Krishna, we can see that many of those who claim to be his greatest devotees are trying to direct the attention of the general people towards aspects of Krishna that appear to be more ordinary - for example, his being a pretty baby in the arms of his mother, a toddler fond of sweets, a simple-minded cowherd boy playing with his little friends, or a careless adolescent romantically involved with girls. In the name of the "most intimate *rasas*", these false devotees insist in focusing the attention of people on those activities of Krishna that most resemble the materialistic adventures of common people, and that are so often the object of foolish (and often envious) gossip among the ignorant masses.

These professional reciters encourage their audience to watch the most intimate dealings between Krishna and the *gopis*, for example, as a sort of peep show just like people go to the movies to watch some romantic comedy or tragedy or porn film, or like those old ladies whose greatest interest is to find out juicy details about the personal private lives of their neighbors. But genuine spiritual life is not that cheap.

We definitely can have a very personal relationship with God as Bhagavan, but such relationship should be based on a permanent, strong and genuine realization of God as Brahman and Paramatma.

सर्वभूतस्थितं यो मां भजत्येकत्वमास्थितः । सर्वथा वर्तमानोऽपि स योगी मयि वर्तते ॥ ६-३१ ॥

sarvabhūtasthitaṁ yo māṁ bhajatyekatvamāsthitaḥ | sarvathā vartamāno'pi sa yogī mayi vartate || 6-31 ||

sarva-bhuta-sthitam: remaining in all beings/ existences; *yah*: he; *mam*: me; *bhajati*: worships/ serves; *ekatvam*: with concentrated consciousness; *asthitah*: situated; *sarvatha*: in every way; *vartamanah*: he may be; *api*: even; *sah*: he; *yogi*: a yogi; *mayi*: to me; *vartate*: exists.

"The yogi who worships me as the One who resides in all existences is situated (in me); wherever s/he may go, s/he always remains in me."

Krishna wants to clarify the concept that he is not an ordinary human being. Many people become devotees of great and powerful personalities, such as cricket or soccer players, pop singers, movie actors, famous politicians, social leaders, writers, philosophers or even religious teachers, because this is a natural tendency of human beings, especially of those who are still unevolved and immature, such as children and adolescents.

People who feel insecure about their own identity and purpose in life tend to vicariously identify with a model and shape their opinions, attitudes and behaviors in the imitation of such model - sometimes even replicating the accent, the gait, or some typical physical gestures. There is nothing intrinsically wrong in this, because each human being needs to develop gradually in order to grow naturally and evolve a balanced and self-sufficient personality, and in healthy societies there are sufficient positive role models that growing people can look up to. As Krishna already said (3.21), the mass of people always look up at the great personalities and follow their example. However, there is a difference between God and a great man. Many great men may consciously or unconsciously convince themselves they have become God, especially when their followers and fans become their devotees and literally worship them as God.

In Vedic tradition, formal worship is offered as an expression of respect and gratitude to all the great personalities and even to one's direct superiors and to nature's manifestations, but all these traditional rituals always require the very clear understanding that the Transcendental Supreme Reality is superior to all the secondary manifestations of power. No man can ever become God. No matter how much power and glory seem to emanate from great men, such greatness is nothing but a pale reflection of the true glory of Bhagavan, as Krishna will clearly state in the next chapters (from 7.7 to 7.13, from 5.9 to 22.9, from 2.10 to 11.10, from 19.10 to 42.10). As clearly stated in chapter 12 (verses 2 to 5), meditation on the personal form of Bhagavan is more congenial to the personal nature of the soul, but we should not forget that the personality that is worshiping God should also have the same transcendental and divine consciousness, otherwise the results will not be the same.

When a materially identified man worships the personal form of God within his limited materialistic perception, his devotion is not true *bhakti*: at best it can be some sentimentalistic attachment or attraction, or cheap bigotry, at worst it can be an offensive attitude of material familiarity that breeds contempt and may even slide into cynical exploitation. Later in *Gita* (9.11) Krishna will explain that less intelligent people attribute material qualities and behaviors to the divine manifestations and their activities because they are unable to understand Transcendence: *avajananti mam mudha manusim tanum asritam, param bhavam ajananto mama bhuta-mahesvaram*. We should never think that the true worship of the personal form of God is something easy and cheap. *Gita* (7.3) confirms that the true understanding of this personal form is extremely difficult to achieve, and those who are true devotees of God are very rare: *manusyanam sahasresu kascid yatati siddhaye, yatatam api siddhanam kascid mam veti tattvatah*. One who really knows the Lord and understands the transcendental nature of his form and activities can remember him at the moment of death and does not need to return to this world of birth and death: *janma karma ca me divyam evam yo veti-tattvatah, tyaktva deham punar janma naiti mam eti so 'rjuna* (*Gita*, 4.9).

आत्मौपम्येन सर्वत्र समं पश्यति योऽर्जुन । सुखं वा यदि वा दुःखं स योगी परमो मतः ॥ ६-३२ ॥

ātmaupamyena sarvatra samam paśyati yo'rjuna | sukham vā yadi vā duḥkham sa yogi paramo mataḥ | | 6-32 | |

atma: with oneself/ the Atman; *aupamyena*: by comparison; *sarvatra*: everywhere; *samam*: equally; *pasyati*: sees; *yah*: s/he; *arjuna*: o Arjuna; *sukham*: joy; *va*: or; *yadi*: if; *va*: or; *duḥkham*: sorrow; *sah*: s/he; *yogi*: a yogi; *paramah*: the best; *mataḥ*: considered.

"O Arjuna, one who sees everything/ everyone as non-different from oneself, both in joy and in sorrow, is in my opinion the greatest yogi."

In the previous chapters Krishna has clearly stated that a true *yogi* and *sannyasi* is completely detached from all material association, from all identifications, sense of belonging and attachments. However, this does not mean that s/he has become insensitive to the happiness and distress of other living entities. Just as the *yogi* and *sannyasi* continues to perform his/ her duties in the best possible way without expecting any personal advantage in return, in the same way s/he loves all living entities without selfish attachment and expectations.

Compassion is a characteristic symptom of a self-realized soul. As the perfect *yogi* is conscious of his/her nature as spirit soul and sees everyone around as a spirit soul, s/he does not make discriminations between him/ herself and others, and therefore deeply shares the joys and sorrows of everyone - especially the sorrows. S/he is therefore called *para-duḥkha-duḥkhi*, "one who shares the sufferings of others".

The expression *atman-aupamyena* indicates that one should see others according to the same standard one applies to oneself, treat others as he would like to be treated himself. This is precisely the contrary of envy and jealousy, and all the other similar sentiments that are characteristic of materialistic people, who see others as separated and different from himself. The Self-realized soul sees the divine *atman* in all beings, and therefore s/he makes no difference between *atman* and *atman*, as we have already seen in the previous verses. This verse, however, add a new dimension of compassion, by specifying *sukham va yadi va duḥkham*, "in joy and in sorrow". Now, we know that the pure consciousness of the Atman only knows a transcendental happiness called *ananda* (as opposed to the material joy called *sukha*), in which there is no place for *duḥkha* or distress. Therefore, we must understand that this empathy also applies to the material joys and sorrows experienced by the bodies and minds of the living entities, and to the pressure these feelings create on the consciousness of the soul.

The compassionate sage thinks, "Seeking happiness is a natural tendency in everyone, and all beings experience joy and suffering. The joys and sorrows of others are the same joys and sorrows that I have experienced in my life, therefore I understand them and I will try to do my best to help others, just like in the past I have anxiously desired to be helped in my time of need."

However, the sage also knows that the greatest happiness lies not in the comforts of the body and mind, but in the attainment of the transcendental realization of the Self, so s/he will try to encourage the conditioned souls to pursue the highest purpose of human life.

This transcendental concern may seem similar to the mentality of some missionaries that conduct activities of social assistance and welfare with the overt or covert motivation of gaining new converts for their particular affiliation. But in fact there is a huge difference between conversion into the sectarian allegiance to a particular faith and the genuine realization of the transcendental nature of the Atman, that is liberating the mind from all divisive identification, affiliation and bondage.

अर्जुन उवाच ।

arjuna uvāca ।

योऽयं योगस्त्वया प्रोक्तः साम्येन मधुसूदन । एतस्याहं न पश्यामि चञ्चलत्वात्स्थितिं स्थिराम् ॥ ६-३३ ॥

yo'yaṁ yogastvayā proktaḥ sāmyena madhusūdana । etasyāhaṁ na paśyāmi cañcalatvāsthitim sthīrām ॥ 6-33 ॥

arjunah: Arjuna; *uvaca*: said; *yah*: it; *ayam*: this; *yogah*: yoga; *tvaya*: by you; *proktaḥ*: explained; *samyena*: as sameness; *madhusudana*: o Madhusudana (Krishna); *etasya*: of this; *aham*: I; *na*: not; *paśyami*: (I) see; *canalvat*: the quality of restlessness; *sthitim*: (permanent) situation; *sthiram*: firmly established.

Arjuna said: "O Madhusudana, I do not see how it is possible to consistently perform this yoga that you have now described to me as equanimity, because (the mind) is restless."

Krishna has described the traditional system of *yoga* and *sannyasa* as it was practiced in the ancient times. It is said that in the beginning, in Satya yuga, the *yuga dharma* was precisely the practice of *yoga* and *sannyasa*, that transcendental meditation that purifies the intelligence from all material identification and attachment and carries it to the level of Brahman realization. This was possible because all human beings were capable of observing and following the basic principles of *dharma*: *tapas* (austerity), *sauca* (cleanliness), *daya* (compassion) and *satya* (truthfulness). People were able to retire alone in the forest and live in a totally detached way.

With the passing of time in the cycle of the *yugas*, mankind gradually became more degraded, because of the restlessness of the mind and its overwhelming desires. First austerity was lost, and people became lusty for the pleasures of the heavenly planets and the material advantages that one can obtain on this earth: a good birth, good descendants, a good wife or husband, fame, wealth and opulence, material power, beauty and physical vigor or fitness, mental strength, knowledge, and so on. Therefore in Treta yuga the ritual performance of sacrifices becomes the *yuga dharma*, that is faithfully executing the *nitya karmani*, the daily duties that include the *homa* or fire sacrifice. The main qualification and concern for this type of religious practice is cleanliness (*sauca*), therefore tradition puts a lot of emphasis on purification and cleanliness at every step - both externally and internally. Without the proper cleanliness and purification, a person has no *adhikara* (right) to perform the traditional rituals, while on the other side, anyone can become qualified through the proper purification and cleanliness system.

In the cycle of the universal seasons, Treta yuga is followed by Dvapara yuga, and the qualities of human beings diminish accordingly. Cleanliness becomes difficult to uphold, both internally and externally, and therefore the focus of religious activities is shifted towards the compassionate *yuga dharma* of Deity worship. Although cleanliness and austerity are always recommended, Deity worship in the temple can be open to those who do not possess very high qualifications in that field, as they can always attend the functions, offer their homage and receive the *prasadam*. The direct altar worship is delegated to priests that can maintain high standards of cleanliness and austerity because they are not required to do any other job, and who act as intermediaries in the relationship between the general people and the *vigrahas* installed in the temple. Therefore in Dvapara yuga, wealthy *kshatriyas* and *vaisyas* take up the responsibility of establishing temples and providing for the regular maintenance of the *brahmanas* who perform the rituals in the name of the *karta* (the financer who dedicates the worship) and of the entire society. Of course cleanliness is always encouraged, especially for the officiating priests but also for the general people albeit in a lesser degree. For example, traditional temples always have sacred tanks or pools, called *kundas* or *sarovaras*, where the devotees and the pilgrims can bathe or at least clean up a bit before entering the temple. But the main activity of temples is the compassionate distribution of sanctified food (*prasadam*) and other consecrated items (such as holy water, flowers etc) and the public readings and discussions about the *shastra*, so that the general people can obtain benefit from the transcendental knowledge without having to strictly observe the rules of cleanliness or austerity.

At the time when Krishna is talking to Arjuna on the battlefield of Kurukshetra, the Dvapara yuga is coming to a close and Kali yuga is approaching, with the gradual degradation of the qualifications of human beings, who will lose compassion after having already lost cleanliness and austerity. The only religious principle that will still remain to support spiritual life will be *satya*, truthfulness, and this is the quality that Arjuna is now demonstrating, by honestly and candidly objecting that the ancient system explained by Krishna (*ayam yah proktaḥ*, "this that has been explained") is very difficult and impractical for this age.

Of course Arjuna is much more qualified than us, and he expresses this opinion for our benefit rather than considering his personal qualifications and capabilities, but what he says is the pure truth and we need to become truthful - i.e. humble and honest - enough to recognize it.

चञ्चलं हि मनः कृष्ण प्रमाथि बलवद् दृढम् । तस्याहं निग्रहं मन्ये वायोरिव सुदुष्करम् ॥ ६-३४ ॥

cañcalaṁ hi manaḥ kṛṣṇa pramāthi balavad dṛḍham । tasyāhaṁ nigrahaṁ manye vāyoriva suduṣkaram ॥ 6-34 ॥

canalam: restless; *hi*: indeed; *manah*: the mind; *krishna*: o Krishna; *pramathi*: turbulent; *balavat*: strong; *dridham*: obstinate; *tasya*: of it; *aham*: I; *nigraham*: conquering; *manye*: (I) consider; *vayoh*: than the wind; *eva*: certainly; *su-dushkaram*: extremely difficult.

"O Krishna, the mind is indeed restless, turbulent, powerful and stubborn. I think that controlling it would be more difficult than controlling the wind."

This is one of the most famous verses of *Gita*, and one of the most useful in the daily practice of *sadhana*. Arjuna is a very practical person, and he can understand the problems of people. He is the perfect example of the *yogi* as described in verse 32, as one who can sympathize with the joys and sufferings of others, and looks compassionately upon them in their difficulties.

As we have already commented in the first chapter regarding Arjuna's sorrow, we should never fall into the mistake of considering him an ordinary person, a confused conditioned soul. Arjuna is a very close and eternal associate of Krishna, and descended with him in this world for the purpose of manifesting the wonderful adventures of assisting the Lord's mission.

As stated by the Lord himself, Arjuna has been a close protagonist of the Lord's *lila* during many lifetimes (see *Gita* 4.4), acting under the superintendence of Yogamaya and apparently forgetting what he is not expected to know, so that he will be able to better play his role, like all the other divine manifestations that appeared with Krishna to assist his mission.

Arjuna's objections in this verse clearly demonstrate that the purpose of meditation is to control the mind and focus it on the contemplation of Transcendence. Many uninformed people believe that *yoga* meditation consists in fantasizing or visualizing imaginary pictures, or simply to witness the constant whimsical flow of the thoughts, perceptions, desires and emotions that run through the mind. This idea is created by the clever mind that naturally resists all forms of control just like a wild horse stubbornly rears and kicks in the attempt to overthrow his rider.

The mind is made of a subtle substance that is able to change appearance and movements, just like an ever-transforming monster that keeps sliding off our grasp, even taking up the appearance of Guru and God in order to deceive us into following its whims.

It is easy for the unbridled obstinate mind to twist things and ideas around and to rationalize and try to justify even the greatest nonsense.

We can overcome this problem by listening to our intelligence, that is superior to the mind, and to purify ourselves from all material identifications and attachments that constitute the roots of the selfish desires of the mind.

श्रीभगवानुवाच ।

śrībhagavānuvāca ।

असंशयं महाबाहो मनो दुर्निग्रहं चलम् । अभ्यासेन तु कौन्तेय वैराग्येण च गृह्यते ॥ ६-३५ ॥

asamśayaṁ mahābāho mano durnigrahaṁ calam । abhyāseṇa tu kaunteya vairāgyeṇa ca gṛhyate ।। 6-35 ।।

sri-bhagavan: the wonderful Lord; *uvaca*: said; *asamsayam*: without (any) doubts; *maha-baho*: o mighty armed (Arjuna); *manah*: the mind; *durnigraham*: difficult to catch; *calam*: moving; *abhyasena*: by practice; *tu*: but; *kaunteya*: o son of Kunti (Arjuna); *vairagyena*: by renunciation; *ca*: and; *grihyate*: is brought under control.

The Lord said: "O mighty armed (Arjuna), certainly the mind is restless and very difficult to manage, but it can be controlled by practice and detachment, o son of Kunti."

One of the most frequent questions asked by beginners in *yoga* practice is, "how can I control the mind?"

Gita clearly recognizes the fact that controlling the mind is not an easy job, but it gives the perfect formula: *abhyasena* (by practice) and *vairagyena* (by detachment). The next verse also hints at some specific exercises that help in that regard. The *Yoga sutras* (1.12) by Patanjali also give the same instruction: *abhyasa-vairagyabhyam tan-nirodhah*, "The cessation (of the *cittavrittis*) is done by (persistent) practice (*abhyasa*) and detachment (*vairagya*)".

Practice and detachment can be exercised with the help of three virtues that are particularly important in the journey of spiritual realization: *utsaha* (enthusiasm), *dhairya* (patience) and *nischaya* (confidence). The last chapter of *Gita* (18.26) also lists *utsaha* (enthusiasm) together with *dhriti* (determination), that is a variation of *dhairya* (patience). Anyone who had the experience of taking care of children knows that it takes a lot of enthusiasm, patience and determination, as well as practice and detachment. Training one's mind is very much like educating a child. By nature, small children are restless, turbulent, energetic and stubborn, and they constantly come up with innumerable demands - desires, ideas and emotions. Some children are stronger and cleverer than others and they are therefore more difficult to manage, but when properly trained and educated, they become the best friends of the people who have taken care of them. Already in 6.5 Krishna has said that one's mind can be one's best friend or worst enemy.

Punishing or merely restraining the child are not effective systems, and allowing the child to do whatever he wants is generally dangerous; in both cases the child will behave like an enemy to us, and there will just be sufferings. The best course of action consists in taking the guidance of intelligence and good sense, and following Krishna's instructions in *Gita*: we must become the best friends of our mind by treating it like a beloved child who needs the proper training. What does a child need? Some good, healthy and tasty food, sufficient rest, some fun, and training exercises suitable for his/ her stage of development. Under the guidance of an expert teacher, we can train our mind successfully if we give it the proper food, rest and fun, and engage it in suitable work, as also confirmed earlier in *Gita* (6.16, 17). Every time the restless childish mind wanders off, we must patiently bring it back, with tolerance, enthusiasm and gentle firmness.

It is also extremely important to offer the mind something better than what it already knows: *rasa-varjam raso 'py asya param drishtva nivatate*, "it can give up the taste (for such objects) when he sees/ finds the Supreme/ something that has a higher/ better taste" (2.59).

The superiority of the gentle, patient and positively enthusiastic method, as opposed to the "hard way" that some people believe is required to deal with small children, is highlighted by the humorous hint offered by Krishna in this verse when he calls Arjuna *maha-baho*, "mighty armed".

Can we control the wind with our mighty arms? Certainly not. One may also try to use brute force to try to control the mind (or a small child) but the results will not be good. Just like the wind or the water find their way around obstacles, popping up again in unexpected (and often more violent and destructive) ways, a repressed mind will become distorted and create many problems that sometimes may seem totally unconnected to the original issue. For example, a child that does not receive sufficient attentions may develop a physical disease, a neglected need of proper nourishment for the body may take the form of craving for junk food, a river in spate whose waters are not properly channeled will break the levies, and a repressed mind will create a series of unhealthy obsessions and phobias.

The gently firm method recommended by Krishna is certainly the best. He stresses this important point by using the word *asamsayam*, "without (any) doubts".

असंयतात्मना योगो दुष्प्राप इति मे मतिः । वश्यात्मना तु यतता शक्योऽवाप्तुमुपायतः ॥ ६-३६ ॥

asam̐yatātmanā yogo duṣṣprāpa iti me matih | vaśyātmanā tu yatatā śakyo'vāptumupāyataḥ || 6-36 ||

asamyata: uncontrolled; *atmana*: self; *yogah*: yoga; *dushprapah*: difficult to obtain; *iti*: like this; *me*: my; *matih*: opinion; *vasya*: controlled; *atmana*: self; *tu*: but; *yatata*: making efforts; *sakyah*: possible; *avaptum*: to achieve; *upayatah*: by the means (I have) described.

"My opinion is that it is very difficult to attain yoga when the self/ mind is not engaged/ controlled, but there are (appropriate) means by which with a little effort one will be able to control the self/ mind."

Controlling one's mind is certainly the main issue in *yoga*. All the practice in *asana* and *pranayama* has the only purpose of helping us to control the mind, because without being able to direct the mind firmly towards the chosen object of meditation, there is no question of *yoga*. The most famous authority on *yoga*, Patanjali, clearly states in the first chapter of his *Yogasutras* (1.2): *yogah citta-vritti-nirodhah*, "Yoga is the cessation of the fluctuations in the mind". This is possible only when we become able to control the activity of the mind and focus it firmly on one object only - what is called *dharana*, "holding the meditation firmly".

The first step in the process consists in deciding that we will not run after the myriad of desires, impulses, feelings, emotions, thoughts, plans, ideas, fantasies, fears, and anxieties that the mind constantly proposes us. Therefore only a fool will think that he can practice *yoga* with the purpose of getting a trim and fit body that is able to run after the whims of the mind and the desires for sense gratification.

Some people even think that we should "get rid" of the mind, but this is simply stupid. The mind is an element of material nature, and we cannot "get rid" of the mind any more than we can get rid of the water that composes our bodies. Also, the idea of "cutting off the mind" because we have problems controlling it is something like deciding to cut off our head because we have a headache. It is true that controlling the mind is difficult, but when we need to do something important, we should make an effort to overcome difficulties. We need commitment and determination in order to achieve any good result. Maybe we will not succeed 100% immediately, but even a small percentage of success is better than nothing, and without making any effort our life will not become any better. The word *yatata* means precisely "making efforts, striving". Krishna reassures us: it is difficult, but it is possible. The word *sakya* ("possible") derives from the same root of *saktum* ("to be able to") and *sakti* ("power"). As individual souls, we have the power to control at least our own mind: this is the door that will take us beyond, towards the greatest possible power in this world. The word *upayatah* suggests that there are means, rules, methods and exercises that we can use to achieve success in this enterprise, but the essential point is always about engagement. Control means engagement: positive engagement enables us to prevent the mind from negative engagement. Another very important point is that one's mind must be controlled by oneself, not controlled by others. Having someone else control your mind is not the solution to your problems: it can help in the beginning, during a training period, because you need to learn good habits and practice the exercises that will enable you to control your mind movements, but after some time you need to stand on your own feet and take responsibility for your own progress.

अर्जुन उवाच ।

arjuna uvāca |

अयतिः श्रद्धयोपेतो योगाच्चलितमानसः । अप्राप्य योगसंसिद्धिं कां गतिं कृष्ण गच्छति ॥ ६-३७ ॥

ayatiḥ śraddhayopeto yogāccalitamānasaḥ | aprāpya yogasamsiddhiṁ kām gatiṁ kṛṣṇa gacchati || 6-37 ||

arjuna: Arjuna; *uvaca*: said; *ayatih*: one who fails (in the effort); *śraddhaya*: with faith; *upetah*: having commenced; *yogat*: from the yoga; *calita*: strayed; *manasaḥ*: the mind; *aprapya*: has not attained; *yoga-samsiddhim*: the perfection of *yoga*; *kam*: which; *gatiḥ*: destination; *krishna*: o Krishna; *gacchati*: he goes to.

Arjuna said: "O Krishna, (let's say that) someone has faithfully embraced yoga but due to insufficient renunciation/ efforts s/he is led astray by the mind and fails to attain the complete perfection of yoga. What destination will s/he achieve?"

Committing oneself fully to *yoga*, to the serious and dedicated practice of Self realization, is not an easy task, because it requires a complete paradigm shift. It is not a mere hobby or leisure activity. It is a full time occupation.

We need to radically rearrange our priorities, starting with our own identification, and this important choice will inevitably change many things in our life - including our relationships, our lifestyle, our position in society. Material illusions can be very gratifying, and when we give them up we may get the feeling that we are losing something very important, that we will not get back so easily if we changed our mind and decided that the path of *yoga* is too difficult for us.

It will be difficult to leave an affectionate family, a good social position, a prestigious job, a comfortable house, and the little indulgences we call "creature comforts" (although we do not really need to lose them - we need to renounce our identification and attachments to them) but even the least successful person in this world has some attachments, some "comfort zone" he does not like to give up, at least in his consciousness. In the 1960s and 1970s, many young people in the West left their homes and families, dropped out from school and refused to get stuck into conventional professional careers and to adapt themselves to conventional social expectations. They had the strong feeling that there must be something more in life, something that is worth pursuing beyond the illusory trappings of the materialistic dream and the illusory identifications and attachments that were obviously insufficient to explain life and make it really worthy of living.

Most of those people were rather ignorant and confused, but they took inspiration from the early preachers of Sanatana Dharma that had ventured in the world to bring the transcendental message of *yoga* to the wealthiest countries of the world - some even traveled to India and lived together with *sadhus* to "experiment" on "how to expand the area of consciousness".

It took a lot of courage and dedication to just drop everything and just search for the meaning of life, to live with integrity and a higher purpose, and there was always a price to pay for burning the bridges behind oneself. Arjuna is thinking along the same lines: if one gives up all attachments and identifications to engage in *yoga*, it will not be possible to return to a life of ignorant bliss and attachments. And because it seems so difficult to achieve success in the higher dimension of life in *yoga*, what will happen to someone who fails because he is not strong and determined enough? What if he changes his mind and decides that he should have taken it a little easier? What if he "bit off more than he could chew"?

The word *ayati* refers to one who fails in the effort, that cannot strive enough, or is not diligent enough. In the previous verse the word *yatata*, "making efforts" clearly stated that it takes a lot of determination and work to achieve success on the path of *yoga*. The expression *yogat calita manasah* translates as "the mind has gone away from the *yoga*", indicating a powerful urge to change the course of one's life, a total loss of interest, as when we say that our heart is "somewhere else". Because the mind is so powerful and difficult to control, when it leaves the path of *yoga* and simply refuses to engage any more into it, the situation becomes unbearable and it is just impossible to continue to work in that direction.

कच्चिन्नोभयविभ्रष्टश्छिन्नाभ्रमिव नश्यति । अप्रतिष्ठो महाबाहो विमूढो ब्रह्मणः पथि ॥ ६-३८ ॥

kaccinnobhayavibhraṣṭaśchinnābhramiva naśyati | apratiṣṭho mahābāho vimūḍho brahmaṇaḥ pathi || 6-38 ||

kaccit: anything; *na*: not; *ubhaya*: of the two; *vibhrastah*: fallen; *chinna*: torn; *abhram*: cloud; *iva*: like; *nasyati*: is destroyed; *apratishthah*: without any position/ support; *maha-baho*: o mighty armed (Krishna); *vimudha*: confused; *brahmanah*: of Brahman; *pathi*: on the path.

"O mighty armed (Krishna), (I wonder) whether s/he will not perish like a scattered cloud, since s/he has abandoned both (pursuits, i.e. ritual activity and engagement in *sannyasa yoga*) and remains without a position/ stand, confused on the path of Transcendence."

In verse 2.41, Krishna explained the importance of seriously focusing on one thing only, which saves our intelligence from getting dispersed into many ineffective enterprises (*ekeha kuru nandana bahu sakha hy anantas ca buddhayo 'avyavasayinam*). It is not possible to attain Self realization without giving up materialistic pursuits, identifications and attachments, because the path of *yoga* requires a totally different perspective on life. The path of *yoga* is the path of *moksha*, and one who is seeking *moksha* has already gone beyond *artha* and *kama*. The natural evolution of the civilized human being goes from the stage of learning and practicing about *dharma* to the stage when he engages in the dharmic pursuit of *artha* and *kama*. These two stages correspond to the *ashramas* called *brahmacharya* (celibate life) and *grihastha* (married life).

Every human being needs to receive the proper training from an early age, so that he will be able to learn good principles, habits and skills. This training is best received as a student in the Guru's house, starting from the age of 5, when a child has become physically and mentally self-sufficient enough to seriously engage in his studies. After completing his training, the young man can successfully engage in the pursuit of *artha* and *kama* without the danger of falling into *vikarma*, or detrimental activities and choices that will obstruct his development and create a dark future for him. He marries and engages in a suitable professional occupation and his regular duties, reaping the fruits of his good *karma* in the form of wealth, knowledge, social position, respect from good people and so on. All this is perfectly legitimate, but as Krishna has explained in the previous chapters, such pleasures are temporary and do not constitute the real purpose of life. All scriptures clearly teach that *artha* and *kama* are just temporary stages in life, and that *moksha* is the highest and most important acquisition for a civilized human being.

Yoga is the path to *moksha*. But what if one was not ready? What if he still wanted to have some *artha* and *kama* from life? What if he felt that he still had something to do, some debts to repay, some work to complete? What if he wanted another chance at doing something good for his family, for his community, and for the world? Of course we know that all this is still possible, and at a higher level, after attaining the liberated stage, so nothing is really ever lost. But what if one is still feeling childish, and small, and attached to the little things that make the life of an ordinary human being? There is nothing wrong in that. The Divine plan is built on the principles of *dharma*, so there must be compassion.

We do not get one chance only, like the abrahamics say, foolishly rejecting the real fact of reincarnation and imagining that a few years in disadvantaged circumstances are all we are offered to win an eternity of happiness in heaven or be sentenced to an eternity of sufferings in hell. God is much more compassionate than that. Whatever good work, whatever progress we have made, we will be able to take it with us to the next lifetime, as Krishna will explain in the next verses. While we cannot take material possessions with us when we leave our body, our spiritual realizations will remain to our credit, and in the next lifetime we will get better circumstances and opportunities to continue our progress and evolution.

In this verse Arjuna responds to Krishna's subtle humor by also addressing him as *maha baho*, "mighty armed", but in this context the name is appealing to Krishna's powerful protection, so that in his compassion he will support the confused souls. In other words, Arjuna is replying, "My dear Krishna, there is nothing to laugh about here: the sufferings of people are real enough, even if they are due to illusion."

एतन्मे संशयं कृष्ण छेत्तुमर्हस्यशेषतः । त्वदन्यः संशयस्यास्य छेत्ता न ह्युपपद्यते ॥ ६-३९ ॥

etanme samśayaṁ kṛṣṇa chettumarhasyaśeṣataḥ | tvadanyaḥ samśayasyāśya chettā na hyupadyate || 6-39 ||

etat: this; *me*: my; *samsayam*: doubt; *krishna*: o Krishna; *chettum*: to cut off/ to eradicate/ remove; *arhasi*: you should; *aseshatah*: completely; *tvad-anyaḥ*: other than you; *samsayasyasya*: of the doubt; *chetta*: one who cuts off; *na*: not; *hi*: certainly; *upadyate*: can be found.

"O Krishna, (please) you should dispel these doubts completely for me, because I cannot find anyone else but you who can remove uncertainty."

We are entitled to have doubts, because doubting is a faculty of intelligence, and blind following is always dangerous even when we are following a good person or a good path. However, we should not remain in doubt forever. The faculty of doubt is meant to encourage us to find the proper information and understanding, so that we will confidently engage in the best path we can find, supporting our choice with the faith we have developed from the experiences we have had. When we overcome our doubts after the proper deliberation, we can really progress in life. This crucial step, that consists in clarifying and overcoming doubts, has already been mentioned several times in *Gita*:

"I am asking you to clarify the confusion of my mind, to tell me without a doubt what is the best thing to do" (2.7), "get up, o son of Kunti, and abandoning all doubts, fix your mind on the battle" (2.37), "Please give me one instruction only, that will not create doubts, and by which I will obtain the best result" (3.2), "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" (4.40), "One who has cut through all doubts by knowledge, finds his desires turning towards the self" (4.41), "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" (4.42), "O Krishna, please tell me what will be the best, without any doubt" (5.1), "The seers of Reality have been purified from all faults and have cut off all doubts..." (5.25), "This is undoubtedly the *yoga* system that must be practiced without getting discouraged." (6.23).

How is it possible to overcome doubt? We need someone we can trust, that has already experienced what we want to attain, and that is only interested to help us, without any strings attached. If one of these factors is missing, then the person we want to trust can be a serious disappointment. Arjuna clearly states that Krishna is the best possible person to solve our doubts, as it will become even more apparent in the next chapters.

श्रीभगवानुवाच ।

śrībhagavānuvāca ।

पार्थ नैवेह नामुत्र विनाशस्तस्य विद्यते । न हि कल्याणकृत्कश्चिद् दुर्गतिं तात गच्छति ॥ ६-४० ॥

pārtha naiveha nāmutra vināśastasya vidyate । na hi kalyāṇakṛtkāścīd durgatim tāta gacchati ॥ 6-40 ॥

sri-bhagavan: the wonderful Lord; *uvaca*: said; *partha*: o son of Pritha (Arjuna); *na*: not; *eva*: certainly; *iha*: here (in this world/ life); *na*: not; *amutra*: in the next (world/ life); *vinasah*: destruction; *tasya*: of him; *vidyate*: is known; *na*: not; *hi*: certainly; *kalyana-krit*: one who performs good/ auspicious activities; *kascit*: any; *durgatim*: bad situation; *tata*: (my) dear (son); *gacchati*: goes to.

The Lord said: "O Partha, s/he will never be lost, in this world or in the next life. One who is engaged in beneficial activities will never meet with a bad end."

The first point in Krishna's reply to Arjuna is reassurance. When we say that God is good, loving and compassionate, we cannot really believe that he will sentence a poor soul to eternal hell just because of some mistake or weakness - also considering that it was God to create human beings in the first place, with their weakness and fallibility, and sanctioned the unfavorable circumstances in which human beings must live and make their choices.

The truth is that all living entities are created as parts of God's body, and their experience in the material universe is meant to be an evolutionary journey - its meaning is reflected in the various dimensions of the microcosm-macrocosm like a series of mirrors reflecting each other. Each living entity appears, grows and strives towards completion and perfection, and at the time of death it naturally moves to the next higher level of evolution; from the unicellular organisms to the human form of life, the laws of progress are naturally and automatically engraved in the heart of the *jiva*, and the process is instinctive. At the human level, these laws of progress are also given in the form of religious teachings, that must be in conformity to the natural law of progress eternally inscribed in the heart of the *jiva* - what we call "the voice of conscience" or the *sanatana dharma*.

The opportunity of human birth is extraordinarily important because it constitutes a sort of "graduation" or "coming of age", granting special freedom of choice and action and a greater power to participate more in God's work, just like a grown-up child will be given the keys of the house or the car, a more substantial allowance for his expenditures, his own TV set or computer, and so on.

However, with greater power comes greater responsibility: if the human being misuses the facilities he has been given, he will be held accountable and even deprived of some of the privileges he used against himself. This is why sometimes the natural evolution of the *jiva* is stopped and even appears to have been reversed, with a next incarnation that is lower than the previous one.

Such lower birth can be as a disadvantaged human being (handicapped, poor, unfortunate etc) or as an animal or a plant, but it is important to understand that the laws of *karma* are very complex and that in no instance our good actions and especially our spiritual evolution will be lost: they will simply remain dormant and will be revived at the proper time to help us continue our evolutionary journey. Many stories from *Puranas*, *Itihasas* and *Upanishads* confirm this fact.

As Krishna has explained in the last verses, everything is based on personal effort (*yatata*, *ayatih*). We only fail due to lack of personal effort - either in this present lifetime or in a previous lifetime... which created the karmic consequences of difficult circumstances in this present lifetime. Why someone fails and falls from the path of transcendence? It is only because of previous bad *karma*, therefore if someone performs good activities, the balance of *karma* will become favorable and after a short time all difficulties will be overcome.

In this verse, the word *tata* is particularly significant. It refers to a bodily relationship (*tanoti*) such as the one between father and son or between teacher and disciple (in Vedic tradition the disciple is considered exactly like a son). As a patient and benevolent parent that is teaching a baby how to walk his first steps, God watches over us and guides us in our efforts, step after step, and gradually letting us go more and more, so that we can learn to stand on our two feet and grow up, becoming stronger and more responsible, until we reach the level where we understand and appreciate God's nature and mission. At that point we attain our "final graduation" or the "full maturity", by which our consciousness becomes firmly established in God's consciousness. This level is called *brahma bhuta*, "the existence of Brahman", or *moksha*, "liberation", and generally takes several lifetimes to be attained, as Krishna will confirm in the next chapter: *bahunam janmanam ante* (7.19).

प्राप्य पुण्यकृतां लोकानुषित्वा शाश्वतीः समाः । शुचीनां श्रीमतां गेहे योगभ्रष्टोऽभिजायते ॥ ६-४१ ॥

prāpya puṇyakṛtāṃ lokānuṣitvā śāśvatīḥ samāḥ | śucināṃ śrīmatāṃ gehe yogabhraṣṭo'bhijāyate || 6-41 ||

prāpya: after achieving; *puṇya-kṛtam*: one who has performed auspicious/ good activities; *lokan*: the planets; *uṣhitva*: after dwelling (there); *sasvatīḥ*: numerous; *samāḥ*: years; *sucinam*: of pure (people); *srimatam*: of wealthy (people); *gehe*: in the house; *yoga-bhrashtah*: one who has fallen from the path of *yoga*; *abhijayate*: takes birth.

"After attaining the planets of those who are virtuous and residing there for many years, one who has fallen from *yoga* takes birth in the house of people who are pure and prosperous."

In this verse Krishna continues to reassure Arjuna, declaring that the *yogi* that renounces material identification and attachments will not lose the material facilitations and benefits pursued by the materialists engaged in their professional and religious duties. As he had already explained in 2.46: "Whatever value is found in a pond is also found, for all purposes, also in a large lake, and similarly whatever is contained in the all the *Vedas* can be found in a person who has realized the knowledge of Brahman".

As *yoga* is precisely the science of Brahman realization, it must naturally offer all the benefits that are contained in all the knowledge of the *Vedas*, what to speak of the ordinary and imperfect knowledge that is characteristic of non-civilized people. Materialistic people worship God to obtain material blessings, such as elevation to the heavenly planets, a good birth, wealth and other similar facilities, therefore Krishna mentions such attainments as intrinsically available to the *yogi* in virtue of whatever effort s/he has done in the direction of personal evolution, even if such effort was not completely successful. One can fall from the path of *yoga* after a long progress or after a short progress, and the circumstances of the next opportunity will be directly related with the amount of work and therefore with the credit that the *yogi* had accumulated in his effort.

Elevation to the heavenly planets is not a bad thing, because the kingdoms of the *devas* are characterized by *sattva*, and life there offers ample opportunities for progress and engagement in the service to God's mission. However, because the residents of the heavenly planets enjoy much greater power and pleasures than the people of the Earth, it is more difficult for them to seriously concentrate on progress in *yoga* and to abandon such attractive and virtuous material identifications and attachments. This is why after a long and very pleasant vacation for rest and relaxation in the best possible resorts in the universe, the failed *yogi* is given another opportunity to engage in serious work in the human form of life, and in favorable circumstances. Taking birth in a good family means growing up in a favorable atmosphere that supports spiritual life and personal evolution through the example and precept of great cleanliness (*sucinam*) and other qualities that attract the blessings of Mother Lakshmi, the bestower of wealth and prosperity (*sri-matam*). These qualities are sense of responsibility, respect towards wealth resources, and proper engagement in hard work. Certainly taking birth in such a family provides a fundamental base of support for further training in *yoga*.

At lower levels, where the family may not be so good, there must still be some cleanliness or sense of order and discipline, in order to maintain a sufficient amount of wealth that enables the children of the family to get a proper education and the opportunity to pursue *yoga* without being harassed by financial difficulties. However, wealth accumulated by illicit and unethical means is not considered to be *sri-matam* and is not accompanied by *suci* or cleanliness - a quality that applies both to the external cleanliness and to the internal or mental cleanliness. People born in families that are simply possessing a lot of money or property, but do not have the blessings of Lakshmi Devi, will lose their wealth and happiness in various ways; this may also be a blessing in disguise because the unfavorable situation will create a friction between the sincere nature of the fallen *yogi* and the unhealthy environment, pushing him to renounce all family ties, identifications and attachments. The Divine plan will provide for the most suitable arrangement according to each individual's particular needs.

अथवा योगिनामेव कुले भवति धीमताम् । एतद्धि दुर्लभतरं लोके जन्म यदीदृशम् ॥ ६-४२ ॥

athavā yogināmeva kule bhavati dhīmatām | etaddhi durlabhataram loke janma yadīdṛśam || 6-42 ||

atha va: or; *yoginam*: of *yogis*; *eva*: certainly; *kule*: in the family; *bhavati*: becomes/ takes birth; *dhimatam*: of the wise; *etat*: this; *hi*: indeed; *durlabhataram*: extremely difficult to obtain; *loke*: in (this) world/ among people; *janma*: birth; *yat*: which; *idrisam*: of this type.

"S/he can even take birth in a family of wise *yogis* - certainly such a birth is extremely rare in this world."

Birth in a family of *sucinam* (clean people) and *srimatam* (wealthy people) is blessed with favorable circumstances for personal evolution, and it is not so difficult to attain. There are many families that offer such benefits, both in India and at global level all over the world. Actually, at present it is even easier to find such families in western countries, where the level of prosperity is higher and people have proper bathrooms, cleaner houses and streets than what is generally seen in present India. Also, there are more opportunities for *sattvic* sense enjoyment, with a greater variety of fruits and vegetables, milk products, grains, and similar virtuous vegetarian ingredients and recipes than what we can find at present in India. And in all western cities there are dozens if not hundreds of *yoga* centers, and the ethics of work and individual responsibility are well developed.

Granted, in ancient times Indian civilization was much better, even compared to the highest level of progress, development, opulence and well-being attained in the western countries. In the ancient Vedic civilization, for example, each home had a bathroom and a functional system of water pipes for centralized sewage disposal, as we can still see in the archaeological sites of the Sarasvati valley. In the description of the *Puranas*, we see that the cities were characterized by many amenities and beautiful buildings, gardens full of flowers, parks and *sarovaras*, or man-made lakes with *ghats* or steps made of stone that descended into the water just like in modern swimming pools.

From the descriptions of the *Kama sutras*, we learn that the quality of life in such ancient Indian civilization was extremely high and refined, and people had long hours to dedicate to pleasurable activities such as poetry, music, dance, calligraphy, making of riddles,

cooking delicious foods and preparing a variety of drinks. They were also making their own oil, sugar, clarified butter, floral bouquets, garlands and other types of decorations, perfumes and scented incense, spinning and weaving, beautiful clothing and ornaments, gardening, interior decoration, artificial flowers, hairdressing and hair dyeing, cosmetics, toys and ropes. They also learned many languages, used to go on picnics, and often engaged in various types of playful games such as chess etc.

Homes were carefully kept clean and pure, and had fine furniture and especially beautiful cots and sitting places, soft beds with white sheets, kitchen gardens, a rich flower garden with a swing and a small pond, ample storage rooms and so on. Such wonderful opulence made India famous all over the world in ancient times, with merchants traveling up and down from China, Indonesia, Egypt, Rome, and Ethiopia. There is ample archaeological evidence about all this, and in fact the climate and the natural resources of the Indian subcontinent are perfectly sufficient to ensure an extremely high quality of life. If this does not materialize today, it is due to poor management of the resources, ignorance, neglect and foolishness only.

At the time when Krishna spoke the *Gita* to Arjuna, Indian civilization was still extremely advanced, opulent and refined, so when he speaks of wealthy people, we should take his words seriously. Yet, in this verse Krishna says that even better than the birth in the house of the *sucinam* and *srimatam*, is taking birth in the family of wise spiritualists that are engaged in the practice of *yoga* as explained by *Gita*.

The expression *yoginam dhimatam kule*, "in the family of wise *yogis*", implies that the genuine practice of *yoga* does not require the acceptance of the order of *sannyasa*. One can effectively and successfully practice *yoga* even while living in ordinary family life, with wife and children, and engaging in a suitable professional occupation, especially in the field of teaching, writing and conducting religious ceremonies and festivals. These families of *brahma rishis* and *raja rishis* were the illustrious origin of descendants that are still bearing the family names of Acharya, Gosvami, etc. Unfortunately, by the effect of Kali yuga the glorious tradition of such families has become lost, and their descendants are often more degraded than people who are of lesser ancestry. We sincerely wish that such descendants will understand the importance of reforming themselves and returning to the glorious qualifications of their ancestors, through a sincere effort guided by the original teachings. Of course any qualified person, from any family of origin, can become a genuine Acharya or Yogi, and start his own *kula* or family tradition, as many Rishis did in the past. Again, the required process consists simply in following the ancient original teachings.

Another meaning of *kula*, or "family", applies to the house of the Guru, of which a disciple becomes a member when he chooses to remain there even after completing his normal course of studies. In ancient times it was not uncommon for a brilliant disciple to be officially adopted by the Guru and become his son and successor under all aspects.

तत्र तं बुद्धिसंयोगं लभते पौर्वदेहिकम् ।

यतते च ततो भूयः संसिद्धौ कुरुनन्दन ॥ ६-४३ ॥

atratam buddhisamyogam labhate paurvadehikam | yatate ca tato bhūyaḥ samsiddhau kurunandana || 6-43 ||

tatra: there/ then; *tam*: that; *buddhi-samyogam*: intelligent engagement/ engagement in *buddhi yoga*; *labhate*: obtains; *paurva-dehikam*: from the previous body; *yatate*: he makes efforts; *ca*: and; *tatah*: then; *bhuyah*: again; *samsiddhau*: towards perfection; *kuru-nandana*: o beloved of Kuru.

"O son of Kuru, there (in such birth) s/he recovers the realizations from his/ her previous lifetime, and again resumes his/her efforts towards full perfection."

When the fallen *yogi* obtains a new favorable environment and circumstances presented by Krishna in the previous verses, he or she should be very careful not to waste that valuable opportunity. S/he should sincerely engage in hard work, making serious efforts in his/ her own individual progress, properly utilizing everything that has been supplied by the kindness of God, and feel encouraged and inspired to continue on the path towards success in *yoga*.

It is very important to understand that such effort is still required. We cannot afford to become complacent and neglectful, and delude ourselves into believing that simply by dint of our high birth, wealth, good position in society etc, we will automatically attain the goal of life. Sooner or later, the fallen *yogi* that has been supported by the favorable circumstances and has been thriving on the good results of his past good activities will find himself facing the very same obstacles that stopped his progress and evolution in the previous lifetime. Advancement in *yoga* will be naturally smooth only up to the point where he had left his previous progress, just like a student that failed an exam after a full year of studies finds life very easy in the next year while repeating the same class, but only until he comes to the point where he had not learned the required lessons well enough to pass the exam in the first instance.

This is a serious moment of crisis, that can create a deep suffering and a lot of doubts, and even the danger of a worse downfall. If the fallen *yogi* makes the wrong choices in this favorable lifetime, allowing himself to be deluded by bodily identifications and attachments and does not make any effort in the proper direction, he will lose all his good qualities and slide into more troubles for his future lifetimes, until he has properly understood the lesson and reformed himself. In that case, since in this lifetime he has not made any effort on the path of *yoga*, he will not get the same benefits that Krishna has promised to one who falls from the sincere practice because of insufficient strength and perseverance. Instead of obtaining a nice holiday on the higher planets and a great next birth, he will slide into the lower forms of life until he awakens from his delusion and becomes sincere again and ready to make the required efforts (*yatate*). This is not a punishment, but a necessary lesson.

In this verse, the expression *paurva dehikam* refers to the realizations (*buddhi-samyogam*) acquired in a previous body or lifetime. While we cannot take material possessions with us when we leave our body, our realizations come with us into the next lifetime. Perfection in *yoga* requires many lifetimes (*aneka-janma samsiddhah*). This is also confirmed in the next chapter (7.19) with the expression *bahunam janmanam ante*, "after many births". Remembering previous lifetimes is a great blessing in this regard, because it will protect us precisely from the disastrous mistake we were mentioning above - coming to believe that we are special people just by dint of our birth, and that we do not need to make any effort to reform ourselves and to become perfect in the Self realization of *yoga*. A person who falls into this delusion may even become downright adharmic and indulge in the worst actions, lying and cheating, becoming offensive and arrogant, and exploiting any social or religious credit to perform illicit and unethical activities, thus accumulating extremely bad *karma* because he will

be misleading people by presenting a false and horrible farce of spirituality and religion as the actual, genuine and original process prescribed by Vedic knowledge. These people are not included in Krishna's reassurance in verse 6.40 ("he will never be lost, in this world or in the next life... will never meet with a bad end"), precisely because they are not "engaged in beneficial activities".

पूर्वाभ्यासेन तेनैव ह्रियते ह्यवशोऽपि सः । जिज्ञासुरपि योगस्य शब्दब्रह्मातिवर्तते ॥ ६-४४ ॥

pūrvābhyāsena tenaiva hriyate hyavaśo'pi saḥ | jijñāsurapi yogasya śabdabrahmātivartate || 6-44 | |

purva: previous; *abhyasena*: by the practice; *tena*: by that; *eva*: certainly; *hriyate*: is attracted to/ is carried forward; *hi*: certainly; *avasah*: spontaneously; *api*: even; *sah*: s/he; *jijnasuh*: inquisitive; *api*: even; *yogasya*: of the *yoga*; *śabda-brahma*: the (rules of the) scriptures; *ativartate*: transcends.

"Whatever s/he had attained in the previous life will certainly create a spontaneous attraction (towards perfection) - because the seeker of *yoga* even transcends the regulations of the scriptures."

As we have already seen in the previous verses, Krishna explains that the good realizations and merits of one's previous lifetimes are carried on to the next birth, where they create favorable circumstances to continue one's personal evolution. This will be true even if the *yogi* had really degraded himself due to some serious mistake or bad choice; in that case he will have to go through some difficult times until the bad effects of the negative actions will not become exhausted, but then his mind will become purified and the good tendencies will rise again, because the results of the sincere effort on the path of *yoga* are not destroyed even if they are covered for a long time. Actual realizations will always accompany us lifetime after lifetime, even if we do not remember exactly when and where we attained them. A powerful habit becomes second nature and will resurface easily whenever the circumstances allow it - this verse says *avasah api*, "without desiring so". Just like a student moves with ease through the lessons that he had already learned in the previous years, even without studying too much, a person who sincerely practiced *yoga* in a previous lifetime finds himself spontaneously attracted by the practice and actually enjoys it. He easily understands the concepts and the methods, and does not need a lot of coaching and training - that is, until he reaches the point where he had stumbled in his previous lifetime. As we explained in the previous verse, at that point he must make a choice to sincerely put sufficient effort to continue his progress. Without this hard work, he will not learn anything further.

The spontaneous attraction to the ideals and practices of *yoga* manifested by a fallen *yogi* who is resuming his transcendental journey is so strong that it does not need to follow the strict systems described in the scriptures and by the conventional traditions. This means that the *yogi* does not need the tedious exercises of *asanas* and *pranayama* and *dharana*, and is not even tied by the rules of *yama* and *niyama*, because the power of his previous realizations and practice is sustaining him easily. Yet again, the *yogi* needs to remain firmly situated in sincerity and hard effort in his personal evolution towards the ultimate purpose of *yoga*, otherwise he will risk falling into the delusional traps of arrogance, neglect, material identification, callousness, cynicism, cheating propensities and unethical practices, which will cause an even greater downfall. It is said that rules are made to help us, not to obstruct our development, and this is certainly true when we remain sincere and honest and hard working, and do not go astray from the proper path of *yoga* - *yogat chālita* - which would be a downfall.

प्रयत्नाद्यतमानस्तु योगी संशुद्धकिल्बिषः । अनेकजन्मसंसिद्धस्ततो याति परां गतिम् ॥ ६-४५ ॥

prayatnādyatamānastu yogī saṁśuddhakilbiṣaḥ | anekajanmasamsiddhastato yāti parāṁ gatim || 6-45 | |

prayatnat: by serious practice; *yatamanah*: making efforts; *tu*: but; *yogi*: the *yogi*; *samsuddha*: purified; *kilbishah*: from contaminations; *aneka-janma*: many lifetimes; *samsiddhah*: having achieved perfection; *tato*: then/ there; *yati*: attains; *param gatim*: the supreme position/ goal.

"Engaging in a serious practice, such a *yogi* becomes purified from all contaminations and attains the supreme goal, a perfection that requires many lifetimes."

The need for sincerity and a serious effort is repeated here by Krishna, and this definitely clarifies the huge importance of these two factors. It is only by sincerity and hard work that one can become purified from all contaminations, reform all imperfections, and progress in his personal development and evolution, towards the supreme goal.

This hard work is not necessarily cause for suffering or anxiety. Especially when done in favorable circumstances, in a good environment and with proper instruments, hard work can be extremely pleasurable and satisfying, just like a person with a healthy and strong body will enjoy regulated physical exercise even if done strenuously. There is a cumulative effect in the totality of the work and realizations accumulated in many lifetimes, just like many small streams converge to create a large river with a powerful current that sweeps away all obstacles. Every river starts with a small seasonal stream springing from some unassuming source, and only becomes a huge reservoir towards the end of its journey, enriched by all the small and not so small affluents that it will meet on its way. So when we see someone who seems to be a natural in *yoga* or spirituality, we must understand that this person has done a lot of sincere work in previous lifetimes and had a lot of experiences - some good, some bad, but all of them required a lot of effort to be faced and utilized in the proper way. Nothing comes automatically on this path, and there is no need of being envious or to think that such person is intrinsically special. Anyone can attain the same level, with the proper amount of work and effort, over the necessary length of time.

Krishna will confirm that in the next chapter, especially in 7.19 and 28: "After many lifetimes, one who has knowledge attains me, realizing that Vasudeva is everything. Such a great soul is very rare" (*bahunam janmanam ante jnanavan mam prapadyate vasudevah sarvam iti sa mahatma sudurlabhah*) and "Those who have put an end to all bad activities, have accumulated virtuous activities, and are completely liberated from the delusion of duality and firm in their determination, worship me" (*yesam tv anta-gatam papam jananam punya karmanam, te dvandva moha nirmukta bhajante mam drdha vratah*).

तपस्विभ्योऽधिको योगी ज्ञानिभ्योऽपि मतोऽधिकः । कर्मिभ्यश्चाधिको योगी तस्माद्योगी भवार्जुन ॥ ६-४६ ॥

tapasvibhyo'dhiko yogī jñānibhyo'pi mato'dhikaḥ । karmibhyaścādhiko yogī tasmādyogī bhavārjuna ॥ 6-46 ॥

tapasvibhyah: than the ascetics; *adhikah*: greater/ superior; *yogi*: the *yogi*; *jnanibhyah*: than the scholars; *api*: also; *matah*: considered; *adhikah*: greater; *karmibhyah*: of those who engage in ritualistic duties; *ca*: and; *adhiko*: greater; *yogi*: a *yogi*; *tasmāt*: therefore; *yogi*: a *yogi*; *bhava*: become; *arjuna*: o Arjuna.

"The *yogi* is superior to the ascetic and is considered also greater than a scholar and greater than those who perform (ritualistic) activities. Therefore, o Arjuna, you should be a *yogi*."

The entire *Bhagavad gita* teaches about *yoga*, a very complex and deep science that can take us to the highest perfection and fulfill the purpose of life. Therefore it is not a cheap subject, certainly not just about bodily positions and breathing exercises as many cheaters would have us believe.

There are six opulences that a human being can obtain, and three of them are considered more important than others - detachment, knowledge and prosperity. These can be attained by one's determined effort during one's lifetime even from a disadvantaged position, while the other three opulences - physical beauty and strength, and fame - largely depend on the good merits from one's previous lifetime, and are not really very useful to achieve the perfection of life. *Moksha*, liberation, is certainly not attained by physical efforts or through one's name and fame, or thanks to one's good looks. Prosperity can therefore be attained through good *karma* that includes the daily worship of the *devas*, knowledge can be attained through the cultivation of *jnana* or the study of scriptures, and detachment can be attained through the practice of *sannyasa*.

In the previous chapters, Krishna has already described the importance and benefits of *karma* (chapter 3), *jnana* (chapter 4) and *sannyasa* (chapter 5), and how to bring these practices to perfection through the application of *yoga*, that transforms them into *karma yoga*, *jnana yoga* and *sannyasa yoga*.

He has also explained that this essence of *yoga* is called *buddhi yoga*, or the engagement of intelligence into the transcendental meaning and purpose of all actions, and that it is superior to all these practices. Similarly, it is called *bhakti yoga*, because it engages emotions and sentiments in the favorable service to the Transcendental Reality. The next chapter will explain that this essence of *yoga* is also called *vijñana*, because it focuses on the practical application of knowledge to the perception of Reality and one's choices in the service to the Divine. Being a *yogi*, as opposed to being an ascetic, a scholar or a performer of rituals, does not mean that a *yogi* can not or should not be detached and renounced, or underestimate knowledge, or to despise the proper performance of the duties required for the progress of the individual, the family and society. Rather, it means that a *yogi* knows that all these are means, and not the end. Asceticism is an instrument to train one's mind and control it, so that it will become able to concentrate easily on the contemplation of Transcendence. The cultivation of knowledge must be oriented towards the highest and most important knowledge, *brahma jnana*, and all other forms of knowledge should support this supreme purpose of life. And the performance of the *karmas*, or duties, should be dedicated to the Supreme in full transcendental renunciation and knowledge of the actual purpose of all *yajnas*: the Supreme Reality or *Tattva*, that is called *Brahman*, *Paramatma* and *Bhagavan*. In other words, by applying one's intelligence and devotion, a *yogi* can utilize everything else to attain perfection.

Last but not least, Krishna clearly gives his direct instruction: become a *yogi*. Arjuna has asked him to clarify his doubts once and for all, and this is exactly what Krishna is doing, not only for him, but for all of us.

योगिनामपि सर्वेषां मद्गतेनान्तरात्मना । श्रद्धावान्भजते यो मां स मे युक्ततमो मतः ॥ ६-४७ ॥

yogināmapi sarveṣāṁ madgatenāntarātmanā । śraddhāvānbhajate yo mām sa me yuktatamo mataḥ ॥ 6-47 ॥

yoginam: of the *yogis*; *api*: even; *sarvesham*: all; *mad-gatena*: fixed on me; *antar-atmana*: within his self; *śraddhavan*: who has faith; *bhajate*: who worships/ serves; *yah*: s/he; *mam*: me; *sah*: s/he; *me*: by me; *yukta-tamah*: the best of the *yogis*; *matah*: is considered.

"And among all *yogis*, one who worships/ serves me with faith and full concentration/ dedication, is considered by me as the greatest *yogi*."

In the previous verse, Krishna established that *yoga* is the spirit that can give life to asceticism, knowledge and the performance of ritualistic duties. We mentioned that such essence of *yoga* is also called *buddhi yoga* or *bhakti yoga*.

In this verse, Krishna confirms that even more powerful than intelligence, is the loving devotion that fixes the meditation to the Transcendental Reality in a dynamic contemplation. Again, the example of the *lilas* of Krishna in Vrindavana can help us understand how love and devotion can overpower any other consideration. The transcendental appearance and adventures of Krishna (*janma karma ca me divyam*, 4.9) are not comparable to the ordinary birth and activities of conditioned human beings: they are specifically planned to attract the attention of devotees and engage them in a blissful meditation, and at the same time to offer a wealth of wonderful symbolic teachings. This is the reason why the great Rishis composed the *Puranas* and *Itihasas*, the sacred scriptures that are most suitable for the simple-minded people of Kali yuga.

All Vedic scriptures contain many layers of meanings, and the adventures or *lilas* of the Lord and his eternal companions also participate to the same transcendental and multi-layered nature. Besides, Krishna will later declare (9.11) that only foolish people mistake his adventures for the ordinary activities of a normal human being (*avajananti mam mudha manusim tanum asritam, param bhavam ajananto mama bhuta-mahesvaram*) because they do not know that he is the Lord of all beings/ existences, and his nature is transcendental and supreme. This means that Krishna is always in control of everything that happens.

Therefore, whatever events appear and develop in his adventures, they are precisely what he wanted them to be, just like a good theater director allows the play to develop seamlessly and naturally, but always remains in full control of the action, and uses it to convey symbolic meanings and his particular message.

It is in this light that we must understand the adventures of Krishna and especially his most intimate relationships in Vrindavana - how the intense feelings of the *gopis*, both younger and older, and the other women there, including the wives of the *brahmanas* that were performing the sacrificial rituals when Krishna and Balarama sent their friends to ask for food. The *bhakti* sentiments or *rasas* of these apparently simple-minded women have *madhurya*, *vatsalya* or *dasya* characteristics, but they are always stronger than mere passive contemplation or *santa*, as usually manifested by the Vedic scholars, the *sannyasi* renunciates, and the ritualistic performers of the *karma kanda*.

The word *bhajate* is particularly important and interesting here. It comes from the root *bhaj*, that means "serving, worshiping, adoring, engaging the consciousness". From the same root we have the word *bhajan*, meaning "devotional songs". This same word was used in 6.31: *yo mam bhajaty ekatvam asthitah*, "one who worships me as the One who resides in all". We will also find it in the next chapters: *catur vidha bhajante mam* (7.16), *te dvandva moha nirmukta bhajante mam* (7.28), *bhajanty ananya manaso* (9.13), *ye bhajanti tu mam bhaktya* (9.29), *api cet suduracaro bhajate mam ananya bhak* (9.30), *imam prapya bhajasva mam* (9.33), *iti matva bhajante mam budha* (10.8), *tesam satata yuktanam bhajatam priti purvakam* (10.10), *sa sarva vid bhajati mam* (15.19).

From the same root we have the word *bhakti*, that will also appear many times in the text of *Gita*.

This supremacy of devotion to God in the practice of *yoga* is confirmed by Patanjali in his *Yoga sutras*, especially in 1.23: *ishvara pranidhanad va*, "(*samadhi*) can also be attained by dedicating oneself to Isvara (God)". Who is Isvara? The *Yoga sutras* immediately answer the question (1.24): *klesha karman vipakashayair a-para-mrishtah purusha-vishesha ishvarah*, "Ishvara is that special Purusha who is Transcendent, and is never touched by sufferings or obstacles, by the actions and their consequences".

Chapter 7

Vijnana yoga

The Yoga of wisdom or applied knowledge

In the first 3 chapters, Krishna has been instructing Arjuna about the performance of one's duty, the distinction between the temporary body and the eternal Atman, the purpose of Yoga as the science of conscious action, the need to control one's mind, the meaning of detachment as selflessness, and the concept of duty as sacred action.

Then Krishna starts to speak about the transcendental level that is above duty and action, and the realization of Atman (3.17-18). However, even those who are already above action and duty should continue to act dutifully, because by their good example they can inspire and support society. Here, for the first time, Krishna speaks about himself and his own transcendental nature (3.22-24), to say that although he is certainly above all duties and actions, and yet he continues to perform those actions that are required for the protection and maintenance of the universe. After this brief comment, Krishna goes back to the subject of dutiful action according to one's position within the order of things in the universe, based on one's qualities and abilities. Again, he briefly mentions his divine nature in 3.30, saying that a *yogi* offers all his/ her activities to him. However, by the end of 3rd chapter, Krishna still presents himself as the equivalent of Atman/ Brahman, in a general transcendental way rather than a very personal way.

The 4th chapter becomes more specific, and Krishna begins to make a clear distinction between himself as a divine Personality, that is immensely different from all other personalities: he is the Supreme Lord of all creatures and states of being (4.6). Unlike the other individual manifestations of Brahman (the Jiva Atmans), Krishna is the supreme individual (Param Atman). Thus from the realization of Brahman, we move to the realization of Paramatma and Isvara. Krishna continues to speak about his own divine nature from 4.1 to 4.14, also revealing that the realization of his transcendental position is the secret to liberation.

Again from 4.15 to 4.43 and from 5.2 to 5.28, Krishna speaks about the sacred nature of dutiful selfless action, talking about Brahman and Nirvana, with only a brief mention about his own divine position (4.35). In 5.29 again Krishna states that one who knows him as the Supreme Lord of all planets, the purpose of sacrifices and the friend of all beings, attains peace.

The 6th chapters shifts the focus again on duty, *yoga* and the realization of the Paramatma, with 2 verses (6.14-15) and then again 2 more verses (6.30-31) stating that Krishna himself is personally the purpose of *yoga* and meditation. This concept is repeated in the last verse of the chapter (6.47).

In the 7th chapter, Krishna will speak much more about himself and his supreme nature, with only one exceptions when he does not mention himself (7.5)

This focus on Krishna bhakti becomes so important that, while previously he spoke about detachment as the key to success, now he is speaking about attachment to him as the key to success on a higher level.

From 7.8 to the end of the chapter, we clearly see that Krishna is not an ordinary material personality, but an extraordinarily deep level of consciousness - that can be found in this world as the essence and support of everything that exists. However, not everybody is able to perceive Krishna because one needs to turn to him with an open mind. It becomes clear, therefore, that *vijnana* is equivalent to the supreme level of transcendental consciousness that we call Krishna consciousness - the complete and constant awareness that encompasses Brahman, Paramatma and Bhagavan, and includes all realities, material and spiritual. By directly connecting to this supreme consciousness, the *yogi* attains the highest position and the perfection of life.

श्रीभगवानुवाच ।

śrībhagavānuvāca ।

मय्यासक्तमनाः पार्थ योगं युञ्जन्मदाश्रयः ।

असंशयं समग्रं मां यथा ज्ञास्यसि तच्छृणु ॥ ७-१ ॥

mayyāsaktamanāḥ pārtha yogam yuñjanmadāśrayaḥ | asamsāyam samagram mān yathā jñāsyasi tacchr̥ṇu || 7-1 ||

sri-bhagavan: the Lord; *uvaca*: said; *mayi*: to me; *asakta*: attached; *manah*: mind; *partha*: o son of Pritha; *yogam*: in *yoga*; *yunjan*: uniting; *mat-asrayah*: taking shelter in me; *asamsayam*: without a doubt; *samagram*: completely; *mam*: me; *yatha*: thus; *jñasyasi*: you will know; *tat*: that; *srinu*: listen.

The Lord said: "Now listen, O Partha (son of Pritha), how by getting the mind to develop attachment for me through the practice of *yoga* and taking shelter in me, you will be able to know me completely and without any doubt."

The expressions *mad-asrayah* and *mayy asakta* indicate that *yoga* requires the practice called *isvara-pranidhana*, or surrendering to God in his personal form, and developing a genuine personal relationship of devotion. The word *samagram*, "completely", does not refer to the idea of completely knowing God: that would be impossible because God is infinite and ever expanding. It refers to the fullness of the consciousness of the devotee, that is completely absorbed in Krishna consciousness, in the awareness of his complete perfections (*bhagas*) for which he is known as Bhagavan: power, beauty, knowledge, wealth, fame and detachment. The word *asamsayam* expresses complete certainty.

Meditation on the Atman, described in the earlier chapters, must be supported by knowledge and renunciation to material identification and attachments, in order to realize its transcendental nature. However, it is a long and difficult method, and there is the danger of falling from the path. In alternative, such awareness can also be attained simply through devotional dedication to Bhagavan: *isvara pranidhanat va* (1.23), Isvara being the special being (*purusha*) that is not touched by sufferings and by the consequences of past actions that create attachments: *klesha karman vipaka asayaih apara mrista purusha vishesa isvarah* (1.24). So *vijnana yoga* is equated with *bhakti yoga*.

Of course, this path of *bhakti yoga* must also be supported by knowledge and renunciation, and this is why it is presented after the previous teachings about the disillusionment about material life, the difference between the body and the Self, the importance of performing one's duty with a pure and sincere consciousness, the knowledge of *yoga*, the renunciation to all forms of selfishness, and the science of meditation on Transcendental Reality.

We should never take *bhakti* cheaply. It true that *bhakti*, devotion to the Personality of Godhead, is the fastest and surest path to perfection, and it is independent from the separate pursuit of learning and renunciation, but genuine *bhakti* includes knowledge and detachment from selfishness, for the simple fact that love for the Personality of Godhead is so pure and powerful that makes us forget all other concerns, desires, fears, and delusions. So when we find a person who claims to be situated in Krishna bhakti, but refuses to follow the instructions of Krishna as expressed in *Bhagavad gita*, we should immediately understand that s/he is a cheater - an ignorant pretender, or worse.

The word *srinu*, "listen", is the first step in the development of *bhakti*. The nine paths of the devotional practice are listed as *sravana* ("listening"), *kirtana* ("speaking"), *smarana* ("remembering"), *vandana* ("offering homage" or "glorifying with prayers"), *pada sevana* ("following the instructions"), *dasya* ("working in service"), *pujana* ("worshiping"), *sakhya* ("behaving as a friend"), *atma-nivedanam* ("fully dedicating oneself").

There are also nine steps in *bhakti*, known as *sraddha* ("faith"), *sadhu sanga* ("association with good people"), *bhajana kriya* ("engaging in *sadhana* - regulated devotional activities"), *anartha nivritti* ("abandoning one's bad habits and correcting one's defects"), *nistha* ("stability of consciousness"), *ruçi* ("actual taste for spiritual life"), *asakti* ("attachment" for spiritual life), *bhava* ("spontaneous devotional emotions"), and *prema* ("pure love for God").

ज्ञानं तेऽहं सविज्ञानमिदं वक्ष्याम्यशेषतः ।

यज्ज्ञात्वा नेह भूयोऽन्यज्ज्ञातव्यमवशिष्यते ॥ ७-२ ॥

jñānam te'haṁ savijñānamidaṁ vakṣyāmyaśeṣataḥ | yajjñātvā neha bhūyo'nyajjñātavyamavaśiṣyate || 7-2 ||

jnanam: knowledge; *te*: to you; *aham*: I; *sa*: together with; *vijnanam*: applied knowledge/ wisdom; *idam*: this; *vakshyami*: I will tell; *aseshatah*: in details/ unlimited forms/ complete; *yat*: which; *jnatva*: by knowing *na*: not; *iha*: here; *bhuyah*: further/ again; *anyat*: anything else/ more; *jnatavyam*: to be known; *avashyate*: remains.

"I will tell you in detail that *jnana* and *vijnana*, knowing which nothing remains still to be known."

This chapter is dedicated to the *vijnana yoga*, or the "*yoga* of applied knowledge". The word *jnana* refers to theoretical knowledge, while *vijnana* refers to applied knowledge or wisdom. In the previous chapters Krishna spoke of detachment from material identification and belonging, and now he has started to speak about spiritual identification and attachment. Before building or cultivating spiritual knowledge, we need to make sure that our ground has been cleared from all material garbage, otherwise there will always be dangers in the future, and the plant of *bhakti* will be suffocated by the outgrowth of weeds.

Patanjali's *Yoga sutras* explain that "*Yoga* means cessation of the fluctuations of the awareness": *yogah citta vritti nirodhah* (*Yoga sutras* 1.2). The purpose of such cessation is to attain the clear realization of the Self, the Atman, expressed in verse 1.3 as *tada drastuh sva-rupe avasthanam*: "then (when the consciousness is stable), the witness (*drasta*) becomes firmly situated in one's true identification (the *sva-rupa*, that is actually true because it can never be lost)".

Verse 1.4 of *Yoga sutras* further clarifies, *vritti sarupyam itiratra* (1.4): "that (awareness) is opposite to the material identification with the mind and body (that is constantly changing)". These verses clearly state that the practice of *yoga* is meant to develop knowledge and wisdom, therefore we must expect anyone who practices *yoga* to be more than happy and competent to discuss such topics - not about health and fitness, rajasic or tamasic sense gratification, or other similar grossly materialistic pursuits.

Later on (*Gita* 13.8-12) Krishna will define what is knowledge, clearly mentioning the freedom from material identification (*anahankara*) and attachments (*asakti*), and the study of spiritual texts (*adhyatma jnana*) and understanding of the categories of reality (*tattva-jnana*). Not even once, in the vast expanse of the *yoga shastra*, we find a statement to suggest that the purpose of *yoga* is to get good health or a good-looking slim and trim body. Such material delusion has originated quite recently, when the Indian Yoga teachers came in contact with the Western mentality - characterized by the obsession with sexual attractiveness as a parameter of social acceptability - and should be considered one of the greatest disasters in Indian culture, comparable to the formulation of the notorious Aryan invasion theory. As stated in *Bhagavata Purana* (1.1.10), in Kali yuga people become *manda, sumanda matayoh manda bhagya hi upadrutah*: unfortunate, foolish and lazy, and misguided by bad teachings.

Another interpretation of *jnana* and *vijnana* is given as material and spiritual respectively, or phenomenal ("pertaining to the effects") and numinous ("pertaining to the cause"). The words *phenomenon* and *noumenon* derive from the Greek language and were used by the ancient Greek philosophers.

The knowledge of Krishna includes both the material and spiritual manifestations, and in fact we see that the *Bhagavata Purana*, that is specifically dedicated to the knowledge of Bhagavan Sri Krishna, begins very much like *Bhagavad gita* - with the questions about duty and proper action, then explains "the first step in God realization" as Brahman and Paramatma, and then speaks about the creation of the material universe, the divisions of the cosmic manifestation, the calculation of time, the appearance of the various *avatars*, the principles of material nature, the cycle of material activities, the story of the descendants of Manu, the Surya dynasty and the Chandra dynasty, the geographical description of the universe, the prescribed duties for mankind, the *varnashrama dharma*, and the wars between the Suras and the Asuras. Of course all these stories and descriptions carry an immense wealth of spiritual information and instructions, especially in the form of dialog between the protagonists of the stories. Similarly, the entire vast ocean of Vedic knowledge can be considered "the science of Krishna", as by Krishna we intend the highest possible level of consciousness - eternity, knowledge and happiness - that is the complete Reality.

मनुष्याणां सहस्रेषु कश्चिद्यतति सिद्धये । यततामपि सिद्धानां कश्चिन्मां वेत्ति तत्त्वतः ॥ ७-३ ॥

manuṣyāṇāṃ sahasreṣu kaścidyatati siddhaye | yatatāmapī siddhānāṃ kaścinnmāṃ veti tattvataḥ || 7-3 ||

manuṣyanam: among the human beings; *sahasreshu*: (counted in the) thousands; *kascit*: (maybe) someone; *yatati*: makes efforts; *siddhaye*: towards perfection; *yatatam*: among those who strive for perfection; *api*: even; *siddhanam*: among those who have achieved perfection; *kascit*: (maybe) someone; *ma*: me; *veti*: knows; *tattvataḥ*: in truth.

"Among thousands of human beings, one may strive for perfection. And among all those who have achieved such perfection, one may actually come to know me."

Krishna wants to dissipate any illusion for those who might have thought that knowing him was something cheap and easy, that can give perfection without the need of too much effort (*karma yoga*), study (*jnana*) or renunciation (*vairagya*). Some foolish people delude themselves and others into thinking that, in order to be situated on the highest platform of spiritual realization, it is sufficient to make a show of some chanting, singing, dancing and eating good food, and fantasizing about romantic or erotic meetings between young Syamasundara and the cowherd girls. Others, equally foolish, believe that sectarian affiliation to some politicized materialistic religious organization is the only requisite to become "properly situated" on such highest platform of *bhakti*. But reality is quite different, as Krishna explicitly states here.

First of all, one must sincerely and seriously strive to become perfect in the performance of one's prescribed duties and in the understanding of *yoga* and *knowledge*, as illustrated in the previous 6 chapters of *Bhagavad gita*. Then, after the *sadhaka* has attained such perfection, s/he can hope to actually approach the Lord - the actual Supreme Personality of Godhead, rather than a first-hand or second-hand mental projection of a fantasy character one may choose to call "Krishna".

The path of perfection is explained in *Bhagavata Purana* (1.2.17-21) as *srinvatam sva-kathah krishnah* ("listening to Krishna's discourses", which of course includes Krishna's instructions), *punya sravana kirtanah* ("a subject of discussion that brings good merits", because it inspires devotees to act dutifully), *hridi antah-sthah hi abhadrani vidhunoti suhrit satam* ("by which the presence of the Lord becomes fixed in the heart and purifies the heart from all inauspicious things"), *nashta prayesu abhadresu* ("all bad things are destroyed), *nityam bhagavata sevaya* ("by the constant service to Bhagavan/ to the Bhagavata"), *bhagavati uttama-sloke bhaktih bhavati naistiki* ("devotion to the Divine, glorified by sublime verses, becomes firmly and permanently established"), *tada rajas tamo bhavah kama-lobhadayah ca ye ceta etair anavidham sthitam sattve prasidati* ("thus the *sadhaka* becomes firmly situated in *sattva*, goodness, without being influenced by the various forms of lust and greed and other material defects born from passion and ignorance").

Then, when the mind is perfectly satisfied on the spiritual level (*evam prasanna manaso*) one becomes united with Bhagavan in the Bhakti Yoga (*bhagavad bhakti-yogatah*) and at that time the applied knowledge of the reality of Bhagavan (*bhagavat tattva vijnanam jayate*) through the contact with the liberated level (*mukta sangasya*). All the knots of the heart are slashed (*bhidhate hridaya granthih*) and all doubts find their answer (*sarva samsayah kshiyante*), because one can directly see (*drishte*) that the soul and Lord (*atmani isvare*) are the purpose of one's activities (*asya karmani*).

A sincere devotee should not underestimate the dangers of inconsistency, neglect towards the basic instructions and requirements, superficiality and artificiality.

भूमिरापोऽनलो वायुः खं मनो बुद्धिरेव च । अहंकार इतीयं मे भिन्ना प्रकृतिरष्टधा ॥ ७-४ ॥

bhūmirāpo'nalo vāyuh kham mano buddhireva ca | ahaṅkāra itīyaṃ me bhinnā prakṛtirasṭadhā || 7-4 ||

bhumih: earth; *apah*: water; *analo*: fire; *vayuh*: air; *kham*: space/ ether; *manah*: mind; *buddhih*: intelligence; *eva*: as well as; *ca*: and; *ahankara*: material identification; *iti*: like this; *iyam*: all these; *me*: my; *bhinna*: separate/ distinct; *prakritih*: nature; *ashtadha*: eight fold.

"Earth, water, fire, air, ether, mind, intelligence and material identification: all these are the eight different forms of my prakriti."

Prakriti means "nature", and refers to the inherent power of God, the Supreme Reality. It is not possible to separate Reality from Power - there is no reality without power, and no power without reality.

In the previous verse Krishna has stated that one should not take him cheaply, because it is not easy to obtain the true knowledge of his nature, and we should remember this warning while reading this verse, so that we do not take cheaply God's energies, too. Material nature - composed by the 8 elements - is not simply a creation of God: it is his actual nature, albeit "separated" (*bhinna*). What is the meaning of "separated"? It means that the elements composing the material bodies in this world are distinct from the principle of consciousness, called the Purusha or Atman. Why? Because the 8 elements of material nature are constantly transforming and they are subject to the action of time and space, they are meant to be the "field" in which the Purusha is working. Later (*Gita* 13.2-4) Krishna will speak about the *kshetra* ("field") and the *kshetra-jna* ("one who knows the field"). The Purusha or Atman is not transforming and is not subject to time and space: he is the active principle, that animates the inert matter. There are two Purushas (*kshetra jnas*): the individual *jivatma* (irrespective of the gender of the body it is wearing) and the Supreme Lord, called *param atma*.

Another meaning of *bhinna* refers to the fact that in the primary creation of the universe, the original *pradhana* - that is described as Brahman itself - *separates* into the various categories of energy, thus manifesting the 8 material elements, the *gunas*, etc. Material science is meant to study the manifestations and the elements of nature, and many famous scientists have expressed their gratitude for the special insights they obtained from Vedic literature. Starting with the decimal system to the most advanced particle physics, one who reads Vedic literature with an open mind and a solid culture will be blessed with extraordinary realizations. Many people do not know that the so-called Arabic numbers were introduced in Europe by Arabs, who took them from India, as confirmed by many historians and scholars, including famous physicist Albert Einstein, author of the revolutionary relativity theory and the law of the photoelectrical effect (the basis of quanta theory) and Nobel Prize for Physics 1921. He declared, "We owe a lot to Indians who taught us how to count, without which no worthwhile scientific discovery could have been made."

Hans Torwesten (born in Germany in 1944), author of *Vedanta - Heart of Hinduism*, wrote, "A fair number of leading physicists and biologists have found parallels between modern science and Hindu ideas". Brian David Josephson (born in Wales, 1940), pioneer of superconductivity and magnetic fields, director of the project of Unification Mind-Matter, and Nobel Prize 1973 for physics, wrote, "The *Vedanta* and the *Sankhya* hold the key to the laws of mind and thought process which are co-related to the Quantum Field, i.e. the operation and distribution of particles at atomic and molecular levels."

Werner Heisenberg wrote, "After the conversations about Indian philosophy, some of the ideas of Quantum Physics that had seemed so crazy suddenly made much more sense." He was the pioneer of quanta mechanics, the father of the "uncertainty principle of quantum theory" that carries his name, and Nobel Prize 1932 for the work that set the foundations for the discovery of the allotropic forms of hydrogen. At the end of the war he was appointed director of the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Physics and he reorganized it until the transfer to Munich in 1958, when it was renamed Max Planck Institute for Physics and Astrophysics. He was also president for the German Research Council, chairman of the Commission for Atomic Physics, chairman of the Nuclear Physics Working Group, and president of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation.

Other prominent scientific thinkers who shared the same opinion were Fritjof Capra (American of Austrian origin, founder of the *Center for Ecoliteracy* and author of *The Tao of Physics: An Exploration of the Parallels Between Modern Physics and Eastern Mysticism*), Erwin Schrodinger (Austrian physicist and political refugee, Nobel Prize 1933 for quantum mechanics, the author of *What is Life? The Physical Aspect of the Living Cell*, and *Mind and Matter*), David Bohm (one of the greatest physicists of quanta mechanics), John Archibald Wheeler (American theoretical physicist, who worked with Niels Bohr on the foundations of nuclear fission, introduced the S-matrix and created the expressions *black hole*, *quantum foam* and *wormhole*), Carl Sagan (astrophysicist and author of *Cosmos*), and Julius Robert Oppenheimer (known as the "father of the atomic bomb", author of the Born-Oppenheimer approximation, the electron-positron theory, the Oppenheimer-Phillips process and the first foundations of the quantum tunneling, of the modern theory of neutrino stars and black holes, quanta mechanics, the theory of the quantum field, and the interaction of the cosmic rays).

Those who say that Vedic knowledge is incompatible with modern science are just plain ignorant.

अपरेयमितस्त्वन्यां प्रकृतिं विद्धि मे पराम् । जीवभूतां महाबाहो ययेदं धायते जगत् ॥ ७-५ ॥

apareyamitastvanyām prakṛtiṁ viddhi me parām | jīvabhūtāṁ mahābāho yayedam dhāyate jagat || 7-5 ||

apara: lower/ not higher; *ayam*: this; *itah*: besides; *tu*: but; *anyam*: another; *prakritim*: nature; *viddhi*: you should know; *me*: mine; *param*: higher; *jiva-bhutam*: the living beings; *maha-baho*: o mighty armed; *yaya*: by whom; *idam*: this; *dharyate*: is sustained; *jagat*: the universe.

"O mighty-armed (Arjuna), know that besides this lower prakriti there is also another - the living beings by which the universe is upheld."

The two *prakritis* (natures) mentioned in this verse are the two "energies" of God: the material elements of creation and the spiritual spark. Later in verses 13.2-4, Krishna himself gives another definition of the difference between the two when he speaks of the *kshetra* ("the field") and the *kshetra-jna* ("the knower of the field"), implying that everything is based on consciousness or knowledge. The spiritual spark is called "superior" because it is the direct manifestation of Shakti, while the material elements are called "inferior" because they are a secondary manifestation of the same Shakti. Just like the senses are more powerful than the sense objects, and the mind is more powerful than the senses, so the *jivatman* is more powerful than the mind.

Some people believe that there are two separate divine Shaktis, of which one is inferior to the other, but this is not a fact. Shakti is one, but manifests in many forms, just like electricity is perceived differently as light, heat, magnetic field, sound, motion, waves, and even as coldness (as in a freezer), logical processing (as in computers), and so on. Thus we find several different definitions of Shakti, such as *bahiranga shakti* ("external potency"), *tathasta shakti* ("marginal potency"), *antaranga shakti* ("internal potency"), *hladini shakti*

("pleasure potency"), *cit shakti* ("consciousness potency"), *avaranatmika shakti* ("covering potency"), *prakshepatmika shakti* ("attracting potency") and so on. The two *prakritis* mentioned by Krishna in this verse are respectively the *bahiranga shakti* ("external potency") and the *tathasta shakti* ("marginal potency"); we should note that Krishna says "there are two energies" and not "there are only two energies". This is a very important distinction, that we need to understand clearly.

Svetasvatara Upanishad (6.8) states, *parasya shaktir vividhaiva sruyate svabhaviki jnana-bala-kriya ca*, "The Supreme is known to have many Shaktis, that by their own nature manifest as knowledge, strength and activity."

The word *dharyate* means "supporting"; it derives from the same root of the word *dharma*. The living entities participate to the divine play of creation, maintenance and dissolution by performing their specific dharmic duties as per their *guna* and *karma*. The idea that the living entities are in this world to "exploit" and "enjoy" it, as suggested by some commentators, is the very basis of our delusion that keeps us imprisoned in material identification and attachment. People may be deluded into thinking they are the owners and enjoyers of material nature, but it is just an illusion, a faulty concept that is projected by the elements of material nature itself - *ahankara*, *buddhi* and *manas*..

When a person is less evolved, s/he is conditioned by ignorance, manifesting as material identification and attachments, compared to bondages: therefore the Atman is called *baddha jiva* ("bonded soul") as opposed to *mukta jiva* ("liberated soul"). Some commentators believe that these two categories of conditioned souls and liberated souls are intrinsically different, and therefore they call them *nitya baddha* ("eternally conditioned") and *nitya mukta* or *nitya siddha* ("eternally liberated" or "eternally perfect").

While we can accept the idea that there are indeed *nitya siddha* personalities, that have always been situated at the highest level of consciousness because they are direct emanations of the Divine on a higher platform, the idea of *nitya baddha* souls (as intrinsically conditioned souls that can never attain the level of liberation) is totally unfounded, as it is not confirmed in any genuine *shastra* that we know of. Of course, we have seen that sometimes words are used in a relative sense - for example, *amara* ("immortal") as applied to the Devas living on the higher planets is not exactly correct because the Devas, too, come to the end of their lives when the universe is withdrawn... the definition applies more to the "eternal position" in the universal administration that will be filled by different personalities from time to time.

Similarly, the "eternity" of the *samsara* or cycle of births and death should be interpreted as the eternal law of cyclic manifestation in the material universe, that comes into being at each new creation. Thus, when we speak of *nitya baddha* souls, it means that the *jivatman* has the free will to choose to remain in the material universe indefinitely, disappearing and reappearing at each dissolution and manifestation of the universe, until s/he chooses otherwise. Conditioning, as a manifestation of ignorance, is called *asat* precisely because it is temporary and illusory. As Krishna has already explained very clearly in 2.16, *sat* can never become *asat*, and *asat* can never become *sat*. What is illusory, temporary and bad does not really exist. Claiming that the *nitya baddha jivas* are *eternally* or *ontologically* conditioned by ignorance and impermanence because of their permanent nature is a serious contradiction in terms - it amounts to saying that *asat* is *sat*.

एतद्योनीनि भूतानि सर्वाणीत्युपधारय । अहं कृत्स्नस्य जगतः प्रभवः प्रलयस्तथा ॥ ७-६ ॥

etadyonīni bhūtāni sarvāṇītyupadhāraya | ahaṁ kṛtsnasya jagataḥ prabhavaḥ pralayaḥ | 7-6 |

etat: these; *yonini*: from the sources; *bhutani*: living beings/ states of existence; *sarvan*: all; *iti*: thus; *upadharaya*: (you should) understand; *aham*: I; *kritsnasya*: of everything; *jagatah*: the universe; *prabhavaḥ*: the source of creation; *pralayas*: the cause of dissolution; *tatha*: also.

"Know that all the things/ beings come from these two matrices. (Thus) I am the origin of the creation and the destruction of the entire universe."

Everything that exists in the universe is composed by the interaction of matter and spirit. Even what appears to be dull and inert matter is actually permeated by consciousness, albeit in a low and faint degree. According to the Vedic vision, even mountains and hills, rivers and oceans are living beings, although they do not appear to be characterized by the usual symptoms of life - birth, growth, reproduction, dwindling and death. The fact of the matter is that they simply have life cycles that are too long and their changes are too imperceptible for us to notice, just like our life as human beings would appear eternal and unchanging to those small insects who live only for the short period of one of our days. And we can see that even minerals can transform with time and the change of circumstantial conditions - compressed coal turns into diamonds, rocks turn into sand and dust, and so on. Any corpse, any dead body - human, animal or vegetal - is still teeming with life in the form of microbes, bacteria, molds, spores and worms. Similarly there are many disembodied entities, such as ghosts and spirits, that are still considered living beings because they have a body made of subtle, but still material, elements - mind, intelligence and ego (*manasa*, *buddhi*, *ahankara*).

We need to keep our minds open and allow the possibility that actually conventional knowledge, modern mainstream science and popular wisdom may not be perfect or right, and that there are still many things to be known and understood in our universe. What would be the harm in hypothetically accepting the idea that Vedic knowledge can still teach us something, if we sincerely make an effort to study and understand the peculiar language it uses? Why shouldn't we put aside the so-called "modern scientific" prejudices and make a fully hearted attempt at experimenting the teachings of the *Vedas* exactly according to the method given in the *Vedas* themselves, and see what comes out of it?

The so-called modern science of mainstream conventional western academia has developed empirically in the last 300 years, and in spite of having full credence and support from government, media, schools and general people, it has created more problems than solutions, still leaving a lot of gaps and unanswered questions, and often undergoing dramatic changes of scenario because of new "revolutionary" discoveries, especially at its top levels as we have seen in the commentary of a previous verse. If the "scientific system" was really objective and unbiased, school books should be re-written every 10 years or even more often, and the "uncomfortable evidence" should not be swept under the rug and kept from the public knowledge.

Krishna states in this verse that he is the origin of both matrixes - the material and the spiritual - and therefore he knows how they work. An intelligent reader, with an open scientifically inclined mind, will be happy to listen to Krishna's explanations and put such knowledge to

the test in the laboratory of practical life, without prejudice or bias, and incorporate the results without being obstructed by false egotism and envy. There is nothing to lose in the process.

The word *yoni* ("matrix") used in this context is particularly interesting, because it clearly defines Shakti as the Feminine principle, the Mother Goddess that is at the root of the manifestation of the cosmos. This means that both material nature and the *jivatman* are feminine in nature, and parts and parcels of the Mother Goddess; also feminine is the illusory energy *maya*, that acts in the material mode as Mahamaya or in the spiritual mode as Yogamaya.

मत्तः परतरं नान्यत्किञ्चिदस्ति धनञ्जय । मयि सर्वमिदं प्रोतं सूत्रे मणिगणा इव ॥ ७-७ ॥

mattaḥ parataram nānyatkiñcidasti dhanañjaya | mayi sarvamidaṁ protaṁ sūtre maṇigāṇā iva || 7-7 ||

mattah: than me; *parataram*: higher; *na*: not; *anyat*: other; *kincit*: there is; *asti*: there is; *dhananjaya*: o conqueror of wealth (Arjuna); *mayi*: in me; *sarvam*: all; *idam*: this; *protam*: strung/ woven/ connected; *sut্রে*: thread; *mani-gana*: a series of pearls; *iva*: like.

"O Dhananjaya (Arjuna), there is absolutely nothing superior to me. Everything rests on me, like pearls are strung on a thread."

All creations are formed by the interaction between the spiritual spark and the material elements, but still both these natures rest on the transcendental existence of Brahman, Paramatma and Bhagavan.

Before the manifestation of the universe, only the Transcendental Reality existed, one and undivided. Then *pradhana* manifested as the total aggregate of existence, and the *jivatmans*, sparks of the Transcendental Reality, entered into the *pradhana*, like the seed enters the field and takes birth by developing a body. Actually we could say that the Supreme One entered the *pradhana* in the form of innumerable sparks known as the *jivatma*: *eko 'ham bahu syam prajayeyeti*, "I am one, but I manifest myself into many" (*Chandogya Upanishad* 6.2.3). This is not easy to understand, because of the eternal and unchangeable nature of the Transcendental Reality; we could compare the process with the generation of an offspring, by which the parent does not become diminished at all. In fact later (14.4) Krishna will clearly say that he is the father of all living beings (*aham bija pradaha pitah*). Each and every emanation is complete and perfect in itself, yet the Supreme remains complete and perfect: *purnam adah purnam idam, purnat purnam udacyate, purnasya purnam adayah, purnam eva avasishyate* (Invocation at the beginning of the *Upanishads* of the *Sukla Yajur Veda*, including the *Isha Upanishad*).

Katha Upanishad (2.2.13) states, *nityo nityam cetanas cetananam, eko bahunam yo vidadhati kaman*, "God is the eternal reality from whom all eternal realities emanate, the conscious soul among all the conscious souls, but alone he is providing for the necessities of all". The Supreme also manifests as the *pradhana*: *eka-desa-sthitasyagner jyotsna vistarini yatha parasya brahmanah saktis tathedam akhila jagat*, "From one single place (existence), Brahman expands everywhere in the form of its energies, just like the radiance of a fire that pervades the entire universe. (*Vishnu Purana*, 1.22.53). *Svetasvatara Upanishad* (6.16) states, *sa visva krd visva vid atma-yonir jnah kalakalo guni sarva vid yah, pradhana-kshetra jna-patir gunesah samsara-moksha-sthiti-bandhahetuh*, "God has created the world and knows the entire universe. He has no other origin or matrix than himself, he is the beginningless origin of time, the origin of the *gunas* and possesses all knowledge and all qualities, and he is the Lord of the *gunas*, of knowledge and *pradhana*. He binds the *jivas* in the *samsara*, keeps them there and guides them to liberation, too."

Svetasvatara Upanishad (3.8-9) says, *vedaham etam purusham mahantam, aditya-varnam tamasah parastat, tam eva viditvati mryum eti nanyah pantha vidyate ayanaya, yasmat param naparam asti kincid yasman naniyo no jyayo asti kincit, vriksha iva stabdho divi tishtati ekas tenedam purnam purushena sarvam*, "I know this Supreme Purusha, whose color is like the sun dissipating the darkness. One who knows him can conquer death: this is the only path. Nothing is superior to him, either in greatness or in subtle pervasiveness. Like a tree, he remains in the spiritual sky, and yet pervades the entire universe."

रसोऽहमप्सु कौन्तेय प्रभास्मि शशिसूर्ययोः । प्रणवः सर्ववेदेषु शब्दः खे पौरुषं नृषु ॥ ७-८ ॥

raso'hamapsu kaunteya prabhāsmi śaśisūryayoḥ | praṇavaḥ sarvavedeṣu śabdaḥ khe pauruṣaṁ nṛṣu || 7-8 ||

rasah: taste; *aham*: I (am); *apsu*: in water; *kaunteya*: o son of Kunti (Arjuna); *prabha*: the radiance/ light/ power; *asmi*: I am; *sasi-suryayoh*: of the moon and the sun; *pranavah*: the *pranava*; *sarva-vedeshu*: in all the *Vedas*; *śabdah*: the sound; *khe*: in space; *paurusam*: capability; *nrisu*: in human beings.

"O son of Kunti, I am the taste of water, the radiance of the moon and of the sun. I am the *pranava omkara* in all the *Vedas*, I am sound in space, and capability in human beings."

In the previous verses, Krishna has clearly stated his divine nature, saying that he is the origin of both the material and spiritual existence, the father of all the living entities and the foundation of the universe. Now, he is elaborating on the meaning of "divine nature". Some people imagine God simply as a powerful person, some kind of king, who lives in a nice place somewhere in the sky, knows everything, sees everything, and constructed the world and created people because he was bored, then gave those creatures a number of laws - those who obey his laws will go to heaven and those who disobey will go to hell.

Things become more complicated because of a number of delusional people claiming to know "something new" about God - new messages, new laws and orders, new stories - which is of course impossible to verify and sometimes even to question, but usually have no deeper symbolic meaning attached and often are contrary to the fundamental principles of ethics, logic and common sense. In this deviant ideologies, people are discouraged to ask questions or even to try to understand things - because it's all "a mystery".

Bhagavad gita offers a very different scenario, and it certainly does not ask us to believe simply out of loyalty. Rather, it goes a great length to explain things under different perspectives so that we might understand its science, verify it for ourselves and become Self-realized. The big difference is that in Vedic knowledge, God realization is Self realization. The concept of God is much deeper and vaster

than what most people think and expect. The transcendental presence of God can be perceived everywhere in this world by a sensitive and pure soul as the intrinsic and pure source of happiness (*rama* means "happiness") - the fresh and sweet taste of water, the smell of clean earth, the light of sun and moon, the warmth of fire, and the feeling of life itself. Subtler energies are also divine, such as the primordial sound vibration from which everything comes to being, and the ability/ capability of action in human beings.

The word *rasa* means "taste" and can be applied at many levels. *Taittiriya Upanishad* (2.7) states, *raso vai sah, rasam hy evayam labdhvanandibhavati*, "God is the taste, and everybody finds happiness by tasting a drop of it." This taste is obviously not limited to the sensory experience of the material tongue, but it can also include it, as we see in the concept of the sacredness of *prasadam*, the food offered to God and then shared by devotees and public. A person who is spiritually active or at least firmly situated in *sattva* can easily taste the difference between the food that has been offered to God and the exact same recipe but cooked with a selfish materialistic mentality. The connection between water and taste is significant.

Contemporary conventional academic knowledge says that pure water is colorless, odorless and tasteless because it contains nothing that triggers taste receptors, but the people who have written these definitions had their sensitivity damaged by bad habits such as smoking, drinking alcoholic beverages, and even consuming industrial food "enhanced" with artificial flavorings, spoiled foods and foods that are hot, spicy, pungent, or downright disgusting - what is diplomatically called today "an acquired taste" - such as fermented fish sauce, some types of fermented cheese, etc. Besides, the water they may have tasted is usually dead water, distilled or processed industrially to make it "safe to drink" and stored in containers for quite some time, generally both before and after the treatments.

Krishna's presence in this world is subtler than that, and can only be perceived by those who have purified their tongue by observing a proper *sattvic*/ spiritual diet and life habits. Any evolved human being who is situated on the platform of *sattva* can experience the true taste of fresh clean and lively water as sweet as nectar (*amrita*), the best drink that one can possibly have. Unfortunately, the number of people who can afford to even taste such water - if only once in their lifetime - is rapidly decreasing, and may become practically zero in a few short years, due to the spreading of pollution and industrial consumerism at global level.

Another important point is that water as mentioned in this verse applies to the essence of liquidity that is present in all liquids. Nobody, even the cleverest scientist, can actually feel any taste when they are really thirsty, the food is dry and their mouth is dry. To get any taste from what they are eating, they need some moisture. Do the experiment and verify for yourself: this is much more scientific than playing parrots and blindly repeating the words of the "academic authorities" when they dish out their pontificating nonsense.

On a different level of meaning, *rasa* indicates the taste of the sentiment of devotion that the *bhakta* experiences towards God. There are several varieties of such sentiments or feelings, some primary and some secondary, and all are considered perfectly legitimate and virtuous. The most intimate and intense *rasa* - called *parakiya sringara rasa* - is the sentiment of a secret lover, exemplified by the love of the *gopis* of Vrindavana towards Krishna. Their feelings were so overwhelming that they completely forgot everything else, and even appeared to have lost their mental sanity. Slightly less intimate and intense is the *svakiya sringara rasa* - the sentiment of a legitimate spouse - exemplified by the queens of Krishna in Dvaraka; such feelings are also so strong that the devotee forgets the divine position of the Lord in the desire to please him and serve him. Next is the *vatsalya rasa*, that we can define as motherly and fatherly affection, exemplified in Krishna's *lila* not only by Yasoda and Nanda and Devaki and Vasudeva, but also by all the elder *gopis* and *gopas*, the elder inhabitants of Vrindavana, Mathura, Dvaraka, all the elder relatives of Krishna, Krishna's *gurus* Garga Muni and Sandipani Muni, and even the cows who were overwhelmed by ecstasy at the thought that Krishna would drink their milk. This *vatsalya rasa* can become mixed with *sakhya rasa*, as in those friends and relatives of Krishna who appeared to be only slighter older than Krishna, such as Balarama the elder brother of Krishna, and the two eldest Pandavas Yudhishthira and Bhimasena.

Sakhya rasa is the sentiment of friendship among peers, exemplified by the young cowherd boys in Vrindavana, by Arjuna (4.3, 11.41-42) and by all those who appeared in Krishna's *lila* to be of the same age of Krishna. This sentiment can also become mixed with the *dasya rasa* - relationship of service towards a superior - when appears in those who appeared in Krishna's *lila* to be younger than Krishna - such as the smallest *gopas* and *gopis*, and Arjuna's younger brothers Nakula and Sahadeva.

By itself, *dasya rasa* is very respectful and submissive, and it is exemplified by the sons of Krishna at Dvaraka, by his house servants both in Vrindavana and Dvaraka, his soldiers, and his devotees in general. Uddhava as a young relative of Krishna also accepted him as his master and teacher, and received his instructions in the *Bhagavata Purana*. The same sentiment can also be observed in the environment of Krishna, including the calves and cows that Krishna takes to the pastures, the animals of the forest, the tree, the grass, and even the water of the rivers. We must not make the serious mistake of evaluating *bhakti* according to the material criteria, and seeing Krishna's personal companions as "just animals" or "just uneducated girls".

The main *rasas* can also become tinged by secondary *rasas* such as *virya* (heroism in battle), *bhayanaka* (fear), *hasya* (humor), *karuna* (compassion) and *adbhuta* or *vismaya* (amazement), manifested in observing Krishna's activities, including some extraordinary roles that Krishna played in his *lila*. In observing the activities of other persons directed towards Krishna, such as devotees offering prayers or enemies attacking him, other secondary *rasas* can appear such as *raudra* (anger) and *bibhatsa* (disgust).

The most elementary of the main *rasas* is *santa* ("peacefulness"), that consists in the realization and appreciation of Krishna's exceptional qualities and transcendental position; this sentiment is expressed in all the prayers we find in the *Puranas* and *Itihasas*. The light of the moon and the sun is actually the *brahmajyoti*, the light of the Brahman, that reaches us filtered through the various layers of material elements. Krishna is also the origin and the basis of the Brahman (14.27, *brahmano hi pratistha aham*) and so we can just imagine what Krishna is talking about when he speaks about himself. The word *prabha* does not mean simply "light", because both the moon and the sun have other powers besides supplying illumination.

The sun's energy includes UV rays, which disinfect liquids and solids and stimulate the growth of plants, and infrared rays, which produce heat. Between the ultraviolet and the infrared frequencies there is a series of "nice colored rays" that have a variety of properties not yet fully explored by conventional mainstream science - such as the healing power of green light, the relaxing power of the blue light, the metabolism-stimulating power of the yellow light and so on. These specific properties may not have been recognized by academic physicists, but they have been empirically verified and effectively utilized for several years already by market strategists in the choice of colors for interior decoration or various equipment.

A suitable elaboration on the *pranava omkara* in Vedic literature and tradition is too bulky to be presented here, therefore we will refer to later verses on this subject (9.17, 17.23-24). *Pranava* means "of the *prana*", and refers to the fact that the *omkara* (the sound AUM) is the fundamental sound of the energy, the subtle life air that constitutes the magnetic field of the living organism and is created by the Atman in the body. All sounds are created from the basic sound AUM, which makes speech and communication and knowledge possible.

The expression *paarusam* translates ability or potency and sometimes even manliness, but it does not refer to the biological function that modern society tries to enhance through medications such as Viagra. It has a much deeper meaning, connected with the other concepts expressed in these verses in regard to the important supportive role (*dharma*) of human beings in the universe.

पुण्यो गन्धः पृथिव्यां च तेजश्चास्मि विभावसौ । जीवनं सर्वभूतेषु तपश्चास्मि तपस्विषु ॥ ७-९ ॥

punyaḥ gandhaḥ pṛthivyāṁ ca tejaścāsmi vibhāvasau | jīvanam sarvabhūteṣu tapaścāsmi tapasviṣu || 7-9 ||

punyah: original/ attractive/ pure/ good/ auspicious; *gandhah*: fragrance/ smell; *prithivyam*: in earth; *ca*: and; *tejah*: heat/ power; *ca*: and; *asmi*: I am; *vibhavasau*: in fire; *jivanam*: life; *sarva-bhutesu*: in all living beings; *tapah*: austerity; *ca*: and; *asmi*: I am; *tapasvisu*: in those who practice austerity.

"I am the good/ pure smell in earth, I am the heat in fire, I am life in all beings, and I am austerity in ascetics."

What taste is to water, scent is earth. The word *punya* is generally referred to saintly activities, such as hearing and talking about the Transcendental Reality (*punya sravana kirtanah*, *Bhagavata Purana* 1.2.17, 10.41.16). In *Bhagavad gita* it is referred to the activities that must be performed in order to accrue merits (6.41, 7.28, 8.28, 9.20, 9.33, 18.71, 18.75). So we should not think that *punya gandham* just means "good smell". Literally, *punya* means "pure and pristine, not decayed, not decomposed", and therefore it can also be translated as "pure, clean, healthy, original, attractive, good, auspicious". We understand that the bad smell comes from decomposition and impurity, that are manifestations of *tamas* or ignorance.

Just like the pure original water that we can find in uncontaminated nature, pure original earth or clay is actually a very purifying substance - whatever the conventional contemporary knowledge may say, and as proven practically by many individuals and groups that work in the field of natural medicine. Applications of pure original clay (mud) packs on wounds actually clean them, spontaneously extracting any impurities and splinters, and can even remove pus from a closed wound that has become infected, or from otherwise contaminated body parts, including tumors. On a more daily basis, clay "masks" are used in natural beauty practice to heal and remove pimples and skin impurities of all kinds, and many commercial companies have been producing clay-based cosmetics for many years, with increasing success. And just as with water, the purity of earth has become increasingly jeopardized and destroyed by the advancing pollution and non-sustainable development, so that in the future it will be more and more difficult to actually find clean earth in the natural state in the environment... in subservience of the "self-fulfilling prophecy" that "mud is dirt", and therefore we can and should throw all kinds of contaminating things into the soil, "where they belong".

In the proper order of things, the purity of water and earth is ensured by the powerful rays of the sun, that disinfects and energizes, burns and regenerates the material elements. This purifying effect of the sun, too, is being threatened by the increasing air and space pollution, from industrial fumes (causing acid rains), nuclear radiation fallout, smog from the burning of fossil fuels, excess carbon dioxide and monoxide, ozone depletion, to the notorious chemtrails.

Tejas is the powerful destructive energy that purifies everything by burning, the remedy that is applied by the laws of nature to bring back the balance in the universe. This power manifests primarily as fire and sun, but also in the microcosm of the human body as the *jataragni*, the "fire in the belly" that digests foods, and the solar plexus that irradiates the energy of determination and will power. It is important to notice here that in Vedic language, fire also includes everything that "burns", including chemicals acids, such as the hydrochloric acid produced by our stomach.

The primary elemental nature of the radiance of sun/ fire called *tejas* (also mentioned in the next verse) is highlighted here by the name *Vibhavasau* referred to the Deity of fire, where *vibha* means "shining with great brilliance" and *vasu* means foundations, "that which resides". The *Vasus* are the eight principles of the cosmic manifestation, sometimes referred as the "material elements", but that definition creates confusion because they can be mistaken for the 8 elements previously mentioned by Krishna (7.4) as *bhumih apah analah vayuh kham manah buddhih ahankara*. The personifications of these *Vasus* are called fire as *Agni* ("burning") or *Anala* ("lively"), earth as *Prithivi* ("wide") or *Dhara* ("that which supports"), wind as *Vayu* ("wind of life") or *Anila* ("breath of life"), space as *Antariksha* ("what is seen in the middle") or *Aha* ("pervading"), the sun as *Aditya* ("eternal") or *Pratyusha* ("he who follows dawn"), the sky as *Dyaus* ("luminous") or *Prabhava* ("radiant") also connected to sunset, the moon as *Chandra* ("illustrious") and *Chandramasa* (the lunar month) or *Soma* (the rejuvenating plant). *Nakshatra* (the aggregate of constellations) is also strictly connected to *Dhruva* (the pole star) and with the *Sapta Rishis* (the Seven Sages) that compose the most famous constellation in the sky: the Great Dipper or *Ursa Maior*.

Dhruva is also known as *Svetadvipa*, the *prapancika vaikuntha* planet in each universe. The primary principles of the universe are also categorized in a slightly different way as the *Adityas*, that are 12 aspects of the sun: *Mitra*, *Aryaman*, *Bhaga*, *Varuna*, *Daksha*, *Amsa*, *Tvastri*, *Pushan*, *Vivasvat*, *Savitri*, *Sakra* and *Vishnu*.

The other group of categories, called the 11 *Rudras*, are the aspects of *Shiva* or the *Purusha* principle: *Atma* (the individual soul), *Ananda* (happiness), *Vijnana* (knowledge), *Manas* (the mind), *Prana* (the vital energy), *Vac* (the faculty of speech), *Isana* (the dominating principle), *Tatpurusha* (that activating principle), *Aghora* (nothing is horrible), *Vamadeva* (pleasant Lord) and *Sadyojata* (appearing quickly).

Life in all living beings is again, the *Atman/ Brahman*, that is the main subject of all Vedic scriptures.

Tapasya is the deliberate practice of tolerating difficulties for a higher purpose; it is another form of *tejas* because it creates power, especially for the creation, the preservation and the dissolution of the universe. In a sense, it is one of the primary principles of the cosmos, too.

बीजं मां सर्वभूतानां विद्धि पार्थ सनातनम् । बुद्धिर्बुद्धिमतामस्मि तेजस्तेजस्विनामहम् ॥ ७-१० ॥

bījaṁ māṁ sarvabhūtānāṁ viddhi pārtha sanātanam | buddhirbuddhimatāmasmi tejastejasvināmaham || 7-10 ||

bijam: the seed; *mam*: me; *sarva-bhutanam*: of all beings; *viddhi*: (you should) know; *partha*: o son of Pritha; *sanatanam*: eternal; *buddhih*: the intelligence; *buddhimatam*: in those who are intelligent; *asmi*: I am; *tejah*: the radiance; *tejasvinam*: in all the things that resplend; *aham*: I (am).

"O Partha, know that I am the eternal seed of all existences/ all beings, I am intelligence in the intelligent, and I am the powerful radiance in the powerful."

Krishna is the seed, or principle, or essence, of everything - all beings, all species of life and all existences. The seed of material existences is eternal, albeit its manifestations appear and disappear in cycles, and keep changing.

The word *bija* is also used for the technical proceedings of worship and rituals, as the "seed sound" from which the *mantras* and the personal presence of the Deity are manifested. So we can understand that here the definition does not simply apply to the sperm that fertilizes the egg in the animal forms of life, or the grain from which the plant sprouts. It is rather the power of life, the knowledge or consciousness contained in the blueprint of existence, that blossoms into full bloom in the cycle of creation.

The attribute *sanatana*, "eternal", adds a new layer of meaning, indicating that at the time of the dissolution of the universe all existences and all living beings are withdrawn and absorbed again into the timeless Brahman, the Maha Vishnu Narayana, "the shelter of all", to be manifested again at the beginning of a new cycle of creation. This is another reminder of how the Divine presence or existence should not be taken cheaply.

Sometimes this *sanatana sarva-bhutanam bija* is interpreted as the *pradhana*, the primary non-manifested aggregate of existence that remains eternally even after the dissolution of the universe, the Shakti that develops the divine seed into the various forms and that is also eternal - the *pradhana* - albeit the forms that she creates are appearing and disappearing in cycles. Again, this is non-different from Brahman.

The intelligence in those who are intelligent is a very interesting principle. It can be defined as a sharper awareness or consciousness, and this brings us back to the intimate nature of the Atman/ Brahman, that is fundamentally consciousness. We have already seen how in *Bhagavad gita* Krishna keeps presenting intelligence as the most important factor in progress, both in material and spiritual life. Such intelligence is created by the accumulation of *punya* or results of virtuous activities, especially the sincere performance of one's duties, and by the effort and desire one invests in obtaining one's purpose.

The expression *tejas* (on which we already elaborated in the previous verse commentary) translates "power" but in its natural form, that radiance of energy/ vibrations/ aura that characterizes truly powerful personalities (7.10, 10.41, 11.17, 11.30, 11.47), just like heat and light immediately reveal the presence of fire.

In human society, it is generally applied to *kshatriyas* and *brahmanas* (16.3, 18.43) especially in the meaning of "courage", but in 11.19 and 11.30 the word *tejas* is specifically applied to the form of Time, that devours and burns everything, covering the universe with its radiance and power. In 15.12 it is applied to the sun and the fire. This same meaning is also expressed in *Bhagavata Purana* (1.1.1) *tejo vari mridam*, "sun/ fire, water and earth", which also connects the idea of fiery power together with water and earth like in the two previous verses of *Bhagavad gita* (7.8-9). After all, earth is produced by the union of fire and water - the first elemental components of the universe, that create the stars and the planets.

बलं बलवतां चाहं कामरागविवर्जितम् । धर्माविरुद्धो भूतेषु कामोऽस्मि भरतर्षभ ॥ ७-११ ॥

balam balavatām cāhaṁ kāmarāgavivarjitam | dharmāvīruddho bhūteṣu kāmo'smi bharatarṣabha || 7-11 ||

balam: strength; *balavatam*: of those who are strong; *ca*: and; *aham*: I (am); *kama-raga-vivarjitam*: free from lust and attachment; *dharma aviruddhah*: not against the *dharma*; *bhuteshu*: in the living beings; *kama*: desire/ pleasure; *asmi*: I am; *bharatarshabha*: o best among the descendants of Bharata.

"O best of the Bharata dynasty (Arjuna), I am the strength of the strong who is free from lust/ selfishness and attachment. In all beings, I am the (sexual) desire that is not contrary to dharma."

The strength (*balam*) mentioned in this verse is connected with the *tejas* of the two previous verses, and with the intelligence (*buddhih*) of the intelligent mentioned in verse 7.10. Like splendor and intelligence, strength is a *shakti* attribute of the Supreme Lord, but just like in the feminine/ masculine couple of *pradhana* and *brahman*, the "genders" are switched.

This is an important point that we should remember every time we contemplate the Supreme Deity pictured in an apparently male or female form: the Divine is not limited like the embodied conditioned souls, and it would be a mistake to project human social conventions on God, even if God plays some roles in the performance of the *avatara lilas*.

Here *balam* is further defined by the expression *kama-raga-vivarjitam*: free from lust and attachment. This is particularly important because *tejas*, *balam* and *buddhi* are required for the protection of the individual and society, but can be very badly misused and therefore become a great danger for everyone.

A person that is controlled by lust, selfishness and attachment but has no strength, power or intelligence can do very little harm, so before training people to help them develop greater power or strength, we should make sure that they are fit candidates. This is the logic of the *gurukula* system, where all children are first examined and tested by the *guru* to ascertain which position they should occupy in society and what kind of training they should receive in that capacity. Re-establishing this educational system is one of the most important priorities in rebuilding a functional society.

In contemporary conventional education (usually called "western") teachers do not have any responsibility towards the proper development of the children, either on the level of the knowledge of the subjects or on the level of ethical principles. Like the members of governments, teachers are appointed by an impersonal "authority" that calculates merits on the basis of academic certificates and other similar criteria, with a great emphasis on the ideological conformity and allegiance to the "official version". So when the students fail in learning their curriculum or in developing the proper qualities and skills, or in becoming useful members of society, the teachers are not held responsible. Their job is just to tell the students to read the text books approved by the school management or the government education board, and if some teachers have a passion for their subject and go the extra mile to inspire students to understand and appreciate it, they are scarcely recognized or supported.

The worst situation seems to be in India, where even the students from the lowest grades of elementary schools need to get regular tuition from private teachers or institutions besides the normal school attendance, if they want to have any chance to passing the test. The reason for this disaster is mainly the casteist discrimination enforced by the government system that rewards backwardness, irresponsibility, and a heavily politicized approach, totally disregarding intelligent, ethical values, merit and actual need - both for the appointment of teachers and for the enrollment of students. Since priority is given to non-brahmins, people learn that the brahminical qualifications are to be considered an obstacle to education, so the general population becomes more and more alienated from the Vedic heritage, values and knowledge.

The ideal education is the *gurukula*-based system, in the hands of genuine *brahmanas* that are qualified both in regards to the knowledge of the subject they are teaching, and in training their students in ethical values (*dharma*) and self-discipline (*tapasya*), as well as in directly developing the skills that are required to perform the job. This can be re-established by promoting home schooling and distance education, that take advantage of present legal provisions created by various ideological groups.

Another important point is that contemporary conventional education does not give the students sufficient practical skills and useful knowledge to become good members of society, because it does not want to recognize the natural diversity of talents and abilities of the individuals. Obsessed by the fear of "diversity", mainstream society (especially in western countries) expects all individuals to be equally capable of learning a common basic education curriculum and getting the same results - so when unqualified students fail in the attempt, the entire class is set a lower standard so that "nobody is left back", and the most intelligent students lose interest in the proceedings.

The *gurukula* system, on the other hand, gives a personalized evaluation and training of each individual student's potential in qualities and tendencies, and gives a different curriculum and training to intellectuals, warriors, business persons, and artisans. The only minimum common education everybody gets is about the basic ethical principles - truthfulness/ honesty, compassion/ selflessness, cleanliness/ purity and self control/ discipline. Even animals can be trained in these basic rules, so there is no question that some human beings are unable to be educated at this level. Of course, there will be human beings who choose not to live according to these basic rules of *dharma*, but they should be kept outside the boundaries of a civilized society, as *anaryas*.

The expression *kama* translates "desire", and is often referred to sexual desire. The topic is tricky because of the artificial superimpositions of the dominant Abrahamic cultures at subtler levels, that often create a tangled mess of emotions around sexual energy and urges, with the development of unnecessary guilt and fears ultimately leading to perversions and damages. First of all, we need to make the very important distinction between natural sex urge and artificial sex urge, that are respectively on the physical and on the mental level.

The human body naturally produces hormones and sexual fluids, especially during the "fertile" period, that is from adolescence to the beginning of old age. In the *gurukula* system, the students are trained in the basic ethical principles and learn to control their minds and senses by engaging them in appropriate and beneficial ways under the constant surveillance and responsibility of a qualified teacher. If a boy is trained properly before puberty, adolescence will be much easier and happier both for the individual and for society: practically all the problems that people have on the sexual level are created by social pressure, cultural myths and stereotyped roles they are unable to cope with.

All forms of desire, including the natural sex urge, are not only admissible but sacred and divine as well, as long as they do not violate the principles of *dharma* - truthfulness, compassion, cleanliness, and self-control. So, as long as a relationship is not based on physical or psychological violence, on betrayal or hypocrisy, on some type of psychological or physical perversion, or on mere animal lust, it is considered legitimate from the moral point of view. It is important to understand that Vedic culture does not consider sexual acts (as long as they are free and based on mutual consent) as illegal or immoral - on the contrary, *kama* is one of the four main purposes of human life (*dharma, artha, kama, moksha*).

The two important concepts expressed in this verse are connected in the definition of strength (*bala*) as divine when it is free from lust, selfishness and attachment, as *kama* and *bala* never go well together. There is no need for "force" in civilized and healthy sexual matters. If someone is attracted by the idea of violence in sexual relationships, they should get their mind examined by a qualified expert, because must be some psychological issue that is poisoning their system. *Kama* or desire is a powerful divine principle in itself, but the activities prompted by it could become disastrous (both for the individual and for the collectivity) unless they are consistently channeled through the principles of *dharma*.

Some people believe *dharma* to be merely a collection of traditional social rules and norms such as marriage rituals and reciprocal duties of family members, or even a net of social prejudices that systematically stifle progress and proper engagement of resources. This misconception is the root of the degradation of society.

ये चैव सात्त्विका भावा राजसास्तामसाश्च ये । मत्त एवेति तान्विद्धि न त्वहं तेषु ते मयि ॥ ७-१२ ॥

ye caiva sāttvikā bhāvā rājasāstāmasāśca ye | matta eveti tānviddhi na tvahaṁ teṣu te mayi || 7-12 ||

ye: they; ca: and; iva: certainly; sāttvika: according to *sattva*, goodness; bhava: state of being; rajasah: according to *rajas*, passion; tamasah: according to *tamas*, ignorance; ca: and; ye: they; mattah: from me; eva: certainly; iti: thus; tan: them; viddhi: you (should) know; na: not; tu: but; aham: I (am); tesu: in them; te: they; mayi: in me.

"You should know that certainly all (those forms of) existence (created) by *sattva*, *rajas* and also *tamas* come from me, but I am not in them: rather, they are in me."

With a long first *a*, the word *bhava* means "emotion, feeling". The word *bhava* (with a short first *a*) means "existence, birth, becoming, manifestation". *Bhava* is also a name of Shiva.

In this verse Krishna is elaborating about the nature of existence. In 7.9, he has said he is the seed of all beings (*bijam mam sarva-bhutanam sanatanam*). The difference of meaning between *bhava* and *bhuta* is that *bhava* is something that is manifesting, while *bhuta* is something that has already come into existence. To continue with the logical thread of Krishna's discussion, we could say that *bhava* is the seed or the preliminary stage of *bhuta*.

The variety of states of being in the material world are produced by the union of the two basic energies - the *apara prakriti* constituted by the 8 material elements, and the *para prakriti* constituted by the living beings, of which Krishna has already said he is the origin (7.4-6). As we will see in detail later in the text, the *apara prakriti* has three *gunas* (modalities or qualities), namely *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*, that regulate all material existences and all living beings. The science of the *gunas* is so important that *Bhagavad gita* dedicates the entire chapter 14 to elaborating on it, and it is also mentioned in many other parts of the text.

All the various forms of material existence emanate from God but they are not divine in themselves (and therefore should not be considered as absolute) because they are intermediate positions meant for the development of the *jivatma* towards the realization of the eternal existence of awareness and bliss, that is the Atman/ Brahman. Krishna, the Transcendental Reality, is like a canvas template on which the three colors of the *gunas* (white, red and black) are painted: the colors are in the canvas, but the canvas is not in the colors.

The canvas template is the support for the ever-changing play of the colors, but it is not really pervaded by them at any stage, even if superficially people may think so: the proof is that when the individual or mixed colors are washed away, the canvas template returns to shine with the original clarity.

Similarly, God (*brahman*, *paramatma*, *bhagavan*) remains always unchanged before and after the creation of the universe, and before and after the dissolution of the universe. At the same time, God contains eternally the "blueprint" for existence, in the form of the spiritual seed - the spiritual qualities. The temporary and changing existences are originated and supported by the eternal existence. Here is the key to reconcile the apparent contradiction between *nirguna* ("without qualities") and *saguna* ("with qualities"). Everything we see in the material world has an original counterpart in the spiritual existence, in the "world of ideals" that transcends manifestation and dissolution, and is eternally perfect.

The material copy of the original blueprint is purposefully distorted with defects (impermanence, ignorance and suffering) because the purpose of the material universe is to train the individual soul towards progress. What is training without the purposeful application of difficulties? There would be no effort, no exercise of will power, no improvement. So the proper way to utilize the material manifestation is to engage it in our journey of progress in consciousness, and let it go when it is not useful any more.

त्रिभिर्गुणमयैर्भावैरेभिः सर्वमिदं जगत् । मोहितं नाभिजानाति मामेभ्यः परमव्ययम् ॥ ७-१३ ॥

tribhirguṇamayairbhāvairēbhiḥ sarvamidaṁ jagat | mohitaṁ nābhijānāti māmebhyaḥ paramavyayam || 7-13 ||

tribhiḥ: by the three; *guṇa-mayaiḥ*: composed by the *gunas*; *bhavaḥ*: by the existences; *ēbhiḥ*: (all) these; *sarvam*: all; *idam*: this; *jagat*: universe/ people; *mohitam*: confused; *na*: not; *abhijanati*: does understand; *mam*: me; *ebhyaḥ*: compared to these; *param*: higher/ supreme; *avyayam*: imperishable.

"Under the conditions of existence created by the three *gunas*, this world does not understand me, as I am inexhaustible and transcendental."

The subject of this verse is *jagat*, "the world", intended as "all the people in general according to the material concept". The embodied conditioned beings cannot understand Krishna, the Transcendental Reality, because of the limitations of their material sense of identification (*ahankara*), that manifests in the *bhavas*, or conditions of existence, constituted by the three *gunas*, or qualities of material nature.

Krishna is beyond and above this level of material identification, beyond and above the *gunas*, in the eternal transcendental reality: we can move to this higher level and ultimately understand him, but first we need to leave our limitations behind.

How can we see reality, if we insist in wearing heavily colored eyeglasses? The colors of the *gunas* confuse our vision and project shadows of forms that do not really exist, because they are only temporary. The actual reality is beyond the eyeglasses and does not depend on them, while the colorful projections of the lenses are precisely what constitutes the eyeglasses and depends on the greater reality for their existence. Nobody is forcing us to keep our eyeglasses on, but because of a strange sense of fun and entertainment, we have taken up the habit of wearing them and after some time we have become convinced that they are an integral part of our vision, and that without these eyeglasses we would not be able to see anything.

To solve the problem, it takes an act of surrender, of faith, that pushes the will power to actually choose to remove the eyeglasses and to look at the real world. The issue of faith and surrender in *Bhagavad gita* is radically different from the concept of faith and surrender we find in abrahamic ideologies, because surrendering to Krishna is only the first step that will enable us to actually experiment and verify the value of his teachings by our direct perception.

Krishna answers all questions and does not speak of mysteries that nobody will ever know, he never asks for blind allegiance and obedience, and does not threaten punishments or promises rewards. On the contrary, he will tell Arjuna, "I have given you this knowledge, now think about it and then choose what you want to do" (18.63-64).

The word *maya* without long *a* means "composed by" or "consisting of", while *maya* with long *a* means "illusion".

Another meaning of *guṇa* is "rope". We can visualize the *gunas* as three different threads that are woven together to form the beautiful cloth or network of the universal manifestation, that is three-dimensional in nature, that we can use as a ladder to move around and

upwards. The combination of the three *gunas* produces bodies/ conditions of existence/ manifestations such as *devas*, *asuras*, human beings and animals and plants. Among the human beings, *brahmanas*, *kshatriyas*, *vaisyas* and *sudras* are also characterized by particular mixtures of the *gunas*, and so are the *anaryas* or uncivilized people. All such conditions of life are temporary, and the living being is supposed to progress through them towards the ultimate purpose of liberation or Self realization.

दैवी ह्येषा गुणमयी मम माया दुरत्यया । मामेव ये प्रपद्यन्ते मायामेतां तरन्ति ते ॥ ७-१४ ॥

daivī hyeṣā guṇamayī mama māyā duratyayā | māmeva ye prapadyante māyāmetāṁ taranti te || 7-14|

daivi: divine; *hi*: certainly; *esa*: this; *guna-mayi*: consisting of qualities; *mama*: my; *maya*: illusion; *duratyaya*: very difficult to overcome; *mam*: me; *eva*: certainly; *ye*: those (who); *prapadyante*: approach; *mayam*: illusion; *etam*: this; *taranti*: can go beyond; *te*: they.

"This divine energy of mine, manifesting as the three *gunas*, is very difficult to overcome but those who take shelter in me (can) cross over this illusion."

The *apara prakriti* mentioned by Krishna in the previous verses (7.4-6) is still divine and unconquerable even by the living beings that are known as *para prakriti*, so she deserves all our respect and worship.

Some foolish people think they can "declare war to Maya" or material nature, but they will be invariably beaten down... the greatest defeat for them is to develop the strong ego of being "a stalwart *sannyasi*" - or *brahmachari*, or *brahmana*, or *yogi*, or *jnani*, or *vaishnava*, or whatever identification their minds dictates to them to make them feel superior - important and great. Indeed, such deluded people have already been humiliated by their arrogance and they remain even more strongly and permanently under the grip of illusion. Krishna's instructions are the only safe path to become free from ignorance and illusion: we need to recognize the divine nature of Maya and bow to the Transcendental Reality that manifests such wonders.

Goddess Mahamaya is like a mother tiger: her jaws are inescapable death for all animals, but they are a place of comfort, safety and love for her kittens, who have affection and respect for her, and depend on her for everything. This is the sentiment of surrender (*prapadyante*) expressed by Krishna in this verse.

The word *prapada* refers to the front part of the feet, and it especially relates to the traditional gesture of touching the feet of a superior as a mark of respect and submission; it expresses the meek and humble attitude that a devotee needs to cultivate towards the Lord and his divine energies. Such meekness and humility, however, should be directed towards God, and not towards adharmic and foolish people who are trying to create obstacles on the path of progress for individuals and for society. We must remember that Krishna speaks the instructions of *Bhagavad gita* to Arjuna precisely to encourage him to engage in a terrible fight where he will contribute directly or indirectly to the killing of several thousands of people, including his own relatives and elders and other great personalities, such as kings and *gurus*. Obviously Krishna does not want Arjuna to surrender, or to be meek and humble towards the evil Duryodhana and his supporters - and neither should we.

Sometimes ignorant people criticize dharmic activists for their outspoken awareness campaigns. Many believe that self-realized souls should always be silent and wearing a beatific vacant smile on their faces, "transcendentally" callous to the events of this world, and if they speak at all, they should only utter incomprehensible and philosophical speculations, vague blessings, sentimentalistic platitudes generally based on "love", totally impractical instructions or complicated technical details about religious rituals.

Unfortunately, the general public is so misguided and so ignorant about the actual contents of the *shastra* that they routinely fall victims to such dangerous cheaters and their followers, because they are told that by simply making a public show of submission to such so-called *gurus* one is automatically "saved" as taught in the abrahamic ideologies.

The expression *guna-mayi*, "made of *gunas*", does not refer to the origin of *maya* but to her production. As we have seen already, and will see again later in the text, the three *gunas* - *sattva*, *rajas*, *tamas* - are the expression of the bondage of the conditioned soul, that is originated and perpetuated by the choices of the individual soul through the exercise of free will.

The Lord is not responsible for such choices and neither is the Mother Goddess Mahamaya: the only cause of the bondage of the conditioned soul is the material identification that covers possession, belonging and gratification. Therefore it is only logical that the only way to get out of the mesh of delusion consists in giving up *ahankara* and *mamatva*, and approaching the Divine - the Lord and his Shakti - in a very humble and submissive attitude, actually following God's teachings. In this regard, it is important to note that in spiritual symbolism, the idea of *pada*, indicating the feet of a divine personality, includes his/ her teachings and instructions, position on the level of consciousness, and service to his/ her mission.

Another meaning of *guna* is "rope", that we can easily connect with the idea of bondage and net, but also with rope walking and rope ladders. The rope is not responsible for our bondage: it all depends on how we use it. By following carefully and sincerely Krishna's detailed instructions in *Bhagavad gita*, we will be able to climb the net by using the higher ropes of *rajas* and *sattva* to lift ourselves out of the most tangled mess of *tamas*, then moving up from *rajas* to *sattva* and finally out of the entire net altogether, attaining the level of *suddha sattva* or spiritual goodness. In the earliest stages of the process, it is very important to get help from an expert person, because when one is bound hands and feet, it is very difficult to do anything, and one's efforts may even cause a further tightening of the ropes. Have you ever disentangled a mass of yarn? It is a very useful exercise for the mind, because it teaches patience, carefulness, gentleness, and the logical process of tracking the extremities of the yarn and liberating them from the mess, keeping all threads clearly visible at all times.

न मां दुष्कृतिनो मूढाः प्रपद्यन्ते नराधमाः । माययापहृतज्ञाना असुरं भावमाश्रिताः ॥ ७-१५ ॥

na mām duṣkṛtino mūḍhāḥ prapadyante narādhamāḥ | māyayāpahṛtajñānā āsuram bhāvamāśritāḥ || 7-15 ||

na: not; mam: me; duskritinah: evil doers; mudhah: stupid; prapadyante: approach in a respectful mood; nara-adhamah: the lowest of the human beings; mayaya: by illusion; apahrita: stolen; jnana: knowledge; asuram: demoniac mentality; bhavam: nature; asritah: those who have taken shelter of.

"The evil doers, the foolish, the most degraded, those whose knowledge has been covered by delusion, and those who have chosen an asuric existence do not approach me."

In the previous verses, Krishna has declared that he is the origin of the universe and the father of all living beings (7.4-7). He is the Transcendental eternal Reality that supports the existence of all things, and knowing him constitutes the highest perfection. Why then it is so difficult to know him? Krishna explains that the consciousness of the conditioned souls is covered and tied by the three *gunas* (7.13) or modalities of material existence, and that only those who approach the Divine in a respectful, humble and sincere manner will be able to overcome (*taranti*) the net woven by such ropes. How to do this practically? Krishna now explains what are the main obstacles to this process.

Duskritina means "evil doers": *duh* means "bad", *krit* means "one who does". Thus, the first negative factor that prevents us from approaching Krishna is the deliberate choice of committing bad actions. What are "bad actions"? Those activities (committed physically, mentally or by abstention) that are contrary to *dharma*, that are contrary to truthfulness and honesty, compassion and benevolence to all, cleanliness and purity of mind, and self-control.

Those who choose to engage in wrongful and damaging activities get caught in a net of negative reactions and lower modes of material identification, and become bound more and more tightly by the *gunas*. Earlier (4.36) and later (9.30) Krishna will say that sincere engagement in devotional service can purify even the greatest criminal actions, but we should never forget that in many more verses he reiterates that it is necessary to give up all bad activities before one can come to know him. This obviously means that the purification from the sins or wrongful activities starts only when one sincerely makes deliberate efforts to give them up, and applies to the karmic residues left by the previous negative activities.

Krishna certainly does not condone the cynical behavior of a false devotee who deliberately continues to engage in wrongful acts, counting on his fake devotion to neutralize their effects: this is clearly an offensive attitude, and listed among the 10 main offenses to be carefully avoided in devotional service.

A *duskritina* has set the course of his boat in the wrong direction, so he will not be able to reach the proper destination. It is up to us, individually: at every step in our lives we are offered the choice between the right thing and the wrong thing, and our conscience is always there to tell us which is which. As a counterpart, the next verse will speak of *sukritinah*, "good-doers", if we may say. From the same root, *kirti* means "good fame" and refers to the glory that is accrued by making the right choices even when it would be easier to make the wrong one.

The expression *duskritina* is sometimes translated as "miscreant", but we should be very careful as this English word carries a profound abrahamic bias that is alien to the Vedic concept. In abrahamic societies apostasy or heresy are punishable crimes. While for abrahamics a "miscreant" is someone who does not blindly accept to believe in the dogmas established by their priests, a *duskritina* is simply one who performs bad and unethical activities, callous to the damage that he causes to others: the definition has nothing to do with one's religious faith or lack thereof.

The second category of hopeless people are the *mudha*, the "fools". Here and in several other passages, we see that Krishna is not trimming words too much when it comes to lack of intelligence or good qualities.

Sometimes "politically correct" people object to the use of "strong words", protesting that *satyam bruyat priyam bruyat*, "truth should only be told in a pleasing manner", but how can you describe a fool without risking him to feel offended at all? If you are not clear enough, there will be no point in speaking, because your warnings will be lost. Calling spade a spade cannot be considered offensive: it just plain truth. Truth has no fault in itself. Those who feel offended by truth should verify their priorities. So, the famous quote (*satyam bruyat priyam bruyat*) actually means that we should try to tell the truth in a friendly manner, so that we avoid unnecessarily hurting people. Of course, it should be the truth: we need to stick to the actual point - we cannot say that someone is a fool because of race, gender, or other factors that are irrelevant to the degree of intelligence and ability to understand.

The word *mudha* has been also translated as "devoid of discrimination" and "beast of burden", as exemplified by the behavior of the donkey, that can be made to carry very heavy burdens simply by dangling a carrot tied to a stick in front of him. Of course the donkey can never get the carrot because the stick with the carrot also moves with him, but in the meantime he is laboring all day, and in the end he must content himself of a bunch of dry grass he could have had simply by stopping on the way to graze from the roadside. Another characteristic of donkeys is that they like to kick, especially with their rear legs; a male donkey always risks to be hurt when he approaches a female for sex, but still he cannot restrain himself.

Nonetheless, the donkey likes to brag and often even sings, very pleased with what he considers his beautiful voice and profound poetry. In human society, these characteristics apply to the gross materialist, only interested in the philosophy of "work hard, play hard", always pursuing a dream of happiness that he can never obtain because of the very nature of the material world, and carrying a burden that give him no benefit. These people may aspire to "cultural programs" such as music, dance and similar entertainment, but because these have no spiritual or educational contents, they remain empty and vain. When they are offered the opportunity for spiritual research, and asked if they ever wonder about the meaning of life and the purpose of the universe, they become spiteful and offensive because they cannot even understand the point of such "waste of time", as they say. "Get a job," is their most likely response.

Naradhamah are the lowest among the human beings, the degraded uncivilized people that prefer to live "freely" like animals, without following any rule or ethical principle, without striving to improve themselves. Or worse, they have concocted cruel and degrading rules

for their community, and they stick to them. These fallen people see no harm in killing innocent and friendly creatures to eat them, to violate women or children for their own sense gratification, to cheat and steal property to which they have no rights, to defoul nature, to destroy or waste resources and the property of others, and in general to behave in a very irresponsible way.

The *maya-apahrita-jnana* people are those who know things "theoretically" but remain unable to put them in practice because of some material attachment or delusion. Many people like to talk about philosophy and spirituality, but when it is time to walk their talk, they do not make any effort to become consistent, and sometimes they are even surprised to hear that we expect them to do what they have been preaching. "But that was just philosophy", they say. Or sometimes, when they have pledged to give or to invest something, they conveniently forget their promise or pretend they did not realize what was expected from them. Many people like to make grandiose statements, such as affirming they are ready to give everything to the cause, even their lives, and fight to the last, and then they refuse to donate even a small amount of money or a few hours of their leisure time. Many people preach about not smoking and yet they keep smoking, talk about environment protection and don't care how much garbage they are producing or how many resources they are consuming unnecessarily. Some say, "*dharma rakshati rakshitah*" ("ethic principles defend those who defend them") and then keep merrily trampling *dharma* in many ways, or say "*satyam eva jayate*" ("truth will prevail") and keep telling lies privately and publicly without any shame, and so on.

The fourth category of people who remain unable to approach Krishna are the *asuram bhavam asritah*, those who have deliberately chosen an asuric life. The word *asura* is generally translated as "demoniac", but we should not confuse this concept with the abrahamic meaning based on the idea of mythical creatures also called "fallen angels", who have powers practically identical to "the good God" (and sometimes even greater) and are always trying to push human beings "to sin". This concept of a "bad god" that keeps fighting against the "good God" in the minds and hearts of human beings is a convenient delusion normally used by abrahamics to justify their own bad choices and even the persecution of innocents. Also, the translation "atheists" is not applicable here, because some people may believe in the existence of God, but project their asuric tendencies on him, or even worship some Asura believing him to be God - so they should be counted in this category, too.

The population of the universe is divided into two broad categories: the *suras* and the *asuras* - those who support the divine plan for the benefit and progress of all beings, and those who oppose such plan for their own misguided and deluded selfishness (individual or collective). More about the asuric nature as opposed to the daivic nature (often translated as "demoniac nature" and "divine nature") is in chapter 16, entirely dedicated to the subject.

The expression *asuram bhavam asritah* shows that the demoniac nature is something that one chooses by one's free will, not a genetic inheritance of a particular species or race. Some commentators aggregate the various categories listed in this verse, signifying that the "bad guys" are expected to have all the four bad qualities at the same time, but this is not the case.

चतुर्विधा भजन्ते मां जनाः सुकृतिनोऽर्जुन । आर्तो जिज्ञासुरर्थार्थी ज्ञानी च भरतर्षभ ॥ ७-१६ ॥

catuṛvidhā bhajante mām janāḥ sukṛtino'ṛjuna | ārto jijñāsurarthārthī jñānī ca bharatarṣabha || 7-16 ||

catuḥ: four; *vidhah*: types; *bhajante*: they worship/ serve/ pray; *mam*: me; *janah*: people; *sukritinah*: those who do good deeds; *arjuna*: o Arjuna; *artah*: one who suffers; *jinasuh*: one who is seeking knowledge; *artha-arthi*: one desires wealth and prosperity; *jnani*: a learned person; *ca*: and; *bharata-rshabha*: o best among the descendants of Bharata.

"O Arjuna, best of the descendants of Bharata, four types of good persons worship me: one who is suffering, one who is inquisitive, one who wants some favor or benefit, and one who has knowledge."

Just like there are four types of people who remain unable to approach Krishna, there are four types of devotees, who are willing to make the right choices in their life (*sukritinah*). *Sukritinah* are also those who have already performed a sufficient amount of good actions and have therefore accumulated karmic merits (*sukriti* or *punya*), even unconsciously (*ajñata sukriti*) as for example in the case of someone who offers a gift to a devotee who in turn will offer it to the Deity, or someone who transcribes or prints or distributes a spiritual book without knowing its contents.

The word *bhajante* is very interesting and expresses a higher level of religious sentiments and behavior. Rather than running around trying to enroll more people into their religious camp by hook or by crook, the genuine devotees of Krishna worship and serve him through the process of *bhakti yoga* by applying Krishna's teachings to their own lives and by elevating their consciousness to a transcendental level. The word *bhajan* derives from the same root of the word *bhakti*, and it can be translated as "devotional service in transcendental consciousness". The word "religion" derives from the Latin *religare*, "connecting", as referred to the relationship connecting the individual with God. This means that religion should be a private concern, based on personal beliefs and worship practices, in which neither the government nor society or other people should have any saying. Of course, there are limits to the personal beliefs and worship practices: if some people believe that killing, or raping, or stealing etc is a legitimate worship practice, they should be closely monitored and prevented from committing any unethical/ violent action.

Expert preachers should inspire them to raise their level of consciousness and engage their destructive tendencies in a non-damaging manner, by directing them against their own negative tendencies. So the "killing" should be turned into the destruction of one's own defects, or as an intermediate stage there will be a temporary allowance for animal sacrifice (duly restricted and monitored, especially to sensitize people towards the sufferings of the animals). The lusty tendencies can be sublimated into the higher emotions towards God by the process of *sravanam kirtanam*, also helped by practices such as dancing, dramatic performance, Deity worship, etc - and at an intermediate and temporary (lower) level through consumption of psychotropic substances and other similar methods. Stealing will be sublimated through the regulated collection of donations and alms from the general public, that will be directly engaged in the service of the Deity, especially used for preparing and distributing consecrated foods. Such fund raising must be done strictly according ethical principles and behaviors, otherwise it will be detrimental to the progress of everyone.

What are the main motivations that inspire a decent person (*sukritina*) to approach God?

The most popular reason is suffering. When one is in very serious danger, or experiences a very great pain, it is natural to think of God: even a professed atheist or agnostic will then resort to fervently praying God. The effect may not be very long lasting - generally people forget God as soon as the danger has passed - but at least for some time the sentiment is very strong.

A *jijnasu* is "one who seeks knowledge". As stated in *Vedanta sutras* (*athato brahma jinasa*) and in other Vedic texts, human life finds its real purpose when the individual starts asking questions about existence, the purpose of life, and so on: this is called "search for knowledge". In different times and different places, such quest has taken various forms, but the common denominator is the aspiration towards a higher level of consciousness. In Vedic tradition, God/ Krishna is consciousness, the essence and origin of all existence, so by approaching Krishna we will obtain the knowledge we are seeking.

Another reason why people approach God is to ask for favors. For most people, "prayer" is the only means by which they approach God, and "praying" simply means asking for something. They say, "give us our daily bread, give us this blessing or that blessing, make me pass this school exam, make me win the lottery, give me a good job, give me a good husband/ wife, remove my disease, give me wealth, give me health, give me position, give me protection, give me intelligence, give me devotion, give me liberation". There is nothing intrinsically wrong in asking God for something valuable (*artha*), and in fact *artha* is one of the four main purposes of life according to the Vedic system. Of course, God helps those who help themselves: praying God for his blessings does not mean that we can just sit back and relax and let him do all the work for us. So if we want to get our daily bread, we need to work for it, and if we want to pass a school exam we need to study. If we want to win the lottery we should remember that there are lots of people who are praying for the same result and only one can possibly win (so we had better accumulate some good *karma* credit by performing sufficient good deeds first). If we want a good job we must make sufficient efforts to qualify ourselves and to go looking for one, and so on.

A *jnani* is a person who lives by knowledge. Having already attained the level of knowledge, he becomes truly qualified to understand and worship Krishna, as we will see in the next verses. The wise person has overcome the fear of duality and loss, so he is ready to accept whatever comes to him according to the results of his past deeds: the bad things - including death, disease, misfortunes of various types, pain and disappointments - as well as the good things, that already come by themselves. Such a *jnani* could be in any *varna* or *ashrama*, because intelligence and wisdom are inherently human characteristics and can be found even in illiterate people or in those who are engaged in menial work, or are faithful to family responsibilities.

In this chapter, Krishna has only started to discuss about the science of *bhakti* (loving devotion to God), and at this stage *bhakti* is still presented as the means to approach God, and not the end (*kevala bhakti*).

तेषां ज्ञानी नित्ययुक्त एकभक्तिर्विशिष्यते । प्रियो हि ज्ञानिनोऽत्यर्थमहं स च मम प्रियः ॥ ७-१७ ॥

tesāṃ jñānī nityayukta ekabhaktirviśiṣyate | priyo hi jñānino'tyarthamaḥ sa ca mama priyaḥ || 7-17 |

tesam: of them; *jnani*: one who has knowledge; *nitya-yuktah*: constantly engaged; *eka-bhaktih*: only in devotional service; *visisyate*: excels over others/ in various special ways; *priyah*: the dearest; *hi*: indeed; *janinah*: to the *jnani*; *ati*: very much; *artham*: value; *aham*: I; *sah*: for this person; *ca*: and; *mama*: my; *priyah*: dearest.

"Of them, the person of knowledge who is constantly engaged (in *yoga*) and focused in devotion is the best; I am very dear to the *jnani*, and s/he is very dear to me."

This verse strictly connects *yoga* and *bhakti*, as one and the same. In fact, *yoga* and *bhakti* are one and the same: *yoga* means "uniting/ connecting with God" and *bhakti* means "loving God". How can one unite with God without love? It is not possible, just like it is not possible to love and serve God without having established a connection with God.

However, this *yoga* is not the fancy gymnastic set of exercises that are presented as meant to lose weight or relieve back pain. To really achieve the purpose, the goal shown by Krishna in *Bhagavad gita*, one must be *nitya-yukta*, "constantly engaged", 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and the engagement must be focused on perfect devotion, *eka-bhakti*. What is perfect devotion? It is perfect concentration on Krishna consciousness only - also called *kevala bhakti* ("only devotion"), *suddha bhakti* ("pure devotion"), *ananya bhakti* ("exclusive devotion"), *akinchana bhakti* ("devotion without anything else"), and *uttama bhakti* ("the highest devotion").

Bhakti rasamrita sindhu, one of the most famous texts in *bhakti* literature, states: *anyabhilashita sunyam jnana karmady anavritam anukulyena krishnanusilanam bhaktir uttama*, "The highest level of *bhakti* is free from all reservation, completely dedicated to please God in a favorable way, and independent from any desire for scholarship or material merit. It is simply about behaving always in accordance with Krishna's instructions and desires." (1.1.11) So, the highest form of *bhakti* is not conditioned by *jnana* or *karma*. More ordinary forms of *bhakti* are called *jnana mishra bhakti* ("devotion mixed with the pride of learning") and *karma mishra bhakti* ("devotion mixed with sense of duty"), which tend to dilute the sentiment of dedication to Krishna, and therefore must ultimately be moved to the back seat. However, we need to watch out for *tamas* and *rajas* creeping and sneaking back from the rear door, and suggesting that *bhakti* can be a cheap and quick shortcut that does not require study and work, but will simply develop with some sentimentalistic emotions and a bigot sectarian allegiance.

Bhakti rasamrita sindhu (1.2.101) explicitly warns us against this dangerous foolishness: *sruti smriti puranadi pancaratra vidhim vina, aikantiki harer bhakti utpatayaiva kalpate*, "Exclusive devotion to Lord Hari (Krishna) that ignores the teachings of *Sruti*, *Smriti*, *Puranas* and other Vedic texts, including the *Pancharatra*, is simply a fantasy and an unnecessary disturbance in society."

Eka bhakti corresponds to *aikantiki bhakti*.

The word *visisyate* derives from *visista*, a definition that carries various levels of meanings. For example, we can find it in the expression *visista-advaita*, or "special non-duality that carries diversity". Thus *visisyate* also means "excellent, special" and also "in various ways" - a meaning that opens the doors to a wide horizon of engagements in devotional service. One should not think that *bhajan*, service to God, is limited to singing or reciting the names, qualities and activities of God, or worshiping the Deity in the temple. Anything, any activity, can be transformed in the highest form of devotional service simply by an act of consciousness.

Later Krishna will say that a simple offering of a leaf, a small fruit or a little water (9.26) is sufficient, or even the daily acts that everybody performs such as eating, performing one's daily duties, distributing charity, or tolerating difficult situations (9.27) can all be transformed in perfectly bona fide devotional service to Krishna. The purpose of such pure *bhakti* is simply to develop a strong loving relationship with Krishna, a personal relationship of affection and care that Krishna will personally reciprocate. Already (4.11, 5.15) Krishna had stated that God is equally disposed towards everybody, and in 9.28 he will repeat that his equanimity towards all living entities is not diminished by the personal loving relationship with his intimate devotees. It is not easy to understand the sublime love relationship between God and his devotee, especially when one is still plagued by the materialistic lust, material identification and attachments, and material concepts. God is not jealous (contrarily to what some deluded people think) and therefore does not become angry if we neglect or forget him or fail in our duties, and he does not punish anyone.

Each individual simply receives the result of his/ her own actions, that s/he sowed in the past and have gradually fructified: it is a natural impartial law, like all natural laws. Gravity works exactly in the same way for everyone, irrespective of their sectarian allegiances, and so do hurricanes, floods, tsunamis, earthquakes, and all natural laws. The laws of probability only create some differences when the actions of a person are different from the actions of another person (for whatever reason, including religious beliefs) - not on the basis of religious beliefs or allegiance themselves. A pure devotee of Krishna acts in perfect harmony with the universal laws and with the Divine plan, and thus sees opportunities of service in each situation - difficult, favorable and unfavorable. This is why *Bhagavata Purana* (1.2.6) says that *bhakti* is not hampered by any circumstance. *Sai vai pumsam paro dharmo yato bhaktir adhokshaje ahaituky apratihata yayatma suprasidati*, "The supreme *dharma* (duty) for human beings is whatever activity carries selfless and constant love and devotion to the Transcendental Lord: this is the way to achieve complete satisfaction."

Whether it is *nitya karma* ("regular duties"), *naimittika karma* ("accessory duties"), *tapasya* (simply tolerating difficulties with patience), any type of work in all the *varnas* and *ashramas* can be transformed into pure blissful *bhakti seva*: it is all in the consciousness - Krishna consciousness. Therefore the pure devotee does not lament or blame or hates anything, and is always sober in all circumstances (12.17, 18.50). This makes the pure devotee "dear to Krishna" because Krishna is the supreme level in pure consciousness. *Bhagavata Purana* (9.4.68) states, *sadhavo hridayam mahyam sadhunam hridayam tv aham mad-anyat te na jananti naham tebhyo manag api*, "I am always in the heart of the *sadhus*, and they are always in my heart, because they are not interested in anything but me."

उदाराः सर्व एवैते ज्ञानी त्वात्मैव मे मतम् । आस्थितः स हि युक्तात्मा मामेवानुत्तमां गतिम् ॥ ७-१८ ॥

udārah sarva evaite jñānī tvātmaiva me matam | āsthitaḥ sa hi yuktātmā māmevānuttamāṁ gatim || 7-18 ||

udarah: great personalities; *sarva*: all; *eva*: certainly; *ete*: these; *jñani*: the person who has knowledge; *tu*: but; *atma*: the Self; *iva*: like; *me*: my; *matam*: opinion; *asthitah*: situated; *sah*: s/he; *hi*: indeed; *yukta*: united; *atma*: the Self; *mam*: me; *eva*: certainly; *anuttamam*: the highest; *gatim*: destination.

"All (these) are great souls, but the person of knowledge is verily the Self. This is my opinion. S/he is firmly situated and connected with the (consciousness of the) Atman, therefore s/he certainly attains me, the highest goal."

The various types of devotees described previously (7.16) are all good people and will ultimately attain perfection. *Bhagavata Purana* (2.3.10) states, *akama sarva-kamo va moksha-kama udara-dhih tivrena bhakti-yogena yajeta purusham param*, "Those who have superior intelligence will worship the Supreme Lord with an intense devotional service, whether they are free from all personal desires, they are full of desires, or they only desire liberation." The word *udarah* is used in both verses to indicate a higher level of intelligence or wisdom, that is required to connect with the Supreme. Sentimentalistic fools are thus excluded from the picture.

However, the *arta*, the *jijnasu* and the *artha-arthi* are still distracted by a sense of duality, a sort of separatist selfishness that prevents them from actually experiencing the Transcendental Reality in full consciousness of Krishna. Their approach is *pradhani bhakti* ("mostly devotion") or *guni-bhuta bhakti* ("devotion conditioned by the modes of material nature").

In chapter 17, entitled *sraddha traya vibhaga yoga*, "the *yoga* of differentiating between the three forms of beliefs", Krishna will further explain this *guni-bhuta bhakti*, detailing the types of *sraddha* (faith), *yajna* (sacrifice in worship), *achara* (behavior), *ahara* (dietary choices), *tapasya* (austerity), and *dana* (charity) - all essential components of spiritual or religious life - under the influence of the three *gunas*. This means that merely "religious" people still have some material identification or attachment.

On the other hand, the *jñani* has acquired the proper knowledge and realized his/ her transcendental nature (*atma*), which enables him/ her to actually develop a spiritual relationship with the Lord as his/ her own Supreme Soul (*param atma*). This concept is quite tricky and almost impossible to understand for those who are still immersed in a material concept of life, because they cannot see how Transcendence is omnipresent and indivisible, therefore they imagine that the individual soul and God cannot be in the same place at the same time. The way prescribed by Vedic knowledge must then include the Brahman realization and the Paramatma realization before one can safely say s/he has actually realized Bhagavan. Of course, the realization of Bhagavan includes the Paramatma and Brahman, but such preliminary stages must have been assimilated - if not in this lifetime, in a previous lifetime. One does not simply jump from the darkness of ignorant gross material identification to pure transcendental *bhakti*: if someone claims to have performed such a feat, we need to verify whether s/he is actually deluded by some form of *prakrita sahajyism*, or "materialistic superficiality", because following such people is extremely dangerous.

This same concept will be repeated by Krishna at the conclusion of the *Bhagavad gita* (18.54): only one who is firmly situated on the transcendental level of Brahman (*brahma-bhuta*) and is favorably disposed towards all beings and situations (*samah sarvesu bhutesu*), which is a characteristic of the Paramatma realization, can really achieve the highest devotion (*mad bhaktim param*). By realizing this transcendental and inconceivable oneness and diversity, we will be able to understand how the devotee can be the *atma* of Krishna, and Krishna the *atma* of the devotee, on a level of consciousness so sublime, vast and deep that everything else becomes completely irrelevant. This is the *anuttama gatih*, the supreme destination, or *paramam dhama*, the supreme position, also described in 8.13, 8.20, 8.21, and then in 15.6.

It is also the *param bhava* described in 7.24, the *brahma bhuta* of 6.27 and 18.54, the *mat samstham* of 6.15 and the *mam* ("me") mentioned frequently as the supreme destination (4.9, 6.13, 6.47, 6.48, 8.5, 8.15, 8.16, 9.25, 10.10, 18.55, 18.65) and the *tat* ("that:") referred to the Supreme abode (18.55).

बहूनां जन्मनामन्ते ज्ञानवान्मां प्रपद्यते । वासुदेवः सर्वमिति स महात्मा सुदुर्लभः ॥ ७-१९ ॥

bahūnām janmanāmante jñānavānmām prapadyate | vāsudevaḥ sarvamiti sa mahātmā sudurlabhah | | 7-19 | |

bahunam: of many; *janmanam*: births; *ante*: at the end; *janavan*: one who has knowledge; *mam*: me; *prapadyate*: approaches respectfully; *vasudevah*: Vasudeva, the omnipresent Transcendental Reality; *sarvam*: everything; *iti*: thus; *sah*: s/he; *mahatma*: great soul; *sudurlabhah*: very rare.

"After many lifetimes, one who has knowledge attains me, (realizing that) Vasudeva is everything. Such a great soul is very rare."

The name Vasudeva (with a long first *a*) means "omnipresent", and it is also referred to Krishna as the son of Vasudeva (with a short first *a*), a name that means "the substance for the universe". When we mentioned the Vasus in the commentary to verse 7.9, we said that the Vasus are the basic components from which the universe is made: fire, earth, wind, space, sky, sun, moon and stars. In the previous verses Krishna has stated that he is the essence and foundation of the universal existence, therefore he is called Vasudeva (omnipresent).

In this verse Krishna clearly expresses that the genuine realization of Bhagavan can be attained only after a long journey of Self realization based on knowledge (*jnana*). This means that actually getting in contact with Bhagavan is no cheap thing. It is not likely that a conditioned soul, immersed in the lower *gunas* and engaged in negative activities, devoid of knowledge, not particularly inclined to do good deeds, identified with the material body and attached to the sense of possession and duality, will quickly become able to realize Krishna consciousness.

What could happen is a *chaya* ("shadow"), *pratibimba* ("reflection") or *abhasa* ("semblance") of devotion that inexperienced people can mistake for the real thing, but it will inevitably disappear, destroyed by the *anarthas* ("bad things") that have not been eliminated from the heart. This "free taste" of devotion is meant to kindle the faith of a beginner, or to reawaken a person to a forgotten progress that was practiced in a previous lifetime, but it does not last long.

If the *anarthas* are not eliminated, if there is no sufficient effort on the devotee's part and the guidance of an expert self-realized soul, the seed of the *bhakti lata* will be suffocated by the weeds growing from the watering of the garden - in the form of the practices of *sadhana bhakti*, including the chanting of the holy names of God. Such weeds are the desire to obtain fame, honor, worship and profit for oneself, the desire to engage in politics and meddling about the private lives of other people, the desire to live an easy comfortable life without working or caring for anybody, a sense of irresponsibility and complacency, a sense of self-righteousness that can grow up into arrogance, exponential growth of *ahankara* and *mamatva* (that are detrimental even when they are just applied to the religious field), and sometimes plain madness and perversion. The blessings of a genuine *guru*, the company of true devotees, the sincere and practical engagement in favorable service, the discussion of the glories of the Lord, the contact with the holy names of God and with the *prasada* - the consecrated food and other articles offered to God - are all very powerful and can be contagious in spreading the faith and attraction towards the sentiments of devotion.

This benign *bhakti* "virus" brings a sort of "mutation", spiritualizing the entire body and mind, deeply transforming the consciousness by making it so clear and transparent that the light of the spiritual Self can shine through all the time, with its happiness, wisdom, peace, harmony, love, and a healthy disposition towards life. It is so beneficial that it can heal all wounds and damage, and protect the entire system from any harm. However, a grossly conditioned soul is "guarded" against the beneficial and purifying contagion of spiritual consciousness, by a strong negative "immune system" made of doubts and desires that fight back fiercely, by a thick layer of ignorance that is difficult to penetrate, and a constant flow of mental fantasies and impressions and memories that instantly washes away the spiritual feelings as soon as they appear. Sometimes, a deeply ingrained tumor of *anartha* (bad habits, cruelty or cynicism) may remain hidden even in later stages of the process of re-spiritualization of the consciousness, and proliferate out of sight until it surfaces with a profusion of contamination and suffering. This is why it is important to constantly work at removing any bad habit and defect that may jeopardize the development of genuine *bhakti*. The process may take several lifetimes.

As we have already mentioned in the commentary to verse 7.1, the stages of the development of the *bhakti lata* (the tender creeper plant of devotion) are *sraddha*, *sadhu sanga*, *bhajana kriya*, *anartha nivritti*, *nistha*, *ruci*, *asakti*, *bhava* and *prema*. It is a long process that requires patience, enthusiasm and determination. According to the level of his/ her realization, a devotee is described as *kanistha* (neophyte), *madhyama* (established on an intermediate level) and *uttama* (advanced).

The *kanistha adhikari* is attracted to Krishna in the form of the Deity in the temple, the *lilas* narrated in the scriptures and the recitation of the holy names; he has sufficient faith to remain on the spiritual path and humility to serve those who are universally recognized as elders and make friends with those who are normally recognized as devotees.

The *madhyama adhikari* has developed more knowledge and realization, so he is able to inspire faith in others and teach and guide them; he has realized the Transcendental existence and the presence of the Lord in the hearts of all living beings (as Brahman and Paramatma respectively), so he sees God everywhere and is friendly with all the good living entities. He can recognize the difference between *sura* and *asura*, *vidya* and *avidya*, *dharma* and *adharmā*, and has established himself strongly and consistently on the level of spontaneous attraction toward God in all his forms. He can recognize an elder and a devotee even when they are not manifesting their position openly, and similarly he can also recognize a cheater who is wearing the dress of a religious person or an elder or a devotee, and avoids such company. He is very serious in the practice of *sadhana bhakti* (regulated devotional service) and compassionate towards the innocent people, including those who are afflicted by ignorance and other defects. His attachment for the Deity in the temple is selfless, and he prefers to engage directly in service (whatever form it may take) rather than attending a gorgeous ceremony as a spectator that enjoys a good show.

The *uttama adhikari* is on the highest level of *raganuga bhakti* (spontaneous loving devotion to God) and has dropped any material concern, identification and attachment; he has become free from all defects and bad habits, and only has good qualities and behaviors. He

is compassionate towards all living entities, including the *asuras* or evil-minded people, and he is not touched by what happens to his material body or by the circumstances in which he may find himself. He sees everything in the spiritual dimension, even ignorance and bad behaviors, considering them as simply different lessons in the great school of life, and different manifestations of the Divine plan - as Krishna will explain in the next verse. Attaining this level usually takes many, many lifetimes.

कामैस्तैस्तैर्हृतज्ञानाः प्रपद्यन्तेऽन्यदेवताः । तं तं नियममास्थाय प्रकृत्या नियताः स्वया ॥ ७-२० ॥

kāmaistaistairhṛtajñānāḥ prapadyante'nyadevatāḥ । taṁ taṁ niyamamāsthāya prakṛtyā niyatāḥ svayā ॥ 7-20 ॥

kamaih: by the desires (for pleasure); *taih taih*: these and those; *hrita-jnanah*: devoid of knowledge; *prapadyante*: respectfully approach; *anya-devatah*: other Divine Personalities; *taṁ taṁ*: these and those (respectively); *niyamam*: methods; *asthaya*: following; *prakṛtya*: according to their own nature; *niyatah*: guided; *svaya*: by themselves.

"Those whose knowledge is confused by a variety of desires approach other *devas*, and according to their nature they follow the (specific) regulations."

In verse 7.16, Krishna explained that good-natured people (*sukritinah*) approach him respectfully to obtain knowledge and prosperity, and relief from their sufferings and dangers. Such people have a concept of God as the Transcendental Reality, the supreme collective intelligence, the origin and foundation of all existence, and they are able to perceive his presence as Brahman and Paramatman. However, there are many people who are unable to understand what Brahman or Paramatman means, because of their own lack of knowledge about the difference between the material and the spiritual levels. Therefore they project on God the same concepts and dynamics they have observed in material life: when they want to obtain something that is not within their own reach, they ask help from a taller or older person - a more powerful, wealthier, wiser, and more important person.

Because in the material world everything is based on duality and differentiation, different powerful personalities are competent to give help in different fields. If you are unable to make your own iron tools, you go to the blacksmith and ask what you want, pay some money and get your article. Similarly, if you cannot grow your own vegetables or fruits, you go to those who sell vegetables and fruits, and so on. If you are unable to overcome a disease you go to the doctor, if you are illiterate and want to read a letter from a relative you go to the school teacher, if you want an electrical connection you go to the officer in charge, and so on.

These are all different persons, each endowed with the specific power that can fulfill one of your wishes, and you approach them one by one according to the circumstances. When you have obtained what you wanted, you may be somehow grateful, but generally the relationship remains superficial. Materialistic people project the same scenario on the religious level. It is true that the scriptures recommend to meditate on the various aspects of the Personalities of Godhead that are subtly connected to the principle one wants to develop - for example Surya when one feels the need for health or strength - but this meditation is meant to awaken those qualities and powers within ourselves, because as Paramatman lives in our soul, so do all his limbs and parts, symbolized by the various aspects of the Personality of Godhead that control the principles of the entire creation.

The confusion (*hrita-jnana*) mentioned in this verse consists in approaching a variety of personalities of Godhead as if they were somehow separated or even in competition with each other, and trying to "bribe" them individually in order to obtain some material benefit.

Deluded people sometimes think they are "using" such divine Personalities (and their *mantras*, *yantras*, etc) as if the *Devas* were order suppliers of the commodities they want to "purchase". However, even this low-mentality tendency should not be stopped as it will ultimately lead to spiritual progress. This is the reason why in the next verse Krishna clearly says that he personally strengthens the faith of such worshipers. A so-called devotee of Krishna who tries to forcibly stop others from performing such worship according to their faith is therefore acting against the Lord's plan and is simply creating an unnecessary disturbance in society. If this method of separate worship is followed sincerely and carefully, and the form worshiped is genuine, ideally under the guidance and the tuition of expert persons who have realized Brahman (the *brahmanas*), the worshipers will gradually develop the same qualities of the *Devas* they honor and serve, and they will become situated on a *sattvic* level. Some foolish people say that some Personalities of Godhead such as Vishnu etc are manifestations of *sattva*, other Personalities of Godhead such as Brahma etc are manifestations of *rajas* and other Personalities of Godhead such as Shiva Mahadeva etc are manifestations of *tamas*. This idea is preposterous and totally contrary to Krishna's teachings. All the Personalities of Godhead are transcendental, even when they appear in this universe playing an apparently material role.

It is true that Vishnu, Brahma and Shiva are *in charge* of each of these three *gunas* respectively, but there is not one single passage in all scriptures that says that God is subject to the power of the *gunas* - like a conditioned soul. Such an idea is deeply offensive. It amounts to saying that a judge of a criminal court is nothing but a criminal, a manifestation of the criminal tendencies of people.

Unfortunately some foolish and immature people utilize this verse of *Bhagavad gita* to justify and encourage an offensive attitude towards those they call "paltry/ unimportant demigods", because they consider the various Personalities of Godhead as different and separate from each other, or even in competition with each other. It amounts to trying to hurt the feet of our friend to show that we prefer his face, because our friend told us that when addressing him we should talk to his face and not to his feet. Such lack of intelligence is certainly the effect of previous offenses committed by the so-called devotee, and leads to complete disaster in spiritual life - as in the case of the square-headed idiot who spit out Mahadeva's *prasada* and rushed to drink the footwash water of some confirmed criminal.

Here the point presented by Krishna is that we should not make the mistake of considering the *Devas* as *ananya*, "different" from Krishna, from the Unified Transcendental Reality. Such mistake has two sides: 1. approaching "other *Devas*" as competitors and separate limited powers that are more likely to grant a wish, 2. approaching Krishna as a competitor and separate different but still limited power that is more likely to grant a wish than the "other Gods".

The first two of the 10 offenses that can damage the development of *bhakti* (as listed in the *Padma Purana*) are: 1. insulting a genuine devotee, 2. separating Vishnu from Shiva and the other Personalities of Godhead by considering them as different and independently existing.

This means that those so-called *vaishnavas* who insult the Devas (who are much more elevated spiritually and closer to God than any foolish human being on this planet) considering them as independently existing from Krishna are in a very bad position indeed.

Much worse, in fact, than the sincere and humble devotees who offer their devotions to the Personalities of Godhead they feel spontaneously attracted to, such as Shiva, Surya, etc.

Even those who can stretch their brain only to accepting the idea that Shiva is the greatest *vaishnava* (*vaishnavanam yatha sambhu*, as stated in *Bhagavata Purana*, 12.13.16) should stop just one moment and ask themselves whether it is healthy to callously commit offenses against the greatest *vaishnava*, and dare to call him "a paltry demigod on the inferior *jnana mishra bhakti* level" - and this in the name of exclusive pure devotion to Krishna, too!

यो यो यां यां तनुं भक्तः श्रद्धयार्चितुमिच्छति । तस्य तस्याचलां श्रद्धां तामेव विदधाम्यहम् ॥ ७-२१ ॥

yo yo yām yām tanuṁ bhaktaḥ śraddhayārcitumicchati | tasya tasyācalāṁ śraddhāṁ tāmeva vidadhāmyaham || 7-21 ||

yah yah: which (whatever); *yam yam*: that (same); *tanuṁ*: body/ form; *bhaktah*: a devotee; *śraddhaya*: with faith; *arcitum*: to worship; *icchati*: wishes; *tasya tasya*: to him (individually and respectively); *acalam*: firm; *śraddham*: faith; *tam*: that; *eva*: certainly; *vidadhāmi*: I give/ strengthen; *aham*: personally.

"Whatever form the devotee wishes to worship with faith, I strengthen the determination by which s/he will become established (in that method and *ista devata*)."'

The variety of forms in which people worship God is not a bad thing at all: in fact God has unlimited forms, unlimited names, unlimited qualities, activities, and variety of approaches - to attract the minds of so many different people. The concept of the "preferred form of God" that one likes to meditate on and worship is called *ista devata* (one's "desired form of God"). One can choose the *ista devata* s/he prefers, and even change his/ her choice in the course of time, when the progress in devotional service or a change of circumstances inspire him/ her to focus in a different aspect of Godhead. Some people choose their *ista devata* according to the suggestions of astrologers, or to please their parents and family, or to gain acceptance into a community; however, the best reason is because of the development of his/ her own personal devotional sentiments.

The important thing is that we should always remember that God is one, and that by worshiping or meditating on one form of God rather than another, we are not offending or betraying the other forms of God. All the forms of the Mother Goddess are aspects of the same Shakti, and similarly, all the forms of the Lord are expansions and emanations of expansions of Vishnu: we should not make the mistake of applying material limitations to the Godhead. All the various forms of the Godhead are limbs of his/ her transcendental body, and there is no real difference among them. In the Vedic system, the genuine scriptures present a variety of Personalities of Godhead, sometimes focusing on one, sometimes on more, and even each Personality is shown in different *avatars* or forms in which s/he descends into this world for a divine mission. *Skanda Purana* teaches, "One should worship Lord Krishna, the cause of all causes, and then worship the best of the *devatas*, Lord Shiva. Then one should worship all the other *devatas* with great faith and devotion." And again, *sivasya hridayam vishnur, vishnos ca hridayam siva*, "Shiva is the heart of Vishnu, and Vishnu is the heart of Shiva."

The *Gautamiya tantra* (one of the most important texts for *vaishnavas*) says: *gopalam pujayed yas tu nindayed anya devatam astu tavam paro dharmah purva-dharmo 'pi nasyati*, "If one worships Gopala but disrespects other *devas/ devis*, his *bhakti* will be lost. Not only he will not be able to get *bhakti*, but even whatever *dharma* he had acquired previously will be lost."

In the *Kurma Purana* (12.20), Vasistha (the *guru* of Ramachandra) answers the questions of the sons of Kartavirya Arjuna saying, "the best thing for human beings is to understand that Shiva is non-different from Visnu, therefore Shiva and Vishnu must be worshiped simultaneously".

Brihad Bhagavatamrita (1.2.86) says: *krsnac chivasya bhedeksa maha-dosa-kari mata ago bhagavata svamin ksamyate na sive krtam*, "One who sees some difference between Krishna and Shiva is committing a great offense. Krishna may excuse someone who commits offenses to his own lotus feet, but will never forgive one who commits *aparadha* at the lotus feet of Shiva".

Krishna himself, in the *Mahabharata*, presents the *Siva sahasra nama stotra*, to which Bhishma follows with the *Vishnu sahasra nama stotra* (which also contains many names such as Shiva - twice - and Sambhu, Isana, Rudra, Mahadeva and others). Krishna also instructs Arjuna to recite the hymn to Durga before the battle of Kurukshetra, following the example of Ramachandra who worshiped Durga before the battle against Ravana. Again, in *Bhagavata Purana* (10.88.38-39) Krishna addresses Shiva as *visva-isa* (Lord of the Universe) and *jagat guru* (the *guru* of all), and says, "If someone commits offenses *against* you, s/he will never get any good fortune". Again *Bhagavata Purana* (4.4.14) says, *yad dvy-aksharam nama gireritam nrinam sakrit prasangad agham asu hanti tat, pavitra-kirtim tam alanghya-sasanam*, "If someone pronounces the name of Shiva, composed by two syllables, all impurities and faults will disappear from his heart immediately. Shiva's fame is spotless, and nobody dares to disobey him."

Narada Purana (63.121, 65.58) says: *diksaya guru-murti-sthah sarvanugrahaḥ sivah*, "In the process of *diksha*, Shiva, the universal *guru*, manifests in the form of the *diksha guru* to bless the disciple" and *om namas te natha bhagavan sivaya guru-rupine*, "I offer my homage to Bhagavan Shiva, who manifests in the form of the *guru*". On a side note, this would explain why some so-called devotees who enjoy offending "the demigod Shiva" have so much troubles with finding a genuine *guru*.

In several scriptural texts we find direct personal disciples of Shiva who were also exalted *vaishnavas* - starting from Narada himself (*Narada Pancharatra*, *ratra* 1, chapters 8-9), to Garga Muni (*Brahma vaivarta purana* 4.13.72), Markandeya Rishi (*Bhagavata Purana*, canto 12, chapter 10) and the Pracetas (*Bhagavata Purana*, canto 4, chapter 24) who specifically became able to approach Vishnu only after being tutored by Shiva. The *Narada Pancharatra* also states: *sivo harir hara iha sakshat siva eva nirupitah, siva-dveshi hari-drohi vishnum nityam bhajan api*, "Shiva is Hari and Hari is none other than Shiva. One who is hostile to Shiva is hostile to Vishnu, even though he may daily worship Vishnu." In the line of the followers of Chaitanya, we find the *Shivastakam* prayers (text 7), quoted by Murari Gupta in his *Sri Caitanya Carita Mahakavya*. There Chaitanya describes Shiva's position as the universal spiritual master: *sivaya sarva-gurave namo namah*, "I repeatedly offer my obeisances to Lord Shiva, who is the *guru* of everyone."

Krishnadasa Kaviraja, in his *Sri Vraja dhama mahimamrita*, glorifies Shiva as Gopisvara - still today, genuine pilgrims humbly offer their obeisances to Gopisvara Mahadeva in his temple before starting their Vrindavana parikrama. It would also be wise, for the *prakrita sahajya* fans of Vrindavana Krishna, to remember that Shiva is the *kshetrapala* (guardian) in Vrindavana (as in all the other holy places) and specifically watches the *rasa mandala* area, so that unqualified people will not be able to enter it. Through his *mahamaya*, Shiva deludes the foolish fake devotees into thinking they are actually standing in the *rasa mandala* or in the *vraja mandala*, while they are simply remaining on the external material and geographical surface - where the Seva kunj is not much different from the Radha Golf Club.

स तया श्रद्धया युक्तस्तस्याराधनमीहते । लभते च ततः कामान्मयैवविहितान्हि तान् ॥ ७-२२ ॥

sa tayā śraddhayā yuktastasyārādhnamīhate | labhate ca tataḥ kāmānmayāivavihitānhi tān | | 7-22 |

sah: s/he; *taya*: with that; *śraddhaya*: faith; *yuktah*: together with; *tasya*: of that (Personality of Godhead); *aradhanam*: for the worship; *ihate*: engages in; *labhate*: s/he obtains; *ca*: and; *tataḥ*: from that (Personality of Godhead); *kaman*: the objects of his desires; *maya*: by me; *iva*: certainly; *vihitan*: (according to) the wishes; *hi*: certainly; *tan*: those.

"Engaged in that faithful dedication, s/he worships that form s/he desires, and obtains those blessings/ favors. But all this is arranged by me."

The fact that a worshiper with material desires decides to approach a particular Personality of Godhead does not mean that such Personality of Godhead is "material". This applies not only to Shiva and the "other *devas*", but to Krishna as well, since there are lots of materialists who worship Krishna with the purpose of getting material benefits: this does not make Krishna a material personality and certainly does not make such materialists any more "spiritual".

Another reading of the last two words is *ihitan*, meaning "beneficial", referred to the things received by the worshiper. This would indicate that the Godhead is very intelligent and gives to their worshipers only those things that will be beneficial for their progress - whether such things will be pleasurable or unpleasurable.

Also, Krishna has already given very clear instructions in 3.9-16 about the need of offering grateful worship to the Devas, to reciprocate their gifts and support in life. As long as we have a material body, we need material resources for our basic maintenance (food, clothes etc) and even to engage in a practical worship to the Supreme Lord. Leaves, flowers, fruits and water (9.26), as well as the tasty sattvic food that is offered to Krishna, and all the other practical paraphernalia for devotional service, are produced only thanks to the blessings of the Devas.

What's wrong in asking help from the Devas for one's devotional service to Krishna, and showing them recognition and gratitude according to the explicit orders of Krishna himself in *Bhagavad gita*, when we do not hesitate to beg and grovel in front of materially wealthy and powerful materialistic people, to flatter them and sycophantically try to get into the picture with them for a nice photo opportunity? Are those arrogant politicians, business people and industrialists, and similar people, more respectable and more worthy of being approached than the sattvic Devas? I think not.

Some say that a pure devotee does not ask any material favor, and therefore s/he does not need to approach the *devas* or even show them a modicum of respect, but this is fundamentally wrong, and inspired by impersonalist and nihilistic ideas. Devotional service does not require the elimination of all desires, but transforms them into spiritual desires by connecting them to a higher purpose, precisely engaging them in the service of God. *Narada Pancharatra* is quoted to say: *sarvopadhi vinirmuktam tat-paratvena nirmalam, hrisikena hrisikesa sevnam bhaktir ucyate*, "*Bhakti* means serving the Lord of the senses by engaging one's senses, and it is pure when it is free from all material designations/ identifications, and completely focused on God."

What's wrong in having desires? Krishna has already said (7.11) that *kama* is even divine when it is in accordance with *dharma*. What we need to give up is not desire, but attachment to the material identification that makes us believe that we are the author of the action and its beneficiary.

The best example that illustrates the real meaning of this verse is the fact that the *gopis* of Vrindavana worshiped Durga by the observance of the long Katyayani vrata to obtain the blessing of having Krishna as their lover. The "exclusive devotees" of Krishna who refuse to honor Mother Durga, Shiva and the other Personalities of Godhead should stop one moment and think whether they are considering themselves more advanced in *bhakti* than the *gopis* of Vrindavana.

Another example is Chaitanya himself, who on several occasions instructed his followers and gave his personal example by offering worship and glorification to Durga and Shiva. For example, at Mayapur, during the dancing drama performance at the house of Chandrasekhara, Chaitanya (then known as Nimai) entered into the royal mood of the Mother Goddess while his follower Gopinatha played Vishnu - in the genuine couple of Durga-Madhava, hugely popular in the Bengali and Oriya cultural areas - and the devotees started offering many prayers to Lakshmi and Chandi Durga. Then Chaitanya explicitly instructed his followers never to disrespect or belittle the Devas.

Vrindavan Dasa quotes him in the *Chaitanya Bhagavata*: "All glories to the universal Mother, Mahamaya Devi. Kindly give the shelter of your lotus feet to the wretched conditioned souls who suffer in this material world. You are the controlling power of the entire material universe and you appear in every *yuga* to uphold the principles of religion. Even Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva are unable to fully describe your unlimited powers, what to speak of ordinary people. You are faith, compassion, modesty, and the personification of pure devotion to Lord Vishnu, Krishna, so all branches of knowledge are your manifestations. The *Vedas* describe you as the original energy, and you appear to be within this material nature consisting of the three *gunas* but you are actually their cause, and you are always situated in a transcendental position. You are the eternal, unchanging, supreme energy, the shelter and resting place of all living entities, the universal Mother who sustains everyone, matchless and unrivalled. You are the life-giving water, and by remembering you one can easily cut the bonds of material illusion. You appear also as Mother Lakshmi, the eternal consort of Lord Narayana, in the homes of the dharmic people,

but to the sinful offender you manifest as the all-devouring death. You are the creator of the universe and those who ignore you, not offering you worship, are punished by the threefold miseries. To the devotees you inspire pure faith, and therefore we pray you to please give us shelter in the shade of your lotus feet. Your illusory potency keeps the entire creation enthralled, so if you do not protect me, who will? Your appearance in the material world is to deliver the conditioned souls, and by remembering you one attains all perfection. O Mother, we are all surrendered to you: kindly look upon us with benevolence, so that we may remain with a fixed mind at your lotus feet."

Also, when Chaitanya set on his journey to Jagannatha Puri, he first visited Chatrabhoga on Ganges at Mathurapura (now called Diamond Harbor), a famous *tirtha* dedicated to Shiva, where Shiva manifests as the water *linga* at Ambulinga ghat, in the form of a great number of streams formed by Ganga. All the followers of Chaitanya took bath there, and Chaitanya himself immediately manifested a strong ecstasy with uncontrollable spiritual emotions and lost external consciousness.

At Prayaga ghata in the Midnapura district of Orissa, Chaitanya guided his followers to pay respects to the temple of Shiva Mahesha, a *lingam* installed at a temple near a bathing *ghat* established by Yudhisthira during the journey of the Pandavas. There Chaitanya ecstatically participated to the *kirtana* of the devotees of Shiva, and in the end he was so happy that he went around to collect food to feed everyone. Walking on, after the incident when Chaitanya's *sannyasa* staff was broken, he left his companions; he arrived alone in Jalesvara and went directly to the local Shiva temple, where his anger subsided and he started to dance happily. Vrindavana Das writes in his *Chaitanya Mangala*, commenting the fact: "If anyone disrespects Lord Shiva, not following the example of Lord Chaitanya, then he cannot be considered a Vaishnava, and all his spiritual advancement will be annulled."

After reaching Bhubaneswar (anciently called Ekamra kanana and Koti lingesvara) Chaitanya took bath in the Bindu sarovara, the holy *tirtha* filled with all the waters collected by Shiva from the various places of pilgrimage. He immediately went to take *darshana* of Tribhuvanesvara svayambhu lingam (also known as Lingaraja - still the most important temple in Bhubaneswar) and by seeing that it was beautifully surrounded by innumerable *ghi* lamps offered by the devotees, Chaitanya felt very pleased and started to dance ecstatically, singing "Shiva, Rama, Govinda". Then he instructed his followers by quoting Krishna's words: "One who claims to be My devotee but disregards Shiva is only trying to pretend devotion to Me" and he offered worship to Shiva, followed by all the devotees.

Vrindavana Das comments: "The Supreme Lord is the supreme *guru*, one who does not follow his instructions suffers because of such grievous mistake."

Chaitanya also visited many other Shiva temples in Bhubaneswar before resuming his journey to Puri. He also stopped on the way outside Bhubaneswar at the Shiva temples called Jalesvara and Kapotesvara near the Bhargavi river. Similarly, Chaitanya devotedly visited many Shiva temples while traveling around south India.

अन्तवत्तु फलं तेषां तद्भवत्यल्पमेधसाम् । देवान्देवयजो यान्ति मद्भक्ता यान्ति मामपि ॥ ७-२३ ॥

antavattu phalam teṣāṃ tadbhavatyalpamedhasām | devāndevayajo yānti madbhaktā yānti māmapi || 7-23 ||

anta-vat: that has an end; *tu*: but; *phalam*: result; *tesam*: to them; *tat*: that; *bhavati*: becomes; *alpa-medhasam*: less intelligent; *devan*: the *devas*; *deva-yajah*: those who become devotees of the *devas*; *yanti*: go; *mad-bhaktah*: my devotees; *yanti*: go; *mam*: to me; *api*: also.

"Persons of lesser intelligence seek temporary benefits. Those who worship the Devas go to them, but my devotees come to me."

This concept is further clarified as Krishna specifically states that confused and less intelligent people seek temporary material benefits only. On the other hand, offering one's unmotivated and selfless respect and adoration to the Devas as limbs of the Supreme Personality of Godhead is a symptom of a true devotee of the Lord, a genuine follower in the footsteps of Chaitanya and the *gopis* of Vrindavana.

Those same people who approach the Devas with selfish purposes, to try to bribe them for some special favor or *karma* discount, inevitably also aspire to attain the higher planetary systems, the realms of pleasure, beauty, power and longevity that are generally known as "paradise". Because materialists are merely interested in their own sense gratification, their ideal of perfection in life is to obtain greater and greater pleasures, at a higher level and for a much longer time. They cannot even imagine a higher purpose, but of course, we know that this is not the best possible things we can do with the valuable opportunity of our human life.

However, there is nothing intrinsically wrong or offensive in that limited understanding and aspirations. It is rather a temporary choice, and those who consider it permanent and sufficient for their full satisfaction are actually less intelligent and knowledgeable. These "demigod worshipers" are not the ones who should be worrying about committing offenses. On the contrary, if they are intelligent enough to properly utilize the opportunities that their receive from the Devas, and to keep their minds and hearts pure, they can further their understanding of devotional service and better serve the Divine mission.

Later in the text (8.15, 16), Krishna will state that in the entire material manifestation, even up to the highest planetary systems, all positions are *asavtām* (temporary) and *duhkhalayam* (fraught with sufferings). So those who aspire to *svarga*, the heavenly planets, when they can actually attain *moksha*, liberation, and *prema*, love for Godhead, can easily be described as less intelligent people. They are not exactly *mudhah* (7.15, 9.11, 3.6) but they do not exactly shine out of their brilliance... not because they have missed out on a "better deal" they could have obtained from Krishna", but because they have not outgrown the materialistic illusion.

Anyway there is no danger if one neglects the worship of the various Personalities of Godhead separately, provided s/he sincerely engages in devotional service to Vishnu, even from a platform of materialistic motivation and gross consciousness. In time, even the grossest and most contaminated materialist can become free from the old attachments and identifications, and attain the level of purity of consciousness (4.36, 9.30).

Of course there is a big difference between honoring the Devas as bodily parts of God, and worshiping only one of them as the "all in all" of Godhead - although such ignorant position is not a dangerous one: after attaining the planet/ dimension of the Personality of Godhead s/he was worshiping, a materialist will get the opportunity to be instructed properly by his/ her *ista devata*, and then return to the earthly level in a human species, to continue his/ her spiritual progress. And of course that route is different from the destination of those who have actually realized Bhagavan and attained the level of genuine and pure devotional service to him: it is all in the consciousness. It is a much

faster and safer route, that takes us directly to the ultimate destination (*param gatih*) without waste of time and energy, unnecessary sufferings and anxiety.

अव्यक्तं व्यक्तिमापन्नं मन्यन्ते मामबुद्धयः । परं भावमजानन्तो ममाव्ययमनुत्तमम् ॥ ७-२४ ॥

avyaktam vyaktimāpannam manyante māmabuddhayaḥ | param bhāvamajānanto mamāvayamanuttamam || 7-24 ||

avyaktam: non-manifested; *vyaktim*: manifestation; *apannam*: obtained; *manyante*: they think; *mam*: me; *abuddhayaḥ*: those who have no intelligence; *param*: supreme; *bhavam*: nature/ birth/ existence; *ajānanto*: the ignorant/ unaware; *mama*: my; *avyayam*: eternal; *anuttamam*: supreme (without superiors).

"Those who are not intelligent believe that the non-manifested has evolved by becoming manifest. They do not know my supreme existence/ nature as the highest imperishable (reality)."

One of the most important words in this verse is *bhava* (with a long first *a*), which means "existence", "birth", "nature" and "purpose". Another important concept is expressed by the words *avyaktam vyaktim* ("non-manifested manifestation") that may appear as a contradiction in terms but are meant to expand our understanding, like so many similar statements and definitions in the scriptures. When two apparently opposite terms are expressed deliberately, we should utilize the contrast to move beyond duality and see how they can be reconciled in a wider sense.

The definition *abuddhaya* ("those who have no intelligence") is a further step in the crescendo that started with *hrita-jnana* ("those whose knowledge is confused", 7.20), and moved to *alpa-medhasam* ("those who have little intelligence", 7.23) and will culminate in *mudhah* ("fools", 7.25). It is evident here that Krishna gives great importance to the quality of intelligence and equates it to the level of evolution and realization in the individual soul.

The word *apannam* refers to an achievement, a success, a higher step in evolution, and therefore cannot be applied to the Supreme Lord, who is always eternally liberated and in full control of everything. People with a materialistic frame of mind are unable to understand the eternal and supreme existence of a reality they cannot see with their own limited eyes, and they try to superimpose their own limitations to the transcendental level of Reality. This mentality is called *mayavada* ("following illusion"), because it entails the conclusion that illusion is more powerful than God, suggesting that Krishna, Vishnu-Narayana himself is under the control of illusion as even God takes a material body, an illusory temporary form made of ordinary material elements like any ordinary individual, subject to ignorance and sufferings. Of course such conclusion is not supported by any genuine scripture. It is rather created by a material misunderstanding about the simultaneous oneness and difference of Atman and Brahman, that remains inconceivable for the material senses, mind and intellect (*acintya-bhedabheda tattva*).

Some less informed persons incorrectly apply the definition of *mayavada* by relying on heavy prejudice, often confusing it with the concept of *advaita*, and pointing at Adi Shankara as the teacher and propagator of "mayavadism". They do not know, or they do not want to notice, that Adi Shankara begins his commentary to the *Bhagavad gita* with the unequivocal statement *narayanah paro 'vyaktat*, "Narayana (Vishnu) is supreme and transcendental", besides having written many wonderful texts in glorification of Govinda (as for example the famous *Bhaja Govindam* song) and of Krishna (as in the famous *Gita mahatmya*) and so on.

The reason of such offensive confusion is the material perception of reality, that is based on material identification and attachments: this creates a strong dualistic mentality based on partisan bias and blind allegiance to a particular camp, which in turn motivates unintelligent people to systematically vilify "the opposite camp" even with unfounded accusations. In dirty politics, all sorts of mudslinging goes on, even if politicians have to concoct and manufacture imaginative new types of mud to throw at their adversaries.

Another verse (9.11) very similar to this one repeats the same concept about the *mayavada* faulty theory: *avajananti mam mudhah manushim tanum asritah param bhavam ajananto mama bhuta-mahesvaram*, "Fools do not understand me when I manifest my human appearance, because they do not know my supreme nature, by which I control all forms of existence."

Because in their experience all the things are at first non-manifested, then become manifest and finally disappear again (2.28), materialistic people apply the same criteria to the Supreme Lord, and think that he has come to existence at a certain moment in time. In this regard, we should also clarify that the expression "incarnation" is inappropriate when referring to the manifestation of a divine *avatara*, as it derives from the Latin *carn* or *caro*, meaning "flesh" and indicates an ordinary earthly form.

Mainstream contemporary academia tends to consider the "historical existence" of a religious teacher as an essential validation of the authority of his teachings, but there is no logical sense in that idea: the validity of a system of knowledge should be in its actual contents and merit, and not in the exhibition of archaeological relics that might be connected to an objective time and place and person. There have always been - and there are still - many individuals whose position in time and space can be fully demonstrated, but who have never contributed to the patrimony of knowledge and wisdom of the world, or even have spread dangerous misconceptions or defective theories.

Hinduism or Sanatana dharma is different from the so-called "historical religions" because it did not begin at a certain point in time, but it constitutes the eternal and universal principles of ethics and spirituality, the verifiable scientific knowledge of reality both objective and subjective, and the fundamental consciousness that is sometimes called "conscience", "logic" or "common sense" - but that we call *buddhi yoga*, or "utilization of intelligence". We could say that Sanatana dharma is the *natural* religion for all human beings, that can accommodate comfortably all categories and types of mentalities, gradually engaging them towards the direction of progressive understanding, awareness, happiness and harmony.

From time to time, the fundamental principles of Sanatana dharma are presented anew according to various perspectives, especially considering time, place, circumstances and audience, but such presentations are to be studied and understood in the light of a direct personal realization by each and every individual. It is in such light that we must understand the transcendental Personality of Krishna.

Earlier (4.6-9), Krishna has explained that he appears periodically to re-establish the eternal principles of *dharma* (generally translated as "religion"), but he is not subject to the oblivion that limits the individual souls. Why? Because Krishna is not an individual soul. In this

chapter, he has clearly stated that he is the essence of all existence - the taste of water, the strength of those who are strong, the light of the sun and the moon, and the eternal origin of everything that exists. How can this Transcendental Existence have a beginning and an end in the material dimension? It is not logical.

It is true that Krishna manifests (*srijami*, 4.7) particular forms as *avatars* that are specifically suited for a mission, but such forms are actually eternal or independently existing, and they only become visible and non-visible cyclically, appearing to take birth and to disappear not unlike ordinary individual souls, but with an important difference: all these forms are made of pure spiritual energy, perfectly controlled by the consciousness - in fact, they are consisting of consciousness only.

The discoveries offered by one of the most recent fields of research in western science - particle physics - can help us to understand this mystery. Sub-atomic physicists have found that all matter actually consists of energy organized according to specific vibrational frequencies arranged in a very precise plan, that are sensitive to various factors, including magnetic fields, heat, etc. This principle of a vibrational energy matrix for the material universe explains the functioning of the Vedic science of *yoga*, based on the control of subtle sound and the biomagnetic energy fields created by the subtle nervous system of the *nadis*, *marmas* and *chakras*. It also explains all the so-called "paranormal" phenomena and many other things that conventional science is still unable to account for.

It is the consciousness - as Atman/ Brahman - that controls the vibrational frequencies of matter. The more powerful, vast and deep is the consciousness, the greater is the control over matter, and there is no doubt that Krishna is the most powerful, vast and deep consciousness, being the origin of Brahman and Paramatma as explicitly stated in *Bhagavad gita* (*brahmano hi pratistha aham* 14.27, *sarvasya caham hridi sannivistho* 13.28). The individual living entities - that are transcendental in nature just like the Supreme Lord, but limited in quantity if not in quality - also have a certain amount of controlling power, in a measure that is directly proportional to the evolution of their consciousness, characterized in ascending order by the material *gunas* of *tamas* (darkness), *rajas* (passion), *sattva* (goodness), *visuddha sattva* (pure goodness) and the spiritual qualities of *sat-cit-ananda vigraha*. The manifestations controlled by the spiritual principle (*purusha*) are accordingly the bodies of less evolved creatures such as plants and less conscious animals (*tamas*), human beings at various levels of evolution (*rajas*), the subordinate Devas (*sattva*), and the five main Personalities of Godhead known as *pancha devata* - Vishnu, Shiva, Devi, Brahma, Surya and Ganesha (that are situated in *visuddha sattva*). All these forms appearing in the universe are sometimes manifested and sometimes non-manifested: even the first Vishnu *avatars* such as Kshirodakasayi Vishnu and Garbhodakasayi Vishnu appear and disappear with the cycles of creation and dissolution, while the original Supreme Personality of Godhead is not a particular form, but the non-manifested essence of all existence (*sat-cit-ananda vigraha*) and thus exists eternally without any change.

नाहं प्रकाशः सर्वस्य योगमायासमावृतः । मूढोऽयं नाभिजानाति लोको मामजमव्ययम् ॥ ७-२५ ॥

nāhaṁ prakāśaḥ sarvasya yogamāyāsamāvṛtaḥ | mūḍho'yaṁ nābhijānāti loko māmajamavyayam || 7-25 ||
na: not; *aham:* I; *prakasaḥ:* make myself known; *sarvasya:* for everyone; *yoga:* connection; *maya:* illusion; *samavritah:* covered by; *mudhah:* the fools; *ayam:* this; *na:* not; *abhijanati:* can understand; *lokaḥ:* a person; *mam:* me; *ajam:* un-born; *avyayam:* imperishable.

"I do not show myself to everyone, but I remain veiled by my own yoga-maya. Foolish people remain unable to understand that I am unborn and eternal."

Krishna does not show any "special mercy", concern or preference towards the most fallen and stupid living beings. Some people believe that excessive generosity in this regard is praiseworthy and bound to conquer the hearts of the idiots, but in the reality of facts we see that it just encourages laziness and callousness, even to the point of rewarding cynicism and open exploitation. Again here Krishna is speaking disparagingly about the *mudha*, the idiots, demonstrating that he gives paramount importance to intelligence and its proper use in *buddhi yoga*, while he has absolutely no sympathy for stupid people. Other occasions in which he used the definition are 3.6, 3.27, 3.29, 7.15, 9.11, 10.3, 11.49, 14.15, 15.5, 15.10, 16.20, 17.19.

It is interesting to note that in this verse Krishna is speaking of Yogamaya and not of Mahamaya when he refers to the covering of his transcendental and supreme nature to the eyes of people during his manifestation in this world. Some commentators hypothesize that here *yogamaya* indicates the "the three *gunas* when considered all together or united", but that meaning is not applicable.

Yogamaya is the modality of Shakti that enables the development of a favorable relationship that *unites* the devotee to God within the devotional sentiments and service, while Mahamaya is that the modality of Shakti that prevents ordinary and ignorant conditioned people from realizing the transcendental reality. In other words, Yogamaya covers the Supreme Personality of Godhead and influences the spiritual perception, while Mahamaya covers the materialistic knowledge of the individual soul.

Yogamaya is qualified by the various *rasas* or sentiments of attachment to the Supreme, while Mahamaya is qualified by the three *gunas* or qualities of material goodness, passion and ignorance. The material *gunas* can never cover the Personality of Godhead, while the spiritual *gunas* that inspire the *rasas* definitely cover the Personality of Godhead and his intimate devotees - to make a crude example, the two coverings can be compared respectively to a layer of smelly filth and to beautiful resplendent ornaments. This same idea is expressed in *Isa Upanishad* (15): *hiranmayena patrena satyasya apihitam mukham, tat tvam pushan apavrinu, satya dharmaya dristaye*, "O radiant sustainer of everyone, the face of the True Reality is covered by a sheet of golden *maya*. Please remove this veil, so that the true Personification of *dharma* can be seen." The expression *hiranmayena patrena* means "the sheet of golden *maya*".

We should wonder why Krishna is saying in this verse, "I do not show myself to everyone". Anyone who has read the previous chapters of the *Mahabharata* have seen that Krishna was very much visible to everyone during his appearance as *avatara*: he was there present on the planet, speaking to Arjuna, and could be clearly seen by all the people assembled on the battlefield at Kurukshetra and by a great variety of people in previous occurrences.

To mention one example for all, we can think about the appearance of Krishna and Balarama in the arena of the Dhanus yajna organized by Kamsa at Mathura: the *Bhagavata Purana* and other similar texts clearly say that different people could definitely see the two brothers attending the festivities and wrestling against Kamsa's champions, but that their perception was different according to their particular level of consciousness. In verse 10.43.17 it is said that human beings (*nara*) simply saw Krishna as *nara varah*, "the best of human beings", and

those who were devoid of knowledge (*avidusam*) saw him as a material manifestation (*virat*). But they did see him, otherwise the wrestlers would have been unable to do their gig, or some of the people in the audience would have been surprised to see the wrestlers fighting against some invisible opponent.

The meaning of Krishna's statement in this verse is that he does not reveal his true nature to those who are unable to perceive it; Yogamaya however makes him appear as an ordinary human being - the people of Vrindavana saw him as their relative, and Devaki and Vasudeva saw him as their child - so that ignorant people will ignore him and pure devotees will interact intimately with him according to their loving propensities. Both these approaches can be considered relationships or connections (*yoga*).

What is veiled is the supreme nature of Krishna's Personality, that is pure and immensely powerful consciousness. The human-like body that Krishna manifests in his adventures is fundamentally different from the material bodies of ordinary individuals (actually composed by the 3 *gunas*), because it can take any form and intrinsically possesses all the qualities of mystic perfections (*siddhis*).

Even *jivatmas* can develop this power in a limited measure through the perfect practice of the *yoga* science, and can therefore manifest their forms as extremely small (*anima siddhi*), extremely large (*mahima siddhi*), extremely light (*laghima siddhi*), reconfiguring the patterns of material atoms (*vasitva siddhi*), materializing things by attracting atoms from other places (*prapti siddhi*), creating new things altogether (*isitva siddhi*), assuming any shape or form (*kamavasayitva siddhi*), and manifesting all kinds of powers (*prakamyā siddhi*). There is nothing really miraculous or supernatural in such feats: anyone can do that, with the proper training and practice - it's all a matter of the appropriate level of consciousness.

वेदाहं समतीतानि वर्तमानानि चार्जुन । भविष्याणि च भूतानि मां तु वेद न कश्चन ॥ ७-२६ ॥

vedāham samatītāni vartamānāni cārjuna । bhaviṣyāṇi ca bhūtāni mām tu veda na kaścana ।। 7-26 ।।

veda: know; *aham*: I; *samatitani*: past; *vartamanani*: present; *ca*: and; *arjuna*: o Arjuna; *bhaviṣyani*: future; *ca*: and; *bhutani*: beings; *mam*: me; *tu*: but; *veda*: knows; *na*: not; *kascana*: anyone.

"O Arjuna, I have full knowledge of the past, the present and the future. I also know all existences/ living beings, but nobody knows me."

To confirm the meaning of the previous verse, Krishna is reiterating here that his supreme nature is nothing but supreme consciousness - Krishna consciousness. Being supreme, there is obviously no higher level of consciousness or knowledge than Krishna's.

Anyone can attain that supreme level of consciousness by simply "connecting" (*yoga*) with Krishna, just like any ordinary computer can instantly manifest much higher functions when directly connected with a more powerful computer database. As with computers, however, the smaller ordinary computers can only share a limited quantity of such data, although there is no difference in the quality of the data shared. This is why the *jivatman* and the *paramatman* are described as "inconceivably one and different". Any *jivatma* can function on the supreme level of Krishna consciousness, provided it remains strongly connected (no loose connections) and humbly devoted to the supreme Program - for example, not trying to change the parameters of the software or too perform too many functions at the same time, or expecting a very high speed of processing data. For anything else, a truly connected unit is by no means different from the supreme unit: one can feed data to the Supreme Unit through any terminal, and the data will be instantly received by the central data base.

Problems can only occur when the peripheral terminal - the individual *jivatma* - becomes convinced that it can function independently or drive the entire show by inserting contrasting instructions in the global data base. The Supreme Unit will not be damaged by such infringement, but the individual system will become confused and stop functioning properly.

The words *samatitani* ("past"), *vartamani* ("present") and *bhaviṣyani* ("future") clearly state that time is a continuum, not a linear evolution. The Supreme Consciousness is fully aware of all such time dimensions, and this knowledge is also possible to the individual consciousness, albeit in a limited form. The knowledge of the past is the easiest function, as each and every event is recorded indefinitely in the akashic structure of the universe (which we could call etheric space) and can be accessed by those who have developed the proper skills. Besides, all the memories of one's previous lifetimes are contained within the corresponding subtle body of the individual (made of *akasha*, or "etheric space" and accessible through the subtle functions of the mind, the intelligence and the ego). Knowledge of the present events is tricky, because things are happening in the "here and now" of which most people remain totally unaware.

The actual consciousness of the present moment requires a very intense exercise of will power, focusing one's attention on each and every fraction of second, and most people find difficult to maintain that perception already when it is limited to the events that are happening in their immediate vicinities, what to speak of what is happening in other parts of one's house, neighborhood, geographical region or planet.

The future is even trickier, because it is constantly changing under the effect of the actions being performed in the present. We can compare the perception of the future to the scintillating reflection of the sun over the swift current of a powerful river: to truly know the future one must be simultaneously aware of the present and the past, too. Not an easy exercise.

Furthermore, the perception of the future expressed within a linear projection of time will externally appear to be different from the perception of the future expressed in another particular moment of time called "present" in a parallel line of development, or in what contemporary cutting edge science calls "parallel universes". These are not different separate universes, but just various projections of the same universe, that are intricately woven together like the threads of a rope to express the version of reality that our gross material senses can perceive from one moment to the next.

Just trying to imagine this level of awareness will give a bad headache to the majority of ordinary people, who use only 15% to 20% of their brain substance - what to speak of also remaining constantly aware of all levels of consciousness in the various conditions of life and all living beings in all the three dimensions of time. And that's only the beginning, because the material manifestation (*eka-pada vibhuti*) is merely one fourth of the sum total of reality, whereas the non-manifested spiritual world is described as being three fourths (*tri-pada vibhuti*) of the entire existence. Who can top that? Genuine Krishna consciousness is unquestionably supreme.

The power (*shakti*) that manifests such consciousness (*cit*) is called respectively *bahiranga shakti* ("external power") and *antaranga shakti* ("internal power"), not on geographical considerations but rather in connection to the attitude of the *jivatmas*. The *bahiranga shakti* covers the perception of those *jivas* who are "outsiders" because they position themselves "outside" Krishna consciousness (*bahirmukha*, or "turned towards the exterior"), while the *antaranga shakti* covers the perception of those who position themselves "within" Krishna consciousness (*antaratmana*, "in the innermost soul" as in *Gita*, 6.47). This same *antaratmana* consciousness is expressed in *Bhagavata Purana* (1.11.32) to describe the *rasa* feelings of the queens of Krishna in Dvaraka.

इच्छाद्वेषसमुत्थेन द्वन्द्वमोहेन भारत । सर्वभूतानि सम्मोहं सर्गे यान्ति परन्तप ॥ ७-२७ ॥

icchādveṣasamutthena dvandvamohena bhārata | sarvabhūtāni sammohaṁ sarge yānti parantapa | | 7-27 | |

iccha: desire; *dvesa*: hatred; *samutthena*: arisen from; *dvandva*: duality; *mohena*: by illusion; *bharata*: o descendent of Bharata; *sarva*: all; *bhutani*: beings; *sammoham*: confused; *sarge*: at creation/ into the creation; *yanti*: (they) go; *parantapa*: o Arjuna ("who burns the opponents").

"O Parantapa, descendant of Bharata (Arjuna), all living beings come to existence/ take birth totally confused, deluded by the duality created from likes and dislikes."

The expression *iccha-dvesa* clearly shows that both attraction and repulsion are the root cause of the material imprisonment. Some people "renounce the world" in disgust and frustration, but they continue to contemplate the objects they renounced, still considering them as legitimate targets for their personal sense gratification. This misunderstanding will cause them to take another birth where their rejection/repulsion will turn into attachment/ attraction, and so on. The only way out of the trap consists in observing all existences/ beings/ objects as worshipable parts of the Divine Reality and properly engaging one's senses in the service of the Lord of the senses (*hrishikena hrisikesha sevnam bhaktir ucyate*, "*bhakti* is defined as serving God through the use of one's senses", *Narada Pancharatra*).

What is the origin of the confusion (*sammoham*) that binds the conditioned soul to a material birth? The equal and opposing forces of attraction and repulsion (*raga* and *dvesha*, or *iccha* and *dvesha*) disturb the balance of the consciousness, creating tension and confusion. It is like being pulled in different directions simultaneously: it becomes very difficult to hold one's balance and make deliberate and conscious choices. Already in 2.67, Krishna had explained that the pull of the senses victimizes the mind and destroys one's wisdom, like the wind sweeps a boat on the water. The solution to the problem is repeated by Krishna several times: to overcome the idea of *dvandva*, duality (4.22, 5.2, 7.27, 7.28, 15.5) by applying the equanimity, *samata*, born from knowledge and detachment (2.14, 2.38, 2.48, 4.22, 5.18, 5.19, 5.27, 6.3, 6.7, 6.8, 6.9, 6.29, 6.32, 9.29, 10.4, 10.5, 12.4, 12.13, 12.18, 13.10, 13.28, 13.29, 14.24, 18.10, 18.42, 18.54), also defined as *tulya*, "balance" (12.19, 14.24, 14.25).

Some people may be perplexed about this need of "equal vision" as they fear the concept of oneness (*advaita*) and its faulty application demonstrated by a class of confused philosophers in the course of time. We need to properly understand the concept of duality, in order to be able to overcome it successfully. Duality is not an "evil" to be defeated and destroyed (as the so-called monotheistic abrahamic ideologies imply at several levels) but rather a veil that we need to recognize as such and overcome in our quest to get a direct vision of Reality.

Duality - as a fundamental expression of form - is both Mahamaya and Yogamaya, and as such it is worthy of all our respect. We just need to recognize it and work in harmony with her higher vibrational frequencies rather than become victimized by her lower vibrational frequencies: it is a tiger, and we have a choice whether we want to be affectionate tiger cubs or a rabbit-based lunch.

The illusion of duality (*dvandva moha*) is inherent in the cosmic manifestation from the very beginning, where the One Transcendental Reality splits into Two, appearing as the Divine Couple. Actually these Two cannot be divided as they are always united, but they appear to be separate in order to create the Supreme Dance of the variegated perceptions of Consciousness. This profound concept is at the foundation of the various representations of Krishna engaging in the *rasa lila*, or the mystic dance, with his many *shaktis*. Actually Shakti is one only, but she manifests in innumerable forms in order to create an infinite variety of enjoyment (*hladini shakti*) starting from the transcendental level and then manifesting also on the material level of the cosmic manifestation.

It is actually this apparent separation (*vipralambha*) between the Two halves of the Supreme Couple that manifests the most powerful energy of attraction and moves the consciousness in the strongest way, therefore its attending sentiment of *parakiya sringara rasa* is considered the most intense and intimate relationship with Bhagavan. Those who fail to understand this ontological and universal truth will remain superficially deluded by the materialistic and dualistic concept of an ordinary human couple relationship between a naughty young man who likes to play around with other women while his true lover is neglected and left alone to suffer because she is a silly village girl - young, ignorant and simple-minded.

We should never take Krishna cheaply and think that he is merely a cowherd boy having fun with some girls of his village who were "his devotees". Of course when an *avatara* descends into this world there is a visible symbolic re-enactment of the profound concepts, that is compared to a theatrical drama performance - a captivating story that aims at focusing the attention of people at whatever level their minds are able to perceive it.

This verse says, *yanti sarge*, "they enter the creation". The locative grammatical case of the word *sarge* ("creation") can indicate either time or place, or both. So according to the different shades of meanings, we can understand that the living entities are confused at the time of their creation and/or at the time of the creation of the material universe, when they enter into it. This is the central subject of the lively and sometimes controversial discussion about the origin of the *jivas*.

Some people believe that the *jivatmas* originally were in the personal company of Krishna in what *Gita* calls "the supreme abode from which one never falls into the material world" (*yam prapya na nivartante tad dhama paramam mama*, 8.21, *yad gatva na nivartante tad dhama paramam mama*, 15.6), but this idea is obviously against Krishna's teachings. This mistaken theory comes from an ignorant speculative elaboration starting from incomplete data, and is compounded by the lack of study of the genuine Vedic scriptures and the decontextualization of the teachings of some *vaishnava acharyas*.

By carefully analyzing Krishna's statements in *Bhagavad gita* we can bring some more light to the subject.

The word *bhuta* refers to the living beings or conditions of beings, indicating only the ordinary conditioned *jivatmas* that are sometimes called *nitya baddhas*. It is important to properly understand this definition as relative to its context and not in an absolute sense. This *nitya* ("eternal") does not apply to a supposed ontological eternal bondage as some are led to believe, but to the immortality of the *jiva*, as highlighted in *Bhagavad gita* (*nityah sarva-gatah sthanur acalo 'yam sanatanah*, 2.24, *jiva bhuta sanatanah*, 15.7).

The adjective *baddha* ("conditioned") is an independent addition to the attribute *nitya* ("eternal") and not its qualifying explanation. This meaning is demonstrated by the fact that a *jiva* can (and should) evolve from the *baddha* position to the *mukta* position, even in this life itself (*jivan mukta*): this is actually one of the main four *purusha arthas*, or purposes in human life.

It would be very illogical to propose *mukti* (liberation) as a normal goal for conditioned souls, if the conditioned souls were intrinsically and ontologically destined to remain conditioned eternally (the improper explanation of *nitya baddha*). Therefore all the innumerable Vedic instructions about the attainment of *mukti* as the most important goal for all conditioned souls would be meaningless, and there would be no point whatsoever in any religious activity or teaching. Any intelligent person will understand this simple point. Those who remain unable to understand it must be confused by Mahamaya because of their offensive attitude and behavior, especially towards the Supreme Guru, Mahadeva.

The fact of the matter is that the *jivatmas* are *paramatma vaibhava*, or the emanations of the radiance of the Supreme Soul, just like in our bodies the various cells composing the tissues and the organs are manifested by the energy emanating from the soul. They start as *anu-atmas* ("atomic souls") and they gradually grow through the evolution of consciousness to the point of developing a transcendently spiritual *siddha deha* ("body of perfection") fully manifesting the qualities of *sat, cit, ananda* and *vigraha* - like Bhagavan, but only smaller and therefore dependent on his consciousness.

All *nitya baddhas* are confused from the beginning, but their confusion can and should have an end through the attainment of the spiritual perfection of *siddha deha*, developed gradually through *sadhana* (*sadhana siddha*) and as a result of sincere devotion (*kripa siddha*). It is important to understand that success through special blessing (*kripa*) can shorten the long path of personal practice (*sadhana*) only when there is sufficient sincerity and pure desire and devotion in the heart of the aspirant. This is clearly explained in Patanjali's *Yoga sutras*: *tatra sthitau yatno 'bhyasah*, "It is the practice (*abhyasa*) (consisting of) being firmly established in one's own effort" (1.13), and *ishvara pranidhanad va*, "Otherwise, (*samadhi* can be attained by surrendering to) God." (1.23).

So the *anu atmas* are born in an immature and confused seed form from the *brahmajyoti* (spiritual radiant light) of the *param atman*, and enter (*yanti*) into creation like any child is born to the world with the purpose of developing a useful body for the human mission of life. This birth, this "entering creation" does not really have a beginning, because it happens at every cycle of creation of the universe, while during the non-manifested state of the universe all the *anu atmas* remain within the body of Mahavishnu in a happily oblivious sleep. Those *anu atmas* who had already experienced the material universe retain their subtle mental bodies containing the seeds of their *karmas*, like the deciduous trees in the winter just lose their leaves and remain apparently lifeless, only to sprout and blossom again at the arrival of spring. Others, that are just beginning their journey into the cycle of life, are comparable to seeds that are sprouting for the first time as seedlings and later will grow and produce leaves, flowers and fruits, as the consequence of their good and bad actions in this world. But their original existence as seeds has no beginning and is as eternal as Vishnu. The other category of living entities, called *nitya muktas* as opposed to the *nitya baddhas*, are only direct expansions of divine Personalities as their *vibhinmamsas*, or "separated parts", as exemplified by the main *gopis* and *gopas* in the Vrindavana lila, and they never enter creation in a confused state of mind. However, once a *nitya baddha jivatman* has attained *mukti*, it is not substantially different from a *nitya mukta*.

येषां त्वन्तगतं पापं जनानां पुण्यकर्मणाम् । ते द्वन्द्वमोहनिर्मुक्ता भजन्ते मां दृढव्रताः ॥ ७-२८ ॥

yeṣāṃ tvantagataṃ pāpaṃ janānāṃ puṇyakarmaṇām | te dvandvamohanirmuktā bhajante māṃ dṛḍhavratāḥ || 7-28 ||

yesam: those who; *tu*: but; *anta*: the end; *gatam*: reached; *papam*: of the wrongful actions; *jananam*: the persons; *punya*: virtuous; *karmanam*: actions; *te*: them; *dvandva*: duality; *moha*: illusion/ confusion; *nirmuktah*: completely free from; *bhajante*: (they) worship; *maṃ*: me; *dridha*: firmly; *vratāḥ*: (engaged) in vows.

"Those who have put an end to all bad activities/ sins, perform /have (accumulated) pious/ virtuous activities, and are completely liberated from the delusion of duality and firm in their determination, worship me."

It is not possible to truly worship the Supreme Personality of Godhead and continue to commit negative activities at the same time. Those who try to do that are simply deluding themselves. Sometimes cynical exploiters quote verses 4.36 (*api ced asi papebhyah sarvebhyah papa-krit-tamah*) and 9.30 (*api cet suduracaro*) to defend their material attachments and bad habits, but Krishna's instruction is never meant for that purpose.

Others even claim to be "transcendental" and "dovetailing" their criminal activities to what they consider "devotional service to Krishna", but they are dangerously delusional, and the object of their worship cannot possibly be Krishna - it will most likely be their own mental projection, and the fact that they are calling it "Krishna" does not make it any better, or more divine or spiritual.

Another tricky verse (*sarva dharman parityajya*, 18.66) should be properly understood in its context. The plural form of the word *dharma* indicates a dualistic perception of social duties as material identifications and attachments, and the verb *parityajya* refers to a quality of detachment, just like in the other famous verse (*subha asubha parityagi*, 12.17) recommending that we should be balanced in front of the various auspicious and inauspicious situations, without being overwhelmed by either elation or depression.

True, *bhakti* is independent from *karma*, *dharma* and *jnana*, but Krishna repeats many times throughout *Bhagavad gita* that a devotee must continue to behave in a proper way, even just to give the good example to the general population (3.25). Neglect towards one's duties, bad behavior and ignorance are never conducive to genuine *bhakti*. This message has already been presented in various verses, including 7.15 (*na mam duskritinah bhajante*) and will be repeated many times in the course of *Bhagavad gita*.

So for those who are beginners on the path of spiritual realization, it is important to first become trained in *dharma*, then in *karma* (as in duties and active service) and *jnana* (as in study of the scriptures). Later on, when the devotee will be firmly established in the proper consciousness, it will be possible to rely on a higher level of understanding, and give less importance to rules. We can make the example of mathematics: a beginner in the study of arithmetics will be taught that it is not possible to subtract a larger number from a smaller number (for example, 7 from 5), but after successfully assimilating the fundamental lessons, the student will be told that in fact one can subtract 7 from 5, and the result is -2. If such information had been given to a student on the first day of school, it would have caused only confusion.

Similarly, trying to function on the purely transcendental *raganuga bhakti* in the higher *rasas* and depending exclusively on the direct instructions of *paramatman* can be disastrous for someone who has not properly assimilated *dharma*, *karma* and *jnana*, and is still materially identified and attached, more or less unconsciously. In this process, the safest choice is to follow the personalized instructions given by an expert spiritual teacher (4.34), that is able to actually see the level of progress of the student and apply the proper lessons and tests from time to time. Krishna outlines the process in this verse: first of all, one must understand and practice *dharma*, by abstaining from negative actions (*papa*) and removing bad habits and defects (*anarthas*) as well as wrong conceptions and ignorance (*avidya*).

We also need to engage in positive actions (*punya karmana*) that culminate in the practical activities of *bhakti yoga* - *sravanam kirtanam vishnu smaranam, pada sevanam, archanam, vandanam*, etc. All these are called *punya karmani*. Even simply listening to *krishna katha* is called *punya sravana kirtana* (*Bhagavata Purana* 1.2.17). The practical knowledge of how to offer a pleasing service to the Lord is called *vidvat pratiti*. Collectively, this stage of development in devotional consciousness is called *yama* and *niyama*, or regulated *vaidhi sadhana bhakti*.

These practices include *svadhyaya*, *isvara pranidhana*, *dharana* and *dhyana* as per the *yoga* system. The genuine spiritual realization obtained through this process will develop a sincere attachment (*asakti*) to God, and already at that point the devotee is situated on the platform of *dvandva moha nirmukta*, because s/he is not confused any more by personal likings and dislikings, but is ready to selflessly serve God and accept whatever God sends him/her. There is no more question of personal gain or loss, pleasure or pain, victory or defeat, heat or cold, fame or infamy, rich or poor, male or female, or any other duality. At that point, it becomes possible to engage in firm vows (*vrata*) of genuine worship to God (*bhajana*), and with time and sincere efforts the devotee will become situated on the levels of *raganuga bhakti, prema* and *bhava*.

जरामरणमोक्षाय मामाश्रित्य यतन्ति ये । ते ब्रह्म तद्विदुः कृत्स्नमध्यात्मं कर्म चाखिलम् ॥ ७-२९ ॥

jarāmaraṇamokṣāya māmāśritya yatanti ye | te brahma tadviduḥ kṛtsnamadhyātmaṁ karma cākḥilam || 7-29 ||

jara: (from) old age; *marana*: (from) death; *mokshaya*: liberation; *mam*: me; *asritya*: taking shelter; *yatanti*: (they) go; *ye*: those who; *te*: they; *brahma*: Brahman; *tat*: that; *viduh*: (they) know; *kritsnam*: everything; *adhyatmam*: transcendence; *karma*: dutiful actions; *ca*: and; *akhilam*: completely.

"They take shelter in me, endeavoring to attain liberation from (the cycle of) birth and death, and they come to know that Brahman is the sum total of all transcendence. (Therefore) they completely understand/ know the science of action/ know everything about transcendence, as well about the social/ religious duties to be performed."

The concept of reincarnation was common knowledge in all human societies until the Christian church took over the power in the ancient Roman Empire and banned the idea as illegal heresy, actively persecuting with very cruel punishments anyone who dared to talk about it. The purpose of this asuric law was to control the people through fear and despair, as one brief lifetime of total submission to the religious and political tyranny was the only way to avoid a sentence of eternal torture in hell and win paradise, and the whimsical cruelty and injustice of differences in the birth circumstances made people believe that God was really as bad as those who claimed to be his representatives on earth.

Not surprisingly, intelligent people became cynical about religion and the existence of a soul, also because the Christian dogma imposed by the government taught that the individual is the body and has a soul (rather than the contrary). Of course such an idea of soul is totally impossible to demonstrate, and irrelevant for any intelligent person. This situation created a great confusion in the minds of people in general, and led to the idea that life in this world is the only real thing that matters, and we should do everything possible to prolong it in spite of old age and disease, and even in a totally disabled condition.

Death became the most terrifying thing, and even speaking about it came to be considered bad taste, therefore when the general people is told about reincarnation, they consider it as a special miraculous occurrence, an extraordinary "second chance" that is only possible for some very special people - like the Tibetan Lamas or other great sages. The Vedic view is radically different. Krishna has already explained, especially in chapter 2, that the Atman is eternal and independent from the material body, and that in any case the body is temporary and afflicted by various types of sufferings. Death - like birth, disease and old age - is an inevitable passage of life and a confusing moment only because of the natural survival instinct, and the accompanying unpleasing feelings. But the problem is neither with birth nor with death: it is the entire cycle of reincarnation under the bondage of conditioned life (*samsara*) from which we can and should become free in order to attain real happiness.

In verse 13.9 Krishna will state that real knowledge consists in the perception that this cycle of birth-death-old age-disease (*janma-mrityu-jara-vyadhi*) is a problem because of its inherent sufferings and impermanence (*duhkha-doshanudarshanam*). Therefore the ultimate success to be achieved by a human being (*purusha-artha*) in this life is *moksha*, liberation from the cycle of births and deaths. The only way to achieve such success consists in taking shelter in the transcendental spiritual consciousness that is Krishna, the Brahman that is also *adhyatma* or the principle of Atman, the true original identity of the soul. Acquisition of knowledge through the *Vedas* (indicated here by the word *viduh*, "they know") and a consistent sincere effort (*yatanti*) on this path of Self-realization are the essential requisites for success, because they support the complete renunciation to material identifications and attachments (*sarva parityaga vrata*) that enables us to direct all our attention and energies to the spiritual platform. It is important to understand that taking shelter in Krishna (*mam asritya*) does not refer to the mechanical prayers, the sectarian affiliations, or the blind belief in some supreme person that dispenses rewards or punishments

to those who obey or disobey him. Rather, it indicates the level of consciousness or awareness of the transcendental reality (*adhyatma*) and its realization or application in daily life and in the sense of identity and belonging.

All the necessary branches of knowledge are contained in *Bhagavad gita*: the proper understanding of Atman/ Brahman, the science of action and duty (*karma*), and the structure and functions of the universe (*akhilam* or *jagat*) which will be specifically explained in the subsequent chapters.

Since Sanskrit terms usually have various layers of meanings, the second part of this verse could be translated as "Therefore they completely understand the Atman, the world and the science of action" or "Therefore they know everything about transcendence as well about the material universe, and the social and religious duties to be performed".

साधिभूताधिदैवं मां साधियज्ञं च ये विदुः । प्रयाणकालेऽपि च मां ते विदुर्युक्तचेतसः ॥ ७-३० ॥

sādhībhūtādhidāivam mām sādhiyajñam ca ye viduḥ | prayāṇakāle'pi ca mām te viduryuktacetasaḥ || 7-30 ||

sa: with; *adhibhuta*: the principle of material elements; *adhidaivam*: the principle of divinity; *mam*: me; *sa*: with; *adhiyajnam*: the principle of sacred action; *ca*: and; *me*: me; *viduḥ*: they know; *prayana-kale*: at the time of death; *api*: even/ certainly; *ca*: also/ as well; *mam*: me; *te*: they; *vidur*: they know; *yukta-cetasah*: those who engage their consciousness.

"They know me and simultaneously they know the principle of material manifestation, the principle of the archetypes governing it, and the principle of sacred action. Thus they will also know me at the time of (their) death, because their consciousness is connected (with me)."

In these last two verses of the chapter, Krishna mentions the fundamental concepts of Brahman, Adhyatma, Karma, Adhibhuta, Adhidaiva, Adhiyajna, and the consciousness at the time of death. At the beginning of the next chapter, Arjuna will ask him for more clarifications specifically on these subjects. The principles called Adhyatma, Adhibhuta, Adhidaiva and Adhiyajna are the foundations of the realities called respectively Atman, material elements, Devas and Yajna, that together with Karma and time constitute the sum total of existence.

Chapter 2 spoke extensively about Adhyatma, the principle of Atman, that we could also call the nature of the soul. This is the most important science, because it studies directly the subject of knowledge, without which there would be no knowledge and no cognition. By understanding the actual nature of the Self, one can achieve complete success in this life and in the next.

The sum total of Atman is called Brahman. Each and every individual Jiva Atman emanates from the Param Atman, or "Supreme Soul", Vishnu. Some commentators translate Param Atman as "Supersoul", but such definition may not be easily understandable for most people, as it could give the idea of a merely bigger and more powerful individual soul, something like a Superman in comparison to ordinary men.

To really understand the principle of Param Atman, we should consider for example the expression *param guru*, that indicates the "*guru* of the *guru*". Thus the Param Atman is the "self of the self" or the "soul of the soul". Just like the individual soul - the Jiva Atman - produces a great number of living cells that constitute his/ her material body, so the Supreme Soul - the Param Atman - produces a great number of living spiritual cells that constitute his spiritual body within the material manifestation.

From this, we can understand how and why the individual Jiva Atman cannot exist separately from the Param Atman, and in fact its consciousness is only a spark of the sum total of the individual consciousness of the Param Atman. We know that each and every cell of our own material bodies is conscious and possesses a complex genetic code that constitutes a great amount of knowledge or information, yet when it is separated from the entire body and from its "higher central consciousness", it inevitably perishes.

The principle of Adhibhuta (that indicates the "conditions of life") is more than the material elements in themselves, that include the *pancha maha bhuta* ("five gross elements") such as earth, water, fire, air and space, and the three subtle material elements known as *manas*, *buddhi* and *ahankara* (mind, intelligence and identification). When considered all together, the sum total of all these material element is called *pradhana* or *maha tattva*, or material nature. Unlike her manifestations, *pradhana* is eternal and always existing, and therefore is also called Brahman - specifically, she is the feminine component of the Undivided One, while the masculine component is called *purusha*.

The Undivided One is called *avyakta*, "non manifested", and *param*, "supreme", and is presented by Adi Shankara Acharya in the first verse of his commentary to *Bhagavad gita* as *narayanah paro avyaktat*, "Narayana (Vishnu) (who) is supreme and non-manifested". This Narayana or Vishnu is also called Sadashiva, "the eternal Shiva", while the "non-eternal" Shiva is his manifestation in the material world for the purpose of renovation - the action of dissolution that establishes the pre-conditions for a new creation. Vishnu is thus the origin of the Adhyatma and the Adhibhuta (7.6).

The concept of Adhidaiva, like the concept of Param Atman, should be understood properly. Just like the Param Atman lives within the heart of each living entity, all the Devas also live within the body of the individual Jivatman, because they are the controlling principles of the Virat rupa, the universal material form of the Purusha.

The budding science of psychology in western academia was considerably developed by Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961), a great admirer and student of Vedic knowledge. Considered the founder of Analytical Psychology, he gave summer lectures on Yoga philosophy and Kundalini in Zurich for a few years. He wrote, "We do not yet realize that while we are turning upside down the material world of the East with our technical proficiency, the East with its psychic proficiency, is throwing our spiritual world into confusion."

Jung is famous for having expounded the concept of Archetypes, or collective, universal and eternal "personality principles" that are found in the subconscious mind of all human beings, irrespective of their education or cultural background, and even unknown to the conscious mind. These archetypes are expressions of the universal symbolic language of the spirit; they are the original model template or ideal representation from which all things of the same nature are copied. He mentioned the Persona, the Shadow, the Anima, the Animus, the Great Mother, the Wise Old man, the Hero, and the Self. Of course Jung expressed this idea in his particular way, that is not the original knowledge, but simply his perception of the reality, and his research has been continued by other scientists, that have developed for example the Constellations technique, or the Dialogue between a person's "sub-personalities", also utilizing instruments such as role

playing, and so on. The most important Archetypes are the Mother, the Father, the King, the Child, the Warrior, the King, the Lover, the Architect, the Magician, the Jester (or Madman), the Hermit, the Teacher, and so on. Other "minor" universal Archetypes are symbolic objects such as a forest, a lake, the ocean, a house, a vase, a wall, etc, or animals such as a bear, a cat, an eagle, a lion and so on. There are several exercises for the exploration of the subconscious programming that are based on the visualization of these particular archetypes.

Traditionally, the best and deepest application of these Archetypes is the study of mythology, or the ancient sacred figures of all cultures - whose memory is still lingering at the edges of the contemporary mind, for example in the figures of the Tarots from which the game of cards originally derived. The Vedic or Hindu tradition contains the greatest wealth of such symbolical descriptions and depictions still surviving in spite of the onslaught of the abrahamic iconoclasm that has been continuously going on for over 2000 years.

Chapter 8

Taraka brahma yoga

The Yoga of transcendental liberation and liberating spiritual existence

In the first 3 chapters, Krishna has been instructing Arjuna about the performance of one's duty, the distinction between the temporary body and the eternal Atman, the purpose of Yoga as the science of conscious action, the need to control one's mind, the meaning of detachment as selflessness, and the concept of duty as sacred action.

Then Krishna starts to speak about the transcendental level that is above duty and action, and the realization of Atman (3.17-18). However, even those who are already above action and duty should continue to act dutifully, because by their good example they can inspire and support society. Here, for the first time, Krishna speaks about himself and his own transcendental nature (3.22-24), to say that although he is certainly above all duties and actions, and yet he continues to perform those actions that are required for the protection and maintenance of the universe. After this brief comment, Krishna goes back to the subject of dutiful action according to one's position within the order of things in the universe, based on one's qualities and abilities. Again, he briefly mentions his divine nature in 3.30, saying that a *yogi* offers all his/her activities to him. However, by the end of 3rd chapter, Krishna still presents himself as the equivalent of Atman/ Brahman, in a general transcendental way rather than a very personal way.

The 4th chapter becomes more specific, and Krishna begins to make a clear distinction between himself as a divine Personality, that is immensely different from all other personalities: he is the Supreme Lord of all creatures and states of being (4.6). Unlike the other individual manifestations of Brahman (the Jiva Atmans), Krishna is the supreme individual (Param Atman). Thus from the realization of Brahman, we move to the realization of Paramatma and Isvara. Krishna continues to speak about his own divine nature from 4.1 to 4.14, also revealing that the realization of his transcendental position is the secret to liberation.

Again from 4.15 to 4.43 and from 5.2 to 5.28, Krishna speaks about the sacred nature of dutiful selfless action, talking about Brahman and Nirvana, with only a brief mention about his own divine position (4.35). In 5.29, again Krishna states that one who knows him as the Supreme Lord of all planets, the purpose of sacrifices and the friend of all beings, attains peace.

The 6th chapter shifts the focus again on duty, *yoga* and the realization of the Paramatma, with 2 verses (6.14-15) and then again 2 more verses (6.30-31) stating that Krishna himself is personally the purpose of *yoga* and meditation. This concept is repeated in the last verse of the chapter (6.47).

In the 7th chapter, Krishna will speak much more about himself and his supreme nature, with only one exception when he does not mention himself (7.5) This focus on Krishna bhakti becomes so important that, while previously he spoke about detachment as the key to success, now he is speaking about attachment to him as the key to success on a higher level.

From 7.8 to the end of the chapter, we clearly see that Krishna is not an ordinary material personality, but an extraordinarily deep level of consciousness - that can be found in this world as the essence and support of everything that exists. However, not everybody is able to perceive Krishna because one needs to turn to him with an open mind. It becomes clear, therefore, that *vijnana* is equivalent to the supreme level of transcendental consciousness that we call Krishna consciousness - the complete and constant awareness that encompasses Brahman, Paramatma and Bhagavan, and includes all realities, material and spiritual. By directly connecting to this supreme consciousness, the *yogi* attains the highest position and the perfection of life.

अर्जुन उवाच ।

arjuna uvāca ।

किं तद् ब्रह्म किमध्यात्मं किं कर्म पुरुषोत्तम ।

अधिभूतं च किं प्रोक्तमधिदैवं किमुच्यते ॥ ८-१ ॥

kiṁ tad brahma kimadhyātmaṁ kiṁ karma puruṣottama । adhibhūtaṁ ca kiṁ proktamadhidaivaṁ kimucyate ॥ 8-1 ॥

arjunah : Arjuna; uvaca: said; kim: what; tad: that (is); brahma: Brahman; kim: what; adhyatma: Adhyatma; kim: what; karma: Karma (action/ duty); purusha: Person; uttama: Supreme; adhibhutam: Adhibhutam; ca: and; kim: what; proktam: called/ defined; adhidaivam: Adhidaivam; kim: what; ucyate: it is said.

Arjuna said: "O Purushottama (Krishna, Supreme Person), what is Brahman, what (is) Adhyatma, what (is) Karma? And what are (the realities) called Adhibhuta and Adhidaiva?"

This verse summarizes the main topics of *Gita*: Brahman (the transcendental unchangeable Reality of the entire sum total of Consciousness), Adhyatman (the living entities), Karma (action), Adhibhutam (the material world) and Adhidaivam (the controlling principle, incarnated by the archetypal Devas). Adhiyajna is the sum total of all the sacred actions, the relationship that connects all these principles and makes it all worthwhile, supporting everything in the universe and creating the harmony and progressive movement we call Dharma and Ritu. In fact, these topics are all that there is to know in the world, and the subject of all the Vedic scriptures. A genuine devotee of Krishna cannot disregard them, because they are right in the heart center of the three most important chapters of the *Bhagavad gita*, that speak about pure devotional service or Bhakti Yoga. Purushottama means "supreme person", the highest among all the *purushas*, or persons. The concept of "person" appears fundamental in the correct understanding of all the realities described above. Without it, the six fundamental principles of the entire material and spiritual existence lose all their meaning.

1. Brahman is ultimately personal in nature as Bhagavan or Isvara.

Those who believe that Brahman is simply "impersonal" fail to understand that Brahman is consciousness and spirit, and this is precisely what defines "personality". Actually, Brahman is the sum total of all personalities. How can consciousness and awareness not be conscious and aware of itself? And when it is conscious and aware of itself, how can it not be a subject of cognizance, a personality? Therefore, the definitions *nirvishesa* ("without variety") and *nirguna* ("without qualities") that are generally applied to Brahman simply refer to the manifestation of variety (implying change and "not being" of something that was "being" before) and quality (as the *guna* implying the absence of one quality when another opposite quality is present). Krishna will elaborate more on this point in later chapters.

2. Adhyatma is sum total of the the individual *jivas* or subordinate *purushas*.

This stage of manifestation has already "separated" itself from the Adhibhuta principle, as a couple represented by Shiva and Shakti. Both these principles were already present within the non-manifested Vishnu (*narayanah paro avyaktat*), and when they manifest as a couple appearing as male-female, the principle of variety and relationship is manifested.

3. Karma or activity/ duty requires a *karta* or person that carries on the action. Without a subject of the action, no action can be performed, although of course the consciousness of the *karta* does not have to be materially identified (4.24).

4. The world of Adhibhuta is filled with personalities, albeit temporary.

The characteristic of the immense variety of material manifestations is specifically built on the various hues of *ahankara*, the sense of identification that is generally considered the basis of a personality, and that constitutes the first material element (*bhuta*) and the origin of all the others. Again, as in the concept of *karma*, the subject of the action can choose to interact with the material elements (*bhuta*) with a material consciousness of selfish exploitation, or with a spiritual consciousness of service. In any case, without a subject (personality) that manipulates and supports (*dharyate*, 7.5) the material elements of the universe, there would be no meaning to the cosmic manifestation.

5) Adhidaiva, the controlling principle, is incarnated in millions of forms or personalities of the Devas, parts of the universal body (*virat purusha*) described in the *Purusha sukta*.

6) Adhiyajna, that will be mentioned in the next verse, is the principle of religious/ spiritual activity, that is different from Karma and in a sense constitutes its purpose. This concept is summarized in verse 3.9: *yajnarthat karmano 'nyatra loko 'yam karma-bandhanah*, "actions must be performed with a religious consciousness, otherwise they will bind to material consequences". In a deeper sense, this definition refers to the Param Atman, the Supreme Self, that resides in the bodies of all the beings, and is the ultimate enjoyer of all their actions.

The word *proktam* (*pra + uktam*) means "defined", "called", "explained", and expresses the concept of universal agreement on the supreme science of *Bhagavad gita*. Some foolish people believe that any opinion should be considered equally valid, and that any person is entitled to give a whimsical meaning and explanation to definitions and concepts, and even to reality.

Now, while it is a fact that there can be many apparently different perspectives of the same reality, and many languages in which we can legitimately and truly describe it, it is also a fact that we must always remain aware of the general context of the perspective and utilize a language that can be interfaced with other languages in an official way. If we fail to do so, our opinions will have no value and will even become an unnecessary disturbance to society. Any language needs a dictionary, where each and every expression is defined in a clear, consistent and universally recognized way. We cannot use words by giving them whimsical meanings that are not recognizable by others, because such a behavior will create confusion and unnecessary hostility. When we want to give a different meaning to a word, we need to record it in some way, so that others can use the reference to understand what we are talking about.

अधियज्ञः कथं कोऽत्र देहेऽस्मिन्मधुसूदन । प्रयाणकाले च कथं ज्ञेयोऽसि नियतात्मभिः ॥ ८-२ ॥

adhiyajñah katham ko'tra dehe'sminmadhusūdana | prayāṇakāle ca katham jñeyo'si niyatātmaḥ | | 8-2 | |

adhiyajnah : Adhiyajna; *katham*: how; *kah*: who; *atra*: here; *dehe*: in the body; *asmin*: this; *madhusudana*: o Krishna; *prayana*: of death; *kale*: at the time; *ca*: and; *katham*: how; *jneyah*: known; *asi*: you are; *niyata*: that strive; *atmaḥ*: to those souls.

"O Madhusudana (Krishna), how is the Adhiyajna (residing) in this body? And how you will be known at the time of death by those who are engaged in Yoga?"

The name Madhusudana refers to Krishna killing the *asura* Madhu, that represents ignorance and illusion, so Arjuna appeals to this power to vanquish confusion and lack of knowledge.

As we have already mentioned, the main subjects of *Bhagavad gita* are as follows:

1. what is Brahman?
2. what is Adhyatma?

3. what is Karma?
4. what is Adhibhuta?
5. what is Adhidaiva?
6. how is the Adhiyajna residing in the body?
7. how will Krishna be known at the time of death by those who are engaged in Yoga?

We have already explained five of these all-important concepts at the end of the previous chapter, when Krishna mentioned them, and now in the subsequent verses Krishna will elaborate more. The concept of Adhiyajna is just as deep and intriguing as the concept of Adhyatma. At a first glance, it indicates Param Atman, that resides in the body together with the Jiva Atman, as described in *Mundaka* (3.1.2) and *Svetasvatara* (4.7) *Upanishads* (*samane vrikshhe purusho nimagno anisaya socati muhyamanah, justam yada pasyati anyam isam asya mahimanam iti vita-sokah; dva suparna sayujya sakhaya samanam vriksham parisvasjate*). The two *purushas*, like two birds of the same nature, are sitting on the same tree.(the body). One of the two is engrossed in contemplating and eating the fruits of the tree, while the other is simply watching him and waiting for him to realize his glories, which will put an end to all worries.

But why is it called Adhiyajna here? Because the *param atman* is the origin and purpose of all *yajnas*, the spiritual and religious activities. Again, materialistic people with a short supply of intelligence will think that a *yajna*, or religious activity, is just a ritual ceremony, a specific set of verbal formulas and ritual gestures that is performed by a caste of priests, but that is not a fact. The concept of *yajna* as religious activity encompasses all the five categories of dutiful action (*pancha maha yajnas*) expressing gratitude and reciprocating the benefits we all received from God and the Devas (*agnihotra, sandhya vandana, upasana*), the Vedic knowledge compiled by the great Rishis (*svadhyaya, sadhana*), the ancestors of the family (*tarpana, sraddha, garbhadana*), the other human beings (*varna karma, atithi seva, dana seva*) and even animals and other creatures (*bali, ahimsa*).

Such *yajnas* can be performed externally as rituals, or just internally as a sacrifice of consciousness and the activities of the senses and the mind in daily life (4.25, 4.26, 4.27, 4.28, 4.29, 4.30), and in many different ways (*bahu vidha yajna*, 4.32) to cover all types of activities on the human level. In fact, each and every action should be transformed into *yajna* by the power of consciousness, as Krishna will clearly say at the conclusion of the central three "purely devotional" chapters of *Bhagavad gita*, in 9.27: *yat karosi, yad asnasi, yaj juhosi dadasi yat*, "whatever you do, whatever you eat, whatever you sacrifice and you give away", *kurusva mad arpanam*, "do everything as a sacred offering to me". This "me" mentioned by Krishna is the Adhiyajna, who lives in the heart of each and every soul, and therefore it is not limited by the form of the Deity in the temple, and does not need to be endorsed by any religious organization or specific process. Bhakti is the most natural function of the self, and it cannot be limited or stopped by any external circumstance.

For those who have established themselves in this consciousness, death becomes irrelevant, as it was already stated by Krishna at the very beginning of his instructions in *Bhagavad gita: dehantara praptir dhiras tatra na muhyati* (2.13), a person who is balanced does not become confused by the end of the body.

Anyone can achieve this level of perfect consciousness: it is just a matter of effort. The *niyata atmas* are those *jivatmas* that sincerely and seriously engage in the practice of the development of consciousness according to the system of *yoga*, that starts with *yama* and *niyama*.

श्रीभगवानुवाच ।

śrībhagavānuvāca ।

अक्षरं ब्रह्म परमं स्वभावोऽध्यात्ममुच्यते ।

भूतभावोद्भवकरो विसर्गः कर्मसंज्ञितः ॥ ८-३ ॥

akṣaram brahma paramam svabhāvo'dhyātmanucyate । bhūtabhāvodbhava-karo visargaḥ karmasāñjītaḥ ॥ 8-3 ॥

sri-bhagavan: the perfect Lord; *uvaca*: said; *aksaram*: eternal/ syllable; *brahma*: Brahman; *paramam*: supreme; *sva*: own; *bhava*: nature; *adhyatmam*: Adhyatma; *ucyate*: is said; *bhuta*: of the living entities/ the conditions of life; *bhava*: the existence; *udbhava*: manifestation; *karah*: that makes; *visargah*: the production/ creation; *karma*: Karma; *samjnitah*: is known as.

The Lord said: "Brahman is the transcendental/ supreme unchanging (existence). The intrinsic nature (of the being) is called Adhyatma. And Karma is described as the creative action that causes the states of existence/ the bodies/ the nature and the birth of the embodied beings."

Krishna is giving here the following definitions:

1. Brahman is the supreme existence that never changes
2. Adhyatma is what manifests the existence of the living entities
3. Karma is creation or manifestation

The definition of Brahman as *akshara* is specifically mentioned also in *Brihad aranyaka Upanishad* (3.89) as "unchanging" is expressed as *na ksharati*, where *kshara* is a synonym of *bhava*, "becoming".

The other meaning refers to the the supreme syllable (*akshara*), the *pranava omkara*, that was mentioned in verse 7.8 and will be mentioned again in 9.17, and 17.23 and 17.24 as the sound form of the Brahman.

This science is also explained in detail in many *Upanishads* - *Chandogya, Prasna, Brahma, Para Brahma, Turiyatita, Amrita nada, Darshana, Dhyana bindu, Hamsa, Mandala brahmana, Nada bindu, Sandilya, Yoga tattva, Kausitaki, Maha, Narayana, Savitri, Rahasya, Svetasvatara, Dattatreya, Hayagriva, Mahanarayana, Nrisimha tapani, Rama rahasya, Vasudeva, Atharva siksha, Bhasma, Rudra hridaya, Brahma vidya, Akshi, Garbha, Gopala tapani, Tara sara, Akshamalika*, and especially *Paramahansa parivrajaka, Sannyasa, Satyayani, Yoga chudamani, and Narada parivrajaka*.

The word *karah*, "the maker" may be applied to the definition of Adhyatma and/ or to the definition of Karma, which is strictly connected by the same verbal root. It is not difficult to see that the word *karma* comes from *karah*. However, the position of the words in the verse

can also refer to the Adhyatma, the principle of manifestation of the *bhutas*, the "beings", a definition that is applicable both to the individual living entities and to the various conditions of existence. These two explanations are not contradictory, but rather meant to expand our understanding on more levels and make it deeper.

The concept of Adhyatma has been explained as the *svabhava* (with a long *a*), that is the inherent and original nature of the Atman, that is the specific mode of consciousness. Such mode of consciousness can be spiritual or material, and as a consequence, a suitable body is manifested through action. The spiritual body is developed through *bhava* or transcendental emotion in the devotional service to the Lord through the agency of Yogamaya, while the material body is developed through the birth into the material universe through the agency of Mahamaya.

It is said, *jivatmanah sambandha yo bhavo*: through the connection or from the relationship, the *jivatman* experiences the feeling of identification (either as part of the Supreme or as a separate enjoyer) and this in turn makes him choose to engage in action (*adi kritya*), which creates his body.

It is then said, *svam bhavayati*: he transforms himself through perception, through emotion or feeling he develops a condition of being. We will here repeat that with a long first *a*, the word *bhava* means "emotion, feeling", while with a short first *a* it means "existence, birth, becoming, manifestation". Although the two meanings are obviously connected to each other, they do not have the same significance, as the former is the cause of the latter. In this sense, it is what causes the manifestation of the conditions of the beings, the original reason for coming into being of all the positions of a living entity. While the Prakriti is the cause of action, the Purusha is the cause of perception and consciousness: this is symbolized by the image of Mother Kali standing on the body of Shiva - as Shiva without Shakti is *sava* ("corpse") and cannot act. However, the perception (pleasure, aspiration, desire, feeling, etc) of the *purusha* stimulates the *prakriti*, and the *karma* (action) is generated.

Karma is probably the most successful and popular word leaked from the corpus of Vedic knowledge into the daily life vocabulary of western countries, even more than *yoga*. However, its meaning is often 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 ideologies, 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 additional concept of reincarnation mixes 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 hells (for example, in Dante Alighieri's *Divina Commedia*). However, Karma is not just an inevitable jail 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; people usually want to get rid of the "bad *karma*" (and don't mind having some "good *karma*"). Actually, the law of Karma is much more complex and deep than that, and is explained precisely, clearly and consistently in *Bhagavad gita*.

The word *visarga*, that can be translated as "creation" or "completion of the sacrifice or activity offered to the Devas", "sending forth", "discharging", is also the name of a particular item in the Sanskrit alphabet, indicating the "end" of sound - an echoing end, as opposed to the nasal end provided by its companion and counterpart *anusvara*. The third companion, the *virama*, provides an abrupt end to the sound.

A symbolic interpretation of these three items in the Sanskrit alphabet is also directly connected with *karma* and the law of cause and effect: when an action is done (mentally, verbally or physically), the result is instantly created, although it may become manifest only after a period of time. The *visarga* or creation proper is the echo of previous tendencies, and perpetuates the repetition of the choices and actions in this life into the future by creating the seeds for future actions and lifetimes. The *anusvara*, that is crowning the transcendental syllable AUM, is the sacred action that neutralizes action and creates *moksha*, the cessation of the cycle of births and death and the attainment of the transcendental level of consciousness. The *virama* is the end of the manifestation. In the cycle of the moon and the earth, *visarga* is the waxing and waning moon, and the pleasant seasons of spring and autumn, *anusvara* is the full moon (symbolized by the dot into the moon sickle, a very recurrent sacred image in all ancient cultures) also called *prana bindu* or *sasa bindu*, and connected to the rainy season. This also connects Chandra, Indra and Soma, and the addition of the name *chandra* to the names of Krishna and Rama. *Virama* is the dark moon (*amavasya*), sleep, death and the barren season where everything seems to be dead and non-manifested: summer in the hot climates and winter in the cold climates.

The word *visarga* is related to *visarjaniya*, and to the "dis-installation" of the Deity at the end of the worship rituals. As a component of the *yajna* or sacred action, the *visarga* or completion is the moment when the desired result of the activity is created and the action or vow is therefore completed.

अधिभूतं क्षरो भावः पुरुषश्चाधिदैवतम् ।

अधियज्ञोऽहमेवात्र देहे देहभृतां वर ॥ ८-४ ॥

adhibhūtaṁ kṣaro bhāvaḥ puruṣaścādhidāivatam | adhiyajñō'hamevātra dehe dehabhṛtāṁ vara || 8-4 ||

adhibhutam: the physical manifestation of the universe; *kshara*: impermanent; *bhavah*: nature; *purushah*: the principle of Consciousness; *ca*: and; *adhidaivatam*: the controlling archetypes; *adhiyajnah*: the Divine principle; *aham*: I; *eva*: certainly; *atra*: in this; *dehe*: body; *deha-bhritam*: of those who have/ carry a body; *vara*: o best.

"O best among those who have a body, the *adhibhutam* is the physical manifestation of the universe and is undergoing constant transformation. The *adhidaivatam* is the principle of Consciousness manifested as the controlling archetypes in the universe, and I am the *adhiyajna*, the Divine principle that resides in each body as the Param Atman."

Krishna is answering Arjuna's questions: in the previous verse he explained about Brahman, Adhyatma and Karma, and here he explains about Adhibhuta, Adhidaiva and Adhiyajna. This should be contemplated in preparation for death, so that it will be easier to leave the body without being confused by identifications and attachments, just like a bird leaves the nest in the tree to soar freely in the sky. The

expression *deha bhritam vara*, "o best among those who are embodied", indicates that the topics of this verse refer to the human body and to the material universe, microcosm and macrocosm, or in other words, they are present *atra dehe*, "in this body".

The *adhibhuta* manifestation is also called material nature, although it is merely a production of the original supreme Shakti. She is also eternal in existence, but the manifestations she produces are in constant transformation, revolving in cycles of creation, preservation and dissolution: therefore the *adhibhuta* principle is called *akshara*, or "non-eternal". The various stages of the material bodies are also detailed as birth, growth, maturity, reproduction, deterioration and death. This is also highlighted by the definition *bhavah*, "nature" or "manifestation", as something that comes into existence; we remember that *bhuta*, "being", is the result of *bhava*, "manifestation". The word *bhava* also means "condition, nature as manifestation of life circumstances". Whatever exists on the physical level is constantly changing due to the action of the *adhyatman* and the *karma*; such action can be direct as in the case of the body or indirect as in the case of those things related to the body, such as buildings, utensils, etc.

The definition of *adhibhuta* includes the 5 gross elements and the 3 subtle elements, but the gross elements are more easily visible, as they form the tangible objects like clay and pots. All the forms of *adhibhuta* depend, for their existence, on the support (*dharyate* 7.5) of the *jivatman* (individually) or *adhyatma* (collectively), and they are originated from the Brahman, that is also the origin of the *adhyatma*.

The definition of *adhidaiva* or *adhidaivata* is the controlling principle, the plan or the system of natural laws and regulations according to which the *adhibhuta* (the material objects) are functioning and directed with intelligence for the proper maintenance and progress of all beings. We can also identify it with the *visva rupa* or the *virat rupa*, the "universal form" of the Lord, that includes all Devas and planets, the principle of order and management that constitutes the authority of the Devas, beginning with Surya. This Purusha or principle of Consciousness resides in the Sun and sustains the organs and senses of all creatures; he is also called Hiranyagarbha, "the golden embryo". All the Devas are parts of the body of the Lord, and as such each particular Deva has the power to perform some activity or function in the universe, and to regulate those *jivatmas* and those material elements that are under their control. The definition of *adhiyajna* is the last - but not least - factor in Krishna's explanation, and is given special importance by the expression *aham eva*, "that is myself", or "it is I only".

The *adhiyajna* is the sacred principle, the principle of the sacred action or sacrifice (*yajna*), the act of sacred consciousness that brings the purpose of the universe and life to a higher level. This Supreme Consciousness or Supreme Lord called Yajna or Adhiyajna also resides within the body, but while the *atman* is a separated part or *vibhinna*, the *param atman* is directly the One Reality or *svamsa*.

The *Bhagavata Purana* (2.2.8) states, *kecit sva-dehantar hridayavakase pradesa mantram purusam vasantam*, "The Supreme Purusha that resides in the heart within the body, is as big as a thumb". This measure is also confirmed by the *Katha Upanishad* (2.1.12): *angustha-matrah purusho madhya atmani tisthati*. This *pradesha matra* or *angustha matra* is explained as the measure of the distance from thumb to tip of index. Of course the body of the Param Atman is a subtle spiritual presence, that can only be contemplated by the vision of the mind and the intelligence.

The meditation practiced by the *yogis* has the only purpose of actually contemplating this Param Atman, and with sufficient practice and purification of the mind and intelligence, through the precise and ample instructions of the *shastra* and the *guru*, the *sadhaka* ultimately becomes able to see the Lord.

Those who have attained this vision confirm that it is a beautiful form, radiant with a soft transcendental light. The Lord appears to be in the prime of youth, with a smiling and kind face, four attractive arms holding the symbols of divinity, and decorated with wonderful ornaments and clothing.

Several other verses of *Bhagavad gita* confirm this presence of the Adhiyajna within the body of the *jivatman*: 15.15 (*sarvasya caham hridi sannivisto*, "I reside in the hearts of all beings"), 18.61 (*isvarah sarva bhutanam hrd dese 'rjuna tisthati*, "O Arjuna, the Lord of all beings resides in the heart"), 13.23 (*upadrasta anumanta ca bharta bhokta mahesvarah paramatmeti capy ukto dehe 'smin purusah parah*, "It is said that the Supreme Lord, the Supreme Person, resides in this body as Paramatma together with the Atman, as the witness, the sanctioning authority, the sustainer and the enjoyer of all actions"), 13.3 (*kshetra jnam capi mam viddhi sarva kshetresu bhārata*, "O Bharata, know that besides the Atman, there is another Consciousness, that is me, and such Consciousness is aware of all the bodies").

Yajna inspires the acts of sacrifice from within the heart of the human being, and resides in the body because sacrifice is performed through *karma* or the actions or work of the body (*Gita*, 3.5, *brahma nityam yajne pratisthitam*, "Brahman eternally resides in sacred action"). This position of the Param Atman or Yajna as the actual enjoyer (5.28, *bhoktaram yajna tapasam*) of all the sacred activities should be properly understood on the transcendental level; to help us in this effort, the *shastras* offer a different and apparently opposite perspective with the example of the two birds sitting on the same tree. The *Bhagavata Purana* (11.11.6) says: *suparnav etau sadrisau sakhayau yadricchayaitau krita-nidau ca vrikshhe, ekas tayoh khadati pippalannam anyo niranno 'pi balena bhuyan*, "Two birds of similar nature, and related by friendship, by their own choice have made a nest in a tree; one is eating the food from the banyan tree, the other is not eating but he is more powerful."

The same image is found in *Mundaka Upanishad* (3.1.1): *dva suparna sayuja sakhaya samanam vriksham parisavajate, tayor anyah pippalam svadv atty anasnann anyo 'bhicakasiti*, "Two birds are sitting on the same tree as friends; one bird is eating the fruits of the tree, and the other is simply observing, without eating."

This exact verse is repeated in *Svetasvatara Upanishad* 4.6, and another verse is added (4.7): *samane vrikshhe purusho nimagno 'nisaya socati muhyamanah, justam yada pasyaty anyam isam asya mahimanam iti vita-sokah*, "Although the two *purushas* are in the same tree, one is experiencing deep anxiety and confusion, but if he turns towards the Lord and becomes aware of his glories, immediately he becomes free from all worries."

The example of the tree as the body is also repeated in *Bhagavata Purana* with different symbolic meanings and references: *ekayano 'sau dvi-phalas tri-mulas catu-rasah pancha-vidhah sad-atma, sapta-tvag asta-vitapo navaksho dasa-cchadi dvi-khago hy adi-vrikshah*, "The one body called the original tree has 2 types of fruits (joy and pain), 3 roots (the *gunas*), 4 tastes (or *rasas* - *dharma artha kama moksha*), 5 ways to acquire knowledge (5 senses), 6 states (lamentation, illusion, old age, death, hunger, thirst), 7 coverings (skin, blood, muscle, fat, bone, marrow, semen), 8 branches (the material elements), 9 holes (or openings), and 10 leaves (the life airs)" (10.2.27), and *dve asya bije sata-mulas tri-nalah pancha-skandhah panca-rasa-prasutih, dasaika-sakho dvi-suparna-nidas tri-valkalo dvi-phalo 'rkam pravistah /*

adanti caikam phalam asya grdhra grame-cara ekam aranya-vasah, hamsa ya ekam bahu-rupam ijyair maya-mayam veda sa veda vedam, "This tree has 2 seeds (good action and bad action), hundreds of roots (the previous impressions or *vasanas*), 3 lower trunks (the subtle elements), 5 upper trunks (the gross elements), producing 5 types of sap (sense perceptions or sense pleasures), 101 branches, 2 birds nests, 3 types of bark (*valkala*, coverings), 2 fruits (*pravritti* and *nivritti*, or *bhoga* and *tyaga*), and it grows as high as the sun. Those who eat one of the 2 fruits are lusty for sense gratification (*grdhras*) and live in urban areas (*grame carah*), while the *hamsas* who live in forests eat the other fruit. One who understands that this tree is the illusory potency (*maya-mayam*) of the One that appears in many forms, by those who are worthy to be worshiped (the Personalities of Godhead, or the Gurus), he actually knows the *Vedas*." (11.12.22-23).

अन्तकाले च मामेव स्मरन्मुक्त्वा कलेवरम् । यः प्रयाति स मद्भावं याति नास्त्यत्र संशयः ॥ ८-५ ॥

antakāle ca māmeva smaranmuktva kalevaram | yah prayāti sa madbhāvaṁ yāti nāstyatra saṁśayaḥ || 8-5 ||

anta: end; *kale*: at the time of; *ca*: and/ also; *mam*: me; *eva*: certainly; *smaran*: remembering; *muktva*: being liberated from; *kalevaram*: the material body; *yah*: s/he; *prayati*: goes; *sah*: s/he; *mad-bhavam*: my nature; *yati*: attains; *na*: not; *asti*: there is; *atra*: here; *samsayah*: doubt.

"One who, at the end of time (of this life), remembers me while leaving his/ her body attains my nature. There is no doubt in this."

The expression *sa mad-bhavam yati* means "attains my nature/ state of existence", but could also be translated as "attains the conception/ideal/ consciousness of me". The word *bhava* also refers to the highest stage of pure *bhakti*, which extends the meaning of the expression "*mad-bhavam*" to an extremely personal level of happiness and realization. We may recall here that the *siddha deha*, the perfect spiritual body developed by the devotee in the progressive cultivation of *vaidhi* and *raganuga bhakti*, is nothing but the sentiment - *rasa* or *bhava* - in relationship with God. The same meanings of *bhava* can be applied in the following verse to the expression *sada tad-bhava-bhavitah*, that refers to always thinking of something, or we could say, developing the same vibration frequency. In Vedic culture, nature or state of existence is synonymous with level of consciousness.

Anta kale literally means "at the end of time" and can apply both to the end of the time allotted within a particular body, or to the time of the death of the universe, when all the bodies are withdrawn inside the *pradhana* and then inside the body of Karanodakasayi Vishnu, the "Spirit floating on the waters". When all the bodies and the planets are destroyed, the *jivatmans* that still have karmic seeds to develop, temporarily re-enter the body of Vishnu, to be manifested again at the beginning of the next cycle. In both cases, the *jivatmans* that had attained the level of *jivanmukta* return to the supreme Dhama, and the others get a little rest from the fatigue of living in the material world. The time of death is a crucial moment for the embodied being, because it opens a door that facilitates the free movement out of a set of material circumstances and into a new path - something like getting off from one train and boarding a new one. We could really say that death is like a railway station, and the more conscious and informed we are at the time of death, the better we can choose our next destination.

In order to have a strong and focused consciousness at the time of death, when the body is struggling with its survival instinct and the senses and mind are failing - and sometimes the awareness is hurt by offensive actions, words and thoughts especially in case of a violent death - we need to have made a lot of practice during our entire lifetime. Probably the greatest danger is to be unable of detaching one's consciousness from thinking negatively about the immediate material cause of our death - in other words, the people we blame for that or for any other failure in our life - because this will push us towards a new incarnation precisely among that type of people. For that, we do not need to be thinking of that form in a positive way, with attraction and desire: a negative meditation, with repulsion and hatred, will have the exact same effect. For example, let's consider two opposite and hostile factions that keep fighting each other for some ideological or even "religious" reason.

People from the group A kill people from the group B (and vice versa), with obsessive determination in a feud that never ends, even coming to the point of suicide terrorism, by which one is glad to blow himself up only to cause the death of more enemies, including people who are not engaged in any hostile activity.

What do you think will happen to the suicide bomber? If he is lucky, he will find himself in the womb of some woman of the opposite faction, and after birth he will be trained to hate and kill the people that were previously his kin, but are now his enemies. But still, that would be a great fortune, because he does not really deserve a second opportunity for a human life after wasting it with a hateful immolation of one's own body to bring about the death of other innocent and unaware people, who had no chance to defend themselves. Usually such a cowardly and cruel action drags the individual down into the lower realms of ghosts or inferior animals, where he cannot do too much damage any more.

The purpose of this cycle of deaths and births is to help the individual to understand the futility of the identification with the material body and its affiliations and designations. Foolish people entertain the strange belief that at the time of death some "savior" will come to reward them of their political or institutional loyalty, and modify their consciousness from the outside, or even take them to "the spiritual world" without any need of modifying their consciousness.

Therefore during their lifetime they do not bother to make sufficient efforts to improve their own realization and consciousness, becoming lazy and complacent about their position they call in "good standing" or "among the saved" because they have made some public statement of allegiance to the particular sect to which they belong, and they have managed to avoid getting into some fight with a priest. Reality is quite different. If we have not developed a higher level of consciousness during our allotted time in this body, we will simply have to take another birth, and another, and another, until we qualify for liberation.

At death, usually the *jivatman* has a window of time in which s/he can gather his/her concentration and direct it towards the proper destination to be attained. The maximum extent of this period is 40 days, after which the *jivatman* that has not been able to cut free from the previous material identifications and attachments remains as a ghost between the gross and the subtle dimension. In ancient times, several civilizations had developed rituals to help the recently deceased find their way towards a better incarnation: the most famous are the *Bardo Thodol* (also called the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*) and the *Egyptian Book of the Dead*, that was often inscribed in the frescoes within the tombs of pharaohs and very important or wealthy people. In the Vedic field we have the *Garuda purana*, that was traditionally

recited for this purpose. However, such practice is meant to be supported by a lifetime of proper meditation and awareness development.

In the previous verse, Krishna clearly stated that one who remembers him at the time of death, will attain him. However, we need to properly understand how to remember Krishna. Arjuna himself asks this important question directly to Krishna, and Krishna answers in the core chapters of *Bhagavad gita*.

यं यं वापि स्मरन्भावं त्यजत्यन्ते कलेवरम् । तं तमेवैति कौन्तेय सदा तद्भावभावितः ॥ ८-६ ॥

yam yam vāpi smaranbhāvaṁ tyajatyante kalevaram | taṁ tamevaiti kaunteya sadā tadbhāvabhāvitaḥ || 8-6 ||

yam yam: whatever; *va*: or; *api*: also; *smaran*: remembering; *bhavam*: feeling/ situation/ nature; *tyajati*: leaves; *ante*: at the end; *kalevaram*: of the body; *taṁ taṁ*: that same; *eva*: certainly; *iti*: thus; *kaunteya*: o son of Kunti; *sada*: always; *tad*: that; *bhava*: nature/ sentiment; *bhavitah*: immersed/ absorbed.

"O son of Kunti (Arjuna), whatever state of existence/ nature one remembers at the time of leaving the body, s/he attains (precisely) that state of being/ condition, (because) of always contemplating that existence."

A true *yogi* knows first of all that s/he is not the material body, which is simply a vehicle or a dress to be used temporarily. This is the first step in spiritual progress and the ABC of Vedic knowledge, without which there can be no advancement or further realization possible.

Krishna already explained this point extensively in the second chapter of *Bhagavad gita*, illustrating the mechanism of reincarnation as a perfectly natural and scientific fact that is caused by the habits and tendencies of each living entity. When the body is no more suitable for our work, we simply leave it and take a new one: "Just like a man abandons clothes that have become torn or worn out and acquires other and new clothes, in the same way one leaves the damaged body and accepts another new body" (2.22).

At each moment in the course of our lifetime, we shed old and damaged cells and we add new fresh cells to our bodies, and when old age or disease make this process too slow or difficult, we drop the entire gross body and we move on to find the most suitable circumstances to develop a new one. Although these passages are perfectly natural, they involve a certain amount of suffering and anxiety because of the perception of non-existence, loss of consciousness and pain, that are contrary to our fundamental need of permanence, knowledge and happiness - the three basic qualities of spiritual reality.

The method of *yoga* is meant for the emancipation from this suffering and ultimately for the attainment of the supreme happiness, that leads to permanent liberation from the cycle of births and deaths. This is possible through the control of one's own mind and the constant meditation on Transcendence, because the deepest happiness of the Atman will automatically detach us from the inferior material pleasures, attachments and identifications even while still living in this material body, as confirmed in the second chapter: "The embodied soul may keep the sense objects at a distance and reject them, but he can give up the taste (for such objects) when he sees/ finds the Supreme/ something that has a higher/ better taste." (2.59)

Chapter 5 also discussed this topic in the following verses:

"Those who, in this very body, have vanquished rebirth, have a mind that is established in equanimity. This equal vision is certainly pure/ free from all defects, because the same (pure) Brahman is (in all that exists). Thus they are (firmly) established in Brahman." (5.19)

"One who here (in this life/body), before dying, is capable of withstanding the onslaughts of lust and anger, is a *yogi* and a happy human being." (5.23)

"One who is happy within (the self), who finds pleasure within (the self), who finds enlightenment/ the light within (the self) is a *yogi* who attains the Brahma nirvana and the existence/ realization of Brahman." (5.25)

"The (wise) seers (of Reality) attain the Brahma nirvana (because) have been purified from (all) sins/ faults and have cut off (all) doubts (dualistic illusions), engaging themselves in (working for) the benefit of all living beings." (5.25)

"The saintly persons who are completely free from lust and anger and have their consciousness steadily fixed (in Brahman), and who have realized the Self: (for them) there is Brahma nirvana very soon/ in whatever way." (5.26)

However, death is not always an easy passage, and those who are unable to keep their mind fixed on the Supreme Transcendental Reality will have to incarnate again, in the form that is closest to the level of consciousness they had during their life. This will be determined by the positive or negative attachments that we have cultivated in this lifetime, making them too strong to be left behind peacefully.

The *Bhagavata Purana* (canto 5, chapter 8) tells the instructive story of King Bharata, who renounced everything to remain alone in the forest and engage in austerity and meditation to prepare himself for death, but developed a strong attachment for a young deer that had befriended him. One night, during a terrible storm, the deer became scared and ran away from the *ashrama*, so Bharata left his spiritual meditation to go after him, but while engaged in this rescue mission, Bharata himself fell down a slope and died, thinking about his beloved pet animal. Naturally he took a new birth as a deer, but as his previous spiritual realizations were not lost, he became conscious of what had happened and maintained his spiritual consciousness while living in that body.

तस्मात्सर्वेषु कालेषु मामनुस्मर युध्य च । मय्यर्पितमनोबुद्धिमिवैष्यस्यसंशयः ॥ ८-७ ॥

tasmat sarvesu kāleṣu māmanusmara yudhya ca | mayyarpitamano buddhimāmevaiṣyasyasamśayaḥ || 8-7 ||

tasmat: therefore; *sarvesu*: in all; *kalesu*: moments of time; *mam*: me; *anusmara*: remembering constantly; *yudhya*: (you should) fight/ in the battle; *ca*: and/ at the same time; *mayi*: to me; *arpita*: offering; *manah*: with the mind; *buddhih*: with the intelligence; *mam*: me; *eva*: certainly; *esyasi*: will come; *asamsayah*: without doubt.

"Therefore at all times (you should) always remember me, even while fighting (this battle), dedicating to me your mind and your intelligence: in this way you will certainly come to me."

To always remember Krishna and to engage at the same time in a battle in an effective way, one has to be a *mahatma*, a great soul, whose consciousness has expanded at least to the sattvic level.

It is important to understand what Krishna means by "always remember me". He is not suggesting that we should do so exclusively by reciting his adventures, contemplating the meaning of his many spiritual names, or meditating about offering some elaborate worship to the Deity through the mind while we are engaged in our other duties, because that would distract us from our practical service.

When a few chapters later in the *Mahabharata*, Krishna and Arjuna will be actually engaged in the battle, there will be no more talking about Krishna's transcendental glories and forms, and especially not even one word will be said about Krishna's adventures in Vrindavana and his loving relationships with the *gopis* and the other people there. The subject of Krishna's discussion will be how to defeat Drona and Karna, and how to get through the battle to secure the protection of the kingdom, so that Arjuna will be able to perform his duty in the best possible way. Of course, Arjuna will continue to appreciate Krishna's presence and friendship *rasa*, but his attention will be mainly focused on his task. The *bhakti* literature offers the example of a woman who is secretly in love: she makes a great effort to perform her regular duties with the utmost care and attention, so that nobody will notice that she is thinking about her lover. We could modify the example into the attitude of a loving wife and mother, who makes equally great efforts to cook and take care of the house and provisions because she wants to please her husband and children with excellent food, a beautiful clean living environment and an inspiring atmosphere. She does not need to picture her family members vividly in her mind all the time, but there is certainly a purpose to her activities that pervades her consciousness even when she is totally focused on some difficult recipe or some other practical work.

The expression *arpita manah buddhih*, "offering one's mind and intelligence", refers precisely to this act of good will, by which we engage willingly and lovingly in the service to the Supreme by performing our duties to the best of our ability. Then, when the mind and the intelligence have fully absorbed the higher meaning of our activities, the senses and the bodily organs engaged in our work will naturally follow with a good performance. This powerful concentration in active devotional service has two aspects: *sankalpa* or motivation, and *vyavasa* as concentration. It is easy to see that the proper motivation and concentration always bring huge improvement to any kind of work, and certainly this devotion to a higher purpose in performing practical activities does not detract anything from the good result of the job - in fact, it is a powerful factor for success and excellence in one's work.

Controlling one's mind by channeling one's thinking, feeling and willing into the proper direction is the key to this superior level of awareness and effectiveness. Already in 2.41, Krishna had clearly stated that one should strive to concentrate the mind and focus the attention properly in order to achieve the goal, and in 6.35 he has recommended to train the mind with practice and detachment in order to improve its effectiveness.

अभ्यासयोगयुक्तेन चेतसा नान्यगामिना । परमं पुरुषं दिव्यं याति पार्थानुचिन्तयन् ॥ ८-८ ॥

abhyāsayogayuktena cetasā nānyagāminā । paramaṁ puruṣaṁ divyaṁ yāti pārthānucintayan ॥ 8-8 ॥

abhyasa: by practice; *yoga*: by engagement; *yuktena*: by remaining connected; *cetasa*: in the consciousness; *na*: not; *anya*: other; *gamina*: going; *paramam*: supreme; *purusam*: person; *divyam*: divine/ resplendent; *yati*: goes; *partha*: o son of Pritha (Arjuna); *anucintayan*: always keeping in mind/ through the proper process of meditation.

"O son of Pritha (Arjuna), by engaging in the practice of yoga with a focused consciousness (that does not deviate from the object of meditation), one attains that supreme Being on whom s/he has been meditating."

The three main factors of success are mentioned as *abhyasa* (practice), *tyaga* (detachment from other pursuits) and *jnana* (knowledge). These are required for any enterprise to achieve any success, and the method of *yoga* and Self realization also include them as priorities.

Practice (*abhyasa*) requires patience (*dhairya*), enthusiasm (*utsaha*) and determination (*niscaya*) to continue over a long period of time with the necessary strength and effectiveness. No success can be attained without sufficient effort over a period of time.

Krishna highlights the importance of *abhyasa* in verses 6.35 (*abhyasena vairagyena*, by practice and detachment it will be possible to control the mind even if it is very restless) and 12.9 (*abhyasa yogena mam icchaptum*, by practice and effort you will obtain your desired result). Good practice goes never lost even from one lifetime to the other: in verse 6.44 Krishna clearly says that thanks to one's previous practice it is easy to resume *yoga* in a next lifetime. The same concept is expressed in *Bhagavata Purana*, for example in verses 3.32.30 (*yogabhyasena nityasah samahita atma nihsangah*) and 11.20.18 (*abhyasanena atmano yogi dharayed acalam manah*).

A mind that is trained in the practice of concentration and consciousness should not be allowed to wander too much. We know that the mind is restless (6.34, 35), but every time that it runs into a wrong direction, we must bring it back, with patience (*dhairya*) and determination (*niscaya*), and knowledge (*jnana*) - by remaining conscious of the reason why we are engaging in the practice of controlling our own mind. This is indicated by the expression *na anya gamine*, "not going astray".

Several other verses in *Bhagavad gita* use the exact same definition in connection to the practice of meditation: 8.12 (*ananya cetah*, "without thinking about others things"), 8.22 (*bhaktya ananyaya*, "by exclusive devotion"), 9.13 (*ananya manaso*, "by focusing the mind intensely"), 9.22 (*ananyas cintayanto mam*, "thinking about me only"), 9.30 (*bhajate mam ananya bhak*, "serving me exclusively"), 11.54 (*bhaktya tv ananyaya*, "with exclusive devotion"), 13.11 (*mayi ca ananya yogena bhakti*, "by a devotional relationship that is exclusively to me").

The concept of *ista deva* is central to the method of *bhakti yoga*. The devotee naturally feels a spontaneous attraction towards one particular form or Personality of Godhead, and s/he is encouraged to worship that specific form and meditate on it in a concentrated way, without dispersing the attention on too many forms: this is called *ananya bhakti*, "exclusive devotion", or also *aikantika bhakti* to such divine Personalities. Generally in the *bhakti yoga* method the *guru* gives one specific *mantra* that is directly connected to the *ista deva* of the devotee; the devotee should then practice that particular *mantra* with the greatest concentration and determination, taking the vow to repeat the *mantra* as *japa* practice for a minimum number of times daily or over a fixed period of time.

There is no need to chant the *japa mantras* of many different Personalities of Godhead simultaneously, because that would tend to dilute the concentration: this exclusive concentration in meditation is called *ananya bhakti*, and gives good results in a very short time. However, we need to clarify a common misconception, because of which many people feel they are expected to disrespect and neglect the other Personalities of Godhead in order to show their exclusive devotion to the *ista deva* they have chosen. This is not a good idea, and should be corrected as quickly as possible to avoid serious damage to one's spiritual progress. Whether one has chosen a particular *ista deva* (for whatever reason) or is still trying to figure out which Personality of Godhead s/he should worship as *ista deva*, the best course of action consists in offering respect to all the Personalities of Godhead when the occasion arises - for example on the occasion of their festivals (such as Durga puja, Ganesh puja, etc) and to study carefully all the parts of the scriptures, including those passages that glorify a Personality of Godhead that is not our specific *ista devata*.

For example, the *Bhagavata Purana* is dedicated mostly to the glories of Krishna, but there are many passages glorifying the various *avatars* of Vishnu, as well as Shiva, etc. At the very least, a devotee of Krishna should carefully and respectfully read also those passages and sincerely offer homage and worship. This thread of thought leads us to another important word in this verse: *anucintayan*, where *anu* means "according to the genuine method", "by following the proper instructions". Inventing new methods of meditation and worship is always a very risky business, because we cannot be sure of the results of such practice. It is much better to abide by the principles established by the great realized souls and by the genuine scriptures, that must be studied very attentively and sincerely before we attempt to present some new perspective on spiritual life.

In the famous *Bhakti rasamrita sindhu*, compiled by Rupa Gosvami, we find this illuminating verse: *sruti smriti puranadi pancaratra vidhim vina aikantiki harer bhaktir utpatayaiva kalpate* (1.2.101), "So-called exclusive *bhakti* to Hari (Vishnu/ Krishna) that is not in accordance to the *sruti* and the *smriti*, including the *Puranas* and all the other Vedic scriptures, and does not respect the rules of the *Pancaratra*, is nothing more than a fantasy creating unnecessary problems to society".

कविं पुराणमनुशासितारं अणोरणीयंसमनुस्मरेद्यः ।
 kavim purāṇamanuśāsītārāṁ aṅoraṇīyaṁsamanusmaredyaḥ ।
 सर्वस्य धातारमचिन्त्यरूपं आदित्यवर्णं तमसः परस्तात् ॥ ८-९ ॥
 sarvasya dhātāramacintyarūpaṁ ādityavarṇaṁ tamasaḥ parastāt ॥ 8-9 ॥

kavim: the poet/ the scholar; *puranam*: ancient; *anusasitaram*: he who controls everything; *anoh*: than the atom; *aniyamsam*: smaller; *anusmaret*: one should remember/ meditate on; *yah*: s/he (the devotee); *sarvasya*: of all; *dhataram*: the one who sustains; *acintya*: inconceivable; *rupam*: form; *aditya*: the sun; *varnam*: the color; *tamasah*: the darkness; *parastat*: that transcends/ overcomes.

"One should remember (the Lord) as the omniscient, the primeval, who controls everything, so small that is contained inside the atom. He maintains everyone/ everything, and his form is inconceivable, as bright as the sun, transcendental to darkness (of ignorance)."

The word *kavi* means "all-knowing", or "very expert", and has passed into ordinary use to describe a poet or an Ayurvedic doctor, indicating that such positions should be occupied only by extremely knowledgeable persons. Of course the sum total of all consciousness must be the repository of all scholarly knowledge and be omniscient by definition, so the Supreme Personality of Godhead includes all the consciousness of Brahman and Paramatma and all beings. Meditation on the Personality of Godhead should always be respectful and loving, aware of his supreme position. This means that one should not meditate on those fake and so-called artistic images of Krishna and other divine Personalities that show imaginative negative qualities or limitations or defects - such as eyeglasses for a weak eyesight, or similar nonsense. Even depictions of actual *lila* episodes where the Lord shows perplexity or sorrow or similar difficult situations - for example in his early childhood - should be considered only within the context of the consciousness of the unlimited glories of Bhagavan, and this means that the discussion of such episode or the contemplation of the connected images should be done only among very advanced devotees, who will not be confused by the apparent limitations shown by the Lord, and therefore will not be led to offensive ideas or behaviors.

The word *purana* means "ancient", "primeval", and reminds us that the Supreme Personality of Godhead is not a mere historical personality, a human being that started to exist at a particular time in a particular place, and is limited by those circumstances. The consciousness and knowledge of the Supreme Lord extend back into the beginning of time and beyond it, into the eternal unlimited non-manifested transcendental existence. The word *anusasitaram* is also very important, because it expresses the unlimited power of the supreme conscious intelligence that controls and sustains (*dhataram*) everything in the universe. Bhagavan is never poor or suffering, or lacking in anything. The supreme consciousness has a precise plan, and directs the entire play with great intelligence and artistry, as the best *kavi* (poet) would do.

The inconceivable form of the Lord is so subtle (*aniya*) that it even penetrates the atoms and at the same time sustains the entire cosmic manifestation, and pervades the heart of the soul of a microscopic unicellular organism and controls the immense body of a whale or elephant. The Lord is certainly not an ordinary cowherd boy who works at keeping the cows for his father or plays with the village girls: when Krishna manifests these activities, we should never take them cheaply, but we should always keep in mind these glories of Krishna described in the three central chapters of *Bhagavad gita*, universally considered the expression of the purest *bhakti*.

The word *dhata* means "maintainer", just like *dhara* means "holder" and *dharma* means "that by which (the world) is supported". Another connected word is *vidhata*, referring to the concept of God as destiny/ providence.

The poetic expression *aditya varnam tamasah parastat* offers a wonderful example for the existence of God: the sun is always gloriously existing beyond the darkness of the night, and similarly ignorance is nothing but absence of knowledge. Actually darkness and ignorance do not have an existence of their own - they are just due to our lack of proper perception. *Aditya varna* is literally "the color of the sun", and has nothing to do with ordinary limited perception and the darkness of the night, when the sun remains non-visible.

Darkness (*tamasah*) is nothing but the inability to see the sun, that continues to exist in the sky independently from the movements of the earth and the relative position of the observers on the earth, who see the sun setting and disappearing into the night. Even the clouds that sometimes appear to cover the sun owe their very existence to the radiance of the sun, that evaporates water from the earth. Similarly, this world is created and functions on the power of Brahman, and although temporary in nature, affords the embodied beings the enlivening experience of spiritual evolution, that can be compared to the blessing of rain and the nourishment created by rains in the form of food grains.

The word *varna* means "color" and applies to the transcendental radiance of the Lord. Some confused people, who are still victims of the damages of the Aryan race theory, remain unable to explain why great Aryas such as Krishna and Arjuna are described in *Mahabharata* as black in complexion, because they would like to think that the best specimen of the Aryan race are blond, white complexioned and with blue eyes like the German nazis said. So they imaginatively state that Krishna's and Vishnu's black complexion, described in many scriptures besides *Mahabharata*, "symbolizes the non-manifested". Too bad that everybody on the battlefield was perfectly able to see Krishna in his black-complexioned body. Others - usually Indians - "solve the problem" by painting Krishna and Arjuna, and Vishnu, too, with a white complexion and distribute such images as genuine for commercial and devotional purposes.

The fact is that such people have a materialistic mind, focused on material bodily identification, and as long as they remain attached to such ignorance, they will never be able to understand the wonderful and radiant form of the Lord, that is black in complexion but resplendent of light like the sun. The example of the sun is also meant to remind us that the mere presence of the Lord is source of immense purification. There is another extremely famous verse from *Garuda purana*, regularly used in all the daily rituals of purification and sacrifice, that re-cites: *om apavitrah pavitro va sarvavasthan gato 'pi va yah smaret pundarikaksam sa bahyabhyantarah sucih*, "Anyone who remembers the lotus-eyed Lord (Vishnu) is immediately and completely purified, both internally and externally, irrespectively of the conditions he has gone through."

प्रयाणकाले मनसाऽचलेन भक्त्या युक्तो योगबलेन चैव ।

prayāṅakāle manasā'calena bhaktyā yukto yogabalena caiva ।

भ्रुवोर्मध्ये प्राणमावेश्य सम्यक् स तं परं पुरुषमुपैति दिव्यम् ॥ ८-१० ॥

bhruvormadhye prāṅamāveśya samyak sa taṁ paraṁ puruṣamupaiti divyam ॥ 8-10 ॥

prayana: of the end/ dissolution (of the body); *kale*: at the time of; *manasa*: with the mind; *acalena*: that is not distracted by moving in different directions; *bhaktya*: with devotion; *yuktah*: united/ connected; *yoga-balena*: by the intense power of union/ *yoga*; *ca*: and; *iva*: certainly; *bhruvoh*: of the eyebrows; *madhye*: in the middle; *pranam*: the *prana*; *avesya*: keeping; *samyak*: fully/ completely controlled; *sah*: s/he; *tam*: that; *param*: supreme; *purusam*: person; *upaiti*: attains; *divyam*: divine.

"One who, at the time of death, (remembers the Lord) without any distraction of the mind, with devotion and powerfully connected through *yoga*, and perfectly keeping the *prana* between one's eyebrows, attains that divine/ radiant supreme Person."

It is interesting to note that the words *deva*, *divya*, etc, derive from the root *div*, that means "resplendent", and also gave origin to the word *diva*, "day", as the time when there is sunlight, and *dyauh*, "space", or "sky", from where the light comes. From this linguistic family we have the English words *divinity*, *deity*, *divine*, *divination*, *day*, the Latin word *deus* and *divinus*, and probably also the Greek word *Zeus*.

The attribute *divya*, "divine" is clearly referred here to the *tam param purusham*, "that supreme Person", indicating the Supreme Personality of Godhead. Krishna was previously talking of the Supreme Lord as himself, and now he is making a subtle distinction, to highlight the need to maintain the meditation on the awareness of the immense power and majesty (*aisvarya*) of the Lord, and prevent all possibility of confusion with ordinary personalities in this world.

Those who do not like the *aisvarya* aspect of the Lord and prefer to meditate on his *madhurya* aspect, as in the most intimate *rasas* where Krishna is seen as a peer or even a subordinate to the devotee, should be extremely careful to avoid the disastrous danger of *prakrita sahayism* - that is the tendency to see Krishna cheaply and simply imitate *rasas* instead of actually developing a solid spiritual consciousness. Such *prakrita sahayyas* can be recognized because they are lusty - not only and not necessarily about pursuing the pleasures of the flesh, but especially for recognition, followers, honors, fame, name, power, control of resources and people, or even just for the pleasure they derive from their contemplation of what they see as Krishna's activities in the most intimate *rasas* with his greatest devotees. Because these people have been confused by the superficial external labeling of "spiritual" to anything that supports or concerns their political allegiance to some materialistic religious organization, they fall into the trap of believing that the thrill and pleasure they feel while reading and discussing such intimate activities is "spiritual" or "transcendental".

They mistake the meaning of the power of the *hladini shakti* ("pleasure potency") as intended to give pleasure to the "devotee" rather than to Krishna, so they are unwittingly taking the position of the *asuras*, who are envious of God and constantly try to take his place as the enjoyer. Such delusion is deeply rooted in the ignorant identification with the gross material body, so it's very easy to recognize *prakrita sahayyas*: that is anyone "relishes the ecstasy of Krishna's pastimes" but still has a material vision of bodily identification (regarding him/herself and/or others) and remains attached to labels, affiliations and allegiances to anything else that is not transcendental consciousness - in other words, the *ahankara* and *mamatva* that Krishna ordered us to drop already at the very beginning of his instructions.

The *shastras* and the genuine *acharyas* recommend that one should carefully avoid associating with *prakrita sahayyas* and hearing their discussions about Krishna, because it is easy to remain contaminated by their materialistic mentality, especially for neophytes who have not had sufficient access to the preliminary teachings of the *shastra*. It is not by mistake or chance that Krishna's most intimate activities have been "sealed" within the heart of the *Puranas*, surrounded by the effective protection of many chapters of solid spiritual instructions

about *sadhana* and the science of the glories of God as they are explained in *Bhagavad gita*. Therefore responsible devotees are always very careful about talking about intimate activities and subjects in the presence of non-qualified persons. Even the teachings of the *Gita*, that are extremely safe in this regard, should not be presented to the wrong people (18.67) with the wrong motivations. They should always be accompanied by sufficient explanations so that uninterested or offensive people will automatically be kept at a distance. We should also make an effort not to neglect the reference to entering (*avesya*) into the *prana* and controlling the vital airs by concentrating them between the eyebrows, in the *ajna chakra*, because it offers another rail of protection against the fall into the abyss of *prakrita sahajyism*. It is true that the practice of *astanga yoga* as a mere physical and mental exercise, without a real connection to its original purpose - Self realization - is just insufficient and may even become an obstacle on the true path of perfection, but as with everything, we have the responsibility to make it work properly and utilize it in the way it was always meant to. It is not that the *prana* stops flowing and acting in the body of a pure *bhakta*, or that his/her mind and attention become independent from the *prana*. The science of *yoga* is held in the greatest esteem by Krishna, who keeps using the terms *yoga* and *yogi* to refer to the bona fide devotee and spiritualist. It is true that the supreme *bhakti* is free from attachment to all personal pursuits of scholarship and social position (*anyabhilasita sunyam jnana-karmadya anavritam anukulyena krisnanusilanam bhaktir uttama*, from *Bhakti rasamrita sindhu*, 1.1.11), but in our enthusiasm to embrace "the most exclusive and supreme method" we should not choose ignorance, complacency and arrogance as better substitutes of the knowledge, austerity and detachment offered by *jnana*, *karma* and *yoga*, that still remain very valuable instruments in devotional service.

यदक्षरं वेदविदो वदन्ति विशन्ति यद्यतयो वीतरागाः ।

yadakṣaram vedavidō vadanti viśanti yadyatayo vītarāgāḥ ।

यदिच्छन्तो ब्रह्मचर्यं चरन्ति तत्ते पदं संग्रहेण प्रवक्ष्ये ॥ ८-११ ॥

yadicchanto brahmacaryam caranti tatte padam saṅgrahena pravakṣye ॥ 8-11 ॥

yad: that; *akṣaram*: imperishable (Brahman/ the syllable Om/ Transcendence/ the spiritual world); *veda-vidah*: those who know the *Vedas*; *vadanti*: they explain; *visanti*: enter; *yad*: that; *yatayah*: the *sannyasis*/ the *yogis*/ those who make effort on the spiritual path; *vita-ragah*: having abandoned all attachments and identifications; *yad*: that; *icchantaḥ*: they desire; *brahmacaryam*: the behavior of Brahman; *caranti*: move around; *tat*: that; *te*: them; *padam*: position/ destination/ stand; *sangraheṇa*: in summary; *pravakṣye*: I will tell.

"(Now) I will tell you in summary about that imperishable (goal/ destination) described by those who know the *Veda*. (That destination) is entered by the great sages/ *sannyasis* who have become fully detached (from material illusion), and who practice *brahmacharya* with the purpose of attaining that destination."

As we have already seen previously, the word *akṣaram* means "imperishable" and is applied to the Brahman or eternal transcendental principle of universal consciousness, expressed in this material manifestation with the primeval sound AUM or OM, called the *pranava omkara*. Why the *pranava omkara* ("the syllable *om* that is the energy of life") is the Brahman? Because it constitutes the subtle sound vibration of all energy.

Start a powerful electrical machinery or go near a heavy duty high tension electrical line wire, and hear the mechanical equivalent of the *pranava omkara*. The life in our body, too, has a bio-electrical nature, and all living organisms create a bio-magnetic field that is measurable through various devices, from the electro-encephalogram machine to the Kirlian camera, and so on.

All these mechanical devices record the presence of life in a body merely through the registration of its bio-magnetic field and currents, so we can safely say that even mainstream conventional science recognizes the connection between life and electricity. Besides the gross and goofy machines used by mainstream contemporary technology, there are natural devices in-built in our own body that are capable of detecting, controlling, manipulating and strengthening these bio-electrical/magnetic field and currents.

The nature of such physical devices is too subtle to be observed by the contemporary machineries, but it is explained clearly and precisely in the *yoga* literature, and it should be considered as the new frontier of science, where Vedic knowledge can help western mainstream academia to take a giant step into a deeper awareness of the universe.

Conventional scientists are baffled when examining the functions of the human brain, because they find that about 75% of the brain mass does not have any visible function. Through their lab experiments (some of which have been truly horrible and asuric) they have labeled about 15% of the areas of the brain in ordinary people, engaging them in different bodily and mental activities, but nobody among their subjects seemed to be able to use the rest of the cerebral mass. Of course such considerable amount of "unknown brain territory" is not without a purpose, and it seems to fit with the huge uncharted regions of so-called "paranormal activities", that conventional science tends to ridicule and dismiss blindly because it cannot explain them.

What if these two huge ignorance pools within the academic scientism territory were one and the same? Vedic literature clearly says so, and it would be wise for contemporary academics to show some true scientific spirit and investigate the matter without being tied up and blinded by biased attitudes and prejudice and by the fear of having to rebuild a different and more realistic picture of the universe than the one they have come to cherish. Already physicists have broken several walls of academic prejudice, at least in their own small circles, and in the process they have come to develop a great respect for Vedic knowledge regarding the structure of the universe. What about actually understanding the structure of the spirit and life itself? Is this science less important?

Those who know the *Vedas* (*veda-vidah*) directly enter (*visanti*) this subtle dimension of Brahman to experience it, and anyone else can do the same by following the proper process (*anucintayan*, 8.8, "according to the genuine method", "by following the proper instructions").

This is the greatest obstacle in the pursuance of the Vedic knowledge in mainstream conventional academia (of the "western" type): the students and the teachers do not give any importance to the basic requirement of "following the genuine method" as it is clearly, precisely and consistently presented in the Vedic texts themselves. It is not possible to understand the subtle science of Brahman without modifying one's personal attitude, life style and choices, because the wrong attitudes and habits will obscure the subtle perception that the Brahman scientist needs to utilize.

This body of requirements for the Brahman scientist is called *brahmacharya*, "the behavior of Brahman". Influenced by the abrahamic ideologies, many people consider *brahmacharya* to be the exact equivalent of "chastity" or "sexual abstinence" vows observed by some priests or monks/ nuns, but that would be misleading. Like the other *yama* and *niyama* requirements in the study and verification of the transcendental science, *brahmacharya* is much more than the superficial and mechanical control of the sense organs, that could even cause serious damage when it is done in the wrong way, without the proper knowledge and techniques. What people call sexual energy is the fundamental energy/ power that sustains the body, and it is "sexual" only when it expresses itself through the lowest *chakras* in the body, i.e. the *muladhara* and *svadhithana*, specifically positioned around the genital area. When this same energy, technically called *kundalini* in the *yoga* texts, is raised, channeled and sublimated through the proper *yoga* techniques, it expresses itself in very different forms: in the third *chakra* (from the bottom) called *manipura*. This power then emanates from the solar plexus, at the mouth of the stomach, and is expressed as will power, determination, courage in battle, enterprising spirit, control over one's mind and body and environment, and so on. In the fourth *chakra*, called *anahata*, located in the heart region, it is expressed as unconditional love, compassion, self-sacrifice, empathy, sensitivity etc. In the fifth *chakra*, called *visuddha* and located in the throat, the same energy becomes manifest as the power of sound, another immense and largely uncharted territory that conventional science should explore, especially in connection with bio-electricity and bio-magnetism, to understand how the ancient Vedic *mantras* applied by qualified persons were able to bring about such dramatic effects on the mental and material environment. In the sixth *chakra*, called *ajna* and located in the forehead, in the area between the two eyebrows, it is expressed as cognition, understanding, vision, illumination, intuition and so on. In the seventh *chakra*, called *sahasrara* and located at the top of the head or the crown, it produces subtle spiritual manifestations of power that are observed as *tejas* (radiance) as depicted in the aura of divine personalities.

The word *brahmacharya* literally means "behaving as Brahman" and points to the need of dropping all identifications and attachments with the gross material body. Obviously, this has a dramatic effect also on one's sexual behavior, because an individual that has overcome the gross material bodily identification leaves the platform where s/he sees bodies and evaluates them in terms of the sexual pleasure they could provide, and rises to the platform where s/he sees persons and evaluates them in terms of their level of consciousness, behavior, aspirations and ultimately transcendental nature. That's a big change of perspective, and without effecting it, nobody will be able to enter Brahman (*aksaram visanti*), which is the purpose of Vedic knowledge. Of course this method requires a serious effort (*yatahay, yatanti*, etc) and the renunciation to attachments and identifications (*vita ragah*), but it works in such a way that the armchair philosophers and academic professors will never be able to even imagine.

सर्वद्वाराणि संयम्य मनो हृदि निरुध्य च । मूर्ध्न्याधायात्मनः प्राणमास्थितो योगधारणाम् ॥ ८-१२ ॥

sarvadvārāṇi saṁyamya mano hṛdi nirudhya ca | mūrdhnyādhāyatmanah prāṇamāsthito yogadhāraṇām || 8-12 ||

sarva: all; *dvarani*: the doors; *samyamya*: controlling; *manah*: the mind; *hridi*: in the heart; *nirudhya*: fixing; *ca*: and; *murdhni*: in the head; *adhaya*: carrying; *atmanah*: the Atman; *pranam*: the *prana*; *asthitah*: firmly established; *yoga-dharanam*: the *dharana* of *yoga*.

"Controlling all the doors (of the body), keeping the mind within the heart and fixing the *prana* (carrying) the self to the top of the head, one is situated in the *yoga* meditation."

In this verse, Krishna continues to give instructions on how to prepare oneself for the time of death, so that the mind will be properly controlled and able to focus on the Transcendental Reality. The expression *sarva dvarani samyamya* indicates the need to control the nine gates of the body, that correspond to the sense organs - two ears, two eyes, two nostrils, one mouth, one genital opening and one anus. Through these "doors of perception", the mind gathers impressions and feelings, and creates the seeds for action, therefore it is imperative to control them through the appropriate practice of *yoga*. The *hatha* or *kriya yoga* teaches several techniques to build such power of control, including the *bandhas* or "blockages" that are meant to show the difference of sensations between an opened "door" and a closed one. However, controlling something means we are able to stop the function or apply the function precisely in the way we intend to. It does not necessarily mean keeping the function blocked or eliminating the function. In *bhakti yoga*, the method of controlling the senses is performed by the deliberate choice of following the *yama* and *niyama* rules and regulations as per instructions of the *guru*, and by the active engagement in devotional service through its 64 specific practices, from *guru pada asraya* (accepting a teacher and guide), *diksha* (initiation), *guru seva* (service to the *guru*), *sat dharma siksa* (learning about *dharma* and transcendence), *precha* (asking questions), *sadhu sanga* (keeping company of the *sadhus*), *bhoga tyaga* (accepting what is favorable to the process and rejecting what is unfavorable), *tirtha vasa* (residing in a holy place), *yavat nirvaha pratigraha* (accepting and consuming only what is basically required), *upavasa* (fasting and observing vows), *dhatri asvattha go vipra vaisnava pujana* (offering respect to the Mother or *amalaki* and banyan trees, the cows, the *brahmanas* and the *vaishnavas*), *aparadha adi dure visarjana* (carefully avoiding to commit any offense), *asat sanga tyaga* (abandoning the company of bad people), *bahu sisya griha grantha kala-abhyasa vyakhyana visarjana* (avoiding to accept many students, construct large and expensive temples or *ashramas*, get tied by academic scholarship and/ or study selectively only what seems convenient), *samatva* (being balanced in joys and sorrows, or gains and loss, and being straightforward in one's dealings), *soka vasa* (controlling the tendency to worry and complain), *deva sastra ninda visarjana* (abstaining from disrespect towards other Personalities of Godhead and genuine *shastras*), *visnu vaisnava ninda visarjana* (abstaining from disrespect towards Vishnu and genuine devotees of Vishnu), *gramya katha visarjana* (avoiding superficial discussions or mundane stories), *ahimsa* (abstaining from causing anxiety or pain to any living entity, directly or indirectly), *sravana* (listening to discussions about God), *kirtana* (discussing about God), *smarana* (remembering God), *arcana* (engaging in worshipping God), *vandana* (offering one's homage to God), *pada sevana* (following God's instructions), *dasya* (considering oneself God's servant), *sakhya* (considering God as one's friend), *atma nivedana* (dedicating oneself completely to God), *agre nrtya* (dancing for the Deity), *gita* (singing), *vijnapti* (keeping one's mind open to change and new understanding), *dandavat nati* (offering prostrations), *abhyutthana* (standing up as a sign of respect), *anuvrajya* (following a sacred procession), *tirtha gati* (going to the places of pilgrimage), *parikrama* (walking around a sacred object in sign of respect), *stava patha* (reciting famous prayers composed by self-realized souls), *japa* (chanting a *mantra* softly or mentally), *sankirtana* (chanting or singing loudly in the company of others), *dhupa malya gandhadi mahaprasada bhojana* (consuming or enjoying the incense, garlands, perfumes etc and food that have been first offered to God),

aratrika mahotsava darsana (attending the *arati* ritual ceremonies and the religious festivals), *sri-murti darsana* (seeing the Deity), *nija priya dana* (offering God things that we like), *dhyana* (meditating or contemplating), *tadiya sevana* (serving those persons or things that are connected to God, such as the tulasi *plant* and its leaves, the devotees, Mathura-Vrindavana and the *Bhagavata Purana*), *krsna arthe akhila cesta* (trying to do everything as Krishna wants), *tat krpa avalokana* (seeking his mercy), *janma dina adi mahotsava* (observing the specific celebrations connected to the Lord), *saranagati* (complete surrender, that consists in praying for spontaneous attraction, offering glorification and desiring to improve in devotional service), *kartika adi vrata* (observing the religious vows such as Kartika vrata), *vaisnava laksana* (wearing the symbols of *vaishnavas*, ie. *tilaka* and *tulasi kanthi mala*) and so on.

The expression *mano hridi nirudhya*, "keeping the mind within the heart", means that one should concentrate on the Self. In the heart both the individual soul and the supreme soul reside, and the proper seat of the mind is the heart as well.

The expression *adhaya atmanah pranam*, "the *prana* carrying the self" refers to the *prana kosha*, the covering/ wrapping of the self that consists of vital energy. *Yoga* teaches that the individual self is covered by five layers of body - two of which are precisely the mind and the *prana*. These five *koshas* are:

1. *annamaya* (gross physical body made of *anna*, "food"),
2. *pranamaya* (etheric or energetic body made of life "airs"),
3. *manomaya* (astral or subtle body made of mind),
4. *jnanamaya* (identification or rationalization, made of cognitive substance or intelligence), and
5. *anandamaya* (spiritual magnetic field made of happiness, that can be distorted by the *ahankara*).

The expression *yoga dharana* specifically refers to the *anga* of *yoga* consisting in keeping one's attention powerfully focused on the object of one's meditation. After attaining this ability, *dharana* is further developed into *dhyana* or dynamic meditation, and finally in *samadhi*, constant consciousness of the object of meditation.

ओमित्येकाक्षरं ब्रह्म व्याहरन्मामनुस्मरन् । यः प्रयाति त्यजन्देहं स याति परमां गतिम् ॥ ८-१३ ॥

omityekākṣaram brahma vyāharanmāmanusmaran | yaḥ prayāti tyajandeham sa yāti paramām gatim | | 8-13 | |

om: *om*; *iti*: like this *eka*: one; *aksaram*: syllable/ imperishable; *brahma*: Brahman; *vyaharan*: vibrating; *mam*: me; *anusmaran*: remembering; *yah*: s/he; *prayati*: leaves/ departs; *tyajan*: leaving; *deham*: the body; *sah*: s/he; *yati*: attains; *paramam*: the supreme; *gatim*: destination.

"Vibrating the Om, this one transcendental syllable/ the syllable form of the One Brahman, and remembering me, s/he who departs leaving the body attains the supreme destination."

The expression *om brahma aksharam* indicates that the transcendental primordial vibration "AUM" is Brahman itself, as we have seen in the previous verses and commentaries.

Among the various quotes, the *Upanishads* clearly mention this meditation: "O Satyakama, this Brahman is Om... one who meditates on the *parama purusha* as the syllable Om is lifted to the world of Brahman" (*Prasna Upanishad*, 5.1-2, 5), "I will tell you of that goal described by all *Vedas*, the purpose of all austerities and *brahmacharya*: it is Om" (*Katha Upanishad*, 1.2.14-15). *Bhagavata Purana* also confirms it: *abhyasena manasa suddham trivrid brahma aksaram param*, "One should practice meditation on the pure and supreme syllable composed by three letters" (2.1.17).

The supreme destination is the liberated level of consciousness we call Brahman, Paramatma and Bhagavan: these three are aspects of the same *tattva*, as confirmed in *Bhagavata Purana* (1.211): *vadanti tat tattva-vidas tattvam yaj jnanam advayam, brahmeti paramatmeti bhagavan iti sabyate*, "Those who know Reality explain that it is One undivided Consciousness/ Knowledge, called Brahman, Paramatma and Bhagavan."

Attaining this level of consciousness can happen suddenly, in a strike of realization or illumination, defined as *sadyo mukti*, perfect instant liberation or *prakasa*. It can also happen through a gradual program for liberation called *krama mukti*, or *sadhana* - in *bhakti yoga* this is called *sadhana bhakti* or *vaidhi bhakti*.

The word *vyaharan*, "vibrating", does not necessarily imply a verbalization, as the *pranava omkara* is a subtle vibration that also exists at the level of the mind and the causal body. Some people believe that chanting the *pranava omkara* is an "impersonalist practice" that should be discarded, in favor of the exclusive chanting of the Hare Krishna *mantra* - *hare krsna, hare krsna, krsna krsna, hare hare, hare rama, hare rama, rama rama, hare hare*. However, we do not find any such instruction in *Bhagavad gita*, *Bhagavata Purana* or in the instructions of the *acharyas*, therefore we must warn the uninformed people against such mental speculations.

Krishna in *Bhagavad gita* very clearly gives the instruction about the immense value of the *omkara* consciousness, and there is no reason why a devotee of Krishna should disregard or even worse, ridicule or oppose such direct order of Krishna. Of course, this does not mean that one should or could not chant the Hare Krishna *mantra*, too. Some argue that the *pranava omkara* is already contained in the Hare Krishna *mantra*, and therefore it does not need to be chanted separately: in this case, too, there is also no need to disrespect, ridicule or oppose the separate chanting of the *pranava omkara* in those who practice it, or the genuine scriptures that present it. Such offensive behavior has no basis in Vedic tradition and is due to the abrahamic mentality that strives to destroy and insult whatever is perceived as "different" from whatever practice one is following.

The chanting of the *pranava omkara* and any other genuine *mantra* should be done as attentively as possible, and with an effort to understand its import and meaning - it should not be a mechanical repetition, although even a mechanical repetition will eventually lead to a breakthrough in penetrating its meaning (Patanjali's *Yoga sutras*, 1.27, 28, 29). As it is said, "no quantity, no quality"... The *japa* practice is helped by the conscious counting of the repetitions of the *mantras* to fulfill a *vrata*, or vow: this is very effective to better control the mind and support one's determination and habit-forming. The specific *mantra* and the number of repetitions, and the window of time to

perform them, are all variables that should be discussed from time to time with one's *guru* according to the individual situation and possibilities of the *sadhaka*. The *guru* is personally responsible for the progress of his/her disciple, and has the duty to adjust the *sadhana* to make it easy enough to maintain it happily for a long time (9.2 *susukham kartum avyayam*), and difficult enough to stimulate a healthy effort for improvement.

This obviously mean that there can be no "one size fits all" *sadhana* method, especially in regard to the *mantra* and the number of repetitions during a specific period of time; believing and teaching that the same precise *sadhana* is equally good for everyone, and excluding the personal responsibility of the *guru* by replacing it with an impersonal loyalty and affiliation to an organization, in which the *sadhaka* only has duties and no rights, is a very dangerous situation, to be accepted only in emergencies, where there is no other option, and in any case there will be negative consequences in the course of time.

Religious organizations quickly become impersonal and materialistic, more interested in their own survival, aggrandizement, propagation and power than in the original purpose for which they were started. Therefore the *bhakti* literature clearly recommends that one should not accept too many disciples or build great temples.

अनन्यचेताः सततं यो मां स्मरति नित्यशः । तस्याहं सुलभः पार्थ नित्ययुक्तस्य योगिनः ॥ ८-१४ ॥

ananyacetāḥ satataṁ yo māṁ smarati nityaśaḥ | tasyāhaṁ sulabhaḥ pārtha nityayuktasya yoginaḥ || 8-14 ||

ananya: nothing else; *cetaḥ*: thinking of; *satataṁ*: always/ constantly; *yah*: s/he; *mam*: me; *smarati*: remembers; *nityasah*: always/ regularly/ consistently; *tasya*: of him/ her; *aham*: I; *su-labhaḥ*: easy to attain; *partha*: o son of Pritha (Arjuna); *nitya*: always; *yuktasya*: who is engaged; *yoginah*: a devotee.

"O son of Pritha (Arjuna), for one who always constantly/ regularly remembers me without thinking of anything else, I am very easy to reach, because s/he is a yogi constantly connected (with me)."

The synonyms *satataṁ*, *nityasah*, *nitya* all indicate "always", "regularly", "consistently", and since the concept is repeated for three times in the same verse, we understand that it is extremely important - a *tri satya*, "three times true". Other synonyms are *sanatana*, *sasvata*, *dhruva*, and *satatana*.

Krishna has been repeating many times, also in previous verses and in subsequent verses, that spiritual realization, the attainment of the supreme abode and transcendental liberation, requires a lot of work. The spiritual path is never a hobby, to be enjoyed in leisure time as a trendy activity to impress one's circle of friends or to de-stress after a busy week fighting for one's career and indulging in excesses of sense gratification. It is not a part-time job that we can pick up and drop and keep on the back burner while we are giving priority to other concerns, identifications and attachments. Of course we do not need to give up our family, job and social duties, but we must direct our entire life purpose towards the development of a transcendental consciousness in all circumstances - including our family relationships, our professional choices, and life style.

In all our activities, in all our concerns, in all our choices, we must always remember the Transcendental Reality, that gives a real meaning to our life. It is not so difficult: *yat karosi yad asnasi yaj juhoshi dadasi yat, yat tapasyasi kaunteya tat kurushva mad-arpanam*, "O Arjuna, whatever you do, whatever you eat, whatever you sacrifice, whatever you give as gift, whatever difficulty you face voluntarily, you should perform these (actions) as an offering to me" (9.27)

And also, *tesam satata-yuktanam bhajatam priti-purvakam, dadami buddhi-yogam tam yena mam upayanti te*, "To those who are always connected to me by serving me with love and devotion, I give the *buddhi yoga*, the engagement in intelligence, by which they will come to me." (10.10).

Another beautiful description of this union with the Supreme is found in Adi Shankara's *Soundarya Lahari*, specifically in this verse: *japo jalpah, silpam sakalam api mudra vicarana, gati pradaksinya kramanam, asanady ahuti vidhih, pranamah samvesah sukham akhila amarpana drsa, saparyaparyayas tava bhavatu yan me vilasitam*, "Let every word of mine be a prayer to you, every movement of my hands be a ritual gesture to you, every step I take be a mark of respect for your image, every morsel of food I eat be a ritual sacrifice to you, every time I lay down be a prostration at your feet, and every act I perform be an act of worship to you." (27)

There is no need of changing one's legitimate position in regards to family, professional occupation, society, and so on: we can simply perform our regular activities with a higher consciousness, a spirit of divine service, and remember what is the purpose of life. On the other hand, those who take *sannyasa* artificially, dumping their responsibilities simply to live at the expenses of others, should not think that they are automatically on a transcendental position because they have "given up everything". That would be simply cheating themselves and the public in general. It is much better to continue to work sincerely to honor one's responsibilities, but with a *niskama* ("selfless") attitude.

Some may try to divide the path of *Bhagavad gita* in *karma misra bhakti*, *yoga misra bhakti*, *jnana misra bhakti* and *kevala bhakti* as if they were separate and independent methods chosen by different people, but this idea can be misleading, especially when presented to candidates who are still affected by materialistic desires for position, fame, name and distinction. The fact is that *karma* and *jnana* are the necessary preliminary steps that everyone must go through in order to ultimately attain the *kevala bhakti* platform. Irresponsibility and ignorance are not compatible with pure devotional service, and if they are not eliminated, they will inevitably cause the downfall of anyone, even of those who may pose as great devotees of Krishna.

Why should a great devotee disregard and disobey Krishna's direct instructions? Who can run, without bothering to practice simple walking? It would be foolish, for someone who cannot even walk, to say that he prefers to run, and he does not walk because that is "below his standards".

In these three central chapters about pure devotion, after saying that one should properly qualify through *abhyasa* (practice) in the preliminary steps of *karma* and *jnana* (verses 7.17 to 7.29), Krishna continues in verses 8.5 to 8.10 by speaking about the *yogi's* attitude towards birth and death, and about *moksha*, that is the position just before attaining perfection - a level that can be attained through proper *karma* and *jnana*. From verse 8.11 to 8.28, Krishna explains how the practice of *yoga*, the control of one's own mind, can take us to the

supreme destination, called *kevala bhakti*, the attainment of perfection. It is a natural and safe process, that is expected to begin after several lifetimes of relative selfishness (7.19) and is a rare attainment (7.3).

The expression *su-labha* means "easy to attain", but also refers to a good aspiration and to a beneficial goal to be attained: apart from the basic *dharma* principles, we should only embrace the rules that are favorable to genuine progress, without trying to demonstrate our greatness to the public by the observance of rigid rules and regulations, strict austerities and vows. We should also avoid the tendency to impress others with the "*prema bhava bhakti* ecstasy" displays and the boasting about our sublime position in the hierarchy of *rasas*, because Krishna is easy to attain but not cheap.

मामुपेत्य पुनर्जन्म दुःखालयमशास्वतम् । नाप्नुवन्ति महात्मानः संसिद्धिं परमां गताः ॥ ८-१५ ॥

māmupetya punarjanma duḥkhalayamaśāsvatam | nāpnuvanti mahatmanah samsiddhim paramam gataḥ || 8-15 ||

mam: me; *upetya*: having attained; *punah*: again; *janma*: birth; *dukkhalayam*: full of misery; *asasvatam*: impermanent; *na*: not; *apnuvanti*: return; *maha-atmanah*: the great souls; *samsiddhim*: completely perfect; *paramam*: supreme; *gatah*: arrived.

"Having attained me, they do not (have to) take another birth, that is the cause of sufferings and impermanence. Such great souls have (already) reached the highest level of perfection."

After summarizing the various phases of the progress on the spiritual realization journey, Krishna declares that the supreme destination is a permanent position, where all aspirations are fulfilled, and there is no more reason to take another birth. The material world, and the material body in which we are born, are here called *dukkhalayam asasvatam*, an impermanent position, seat of all sufferings. This characteristic applies to all the planets of the universe and to all states of embodied life, from the position of Brahma (the creator of the universe) down to the lowest level of life, as all such bodies contain in themselves the seeds for rebirth in the cycle of *samsara*, as we will see in the next verse (*a-brahma-bhuvanal lokah punar avartino 'rjuna*, 8.16).

The word *asasvatam* is the opposite of "eternal", that we have seen repeated three times in the previous verse, and highlights the difference between the material and the spiritual level.

आब्रह्मभुवनाल्लोकाः पुनरावर्तिनोऽर्जुन । मामुपेत्य तु कौन्तेय पुनर्जन्म न विद्यते ॥ ८-१६ ॥

ābrahmabhuvanāllokāḥ punarāvartino'rjuna | māmupetya tu kaunteya punarjanma na vidyate || 8-16 ||

abrahma: Brahmaloaka; *bhuvanat*: from the world; *lokah*: the planetary systems; *punah*: again; *avartinah*: those who return; *arjuna*: o Arjuna; *mam*: me; *upetya*: having attained; *tu*: but; *kaunteya*: o Arjuna (son of Kunti); *punah*: again; *janma*: birth; *na*: not; *vidyate*: experiences.

"O Arjuna, (all these) worlds, from the planet of Brahma (downwards) (are places from which) one returns, but for one who has attained me, o son of Kunti (Arjuna), there is no more rebirth."

The highest planetary system is called Brahmaloaka, and is the abode of Brahma, the first created being in the universe.

Sometimes there is a confusion between *brahma* (with the long final *a*) and *brahman*, that is also sometimes written as *brahma* (without long final *a*); the former refers to the Personality of Godhead that manifests the variety of the universe in the secondary creation, and the latter refers to the unchangeable eternal and omnipresent Brahman, the transcendental reality of the spirit. The first creation consists in the emanation of all the *brahmandas* ("eggs of Brahman") from the body of Mahavishnu while he is lying on the Karanodaka (*karana udaka*, "the ocean of causes"), like small bubbles of air from the pores of his skin. At the end of each breathing cycle of Mahavishnu, each and every universe is re-absorbed into the sleeping body of the Purusha Avatara, and at the beginning of the next cycle of breathing there is another emanation of *brahmandas*. Within each of these innumerable *brahmandas*, that are radiant like the sun and are therefore called Hiranya ("golden"), Vishnu manifests in a direct emanation known as Garbhodakasayi (*garbha udaka sayi*, "lying on the ocean of the embryo") and from his navel a lake is formed, with an immense sprouting lotus flower.

Inside the lotus bud grows the *garbha* ("embryo") of Hiranya Vishnu, also called Hridayagarbha or Brahma ("coming from Brahman"). This Brahma begins the secondary creation of the universe. Each of the innumerable universes emanated by Mahavishnu (or Karanodakasayi Vishnu) has its own Garbhodakasayi Vishnu and Brahma. In this stage, the various elements are manifested, then the planets, and the bodies of all living entities. All the species of all the living entities are created simultaneously, although some are manifested in a particular period of time and some disappear or appear again. The evolutionary theory expressed by Darwin does not contradict the simultaneous creation of all the species at the beginning of the cycle, because in fact the different species appear and disappear according to the particular environmental circumstances along history - it is indeed the "survival of the fittest".

Inside the *brahmanda*, the expanse of the universe is measured by the length of the stem of the lotus on which Brahma is born. Of course this is no ordinary lotus flower, just like the "umbilical lake" of Garbhodakasayi Vishnu has nothing to do with regular lakes - it is more like an immense amniotic bag made of subtle energy, the "higher waters" that are different from the ordinary waters we find in the earthly dimension.

It is an ocean of space, filled with matter so subtle that it cannot even be considered gas yet, but nevertheless there is matter everywhere, and energy everywhere - a sort of subtle blueprint of the universal manifestation. Sometimes this stem is measured as 16 times the length of Brahma's arm, which gives the total expanse length of Brahma's body, from the lowest *chakra* to the highest *chakra*. Usually *yoga* practitioners are told there are 7 *chakras* (*sahasrara*, *ajna*, *visuddha*, *anahata*, *manipura*, *svadhithana*, *muladhara*) along the human body, respectively at the top of the head, between the eyebrows, at the base of the throat, in the region of the heart, at the solar plexus, a little above the genitals and at the base of the spinal column.

These are considered the 7 earthly planetary systems, where it is calculated that 400,000 human species normally live, plus 8 million other animal and vegetal species.

However, there are also 7 *chakras* above the top of the head and 7 *chakras* below the base of the spinal column: their names are the same used to describe the various planetary systems of the universe. Above the head there are the *chakras* that constitute the worlds of the *upadevas* (including *yakshas*, *rakshasas*, *pisachas*, *nagas*, *uragas*, *kinnaras* or *pakshis*, *kimpurushas*, *vanaras*, *suparnas*, *charanas*, etc), the world of the *gandharvas* and *apsaras*, the world of the *siddhas* and *vidyadharas*, and the worlds called *maharloka* or *pitriloka* (with Dhruvaloka etc), *janaloka* (where the sons of Brahma like the Kumaras live), *tapoloka* (inhabited by mystic beings called Vaibhrajans) and *satyaloka* (the top of the lotus where Brahma himself resides). Below the root *chakra*, *atala* is located around the hips, *vitata* in the thighs, *sutata* in the knees, *talatala* in the calves, *rasatala* in the ankles, *mahatala* in the feet, *patala* at the soles of the feet. Other minor *chakras* are in the palms of the hands, at the elbows, at the clavicles, at the shoulders and at the ears; these should correspond to minor worlds.

This description in its entirety is called *tri-loka*, or the three divisions of planetary systems mentioned in many scriptures: the 3 groups of 7 *chakras* each.

Above Satyaloka we find the divine planets (*viraja*, *kailasa* and *vaikuntha*) that do not belong to the material universe and from which one does not return to the cycle of births and deaths, while from Satyaloka downwards we find the material planets, and the lower we go, the most dense and dark are the regions.

The base of the lotus flower is the bottom of the universe, originated from the navel of Garbhodakasayi Vishnu, who in turn is lying on Garbhodaka ocean that fills half the *brahmanda*. This ocean, too, is certainly not made of the water as we know it on this planet.

Similarly, the bodies of the living entities who reside on the various planetary systems can be very different, although they are all composed by a combination of the material elements that are found all over the universe - *ahankara* (sense of identity), *buddhi* (intelligence), *manas* (mind), *akasa* (space), *vayu* (air, and also *prana* energy), *agni* (fire, and also light and heat), *apah* (water, and also all liquid substances) and *bhumi* (earth, and all all solid substances). Also, some living entities are so powerful that their mind can modify and re-arrange the configuration of material atoms and energy vibration frequencies, so it is very difficult to understand or describe what their bodies are really made of. Because of the *tejas* (radiance) of the atomic rearrangement of their form - if this description can give the idea of the actual facts - these powerful beings are called *devas*, that literally means "luminous", "radiant".

These *devas* who live on the highest planetary systems have a duration of life that is measured by the movements or orbits of their abodes, up to the very long duration of the life of Brahma, then at the end of the cycle all those who have developed a sufficiently evolved level of awareness are directly promoted to the transcendental existence.

सहस्रयुगपर्यन्तमहर्षद् ब्रह्मणो विदुः । रात्रिं युगसहस्रान्तां तेऽहोरात्रविदो जनाः ॥ ८-१७ ॥

sahasrayugaparyantamaharyad brahmaṇo viduḥ | rātriṁ yugasahasrāntāṁ te'horātravido janāḥ || 8-17 ||

sahasra-yuga one thousand *yugas*; *pari-antam*: after the full completion; *ahah*: one day; *yat*: of Brahma (the creator of this universe); *brahmanah*: of Brahma; *viduh*: they know; *ratrim*: the night; *yuga-sahasra-antam*: at the end of 1000 *yugas*; *te*: they; *ahah-ratraḥ*: one full cycle composed by day and night; *vidah*: those who know; *janah*: the people.

"Those who have knowledge about the cycle of day and night know that one day of Brahma comprises 1,000 (cycles of) *yugas*, and the night also comprises 1,000 (cycles of) *yugas*."

According to the *Surya siddhanta* the calculation of the four ages is based on the "cycles of the Gods": Satya/ Krita yuga 4,800 years, Treta 3,600 years, Dvapara 2,400 years, Kali 1,200 years, for a total of 12,000 years.

The "cycle" mentioned in this verse as a "year of the *devas*" composed by 365 earth years, calculating that one of our years is just one day for the *devas*, and therefore it gives the duration of the *yugas* respectively in Satya 1,728,000 years (or 80 cycles of 21,600 years), Treta 1,296,000 years (60 cycles of 21,600 years), Dvapara 864,000 years (40 cycles of 21,600 years), Kali 432,000 years (20 cycles of 21,600 years). If, on the other hand, we consider a "cycle of the gods" as the passage of the Sun within the Great Zodiac (12 x 2,160), we find that the Kali yuga would be lasting 25,920 years, which is too similar to the astronomical cycle of the alignment of the solar system with the center of the galaxy.

One day of Brahma corresponds to 2000 cycles of the Great Zodiac, each 21,600 earth years, for a total of 4 billion 320 million years - a time window that, according to geologists, is very likely the actual age of Earth and the solar system. Why 2000 and not 1000? Because Brahma's day includes the same duration of day and night, as *Gita* clearly states. During Brahma's night (half of that time) the solar system remains unsuitable for the activities of life. The number 4,320 is also found in other important astronomical references, as for example the cycle of Jupiter (that represented Amon Ra the Father God for the Egyptians, Zeus the King of Gods for the Greek, and Brihaspati the Guru of the Gods for the Indians) that goes around the entire zodiac in 12 years: multiplied into the 360 degrees of the circle, we get 4,320.

As we know, the ancient peoples gave great symbolic importance to mathematics, and not always to the decimal system. Sumerians, for example, had a numeric system based on 60: still today there is some trace of this system in the calculation of time - where one hour is 60 minutes and one minute is 60 seconds - and in the "dozen" measurement. According to Plato, 6 is considered the "perfect number" because it is the sum of its divisors (1+2+3). It is easy to count to 12 on hand fingers, if we use the finger joints instead of the finger tips (as it is still done in India): each of the 4 main fingers has 3 joints, that can be counted by using the thumb of the same hand. By using the other hand and counting a finger every 12 cycle, we can easily count 12 x 5 = 60. By dividing the entire cycle of the precession of the equinoxes (25,920) into 6, we get 4,320.

Saturn is the Lord of Time both in the Greek (and Roman) symbolism and in India it is identified as Sani, the "Black Lord", an emanation of Shiva in his destructive aspect. In Egypt Saturn (Ptah) was known as "the Lord of the 30-year cycle", which multiplied for the 360 degrees of the circle, gives the duration of Heraclitus' Great Year: 10,800 years. Which, curiously, is also the number of the bricks in the Vedic altar, that multiplied into 40 (the number of the syllables in each verse) gives the total of the verses in *Rig Veda*: 432,000.

In other traditions, the "warriors of the end of the world" are 432,000, and 4,320 are the Einhrjarr warriors coming out from the Valhalla on the day of Ragnarok for the final battle against Loki (800 warriors x 540 doors). The measurements of the Great Pyramid of Giza are based on the number 4,320: its height is 147.1 meters and is obtained by dividing the Earth's polar radius into 43,200, while its perimeter is obtained by dividing the Earth's equatorial radius for the same number (43,200). The measurements of the Angkor Vat temple, too, are based on the same number. On the other hand, Sri Yuktesvar and David Frawley believe that the total of 12 "divine cycles" does not refer to the Kali yuga but to a Maha yuga, a complete cycle of 4 ages, of which Kali yuga would be only a fraction. To be precise, according to their calculation the ascending cycle of the Kali yuga started in 700 BCE with the imperialist age of Alexander of Macedonia and the foundation of Rome, while the descending cycle started in 500 CE with the beginning of the middle ages and ended in 1700 with the age of lights and the rediscovery of electricity.

Sri Yuktesvara also speaks of another important alignment of planets, with a cycle of about 12,000 years: its effect produces strong gravitational and magnetic effects, with both cosmic and solar and meteorological storms on Earth. As we will see later on, this cycle has been confirmed by modern research: every 12,000 to 13,000 years the spiral that is at the center of the galaxy enters an explosive phase lasting 1,000 years and characterized by the emission of gamma rays and particles of matter.

From the geological point of view, the last of these periods coincided with 10,600 BCE - the explosion of supernova Vela X, and the arrival into our solar system of its shock-wave of magnetized cosmic particles. This shock-wave modified the orbit of the Encke comet, that shattered against some other asteroid; one of the fragments fell on the Earth, more specifically in the Atlantic ocean, destroying Atlantis, causing the Flood remembered by the Sumerian culture (quoted in the Bible). This also caused the inclination of the Earth's axis (that until then had been perpendicular to the ecliptic) and the sudden shifting of the earth crust, which radically changed the shape and position of the continents. This corresponds to the passage of the solar system into the cardinal sign of Leo, that had a great importance in the history of mankind, in Egypt but also in south America and in Asia.

Alchemist Fulcanelli connects the description of the Flood with the effect of the inversion of the poles, where Uranus, previously "constantly conjoint with Gaia", became distant. This movement shifted the south pole to Antarctica, a continent that had been lush green and a cradle of civilization, as shown by the famous map of Piri Reis. In the northern hemisphere, in what is today the arctic polar circle, there was the disappearance of another great civilization described by some Indian scholars - and recently surfaced thanks to the archaeological discoveries of Canadian Jenness and Danish Rasmussen Therkle and Birker Smith (the civilization of Thule or Tulla), described by Plato as originated by the hyperborean Apollo (the Sun).

In *Rig-Veda* (10, 89, 4) we find this verse: "With your power, you keep Heaven and Earth separated like the two wheels of a chariot are held by its axis". The verse refers to Svetadvipa Dhruvaloka, the polar star, the axis on which the "seven Rishis" of the Ursa Major revolve in the movement symbolized by the *svastika*, and that according to another verse of *Rig Veda* (1, 24, 10) are "high above". Such an observation is possible only for someone who is standing at the north pole.

Anaximenes repeats this image, comparing the movement of the skies in the early times to the "rotation of a man's hat on his head". Irish astronomer Sir Robert Ball described the cycle of the year in northern Europe before the disaster, as a summer of 229 days, with a mild winter of 136 days. This refers to the shifting of the poles, not to the complete reversal, that is much rarer. According to geological studies, a complete reversal happened 171 times in the last 76 million years, of which 14 times in the last 4,5 million years, the last time about 780,000 years (*Science*, 1969).

The movement itself can happen in very short periods, with an exponential increase in speed - 30 days could be enough to cover all the 180 degrees of the complete reversal - but the effects remain felt even for a thousand years, like it happened in the last episode, when the strata of geological material belonging to the 1,000 years after the shifting are magnetized towards various directions (that is, not aligned) before they return to the north-south alignment. At present, the magnetic poles are already moving, through north Canada and Antarctica, at the speed of about 30 km/year, but as we have seen this speed could increase exponentially even without any warning. The seriousness of the situation is demonstrated by the fact that from 1970 to date, the Earth's magnetic field has already dropped 38% and is still dropping. The largest crack in the magnetic field, called south Atlantic Anomaly, is about 250,000 sq km and goes from south Africa to Brazil. Many satellites have already been damaged while crossing space above this region.

The most sensational correspondence discussed at present is between the beginning of the third Mayan calendar and the date offered by the Indian *Surya siddhanta* as the beginning of the Kali yuga, 3,102 BCE (3,113 BCE for the Mayans). We know that in this period there was the sudden rise of the dynastic civilization in Egypt and the Sumerian civilization in present Irak, while the green plains of Sahara suddenly turned into a desert. In India, the catastrophe of those years has submerged the city of Dvaraka, the capital of the Yadu kingdom, Krishna's dynasty. It was a global event. Lonnie Thompson, glaciologist (ice researcher) at Ohio University, has collected a huge quantity of data analyzing the oxygen isotopes in the ice layers, as well as the tree growth rings, the bone sediments in human skeletons, and the plant pollen deposits. Everything shows that about 3,100 BCE Earth suffered a climate disaster also connected to a peak of solar activity.

अव्यक्ताद् व्यक्तयः सर्वाः प्रभवन्त्यहरागमे । रात्र्यागमे प्रलीयन्ते तत्रैवाव्यक्तसंज्ञके ॥ ८-१८ ॥

avyaktād vyaktayah sarvāḥ prabhavantyahaṛāgame | rātryāgame praliyante tatraivāvyaktasañjñake || 8-18 ||

avyaktat: from the non-manifested state; *vyaktayah*: the manifestations; *sarvāḥ*: all; *prabhavanti*: become emanated; *ahar*: of the day; *agame*: at the beginning; *ratri-agame*: at the beginning of the night; *praliyante*: they are dissolved; *tatra*: there/ in that; *eva*: certainly; *avyakta*: non-manifested; *samjnake*: is known.

"At the beginning of the day all manifestations/ beings rise from the (state of) non manifestation; at the beginning of the night they are dissolved into that same non-manifestation."

Here, *vyakta* and *avyakta* are utilized in a relative sense, just like sometimes the *devas* are called *amartya*, "immortals". From our human point of view, especially in Kali yuga, a duration of life that is calculated in millions of years can legitimately call for the definition of

"immortality", and similarly the partial destruction of many planetary systems in our universe every 4 billion 320 million years can easily be considered a withdrawal of the creation, even if several planets remain still untouched. As we have seen, there is a greater cycle of the entire lifetime of Brahma that covers a period of time that is even greater: 157,680,000 millions of years (4,320 millions x 365 x 100), where it becomes really difficult for our mind to conceive a beginning and an end. Yet, this greater cycle, too, is just the time of one breath for Mahavishnu.

The words *prabhavanti* and *praliyante* refer to the shorter cycle constituted by the day and night of Brahma. At the end of this cycle not all the planets are destroyed, so the state of non-manifestation mentioned in this verse is not the original *pradhana*. Only Bhur, Bhuvah and Svar are destroyed; the residents of the other planets (from Mahar to Tapas) move to Satya, where they take rest along with Brahma himself. On the other hand, at the end of the longer cycle constituted by the life of Brahma all the planets are destroyed and the universe is re-absorbed into Mahavishnu.

From the descriptions of the Vedic scriptures we understand that time is eternal, and there is no "end of the world", just end of cycles. We can become liberated from this cycle by attaining the full spiritual realization, or continue to incarnate in various species of life and on various planets, experiencing the immense range of pleasures and sufferings afforded by the various bodies of *devas*, human beings, animals and vegetal beings. Beyond all this, there is the unlimited expanse of the spiritual world, the eternal and unchanging existence of Brahman. The correspondence between the macrocosm and the microcosm continues: at the level of Brahma, who is the universal creature, the day and the night correspond to very long cycles of activity and rest in the entire universe, while at the level of the ordinary human beings, the day and night are marked by the appearance and disappearance of the sun and bring cycles of activity and rest for the earthly creatures.

This concept of the parallel between the macrocosm and the microcosm is exquisitely Vedic in origin, but along the history leaked into other cultures, where it created strong mystic and alchemic movements awakened by this astonishing realization about the nature of the universe.

"As above, so below" is a very famous saying, extremely popular among the practitioners of what is called today wicca, witchcraft, magic or natural religion. It is the main foundation of all religious rituals, by which the adept calls the macrocosmic Deity into the microcosm of his/ her own heart, offers worship and obedience, and propitiates the attainment of something that s/he desires, through the practice of prayer and symbolic presentations. Some commentators explain that the 7 *chakras* within the human body should be identified as Bhur, Bhuvah, Svar, Mahar, Jana, Tapa and Satya respectively from the base of the spine to the crown on the head. According to this perspective, below Bhur there are the 7 lower *chakras* of sub-human life, and above Satya there are no more planetary systems: this gives the calculation of the 14 planetary systems or 14 worlds that we often find in the *shastras*.

So, Bhur represents the planet earth, Bhuvah is the intermediate dimensions where the *upadevas* live, and Svar is the higher planetary system of the *devas*, where Indra and the Adityas live. This interpretation is not necessarily at odds with the version we have described in the commentary to verse 8.16 (where the 7 *chakras* normally considered in the human body, along the spine, all represent the earthly level) because the total number of planets remains the same - they are only classified in a different number of categories. In regard to the subdivision of the centers of energy in the human body, this calculation could also be applied to the physical structure of the energy body, made of vortexes (physical *chakras*), meridians (*nadis*) and nodes (*marmas*) from which the subtle or causal forms of the structure are projected into the aura, that can expand for several feet outside the limits of the gross physical body.

भूतग्रामः स एवायं भूत्वा भूत्वा प्रलीयते । रात्र्यागमेऽवशः पार्थ प्रभवत्यहरागमे ॥ ८-१९ ॥

bhūtagrāmaḥ sa evāyaṁ bhūtvā bhūtvā praliyate | rātrīyāgame'vaśaḥ pārtha prabhavatyaharāgame || 8-19 ||

bhuta-gramah: the aggregate of beings; *sah*: it; *eva*: certainly; *ayam*: this same; *bhutva bhutva*: coming to existence again and again; *praliyate*: is destroyed; *ratri-agame*: at the beginning of the night; *avasah*: automatically, controlled by higher laws; *partha*: o Arjuna (son of Pritha); *prabhavati*: it becomes manifest; *ahar-agame*: at the beginning of the day.

"O son of Pritha (Arjuna), all these beings certainly continue to appear and are dissolved again automatically at the beginning of the night, and manifest again when the day arrives."

In the second chapter, from verse 12 to 30, Krishna had already explained how the Atman goes through cycles of incarnations, that we could call manifestation and non-manifestation, corresponding to the birth and the death of the body, but is never destroyed. Here, responding to Arjuna's question about the consciousness of the devotee at the time of death, Krishna repeats the concept of the cyclic manifestation and non-manifestation of the body, from the macrocosmic to the microcosmic. Therefore we understand that there is no reason for anxiety or distress regarding death, just like we should not worry about "the end of the world". Nothing really ends: it just becomes invisible for some time.

The word *ayam* in this verse indicates that at the new manifestation at the beginning of the day of Brahma, it is those very same living beings of previous manifestation that are recycled, and obtain a new opportunity for action and development. So at the end of a body, or even at the end of a cycle of the universal manifestation, nothing is really lost. The conditioned souls simply "go to sleep" for some time, and then they "wake up" again to resume their activities, just like at any new day in one's regular lifetime. However, the conditioned beings cannot freely choose the type of body they are going to receive.

The word *avasah* in this verse means "without control", to indicate that they are transported up and down by the mighty tides or waves of the material world, that is often compared to an ocean. We should not think that such movements are casual and simply governed by chance, because there are natural laws in the world that act very subtly outside the limits of the knowledge of ordinary persons: the ignorant conclude that things happen "by chance", or "by coincidence" when they are unable to see the subtle laws of cause and effects that created the circumstances they are facing. Nothing happens by chance.

This higher law, or higher control authority that governs the movements of the conditioned beings and their new incarnation and condition of life (*bhuta*), is an impartial conscious power based on the two major factors of *karma* and *smarana*. *Karma* ("actions") refers to the

activities performed in previous lifetimes and their consequences, that create *samskaras* or *vasanas*, deep impressions in the causal body that give it a precise shape as the blueprint of the future gross body. *Smarana* ("remembrance") is the conscious act by which we choose what we want to contemplate in our consciousness. The two factors are closely connected, because by repeating a particular type of action or set of actions - physically, verbally and mentally - the impression is created, and the habit makes it much easier to perform the action, almost spontaneously. The constant or regular choice of remembering and enacting a particular activity creates a strong attraction towards the particular vibrational frequency (or mode, called *guna*), like a diapason tuning, and this organizes the matter to form the new body. It is an automatic process, governed by natural laws; although the Atman has a certain amount of free will, the stronger its conditionings are, the less freedom it will have in the choice of its next body. According to the level of consciousness that one has developed, the *ahankara* that is the foundation of the causal or astral body responds to the attraction of the thought-forms (*yam yam vapi smaran bhavam* 8.6).

When we speak of an impartial conscious power that governs the manifestation of the bodies in the universe, we imply that besides the "mechanics" or "dynamics" of the *guna*, *karma* and *smarana*, there is some *deva*, some divine Personality, in charge of the process. Yama ("the regulator"), also called Dharma, is the personification of this natural law and oversees the process, even intervening directly or indirectly to modify it in case of necessity. Usually his intervention is indirect, as he sends his *yamadutas* ("servants of Yama") to capture those souls that are not ready for an immediate reincarnation and need a particular type of debriefing before proceeding into their next stages.

At the time of death there can be several different scenarios. In the best situation, the *yogi* has a very clear mind and a high level of consciousness and therefore s/he can freely proceed to the destination s/he had chosen, sometimes with the help of benevolent guides who have a subtle body made of mental energy. As the substance of the bodies of these guides is subject to the laws of the mind and expressed in the forms of symbols, each individual will see them through the filters of cultural expectations: as angels with wide swan-like wings and immaculate white tunics, or as radiant *vishnudutas* having a form similar to Vishnu's, or as one's loved relatives and friends who died before us, or any other form that the mind accepts as positive, benevolent and friendly.

If the deceased person is confused and still has material identifications and attachments connected to the previous body and circumstances, his/ her mind will play several tricks, bringing up various memories and visions of the past, present and future, sometimes all mixed together, and even visions of alternate realities according to his/ her unfulfilled desires and aspirations. Depending on his/ her good *karma*, *guna* and *smarana*, the deceased will be attracted by different colors of lights and other sensory perceptions that appear in this period between lives, and that attraction will lead to the circumstances where the next body will be developed. Sometimes the deceased is visited by visions of guides that may appear benevolent or angry, but these simply have the function of stimulating a response that will decide the direction of the new incarnation. In some cases, when the deceased is sincere and inquisitive, and humbly asks for help, these guides hold a consultation with him/her, not unlike university professors discussing a new curriculum and exams with a student, and there can be a thorough analysis of the karmic journey of the individual over a number of lifetimes. The consultation of the akasic records, guarded by an assistant of Yama called Chitragupta, is generally a very important factor in this process.

It is very interesting to note that this particular exploration of the "between lifetimes" situation and the analysis of the various lifetimes can be performed also while one is still in the body, during the period of the current lifetime, through specific techniques that are called astral traveling. With or without a guidance in this gross physical dimension, the "explorer" can enter the subtle dimensions of the afterlife (that are always existing within our minds and all around us in the subtle dimension) and even meet those same guides that s/he would meet after death and before the next incarnation. This experience could be compared to a dream, but it is much more vivid than a dream, and gives very good and useful realizations; sometimes it is called "conscious dream" or "shamanic journey".

The same facilities are available at the end of the day of Brahma, when most of the planets and the bodies of the conditioned souls are withdrawn into the cosmic sleep.

परस्तस्मात्तु भावोऽन्योऽव्यक्तोऽव्यक्तात्सनातनः । यः स सर्वेषु भूतेषु नश्यत्सु न विनश्यति ॥ ८-२० ॥

parastasmāttu bhāvo'nyo'vyakto'vyaktātsanātanah | yah sa sarvesu bhutesu nasyatsu na vinaśyati || 8-20 ||

parah: supreme, transcendental; *tasmāt*: that; *tu*: but; *bhavaḥ*: nature; *anyo*: other; *avyaktaḥ*: non-manifested; *avyaktat*: from the non-manifested; *sanānataḥ*: eternal; *yah*: s/he; *sah*: s/he; *sarvesu*: in all; *bhutesu*: beings/ conditions of life; *nasyatsu*: while being destroyed; *na*: not; *vinaśyati*: is destroyed.

"But there is another nature, different from this non-manifested (state), a non-manifested (nature) that is eternal and is not dissolved when all the beings are dissolved."

Previously (2.28), Krishna had already mentioned that the beings (*bhūtanī*) regularly go through a cycle of non-manifested, manifested, and non-manifested again. This applies to the individual bodies, and in a wider sense also to the varieties of species that appear and disappear cyclically in the various planets according to the different circumstances.

Sometimes an animal species that had been considered extinct is seen to appear again, and sometimes entire sets of species - like the dinosaurs - disappear completely: this fact does not contradict the creation system explained in Vedic scriptures, because the genetic blueprint of the various species is always existing, either in the manifested or non-manifested state.

When Krishna spoke of manifestation and non-manifestation in the cycle of creation and dissolution of the universe, either partial (at the end of Brahma's day) or complete (at the end of Brahma's life), he was talking about the bodies, physical and mental, that are made of material substance inevitably destined to change and transformation. However, Krishna had already clearly stated that there are two natures or *prakṛitīs* (7.5), one called material or *adhibhūta*, and the other called spiritual or *adhyatma*. Their respective products are the material bodies and the *jīvatmans* or the individual souls. It is important to understand that the temporary non-manifested state (*avyakta*) described in the previous verses (8.18, 8.19) is different from the unchangeable and eternal original state of the soul. Therefore the expression *anyo avyakto avyaktat sanānataḥ* makes a clear distinction between the non-manifested state of matter (that is not eternal and is subject to change) and the non-manifested state of the Atman/ Brahman (that is eternal and is not subject to change).

To make a practical example, we can compare the former to the darkness of the night and the latter to the darkness of the unlimited space in the universe. Night is a temporary situation, where our vision is limited by the absence of the sunlight and other similar factors, while the apparent darkness of the unlimited space is in fact full of the sun's energy and light, but due to the perspective of the distance there is a feeling of space and darkness of the background. However, a photovoltaic device, like the solar sails used in some spaceships, is not limited by this apparent darkness and easily perceives and absorbs the solar radiations and energy. To the materialist, transcendental reality seems not to exist because he is unable to see it with his physical eyes, but that does not mean that transcendental reality does not exist at all. We just need to develop the suitable vision and perception.

It is important to understand the meaning of *jivabhuta* as compared to *jivatman*. They are similar definitions, but there is an important difference: the *jivabhuta* is a "condition of being" in which the *jiva* finds itself, and it is always a material condition, a material body, a material situation. On the other hand, the *jivatman* is the individual soul itself, that as a *jivabhuta* is experiencing the material condition by falsely identifying with it.

This verse explains this difference, saying that the position of the *para prakriti* or *para bhava* is different from the position of the *apara prakriti*, in the sense that the souls are never non-manifested, even when they appear to have no body. Later (15.17), Krishna will again confirm this fact, by saying that the *jivabhutas* are actually his eternal *amsas* ("parts", "limbs" or "cells") who appear in the material world of *prakriti*, and struggle with the six senses, starting from the mind (*mamaivamso jiva-loke jiva-bhutih sanatanah manah-shashtanindriyani prakriti-sthani karshati*). Does it mean that during the night of Brahma the conditioned living entities do not lose their self-consciousness, but remain somehow conscious, while their bodies are sleeping in the non-differentiated non-manifested state? Of course. Just like in our daily microcosm we have the night, when we experience deep sleep and the dreaming state, during the night of Brahma the conditioned living entities are suspended in a happy sleep in which they do not lose themselves.

Even during the time of the complete dissolution of the universe, the conditioned living entities, the *jivabhutas* are absorbed in the blissful radiance of the *brahmajyoti*, the non-differentiated white light of the pure consciousness, from which they will again emerge refreshed and ready for a new cycle of creation.

This *brahmajyoti* can also be attained at any time during the manifestation phase of the cycle of the universe, provided one has attained the Brahman realization and has abandoned all material identifications and attachments, even without developing an actual *siddha deha* or *siddha svarupa* (spiritual body). The *jivatman* remains in the radiant bliss of Brahman (*brahmananda*) in its *anu-atma* (atomic soul) form until s/he is ready to incarnate again and continue its development. However, this temporary liberation is only a brief taste of the actual, permanent, fully cognizant and perfectly blissful state of liberation (the real *moksha*) that comes from the genuine development of the *svarupa-siddhi*; that highest perfection is called *param dhama* (supreme abode, supreme position).

अव्यक्तोऽक्षर इत्युक्तस्तमाहुः परमां गतिम् । यं प्राप्य न निवर्तन्ते तद्धाम परमं मम ॥ ८-२१ ॥

avyakto'kṣara ityuktastamāhuḥ paramāṁ gatim | yaṁ prāpya na nivartante taddhāma paramaṁ mama || 8-21 ||

avyaktaḥ: non-manifested (materially); *aksharah*: eternal - the Brahman or the Omkara; *iti*: like this; *uktah*: it is described; *tam*: that; *ahuh*: it is expressed/ called; *paramam*: supreme; *gatim*: destination; *yam*: which; *prapya*: by reaching; *na*: not; *nivartante*: returns; *tat*: that; *dhama*: abode/ position/ nature; *paramam*: supreme; *mama*: my.

"That eternal non-manifested (Brahman) is the highest destination/ goal. After attaining it, one does not fall back. That is my supreme abode."

While the previous verse was speaking about the *jivatmans*, the products of the *para prakriti* that are never dissolved even at the cyclic destruction of the entire universe, this verse is speaking about the *siddha vastu*, the eternal perfect spiritual world, that is the abode of the *siddha svarupas*, the eternal perfect spirit souls that have fully developed a transcendental body made of eternity, awareness and happiness.

Many people, who have an eminently materialistic vision - based on material body identification and affiliations - envision liberation (*moksha*) simply as a negative condition, in which there are no material ties, no identifications, to attachments, etc. However, *moksha* is not an end, but just a beginning. Verse 18.54 clearly says that on the level of Brahman (*brahma-bhuta*), that is another definition for the liberated state, true devotional service (*mad bhaktim labhate param*) starts. Without personal relationships, there can be no *bhakti*, and without personalities there cannot be any personal relationships. So there are personalities, and relationships, and activities on the liberated platform. Who can say that Krishna's nature or existence is void, or impersonal? It's full of *lilas* and *rasas*, activities and relationships: it is certainly not impersonal.

Also, all along the *Gita*, Krishna has been saying that those who are perfectly liberated attain him - his nature, his abode, etc - and then they do not return to the materially conditioned level again. Yet, we see Krishna descending into this world not only once (as he is evidently there talking to Arjuna), but regularly, from age to age (4.7). There is not one single statement by which we can assume that Krishna takes on a material conditioned form when he descends, but rather there are several very clear and very incisive statements on the opposite: see 2.12 (we all exist eternally as distinct persons, including Krishna who is obviously not a conditioned soul), 3.22 (Krishna is not conditioned to act, still he is engaging in the proper activities to give the good example to people), 4.6 (Krishna manifests his form and activities out of his own *yogamaya* and not as a material condition of life), 4.9 (Krishna's birth and activities are not material), 7.6 (Krishna as the person - *aham* - is the origin of the entire universe), 7.7 to 7.12 (Krishna as the person - *aham* - is the essence and existence of everything), 7.24 (only the fools - *abuddhayah* - believe that Krishna has taken a temporary material personality), 7.25 (only the idiots - *mudhah* - are unable to understand that Krishna is eternal and unborn).

Again in later chapters we see 9.9-10 (Krishna manifests the creation of the universe, but he is always neutral and detached), 9.11 (only fools - *mudhah* - believe that Krishna takes a temporary material personality when he descends into this world), 10.2 (Krishna as the person - *aham* - is the source of all *devas* and *rishis*), 10.3 (one who understands this transcendental nature of the Personality of Godhead is on the liberated platform), 10.8 (Krishna as the person - *aham* - is the source of everything), from 10.19 to the end of the chapter (10.42) the transcendental nature and position of Krishna will be further elaborated, much like we had seen from 7.7 to 7.12, only in a more

extensive way. In the 11th chapter, Arjuna penetrates this universal consciousness and existence personified by Krishna when he contemplates the universal form, the Visva rupa, that includes all the *devas* and all the planets and their inhabitants, that is presented as a mere partial emanation from Krishna the person.

From chapter 12 the statements become even clearer as the declared topic is *bhakti*, or personal devotion to God, which obviously implies a personal relationship, and not as a "second choice" for the simple minded unable to grasp the philosophical truths. In 14.27, Krishna clearly states that he as the person - *aham* - is the foundation of the Brahman, the eternal existence of happiness, and 15.6 will speak about the *siddha vastu*, the *dhama param*, the supreme position, saying that the spiritual world is self-radiant and needs no sun or moon or fire.

Some commentators argue that Krishna speaks of himself - *aham* - as the impersonal principle of Brahman, but that is ridiculous. How can a statement based on a personal subject ("I") indicate an impersonal principle? And if this was the case, why is Krishna clearly saying that he is the foundation and origin (*pratistha*) of the eternal Brahman (14.27)?

The fact is that the liberated state, both while still living in a body (*jivanmukta*) and after leaving this body, is full of consciousness and happiness, and a void by definition is non-existent: therefore, it is *asat*, and cannot have any consciousness or any happiness. There could only be a cessation of suffering, as in the idea of *nirvana* among some Buddhists, but that's certainly not the *brahma nirvana* described in *Bhagavad gita*. *Suka rahasya Upanishad* (40-42), *Bahuricha Upanishad* (5), *Nrisimha tapani Upanishad* (uttara, 4, 7), *Rudra hridaya Upanishad* (conclusion) explicitly describe the *param padam*, the supreme position, as *sat cit ananda*. The word *sat* expresses one of the most important concepts in Vedic knowledge, and by understanding its various levels of meanings, we can attain Self realization and liberation.

Sat means "existence, reality", and hence "essence, ontological being", "eternity, permanence" but also "spiritual, transcendental", "good, positive, virtuous", because whatever is good is supporting the existence of the universe for the progress of all the beings. This also means that only good exists positively - what we perceive as "bad" is merely the apparent absence of "good". So when the *shastra* describe Krishna consciousness as *sat*, it cannot be a non-existent void, as it has already been explained in 2.16, 17, 18.

The second attribute of the Supreme Existence is awareness, called *cit*, and sometimes describes as knowledge, cognizance, or consciousness. We have already seen that the essence of all existence is its knowledge, or its blueprint on the subtle level, so *sat* and *cit* cannot be separated, because they are one and the same. And if consciousness is the very nature of existence in the spiritual world, it means that such existence contains the knowledge and consciousness of everything that can exist - its pure ideal form, from which the material manifestation can subsequently take place in cycles of creation. This is the greatest possible variety, as it contains all the original perfect forms of all the varieties that can ever exist in the past, present and future.

Finally, the third attribute of Transcendence is happiness, *ananda*. The personal transcendental level expressed by Krishna as "my nature" is characterized by the supreme happiness, and just as Krishna as the person is the foundation of the Brahman, the happiness of the *siddha vastu*, *siddha svarupa*, *cintamani dhama* and *param bhakti* is the foundation of the *brahmananda*, the happiness that is found in Brahman. To find this transcendental world one does not need to move physically or geographically: this *siddha vastu*, like the *siddha svarupa*, is contained within the *atman*, even within this body. Where? Within the origin of the *prana* in the body, the *pranava* ("of the *prana*") *omkara*, the supreme vibration that is the source of everything. The *avyakta akshara* is not a material sound, but a subtle vibration frequency of energy that organizes and supports the existence of matter as we see it: therefore, being the origin of everything, it is described as the supreme level or supreme position, *parama gati* or *parama dhama*, but in fact it cannot be described fully by words.

In this verse, *ahuh* means "calling, expressing", and it also refers to consciously vibrating the *pranava omkara* as a practice of meditation on the subtle reality; *uktah* also means "pronounced", which reinforces the idea by repetition. In Patanjali's *Yoga sutras* (1.27, 28, 29) it is clearly said that the *pranava omkara* is the "description" of Isvara (God), and that by repeating this subtle sound, one comes to realize its meaning. This practice automatically turns the consciousness towards the inner Reality and all obstacles disappear (*tasya vacakah pranavah, taj-japas tad-artha-bhavanam, tatah pratyak-cetanadhigamo'py antarayabhavash ca*).

पुरुषः स परः पार्थ भक्त्या लभ्यस्त्वनन्यया । यस्यान्तःस्थानि भूतानि येन सर्वमिदं ततम् ॥ ८-२२ ॥

puruṣaḥ sa paraḥ pārtha bhaktyā labhyastvananyayā | yasyāntaḥsthāni bhūtāni yena sarvamidaṁ tatam || 8-22 ||

puruṣaḥ: the principle of consciousness; *saḥ*: he; *paraḥ*: superior, supreme; *pārtha*: o Arjuna (son of Pritha); *bhaktya*: through devotion; *labhyaḥ*: can be obtained; *tu*: but; *ananyaya*: undivided; *yasya*: of him; *antah-sthani*: that are staying within; *bhutani*: all the beings/ conditions; *yena*: by him; *sarvam*: all; *idam*: this; *tatam*: pervaded.

"O Partha, this supreme Person can be attained by undivided devotion. Within him exist all these beings, and he pervades everything."

In this verse we find the definition *puruṣaḥ paraḥ*, "the Supreme Person". The *puruṣa* is the principle of consciousness, while *prakṛiti* is the principle of activity, therefore the Supreme Puruṣa is the sum total of all the consciousness. No single individual can be the sum total of all the consciousness: s/he can only connect to this supreme *puruṣa*, or "enter" into this supreme *puruṣa* (*visate tad anantaram*, 18.55) like one enters a great ocean or a great forest and becomes a part of it.

As we have already elaborated in the previous commentary, devotion or *bhakti* can never be applied to an impersonal object, what to speak of a "non-existence" or void. The expression *bhaktya labhya*, "to be obtained through devotion" is a clear reference to the other instructions focusing on *bhakti*, devotion as the development of a loving service attitude through the dedication of all one's activities to God.

Some people interpret this devotion and worship as meant to be directed towards one's self, and apply Krishna's statements on *aham* ("I") and *mam* ("me") as referring to their own self or Atman. By following the discourse of Krishna about the Atman and its non-difference in quality with Brahman, they conclude that all the subsequent descriptions of the glories of the Supreme Personality of Godhead, the origin of all existences, should be understood as applying to the ordinary *jivatman*. This is a serious mistake, and because these confused people cannot understand the concept of *paramatman*, they end up worshipping their own material personality (*aṅgrahopasana*). Some

commentators confuse this idea with the concept of *advaita*, or "monism", but it is a mistake. Thinking oneself qualitatively one with God is not wrong, because the Atman is actually of the same nature of the Brahman: the difference is the "*aham*" in *ahangrahopasana*, that cannot refer to the Brahman in this meditation, simply because it is the "wrong" *aham* - it is the individual soul's ego, and not Krishna.

Along the *Bhagavad gita*, Krishna speaks of the Supreme Personality of Godhead sometimes in the first person as "I" and "me" (*aham, mam*) and sometimes in the third person as "he" and "him" (*yasya, yena, tam purusham*). However, he never applies the concept "you", because there is always a very clear distinction between the *jivatman* and the *paramatman*. Atman and Brahman are qualitatively one, or "of the same nature" as Krishna says, but one (the Atman) depends on the other (Brahman, or Param Atman).

It is true that the Parama Purusha (the Supreme Person) is within all living beings (18.61, *isvarah sarva-bhutanam hrid-dese tishthati*), but "residing in the heart of all beings" does not mean "being the individual *atman*", because the individual *atman* is only in the heart of one body. Here the verse clearly says, *bhutani sthani*, "all the beings/ the multitude of beings exist in him".

If one wants to worship oneself, s/he should start by having the full knowledge of the past, present of future of all beings (7.26) and everywhere in the universe: it is easy to understand that such a consciousness cannot be an individual consciousness, by definition. Even the *paramatman* that is present in the heart of the individual as the soul of the soul, or the *atman* of the *atman*, is not the sum total of the Transcendental Reality (9.4, 9.5)

After attaining the level of perfect realization, one *enters* into the Supreme (18.55), which implies a differentiation that is present at least in the initial stage of the process: therefore the *ahangraha upasana* as a preliminary practice is totally useless. One could say that at least the neophyte moves his/ her attention away from the constant search of enjoyment in the material world and focuses it towards the inner reality of Atman - but that was already done brilliantly in chapter 2 of *Gita* by simply explaining that the *atman* is the actual identity or self. After understanding that simple point, it is better to direct one's devotion towards the Paramatman, rather than towards the Atman.

The word *ananya* means "not other", in the sense of "exclusive, complete, full, dedicated, concentrated, focused, uninterrupted, constant, consistent". Once again, Krishna is emphasizing that spiritual realization should not be a side dish in our life, a social opportunity, a hobby or a method to become more fit and healthy to better enjoy our senses: it is the only purpose of life, and we need to become fully dedicated into it, every single moment of our time, with every single act and thought.

यत्र काले त्वनावृत्तिमावृत्तिं चैव योगिनः । प्रयाता यान्ति तं कालं वक्ष्यामि भरतर्षभ ॥ ८-२३ ॥

yatra kāle tvanāvṛttimāvṛttiṁ caiva yoginaḥ | prayātā yānti taṁ kālaṁ vakṣyāmi bharatarṣabha || 8-23 ||

yatra: there; *kale*: at that time; *tu*: but; *anavṛttim*: no return; *avṛttim*: return; *ca*: and; *eva*: certainly; *yoginah*: the *yogis*; *prayatah*: having left; *yanti*: they go; *tam*: that; *kalam*: moment/ time; *vakshyami*: I will tell; *bharatarshabha*: o best of the Bharatas (Arjuna).

"O best of the Bharata dynasty (Arjuna), I will tell you at which time the *yogis* leave (the body) not to return or to return, and the time when they can attain (the supreme destination)."

We have seen in the commentary to verse 8.19 that at the time of death, the deceased can find various situations and circumstances, that will lead to rebirth on this planet or to the attainment of other levels of life. Nothing happens by chance, not even the particular time and place of death: everything is created by a combination of *karma*, *guna* and *smarana* - past actions, the qualities or tendencies developed, and the concentration of the mind to remember a particular level of consciousness. The moment of death is important in regard to one lifetime just like the moment of the final exams is important for an entire course of studies, or the moment we choose to board a train for a very long journey, so intelligent people will do their best to arrange the appropriate circumstances to keep very focused and attentive, so that there will be no mistakes caused by confusion or emotional imbalances.

A person who knows the Vedic science of the Self is not afraid of death in itself, but is concerned about the level of consciousness at the time of death, so s/he will give more importance to dignified and peaceful circumstances and environment than to the artificial and messy prolongation of life, as it happens too often in contemporary medical procedures. Resuscitation attempts, prolonged external life support, and unnecessary surgeries will simply confuse the dying person and cause fear, anger and resentment to develop in his/ her mind, and this in turn will most likely lead to a lower condition in the next lifetime.

Two serious legal and moral issues are connected to this topic: euthanasia and organ harvesting. These are very controversial issues, because mainstream culture and public opinion are conditioned to fear death it itself and to blindly accept the decisions of the medical establishment that are built on total disregard for the dignity and the personal choices and proper information of the patients. Also, there is a lot of deliberate misinformation about both issues, caused by partisan interests and biased beliefs.

Euthanasia (a Greek word literally meaning "good dying") is the legal definition for medically assisted suicide, which means intentionally ending a life on the request of the patient in order to relieve pain and suffering in a terminal medical condition where there is no hope for recovery - to allow the patient the blessing of a dignified and orderly death at the time of his/her choice. This may be done actively, as by administering a medication that will painlessly stop the heart or cause similar effects on the body, or passively, as by simply switching off the artificial life support on which the patient depends for heart stimulation and breathing. Active euthanasia is used when the mere suspension of artificial life support would cause death only over a relatively prolonged period of time and entail a certain amount of sufferings.

The abrahamic ideologies put a blanket condemnation on all forms of suicide as a very serious sin because it gives the human being the power to decide on him or her own life and death, while in the Vedic system suicide is considered a very personal choice on which nobody else should have any say, except for the person who wants to die. A hot debate on the legal legitimacy of euthanasia is going on in several countries, and usually in the regions where Christian churches have more power, there is more persistence in prosecuting the patients who want to die peacefully and the doctors who are willing to help them.

But the really bad reputation of euthanasia is due to the arbitrary (and incorrect) application of the definition to the organized killing of people that the German Nazi regime did not consider "genetically fit" enough, especially based on racial considerations. There was nothing

"good" about such deaths because those people were killed against their will, and without allowing them any dignity or peaceful or uplifting environment at all, so the term was misused and its distortion still causes similar fears in the minds of the general public opinion.

On the opposite side of the spectrum, organ donors are made to believe they are making a very good ethical and moral choice when they sign their legal declaration. Even when organs are harvested without the consent of the source patient, generally the public opinion tends to think that it is all for the best, because the receiving patient will get a new lease on life - and in any case the source patient was already dead. Or so they think.

Actually organs must be harvested when they are still functional, and if they are not implanted immediately, they need to be kept strictly under refrigeration at a very low temperature, because death naturally brings about the decay of the body tissues, and in normal environmental conditions the organs become useless after mere minutes from death. So here the interests of the medical establishment intervene on the legislation to define the moment of death as the moment when the legally certified physician declares the source patient dead based on direct observation, usually focused on the absence of heart beat or brain waves. This means that the anxiety to harvest the organs of a patient and use them in their best shape possible could easily lead the doctor to speed up the procedure to the detriment of the source patient.

Also, the doctors do not give any consideration to the fact that the passage of death takes a longer time for the subtle body as compared to the reactions of the gross body, and this is precisely the crucial period when the level of the consciousness of the dying person should remain stable and peaceful, focused on the transcendental reality. Even after several minutes and sometimes even after hours from the moment when the heart stopped beating and the brain stopped showing signs of activity, the soul encased in the subtle body is still attached to the gross body, inside it or immediately around it, as it has been reported by many patients who had what are called NDEs or "near death experiences".

Sometimes a patient that has been declared dead returned to life spontaneously and unexpectedly, and the descriptions given by these patients consistently report that they were perfectly conscious of everything that was done on and around their bodies, even if they were observing the events from a point outside the body itself. The most impressive part of these stories is that such patients are able to describe exactly what happened, what the doctors said etc, even if their body was apparently dead or completely unconscious.

In the Vedic system, death normally occurs in a very quiet and peaceful way, and the ideal circumstances are those characterized by silence and solitude, just like when one sits for meditation in the course of his/ her normal *yoga* practice. Of course the best scenario for a person who is dying consists in the loving support of evolved persons who encourage the departing soul to leave the body peacefully and happily and to continue in her/his journey, knowing that those who are left behind are not "bereaved" or "mourning" but simply remembering him/ her with affection and good wishes.

Dying peacefully during the night is always better than dying surrounded by callous medical professionals or even crying family members, and although in the next verse we will see that the night is less auspicious than the day, still it offers a greater amount of protection from the distraction and distress caused by emotional people who do not have sufficient realization and wisdom to see death in a positive way.

Sannyasis live alone and take distance from other people specifically because they are preparing for the passage of death, therefore even during the daytime they are unlikely to be disturbed by emotional people who will create negative feelings about their demise.

अग्निर्जोतिरहः शुक्लः षण्मासा उत्तरायणम् । तत्र प्रयाता गच्छन्ति ब्रह्म ब्रह्मविदो जनाः ॥ ८-२४ ॥

agnirjotirahaḥ śuklaḥ ṣaṅmāsā uttarāyaṇam । tatra prayātā gacchanti brahma brahmadevidō janāḥ ॥ 8-24 ॥

agnih: in the fire; *jyotih:* in the light; *ahah:* during daytime; *suklah:* during the bright fortnight of the waxing moon; *sat-masah:* during the six months; *uttarayanam:* of the northern journey of the sun; *tatra:* there; *prayata:* by leaving; *gacchanti:* they go; *brahma:* to the Brahman; *brahma-vidah:* those who know Brahman; *janah:* the persons.

"In the fire, in the light, in the day, in the waxing moon, and in the six months of the *uttarayanam:* those who know Brahman attain Brahman departing at those times."

The most important part of this verse is the conclusion: *brahma vidah janah*, "those who know Brahman".

We should not delude ourselves into thinking that merely catching the proper time for our death will automatically take us to the spiritual world or to liberation, if we have not realized the Brahman - the Transcendental Reality of the Universal Consciousness - during our lifetime. So it is essential to understand that whatever dissertation we may conduct about the various auspicious or inauspicious moments for dying becomes irrelevant for those who are still conditioned by material identifications and attachments: for such people, there is no auspiciousness and no chance of attaining the supreme abode.

For those who have actually attained the level of liberation and realization, there are moments that are considered more auspicious or favorable, merely because they inspire happiness and enlightenment in the soul that is leaving for his/ her next journey after this lifetime. Such times have nothing particularly transcendental or magical about them, but they can certainly help, just like it is better to choose a sattvic place and time for our regular meditation, as per Krishna's instructions in *Gita* (6.10 to 6.13).

Of course, the circumstances mentioned in this verse apply to a society where people respect the dignity and privacy of others, live according to the natural rhythms of the universe, are free from bad habits, have a keen sense of the purpose of life and the Vedic values and are not exposed to extensive pollution of the environment (including the sound and magnetic pollution). Also, exceptions to this verse are other external factors that are considered even more inauspicious, such as war, natural disasters, any type of violent death, negative emotions expressed or cultivated or caused by the people around the dying person, or any other cause of fear or anger that would lower the level of consciousness of the dying person.

In the ideal circumstances taken for granted by the Vedic civilization, a human being enjoys not only a high quality of life, but even more importantly a high quality of death. Fire (*agni*) refers both to illumination and cremation. The meaning of illumination is offered as an alternative to the daylight, because obviously during the day time there is no need for fire except for the cremation, but that is a subsequent

factor that applies to a moment that comes after the precise time of death itself. The most important window of time for the proper orientation of the consciousness consists in the minutes before and after the gross material body becomes lifeless. Another important role of fire is the sacred flame of the sacrifice, that is carefully kept in every Vedic home, and transferred to the worship room or the kitchen when required. On the other hand, fire as a house heating facility does not have a central role in Vedic life, because of the mild climate characteristic of the places where people are situated in a sattvic mode.

Light is always given a great importance in Vedic culture and lifestyle, because it represents the radiance of the Brahman and has a positive effect on the mind, enlivening, enlightening and inspiring good feelings, therefore according to tradition there should always be some lamp burning in the rooms even during the night when everyone is asleep. To avoid the dangers connected with live flames, Vedic homes had built-in niches for lamps and special safe lamps - ideally transparent ones - positioned high on the walls, and equipped with long wicks and a good store of oil or clarified butter to last for several hours.

Still today, in some temples, there is the tradition of the *akhanda dipa* ("eternal lamp") that is kept burning constantly day and night by adding clarified butter or special types of vegetal oils. Also other ordinary types of lamps are regularly offered by the visitors of all temples as a mark of respect and devotion to the Deity, and the most famous popular festival in India is still Divali or Dipavali, a name that literally means "many lamps", as people in every household and neighborhood light as many lamps as possible on the new moon night in the month of Kartika, in October-November each year.

The sun (*arci*) is undoubtedly the greatest and most powerful source of light in the universe, and therefore its visible presence is very auspicious, inspiring and enlightening. A sunny day gives happiness to the heart and lightens and comforts the mind, and therefore it can ease the crucial passage of death.

The other great influence on our planet is the moon, whose power creates the tides and controls the growth of plants. Ancient peoples also knew that the gravitational attraction of the moon, with its monthly cycles, had a deep influence on the mind, as well as on the menstrual periods of women, on the fermentation of brews and the preparation of medicines. The waxing moon brings a rising energy and an increasing amount of light during the night time, therefore it is considered auspicious. The two fortnights of the lunar cycle are called *sukla* ("white") and *krishna* ("black") to indicate the increasing and decreasing amount of moonlight.

Uttarayana is the definition given to the six months that go from the winter solstice to the summer solstice, and the days progressively become longer and brighter. It is said that on the highest planets of this universe, one day of the *devas* is equal to one entire earthly year, and therefore our six months from winter to summer constitute the daytime for them, and they can be approached more easily.

However, we must be very careful not to judge anybody's death circumstances, because it is always difficult to know exactly what level of consciousness an individual is able to maintain at each moment, and the reason why something had to happen. Sometimes an advanced soul just needs to burn a little bit more of *karma* that is still attached to that body, so death may occur in stressful or violent circumstances. On the other hand, sometimes a person has organized everything to have a very peaceful and dignified death, and still the consciousness remains disturbed from within, and s/he is attracted to a lower birth or worse.

We should never take anything for granted, and we should remember that self-complacency and self-righteousness are the first symptoms of pride and arrogance, which reinforce the material identifications and attachments... so by the very fact of remaining humble about our actual position and capabilities, we protect ourselves from falling down from such position. The following verses constitute a map of the subtle paths of the universe, by which a *yogi* can travel everywhere and choose to leave the material sphere or to remain in the higher levels of material enjoyment. The archetypes of light, fire, waxing moon and increasing radiance of the sun dispose the mind towards enlightenment, while the opposite archetypes tend to weigh it down to fall back into material vibrations. Similarly, the various purification rituals and pious activities are meant to elevate the vibrational frequency of the mind so that it can carry the soul to the highest levels of the material universe, up to the limits of liberation. These are also considered as valid as the auspicious environmental circumstances, if not more effective.

However, a true *yogi* transcends both paths - the light and the darkness - by constantly meditating on the Adhiyajna within the heart, therefore s/he can never be confused and s/he does not need to worry about external circumstances or ritualistic proceedings.

धूमो रात्रिस्तथा कृष्णः षण्मासा दक्षिणायनम् । तत्र चान्द्रमसं ज्योतिर्योगी प्राप्य निवर्तते ॥ ८-२५ ॥

dhūmo rātristathā kṛṣṇaḥ ṣaṅmāsā dakṣiṇāyanam | tatra cāndramasaṁ jyotiryogī prāpya nivartate || 8-25 ||

dhumah: in the smoke; *ratrih*: in the night; *tatha*: also; *krishnah*: the dark fortnight of the waning moon; *sat-masa*: the six months; *daksinayanam*: of the south-bound journey of the sun; *tatra*: there; *candramasam*: the moon sphere; *jyotih*: the light; *yogi*: the spiritual seeker; *prapya*: attaining; *nivartate*: comes back.

"In the smoke, in the night, in the waning moon and in the six months of the *dakshinayana*, the *yogi* reaches the lunar light and then comes back."

Those who have attained liberation, the supreme consciousness of the Transcendental Reality of Brahman, are free from all material identifications and attachments, and do not have any selfish independent desire to be pursued in the material world.

However, the moment of leaving one's material body is always critical, because the *yogi* might be attracted by the sattvic opportunity to engage in a devotional service to the Lord of the universe, by joining the *devas* in the administration of the cosmic affairs. The *uttarayana* path described in the previous verse as connected to the sun's journey in the sky is also called *devayana*, or "the path of the *devas*" because it opens the way to a beautiful tour of the higher planets, where one is welcome to stay until the time of the dissolution of the universe, in the company of great Personalities such as Brahma, Indra, and others, under the sphere of influence of the sun, Surya.

The *dakshinayana* path described in this verse gives the tour in the opposite direction, that is governed by Chandramasa, the sphere of the moon, and it is also known as the *pitri ayana*, the "path of the *pitris*", the dharmic departed souls, generally called "the ancestors". Within the sphere of influence of the moon we find Pitriloka or Yamaloka, the dimension where Yamaraja or Dharmaraja lives, and where all the

ordinary souls (not the liberated *yogis*) arrive after death for a consultation about their next incarnation program. The "bad people" are escorted here by the *yamadutas*, "the servants of Yamaraja", who serve as a sort of police officers in the after-death dimension. Good people either arrive there spontaneously or guided by the same *yamadutas*, who in this case are perceived as gentle, caring and luminous angels, as the mind of the deceased remains neutral and free from fear.

To understand how it is possible that the same beings can be perceived as brutal and scary law enforcers - even looking like some depictions of devils in the abrahamic tradition - or as a beautiful sort of social services workers - even looking like the angels or saints of the abrahamic tradition - we can make the example of a man who is in a rather dark room, where eyesight cannot help much, and bumps into a mannequin wearing some bulky clothing. Depending on the state of mind of the man, he will perceive the dummy either as an enemy or a friend, possibly mistaking it for a thief or a murderer if he is really scared, or as a dear friend who came to help him: it is all in the mind, like the perception of the snake in the rope. In the subtle dimension between lifetimes, all perceptions remain on the subtle level of the mind, therefore the shape we project on things becomes real for our own mind.

When they reach this sphere, the *yogis* that know Brahman (*brahma-vido janah*) and are free from material identifications and attachments are not directed to take another material body because they do not need to play out any more *karma*. However, they are welcome to stay as guests of Yamaraja and members of his household and court: these are the *pitris* to whom the *sraddha* rituals are offered. The descendants of the great *brahmanas* and *rishis* know that their ancestors were pure, liberated souls who knew Brahman very well and had no material identification and attachment, so they offer the *sraddha* confidently that the presentations - *tarpana*, *homa* etc - will reach them. After all, the *pitris* are allowed to stay in Yama's house for a period of 10,000 years, in which they enjoy a very high level of quality of life, comparable to the most luxurious holiday resorts on this planet. The *pitris* drink the *soma rasa* with the *devas*, help the confused departed souls and even astral travelers and shamans by giving counseling and guidance, and gather in assembly to discuss the events of the universe and how they can influence the people on earth in a positive way. They also have the power to visit earth in various shapes - as birds, as human beings etc - to test human beings and offer them blessings or curses, but they never engage directly in any conflict, either between human beings or between *devas* and *asuras*.

At the end of their 10,000 years, they return to this earthly dimension to take a new material body and complete their service to the Lord and mankind by spreading their wisdom and knowledge, then they get another opportunity to leave the material dimension and attain Brahman.

In any case the *sraddha* rituals, the *tarpana* and the *svadha* oblations for the ancestors are always beneficial, even if those ancestors we are thinking about have not been able to attain Pitriloka, due to their lack of knowledge of Brahman, purity of heart and luggage of bad karmic reactions. Any action performed for their benefit will reach them wherever they are and will help them in their progress.

Another interesting point about this verse is the definition of day and night, and its application to the level of consciousness to be pursued at the time of death.

In verse 2.69, Krishna declared, "For a wise person, what is night for all creatures becomes the opportunity for regulated awakening, and the time when the creatures remain awake is night for him." In the commentary to that verse, we gave various levels of meanings, from the most literal (the most sattvic time is the *brahma muhurta*, the quiet hours of very early morning, about 2 hours before sunrise, when everybody else is sleeping - most people would call it "night") to the deepest, that refers to the day and night of consciousness itself as the light of knowledge and the darkness of ignorance respectively.

This deep and symbolic interpretation adds many layers of meaning to these two specific verses (8.24-25) because they elaborate on the various archetypal components of our mind, from the sun of the conscious level to the moon of the emotional level, to the fire of dedication and the smoke of confusion, and the greater orbit of the *samsara* cycle based on the *guna* and *karma* that each individual cultivates in his/her own human life and leads upwards (*uttarayana*) or downwards (*dakshinayana*) in the wheel of evolution-involution of the species. We should remind our readers here that a man or woman who has misused the valuable opportunity of the human birth may very well be pushed to take birth in some animal or vegetal species, at least for some time.

Some commentators have called the *uttarayana* and the *dakshinayana* as *navritti* and *avritti* respectively, indicating that the recommendations on the different moments of time simply apply to the level of consciousness and the motivation. According to this interpretation the *devayana* refers to the Supreme Personality of Godhead (the supreme *deva* by definition).

This means that the *yogis* who take this road do not stop at the higher planetary systems but go directly into the *siddha vastu*, the eternal spiritual world that is also called Vaikunthaloka.

शुक्लकृष्णे गती ह्येते जगतः शाश्वते मते । एकया यात्यनावृत्तिमन्ययावर्तते पुनः ॥ ८-२६ ॥

śuklakṛṣṇe gatī hyete jagataḥ śāśvate mate | ekayā yātyanāvṛttimanyayāvartate punaḥ || 8-26 ||

sukla: in the white; *kṛṣṇe*: in the black; *gati*: destination; *hi*: certainly; *ete*: these; *jagataḥ*: of the universe; *śasvate*: eternal/ permanent; *mate*: are considered; *ekaya*: by one (only); *yati*: goes; *navrittim*: without return; *anyaya*: by the other; *vartate*: one returns; *punaḥ*: again.

"These two paths of the world, the white and the black, are considered eternal. One takes to the non-return, and the other winds back."

Several times along the text of the *Bhagavad gita* (2.45, 4.22, 5.3, 7.27, 7.28, 15.5), Krishna says that we need to overcome the idea of duality, but some people get confused and conclude that we must eliminate all sense of discrimination and distinction, and that we must believe that everything is the same - all is "one".

While it is true that everything is connected, and coming from the same origin and the same great universal plan, it is nonsensical to think that everything is the same, and that every choice will bring the same results. We cannot say that *sat* and *asat* are on the same level, that *dharma* and *adhama* are equally valid, or that knowledge and ignorance will give the same benefits.

The illusion of duality (*dvandva moha*) consists in believing that one's existence is separated and independent, that we can hurt others to get whatever we want, and that there is an absolute value and importance in material differences such as pleasure and pain, gain and loss, success and failure, etc.

All these things are relative and temporary, and they do not have a real permanent existence of their own - they are simply material conditions meant to keep us moving on in our pursuit of the permanent meaning of life. When we overcome this illusion, we realize what is important and what is not, what should be done and what should not be done (16.7 *pravrittim ca nivrittim ca*). This perception could be mistaken for duality, but it is not. It is intelligence, *viveka*, the power of proper discrimination that guides us along the right path, to obtain the desired results.

If there was really no difference or distinction, all the purpose of the Vedic knowledge would be lost, because whatever people would do, they would obtain the same result - enlightenment or conditioning: this idea is preposterous. There would be no meaning to the instructions of the *Vedas* and the missions of the *avatars*, the preaching of the *acharyas* and *rishis*, and the idea of *sadhana* would be ridiculous. Persons who are intelligent and sincere will be able to understand this point, while the foolish and materially motivated will remain confused and object that we are inconsistent.

Some people foolishly claim that all paths are equally good and should be equally considered valid and respectable, simply because there are those that have chosen to follow them as their affiliation. They call this "freedom of religion", but it is a mistaken definition. Freedom of religion, or freedom of thought, consists in having the legitimate right to think and believe whatever one wants, whether such beliefs are right or wrong, founded or unfounded. Nothing more.

The right to the freedom of religion does not make all opinions equally valid.

It does not authorize people to commit criminal actions simply because they believe such actions are legitimate according to their opinion. It does not invalidate the others' right to question or criticize an opinion or belief that is obviously illogical, contradictory, unethical or based on false data, or even advocating or supporting ignorance, cruelty, violence, selfishness (individual or collective), dishonesty, injustice, intolerance, oppression, greed, insensitivity, and other similar asuric characteristics.

Opinions should be allowed to exist as opinions, but they should never be allowed to materialize in actual aggressive or oppressive behaviors in society - simply because at that point they are not "opinions" any more. Acting out on wrong opinions becomes wrongful action, another definition of crime, and criminals must be stopped.

The famous saying *sarva dharma samo bhava*, "all the manifestations of *dharma* are of the same nature", is often used by uninformed people to claim that "all religions are the same", so no ideology can be criticized (usually this means abrahamic ideologies cannot be criticized). There are some Hindus who feel such statement to be fundamentally wrong, but because their ideas are not very clear, they respond by trying to deny that Hinduism is a religion to begin with - with the only result of losing their legally recognized rights and discouraging those who want a valid and healthy religious affiliation. Others react by resorting to racism or casteism, trying to establish that Hindus (as those who were born in the Indian race and from "high caste" families) are always right, because their birth makes them genetically different from the rest of the human beings. This weird idea is totally unsupported by any scientific evidence, but its fascination is so strong that its proponents do not even want to see that a growing number of individuals born in the Indian race and from "high caste" families easily become opposed to the Vedic knowledge and ideals, turning into cynical materialists, naxalites, criminals, or converting to Christianity or Islam or some other non-dharmic ideology. Nothing has changed in their physical genetic composition, but they hate the very idea of being somehow connected with Hinduism or Vedic culture.

The fact is that the quote says *sarva dharma samo bhava*, not *sarva mata samo bhava* ("all opinions are of the same nature"). The key word is *dharma*.

The meaning of *dharma* is always accompanied by a set of positive principles, of an eternal and universal nature (*sanatana dharma*) that promotes progress and happiness of everyone, therefore when we translate the term as "religion", we are surmising that all the ideologies presently defined as "religions" are also based on the same positive principles. Yet, this is an illusory idea, that is not substantiated by facts, ideology, scriptural evidence or history of the behavior of those who claimed to be acting in the name of their religion (and were universally accepted as such).

Clever manipulators of debates will try to reply that bad people are found in all religious communities, but they will not be able to explain why an abrahamic who preaches killing people in the name of his religion should not be immediately stopped - unless they admit that abrahamic scriptures actually approve and recommend the action of killing people in the name of religion (or mindlessly destroying resources, enslaving, raping, lying, looting, etc), and that again, is certainly not within the category of "opinion".

Materialistic people, who identify with the gross body and birth, will propose the vision of *sva-dharma* or "specific duty" within society, saying that *dharma* is the duty connected to the inherent quality and tendency (*guna* and *karma*) of the individual, therefore since one is born to be good or bad, he will not be able to change that situation and therefore he should embrace it as his duty (*dharma*). But this is a fallacy, because there is no such thing as criminal *dharma*. It is true that *dharma* is the specific duty of each being, determined by *guna* and *karma*, but its meaning cannot be separated from its root, *dhr*, that means "to support". *Dharma* is what supports, not what damages. *Dharma* is about good qualities, not defects. The purpose of the existence in this world is to evolve: *asato ma sad gamaya, tamaso ma jyotir gamaya, mrityor ma amritam gamaya* (*Brihad aranyaka Upanishad* 1.3.28), "from ignorance lead me to truth, from darkness lead me to light, from death lead me to immortality". Evolution means moving from bad to good, from defects to qualities.

But even if we want to state that a *sudra* - for example - should not directly study the *Vedas* or make an effort to improve his life in a sattvic direction, because he does not have the *guna* and *karma* to actually succeed in that effort, still we should remember that such a condition is simply temporary and relative, and they should be abandoned as much as possible.

Krishna will clearly state later in *Bhagavad gita* (18.66 *sarva dharman parityajya*) that we must abandon the pluralistic and dualistic vision of "many" different *dharman* as rules for different levels of human evolution, because such divisions are simply referred to the temporary variety of bodies, that belongs to the category of the illusory dualities to be overcome. Of course *dharma*, as the universal and eternal ethical principles, must never be abandoned.

Vedic society and culture have always demonstrated immense tolerance and accommodating attitude towards freedom of opinion, freedom of expression and even freedom of lifestyle, but within the limits of non-aggression towards innocent and good members of the society - technically called *prajas*, "children" in the family of the sattvic king.

As soon as any individual tried to perform an act of aggression, he would immediately be stopped, either by the individual that was being attacked, or by the *kshatriya*, "the protector" of the *prajas*. The protection of the *prajas* is the only real duty of the *kshatriya*, because the Government has no business controlling what people think and believe. The demonstration of this point is that in ancient times Vedic *kshatriyas* always showed perfect tolerance towards all religious traditions - Shaivas, Shaktas, Vaishnavas etc - and sometimes even directly funded and promoted all of them. The best example of this ideology is found in the tradition of Jagannatha ("the Lord of all") in Puri, that reunites all the main Vedic *ista devata* in the same *tattva* without any contradiction; this was and is still considered the best approach for the choice of an *ista deva* for the king, so much that the king of Puri traditionally considers himself as the "younger brother" and "first servant" of Jagannatha. Vedic rulers even had no problems with the proponents of antagonistic theories called *nastika darshanas* ("faithless perspectives") such as because the teachings of Charvaka (materialistic atheism), Buddha (Buddhism) and Jina (Jainism).

The word *nastika* refers to the denial of the authority of the genuine scriptures and the existence of a Supreme Godhead, a position that is totally at odds with the Vedic tradition. Yet neither materialistic atheism, materialistic agnosticism, Buddhism, Jainism have ever been persecuted in Vedic India. Even in more recent times (up to about 50 years ago) the refugees of various faiths - such as Hebrews, Christians and Lamaists - have always found a peaceful and friendly welcome from Hindus of all groups and denominations, especially when such refugees and settlers maintained an equally respectful attitude towards other faiths and especially towards *dharma*.

नैते सृती पार्थ जानन्योगी मुह्यति कश्चन । तस्मात्सर्वेषु कालेषु योगयुक्तो भवार्जुन ॥ ८-२७ ॥

naite sṛti pārtha jānanyogī muhyati kaścana | tasmātsarveṣu kāleṣu yogayukto bhavārjuna || 8-27 ||

na: not/ never; *ete*: these (two); *sṛiti*: different paths/ courses; *partha*: o Arjuna (son of Pritha); *janam*: knowing; *yogi*: a yogi; *muhyati*: is confused; *kascana*: ever/ in any circumstance; *tasmat*: therefore; *sarvesu*: in all; *kalesu*: moments; *yoga-yuktah*: connected through yoga; *bhava*: become; *arjuna*: o Arjuna.

"O Partha, a yogi who knows these paths is never confused, therefore (you should) be engaged in yoga always."

The definitions of *yogi* and *yoga* indicated in this verse obviously refer to the *buddhi yoga*, that is the intelligent application of knowledge (*jnana yoga*) and performance of one's duty (*karma yoga*) in a spirit of devotion (*bhakti yoga*) regulated by a scientific method of activities (*kriya yoga*).

The progress in this *yoga* is clearly traced from the initial questioning about the purpose of life (*visada yoga*), the understanding of the difference between body and soul (*sankhya yoga*), the renunciation to material identifications and attachments (*sannyasa yoga*), the focusing of one's mind in meditation (*dhyana yoga*) that liberates from material ignorance (*taraka brahma yoga*). Each of these passages corresponds to a chapter in *Bhagavad gita*. The exact center of the *Gita* is the next chapter, 9, that bears the title *raja guhya yoga*: the *yoga* of the supreme secret.

We should never fall in the trap of those commercial exploiters who teach that *yoga* is a physical and mental system of exercises meant to help in de-stressing and improving one's body shape so that it will be easier to engage in *artha* and *kama* - wealth acquisition and sense gratification.

It is true that *artha* and *kama* are legitimate *purusha arthas* ("purposes of human life") and there is nothing wrong with them, but they are not the purpose of *yoga*. A *yogi* may continue to give some space for *artha* and *kama* in his/ her life, but the real purpose of *yoga* is *moksha* (as declared by the name of the 18th and last chapter of *Gita*), but those energies and time invested in *artha* and *kama* will be subtracted from the pursuit of *moksha*, and this will delay success in the ultimate purpose.

Therefore Krishna clearly says that one should be very focused and not pursue any other concern (8.14, *ananya cetah*): this will make success very easy to attain (*su-labham*). This is confirmed in Patanjali's *Yoga sutras* (1.21, 1.22) with the expressions *tivra-samveganam asannah*, "those who make a stronger effort attain a quicker result" and *mridu-madhyadhimatratvat tato 'pi visesah*, "going from mild to medium to intense".

Some commentators express the belief that *Bhagavad gita* teaches that one should leave everything and take *sannyasa* in order to attain the supreme Consciousness, but this is not confirmed anywhere. Rather Krishna clearly says at the beginning of the chapter on *sannyasa yoga* (6.1) that real *sannyasa* is not about formal renunciation to occupational and family engagements, but simply about the dutiful performance of the activities within their circle of responsibilities but without being attached to enjoying its results (2.47, *ma phalesu kadacana*).

The most important factor is the knowledge or awareness of the spiritual reality, that gives a clear vision and dissipates confusion (2.13, 2.72, 4.35, 18.72). This knowledge is based on the *viveka*, the "intelligent discrimination" between *sat* and *asat* - what is eternal and spiritual on one side, and what is temporary and material on the other side. Here is precisely the meaning of the previous verses as applied to the *sukla* and the *krishna*, the white path and the black path.

The word *kascana* ("ever", "in any circumstance") suggests that a person who is situated in *buddhi yoga* can make the perfect choice in all circumstances, either favorable or unfavorable, because a journey is about the direction in which one is traveling, not about the position that one may have achieved at any given time along the road. Similarly, Krishna instruction *sarvesu kalesu yoga-yukta bhava*, "always be a *yogi* at all times", refers to the level of consciousness in different situations, not to a particular position or moment in life, such as the time we dedicate to our regulated *sadhana* exercises or the stage in which we renounce all other responsibilities to simply lead "a spiritual life". In fact, the danger of this reductive vision according to which one can practice *yoga* only in certain circumstances and at certain times is that that one can easily miss the entire point of *yoga* and become mechanical, egotistic, self-righteous, arrogant, and totally confused about which is the white path and which is the black path. The evidence of such downfall is given by those so-called *sannyasis* that are engaged in activities and behaviors that are explicitly forbidden for *sannyasis*, and demonstrate a very strong tendency to material identification and

affiliation, attachments and belonging, and materially based duality. The worst and most serious symptoms or examples of such behaviors are illicit sexual relationships and power-mongering politics; where by "illicit" we intend any sexual relationship that is contrary to the fundamental principles of *dharma* and by politics we intend a dishonest game of selfishness and duality that is contrary to truthfulness.

At another and more physical and superficial level of meaning, that applies to the material structure of the universe, the proper knowledge and practice of *yoga* towards the two paths called *deva yana* and *pitri yana*, enables the *yogi* to utilize both or either in a conscious and progressive way, without becoming confused by the external circumstances and by the particular position that one might find him/herself in at the time of death.

वेदेषु यज्ञेषु तपःसु चैव दानेषु यत्पुण्यफलं प्रदिष्टम् ।

vedeṣu yajñeṣu tapaḥsu caiva dāneṣu yatpuṇyaphalaṁ pradīṣṭam ।

अत्येति तत्सर्वमिदं विदित्वा योगी परं स्थानमुपैति चाद्यम् ॥ ८-२८ ॥

atyeti tatsarvamidaṁ viditvā yogī paraṁ sthānamupaiti cādyam ॥ 8-28 ॥

vedesu: in the study of Vedic scriptures/ in the pursuit of knowledge; *yajnesu*: in sacrifices/ sacred activities/ ritual performances/ sacred duties; *tapaḥsu*: in austerities; *ca*: and; *eva*: certainly; *danesu*: in charity; *yat*: that; *puṇya*: virtuous/ sattvic/ pure; *phalam*: fruit/ result; *pradistam*: indicated/ assigned/ declared by the scriptures; *atyeti*: surpasses/ exceeds/ is greater; *at*: that; *sarvam*: all; *idam*: this; *viditva*: by knowing; *yogi*: the *yogi*; *param*: supreme; *sthanam*: position; *upaiti*: attains; *ca*: and; *adyam*: original/ primeval/ most important.

"(A *yogi*) obtains greater benefits than those acquired by the prescribed virtuous acts (*puṇya*) such as reciting the *Vedas*, performing *yajnas*, engaging in austerities and distributing charity. Knowing all this, a *yogi* attains the supreme and original position."

Both levels of meaning are confirmed here in this verse by Krishna: provided one knows (*viditva*) how things should be used in the proper way, both the white and the black paths can be used beneficially (*puṇya phalam*, "bring good results") "as indicated by the Vedic scriptures" (*pradistam*). The factors of *veda*, *yajna*, *tapas* and *dana* are found in both genuine dharmic paths - the *anavritti* and the *avritti*, leading respectively to *devaloka* and to *pitri-loka*. The white path is faster and the black path is slower, but they are not antagonistic to each other, because contrarily to the abrahamic idea of the "only one true path" that disproves or destroys other paths, the Vedic vision offers the intelligence to utilize all resources in a positive way.

Another similar verse to this one is found in 9.27: *yat karosi yad asnasi yaj juhosi dadasi yat, yat tapasyasi kaunteya tat kurushva mad-arpanam*, mentioning specifically *juhosi* as representing *yajna*, *dadasi* representing charity, and *tapasyasi* representing *tapas*. There *karosi* ("you do") summarizes all other activities and behaviors that in this verse are regulated by the prescriptions of Vedic texts and/ or by the proper knowledge (*veda*). We can therefore add another layer of meaning to the discussion about *sat* and *asat* as "proper" and "improper" and about *viveka* and *dvandva* as "choosing with intelligence" as compared to "choosing whimsically".

Some say that the recitation of the *Vedas* and the practice of *yajnas*, *tapas* and charity belong to the *karma kanda* section or the scriptures and are followed by the *smarta* Hindus (*smarta* meaning "those who follow the *smṛiti* scriptures"), and therefore they belong to the black path of the *pitris*, and therefore they are to be abandoned in favor of complete renunciation and dedication to the path of God (*deva ayana*). Realistically, in their opinion this idea is equated to the formal acceptance of the order of *sannyasa* in their particular religious organization, the purely theoretical of philosophical contemplation on the Supreme Consciousness as the union of Atman with Brahman, or the contemplation of the activities of the Supreme Personality of Godhead in a superficial devotional attitude not supported by *jnana* or *karma*. Krishna does not advocate any of these, so those who claim to consider *Bhagavad gita* as their authority should carefully examine their views, and make sure they have not misinterpreted other texts, too.

The expression *sarvam viditva* indicates that in the Vedic vision, a *yogi* should know everything, both the material (*apara*) and the spiritual (*para*) knowledge, because he needs a sufficient understanding of both in order to work within this body, within this universe, and render a useful and favorable service to God, as stated in the *bhakti* literature (*Bhakti rasamrita sindhu*.1.1.11) as *anukulyena krishna-anusilanam bhaktir uttama*, "supreme *bhakti* consists of the activities that are favorable to the service to Krishna".

The adjective *anukula* ("favorable") balances the other affirmation in the same verse according to which pure *bhakti* should be from selfish/ dualistic (*anya*, "other") personal desires (*anya-abhilasita sunyam*) and not overpowered or covered by *jnana* and *karma*. This statement could confuse some materialistic minds into thinking that a pure devotee can, or should, be ignorant or stupid and lazy or irresponsible. In the verse quoted above, *jnana-karmady anavritam* means "not covered (overwhelmed, obstructed) by *jnana* and *karma*". Of course we must be careful to avoid arid/ theoretical academic attitude and attachment to social expectations within one's religious community, because these may become obstacles to sincere devotion. But if you totally remove *jnana* and *karma* (knowledge and sense of responsibility in honoring one's duties) you do not get *uttama bhakti* ("supreme devotion") consisting in *anukulyena krishnanusilanam* ("a behavior that is properly in accordance with the favorable service to Krishna"). We will instead get the foolish and irresponsible behavior of the *prakṛita saḥajyas* ("materialistic simpletons"), the kind of people that Rupa Gosvami described in his *Bhakti rasamrita sindhu* as "unnecessary disturbance to society". We should never forget that the original statement of this logical thread (8.24) subordinated the description of the two paths (the *sukla* and the *krishna*) to the preliminary realization of Brahman, which requires sufficient *jnana* and *vairagya* to destroy all material delusions to begin with.

The knowledge of Brahman (that is the same *tattva* also called Paramatma and Bhagavan) is also the pre-requisite mentioned in verse 2.46 with the expression *brahmanasya vijanatah*, "a person who really knows Brahman". That verse, too, expressed a sense of greater scope and inclusion in the direct knowledge of Brahman as compared to the various branches of knowledge contained in the different Vedic scriptures (*sarvesu vedesu*). Here in this verse the same idea is expressed by the word *atyeti*, that means "surpasses" but also "includes", as

a greater number automatically includes the smaller numbers. Again, this does not mean that we should discard the smaller numbers and throw them away, thinking they are opponents, rivals, or obstacles to the existence or glory of the greater number.

Thus, as long as the *yogi* remains properly situated in the *buddhi* or *viveka* - the ability to distinguish *sat* from *asat*, *dharma* from *adharma*, there is no need of rejecting the knowledge of the structure and functions of the universe, especially since we still are in this universe and we need to work with it.

Precisely for this reason, in later chapters of *Bhagavad gita* Krishna will dedicate much time and energy in detailing about the three *gunas* and similar subjects that would appear to be "material".

Chapter 9 Raja guhya yoga The Yoga of the supreme secret

The supreme secret of *Bhagavad gita* is pure devotion to the Supreme Personality of Godhead. It is not the cheap and superficial devotion of materialistic simpletons, but the pure love of those selfless souls who have come to this level through the path already traced by Krishna in the previous chapters.

Such path is so sublime, simple and clear that it can be followed successfully by everyone, including those who are less qualified materially in terms of erudition, austerity, ritual purity and so on.

In chapter 1, Krishna utilized the disillusionment expressed by Arjuna to move our attention from the ordinary material concerns to the pursuit of spiritual knowledge and realization. In chapter 2, Krishna clearly explained what is the difference between the temporary material body and the eternal transcendental spirit soul, called *atman*. In chapter 3, the *yoga* of action is explained, by which we can work on the spiritual level while still living in the material body and world - performing our duties selflessly, as an act of worship to the Supreme, or *yajna* (sacred action). This could be called the ABC of Self realization.

The next group of chapters takes us deeper into the understanding of the transcendental science. Chapter 4 teaches that adequate knowledge (*jnana*) is required in order to remain in spiritual transcendental consciousness, for our own benefit and for the benefit of society in general. Chapter 5 explains the importance of genuine detachment (*vairagya*), also called renunciation (*sannyasa*) - something that is not limited to superficial appearances. Chapter 6 unites the application of knowledge and the development of genuine detachment, to guide us into the practice of true meditation, consisting in engaging the mind in the service of the Supreme.

The next chapters bring meditation to a new level: from theory into practice (*vijnana*) as explained in chapter 7, that is also called devotion (*bhakti*), consisting in seeing the Supreme Personality of Godhead as the source and support of all manifestations, material and spiritual. Chapter 8 continues to elaborate on the meditation on the Supreme, especially in preparation for the moment when we will be able to leave the present body, so that we can remain on the liberated platform. Chapter 9 reveals how the Supreme Consciousness manifests through his divine energies, and how we can always concentrate on this consciousness and attain full perfection.

श्रीभगवानुवाच ।

śrībhagavānuvāca ।

इदं तु ते गुह्यतमं प्रवक्ष्याम्यनसूयवे ।

ज्ञानं विज्ञानसहितं यज्ज्ञात्वा मोक्ष्यसेऽशुभात् ॥ ९-१ ॥

idaṁ tu te guhyatamaṁ pravakṣyāmyanasūyave | jñānaṁ vijñānasahitaṁ yajñātvā mokṣyase'śubhāt || 9-1 ||

sri-bhagavan: the wonderful Lord; *uvaca*: said; *idam*: this; *tu*: but; *te*: to you; *guhyatamam*: the most secret; *pravakṣyami*: I will explain; *anasuyave*: to the non-envious; *jnanam*: knowledge; *vijnana*: wisdom; *sahita*: united; *yat*: that; *jnatva*: (by) knowing; *mokṣyase*: you will become free; *asubhat*: from all inauspiciousness.

The Lord said: "I will explain to you this supreme secret, because you are not envious. By knowing (reality) with/ through this theoretical and practical knowledge, you will be free from all inauspiciousness."

All along the *Bhagavad gita*, the text repeats that Krishna is Sri Bhagavan, the wonderful Supreme Personality of Godhead, and not a mere human being. The knowledge we find in *Gita* has an extraordinary value because it opens for us the door into the consciousness of the Personality of Godhead, which is the precisely the characteristic that defines God. Krishna is God - not because he says so, or someone else says so, but because of what he says about the perception of Reality: an unlimited dimension of consciousness that covers everything that exists. *Vasudeva sarvam iti* (7.19). This is the supreme secret: the secret of Krishna Consciousness. The word *guhyatama* ("the most secret") is the superlative form of the adjective *guhya* ("secret"), while the comparative is *guhyataram* ("more secret"). *Bhagavata Purana* (2.9.31) also offers homage to the supreme secret (*jnanam parama guhyam*), that is the Transcendental Consciousness expressed respectively as *jnana* (the study of material and spiritual natures), *vijnana* (the practical application and realization of knowledge), *rahasya* (the attraction and dedication to the divine consciousness) and *tad anga* (the supreme Consciousness himself). Translated into the technical *bhakti* language, *jnana* corresponds to the preliminary stage of *sadhana* or *vaidhi bhakti*, *vijnana* to the *sambandha* (establishment of a personal relationship) with the manifestation of the Supreme Guru in everybody's heart as the specific form of Krishna called Madana

Mohana, *rahasya* to the *abhidheya* or actual devotional service to the form of Krishna called Govinda, and *tad anga* to the *prajoyana* or the attainment of the permanent union with the form of Krishna called Gopinatha.

The concept of *guhyam* is also confirmed in other verses of *Bhagavata Purana* such as in 11.11.49: the *paramam guhyam* ("greatest secret") that can be given only to a person who is not envious - a friend (*sakha*) and a servant (*bhritya*) of God. Interestingly, this verse in the *Bhagavata* uses the definition *su-gopyam* ("very confidential") associated to the definition *paramam guhyam*. We can comment here that the word *gupta* ("hidden") comes from the same root. Sometimes the best way of keeping a secret is to put it in full view, but covered by a layer of illusory energy, and this is exactly what Krishna does (4.6, 7.13, 7.25).

This *maya* ("illusion") is based on the perception of material duality, created by the centrifugal tension called selfishness or separatism. Another definition for this centrifugal force is "envy", therefore the only way to overcome such illusion is to renounce envy: this concept was already introduced in verse 7.14 (*mam prapadyante mayam etam taranti te*, "they can overcome the illusion of *maya* by taking shelter in me").

The same idea was expressed in 7.15 (*na mam prapadyante mayayapahrita jnana*, "they do not take shelter in me because they are deluded"), 7.25 (*maya samavritah*, "I am hidden by *maya*"), 9.3 (*asraddhadhanah*, "they do not believe") and 9.11 (*avajananti mam mudha*, "they disrespect me").

Specifically, the word *anasuya* means "not envious", "not finding faults", "not malicious", "free from ill will", "free from spite". This refers to the fact that doubting and questioning must always be expressed from a sincere approach, free from any hostile motivation, from any hidden agenda. The prerequisite of being free from envy does not apply only to the relationship between the individual devotees and Krishna. It also applies to the relationship between the devotee and the *guru*, and to the relationship between the *guru* and Krishna.

It is not possible for a student to learn much if there is any envy towards the teacher, because he will not listen properly with an open mind and he will give too much importance to marginal defects of expression or to the inevitable limitations of body and mind. *Chandogya Upanishad* (6.14.2) says that one should see the qualified teacher as the personification of Knowledge (*acharyavan purusho veda*), and this means that one should strive sincerely to understand knowledge even when it is presented in a form that seems difficult to grasp, or appears to have some superficial defects due to the material package in which it is delivered.

This is confirmed in *Bhagavata Purana* 1.5.11: *abaddhavati api*, "appearing irregular". Of course we are speaking here of superficial irregularities due to the limitations of the physical body and mind, and not to adharmic activities or conclusions, therefore we must make sure that we are choosing a *guru* that has no envy towards Krishna. For example, the *guru* should not demand or expect to be worshiped instead of Krishna.

Some people are interested to use the *Gita* (or any of the many other forms of God) for their individual or collective (sectarian) aggrandizement or material benefit, rather than helping people develop that same supreme consciousness that Krishna is showing to Arjuna. This is because they want to channel the manpower and the resources of a spiritual seeker towards themselves, and maintain such power over people through a politicized or organizational hierarchical system, by giving the impression that the general mass of people can merely be ordinary followers, servants or devotees, and can never qualify for the direct attainment of the supreme consciousness.

The litmus test is the fact that they demand a person to follow them, worship them, serve them, listen to them, and obey to them unquestionably, but in exchange for such total dedication of the disciple they do not accept any real responsibility for the disciple's actual progress and attainment of the supreme realization.

These people carefully draw a line, more or less visible officially, between theory and practice, starting from the very first step in God realization, explained by Krishna in the beginning of *Bhagavad gita*: all beings are pure consciousness, and their material bodies are merely circumstantial, temporary and completely irrelevant in regard to the potential of perfect consciousness. Guiding their follower to this supreme realization, however, would make him/ her independent, therefore the fake *guru* cannot allow that, so they keep their follower strictly chained to the illusion of duality, and of bodily identification and belonging, while superficially preaching the opposite.

On the other side, Krishna in *Bhagavad gita* explains that *jnana* and *vijnana* must be perfectly consistent and work together as united, and not separated. Theoretical knowledge is not sufficient: we must come to the realization level, the practical applied wisdom that is direct perception (*aparoksha*) rather than *uparoksha* (something that is learned from others). This does not invalidate the need for the guidance of a genuine spiritual teacher, as stated by *Svetasvatara Upanishad* (6.22-23): *vedante paramam guhyam pura-kalpe pracoditam, na aprasantaya datavyam na aputraya sisyaiva va punah, yasya deve para bhakti yatha deve tatha gurau, tasyaite kathita hy arthah prakasante maha-atmanah*, "The purpose and conclusion of Vedic knowledge is the supreme secret that was explained in a previous age. It should not be given to a person who is restless (with material interests) or to one who is not as well known as one's own child or disciple. This (secret knowledge) must be transmitted only to those who have affection both towards the Lord and towards the teacher: this is the meaning that has been explained by the great souls."

राजविद्या राजगुह्यं पवित्रमिदमुत्तमम् । प्रत्यक्षावगमं धर्म्यं सुसुखं कर्तुमव्ययम् ॥ ९-२ ॥

rājavidyā rājaguhyam pavitramidamuttamam | pratyakṣāvagamam dharmyam susukham kartumavyayam || 9-2 ||

raja: king/ chief; *vidya*: knowledge; *raja*: king/ chief; *guhyam*: secret; *pavitram*: pure/ sacred; *idam*: this; *uttamam*: supreme; *pratyaksa*: by direct experience; *avagamam*: understood; *dharmyam*: in accordance to the ethical principles; *su-sukham*: very pleasurable; *kartum*: to be performed; *avyayam*: eternal/ imperishable.

"This is the king among all sciences, the king among all secrets, the highest purifier/ sanctifier. It is known through direct experience, it is dharmic, it is easy/ joyful to practice and it is imperishable/ eternal."

This is one of the most important verses of *Bhagavad gita*, extensively memorized and quoted.

The word *raja*, literally meaning "king", comes from the root *raj* (with a long *a*), meaning "to shine". In human society, the king is a person who shines with charismatic power (*tejas*) that comes from the *guna* and *karma* that define him (18.43). The word *vidya* derived

from the root *vid* - the same of the word *veda* - is generally used to refer to spiritual knowledge. Transcendental knowledge as explained in *Bhagavad gita* is the most important of all sciences, because it gives us a much better perspective of all other forms of knowledge and perception, both in this world and in the next. Without it, all other forms of knowledge become irrelevant.

The expressions *guhya* and *pratyaksha avagamam* confirm the meanings expressed in the previous verse about the need of directly experiencing this most secret knowledge of the universal Consciousness. Devotion to Krishna, or Krishna consciousness, is not merely a question of faith, but must be directly experienced, by each and every individual. Nobody can be a *vaishnava* by proxy, by power of attorney, by inheritance, by affiliation, by birth, by tradition, by legal certification, or by vote. Those who entertain such a delusional idea are simply demonstrating their total ignorance and lack of understanding about what Vishnu is.

The definition of *pavitra* includes all those *punya-phalam pradistam* (8.28) such as the study of the *Vedas*, the performance of *yajna*, *tapas* and *dana*. These meritorious and purifying activities increase our credit towards progress and realization, and destroy our karmic debts. Among all meritorious activities, spiritual knowledge and *bhakti yoga* have the strongest effect, because through Krishna consciousness we lose all separate dualistic interests and we are only acting for the universal benefit, without any trace of selfishness.

This pure consciousness destroys all karmic ties, whether they are *prarabdha karma phala* (already fructified), *aprarabdha* (not fructified yet), *kuta* (in the form of sprouts or seedlings) and *bija* (in the form of seeds). This is confirmed in *Bhagavata Purana* (6.1.15): *kecit kevalaya bhaktya vasudeva parayanah agham dhuvantanti kartsnyena niharam iva bhaskaram*, "Only through genuine *bhakti* to Vasudeva (Krishna) all results of bad activities are destroyed completely, like fog disappears when the sun comes."

The word *dharmyam* means that Krishna consciousness, *bhakti yoga* or *buddhi yoga*, is never contrary to the fundamental, eternal and universal ethical principles. If we see anyone behaving in some adharmic way or preaching adharmic conclusions, we can rest assured that s/he is not a true *bhakta* or in Krishna Consciousness: he or she must be a fraud. This is one of the most important tests to verify the genuineness of the conclusions and practices that we are asked to follow.

Anything very important expression in the verse is *su-sukham kartum*, meaning "it is performed very easily" and "it is performed very joyfully". Often this verse is quoted to support the idea that *bhakti yoga* is just about hearing and telling nice stories, singing songs and dancing, eating good food, enjoying flowers and scented incense, beautiful rituals, the attractiveness of the forms worshiped in the temple, and so on. *Bhakti yoga* does not require strict austerities or deprivation from sense enjoyment. It allows space for sense enjoyment, provided that such pleasures are dharmic and sattvic, and directly connected to Krishna as an act of worship. Later (9.27) Krishna will clearly say, "Whatever you do and eat, offer it to me." Since we can offer only sattvic and dharmic items to Krishna, there is no danger in happily accepting and consuming Krishna's *prasadam*.

However, we should not get in the mode of the entertainment "*gurus*" and take up religious life simply as a nice way to gratify our senses, because the purpose of all such activities should be Krishna's pleasure, not our personal pleasure. We get to enjoy, but only as a by-product of our service - which is the actual source of satisfaction. Everyone has experienced the fact that material sense gratification can never really satisfy the soul's hunger. People who have enough always want more, and those who have more want even more, to the point that wealthy, healthy and beautiful people commit suicide by recklessly risking their lives for a bit of adrenaline rush - bungee jumping, para gliding, free climbing, swimming with sharks, driving full speed in the wrong lane of the highway, consuming dangerous drugs, playing the Russian roulette, and pulling other similar unnecessary stunts.

It is a fact that we, as individual *jivatmas*, can find satisfaction only in service. We feel good when we have done our job or our duty properly, when we have pleased our loved ones, brought a smile on a child's face, given a present to someone who appreciates it. If we do not have customers or family members, children, friends, or a lover to serve, we may find joy in getting a dog or a cat and lovingly serve them by feeding them and taking care of all their needs, including the cleaning of their excreta.

Some people will object that it is better to be served than to serve, but that is not demonstrated by facts. What we really want is the loving reciprocation of service, something that we can only get when we serve selflessly to please a selfless and deserving person. The Supreme Personality of Godhead is the best choice. Once we attain this level of genuine *bhakti*, we lose all attraction for everything else, therefore true *bhakti* is *avyaya*, "imperishable", "permanent".

Another meaning of this word indicates that every small step of sincere devotion remains a permanent asset and is never lost even if we somehow fall back into material life before we have attained actual realization (6.40).

अश्रद्धाऽनाः पुरुषा धर्मस्यास्य परन्तप । अप्राप्य मां निवर्तन्ते मृत्युसंसारवर्त्मनि ॥ ९-३ ॥

aśraddadhānāḥ puruṣā dharmasyāśya parantapa | aprāpya mām nivartante mṛtyusamsāravartmani || 9-3 ||

asraddadhanah: those who have no faith; *purusah*: the persons; *dharmasya*: in the *dharma*; *asya*: in this; *parantapa*: o tormentor of the enemies (Arjuna); *aprapya*: without obtaining; *mam*: me; *nivartante*: they return; *mṛityu*: death; *samsara*: cycle of; *vartmani*: on the path.

"O Parantapa (Arjuna), those persons who have no faith in this *dharma* wander back to the path of *samsara* and death, without attaining me."

The *Bhagavata Purana* (11.2.42) compares the experience of *bhakti yoga* with the process of eating: at each mouthful we can feel the taste, pleasure and satisfaction of good food, and at the same time we can feel that our stomach is becoming full and our hunger is disappearing. There is no need for anybody else to tell us that we are getting our food: it is *pratyaksa avagamam*, "experienced directly".

Similarly, by the experience of *bhakti* we feel the taste and happiness of the direct personal relationship with the Supreme Personality of Godhead, we become nourished with energy, blessings and realizations, and our sufferings and material attachments gradually disappear.

Faith has a role to play in the process, but only in the beginning, when the aspirant is still unable to have the direct experience of *buddhi yoga*. One must first approach the Vedic system in the proper way, with an open mind, and acquire *jnana* and *vijnana*, *vairagya* and *punya*. To continue with the example of eating: before we can actually put the food in our mouth, we need to earn the money to purchase the ingredients, then we must get to the kitchen and cook the meal properly, and then we will be able to eat. This applies to all experiences:

even the simplest and most empirical experience initially requires a certain amount of faith because without following the instructions of an expert and investing the required time and energy, it will be impossible to actually obtain the success we desire in that particular field.

The four types of *duskritinah* that do not approach God (7.15) are all characterized by a lack of faith: the foolish gross materialist, the cynical person who has no ethical principles, one who is confused by an egotistic use of academic knowledge, and one who has chosen to be an *asura*.

The previous verse defined *bhakti* as *dharmyam*, "what is in accordance to *dharma*", and we already mentioned how genuine *bhakti* will never motivate actions that are contrary to *dharma*. In the Vedic system, all children enter the *gurukula* - the *guru*'s family - to learn *dharma* and *vidya* in theory and practice, to become able to make the proper choices during their lives. And the greatest *dharma* and *vidya* consists in raising one's consciousness to the supreme level of Krishna Consciousness, the awareness of the transcendental, eternal and universal *tattva* that is called Brahman, Paramatma and Bhagavan. This is the "me" Krishna is talking about in this verse. *Bhagavata Purana* (1.2.6) states, *sa vai pumsam paro dharmo yato bhaktir adhoksaje ahaituki apratihata yayatma suprasidati*, "The supreme *dharma* for all human beings is loving devotion (*bhakti*) to the inconceivable Lord, and this *bhakti* can completely satisfy the soul when it is selfless and constant."

It is important to note that *bhakti* must be selfless, not motivated by selfish considerations, either individual or collective. Collective or expanded selfishness means shifting one's individual selfish separatist mentality to a larger group of persons with whom one identifies on the material level, such as family, interest group, community, nation, race, or even species.

As already explained in verse 5.8, the person who possesses the true *vidya* (knowledge) is a *sama darshi* ("sees equally", without prejudice) all beings, from the qualified learned *brahmana* to the cow and elephant, and even the dog and the uncivilized human being who is accustomed to eating dogs' flesh.

Since the previous verse (9.2) clearly stated that *bhakti* is the supreme *vidya*, it stands to reason to conclude that a true devotee of Krishna will never commit any injustice against any being on the basis of material prejudice, and rather s/he will gladly and affectionately accept the cooperation of any being that is behaving in a favorable way towards *dharma*, and will see all beings as *jivatmas*, parts and parcels of the Supreme Lord.

As long as one has not realized this level of consciousness, s/he will have to go round and around the wheel of *samsara*, the cycle of births and deaths, experiencing the many different conditions of existence (*bhutani*) of all the living beings (*bhutani*), to learn how to feel the sufferings of others and to become detached from material identifications. The word compassion (*karuna*) derives from the Latin *cum-patere*, "suffering together with" and refers to the ability of a sensitive person who can feel the sufferings of other beings, without any prejudice or separatist dualism: this is also another definition for Krishna Consciousness.

Although Krishna does not identify personally with the specific beings and is not attached to their sufferings, he perfectly understands them because he lives in the hearts of all living beings.

Sometimes sensitive persons observe the sufferings of apparently innocent beings and, confused by the abrahamic cultural influence (denying the concept of reincarnation and *karma*), blame the all-powerful God for such injustices. Or, misunderstanding the concept of reincarnation and *karma*, and not knowing the Vedic principles of governance and the duties for the various categories of human beings, they feel that blaming the victims for their sufferings is nothing but a cruel joke and a justification of the unethical behaviors of those who cause damage to others.

The truth of the facts is that there is no justification whatsoever for aggression and unethical actions, and each and every *arya*, or civilized person belonging to the Vedic society, has the duty to step in and make the aggression stop, with whatever means the situation requires. *Kshatriyas* are particularly suited to this job, and therefore they are expected to fulfill this responsibility by carefully, dispassionately and wisely, applying the exact amount of force and strategy to protect the victims - without considering whether their sufferings are due to their previous *karma* or not. Giving spiritual instructions to the victims about their karmic problems is certainly not the job of the *kshatriyas*; gentle *brahmanas* can step in later, when the aggression has been averted or stopped, and compassionately help the victims overcome the shock and come to terms with the facts in a positive and progressive way.

मया ततमिदं सर्वं जगदव्यक्तमूर्तिना । मत्स्थानि सर्वभूतानि न चाहं तेष्ववस्थितः ॥ ९-४ ॥

mayā tatamidaṁ sarvaṁ jagadavyaktamūrtinā | matsthāni sarvabhūtāni na cāhaṁ teṣvavasthitāḥ || 9-4 ||

maya: by me; *tatam*: pervaded; *idam*: this; *sarvam*: all; *jagat*: world/ universe/ people/ beings; *avyakta*: non-manifested; *murtina*: by the form; *mat-sthani*: situated in me; *sarva-bhutani*: in all beings/ in all existences; *na*: not; *ca*: and; *aham*: I; *tesu*: in them; *avasthitah*: situated/ contained.

"All this universe is pervaded by me in my non-manifested form. All beings exist in me, but I am not in them."

In this verse Krishna is briefly explaining what Krishna Consciousness is.

The sum total of the consciousness of all the beings and life conditions and existences in the universe is only a part of Krishna's Consciousness, as it corresponds with the Brahman and Paramatma consciousness. Krishna is also the Consciousness of Bhagavan, that is the origin and foundation of them all (*brahmano hi pratisthaham*, 14.27, *aham sarvasya prabhavah*, 10.8, *sarvasya hr̥di sannivistho* 15.5).

The expression *avasthitah* ("not contained", "not limited") specifically says that Krishna Consciousness is greater than the consciousness of all beings together. All beings exist in this supreme Consciousness, but the supreme Consciousness is not limited to them.

Another extremely interesting expression in this verse is *avyakta murti*, "non-manifested form". This may look like a contradiction in terms, because a form is usually considered as "manifested"... if something is not manifested, how can it have a form? The answer is that the Sanskrit words *vyakta* and *avyakta*, or "manifested" and "non-manifested" have a more complex significance that applies respectively to the ordinary material manifestation and to the eternal spiritual existence, that both have forms.

The difference is that the spiritual form is made of consciousness, and therefore it is perfectly directed by intelligence and deliberation. This means it is eternal (non subject to change), full of knowledge and bliss; it is the ideal form, a sort of conceptual blue print of reality, that becomes visible when the observer is properly tuned in with the appropriate vibrational frequency of awareness. As Krishna says in *Gita*, when he has "divine eyes" (*divya caksu*, 11.8). On the other hand the *vyakta* form is a temporary and circumscribed form expressed through the universal laws of material nature, from the smallest living being to the immense *Virata rupa* that includes the entire material universe itself.

In this verse, Krishna says that the *vyakta* form of the *Virata rupa* is pervaded by the *avyakta* form of the Supreme Consciousness - just like the individual consciousness of the *jivatman* pervades the entire body. This is the important correspondence between microcosm and macrocosm: "as above, so below". For this reason, the teachings of *Bhagavad gita* start with the knowledge of the nature of the *atman* compared to the material body that constitutes its vehicle and house.

Also the *Mahabharata*, in the *Vishnu sahasra nama* (*Mahabharata, dana dharma parva*, 189) lists the name *amurtiman*, "who has no form", in the same passage together with the apparently contradictory names *visvamurti* ("whose form is the universe"), *mahamurti* ("the great/ greatest form"), *diptamurti* ("radiant form"), *anekamurti* ("innumerable forms"), *satamurti* ("hundreds of forms"), as well as *avyakta*. This rather difficult concept, of the "form of the formless", has created a famous controversy between two different perspectives of the same Transcendental Reality in regard to the existence of the material manifestation - whether it is a transformation of God (*parinama*) or a delusional perception (*vivarta*).

Parinama vadis and *vivarta vadis* have been debating for a rather long time, just like the various proponents of the *siddhantas* ("conclusions") called *advaita* ("non-dualism" or "monism") and *dvaita* ("dualism"), generally described as "impersonalists" and "personalists" respectively. Here is the origin of the long controversy between the supporters of the *advaita* ("non-dual") philosophy and the *dvaita* ("dual") philosophy, Actually the contradiction between the two perspectives is simply due to a lack of understanding of the subject. If we sincerely want to understand the *tattva*, we must follow the path of the *mahajanas* (*mahajano yena gatah sah panthah, Mahabharata, vana parva* 313.117), the great *acharyas*, who have elaborated on this problem to help us overcome the limitations of the dualistic material logic.

Adi Shankara has explained the nature of Brahman simply as *advaita*, "non dual", which is amply confirmed also in *Bhagavad gita* and *Upanishads*. The great *acharyas* who appeared later have continued by presenting the same Knowledge in perspectives that are slightly different from each other, so that we can have a vision that is as multi-dimensional as possible. Ramanuja, who appeared some hundreds of years after Adi Shankara, proposed the vision called *visista advaita*, "non-duality characterized by variety". More than one century later, Madhva presented his perspective called *visista dvaita*, "duality with variety", that constitutes an extreme vision, at the opposite side of the *kevala advaita* ("pure and simple non-duality"). The perspectives called *dvaita advaita* or "simultaneous duality and non-duality" and *suddha dvaita* or "spiritual duality" have been presented respectively by Nimbarka and Visnusvami, the other two *acharyas* that are most famous for their teachings on *Vedanta*.

Still more recently we find Chaitanya's perspective, defined as *acintya bhedabheda*, or "inconceivable simultaneous diversity and non-diversity (or duality and non-duality)" that rightly puts the issue of Brahman realization on a level that goes beyond mere intellectualism. In fact, Chaitanya preached the primary importance of *bhakti*, devotion towards the Supreme Brahman in its forms of Paramatma and Bhagavan, that enables us to cross the abyss of intellectual elaborations beyond which we can find the pure perception of Reality.

It is important to understand that according to the perspective of the genuine *acharyas*, the differences of opinions expressed in their commentaries are meant to offer a variety of perspectives (*darshana*) on the same reality (*tattva*), that are not in competition between themselves, but rather should help us to widen our field of understanding by reconciling apparent differences, exactly like the statements of the various genuine scriptures. Of course this applies only to the teachings of the realized souls, not to the mental speculations of those "empirical" philosophers that are simply grappling for answers or want to establish their beliefs in a dogmatic form, as an "absolute truth", considered as such only because it destroys other truths by stamping them as falseness *a priori* because they are presented by the "opponents".

न च मत्स्थानि भूतानि पश्य मे योगमैश्वरम् । भूतभृन्न च भूतस्थो ममात्मा भूतभावनः ॥ ९-५ ॥

na ca matsthāni bhūtāni paśya me yogamaīśvaram । bhūtabhṛnna ca bhūtastho mamātmā bhūtabhāvanah ॥ 9-5 ॥

na: not; *mat-sthani*: situated in me; *bhutani*: living beings/ states of being; *pasya*: look; *me*: my; *yogam*: of *yoga*; *aisvaram*: control/ glory/ power/ opulence; *bhuta-bhrit*: the support/ sustenance of all beings; *na*: not; *ca*: and; *bhuta-sthah*: in the being/ (material) existence; *mama*: my; *atma*: the Atman/ the Self; *bhuta-bhavanah*: the origin of (all) being/ existence.

"(At the same time) the beings are not in me. See my divine yoga! I maintain/ support/ create/ contain all existences/ beings, but I am not contained in the various beings, (because/ although) I am myself the source/ creation of all beings."

In the previous verse Krishna said, "all beings are in me, but I am not limited to them". Now he is saying, "I am distinct from these beings" and "these beings are not necessarily conscious of me". By applying the two meanings of *bhuta* as "living beings" and "conditions of being", we can expand the elaborations on the significance of this verse without any contradictions.

The *avyakta murti* of Krishna is not directly engaged or concerned in this material universe, as everything is done automatically through the laws of nature. Contrarily to what some people think, God is not some old dude living in the clouds that spends all his time watching what people are doing, to reward those who are faithful to him and punish those who are not. What is he doing then? He lives in the spiritual dimension, where the consciousness is focused on loving exchanges, and is engaged in attracting all souls. Therefore the name Krishna is sometimes associated with the root *karsh*, that means "attracting", and translated as "the all-attractive". From the same root comes the name Sankarshana, that is also applied to the principle of gravitation as the most important powers in the universe - immediately after the Consciousness.

It is also interesting to note that the color black, described in connection with Krishna's complexion, is the sum total of all colors, the most concentrated form of the power in the universe, as in the black holes - the most mysterious objects contemplated by scientists.

The expression *bhuta-asthah* means "staying within the beings", while *bhuta bhrit* means "supporting the beings", and *bhuta-bhavana* "causing the existence of the beings". *Bhagavata Purana* (1.11.38) confirms, *etad isanam isasya prakriti-stho api tad gunaih, na yujyate sada atma-sthah yatha buddhih tad-asraya*, "Although the Lord is situated in his nature, he is never affected by her qualities, and similarly also the devotees who take shelter of that intelligence remain unaffected by matter."

The expression *yogam aisvaram* is very interesting. It will be used again in 11.8 to refer to the vision of the universal form, or the form of the universal consciousness, when Krishna tells Arjuna that he is going to show him. One could translate it as "mystic opulence", but this does not help us to understand why Krishna speaks about *yoga* as the connection between him and the devotee, also considering that almost as often the same version translates *yoga* as "devotional service". In previous chapters and verses, Krishna has always used the word *yoga* with reference to the *sadhana* and meditation that the individual *jivatman* performs with the purpose of attaining a higher level of consciousness, or more specifically to "unite" with the universal Consciousness. In fact the word *yoga* is mentioned so many times in *Bhagavad gita* that generally *Gita* is considered the most important text on *yoga*, even more important than the famous *Yoga sutras* of Patanjali. The various approaches or limbs (*angas*) of this *yoga* practice have been described as *buddhi*, *karma*, *sankhya* etc. Here we see that Krishna is applying the same definition to himself, and later (11.4, 11.9, 18.74) Krishna will be called Yogesvara, "the Lord of Yoga". This greatly expands our understanding of the concept of *yoga*, and takes us one step closer to the actual Krishna Consciousness.

The expression *pasya me*, "look at me", "see me", is particularly important in this verse as Krishna is explaining the *darsana* or *darshana*, the "vision of Reality" of which so many perspectives exist. This is why the name of Darshana is used to refer to the six most important philosophical schools in the Vedic tradition, i.e. *Nyaya* (the science of logic), *Yoga* (control of body and mind), *Sankhya* (analytical philosophy), *Vaisesika* (cosmology and physics), *Purva mimamsa* (commentaries to the *Kalpa sutra*), and *Uttara mimamsa* (also known as *Vedanta sutra*).

yatha: just like; *akasa*: in space/ ether; *sthitah*: situated; *nityam*: constantly; *vayuh*: the air; *sarvatra-gah*: that goes everywhere; *mahan*:

यथाकाशस्थितो नित्यं वायुः सर्वत्रगो महान् । तथा सर्वाणि भूतानि मत्स्थानीत्युपधारय ॥ ९-६ ॥

yathākāśasthito nityam vāyuh sarvatrago mahān | tathā sarvāṇi bhūtāni matsthānītiyupadhāraya || 9-6 ||

great; *tatha*: similarly; *sarvani*: all; *bhutani*: beings/ existences; *mat-sthani*: situated in me; *iti*: thus; *upadharaya*: (you should) try to understand.

"Understand that just like air is always (present) in space although it blows everywhere as the great (winds), similarly all the beings are situated in me."

The example presented by Krishna in this verse is particularly significant. We should really make an effort to try to deeply understand it, as Krishna is explicitly requesting.

The material element called *akasa* or *akasha* is often translated as "ether", a definition that most people are unable to understand, because it is not in their normal experience. Most people just do not bother to understand: they content themselves with mechanically repeating or "chanting" the Vedic texts, not unlike ignorant parrots, with the intention of acquiring some personal benefit called religious merits, or a good position in society, name and fame, respect from the neighbors, or even monetary profit. However, this is not what Krishna asks.

Krishna very clearly says, *upadharaya*, "make a sincere effort to understand these things", because simple mechanical recitation is not sufficient. Mere mechanical recitation it is like carrying a load of books on one's back: it is certainly a meritorious activity because in this way the books are preserved from oblivion and from the attacks of the *asuras* - who always try to destroy the visible manifestations of genuine spiritual knowledge - but it does not do much good to one's personal realization and cultivation of knowledge. If your children merely carried their textbooks up and down to school without ever reading them, you would certainly understand why they are failing their exams and you would want to teach them the proper method to study. A genuine *guru* must do the same with his/ her disciples: if s/he is not doing that, you should start to worry and seek for alternative options.

The word "etheric" or "sub-etheric" belongs to the advanced study of physics, as well as to the ancient vision of the world popular in various cultures. The average ordinary people, on the other hand, will more likely understand "ether" as the volatile flammable liquid formerly used as anesthetic and presently used as solvent and reagent.

In several ancient cultures, the definition of "ether" was explained as the element filling all the space in the universe, beyond the atmosphere of the earthly planet; this idea was also shared later by Gnostics and Rosicrucians, Alchemists, and other secret groups that continued to cultivate knowledge in medieval times in spite of the cruel and relentless persecutions they were subjected to.

In more recent times, Theosophists Helena Blavatsky, Annie Besant and Charles Webster Leadbeater described it as the fourth of the planes of existence in their cosmology (beyond solid, liquid and gaseous). This view was presented also by Alice Bailey, Rudolf Steiner and Walter John Kilner, and became an object of study in Victorian physics as *Luminiferous aether*, the medium that supports the movement of light and electromagnetic radiations. In the 20th century the concept was considered controversial and its existence "disproved", also because in the late 1880s the famous Nikola Tesla had used it to formulate the *Unidirectional Pulses* fractioning electricity into etheric energy as spatially distributed voltage, which is the primary operating principle of his Magnifying Transmitter, a truly revolutionary device that seems to be producing electricity from space itself or better from ether, that he described as a fluid dynamic structure similar to crystal but infinitely subtler.

With this understanding of the expression *akasa stha* in this verse, referred to *vayuh mahan* that is described as *sarvatra-go*, we can better elaborate on the mystic connection between Krishna and the various beings in the universe. The expression *vayu mahan* is also very interesting. The adjective *mahan*, related for example to the expression *mahat tattva*, refers to the sum total of the manifestations of the air element, not simply to ordinary gases, otherwise it would not be called *sarvatra go* ("that goes everywhere").

In Vedic literature, the word *vayu* is often applied to the *prana*, that "life air" that circulates within the body at a subtler level than the ordinary air we breathe. *Prana* runs within the subtle energy channels called *nadis* (sometimes mistranslated as "nerves") and in the *chakras* (that can be detected only by instruments similar to the Kirlian camera, photographing the aura of living organisms), where obviously there is no gas - oxygen or others. So both these realities in the universe - *akasa* and *vayu* - are extremely subtle and all-pervading, although sometimes they cannot be perceived by our ordinary senses. This makes them excellent comparison terms for Bhagavan and Atman respectively.

Also, both elements - *akasa* and *vayu* - never really touch the various objects and qualities in this universe, although they are really deeply connected to each other, and *vayu* cannot exist without *akasa*. *Vayu* can temporarily associate with them and therefore acquire temporary qualities such as smell, color (due to smoke or dust) etc, but *akasa* is never touched by them and never even comes in contact with them (*asanga*) even though it pervades everything. Another interesting point is that in the process of the manifestation of the *mahat tattva*, *akasa* generates *vayu*, which in turn generates the next element, and so on. Since the mode of this generation is sound (*śabda*), we can understand how this example offered by Krishna can apply to the connection of the *jivatmas* with *paramatma* and *brahman* through the original sound, the *pranava omkara*, the syllable Om.

We have already mentioned how the *Upanishads* and other important Vedic texts refer to the *pranava omkara* as the Atman itself, the origin of the *jivatman* and its final destination.

सर्वभूतानि कौन्तेय प्रकृतिं यान्ति मामिकाम् । कल्पक्षये पुनस्तानि कल्पादौ विसृजाम्यहम् ॥ ९-७ ॥

sarvabhūtāni kaunteya prakṛtiṁ yānti māmikām | kalpakṣaye punastāni kalpādau visṛjāmyaham || 9-7 ||

sarva-bhutani: all the beings/ existences; *kaunteya*: o son of Kunti (Arjuna); *prakritim*: into nature; *yanti*: they go; *mamikam*: my; *kalpakṣaye*: at the end of the *kalpa*; *punah*: again; *tani*: them (those same); *kalpa*: of the *kalpa*; *adau*: at the beginning; *visrijami*: I manifest; *aham*: I.

"O son of Kunti (Arjuna), all beings enter my *prakriti* at the end of the *kalpa*, and again at the beginning of the (next) *kalpa* I manifest them."

This thread of discussion already started in 8.16, answering Arjuna's question on how to remember God at the time of death, and Krishna said that death and rebirth are a normal occurrence in the material world - even at the level of Brahma. Then verse 8.17 started to illustrate the duration of the *kalpa*, the day of Brahma, that lasts 1000 cycles of *yugas* each. Verses 8.18 and 8.19 were very similar to 9.7: "At the beginning of each day what was *avyakta* (non-manifested) becomes *vyakta* (manifested) and at the beginning of the night (everything) returns into non-manifestation; all classes of beings continue to appear and disappear automatically with the cycle of day and night."

There Krishna explained how the *yogi* can choose the *sukla* path or the *krishna* path, respectively called "the path of non-return" and "the path of return" to the earthly planet. In this verse the discussion returns to the cycle of manifestation and non-manifestation of all beings, that always remain in God at all times like air remains in space. So what is actually changing with the manifestation and non-manifestation of beings?

The answer to this question is "form". Any material or spiritual form is manifested by *prakriti*, nature, the feminine principle within God that is called the Mother Goddess. Vishnu or Krishna contains both sides - the feminine and the masculine - therefore Vedic scriptures and Tradition always highlight the importance of worshiping God together with his Shakti. When the Mother Goddess is not personally visible as Lakshmi, Bhu or Nila, Radha, Sita, etc, it is the name Sri or the very form (*rupa*) of the Deity that represent the Mother Goddess and makes God perceivable. *Prakriti* is not necessarily illusory, and illusion is not necessarily contrary to the benefit of the *jivatman*, or conducive to materialistic consciousness.

The delusion of material identification and attachments is caused by *mahamaya*, "the great illusion", that encompasses even Brahma himself, the creator of this universe (*muhyanti surayah, Bhagavata Purana*, 1.1.1). On the other hand, the particular type of illusion that enables us to have a direct personal relationship with Bhagavan - the sum total of Existence - is called *yogamaya*, "the illusion for union". This is called *bahiranga shakti*, or "external power", and are identified with Mother Durga, who can either bless the living being with pure devotion (*prema bhakti*) or shackle him/her with material delusion (*ahankara* and *mamatva*). Durga also manifests in many other forms and names by which the one Mother Goddess is known and worshiped.

A secondary manifestation of Durga is the *pradhana* or *mahat tattva*, from which all the material elements (*bhuta*) are created, specifically the *pancha maha-bhuta* (ether, air, fire, water and earth) and the subtle *bhutas* (material identification, intelligence and mind) that compose the material bodies. This material nature is called *apara prakriti*, or "non-supreme nature".

Another manifestation of *prakriti* is the *antaranga shakti*, or "internal power", that manifests the spiritual forms according to the particular *rasa* or *lila* expressed and felt by Bhagavan. In this modality we find Radha, who expresses the most intimate form of Krishna's feelings and activities in *madhurya rasa*, and Lakshmi, who expresses the glorious opulence of Vishnu's feelings and activities in *aisvarya rasa*. Radha and Lakshmi manifest all the forms and core personalities (called *akshara* in 15.16) respectively in the dimensions called Goloka and Vaikuntha by the *vaishnava bhakti* literature.

The ordinary *jiva-atmans*, or *anu-atmans*, are called *tathasta shakti*, or "marginal power". They are part of the *brahmajyoti* ("the spiritual light") of Bhagavan or Paramatman, and get the opportunity to develop a fully functional spiritual body (*siddha deha* or *siddha svarupa*) through the evolution of their consciousness. Ultimately, these *jiva atmans* become *nitya siddha* or *akshara* "in the following of" one of the original core personalities in Goloka or Vaikuntha and function as their expansions, friends, servants or associates. They will never return to the material level, and the original core personalities of the spiritual world will never fall to a material level, either. The idea that someone has fallen from Goloka is therefore unfounded.

The controversy over the origin of the *jiva atmans* or *anu atmans* can be easily clarified by understanding that the Paramatman, from whose *jyoti* the *anu atmans* are created, is also a form of Vishnu, although he appears in the material world as Purusha avatara or Kshirodakasayi Vishnu. This specific form of Vishnu resides in Dhruvaloka, the polar star, that is also called Prapancika Vaikuntha,

"almost Vaikuntha", or maybe we could say "the Consulate of Vaikuntha". This is the place where Brahma comes to pray Vishnu for help when the management of the universe becomes difficult; this is where the four Kumaras arrived and had a clash with the two doorkeepers Jaya and Vijaya; this is where Durvasa Muni, Bhrigu Muni and all the other Rishis and Devas come when they want to meet Vishnu. From this place one can definitely return to the material world, either with a confused consciousness or with the sacred, pure and deliberate act of descending among conditioned souls for a mission of deliverance. Into this form of Vishnu all the beings are absorbed at the end of the *kalpa*, the day of Brahma. At the end of the life of Brahma, however, the entire universe is withdrawn back into the body of Karanodakasayi Vishnu (including Kshirodakasayi Vishnu and Garbhodakasayi Vishnu) for the time of one of his inhalations. This complete dissolution is mentioned in *Bhagavata purana* 12.4.5-6 (*dvi parardhe tvatikrante brahmanah paramesthinah tada prakritayah sapta kalpante pralayaya vai, esa prakritiko rajan pralayo yatra liyate anda-kosas tu sanghato vighata upasadite sanghata*), where it is said that all the elements are fused into the universal egg (*anda kosa*) which is then reabsorbed by Vishnu.

प्रकृतिं स्वामवष्टभ्य विसृजामि पुनः पुनः । भूतग्राममिमं कृत्स्नमवशं प्रकृतेर्वशात् ॥ ९-८ ॥

prakṛtiṁ svāmaṣṭabhya visṛjāmi punaḥ punaḥ | bhūtagrāmamimam kṛtsnamavaśaṁ prakṛtervaśāt || 9-8 ||

prakritim: nature; *svam*: own; *avastabhya*: by entering; *visrijami*: I manifest/ I create; *punah punah*: again and again; *bhuta-gramam*: the categories of beings/ the aggregate of beings; *imam*: these; *kritsnam*: completely; *avasam*: without control/ controlled automatically; *prakriteh*: by nature; *vasat*: under the control.

"Entering my own *prakriti*, I repeatedly manifest (create), the entire sum total of all beings, that is automatically under the power of *prakriti*."

The word *visrijami* ("I manifest") is interesting because it applies to the manifestation of the beings from the Lord, while in 4.7 a similar (but not identical) word, *srijami*, applied to the manifestation of the *avatara* or the visible form of God within this world. The prefix *vi* used in the construction of Sanskrit words is a shortened form of *visesa* ("differentiation") or *vigata* ("devoid of") and can indicate specificity, difference, a practical function, application (as in *vijnana*), separation, absence, also in a negative sense (as in the word *vikarma*, "bad actions"). In this case, *vi* brings the meaning of "separate manifestation" as applied to the material phenomena, as opposed to the spiritual manifestation of the *avatars* that are not separate or different from the original Personality of Godhead.

The word *avastabhya* means "controlling, leaning, resting, initiating, igniting, entering", and it indicates the act of will, the resolution to perform an action, also called *kratu* or *sankalpa*. This *kratu* (will power) is one of the fundamental factors of success in action, together with *daksha* (skill), *manisha* (inspiration) and *medha* (wisdom). *Chandogya Upanishad* (6.2.3) expresses this act of will (*sa kratum kurvita*) with the famous aphorism *eko bahu syam*, "I will become many". In this verse Krishna continues to explain the creation of the various beings or conditions of being within the material universe, that happens simultaneously, for all species of life, although during the long period of manifestation of the universe some species may appear or disappear (evolve or become extinct) due to temporary circumstances.

The expression *prakrite vasat* means, "under the control of *prakriti*", indicating that nature is the active principle of the manifestation, development and dissolution of the beings - both the living entities and the conditions of being - without the direct participation of the *purusha*. In other words, "Mother is the Boss." In the previous commentaries we have already given some explanation about the meaning of *prakriti*, and this verse gives us the opportunity to elaborate more.

The fundamental concept in Vedic culture, *dharmā*, expresses the ideal of harmony and selfless cooperation for the support, prosperity and progress of the collectivity. All the members of society are expected to work together seamlessly, like the various limbs of one single body, described in the famous *Purusha sukta* hymn (3.14-15, *Svetasvatara Upanishad*). It is not easy for western conventional academia to understand this concept, because for many centuries western society has been poisoned by the asuric attitude of inequality and exploitation, that created the hostility between social classes and even between genders. The natural condition of human life is ideally shaped by the individual tendencies, qualities and skills (4.13) for the division of work. In all societies or human groups there are individuals who have a greater inclination to acquire knowledge and a greater capacity to understand things: these are called intellectuals and are compared to the head of the social body. Similarly, those who are inclined to defend others, and have the strength to do so, are called warriors and are compared to the arms. Those who are unable to perform these functions can at least provide the material necessities of life, take care of good animals and cultivate useful plants, and supply functional tools and objects: these are called merchants or entrepreneurs, and are compared to the belly of the social body. Those who are only able to follow orders and depend on others for their sustenance are called laborers, and are compared to the legs and feet, that carry the others around and carry out the directions of their employers. Similarly, by natural arrangement women are structured to give birth and nurture children, educate them and train them in the basic social skills and ethical values, and therefore they tend to take care of the home as the environment where the children can live safely and happily.

Ordinarily, as "queen of the house", the woman watches over the cooking of the food, the ministration of water, the necessities of all the family members, and the service of the family Deities - all activities that can be easily woven into a good home caring schedule. According to this arrangement and task division, the man of the family has the duty to provide whatever is available outside the house, such as food provisions and other things, according to his abilities.

Like in the natural society, in Vedic society there is no competition for power and no exploitation of one member by another, and no strict limitations in regard to the roles: young women who have no children can choose to engage in activities that are not connected with children and home-making, and even mothers can leave their children in the care of responsible persons and join their husbands in their activities if they so desire. There is ample evidence that such choices are (or were) perfectly respected and even admired, and not only in times of emergency. However, because there is no competition or hostility between the genders (or the classes), individuals could engage in the activities they were naturally able and happy to perform, for the benefit of the collectivity and not to demonstrate something to themselves or to others, or to gain a modicum of dignity or respect or freedom, or some power over their own lives. On the other hand, such problems are very evident in societies shaped and governed according to the sociology models created by mainstream academic authorities.

The original Vedic society is not patriarchal or matriarchal, simply because there is no opposition between men and women: just like in the Godhead, the masculine side and the feminine side are one harmonious unit, and their diversity is functional simply for the increase of the pleasure of both, as in a dance or in intercourse. In the same way, *brahmanas* and *kshatriyas* do not try to rule one over the other, but simply share the responsibilities towards society and work according to their abilities, in a selfless way (2.47) as Krishna explains very clearly in *Bhagavad gita*. When everyone works with the same purpose and motivation, and tasks are distributed according to functionality and actual abilities, the members of the group are not concerned about power games, petty interests and selfishness, personal gains and losses, position, hierarchy, bureaucracy, etiquette, definitions of rights and duties, prejudice, conventional expectations, conformism, imposed conformity to roles or the other artificial devices that create problems in contemporary societies. They just work together, as a family, as a team, for a common purpose.

As microcosmic manifestation of the macrocosm, or "part and parcel of God", each human being has a feminine side and a masculine side, incarnated in the two hemispheres of the brain that control the two halves of the body. The prevalence of one of the two energies in the subtle body of the individual at the time of birth determines which gender the body will be - boy or girl. Sometimes the two energies are more balanced or indecisive, and thus the individual develops with a detached mental disposition, or a "trans-sexual" tendency. In any case, the purpose of *yoga* consists in learning how to balance these two hemispheres perfectly and uniting the two energies in the Sacred Marriage within one's own body, with the purpose to overcome duality and the feeling of need and dissatisfaction that naturally comes with it.

This *ha-tha yoga* ("the union of the masculine and feminine") is the practice of balance in one's identification, and is connected to the realization of Brahman; while materialistically imbalanced people see the world of duality as a fighting arena, where "one side" must fight viciously to prevail and dominate "the other side", because they project their imbalances on the external reality. Thus the problem expands into society and negatively impacts the minds of other people, reinforcing the vicious circle and creating male chauvinism and extreme feminism - just like it creates extreme totalitarian political ideologies that equally cause sufferings and damage to human beings, even if they appear to have opposite theories on how to achieve perfection in society.

न च मां तानि कर्माणि निबध्नन्ति धनञ्जय । उदासीनवदासीनमसक्तं तेषु कर्मसु ॥ ९-९ ॥

na ca mām tāni karmāṇi nibadhnanti dhanañjaya | udāsīnavadāsīnamasaktam teṣu karmasu || 9-9 |
na: not/ never; ca: and; mam: me; tani: them/ these; karmani: activities; nibadhnanti: bind; dhananjaya: o conqueror of wealth (Arjuna); udasina-vat: in a neutral position; asinam: situated; asaktam: detached; tesu: in those; karmasu: activities.

"O Dhananjaya, I am not bound by such actions, as I am situated neutrally, without any attraction for such activities."

As we were explaining in the previous commentary, Bhagavan is not directly involved in the process of creation, maintenance and dissolution of the universe, in the manifestation of the beings, and in their control and education, because that is the work of the Prakriti: Mother is the Boss.

As exemplified by the symbolic representation of Mother Kali that stands on Shiva's body, Prakriti is the principle of action, while Purusha is the principle of consciousness or feeling. This is confirmed in 13.21 (*karya-karana-kartritve hetuh prakritir ucyate, purushah sukha-dukhhanam bhoktritve hetur ucyate*) and applies both to the individual *purusha* and to the supreme *purusha*. Even more clearly, 3.27 says that only a *vimudha* believes he is performing the action, while in fact it is the *prakriti* that does everything.

Again, 13.32 repeats that the Paramatman, the Supreme Purusha, does not take part in any activity and simply remains as a witness, an advisor and a friendly helper to the individual soul directing him/ her on the path to realization (*anaditvan nirgunatvat paramatmayam avyayah, sarira-stho 'pi kaunteya na karoti na lipyate*). In 4.14 Krishna clearly said so: *na mam karmani limpanti na me karma-phale spriha, iti mam yo 'bhijanati karmabhir na sa badhyate*.

The expression *udasina vat*, "sitting like a neutral (observer)" is very clear in this regard. *Mundaka Upanishad* (3.1.1) gives the example of the two birds, inseparable friends, that are sitting on the same tree. One is busy eating the fruits and the other is just sitting and watching, but is always ready to illuminate his friend and offer him the perfect satisfaction of all desires on the level of the consciousness. Because real happiness can be attained only on the level of the consciousness, not through the contact of the senses with the material sense objects. The Lord is called *aptakama*, "one whose desires are all fulfilled" from the very beginning, and the path to happiness for the individual *atman* leads inwards, into the *atman* itself (2.41, 2.45, 2.55, 3.17, 3.43, 4.41, 5.26, 6.5, 6.10, 6.15, 6.18, 6.19, 6.20, 6.25, 6.26, 6.28, 6.29, 6.32, 7.18, 12.11, 13.25, 13.29, 14.25, 15.11).

The example of the etheric space supporting air offered in 9.6 will be repeated in 13.33 to reiterate that neither the individual *purusha* nor the supreme *purusha* are really touched by the material influences and activities. The same point was also stated in 5.14 where it was said that all actions are performed by nature only. Consequently, the Lord is not concerned by the actions or the merits of the individual souls, but with their consciousness. (5.15, 9.29) and specifically with their efforts to unite with the universal Consciousness.

Of course, the fact that Bhagavan is not directly involved or attached to the manifestation of the beings does not mean that he is not conscious of them: actually, Bhagavan is the supreme Consciousness, and therefore he knows very well everything - every situation, every action, every thought and every feeling of all beings in the past, in the present and in the future. This is the Universal Consciousness, and it is characterized by the same qualities of consciousness manifested in the microcosm: intelligence, identity, personality, will power, relationships, compassion, and so on.

In fact, Bhagavan is *rasa*, "sentiment", or "taste", as stated in the *Upanishads*: *yad vai tat sukritam raso vai sah, rasam hy evayam labdhva anandi bhavati, ko hy evanyat kah pranyat, yad esa akasa anando na syat esa hy eva anandayati* (*Taittiriya Upanisad* 2.7). *Rasa* and *ananda* are strictly connected, and they are the purpose that every fragment of God is trying to attain, the ultimate Reality that transcends the world of changes. Because the Supreme Consciousness is *sat* (eternity), *cit* (awareness) and *ananda* (happiness), he is not attracted or interested in the changes of the world. Even the embodied soul can lose interest in the objects of the world when he is tasting actual happiness (*vishaya vinivartante niraharasya dehinah rasa-varjam raso 'py asya param drishtva nivartate*, 2.59)

The *Vishnu Purana* explains the Transcendental Reality of *sac-cid-ananda* as connected to the attributes of *hladini sandhini samvit*, the threefold manifestation of the one *para prakriti* (*hladini sandhini samvit tvayy eka sarva-samsraye*) while the material duality of joy and sorrow (*hlada tapa kari mishra*) does not affect him (*tvayi no guna-varjita*) because they belong to the *bahiranga shakti*, the external manifestation of the *Prakriti*.

The *Upanishads* clearly state that Bhagavan, the Supreme Consciousness, has many *shaktis* that are in charge of all the activities: *na tasya karyam karanam ca vidyate, na tat-samas cabhyadhikas ca drsyate, parasya saktir vividhaiva srutyate, svabhaviki jnana-bala-kriya ca* (*Svetasvatara Upanisad* 6.7-8). These energies are also known as *jnana*, *bala* and *kriya*, or "knowledge", "strength" and "duty/ action".

Krishna calls Arjuna *dhananjaya*, "conqueror of wealth", to remind him that he collected tributes from other kings during the *asvamedha yajna*, but not for selfish purposes: those resources were meant to finance the protection of the kingdom. Each individual has a task in society according to the *guna* and *karma*, and such task is called "duty": the activities performed are therefore determined by the nature of each individual and carried out by that same nature, that same *shakti* that consists of determination (will power), strength (physical and mental), and intelligence (wisdom, knowledge etc). What is the individual *purusha*'s responsibility, then, if everything is done by the *prakriti*?

The *purusha* can modify his/her own level of consciousness, which will bring him/her under the shelter of a different function of *prakriti*: either the material consciousness or the spiritual consciousness; *sattva* rather than *rajas* or *tamas*; *bhakti* rather than *ahankara*.

Everything else will fall into place through the action of nature.

मयाध्यक्षेण प्रकृतिः सूयते सचराचरम् । हेतुनानेन कौन्तेय जगद्विपरिवर्तते ॥ ९-१० ॥

mayādhyaṅśeṇa prakṛtiḥ sūyate sacarācaram | hetunānena kaunteya jagadviparivartate || 9-10 ||

maya: by me; *adhyakṣena*: by the instruction/ direction; *prakritiḥ*: nature; *suyate*: manifests/ gives birth; *sa*: together with; *cara*: those that move; *acaram*: those that do not move; *hetuna*: for the purpose; *anena*: this; *kaunteya*: o son of Kunti (Arjuna); *jagad*: the world; *viparivartate*: goes around/ keeps working.

"O son of Kunti (Arjuna), under my order this *prakriti* manifests all things, both moving and non-moving; by this cause the universe revolves/ functions/ is created cyclically."

After clearly explaining that all actions are performed by *prakriti* and all beings are manifested automatically under the control of *prakriti* herself, Krishna states that such manifestation happens under the direction of the consciousness - the *purusha*. We should remember here that the individual *purusha* can be manifested either in a male or in a female body: still it remains a *purusha*. Here we also need to remember that the *purusha* is the consciousness (feelings, sentiments etc) while *prakriti* is the instrument or medium for action.

Consciousness gives the direction for the manifestation of the action through the *prakriti*: therefore Bhagavan is the supreme controller, and similarly the individual soul is responsible for his/ her choices - if not in the short run, certainly in the long run, because even the influence of the *gunas* and *karma* that determine our present choices can be modified by the action of consciousness through the proper application of the will power, strength (or effort) and dutiful action (*jnana*, *bala*, *kriya*).

The word *adhyakṣena* includes the meanings of direction, order, supervision, desire, without any direct involvement in the action. Still, this concept is summarized as "control", both at the supreme level and at the individual level. The *purusha* always has a choice about where to go in the *prakriti*, but while the Lord is always perfectly liberated and therefore always in control of the *prakriti*, the individual soul is subject to the power and control of the *prakriti* (*prakriteh vasat* 9.8) because of the limited power of his/ her consciousness. So the individual *purusha* can only choose whether s/he wants to be controlled by the *prakriti* in the material mode (*Mahamaya*) or in the spiritual mode (*Yogamaya*).

The word *hetu* indicates "cause, reason, purpose", and as an act of the pure consciousness, it triggers the activities of the *prakriti* and makes the world go round, in the *samsara* or cycles of creation and dissolution. One of the important questions that a human being can ask is "why all this?"... "what is the purpose of the world?". After the primary question "what am I?", the issue of the purpose of the material manifestation is certainly the most universal and eternal concern of all intelligent persons.

Some ideologies avoid the question by claiming that God's will is mysterious, and that it is impossible to know why he created the universe. So people may conclude that perhaps God was feeling lonely, perhaps he wanted some followers and worshipers, or he just acted on a whim. Some say that it is impossible to know why the universe exists - or that everything happens by chance, by the random combination of elements which in turn were created by chaos from a previously existing matter for whose creation there is no explanation possible. Often these ideologies conclude that the universe is simply a product of lust - the sensual attraction between the male and the female bodies - and is simply meant to fulfill the desire for lust and greed. This asuric mentality (16.8-10) prompts the conditioned souls to exploit and destroy for their own selfish purpose, without caring for others or for some higher or universal purpose. The Vedic version is rather different.

As the original source of the universe is Consciousness (characterized by existence, awareness and happiness as *sat cit ananda*), the purpose of the cosmic manifestation is to create opportunities for the Consciousness fragments, the *jiva atmans* or *anu atmans*, to develop in existence, awareness and happiness. Why, then, we find so much suffering in the universe, if its purpose is the tasting of happiness?

The answer is that the world would be a much better place if people simply followed the original map provided with it: learn how to use the universe first by understanding *dharma* and *vidya* in theory and practice, then engage in an appropriate and civilized professional occupation in a selfless way, just for the satisfaction of doing a good job: if everybody in society does their part in the proper way, prosperity comes automatically.

After *dharma* and *artha*, the third *purushartha* in this universe is *kama*: the honest and joyful pursuit of sense gratification; as this pursuit is based on dharmic or ethical foundations, it does not entail sufferings for others and is not damaging for one's body and mind. After

having enjoyed life in the fullest possible way, free from guilt and mental deviations or imbalances, a human being naturally engages in the pursuit of the highest possible happiness, found on the platform where one is liberated from all material conditionings.

It is true that the nature of this cosmic manifestation is defined as a place of suffering and impermanence, *duhkhalayam asasvatam* (8.15), but ideally this simply refers to the fact that everything in this world has a beginning and an end, and therefore those who are attached to identifications and possessions or affiliations will have to suffer when they lose what they liked and when they get what they do not like - such as heat or cold (2.14, 6.7, 12.18). One should simply learn to tolerate. This does not mean that one should passively accept sufferings without taking action to mitigate or solve it (as many misinformed people think). The endowment of intelligence that comes with the human form of life includes the ingenuity and resourcefulness required to build proper clothing to alleviate the impact of heat and cold, and proper housing where one can live comfortably both in the summer and in the winter. Even the loss of youth or health can and should be counteracted with appropriate methods (as described for example in the *Ayur Veda*), but it is not possible to completely eliminate old age and disease, or death. Trying to fight them or dominate them will simply bring more and more misery to our lives, individually and collectively.

The impermanence of material conditions is a fundamental characteristic of the material manifestation, and it is meant to push us forward, to improve ourselves, expand our consciousness, and set higher goals and objectives for our existence. Even considering the defect of impermanence, this process is supposed to be joyful, like the blossoming of a flower, or the graduation course of a good university student, or the developing of a good relationship between balanced, caring and responsible persons.

However, man should understand that it is not in his power to stop the cycle of seasons itself. He can mess with it - as he has done, causing dangerous climate changes - but he cannot really dominate it to his advantage. The best thing one can do is to "dovetail" one's own consciousness by tuning it into the supreme Consciousness and working in harmony with it, like a swimmer that decides to follow the current of the river instead of trying to go upstream: in this way we become able to actually enjoy the changes and appreciate summer and winter for their own characteristic qualities and opportunities, rather than trying to fight against them. When we tune in properly, we find out we are able to appreciate what we have when we have it, instead of always thinking about what we do not have.

अवजानन्ति मां मूढा मानुषीं तनुमाश्रितम् । परं भावमजानन्तो मम भूतमहेश्वरम् ॥ ९-११ ॥

avajānanti mām mūḍhā mānuṣīm tanumāśritam | paraṁ bhāvamajānanto mama bhūtamahēśvaram || 9-11 ||

avajananti: they do not recognize; *mam*: me; *mudhah*: the fools; *manusim*: human form; *tanum*: body; *asritam*: I take up; *param*: supreme; *bhavam*: nature/ birth; *ajanantah*: (because) they do not know; *mama*: my; *bhuta-mahesvaram*: the great Lord that controls all beings/ all existences.

"Fools disregard/ disrespect me when I manifest in a human form. They have no knowledge of my supreme/ transcendental nature as the great Lord of the living beings/ of the existences".

This concept has already been stated in previous verses (7.13, 7.15, 7.24, 7.25, 9.9) and will be repeated later (10.3, 16.20): the lack of intelligence and understanding of the power of Consciousness is due to the influence of ignorance and illusion, that is extremely strong (7.14). It also connects with verse 9.1, where it was stated that only a person who is free from envy (*anasuya*) can come to understand God.

In this regard, we would also like to remember the difference between the expression "Supreme Personality of Godhead" and "Supreme Person". The first implies the unity of all personalities as parts of the Supreme Godhead, while the second expression gives the idea of God as merely a bigger and more powerful person among many other independent, separated and different persons - something like the "monotheism" that says that there is a good God who must be made the winner and many other bad gods that must be defeated because they are manifestation of the "supreme bad god" called Satan.

Many people influenced by academic secularism tend to believe that Krishna was simply a great man, and they sometimes describe him as a philosopher and a politician, or a powerful warrior. By this they often mean no disrespect, because they are projecting on him the qualities and abilities they would like to have, and because such descriptions are by comparison much more favorable than the offensive opinions expressed by the opponents of the Vedic tradition. However, we can do much better than that.

First of all, one who has really studied and understood the *Bhagavad gita* will never say that Krishna is an ordinary human being, because the text itself offers many statements to the exact opposite. The concept of Krishna's divinity is also expressed in several other recognized texts, such as the *Bhagavata Purana*, but *Gita* is the most effective in this regard. Why? Because it shows Krishna's supreme Consciousness.

Anyone can claim to be a divine Personality and tell some stories on his own childhood miracles (real or imagined), and even get some followers and supporters to invent such stories and circulate them to substantiate the divinity claims. There have also been individuals who have gone to a civil court to get their divine position of *avatara* certified by the government, but of course all this is very inconclusive to say the least. Materialistic courts have no authority to ascertain the divinity of an individual, and if the popular method to endorse such claims is the "miracle evidence", we should remember that any individual soul can develop mystic powers that can appear miraculous simply through the practice of *yoga* or magic, or more precisely, through the intimate scientific knowledge of the laws of material nature.

Yoga is a very deep and complex science, and "magic" or "miracle" are usually the definitions given by less knowledgeable people for anything they do not really understand.

What really demonstrates Krishna's divinity is the expanse of consciousness he is showing. How can you tell a knowledgeable person from an ignorant fool? Government certificates or court orders, or a large number of followers are not demonstrating anything - but you can immediately recognize the level of consciousness of an individual by what he says. It is said that a fool can remain undetected or even pass for a great divine personality, especially if he has mastered the art of dressing and acting smart, but he can do so only as long as he does not talk, or as long as he is not faced with a difficult choice.

In the Indian folk tradition there is a very popular story about a jackal that had fallen into a dyeing vat and had come out colored in an intense blue. The animals of the forest, amazed by that very unusual sight, asked him who he was, and the jackal replied he was Vishnu. So the naive residents of the jungle accepted him as a divine *avatara* and worshiped him with all the best they could offer, and the jackal was very careful not to expose himself for what he really was. However, one day one of the animals inadvertently dropped a bone and the jackal foolishly blew his cover by jumping down from his *simhasana* to catch the bone.

The teaching of the story is that external appearances can be very deceiving, and only talk and action can really demonstrate the level of consciousness of a person, and hence his divinity.

The nature/ existence (*bhava*) of Krishna is called supreme (*param*) because he can perfectly control (*mahesvaram*) all states of existence (*bhuta*). Krishna's body appears just like an ordinary human body (*manusim tanum asritam*) but it is perfectly controlled and operated by Consciousness, therefore it does not have the limitations of ordinary material bodies. This is why it is called a spiritual body - a body made of consciousness.

Many Vedic texts also speak about this special nature of Krishna's body, especially the *Bhagavata Purana*, that describes the appearance and the activities of Krishna. In verse 3.21.8 we find a description of Vishnu's form as *sabda brahma vapuh*, "the body composed of spiritual vibrations", and in verses 7.10.48 and 7.15.75 we find, *gudham param brahma manusya lingam*, "the Supreme Brahman (the Supreme Consciousness) hidden by a human appearance".

The word *bhuta* is connected to the word *bhu*, or "earth", therefore it is sometimes translated as *yukte kshmad avrite bhutam* (*Amara kosa* dictionary) "whatever is covered by earth", where by "earth" we intend all solid substances that form a body - flesh, bones, etc. However, we can also translate *bhu* as the earthly platform or dimension of this planetary system, and therefore the word *bhuta* can be applied to all the embodied living beings that inhabit the earthly plane or dimension. Of course this also applies to the *archa vigraha*, the Deity of the Lord worshiped in the temple, that can manifest in a form shaped with various earthly materials - gems, stone, metal, wood, clay, sand etc.

The foolish iconoclasts remain unable to understand that the Deity of the Lord is not identical with the form made of earthly materials in which it manifests, and therefore it can be present or absent according to the level of consciousness of the devotee who worships it. Therefore when the iconoclasts disrespect the *archa vigraha* of the Godhead, they are not touching the actual form of the Lord at all, but simply the external shell in which it was manifested. They cannot keep God as a prisoner by capturing the statue where the *archa vigraha* was worshiped, and certainly they cannot destroy or harm God by destroying or mutilating the statue: simply the divine presence becomes non-manifested in that form.

मोघाशा मोघकर्माणो मोघज्ञाना विचेतसः । राक्षसीमासुरीं चैव प्रकृतिं मोहिनीं श्रिताः ॥ ९-१२ ॥

moghāśā moghakarmāṇo moghajñānā vicetasah | rākṣasīmāsurīm caiva prakṛtiṃ mohiniṃ śritāḥ || 9-12 ||

mogha-asah: confused in their desires; *mogha-karmanah*: confused in their actions; *mogha-jnanah*: confused in their knowledge; *vicetasah*: devoid of awareness; *rakshasim*: of the Rakshasas; *asurim*: of the Asuras; *ca*: and; *iva*: certainly; *prakritim*: the nature; *mohinim*: confusing; *sritah*: taking shelter in.

"Entertaining delusional hopes/ desires, engaging in delusional activities, and delusionally convinced of their knowledge, (such people are) confused by incorrect awareness, so they certainly take shelter in the bewildered nature of raksasas and asuras."

We have already mentioned that the individual soul, that does not have the immense power of the Supreme Consciousness, can only choose whether to take shelter in the spiritual nature or in the material nature. This is confirmed also in verse 7.14 *asuram bhavam asritah*, "(the evil doers) take shelter in the nature of the Asuras", 9.13 *daivim prakritim asritah*, "take shelter in the divine nature", and 12.11 *mad yogam asritah*, "take shelter in my Yogamaya".

Chapter 16 of *Bhagavad gita*, entitled *daivasura sampad vibhaga yoga*, will describe more specifically the difference between the daivic and the asuric personalities, by describing their respective characteristics. The asuric qualities are listed as arrogance, pride, selfishness, anger, cruelty and ignorance (16.4) and will further be elaborated with several examples. The words *daivi* and *asuri* are usually translated as "divine" and "demoniac", but these definitions may confuse the minds of people who are burdened with abrahamic cultural superimpositions. In abrahamic ideologies - incorrectly classified as "monotheistic" - Jahveh is presented as the "good god" and Satan as the "bad god", so whatever applies to Jahveh is considered "divine" and whatever applies to Satan is "demoniac", especially his servants that are called demons or devils. According to the abrahamic ideology, a human being can never be demoniac unless s/he is possessed by one of this demoniac beings. In such a case, the behavior of the demonically possessed person is simply characterized by a sort of allergy to everything that is connected to the "good god" - especially the Christian symbols such as the cross etc, which are then used to "exorcise the demon" from the human being. In the Vedic ideology, however, all individual souls are equally divine because they are *amsa* (parts) of God (15.7), but they can choose to take shelter (i.e. focus, develop, take action) in the *daivi prakriti* (divine nature) or in the *asuri prakriti* (asuric nature) - both potentially present in each individual. When the individual chooses to develop divine qualities and activities that support the progress and happiness of the entire universe, the asuric tendencies become harmoniously engaged in the destruction of obstacles. On the other hand, when the individual chooses to develop asuric qualities and activities that are destructive for the progress and happiness of others, the divine tendencies become eclipsed and cannot be seen any more although they still exist - just like the sun or the moon are temporarily covered during an eclipse. There are no devils or demons proper: those that act as such (as for example in the case of so-called "demoniac possession") are simply individual *jivatmas* that have developed strong asuric tendencies and continue to act in that consciousness even without having a physical body.

The word *a-sura* is simply the contrary of *sura*, the definition for the *devas* that work in the administration of the universe to support the progress and prosperity of all embodied beings. The *Rig Veda samhita* (1.22.20) says, *tad visnoh paramam padam sada pasyanti surayah*, "the *suras* are those who always contemplate the supreme position of Vishnu". The *Padma Purana* (*Patāla khanda*, 111) states, *dvau bhuta-sargau loke 'smin, daiva asura eva ca, visnu bhaktah smrto daiva, asuras tad-viparyaya*, "In this world there are two types of beings - the *devas* and the *asuras*. The *devas* are those who are serving Vishnu, and the *asuras* are those who oppose them."

We should be very careful not to misunderstand this statement, because the *devas* are not simply servants who are loyal to the side of the "good god", for some kind of sectarian or political allegiance. Vishnu is the name of the Supreme Consciousness, the sum total of all Existence, therefore the *devas* who are serving Vishnu are serving the interests of the entire community of the beings in the universe, while the *asuras* are merely interested in their own separatist selfish material advantage.

This is confirmed by the *Satapatha Brahmana* (5.1.1.1) with the description of the creation of the *asuras*: both *devas* and *asuras* were born from Brahma, but the *asuras* immediately decided to serve only their own selfish interests, by placing offerings into their own mouths. Similarly, in his commentary to *Bhagavad gita*, Madhva writes, *asusu rata asurah*, "*asuras* are those who are (only) attached to their selfish gratification".

In various parts of the Vedic literature, *asuras* are sometimes called Daityas or Danavas, because traditionally the descendants of Diti and Danu (both wives of Kasyapa Rishi, together with their sister Aditi the mother of the *devas* or Adityas) followed the asuric mentality. However, this is not necessarily always true, because we see for example the great *vaishnava* devotee Prahlada, son of Hiranyakasipu, direct son of Diti (10.30).

There is some difference in the definition of *rakshasa*, that is often equated to the definition of *asura*. Specifically, the *rakshasas* are described as a particular humanoid race that traditionally prefer the conclusions and the behaviors of *asuras*. The race of the Rakshasas are the descendants of Pulastya Rishi (like Ravana and his brothers), that are endowed with great mystic/ magic powers and are fond of eating human flesh and blood. However, among the Rakshasa people there were/are/ can be also some very good and saintly individuals, such as Vibhishana, Ravana's brother, who was a devotee of Rama.

Some historians claim that Devas and Asuras (and Rakshasas etc) were merely different human populations on this earthly planet, that waged war against each other in pre-Vedic times, and the winners got to "write history" with the opportunity to demonize their opponents. There might be some value in such hypothesis, especially considering the Zoroastrian ideology based on the eternal fight between the "good God" Ahura (or Asura) Mazda and the "bad God" Ariman ("the Enemy"); this vision later developed into the abrahamic faiths. However, this theory does not explain why all over the world, in all cultures, there are consistent tales of a race of black magicians with superhuman powers that perfectly fit the Vedic descriptions of Rakshasas. Although a human being can become an *asura* in this very lifetime, he usually needs to take another birth in order to become a *rakshasa*.

In both such cases, the individual *jivatman* takes shelter in the *asuri prakriti*, "the asuric nature" that is based on a confused state of mind, by which one develops strongly dualistic desires (*asa*) due to ignorance (*ajnana*) and then acts on them (*karmana*) because of lack of proper awareness (*vi-cetasah*). If these *jivatmas* were properly aware of their actual nature, and of the fundamental connection between all fragments of consciousness, they would never try to pursue selfish gratification to the expenses of other beings.

महात्मानस्तु मां पार्थ दैवीं प्रकृतिमाश्रिताः । भजन्त्यनन्यमनसो ज्ञात्वा भूतादिमव्ययम् ॥ ९-१३ ॥

mahātmanastu māṁ pārtha daivīm prakṛtimāśritāḥ | bhajantyananyamanaso jñātvā bhūtādimavyayam || 9-13 ||

maha-atmanah: the great souls; *tu*: but; *mam*: me; *partha*: o son of Pritha (Arjuna); *daivim*: resplendent/ of the *devas*; *prakritim*: in the nature; *asritah*: taking shelter; *bhajanti*: they worship/ serve; *ananya*: undivided; *manasah*: attention/ meditation; *jnatva*: knowing; *bhuta-adim*: the origin of (all) existences/ beings; *avyayam*: imperishable/ eternal.

"However, o son of Pritha (Arjuna), the great souls take shelter in the divine nature and worship/ serve me with undivided attention, knowing that I am the inexhaustible origin of everything/ all beings."

Again this verse proclaims the reason why Krishna is God: he is the sum total of all existences and beings, the Universal Consciousness, from whom everything becomes manifested. Therefore the *devas* - from the highest creature in the universe, Brahma, to the ordinary human beings who situate themselves in a favorable position in regard to the Universal Consciousness - are those who take shelter in that same nature of *sat*, *cit* and *ananda* that is the nature of the Supreme Brahman. The first verse of the *Gopala tapani Upanishad* (1.1) proclaims: *om sac cid ananda rupaya krishnaya*, indicating that the *devas* worship and serve Krishna as presented in *Bhagavad gita*.

In practice, this means that the individual *jivatmas* that have taken shelter in the *daivi prakriti* become *mahatmas* ("great minds") expanding their consciousness and awareness and becoming free from all selfishness; this is always accompanied by compassion. The exact opposite of *mahatma* is *duratma* ("bad mind" or "difficult mind"), a definition that clearly describes the callousness, insensitivity and cruelty of a selfish person, who does not care about the happiness and progress of others. This is why the true *brahmana* is called *bhu-deva*, the *deva* that lives on earth. The correct way to remain concentrated on this supreme level of Consciousness is the attitude of sincere service (*bhajanam*) towards the Supreme, that includes all beings and existences and is eternal (*bhuta-adim avyayam*) - which is precisely the attitude that characterizes the *devas*. One cannot claim that he is worshiping or serving God and at the same time callously create sufferings to innocent beings in the pursuit of one's selfish material advantage, either individual or collective, because that is the hallmark of the asuric mentality, as we will see later on in chapter 16.

The first and most popular meaning of the expression *ananya manasah* is "with undivided attention/ meditation" because we should not allow any other concern to obstruct our service; only when we have become free from all material "luggage" and distractions, such as material identifications and attachments, we can really engage in devotional service. Another meaning of the expression *ananya manasah* refers to the fact that the Supreme includes all beings and existences (*bhuta-adim*), and can be translated as "without any sectarian mentality, without a dualistic illusion". As Krishna himself states in *Bhagavad gita*, he is the best friend of all living entities (*suhridam sarva bhutanam*, 5.29, *isvarah sarva-bhutanam hrid-dese tishthati 18.61*) and remains present in the hearts of all beings (*sarvasya caham hridi sannivisto*, 15.15, *sarva-bhuta sthitam*, 6.31), without considering the merits or demerits of anyone (*nadatte kasyacit papam na caiva sukritam*, 5.15). God does not have a single chosen people - neither the Jews nor the Indians - and actually does not care whether one believes in him or not, or even follows his instructions or not. He equally loves and cares for all living beings, that are like his children (*aham bija-pradah pita*, 14.4), but he does not interfere with their training, schooling and homework, that are entrusted to Mother Nature.

The word *tu*, "however", connects this verse with the previous verse, where the confused *asuras* and *rakshasas* were described. The context says, "Confused people create problems to the universe, but those who have chosen to develop a divine consciousness worship God". This worship and service to Krishna can be perceived and applied at various levels.

The most elementary level consists in learning about Krishna's teachings and recommendations especially in *Bhagavad gita* and following them, without being distracted by other concerns - fears, attachments, identifications, etc. In daily life, this worship and service takes the form of ritual ceremonies meant to keep our mind focused on the divine consciousness, and the favorable work that supports the universe and is allotted to us as specific duty in accordance to our *guna* and *karma*. This is also called *bhuh*, the "earthly level", that is accessible at present in a relatively easy way.

At the intermediate level, the ritual ceremonies become increasingly internalized because we become more clearly aware of our true spiritual nature, therefore we meditate on the Supreme Personality of Godhead in our heart (*om tad vishnoh paramam padam*) and we effectively become instruments (*nimitta matra bhava*) or bodily parts (*anga* or *amsa*) of God. This is also called *bhuvah*, the level of the existence of the *devas* that are the limbs or bodily parts of God in this world.

At the advanced level, we become situated in the supreme consciousness, called Krishna Consciousness, and our nature becomes totally spiritualized. It is very difficult to speak about this level, because it cannot be expressed through material logic or examples, therefore a person who is still situated on the level of material consciousness and identification can easily misunderstand and misinterpret it. This supreme level can also be called *svah*, the real identity of the Self, the *atman/ brahman*, to whom the oblations of the sacrifice are offered.

The expression *ananya manasah* can similarly be explained at different levels, from the elementary platform on which the sincere devotee invests attention, intelligence, work and desires, to the intermediate platform on which we perceive ourselves as never separated (*anya*) from the *param atman*, the Soul of our soul, to the complete union (*visate tad anantaram*, 18.55) that constitutes the final word in the teachings of *Bhagavad gita*.

It is important to remember that one should be constantly aware of Krishna as the eternal origin of all beings/ existences (or *rasas*); the superficial and mechanical ritual worship of a sacred form or image is not sufficient, although of course it can slowly accrue the *punya* or merits/ credits that will ultimately take one to actual spiritual life.

सततं कीर्तयन्तो मां यतन्तश्च दृढव्रताः । नमस्यन्तश्च मां भक्त्या नित्ययुक्ता उपासते ॥ ९-१४ ॥

satatam kīrtayanto māṁ yatantaśca dṛḍhavrataḥ | namasyantaśca māṁ bhaktyā nityayuktā upāsate || 9-14 |

satatam: always/ constantly; *kīrtayantah*: chanting/ singing/ discussing; *mam*: about me; *yatantah*: making sincere efforts; *ca*: and; *dṛḍhavrataḥ*: firmly observing their vows; *namasyantah*: offering their obeisances; *ca*: and; *mam*: me; *bhaktya*: with love and devotion; *nityayuktah*: always engaged (in *yoga*); *upasate*: they worship.

"Always speaking (chanting, etc) about me, they engage in firm vows with great determination, they offer me their obeisances and worship me with devotion, eternally connected with me/ in Yoga."

This beautiful verse further elaborates on the meaning expressed in the previous verse as *mahatmanah bhajanti mam*, "the great souls worship me", and delineates the fundamental requirement for the development of *bhakti*: the process that starts with *sravana* and *kirtana* (listening and speaking), that blossoms into *smarana* (remembering, or remaining conscious/ aware), and so on.

Mere superficial ritualistic worship in the temple, without the proper divine consciousness cannot be defined as *bhakti* or devotion, whereas the discussion about the Supreme Personality of Godhead (his names, forms, qualities, activities, teachings, companions, energies etc) is self-sufficient as a method of worship, and does not need any other ritualistic formality. It is said that in Kali yuga this method of loving discussion on Krishna is the actually appropriate religious practice.

In previous *yugas* one could successfully engage in the other prescribed religious practices, such as Deity worship (Dvapara yuga), ritual sacrifices and offerings to the fire (Treta yuga) and meditation (Satya yuga), because in those periods people were intelligent and sincere enough to understand that *sravana* and *kirtana* are the foundation for such activities. How can one worship the Deity, perform a *yajna* or engage in meditation without remembering/ knowing the Supreme Personality of Godhead? It is impossible: if someone tried to practice these religious activities without the proper consciousness, only the external shell of the activity would remain - like an empty box that only appears to be a container of food because it is labeled as such.

However, in Kali yuga people actually are stupid, lazy and unfortunate, so they easily delude themselves into thinking that the external practices can really be sufficient to grant success. So they simply go to the temple or to the *guru* to make a superficial and temporary show of devotion and get some "blessings" in return, expecting God and Guru to magically change their karmic situation and make everything perfectly happy in their material lives. What to speak of those foolish people who believe they are engaging in *yoga* just because they practice some physical gymnastics for a better health or weight loss or stress relief, without even bothering to observe the fundamental *vratas* required for *yoga*, such as the *yamas* and *niyamas*. Even some so-called "yoga teachers" are not ashamed of eating meat in their daily life, and we heard some of them state that actually following the instructions of the *yoga shastra* would be "stupid fanaticism". Considering such situation, we should not be surprised when we find out that some imaginative people have invented things as the "yoga for dogs" or the "yoga for couples" involving ordinary sexual stimulation or intercourse they call "*tantra*".

As in so many other verses in *Bhagavad gita*, the word *satatam* ("always, constantly") indicates that *bhakti yoga* is not a hobby, a social opportunity or a part-time job, but it is a full-time engagement of senses, body, words, mind, intelligence and soul, requiring full surrender and concentration. A very similar verse will be found in 10.9, where the purpose of the *kirtana* will be elaborated further.

The word *kirtana* is usually translated as "singing devotional songs", especially together with other devotees, to the accompaniment of musical instruments on the occasion of religious festivals and ceremonies, usually in a temple. However, it also includes the discussion, the study and the teaching of everything that concerns God - the universal Consciousness that contains all existences. The subject of God's

teachings, nature, missions, activities, qualities, names, position, etc, is the most interesting and important subject, because when we understand it, we can attain the level of Krishna Consciousness, the origin and foundation of all things, including our own existence and purpose of life. Every evolved human being is naturally attracted by this type of discussion.

In the abrahamic ideologies, the healthy practice of *kirtana* is distorted into the mechanical presentation, memorization and repetition of unquestionable dogma, as in the catechism, that is meant to define the allegiance of the congregation and separate its members from other groups. On the other hand, genuine *kirtana* as discussion about *tattvas* is also called philosophical debate, and traditionally it was done in public assemblies, so that the people participating to the meeting could profit from the explanations, proper information and examples. The declared purpose of the practice is to reconcile the apparent differences or contradictions, to expand the limited understanding, and to eliminate all misconceptions and false information, including the prejudice and the unfounded popular beliefs called *laukika sraddha*. To borrow a brilliant definition, "to comfort the confused and to confuse the comfortable".

Another very effective method for *kirtana* consists in writing articles or books, and publishing them. Bhaktisiddhanta, one of the greatest exponents of Gaudiya Vaishnavism, called his printing press the *brihat mridanga*, "the great drum" that sustained his *sankirtana*, or "congregational *kirtana*", beyond the limits within which an ordinary drum could be heard.

There are some asuric people who believe they can solve philosophical disagreements or controversies by banning books, magazines, topics or people, denying permission to speak in assemblies or entrance in public assemblies, functions and temples. They also resort to conducting character assassination campaigns by spreading false accusations or denigration based on bodily identification, or even by physically persecuting, intimidating, threatening, or killing people. This is certainly not the Vedic system or the path of *bhakti yoga*: those who tolerate such adharmic nonsense are also responsible for its karmic consequences, and should not delude themselves into thinking they are serving God.

The word *yatantah* ("making efforts") is also important for the seriousness of the process. For most people, who remain on a relatively low level of personal evolution, religion is a mental need for social affiliation, and therefore it is associated with the community of birth, family, and ethnic identity. In a sense, we could say that all religions are same, including Hinduism, because at this level nobody is really interested in understanding the spiritual truths and their application. A little daily prayer, some sentimental devotion, a little cheap morality, pious gatherings for social occasions, and seasonal greetings are not very different from one camp to the other. Even some so-called devotees of Krishna have this superficial approach, but this is not recommended in *Bhagavad gita*. Krishna's instructions clearly say that his devotees should illuminate each other (*bodhayantah parasparam*, 10.9) into deeper and wider visions of his Consciousness.

The expression *dridha-vratah*, "firmly observing their vows", applies to the *sadhana* or regulated spiritual/ religious practices that the individual is expected to follow as a routine to modify his/ her consciousness for the better. The most popular *vrata* is the *japa vrata*, defined by Krishna in *Bhagavad gita* as the best form of *yajna* (10.25) because it is by far the easiest, the most effective and the most essential of all religious practices, especially suited for the people of Kali yuga. This is confirmed in the *Kali santarana Upanishad* (verses 1-11) from *Krishna Yajur Veda*, in the *Brahmanda Purana* (*Uttara khanda*, 6.55-60), *Agni Purana*, *Padma Purana* (*Svarga Khanda* 50.6), as well as the *Ananta samhita* (*Narada Pancharatra*), that present the Hare Krishna *maha mantra* as the most powerful *mantra*. The most basic form of the Hare Krishna *mantra* is *hare krsna, hare krsna, krsna krsna hare hare*. A more elaborated form adds the corresponding names of Rama in this way: *hare rama, hare rama, rama rama, hare hare*.

The *japa vrata* consists in softly or mentally chanting the holy Names of the Personality of Godhead or *hari nama*, arranged in genuine *mantras* properly received from a realized teacher (preferably in person, but also possibly through the heart). The most popular method works by fingering a rosary (*japa mala*) of 108 beads plus a bigger bead (*meru*) that helps the counting (*sankhya*), but the ancient method utilized 108 small balls made of various pure substances to be moved from one side to another at the completion of each *mantra*, or counted the *mantras* on the finger joints of both hands.

The beads of the *japa mala* can be made from a variety of pure substances, mostly *tulasi* wood for *vaishnavas* and *rudraksha* seeds for *shaivites*. Also popularly used are *sphatika* (clear quartz crystal) beads, *chandana* (sandalwood) beads or imitations, or *padma bija* (lotus seeds).

Padma Purana (*Brahma Khanda* 25.15-18) also details the rules for the chanting of this *mantra*, and specifically the 10 types of offenses to be avoided. This, together with the sincere and serious observance of the traditional *yama* and *niyama* rules, constitutes the basis for the *vratas* mentioned in this verse. There are several other practices called *vrata*, such as the special worship offered to Krishna in the month of Kartika and the fasting observed on Ekadasi, but the *japa vrata* is the best, either performed daily with a prescribed number of repetitions, or with a cumulative number over a period of time.

The particular modalities of the *vrata* will be personalized according to the needs and abilities of the disciple, and given by the *guru* after considering all the factors involved. The general principle is that the practice of *sadhana* should remain *su-sukham* (9.2) or easily performed with joy, so that the disciple will be inspired and encouraged to continue, rather than developing a more or less subconscious feeling of resentment for what s/he experiences as a difficult burden. There are different levels of *sadhana* that are more suitable for different mentalities and abilities, also according to the *varnas* and *ashramas*, as well as according to time, place and circumstances. Some people prefer to write the holy names instead of chanting them; as the actual emission of the voice vibration is not required in the practice of *japa* (and rather it is not even encouraged, as mental recitation is much more powerful for individual practice), writing names is as good as a *japa mala* to support devotional meditation.

The words *namasyantah* and *bhaktiya* refer to the sentiments of surrender, respect and love that a devotee must develop towards the Supreme Personality of Godhead, accepting God's will in the understanding that God's plan is not always easy to see and to understand, but it is always for the better. Indirectly, this also applies to the attitude of a genuine devotees towards other people, because Krishna clearly says that "everyone follows his way" (*mama vartmanuvartante*, 3.23) and therefore the opinions and beliefs of others should always be respected, as long as they are not adharmic in nature or contrary to the final conclusions of all the vedic scriptures.

ज्ञानयज्ञेन चाप्यन्ये यजन्तो मामुपासते । एकत्वेन पृथक्त्वेन बहुधा विश्वतोमुखम् ॥ ९-१५ ॥

jñānayañjēna cāpyanye yajanto māmupāsate | ekatvena pṛthaktvena bahudhā viśvatomukham || 9-15 ||

jnana: of knowledge; *yajnena*: by the sacrifice; *ca*: and; *api*: certainly; *anye*: others; *yajantah*: that perform sacrifice; *mam*: me; *upasate*: they worship; *ekatvena*: in oneness; *pṛthaktvena*: in the couple; *bahudha*: in multiplicity; *visvatah-mukham*: as the universal form.

"Others engage in the sacrifice/ cultivation of knowledge, others worship me through various rituals, as the One, as the Two, as the Many, or as the Universal form."

Krishna continues to elaborate on the method of worship and service to God.

After establishing the importance of *bhakti* - the central subject of the chapters 7, 8 and 9 - and affirming that it must be supported by a constant remembrance and discussion about God, here Krishna explains that the cultivation of knowledge is a sacred act in itself, a *yajna*, by which the Supreme Personality of Godhead is worshiped and the entire universe is supported. Why? Because the cultivation of knowledge culminates in the *raja vidya* (9,2), the transcendental science of *atman* and *brahman*, by which a human being can truly serve God in divine consciousness.

The word *upasate* ("worship") we saw in the previous verse is repeated again here, and refers to the loving meditation on God, specifically on the form of God that is most cherished by the devotee, and that is called *ista devata*. The word *anyate* refers to the different groups of people who prefer to worship God in all such different and genuine forms. These different perspectives are not incompatible or even opposed to each other - actually they complement each other, as the intelligent and knowledgeable people can understand. This is why these various groups are described as engaged in the *jnana yajna*, "sacrifice of cultivation of knowledge".

Worshipping God in *ekatva*, "oneness", can be interpreted at different levels. The most elementary level consists in the realization of the *atman/ brahman*, that gives liberation from material identifications and attachments. Once the individual *jivatman* realizes its position of fragment, or "part and parcel" of the universal Consciousness (*mama ivamso jiva loke*, 15.7), it enters (*visate*, 18.55) into the Transcendental Reality, liberated from all other concerns and feelings of separative duality - that are repeatedly condemned by Krishna in *Bhagavad gita*.

Another interpretation of *ekatva* is offered by some *vaishnava* groups that have embraced a type of monotheism resembling the abrahamic image of one Supreme Lord that excludes the worship or contemplation of all other Personalities of Godhead. We are walking here on thin ice, because in fact Krishna states in *Bhagavad gita* that the worship of many different forms of Godhead (9.22) is due to a lack of proper knowledge and a diversion from the correct method (*avidhi purvakam*). Also, there is absolutely nothing wrong in focusing on one specific form of God only, especially if such form is Vishnu or Krishna, as long as one does not commit the tragic and disastrous mistake of actually disrespecting the other forms and Personalities of Godhead - from the various *svamsas* of Vishnu and his *avatars*, to the *vibhinmamsa devas* that are serving and representing Vishnu in the administration of the universe. Here is where the concept of *vaishnava aikantika bhakti* abruptly separates from its abrahamic look-alike, because it remains non-offensive.

We have mentioned that the *Padma Purana* cautions *bhaktas* against the offenses in the chanting of the holy names, and that one of such violations is considering the *devas* as separate and independent from Vishnu.

However, the worst of all offenses - called the "mad elephant offense" because it totally destroys one's advancement in *bhakti* just like a maddened elephant utterly devastates all the plants of a garden - consists in *vaishnava ninda*, "being disrespectful towards a *vaishnava*". Showbottle affiliates to politically religious institutions are very keen to exploit this idea to escape the questioning about their own bad behaviors and conclusions or those of their associates (claiming such questioning is an "offense" against them), but they do not show any hesitation in openly insulting the *devas*, who are much greater *vaishnavas* than any paltry human being.

The *ekatva* described in this verse can be considered as *aikantika hari bhakti*, but it really needs to remain within the dharmic and ideological guidelines of the *sruti* and *smriti* - all the *Puranas* (not just the *vaishnava Puranas*) and all the other genuine Vedic texts, otherwise it will not simply be "imperfect": it will become a dangerous nuisance to society.

The meditation called *pṛthaktva*, "by distinction", may apply to the *lilas* of the Divine Couple manifested in so many forms through the development of the *rasas* in devotional relationships, or by the *svamsa* forms, including those of the *avatars*.

The meditation called *bahudha* ("in multiplicity") can be directly connected to its qualifying attribute *visvatah-mukham* ("as the universal form"), and applies specifically to the visualization offered by *Bhagavad gita* for our meditation, in 7.7-12 and then again in the next verses 9.16-20. Again on Arjuna's request, Krishna will offer more of the same meditations in 10.19-42, then will actually show the visualization directly in 11.15-30.

Then briefly Krishna will show Arjuna his four-armed Vishnu form and again two-armed Krishna form (11.50), closing the circle and returning to the *ekatva* meditation, but with a strong warning: contemplation on God's human-like form may appear easier and more comfortable than the visualization of the *Visva rupa*, but is actually extremely rare to experience in truth, even for the greatest personalities in the universe (11.51-55). Much more emphasis is given to this concept than on the meditation of the form itself. What does that mean? Everybody could see the "normal" two-armed Krishna on the battlefield. What to speak of the great *devas*, even the *asuras* that went to try and kill Krishna in Vrindavana could very easily see him. Or could they?

Actually, they could not. Unqualified people remained unable to see the actual Krishna even while he was personally present in front of them as *avatara*: all they saw was their own mental projection, as it is clearly explained in the *Bhagavata Purana* episode when Krishna enters the wrestling arena of Kamsa in Mathura and is perceived in very different ways by different categories of *maya* - because they were all projecting their own mental images of Krishna on the true Krishna. This illusory projection is called *maya* ("what is not"), and as we have seen, it can be favorable to *bhakti* as *yogamaya*, or unfavorable to *bhakti* as *mahamaya*.

Yogamaya is achieved only through a precise and very demanding method, while *mahamaya* is easily available to all conditioned souls. *Yogamaya* brings us closer to the real Krishna and elevates us to the divine level, while *mahamaya* takes us farther from the real Krishna

and keeps us in ignorance and delusion. At any time, we can make the conscious deliberate choice of changing the polarity of this energy, simply by turning our "face" (*mukha*) towards the inner reality (*antah*) rather than the external reality (*bahir*). God is everywhere, always, wherever we turn our face (*visvato-mukha*), but to see him we need to turn our face in the proper direction, too: this seems a contradiction, but it is not. It is a very specific method that can be considered the origin of the Koan in Zen meditation, meant to expand the greatness of the mind (*maha-atmanah*) by eliminating its materialistic limitations.

So the *ekatva*, *prithaktva*, *bahudha* and *visvatah-mukham* mentioned in this verse can be explained variously according to the level of evolution of the devotee - we can make the example of the series of 7 musical notes that repeat themselves with different sound pitches and produce different melodies, but are still the same fundamental sacred syllable *omkara*, the unheard subtle vibration of life and power that is the actual basis of reality in all its different manifestations.

In this musical science of God there is no inherent contradiction but there can be wrong sequences that create superficial dis-harmonies, that we call ignorance and *adharma*; we need the guidance of an expert teacher to avoid becoming mistakenly attached to some cacophony that we may call music but is not (*ma aya*, "not this").

Although it may appear strange, *ekatva* can indicate both Brahman and Bhagavan realizations (at two different "sound pitches", like the same note played an octave higher), while *prithaktva* can indicate both Paramatma and *madhurya rasa* realizations (in the contemplation of the Divine Couple and their *rasa* for each other), and *bahudha* can indicate Bhagavan and Brahman again in the reverse order. This is because in the very intimate relationship that Krishna Syamasundara is manifesting with each and every one of his closest devotees like in the *rasa lila*, he takes a very great number of equal forms to dance with each and every one of his *gopis* exclusively, or in the mind of the *gopis* that could see Syamasundara everywhere, and everything reminded them of Syamasundara (*visvato mukhah*).

This is the deepest sense of the *bahudha* form meditation, while the easiest meaning is the variety of powerful and majestic material manifestations in the universe that Krishna wants us to meditate on. Without actually going through this level according to Krishna's orders, it will be almost impossible to penetrate the inner meaning.

All we would be able to see then is our own cheap mental projection of a blue (black, bluish, grayish, whitish, pinkish, etc) boy with a peacock feather on his head and a flute in his hand: not any different from what you could easily see at a costume party or in any TV serial, cheap calendar or incense stick wrapping, especially in India.

Such a "vision" does not make us any special or advanced at all, because there is no real devotion involved - at most some sentimentalistic attraction (just like the one people feel for cute dog puppies, especially the photoshopped ones) or ethnic folkloristic or regional identification... just like for mutton *hyderabady biryani* or *bengali* fish curries. It is a beginning - much better than worshipping some Bollywood or cricket idol, or their western equivalents - but it's only the beginning.

अहं क्रतुरहं यज्ञः स्वधाहमहमौषधम् ।

मन्त्रोऽहमहमेवाज्यमहमग्निरहं हुतम् ॥ ९-१६ ॥

aham kraturaham yajnah svadhahamahamausadham | mantra'hamahamevājyamahamagniraham hutam || 9-16 ||

aham: I (am); *kratuh*: the Vedic ritual; *aham*: I (am); *yajnah*: the sacred action; *svadha*: the offerings to the Pitris; *aham*: I (am); *aham*: I (am); *ausadham*: the medicinal herb/ the psychotropic substance; *mantra*: the *mantra*; *aham*: I (am); *aham*: I (am); *eva*: certainly/ also; *ajyam*: the oblation of clarified butter; *aham*: I (am); *agnih*: the fire; *aham*: I (am); *hutam*: the offering itself.

"I am the *kratu*, I am the *yajna*, I am the *svadha*, I am the *ausadha*, I am the *mantra*, I am the clarified butter, I am the fire and I am the act of offering."

In this new series of visualizations, Krishna gives us plenty to meditate about, starting with the first established link of connection between the macrocosm and the microcosm at the beginning of creation: the act of sacrifice (3.10-16) as a deliberate offering to feed the root of the universe, and thus contribute to the task of supporting the universe.

In the previous verse, Krishna spoke about the *jnana yajna*, the sacred act of cultivating knowledge, and about the meditation on God as one, two, many, and everything. Yet, these are the chapters dedicated to the description of *bhakti*. Obviously, genuine *bhakti* is much more than the superficial sentimental devotion and social religiousness that usually goes under such name.

Kratu is the religious ritual proper (the act of meditation and worship), *yajna* is the sacred selfless performance of one's duties, and *svadha* (also called *tarpana* or *sraddha*) is the relation of family kinship that connects the virtuous personalities at all levels of the universe.

Through the basic concepts of *kratu*, *yajna* and *tarpana* mentioned in this verse, a human being actively contributes to the support of the entire universe, therefore these acts are called *dharma*. In the category of *kratu* (personal religious duties for purification) we can include the *nitya karma*, that are the mainly the daily *agnihotra* and *sandhya* performed daily by all *dvi-jas* ("twice born"), those who have received the sacred thread at the time of initiation as *brahmanas*, *kshatriyas* or *vaisyas* (with specific requirements according to their level of capability). We also include some *naimittika karma* or instrumental religious rituals such as the many *samskaras* - from the *garbhadhana* (conception) to the *vivaha* (marriage) - and the *kamya karma* or optional rituals performed to obtain a particular blessing or purpose. Some specific rituals, such as the *agnistoma* or *jyotistoma* (that includes the preliminary *prayascitta* or atonement) are meant to purify and redeem a person who had fallen from the proper position in his duties to society, or in any case start a religious life in the Vedic tradition.

In the category of *yajna* (payment of one's debts to the universe) we find the *panca maha yajnas* called *brahma yajna* (study of the scriptures, meditation for Brahman realization, practice of *sadhana* and *yoga*), *pitri yajna* (also overlapping the category of *svadha*), *deva yajna* (worship to the Deity), *bhuta yajna* (consisting in giving food and other beneficial and pleasurable things to the ghosts and lower animals, and practicing non-violence), and *nri yajna* (consisting in hospitality, charity, social cooperation towards human beings). These duties also include the observance of the seasonal festivals all along the calendar year, the offering of various good things as tokens of gratitude and affection to the *devas*, and some *naimittika karma* that include one's honest professional occupational duties and family duties, the regular cleaning of the house and temple, and the daily bathing activities. In connection with these two groups of religious

activities, the invocation *svaha* is called to present the offerings to the Personalities of Godhead - the *devas*, personifications of the principles of the universe and not ordinary individual souls. The invocation *svadha*, on the other hand, is addressed to the *pitris* - ordinary individual souls who have qualified as virtuous personalities during their lives on earth, and that are honored by the *devas* and cooperate with them for the administration of the universe and often for the guidance of the deceased souls during the period between incarnations. Mostly the *svadha* is connected with food offerings, called *sraddha* or *pindi*.

A *mantra* is a very characteristic component of the Vedic religious tradition and way of life, so much that the definition has leaked into the dictionaries of several languages even on a metaphorical level, sometimes assimilated with words such as "slogan", "motto", etc. However, the actual meaning in Vedic culture refers to a sacred formula consisting of names of God, that is repeated (usually silently) as a *sadhana* for one's purification and meditation, as we have already mentioned in commentary 9.14 about the *japa yajna*.

The oblation of the clarified butter, called *ajyam*, refers to the completion of the action, that gives the desired result. It is also considered to indicate success and victory (*jayam*).

Regarding *ausadha*, the offering of burning incense - called *dhupa* or *agarbatti* or *jhuna* - is considered an essential ingredient in all religious rituals, and sometimes the participants inhale clouds of incense smoke, but in this case, too, the beneficial effects depend on the composition of the incense. Traditionally, the resin used was *guggul* (*Commiphora Mukul*), a very powerful medicinal herb that Ayurveda recommends for treating all *vata* and *kapha* imbalances, including paralysis, arthritis, joint pains, rheumatism, atherosclerosis, high cholesterol and lipid levels in the blood, heart diseases, skin disorders, acne, sore throat, sinusitis, allergic rhinitis, cold and bronchitis, renal stones, urinary tract infections, erectile dysfunctions, dysmenorrhea, allergies and fungal infections, piles, excess bile, constipation, difficulties of digestion, diabetes, hypothyroidism, lympho-adenopathy, obesity, etc. Its application promotes the union of bone fractures. It is immuno-stimulant, tonic, anti-inflammatory, analgesic, disinfectant, and strengthens the body. Its neutralizers are alcohol, excessive physical exercise, standing in the heat for a long time, and the consumption of sour and pungent foods (such as onion and garlic). Unfortunately, today incense sticks are made of coal powder, generic sawdust powder, some type of chemical glue and synthetic perfumes - and inhaling their smoke is not exactly a recommended method to improve one's health. The best that can be said about them is they can help in keeping mosquitoes away. It is still possible to create healthy incense sticks with different beneficial herbs, but they are not easy to find.

Another medicinal ingredient used in traditional worship is the very aromatic camphor or *Cinnamomum camphora* (called *karpura* in India) that is burned in the *arati* lamp and sometimes also sprinkled on offerings. The original camphor has a direct effect on the brain and spinal cord and is used in extremely low dosage to treat mental disorders including hysteria, depression and obsessive anxiety. Its properties are analgesic, anti-spasmodic, cardiac, carminative, diuretic, hypertensive, insecticide, laxative, and stimulant. It will produce a strong anesthetic effect, reduce swelling of the body (for example in case of rheumatism and arthritis) and blood pressure, treat sprains, stimulate circulatory and nervous system, facilitate sleep, treat epilepsy, relieve gout and rheumatism, treat eye diseases, heal chapped lips, calm inflammation and spasms (especially in bronchitis), soothe respiratory tracts and sinuses, improve digestion, kill internal parasites, revive people from faints, treat wounds, and even reduce flatulence and teeth plaque. Unfortunately it has become very rare, just like the genuine *guggul*, and in its place people use a sort of soft and greasy plastic dust that never evaporates spontaneously and does not even have any good smell. Similarly, sandalwood - *chandana* - is a very valuable Ayurvedic medicine, both for external and for internal use, with cooling, calming effects. It is mostly used for skin damage.

Two other famous *ausadhas* used in Vedic religious rituals are *soma* and *bhanga*. *Soma* is the non-fermented juice of a very beneficial plant called *Ephedra*, that is known to contain a good alkaloid used even today to boost physical and mental performance, and so effective that its concentrated extracts have been banned in professional competitive athleticism. *Soma* is at the center of several types of *yajnas* and is offered to Indra and the *devas*; its medicinal properties are too many and too important to be dismissed in a few lines, so we will give some more space in the commentary to 9.20.

Bhanga is offered only to Shiva Mahadeva, but it also has important medicinal properties as well as psychotropic properties, that in ancient times were considered perfectly legitimate, normal and desirable effects, that were pursued with the proper consciousness and modalities. Nobody smoked *ganja* to get stoned stupid during the weekend, or ate funny mushrooms just to see the pretty colors and have a laugh with friends. The consumption of alcoholic drinks was considered normal and even medicinal when done within limits and by people who knew how to deal with it, such as the well trained *kshatriyas*, but it was never meant for drinking oneself into a stupor to forget one's problems. Excesses were extremely rare and unintentional damage to people and property due to drunk behavior was unheard of.

The fire and the act of offering mentioned in this verse are the other essential factors in all religious performances, worship, purification and meditation.

Now, Krishna states that he is all this - such consciousness can help us in two ways: first of all it will make us appreciate more and more all these factors and components of religious activities, and focus our awareness better, which will give much better results. The second way is when our consciousness is firmly and genuinely fixed on Krishna consciousness: then all the external aspects of religious activities become secondary and can be substituted by a more intense spiritual awareness.

पिताहमस्य जगतो माता धाता पितामहः । वेद्यं पवित्रमोकार ऋक्साम यजुरेव च ॥ ९-१७ ॥

pitāhamasya jagato mātā dhātā pitāmahah | vedyam pavitramoṅkāra ṛksāma yajureva ca || 9-17 | |

pita: the father; *aham*: I am; *asya*: of this; *jagatah*: universe; *mata*: the mother; *dhata*: the supporter/ maintainer; *pitamahah*: the grandfather; *vedyam*: the object of knowledge; *pavitram*: perfectly pure; *omkara*: the sacred syllable *om*; *rik*: the *Rig Veda*; *sama*: the *Sama Veda*; *yajur*: the *Yajur Veda*; *eva*: certainly; *ca*: as well.

"I am the father of this (world), I am the mother, the supporter, the grandfather, I am the object of knowledge, I am the source of purification, I am the Omkara, and the *Rig*, the *Sama* and the *Yajur* (*Vedas*)."

As in the previous verse, Krishna is personally giving us the precise type of meditation we must perform on his Personality - meaning that all the factors mentioned represent Krishna and therefore must be honored and kept in the center of our lives, but also meaning that on a higher level, meditation on his Personality is automatically fulfilling all the benefits usually given by the other factors.

Materialistic simpletons (*prakrita sahajiyas*) prefer to skip this type of passages in the *shastra* and to forget Krishna's divine glories to jump directly into the contemplation of the amorous pastimes narrated in the *panchadhya* ("5 chapters") from 29 to 33 of the 10th canto of *Bhagavata Purana* that deal with the *rasa lila*, but the "*rasa*" ("taste") they derive from such recitation is not spiritual, but material. It is true that the *gopis* liked to see Krishna simply as their handsome boyfriend, but they were not ignorant fools or even ordinary persons - they were direct manifestations of God's internal potency, and their younger friends and assistants the *sakhis* were great liberated sages. They knew very well that Krishna was the Supreme Personality of Godhead, and they reminded him and each other about that, too. This is why the *acharyas* sternly warn us against skipping the first 9 cantos of *Bhagavata Purana* and directly going to the amorous pastimes in Vrindavana: without properly studying and realizing the transcendental science and the immense glories of God, we will remain unable to perceive the real Krishna, and we will simply see a naughty but attractive cowherd boy who is adored by some young, romantic and simple minded village girls. Any ordinary good looking boy could play this part, and indeed many not-so-good looking boys play it as well, because all silly girls are more than ready to get a crush on boys, and make a big entertaining story out of it. Thousands of love stories are told by novels and movies, or from one friend to another, but hearing or reading them does not give the same effect of hearing and reading the Krishna *rasa lila* with the proper knowledge and consciousness. There is a very famous verse from the *Mahabharata* that says, *tvam eva mata ca pita tvam eva, tvam eva bandhus ca sakha tvam eva, tvam eva vedyam ca dravinam tvam eva, tvam eva sarvam mama deva deva*, "O Great God! To me, you are mother, father, friend and family. You are my knowledge, my Veda, my wealth, you are everything for me". It is a deeply touching, very personal prayer that can never be called "impersonalistic" - a point confirmed by the fact that a very similar prayer is offered in *Bhagavata Purana* (1.11.7) by the residents of Dvaraka when Krishna returns to his city after the Kurukshetra war.

Another very similar verse is expressed by Ramanuja: *tvam eva mata ca pita tvam eva tvam eva bandhus ca gurus tvam eva, tvam eva vidya ca dravinam tvam eva, tvam eva sarvam mama deva deva*.

The *Varaha Purana* states, *prapitamaho me bhagavan iti sarva janasya tu, guruh sri brahmano visnuh, suranam ca guror guruh*, "People in general honor Vishnu as their prime ancestor/ great-grandfather, the *guru* of all the *devas*".

Naturally father and mother are the first and most important influences in one's religious life.

Here Krishna not only presents himself as the father, but as the mother, too, so we should not think that there is some contradiction in meditating on Krishna as the Mother Goddess, in a feminine form: attributing physical limitations to God is always wrong.

Here we must understand what is the position of mother and father in the genuine Vedic culture: *Bhagavata Purana* (5.5.18) says, *gurur na sa syat sva-jano na sa syat, pita na sa syaj janani na sa syat, daivam na sa syan na patis ca sa syan, na mocayed yah samupeta-mrityum*, "One should not become a *guru*, a companion, a father, a mother, a *deva*, or a husband, without being able to liberate (others) from further deaths."

In order to be a real father or mother it is not sufficient to have sex and give birth to a baby, without properly fulfilling the responsibilities required by the role. A materialistic attachment to non-civilized family life, filled with lust and greed, quarrel and envy, jealousy and revenge, does not represent Krishna at all. However, when the parenting role is fulfilled properly (which can be done even by adoptive parents), the child benefits immensely and develops a healthy, balanced, strong, self-sufficient and responsible personality. In our days there is a lot of controversy about gay marriages and adoptive parenting, and we should be careful not to let ourselves be dragged into some sort of abrahamic-styled puritanism and try to interfere in the private lives of other people - something that Vedic culture always avoids.

Even those who have disgraced themselves by actually committing aggression against innocent good people, or criminal actions contrary to the principles of *dharma* (truthfulness, compassion, cleanliness and self-control) or seriously neglecting their duties to family and professional occupation, should simply be ostracized by their particular community but they should remain free to join another less demanding community, or move to a different city or kingdom (no need for passports or visas), or perform the required purification and be welcomed again in their original community.

Per se, consensual gay unions based on the same principles of ordinary heterosexual marriages cannot be defined as aggression, criminal action or infringement on family or professional responsibilities. They are simply a personal matter of choice that should be respected, and if one or two persons (irrespective of their sexual orientation) want to lovingly accept, feed and raise a child that would otherwise remain abandoned in the hands of impersonal institutions, they should be commended and praised, not obstructed, just like heterosexual individuals who do the same.

The word *dhata* means "supporter/ maintainer", as well as "creator", "ordainer" as in "boss", or "employer". With the suffix *vi* (*vidhata*) it is used to refer to Destiny or Providence as the universal plan of the supreme Consciousness.

The word *pitamahah*, "the grandfather", is often applied to Brahma, the first creature of this universe, from whom all other living beings were generated: thus he is the true ancestor of everyone, the original teacher and *guru*, the original ancestor that established the proper dharmic tradition for the family, and he should always be respected and honored. The word *vedyam*, "the object of knowledge", has a great depth of meaning. Krishna (as the supreme universal Consciousness) is the purpose of the *Vedas* (15.15) and the knowledge we all seek to understand ourselves, the universe, and the purpose of life. In 9.2 Krishna used the word *dharmyam*, "the object of *dharma*", to describe the Yoga of the supreme Consciousness: both *vidya* and *dharma* should always go together.

The word *pavitram*, "perfectly pure", refers to something that has the power to purify the things it touches - like the wind, the sunlight, fire, and so on. All such things are considered religiously sacred because of their power of purification.

The *omkara*, the sacred syllable *om*, is mentioned several times in *Bhagavad gita* and in many other Vedic texts, because of its great importance and power. Patanjali's *Yoga sutras* state, *tasya vacakah pranavah*, "The *pranava* is his sound" (1.27), and *taj-japas tad-artha-bhavanam*, "the chanting of the *omkara* is done with the understanding of its meaning and scope" (1.28), meaning that the *japa sadhana* of

a *mantra* will automatically bring the realization of its significance, but that one should chant the *mantra* purposefully and attentively, trying to concentrate on its meaning. Mere mechanical repetition has much less effects.

The *Vedas* mentioned in the verse are the *samhitas* or collections of hymns known as *Rig*, *Sama* and *Yajur*. Some commentators explain that the word *ca* indicates the *Atharva*, the fourth *Veda*.

गतिर्भर्ता प्रभुः साक्षी निवासः शरणं सुहृत् । प्रभवः प्रलयः स्थानं निधानं बीजमव्ययम् ॥ ९-१८ ॥

gatirbhartā prabhuḥ sāksī nivāsaḥ śaraṇam suhṛt | prabhavaḥ pralayaḥ sthānaṁ nidhānaṁ bījamavyayam || 9-18 ||

gatih: the goal; *bhartā*: the nourisher; *prabhuḥ*: the Lord; *sakshi*: the witness; *nivasah*: the abode; *saranam*: the shelter; *suhrit*: the friend; *prabhavah*: the creation; *pralayah*: the destruction; *sthanam*: the maintenance; *nidhanam*: the storage; *bijam*: the seed; *avyayam*: that is never destroyed.

"I am the destination, the nourisher, the Lord, the witness, the abode, the shelter, the friend. I am the origin, the end, the foundation, the resting place and the seed that never perishes."

The word *gati* has a number of meanings, mostly "destination, goal, purpose, end of a journey". Some commentators say that in this verse it refers to the result of *karma* that ultimately is attained, but we can also raise this meaning to higher levels, and specifically to the ultimate goal and purpose of life, that is liberation from material illusion, attainment of spiritual realization and pure love for God - that will be mentioned in 9.32 as *param gatim*.

In a deeper devotional sense, Krishna is the ultimate destination and the purpose of all actions for the devotee, who constantly meditates on him and only desires to attain him. The *surah* ("devotees, divine personalities") always keep their vision on Vishnu, who is the supreme destination: *om tad visnoh paramam padam sada pasyanti surayah diviva caksur atatam visnor yat paramam padam*.

This is the verdict of the *Rig Veda samhita* (1.22.20), repeated in several *Upanishads* (*Paingala*, 4.30-32, *Subala*, 6.6, *Tara sara*, 3.9, *Tripura tapani*, 4.13).

In his instructions in *Bhagavata Purana* (7.5.30), Prahlada mentions that the persons who identify with their family (*grha vratā*) and do not control their senses (*adanta gobhīh*) walk into a dark path (*visatam tamisram*). In the subsequent verse (7.5.31) he continues to explain: *na te viduh svartha gatim hi visnum, durasaya ye bahir artha maninah, adha yathandhair upaniyamanas, te 'pisa tantryam uru damni baddhah*, "They do not know that Vishnu is the goal of life, and thus they cultivate high egotic ambitions and consider the external things to be actually valuable in themselves. They are just like blind people led by other blind people, strongly tied up by the power of God."

The same point will be established by Krishna later in *Bhagavad gita* 16.23: *na sa siddhim avapnoti, na sukham, na param gatim*, "they cannot achieve perfection, happiness or the ultimate purpose".

The word *bhartā* means "nourisher, maintainer", and therefore it refers to a person who lovingly takes care of his dependents, like a husband or an employer - someone in the category indicated by the *Bhagavata Purana* (5.5.18) as *guru*, father, mother, *deva* and so on. Such a person, who is only concerned with our good, deserves all our respect and affection. In verse 13.23 Krishna will again mention the quality of *bhartā* as one of the main characteristics of God (*bhartā, bhokta, mahesvarah, paramatma, parama purusha, upadrasta, anumanta*).

The word *prabhu*, "lord", is from the same root of *prabha*, "power". It is used to refer to God and sometimes also to refer to powerful personalities, saints and devotees. Its deep meaning can be understood from the description of *Svetasvatara Upanishad* (3.17): *sarvasya prabhum isanam sarvasya saranam brihat*, "Isana, the Lord, has power over all, and is the immense shelter for everything and everyone."

The word *sakshi*, "witness", appears in many places to describe Bhagavan, of whom Paramatma is an expansion. *Bhagavata Purana* (4.20.7) describes this supreme Self as *ekah suddhah svayam jyotir, nirguno 'sau gunasrayah, sarva go 'navritah sakshi, niratmatma atmanah parah*, "The One/ All, pure, effulgent in itself, free from all designations but origin of all qualities, omnipresent (going everywhere), never covered (by material identification), the witness, selfless self of the self - totally spiritual."

It refers to the fact that Krishna is the Soul in the heart of all beings, but remains detached observing the activities of the individual soul. What is exactly this presence? It is simply Consciousness: the pure awareness that transcends the limitations of time and space and phenomenon. It is the eternal, blissful, and awakened state of being that we are, when we overcome the identification and the movements or modifications of the mind and body. This is what Patanjali describes in his *sutras* as the purpose and meaning of Yoga, and therefore one of the earliest practices of meditation consists in becoming conscious of ourselves as the detached and blissful witness of the movements and activities of our body and mind.

Several famous and beautiful prayers address the Lord as *sakshi*. Narada Muni thus addresses Krishna after the killing of the Kesi *asura* in Vrindavana: *tvam atma sarva bhutanam eko jyotir ivadhasam, gudho guha sayah saksi maha purusa isvarah*, "You are the Self in all the beings, the One, hidden in the cave of the heart like the radiant light of fire in the kindling wood. O great *purusha*, o *isvara*, you are the witness" (10.37.11).

Similarly, king Bahulasva of Videha prayed, *bhavan hi sarva bhutanam atma saksi sva drg vibho, atha nas tvat padambhojam smaritam darsanam gata*, "Your Grace is the Self of all being, the witness, that sees itself/ self illuminated, the powerful. You have shown yourself to us, because we are always remembering your lotus feet" (10.86.31).

The word *nivasah*, "abode", is applied to Krishna in several other verses of *Gita* and especially in the description of the universal form of God (11.25, 11.36, 11.45), but also in 12.8, and is echoed by the synonym *dhama* (8.21, 10.12, 11.38, 15.6) and similar words (*visanti*, 8.11, 11.21, 11.26, 11.29, *visate*, 18.55). It is also the root for Vishnu's name Srinivasa, "the abode of Sri".

In *Bhagavata Purana* we find this definition in the description of Devaki while pregnant with Krishna: *sa devaki sarva jagan-nivasa nivasa bhuta nitaram na reje*, "The womb of Devaki had become the abode of the abode of everything, but she kept that radiance to herself." (10.2.19)

The word *saranam* means "one who delivers others from danger" and therefore "protection, shelter, refuge", and is used very frequently in prayers by which the devotees surrenders to God seeking his protection. Krishna also uses the word in 2.49 when he speaks about "taking shelter in intelligence", and recommending to "take shelter" in God as in 18.62 *saranam gaccha*, and 18.65 *saranam vraja*. A synonym is *prapannam* ("surrender") as in 2.7.

Krishna also describes himself as the supreme friend (*suhrit*) of all beings, not only here but also in 5.29. Another synonym is *sakha*, that is used specifically to refer to the relationship between Arjuna and Krishna (4.3, 11.41, 11.44).

The word *prabhava* means "creation, origin of existence, manifestation, beginning of things", while *sthanam* means both "maintenance, conservation, continued existence" and "position, background, basis". It is directly connected with *pralayah* (the destruction) and *sthanam* (the maintenance), that is also connected to the name *nivasah*.

The word *nidhanam* means "treasure, store for the future, savings, investment", and is mentioned in 2.28 in reference to the living beings or states of existence that are "stored" into God in the period of non-manifestation. It is also found in Arjuna's prayers to the universal form (*param nidhanam*, 11.18, 11.38).

Closely related to this meaning are the two other words *bijam* ("the seed") and *avyayam* ("that is never destroyed"). The supreme Consciousness is the seed that contains the existence of the entire tree of the universal manifestation, in which innumerable seeds are produced (7.10, 10.39, 14.4).

This is an extremely powerful meditation, to be practiced every day to remind ourselves what we are supposed to do, and why, in the course of our daily activities. Whatever we do, eat, sacrifice, endure, or give away (9.27), we must remember that Krishna is the purpose we want to attain (*gati*), the strength that carries us across, the witness of everything that happens, our friend and shelter, the power that brings beginnings and ends, and the imperishable bank account where we store all our merits. When we are able to remember this, every day is a success, irrespective of what we have been able to accomplish on the gross material level.

तपाम्यहमहं वर्षं निगृह्णाम्युत्सृजामि च । अमृतं चैव मृत्युश्च सदसच्चाहमर्जुन ॥ ९-१९ ॥

tapāmyahamaḥam varṣaṁ nigṛhṇāmyutsṛjāmi ca । amṛtaṁ caiva mṛtyuśca sadasaccāhamarjuna ॥ 9-19 ॥

tapami: I heat up; *aham*: I; *aham*: I; *varsham*: the rain; *ngrihnam*: withhold; *utsrijami*: send forth; *ca*: and; *amritam*: immortality; *ca*: and; *eva*: certainly; *mrityuh*: death; *ca*: and; *sat*: *sat*; *asat*: *asat*; *ca*: and; *aham*: I (am); *arjuna*: o Arjuna.

"I am the origin of the heat (of the sun), I pour down or withhold the rains. I am immortality and death as well. I am *sat* and *asat*, too, o Arjuna."

All the world cultures recognize the Sun as the original Deity, from whose immense power everything is created and destroyed. The Sun bestows both life and death, and therefore manifests both the "good" and "bad" aspects of power - the fierce and the benevolent, defined in Sanskrit as *saumya* and *asaumya*.

The words *sat* and *asat* are difficult to translate because they contain many levels of meanings, all in the category of opposites or polarities: spiritual and material, permanent and temporary, good and bad, higher and lower, and so on. The path of progress leads from *asat* to *sat* (*asato ma sad gamaya, tamaso ma jyotir gamaya, mrityor ma amritam gamaya - Brihad aranyaka Upanishad* 1.3.28), "from ignorance lead me to truth, from darkness lead me to light, from death lead me to immortality".

However, to really appreciate God we need to understand that God is the source of everything - not only the things we consider good, but also the things that appear bad. Everything that exists has a purpose, and is arranged by the universal intelligence according to precise and perfect laws, meant for the progress and support of all. What we consider bad is just the absence of good, just like darkness is just the absence of light. However, darkness too is created by the sun, in daytime because of clouds (created by the sun by evaporating water) and in the night because the mass of the earth (also created by the sun when the planets were separated from the original mass, and moved in its orbit by the gravitational pull of the sun) remains between our eyes and the sun itself.

The abrahamic ideologies we often mention as a wide-spread cultural contamination at global level are closely related to the Parsi ideology created by Zarathustra - depicting two rival Gods: Ahura Mazda and Ariman. Once Zarathustra had chosen Ahura Mazda as his "good God", Ariman automatically became the Enemy, "the God of the others" (as in "the other peoples who are our enemies and we must vanquish"). As a consequence, a strange theology developed, according to which "the good God" created all the good things and whatever bad or evil things exist in the world were created by Satan, the enemy of God. Both *satan* and *ariman* literally mean "the enemy".

In the Bible, Satan was originally Lucifer (a Latin word literally meaning "the bringer of light"), who entered the Garden of Eden and tempted the first two human beings - Adam and Eve - to disobey God (Jahweh) and eat the apple of knowledge. Jahweh did not want them to eat the fruit of knowledge because by actually becoming able to tell good from evil, they would become as powerful as him. Eve ate the apple and gave it to Adam, and Jahweh kicked out both from his garden, cursing them to suffer for everything in life, from growing their food to giving birth. However, somehow the descendants of these two people prospered and built a great civilization; Jahweh did not like it and killed almost all of them, including all animals, with the Great Flood - only Noah was spared because Jahweh tipped him beforehand and told him to build a big boat. Some time later, when people had recovered from that mass slaughter and developed another great civilization, God chose a man called Abraham and told him to become his follower. In exchange he promised him many descendants and domination over all the lands. As evidence of their allegiance to Jahweh, Abraham and all the males of his family would have to practice genital mutilation and animal sacrifices, because what pleases Jahweh most is the blood and pain of the innocent... so much that, thousands of years later, in order to "save the entire mankind", Jahweh will organize for the brutal torture and death of "his only son" Jesus, and by the blood and pain of Jesus, Jahweh would be appeased. From the recorded history of the last 2000 years, however, it seems Jesus' sacrifice was simply not sufficient, and much more blood and sufferings were required.

This is the basic theology of what is called "abrahamic monotheism", that means "only accepting one God" and fighting against all the other Gods. On the other hand, Vedic monotheism means "accepting that there is one God that manifests in many forms"; as Krishna

confirms in this verse, he is *sat* and *asat* at the same time, and yet he is not limited by them. But who created Satan in the first place? If God is all-knowing and all-powerful, he must have calculated the nature of Satan to work exactly as it worked, and in the worst case, God should have destroyed Satan as the *asuras* are systematically destroyed along the course of history.

Since abrahamics say he hasn't, the entire abrahamic theology remains built on the inherent ontological duality between good and evil, creating a deep imbalance - a sort of fundamental schizophrenia - in the minds of the followers, because this so-called enemy God lives within each and every human being, in the form of the material body, the world, nature, or the feminine hemisphere of the brain connected to the left side of the body. The imbalance caused by the hostility towards nature and by the intention to defeat, oppress and dominate it, creates fear and aggressiveness against everything feminine (like nature and like the origin of the body), and the natural duality (called *sat* and *asat*, and that must be overcome by transcending it on a higher level of consciousness) becomes an obsessive never-ending war rather than the joyful, graceful and passionate sacred dance it is supposed to be. In the eyes of the abrahamics, spirit and matter become antagonists and enemies to each other, and man and woman can never be friends or cooperate with each other.

The victory of armored patriarchy, that became firmly established with the abrahamic ideologies, caused the bondage of women in various degrees of oppression because women as a class represent nature and the beauty of material things - bodies, sex, children, pleasure, sweetness, tenderness, and so on. Rape appeared for the first time in human history as an instrument of oppression. Previously, in dharmic human societies, there had been sexual acts dictated by the passion of the male, but because of the general ethical values of society and human nature, they had been mostly physical discharges of lust, devoid of the intention to hurt and humiliate the woman who had become the target of the sexual urge. It was more similar to the animals' sexual encounters than to the rape as we have known it for the last 3000 years - an act that is more similar to the mentality of *rakshasas*, the asuric beings who enjoy the sufferings of other people.

Rape always goes together with slavery and torture, because all these are based on the idea that the victim has no rights to decide on her/his own life and to oppose what others want to do with her/his body. This of course deeply changed the dynamics of family, because women lost all decisional power in the matter of marriage and children, so the system of arranged marriages started and marriage itself became just a form of institutionalized and legalized rape. In the same period we also observe the beginning of wars, crude iron weapons among the uncivilized tribes, use of horses and chariots for the hostile invasion of peaceful territories, pillaging, reducing animals and land to objects of private property (without inherent rights of the animals and land to proper use), mistreatment of children, painful bodily modifications (circumcision, mutilation, cranial elongation, feet shrinking etc), unnecessary felling of trees, destruction of property (such as houses etc), division of society in classes, hereditary of social positions (especially in priesthood), male priesthood, etc.

Hopefully, we are coming to the end of this horrible parenthesis in human history, and the last throes of the monster can be less disastrous if we have been able to attract more people to the sanity and beauty of dharmic ideologies. Unfortunately, Hinduism too has been poisoned by such alien infiltrations at conscious and subconscious collective level so that a lot of confusion has been created; we have the mission to clean the mess up. Our greatest hope is *Bhagavad gita*.

There are fools who are questioning the "relevance of *Gita* for our times", but they simply have not understood anything about the *Gita*, and are very confused about the problems that we are to face at this moment in time. Just this one verse of *Gita* offers the perfect solution to the ideological schizophrenia of eternal conflict: God is the sum total of everything that exists, the place where all dualities are overcome because they unite and reconcile. God is *sat* and *asat* at the same time - existence and non-existence, spirit and matter, cause and effect, heat and rain, death and immortality. Fear is thus immediately vanquished, and when fear vanishes, a human being really starts to live.

त्रैविद्या मां सोमपाः पूतपापा यज्ञैरिष्ट्वा स्वर्गतिं प्रार्थयन्ते ।
 traividyaṁ māṁ somapāḥ pūtapāpā yajñairiṣṭvā svargatiṁ prārthayante ।
 ते पुण्यमासाद्य सुरेन्द्रलोकं अश्नन्ति दिव्यान्दिवि देवभोगान् ॥ ९-२० ॥
 te puṇyamāsādyā surendralokaṁ aśnanti divyāndivi devabhogān ॥ 9-20 ॥

trai-vidya: those who know the 3 *Vedas*; *mam*: me; *soma-pah*: drink the *soma rasa*; *puta*: purified; *papa*: wrongful actions; *yajnah*: with sacrifices; *istva*: by worshipping; *svah-gatim*: attainment of Svarga; *prarthayante*: they pray for; *te*: they; *punyam*: virtuous/ meritorious; *asadya*: attaining; *sura-indra-lokam*: the planet of the King of the *devas*; *asnanti*: they eat; *divyan*: divine; *divi*: in heaven; *deva-bhogan*: the pleasures of the *devas*.

"Those who know the three (*Vedas*), who drink the *soma* and who are purified from all wrongs through the (acts of) sacrifice, worshipping me (in this way) pray to attain Svarga. After reaching the pious (planets) of the King of the *suras* (Indra) in heaven, they enjoy the celestial pleasures of the *devas*."

Krishna speaks here of the *trai vidya*, "the three forms of knowledge", and we might easily conclude that he is referring to the three main *Vedas* called *Rig*, *Sama* and *Yajur*, that deal with the same hymns and the same understanding of the universe, and are focused on the glorification of the *devas*. The fourth *Veda*, called *Atharva*, is considered slightly different as it contains various specific formulas to solve daily problems such as dealing with controlling natural and atmospheric calamities, neutralizing environment pollution, fighting ghosts and hostile spirits, and alleviating the negative influence of the planets. Another interpretation of the *trai vidya* reference is the triad of *sruti*, *smriti* and *agama*, which form the foundations for a genuine engagement in religious life. It can also refer to the knowledge of the three levels or dimensions of existence, called *Bhu*, *Bhuvah* and *Svah* - the earthly or material levels, the intermediate subtle levels, and the higher or spiritual levels.

Svah or *Svarga* is already considered almost spiritual because it is the residence of the *devas*, the limbs and representatives of the Supreme Personality of Godhead, in charge of the administration of the universe. Indra himself is considered to be a direct manifestation of Vishnu, so much that in this verse Krishna says, *mam istva*, "by worshipping me" referred to the offerings of *soma* and the invocations to the King of the *devas*.

This higher planetary system is said to be composed by the planets Mahar, Jana, Tapa and Satya, that is the abode of Lord Brahma, the architect of the universe. Those who have properly studied Vedic scriptures cooperate with the *devas* in the proper administration of the universe, by dutifully performing their *karmas* and by serving *dharma* as prescribed. In the course of their religious ceremonies, these saintly persons become purified by the performance of their duties and by drinking the famous *soma rasa*.

Some commentators believe that this reference to the *soma* is symbolic and stands for the power of intelligence, but even a literal meaning is not out of place. However, we need to clarify some misunderstanding regarding the *soma rasa*, the juice of the *soma* plant or *soma lata*.

Colonial scholars explained that the *soma rasa* was the milky juice of the *Sarcostemma viminalis* (or *Asclepia acida*) turned alcoholic with the fermentation with flour and butter - but this procedure does not correspond with the original texts in regard to the preparation or to the beneficial and purificatory effects described in the traditional texts. On the other hand, the ancient Ayurvedic tradition identifies the *soma lata* with the *Ephedra gerardiana*, the Indian variety of the ubiquitous Ephedra, a very popular medicinal herb that grows spontaneously in Asia, Europe and America, where it is called *Mormon Tea* and *Squaw Tea*. The *Susruta samhita* (which is part of the *Ayur Veda*) lists those places where the *soma lata* grows spontaneously in two varieties: the mountain and the marsh.

Ephedra contains a bland alkaloid called ephedrine, comparable to the "good caffeine" of *guaranà* and *yerba matè*, used in Ayurvedic medicine as a stimulant at the mental and physical level, for curing headaches, allergies and rheumatism, and improving metabolism and digestion. Its active principles stimulate the natural production of adrenaline, and in fact it is very popular among sports people and students during the exam periods, and also for the purpose of burning off excess weight. Synthetic ephedrine is catalogued by the International Olympic Committee and by the World Anti-Doping Agency among the banned substances in professional sports, so much that some athletes have been disqualified in some competitions.

Hymn 4 of *mandala* 9 of *Rig Veda* (completely dedicated to the *soma rasa*) prays, "may we obtain agility, strength and mental power, to win and repel our enemies, and to become better persons."

This, in the Vedic culture, is considered true purification; some enemies of Vedic culture have concocted cruel and gruesome fantasies about the concept of purification and have inserted them into manipulated texts of the *Manu samhita*, for example, and simpletons have even gone as far as to believe them, but *Gita* is very clear about this subject, both here and later (17.5-6, 17.14-19). In the various descriptions of the *Rig Veda* we also find the important information that the *soma* plant does not have leaves or bark, but smells like pine and tastes rather bitter. Depending on the variety and the age of the plant, the color goes from bright green of the evergreen to green with golden or dark red hues. The stems are pressed with special stones, then the juice is filtered and left to macerate for one night: a procedure that is normally used in herbal medicine to extract the active principles, but does not imply alcoholic fermentation, which would require a longer time. It is interesting to see that Soma as the juice of the plant is identified with the Deity Soma (the Moon) and the other way around, and that in traditional iconography it is represented as a bull, a bird or a human embryo.

The word *asnanti* in this verse is particularly interesting because it focuses on the fact that in this material world, eating always remains the greatest pleasure, and trying to deny oneself the healthy and sattvic pleasure of the tongue will simply twist around the natural pleasure propensity towards more dangerous directions. Even the *devas* enjoy their foods - and sattvic food is the best.

ते तं भुक्त्वा स्वर्गलोकं विशालं क्षीणे पुण्ये मर्त्यलोकं विशन्ति ।
 te taṁ bhuktvā svargalokaṁ viśālaṁ kṣīṇe puṇye martyalokaṁ viśanti ।
 एवं त्रयीधर्ममनुप्रपन्ना गतागतं कामकामा लभन्ते ॥ ९-२१ ॥
 evaṁ trayīdharmamanuprapannā gatāgataṁ kāmakāmā labhante ॥ 9-21 ॥

te: they; *taṁ*: that; *bhuktvā*: enjoying; *svarga-lokam*: of Svargaloka; *visalam*: great; *kshine*: after having exhausted; *punye*: the virtuous merits; *martya-lokam*: on the planet of mortal people; *visanti*: fall down; *evam*: thus; *trayi-dharmam*: of the three dharmas; *anuprapannah*: following; *gata-agatam*: coming and going; *kama-kama*: desire for desires; *labhante*: obtain.

"After a long time spent in the enjoyment of Svargaloka, those who have exhausted their virtuous merits fall down again to the level of mortals. In this way, following strictly the path of the three dharmas, they develop a lust for desires and they continue to take birth and die."

In verse 9.19, Krishna mentioned that he is death and immortality at the same time, and in these subsequent verses there seems to be some sort of overlapping of the two concepts when we speak of Svargaloka, the world of the *devas* as opposed to Martyaloka, the world of mortal human beings. Actually, Svargaloka too is a place reached by death, although the duration of life there is different for different degrees of *devas*. Besides the main Personalities of Godhead there - the 12 Adityas, the 8 Vasus, the 11 Rudras, the 2 Asvini kumara and the 49 Maruts - there is a large population of *devas* and *upadevas* (Gods and "under-Gods") that is usually calculated around the tune of 33 million people.

There are innumerable administrative posts to be filled in the universal government capital, and only the most qualified are appointed there by dint of their own personal *punya*, or virtuous merit. This is indicated by the expression *trayi-dharmam*, "by the three dharmas", that can be translated in a variety of ways just like the expression *tray-vidya* (9.20) - the three dimensions of Bhu, Bhuvah and Svah, as well as the knowledge of the three main *Vedas* (*Rig, Sama, Yajur*).

Thus *trayi-dharma* refers to the dutiful performance of one's work on the three levels of existence (earthly, subtle and religious/ spiritual), or to the three main *sva-dharmas* in the *varna* system of *brahmanas*, *kshatriyas* and *vaisyas*, because *sudras* are not expected to perform the *yajnas* for the higher planets. The word *dharma* means "duty", therefore it can apply here to family, society and mankind, and also to the pursuance of the cultivation of *dharma*, *artha* and *kama*, in the cycle of death and rebirth.

These are the *dharman* (in the plural) Krishna will mention in 18.65, when he will say that one should abandon all such identifications and simply surrender to the supreme universal Consciousness to attain permanent liberation.

Non unlikely the noble souls that have reached the Pitrilokas and are maintained there by the credit of the *sraddha* offered by their descendents, the residents of Svargaloka attain and maintain their positions by credits. If they do not distinguish themselves by their selfless and careful work in their particular post, at some point they exhaust their credits and must return to earth, just like men who live in a very expensive luxury residence hotel but are not earning sufficient money will eventually have to leave and find a more modest accommodation. Similar verses are found in *Bhagavata Purana*, for example in 3.32.1-4, where Kapila explains that *grihamedhis* (people attached to family life) perform many religious duties (*dharman*, in the plural) while living at home and enjoying *dharma*, *artha* and *kama*, and engaging in ceremonies (*kratu*) to worship *devas* and *pitris*, without being interested in the pure Krishna Consciousness (*bhagavad-dharma*). By drinking the *soma rasa* during such worship, these people will attain the higher planets but will ultimately fall down again, if not earlier, by the time Mahavishnu withdraws the universe into his body.

Another series of verses is found in *Bhagavata Purana* (11.10.22-26), where Krishna explains to Uddhava that those who properly perform the Vedic duties without any mistake are elevated to Svarga, where they enjoy the same pleasures of the *devas*. Shining with the power of their virtuous merits, they travel around in wonderful airplanes, surrounded by beautiful women and glorified by the Gandharvas' songs. Then, when their old merits are exhausted, they are forced to leave those wonderful places and to return to earth to work. Here we clearly see that the problem is not pleasure in itself, or even desire in itself, but rather the deliberate choice to cultivate desires for sense gratification as the purpose of life. This constitutes a major distraction because it is simply impossible to achieve real satisfaction through sense gratification - one simply wants more and more - and in the process one completely forgets the purpose of human life, the realization of the Atman.

These people who cultivate the desire for desires (*kama-kama*) use Svarga simply as a luxury vacation resort and not as a service post, and therefore they miss the great opportunity offered by the company of such great Personalities, choosing simply to enjoy their pleasures.

अनन्याश्चिन्तयन्तो मां ये जनाः पर्युपासते । तेषां नित्याभियुक्तानां योगक्षेमं वहाम्यहम् ॥ ९-२२ ॥

ananyaścintayanto māṁ ye janāḥ paryupāsate | teṣāṁ nityābhiyuktānāṁ yōgākṣemaṁ vahāmyaham || 9-22 ||

ananyah: with no other; *cintayantah*: thought/ concern/ interest; *mam*: me; *ye*: those; *janah*: people; *paryupasate*: perfectly worship; *tesam*: to them; *nitya-abhiyuktanam*: always engaged favorably/ constructively; *yoga-ksemam*: what is required for their service; *vahami*: I carry; *aham*: I (personally).

"Those who are interested only in me and my worship are always favorably/ constructively engaged. I personally carry what they need."

A householder carries the burden of the maintenance of his family - the father maintains his children, and the grown up son maintains his elderly parents - and similarly the Lord takes personal care of his family or *samsara*, therefore he is called *bhakta vatsala*, very affectionate and sensitive to the needs of his devotees.

The word *vahami* derives from the same root of *vahana* ("carrier") and literally means "carrying, transporting". There are many beautiful episodes, in ancient and in more recent times, of the Lord personally appearing in various forms to practically demonstrate the truth of this statement; as for example in the story of Madhavendra Puri and Kshirachora Gopinatha (who stole a pot of rice pudding for him), a devotee of Jagannatha named Bandhu Mohanty (whose entire family was fed by a mysterious black boy who gave them a huge golden plate filled with food), to Bilvamangala (who was daily fed with milk by Krishna in Vrindavana).

There was also that famous Gita Panda (named Arjuna Mishra) who was studying this very same verse and became perplexed about it. When the Panda went to take bath, his wife was visited by a black-complexioned boy who was carrying a heavy load of food for him as a gift. In this last incidence, the identity of the mysterious donor was highlighted by the fact that he had a deep red scratch across his chest, which the Panda recognized later as a same scratch he had done with his pen on the verse that had left him so dubious. Another similar example is Draupadi's *sari*, that Krishna kept supplying out of thin air to protect her dignity when she was being disrobed by the order of evil Duryodhana in the assembly of the Kurus. We can also remember the story of the *brahmana* Sudama, narrated in the 10th canto of *Bhagavata Purana*, who returned home without asking anything from his friend Krishna, but found his house had been instantly filled with immeasurable wealth. But there are also every day miracles we can observe in our own lives when we totally devote them to the service of God, without any other consideration. These necessities not only apply to the material ingredients or maintenance, but also to the spiritual realizations and inspiration to continue in our service. The previous verse was speaking about ordinary virtuous people, who engage in the three types of duties, and after attaining the higher planetary systems and spending some time there, must return to the earthly platform to earn new merits. Such people are not selfish, because the influence of *sattva guna* keeps them free from egotism and exploitation: they are simply concerned about their own maintenance and the maintenance of those who depend on them.

Here Krishna reassures his devotees that they do not need to be worried about anything: he will take care of them personally at every step of the way, for each and every necessity. However, we should not forget the required qualifications that entitle the devotee to the personal attention of Krishna: 1) exclusive concern with Krishna's service, 2) perfect performance of worship, 3) continued, regular and consistent favorable engagement. Exclusive concern with Krishna's service means that the devotee is not interested in his/ her own pleasure or benefit, and rather s/he is ready to sacrifice everything and engage everything in Krishna's service, following to Krishna's explicit instructions and not some imaginative plan that is not in accordance to the principles of *dharma* and the conclusions of the *shastra*.

Ananya means "no other", and refers to the total surrender of the devotee, who has no mental reservations in his dedication to God. The perfect performance of worship does not refer to the particular technical details, which can be adjusted from time to time according to the circumstances. It rather refers to the purity of the desire to serve Krishna, and the love and devotion that is engaged in the process.

The concept of continued and consistent favorable engagement refers to the identification of the devotee as Krishna's servant only; the pure devotee completely depends on Krishna and surrenders everything to him, without remaining attached to any expectation or identification. We should be careful not to misinterpret this verse to mean that we can just do some little *puja* to Krishna, without actually working sincerely to perform our duties, and expect that Krishna will take care of everything for our maintenance.

The tendency of a lazy person is to expect everyone else to work for him, but the characteristic of a devotee is exactly the opposite: he works for Krishna, and performs his duties sincerely and carefully, including those to society and family, because he sees everyone and everything as belonging to Krishna, and he turns all actions into a service to God.

The expression *niya abhi yuktanam* indicates a perfect constant union in *yoga*, the highest level of success in the pursuance of the evolution of Consciousness. The words *yoga* and *kshema* respectively apply to what is necessary to connect with God and what is required for one's protection and maintenance.

येऽप्यन्यदेवताभक्ता यजन्ते श्रद्धयान्विताः । तेऽपि मामेव कौन्तेय यजन्त्यविधिपूर्वकम् ॥ ९-२३ ॥

ye'pyanyadevatābhaktā yajante śraddhayānvitāḥ | te'pi māmeva kaunteya yajantyaividhipūrvakam || 9-23||

ye: those; api: also; anya-devatah: other devas; bhaktah: the devotees; yajante: worship; śraddhayānvitah: with that faith; te: them; api: also; mam: me; eva: certainly; kaunteya: o son of Kunti (Arjuna); yajanti: they are worshiping; a-vidhi: not according to the knowledge/rules; purvakam: previous.

"O Arjuna, those devotees who worship the devas separately with that faith, are actually worshipping me only, but they are acting in a way that is not in accordance with the proper knowledge."

This is the famous verse used as evidence by those who claim that worshipping "the demigods" is contrary to devotional service and amounts to an offense towards Krishna. The other evidence they give is the verse from *Padma Purana (Brahma Khanda 25.15-18)* that lists, second among the 10 main offenses to be avoided in the chanting of the holy names, *sivasya sri-visnor ya iha guna-namadi-sakalam dhiya bhinnam pasyet sa khalu hari-namahita-karah*, "separating Vishnu from Shiva (and their names, qualities etc) by considering Shiva as different and independently existing from Hari".

The other verse of *Bhagavad gita* quoted as "condemning demigod worship" is 7.20: *kamais tais tair hrita-jnanah prapadyante 'nya-devatah, tam tam niyamam asthaya prakriya niyatah svaya*, "Those whose knowledge is confused by a variety of desires approach other devas, and according to their nature they follow the (specific) regulations."

However, usually the next verse is forgotten: *yo yo yam yam tanum bhaktah śraddhayarcitum icchati, tasya tasyacalam śraddham tam eva vidadhmy aham*, "Whatever form the devotee wishes to worship with faith, I (Krishna) strengthen the determination by which s/he will become established (in that method)." (7.21) So it is Krishna himself who is encouraging such worship. Happily enough, there are no verses in *Bhagavad gita* "condemning" (what to speak of "prohibiting") the worship offered to the devas. At most, Krishna says that it is done without the proper awareness of the supreme Unity of the Transcendental Consciousness.

To begin with, verse 9.23 does not exactly say that one should not worship "other devas" - or even that a devotee of Krishna should stop other people from worshipping the devas, as several confused persons have been led to believe. This would be in contradiction with other passages, especially 3.10-14, where Krishna clearly says that one who does not offer sacrifices to the devas in gratitude for their gifts is just a thief.

This verse (9.23) simply says that the worship offered separately to the devas actually reaches Krishna, but without the knowledge of the worshiper. It is amazing how some people can carve out such offensive hostility against the devas from this terse, neutral and simple statement of Krishna. We would better understand this problem if we examine the basic abrahamic ideology, in which "the other god" is nothing less than Satan himself, the Great Enemy that man must oppose and destroy in all possible ways (including by killing cats and dogs) because Jahweh is not capable or willing to do it himself. If we want to actually understand and apply Vedic knowledge, we need to get rid of these faulty and damaging cultural superimpositions.

The proper way (*vidhi purvakam*) in Vedic culture is to always show respect to the devas as limbs and representatives and servants of the Supreme Consciousness. Not worshipping them as "competition Gods", and also not disrespecting them: both these attitudes would be wrong. During the meditation on the Supreme Lord, we offer worship to the various limbs of his body, beginning with his feet, and then we honor the Lord's companions and intimate servants, at various levels and degrees. The devas are not separate from the Lord, rather they are his limbs - his dear companions and assistants - and the Lord personally intervenes to help them and save them from the asuras, as we see in innumerable episodes in the Puranas. This is also confirmed in *Bhagavata Purana 10.40.9-10: sarva eva yajanti tvam sarva devamayevaram, ye 'py anya-devata bhakta yady apy anya-dhiyah prabho, yathadri prabhava nadyah parjanyaipuritah prabho visanti sarvatah sindhum tadvat tvam gatayo 'ntatah*, "Everyone actually worships you, Lord, because you are the sum total of all devas, even if devotees meditate on the other forms separately from you. Just like the rivers are born from the mountains where the rainwater is collected, and then end up into the ocean, all paths ultimately attain you, Lord."

The problem lies only in the minds of the worshipers who delude themselves into thinking that they can cut some corners in life by bribing some lower-rung minister in the government and obtain benefits without having actually earned them. This is explained in verses 7.23 ("Persons of lesser intelligence seek temporary benefits") and 4.12 ("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").

There is nothing wrong in respectfully making friends and associating with the devas - just like there is nothing wrong in making friends with powerful virtuous personalities in the government - because by associating with them we can learn to work and live like them on a sattvic and responsible platform, and cooperating with them for the support of the society and the universe is always required by the proper established system. The mistake would be considering them as authorities in themselves, as separate and independent from the Government, and expecting them to support and protect us even if we engage in illicit and illegal activities, or to give us what is not lawfully destined to us. A famous example in this regard is offered by *Bhagavata Purana (4.31.14): yatha taror mula nisekanena tripyanti tat skandha bhujopasakhah, pranopaharac ca yathendriyanam tathaiva sarvarhanam acyutejya*, "Just like by watering the root of a tree all its branches and twigs are satisfied, and by feeding the prana all the senses are nourished, by worshipping Acyuta, the Supreme Personality of Godhead, one can please everything (in the universe)."

This example is particularly suitable because intelligent people are able to understand that, besides watering the roots and feeding the *prana* in the body, it is always good to wash the leaves of the tree to remove the dust that obstructs the proper functions of the photosynthesis, as well as to brush one's teeth, apply eye balm and proper hair and skin massage oils or ointments.

अहं हि सर्वयज्ञानां भोक्ता च प्रभुरेव च । न तु मामभिजानन्ति तत्त्वेनातश्च्यवन्ति ते ॥ ९-२४ ॥

aham hi sarvayajñānāṁ bhoktā ca prabhureva ca | na tu māmabhijānanti tattvvena tashchyavanti te || 9-24 ||

aham: I (am); *hi*: certainly; *sarva-yajnanam*: of all the *yajnas*; *bhokta*: the beneficiary; *ca*: and; *prabhuh*: the Lord; *eva*: certainly; *ca*: and; *na*: not; *tu*: but; *mam*: me; *abhijananti*: they know; *tattvena*: in truth; *atah*: therefore; *cyavanti*: (they) fall down; *te*: they.

"I am the Lord and beneficiary of all *yajnas*. Those who do not understand my *tattva* will have to take birth again."

Again, this verse repeats that all sacred actions should be dedicated to the Supreme Consciousness, that is the ultimate and true beneficiary, as we had already seen in verse 3.9.

The downfall mentioned in this verse is the cycle of births and deaths, in which the conditioned soul keeps revolving, even when he qualifies for a position in the higher planets and the company of the *devas* - that are temporary manifestations of the Supreme Personality of Godhead. As we have seen explained in several verses, those who aspire simply to attain the higher planets for better sense enjoyment will have to fall back again when their virtuous merits have been spent, while those who consistently make an effort in *yoga* to attain a level of transcendental consciousness become liberated - whether they continue to perform their ordinary religious duties to society and family, or they enter the order of renunciation.

A deep lack of understanding of this verse is the cause of the old and bitter controversy between the exponents of *smarta* brahmanism based on the ritualistic *karma kanda* path on one side, and the shankarite *sannyasis* who follow the path of renunciation and a more philosophical interpretation of Vedic knowledge on the other side, as we mentioned in commentary to verse 3.1. Only after properly studying chapter 3 (and remembering it) we will be able to understand chapter 9, otherwise we will simply perpetuate the misunderstanding. For someone who has really read and understood the instructions of Krishna until this point of *Bhagavad gita*, it should be already very clear that this verse does not prohibit or minimize the importance of the *yajnas* or the worship to the *devas*, but simply states that - as for everything else - all our actions should be performed on a higher level of awareness, not simply to obtain some material benefits but to actively participate to the universal Consciousness.

The *devas* do not have any animosity or competition feelings towards the Supreme Personality of Godhead, and if sometimes there appear to be some disagreements, they are meant to create a *lila* that will enthrall the attention of human beings as a wonderful story of adventures - just like the actors of a same troupe will play out different scripts to make their repertoire more interesting. In the end, all the *devas* always cooperate with each other and they always worship the Supreme Personality of Godhead, Vishnu, who is called *deva deva*, "the God worshiped by the Gods". In this understanding, we can read the many verses from the *vaishnava shastra* where Vishnu is presented as the Supreme, without remaining confused by the illusion of duality typical of so-called monotheism. In recent times, there has been a controversial theory according to which the concept of reincarnation is not an original idea in Vedic culture, because the Veda *samhitas* - considered by mainstream western academia as the most ancient part of the Vedic scriptures - do not speak about reincarnation at all. It's like saying that because in the texts about mathematics and calculus there is no mention about cooking recipes, mathematicians never eat food, or do not believe in eating food.

The Rig Vedic hymns are meant to worship the *devas* and to raise the consciousness of the worshipers to a divine level, to bring him into the personal company of the *devas*. That is precisely to avoid reincarnating on a lower level. Reincarnation is never the purpose of Vedic knowledge: such an idea is never expressed in any Vedic text, ancient or more recent. The purpose is to achieve *moksha*: reincarnation is just the mechanism by which those who fail in one lifetime can try again in a next birth. The Rig Vedic hymns are meant to worship the *devas* and to raise the consciousness of the worshipers to a divine level, to bring him into the personal company of the *devas*. That is precisely to avoid reincarnation on a lower level. One of the main problems is that non-Vedic academia wants to demonstrate that Vedic knowledge/ culture is a "work in progress", and that it started from a primitive level. This obviously is an attempt to show that in the course of time, one should "progress beyond Vedic knowledge" and arrive at the "superior knowledge of the mainstream academia".

Trying to give an interpretation of Vedic scriptures according to some hypothetical "linear historical development" is futile, as the Vedic scriptures themselves clearly state that the entire corpus of Vedas - *Samhitas*, *Brahmanas*, *Aranyakas*, *Upanishads*, *Puranas*, *Mahabharata* - was compiled at the same time by Vyasa about 5000 years ago at the beginning of Kali yuga. Also, there is no evidence that disproves this statement of the Vedic scriptures: absence of proof is not proof of absence, especially when so much evidence supporting the Vedic version has been destroyed by the opponents of Hinduism.

These academics that date Vedic scriptures only according to the manuscripts in their possessions are practically telling you that your grandmother did not exist, because there are no documents about her identity. The simple fact is that grandmother did not need passports or certificates to prove that she existed. Also, we all know that passports and certificates can be falsified by dishonest persons, so they don't have much value anyway.

यान्ति देवव्रता देवान्पितृन्यान्ति पितृव्रताः । भूतानि यान्ति भूतेज्या यान्ति मद्याजिनोऽपि माम् ॥ ९-२५ ॥

yānti devavratā devānpitṛnyānti pitṛvratāḥ | bhūtāni yānti bhūtejyā yānti madyājino'pi mām || 9-25 ||

yanti: they go; *deva-vratah*: those who dedicate themselves to the *devas*; *devan*: to the *devas*; *pitrin*: to the *pitris*; *yanti*: they go; *pitri-vratah*: those who dedicate themselves to the *pitris*; *bhutani*: to the ghosts/ beings; *yanti*: they go; *bhuta-ijyah*: those who sacrifice to the ghosts/ beings; *yanti*: they go; *mad-yajinah*: those who sacrifice to me; *api*: certainly; *mam*: me.

"Those who dedicate themselves to the worship of the *devas* will go to the *devas*, those who worship the *pitris* will go to the *pitris*, those who worship the ghosts and other beings will join them. In the same way, those who sacrifice for me will come to me."

Whatever level of consciousness we have developed during the time allotted to us for this lifetime, we will be able to retain it at the time of death, and whatever we remembers at the time of death will be our next destination (8.6). It is not a reward for an allegiance, but the development of a natural attachment, of the tendencies and qualities that are most suited for a particular level of consciousness, that will automatically attract us to our next destination. The *vidhi* or *niyama* specific for each different type of worship is meant to stimulate certain qualities and tendencies: worship to the *devas* for the purpose of attaining their planets lead to developing sattvic qualities in sense enjoyment, and a conditioning to material joy and power. What is worship? Association.

When we worship the *devas* by remembering them, calling them to accept our offerings, and talking about them - their names, their activities, their qualities, etc - we are associating with them and therefore we develop the same characteristics, thus automatically qualifying ourselves to reside with them and to become their personal companions and assistants in their valuable service to God. We will not - as some fools have dared to say - go to hell or fall to a lower level of life.

On the other hand, worship to the *pitris* means full dedication to family and society life in the *karma kanda* system, with a strong attachment to tradition; when the ancestors worshiped were virtuous people worthy of attaining the dharmic planet of Dharmaraja, the worshipers also develop the same qualities and ultimately attain the *pitris'* planet or in the very least they obtain rebirth in the same family among the same people. Also in this case, honoring and worshiping the ancestors will take us higher, and not lower - provided of course that our worshiping is performed according to the principles of *dharma*. Also, such ancestors must have been actually qualified as civilized human beings, or even saintly personalities who actually reside in Pitriloka, and not asuric people who became ghosts or reincarnated in a lower form of life.

In Kali yuga, this path is becoming increasingly distorted and difficult because people are unable to actually follow it, and therefore they only keep the externals, or simply the identification label, with no actual substance - of course, this is not sufficient to grant access to the higher planets.

These are the two paths that Krishna had already described in verses 8.23 to 8.27 as *deva ayana* and *pitri ayana*, for those who have cultivated the knowledge of Brahman. However, there is also another path, that does not take higher but remains within the earthly level or even lower than that, and keeps the individual soul in the world of harsh conditions.

Worship to the *bhutas* refers to the dedication to the worship of conditioned souls on the earthly level or even lower levels (subterranean, or lower planetary systems), whether they are embodied or not. This also includes the worship to materialistic conditioned people, such as movie stars, professional sports stars, music stars, politicians, or other popular or cultural icons that become true idols and gods in the eyes of their fans. At the time of death, their most loyal and passionate fans will follow them in whatever destination they have attained. Many people in India claim to be tantric worshipers devoted to the Mother Goddess or Shiva in their terrifying forms, but in fact they associate with those servants of Bhairavi or Bhairava that are in the categories of *dakhinis*, *vinayakas*, *vitalas*, *yakshas*, and *pisacas*. Whenever a tantric worships with impure substances (such as liquors, meat, blood etc) the offering is accepted not by Bhairavi or Bhairava, but by their followers and companions, the ghosts.

Often simple-minded people are strongly attracted to these creatures because of the power they can manifest on the subtle level, and because of the favors they can render to their human associates; there is a fine line between honoring them as servants of the Mother or Father, and actually establishing a personal relationship with them or even entering into some pact with them. By doing so, one inevitably develops similar characteristics and tendencies.

In modern times, ghost worship has taken a new dimension through the popular culture of horror movies - zombies, vampires, ghosts, serial killers, dark mystery etc - and also due to the sharp increase of suicides, violent deaths, drug abuse and mental illnesses, that are all connected to the ghostly world and qualities. A sensitive person will immediately feel when the people around him/ her have developed this particular tamasic character, and will avoid their company. On the other hand, those who constantly think about Krishna as the Supreme Personality of Godhead - Bhagavan, Paramatma, Brahman - will enter that dimension of consciousness and at the time of death they will not need to take another birth in this material world.

पत्रं पुष्पं फलं तोयं यो मे भक्त्या प्रयच्छति । तदहं भक्त्युपहृतमश्नामि प्रयतात्मनः ॥ ९-२६ ॥

patraṁ puṣpam phalaṁ toyam yo me bhaktyā prayacchati | tadahaṁ bhaktyupahṛtamaśnāmi prayatātmanah || 9-26 ||

patram: one leaf; *pushpam*: one flower; *phalam*: one fruit; *toyam*: some water; *yah*: one who; *me*: to me; *bhaktya*: with love and devotion; *prayacchati*: asks to accept; *tat*: that; *aham*: I; *bhakti-upahritam*: (because it is) presented with love and devotion; *asnami*: I eat; *prayata-atmanah*: sincerely dedicated/ in purity of mind.

"If someone, with sincere love and devotion, offers me even one leaf, one flower, one fruit or some water, I will accept the offering because of that love and devotion."

This verse is also very famous and important, and needs to be understood properly.

In all personal relationships, food constitutes a very strong bond and an intimate exchange. The affection between mother and child develops through feeding, especially breast feeding, so bottle-feeding, restricted feeding times, or wet-nurse feeding of infants is going to weaken the connection with the natural mother, especially in the first days after birth, and create the basis for an emotionally frustrated adult.

An asuric culture based on compulsive emotional consumerism and mind control through manipulation of low self-esteem of the public will certainly obstruct a healthy and natural relationship between mother and child. When a boy and a girl fall in love, they enjoy eating together and exchanging chocolates or candies, or cooking for each other. It is also common knowledge that the best way to a person's heart is through the stomach, so a good wife should train herself to become a good cook and put love in her cooking.

When we go to meet someone important we bring a gift of food - sweets, a bottle of drink, etc - and seasonal and festival gifts were originally based on food, either cooked, or uncooked. Similarly, when devotees visit temples, they bring food offerings especially in the form of fruits and sweets. Flowers are also an all-popular gift in all affectionate relationships. The "essence of flowers" is often presented in the form of perfumes, scents, after-shave lotions, scented candles etc, which brings us back to the flower idea. Thus, the very popular offering of incense and flower garlands in temples perfectly fit in the "*puspam*" definition given in this verse.

The *patram* (leaf) mentioned in the verse mainly refers to the leaves of sacred plants, especially *tulasi*, that is considered the best offering for Krishna for several reasons. The *tulasi* plant grows easily and wildly in many places, especially those places that have been purified by some religious/ spiritual activity or by the presence or passage of a great soul, therefore an offering of *tulasi* leaf is easily affordable for everyone. Even more important, *tulasi* (*Ocimum sanctum*), has extraordinary medicinal properties, fighting infections, fevers and contaminations of all kinds. In a wider sense, the leaf, flower and fruit mentioned in the verse refer to a sattvic vegetarian diet, as there is practically no violence, no killing, involved in collecting leaves, flowers and fruits from plants, and they can be consumed without even cooking. This is the perfect *yoga* diet, free from *karma*, and it becomes perfectly spiritualized when such ingredients are offered to God in sincere love and devotion. For those who are unable to follow this strict diet, there are provisions for other sattvic vegetarian ingredients, such as food grains and pulses, roots vegetables, nuts and seeds of various types and their derivatives.

In a proper environment and society, milk is obtained without causing any suffering to the animals, and as cows are honored like mothers, a positive direct relationship is developed between the cow and the human beings who drink her milk. Just like in humans, a mother cow can produce more milk than what is actually needed by the newborn, and the flow of milk increases with the deepening of affection and the requirement of feeding - of course, within reason. Genetic manipulation, artificial insemination and other unnatural practices in dairy farms, and even more so the forced separation of the calves from their mothers, create an asuric condition by which milk becomes contaminated by bad *karma* and thus generates diseases in the human beings that consume it. In such conditions, it is better to opt for a vegan diet.

In commentary to verse 2.64 we have already discussed about the *prasadam*, the sanctified pure vegetarian food offered to God. Here we may add a few more considerations. First of all, the most important factor in the offering of foods to God is *bhakti*. Without sincere love and devotion, God is not bound or forced to accept anything - not by government or institutional order, by political appointment of the priest, by dint of the priest's ancestry, or even by complicated ritual procedures or regulations, or because of the material value of the food that is being offered. We should remember the episode when Krishna went to Hastinapura and refused to attend the royal banquet prepared by Duryodhana, but was happy to eat the very simple food offered lovingly by Vidura. Also, we should remember the humble gift that the *brahmana* Sudama had carried to Krishna's house; on that occasion, Krishna speaks this very same verse (9.26) to Sudama (*Bhagavata Purana* 10.81.4).

God is not a "*prasada* vending machine", to which you supply the *bhoga*, click away with the correct alphabetical sequences, sprinkle some water, and presto! the *prasadam* is ready. If there is no *bhakti*, God does not accept any offering. In some exceptional cases, God may accept the offering even if the priest is not qualified, but only because there are sincere devotees outside who are hoping to obtain the sanctified food and will honor it properly. Also, *bhakti* means total dedication (*prayata atmanah*). One should not offer simply a leaf or a fruit to Krishna, and eat a big feast himself without offering it to Krishna.

The expression *prayata atmanah* can be better understood by reading in *Bhagavata Purana* (8.16.62) the instructions of Kasyapa explaining to Aditi how to perform the *payo vrata*: *tasmāt etat vratam bhadre prayata sraddhaya acara bhagavan paritusta te varan asu vidhasyati*. The Lord is pleased when a devotee is *bhadra* (benevolent, gentle, friendly to everyone, wishing good for everyone), *sraddhavan* (sustained by consistent and strong faith in God), and behaves (*achara*) according to the rules of *yoga* (*yama* and *niyama*) and the requirements of sincere *bhakti*. There must be dedication and consistency in consciousness, and purity of heart.

Some commentators believe that this purity refers to the body, therefore people of the "wrong caste" and women, especially during their menstrual periods, cannot offer anything to Krishna. This is incorrect. Of course when we speak about institutionalized religion, official temple worship aimed at social aggrandizement, and appeasement of materialistic and ignorant people, it might be useful to maintain some professional priests and establish some elaborate grandiose rituals and build an impressive temple that could add prestige to the enterprise, but that has no relevance to direct *bhakti*, because Krishna does not care for such externals.

The only justification for such theatrical trappings is the limited value of their attractiveness in the eyes of the ignorant masses, that can somehow be inspired by the idea of the entertainment provided, and will acquire some *ajnata-sukriti* (unconscious merit) by seeing the gorgeously decorated Deity in the temple and assisting to some emotionally charged, folkloristic, solemn, grandiose and expensive ceremony. Purification is already guaranteed by the mere remembrance of the Lord, as we are reminded constantly by the popular *mantra* from the *Garuda Purana*: *om apavitrah pavitro va sarvavastham gato 'pi va, yah smaret pundarikaksam sa bahyabhyantarah suh*, "One who remembers the lotus-eyed Lord immediately becomes purified internally and externally, no matter whether s/he has performed the prescribed ablutions or is in an impure condition of any type."

Now: either we believe in the statements of the *shastras*, or we don't. If we repeat *mantras* without actually believing what we say, we are not better than ignorant animals who just parrot what they heard without understanding. Of course, this should not be an encouragement to become lazy and simply avoid taking bath or observing the rules of cleanliness: it is all in the sincerity of the heart. The most important purity is the purity of the heart. *Bhagavata Purana* (4.31.21) confirms: *na bhajati kumanisinam sa ijjam harir adhanatma-dhana priyo rasa-jnah, sruta dhana kula karmanam madair ye, vidadhati papam akincanesu satsu*, "The Lord never accepts any offering or sacrifice from persons who have a dirty mind/ heart. He is dear to those who have abandoned all identifications and attachments to material things, and simply depend on the Atman. On the other hand, those who are arrogant by dint of their ancestry, learning, wealth and great deeds are simply sinful people, who mistreat the devotees."

The word *prayaccha* means "asking". When we offer something, we are asking Krishna to accept our offering, because it is a favor that Krishna is doing to us, not the other way around. Krishna does not need our offerings. He does not need food or worship, because he is already perfectly satisfied in himself, and he can get unlimited pleasures and valuables from his own internal *shaktis* - those same *shaktis* that create the entire universe. When we offer something to God, the only merit we accrue is the result of our *bhakti*.

यत्करोषि यदश्नासि यज्जुहोषि ददासि यत् । यत्तपस्यसि कौन्तेय तत्कुरुष्व मदर्पणम् ॥ ९-२७ ॥

yatkaroṣi yadaśnāsi yajjuhoṣi dadāsi yat | yattapasyasi kaunteya tatkuruṣva madarpaṇam || 9-27 ||

yat: whatever; karosi: you do; yat: whatever; asnasi: you eat; yat: whatever; juhosi: you sacrifice; dadasi: you give in charity; yat: whatever; yat: whatever; tapasyasi: you endure as austerity; kaunteya: o son of Kunti (Arjuna); tat: that; kuruṣva: you (should) do; madarpaṇam: for my sake.

"O Arjuna, whatever you do, whatever you eat, whatever you sacrifice, whatever you give, whatever you endure in the performance of your duties - do it for me."

Krishna does not require complicated rituals or great deeds: it is sufficient that we remember him with love and devotion all the time, in every action we do. We do not need to constantly remember the *lilas* of Syamasundara playing the flute or dallying with the *gopis*; it is sufficient that we realize that Krishna is the sum total of the entire Consciousness, and we remain tuned in on the proper frequency of awareness - the spiritual, transcendental existence of Brahman, Paramatma and Bhagavan.

Bhagavata Purana (1.5.5) confirms this point in the instructions of Narada to Vyasa: *kurvana yatra karmani bhagavac chikshayasakrit, grinanti guna namani krsnasyanusmaranti ca*, "One should perform one's duties properly, as instructed by Krishna, and at the same time s/he should always remember Krishna's names, qualities, etc."

Again in 11.2.36, we find: *kayena vaca manasendriyair va buddhyatmana vanusrta svabhavat, karoti yad yat sakalam parasmai narayanayeti samarpayet tat*, "Whatever activities one performs according to one's true nature by body, speech, mind and intelligence, one should be focused on the *atman* and offer everything to Narayana."

Our daily work in our professional occupation should be offered to Krishna, because Krishna has given clear instructions that we should perform our duties in the best possible way, albeit without personal selfish attachment.

Our activities in family and society should be offered to Krishna because all the people we interact with are children and servants of Krishna, and Krishna lives in their hearts and is their best friend. Whatever we do for fun or relaxation, including simple sleep, or to keep our bodies and mind in shape as required by our work, should also be offered to Krishna because our bodies and minds belong to Krishna, and we must take proper care of them to be able to utilize them in his service.

Whatever we eat should be offered to Krishna - either officially, with the proper ritual and *mantras*, or unofficially, with a simple mental offering by which we remember Krishna's presence within us, and his supreme Consciousness as the leader of our individual consciousness. Thus the very act of eating - for pleasure and for nourishment - becomes a sacred act of sacrifice.

Adi Shankara wrote in his *Soundarya lahari: japo jalpa silpam sakalam api mudra viracana, gatih pradaksinya kramanam asanady ahuti vidhih, pranamah samvesah sukham akilam atmarpana drsa, saparya paryayas tava bhavatu yan me vilasitam*, "Let every sound I pronounce be a prayer to you and a repetition of your holy name, let every work and movement of my hands be ritual gestures in your worship. Let each step I take be a *pradaksina* - a mark of homage - to you, let my eating and drinking be sacred offerings in the fire of your reality, let my laying down to rest be a prostration to your feet, and let whatever gives pleasure to my life become a sacred offering to you."

The meritorious acts of ritual ceremonies (*yajna*), distribution of charity (*dana*) and the voluntary facing of difficulties in pursuance of a higher purpose (*tapas*) are considered fundamental religious duties, and they are listed in this verse as *juhosi*, *dadasi* and *tapasyasi*. We have already discussed about the various types of *yajnas*, especially in 3.9 to 3.16, and 4.23 to 4.34; here we may simply add that traditionally, even those who are most strongly attached to the *karma kanda* path always pronounce the *mantra sri krishnaya samarpana astu*, "I am offering this to Sri Krishna", indicating that the ultimate purpose of the ritual is to please Krishna.

There are a lot of misconceptions about charity and austerity, and they will all be cleared later by Krishna in chapters 16, 17 and 18.

शुभाशुभफलैरेवं मोक्षयसे कर्मबन्धनैः । संन्यासयोगयुक्तात्मा विमुक्तो मामुपैष्यसि ॥ ९-२८ ॥

śubhāśubhaphalairēvaṁ mokṣayase karmabandhanaiḥ | sannyāsayogayuktātmā vimukto māmupaiṣyasi || 9-28 ||

subha: auspicious/ favorable; asubhah: inauspicious/ unfavorable; phalaih: the results; evam: thus; mokshyase: you will become free; karma-bandhanaih: from the bondage of activities; sannyasa-yoga: in the *sannyasa yoga*; yukta-atma: engaging your self; vimukta: liberated; mam: me; upaisyasi: you will attain.

"O Arjuna, by engaging in the *sannyasa yoga* (the principle of renunciation), you will become free from the bondage of activities, and from the favorable and unfavorable results of actions. Thus you will attain me."

The principle of renunciation (*sannyasa*) has been already amply elaborated in chapter 5, entitled specifically *Sannyasa Yoga*. To summarize it, we can quote the famous verse 2.47: "You certainly have the right to perform actions but never (the right) to enjoy the fruits of your actions. Do not (try to) become the cause of the fruits of the action, but do not become attached to inaction."

Some foolish and ignorant people suggested that *Bhagavad gita* is outdated and irrelevant today, because Krishna says, "Do your duty without being concerned about the results of your activities". In their foolishness and ignorance, they interpret this instruction to mean that one should be irresponsible and callous towards the effects of one's actions, like a reckless driver that does not care for the safety of other people on the road. But this is not Krishna's instruction. Krishna said (2.47) that one should perform the proper duty selflessly, not for the personal benefit that one can derive from it, but out of a spirit of sacrifice. Rather than comparing the *buddhi yogi* to a reckless driver, we should compare it to a benevolent gardener, who plants virtuous and useful trees in in public places to benefit everyone, without planning to keep the fruits for himself only. Without this spirit of selfless social service to the community, people become selfish and greedy and end up suffering from their own miserliness, because nobody gets any fruits as nobody plants trees.

The Bhakti literature (*Bhakti rasamrita sindhu* 2.255) offers a valuable key to understand this concept in the light of the higher consciousness of service to Krishna as the Sum total of all Consciousness and Reality: *anasaktasya visayan yatharham upayunjatah, nirbandhe krsna-sambandhe yukta-vairagyam ucyate*, "Yukta vairagya, or yoga vairagya, is the quality of detachment and renunciation by which one carefully and sincerely engages in one's prescribed duty, considering it a service in relationship with Krishna Consciousness."

Genuine renunciation does not mean abstaining from good actions, but it is about engaging in proper work with a selfless spirit, as it is repeated many times in *Gita*: 2.71, 3.4, 3.5, 3.7, 3.8, 3.9, 3.18, 3.19, 3.30, 3.33, 4.17, 4.18, 4.20, 4.21, 4.22, 4.23, 4.41, 5.2, 5.3, 5.6, 5.7, 5.8, 5.9, 5.10, 5.11, 5.12, 5.13, 5.14, 6.2, 6.3, 18.2, 18.5, 18.6, 18.7, 18.8, 18.9, 18.10, 18.11, 18.12, 18.23, 18.24, 18.25, 18.48, 18.49.

Renouncing egotism and selfishness (also called *ahankara* and *mamatva*) covers both the good results and the bad results (gain or loss, victory or defeat, joy or sorrow) that may come from the proper performance of one's duty: *yo na hrisyati na dvesti na socati na kanksati, subhasubha-parityagi bhaktiman yah sa me priyah*, "A devotee who is not distracted by joys or sorrows, worries or aspirations, and is detached both from positive and negative circumstances, is very dear to me" (12.17). The point is that a devotee performs his/her duty without being hampered by his/ her own emotions or other distractions due to his/ her own body or mind.

All these emotions are simply circumstances created by the material body and mind, and are temporary like the appearance and disappearance of heat and cold during the various seasons, and they should simply be tolerated (2.14, 6.7, 12.16) while we continue to perform our duty in the best possible way. This is the only way to attain *moksha* (liberation).

समोऽहं सर्वभूतेषु न मे द्वेष्योऽस्ति न प्रियः । ये भजन्ति तु मां भक्त्या मयि ते तेषु चाप्यहम् ॥ ९-२९ ॥

samo'ham sarvabhūteṣu na me dveṣyo'sti na priyaḥ | ye bhajanti tu mām bhaktyā mayi te teṣu cāpyaham || 9-29 ||

samah: equally disposed; *aham*: I (am); *sarva*: (towards) all; *bhutesu*: the living beings; *na*: not; *me*: for me; *dvesyah*: (someone who is) hated; *asti*: there is; *na*: not; *priyah*: (someone who is) dear; *ye*: those; *bhajanti*: offer sincere service; *tu*: but; *mam*: me; *bhaktya*: with devotion; *mayi*: in me; *te*: them; *tesu*: in them; *ca*: and; *api*: certainly; *aham*: I (am).

"I am equally disposed towards all living beings. I do not hate anyone, and I do not favor anyone. Yet, when someone offers me a sincere service in devotion, they are in me and I am in them."

This verse presents two extraordinary points, that can totally change our ideas on religion.

The first point is God's personal impartiality towards all beings. There is no chosen people - neither Jewish, Indian, Hindu, Islamic or Christian, American, Bengali, Tamil, Brijabasi or Puribasi. There is no chosen group: no high caste or dalits/ Harijans, no special family or ethnic background or any other denomination.

There are no favoritisms to white, brown or black, men or women, or people affiliated to a particular organization or group, or another. Even the idea of "caste *vaishnavas*" is a totally unfounded superstition that is not confirmed by any genuine scripture, because Vishnu reciprocates his devotees individually, for the personal devotion that each one of them sincerely and genuinely offers to him, and not for the merits of some distant ancestors.

In fact, God equally loves all living beings, those who are super-human and those who are sub-human, and wants them all to progress and find the ultimate happiness. Therefore God does not condone any unnecessary violence or disrespect towards his creatures, and allows each and every individual to make their choices and learn from the consequences. All the time, he remains everybody's hearts as the Paramatma, the most benevolent and intimate friend, even when they fall into the most degraded forms of life. The sun equally shines over everyone, and we can choose whether to appreciate it or not. Lotus flowers bloom in their full splendor and perfume under the sun, while bats go to hide in dark places until sunset. God is benevolent even towards the *asuras*, those human or over-human people that choose to act against the progress and benefit of others and against the order of the universe. Sometimes God appears personally to engage in battle with them, and then by his direct contact the *asura* is instantly enlightened and becomes liberated.

However, God is not interested in killing or protecting anyone (*Bhagavata Purana* 8.5.22), in neglecting or glorifying anyone: he simply engages his nature (*maya sakti*) for the creation, preservation and dissolution of the material manifestations, for the benefit and progress of all. This is confirmed in *Bhagavata Purana* 8.16.14, for example, where Aditi speaks to Kasyapa Rishi, who says that he is equally benevolent to all his sons, *devas* and *asuras*, just like the Supreme Personality of Godhead, who lovingly serves his devotees. This sentiment of God towards his devotees is called *bhakta vatsalya*, indicating that he is "affectionate to his devotee like a cow loves her calf". Another confirmation is found in *Bhagavata Purana* 10.86.59, where God is called *bhakta bhaktiman*, "devotee of his devotees".

Human beings cannot anger God by insulting or disobeying him, or bribe him by praising or worshiping him. This is explained in *Bhagavata Purana* 6.17.22: "God has no kith and kin, no relatives or friends, no chosen people, as he does not favor anyone over others. This is because he is not touched by the transformations and fluctuations of material nature, by joy or sorrow, by attachment or by anger."

We can only please God by our sincere devotion, that can be expressed in several ways detailed scientifically in the Bhakti literature, that we have already mentioned in previous comments. Talking and listening about God's names, qualities, activities, teachings, and remembering them is the most important of all, because it brings us closer to the Transcendental Consciousness that is our real original nature.

Pada sevana, "serving the feet of God", is a symbolic expression for following the instructions offered by God, but this will work only when it is done with sincere devotion, and not in a mechanical or sycophantic way. The definitions of *bhajan* and *bhakti* ("worship and serve with devotion") also include the others of the nine forms of devotional service, namely offering pleasurable objects (as in *archana*), offering sincere homage and prayers (*vandana*), remaining always ready to serve God (*dasya*), becoming close friends with God (*sakhya*) and dedicating oneself fully to God (*atma nivedana*). And when we establish such sincere loving personal relationship with God, the most wonderful thing happens: God reciprocates with us exactly in the same way. Krishna does not say that he will bless us, or reward us: he says he will also worship his devotees and serve his own devotees with sincere devotion (*bhajami aham*, 4.11).

अपि चेत्सुदुराचारो भजते मामनन्यभाक् । साधुरेव स मन्तव्यः सम्यग्व्यवसितो हि सः ॥ ९-३० ॥

api cetsudurācāro bhajate māmananyabhāk | sādhereva sa mantavyaḥ samyagvyavasito hi saḥ || 9-30 ||

api: even; *cet*: if; *su-dura-acarah*: very bad behavior; *bhajate*: offers sincere service; *mam*: me; *ananya-bhak*: without any other attachment or concern; *sadhur*: a good person; *eva*: certainly; *sah*: s/he; *mantavyah*: must be considered; *samyak*: completely; *vyavasitah*: situated; *hi*: indeed; *sah*: s/he.

"When a person is fully immersed and engaged in true devotional service, without any other concern or desire, must be considered a sadhu, even if he shows a very bad behavior. This is because his/ her position is completely different."

The expression *su-dura-acarah* especially applies to behaviors that are contrary to virtuous social conventions, such as the violation of the rules of civilized life expected from a *yogi* and an *arya* - especially those regarding food and other personal life habits. It is an expression similar to *duratma* ("bad person"), but while *duratma* refers to a person's nature, *duracara* only refers to the external behavior.

A *bhakta* normally shines with high sattvic qualities demonstrated consistently in his/her behavior, as described for example in *Bhagavata Purana* 1.16.26-30, or in *Madhurya kadambini*, a Bhakti manual written by Visvanatha Chakravarti where it is said, *sarvair gunais tatra samasate surah*, "a genuine devotee shows all the good qualities of the *devas*". For example, s/he is always peaceful, meek, kind and mild, does not quarrel with anyone, talks pleasantly and tactfully, and is only interested in spiritual topics, with a strong disinterest in material affairs. However, sometimes we also find great devotees or even divine Personalities that, for some reason, exhibit a behavior that does not exactly correspond to these expectations, and this creates ripples in social interactions and conventions. Such apparent defects are instrumental to the particular mission of those devotees, because a sincere and genuine devotee, completely immersed in pure devotional service as clarified in this verse, has no other concern and certainly no personal attachments or identifications to accommodate.

It is said that the true mission of a reformer is to "comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable", because both extremes of the mental condition in a human being create a blockage that prevents progress in spiritual realization. Sometimes a devotee comes to shake the boat and wake up the sleeping souls, even if that might be perceived as a social disturbance or subversion of the established order.

For example we see that Vasistha Rishi ate the *asura* Vatapi, and Ganga drowned her own children. Shiva lives in crematoriums and drank the *halahala* poison. Rama killed Vali. Krishna danced with the married *gopis*, abducted Rukmini and organized the abduction of his sister Subhadra (both girls were very happy about the abduction, though), and gave the Pandavas apparently questionable instructions on how to defeat their enemies.

As confirmed in *Bhagavata Purana* (10.33.29): *dharma vyatikramo drsta isvaranam ca sahasam tejiyasam na dosaya vahneh sarva-bhujo yatha*, "Sometimes we see that greatly powerful personalities appear to transgress the conventional religious or moral principles, but one should not dare imitate them artificially, because they are like fire, that can devour everything and still remain pure."

This concept is described in the verse under study with the expression *samyak vyavasitah*, "they are in a very special position", because they have no personal selfish interest in such actions, either individual or collective. If we carefully analyze the actual motivations and effects of such apparently questionable actions, we find that they were always aimed at a greater benefit, both for the people that were directly involved in the action and for the universe in general.

Here is a crude example about this higher level of *dharma* that appears to break the conventional idea of *dharma*: let's say that we are sitting at the door of our house, when an innocent and terrified child comes running desperate to find shelter, as she is pursued by a criminal who wants to harm her. We watch as the child hides out of sight, and in the meantime the criminal arrives on the scene. When the criminal asks us if we saw a little girl running away, what should we say? Should we be fanatically loyal to the fundamental principle of *dharma* - truthfulness - and reveal the hiding place of the little girl? Certainly not. We should give the criminal some false information that will keep him running in the wrong direction long enough to ensure the protection of the innocent girl.

Yet, truthfulness and honesty is the most important principle in religious and spiritual life, without which it is not possible to make any advancement or even to maintain the position one has already reached. Therefore we should be very careful to always remain free from all selfish motivations, identifications and attachments, because this idea "for the greater good" can be dangerously twisted by a mind that is not perfectly pure yet.

Some people abuse this verse by taking it as an authorization to continue to commit illicit activities or even serious crimes on the strength of their so-called "devotion" to God, sometimes even claiming that they are indulging in their violent, immoral and/or dishonest activities as a form of devotional service, usually to defend their own material, social or political position and prestige, or the material interests of some institution or organization to which they are affiliated.

Such misinterpretation is not substantiated by any scripture or genuine *acharya*. Nowhere Krishna has stated or implied that one can use violence or dishonesty in devotional service, either in the preaching of his glories and teachings, or in any other devotional method of worship. It is ok to be bold and straightforward in speaking up about the scriptures and their application, and engage in debates and discussions, but there can be no physical violence or aggression under any circumstance, either against persons or against books or images etc, or to harm dissenters or people who ask difficult questions.

The use of force is only allowed in self defense and the defense of innocent and good people when some aggressors literally come forward with dangerous weapons such as guns and knives, fire, etc; otherwise a devotee must not get into physical fights or brawls or engage in persecution or harassment of any type. Krishna certainly does not condone the cynical behavior of false devotees who deliberately continue to engage in wrongful acts, counting on their fake devotion to neutralize their karmic effects: this is clearly an offensive attitude, and listed among the 10 main offenses to be carefully avoided in devotional service. If by any chance we happen to meet so-called devotees who secretly or openly - or even boastfully - commit criminal actions, we should very carefully avoid any association with them and keep a distance, albeit without showing disrespect.

क्षिप्रं भवति धर्मात्मा शश्वच्छान्तिं निगच्छति । कौन्तेय प्रतिजानीहि न मे भक्तः प्रणश्यति ॥ ९-३१ ॥

kṣipram bhavati dharmātmā śaśvacchāntim nigacchati | kaunteya pratijānihi na me bhaktaḥ praṇasyati || 9-31 ||

ksipram: very quickly; *bhavati*: s/he becomes; *dharma-atma*: totally dedicated to *dharma*; *sasvat*: permanently; *santim*: peace; *nigacchati*: s/he attains; *kaunteya*: o son of Kunti (Arjuna); *pratijanihi*: (please) declare; *na*: not; *me*: my; *bhaktah*: devotee; *pranasyati*: is destroyed.

"My devotee quickly becomes fully dedicated to *dharma* and attains a permanent peace. O son of Kunti, you can (safely) say that my devotee is never destroyed."

In verses 4.36 and 9.30, Krishna had already stated that sincere engagement in devotional service can purify anyone, irrespective of his or her past activities. We have seen the special case of greatly powerful personalities that exhibited apparently questionable behaviors; now we will examine the case of an ordinary devotee who happens to accidentally fall down on the path to perfection.

Sometimes it is not easy to distinguish one category of devotees from another, because often great personalities present themselves very humbly, as ordinary individuals, and declare that they have committed some mistake or offense, although the action was obviously instrumental to the Divine plan. In this case a devotee could manifest a bad behavior due to a weakness that is ascribed to some previous bad habits, a curse, and/ or very difficult circumstances, that cause a temporary downfall to a lower level of consciousness. Maharaja Parikshit became distracted by fatigue, thirst and hunger, and unwittingly offended an innocent *brahmana*. Entering the *ashrama* of Samika Rishi he hoped to receive a decent welcome and at least some water, but the Rishi was deeply immersed in meditation and did not even notice the king's arrival. Parikshit suspected that the *brahmana* was only pretending to be in a trance to avoid taking care of his guest, so he tried his patience by hanging a dead snake around the neck of the *brahmana*, in a mock imitation of the image of Shiva meditating. When the young son of Samika, named Sringi, returned home, he saw Parikshit leaving and discovered the bad joke at the expenses of his father, so he cursed Parikshit to die within 7 days. Informed about the curse by a concerned Samika, Parikshit recognized his fault and accepted to submit to the curse. Another example is Bhishma, considered one of the 12 *mahajanas* or greatest spiritual/ religious authorities of the universe, who became confused by the material affection for his father Santanu and for the wayward Duryodhana and sided with him against the Pandavas. At the end of the battle, making ready to die on his bed of arrows, Bhishma consoled Yudhishthira and the other Pandavas by saying that they should not be sorry for his death, as he had deserved it by his own bad choices. Visvamitra Rishi broke his meditation and austerities several times, falling prey to the power of *kama* and *krodha*. Every time he recognized his fault and atoned for his bad behavior, engaging in even more rigid austerities until he had completely conquered his senses. And there are also other examples of good devotees who committed mistakes due to some particular circumstances. The story of the Syamantaka jewel is all centered on a miraculous gem that Satrajit accused Krishna of having stolen. While searching for the gem, Krishna was faced with Jambavan who fought him off until he recognized him. As soon as they realized their mistake, both Satrajit and Jambavan begged forgiveness and offered Krishna their daughters in marriage, with great happiness of the concerned girls.

We may legitimately believe that such actions were actually organized by Krishna according to the Divine plan, because in all instances greater good came to all the concerned and to the universe at large, but since these devotees explicitly recognized their bad behavior and atoned for it, we must understand that they were setting the example for us to follow - recognizing our defects and mistakes, and humbly accepting to pay the price for them. As long as we have a material body, we are subject to the 4 material defects: the possibility of making a mistake, the limitations of our sense perception, the attraction of illusion, and a tendency to cheat - to choose a vision of reality that is more subjective than objective. However, true devotees are ready to recognize their faults, defects or mistakes, striving to atone and reform themselves. They accept the consequences of their actions, knowing that *karma* must take its course, and they do not try to escape or beg their way out.

The most common pitfalls created by bad habits or difficult circumstances consist in irregularities in diet (wrong food, too much food, impure food, food eaten without the proper consciousness), sex (any violation of the *brahmacharya* rules), intoxication (any activity that creates an artificial state of consciousness), dishonesty (any misappropriation or lack of truthfulness), and lack of self control (anger, etc).

All this simply refers to the external and occasional behavior of a person, and not to his/ her normal nature, because a person that is normally and deliberately engaged in harmful and immoral activities cannot truly be a devotee of God. Krishna clearly says (7.28) that the devotees who worship him are liberated from the illusion of duality, have accumulated pious activities and abandoned all bad activities. Those who are *duskritinah*, "evil doers" will never be able to approach Krishna truly (7.15).

Two famous verses from the *Bhagavata Purana* are often quoted in this regard:

sva pada mulam bhajata priyasya, tyaktanya bhavasya harih paresah, vikarma yac cotpatitam kathancid, dhunoti sarvam hrdi sannivistam, "One who has given up all other interests and is engaged in serving the lotus feet of Hari is very dear to him. If he accidentally commits some bad action, the Lord that resides in his heart removes all impurities." (11.5.42)

yadi kuryat pramadena yogi karma vigarhitam, yogenaiva dahed amho nanyat tatra kadacana, "If a *yogi* should commit some bad action because of momentary confusion, the practice of *yoga* itself will burn the negative consequences. There is no need of seeking other remedies." (11.20.25)

मां हि पार्थ व्यपाश्रित्य येऽपि स्युः पापचोनयः । स्त्रियो वैश्यास्तथा शूद्रास्तेऽपि यान्ति परां गतिम् ॥ ९-३२ ॥

mām hi pārtha vyapāśritya ye'pi syuḥ pāpayonayah | striyo vaiśyāstathā śūdrāste'pi yānti parāṁ gatim || 9-32 ||

mam : me; *hi*: indeed; *partha*: o son of Pritha (Arjuna); *vyapasritya*: have taken full shelter; *ye*: those; *api*: even; *syuh*: if they are; *papa-yonayah*: born from impure sexual intercourse; *striyah*: women; *vaisyah*: business people; *tatha*: also; *sudrah*: manual workers; *te*: they; *api*: also; *yanti*: attain; *param*: the supreme; *gatim*: destination.

"O Arjuna, those who have completely taken shelter in me will attain the supreme destination, even if they were born from impure intercourse, women, business people and traders, or manual workers."

This verse is often misused by misogynists who claim that women are impure by birth and therefore they should not be allowed to study Vedic knowledge or engage in religious activities.

Some commentators translate *papa-yonayah* associating it with *striyah* and giving it the meaning of "prostitutes", but this does not seem to be Krishna's intention, first of all because the Vedic model of prostitution was not considered a sin. Still in Krishna's time we can see the examples of Kubja (Trivakra) and the *ganikas* of Dvaraka that were great devotees like all the other residents of Krishna's city (*Bhagavata Purana* 1.11.19-21). The idea of prostitutes as "sinners" came to India only with the infiltration of the abrahamic ideologies, while in Vedic times (any time before the first islamic invasions) the *ganikas* ("women who associate with the public") or *svarinis* ("independent women") were very respected and their presence was considered auspicious, so much that they were regularly invited to various religious functions for family and society to bless the participants with their presence. Still today an echo of this tradition remains with the habit of transexual males who dress as women. We may remember in this regard that the presence of a real sinner is considered so contaminating that even seeing his face calls for a complete bath and change of clothing.

Another reason is purely grammatical. This verse is divided into two lines, and the expression *papa-yonayah* belongs to the first part, while the second half of the verse lists the other categories, in descending order of purity or importance. Obviously *sudras* are less qualified than *vaisyas*, so we must conclude that since Krishna has a reason for the order in which he lists the various categories, women should be considered more qualified than *vaisyas*. If we wanted to stretch the meaning of the verse to mean that all the categories described are "of sinful birth", we should accept the idea that *vaisyas* are born in a sinful condition - something that is certainly not supported by any other declaration in Vedic scriptures. Thus, the *papa yonayah* must be a separate category, that does not include the other categories listed in the second part of the verse. We could even say that the category described as *papa-yonayah* is considered by Krishna as more qualified than ordinary women (as well as than *vaisyas* and *sudras*), and this interpretation makes perfect sense if we apply it to all those individuals who were born from "impure intercourse", or from sexual unions that were not properly purified by the *samskara* prescribed by Vedic culture for the higher categories of civilized human beings: the *garbhadhana samskara*.

The definition itself - *papa yonayah* - refers to children who have been conceived without the proper purificatory rituals called *garbhadhana samskara*. All the *dvi-jah* (*brahmanas*, *kshatriyas*, *vaisyas*) that are in the *grihastha* (family) *ashrama* are expected to regularly perform a number of purificatory ceremonies, starting from the *vivaha* or solemnization of the marriage of the parents, to the *garbhadhana* ("giving the embryo") at the time of conception. After conception and before birth, the child is purified through the *pumsavana* and the *simantonayana samskaras*, then at birth the *jatakarma* is performed. After 6 months from birth, the name is given (*nama karana*), then the first grains are fed to the baby (*anna prasana*), then around 2 years of age the hair is cut (*chuda karana*). The *karna bheda* (wearing ear rings) is done only for *brahmanas*. The next *samskara* is the *upanayana* (accepting the sacred thread) and is followed by a number of minor rituals for the student life purification, all categories under the name *prajapatyam*. Next comes the *vivaha* or marriage.

The "purification of the womb" that removes the *papa* from the *yoni* - the ritual called *garbhadhana* - is meant to ensure that a sattvic, civilized, progressive and ethically and religiously inclined soul will be attracted to take birth from that specific sexual intercourse.

When the fecundation and conception is done through a whimsical act of mere animal lust, or worse, the child generated is called *papa yonayah*, and is not considered as a legitimate member of the *varna* to which the parent belong. This also applies if the two parents were legally married; the *papa* ("negativity") does not refer to social considerations, but rather to the level of consciousness at the time of the intercourse and conception.

Such *papa-yonayah* are simply the *antyajah*, all those persons who were born outside the original system of *varnas* and *ashramas*, irrespective of their actual natural *guna* and *karma* - which could make them suitable candidates even for the highest positions in society. To tell the truth, it is extremely difficult if not impossible to find today someone who was born from a purified womb through the *garbhadhana samskara*, even among the highest castes of traditional orthodox Indian Hindus.

According to the original Vedic system, those *antya-jah* or *papa-yonayah* who possess the required *guna* and *karma* can become full-fledged members of the higher *varnas* - *brahmanas* and *kshatriyas* - simply by undergoing the prescribed purificatory ceremonies called *prayascitta* and *vratyastoma* or *suddhi*, and receiving the appropriate *upanayana diksha* from a qualified *guru*. This is unequivocally confirmed in several passages of the scriptures, for example in *Bhagavata Purana* 2.4.18, *kirata hunandhra pulinda pulkasa abhira sumbha yavanas khasadaya, ye 'nye ca papa yad apasrasrayah sudhyanti tasmai prabhavisnave namah*, "Kiratas, Hunas, Andhras, Pulindas, Pulkasas, Abhiras, Sumbhas, Yavanas, Khasas etc, even those who were born in still more degraded cultures, are immediately purified when they put themselves under the guidance and protection of those who have taken shelter in Vishnu. Therefore I offer my homage to the all-powerful Sri Vishnu", 3.33.7: *aho bata sva-paco 'to gariyan yaj-jihvagre vartate nama tubhyam, tepus tapas te juhuvuh sasnur arya brahmanucur nama grnanti ye te*, "It is wonderful to see how those who have accepted to invoke your holy name are immediately glorified as civilized persons (*aryas*) and are called *brahmanas*, even if there were born in uncivilized families. The very fact that they call your name qualifies them for the performance of sacrifices and austerities according to tradition" and 11.14.21, *bhaktiyaham ekaya grahyah sraddhayatma priyah satam, bhaktih punati man-nistha sva-pakan api sambhavat*, "Only devotion enables one to attain me. The devotees who serve me with faith and transcendental attachment are completely purified through their devotion, even if they had been born in uncivilized families."

Even the historical chronicles and archaeological findings confirm that often individuals or entire populations of foreign origin chose to become part of Vedic society, adopting Sanskrit names and the rules of the *varna ashrama*, like for example the Scythian kings who became known as Satyasimha and Rudrasena.

The women (*striyah*) described in this verse are ordinary women, those who are mainly interested in family and social affairs, a good husband and nice children, a beautiful house and a prosperous life full of beauty and pleasure, palatable foods, elegant clothing and ornaments, and so on. The Vedic system does not despise this nature, because it tends to create a safe, pleasurable, affectionate, beautiful and sweet environment for the earliest experiences of children, which is turn will help the new generations grow without the physical and

psychic damage and chronic dissatisfaction that is conducive to criminality. The caring and loving support of a good woman is also important for men in general, as they become able to achieve more in their professional and social life with the cooperation of their good wives. A woman must be a good administrator of the house, a good organizer of the servants and a good caretaker of all the people in the family and clan, and especially educate the children to the higher values and principles in life. Compared to a good wife's, the duty of the *vaisyas* is certainly easier and requires less qualifications and effort, because it is simply about managing laborers, animals, plants, land, money, and inanimate objects such as minerals and other merchandise.

By definition, *sudras* are less qualified than *vaisyas* because they cannot even take care of themselves and organize their own survival, therefore they depend on other more intelligent people who will give them instructions and provide to their maintenance.

किं पुनर्ब्राह्मणाः पुण्या भक्ता राजर्षयस्तथा । अनित्यमसुखं लोकमिमं प्राप्य भजस्व माम् ॥ ९-३३ ॥

kim punarbrāhmaṇāḥ puṇyā bhaktā rājarṣayastathā | anityamasukhaṁ lokamimam prāpya bhajasva mām | | 9-33 | |

kim : what/ how much; *punah*: again; *brahmanah*: the *brahmanas*; *punya*: endowed with religious merits; *bhakta*: endowed with loving devotion; *rajarshayah*: the saintly kings; *tatha*: also; *anityam*: impermanent; *asukham*: devoid of real happiness; *lokam*: world; *imam*: this; *prapya*: have come to; *bhajasva*: being immersed in devotional service; *mam*: to me.

"What to speak of the *brahmanas*, (the virtuous devotees) and the saintly kings (who are rich in religious merits and devotion), and who are immersed in a service of devotion to me even in this impermanent and unsatisfactory world."

After listing the categories that are less qualified in regard to social position and religious inclinations, Krishna compares them to the two remaining categories in the Vedic social order: the *brahmanas* and the *kshatriyas*, that are properly qualified as per *guna* and *karma*. The comparison is meant to indicate greater expectations; in the previous verse Krishna declared that even those who are *papa yonayah* can attain the highest perfection of life, so for more qualified people should be even easier. The expression *kim punah* means "what to speak of/ no need to say more".

What are these qualifications? *Guna* means "qualities" and *karma* means "activities" or "performance of duties": both these requirements for these two higher *varnas* are amply described in the scriptures. In verse 4.13, Krishna has already stated very clearly that categorization in one of the *varnas* depends on the *guna* and *karma*, and not on *jati* (birth).

A child who was born according to the proper purificatory system (*garbhadhana samskara*) in the higher *varnas* of society is not a *papa yonayah*, but his *guna* and *karma* must be ascertained thoroughly and he must be trained by a responsible *guru* before he can be recognized as a true and functional member of the *varna* of his parents. Therefore the *varna* system is not hereditary, as misinformed people believe.

In 18.42, Krishna says, *samo damas tapah saucam kshantir arjavam eva ca, jñanam vijñanam astikyam brahma-karma svabhava-jam*, "Equanimity, self-control, austerity, purity, tolerance, honesty, knowledge, wisdom and religiousness - these are the natural qualities determining the duties of the *brahmana*."

The *Mahabharata* confirms: *dharmas ca satyam ca damas tapas ca, amatsaryam hris titiksanasya, yajnas ca danam ca dhrtih srutam ca, vratani vai dvadasa brahmanasya*, "(A *brahmana*) must always behave in accordance to *dharma* (the ethical principles that constitute the foundations of religion). First of all he must be truthful and able to control his own senses. He must be austere, detached, humble and tolerant. He must not envy anyone. He must be expert in the performance of sacrifices and distribute his possessions in charity. He must be seriously determined in the study of Vedic scriptures and in religious activities: these are the 12 fundamental qualities of a *brahmana*." Again in the *Mahabharata* (*Vana Parva* chapter 180) we find: *satyam danam ksama-silam anrsyamsam tapo ghrna, drsyante yatra nagendra sa brahmana iti smrtah*, "A person who is truthful, charitable, forgiving, sober, kind, austere and free from hatred is called *brahmana*."

In the *Bhagavata Purana* (7.11.21) Narada Muni states: *samo damas tapah saucam santosah ksantir arjavam, jnanam dayacyutatmatvam satyam ca brahma-laksanam*, "The qualities that characterize a *brahmana* are the control of one's mind and senses, austerity and tolerance in the face of difficulties, cleanliness, contentment, tendency to forgive, simplicity, knowledge, compassion, truthfulness, and complete surrender to the Supreme Personality of Godhead." One who does not show such qualities cannot really be considered a *brahmana*.

In the *Mahabharata* (*Vana Parva* chapter 180), Maharaja Yudhisthira states: *sudre tu yad bhavel-laksmā dvije tac ca na vidyate, na vai sudro bhavet chudro brahmano na ca brahmanah*, "If these qualities (listed as the characteristics of the *brahmanas*) are found in a *sudra* (i.e. a person born in a *sudra* family), such a person must never be called a *sudra*, just like a *brahmana* (i.e. a person born in a *brahmana* family) is not a *brahmana* if he lacks these qualities."

Again the *Mahabharata* gives further clarifications in this regard (*Anusasana Parva* 163.8, 26, 46), where Shiva tells Parvati that society should be progressive: *sthitō brahmana-dharmena brahmanyam upajivati, ksatriyo vatha vaisyo va brahma-bhuyah sa gacchati, ebhis tu karmabhir devi subhair acaritais tatha, sudro brahmanatam yati vaisyah ksatriyatam vrajet, etaih karma-phalair devi suddhatma vijitendriyah, sudro'pi dvija-vat sevyā iti brahmabravīt svayam, sarvo'yam brahmano lōke vrttena tu vidhiyate, vrtte sthitas tu sudro'pi brahmanatvam niyacchati*.

Here is the translation: "If *kshatriyas* or *vaisyas* behave like *brahmanas* and engage in the occupations of *brahmanas*, such persons attain the position of *brahmana*. In the same way, a *sudra* can become a *brahmana* and a *vaisya* can become a *kshatriya*. O Devi, thanks to the performance of these activities and by following the instructions of the *Agamas* (Vedic scriptures that contain the instructions for the rituals) even a person born in a family of *sudras* devoid of qualifications can become a *brahmana*. In this world, a person is born in a *brahmana* family as a result of his tendencies, therefore a *sudra* that manifests the tendencies of a *brahmana* and acts as a *brahmana*, automatically becomes a *brahmana*."

Another verse of the *Mahabharata* (*Anusasana Parva* 143.50) explains even more precisely: *na yonir nāpi samskaro na srutam na ca santatih, karanani dvijatvasya vrttam eva tu karanam*, "Neither birth, nor purification rituals, scholarship or ancestry constitute legitimate qualifications for the position of *brahmana*. Only the behavior as *brahmana* constitutes the basis for the position of *brahmana*."

The position of *brahmana* is particularly delicate because *brahmanas* are responsible for the proper material and spiritual progress of society; they must teach, train, inspire, direct and purify the other *varnas* and even the *antya-jah*, those who were born outside the *varna* system. If they do not perform such duties, or they disgrace such duties by awarding the sacred thread irresponsibly to unworthy people without any training, they should be exposed and ostracized from the community of *brahmanas*. We should not take these matters lightly. The position of *kshatriya* is also very important and only qualified people should be allowed to occupy it. A true *kshatriya* is a *rajarshi*, a saintly warrior that is totally dedicated to the protection of the *prajas* and especially of the good people and the sacred places. The definition is composed by the two words *raja* ("king") and *rishi* ("self-realized sage") and refers to the deep knowledge and realization of the transcendental science.

Some misinformed people believe that any fighter can be called a *kshatriya* - including bullies, criminals, and warmongers - but this is wrong. Krishna in 18.43 describes the qualities of a *kshatriya*: *sauryam tejo dhritir dakshyam yuddhe capy apalayanam, danam, isvara-bhavas ca kshatram karma svabhava-jam*, "The natural qualities determining the duties of the *kshatriya* are: loyalty to the ethical principles (*sauryam* means "the quality of *suras*", referring to the *devas* who support and protect the universe), radiance/ charisma/ personal power (*tejas*), determination (*dhritih*), expertise/ resourcefulness (*dakshyam*), courage and stability in battle (*yuddhe capy apalayanam*), generosity (*danam*), and the ability to direct and manage people (*isvara-bhava*)."

The words *punya* ("who have virtuous merits") and *bhakta* ("devotees") could be applied to the *rajarshi*, or it could also be interpreted as a category in itself. In this case it refer to virtuous and devotional persons that do not identify with any particular *varna* but simply dedicate themselves to *sadhana* and personal spiritual development, such as the *sannyasis*.

मन्मना भव मद्भक्तो मद्याजी मां नमस्कुरु । मामेवैष्यसि युक्तवैवमात्मानं मत्परायणः ॥ ९-३४ ॥

manmanā bhava madbhakto madyāji mām namaskuru | māmevaiṣyasi yuktvaivamātmānaṁ matparāyaṇaḥ || 9-34 ||

mat: of me; *manah*: think; *bhava*: become; *mat*: of me; *bhaktah*: devotee; *mat*: of me; *yaji*: a worshiper; *mam*: to me; *namah kuru*: offer respect; *mam*: me; *eva*: certainly; *eshyasi*: will come/ attain; *yukta*: connected; *evam*: therefore; *atmanam*: the *atman*; *mat-parayanah*: devoted to me.

"Always think of me, become my devotee and my worshiper. Offer me your respect and dedicate yourself to me. You will attain me because of this connection.

The word *yukta* here refers to the path of *yoga*, or "union" with the Supreme, that is the constant motif of *Bhagavad gita*. This union is achieved through the proper meditation, or consciousness, and therefore it is also called Krishna Consciousness.

This is one of the most famous and important verses in *Gita*, establishing the preminence of devotion (*bhakti*) in spiritual progress and God realization. We have already mentioned that the chapters 7, 8 and 9 are the central focus of *Bhagavad gita* and present the great importance of *bhakti*; however, an attentive and intelligent study of these chapters will help us understand that such *bhakti* is not the mere superficial sentimentalism of social or folkloristic religiosity. Being able to tell the difference between sentimentalism and devotion is not so difficult: one is material, and one is spiritual. A person who is still identified on the material level is unable to understand Bhagavan, therefore it is very unlikely that s/he will actually have genuine devotion. Some people try to justify sentimentalism by labeling it as "intimate/ familiar" devotion, but a real *rasika* devotee is never a materialist identified with the gross body or attached to personal sense gratification.

The expression *prakrita sahajiyas* indicates a category of people who superficially imitate the *gopis* or utilize the *lilas* of Krishna as a form of cheap and titillating entertainment. Because the intimate *lilas* of Krishna with the *gopis* are based on the erotic mood (called *sringara* or *madhurya rasa*), some people may come to think that *prakrita sahajiya* refers to some type of "yogic sex", but that idea is not correct

The words *prakrita sahajiya* actually mean "materialistic" and "simpleton" respectively; the definition applies to people who take "devotion" as a form of entertainment for the public, expressed usually through the superficial recitation of the most popular stories of Krishna, mostly in the *sringara rasa* but also in *vatsalya rasa*, as in the episodes of Krishna's early childhood. Sentimentalist people "love baby Krishna because he is so cute and is stealing butter", and so they keep pictures of a faintly bluish chubby baby with a peacock feather on his head (the imaginative or artistic projection/ interpretation of what they consider to be Krishna). But cats are cute, too, and they are perfectly able to steal and eat butter as well, and their pictures are put on calendars and postcards and Facebook pages, exactly in the same way. Teenager Krishna is even more popular, because everybody likes a nice love story, especially when it involves some period of separation or some secrecy, some sad romantic longing of unfortunate young and passionate lovers. All along history, there have been thousands of poems, songs, novels, dramas, tales, paintings, and more recently also films about this type of stories. No story can attract the public if it does not contain a bit of romance, and if the relationship becomes physically sexual and its consummation is described in lyric tones, it becomes even more popular. What to speak about deliberate entertainment business - even the private romantic and sexual lives of ordinary people are attractive for lusty gossipers and peeping toms.

Of course reading or singing about the superficial external vision of the love games between what people call Krishna and the girls of Vrindavana is better than getting engrossed in the romance stories of fictitious or historical ordinary people, but for the *prakrita sahajiyas* it is still a manner of material entertainment to attract people through material sense gratification and not through devotion. Bhaktivinoda strongly condemned this tendency to entertaining oneself or the public with Krishna's stories. Bhaktisiddhanta did not like his Bengali followers to launch into virtuoso performances with their singing and playing *mrđanga*, so in order to disrupt their delusion, he used to start banging the *karatalas* to a different rhythm. Genuine Bhakti literature, such as the *Bhakti rasamrita sindhu* (1.2.101) compiled by Rupa Gosvami, clearly points out that devotion is never cheap and ignorant: *sruti smriti puranadi pancharatri vidhim vina, aikantiki harer bhaktir utpatayaiva kalpate*, "so-called exclusive devotion to Hari is simply a disturbance to society when it is not solidly based on the knowledge contained in *sruti, smriti, Puranas* etc". This ignorant sentimentalism is particularly dangerous when such superficial entertainment "devotion" is presented by professional reciters - that is to say, by persons or groups that commercialize the process for the materialistic purpose of monetary gain, fame, name, adoration, and so on, even to the point where they consider themselves the sole depositories of a sort of monopoly (by caste or by "succession") that they would like to be legally enforced to their exclusive profit.

The superficial readings and dramatic renditions of Krishna's transcendental *lila* (which we see for example in many Indian tv and movies) certainly do not give the actual results of the genuine meditation as per the actual Krishna Consciousness. The Names themselves will only manifest as a shadow of the real thing, for those who do not have the sufficient attitude and realizations.

We should not think that simply by imagining oneself to be a *gopi*, one will be actually situated on the level of *gopis*. The *gopis* were not ordinary people or stupid village girls. They were direct manifestations of Krishna's internal *shakti*, and their assistants (the *sakhis*) were great liberated saints and sages. If we actually read the chapters of the *Bhagavata Purana* where the *rasa* dance is described, this point is repeated again and again.

Chapter 10 Vibhuti yoga The Yoga of powers

The word *vibhuti* contains many meanings, such as "powers", "opulences", "glories", "magic".

Every living being has some of such "magic powers" - a special ability, or strength, or beauty - but not everyone has the same powers, or a power to an absolute degree. Among the materially embodied beings, such powers are always conditioned by circumstances and exhausted when they are used.

Through the correct practice of *yoga*, a *sadhaka* can develop special *vibhutis* up to the level of *siddhi* ("perfection"), usually listed as being able to become extremely small (*anima siddhi*), extremely large (*mahima siddhi*), extremely light (*laghima siddhi*), reconfiguring the patterns of material atoms (*vasitva siddhi*), materializing things by attracting atoms from other places (*prapti siddhi*), controlling the minds of others (*isitva siddhi*), assuming any shape or form (*kamavasayita siddhi*), and manifesting all kinds of wonders (*prakamya siddhi*). Another of such powers consists in entering and controlling the body of another, living or dead (*parakaya pravesa*). Also, the knowledge of genuine *yoga* enables the serious *sadhaka* to control the material elements (such as fire, water, air etc), control the weather (call or dispel storms and lightning, bring or withhold rain, etc), travel in different dimensions and planets without any vehicle, call the dead back into their old body (usually temporarily), and so on.

In verse 7.25, Krishna, the original teacher of *yoga*, declared that the human-like body that he manifests in his adventures is fundamentally different from the material bodies of ordinary individuals, because it can take any form and intrinsically possesses all the qualities of mystic perfections (*siddhis*). He said, "I do not show myself to everyone, but I remain veiled by my own *yoga-maya*. Foolish people remain unable to understand that I am unborn and eternal."

In this chapter, Krishna elaborates more on this particular point, offering many examples, so that we can become able to really understand his supreme nature of Bhagavan, manifested by his *shaktis* particularly in this material universe, of which we all have some direct experience. The *Bhagavad gita* is meant to instruct - through Arjuna - the people living in this world so that they will learn to know, worship and serve God and elevate themselves to the spiritual world. Therefore it offers terms of comparison chosen from the manifestations that we can find in this universe, but highlighting the fact that the divinity is not in the specific manifestations themselves, but rather in their characteristic of preeminence or superiority in respect to other things.

The word *bhagavan* - "having all *bhagas*" - is explained by Parasara Rishi as "perfect in the 6 opulences, that are beauty, fame, wealth, strength, knowledge and renunciation". In this sense, sometimes the definition is applied to great saintly Personalities that are representing God as his manifestations, *avatars*, or direct servants in the administration of the universe. These are called the *vaibhava prakasa* of God and include all the *avatars*, *amsas* etc.

The word *bhaga* also means "parts", as a synonym of *amsa*. In this sense, Bhagavan is he who possesses or emanates "parts" or secondary manifestations, and/ or has "quotas" of power. In *Bhakti rasamrita sindhu*, Rupa Gosvami elaborates on this point, stating that Krishna is 100% Bhagavan, while Narayana is 94%, Shiva is 84% and all *jivatmas* - starting from Brahma downwards - are only up to 78% of Bhagavan. Vaishnavas often quote verse 1.3.28 of *Bhagavata Purana* in this regard: *ete chamsa kalah pumsah krishnas tu bhagavan svayam*, "All these (*avatars*) are *amsas* and *kalas* (emanations and emanations of emanations), but Krishna is the supreme Bhagavan." The measure of such "Godhead" is expressed in *bhagas*, or *vibhutis*.

But Krishna is not simply a greater and more powerful being, that excels the others in powers. God is supreme, but not simply because he is more powerful than anyone else in the universe: he is the very essence of supremeness, therefore his Personality cannot really be compared to other personalities. People who have not realized the meaning of transcendence (Brahman) remain unable to understand Paramatma, and it is totally impossible for them to even start to imagine what Bhagavan really is, so they simply project their own limited material concepts and they create a "God" that is in their likeness or image, and that agrees with their limited understanding. But that is not really God.

God is not merely an exceptional person: *he is the characteristic of exceptionality* that gives such powers to the individual souls. He is their transcendental DNA, so to speak: pure Consciousness that has the power to manifest any form and any opulence. And Krishna is the supreme "concentration" of such transcendental identity, from whom all other transcendental existences emanate.

In this chapter Krishna himself, on the specific request expressed by Arjuna, continues to describe how one should meditate on him as the Supreme Consciousness and the Sum total of all Reality, source and foundation of everything that exists. Whatever is great, glorious, wonderful, beautiful, powerful, constitutes a prominent manifestation of the Supreme, for the very fact that it is supreme among all things. This thread was started in chapter 7 and will culminate in chapter 11, where Krishna manifests the direct vision of the universal form of Consciousness as requested by Arjuna.

श्रीभगवानुवाच ।

śrībhagavānuvāca ।

भूय एव महाबाहो शृणु मे परमं वचः । यत्तेऽहं प्रीयमाणाय वक्ष्यामि हितकाम्यया ॥ १०-१ ॥

bhūya eva mahābāho śṛṇu me paramam vacaḥ । yatte'haṁ prīyamāṇāya vakṣyāmi hitakāmyayā ॥ 10-1 ॥

sri: the wonderful; *bhagavan*: Lord; *uvaca*: said; *bhuyah*: again; *eva*: certainly; *maha-baho*: with mighty arms; *sṛinu*: listen; *me*: to me; *paramam*: supreme; *vacaḥ*: speech; *yat*: that (which); *te*: to you; *aham*: I; *prīyamānaya*: considering you dear; *vakṣyāmi*: I will tell; *hitakāmyaya*: for your benefit.

The wonderful Lord said, "O mighty armed Arjuna, listen to me. I will tell you the supreme explanation (about Transcendence). I will do this for you, because you are very dear to me/ it gives great pleasure to me."

The expression *hita kamyaya* ("desiring the benefit") may be applied both to the benefit of Arjuna's understanding, or - at a deeper level - to the benefit of all those who will study *Bhagavad gita* in the future, including us. Because Arjuna is very compassionate to conditioned souls, Krishna is offering him the opportunity to become the medium and cause for the distribution of such transcendental knowledge. This is confirmed by Adī Shankara (*avatara* of Shiva) in his *Gita mahatmya* ("Glorification of the *Bhagavad gita*") when he says, *sarvopanishado gavo dogdha gopala-nandanah, partho vatsah sudhir bhokta dugdham gitamritam mahat*, "Comparing all the *Upanishads* as a cow, Krishna the son of the cowherd chief is the milkman, Arjuna the son of Pritha is the calf, and the intelligent people will enjoy the great nectar of *Bhagavad gita* as the milk."

Arjuna is also Shiva's *avatara* and eternal companion of Krishna. This is confirmed in *Bhagavata Purana* for example in 4.1.59: *tav imau vai bhagavato harer amsav ihagatau, bhara vyayaya ca bhuvah, krishnau yadu-kurudvahau*, "That same Bhagavan Hari has appeared in a twin form together with his emanation, to alleviate the burden of the world, as the two Krishnas: the best of the Yadavas and the best of the Kurus." There are also other verses in *Bhagavata Purana* in this regard, that we will examine more thoroughly in the commentary to verse 10.37. The word *prīyamānaya* ("taking delight") further clarifies this point. It can apply both to Krishna and Arjuna, who are very compassionate and extremely pleased to deliver the transcendental science to the people in this world. This is certainly the highest devotional service that one can render to God, and the greatest source of pleasure for the devotee as well, compared to which all the material pleasures of this world simply become dim and disappear. The expression *bhuyah eva* ("yet again") refers to the fact that Krishna has already presented a similar description, starting from chapter 7, where he stated, *mattah parataram nanyat*, "there is nothing superior to me" (7.7).

Krishna describes these examples as *paramam vacaḥ*, "the supreme explanation", or "the supreme teachings", although they do not describe his human-like form of the Vrindavana lila. After clearly saying that a devotee should worship him only in his *tad rupa* ("direct form"), Krishna is here describing his *vibhūtis* as a higher instruction, because we need to understand very clearly that God is never cheap.

न मे विदुः सुरगणाः प्रभवं न महर्षयः । अहमादिर्हि देवानां महर्षीणां च सर्वशः ॥ १०-२ ॥

na me viduḥ suragaṇāḥ prabhavaṁ na maharṣayaḥ । ahamādirhi devānāṁ maharṣīṇāṁ ca sarvaśaḥ ॥ 10-2 ॥

na: not; *me*: me; *viduḥ*: (they) know; *sura-gaṇah*: the hosts of *devas*; *prabhavam*: the manifestation; *na*: not; *maharshayah*: the great Rishis; *aham*: I; *adiḥ*: the origin; *hi*: certainly; *devanam*: of the *devas*; *maharshinam*: of the great Rishis; *ca*: and; *sarvasah*: in everything.

"Not even the Devas and the great Rishis are able to ascertain my origin, because I am the origin of everything, including the Devas and the Rishis."

This verse is confirmed by the first text of *Bhagavata Purana* (1.1.1): *janmady asya yato 'nvayad itaratas carthesv abhijnah svarat, tene brahma hrda ya adi kavaye muhyanti yat surayah, tejo vari mrdam yatha vinimayo yatra tri sargo 'mrsam dhamna svena sada nirasta kuhakam satyam param dhimahi*, "I offer my respect to Bhagavan Vasudeva, from whom the creation/ birth etc of this (universe, body, manifestation) proceeds. He is fully independent, fully conscious of purpose, directly and indirectly. He inspired *brahman* (Vedic knowledge) in the heart of the first poet (Brahma). His nature/ existence/ energy of illusion overpowers even the *suras* (*devas* and *rishis*), (just like) with the optical illusions created by heat, water and earth. In this way by action and reaction he always manifests himself as the 'almost reality' of the three creations and all their objects/ places of existence. I meditate on (him), the supreme truth, always self-sufficient, of whom illusion is just the absence of perception."

The *devas* and the *rishis* mentioned in this verse are the most advanced beings in the universe, as they constitute the highest concentration of consciousness/ awareness that can be attained by an individual soul. All the *jivatmas* start from the same basic level as *anu atmās* ("atomic souls") and then develop gradually through the cultivation of knowledge and consciousness. As their level of consciousness and knowledge rises, they are able to build and manage more and more sophisticated bodies, endowed with greater powers (*vibhūtis* or *bhagas*). In all the original cultures of the world, such greatly evolved beings are called Gods and worshiped or honored in some religious rituals. Human beings who have a lower level of personal development and understanding are only able to see such Gods in their individual forms, as greatly powerful beings and even personifications of the powers of nature, or teachers and well wishers capable of granting various types of blessings. However, the more one associates with such great beings, the more one develops the same qualities and tendencies (*guna* and *karma*), and at some point in our eyes the Gods even become models and ideals to be followed, and then we become able to see them as manifestations of a greater and more transcendental Reality - Consciousness, the origin and container of all *vibhūtis*.

When Krishna says *na te viduh*, "they do not know", obviously he is meaning that *devas* and *rishis* cannot know him *fully* - they cannot perceive his origin, because he is beyond time and space - but they do know him at least partially, and that is why they worship him as their supreme Self. This is why in verse 10.14 Arjuna will declare that the word of the Rishis and the Devas about God is the most authoritative.

From the level of transcendental Brahman realization, genuine *bhakti* can really develop (18.54), because we can really know Krishna "in truth" (*janma karma ca me divyah... vetti tattvatah*, 4.9) and not as some folkloristic mythological fairy tale. Krishna had already explained his transcendental identity and nature of pure Consciousness in verse 4.6: *ajo 'pi sann avyayatma, bhutanam isvaro 'pi san, prakritim svam adhisthaya, sambhavamy atma mayaya*, "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".

He will reiterate it in verse 10.8: *aham sarvasya prabhavo mattah sarvam pravartate*, "I am the existence of everything, and from me everything emanates". Krishna is thus the origin and foundation of everything: he is Existence and Reality himself. The "great *rishis*" mentioned in the verse are a category to which the most evolved personalities among the sages can be added. The *sapta rishis* ("seven *rishis*") that inhabit the higher planetary system also known as the Great Dipper are chosen among the famous Angirasa, Bhrgu, Kandu, Markandeya, Mudgala, Pippalada, Digatasama, Atri, Kratu, Vasistha, Vyasa, Pulastya, Marici, and several others. For more about this, see the commentary to verse 10.6.

The *devas* are the incarnation of the elements that constitute the universe. We call them "personalities" rather than "persons" because each of their identities constitutes a position that could be covered from time to time by different persons (individual souls). This difference that we apply between the two words "personality" and "person" also explains how, at the human level, there can be multiple personalities within the same one person.

यो मामजमनादिं च वेत्ति लोकमहेश्वरम् । असम्मूढः स मर्त्येषु सर्वपापैः प्रमुच्यते ॥ १०-३ ॥

yo māmajamanādīṁ ca vetti lokamaheśvaram | asammūḍhaḥ sa martyeṣu sarvapāpaiḥ pramucyate || 10-3 ||

yah: a person who; *mam*: me; *ajam*: non-born; *anadim*: without origin; *ca*: and; *vetti*: (s/he) knows; *loka maha isvaram*: the great ruler of all planets/ people; *asammudhah*: free from illusion; *sah*: s/he; *martyeshu*: among the mortal beings; *sarva-papaih*: from all faults; *pramucyate*: becomes free.

"A person who knows/ understands/ realizes me as the Reality that is non-born and without origin, (sees me as) the great ruler and controller of all the planets and people. Such a person, although still living in a mortal body, is free from all illusion and becomes purified from all negativities."

Pure Consciousness is never born. In conditioned beings who live in a material body, consciousness existed before birth, and continues after birth and after death: it merely moves from one body to the other. In Krishna, who is the supreme Consciousness without any material limitations, there is not even such passage from one body to another, because the supreme Consciousness simultaneously contains and controls all forms at all times and in all places, beyond the scope of time and place.

Krishna's bodies are not controlled by the laws of material nature, but they are manifested directly by the spiritual nature of consciousness. We study in nuclear physics that all matter is composed of sub-atomic particles that are a condensed form of energy, vibrating at different frequencies and densities, and thus forming atoms of the various material elements. Such sub-atomic particles are sensitive to magnetic fields, including those created by life or consciousness; the stronger the consciousness is, the more it can control the alignment and movements of matter. Even ordinary souls can develop this power through the correct practice of *yoga*, and thus manifest what are known as *yoga siddhis*.

Krishna - God, the Supreme Brahman - is the most powerful Consciousness, and perfectly controls all manifestations, spiritual and material. Spiritual manifestations are called *para*, "superior", because they are a form of greater and more powerful consciousness, while material manifestations are characterized by more dullness. A person who comes to understand this totally transcendental nature of Krishna as the supreme Consciousness is immediately freed from illusion and contamination, because consciousness is also the transcendental nature of the *jiva*. One who realizes his/ her own identity and nature as pure consciousness cannot be conditioned by the material body or by material considerations. Even if s/he still lives in a material body, s/he does not need one any more, so at the time of death s/he will not take another one, but will remain as a fully developed spiritual body. The same point was already stated in 4.9: *janma karma ca me divyam evam yo vetti tattvatah, tyaktva deham punar janma naiti mam eti so 'rjuna*, "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."

In this view, we will be better able to understand verse 5.29 as the description of the supreme Consciousness that is present in - but not limited to - all beings: *bhoktaram yajña-tapasam sarva-loka-mahesvaram, suhridam sarva-bhutanam jnatva mam santim ricchati*, "(One who) knows me as the enjoyer/ beneficiary of *yajna* (sacrifice) and *tapas* (austerity), the great Lord of all the worlds /all people, and the dearest friend of all beings, attains peace."

Less evolved forms of religion cannot bring peace into the world because they are unable to teach that God is simply Existence itself, present everywhere as Consciousness. This is the definition of Brahman, and its nature is existence, consciousness and happiness. Of course this understanding is difficult to achieve for those who identify with the material body and mind, so the real path of religion starts with the genuine study of the transcendental science of *atman/ brahman*. From the beginning, *Bhagavad gita* (2.29) clearly says, *ascarya-vat pasyati kascid enam ascarya-vad vadati tathaiva canyah, ascarya-vac cainam anyah srinoti srutvapy enam veda na caiva kascit*, "Some see this (*atman*) as amazing, some others describe it as amazing. Some hear (of it) as amazing, and some remain unable to understand it even after hearing about it."

Understanding the *atman* is the foundation for understanding the *brahman*. Verse 2.25 says, *avyakto 'yam acintyo 'yam avikaryo 'yam ucyate, tasmad evam viditvainam nanusocitum arhasi*, "It is said that this (the soul) is invisible to material eyes, inconceivable to material intellect, and not affected by change. Therefore, knowing this (soul), you should not worry."

And also:

nasato vidyate bhavo nabhavo vidyate satah, ubhayor api drishto 'ntas tv anayos tattva-darsibhih, "Those who see the truth know that what is illusory/ temporary/ bad will not (continue to) be, while what is real/ eternal/ good will never be destroyed. They have carefully observed both things and reached this conclusion." (2.16)

avinasi tu tad viddhi yena sarvam idam tatam, vinasam avyayasyasya na kascit kartum arhati, "Know that it is an imperishable (spirit) that pervades all this (universe of bodies). And no one will be able to destroy what is imperishable." (2.17)

na jayate mriyate va kadacin nayam bhutva bhavita va na bhuyah, ajo nityah sasvato 'yam purano na hanyate hanyamane sarire, "(The soul) never takes birth and never dies at any time. It eternally exists, without beginning or end. This (soul) that is in the body is unborn, eternal, imperishable, immensely ancient, and cannot kill or be killed." (2.20)

na tv evaham jatu nasam na tvam neme janadhipah, na caiva na bhavishyamah sarve vayam atah param, "Certainly there was never a time when I did not exist, and you and all these chieftains of men have always existed as well. Also, none of us will cease to exist in the future." (2.12)

This is also the message contained in the center of the *Bhagavata Purana*, also called the *chatur* (4) *sloki Bhagavata*, that consists of 4 verses (2.9.33, 34, 35, 36) and that is often connected to the central verses of *Bhagavad gita*, called the *chatur* (4) *sloki Gita*. We will quote them in the commentary to verse 10.11.

बुद्धिर्ज्ञानमसम्मोहः क्षमा सत्यं दमः शमः । सुखं दुःखं भवोऽभावो भयं चाभयमेव च ॥ १०-४ ॥

buddhirjñānamasammohaḥ kṣamā satyaṁ damaḥ śamaḥ | sukhaṁ duḥkhaṁ bhavo'bhāvo bhayaṁ cābhayameva ca || 10-4 ||

buddhih: intelligence; *jñanam:* knowledge; *asammohah:* freedom from confusion; *kshama:* forgiveness; *satyam:* truthfulness; *damah:* self-control; *samah:* mental balance; *sukham:* joy; *duhkham:* sadness; *bhavah:* existence; *abhavah:* non-existence; *bhayam:* fear; *ca:* and; *abhayam:* freedom from fear; *eva:* also; *ca:* and.

"Intelligence, knowledge, freedom from confusion, forgiveness, truthfulness, self-control, mental balance, joy, sadness, existence and non-existence, as well as fear and freedom from fear (are arranged by me)."

This verse and the next one are usually studied together because the verb supporting both is contained in the second one. The qualities and principles listed here are not all "positive" or "desirable" in their conventional practical application: for example sadness, non-existence and fear. In the next verse, *ayasah* ("infamy") will also be mentioned. However, a little more meditation on these two verses will lead us to wonder why Krishna has deliberately chosen to list them together with other more "positive" and "desirable" qualities and concepts, that are also requirements for progress in spiritual life.

We may remember that in the very first chapter of *Bhagavad gita*, Arjuna expressed his sadness about the situation created by Duryodhana and the need to engage in the horrible fratricidal battle. On that occasion, Krishna expertly utilized Arjuna's concern and anguish to direct his mind towards a higher level of consciousness, thus creating the scene for the wonderful discussion of the *Bhagavad gita*.

In the commentaries to that chapter, we observed that dissatisfaction with the material world - that has been specifically created as a place of misery and impermanence (*duhkhalayam asasvatam*, 8.15, *anityam asukam*, 9.33) - is the beneficial wake up call that we need to become detached from illusion.

Only a person that has realized the suffering caused by the defects inherent to the process of birth, death, old age and disease can really overcome the attractiveness of the good and pleasurable sattvic life offered by Vedic society and attain detachment and freedom from material identifications. This is confirmed in verse 13.9: *indriyartheshu vairagyam anahankara eva ca, janma-mrityu-jara-vyadhi-duhkha-doshanudarsanam*, where Krishna describes the factors that constitute knowledge (*jnanam*).

This does not mean that we should deliberately try to increase our sufferings, or that the principle of suffering is characteristically spiritual or religious, while the principle of pleasure is characteristically material. Such extremist ideas are never entertained by the *rishis* and *acharyas* that compiled the Vedic scriptures and offered their valuable teachings to mankind. According to abrahamic ideologies, pain and suffering are glorified as "penance" and considered indispensable for the purification of the soul from material contamination, therefore a religious person is expected to strictly avoid all sense gratification and pleasures, to the point of sensory deprivation and even self-torture.

The Vedic path is not a punitive one. It does not give suffering an absolute value in itself, but it explains why life cannot be all play and fun. Vedic knowledge offers many remedies to alleviate the pain and increase pleasures - through a comprehensive medical system, scientific arrangements for social harmony, wonderful technology and crafts, and especially a perfect method for karmic success. However, the four fundamental defects of materially embodied life cannot be totally eliminated by materially devised solutions. Still there will be death, albeit a serene and almost painless one. Disease and old age can still leave us reasonably healthy and able to function and enjoy the natural and virtuous pleasures of life. Birth and infancy can be made easier and happier when the parents are more knowledgeable, balanced and responsible. On the higher planetary systems, the *devas* face only a very minimal version of these sufferings, and yet all material bodies must have a beginning and an end, and a few troubles in between, just to remind us that this universe is not our real home.

The same consideration applies to existence and non-existence, and fear and lack of fear: these all serve as a stimulus for progress, to find the answers to the really important questions in life. This does not mean that we should cultivate fear or worship non-existence: it simply means that we should face each problem as an opportunity, and find the ways to use it to our better advantage - like "a blessing in disguise".

In this verse, the word *sama* (that could also be written as *shama*, with a slightly different "s" that is a separate letter in the Sanskrit alphabet) means "control" and is different from the similar word *sama* or *samata*, meaning "equal vision". This self-control applies to the external and internal sense organs, where *dama* specifically refers to the external actions and *sama* to internal (mental) activities.

अहिंसा समता तुष्टिस्तपो दानं यशोऽयशः । भवन्ति भावा भूतानां मत्त एव पृथग्विधाः ॥ १०-५ ॥

ahimsā samatā tuṣṭistapo dānaṁ yaśo'yaśaḥ । bhavanti bhāvā bhūtānāṁ matta eva pṛthagvidhāḥ ।। 10-5 ।।

ahimsa: freedom from hatred; *samata*: equanimity; *tushtis*: contentment; *tapah*: austerity; *danam*: charity; *yasah*: good fame; *ayasah*: bad reputation; *bhavanti*: become/ happen; *bhava*: existence/ natural characteristic; *bhutanam*: of the beings; *mattah*: by me; *eva*: certainly; *prithag-vidhah*: various types.

"Freedom from hatred, equanimity, contentment, austerity, charity, good fame and also bad reputation: all these manifest as the natural situations of the beings, and are devised by me."

The second part of the statement is given in this verse, complete with the verb supporting the sentence. All these different situations are controlled by Krishna.

The exact expression (*mattat eva prithak vidhah*) means, "are variously divided by me", referring to their assignment of the different situations in life as per "destiny" to each individual in a particular time and place. Why? Because in order to grow and develop, we need to face a number of lessons in life, and a lesson is only useful if it presents the exact amount of difficulty suitable for our particular level of realization. By analyzing these two verses, we will be able to understand what the biggest lessons in life are. Intelligence, knowledge and freedom from confusion are the first and foremost tools in this task, and we definitely need to develop them more and more, as a first lesson that will help us succeed in the rest of the training. The next group of qualities are the second step in personal evolution, and while the first group was connected with the intellect, these are connected with the emotions and the choices of life - forgiveness, truthfulness, self-control, mental balance.

The proper use of intellect and emotional management will enable us to navigate various tests of ups and downs - joy, sadness, existence and non-existence, fear and fearlessness. The duality of existence and non-existence here refers the loss of something (2.38, *labha alabhau*, "getting and not getting", *jaya ajayau*, "victory and defeat") and must be kept in the proper perspective with the correct use of the previously acquired tools - those regulating the intellect and those regulating emotions and choices. In this verse we make a further step forward.

Ahimsa is a compound word consisting of the "privative" *a*, and the noun *himsa*, of the same root of the verb *himsati*, "to hate". The usual translation of "non-violence" is therefore rather simplistic, as it does not explain how a *kshatriya* can remain perfectly situated in *ahimsa* while he is doing his job of protecting the innocent and good *prajas* from the aggression of criminals. Coupled with the mythical vision that many uninformed people have about the policies of MK Gandhi, often called "the apostle of non-violence", as well as about the history of India in the last 1200 years, this imprecise rendition of the Sanskrit concept of *ahimsa* can really cause serious misunderstandings.

We need to clarify that the Vedic idea of *ahimsa* is not cowardice, absenteeism, irresponsibility, callousness or the delusional hope that "evil" will simply disappear if we choose not to look at it. Real *ahimsa* is directly connected to *samata* or equanimity: it is about being free from prejudice and hatred, and about looking straight at reality to take the required measures without any selfish motivation.

The next group of characteristics are contentment, austerity and charity, that enable us to live a happy life in this world and in the next, without expecting anything from anyone and therefore without the danger of being frustrated. *Tushti* means "contentment", "satisfaction", and is actually a inner quality, measured by how happy we can make ourselves by counting our blessings instead of only noticing what we do not have.

Tapah or austerity simply consists in the voluntary acceptance of those difficulties that come to us spontaneously in the course of our work or journey; it does not mean that we should go deliberately looking for troubles or for sufferings, or worse, torture our bodies and minds with unnecessary deprivations or damage.

The most difficult lesson in life consists in becoming able to serenely face good fame and defamation - two things that are not necessarily referred to our actual qualities and deeds. The verse uses the terms *yasa* and *ayasa*, "good reputation" and "lack of good reputation", which are synonyms of *kirti* and *akirti*, used by Krishna in 2.33, 34, 35, 36 to warn Arjuna about the bad rumors that his enemies would have circulated if he had decided not to engage in the battle. Anyone who has been falsely slandered by envious people knows that bad reputation comes even to perfectly innocent people, as it is demonstrated many times in history. Sometimes it is difficult or impossible to dispel bad rumors, especially when they have been cleverly fabricated by exploiting the prejudice and fears of the ignorant people who will listen to such envious defamation. The very nature of slandering is based on envy, and envy is stimulated by the apparent success of a person: this is why defamation campaigns and bad rumors often appear together with great glorification and appreciation of the same person. Especially if the person in question is very straightforward and seriously engaged in fighting *adharmā*, s/he will have to expect lots of both - insult and praise - and remain untouched by either.

महर्षयः सप्त पूर्वे चत्वारो मनवस्तथा । मद्भावा मानसा जाता येषां लोक इमाः प्रजाः ॥ १०-६ ॥

maharṣayaḥ sapta pūrve catvāro manavastathā । madbhāvā mānasā jātā yeṣāṁ loka imāḥ prajāḥ ।। 10-6 ।।

maharshayah: the great *rishis*; *sapta*: the seven; *purve*: before (them); *catvarah*: the four; *manavah*: the Manus; *tatha*: as well; *matbhavah*: created by me; *manasa*: from the mind; *jatah*: born; *yesham*: of them; *loke*: in the world; *imah*: these; *prajah*: creatures.

"The great seven Rishis, the four (who were born) before them, and the Manus, were all created by me and generated through the mind. All the creatures in this world descend from them."

This verse lists the most prominent early descendants of Brahma, who were generated from his mind with the purpose of expanding the creation of the universe. The Great Rishis had already been mentioned in verse 10.2. The four (Rishis) before them are the *chatur sanah* ("the 4 Sanas"), namely Sanaka, Sananda, Sanatana and Sanat kumara, the first generated sons of Brahma. These four great Rishis did not

want to engage in procreation to populate the universe, therefore they chose to remain always in a child-like form (hence the name *kumaras*, "boys").

The Manus mentioned in the verse are the administrators of the planet Earth in the various periods of Brahma's day. There are 14 in the present day: Svayambhuva, Svarocisa, Uttana, Tamasa, Raivata, Chaksusa, Vaivasvata, Savarni, Dakshasavarni, Brahmasavarni, Dharmasavarni, Rudra putra, Rocya or Devasavarni, and Indrasavarni. These are all great and glorious personalities, from whom we should be proud of descending. In fact, it is interesting to think that not only the great *gotras* of "high class brahmins" descend from these wonderfully qualified personalities, but also all human beings and even all the other creatures of the universe can trace their family lineage directly to them.

Of course in this verse Krishna is speaking about the bodies, and not about the individual *jivatmas* that go to occupy these exalted positions in the administration of the universe. It is important to understand that such prestigious posts come equipped with a full set of mind/senses/ body organs meant to execute the required functions; therefore whenever a *jiva* develops the suitable *guna* and *karma*, he can take birth in that situation and perform its duties.

There are apparently contradictory lists of the names of these Sapta Rishis, but this is due to the fact that they can change from one *manvantara* to the other. In chapter 13 of canto 8 of *Bhagavata Purana*, we find the description of the future Manus. Under the present one (the 7th), named Sraddhadeva, the main *devas* are the Adityas, Vasus, Rudras, Visvedevas, Marutas, Asvini kumaras and Ribhus; the seven *rishis* are listed as Kashyapa, Atri, Vasistha, Vishvamitra, Gautama, Jamadagni and Bharadvaja. The Vishnu *avatara* assisting the *devas* is Vamana, the younger brother of Indra.

Under the next Manu (the 8th), named Savarni, the *devas* will be the Sutapas, Virajas and Amritaprabhas; the post of Indra will be occupied by Bali Maharaja, the son of Virochana, who previously was the king of the *asuras* - the passage will be performed through a *lila* manifested by the *avatara* Sarvabhauma, son of Devaguhya and Sarasvati. The Sapta Rishis will be Galava, Diptiman, Parasurama, Asvatthama, Kripacharya, Rishyashringa and Vyasadeva, who are presently living on Earth. Similarly, under Daksha Savarni Manu (the 9th), son of Varuna, the *devas* will be the Paras and the Maricigarbhas, the position of Indra will be occupied by Adbhuta, and a new group of Sapta Rishis will be headed by Dyutiman (*Bhagavata Purana*, 8.13.19). The Vishnu *avatara* assisting the *devas* will be Rishabha, son of Ayushman and Ambudhara.

In the subsequent verses (up to verse 36, the end of the chapter) the other future sets of *devas* and *rishis* are described, up to the 14th and last Manu in this day of Brahma.

एतां विभूतिं योगं च मम यो वेत्ति तत्त्वतः । सोऽविकम्पेन योगेन युज्यते नात्र संशयः ॥ १०-७ ॥

etām vibhūtiṁ yogam ca mama yo vetti tattvataḥ | so'vikampena yogena yujyate nātra saṁśayaḥ || 10-7 ||

etam: this; *vibhuti*: power; *yogam*: union; *ca*: and; *mama*: my; *yah*: a person who; *vetti*: knows; *tattvataḥ*: in truth; *sah*: s/he; *avikalpena*: without distraction; *yogena*: by *yoga*; *yujyate*: is engaged; *na*: not; *atra*: here; *samsayah*: (there is) doubt.

"A person who truly understands this, and knows this *vibhuti yoga*, is certainly engaged in (the proper) meditation, without any doubt."

Here Krishna clearly states that *yoga* and *bhakti* must be solidly based on the consciousness of the supreme powers and glories of God, otherwise they will not be performed properly. How and why God is great? Not because he is older, taller or he lives upstairs as a landlord, or because he has the power to kill people or send them to hell. The danger, as we have discussed previously, is to take Krishna cheaply as in *prakrita sahayism*, or "materialistic simplism", and to miss the entire scope of transcendental realization.

In this regard, we should give special attention to the definition *avikalpena*, "without distraction" from the purposed goal. This type of distraction normally happens with fairy tales or adventures of great men, because it is not possible to continue indefinitely to concentrate on material stories with the same or greater interest. So the only safe way to remain genuinely fixed in *yoga* and *bhakti* is to actually attain the level of *brahma bhuta*, or transcendental realization, demonstrated by overcoming all material identifications and attachments (*ahankara* and *mamatva*). At that point, our contemplation and meditation on Krishna will be solidly based on the understanding and realization of his transcendental glories and nature (as described in these precious verses of *Bhagavad gita*) and thus it will only increase and not decrease.

The *bhakti* literature clearly speaks of a *chaya rati*, "shadow attachment" or "reflection attachment", that can be compared to a mirage of water created by the extreme heat on the surface of the desert. This initial artificial/ sentimental attraction is beneficial because it will trigger an interest for the process of devotional service and the discussion of the names, qualities and activities of Krishna, but it should not be considered the ultimate goal, because it is not.

In *Jaiva dharma*, Bhaktivinoda says through the declaration of his character Raghunatha dasa Babaji, "*Kanistha* devotees who have limited knowledge and realizations may experience some ecstatic symptoms when they come in contact with holy places or other manifestations of the Lord. Such reflection of ecstasy is called *chaya rati abhasa*, and is born from previous good merits (*punya*), but because it is temporary, its waning and disappearance will cause perplexity and suffering."

At this point, when the first reflection of *bhakti* disappears, we are facing the most important choice in our development: we can become serious and rise to the level of actual transcendental realization (*brahma bhuta*) through the meditation offered so clearly here by Krishna, and in this direction our journey will take us to the real (*para*) attachment to Krishna and genuine devotion, through the *madhyama* and the *uttama* levels.

If we fail to take this very crucial step, and we remain attached to material considerations - identifications, affiliations, possessions, expectations, and duality - we will remain on the *kanistha* platform, that can easily degenerate into materialistically motivated organized religiousness. As a result, we will become materially proud and arrogant, and we may commit the disastrous mistake of evaluating other persons, especially devotees, according to the wrong parameters - grossly materialistic parameters, based on physical identification such as

gender, birth, race, nationality, age, shape of the body, etc, and social position such as wealth, erudition, hierarchical status (or more importantly, lack thereof), etc. As true devotion has nothing to do with material identifications, affiliations, and physical appearances, it is extremely easy to become offensive and therefore lose any chance to progress in spiritual life.

अहं सर्वस्य प्रभवो मत्तः सर्वं प्रवर्तते । इति मत्वा भजन्ते मां बुधा भावसमन्विताः ॥ १०-८ ॥

aham sarvasya prabhavo mattaḥ sarvaṁ pravartate | iti matvā bhajante mām budhā bhāvasamanvitāḥ || 10-8 ||

aham: I (am); *sarvasya*: of everything; *prabhavah*: the origin of existence; *mattaḥ*: from me; *sarvam*: everything; *pravartate*: emanates; *iti*: like this; *matva*: thinking; *bhajante*: they worship; *mam*: me; *budhah*: the intelligent; *bhava-samanvitah*: with great attention.

"I am the origin of existence of everything, as everything emanates from me. Intelligent people remember this, and worship me with intense attention."

In verse 10.2, Krishna had already said, *aham adir hi devanam*, "I am the origin of all the *devas*".

Again Krishna repeats this extremely important point: only those intelligent people who actually realize Krishna's transcendental glories and position will be able to worship him properly, with the required attention and consciousness. The others will simply be licking the exterior of the honey jar and imagine they are tasting the supreme sweetness.

There are innumerable texts from various scriptures confirming the fact that Narayana is the origin of everything. The first and foremost source in this regard is the *Bhagavata Purana*, that speaks almost exclusively of Vishnu/ Krishna, but there are also 5 more *vaishnava Puranas* (*Vishnu Purana*, *Brahma Purana*, *Brahmanda Purana* and *Brahma vaivarta Purana*) and 13 *vaishnava Upanishads* - *Vasudeva*, *Avyakta*, *Advaya taraka* and *Tarasara* in *Sukla Yajur Veda*; *Kali santarana* in *Krishna Yajur Veda*; *Nrisimha tapani*, *Mahanarayana*, *Rama rahasya*, *Rama tapani*, *Gopala tapani*, *Krishna*, *Hayagriva*, *Dattatreya* and *Garuda* in *Atharva Veda*. However, also all other *Puranas* and *Upanishads* recognize the supreme position of Vishnu, although they do not deal with this topic preeminently. The *shaiva Puranas* and *Upanishads* actually refer to Vishnu/ Narayana when speak of Sadashiva ("the eternal Shiva"), because Shiva is a temporary manifestation of Vishnu that descends into the material universe as Param Atman. The *Varaha Purana* is quoted to say, *narayanah paro devas tasmaj jatas caturmukhah, tasmad rudro bhavad devah sa ca sarva-jnatam gatah*, "Narayana is the Supreme *deva*, from him the four-faced (Brahma) was born, from him Shiva proceeds, and all the *devas* and all that is worth knowing."

The *Maha Upanishad* (1) says, *eko vai narayana asin na brahma na isano napo nagni-samau neme dyav-aprithivi na naksatrani na suryah*, "(In the beginning) there was only Narayana - not Brahma nor Isana (Shiva). There was no water, fire, moon, sky, earth, stars or sun."

The *Narayana Upanishad* (1) says, *narayanad brahma jayate, narayanad prajapatih prajayate, narayanad indro jayate, narayanad astau vasavo jayante, narayanad ekadasa rudra jayante, narayanad dvadasadityah*, "From Narayana, Brahma was born. From Narayana, the Prajapatis were generated. From Narayana, Indra and the 8 Vasus are born; from Narayana, the 11 Rudras and the 12 Adityas were born."

The *Bhagavata Purana* (11.5.33) also shows Narayana worshiped (*nutam*) by Shiva and Brahma (*siva virinci*). However, the same *Bhagavata* (4.7.50) clearly states that there is no difference or separation (*avisesa*) between these Personalities of God, that are the supreme cause of the universe, the witness and the self-sufficient Lord of the *atman* (*aham brahma ca sarvas ca jagatah karanam param, atmesvara upadrasta svayan drg avisesanah*).

मच्चित्ता मद्गतप्राणा बोधयन्तः परस्परम् । कथयन्तश्च मां नित्यं तुष्यन्ति च रमन्ति च ॥ १०-९ ॥

maccittā madgataprāṇā bodhayantaḥ parasparam | kathayantaśca mām nityaṁ tuṣyanti ca ramanti ca || 10-9 ||

mat cittaḥ: with their consciousness focused on me; *mad-gata-pranah*: having dedicated their energy and life to me; *bodhayantah*: help to understand; *parasparam*: each other; *kathayantah*: they discuss; *ca*: and; *mam*: me; *nityam*: always; *tushyanti*: find satisfaction; *ca*: and; *ramanti*: find pleasure; *ca*: and/ as well.

"They concentrate their consciousness on me, dedicate all their energies to me, and always discuss to help each other to better understand (me). In this, they find great pleasure and satisfaction."

There are several important points in this verse. The first and foremost is that the discussion (*katha*) about Krishna must be accompanied by sincere dedication to his service (*gata prana*) and by intense concentration (*citta*). This means that mechanical and superficial recitation by materialistic people will not have the expected effects. The expression *mad gata pranah* is referring to all *pranas*, as it appears in the plural; this means that a devotee spontaneously serves the Lord with all the activities of his/ her body and mind. The word *citta* ("awareness/ attention") shares a common root with the words *chaitanya* ("consciousness") and *chaitya guru* (the voice of conscience as the *antaryami paramatma* that is always ready to instruct us for our benefit). It is a traditional practice among Indian Hindus to attend social gatherings where the *lilas* of Krishna and Rama are recited or played (especially by actors or dancers), mostly episodes from *Bhagavata Purana*'s 10th canto, *Ramayana*, or *Mahabharata*.

While it is always commendable to hear and remember the activities of the Lord, we should be careful not to become confused by the materialistic tendencies of professional reciters and entertainers, who cleverly pick only the passages that can attract most customers and skip over the transcendental instructions that are contained in the original texts. Although the activities of the Lord and his direct servants are always beneficial in themselves, we must remember that they are enacted in this world precisely to attract people to listen to the spiritual teachings and the transcendental knowledge that they contain.

On the occasion of the many religious festivals in the Hindu calendar, religiously-minded people assemble in temples or in private homes, sometimes for one entire night, as for example on Shiva ratri. This vigil is called *jagram*, and it is meant for such spiritual discussions, as well as for *bhajana* and *kirtana* etc.

We should be careful not to remain stuck on the primitive level of material and social religiosity, where people devoid of sufficient sincerity convince themselves that a little theory is sufficient to keep them in a position of "good standing". This is particularly dangerous when the misunderstanding is compounded by the delusional idea of automatic qualification through some material consideration, such as birth in the caste system, or official affiliation to some registered hierarchical organization.

The discussion about God's activities and teachings must always be about practical application as well, as the *Vedas* clearly and repeatedly recommend: *asato ma sad gamaya*, "from *asat* lead me to *sat*", where *asat* refers to the temporary and illusory level of material identifications and attachments, while *sat* refers to the permanent and happy realization of transcendental Reality.

The other important point is that the recitation must include sufficient explanations for the proper understanding and application. The expressions *bodhayantah parasparam* and *kathayanti* clearly show that the discussion of the Lord's activities should not be a mere monologue offered by a lecturer, but an interactive program where all the members actively participate.

Of course there are different degrees of participation, based on the levels of knowledge and realization of the devotees who attend the program. From time to time, some will ask questions and elaborations, some will offer different perspectives, and some will debate on the applications and implications. In any case, when the participants are sincere, attentive, and dedicated to the loving service of the Lord, they derive the greatest happiness and satisfaction in discussing about God to understand and make understand his activities and teachings. This is confirmed by another famous verse in *Bhagavad gita* (2.59), that speaks about the "superior taste" (*param drstva nivatate*) that will make us forget material pleasures (*rasa varjam*).

The word *ramanti* is particularly interesting, as *rama* is the pleasure of a loving encounter, especially on the romantic level. So the devotees actually fall in love with Krishna, and like all lovers do, they are always anxious to speak and hear about their beloved. We must be extremely careful to avoid confusion on the very delicate issue of the *madhurya* or *sringara rasa*, the sentiment of romantic and erotic love expressed especially in the Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition in pursuance of Chaitanya's teachings and example.

The danger is that immature people, still trapped by the materialistic concepts of bodily identification, social conventions, duality and sectarianism, will approach the most intimate activities of Krishna with some measure of false pride, considering themselves as "exclusive devotees" members of an elite group or club, simply because of their official affiliation and selective object of meditation. Under the pretext of *aikantiki bhakti* or exclusive devotion to the most intimate form of the Lord, they claim that they only need to think about his erotic activities with the *gopis*, and they disregard all the numerous philosophical statements and instructions that accompany the descriptions of such *lilas* in the genuine scriptures, as well as the other transcendental activities of the Lord in his various manifestations.

The solution to this problem is not difficult. We must remain humble and appreciate all the activities and instructions of the Lord, without applying materialistic discriminations of "lower", because on the spiritual platform there is no "lower".

तेषां सततयुक्तानां भजतां प्रीतिपूर्वकम् । ददामि बुद्धियोगं तं येन मामुपयान्ति ते ॥ १०-१० ॥

teṣāṃ satatayuktānāṃ bhajatāṃ prītipūrvakam | dadāmi buddhiyogaṃ taṃ yena māmupayānti te || 10-10 |

tesam: for them; *satata-yuktanam*: always united in *yoga*; *bhajatam*: worship; *priti-purvakam*: in a loving way; *dadami*: I give; *buddhi yogam*: the *yoga* of intelligence; *taṃ*: that; *yena*: by which; *mam*: to me; *upayanti*: (they) approach; *te*: they.

"To those who are always connected to me by serving me with love and devotion, I give the *buddhi yoga*, the engagement in intelligence, by which they will come to me."

Krishna gives great value to the exercise of intelligence. He had already mentioned *buddhi yoga* specifically in several verses of chapter 2 (39, 49, 50, 51, 52), and will mention it again at the end of the *Bhagavad gita*. The *yoga* of intelligence is the first description of *yoga* in *Bhagavad gita*, and refers to making the proper choices to progress in life and become free from karmic bondage, so that we can become permanently situated in Krishna consciousness (*mat cittah satatam bhava*, 18.57).

Buddhi, "intelligence", is the highest faculty and includes the powers of understanding, discernment, doubt, determination, reasoning and will. Several more times the text of *Gita* mentions *buddhi* ("intelligence") as a crucial factor in spiritual life: 1.23, (2.39), 2.41, 2.42, (2.49, 2.50, 2.51, 2.52), 2.53, 2.63, 2.65, 2.66, 2.73, 3.2, 3.26, 3.40, 3.42, 3.43, 4.18, 5.11, 5.17, 5.20, 5.28, 6.9, 6.21, 6.25, 6.43, 7.10, 7.24, 8.7, 10.4, (10.10), 12.3, 12.8, 12.13, 13.6, 15.20, 16.19, 18.16, 18.17, 18.29, 18.30, 18.31, 18.32, 18.37, 18.49, 18.50, 18.56 (and 18.57).

Katha Upanishad (1.3.12) also states: "The *atman* is hidden in all beings and its radiance can be perceived only by those who are able to see subtle things by focusing *buddhi*".

Bhagavata Purana (4.28.41) clearly states that God is the real *guru* for everyone, and can directly instruct any person with the pure and enlightening spiritual knowledge. This is again confirmed by 1.1.1 (*tene brahma hrida*, "revealed to Brahma through his heart"), 1.2.17 (*hrdy antah stho hy abhadraṇi vidhunoti*, "situated within the heart, he destroys all bad things"), 3.5.4 (*hrdi stithah yacchati jnanam satatva adhigamam*, "situated in the heart, he gives the knowledge by which one can understand the truth"), 3.15.26 (*tad visva guru adhikritam bhuvanaika vandyam* "the universal *guru*, who is the original maker, worshiped by all"), 3.25.38 (Kapila tells his mother that his devotees consider him as son, friend, *guru*, and *ista daivam*), 4.8.44 (Dhruva meditating on Vishnu as the *guru* of all *gurus*), 4.21.36 (Prithu telling his subjects that Hari is the supreme *guru*), 8.24.50 (king Satyavrata addressing Vishnu as his *guru*), 10.69.15 (*jagat guru tamah*, "the supreme *guru* of the universe"), 10.80.44 (Sudama's prayers to Krishna).

We may ask ourselves, what is the meaning of the expression "always connected" (*satata yuktanam*) if only after realization they will be able to approach Krishna? On the material level, one first approaches a person, and then it becomes possible to remain connected to him. But here we are not on the material level. The first approach to God is through the *sadhana* of meditation on the glories of Krishna, his names, forms, activities, teachings etc. This effectively puts the sincere devotee in touch with God, and through the regular and consistent engagement in cultivating the transcendental knowledge and consciousness, the spiritual intelligence (*buddhi yoga*) develops and the devotee becomes able to understand Krishna as he really is - and not just an imaginative projection.

तेषामेवानुकम्पार्थमहमज्ञानजं तमः ।

नाशयाम्यात्मभावस्थो ज्ञानदीपेन भास्वता ॥ १०-११ ॥

teṣāmevānukampārthamahamajñānajaṁ tamah | nāśayāmyātmabhāvastho jñānadīpena bhāsvatā || 10-11 ||

tesam: for them; *eva*: certainly; *anukampa artham*: for the purpose of kindness; *aham*: I; *ajnana-jam*: born from ignorance; *tamah*: darkness; *nasayami*: I destroy; *atma-bhava-sthah*: situated in the existence of their Self; *jnana-dipena*: with the lamp of knowledge; *bhasvata*: radiant.

"Out of my kindness for them, I destroy the darkness of ignorance from within their hearts, by (shining forth with) the radiant lamp of knowledge."

The explanation continues: *buddhi yoga* is the genuine transcendental understanding of the Personality of God, illuminated by the light of true knowledge. The darkness of ignorance is the material mentality, based on bodily identification, that covers the perception of the *atman/ brahman*, that is the true reality. The *atman* is the individual soul, that participates to the universal existence of *brahman* because they are both made of consciousness (*cit*), transcendental to circumstances and therefore ever existing (*sat*) and inexhaustible sources of happiness (*ananda*). There is no qualitative difference between the *atman* and the *brahman*: the only distinction is quantitative, as the *brahman* includes all the *jivatmas* and more.

The expression *atma bhava stha* refers to the sentiment of the self identification as it is present in the *bhava* (existence) of *atman*. The material self identification is the darkness, and the spiritual self identification is the light; the entire process of Self realization is to move from the material level to the spiritual level: *asato ma sad gamaya, tamaso ma jyotir gamaya, mrityor ma amritam gamaya*, "from what is temporary lead me to what is eternal, from darkness lead me to the light, from death lead me to eternal life". This famous verse from *Brihad Aranyaka Upanishad* (1.3.28) is the refrain (*adhyaroha*) of the *stutis* called *Pavamanas*.

Krishna states that he will personally enlighten his sincere and dedicated devotee, from within the heart. Now, some lazy and superficial people may imagine that there is no need to actually study, because we can get knowledge directly from inside our hearts, especially since in the *shastra* we can find several other declarations that give greater importance to *bhakti* (love and devotion) compared to *jnana* (knowledge), and that glorify the quality of simplicity and humility condemning the pride and arrogance that often comes with a material attachment to erudition and scholarship. While it is true that academic qualifications are not relevant in the process of true *bhakti*, we absolutely need the genuine light (*jnana dipa*) of transcendental knowledge and realization. Krishna is stating here that he will provide this light to those sincere devotees who are constantly engaged (*satata yujtanam*) in *buddhi yoga* - the constant effort to better understand Krishna. This fundamental requirement for sincerity and effort automatically excludes lazy and superficial posers, materialistic simpletons, sentimentalistic fools, and all the other delusional imitators.

We should not forget that those passages glorifying simplicity and humility are contained in the scriptures and written in Sanskrit, therefore they are addressed to those who actually study the scriptures and know Sanskrit well enough. They are directed not to illiterate and ignorant people, but to those who could become proud of their scholarship and erudition, therefore they should never be taken as a glorification of ignorance and disrespect towards the scriptures and the genuine *guru* who teaches them.

This is the last of the four central verses of *Bhagavad gita*, called *chatur sloki gita* (10.8 to 11), that are situated exactly in the middle of the text. For their importance, they are often compared to the *chatur sloki bhagavata* (2.9-33-36), that we quote here for reference:

aham evasam evagre nanyad yat sat asat param, pascad aham yad etac ca yo 'vasisyeta so 'smy aham, "I am what existed before the creation, and all that will ever exist. I am the *sat* and the *asat* (the supreme cause and effect), up to the end (of the universe), and I am what remains after all these (creations) and everything else (are dissolved)",

rite 'rtham yat pratiyeta na pratiyeta catmani, tad vidyad atmano mayam yathabhaso yatha tama, "Whatever appears to be of value or without value, is only in relationship with me. You must know that everything (in this world) is just the shadow of my Maya, like darkness is a shadow (of light)",

yatha mahanti bhutani bhutesucchavacesv antu, pravistani apravistani tatha tesu na tesv aham, "Just like the elemental powers (ether, air, fire, water, earth) are contained in all beings, both great and small, and at the same time they are not limited to them, similarly I am in all beings, and yet I am not (limited to them)",

etavad eva jijnasyam tattva jijnasunatmanah, anvaya vyatirekabhyam yat syat sarvatra sarvada, "This (that I have now said) is the most important subject of transcendental knowledge, the *tattva* that should be researched directly and directly, at all times and places and in all circumstances".

अर्जुन उवाच ।

arjuna uvāca |

परं ब्रह्म परं धाम पवित्रं परमं भवान् ।

पुरुषं शाश्वतं दिव्यमादिदेवमजं विभुम् ॥ १०-१२ ॥

param brahma param dhāma pavitraṁ paramaṁ bhavān | puruṣaṁ śāśvataṁ divyamādidevamajaṁ vibhum | || 10-12 ||

arjunah: Arjuna; *uvaca*: said; *param brahma*: the Supreme Brahman; *param dhama*: the supreme abode; *pavitram*: purifier; *paramam*: supreme; *bhavan*: you; *purusham*: the Purusha; *sasvatam*: eternal; *divyam*: divine; *adi devam*: the first of the *devas*; *ajam*: non-born; *vibhum*: powerful.

Arjuna said, "You are the supreme Brahman, the supreme abode, the supreme purifier. You are the eternal and divine Purusha, the first of the Devas, non-born and all-powerful."

These prayers offered here by Arjuna express his understanding of the meditation recommended by Krishna, and validate it through references to the teachings of great Rishis that Arjuna deeply trusted.

The definition *param brahman* indicates that the personal form of Krishna, as *sa-guna* ("with qualities") *brahman*, is superior to *nir-guna* ("without qualities") *brahman*, or the non-manifested Narayana (*narayanah parah avyaktat andam avyakta-sambhavam*) from whom the manifested universe has been generated. This is confirmed in 14.27 by the declaration, *brahmano hi pratistha aham*, "I am the foundation of *brahman*".

This non-manifested form has already been explained in verse 9.4, "All this universe is pervaded by me in my non-manifested form. All beings exist in me, but I am not in them." (*maya tatam idam sarvam jagad avyakta-murtina, mat-sthani sarva-bhutani na caham tesv avasthitah*).

The expression *avyakta murti* ("non-manifested form") appears to be a contradiction in terms, but it is not, if we understand the deep meaning of *avyakta* as "transcendental" as opposed to "manifested on the level of the material senses". This can become easier to understand if we contemplate the meaning of similar expressions such as *avyakta mulam*, "the invisible root of the universe" (3.8.29) and *avyakta lingah* (4.4.21, 5.10.20) as applied to Shiva Mahadeva, the manifestation of Vishnu that interacts with the material energy. Further light on the topic is shed by the *Bhagavata Purana*:

"I offer my respect to the power of scientific knowledge (*vijnana virya*), that has taken the form of this body, accepting the distinct modality of passion/ action, born from the non-manifested matrix" (*namah vijnana viryaya mayaya idam upeyuse, grihita guna bhedaya namas te 'vyakta yonaye*, 3.15.5)

"The universe is situated within the senses of the supreme *brahman* through the *vishnu maya* ("the illusion of Vishnu"); it is separated by time from the non-manifested existence" (*visvam vai brahma tan matram samsthitam visnu mayaya, isvarena paricchinnam kalena avyakta murtina*, 3.10.12)

"The *avyakta brahman* is like a great ocean where all the beings rest after the dissolution of the universe; it is like the belly, the heart and the mind of the Virat Purusha" (*avyakta rasa sindhunam bhutanam nidhanasya ca, udaram veditam pumso hridayam manasah padam*, 2.6.11).

The meditation system offered by Krishna in *Bhagavad gita* is meant to lead us to the Brahman realization, because only on this level we can truly develop spiritual devotion (*para bhakti*). This is the conclusion of *Gita* in verse 18.54: "(A person who is situated in the) Brahman realization is always satisfied in the self, never complaining or running after desires. S/he is equally disposed toward all beings and states of being, and thus attains my spiritual devotion" (*brahma bhuta prasannatma na socati na kanksati samah sarvesu bhutesu, mad bhaktim labhate param*).

This Brahman realization is not as difficult as one may think: it just boils down to truly abandoning all the false material bodily identifications and attachments (*neti neti*, "I am not this, I am not that"). This leaves us with the simple, naked and wonderful beauty of our real spiritual identity. From this platform, where we really perceive ourselves as spirit souls, we become able to actually perceive the supreme Spirit - God.

Bhagavad gita establishes the importance of this crucial step in God realization:

"One who is constantly serving me in *bhakti yoga* comes to transcend all the material influences (the *gunas*) and is elevated to the level of Brahman" (*mam ca yo 'yabhicarena bhakti yogena sevate, sa gunan samatityaitan brahma bhuyaya kalpate*, 14.26). The meaning of this verse (14.26) is exactly the same of verse 10.10.

The *Bhagavata Purana* (4.30.20) also confirms: "Those who are engaged in spiritual consciousness (*brahma vadis*) experience this Brahman (realization) as always fresh and enthusiastic (*navya-vat*) and perceive knowledge within the heart (*hridaye yat jnah*). After attaining this level, one is never confused or worried, or overwhelmed by emotions" (*navyavat hridaye yat jnah brahma etad brahma-vadibhih, na muhyanti na socanti na hrisyanti yato gatah*).

Bhagavad gita speaks at length of this Brahman realization:

"Brahman is the transcendental/ supreme unchanging (existence). The intrinsic nature (of the being) is called Adhyatma. And *karma* is described as the creative action that causes the states of existence/the bodies/the nature and the birth of the living beings" (*sri-bhagavan uvaca, aksaram brahma paramam svabhavo 'dhyatmam ucyate, bhuta-bhavodbhava-karo visargah karma-samjnitah*, 8.3).

"The (wise) seers (of Reality) attain the *brahma nirvana* (because) they have been purified from (all) sins/ faults and have cut off (all) doubts (dualistic illusions), engaging themselves in (work for) the benefit of all living beings" (*labhante brahma-nirvanam rishayah kshina-kalmashah, chinna-dvaidha yatatmanah sarva-bhuta-hite ratah*, 5.25).

Brahman realization, however, does not necessarily mean Brahman meditation (on the formless). Starting from chapter 7 and up to chapter 11, Krishna is giving us the perfect method of meditation that will enable us to realize how God is the transcendental and eternal Existence and Consciousness, from whom everything comes. Meditation specifically focused on the idea of Transcendence as merely non-limited by material designations (*nirguna brahman*) is not recommended in *Bhagavad gita*, because as Krishna says in 12.5, those who are embodied will find that progress is more troublesome to achieve if one remains attached to the non-manifested (*kleso 'dhikataras tesam avyakta asakta cetasam, avyakta hi gatir duhkham dehavadbhir avapyate*).

Even better is the transcendental form of Bhagavan mentioned in 8.20: "But there is another nature, different from this non-manifested (state), a non-manifested (nature) that is eternal and is not dissolved when all the beings are dissolved" (*paras tasmat tu bhavo 'nyo 'vyakto 'vyaktat sananatah, yah sa sarvesu bhutesu nasyatsu na vinasyati*).

The Names of God are non-different from his transcendental form: "The transcendental sound is the manifested form of the non-manifested *brahman*; it remains spiritual although it appears clearly perceivable, and is charged with many different energies that are distributed (all over the universe)" (*sabda brahma atmanas tasya vyakta avyakta atmanah parah, brahma avabhati vitatah nana shakti upabrimhitah*, 3.12.48).

आहुस्त्वामृषयः सर्वे देवर्षिनारदस्तथा । असितो देवलो व्यासः स्वयं चैव ब्रवीषि मे ॥ १०-१३ ॥

āhustvāmṛṣayaḥ sarve devarṣināradaṣṭathā | asito devalo vyāsaḥ svayam caiva braviṣi me || 10-13 ||

ahuh: they say; *tvam*: you; *rishayah*: the Rishis; *sarve*: all; *devarshih*: the *rishis* among the *devas*; *naradah*: Narada; *tatha*: as well; *asitah*: Asita; *devalah*: Devala; *vyasah*: Vyasa; *svayam*: yourself; *ca*: and; *eva*: certainly; *bravisi*: you are telling; *me*: to me.

"All the Rishis say this - Devarshi Narada, and also Asita, Devala, Vyasa - and now you are also telling me, very clearly."

The realization of Brahman, as any other realization, must be verified and confirmed with the genuine *shastra* and the truly Self realized souls, because the mind can play many tricks, and we may be led to project our idealizations, expectations and hopes beyond the actual facts. The Rishis mentioned in this verse - Narada, Asita, Devala and Vyasa - are all authentic without any doubt, and Arjuna had personally met them on several occasions and heard their explanations about the transcendental science. We know that Vyasa is the son of Parasara and Satyavati, related to the family of Arjuna, and that he is the compiler of most of the presently known Vedic literature. Narada is also very famous as having composed authoritative texts especially on *bhakti*, such as the *Narada bhakti sutras*, and is usually portrayed as playing his special *vina* (stringed musical instrument). He is a direct son of Brahma, and he is known as a tireless space traveler, therefore we find him in almost all the spiritual and religious assemblies all over the universe. The Asita mentioned in this verse is also found in several religious meeting, including the coronation of Yudhisthira and the *sarpa yajna* performed by Janamejaya (the son of Parikshit). However, there seems to be more than one Rishi going by that name, or it is the same Rishi that also goes under the composite name of Asita Devala - as we find in the *Mahabharata*, where he is described as the Rishi who narrated the story of Krishna's advent to the Pitris (while Narada narrated it to the Devas, Sukadeva to the Rakshasas and Yakshas, and Vyasa to the human beings). This Asita Devala is said to be a descendant of Kasyapa. Asita (a name that literally means "blue" or "black") is credited with having announced the extraordinary character of the newborn Krishna, as well as the future destiny and mission of Siddhartha Gautama (the historical Buddha).

The word *bravisi*, "you are telling", carries a meaning that goes beyond mere theory. Krishna is not repeating some textbook definitions on the academical level - he is explaining and demonstrating his position through the description of his level of consciousness. This is precisely the method required to obtain transcendental knowledge: we must approach a realized soul and hear the explanations and examples from the level of consciousness that he has actually experienced (4.34). The transmission of spiritual realization is done through the transcendental sound vibration (*śabda brahman*), that is much more powerful of ordinary material sound - already a considerably strong factor in this world. The faculty of hearing is the most powerful sense, that continues to work even when we are asleep and all other senses are suspended and inert. Sound is also the subtlest of all energies, from which all the elements are manifested in the beginning of creation - something that modern scientists have called "the Big Bang". The vibrations of sound cover a wide range of frequencies, of which presently the human ear can only perceive a limited variety; even within such frequencies, some are so powerful that they can break glass, and can become even more effective through the application of magnetic fields. In ancient Vedic times, the science of sound was so advanced that it was normally applied to many functions that contemporary scientists are still unable to understand - and therefore are labeled as "mythology" or "unexplained phenomena".

सर्वमेतदृतं मन्ये यन्मां वदसि केशव । न हि ते भगवन्व्यक्तिं विदुर्देवा न दानवाः ॥ १०-१४ ॥

sarvametaḍṛtaṁ manye yanmāṁ vadasi keśava | na hi te bhagavanvyaktim vidurdevā na dānavāḥ || 10-14 ||

sarvam: all; *etat*: this; *ritam*: the rule of truth; *manye*: I consider; *yat*: that; *mam*: me; *vadasi*: you are saying; *kesava*: o Kesava; *na*: not; *hi*: certainly; *te*: your; *bhagavan*: God; *vyaktim*: manifestation; *viduh*: they know; *devah*: the *devas*; *na*: not; *dānavah*: the *dānavas*.

"O Kesava, I consider all this that you have been saying as the (supreme) truth. Certainly neither the Devas nor the Danavas are able to understand your divine manifestation."

The *bhagavan vyakti*, "manifestation of God", mentioned in this verse is the transcendental form of Bhagavan that is the foundation of Brahman, and that is only perceived partially (*ekamsena sthito jagat*, 10.42) through the *vibhuti yoga*. The complete form of God is much more difficult to see and to contemplate (11.52-53). This realization is not opposed to the realization of *avyakta brahman*, but rather it completes it, carrying us to the higher level of Krishna Consciousness (*mat cittah*, 10.9).

The other crucial word in this verse is *ritam*, that contains many levels of meanings. It is not just "truth", but also "*dharma*", "law", "order", "cycle", and "*vyakti*" as revelation or manifestation, as opposite of *avyakti*. To better understand how all these concepts are connected, we need to relate *ritam* with *sat*, a very similar word. *Sat* also means "truth", and also "existence", "eternity", "reality", "spiritual", "good", "virtuous", as compared to *asat*, that has all the exact opposite meanings.

Narada, Asita, Devala, Vyasa, and the other true Rishis recognize Krishna's divinity, because of his teachings that conform and integrate the consistent realizations of all the Rishis ("those who see Reality"). A person's divinity cannot be demonstrated simply by claiming he performed some miracles and his presence on the planet can be proven historically. The divine status is not awarded to someone because of the entertaining stories circulating on him, more or less verifiably or truthfully.

From a superficial, materialistic point of view, the adventures of Krishna's *lila* are not more impressive than many other stories told about various personalities and characters. Krishna's divinity is not proven by the fact that some people say that he lifted a hill when he was a child or that he appeared in a four-armed form to his parents. God cannot be limited by such considerations, or even by the mere fact that he says he is God. No material criteria can be used to measure the transcendental spiritual reality - only transcendental consciousness can perceive it. The validity of a teaching is in its intrinsic value and merit, and not in the historical circumstances in which it was spoken, or by the evaluation of the physical appearance of the person who spoke it.

This is why a fool or ignorant can be detected only when he speaks. A famous example is the story of Jada Bharata, narrated in *Bhagavata Purana*, canto 5, chapters 8 to 13. Because king Rahugana was intelligent, he was able to appreciate Jada Bharata's sublime level of

realization after hearing him speak about the transcendental science - although Jada Bharata externally appeared as a very ordinary person, uninterested in social conventions.

स्वयमेवात्मनात्मानं वेत्थ त्वं पुरुषोत्तम । भूतभावन भूतेश देवदेव जगत्पते ॥ १०-१५ ॥

svayamevātmanātmanāṁ vettha tvam puruṣottama | bhūtabhāvana bhūteśa devadeva jagatpate || 10-15 ||

svayam: personally/ yourself; *eva*: certainly; *atmana*: the self; *atmanam*: the self; *vettha*: you know; *tvam*: you; *puruṣa uttama*: o supreme Purusha; *bhuta-bhavana*: origin of everything; *bhuta isa*: Lord of (all) beings; *deva-deva*: God of the Gods; *jagat-pate*: protector of the universe.

"You certainly know yourself, (as you are) the Param Atman (the *atman* of the *atman*). O Supreme Purusha, origin of everything, Lord of all beings, God of the Gods and protector of the universe!"

God is the supreme Consciousness and Existence, therefore the very foundation of the concept of divinity is self-awareness. The *Bhagavata Purana* declares that Bhagavan is non-different from Param Atman and Brahman: "Those who know the truth say that Existence is the non-dual knowledge/ awareness called Brahman, Paramatma and Bhagavan" (*vadanti tat tattva-vidah tattvam yaj jnanam advayam, brahma iti, paramatma iti, bhagavan iti sabdyate*, 1.2.11).

We have already explored the meaning of Brahman. Paramatma is the *atman* of the *atman*, the soul of the soul - the consciousness of all consciousness, the existence of all existence. It is always present in each and every being - *jiva* and state of being - and also within each and every atom of the entire creation. These are the concepts expressed by Arjuna in his prayer.

The definition of *puruṣa uttama*, "supreme Purusha", adds another dimension to our understanding of God. Brahman/ Paramatma/ Bhagavan is Consciousness (*chaitanya*), and therefore it constitutes the enjoying principle, that perceives the feelings and the sentiments; on the intimate level personified by Krishna, it is called the *rasa svarupa*, or the "personification of sentiments", or *rasa vighraha*, "the form of sentiments". Thus, the *puruṣa* is the passive and stable principle, while *prakriti* is the active and changing principle.

In the ordinary materialistic sense, the word *puruṣa* is often used to refer to "man/ male" as opposed to "woman/ female" (*stri*), as within the ordinary sexual relationship, bodily identified persons naturally take up the masculine or feminine roles according to the type of body they are wearing. In the metaphysical sense, the term *puruṣa* is complemented by the word *prakriti* ("nature"), so there is a sort of ideological superimposition area where *prakriti* is considered as female in nature, and the principle of consciousness (*puruṣa*) is depicted in a male form, accompanied by his *prakriti* or *shakti* in female form. We need to be very careful here, to avoid projecting a materialistic limited mentality on the symbolic representation of metaphysical realities that are not limited by the dualities of material attributes. God contains both the masculine and the feminine principles, and when there is a differentiation in iconography, the divine Couple should be depicted together: there can be no real separation between the two. More about the principles of *puruṣa* and *prakriti* will be found in chapter 13, entitled *prakriti-puruṣa-viveka yoga* ("the *yoga* of understanding nature as distinct from the personal principle") and in chapter 15, entitled *puruṣhottama yoga* ("the *yoga* of the Supreme Person").

The definition *bhuta*, as in *bhuta bhavana* and *bhuta isa*, literally means "what has come to being", or simply "being". Thus it can be applied both to the living beings (the *jivatmas*, including those who only have a subtle body) and to the states of existence in this created world. Because God is the origin of all beings, he can also control them completely; such complete control is highlighted by the next definition of *deva deva*, "God of the Gods". However, such control is always benevolent and never tyrannical: Bhagavan protects the universe and cares for all beings, through the agency of *prakriti*.

वक्तुमर्हस्यशेषेण दिव्या ह्यात्मविभूतयः । याभिर्विभूतिभिर्लोकानिमांस्त्वं व्याप्य तिष्ठसि ॥ १०-१६ ॥

vaktumarhasyaśeṣeṇa divyā hyātma vibhūtayah | yābhirvibhūtibhirlokanimāṁstvam vyāpya tiṣṭhasi || 10-16 ||

vaktum: to say; *arhasi*: you should; *asesena*: by endless; *divya*: divine; *hi*: indeed; *atma-vibhutayah*: by (your) own powers/ opulences; *yabhih*: by them; *vibhutih*: powers/ wonders; *lokan*: all the planets/ all the people; *iman*: these; *tvam*: you; *vyapa*: pervading; *tisthasi*: you remain/ are situated.

"Please tell more about (your) endless divine powers, by which you pervade all these planets and remain situated in them. "

Arjuna is requesting Krishna to continue the description of the *vibhuti yoga*, by which we can unite (*yoga*) with the supreme *atman* through the contemplation of his glories (*vibhuti*).

The expression *vaktum arhasi asesena* literally means "you should speak endlessly", where the word *arhasi* is very respectful and conveys the meanings of "be pleased to", "you are able to", indicating that a superior person is more qualified to perform an action, and therefore by engaging in that action, he will better benefit the universe. It is a word used often in prayers, where the devotee is requesting the Lord to grant some blessing or deliver some important teaching.

The word *a-sesa* literally means "without end", and indicates that the glories of God are endless - not just very numerous or too many for us to count, but always expanding and therefore unlimited. Even the empirical study of ordinary material things can be mind boggling: how a single seed can contain the genetic information for the production of thousands of seeds, each one of them also possessing the same reproductive power. Everything is contained within information - knowledge, or consciousness. Each atom is a microcosm, containing innumerable sub-atomic particles, and an enormous amount of energy - as we can see, for example, in the process of nuclear fusion or fission. Physicists have been shocked to discover that such sub-atomic particles are actually unlimited - therefore they have been called *quanta*, "non-measurable quantities".

The definition *lokan* (plural of *lokah*) is very interesting as it refers to individuals, peoples and worlds as well. We find it in the names of the various regions of space, such as Bhuloka, Bhuvarloka, Svarloka (as the three main dimensions of the universe) as well as Satyaloka,

Tapoloka, Janaloka etc, down to the lower systems such as Patalaloka, etc. The interesting point is that the definition is connected to the people inhabiting the place, and not to the physical characteristics of the place: this means that it does not need to be a planet proper, like Earth or Mars. It could even be a subtle dimension that is not to be perceived on the gross level through our material senses; there the inhabitants may have subtle bodies, or bodies that are composed in a different way. Our bodies are mainly composed by water and earth, with a small part of fire and air, as well as ether, mind, intelligence and ego. Other bodies may have a prevalence of fire and air, and very little water and earth, and other bodies are only composed by subtle elements and have the power to arrange and rearrange molecules of the other elements to manifest temporary forms.

The expression *divya atma-vibhutayah*, "divine powers of the self", states that we can find the divine presence also in the material universe: *vibhuti* is the spirit - the consciousness, the knowledge - that manifests all the wonders within the universe.

Abrahamic faiths have created a very damaging rift between religion and science, but Vedic knowledge beautifully integrates them, just how it used to be in pre-abrahamic times in all world cultures. The most advanced contemporary scientific research is confirming the ancient teachings of Vedic scriptures. God is omnipresent in the universe, as he pervades (*vyapya*) everything in a permanent way (*tisthasi*), because without the consciousness/ knowledge/ information, that constitutes the subtle blue print of all things, nothing can exist. Therefore he is called *visvato mukham*, "whose face is everywhere".

कथं विद्यामहं योगिंस्त्वां सदा परिचिन्तयन् । केषु केषु च भावेषु चिन्त्योऽसि भगवन्मया ॥ १०-१७ ॥

katham vidyāmaham yoginśtvāṁ sadā paricintayan | keṣu keṣu ca bhāveṣu cintyo'si bhagavanmayā || 10-17 ||

katham: how; *vidyam aham*: I should know; *yogin*: o yogi; *tvam*: you; *sada*: always; *paricintayan*: meditating on; *keshu keshu*: in which (different ways); *ca*: and; *bhaveshu*: in the sentiments; *cintyah asi*: you should be contemplated; *bhagavan*: God; *maya*: by me.

"O Yogi, how should I know you through constant meditation? O Lord, in which different ways and sentiments should I contemplate you?"

This is the 5th verse of Arjuna's prayers, starting from 10.12. Arjuna recognized the truth of Krishna's statements, that are in accordance to the explanations that he had heard several times from the Rishis.

Only the direct transcendental perception of Consciousness enables us to understand Krishna's glories, and that does not depend on material qualifications or powers: intellect is not sufficient, because it will merely take us to the theoretical level, while consciousness is something that we must experience in our very soul, at the spiritual level. It is the thrill and the emotion and the union (*yoga*) and the deep feeling of direct perception, that we also call enlightenment or ecstasy.

This is the nature of *bhakti*. Verse 18.55 (*bhaktya mam abhijanati yavan yas casmi tattvatah*, "only through *bhakti* one can know me as I truly am") will conclude that only the genuine emotion of love and devotion can tune our consciousness to the spiritual level of the supreme Consciousness and experience that eternal existence, awareness and happiness that transcends material limitations.

Arjuna calls Krishna "*yogi*", to indicate that he is connected to everything. He does not mean to belittle Krishna's position by comparing him to an ordinary *yoga* practitioner, but rather he is showing his great appreciation and deep understanding of the true meaning of Yoga. This Yogi is also Bhagavan, the personal manifestation of the supreme Brahman. Meditation in *yoga* means tuning one's consciousness into the supreme Consciousness, through the contemplation of forms, names, activities, qualities, or powers manifested by the supreme Consciousness. Ordinary meditation - that is not in *yoga*, "in union with the Supreme" - can focus on any object, as it simply consists in concentrating our attention on something specific, like we do when we study a lesson or we try to solve a problem, or even when we are engrossed in watching some film or remembering some past event or some person. A relaxing meditation can be done by visualizing nice images, such as a sunlight clear sky with some fluffy white little clouds, a beautiful meadow with lush green grass and cute flowers, a majestic forest with light mysteriously filtering down through the branches and leaves, or fresh mountains covered in snow, and so on. But that is not *yoga* - it's just a pleasing exercise of imagination or fantasy, a nice illusion or day-dream.

Yoga meditation is not about "the void" either. It is true that a little "void meditation" can help us in learning how to quiet our mind, become detached from the compulsive desire to run after whatever thoughts and impressions that flow in, and appreciate silence and peace. Most people are so used to the unending chattering of their minds that they become scared and anxious whenever there is silence - when the TV breaks down, when they do not have noisy people around, when they do not have some work to do, when they can't get on internet, social media, phone, game sites, and so on. So dropping all these distractions is merely a preliminary stage, called *pratyahara*, that will gradually enable us to actually concentrate our attention on a single thought (*dharana*) - the first stage of real *yoga* meditation; *dhyana* is the stage of *yoga* meditation in which we focus on a set of interconnected spiritual concepts or aspects of the Divine (*keshu keshu bhaveshu*). *Yoga* means "union", by which we deliberately and consciously join in with the supreme awareness and intelligence.

The word *bhavesu* ("in which sentiments") is the plural locative of the noun *bhava*, that conveys the meanings of "emotion", "feeling", "sentiment", "physical thing", "aspect", "existence", "nature". Arjuna is requesting the Lord himself (*bhagavan*) to explain in which sentiment one should meditate on him; since Arjuna is presenting the request in a personal manner (*maya*: "by me"), and we know that Arjuna is not an ordinary unevolved person, but a close companion of the Lord, we understand that the meditation recommended to him by Krishna is not meant just for "beginners" or "neophytes".

विस्तरेणात्मनो योगं विभूतिं च जनार्दन । भूयः कथय तृप्तिर्हि शृण्वतो नास्ति मेऽमृतम् ॥ १०-१८ ॥

vistareṇātmano yogam vibhūtiṁ ca janārdana | bhūyaḥ kathaya tṛptirhi śṛṇvato nāsti me'amṛtam || 10-18 ||

vistarena: in various ways; *atmanah*: the *atman*; *yogam*: the *yoga*; *vibhutih*: the power/ opulence; *ca*: and; *janardana*: o Janardana; *bhuyah*: again; *kathaya*: describe; *triptih*: satisfaction; *hi*: indeed; *srinvatah*: hearing; *na*: not; *asti*: there is; *me*: for me; *amritam*: nectar.

"O Janardana, (please) describe the various manifestations of your *vibhuti yoga* again, because I can never be tired of hearing such nectar."

This is the difference between material subjects and spiritual subjects: spiritual knowledge is always fresh and interesting, and one never tires of hearing about it. *Krishna katha* means "discussions about Krishna", while *gramya katha* means "village discussions" - the ordinary talking that ordinary people engage in.

Two other very important words in this verse are *tripti* and *amrita*. *Tripti* means "satisfaction", the exhaustion that has removed the hunger or interest for something after having enjoyed sufficient pleasure, like after a very good meal. When we have eaten enough, we lose interest even in the most delicious treats, because we are unable to take anything more. This is because such sense gratification is on the material level. It is material food, and it is a material stomach - and only a certain quantity can be processed pleurably. After that, eating actually becomes a suffering and our body revolts against it.

On the spiritual level, however, our hunger for happiness is unlimited, and therefore we see that people who seek happiness from the material objects are never really satisfied. This is the difference between *tripti* ("satiating") and *tusti* ("contentment"), mentioned in verse 10.5.

In material pleasures, a *yogi* (a person who focuses on the cultivation of consciousness) is content with a reasonable and healthy amount of sattvic pleasure, while a *bhogi* (a person who focuses on sense pleasure) is never satisfied but always hits the wall of *tripti*, "satiating". For this reason, the word *tripti* in this verse is counter-balanced by the word *amrita*, that is usually translated as "nectar". Its literal meaning is actually "immortal", and refers to transcendental nature: only the spiritual immortal and inexhaustible nectar can satisfy the soul's hunger for happiness, that is also spiritual. This is confirmed by *Bhagavata Purana* in several verses:

"We shall never be tired of hearing about the activities of the Lord, who is glorified with transcendental prayers, because we relish these sweet sentiments at every step, even by listening continuously" (*vayam tu na vitripyana uttama sloka vikrame, yat srnvatam rasa jnanam svadu svadu pade pade*, 1.1.19)

"Bless you! Please tell us more about these generous activities (of the Lord). Any person who knows about *rasas* will never become tired of drinking the nectar of Hari's stories" (*ta nah kirtaya bhadrām te kirtanya udara karmanah, rasajnah ko nu tripyeta hari lilamritam piban*, 3.20.6).

"O *brahmana*, Bhagavan manifests unlimited activities according to his own desires. Who can become tired of listening to such nectar, as his generous activities as a cowherd boy?" (*brahman bhagavatas tasya bhumnah svacchanda vartinah, gopala udara caritam kar tripyeta amrita jusan*, 10.16.3).

The activities of the Lord are called *udara* ("generous", "magnanimous") because they are manifested in this world with the purpose of attracting and inspiring the conditioned souls towards the spiritual level.

श्रीभगवानुवाच ।

śrībhagavānuvāca ।

हन्त ते कथयिष्यामि दिव्या ह्यात्मविभूतयः । प्राधान्यतः कुरुश्रेष्ठ नास्त्यन्तो विस्तरस्य मे ॥ १०-१९ ॥

hanta te kathayisyāmi divyā hyātmavibhūtayah । prādhānyataḥ kuruśreṣṭha nāstyanto vistarasya me ॥ 10-19 ॥

sri: the wonderful; *bhagavan*: Lord; *uvaca*: said; *hanta*: yes; *te*: to you; *kathayisyami*: I will speak; *divya*: divine; *hi*: indeed; *atma-vibhūtayah*: the potencies of the self; *pradhanyatah*: the most notable; *kuru-srestha*: o best of the Kurus; *na*: not; *asti*: there is; *antah*: the end; *vistarasya*: of the variety; *me*: mine.

The wonderful Lord said, "Yes, o best of the Kurus, I will tell you about the divine potencies of the Self, but only about the most prominent, because there is no end to the variety (of my glories)."

The word *hanta*, that could be translated as "yes, now", is still used in Indian languages (in its *prakriti* form *han*) to indicate affirmation, agreement, approval, etc. It is interesting to note that a similar sound - albeit spontaneous and not considered as a word proper - is also popular in many other languages to express this same sentiment, and is intuitively understood by anyone provided it is modulated with the proper intonation.

The word *pradhanyatah*, meaning "the main", "those excellent among", and "supreme position", is from the same root as *pradhana*, that refers to the primeval non-differentiated aggregate of material nature.

In the process of spiritual realization and study of transcendental science, the most important factor is the proper communication between the teacher and the student. Krishna in *Bhagavad gita* gives the perfect example of the teacher who is always ready to answer all the questions, offer more examples for elucidation, dispel doubts, reconcile apparent contradictions, and destroy misconceptions even with strong words.

From his part, Arjuna is also playing his student role perfectly, from the very start of the conversation, when he asks Krishna to drive his chariot in the middle of the battlefield, to see who has come to fight to support the "bad guys", and what work is expecting him in the execution of his duties.

Arjuna is not afraid of uncovering his weakness and problems before Krishna, and this constitutes the first and most important step in the relationship with the genuine *guru*.

Many people labor under the delusional idea that the *guru* is not supposed to be interested in their problems, or that he already "knows everything" so there is no need to ask questions and present doubts and perplexities. Especially in the case of "superstar *gurus*", disciples can hardly approach the *guru* at a personal level for a few minutes of superficial conversation, what to speak of establishing a deep, meaningful and useful relationship to be correctly guided in personal evolution. Yet, such "*gurus*" demand total, unquestioning, and

exclusive allegiance to their particular person, as well as worship and profit of some kind, and expect the disciples to keep pledging their immense and inexpressible gratitude for their debt towards their "lord, master and savior" lifetime after lifetime.

This is unfair, as it puts the entire load of responsibility and duties on the students, who by definition are less qualified to sustain the weight of the relationship. A genuine *guru* is very well aware of the responsibility of accepting a disciple, and of the fact that the *guru* will have to come back, lifetime after lifetime, until all the disciples have either attained the desired goal, or have explicitly rejected the *guru*. For this reason, the genuine *guru* is always very interested in understanding any problem the disciples may be going through, and answer all their questions.

The service that the disciples offer to the *guru* is a reciprocation and an expression of gratitude for the *guru's* actual help; a *guru* who simply acts as a representative for someone else, and does not answer to any responsibility, or is not able to give proper explanations and knowledge, is not a real *guru*.

Bhagavad gita is very clear about this issue: "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)" *tad viddhi pranipatena pariprasenena sevaya, upadekshyanti te jñanam jñaninas tattva-darsinah* (4.34).

अहमात्मा गुडाकेश सर्वभूताशयस्थितः । अहमादिश्च मध्यं च भूतानामन्त एव च ॥ १०-२० ॥

ahamātmā guḍākeśa sarvabhūtāśayasthitaḥ | ahamādiśca madhyam ca bhūtānāmanta eva ca || 10-20 ||

aham: I (am); *atman*: the *atman*/ Self; *gudakesa*: o Gudakesa; *sarva-bhuta*: of all beings; *asaya sthitah*: situated/ established in the heart; *aham*: I (am); *adih*: the beginning; *ca*: and; *madhyam*: the middle; *ca*: and; *bhutanam*: of the beings; *antah*: the end; *eva*: certainly; *ca*: as well as.

"O Gudakesha, I am the *atman* situated in the hearts of all beings. I am the beginning, the middle and the end of all beings as well."

The words *param atman* mean "the *atman* of the *atman*", where *atman* is translated as "self". The meanings of "self" can be applied to different levels according to the sense of identity or identification of the person who speaks. Materialistic people who identify with the body will interpret "self" as the body, while those who mostly live on the mental platform will - like Descartes - say "*cogito, ergo sum*" ("I think, therefore I exist"). A spiritualist will understand the "self" as the individual *atman*. When Krishna, the supreme Consciousness, talks about the *atman*, he means the *adhyatma*, the *param atman*, that is pure consciousness and awareness at universal level. Of course, for Krishna there is no difference between his spirit, his mind and his body, because his body and mind are manifested by his internal spiritual energy, therefore as a manifestation of pure consciousness, they are not material or limited by material conditions. This is why he is called "non-born" (*ajam*, 10.12). In the same way as he manifests in his *tad rupa/ svayam rupa, svayam prakasa, tad ekatma, prabhava, vaibhava, vilasa and avatara*, Krishna also manifests in the *shakti avesha* and in the ordinary *jivas* - as Consciousness. As we have already quoted, *Bhagavata Purana* (1.2.11) confirms that Bhagavan is non-different from Param Atman and Brahman: "Those who know the truth say that Existence is the non-dual knowledge/ awareness called Brahman, Paramatma and Bhagavan" (*vadanti tat tattva-vidah tattvam yaj jnanam advayam, brahma iti, paramatma iti, bhagavan iti sadyate*, 1.2.11).

When Krishna says that he is the beginning, middle and end (*adi, madhyam, antah*) of all beings, he speaks about the creation, maintenance, and dissolution of everything. It is easy to remember here the *guna avatara*s Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva who are connected with the creation, maintenance and dissolution of the universe respectively. However, we should look even further, and try to understand more deeply the transcendental and scientific meaning of this. Later, Krishna will reveal himself as Time (11.32), so we can understand that Consciousness is the past, present, and future of all manifestations and all beings. In verse 2.12, at the very beginning of his instructions to Arjuna, Krishna has already declared that each being always existed, and will continue to be: how? Certainly not in terms of the temporary material bodies, because at each moment the bodies keep disappearing and appearing, in a constant dance of transformation. So what always remains in the past, present of future of all beings, is Consciousness - Krishna as Brahman, Paramatma, Bhagavan.

आदित्यानामहं विष्णुज्योतिषां रविरंशुमान् । मरीचिर्मरुतामस्मि नक्षत्राणामहं शशी ॥ १०-२१ ॥

ādityānāmahaṁ viṣṇurjyotiṣāṁ raviraṁśumān | marīcirmarutāmasmi nakṣatrāṇāmahaṁ śaśī || 10-21 ||

adityanam: of the Adityas; *aham*: I (am); *vishnuh*: Vishnu; *vyotisham*: of the lights; *ravih*: the sun; *amsuman*: radiant; *maricih*: Marici; *marutam*: of the Marutas; *asmi*: I am; *nakshatranam*: of the lunar mansions; *aham*: I (am); *sasi*: the moon.

"Among the Adityas, I am Vishnu. Among the lights, I am the radiant Sun. To the Marutas, I am Marici. To the constellations, I am the Moon."

The descriptions of the these verses connect the principle of Consciousness to the various manifestations of this world, not only to express the greatest, most powerful and most important of every category, but also to refer to their meaning. This is why the verse connects the Moon with the *nakshatras* ("lunar mansions"), as Krishna knows very well the difference between the Moon and the stars. The word *nakshatra* refers specifically to stars, and the Vedic science of astrology/ astronomy (*vyotisha*) clearly teaches that the Moon is the companion or Lord of the stars - not one of them, not even the brightest or most important.

The names of the 27 *nakshatras*, covering the entire circle of 360 degrees of the sky vault, are as follows: Visakha corresponds to the star *Alpha Librae*, Jyestha is *Antares*, Purva asadha is *Delta Sagittari* and Uttara asadha is *Sigma sagittari*, Sravana is *Alpha Aquilae*, Purva bhadra pada is *Alpha Pegasi* and Uttara bhadra pada is *Gamma Pegasi*, Asvina is *Beta Arietis*, Kritika is *Eta Tauri* (associated with the constellation of the Pleiades), Mrigasira is *Lambda Orionis*, Pushya is *Delta Cancri*, Magha is *Regulus*, Purva phalguni is *Delta Leonis* and

Uttara phalguni is *Beta Leonis*, Chitra is *Vegas* or *Spica Virginis*. Other important stars are Rohini (*Aldebaran*), Revati (*Zeta Piscium*), Anuradha (*Delta Scorpio*), Dhanishta (*Beta Delphinium*), Ardra (*Alpha Orionis/ Betelgeuse*), Satabisha (*Lambda Aquarius*), Aslesha (*Alpha Hydrae*), Punarvasu (*Beta Geminorum*), Hasta (*Delta Corvi*), Svati (*Arcturus*), Mula (*Lambda Scorpionis*), Bharani (35 *Arietis*), Asvayuja and Punarvasu (*Castor* and *Pollux*), Abhijit (*Vega*) etc. On the other hand, it is not clear which contemporary astronomical names correspond to the stars called Radha, Sunrita, Sravistha and Prosthapa.

According to the position of these stars, the Vedic calendar lists the 12 months bearing the names of the constellations: the first month (April-May) of the Vedic calendar is called Vaisakha, the second (May-June) is Jyestha, then come Asadha (June-July), Sravana (July-August), Bhadra (August-September), Asvina (September-October), Kartika (October-November), Margasira (November-December), Pausa (December-January), Magha (January-February), Phalgun (February-March) and Chaitra (March-April).

In the Vedic system, *nakshatras* are considered particularly important in the calculation of the personal horoscope of an individual or of the auspicious moment to begin a specific activity - something that is very interesting because this concept does not exist any more in western astrology (that considers practically only the members of our solar system - the 9 planets, the Sun and the Moon) although people still use expressions such as "being born under a good/ bad star", "what the stars say", and so on.

The 12 Adityas are listed as Dhata, Mitra, Aryama, Rudra, Varuna, Surya, Bhaga, Vivasvan, Pusha, Savita, Tvasta, and Vishnu. This Vishnu among the Adityas is the youngest son of Aditi, named Upendra or Vamana. The mention of the Sun just after the Adityas is significant, as Surya is the Sun. In fact, all the Adityas are considered manifestations of the Sun - the greatest power in the universe, next to the *brahmajyoti* or transcendental light of the spirit (Brahman).

Equally if not more intriguing are the Marutas or Maruta ganas, usually associated with wind, storm, or air (including the breathing in human beings), close companions of Indra. Actually the Marutas were sons of Diti - the mother of the Daityas, enemies of the Adityas - but as explained in chapter 18 of canto 6 of the *Bhagavata Purana*, Indra came to know that Diti was planning to generate a son who would be his enemy, and he managed to enter Diti's womb to kill the embryo by cutting it to pieces. However, by the power of Diti's austerities, each of the pieces continued to live independently as an individual child, so after the original embryo had cloned itself into 49, Indra decided to befriend him/ them, and considered him/ them as his brothers, *sa-udara* ("who have been in the same uterus").

The 7 main Marutas are listed in Vedic literature as Avaha, Pravaha, Vivaha, Paravaha, Udvaha, Samvaha, Parivaha; it is then obvious that Marici (literally, "ray of light") is not the most prominent among these sons of Diti - and it does not even seem to be the original embryo. The only famous Marici is the Marici Rishi, that is the *manasa putra* of Brahma and one of the Sapta Rishis, who became the father of Kasyapa Rishi, the father of all the other creatures of the universe.

Kasyapa married several of Daksha's daughters: Aditi, Diti, Danu, Kastha, Arista, Surasa, Ila, Muni, Krodhavaśa, Tamra, Surabhi, Sarama and Timi. Aditi became the mother of the Adityas (the main Devas), while Diti became the mother of the Daityas (the traditional enemies of the Adityas) and Danu the mother of the Danavas. Arista became the mother of the Gandharvas, Muni of the Apsaras, Surasa of the Rakshasas. Vinata became the mother of Garuda (Vishnu's bird carrier) and Aruna (Surya's charioteer), while Kadru became the mother of all the serpents, except the *dandasukas*, who were produced by Krodhavaśa. Surabhi was the mother of all the cows, the buffaloes and similar animals. Kastha produced the horses, Tamra the great birds of prey and Patangi all the other birds, Timi the aquatics, Sarama the fierce carnivores such as lions and tigers, and Yamini the locusts. Ila produced all the various trees and plants. This should make us understand that this type of "motherhood" does not refer to the ordinary reproduction of human beings, but it refers to symbolic principles of the creation of the universe.

The connection of Marici Rishi with the Marutas is not immediately clear if we remain on the superficial "mythological" level of genealogical descriptions, so we need to dive deeper into their scientific symbolic significance. At this level, we find that Maruta is the Vedic definition of space/ wind, as 49 varieties of forces or vibrational frequencies, not connected to light, sound, magnetism, or gravity, that are listed separately.

वेदानां सामवेदोऽस्मि देवानामस्मि वासवः । इन्द्रियाणां मनश्चास्मि भूतानामस्मि चेतना ॥ १०-२२ ॥

vedānām sāmavedo'smi devānāmasmi vāsavaḥ | indriyāṇām manaścāsmi bhūtānāmasmi cetanā || 10-22 ||

vedanam: of the *Vedas*; *sama-vedah*: the *Sama Veda*; *asmi*: I am; *devanam*: of the *devas*; *asmi*: I am; *vasavaḥ*: the ruler; *indriyanam*: of the senses; *manah*: the mind; *ca*: and; *asmi*: I am; *bhutanam*: of the beings; *asmi*: I am; *cetana*: the consciousness.

"Of the Vedas, I am the Sama. Of the devas, I am Vasava. Of the senses, I am the mind. In living beings, I am consciousness."

The *Sama Veda* is the most elaborate and artistic of the four *samhitas*, and it is meant to be sung (rather than chanted) in the rituals to call the *devas*. The musical tunes of the *Sama Veda* are mathematical combinations of the basic notes, so they add extra power to the hymns of the *Rig* and *Yajur*.

We know that in ancient times mathematics was highly respected as the perceivable expression and manifestation of the supreme spiritual realities, and strictly connected to music; some fragments of that knowledge have survived from the teachings of Pythagoras and other great thinkers.

Colonial indologists have done their worst to trivialize the tremendously deep symbolic and scientific knowledge contained in the *Vedas*, but the hidden power of these immensely ancient texts is still very much present and can be unlocked by those who have developed the required level of realization.

The name Vasava (generally referred to Indra) literally means "of the *vasus*", that are the subtle material elements of the cosmos, and as personifications they are one of the main group of *devas*, together with the Adityas and Rudras. As we mentioned in commentary to verse 7.9, the Vasus are the eight principles of the cosmic manifestation, sometimes referred as the "material elements", but that definition creates confusion because they can be mistaken for the 8 elements previously mentioned by Krishna (7.4) as *bhumih apah analah vayuh kham manah buddhah ahankara*.

The personifications of these Vasus are: fire as Agni ("burning") or Anala ("lively"), earth as Prithivi ("wide") or Dhara ("that which supports"), wind as Vayu ("wind of life") or Anila ("breath of life"), space as Antariksha ("what is seen in the middle") or Aha ("pervading"), the sun as Aditya ("eternal") or Pratyusha ("he who follows dawn"), the sky as Dyaus ("luminous") or Prabhasa ("radiant") also connected to sunset, the moon as Chandra ("illustrious") and Chandramasa (the lunar month) or Soma (the rejuvenating plant).

Nakshatra (the aggregate of constellations) is also strictly connected to Dhruva (the pole star) and with the Sapta Rishis (the Seven Sages) that compose the most famous constellation in the sky: the Great Dipper or *Ursa Maior*. Dhruva is also known as Svetadvipa, the *prapancika vaikuntha* planet in each universe. The primary principles of the universe are also categorized in a slightly different way as the Adityas, that are 12 aspects of the sun: Mitra, Aryaman, Bhaga, Varuna, Daksha, Amsa, Tvastri, Pushan, Vivasvat, Savitri, Sakra and Vishnu. The third meditation in this verse is very direct: Krishna is the consciousness or awareness (*cetana*) among all states of beings and in all living entities; as we have already elaborated quite often, Brahman is pure transcendental consciousness.

रुद्राणां शङ्करश्चास्मि वित्तेशो यक्षरक्षसाम् । वसूनां पावकश्चास्मि मेरुः शिखरिणामहम् ॥ १०-२३ ॥

rudrāṇām śaṅkaraścāsmi vittiśo yakṣarakṣasām | vasūnām pāvakaścāsmi meruḥ śikhariṇāmaham || 10-23 ||

rudranam: of the Rudras; *sankarah*: Sankara; *ca*: and; *asmi*: I am; *vitta isah*: the Lord of wealth; *yaksha-rakshasam*: of the Yakshas and Rakshasas; *vasunam*: of the Vasus; *pavakah*: the fire; *ca*: and; *asmi*: I am; *meruh*: the Meru; *sikharinam*: of the mountains; *aham*: I (am).

"Of the Rudras, I am Shankara. Of the Yakshas and Rakshasas, I am the Lord of wealth. Of the Vasus, I am fire, and among the peaks, I am Meru."

The theme of the Vasus returns in this verse. Krishna has already mentioned the Adityas. Here Krishna brings the principle of Fire as the most important and primeval constituent of the universe - fire as the heat created by the fast and powerful movement of the smallest particles of matter, that expand into creation, like the warm breath of Narayana exhaling the universes.

Agni - fire - is the messenger who carries our offerings to all the *devas*. He is the purifier, destroyer and giver of life, and the primeval teacher for all human beings, that gives knowledge and realizations in a spontaneous and elemental way, and on the highest level as well. As we mentioned in the commentary to 7.9, the other group of categories of the universal principles, called the 11 Rudras, are the aspects of Shiva or the Purusha principle: Atma ("Self", "the individual soul"), Ananda ("happiness"), Vijnana ("knowledge"), Manas ("the mind"), Prana ("the vital energy"), Vac ("the faculty of speech"), Isana ("the dominating principle"), Tatpurusha ("that activating principle"), Aghora ("nothing is horrible"), Vamadeva ("pleasant Lord") and Sadyojata ("appearing quickly"). All these are personifications of the conscious principle in each of the manifestations that gives them their names. According to the *Brihad aranyaka Upanishad* (3.9.4), the Rudras are personifications of the senses, including the mind. The collective name Rudra literally means "violent", "fierce", "wild", and derives from the root *rud*, meaning "to howl". This is certainly not a negative meaning, but simply indicates a very powerful and overwhelming force that is intrinsic in the manifestation of consciousness in the material world. Within the universal plan, such manifestations are meant to fuel the momentum of creation that brings the inevitable destruction, which in turn establishes the necessary conditions for a new creation. Shankara is a famous name for Shiva Mahadeva, who is the origin of all the Rudras; although he is not one of these 11 (who are his expansions), he is also called Rudra, especially as the manifestation of the Sun that is among the 12 Adityas.

The Yakshas and Rakshasas are two humanoid races that have greater powers than human beings and are known to interact with them quite often, even establishing permanent settlements or bases on Earth. Especially the Yakshas like to live in mountain caves and tunnels, where they sometimes accumulate treasures of gold and other valuable things. The capital of the Yakshas on Earth is Alakapuri, in the Himalayan mountains. The Lord of wealth mentioned in the verse is Kuvera, the king of the Yakshas and "brother" of Shiva Mahadeva. Mount Meru (also called Sumeru) is mentioned here as the greatest and most important of all mountain peaks, because it is the center of the universe, the axis around which the cosmos revolves. Its roots reach down into the lower planetary systems and its summit touches Brahmaloaka. It represents the spinal column of the universal body, therefore it is also called Meru Danda, where *danda* means "column", "pillar", "rod".

Several people have attempted to identify mount Meru with visible mountains, but this is not the Vedic perspective, as the Meru is the divine subtle axis on which the planet revolves, and that gives it the proper orientation in connection with the rest of the universe.

पुरोधसां च मुख्यं मां विद्धि पार्थ बृहस्पतिम् । सेनानीनामहं स्कन्दः सरसामस्मि सागरः ॥ १०-२४ ॥

purodhasām ca mukhyam mām viddhi pārtha bṛhaspatim | senānīnāmaham skandah sarasāmasmi sāgarah || 10-24 ||

purodhasam: of the priests; *ca*: and; *mukhyam*: the chief; *mam*: me; *viddhi*: you should know; *partha*: o son of Pritha; *brihaspatim*: Brihaspati; *senaninam*: of the generals; *aham*: I (am); *skandah*: Skanda; *sarasam*: of the lakes; *asmi*: I am; *sagarah*: the ocean.

"O son of Pritha, know that among the priests, I am the chief, Brihaspati. Among the generals, I am Skanda. Among the lakes, I am the ocean."

A *purodhasa* is a professional priest who performs the ritualistic ceremonies for the benefit of the family or the kingdom he works for. It is important here to understand that a *brahmana* never depends financially on anyone, and does not receive a salary, because that would be dangerous for his integrity. No *brahmana* should ever compromise on *dharma* or *vidya* to please the wealthy or materially powerful people, and thus obtain some personal profit. Therefore the relationship between the *purodhasa* (or *purohita*) and his *karta* (the "doer" of the sacrifice, for whose benefit the ritual is performed) is like the relationship between the *guru* and the disciples. In fact, the *purodhasa* gives a particular *diksha* to the *karta* every time a major ritual is performed, and the *dakshina* ("compensation") he receives is a gift that must be offered with gratitude and humility. There is a famous story about Indra once disrespecting Brihaspati, because he got the idea that his priest was a member of his court working for him like the others; as a result, Brihaspati abandoned him and the Devas, and the Devas ended up being defeated by the Asuras and losing their kingdom.

Brihaspati, son of Angira Rishi, was granted the position of preceptor of the Devas by the blessing of Shiva as a reward for his religious practices at Prabhata tirtha (Somanatha). He is also identified with the beneficial planet Jupiter (called Guru or Brihaspati in Vedic astronomy/ astrology) and has 3 wives - Subha, Tara and Mamata.

Skanda or Kartikeya (also called Subramanyam or Sanmukha) is Shiva's son, born out of fire. He is associated with the planet Angaraka or Mars - ruling over war and martial arts. Traditionally, his worship is very popular in south Indian culture, where he is honored by the famous festival of Thaipusam. Probably the greatest version of this festival is the one held by the Hindu Tamil community at the Batu caves, in Malaysia, attended by several thousands of people.

The word *sara* or *sarovara* means "lake", "pond", and also applies to man-made lakes or large tanks where people take bath for purification. The ocean (*sagara*) is the greatest among all bathing places, the purest and the most powerful.

महर्षीणां भृगुरहं गिरामस्म्येकमक्षरम् । यज्ञानां जपयज्ञोऽस्मि स्थावराणां हिमालयः ॥ १०-२५ ॥

maharṣīṇāṃ bhṛgurahaṃ girāmasmyekamakṣaram | yajñānāṃ japayajño'smi sthāvarāṇāṃ himālayaḥ || 10-25 ||

maha rishinam: of the great Rishis; *bhṛgūh*: Bhṛigu; *aham*: I (am); *giram*: of the words; *asmi*: I am; *ekam aksharam*: the one syllable; *yajnanam*: of the *yajnas*; *japa-yajnah*: the *japa yajna*; *asmi*: I am; *sthavaranam*: of the established; *himalayah*: the Himalayas.

"Of the great Rishis, I am Bhṛigu. Among the words, I am the one syllable. Of the sacrifices, I am the *japa*. Among the established things, I am the Himalaya."

Bhṛigu is one of the Sapta Rishis, and was born from the mind of Brahma (*manasa putra*). Buddha (Siddhartha Gautama) recognized him as a genuine authority, together with Visvamisra, Atri, Valmiki, Vamadeva, Yamadagni, Angira, Bharadvaja, Vasistha and Kasyapa (1.245 *Vinaya Pitaka, Mahavagga*). Contrarily to what many people believe, Buddha did not reject the authority of the genuine *Vedas*, but only their manipulated and distorted versions created by unscrupulous degraded brahmins.

The most famous episode about Brighu is about the origin of the special mark called *brighupada* ("foot of Brighu") that is found on Vishnu's chest: one day the assembled Rishis asked Brighu to establish who was the most elevated Personality of God - Brahma, Vishnu, or Shiva. So the Rishi went to test the patience and generosity of these three great Personalities, stimulating their anger respectively by neglecting to salute Brahma (his father), by throwing insulting words at Shiva, and by actually kicking Vishnu on his chest.

Brighu is the father of one incarnation of Lakshmi, named Bhargavi, as well as of Sukracharya (also called Usana), Cyavana Rishi, and the two brothers Dhata and Vidhata. As the greatest authority on astrology/ astronomy, Brighu compiled a database of about 45 million templates with all the possible positions of the planets and stars, covering all past, present and future lifetimes of all human beings. Unfortunately most of these texts were lost during the Islamic invasions, especially with the destruction of the university and library of Nalanda, where most of his writings were collected.

The "one syllable" (*ekam aksharam*) mentioned in this verse is the sacred syllable *om*, that is undoubtedly the most fundamental of utterances or discourses (the literal meaning of *gira*). In chapters 3 and 4, we have elaborated on the meaning of *yajna* as sacred action or sacrifice, by which a human being participates to the support of the universe. Here Krishna states that among all acts of sacrifice, he is the *japa yajna* - the sacred religious action of softly chanting the Names of God. The *japa yajna* is the only act of worship that can be performed in all places and circumstances, and does not need any external paraphernalia; it is very simple and yet it is the most effective of all religious practices, capable of bringing enormous benefits both at spiritual and material levels. In fact, the chanting of the Names of God constitutes the fundamental basis of all religious practices, because there is no ritual that can dispense with the preliminary action of calling the Deity to accept our worship, offerings and praise.

According to the instructions and the example of the greatest teachers of the Bhakti tradition, the chanting of the Names of God - any of the innumerable genuine Names we find in the scriptures - is the best and most intimate way to connect with the transcendental Personality of God, because it establishes a personal relationship. We can see it also in our ordinary experience: even more than exchanging food, gifts or compliments, calling the name of a loved person attracts the direct attention and elicits an affectionate response between lovers. So all forms of ritual worship to the Personality of God start from calling the Name of the Deity to be present personally either temporarily (*avahana*) or permanently (*prana pratistha*).

Then various pleasing items are offered (fresh water, scents, auspicious substances, nice clothes, ornaments, flower, incense, lamps etc), then food is offered (*bhoga* or *naivedya*), and finally prayers and praise (*vandana*).

The Himalayas are not exactly immovable, as they keep growing in height from the corrugating pressure of the tectonic plate of the Indian subcontinent pushing into the Asian land mass. However, the word *sthavaranam*, "stable", refers to the fact that the Himalayas "will not go away" but remain permanently, as they are the most considerably established feature of the planet, that can be easily seen even from outer space.

अश्वत्थः सर्ववृक्षाणां देवर्षीणां च नारदः । गन्धर्वाणां चित्ररथः सिद्धानां कपिलो मुनिः ॥ १०-२६ ॥

aśvatthaḥ sarvavṛkṣāṇāṃ devarṣīṇāṃ ca nāradaḥ | gandharvāṇāṃ citrarathaḥ siddhānāṃ kapilo muniḥ || 10-26 ||

asvatthah: the Asvattha banyan tree; *sarva-vrikshanam*: of all the plants; *devarshinam*: of the Rishis among the *devas*; *ca*: and; *naradah*: Narada; *gandharvanam*: of the Gandharvas; *citraratah*: Citraratha; *siddhanam*: of the Siddhas; *kapilah*: Kapila; *muniḥ*: the silent sage.

"Among all the plants, I am the *asvattha*. Among the Rishis of the Devas, I am Narada. Among the Gandharvas, I am Citraratha. Among the Siddhas, I am Kapila Muni."

The *asvattha* (also called *pipal* or *bodhi*) is a particular type of banyan tree that does not always have aerial roots from the branches. Its fruits and leaves and even the bark are edible and have medicinal properties (including relieving toothache, asthma, thirst, diseases of

blood and heart, gout, ulcers, and menstrual problems). Due to its beautiful shape, this tree is often planted for decorative purposes, and the leaves are used as canvas for small artistic paintings. Sometimes its seeds germinate over other trees, so it appears that the *asvattha* was born directly from the host tree. Its botanical name, *Ficus religiosa*, derives from the fact that the Buddha - Siddhartha Gautama - sat and meditated under this tree, as it has always been the tradition in ancient times, as the *asvattha* is considered a sacred plant, worthy of worship. And in fact the *asvattha* has been sacred to Vedic peoples since time immemorial. In some Harappan seals, we find the characteristic leaves of this tree crowning the buffalo horns of the "Pasupati", the bearded male sitting in meditation and surrounded by several wild animals. On other Harappan seals, we see the *asvattha* tree itself at the center of the image, together with 7 *matrikas* or forms of the Goddess; in some of such images the *matrikas* have bird faces, in others they have human faces but bird characteristics, such as feathers wings.

Devarshi Narada is a very special personality, a Rishi among the Devas, direct son of Brahma at the beginning of creation. He is the famous author of the *Narada bhakti sutras*, and he is always listed among the great Rishis present at the various important occasions all over the universe, but especially on Earth. His role in the Krishna lila described in *Bhagavata Purana* (10th canto) is crucial, and he appears several times in the narration. In *Bhagavata Purana* (1.5.23-39, 1.6.1-36) Narada himself tells about his previous life while speaking with Vyasa, highlighting the importance of devotional service and especially of the company of self-realized souls who discuss about Krishna (*krsna katha*, 1.5.26) and the leftovers of the food that was offered to God (1.5.25). Interestingly, Narada compares devotional service to homeopathy (1.5.33), meaning that attachment, desire and identification with one's actions (when engaged in devotional service) are the medicine that will cure the conditioned soul from attachments, desires and identifications with material things.

Although in that previous lifetime Narada had been a mere 5 year old boy, son of an unmarried maidservant (that we could call a *sudrani* or low caste woman), he was immediately able to attain the level of Brahman realization (1.5.25, 26, 27, 31) because of his good behavior, sincerity and attentiveness (1.5.24). After the sudden death of his mother, the child started traveling like a *sannyasi*, until he finally reached a sacred and solitary place, near a river lake, and sat under a *pipal* tree (the sacred *ficus religiosa* mentioned just before) to meditate until he obtained the full *darshana* of the transcendental form of the Supreme Personality of Godhead. Narayana spoke to him, saying that he would not get another opportunity for such *darshana* in that lifetime, but that he should consider this as a greater blessing, because the feeling of separation (*vipralambha*) and hankering (*lalasamayi*) for God is the greatest form of meditation, that keeps the heart completely free from all material contamination. After several years spent in traveling and remembering God, the child left his body and remained in a transcendental body (*suddha tanum*, 1.6.28), and at the beginning of the subsequent creation, he was born from Brahma, to travel freely in the spiritual and material worlds to carry out his preaching work on behalf of the Lord.

Citraratha (literally, "beautiful chariot", referred to his *vimana* or airplane), is considered the king and the best singer among the Gandharvas, the *upadevas* or subordinate *devas* on the higher planetary systems that are famous for their performing arts. He is mentioned several times in puranic episodes, including one (*Bhagavata Purana* 9.16.3) in which his handsomeness fascinates the mind of Parasurama's mother Renuka, who saw him playing in the river with the Apsaras and totally forgot that she was supposed to be fetching water for an important religious ritual performed by her husband Jamadagni. Citraratha also became the dance teacher of Arjuna, and out of affection, he gifted him with beautiful white horses that could move swiftly both on earth and in the sky and were invulnerable in battle. In *Mahabharata* we find a chapter entitled *Citraratha parva*, describing the early encounter between Arjuna and Citraratha (in which Citraratha is defeated in a duel), and another episode in the *Ghosha yatra parva*, where Citraratha (there called Citrasena) punishes Duryodhana for his impudence, and delivers him as a prisoner to Yudhishthira and Arjuna.

Kapila is the famous teacher of the Sankhya darshana (philosophy), based on the analysis of the components of the universe, including the fundamental principles of *purusha* and *prakriti*. The *Bhagavata Purana* recognizes him as an *avatara* of Vishnu (2.7.3) together with Dattatreya (2.7.4). Verse 3.24.17 mentions his characteristic golden hair. Several chapters of the *Bhagavata Purana* (3.24.8-47, 3.25.1-44, 3.26.1-72, 3.27.1-30, 3.28.1-44, 3.29.1-45, 3.30.1-34, 3.31.1-48, 3.32.1-43, 3.33.1-37) are totally dedicated to the story of Kapila and his teachings to his mother Devahuti.

The Siddhas ("perfect beings") are a category that is often mentioned in the lists of divine beings, and it is said they reside in a particular dimension of this universe. They have become perfect in *yoga*, and therefore their bodies can spontaneously manifest the *siddhis* ("perfections") that we have already mentioned as *anima*, *mahima*, *laghima*, *vasitva*, *prapti*, *isitva*, *kamavasayita*, *prakamyata* and so on.

The word *muni* literally means "silent", and is used often to refer to Rishis and Self-realized souls who are very grave and serious in the concentration of their awareness, and therefore do not engage in idle gossip and ordinary social conversations. Beginners on the path of *yoga* are advised to practice *mauna*, "silence", by maintaining strict control over what they talk about and avoiding unnecessary conversations. Unfortunately, some people had been mistakenly led to believe that a Self-realized soul never speaks (or should never speak) at all, and that those who teach/ preach must therefore be unqualified cheaters. So they claim "those who know, do not speak, and those who speak, do not know" - instantly demonstrating how, according to their own *diktat*, they should not be given any consideration as they do not know anything, because they are definitely speaking. This foolish idea of a "never speaking sage" encourages the ignorant and sentimentalists to worship actual cheaters who pose as great sages simply by remaining silent (which is not so difficult) and to discredit the very process of teaching and preaching and discussing about transcendental topics - that as we have abundantly seen in *Bhagavad gita* and many other texts, is essential in Self-realization.

उच्चैःश्रवसमश्वानां विद्धि माममृतोद्भवम् ।

ऐरावतं गजेन्द्राणां नराणां च नराधिपम् ॥ १०-२७ ॥

uccaiḥśravasamaśvānāṃ viddhi māmamṛtodbhavam | airāvataṃ gajendraṇām naraṇām ca narādhipam || 10-27 ||

uccaiḥśravasam: Uccaiḥśrava: *asvanam*: of the horses; *viddhi*: you should know; *mam*: me; *amrita udbhavam*: risen from the nectar; *airavatam*: Airavata; *gajendranam*: of the kings of elephants; *naranam*: of the human beings; *ca*: and; *nara adhipam*: the chief.

"Among the horses, I am Uccaiśrava, born from the nectar. Among the kings of elephants, I am Airavata. Among the human beings, I am the chief/ king."

In the history of the long wars between Suras and Asuras, we find a very interesting and famous episode called *samudra manthana* ("the churning of the ocean"), that also gave origin to the popular festival called Kumbha mela. As related in several texts (*Ramayana, Mahabharata, Bhagavata Purana, Vishnu Purana*, and especially *Matsya Purana*), Vishnu suggested that Devas and Asuras should ally and cooperate to produce the nectar of immortality, by churning the ocean of milk on which Kshirodakasayi Vishnu reclines. Vasuki was employed as the rope and mount Mandara as the churning rod; after the poisonous black froth (*halahala* or *kalakuta*) was removed by Shiva, the nectar (*amrita*) started to form, like butter when yogurt is churned, and several wonders (called *ratnas*, "jewels") also appeared. One of such wonders was Uchchaisrava, a beautiful and divine white horse, who was given to Bali Maharaja on the advice of Vishnu (*Bhagavata Purana*, 8.8.3).

Right next, the great elephant Airavata appeared (*Bhagavata Purana*, 8.8.4) - a large white pachiderm with 4 tusks, who became the foremost of the Guardians of the Directions in the universe. Together with him, the other 7 great *dik gajas* appeared (Pundarika, Vamana, Kumuda, Anjana, Puspadanta, Sarvabhauma, Supratika) as well as 8 female elephants headed by Abhramu.

After that the ocean produced the Kaustubha mani, the Padmaraga mani and the *parijata* flower, and finally the nectar of immortality, carried by Dhanvantari, the *avatara* who taught the science of *Ayur Veda*. At that time, Devas and Asuras started to quarrel about which party would get to drink the nectar first, and so Vishnu intervened again, taking the form of the female *avatara* Mohini, to distract and confuse the Asuras, and give the nectar to the Devas first.

In the process, a few drops of the nectar fell on Earth, in the places known as Har Ki Pauri at Haridvara ("the door to Hari") in Uttaranchal on the Ganga (and all subsequent *tirthas* on the Ganga down to the Bay of Bengal), and Prayaga ("the site of *yajnas*") at the confluence of Ganga, Yamuna and Sarasvati. The other two sites are Nasik (Maharashtra) on the Godavari (where the Triambakesvara *vyotir linga* resides) and Ujjain on the Shipra river (Madhya Pradesh, where the Mahakalesvara *vyotir linga* resides).

The precise times for the bathing in these places are: at Haridvara when Brihaspati (Jupiter) is in Kumbha rasi (Aquarius) and Surya (the Sun) is in Mesha rasi (Aries), at Prayaga when Brihaspati is in Vrisha rasi (Taurus) and Surya is in Makara rasi (Capricorn), at Nasik when both Brihaspati and Surya are in Simha rasi (Leo), and in Ujjain when Brihaspati is in Tula rasi (Libra) and Surya is in Mesha rasi (Aries).

According to the positions of other planets and stars, the assemblies are held once every 4 years or 12 years. The festival held every year in each of these sacred location is called Magha mela. It is believed that all the Devas and 88,000 Rishis, as well as about 350 million residents of the higher planets, come to bathe in these sacred rivers at the auspicious times in various forms, visible and invisible. The tradition of Kumbha mela was officialized by Adi Shankara to revive the Vedic *dharma* in his times after the Buddhist revolution had weakened the tradition.

The word *adhipam* literally means "the chief", and can be applied to all varieties of kings as leaders of human beings. Natural leaders have a special charisma, a radiating energy (*tejas*) that distinguishes them from ordinary men, and that is found in all cultures and societies. Monarchy is the best government system because the king is directly responsible for the protection and well being of the *prajas* (subjects), and is expected to sacrifice himself for the kingdom in all possible ways.

आयुधानामहं वज्रं धेनूनामस्मि कामधुक् । प्रजनश्चास्मि कन्दर्पः सर्पाणामस्मि वासुकिः ॥ १०-२८ ॥

āyudhānāmahaṁ vajraṁ dhenūnāmasmi kāmadhuk | prajānaścāsmi kandarpaḥ sarpāṇāmasmi vāsukih | | 10-28 | |

ayudhanam: of the weapons; *aham*: I (am); *vajram*: the *vajra*; *dhenunam*: of the cows; *asmi*: I am; *kama dhuk*: the wish-fulfilling cow; *prajanah*: of those who generate offspring; *ca*: and; *asmi*: I am; *kandarpah*: Kandarpa; *sarpanam*: of the snakes; *asmi*: I am; *vasukih*: Vasuki.

"Among the weapons, I am the Vajra. Among the cows, I am the Kamadhenu. Of those who generate offspring, I am Kandarpa. Of the serpents, I am Vasuki."

The word *ayudha* means "weapon" but also "insignia", therefore it mainly applies to the weapons held as symbols by the various forms of the Personalities of God, signifying the nature of their specific powers. The word *vajra* means "lightning" and also "diamond" (see for example *Bhagavata Purana* 3.15.29) and is considered the hardest and strongest material, unleashing immense power. The association of meanings between the lightning and the diamond calls for the piezoelectric properties of crystals, that can produce electricity. Piezoelectricity, already studied by Carl Linnaeus and Franz Aepinus, was demonstrated in 1880 by Jacques and Pierre Curie. It is the electric charge that accumulates in crystals, such as amber and quartz, topaz and other gems, some kinds of ceramics, as well as in cane sugar, bone, various proteins and DNA itself.

The piezoelectric effect is defined as the linear electromechanical interaction between the mechanical and the electrical state in crystalline materials with no inversion symmetry. It is presently used in the production of ultrasonic sound waves and other electronic frequencies (as in the Sonar), as well as for the ignition of gas lighters for example in cooking ranges.

Vedic civilization, like several other ancient cultures, had a deep knowledge about the properties of crystals and used them extensively. It is said that Atlantis - the lost continent mentioned by Plato and others - was destroyed because of an ill-fated incident from tampering with its power-center working with crystals. Lightning is another very important universal symbol of power, revered as divine not only by Hindus and Buddhists, but also by the Roman, Greek and Hellenistic cultures and the pre-abrahamic Canaanite culture, where the King of Gods - called respectively Jupiter, Zeus, and Baal (literally, "the Lord") - were iconically represented holding the lightning bolt.

Specifically about Baal, we can mention here that his worship in the Mediterranean was centered around the ancient city of Baal-bek in Lebanon, later renamed Heliopolis. It was originally built before 9000 BCE with huge stones estimated to weight 800 to 1500 tons each, perfectly shaped and arranged to form a very big platform - something that even the most advanced contemporary technology (or "western" type) is unable to do.

Vasuki, the Nagaraja, is Shiva's snake, and his sister (i.e. female manifestation) is Manasa, a form of the Mother Goddess. He is one of the 8 great Naga kings, together with Nanda, Upananda, Sagara, Takshaka, Balavan, Anavatapta and Utpala. He is also revered in Chinese and

Japanese traditions, which have a deep connection with the Nagas or celestial Dragons, of whom the Chinese emperor was considered to be a direct descendant.

As we have already mentioned, Vasuki is also one of the protagonists of the *samudra manthana* (the churning of the ocean) that produced the nectar of immortality.

Kandarpa, also called Kamadeva, Ananga and Madana, is the God of erotic love. He holds a bow and arrows made with flowers, rides a parrot and is accompanied by his wife Rati ("attachment"). The parrot - a very romantic and affectionate creature - also appears as a symbol in the iconography of Matangi (a form of the Mother Goddess worshiped in Sri Vidya rituals) and Radha/ Vrinda Devi.

Krishna, too, is identified with Kamadeva in the famous Kama gayatri. The *Tantraraja tantra* says that Matangi, the Mother Goddess, manifested as the six forms of Krishna known as Kamaraja Gopala, Manmatha Gopala, Kandarpa Gopala, Makaraketana Gopala and Manobhava Gopala. The fundamental principle of erotic love represented by Kandarpa is essential in the sexual act of procreation (considered perfectly moral and even sacred in Vedic culture) and therefore it represents Krishna as the essence of existence.

अनन्तश्चास्मि नागानां वरुणो यादसामहम् । पितृणामर्यमा चास्मि यमः संयमतामहम् ॥ १०-२९ ॥

anantaścāsmi nāgānām varuṇo yādasāmaham | pitṛṇāmaryamā cāsmi yamaḥ saṁyamatāmaham || 10-29 |

anantah: Ananta; *ca*: and; *asmi*: I am; *naganam*: of the Nagas; *varunah*: Varuna; *yadasam*: of those who are connected with water; *aham*: I (am); *pitṛinam*: of the Pitris; *aryama*: Aryama; *ca*: and; *asmi*: I am; *yamah*: Yama; *samyamatam*: of the enforcers/ controllers; *aham*: I (am).

"Of the Nagas, I am Ananta. Of the aquatic principles, I am Varuna. Among the Pitris, I am Aryama, and among the law enforcers, I am Yama."

There seems to be a superimposition between the *sarpas* of the previous verse (10.28) and the *nagas* of this verse, with Vasuki and Ananta Sesha mentioned respectively. This could be explained by considering that the category of *sarpas* also includes ordinary snakes, so it is fitting to be topped by a divine Naga like Vasuki. On the other hand, the Nagas are all divine serpents, with powers far exceeding those of human beings, and Ananta Sesha Naga cannot be called a mere *sarpa* (serpent). It is a different and higher level.

Chapter 25 of the 5th canto of the *Bhagavata Purana* is all dedicated to elaborations about Ananta Sesha. An important point we should make in this regard is that Ananta Sankarshana is said to support all the planets with his many heads. The word *sankarshana* literally means "that which attracts together", and effectively expresses the natural law known as gravity. Ananta, also called Sankarshana, is a direct emanation of Mahavishnu in the first *chatur vyuha* (Vasudeva, Sankarshana, Pradyumna, Aniruddha) and is not different from Shiva. On this point, different groups feel differently: some fundamentalist *vaishnavas* believe that Shiva is simply a devotee of Sankarshana, while fundamentalist *shaivites* see Sankarshana as an emanation of the Shiva principle - identifying Mahavishnu as Sadashiva, the origin of all material universes. We can happily solve this conundrum by applying the brilliant perspective (*darshana*) offered by Chaitanya, and called *acintya bheda abheda tattva* ("inconceivably simultaneous difference and non-difference"). This vision has a long and very popular tradition that spans centuries if not millennia before the appearance of Chaitanya, who simply offered it as the conclusion of the debate on vedic perspectives that had started with Adi Shankara and then continued with Ramanuja, Nimbarka and Madhva.

In fact, especially in Orissa but also in many other regions we find the worship of Hari-Hara (the composite form of Hari and Hara - Vishnu and Shiva as one person) and Madhava ("the husband of the Mother Goddess"). The identification or strict connection of Ananta with Shiva is confirmed as the end of Brahma's day, it is the fire from Ananta's thousand mouths that consumes the universe (*Bhagavata Purana* 3.11.30, 4.24.36).

Some extremist *vaishnavas*, who have not realized the meaning of the *tattva* (especially its *darshana* called *acintya bhedabheda*), claim that worshiping Shiva or chanting his name constitutes an offense against Vishnu, and they quote the list of 10 offenses to be avoided in the chanting of the holy Names. The original text of *Padma Purana* (*Brahma Kanda*, 25.15-18) says: *sivasya sri-visnor ya iha guna-namadi-sakalam, dhiya bhinnam pasyet na khalu hari-namahita-karah*. The translation offered by the *vaishnava* extremists is as follows: "The holy Name of Krishna is source of all auspiciousness. The name, form, qualities of Vishnu are all transcendental. Therefore it is offensive to separate God, the Supreme Person (Vishnu) from his holy name, form, or transcendental qualities and pastimes, considering them material."

Although this is one of the valid translations of the verse, it becomes ambiguous with the addition that is sometimes presented as the second part of the translation: "Similarly, it is blasphemous to think that the names of the demigods such as Shiva, Brahma etc are on the same level of the name of Vishnu, or that the demigods are equal to Vishnu."

This invented meaning (in which *bhinna*, "separate" or "different" is taken to mean its exact opposite, i.e. "equal") is compounded by the use of the improper term "demigod", that literally means "half god" - a word created by abrahamic academia to discredit the ancient Deities of pre-abrahamic religions by implying that they were not really God, but merely some powerful beings like angels - specifically the "fallen angels" such as Satan and his companions. We need to remember here that the "flavor" of English taught in British colonial schools in India (including the Scottish College in Calcutta) was certainly not supportive towards the indigenous culture and religion, and although students were not required to formally convert to Christianity, their use of language was intentionally poisoned from the very start of their schooling, when their innocent minds were taught false and belittling linguistic equivalences. Another famous example is the word "idol", that unfortunately is still used by a majority of Indian Hindus to indicate their own *ista devata*.

To clarify any possible misunderstanding about that verse from *Padma Purana*, we therefore offer a complementary (not opposite) translation as follows: *sivasya sri-visnor ya iha guna-namadi-sakalam, dhiya bhinnam pasyet na khalu hari-namahita-karah*, "To contemplate, in one's meditation, any difference/ separation between the holy names, qualities etc, of Shiva and Vishnu: this certainly destroys the benefits of chanting the name of Hari." Here is the dictionary meaning of the words: *sivasya*: of Shiva; *sri visnor*: of Sri

Vishnu; *yah*: s/he; *iha*: here/ certainly; *guna-namadi*: the qualities, names etc; *sakalam*: everything; *dhiya*: in meditation; *bhinnam*: separated; *pasyet*: sees/ considers; *na khalu*: most certainly not; *hari-nama*: the name of Hari; *hita*: benefit; *karah*: that does.

Brihad Bhagavatamrita (1.2.86) very clearly confirms this meaning by stating: *krsnac chivasya bhedeksa maha-dosa-kari mata, ago bhagavata svasmin ksamyate na sive krtam*, "One who sees some difference between Krishna and Shiva is committing a great offense. Krishna may excuse someone who commits *aparadha* to his own lotus feet, but will never excuse one who commits *aparadha* at the lotus feet of Shiva".

Krsna himself in *Bhagavata Purana* (10.88.38-39) addresses Shiva as *jagat guru*, and says, "If someone commits *aparadha* to such a *mahajana* and *jagat guru* as you are, they will never get any auspiciousness". In this context, we may remember that in *Bhagavata Purana* Krishna recommends: *acharyam mam vijaniyan navamanyeta karhicit*, "One should know that the spiritual teacher is non-different from me." (11.17.27)

It just does not make sense to say that equating *jagat guru* Shiva Mahadeva with Krishna constitutes one of the most serious offenses in devotional service. Chaitanya himself always offered respectful and loving worship to Shiva, as we can see from the complete story of his life (that we have summarized in another publication). Also, we can refer to the *Shivastakam* prayers (text 7), quoted by Murari Gupta in his *Chaitanya Charita Mahakavya*, where Chaitanya says: *sivaya sarva-gurave namo namah*; "I repeatedly offer my obeisances to Shiva, who is the *guru* of everyone."

This verse also mentions Varuna and Aryama, in connection to the *yadasas* and the *pitris* respectively. The *yadasas* are divine/ elemental personalities controlling the waters, comparable to the nymphs of the sacred stories of ancient Europe; among them Varuna is certainly the supreme, as he is the personification of all waters including the ocean, and is listed as one of the 12 Adityas.

Aryama is also one of the 12 Adityas, and therefore he is considered a manifestation of Surya. He resides on Pitri-loka, the planet or dimension accessible to those great personalities who have perfectly fulfilled their duties in their lifetime on Earth, and as such, he is called as witness during marriages. Following the thread of associations, next Krishna mentions Yama, the Deva who could be described as the highest magistrate of the supreme court of the universe. Yamaraja also resides on Pitri-loka, but he is primarily concerned with judging the conditioned souls who have committed serious crimes during their life as human beings; his servants, the Yamadutas, can be equated with a special police force, who pick up the culprits at the time of death and take them to court for the sentence.

प्रह्लादश्चास्मि दैत्यानां कालः कलयतामहम् । मृगाणां च मृगेन्द्रोऽहं वैनतेयश्च पक्षिणाम् ॥ १०-३० ॥

prahlādaścāsmi daityānām kālah kalayatāmaham | mṛgāṇām ca mṛgendro'ham vainateyaśca pakṣiṇām | | 10-30 | |

prahladah: Prahlada; *ca*: and; *asmi*: I am; *daityanam*: of the Daityas; *kalah*: time; *kalayatam*: of the conquerors/ measuring parts; *aham*: I (am); *mrganam*: of the animals; *ca*: and; *mriga indrah*: the king of animals; *aham*: I (am); *vainateyah*: the son of Vinata; *ca*: and; *pakshinam*: of the birds.

"Among the Daityas I am Prahlada. Among the conquerors I am Time. I am also the king of the animals among the beasts, and the son of Vinata among the birds."

In the *Bhagavata Purana*, Prahlada's story and teachings occupy all the 15 chapters of the 7th canto, and his name comes up very frequently as an example of a great divine personality. Some translate *daityas* as "demons", but this can cause considerable confusion. According to the English dictionary, a *demon* is an evil spirit; in abrahamic cultures this definition is equated with the devil, and refers to the various manifestations of Satan the "bad God", similar to the *jinn*s or diabolic ghosts that can enter the bodies of living beings and possess them. In ancient Greece, the *daimon* was a powerful spirit that could either protect or harm human beings, and it was often depicted in a serpent form (that we would call Naga). However, anyone who has heard Prahlada's story will agree that there is/ was absolutely nothing evil or demoniac in him - on the contrary, he is/ was a very saintly person and deeply devoted to Vishnu. He is actually one of the 12 *mahajanas*, the highest authorities on spiritual science and devotional service to Vishnu. So, a better translation of the word *daitya* is in order, for us to understand the example offered by Krishna in this verse. The Daityas are simply the sons of Diti, descendants of Kasyapa Rishi just like the Devas (also called Adityas or sons of Aditi). True, the cultural tradition of the Daityas keeps them in opposition against the Devas and therefore they can generally be called Asuras, but applying such definition to Prahlada would be a seriously wrong prejudice based on birth.

The word *kalayatam* is a tricky one. From the point of view of grammar and etymology, it means "of those who are connected with *kala*" (with a short "a"). Now, *kala* (with a short "a") means "part", "measure", "flow", and obviously the word that refers to time, *kala* (with a long "a") is related to it as "what is measured" or "which flows". Therefore we could translate the passage as "among those who calculate and control time, I am Time (itself)". Previous commentators have chosen to translate *kalayatam* as "among the subduers", "among those who conquer", or "among those who destroy". This is also correct, because destruction is nothing but the end of the calculated time allotted to a particular material manifestation, and those who can destroy a thing are also in control of it. The name *Kala* (with a long "a") indicating Time is also translated as "black", and is applied to the names of fierce manifestations of Godhead such as *Kala Bhairava* (an aspect of Shiva) and *Kali Bhairavi* (an aspect of Shakti) - both associated with the destruction of the universe, as Time obviously is.

The word *mriga*, "animal", is generally applied to mammals - and not to birds or reptiles or fish, for example. The expression *mriga indra* literally means "the king of animals", and it could be applied to the lion, or to any other powerful animal. In any case, the sense of the statement is clear.

Vainateya, "the son of Vinata", is Garuda, the carrier of Vishnu. He is depicted as a powerful being, half human and half eagle, but his body is in constant and direct personal touch with Vishnu, therefore it cannot be ordinarily material; this is confirmed by the descriptions according to which the movement of Garuda's wing vibrates the Vedic hymns. Garuda is popular also as in several other cultures, and especially in Mongolian shamanism we find him clearly mentioned as Han Garid, the Thunderbird - the gigantic eagle that is able to fly in outer space. Through early migrations, the Mongolian tribes carried their faith to north America and this is how we find Garuda on many totem poles in Native American tribal traditions.

पवनः पवतामस्मि रामः शस्त्रभृतामहम् । जषाणां मकरश्चास्मि स्रोतसामस्मि जाह्नवी ॥ १०-३१ ॥

pavanaḥ pavatāmasmi rāmaḥ śastrabhṛtāmaham | jhaṣāṇāṁ makaraścāsmi srotasāmasmi jāhnavī || 10-31 ||

pavanaḥ: Pavana; *pavatam*: of the purifiers; *asmi*: I am; *ramah*: Rama; *sastra-bhritam*: of those who carry weapons; *aham*: I (am); *jhashanam*: of the fish; *makarah*: the shark/ alligator; *ca*: and; *asmi*: I am; *srotasam*: of the flowing rivers; *asmi*: I am; *jahnavi*: the daughter of Jahnu.

"Among the purifiers, I am Pavana. Among those who carry weapons, I am Rama. Among the water creatures, I am the makara. Among the flowing rivers, I am Jahnvi."

Pavana ("the purifier") is another name of Vayu, the wind. In this regard we may remember one of the famous names of Hanuman, son of Vayu, as Pavana suta. The wind can never really become contaminated for a long time, although it effectively carries away bad smells, dust, germs, smoke and so on. As soon as its speed slows down in some open space, the wind drops the contaminants back to earth and lets them be washed away by rain, to be recycled within nature. At a deeper level, we could contemplate the purifying effect of breathing (such as in *pranayama*) over the mind and especially over emotions. Even simply getting a bit of fresh air or taking a few deep breaths will clarify the mind from the fumes of intoxication or from the influence of bad company.

The Rama mentioned in the verse could be Ramachandra, the great archer, the valiant warrior prince that is universally recognized as an *avatara* of Vishnu. However, there is another famous weapon carrier by the name of Rama - Parasurama, "the Rama of the axe", also recognized as a Vishnu *avatara*. The entire *Ramayana* is dedicated to the wonderful story of Ramachandra, but both *avatars* are described in 9th canto of the *Bhagavata Purana* (respectively chapters 10 to 11 for Ramachandra and 15 to 16 for Parasurama).

The word *jhasa* does not refer exclusively to fish (called *mina*), but includes all aquatic animals. For example, it is used to describe the crocodile that attacked Gajendra (3.19.35). The definition of *makara* is sometimes translated as "shark" and sometimes as "crocodile", but looking at the traditional depictions we see that it is quite different from both - a sort of monster with the head similar to a crocodile's and the tail of a fish. Sometimes the head's picture resembles an elephant's, with a trunk that could also be a long snout like a boar's, or even a goat's or a deer's horn. The *makara* is especially famous because it represents one of the zodiac signs (*makara rasi*), corresponding to the western Capricorn - an extraordinary animal that is generally represented having a fish tail and a goat's head. It is very much possible that such an animal really exists, or existed, hidden in some mysterious abysses below the surface of the ocean, like so many other creatures that have been considered mythological or extinct because they show themselves only rarely.

Jahnvi is another name of Ganga, the Ganges river. It originates from a puranic episode regarding the descent of the holy river to Earth. The Ganges is believed to be created by the waters of the Karana Ocean, that leaked through the covering of the universe when Vamana's foot pierced it.

Ganga remained in the heavenly planets for a very long time, then (as described in *Bhagavata Purana*, chapter 17 of canto 5, and chapter 9 of canto 9) she agreed to descend to Earth to bless Bhagiratha for his long austerities. For this reason, Ganga is also known as Bhagirathi.

When the rushing Ganges swept the land, she arrived at the *ashrama* of Jahnu Rishi, who was concerned about the disasters caused by the flood. The Rishi simply opened his mouth and swallowed the entire flow of the river. When Bhagiratha requested him to release the river, so that his own ancestors could be purified from their bad actions, Jahnu let her flow out of his ear - that is considered a clean part of the body as it is purified by the hearing of sacred *mantras*. This is the reason why *dvijas* - the twiceborn who wear the sacred thread - hang it on their ear when they go to the bathroom. Since the Ganges came out from Jahnu's body, she is considered his daughter.

सर्गणामादिरन्तश्च मध्यं चैवाहमर्जुन । अध्यात्मविद्या विद्यानां वादः प्रवदतामहम् ॥ १०-३२ ॥

sargāṇāmādirantaśca madhyaṁ caivāhamarjuna | adhyātmavidyā vidyānāṁ vādaḥ pravadatāmaham || 10-32 ||

sarganam: of creations; *adih*: the beginning; *antah*: the end; *ca*: and; *madhyam*: the middle; *ca*: and; *eva*: certainly; *aham*: I (am); *arjuna*: Arjuna; *adhyatma-vidya*: the knowledge of the original Self; *vidyanam*: of sciences; *vadah*: the conclusion; *pravadatam*: of the discussions; *aham*: I (am).

"Of all creations, I am the beginning, middle and end. O Arjuna, among the sciences I am the science of the atman, and in all discussions I am the conclusion."

The word *sarga* ("creation", "manifestation") is used here in the plural form, therefore it indicates a variety of creations all along the manifestation of the universe. Everything we know in this world has a beginning, an intermediate period and an end, because this is the rule for all material things - situations, experiences, bodies, enterprises, buildings, and even empires.

Adhyatma is the original transcendental Self, the *atman* of the *atman*, so the *adhyatma vidya* is the spiritual science that makes us understand both ourselves and God - as we are of the same nature. The science of the Self is the most important form of knowledge, because it gives meaning to all the rest. We have already mentioned this point in reference to verse 9.2, that described Krishna's teachings as *raja vidya*, "the king of all knowledge". Knowing the Self means understanding the subject of all knowledge, by which the very concept of knowledge becomes actually relevant. Without the knower, there is no meaning to the idea of knowledge. In this connection, it might be interesting here to remember Werner Heisenberg, the father of quantum physics, who formulated the principle of uncertainty, according to which the observer influences the observed system by the simple fact of observing it. So when we try to measure a system, the system behaves differently. According to the Vedic knowledge of the *adhyatman*, the entire Reality is solely based on Consciousness, and everything else is created by it.

This *adhyatma vidya* is the central part of Vedic knowledge, and is extensively explained in *Bhagavad gita*, as well as in the *Upanishads* and in the *Vedanta sutras*. We are humbly trying our best to bring such an invaluable treasure to the attention of all classes of people, by presenting it in such a way that it can be understood in practice as well as in theory.

Such work requires a tireless, patient, enthusiastic, selfless and determined engagement in debate or discussion, as there is no other way to establish knowledge. In present times, however, people are often confused about the idea of debate or discussion, especially because of the popular misconception that wants to give "equal opportunities" to all. Therefore we often find people who believe that all opinions should be equally considered valid, no matter how unfounded they are. Some particularly confused people become angry and envious when a better proposition is presented, and accuse a good teacher of being arrogant for trying to defeat sheer ignorance.

Of course there are also many people who engage in discussions with ill motives, without any actual desire to discover and understand the truth and the facts (and the conclusion) - which as we find in this verse, constitutes the very purpose and essence of the discussion. To better understand the meaning of the term *vada*, it is useful to compare it with the other modalities of discussions listed in the *Nyaya shastra* (the science of logic, attributed to Akshapada Gautama Rishi). *Vada* is the genuinely correct debate, the open minded discussion, while the other (faulty and invalid) methods are called *vitanda* (wrangling), *hetvabhāsa* (illogical argument), *chala* (changing the topic or "beating around the bush", so to speak), *avayava* (syllogism), *jati* (false generalization), *nigraha sthana* (stalling position) and *jalpa* (pointless arguments). Other possible positions are *tarka* (hypothetical reasoning), *nirṇaya* (compromise) and *samsāya* (doubt). The other categories (*padarthas*) contemplated by Nyaya are the all-important *pramana* (proof or evidence), *prameya* (objects of knowledge), *prayojana* (purpose) and *dristanta* (example).

A correct application of *vada* (also called *vagyvada*, or "spoken discussion") is aimed at sincerely establishing the *tattva* (substance) and *siddhanta* (perfect conclusion), by presenting different perspectives of the same Reality in order to deepen the vision and expand the minds of the participants.

अक्षराणामकारोऽस्मि द्वन्द्वः सामासिकस्य च अहमेवाक्षयः कालो धाताहं विश्वतोमुखः ॥ १०-३३ ॥

akṣarāṇāmakāro'smi dvandvaḥ sāmāsikasya ca | ahamevākṣayaḥ kālo dhātāhaṁ viśvatomukhaḥ | | 10-33 | |

aksharanam: of the letters; *a-karo*: the letter A; *asmi*: I am; *dvandvah*: the double word; *samasikasya*: of compound words; *ca*: and; *aham*: I (am); *eva*: certainly; *akshayah*: imperishable; *kalah*: time; *dhata*: the creator/ destiny; *aham*: I (am); *visvato-mukhah*: (the one) whose faces are everywhere.

"Of the letters, I am the A. Of the compound words, I am the *dvandva*. I am Time eternal, the creator, and the omnipresent (consciousness of the universe)."

An identical statement is found in *Bhagavata Purana* (11.16.12) in Krishna's instructions to Uddhava: *aksharanam akaro smi*, "Among the letters I am the A". The Sanskrit devanagari script is a special alphabet system, where all consonants are built "modularly" on the support of the simple straight line/ basic sound that constitutes the letter A. The concept of *akshara* unites both meanings of "letter" and "syllable": unlike the Latin alphabet, where each consonant is standing alone (B, C, D, M, G etc), Sanskrit has each consonant accompanied or supported by a vocalic sound that enables its pronunciation (normally, A). Therefore when we refer to the consonants in Sanskrit, we call them Ba, Ca, Da, Ma and so on. Actually the same thing happens, albeit not officially, also in the European languages, because the consonants by themselves are spelled as Bi, Ci, Di, eM, Gi, and so on. Sanskrit/ Devanagari scientifically applies this instinctive concept and codifies it precisely: this already shows us the type of mental structure that is the basis of Vedic knowledge - the precise understanding and the scientific formulation of the natural universal laws instinctively known and applied by everyone. The Sanskrit alphabet includes 15 vowels and 34 simple consonants, 4 of which (Ra, Ya, La, Va) are considered "semi-vowels" and according to the laws of *sandhi* ("euphonic ties") they can transform into their vocalic counterparts or in special consonantic groups with a particular graphic configuration. The number of composite letters/ syllables is very large - a tribute to the appreciation of unity in diversity demonstrated by Vedic culture.

A *samasa* or *samasika* is the nominal compound (union of more words in the same grammatical case) where only the final element receives the case inflection. The various forms of *samasikas* are: *avyayibhava* ("unchangeable", or indeclinable, where the first word has primacy), *tatpurusha* ("determinative", where the second word has primacy either as *vyadhikarana* or "instrumental" or *karmadharaya* or "descriptive of the action"), *upapada samasa* (union with noun and verb), *bahuvrihi* ("possessive" or "qualifying by attributes"), *amredita* (iterative), *aluka samasa* (compound where both words express the case declination), and *dvandva* ("coordinative"). The *dvandva* type connects words logically united by the copulative or coordinative conjunction ("and").

The second part of the verse marks a pause in the comparative series, offering three distinct and independent statements, that can also be connected together to evoke a multi-dimensional vision of the essence of Reality. Time eternal is the origin of the material creation, and is the continuum on which everything is based. The name *dhata* ("the giver") means both "creator" and "destiny", as well as "provider" and "providence". The expression *visvato mukhah* literally means "whose faces are everywhere".

मृत्युः सर्वहरश्चाहमुद्भवश्च भविष्यताम् । कीर्तिः श्रीर्वाक्च नारीणां स्मृतिर्मेधा धृतिः क्षमा ॥ १०-३४ ॥

mṛtyuḥ sarvaharaśchāhamudbhavaśca bhaviṣyatām | kīrtiḥ śrīrvākca nārīṇāṁ smṛtirmedhā dhṛtiḥ kṣamā | | 10-34 | |

mṛtyuh: death; *sarva-harah*: of all those who take away; *ca*: and; *aham*: I (am); *udbhavah*: the act of creation; *ca*: and; *bhaviṣyatam*: of the future things; *kīrtiḥ*: good fame; *sriḥ*: beauty and opulence; *vak*: speech; *ca*: and; *narinam*: of women; *smṛtiḥ*: memory; *medha*: intelligence; *dhṛtiḥ*: determination; *kshama*: patience.

"Among those who take away things, I am death. Of future things, I am the fulfillment. In women, I am fame, splendor, eloquence, memory, intelligence, determination and patience."

Hara means "who takes away", and applied to God, it refers both to the removal of the devotee's sufferings and difficulties, and to the need of developing complete dedication in devotion - relinquishing all other attachments.

In *Bhagavata Purana* (10.88.8), Krishna is quoted to have stated: *yasyaham anugruhnami harisyē tad dhanam sanaiḥ, tato adhanam tyajanti asya svajana dukkha dukkhitam*, "When I want to show special favor to someone, I gradually take away all his material assets, so

that he is abandoned by everyone, and suffers a setback after another". The logic of this statement is that only after becoming disillusioned with material attachments, the conditioned soul starts questioning himself about the purpose of life, and turns towards a higher dimension of awareness. As we can remember, this is also the starting point of the discussion between Krishna and Arjuna in *Bhagavad gita*.

Among all the losses we can face in this world, death is certainly the most radical, as by leaving the body we also lose everything that was related to the body - wealth, relationships, home, social position, attainments, identifications, and so on. However, death is simply a passage that will take us to a future life, just like any loss is simply a pre-requisite for the attainment of something better and more valuable - if we are able to see it, appreciate it and seize it at the proper time. The word *udbhava* means "creation", "completion", "production", "fulfillment", and "success", indicating the process of something becoming a reality. Therefore, it is also used to mean "prosperity", and even "change"; however, such change is not necessarily about increasing possessions or identifications. The 6 changes (*udbhavas*) are listed as: birth, growth, maturity, reproduction, decline, and death. The word *bhavisyatam* literally means "of the things that will be/ become".

The second part of the verse lists a series of special qualities that according to Krishna are to be considered the epitome or perfection of femininity. The misogynist propounders of the "patriarchal model" in Hinduism superimpose - more or less unconsciously - the idea of modesty with the typically abrahamic mentality of absolute submission of the women, that should be generally considered a mere extension of their husbands. But Krishna does not speak here of submission, shyness, abnegation, silence, or capability to breed. This is because Vedic culture has always appreciated the eloquence of women, starting from Sarasvati, the form of the Mother Goddess that is worshiped by all as she personifies knowledge, learning, and the power of speech. Another name of Sarasvati is Vak ("speech"). Another name still is Sarada ("giving the essence") while Sarasvati means "knowing the essence".

And this does not simply concern the Goddesses, but includes all the women as well. In the marriage hymn of the *Rig Veda* (10.85.26) it is said that the bride "addresses the assembly like a general addresses the army". Then *Rig Veda* continues (10.159.2) describing the position of a married woman in the words of Sachi Paulomi: "I am the banner. I am the guide. I possess excellent eloquence; my husband cooperates with me and follows my will."

The name Sri ("beauty and opulence") is also honored as a major form of the Mother Goddess - Lakshmi, also called Kamala or Padmavati, because she holds lotus flowers (the symbol of the Sun) besides being seated on a lotus. The word *sri* is regularly added - to signify the beneficent presence of Lakshmi - to the names of all respectable and glorious personalities, not only the divine Personalities such as Sri Vishnu, Sri Krishna, etc, but also ordinary human beings in everyday dealings. In Orissa, this custom is even more explicit, as married men are addressed as *sri-yukta* ("united with Sri"), signifying the mystical union of the male principle to the female principle during the marriage ritual. Similarly, the new bride is worshiped ritually and addressed as Lakshmi herself when she enters the house of her husband. If all Hindus really practiced what their tradition teaches, the world would be a much better place, especially if girl children were encouraged and supported to stand up to such a high role in family and society.

Besides eloquence and opulence, the other qualities listed by Krishna as essential characteristics of femininity are intelligence (*medha*) and memory (*smriti*), determination (*dhriti*) as well as patience/ tolerance (*dhriti*), qualities that ensure that women will not misuse their position in family and society. More specifically, *medha* indicates the ability to apply knowledge to practical situations, while *dhriti* conveys the meanings of courage, fortitude and endurance, as well as support for all, exemplified by Bhumi, Mother Earth. The word *kirti* ("good fame") comes from the same root of *kirtana*, and refers to people speaking highly of the qualities and activities of women - who definitely should not be hidden or segregated within the ladies' apartments or behind veils.

Kirti is also considered as another name of Gayatri, the Mother of the *Vedas*.

It may be interesting to note here that in the symbolic genealogical tables described in the *Puranas*, Kirti, Medha, Dhriti, Smriti and Kshama are the names of *prajapati* Daksha's daughters, who married great personalities such as Dharma (Kirti, Medha, Dhriti), Angira (Smriti) and Pulaha (Kshama).

In the same line, Sri was the daughter of Bhrigu and Khyati (daughter of Daksha) and married Vishnu. Thus another interpretation of the verse could refer to these great ladies rather than simply to the qualities they represent.

बृहत्साम तथा साम्नां गायत्री छन्दसामहम् । मासानां मार्गशीर्षोऽहमृतूनां कुसुमाकरः ॥ १०-३५ ॥

bṛhatsāma tathā sāmnaṁ gāyatrī chandasāmaham | māśānāṁ mārgaśīrṣo'hamṛtūnāṁ kusumākaraḥ | | 10-35 |

brihat-sama: the *Brihat Sama*; *tatha*: as well; *samnam*: of the (hymns) of the *Sama*; *gayatri*: the *Gayatri*; *chandasam*: of poetic metrics; *aham*: I (am); *masanam*: of the months; *marga-sirshah*: the month of Margasirsha; *aham*: I (am); *ritunam*: of the seasons; *kusuma karah*: the maker of flowers.

"Among the hymns of the *Sama Veda*, I am the *Brihat Sama*. Among the forms of poetry I am the *Gayatri*. Among the months I am Margasirsha. Among the seasons, I am the one that brings flowers."

The name *brihat* literally means "great", so we can easily understand the high fame of this particular hymn in the *Sama Veda samhita*, sung by the *udgatar rtivik* during the *soma yajna* to summarize the entire purpose of the hymns of the *Veda samhitas* accompanying the performance of rituals. It is the 7th hymn in the second book (*Uhaganas*) of the traditional collection; it is dedicated to Indra and its translation goes as follows: "Since very ancient times we have sung the hymns of prayers to Indra. (Our ancestors) have sung this *Brihat* in many rituals, expressing the sentiments of worshipers. Indra has given us great wealth, and both the worlds, and the Sun. Therefore we mix milk with the pure and radiant juice of the *soma* for Indra's pleasure."

The *Gayatri* - the "Mother of the *Vedas*" - is the most famous *mantra* in Vedic tradition, and it represents the entire corpus of Vedic knowledge that is transmitted by the *guru* to the disciple together with the sacred thread at the time of *diksha* (initiation), also called *upanayana samskara*. The *Gayatri mantra* is the sacred thread (*sutra*) that binds together the evolved human beings with the other *suras* ("divine beings") who are engaged in supporting the progress and well being of the universe, both materially and spiritually. The original *Gayatri*, quoted in *Rig Veda* 3.62.10, *Yajur Veda* 3.35, 36.3, 22.9 and *Sama Veda* 1.462, is: *om bhuh bhuvah svah, tat savitur varenyam*

bhargo devasya dhimahi dhiyo yah nah prachodayat, "Om! Bhu! Bhvah! Svah! That Divine Supreme (Existence) is radiant and purifying like the Sun. May our intellect receive inspiration from it."

From this original *Gayatri*, the Rishis have created more versions dedicated to the meditation on Ganesha, Surya, Vishnu, Narayana, Nrisimha, Rama, Krishna, Shiva, Durga, Lakshmi, Radha, Sita, Sarasvati, Hanuman, Brahma, Indra, Chandra, Yama, Bhumi, Varuna, Tulasi, Hamsa and Hayagriva.

So important and famous is the *Gayatri mantra*, that it gave its name to the first and foremost metric form in Sanskrit poetry, composed by 3 *padas* (verses, literally "positions" or "feet") of 8 syllables each of precise length (*matra*). The other metric forms (*chandas*) of Sanskrit poetry are the Ushnika, with 4 *padas* of 7 syllables, the Anustubha with 4 *padas* of 8 syllables, the Brihati with 4 *padas* of 9 syllables, the Pankti with 4 *padas* of 10 syllables, the Tristubha with 4 *padas* of 11 syllables and the Jagati, with 4 *padas* of 12 syllables.

In the Vedic calendar, time are calculated according both systems - the solar and the lunar - adjusting the differences with the addition of one special month (Purushottama adhika) every few years. The solar months, however, do not correspond each to the western months because they are calculated to start from the *sankranti*, the day in which the Sun enters each of the Zodiac signs. Western astrology calculates these around the 21 of each month (as they were in ancient times), but since Vedic astrology contemplates the notion of the variable represented by the precession of the equinoxes, it calculates the *sankranti* days in their actual present positions, that fall around the middle of the western months.

Marga sirsha or Marga sira ("the head of the road") is also called Agrahayana ("ahead of the journey") and corresponds to November-December. In India it is harvest time, and still today the celebration of the offering of the first grains (called Pongal in south India) marks the beginning of an important cycle in the year. On the higher planets, this time marks the start of the "working day" for the Devas, who have awakened on Hari utthapana ekadasi (the 11th day of the waxing moon in the previous month of Kartika) and have now completed their morning rituals. We may remember here that one complete year on Earth equals to one single day on the higher planetary systems.

Seasons (*ritus*) are calculated according to the inclination of the Earth in respect to the Sun; it is interesting to note that in the Vedic calendar there are six seasons instead of the four seasons usually considered in the European calendar (winter, spring, summer, autumn).

The six Vedic seasons are: 1. Vasanta Ritu (spring) comprising the two months of Chaitra and Vaisakha (also called Madhu and Madhava), 2. Grishma Ritu (summer) comprising the two months of Jyestha and Ashada (also called Sukra and Suci), Varsha Ritu (rainy season) comprising the two months of Sravana and Bhadra (also called Nabhas and Nabhasya), Sarada Ritu (autumn) comprising the two months of Ashvina and Kartika (also called Isha and Urja), Hemanta Ritu (winter) comprising the two months of Margasirsa and Pausha (also called Sahas and Sahasya), and Sisira Ritu (dewy season) comprising the two months of Magha and Phalgun (also called Tapas and Tapasya). The most pleasant season is certainly spring, that brings flowers and sweetness - in fact *madhu* means "honey".

द्यूतं छलयतामस्मि तेजस्तेजस्विनामहम् । जयोऽस्मि व्यवसायोऽस्मि सत्त्वं सत्त्ववतामहम् ॥ १०-३६ ॥

dyūtam chalayātāmasmi tejastejasvināmaham | jayo'smi vyavasāyo'smi sattvam sattvavatāmaham || 10-36 ||

dyutam: gambling; *chalayatam*: of the cheaters; *asmi*: I am; *tejah*: radiance; *tejasvinam*: of all that is radiant; *aham*: I (am); *jayah*: victory; *asmi*: I am; *vyavasayah*: of ventures; *asmi*: I am; *sattvam*: virtue; *sattva vatam*: of the virtuous; *aham*: I (am).

"Among cheaters, I am gambling. Of all that is radiant, I am the power that radiates. Of all ventures, I am victory. Of everything good, I am goodness."

The word *dyuta* includes all forms of gambling, that constituted a popular pastime in Vedic times, so much that casinos or gambling houses (*dyuta sadanas*) are mentioned in *Bhagavata Purana* (11.25.25) as examples of residence under the influence of ignorance (*tamas*) and one of the four places granted by king Parikshit to the personification of Kali yuga (1.17.38) together with gold hoarding, drinking and smoking and chewing (extravagant foods) and those womanly pastimes that may lead to *adharma*.

Vedic culture does not condemn these activities as sinful, but warns us that they easily stimulate material desires, attachments and identifications, and the power of these material urges can carry the mind away from dharmic considerations. A man who falls victim to the fascination of gold, to the uncontrolled pleasures of the tongue, to sex addiction or to gambling will easily lose his good judgment and become a hopeless slave of illusion and need, suffering immensely and destroying all the good things he had in life - including wealth, health, family relationships, friends, career, respect from society, and even their own life in this world and in the next. This inevitably happens in all cultures.

Gambling is particularly dangerous because it is based on the cheating delusional hope of easy gains obtained without any real work - on the roll of a dice. Nobody really ever wins at gambling, even those who "hit the jackpot" from time to time: otherwise the gambling houses would not be able to thrive on their clients. Sooner or later, gamblers lose everything they had obtained, and usually more than that. What gamblers actually buy is "fun and excitement".

The excitement produced by the conflict of hope and fear for gain and loss respectively stimulates the adrenal glands and the resulting rush of adrenaline - a powerful endorphine - has a physical effect that is not much different from the results of dangerous drugs such as cocaine etc. Adrenaline junks do not purchase narcotics on the market, but they are often even more damaging to society than other addicts, because they normally endanger themselves and others while seeking their "kicks" in extremely dangerous situations.

The word *tejas* is explained as deriving from the root *tij*, meaning "point of flame", as in the rays of the flaming aura we can see in many iconographic images of Devas. The word *tij* also contains the meanings of "to excite", "to stir up", and refers to the impact that *tejas* has on people. This concept has already been elaborated in the commentary to verse 7.9; it includes all forms of power, from the light and heat of the sun and the fire, to the charisma of great leaders, warriors and saints. Similarly, *sattva* includes the concepts of virtue (in the general sense, as "good quality") and goodness and can be applied to all the manifestations of the universe and especially to the activities and choices of human beings, as we will see extensively in chapter 14 of *Bhagavad gita*, dedicated to the *guna traya vibhaga yoga*, the *yoga* of differentiating between the *gunas*.

Tejas and *sattva* are closely linked as symbols of spirit and divinity, as expressed in *Brihad Aranyaka Upanishad* (1.3.28): *asato ma sad gamaya, tamaso ma jyotir gamaya, mrityor ma amritam gamaya*, "from what is temporary lead me to what is eternal, from darkness lead me to the light, from death lead me to eternal life".

The word *jaya* conveys the meaning of excellence achieved through effort, while *vyavasayah* ("venture", "enterprise") conveys the meanings of perseverance and deliberate effort applied with the proper discrimination. These are also characteristics of *sattva*, or goodness. A similar verse is found in *Bhagavata Purana* (11.16.31): *vyavasayinam aham lakshmih, kitavanam chala graha, titikshasmi titikshunam, sattvam sattvavatam aham*, "Of those who work well and hard, I am prosperity. Among the thieves, I am gambling. I am tolerance in tolerant persons, and the goodness in good people".

Of course, this means that gambling includes all the cheating tricks meant to get easy money without really producing anything useful for society - frauds of all types, stock market gambling, interest banking on loans, usury, robberies and so on, that create heavy karmic debts that will have to be paid in the future.

As we may remember, the word *vyavasayah* was already used in verse 2.40 referring to the quality of intelligence (*vyavasayatmika buddhi*) that is resolute and well focused on the purpose, and sustains hard good work that is productive and beneficial for society.

वृष्णीनां वासुदेवोऽस्मि पाण्डवानां धनञ्जयः । मुनीनामप्यहं व्यासः कवीनामुशना कविः ॥ १०-३७ ॥

vṛṣṇīnām vāsudevo'smi paṇḍavānām dhanañjayaḥ | munīnāmapyahaṁ vyāsaḥ kavīnāmuśanā kavīḥ || 10-37 ||

vrishinam: of the Vrishnis; *vasudevah*: Vasudeva (with long "a"); *asmi*: I am; *pandavanam*: of the Pandavas; *dhanañjayaḥ*: the conqueror of wealth; *muninam*: of the Munis; *api*: although; *aham*: I (am); *vyasah*: Vyasa; *kavinam*: of the scholars/ poets; *usana*: Usana; *kaviḥ*: Kavi.

"Among the Vrishnis I am Vasudeva. Among the Pandavas, I am Dhananjaya. Among the munis, I am Vyasa, and among the scholars I am Kavi Usana."

The name Vasudeva (with a long "a") in this verse literally means "son of Vasudeva", and therefore it can be applied to both Krishna and Balarama. At the ontological level, the word means "all-pervading", and therefore it indicates the appearance of Krishna from the all-pervading supreme Consciousness.

Krishna and Arjuna (*Bhagavata Purana*, 4.1.59, 10.69.16, 10.89.59) are Nara and Narayana Rishis, the two great spiritual teachers to whom homage is paid before starting to study the scriptures (1.2.4, 5.19.11, 8.16.34, 10.86.35, 11.5.29-30, and the entire chapter 8 of canto 12). They appeared as the twin sons of Dharma and Murti, daughter of Daksha (1.3.9, 11.4.6) and according to *Bhagavata Purana* (12.4.41) they taught all the *Puranas* to Narada, who in turn transmitted them to Vyasa.

The Vrishnis are a branch of the Yadu dynasty where Krishna appeared; his grandfather king Ugrasena reigned over the Vrishnis, Bhojas, Satvatas and Dasarhas. Vrishni was a great king, the elder of the 100 sons of king Madhu, who descended from Yadu through Jayadhvaja, one of 5 sons of Kartavirya Arjuna who survived the slaughter by Parasurama. Yadu was one of the two sons of Devayani (daughter of Sukracharya) by king Yayati, second son of Nahusha, who had ascended the throne when his elder brother Yati chose to retire in the forest to fully dedicate to spiritual life. Nahusha was a descendant of Pururava and the Apsara Urvasi - like Visvamisra Rishi, the river Kaushiki (previously Visvamisra's sister named Satyavati) and Parasurama. The first origin of this Soma vamsa (lunar dynasty) starts from Atri, *manasa putra* of Brahma; Atri was the father of Soma/ Chandra (the Moon), who eloped with Brihaspati's wife Tara, generating Budha (planet Mercury). Budha became the father of Pururava at the end of Satya yuga.

The name Dhananjaya ("conqueror of wealth") is used to address Arjuna in several verses of *Bhagavad gita*. As we mentioned in the commentary to verse 1.15 it refers to the campaign by which Arjuna traveled in various regions to collect funds from allies in order to build their new capital Khandavaprastha and perform the Rajasuya yajna. Again Krishna addresses Arjuna with this name especially in 2.49 and 9.9 to make a contrast between the ideal position of the *yogi* and the sad position of those misers who act only for their materialistic interest. Arjuna is not the eldest of the Pandava brothers, but he is certainly the most valiant protagonist in the adventures of the sons of Kunti. He is the one who wins the hand of Draupadi in marriage, the one who goes on a quest for special divine weapons up to the capital of Indra, the one who goes alone to fight against the Kurus to defend Virata's kingdom, and leads the Rajasuya campaign to establish Yudhisthira's prominence over the greatest possible area.

Veda Vyasa is the greatest among all those who silently contemplate the vast expanse of Vedic knowledge, and the teacher of all the Rishis that compiled and expanded the Vedic scriptures. Interestingly, he is also a relative of Arjuna, as Vyasa was the first son of Satyavati, who later on married king Santanu, the grandfather of Pandu, the father of the Pandavas, and more importantly, Vyasa was the biological father of Pandu, as he was called by Satyavati to give sons to the widows of his impotent half-brother Vicitravirya.

In this regard, the word *muni* used to indicate Vyasa in this verse can be particularly significant, as Vyasa loyally and humbly obeyed the order of his mother Satyavati, strictly avoiding to reproach or blame her for the unnecessary difficulties that she had created to the royal succession in the Kuru dynasty. When Satyavati was asked in marriage by king Santanu, she should have contented herself of becoming the queen and the foster mother of Bhishma, the perfectly qualified heir apparent to the throne, who was the direct son of Ganga Devi. Instead, she demanded that Bhishma irrevocably renounced all his succession rights in favor of her own future descendants - a disastrous choice that caused immense sufferings to innumerable people.

The word *kavi* literally means "intellectual", "thinker", and is often translated as "poet" because of the remarkable amount of attention and learning required to compose poetry in the Vedic tradition. Unlike modern western arts, that are often whimsical and do not follow any rule (in poetry, as well as in figurative arts such as painting etc) to the point of utter absurdity, all the Vedic arts are extremely precise and carefully codified. Usana is another name of Sukracharya, a great strategical thinker and poet, the traditional preceptor of the Daityas, who skillfully performs all the required rituals to support their astounding military power and luxurious lifestyle. He is famous for having obtained from Shiva the *sanjivani mantra*, that can bring the dead back to life, provided that the bodies have not been critically mutilated (*Bhagavata Purana* 8.11.47). Just like Brihaspati (the preceptor of the Devas) is identified as the planet Jupiter, Sukracharya is identified

as the planet Venus. Puranic genealogical lore, that is charged with deep symbolic meanings, states that Sukracharya is a descendant of Brighu - one of the Sapta Rishis and *manasa putras* of Brahma, mentioned in verse 10.25 as the greatest among the Rishis. Brighu's wife Khyati had two sons (Dhata and Vidhata) and one daughter, Sri, a direct manifestation of Lakshmi. Dhata and Vidhata generated respectively Mrikanda and Prana; Mrikanda became the father of the famous Markandeya Rishi, while Prana's son became the father of Usana/ Sukracharya. Sukra's son Chanda and Amarka were the school teachers for Prahlada, the son of Hiranyakasipu; Sukra also had a daughter called Devayani, who married king Yayati, the father of Yadu - so we can safely say that Krishna is still talking about "family".

Sukracharya is also famous for his *Nitis*, or compilations about good conduct. Here are some examples:

"A King should never lust after the wives of others or the properties of others, or punish his subjects in an angry mood. The lusty attraction towards the wives of others has been the downfall of many great men such as Indra, Dandakya, Nahusha and Ravana. Similarly, one who acts hastily without thinking about the consequences of his actions will only get sorrows. Good actions give good results and bad actions give bad results: so it is very simple, one should engage in good actions and avoid bad actions."

"A *kshatriya* is a brave man who cleverly protects his subjects, controls his own senses and has a natural tendency to oppose wrong doers. One should recognize good qualities even in one's enemies and respect them for that reason; however, bad qualities should be condemned even in one's own son or teacher. In this world nobody is a *brahmana*, *kshatriya*, *vaisya* or *sudra* by birth, but only through *karma* and *samskaras*."

"One must never show indifference towards his wife, child, diseases, servants/ subordinates, domestic animals, wealth, knowledge and studies, and serving the good people. One should maintain secrecy about 9 things: his own age, wealth, house problems, practice of *mantras*, sexual intercourse, consumption of medicine, acts of charity (given or received), and acts of respect and disrespect (given or received)."

दण्डो दमयतामस्मि नीतिरस्मि जिगीषताम् । मौनं चैवास्मि गुह्यानां ज्ञानं ज्ञानवतामहम् ॥ १०-३८ ॥

dandaḍo damayatāmasmi nītirasmi jigīṣatām | maunaṁ caivāsmi guhyānāṁ jñānaṁ jñānavatāmaham || 10-38 ||

dandah: the use of force; *damatayam*: of the curbing; *asmi*: I am; *nitih*: ethics; *asmi*: I am; *jigishatam*: of those who seek victory; *maunam*: silence; *ca*: and; *eva*: certainly; *asmi*: I am; *guhyanam*: of the secrets; *jnanam*: the knowledge; *jnanavatam*: of the learned; *aham*: I (am).

"Among the subduers, I am the use of force. Of those who seek victory, I am ethical behavior. Of secrets, I am silence. Of those who have knowledge, I am knowledge itself."

Danda (literally, "the stick", i.e. the use or simply the threat of force) is one of the categories of action contemplated by the codes of government against enemies, as the last resort after the failing of the other categories of action - *sama* (not fueling low level dangers by giving them real importance), *dana* (offering of gifts or benefits to turn enemies into allies), and *bheda* (creating divisions among enemies).

The use of force should be avoided as much as possible, but it is not negative in itself - rather it is perfectly legitimate and even sacred, as Krishna expresses in this verse. The concept of *ahimsa* does not mean that the use of force is adharmic in itself: it means that it should be applied without hatred. Also, it is very important here to understand who is the enemy that we must subdue.

Only an aggressor is an enemy. Vedic civilization does not mistake dissenters for enemies, and does not interfere with the individual's private life, professional occupation, beliefs, or freedom of expression. The government (the *kshatriyas*) intervene only when an innocent individual is subject to an aggression that s/he is unable to prevent or stop - this is the true demonstration of the famous motto "to serve and protect". There is no need for the government to issue or enforce many laws and rules to restrict the liberties of the people: the only thing that the government/ *kshatriya*/ police should do is to protect the people (innocent human beings and innocent animals) from any form of violence.

In the Vedic system there are no jails or lawyers. Any individual has the right to fight back all categories of aggressors (*atayinah*): those who attack with any type of deadly weapon, or who set fire to a house, give poison, attack (rape or abduct) a girl or woman, break into a house to steal or destroy/ damage property, or encroach land or property. Thus any individual has the right to own suitable defensive weapons and is responsible for their proper use. The *kshatriya* (police) should only intervene to protect a victim of aggression that is unable to protect himself/ herself sufficiently. If the aggressor surrenders and atones/ pays for his crime by compensating the victim appropriately, he is allowed to go free; repeat offenders are immediately exiled. If the aggressor does not surrender but escapes, the *kshatriya* has the duty to pursue him and bring him to justice to the full satisfaction of the damaged party - which by the way is the victim of the aggression, and not the government itself. However, all such dealings should be moderated by ethical considerations, especially in the behavior of the most powerful and responsible persons concerned - those who pursue victory, as clearly stated in this verse. It is important to understand the meaning of the word *nitih*, that implies wisdom, ethical values, integrity, responsible conduct, and so on. In Vedic literature, *nitishastras* are the texts that teach all this. Revenge is not condemned or forbidden in itself, but those who behave within the restraint of wisdom and compassion are blessed with a virtuous victory that represents Krishna.

Keeping silence about secrets or hidden things is not only a legitimate choice, but even a commendable or sacred course of action. It is true that truthfulness is a great virtue, but that does not mean that we are supposed to disclose everything to the wrong people, or at the wrong time and place, or circumstances. In any case, when a secret is spoken about, it's not a secret anymore - it has lost the essence of its existence. *Jnanam* is knowledge, or in other words, the perception and memory of an objective fact. Without knowledge, learning has absolutely no meaning or existence: this confirms the pragmatic and honest approach of Vedic civilization in regard to reality. It does not matter how many academic titles, advertisement, certificates and stamps one can obtain from so-called registered authorities: the only evidence of knowledge is the knowledge itself.

यच्चापि सर्वभूतानां बीजं तदहमर्जुन । न तदस्ति विना यत्स्यान्मया भूतं चराचरम् ॥ १०-३९ ॥

yaccāpi sarvabhūtānām bijam tadahamarjuna | na tadasti vinā yatsyānmayā bhūtaṁ carācaram || 10-39 ||

yat: whatever; ca: and; api: certainly; sarva-bhutanam: of all existences/ beings; bijam: the seed; tat: that; aham: I (am); arjuna: Arjuna; na: not; tat: that; asti: there is; vina: without; yat: that; syat: there can be; maya: by me; bhutam: of (all) beings; chara acharam: moving and non-moving.

"O Arjuna, I am the seed of all existences, of all beings - moving and non-moving. Without me, nothing could ever exist."

The comparison with the seed (*bija*) has already been mentioned in verse 7.10 (*bijam mam sarva-bhutanam viddhi partha sanatanam, buddhir buddhimatam asmi tejas tejasvinam aham*, "O Partha, know that I am the eternal seed of all existences/ all beings. I am intelligence in the intelligent, and I am the powerful radiance in the powerful"). In the commentary to that verse, we elaborated on the basic concept of seed as the principle or essence of everything, the blueprint of existence, the information from which things manifest and develop. On the spiritual level, this is represented by the *bija mantras*, the "seed sounds" that contain the personal presence of the Deity.

In verse 14.4, Krishna will give another statement that completes these two: *sarva-yonishu kaunteya murtayah sambhavanti yah, tasam brahma mahad yonir aham bija-pradah pita*, "O son of Kunti, whatever form they will develop, in whatever matrix, all (beings) are born from the supreme matrix of Brahman, and I am the father, that gives the seed."

The broad categorization between moving beings and non-moving beings, offered by the Vedic tradition, is more practical than the conventional classification of animals and plants, because it is functional and not ontological. Therefore it does not have "gray areas" such as the sea anemone and the carnivorous plants, and it can be verified empirically and directly by anyone. As we have already mentioned in several commentaries, the word *bhuta* literally means "being", so it can apply both to living beings and to the conditions of being or circumstances in life. This interpretation is perfectly in line with the series of examples presented by Krishna in this thread of conversation.

This last statement summarizes the meaning and purpose of all the previous examples, and closes the thread.

नान्तोऽस्ति मम दिव्यानां विभूतीनां परन्तप । एष तूद्देशतः प्रोक्तो विभूतेर्विस्तरो मया ॥ १०-४० ॥

nānto'sti mama divyānām vibhūtīnām parantapa | eṣa tūddeśataḥ prokto vibhūtervistaro mayā || 10-40 ||

na: not; antah: end; asti: there is; mama: my; divyanam: divine; vibhutinam: powers; parantapa: o scorcher of the enemies; esah: (all) this; tu: but; uddesatah: examples; proktaḥ: told (by me); vibhuteh: of glories; vistarah: the scope; maya: by me.

"O Parantapa, there is no end to my divine powers. This (series of statements in the previous verses) that I have spoken about, was just to exemplify the scope of my glories."

The word *divya* is applied here to the *vibhuti* - glories, powers, opulences - of the Supreme Personality of God, Krishna. We have already mentioned that the root of the word *divya* ("divine") is *div*, from which we have other words such as *deva* ("God"), *diva* ("day"), and so on. The word *div* contains the meanings of "resplendent", "powerful", "radiant". Another word for "divine" is *daiva*, as we will see later in the chapter entitled *daivasura sampad vibhaga yoga*, the *yoga* of the difference between *deva* and *asura*. Its meaning is slightly different, as it derives not directly from *div*, but from *deva*, therefore it refers to a quality that is manifested personally by a *deva* like the noble personalities in charge of the administration of the universe. On the other hand, the concept of *divya* develops at a primeval level, at a point that is the origin of the *devas* and of all other manifestations as well - the Supreme Brahman, Paramatma and Bhagavan. Here Krishna addresses Arjuna calling him Parantapa ("scorcher of the enemy"), which implies the fact that Arjuna, too, manifests a part of Krishna's *divya vibhuti*s, most notably through his extraordinary valor in fighting.

We could continue forever talking in the thread of the divine powers manifested in this creation, as the universe is full of wonderful and powerful things in many dimensions. Krishna has spoken of things that human beings can easily understand, but there are many more things on the higher and subtler levels of reality, in what we could call "other dimensions". This is the reason why the extent of the compilations of the Vedic scriptures varies considerably from age to age, and from place to place, as it is presented in a manner that is suitable for the understanding of the people it is meant for. On other planets (or in other dimensions, if we prefer) the *devas* can avail of much larger compilations, and even on our own planet/ plane of existence, the collection of Vedic teachings was much larger in previous ages, such as Dvapara, Treta and Satya. Mainstream conventional historians believe that civilization started only about 5000 years ago with the "invention" of the art of writing, but according to the Vedic tradition, exactly the opposite was true. People knew very well how to write even in previous ages, but they simply did not give it much importance because memory, intelligence and the other faculties of human beings were much sharper and stronger than we can find in Kali yuga. They remembered what they needed to do without having to note down a "to do list". To make a crude example, we can apply the same principle to the situation of an old man who is afflicted by senile dementia, Parkinson's disease, Alzheimer's, or a similar decrease in mental faculties, who starts wearing a bracelet where his own home address is written. This does not mean that he has "evolved" and now he has become able to write his name and address on his personal ornaments. It means that his memory has become so weak that he needs to read his bracelet to find his way back home, otherwise he will be lost.

यद्यद्विभूतिमत्सत्त्वं श्रीमदूर्जितमेव वा । तत्तदेवावगच्छ त्वं मम तेजोऽसम्भवम् ॥ १०-४१ ॥

yadyadvibhūtimatsattvaṁ śrīmadūrjitameva vā | tattadevāvagaccha tvam mama tejo'sambhavam || 10-41 ||

yat: whatever; yat: whatever; vibhuti mat: that has powers; sattvam: existence/ virtue; srimat: beautiful/ wonderful; urjitam: glorious; eva: certainly; va: or; tat: that; tat: that; eva: certainly; avagaccha: (you) should come to; tvam: you; mama: my; tejah amsa: a part of the radiance; sambhavam: come to existence.

"Anything that is good, powerful, wonderful, or glorious, you should encounter, has come to existence as a part of my radiance."

The word *tejas* is used here to indicate the origin of the *vibhūtis*: we can better understand the meaning by comparing the two terms with the radiance of the sun and the sun rays respectively. The rays are emanations from the original radiance, that is the power of the Sun. Similarly, the *vibhūtis* manifested in this universe of which Krishna has spoken to Arjuna are the emanations from the original *tejas* or radiance (*brahmajyoti*) of the Supreme Brahman.

The examples listed up to here refer to things that Arjuna (or a human being living on this planet) might have come to encounter (*avagaccha*) and is therefore able to understand. There is no end to such wonderful manifestations, because they are not limited to the natural phenomena but also include the creations of the human intellect, which is also a creation of God. So all the great artistic products of all living beings can be counted among the *divya vibhūtis* of the Supreme Personality of God - the pyramids, great temples and other magnificent buildings, jewels and ornaments, paintings, sculptures, and so on.

Anything that takes our breath away in awe and wonder - and inspires a sense of worship even in the most primitive human minds - is giving us a glimpse of God's divine powers. Krishna has spoken about the "most prominent" (*pradhanyatah*, 10.19) of such things, that are the most easily macroscopic, visible and famous in Vedic civilization.

However, there are endless other wonders even on this Earth, that are not considered very extraordinary by many people - a mighty waterfall, a powerful cyclone, a sunlit meadow, a forest of majestic trees, delicate flowers, or even the beauty of animals. What to speak of the wonders of the atoms and sub-atomic particles, even a mere grain of sand seen through a strong magnifying device or the multicolored designs on the wings of a butterfly can inspire great admiration in those who are sensitive to the beauty of the universe.

This means that we can constantly remain conscious of Krishna wherever we turn our eyes, even on the "material" things, provided we look at the world with the respect, admiration, love and sense of worship that is the sentiment of religious/ spiritual meditation, as stated by Arjuna (10.17). Actually, for a person who is truly Krishna conscious there is nothing "material" - everything is spiritual, because it is a manifestation of Krishna's glories. It is all a matter of consciousness (*chaitanya*).

The *Upanishads* and especially the *Svetasvatara Upanishad*, confirm the import of these verses. The chapters 4, 5 and 6 declare that God can be perceived in fire, in the sun, the moon, the stars, in any woman, man, boy, girl, or a thundercloud. God can be perceived in the beauty of the seasons, of blue butterfly and the green parrot. Everything is manifested from God's *svabhava* (*Svetasvatara Upanishad*, 5.5).

अथवा बहूनैतेन किं ज्ञातेन तवार्जुन । विष्टभ्याहमिदं कृत्स्नमेकांशेन स्थितो जगत् ॥ १०-४२ ॥

athavā bahunaitena kim jñātena tavārjuna | viṣṭabhyāhamidaṁ kṛtsnamekāśena sthito jagat || 10-42 ||

atha va: or also; *bahuna*: many; *etena*: by these; *kim*: what; *jñātena*: by knowing; *tava*: your; *arjuna*: Arjuna; *viṣṭabhya*: pervading; *aham*: I (am); *idam*: this; *kṛtsnam*: entire; *eka*: one; *amsena*: by a part; *sthitah*: established; *jagat*: the universe.

"O Arjuna, what more should we say about these things that can be known? I pervade and establish this entire universe simply by one partial manifestation (of myself)."

The expression *ekamsena sthita*, "established from one *amsa*", refers to the fact that the Personality of God that establishes and pervades all the material universes is known as Kshirodakasayi Vishnu, the form of the Paramatma that resides in Svetadvipa in the ocean of milk within this universe. As explained in the *Bhagavata Purana* (1.3.1, 3.7.22, 11.15.18) this is the third expansion of the *purusha avatara* that penetrates the material energy to manifest the universes.

The first form of this *purusha avatara* is Karanodakasayi, also called Maha Vishnu or Narayana, who rests on the Causal Ocean (*karana* means "cause", *udaka* means "ocean" and *sayi* means "reclining") also called Viraja. All the universes emanate from the pores of Karanodakasayi at each exhalation, and are withdrawn again into his body at each inhalation. After exhaling the universes, the *purusha avatara* enters each one of them as Garbhodakasayi (*garbha* means "embryo", "fetus" or "uterus"), who rests at the bottom of the universal egg (*brahma anda*) on the Garbha ocean. From the water contained within his navel, a lotus flower (that is, a form that we can compare to a lotus flower) grows, and in the middle of this blooming lotus, Brahma is born. The third form of the *purusha avatara* resides in *prapancika vaikuntha*, also called Svetadvipa, that is located on the pole star (also called Dhruvaloka), and from there he establishes a direct connection within the heart of each being and each atom of the universe.

The expression *atha va bahuna etena kim jñātena* ("what more things can be known") should be understood correctly. Krishna is not saying that there is no need to speak about such glories, otherwise he would not have recommended to Arjuna to meditate on them. He is rather saying that Arjuna must have understood the point, and can find other examples by himself. Ideologies that teach a fundamental opposition between spirit and matter tend to create a dangerous confusion in the minds of people, to the point of demonizing the material manifestations in the universe and preaching that we need to fight against nature and subdue it as an inferior and negative power. This is not the Vedic perspective.

True, there is a distinction between the *para* and *apara prakriti*, the "supreme" and "not supreme" functions of nature, but there is no condemnation in such definition - just the expression of a different type of manifestation.

So although we are advised to move our consciousness from the temporary material manifestations to the eternal existence of consciousness (spirit), nevertheless we need to offer our sincere respect and worship to the Divine in material manifestations as well.

The word *viṣṭabhya* includes the meanings of "pervading", "supporting", "being situated in", "accepting the form", "controlling" - all of which can help us to better understand the nature and activities of God.

The word *kṛtsnam*, meaning "entire", applies here to the universal form of which Krishna has been speaking in these last chapters. The same meaning is conveyed by the words *jagat*, *akhila*, and *visvam*, also used extensively in *Bhagavad gita* and other Vedic texts. However, this amazing universal form, so full of great, glorious and majestic manifestations, is simply one fraction of God's creation. It is called *ekapada*, "one *pada*", where *pada* means "foot", "position" or "measure", as in the metric measurement of poetic verses.

There is another and greater expanse of *vibhūtis*, called the *tri-pada-vibhūti*, that consists of the glories and wonders of the spiritual world, that is eternal and unlimited by time or space. This *tripada vibhūti* is mentioned as *tripadasyamritam divi* ("the 3 divine imperishable *padas*") in several traditional scriptures, such as the *Puruṣa sukta* in *Rig Veda* (10.90.3) and the *Taittirya Aranya Upanishad* (3.12.3).

Why three? When we speak of innumerable universes, and the unlimited expanse of the spiritual world, saying that the spiritual world is three times greater than all the material universes together, we are dealing with quantities that are not in the scope of ordinary human calculation. Who can count even only the stars in this one universe? Yet, Vedic rishis speak of a proportion - not a quantity - of something much greater, with the same confidence and clarity they show when they speak of the astronomical duration of the entire life of Brahma, itself containing a great number of cycles of creation and dissolution of the universe, and then compare it to a mere breathing cycle of Narayana.

Only ignorant people can dismiss such information as mere mythology. Many great physicists working at the cutting edge of the exploration of the mysteries of the cosmos have shown great admiration for the extraordinary vision of the Vedic Rishis. Werner Heisenberg, Robert Oppenheimer, Brian David Josephson, and other famous scientists and writers such as Fritjof Capra and Alan Watts are only a few of such people, that we have quoted in our book *Introduction to Vedic Knowledge*.

Chapter 11

Visva rupa darshana yoga

The yoga of contemplation of the universal form

After speaking about the glories of the universal form, Krishna is now going to show it directly to Arjuna, on his request. Arjuna knows that the supreme Consciousness can connect directly to his mind and give him a direct perception of its *vibhūtis*, just as if he was looking at it physically. What would be the difference anyway?

What is sense perception? A micro electrical transmission in the nervous system, carried by the electro-magnetic power of consciousness, and received from other sources of transmission that use waves of various frequencies, such as light, sound, motion, heat, etc. When the consciousness leaves the body, or where the nervous system wiring is interrupted by tissue damage, there is no more sense perception.

Conversely, when the consciousness expands outside the range of the physical senses (sight, hearing, touch, smell, taste), it can perceive other things in what many call ESP (extra sensorial perception). Also, there is a "6th sense" of subtle perception of magnetic energy, that we can feel for example when we are within someone else's magnetic sphere of the body (called *aura*), and we can perceive their emotions - such as fear, lust, joy, anger, etc.

Conventional academy says it is about pheromones - a type of hormones produced by the gland system in our bodies, that give off a particular smell, but if our perception is clear enough, we can directly experience a flow of energy, like an electrical current, that has nothing to do with smell. In this regard, we may note that according to the Vedic system, the mind is called the 6th sense.

Furthermore, the mind can independently create sensory perceptions through visualization, memory, and even hallucination - that are increasingly powerful manifestations with varying degrees of deliberation, knowledge and awareness, depending on the individual experiencing them.

Popular mainstream culture has developed a sort of duality of love-hatred for these powerful functions of the mind, on one side ridiculing and condemning day-dreaming and hallucinations, and on the other side praising genius in creative imagination. The actual difference between the two sides is the strength of awareness and understanding. The lack of knowledge and clarity among the general population usually lead people to think that the problem is about conventional reality versus subjective illusion, and to rely on established official authorities to tell the difference between the two.

However, the boundary between what is acceptable and what is not acceptable can be easily misplaced by ill-motivated leaders that take the position of authorities in spite of their lack of ethical qualifications. This generates serious problems at many levels - individual and collective - and inevitably sufferings appear whenever the natural order becomes unbalanced and the purpose of life is derailed.

Vedic knowledge gives us a complete and scientific method of directly verifiable experiences, that can be repeated consistently by different individuals in exactly the same way, with the precisely same procedures and results. This is why it is so important for any student of Vedic knowledge to follow the requirements with the greatest precision and sincerity possible, because even a small inconsistency or disruption in the programmed protocols will vitiate the process and make it unsuccessful. Thus, academic indology is intrinsically doomed to fail to understand Vedic knowledge, because it does not give any importance to the actual key that can open its doors.

Modern medical research has admitted that a large part of the human brain (between 65% and 85%) remains unused by most people in contemporary society. The ancient science of *yoga* is precisely meant to train individuals to the full utilization of the human body-mind set, consciously engaging those faculties that sometimes manifest spontaneously in phenomena that modern science cannot explain, and that have been defined as telepathy, telekinesis, clairvoyance, and so on.

अर्जुन उवाच ।

arjuna uvāca ।

मदनुग्रहाय परमं गुह्यमध्यात्मसंज्ञितम् ।

यत्त्वयोक्तं वचस्तेन मोहोऽयं विगतो मम ॥ ११-१ ॥

madanugrahāya paramam guhyamadhyaātmasañjītam । yattvayoktam vacastena mohoyam vigato mama ॥ 11-1 ॥

arjunah: Arjuna; *uvaca*: said; *mat anugrahaya*: for kindness towards me; *paramam*: supreme; *guhyam*: secret; *adhyatma*: of the original *atman*; *samjñitam*: understanding; *yat*: that; *tvaya*: by you; *uktam*: said; *vacah*: words; *tena*: by that; *mohah*: confusion; *ayam*: this; *vigatah*: is gone; *mama*: my.

Arjuna said, "My confusion has been removed by the teachings that you have kindly explained to me about the supreme secret of spiritual science."

The transmission of this intimate knowledge is motivated by kindness and compassion, as *Bhagavad gita* has already mentioned before (10.11). This is because the only real problem in the world is ignorance, or the absence of proper knowledge and realization, that is causing all types of sufferings. Ignorance is the only real enemy to be defeated, both at individual and at collective level, and the only means to defeat it is knowledge. For this reason, the Supreme Consciousness descends in human form into this world from time to time (*paritrānaya sadhunam vinasaya ca dushkritam, dharma samsthapanarthaya sambhavami yuge yuge*, "I manifest myself *yuga* after *yuga*, to protect the good people, destroy the evil doers and to establish *dharma*", 4.8), and/ or empowers individual souls (*shakti avesā*) to carry on the mission of transmitting Vedic knowledge. It is the most important job in the entire universe, and it can really change the history of mankind.

True, life in the material body is inevitably marred by the inherent pains of birth, disease, old age and death, but these sufferings can be reduced to almost nothing by applying the proper knowledge offered by the genuine and original Vedic tradition. It's not just about the medical, social, or technological fields, that can greatly improve the quality of life: above all, it is about the fundamental knowledge of the Self, that dispels the illusion (*moha vigata*) clouding the natural and fundamental happiness (*ananda*) that is the nature of the Self. The *adhyatma* is the original Self, the *atman* of the *atman*, the soul of the soul. It is individual and at the same time, it is beyond individuality, because all Consciousness is connected: this is the supreme secret, the *paramam guhyam*, that Krishna has been explaining (9.1-2, 15.19, 18.63-64, 18.67, 18.74).

Conditioned souls waste their time and energy running after the whims and desires of their minds, hoping to find happiness in the external objects of sense gratification, when actually the real happiness is already eternally (*sat*) present within the Self. The key to actually experiencing this happiness is knowledge or awareness (*cit*).

Here Arjuna is confirming this realization for us, and expressing gratitude towards Krishna for this wonderful gift. We know that Arjuna is simply playing the role of the student for our benefit, because he is not an ordinary ignorant person. So the gratitude he expresses for Krishna's kindness applies also to recognizing his affection in including him into the compassionate plan for the dissemination of the transcendental science among the conditioned souls. This declaration concludes the first part of the *Bhagavad gita*, that started when Arjuna, apparently overwhelmed by confusion, requested Krishna to dispel his doubts (1.28, 2.7-8). In this first part, Arjuna asked many questions (2.54, 3.1, 3.36, 4.4, 5.1, 6.33, 6.37, 8.1). After contemplating the universal form, Arjuna will ask more questions, albeit on a higher level of understanding (12.1, 13.1, 14.21, 17.1, 18.1), giving Krishna the opportunity to elaborate more on the practical aspects of devotional service. At the conclusion of the conversation, in 18.73, Arjuna will again state that confusion has been destroyed (*nasto mohah*) and the memory regained (*smritir labdha*) thanks to the kindness of Krishna (*tvat prasadam*).

In that last verse (18.73) Arjuna's words can be referred to the confusion of the general people, and also to his memory of the mission in which he was meant to engage by Krishna's side. Thus we should be extremely grateful for all the opportunities we are offered in this world to come in touch with spiritual knowledge.

भवाप्ययौ हि भूतानां श्रुतौ विस्तरशो मया । त्वत्तः कमलपत्राक्ष माहात्म्यमपि चाव्ययम् ॥ ११-२ ॥

bhavāpyayau hi bhūtānām śrutau vistaraśo mayā । tvattah kamalapatrākṣa mahātmyamapi cāvayam ॥ 11-2 ॥

bhava: the coming to existence; *apyayau*: and the dissolution; *hi*: indeed; *bhutanam*: of (all) beings/ existences; *srutau*: (that I have) heard; *vistarasaḥ*: the elaboration; *maya*: by me; *tvattah*: from you; *kamala patra aksha*: o lotus-eyed; *mahatmyam*: the glorification; *api*: although; *ca*: and; *avyayam*: imperishable.

"O lotus-eyed (Lord), I have heard from you the explanation about the manifestation and the withdrawal of all existences/ beings, and the glories of the imperishable (spirit)."

The word *apiya* means "withdrawing", and refers to the time of the dissolution of the universes (*Bhagavata Purana*, 10.87.12), when all the worlds again enter into Narayana's body (*sva sristam idam apiya sayanam saha shaktibhih*, "having absorbed this world, that was originally created by him, he reclines together with his energies").

We have often elaborated on the meaning of *bhava*, as "existence", or "appearance", as in "becoming". This word applies to the transformations of material nature, and together with the idea of dissolution of the material manifestation, it creates a contrast with the eternal imperishable existence (*avyayam*) whose *vibhūtis* manifest within the creation and make it glorious. Yet, the two elements - spirit and matter - are not in opposition, but rather they are contemplated in their fruitful union, motivated by the divine compassion for the individual souls who will thus obtain the opportunity to evolve and develop up to the perfect spiritual realization.

The word *srutah*, "heard", refers to the direct process of the acquisition of knowledge, from the mouth of the *guru* and from the original Vedic scriptures, called *sruti*, that are as valid as the process of direct hearing from the realized souls (*tattva darsis*, 2.16, 4.34) or having a direct personal perception (*darshana*, 5.18, 6.29, 11.4, 11.5, 11.9, 11.10, 11.45, 11.46, 11.47, 11.50, 11.52, 13.9, 13.12), that is precisely

the subject of this chapter. The recognized *sruti* scriptures are the *Veda samhitas*, the *Brahmanas*, *Aranyakas*, *Upanishads*, and the *Vedanta sutras*. Many also recognize the *Puranas*, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* as traditional *sruti*. The other scriptures, that constitute the commentaries to the original *srutis*, are called *smritis* ("about remembering") because their compilers wrote them by remembering the *srutis*. The word *vistara* conveys the meanings of "elaboration", "enumeration", "explanation", "evaluation", "measurement", "expansion", "expanse", "scope", and so on. Of course, as Krishna has clearly said, the description in these chapters is only meant to give a glimpse of a subject that is truly unlimited and always expanding.

The expression *kamala patra aksha*, "lotus-eyed", is also significant here. The lotus flower is not simply a symbol of beauty, freshness and elegance, but also of extreme purity; although it grows in muddy ponds, the flower is always perfectly fresh and pure, crispy clean and emanating a sweet fragrance, even under the scorching rays of the sun. Therefore the example of the lotus flower is applied to the divine Personalities that appear in this material world but are never tainted by any material contamination - rather they bring their purity, freshness, beauty and sweet scent to the conditioned souls who live in the muddy pond. We often find the lotus example in descriptions of the form of divine Personalities, referred to various parts of the body. The lotus eyes refer to the function of seeing, and indicate that divine Personalities have a pure vision (*darshana*) and are not distracted by temporary manifestations like conditioned souls are. The *yogi* that rises to the platform of divine Consciousness naturally develops the same purity of vision (5.18, 6.29, 11.4, 11.8, 11.9, 11.46, 11.47, 11.50, 11.53, 13.9, 13.12).

The lotus feet represent the purity of the teachings of the divine Personality and the service that is offered to such teachings. *Bhagavata Purana* (6.3.19) states that Bhagavan directly appears to establish *dharma* (*dharmam tu saksad bhagavat pranitam*), and this is also confirmed in *Bhagavad gita* (4.8). This means that the mission of innovation and reformation in religious tradition needs a very clear and solid realization (*darshana*) of the supreme Consciousness - that is substantially the position of Bhagavan himself. Here we need to understand that Bhagavan is a state of consciousness; individual *jivatmas* can also be Krishna conscious (attaining the Bhagavan quality or level of consciousness), although their individual "quantity" of consciousness remains limited. This is why the name Bhagavan is also used for great personalities such as Narada etc.

At the spiritual level there is no difference between *vapu* ("form") and *vani* ("message"), and in fact the *vani* is much more important than the *vapu*. To understand this point, we can bring the example of a good servant who eagerly follows the orders of the master, and is more pleasing to the master than another servant who is just sitting and looking at him without doing anything. The lotus hands metaphor refers to the purity of action, as we can observe for example in the loving play between Krishna and the *gopis*.

Ordinary materialists, afflicted by bodily identification and base lust, remain unable to see how Krishna's caressing the intimate parts of the cowherd girls' bodies can be a purely spiritual action. The secret to this understanding is the difference between love and lust. While lust is selfish and wants to get pleasure for oneself and a feeling of possession and domination, love is selfless and wants to give happiness and pleasure only. In this perspective, even (genuine) love between two individual souls must be respected as spiritual. This is why Krishna has already declared (7.11) that sexual desire is sacred and divine when it is in accordance to the principles of *dharma*. The word *mahatmya* refers to the description of the glories. The origin of the word comes from *maha atman*, "great personality", but since in Vedic tradition all glorious manifestations are considered personalities, it applies also to holy places, scriptures, etc.

Thus we find the *Gita mahatmya*, the *Dhama mahatmya*, and so on. One of the most famous *mahatmyas* is the *Devi Mahatmya*, from chapter 81 to chapter 93 of *Markandeya Purana*.

एवमेतद्यथात्थ त्वमात्मानं परमेश्वर । द्रष्टुमिच्छामि ते रूपमैश्वरं पुरुषोत्तम ॥ ११-३ ॥

evametadyathātha tvamātmānam paramēśvara | draṣṭumicchāmi te rūpamaiśvaram puruṣottama || 11-3 ||

evam: thus; *etat*: this; *yatha*: as it is; *atha*: has been spoken; *tvam*: you; *atmanam*: Self; *parama isvara*: supreme Lord; *drastum*: to see; *icchami*: I wish; *te*: your; *rupam*: the form; *aisvaram*: majestic/ divine; *purusha uttama*: o supreme Purusha.

"O supreme Lord, I also wish to see you as you have described your self - that majestic form of the supreme Purusha."

In other words, Arjuna is saying, "what you have spoken about yourself, I wish to see directly".

We should be careful not to trivialize the meaning of this verse by bringing it down to a material challenge. Materialistic people want to see "miracles" but these are not to be considered actual evidence of divinity, because there are so many tricks that can be used to bamboozle the senses and the minds of ordinary people. Simple hypnotism can already make us believe we are seeing or perceiving things that do not really exist in tangible reality, or make us fail to perceive what is actually existing, as it has been amply demonstrated by clinical hypnosis, that is even used as anesthetic in surgical operations. Illusionists also have their own craft secrets, especially if they can work in their own special environment, or with suitable instruments. Besides these cheap magicians, there are also genuine *yoga* adepts that have developed real magic powers, and can manifest wonders to impress their followers. Flying or walking on water, producing fire without fuel, controlling the weather, materializing physical objects, traveling in subtle dimensions and other similar feats are perfectly within the reach of any human being, provided that the proper process is followed. Some humanoid races - such as the Siddhas, Gandharvas, Rakshasas, Yakshas, Nagas, etc - are naturally capable of manifesting these functions without being trained. But that does not prove they are God. On the other side, we can see that a genuine divine Personality may simply refuse to grant such a request, saying that we do not have the required vision (*divya chakshu*), as Krishna says in 11.8. So we cannot rely on the "request for miracle" asking people to show their universal form to verify their divinity, because they can always reply that we are not qualified to see it. We need to be more intelligent than this, and to develop the proper knowledge and realization that are required to recognize a genuine divine manifestation.

Arjuna's request is not an idle one. He is not looking for some entertainment, or legal evidence, or the satisfaction of material curiosity: he wants to put theory into practice, and actually experience the meaning of divine Consciousness. This should also be our purpose. Theoretical knowledge will not be sufficient to take us to the liberated platform or further up to the level of transcendental relationships: we need to take the big leap into full dedication to practicing spiritual life.

The tradition of *bhakti* literature explains that there are 3 levels in spiritual progress - the *kanistha*, the *madhyama* and the *uttama*. The *kanistha* level is characterized by a certain measure of theoretical knowledge, that enables one to understand that spiritual and religious life is about worshipping God and observing certain rules and regulations in one's activities. This is the position where most religious people stand, in all the different faiths and ideological traditions; they mostly rely on the instructions given by their specific religious authorities or recognized holy books. They attend or perform religious rituals in temples/ churches/ mosques/ holy or sacred places of various types, and show respect and adoration to sacred symbols such as images, statues, etc.

If their religious authorities are genuine, and the followers are sincere enough to listen to their own conscience, everything is well, because the universal and eternal principles of religion can be perceived spontaneously and naturally by any human being. Also, the symbolic language of the subconscious is common to all human beings in all cultures, so anyone can appreciate and understand (more or less consciously) the iconography and the meaning of the universal archetypes that are connected to the Divine. We will elaborate more on this point in another publication, specifically dedicated to the subject. Here we can simply mention that God is naturally and spontaneously perceived as the supreme Father and/ or Mother, and associated with the fundamental elements of power that we can observe around us - such as the Sun, etc.

मन्यसे यदि तच्छक्यं मया द्रष्टुमिति प्रभो । योगेश्वर ततो मे त्वं दर्शयात्मानमव्ययम् ॥ ११-४ ॥

manyase yadi tacchakyaṁ mayā draṣṭumiti prabho | yogeśvara tato me tvaṁ darśayātmānamavyayam || 11-4 ||

manyase: you think; *yadi*: if; *tat*: that; *sakyam*: capable; *maya*: by me; *drastum*: to be seen; *iti*: like this; *prabho*: o Lord; *yoga isvara*: o Lord of *yoga*; *tatah*: then; *me*: to me; *tvam*: you; *darshaya*: let me see; *atmanam*: the Self; *avyayam*: imperishable.

"O Lord, supreme master of *yoga*, if you think that I am capable of seeing it, then please let me have the direct vision of your imperishable self."

The expression *sakyam mayā drastum* means "I have the power to see", where *sakyam* comes from the same root as *sakti* (*shakti*). Krishna has already declared (2.25) that the *atman* cannot be perceived by material senses: *avyakto 'yam acintyo 'yam avikaryo 'yam ucyate*, "It is said that this (soul) is invisible to material eyes, inconceivable to material intellect, and not affected by change".

This "invisibility to material eyes" was defined by the word *acintya*, literally meaning "inconceivable". The point here is that the eyes can see only what the mind is able to take in: a mind still wrapped in material identifications and projections can barely see beyond the veil of matter. Physically speaking - as we have already mentioned - sense perception is nothing but a micro-electrical current that travels along the nervous system, and it can be easily replicated for example by electronic equipments that are used to experience virtual reality in computer simulations.

A few verses later (2.29) in the second chapter, Krishna had stated that it is indeed possible to see the *atman*: *ascarya-vat pasyati kascid enam ascarya-vad vadati tathaiva canyah, ascarya-vac cainam anyah srinoti srutvapy enam veda na caiva kascit*, "Some see this (*atman*) as amazing, some others describe it as amazing. Some hear (of it) as amazing, and some remain unable to understand it even after hearing about it."

This basically means that spiritual reality, constituted by spiritual bodies (*tad rupa* or *svarupa*) and spiritual objects (*siddha vastu*) can indeed be directly perceived by our physical senses, provided that our mind is adequately pure and tuned into the required level of consciousness. This is a radical concept, challenging the popular misconception according to which, as a definition, matter is tangible and real, while spirit is intangible or abstract. According to this Vedic vision, the direct experience of spiritual reality is perfectly scientific and can be empirically verified by anyone. As a consequence, spirituality is perceived objectively, and not only subjectively: therefore it is not a matter of opinion only.

The sincere spiritualists progress by following the instructions and guidance of the voice of conscience (the *antaryami paramatma*) and the genuine religious authorities and scriptures, and thus reach the intermediate level of *madhyama*, where they become able to apply the transcendental science in their daily life without the threat of punishment or the promise of rewards. On this level, we directly experience the divinity within ourselves and in the other living beings, and in the glorious manifestations that Krishna has described in these chapters. We thus acquire the divine vision (*divya chakshu*) or in other words, we can see through the eyes of the scriptures (*shastra chakshu*) with the same vision of those who compiled them. In fact, our understanding of the genuine scriptures increases and deepens, and we become able to distinguish between spirit and matter, divine and asuric characters, and the different modes and qualities of nature. We continue to see and worship the Deity in the temple and in the sacred symbols, but we are able to understand that divinity is not bound or restricted by material limitations of time and space.

When our perception and realization attain the *uttama* level, we become able to directly see and worship the Divine in everything, because our consciousness is fully connected to the supreme Consciousness. This can only happen when we realize that we are simply a fragment, a part, of that supreme Consciousness, and we are subordinate to the supreme. Humility is required, as demonstrated by Arjuna who says, "if you think I can do it". Krishna is not obliged to reveal himself to anyone, and the supreme Consciousness can be perceived only by the power of the supreme Consciousness, not by the limited power of the limited consciousness.

Of course, the individual soul will never be able to experience the entire expanse of the supreme Consciousness simultaneously, because the *jiva* is *anu atma*, while Krishna is *param atma*, so the consciousness of the *jiva* is *anu chaitanya*, while the consciousness of Krishna is *vibhu chaitanya*. But still, the consciousness of the individual will be perfectly full. We can make the example of the ocean - that represents the supreme Atman - and our cup of water. Although the water in our cup is much smaller as a quantity than the water that is in the ocean, still it is of the same nature, and it perfectly fills our cup, making it complete and happy.

श्रीभगवानुवाच ।

śrībhagavānuvāca ।

पश्य मे पार्थ रूपाणि शतशोऽथ सहस्रशः । नानाविधानि दिव्यानि नानावर्णाकृतीनि च ॥ ११-५ ॥

paśya me pārtha rūpāṇi śataśo'tha sahasraśaḥ । nānāvīdhāni divyāni nānavarṇākṛtīni ca ॥ 11-5 ॥

sri: the wonderful; *bhagavan*: Lord; *uvaca*: said; *pasya*: see; *me*: my; *partha*: o son of Pritha; *rupani*: the forms; *satasah*: hundreds; *atha*: as well as; *sahasrasah*: thousands; *nanah*: various; *vidhani*: ways; *divyani*: divine; *nana varna*: various colors; *akritini*: manifestations; *ca*: and.

The wonderful Lord said: "O son of Pritha, look: these are my forms, hundreds of thousands, all different, of various colors, but all divine."

The word *akritini* literally means "made", "manifested", where *akritya* means "form". A synonym is *srista*, "created" (4.7, *sriyami aham*, "I manifest myself"), that Krishna also uses to speak about material manifestations (5.14, 9.7, 9.8). Although these divine forms are eternally existing within the supreme Consciousness, in this world they become manifested at a particular time and place through the agency of Yogamaya. The "making" of such forms is not on the same level with the creation of the material forms, that are under the agency of Mahamaya.

The universal form was already present before Arjuna became able to see it. There are hundreds and thousands of true forms of God, and they have different shapes and colors - some human, some non-human, some male and some female. Some are composite forms with animal characteristics (especially faces) that symbolize special qualities, worthy of respect and admiration. All the powerful and majestic forms worshiped as manifestations of God by various cultures all along the recorded history are contained within the universal form of the Consciousness, and even more are there. Whatever a human mind can conceive, it has already been conceived by the universal Consciousness, and will remain there forever, to be contemplated and worshiped by those people who choose it as their *ista devata*.

Philosophers and theologians from conventional academia have tried to categorize the various perspectives on divinity, labeling them as monotheism, polytheism, pantheism, enotheism, and so on. Unfortunately, they present such perspectives as separated, independent and even opposite paths, all subjective and therefore all having the same value, or we should say, the same lack of value. For such theoretical thinkers, a monotheist cannot be a polytheist, or any of the intermediate ideological positions more or less superficially identified as recognized and followed by various cultures and individuals. In such a thwarted and miopic line of thinking, there can never be any sincere agreement or understanding among the followers or believers of these different ideologies. This problem has been created by the abrahamic model of so-called monotheism, that we have partially analyzed in several other occasions. It is not real monotheism, because by definition monotheism means "believing in one God", and the abrahamic model presents a fundamental dichotomy between the "good God" and the "bad God", i.e. Satan, that in turn is believed to manifest in a variety of other demoniac personalities considered "false Gods". In such faiths the devotee needs to pledge exclusive loyalty (with a pact or covenant) to the "good God" and total and blind obedience to his representatives (priests, mullahs, etc), and especially fight in all possible ways against all other faiths.

In this perspective, the Absolute Truth is one of the many possible truths that somehow or other wins over the others, destroying all traces of them - temples, books, teachers, holy places, entire populations - down to the very memory of them having ever existed, or distorting their memory to demonize them. But this is a very negative mentality, based on violence, fear, deceit, oppression, and ignorance.

The Vedic perspective is radically different: the Absolute Truth is seen as the greater picture in which all the relative truths can be contained, reconciled and harmonized, in a multi-dimensional vision that can truly bring peace and good will among all the people on the planet. Indeed, there is no other way to save the human species from the impending disaster.

Genuine atheism - that is the denial of any relevance of a personal form of God over human affairs and universal creation - is not actually dangerous to genuine religion, because by definition it does not try to force people to believe in something or adhere to rules that are not simply those of natural and universal ethics. This is perfectly acceptable from the point of view of *sanatana dharma*, that is also based on the natural and universal ethics, and has a much broader vision about the concept of divinity.

Therefore Vedic tradition respects materialistic atheism as a legitimate perspective (or lack thereof) about God, and lists its ancient form (taught by Charvaka) among its recognized philosophical ideologies, as one of the three *nastika* ("agnostic") *darshanas*, together with Buddhism and Jainism.

अनेकबाहूदरवक्रनेत्रं पश्यामि त्वां सर्वतोऽनन्तरूपम् ।

anekabāhūdaravakṛnetraṁ paśyāmi tvāṁ sarvato'nantarūpam ।

नान्तं न मध्यं न पुनस्तवादिं पश्यामि विश्वेश्वर विश्वरूप ॥ ११-१६ ॥

nāntaṁ na madhyaṁ na punastavādiṁ paśyāmi viśveśvara viśvarūpa ॥ 11-16 ॥

pasya: see; *adityan*: the Adityas; *vasun*: the Vasus; *rudran*: the Rudras; *asvinau*: the two Asvinis; *marutah*: the Marutas; *tatha*: as well as; *bahuni*: many; *adrista*: unseen; *purvani*: previously; *pasya*: look; *ascaryani*: the wonders; *bharata*: o descendant of Bharata.

"Look at the Adityas, the Vasus, the Rudras, the two Asvinis, the Marutas, and also at the many other forms that have not been seen before. O descendant of Bharata, look at all these wonders."

In the commentaries to the previous verses, we have elaborated on the divine Personalities listed in this verse - the 12 Adityas, the 8 Vasus, the 11 Rudras, the 2 Asvinis, and the 49 Marutas (7 in each group of 7). To summarize, we can say that the Adityas are manifestations of the Sun as the source of all the power in the universe, the Vasus are the main elements that constitute the cosmos, the Rudras are the dissolution principles that eliminate the obstacles, the Asvinis are the healing principle that brings balance back wherever it was lost, and the Marutas are the principles of movement such as waves, frequencies, etc.

The Devas described in Vedic literature are universal archetypes whose existence is not limited by time and space, therefore they can be recognized spontaneously by persons belonging to any culture, provided they are open to listen to their subconscious. Of course the strong blind belief in the impossibility to perceive such universal and eternal archetypes will prevent one from actually perceiving them, but that is simply a superimposed obstacle that can be removed, not a real inability. The same thing can be applied to the unlimited number of *avatars* (forms in which the Divine descends in this world to carry out specific missions), as confirmed in many scriptures, especially in the *Bhagavata Purana*, as stated by the *Bhagavata* itself (12.12.7). Here are some important verses in this regard:

avatara hy asankhyeya hareh sattva nidher dvijah, yatha avidasinah kulyah sarasah syuh sahasratah, "O brahmanas, the *avatars* of Hari - the ocean of goodness - are innumerable, just like the myriad of rivulets that originate from a great lake" (1.3.26)

bhavayaty esa sattvena lokan vai loka bhavanah, lila avatara anuratah deva tiryam nara adisu, "The creator of the world maintains all this (universe) through the quality of *sattva*, assuming the role of various *lila avatars*, from among the *devas*, the animals, and the human beings" (1.2.34)

yasyavatara karmani gayanti hy asmad adayah, na yam vidanti tattvena tasmai bhagavate namah, "We offer our respect to Bhagavan, whose *avatars* and activities are recited by people like us, who still cannot fully know him" (2.6.38)

avatara anucaritam hares casya anuvartinam, pumsam isa kathah proktah nana akhyana upabrimhitah, "The discussions about God concern the many stories of the *avatars* and the activities of Hari, as well as those of his followers/ devotees" (2.10.5)

kridan vidhatte dvija go suranam kshemaya karmany avatara bhedaiah, mano na tripyaty api srinvatam nah susloka matules charita amritani, "Our mind is never satiated even by constantly hearing about the wonderful immortal/ nectarine stories about the Lord, who manifests different *avatars* and activities for the benefit of the twice born, the cows and the *devas*" (3.5.7)

yah idam deva devasya harer adbhuta karmanaih, avatara anucharitam srinvan yati param gatim, "One who listens to the wonderful (stories of the) *avatars* and activities of Hari, the God of the Gods, whose deeds are extraordinary, will attain the supreme destination" (8.23.30)

raksha acyuta avatara iha visvasya anu yuge yuge, tiryam martya rishi devesu hanyante yaih trayi dvisah, "Age after age, the infallible Lord protects (the world) by descending in this universe among animals, human beings, *rishis* and *devas*, and killing the enemies of the three" (12.7.14).

The import of this verse is confirmed in the famous *Purusha sukta* (*Rig Veda*, 10.90):

sahasra sirsa purusha sahasraksha sahasra pat, sa bhumim visvato vritvaty atisthad dasangulam, "The Purusha has thousands of heads, thousands of eyes and thousands of feet. He contains the Earth and the universe, and yet he is established beyond that, in a space of ten fingers",

purusha evedam sarvam yad bhutam yac ca bhavyam, utamritatvasyesano yad annena tirohati, "The Purusha is the entire universe, everything that was and everything that will be. He is immortal, and sustains all".

As we can see, the universal form, the Virat Purusha, is the Paramatman, the supreme Atman that is present in all material manifestations, within the bodies of the conditioned living entities and also within each and every atom - as well as outside them. The mention of the "ten fingers" as the measurement of the form of the Purusha refers to the comparative size of the Paramatman within the embodied beings. Of course it is not a material measurement, as it applies to the individual perception of the individual soul, so we cannot really go around with a measuring tape trying to size up the Paramatman along the body of someone.

इहैकस्थं जगत्कृत्स्नं पश्यद्य सचराचरम् । मम देहे गुडाकेश यच्चान्यद् द्रष्टुमिच्छसि ॥ ११-७ ॥

ihaikastham jagatkṛtsnam paśyādya sacarācaram | mama dehe guḍākeśa yaccānyad draṣṭumicchasi || 11-7 ||

iha: in this; *eka stham*: one place; *jagat*: the universe/ all the people; *kritsnam*: entire; *pasya*: see; *adya*: now; *sa cara acaram*: both moving and non-moving; *mama*: my; *dehe*: in the body; *gudakesa*: o Gudakesa; *yat*: that; *ca*: and; *anyat*: other; *drastum*: to see; *icchasi*: you wish.

"O Gudakesa, see now in this one place the entire universe, with all the moving and non-moving beings and much more, all contained within my body, as you have wished to see.

The expression *iha eka stam*, "in this one place", shows the extraordinary nature of the experience of awareness that Krishna is offering to Arjuna. It would not be very extraordinary to see the different beings of the universe normally spread over the vast expanse of time and space, but to perceive all of them at the same time in the same place in a focused flash of awareness is truly a special experience. We could describe this difference as ordinary light compared to the concentrated laser beam that can cut through thick steel. Such an experience cannot be explained through words or even understood intellectually, but it can be perceived at a subtler, spiritual level.

Krishna is addressing Arjuna as Gudakesa, where *gudaka* means darkness or *tamas*, to highlight the key factor of the experience: the spiritual vision is clouded by ignorance, therefore we must dissipate all traces of ignorance through the proper application of knowledge and goodness - *sattva*. At that level, we become able to perceive the spiritual reality, that is even subtler than the mental reality. The conditioned soul that is covered by the darkness of ignorance is defined as *mudha* (7.15, 9.11, 14.15, 15.10, 16.20, 17.19, but also 3.6, 3.27, 3.29) and remains unable to approach the spiritual level. This point is clarified not only in the above mentioned verses in *Bhagavad gita*, but in the *Bhagavata Purana* as well.

For example, in the description given by Narada about his mother in his previous life (*yosit mudha ca kinkari*, "a simple-minded maidservant", 1.6.6). Although the servant girl had the opportunity to listen to the *bhagavat katha* and served the Rishis as her child did, she was simply not interested in spiritual things.

Another useful verse in the *Bhagavata Purana* says, *maya javanikacchannam ajna adhokshajam avyayam, na laksyase mudha drisa, nato matyadharo yatha*, "You remain hidden by the veil of *maya* for the ignorant people, as you are transcendental and beyond material perception. Foolish observers cannot see you, just like they cannot recognize an actor under his costume" (1.8.19).

Again we read, *sa tvam mamaivarya mada plutasya krtagasas te avidusah prabhavam, kshantum prabho atharhasi mudha cetasah, maivam punar bhun matir isa me asati*, "Intoxicated with my own exalted material position, I have committed a serious offense against you, not recognizing your actual power. O Lord, I beg you to forgive me, and bless me so that my consciousness will never be so grossly ignorant again. O Lord, I feel contaminated." (*Bhagavata Purana*, 10.27.8).

The expression *cara acara* is often used to describe all embodied beings, as we have already seen, for example in verse 10.39 (*yac capi sarva-bhutanam bijam tad aham arjuna, na tad asti vina yat syan maya bhutam caracaram*, "O Arjuna, I am the seed of all existences, of all beings - moving and non-moving. Without me nothing could ever exist.").

In our commentary to that verse, we already mentioned that the broad categorization between moving beings and non-moving beings, offered by the Vedic tradition, is more practical than the conventional classification of animals and plants, because it is functional and not ontological, therefore it can be verified empirically and directly by anyone at any time. The Vedic system, however, goes beyond the immediately visible characteristics of the objects surrounding us, and takes us deeper into the atomic and sub-atomic realms, stating that among the "non-moving" beings there are not only plants but minerals as well. This amazing scientific knowledge is based on the fundamental equation that connects life with consciousness or knowledge: this consciousness or knowledge is manifested in minerals, too, by the consistency and perfection of structure in crystals, as well as in molecules, atoms and sub-atomic particles. The deeper and subtler we go, the more our perception expands to include a wider understanding of the universe - still, the Vedic categorization remains a solid anchorage, based on the functional distinction between moving and non-moving. Thus the vibrating quanta of energy formations that we find in sub-atomic dimensions take us beyond the duality of the definition, as they are simultaneously moving and non-moving (being the most basic constituents of so-called inert matter). Therefore the expression *cara acara* (and its equivalent *sthavara jangama*, 13.27) can also be applied as the description of the simultaneous existence of two apparently opposite characteristics within the same object, affirming the fundamental unity of all existence, described in Vedic scriptures as Brahman. Two other verses of *Bhagavad gita* specifically focus on this point:

mayadhyaksena prakritih suyate sa-caracaram, hetunanena kaunteya jagad viparivartate, "O son of Kunti (Arjuna), under my order this *prakriti* manifests everything, both moving and non-moving; by this cause the universe revolves/ functions/ is created cyclically" (9.10),

yavat sanjayate kincit sattvam sthavara-jangamam, kshetra-kshetrajna-samyogat tad viddhi bharatarshabha, "O best of the descendents of Bharata, you should know that whatever is generated and whatever exists, moving and non-moving, comes from the union of the *kshetra* and the *kshetra jna*" (13.27).

न तु मां शक्यसे द्रष्टुमनेनैव स्वचक्षुषा । दिव्यं ददामि ते चक्षुः पश्य मे योगमैश्वरम् ॥ ११-८ ॥

na tu mam śakyase draṣṭumanenaiva svacakṣuṣā | divyaṁ dadāmi te cakṣuḥ paśya me yogamaiśvaram || 11-8 ||

na: not; *tu*: but; *mam*: me; *sakyase*: you will be able; *drastum*: to see; *anena*: with these; *eva*: certainly; *sva-caksusa*: own eyes; *divyam*: divine; *dadami*: I give; *te*: to you; *cakṣuḥ*: eyes; *paśya*: look; *me*: my; *yogam aisvaram*: the wonders of *yoga*.

"However, you will not be able to see me with your physical eyes, therefore I am giving you divine eyes. Look at the wonders of my *yoga* power."

Krishna clearly states here that the vision of the universal form is not something that we can see with physical eyes; rather, it is something we can see through the eyes of our intellect - *buddhi* - or with a spiritual vision. *Buddhi* is the bridge between matter and spirit, that takes our vision beyond the level of the physical eyes. What is the difference between spiritual and divine? The Devas are called divine, yet they have a material body, as they are born and die (or better, their bodies are born and die).

However, the Devas are not on the same level with the ordinary conditioned souls, because they have developed the clear perception of their identity as limbs of the Supreme: this is the spiritual level of consciousness, and therefore we can say that they are spiritual personalities, and not material personalities. The same applies for any *jiva* who has overcome the gross material identifications and attachments, and has the clear perception of its own nature as part of the body of God (*mamaivamso jiva loke, jiva bhuta sanatanah*, 15.7). These realized souls are called *jivan muktas*.

Katha Upanishad (1.3.12) states: "The *atman* is hidden in all beings and its radiance can be perceived only by those who are able to see subtle things by focusing *buddhi*". The fact that we cannot see the universal form with our ordinary material eyes does not make it less real - it simply puts it on a different level, just like the perception of ideas. What to speak of spiritual realities or the subtle mental level... even among ordinary sense objects, there are some that escape our range of perception, like for example the ultraviolet and infrared light rays, or the ultrasounds.

The evolution of consciousness in the individual soul carries from the material level to the spiritual level, gradually removing more and more boundary walls created by our gross material identifications and limitations, and rising our awareness to contemplate wider horizons. In this individual evolutionary journey, our vision becomes more and more penetrating. At some point, the boundary between material and spiritual becomes so subtle that it's just a question of consciousness, and they can turn into one another instantly.

The universal form is called divine, and divine eyes are required to contemplate it, because it is beyond the limits of time and space (*eka stham*). It is the divine vision of the Devas, who can see through their consciousness and not just through the gross material sense organs as ordinary human beings do. The expression *sva caksu* is particularly interesting in this regard, because it implies a separation or

differentiation based on material identification; a similar example can be shown in the expression *sva dharma* as opposed to *sanatana dharma*. *Sva dharma* refers to the temporary duties towards society and family, based on bodily identification, while *sanatana dharma* belongs to the *sat* ("eternal") identity of the *atman*.

Krishna has already shown the *virat rupa* before. We see that happening two times in Vrindavana to mother Yasoda, once while breast-feeding (*Bhagavata Purana* 10.7.34-37) and once when little Krishna was caught eating mud (*Bhagavata Purana* 10.8.32-39). Also in the *Mahabharata*, before the armies arrived on the battlefield of Kurukshetra, Krishna manifested the *virat rupa* in the assembly of the Kurus, when Duryodhana attempted to arrest him for trying to bring reconciliation with the Pandavas. However, no contemplation of the *virata rupa* can be exactly the same for different persons, because of the fundamental spiritual nature of the experience, that is based on perception.

The expression *yogam aisvaryam* is very interesting. Literally, *yoga* means "union", "connection", and *aisvarya* means "power", indicating something great, impressive, majestic, glorious. Unfortunately, the idea of *yoga* has been trivialized to the level of some exotic or folkloristic physical exercise ("stretch and relax"), so when we speak of *yoga* powers, most people will think of getting in a better physical shape.

Those who have heard about the *yoga siddhis* may think of some magic powers that can be developed through some secret practice of *mantras* and breathing exercises. However, the *yoga siddhis* are not the purpose of *yoga*, but simply a side effect of the expansion of consciousness - the real power of *yoga*. In this light we can better understand Krishna's statement: the universal form is certainly the vision of the greatest and highest possible level of expanded consciousness.

सञ्जय उवाच ।

sañjaya uvāca ।

एवमुक्त्वा ततो राजन्महायोगेश्वरो हरिः । दर्शयामास पार्थाय परमं रूपमैश्वरम् ॥ ११-९ ॥

evamuktva tato rājanmahāyogeśvaro hariḥ । darśayāmasa pāarthāya paramaṁ rūpamaiśvaram ॥ 11-9 ॥

sanjaya: Sanjaya; *uvaca*: said; *evam*: thus; *uktva*: said; *tatah*: then; *rajan*: o king; *maha yoga isvarah*: the great Lord of *yoga*; *harih*: Hari; *darsayam asa*: showed; *parthaya*: to the son of Pritha; *paramam*: supreme; *rupam*: form; *aisvaram*: majestic.

Sanjaya said, O king, saying these words Hari, the great Lord of *yoga*, showed the supreme majestic form to Arjuna.

We are reminded here that Arjuna is not the only person who is about to see the universal form. At least Sanjaya is watching everything that happens on the battlefield and narrating it to king Dhritarastra: this is the "container" in which the conversation between Krishna and Arjuna is held. The first two verses of *Bhagavad gita*, in chapter 1, introduced us to this dialog between Sanjaya and Dhritarastra, who were sitting in the royal palace in Hastinapura. Dhritarastra asked Sanjaya to describe the activities of his sons (*mamakah*) and the sons of Pandu (*pandavah*), and Sanjaya started by describing how Duryodhana had approached Drona to discuss about the arrangements of the two armies. Sanjaya's ability to watch the events developing at Kurukshetra from such a great distance is also extraordinary, but not as much as the vision of the universal form that he will soon describe in this chapter. It is said that such power of clairvoyance was granted to Sanjaya by his *guru* Veda Vyasa, and we will see in 11.22 that the Rishis, the Siddhas and the Devas, but also the Yakshas and the Asuras are able to contemplate the universal form as shown to Arjuna.

The word *rishi* comes from the same root of *darshana*, and means "those who see". The definition is not far from the meaning of clairvoyant, although the perception of the *rishis* is much more scientific and deeper in comparison to the vague perceptions of untrained and sentimentalistic psychics, who can merely get impressions from the etheric level without really understanding what they are seeing. Again this verse reminds us about the real meaning and purpose of *yoga* - the awareness or consciousness of reality at the original transcendental level, from which all the material manifestations come into being.

Another important point in this verse is highlighted by the expression *darsayam asa*, "showed". *Darshana*, or direct perception of a transcendental spiritual reality, is not an ascending process, but a descending process, a revelation that is granted from a higher level, out of kindness and as a blessing.

Sanjaya is addressing Dhritarastra as "king" out of politeness and loyalty, but Dhritarastra is in fact only a regent, because blindness - physical as well as mental and spiritual - such as Dhritarastra's automatically disqualifies one from occupying the throne. Arjuna is here called Partha, "son of Pritha", because of Krishna's affectionate and strong relationship with his aunt Kunti, also called Pritha, who is the mother of Arjuna. Krishna is thus highlighting the close ties he chose to establish with Arjuna in this *avatara*, and encouraging him to get through the extraordinary experience with the proper attitude and confidence.

The *virat rupa*, or universal form, is here called *parama aisvarya rupa* ("the supreme majestic form") in relation to the things that we can experience in this world. After the universal form, Krishna will show Arjuna his four-armed form of Vishnu and then his intimate form of Krishna again.

The *aisvarya* or *vibhuti* form does not manifest in intimate *lilas* but it is always fully present, as we are constantly reminded in the genuine *shastra* and by the genuine *guru*.

Many superficial pretenders like to entertain their followers by telling stories on the intimate *lilas* manifested by Krishna especially in his Vrindavana period, but that should be done by following the original authentic text of the *Bhagavata Purana*, especially in the 10th canto, that describes such stories.

The genuine text keeps reminding us that Krishna is Brahman, so that we do not take him lightly; see for example verse 10.12.11 (*brahma sukha anubhuta*, "the origin of the transcendental happiness", *para deva*, "the supreme Lord", *krita punya punjah*, "had accumulated lots of religious credits (previously)").

अनेकवक्त्रनयनमनेकाद्भुतदर्शनम् ।

अनेकदिव्याभरणं दिव्यानेकोद्यतायुधम् ॥ ११-१० ॥

anekavaktranayanamanekādbhutadarśanam | anekadivyaābharaṇaṁ divyānekodyatāyudham || 11-10 ||

aneka: many; *vaktra*: faces/ mouths; *nayanam*: eyes; *aneka*: many; *adbhuta-darsanam*: wonderful to see; *aneka*: many; *divya abharanam*: divine ornaments; *divya*: divine; *aneka*: many; *udyata*: raised; *ayudham*: weapons/ symbols.

"So many faces, so many eyes - an amazing sight. So many divine ornaments, and so many divine symbols raised (in that form)."

The first impact of the vision shown to Arjuna is about the innumerable faces and innumerable eyes of the many forms of God. This puts the emphasis on the personal nature of the relationship with God, as God manifests so many faces and eyes to interact with us - to look at us and to be looked at. When we sincerely and intensely address a person, we look at his/ her face and eyes, because we want to establish a deep contact and sense of communication. There are several reasons why one does not look an interlocutor in the face or eyes: fear, lack of sincerity, excessive humility, lack of confidence. All these feelings are obstacles to the development of a genuine relationship with God.

There are some who believe that religion should inspire people with the fear of God, but that's not Krishna's idea. Only *asuras* need to fear God, and even in their case, their meeting with God will be beneficial because they will be purified from their crimes and misconceptions, and therefore will attain a better status. In any case, God will allow them to look at his face and eyes and do their best to engage in fight, as a part of his playful activities as we see in so many episodes of the *Puranas* etc.

It is said the eyes are the windows to the soul, and looking into God's eyes is certainly an extraordinary experience. We can have this feeling when we look into the eyes of the installed Deity when we serve him/ her with sincere love and devotion, and we have developed sufficient sensitivity to spiritual reality. At that level, we will be able to easily tell the difference between ordinary food and sanctified food offered to the Deity, and between an ordinary statue and the installed *murti* of the Deity, and also between an ordinary person and a genuine self-realized soul.

The word *vaktra*, like *mukha*, can refer both to "face" or to "mouth". In this second case, the emphasis is given to the two main functions in the relationship between God and the devotee - the feeding or offering of food or oblations, and the transmission of the sacred sound or teachings.

The various forms of God hold many divine symbols or weapons, called *ayudha*, and this verse describes them as *udyata* ("raised", "uplifted") because they constitute the emblems of the divine powers. There is a difference between these *ayudhas* and ordinary weapons, that are usually called *astras* or *sastras* (with a short "a") as described in the texts composing the *Dhanur Veda*. Conventional "human" weapons (called *manava sastra*) are described as *dhanur* (bow) and *sara* or *bana* (arrows, including small rockets called *agnibana*), *kunta* (spear), *khagda* or *asi* (sword), *churika* (knife or dagger), *gada* (mace), *chakra* (disc), while more sophisticated weapons (called *divya astra*) entail the conscious control of vibrational frequencies and electro-magnetic fields that are able to alter the state of matter.

Among these, we can mention the Brahma astra (a nuclear missile), the Agneya astra, the Vayuva astra, and the Narayana astra, Pasupata astra and Naga astra, that had effects still unparalleled by modern mainstream technology. On the other side, the *ayudhas* are generally symbolic weapons - for example the sword indicates cutting material bondage, etc.

Another meaning of *aneka adbhuta darshanam* is "many wonderful realizations", and it can be applied to the deep understanding and knowledge that is expressed through these divine forms - that are concentrated forms of consciousness and knowledge. As we know, the word *darshana* also means "perspective", as in the definitions of the various philosophical schools. In this sense, the verse we are analyzing is a glorious affirmation about the amazingly comprehensive nature of the pluralistic approach typical of the Vedic system.

दिव्यमाल्याम्बरधरं दिव्यगन्धानुलेपनम् ।

सर्वाश्चर्यमयं देवमनन्तं विश्वतोमुखम् ॥ ११-११ ॥

divyamālyāambaradharaṁ divyagandhānulepanam | sarvāścaryamayaṁ devamanantaṁ viśvatomukham || 11-11 ||

divya: divine; *malya*: garlands/ necklaces; *ambara*: clothes; *dharam*: wearing; *divya*: divine; *gandha*: scents; *anulepanam*: anointed with; *sarva*: all; *ascarya mayam*: consisting of wonderful majesty; *devam*: radiant/ God; *anantam*: unlimited; *visvato mukham*: whose face is everywhere.

These wonderfully majestic forms of God were unlimited, and looking in all directions. They were wearing divine clothes and garlands/ necklaces, and were anointed with divine scents.

The innumerable heads and faces of the effulgent *virata purusha* are also mentioned in the Nrisimha *maha mantra*: *ugram viram maha vishnum jvalantam sarvato mukham, nrisimham bhisanam bhadrām mṛtyor mṛtyur namami aham*, "I pay my homage to the fierce and valiant Mahavishnu, whose radiant face is omnipresent, Lord Nrisimha who is unlimitedly benevolent. He is the death of death."

Why God's face is omnipresent? Because his consciousness is alert everywhere, at all times. In our human experience, the face or the head of the body normally functions as the "central operative room" of consciousness, where the brain receives and elaborates the information from the chief sensors (eyes, ears, nose, mouth, all in the head) and prepares the orders for action to be sent all around the body, including the communication and relationship interactions with the external world, especially with other people.

The many forms within the *virata rupa* are decorated with various ornaments, and this shows that such forms are devoutly worshiped by sincere spiritualists. They can be also simple ornaments, made of flowers or other inexpensive materials, but in all cases for God to have accepted them, they must have been offered with love and devotion, because God is only interested in *bhakti*, not in the materialistic showing off of proud and arrogant people. This is why they are called divine (*divya*): anything offered through *bhakti* immediately becomes spiritual.

The traditional worship system is based on the devotional and ceremonial offering of various pleasurable items to the image of God; among these, clothes (*vastra*), necklaces (*malya*) made with flowers or various other materials, scents (*gandha* or *sugandha*), ornaments (*abharana*) are characteristic in many cultures, not only in the Hindu/ Vedic tradition. Another meaning of the ornaments decorating the

body of God refers to his *shakti* and his devotees, who never want to leave him even for one moment, and who highlight his beauty by constantly glorifying him and speaking about his amazing qualities. In this regard, we need to note that in the spiritual world, everything is made of consciousness, therefore even apparently inanimate things are conscious personalities - Krishna's flute, the jewels that decorate the Lord's body, and everything else.

The word *ambara* ("clothes") is a synonym for *vastra*, and is found in several Names of God. *Pitambara* means "dressed in yellow". *Visvambara* means "dressed by the universe" (a poetic expression to mean "naked"), similar to *Digambara* ("dressed by the directions") and it is a name of Shiva. The sweet scent mentioned in this verse is an intrinsic quality of the divine presence; when a divine Personality appears or manifests (even remaining invisible to the eye) we can often perceive his/ her presence through the inexplicable appearance of a wonderful scent, or sweet sounds similar to music, ringing bells or sacred chants. These perceptions have been proved as being real and not mere hallucinations or figments of one's imagination, as they can be clearly experienced by several people at the same time.

In *Bhagavata Purana* we find numerous descriptions of the Virata Rupa, offered as the fundamental meditation on the glories of the Lord: for example in 2.1.23-39, 2.5.34-41, 3.6.1-40, 3.26.50-73, 5.16.3, and so on. In verse 3.26.72 this meditation is even applied to one's self (*atmani*): *tam asmin pratyak atmanam dhiya yoga pravrittaya, bhaktiya viraktiya jnanena, vivicya atmani cintayet*, "Meditating on him, the supreme Soul, in this (universal form), the *yogi* should apply devotion, detachment and knowledge to perceive him within one's self".

दिवि सूर्यसहस्रस्य भवेद्युगपदुत्थिता । यदि भाः सदृशी सा स्याद्भासस्तस्य महात्मनः ॥ ११-१२ ॥
divi sūryasahasrasya bhavedyugapadutthitā | yadi bhāḥ sadṛśī sā syādbhāstasya mahātmanah || 11-12 ||

divi: in the sky; *surya sahasrasya*: of thousands of suns; *bhaved*: there would be; *yugapat*: at the same time; *utthita*: risen; *yadi*: if; *bhah*: the light/ splendor; *sadr̥śī*: in the same way; *sah*: that; *syat*: would be; *bhasah*: radiance; *tasya*: of that; *maha atmanah*: the great Atman.

If thousands of suns were rising simultaneously in the sky, that radiance would be similar to the radiance of the great Atman.

The light of the universal form is described here as *sahasra surya utthita*, "the rising of one thousand suns". It is a bright but pleasing light, that inspires and comforts all, while a comparison with the blazing midday sun would have laid the emphasis on fierceness. The expression *yadi syat* means "if it were", "it might be".

The *virat rupa* is called here *mahatma - maha atman*, the "great *atman*", a synonym of *paramatma* or *param atman*. Sometimes the name *mahatma* is superficially applied to some famous material personality, as a kind of honorific title. However, we should not forget that the word *atman* actually refers to the spiritual identity of the self, and it should not be used lightly, otherwise people may be misled into incorrect beliefs about what makes a person great. As we have mentioned already, spirit and light are closely connected. The *Brihad Aranyaka Upanishad* (1.3.28) establishes the standard in this regard: *asato ma sad gamaya, tamaso ma jyotir gamaya, mṛtyor ma amritam gamaya*, "From what is temporary lead me to what is eternal, from darkness lead me to the light, from death lead me to eternal life". The light of the *atman* is the light of the *brahmajyoti*, that is the origin of all sources of light in the universe (*jyotisham ravir amsuman*, 10.21, *jyotisham api taj jyotis tamasah param ucyate*, 13.18, *prabhasmi sasi-suryayoh*, 7.8, *jnana-dipena bhasvata*, 10.11, *yad aditya-gatam tejo jagad bhasyate 'khilam, yac candramasi yac cagnau tat tejo viddhi mamakam*, 15.12, *asmi tejas tejasvinam aham*, 7.10, *asmi tejas tejasvinam aham*, 10.36, *tvam dipta-bhutasa-vaktram sva-tejasa visvam idam tapantam*, 11.19).

In the *paravyoma*, the spiritual sky, there is no need for such secondary sources of light because the primary light of the *brahmajyoti* is all pervading: *na tad bhasyate suryo na sasanko na pavakah, yad gatva na nivartante tad dhama paramam mama* (*Bhagavad gita*, 15.6). This is also confirmed by *Katha Upanishad* (2.2.15): *na tatra suryo bhati na candra tarakam, nema vidyuto bhanti kuto agni*, "There is no sun radiance, no moon or star, or lightning/ electricity or fire".

The word *bhah*, "effulgence", is a synonym of *jyoti* and *tejas*. From *bhah*, or *bhar*, we derive the word *bhargah* as in *bhargo devasya dhimahi*, the famous line from the original Gayatri mantra (*Rig Veda* 3.63.20, *Yajur Veda* 3.35 and *Sama Veda* 6.3, 10.1): *om bhuh bhuvah svah, tat savitur varenyam bhargo devasya dhimahi dhiyo no nah prachodayat*, "We meditate on God, who is the three worlds (*bhuh, bhuvah, svah*). He is the radiant divine Light. May our intelligence be inspired by him."

The components of the Gayatri mantra have many layers of meanings, but they are all based on the light of the Brahman, and apply to the contemplation of the universal form. The three worlds *Bhuh, Bhuvah, Svah*, are the physical, subtle and causal levels of existence, that manifest at cosmic level as the Earth, the intermediate planets/ dimensions, and the higher planets. Applied to the divine existence, *Bhuh* is described as the vital energy (*Shakti* as *prana* or *vayu*), *Bhuvah* as the destruction of sufferings and sorrows (*Hari* and *Hara*), and *Svah* is the source of happiness (*Rama*).

The word *tat* is a pronoun ("that"), of which *tasya* (mentioned in this verse in the singular referring to the *maha atman* or *param atman*) is the possessive/ genitive form ("of that"). *Tat* is the root for the word *tattva*, or Reality. The concept of Transcendence, *tat* or *tattva*, is described as Brahman, Paramatma and Bhagavan: *vadanti tat tattva vidas tattvam yaj jnanam advayam, brahmeti paramatmeti bhagavan iti sabyate*, "Those who know Reality say that Transcendence is Reality, the non-dualistic Knowledge that is called Brahman, Paramatma and Bhagavan" (*Bhagavata purana*, 1.2.11).

In our commentary to verse 5.17, we have listed the most important verses of *Bhagavad gita* in which this word is used to define God: 2.17 (*tat viddhi*), 3.19 (*tat artham*), 4.39 (*tat parah*), 5.5 (*tat yogaih gamyate*), 5.16 (*tat param*), 5.17 (*tad-buddhayas tad-atmanas tan-nishthas tat-parayanah*), 7.1 (*tat sṛinu*), 8.21 (*tat dhama paramam*), 10.39 (*tat aham*), 11.37 (*tat param*), 13.13 (*tat pravaksyami*), 13.14 (*tat sarvatah*), 13.16 (*tat avijneyam*), 13.17 (*tat jneyam*), 13.18 (*tat jyotih*), 15.4 (*tat parimargitavyam*), 15.5 (*tat padam avyayam*), 15.6 (*tat dhama paramam*), 15.12 (*tat tejah*), 17.23 (*om tat sat*), 17.27 (*tat arthiyam*), 18.5 (*tat yajnam danam tapah*), 18.20 (*tat jnanam*), 18.55 (*tat anantaram*), 18.62 (*tat prasadat*), 18.77 (*tat samsmritya*).

By and large, the word *tat* is meant to indicate the Supreme, Brahman, the transcendental Spirit, as we see in the important mantra "*om tat sat*" (17.23, 24, 25, 26, 27) and in the famous *maha vakya* "*tat tvam asi*" (*Chandogya Upanishad*, 6.8.7). The *tat* identified with *om*, the

universal form of God in the first part of the Gayatri, is further associated with Savitur, another name of Surya (the Sun), that gives his name to Gayatri mantra herself (as Savitri).

The word *varenyam* means "supreme", "best", but also "worshipable", "giver of blessing". *Bhargo* means "radiance", and *devasya* ("of God") refers to the divine nature of Bhagavan, Paramatma, Brahman. The word *dhiya* ("intellect") comes from the same root as *dhyana* ("meditation").

तत्रैकस्थं जगत्कृत्स्नं प्रविभक्तमनेकधा ।

अपश्यदेवदेवस्य शरीरे पाण्डवस्तदा ॥ ११-१३ ॥

tatraikastham jagatkṛtsnam pravibhaktamanekadhā | apaśyaddevadevasya śarīre pāṇḍavastadā || 11-13 ||

tatra: there; *eka stham*: in one place; *jagat kṛtsnam*: the entire creation; *pravibhaktam*: in so many different ways; *anekadha*: into many; *apaśyat*: could see; *deva devasya*: of the God of the Gods; *śarīre*: in the body; *pandavah*: the son of Pandu; *tada*: at that time.

Then, in that one place, the son of Pandu could see the entire universe with its innumerable manifestations, within the body of the God of Gods.

Verse 11.7 also stated, with almost exactly the same words (*īha eka stham jagat*) that the perception of the universal form was focused in one single place in space and time, in a concentrated "here and now" that is the essence of existence and eternity. However, this fundamental unity of Reality is full of unlimited variety - *visesa* - of forms (*rupa*) and qualities (*guna*) that are created by Prakriti: the material variety produced by Mahamaya, and the spiritual variety produced by Yogamaya. Thus it is said that Reality or God is one and many, categorized into direct or primary manifestations (*amsas*) and secondary manifestations (*vibhinnamsas*).

The concept of variety as division or categorization is also expressed by the word *pra-vibhaktam*, that comes from the same root as *vibhakta*, *vibhaga* and *vibhuti*. We can find references in this regard also in *Bhagavata Purana* (*guna pravahena vibhakta viryah*, "the various potencies as per their qualities") in verses 3.33.3 and 4.11.18.

Yet, *Bhagavad gita* (13.17) clearly affirms that Reality is undivided (*avibhakta*): *avibhaktam ca bhuteshu vibhaktam iva ca sthitam, bhutabhartri ca taj jneyam grasishnu prabhavishnu ca*. Again, we find ourselves facing the apparent contradiction of the *acintya bheda abheda tattva*, the simultaneous and inconceivable unity and diversity or separation, between Bhagavan and Shakti.

Chapter 13 is specifically entitled *Prakriti purusha vibhaga yoga*, "the *yoga* of the difference between *prakriti* and *purusha*". However, the most interesting thing is that in that chapter the conclusion is that there is actually no *vibhaga* and no *bheda* - no separation and no difference. The word *anekadha*, "of many different types", can be applied to the various cosmic manifestations as "innumerable diverse planets of different compositions", which includes not only planets proper, but the subtle dimensions as well, and also the various types of bodies in which the *jivas* live, as all living entities are within the universal form (7.12).

The universal form or *virata rupa* is a manifestation of Vishnu, the Supreme Personality of Godhead. The definition *deva deva* (or its equivalent *deva isa*) is found not only in *Bhagavad gita* (10.15, 11.13, 11.25, 11.37, 11.45), but also in other scriptures. Naturally the *Bhagavata Purana* is expected to be on the first line in recognizing the Supreme Personality of Godhead, Hari and Hara, and we can consult the relevant verses at 1.7.26, 1.8.9, 1.9.24, 2.5.1, 3.1.12, 3.7.20, 3.15.4, 3.16.17, 4.5.5, 5.3.15, 6.4.10, 7.3.6, 7.10.26, 8.7.21, 8.7.45, 8.12.4, 8.18.28, 8.22.21, 8.23.30, 9.3.33, 9.6.14, 9.6.35, 9.11.1, 9.14.47, 9.16.20, 9.18.48, 10.1.20, 10.40.9, 10.41.16, 10.51.29, 10.54.33, 10.59.25, 10.64.22, 10.64.27, 10.71.39, 10.72.5, 10.73.8, 10.80.44, 10.81.18, 10.81.39, 10.86.54, 11.4.14, 11.6.42, 11.31.27, 12.9.4, 12.13.22.

ततः स विस्मयाविष्टो हृष्टरोमा धनञ्जयः ।

प्रणम्य शिरसा देवं कृताञ्जलिरभाषत ॥ ११-१४ ॥

tataḥ sa vismayāviṣṭo hr̥ṣṭaromā dhanañjayaḥ | praṇamya śirasā devaṁ kṛtāñjalirabhāṣata || 11-14 ||

tataḥ: then; *sah*: he; *vismaya*: by amazement; *avishtah*: overwhelmed; *hrishhta*: raised; *roma*: bodily hairs; *dhanañjayaḥ*: the conqueror of wealth; *praṇamya*: offered his homage; *śirasa*: with the head; *devam*: to God; *kṛta añjaliḥ*: with folded hands; *abhashata*: began to speak.

Then Arjuna was overwhelmed by awe and wonder. His hairs standing on end, he bowed his head in homage to God, and with folded hands, he began to speak.

The direct experience (*prakasa*) of genuine connection to the supreme Consciousness is overwhelming. Even at a lower level, when the individual's consciousness suddenly shifts to a higher or wider perspective, getting a clear vision of some relative truth or knowledge that was previously unperceived, it is a shock often compared to being struck by lightning. It is a paradigm shift, an epiphany, that instantly changes all our perspective of the entire world, and often drastically rearranges our priorities in life. To make crude examples, this consciousness revolution may happen when we discover that we have been viciously betrayed by a person we deeply loved and trusted, or we have a close shave with death and become aware of the fragility of the human body, or we see the demonstration of a totally unknown scientific or technological wonder. This intense emotion is basically wonder or amazement (*vismaya*), although it can be mixed with fear, pleasure, happiness, or pain, according to the circumstances and the type of revelation.

The period in which we live, the dawn of the 21st century, is particularly significant regarding the change of consciousness or paradigm shift, at many levels. Many have stated that as a human species, either we radically change our priorities and attitudes, or we will face some extreme situation of degradation and destruction, because the non-sustainable model of development that man has carried on for the last few centuries has reached a critical level. So from many sides and many perspectives, men and women of good will are trying to inspire and help this important passage in collective evolution, often compared to the birth of a new age consciousness. Vedic knowledge offers an immense wealth of theoretical and practical resources to facilitate this passage, both at individual and at collective level, because the evolution of consciousness is the central theme and the very purpose of Vedic civilization. Arjuna is experiencing here such a paradigm shift, as we can easily recognize from the symptoms described.

The word *vismaya*, "amazement", applies to one of the *rasas* (emotions, feelings) contemplated by the science of *bhakti*. Another similar word is *adbhuta* ("wonder", "amazement"). *Adbhuta* is one of the secondary or indirect *rasas*, together with *hasya* (amusement, laughter), *vira* (heroism, chivalry), *karuna* (compassion, pity), *raudra* (anger, fierceness), *bibhatsa* (disgust, repulsion), *bhaya* (fear). These emotions are indirect because they are not focused on Bhagavan (as the *rasa visaya alambana* or object of worship) but on the interactions of Bhagavan with other persons or on the attending circumstances. The devotee (as *rasa asraya alambana*) feels these sentiments, for example, while contemplating Krishna who is apparently in danger when fighting with the Kaliya serpent, or seeing another devotee who is in some difficult and painful situation.

In this science of emotions, the perception of the situation (as in this example, the vision of the universal form) is the stimulus (*uddipana*) to the arousal of the mood or attraction (*rati*), that in the case described in this verse is called *vismaya rati*. From this feeling, the sentiment (*rasa*) is developed as *adbhuta rasa*, that fuels love for God (*prema*). The ensuing ecstasy (or peak of emotion) is called *bhava*, or "existence" of consciousness. The direct emotions or primary *rasas* are *santa* (quiet admiration), *dasya* (service), *sakhya* (friendship), *vatsalya* (motherly/ fatherly affection) and *madhurya* (erotic), which in turn can be classified further into *svakiya* (legitimate, as in one's marital relationship) and *parakiya* (outside the marriage conventions). As some readers may not be familiar or comfortable with the concept of eroticism in the religious connection of the devotee with God, it will probably help to spend here a few more words on the subject. Erotic love is fundamentally different from lust, although externally it might be difficult to distinguish the two. Also, an external observer may have difficulties in understanding dharmic heroism, and may confuse it with ordinary anger. Dharmic heroism is that emotion of indignation and combative spirit that rises when we see injustice.

The difference between love and lust, and heroism and anger respectively is simple: the absence of *ahankara* and *mamatva*, the fundamental roots of ignorance, keeps the consciousness on the spiritual level of selflessness and true happiness, that benefits all the persons involved. Otherwise, the power of the emotion in itself is raw energy, neutral like electricity that can be channeled to create heat or cold, respectively in heaters and refrigerators. The results of the emotions will depend on how it is channeled by detached and pure consciousness, and illuminated by knowledge and wisdom (*jnana* and *vijnana*). Emotions are like powerful horses: they cannot be kept immobile all the time (repression is extremely dangerous), but they can certainly be tamed, bridled and directed in a sattvic way or even in a transcendental way. The science of devotion is essentially the science of emotions directed towards God; in the Vedic system every natural function is respected as the perfect result of the supremely intelligent plan on which the entire universe is engineered. The secret consists in the proper utilization of each and every creation, according to time, place, circumstance, subject and object. Thus in the cultivation of a personal relationship with the Godhead, the existing set of human emotions is applied in a favorable manner (*anuvrittya*, as described in *Bhagavata Purana* 1.3.38) towards Bhagavan. Apparently negative emotions, such as disgust and fear, will be properly applied in the indirect form, to those factors that appear as opposed to the love for Bhagavan. The only emotions that are excluded from such application are the asuric transformations of basic emotions such as hatred, malice, envy, avarice, lust, etc, from which a devotee must become free as a preliminary requirement even before starting to engage in *sadhana bhakti*, what to speak of *raganuga bhakti*.

The most intense emotion of direct attraction and attachment is the erotic feeling, based on love (that is divine) and not on lust (that is asuric). And among the various hues of erotic love, the most intense is the secret love that is enhanced by some sort of difficulty, such as separation (*vipralambha*), that makes each encounter (*sambhoga*) even more thrilling. Of course, the same applies to the other primary *rasas*, such as *vatsalya* (as in Devaki and Yasoda), or *sakhya* (as in Sudama or other friends of Krishna who lived far from him). The experience of separation (*vipralambha*) greatly intensifies the feelings wherever it is applied.

This verse also describes the *anubhava*, the physical manifestation of *bhava* (ecstasy, or heightened state of consciousness or existence) that expresses the *rasa* (sentiment). The development of *bhava* is described as *sattvika bhava* (actual spiritual feeling), *sanchari bhava* (temporary manifestation of spiritual emotions), and finally *sthayi bhava* (permanent manifestation of spiritual emotions).

Arjuna feels his hairs standing up (*hrista roma*), which is a typical symptom of ecstasy or strong emotion, caused by the agitation of the *pranas* in the body. We may remember that Arjuna manifested a similar strong feeling in verse 1.29, when he was shocked at the idea of the imminent fratricidal battle, in which practically all the valid *kshatriyas* of the planet were going to sacrifice their lives for the evil schemes of Duryodhana. At that time, Arjuna's feelings of amazement (*adbhuta*) were mixed with disgust (*bibhatsa*) and compassion (*karuna*). Readers may find useful to review the commentary to that verse. More about *rasas* (emotions, feelings) in *bhakti* literature can be found for example in Rupa Gosvami's *Bhakti rasamrita sindhu* (4.2.1), or in Sanatana Gosvami's *Hari bhakti vilasa* (especially for direct and indirect application of *rasas*, verse 11.676).

अर्जुन उवाच ।

arjuna uvāca ।

पश्यामि देवांस्तव देव देहे सर्वास्तथा भूतविशेषसङ्घान् ।

paśyāmi devāṁstava deva dehe sarvāṁstathā bhūtaviśeṣasaṅghān ।

ब्रह्माणमीशं कमलासनस्थं ऋषींश्च सर्वानुरगांश्च दिव्यान् ॥ ११-१५ ॥

brahmāṇamīśaṁ kamalāsanasthaṁ ṛṣīṁśca sarvānuragāṁśca divyān ॥ 11-15 ॥

arjunah: Arjuna; *uvaca*: said; *pasyami*: I see; *devan*: the devas; *tava*: your; *deva*: o Lord; *dehe*: in the body; *sarvan*: all; *tatha*: as well as; *bhuta*: the beings; *visesa*: of different kinds; *sanghan*: the assembly; *brahmanam*: of Brahma; *isam*: the Lord; *kamala*: lotus; *asana*: sitting place; *stham*: situated; *rishin*: the Rishis; *ca*: and; *sarvan*: all; *uragan*: the Urugas; *ca*: and; *divyan*: divine.

Arjuna said, "O Lord, in your body I can see all the Devas and also all the various types of beings. I see Lord Brahma, sitting in the lotus flower, and the Rishis, and the divine Urugas."

The ecstatic feelings of *vismaya* and *adbhuta* that were overwhelming Arjuna did not stop him from expressing his appreciation of the wonderful vision. The previous verse used the word *abhasata*, "addressed", "started to speak", that belongs to the same etymological family of the word *bhasa*, "language". By this, we understand that Arjuna is expressing his ecstatic feelings through language, although we may easily imagine that his voice faltered and choked in the first words, to grow steadier and stronger as his glorification of the Lord successfully channeled his sentiments.

Arjuna is addressing Krishna, but his first words are for our benefit only, as he describes what he is seeing (*pasyami*). We must always remember that Arjuna is not a conditioned soul or even an ordinary devotee, but he is an expansion of Krishna himself, and an eternal *lila* companion who descends with him to assist the divine mission of disseminating spiritual knowledge.

The vision described by Arjuna truly encompasses everything: not only all the *devas*, but also (*tatha*) all the different beings as all the different levels of consciousness experienced in this world (*bhuta visesa*). They are all contained within the body of the Lord as the universal form: once again, this shows that Paramatma, Purushottama, is omnipresent - simultaneously within the heart of each being and atom, and all around them, containing all the manifestations of existence.

This confirms that all levels of existence and reality are contained together (*sanghan*) within the supreme Consciousness: once again, we are reminded that in the Vedic perspective, inert matter is nothing but the expansion of the consciousness of the living beings.

The highest level of embodied consciousness in this universe is Brahma, the first created being, of whom the various planets represent the physical body, measuring merely seven cubits, or spans of his own forearm (*sapta vitasti, Bhagavata Purana*, 10.14.1). The cubit is an ancient measure based on the inherent proportions of the human body; it could vary between 8 and 11 inches (20 to 28 cm), on which one could calculate a total body height of 4'8" to 6'6" (140 to 196 cm) about respectively.

The word *brahmanam* here has a long "a" in the second position and refers to Brahma. The word *isa* ("the Lord") mentioned immediately afterwards is sometimes translated as referred to Shiva, but it can also indicate Brahma himself, especially in this verse, where we see a clear reference of the lotus seat (*kamala asana*), that is characteristic of Brahma and not of Shiva. Some commentators explain that the lotus seat mentioned in this verse is mount Meru, the subtle (*karana*) body of the entire universe, the axis around which the cosmos revolves. The mountain itself is described as the stem of the lotus, along which the 14 planetary systems or dimensions are located. At the top of the Meru there is a 80,000 *yojana* square surface called Devaloka, topped by Brahmaloaka or Satyaloka.

According to the *Devi Bhagavata Purana*, that is the residence of Devi; it is interesting to note that at times the figure of Brahma overlaps the figure and functions of the Mother Goddess, as Laksmidevi, too, is portrayed as sitting on the lotus.

According to the orthodox vaidic brahmins, Subhadra in the Jagannatha Puri triad is Padmayoni Brahma. Under Satyaloka, there are the residences of Indra and the other chief Devas. Then mount Meru tapers down to a circumference of 20,000 *yojanas*, at the height of 40,000 *yojanas* above the sea (Garbhodaka). At that point the girth of the mountain expands again into a series of terraces; the first is the abode of the four great Kings respectively of the Nagas, Yakshas, Gandharvas and Kumbhandas, and the subsequent terraces are the residences of their subjects. Arjuna is seeing all these peoples (*sanghan*), as well as the Rishis, and everything else.

अनेकबाहूदरवक्रनेत्रं पश्यामि त्वां सर्वतोऽनन्तरूपम् ।

anekabāhūdaravakranetraṁ paśyāmi tvāṁ sarvato'nantarūpam ।

नान्तं न मध्यं न पुनस्तवादिं पश्यामि विश्वेश्वर विश्वरूप ॥ ११-१६ ॥

nāntaṁ na madhyaṁ na punastavādiṁ paśyāmi viśveśvara viśvarūpa ॥ 11-16 ॥

aneka: many; *bahu*: arms; *udara*: bellies; *vaktra*: faces; *netram*: eyes; *pasyami*: I see; *tvam*: you; *sarvatah*: everywhere; *ananta rupam*: the unlimited form; *na*: not; *antam*: end; *na*: not; *madhyam*: middle; *na*: not; *punah*: again; *tava*: your; *adim*: beginning; *pasyami*: I see; *visva isvara*: o ruler or the universe; *visva rupa*: o form of the universe.

"I see your innumerable arms, bellies, faces, and eyes everywhere. There is no beginning, end nor middle to this unlimited form, o Lord of the universe, who are the universe itself."

Arjuna continues to describe his vision for our benefit, and addresses Krishna as *visva isvara* ("Lord of the universe") and *visva rupa* ("form of the universe"). As such, he has no beginning, middle or end, but he covers the entire span of Reality. It is said that God is the Sum total of Reality or existence, and that he is simultaneously and inconceivably one and distinct from his energies (*shaktis*) consisting in the various stages of the supreme Nature (*para prakriti*). Once we declare that someone or something is inconceivable (*acintya*), or beyond the capacity of the senses (*adhoksaja*), obviously any ensuing description or declaration must be considered only indicative and not exhaustive - especially those statements that appear to be affirming a sharp distinction or difference between the terms that have been preliminarily defined as "inconceivably one and distinct". Already *Bhagavad gita* (8.9) has clearly stated that God's form is inconceivable (*acintya rupam*). Similarly, *Bhagavata Purana* (8.5.26) states that the nature of Bhagavan is indefinable (*aniruktam*) and impossible to discuss (*apratarkyam*). Such statements must be kept in the proper perspective, otherwise we may end up in the foolish position of having to reject even the *Bhagavata Purana* itself and all the other scriptures that actually contain so many descriptions, definitions and discussions about God.

The important point here is that the Reality/ Nature of God is not so easy to understand or explain, and our efforts in engaging in such discussions must be supported by the utmost honesty, humility and open-mindedness. This is certainly not a place for sectarianism or materialistic motivations of any other kind. After clarifying this point, we may elaborate on the need of reconciliation between the two apparently different (or even opposite) perspectives called *vivartavada* and *parinamavada*. Originally, the propounders of such

perspectives were striving to present mutually complementary visions of the same inconceivable Reality, and their public debates were aimed at clarifying misconceptions and facilitating the proper perception. However, especially in Kali yuga the genuine *acharyas* rarely find worthy successors that will continue to present their teachings in the proper way. Usually after one or two generations the original message already becomes distorted and tainted by the materialistic projections of unqualified followers who present themselves as the "empowered" (and often even "exclusive") representatives of the original *acharya* from whom they arrogantly and foolishly claim they derive their authority. Since such "descendants" usually control the materially impressive inheritance of temples, *ashramas*, etc, left by the original *acharya*, they are able to attract the innocent or ignorant masses and mislead them. The same problem is observed in the conventional academia, in which the transcendental Vedic knowledge and the teachings of the great *acharyas* are presented by non-realized professors who have no faith in the scriptures and no interest in actually realizing their true meaning, but stand on the material prestige of the institutions to which they are affiliated. Actually, the genuine Vedic system requires individual realization - *guna* and *karma* - for any qualification, material or spiritual. It never accepts "qualification by proxy", as by seminal descent, legal inheritance, vote, or rubber-stamped certification or any kind. Each and every individual must personally attain the required level of realization, otherwise he is not considered qualified. By honestly following this genuine and original method, we will happily overcome all the delusional hostility, dualism and sectarianism that prevent people from attaining the transcendental level of realization.

It is certainly possible to reconcile the two perspectives known as *vivartavada* and *parinamavada*, but only by the grace of the Mother Goddess Yogamaya, the *cit shakti* or *para prakriti* through which we can connect to the supreme Consciousness. Now, according to the conventional academic view, Shankara's *vivartavada* theory claims that the universe is not a transformation of God/ Brahman, but only an appearance/ illusion (*maya*); the universe is therefore *adhyasa*, a superimposition over the changeless Existence. This is summarized in the famous aphorism *brahma satya jagan mithya* ("Brahman is true, the universe is illusion"). On the other side, the Shakta perspective called *parinamavada* claims that God is simultaneously immanent and transcendent, as he transformed into the existence of the universe. In the words of the *Chandogya Upanishad* (6.2.3), *eko bahu syat*: "the One became many", through his own *kriya shakti* (the "will power").

But where is the contradiction? All misgivings can be dissolved instantly when we understand that Brahman is *avyakta*, "non-manifested", and only manifests a form - spiritual or material - through the agency of his *shakti* - spiritual or material. The same applies to the definition of *nirguna*, used to describe the Brahman, that is also called *avikarya* (changeless). Already in the very beginning of *Bhagavad gita* (2.25) the *atman* was described as *avyakta* (non-manifested), *acintya* (inconceivable), and *avikarya* (changeless).

If we accept the fact that the *jivatman* or *anu atman*, that is so small and subject to the power of Maya, is changeless, inconceivable and non-manifested, we should also logically understand that the Brahman is changeless, inconceivable and non-manifested, too. The spiritual forms and qualities of Brahman are manifested by his internal energy, *antaranga shakti*, that is also called *para prakriti* or Yogamaya. The external energy, called *bahiranga shakti*, *apara prakriti* or Mahamaya, is in charge of the material manifestations.

But what is the real difference between Yogamaya and Mahamaya? Actually, they are one and the same person, just like Hari and Hara are one and the same person: only the functions (or actions, which are a characteristic of *prakriti*) are different. We have already elaborated on this topic within the commentary to verse 7.7, where we also quoted the famous Invocation at the beginning of the *Upanishads* of the *Sukla Yajur Veda*. including the *Isa Upanishad*: *om purnam adah purnam idam, purnat purnam udacyate, purnasya purnam adayah, purnam eva avasisyate*, "Each and every emanation of God is complete and perfect in itself, yet the Supreme remains complete and perfect (even after emanating them)". God does not lose his separate existence in his many expansions: on the transcendental level of eternal existence, one minus one is still one.

Vedanta sutra (2.1.14) declares: *tad ananyatvam arambhana sabdadibhyah*, "the differentiation in the Supreme began by sound etc", and *Chandogya Upanishad* (6.1.4) adds, *vacarambhanam vikaro namadheyam*, "transformation is done through the giving of names". The complete quote of the *Chandogya Upanishad* verse is as follows: *yatha saumy ekena mrt pindena sarvam, mrmmayam vijnatam syad vacarambhanam, vikaro namadheyam, mrittikety eva satyam*, "From the same one clay all the earthen pots are originated. The transformations of clay/ earth are known through the process of giving names (to objects), that begins the differentiation between manifestations. However, the earth/ clay is the real substance."

किरीटिनं गदिनं चक्रिणं च तेजोराशिं सर्वतो दीप्तिमन्तम् ।
 kirīṭinam gadinam cakriṇam ca tejorāṣim sarvato dīptimantam ।
 पश्यामि त्वां दुर्निरीक्ष्यं समन्ताद् दीप्तानलार्कद्युतिमप्रमेयम् ॥ ११-१७ ॥
 paśyāmi tvāṁ durnirikṣyam samantād dīptānalārkadyutimaprameyam ॥ 11-17 ॥

kiritinam: of crowns; *gadinam*: of maces; *cakrinam*: of discs; *ca*: and; *tejah rasim*: the powerful radiance; *sarvatah*: everywhere; *dīpti mantam*: illuminating/ radiating light; *paśyami*: I see; *tvam*: you; *durnirikshyam*: difficult to look at; *samantat*: all encompassing; *dīpta*: luminous; *anala*: fire; *arka*: the sun; *dyutim*: the rays; *aprimeyam*: immeasurable.

"The luminous radiance of all those crowns, maces, and discs is everywhere, so dazzling that I can barely see you. It is like the rays of the sun or an immeasurable blazing fire."

This description of the *virata rupa* continues to give us the opportunity to better understand the concept of *shakti* and *shaktiman* ("energy" and "he who has the energy"), the universe and the Lord of the universe.

Another important quote that can help us in understanding the process of transformation/ creation to reconcile the various perspectives is from *Vishnu Purana* (1.3.2): *saktayah sarva bhavanam, acintya jnana gocarah, yato 'to brahmanas tas tu, sargadya bhava saktayah, bhavanti tapatam srestha, pavakasya yathosnata*. "The energies in all creations are inconceivable for the human capacity of knowledge. They emanate from Brahman, but manifest the creation and all the rest. Such creative energies are comparable to the heat emanating from fire."

This is precisely the meaning of the word *tejah rasim*, "the radiance of power", that expands everywhere (*samantat*). Like a fire produces heat, light, sparkles, and even smoke, the Supreme Consciousness has many apparently different energies (*parasya shaktir vividhaiva srutyate, svabhaviki jnana bala kriya ca, Svetasvatara Upanishad, 6.8*). Such energies have many names - Sri, Bhu, Lila, Hladini, Bhakti, Murti, Vidyavidya, Maya, Samvit, Sandhini, Kriya, Kanti, Kirti, Tusti, Gir, Pusti, Satya, Jnana, Jaya, Utkarshini, Vimala, Yogamaya, Prahvi, Isana, Ila, Anugraha and so on - but they are all manifestation of the one supreme energy, the *cit shakti*, called *para prakriti*, or *daivi maya*. By taking shelter in this *daivi prakriti*, the *mahatmas* become able to understand the mystery of the *acintya bhedabhedata tva* and to properly serve God: *mahatmanas tu mam partha daivim prakritim asritah, bhajanty ananya-manaso jnatva bhutadim avyayam*, "However, o son of Pritha (Arjuna), the great souls take shelter in the divine nature and worship/ serve me with undivided attention, knowing that I am the inexhaustible origin of everything/ all beings" (9.13).

Bhagavata Purana (3.28.40) also confirms the example of fire: *yatholmukad vishpulingad, dhumad vapi sva sambhavat, apy atmatvenabhimatad, yathagnih prithag ulmukat*, "Fire is distinct from the blazing flames, from the sparks and from the smoke, although all these are intimately connected by nature and produced from the fire itself."

The concept of the *jivatmas* as sparks of the great fire of Bhagavan/ Brahman is further confirmed by *Brihad aranyaka Upanishad* (2.1.20): *yathagneh ksudra visphulinga*, "just as tiny sparks of fire fly in all directions", and *Isa Upanishad* (7): *yasmin sarvani bhutany, atmaivabhud vijanatah, tatra ko mohah kah soka, ekatvam anupasyatah*, "One who knows that all these beings/ existences are created by and from the *atman*, will not be overcome by illusion or anxiety, because he correctly sees that everything is one".

We have also mentioned this in commentaries to verses 2.12, 2.23, 7.5, 7.7, and will do again in verse 15.2, discussing of the original transcendental light of Brahman (*jyoti*) that shines through the sun, the moon and the fire in this universe. The important concept of *tejas* has also been discussed in the commentaries to verses 7.9 and 10.36, where we have quoted the famous verse from *Brihad Aranyaka Upanishad* (1.3.28): *asato ma sad gamaya, tamaso ma jyotir gamaya, mrityor ma amritam gamaya*, "from what is temporary lead me to what is eternal, from darkness lead me to the light, from death lead me to eternal life".

This dazzling light (*jyoti*, *tejas*, etc) of the Brahman constitutes only the rays, or the emanations, from the Supreme Personality of Godhead, manifesting his majestic glories (*aisvarya vibhuti*). However, such radiance is difficult to contemplate (*durnirikshyam*) for the embodied souls; this will be clearly stated in verse 12.5 (*kleso dhikataras tesham avyaktasakta-cetasam, avyakta hi gatir dukkham devavadbhir avapyate*). Therefore, *Isa Upanishad* (15) prays, *hiranmayena patrena, satyasyapihitam mukham, tat tvam pusann apavru, satya dharmaya dristaye*, "O sustainer (of life), the face of Truth is covered by a golden veil. Please remove it, to show yourself to the true *dharma* (a devotee who is dedicated to truth and therefore personifies *dharma*)".

त्वमक्षरं परमं वेदितव्यं त्वमस्य विश्वस्य परं निधानम् ।
 tvamakṣaram paramaṁ veditavyaṁ tvamasya viśvasya paraṁ nidhānam ।
 त्वमव्ययः शाश्वतधर्मगोप्ता सनातनस्त्वं पुरुषो मतो मे ॥ ११-१८ ॥
 tvamavyayaḥ śāśvatadharmagoptā sanātanastvaṁ puruṣo mato me ॥ 11-18 ॥

tvam: you; *aksharam*: eternal; *paramam*: supreme; *veditavyam*: to be known; *tvam*: you; *asya*: of this; *visvasya*: of the universe; *param*: supreme; *nidhanam*: the foundation; *tvam*: you; *avyayah*: imperishable; *sasvata dharma*: eternal *dharma*; *gopta*: protector; *sanatanah*: eternal; *tvam*: you; *purushah*: the Purusha; *matah me*: my belief.

"I believe you are the imperishable Reality, the supreme object of knowledge, the supreme foundation of this universe, the protector of the eternal unchangeable *dharma*. You are the eternal Purusha."

Arjuna's words are turning from the description of his vision and penetrating its meaning. The particular metric of these verses is beautifully suited to express the wonder, power and majesty of the universal form, and the ecstatic feelings that a devotee experiences in its presence.

The word *aksharam*, "eternal", is often used to indicate the sacred syllable *om*, that is the sound manifestation of Brahman, the *akshara tattva*, and in the specific expression of this verse (*aksharam paramam veditavyam*) it declares that the universal form, the eternal Purusha, Krishna, is the Param Brahman, the origin and the entire expanse of Vedic knowledge. Yet, here Arjuna directly connects this mind-blowing realization with the word *tvam*, "you", that is exquisitely personal. There is nothing "impersonal" in Brahman: one who has attained the correct realization experiences rather an "over-personal" or "trans-personal" existence, containing unlimited personalities at the same time. This was already clearly confirmed in verse 7.24: *avyaktam vyaktim apannam manyante mam abuddhayah, param bhavam ajananto mamavyayam anuttamam*, "Those who are not intelligent believe that the non-manifested has evolved by becoming manifest. They do not know my supreme existence/ nature as the highest imperishable (reality)."

When Arjuna repeatedly addresses the universal form as "you", he is speaking directly to the supreme Personality of God, that includes and contains all other personalities. *Svetasvatara Upanishad* (6.9) states: *sa karanam karana adhipa adhipo na casya kascijanita na ca adhipa*, "The supreme Personality is the cause of all causes, and there is nothing and no one who is superior to him or greater than him". This concept is also expressed in this verse by the words *visvasya param nidhanam*, "the supreme foundation and place of dissolution of the universe".

Those who see a contradiction in these verses must be blinded by the limitations of gross material bodily identification, because the knowledge of *Atman/ Brahman* is very clear and consistent. This is the supreme knowledge, the supreme consciousness, that we all seek in our evolutionary journey, and that can truly change our life for the better. God is the eternal Purusha (*sanatana purusha*), but he kindly descends into the world among us (4.8) for the purpose of disseminating this knowledge and destroying the darkness of ignorance (10.11, *jnana dipena*). This is the meaning of the expression *avyaya sasvata dharma gopta*, "the imperishable protector of the eternal principles of religion". The entire text of the *Bhagavad gita* is an amazingly skillful and beautiful journey into the transcendental knowledge. From the first chapter (*arjuna visada yoga*, the *yoga* of Arjuna's grief) the stage is set to present the perfect opportunity for the analysis of the human condition (*sankhya yoga*, the *yoga* of enumeration) and the indications on how to begin one's evolution through wise choices and proper

engagement (*karma yoga*, the *yoga* of action). A sincere seeker who passed the preliminary test of selfless engagement in duty and service will be introduced to the fundamental knowledge on the purpose of life (*jnana yoga*, the *yoga* of knowledge) and to the real meaning of detachment (*sannyasa yoga*, the *yoga* of renunciation). From this level, the *sadhaka* becomes totally dedicated to spiritual evolution (*dhyana yoga*, the *yoga* of meditation), (*vijnana yoga*, the *yoga* of applied knowledge), (*taraka brahma yoga*, the *yoga* of liberating spiritual existence).

With the 9th chapter, the student enters in the contemplation of the transcendental Personality of God (*raja guhya yoga*, the *yoga* of the supreme secret), that is not limited by time and space like the embodied *jivatmas* we meet every day. To expand this understanding, *Bhagavad gita* offers us the best meditation exercise (*vibhuti yoga*, the *yoga* of powers), (*visva rupa darsana yoga*, the *yoga* of contemplation of the universal form), (*bhakti yoga*, the *yoga* of devotion). The trained mind of the *sadhaka* becomes increasingly able to contemplate the idea of God as simultaneously immanent and transcendent, personal and above-personal, power and powerful, same and different from the individual *jivatman*. Each concept is presented gradually, along the logical thread of conversation, with questions and answers, and examined under different perspectives, in what could appear as repetitions but only to a superficial and distracted mind. In fact, there is no imperfection in *Bhagavad gita*: its teachings are expressed in a wonderfully consistent way, and made extremely easy to understand for a sincere student. The 11th and 12th chapters are developing the foundations for the all important question of the oneness and difference of God and the world in regard to the cultivation of love and devotion towards the supreme Personality of God. Then in chapter 13 the issue will be explored fully (*prakriti-purusha-viveka yoga*, the *yoga* of understanding nature as distinct from the personal principle).

The last chapters of *Bhagavad gita* supply the missing links that are required to bring the transcendental knowledge into practice, in our daily life in the big and small choices. In order to attain *moksha* (in the 18th chapter) we need to transcend the material *gunas*, and that is precisely what the 14th, 16th, 17th chapters are all about (*guna traya vibhaga yoga*, the *yoga* of differentiating between the *gunas*), (*daivasura sampad vibhaga yoga*, the *yoga* of differentiating between the characteristics of the divine and the demonic personalities), (*sraddha traya vibhaga yoga*, the *yoga* of differentiating between the three forms of faith). In between these practical instructions, the brief 15th chapter shines to remind us about the ultimate goal (*purushottama yoga*, the *yoga* of the Supreme Person).

अनादिमध्यान्तमनन्तवीर्यम् अनन्तबाहुं शशिसूर्यनेत्रम् ।
 anādimadhyāntamanantavīryam anantabāhuṃ śaśisūryanetram ।
 पश्यामि त्वां दीप्तहुताशवक्रं स्वतेजसा विश्वमिदं तपन्तम् ॥ ११-१९ ॥
 paśyāmi tvāṃ diptahutaśavaktram svatejasā viśvamidam tapantam ॥ 11-19 ॥

anadi: without beginning; *madhya*: middle; *antam*: end; *ananta viryam*: infinite prowess; *ananta bahum*: infinite arms; *sasi*: the moon; *surya*: the sun; *netram*: eyes; *pasyami*: I see; *tvam*: you; *dipta*: blazing; *hutasa*: flames of fire; *vaktram*: mouth/ face; *sva tejas*: (your) own radiance; *visvam*: universe; *idam*: this; *tapantam*: heating/ scorching.

"Without beginning, middle or end, your prowess is unlimited. Your arms are innumerable, and your eyes are the Sun and the Moon. I can see your face blazing with flames of fire from your own radiance, scorching the entire universe."

The first word of the verse, *anadi*, "without beginning", is strictly connected to the other two parts of the three word compound (*adi*, *madhya*, *antam*) to which the privative "a" is applied. Arjuna's words in this verse are also found in other previous verses, but this repetition is not a literary flaw; rather, it reinforces the emotion and the importance of the revelation he is expressing. In Vedic tradition, when a statement is repeated (usually 3 times) it is called *tri satya*, "three times true". See for example in *Narada bhakti sutra* (81), *tri satyasya bhaktir eva gariyasi, bhaktir eva gariyasi*, "*bhakti* is most glorious: this is *tri satya*, fully established truth", or the famous declaration by Chaitanya, *harer nama harer nama harer namaiva kevalam, kalau nasty eva nasty eva nasty eva gatir anyatha*, "The Name of Hari, the Name of Hari, the Name of Hari only. In the age of Kali there is no other way, there is no other way, there is no other way."

Repetition is considered useful to facilitate understanding and memorization; for example it is said that all *shastras* should be studied at least 3 times, as exemplified by Brahma himself (*Bhagavata Purana*, 2.2.34). The practice of *japa yajna* is eminently based on the repetition of the same *mantra* for a prescribed number of times, so that the impression created by the contact with the sacred Names can sink deeply into the mind and the heart. Also on the natural platform, we see that we all tend to express our happiness, surprise or love by repeating the name of a loved one or some particular word - as this gives us great happiness. Alliteration, that is simply the repetition of the same sound or similar sounds in different words within a sentence - is a popular poetic figure in several languages, and many songs and poems contain a refrain that is purposefully repeated to stress the most important concepts that are to be expressed. In this way, we see that Arjuna is particularly impressed by the infinity and by the radiance of the *visva rupa*, two characteristics that are certainly extraordinary in this world and connected universally to the divine nature.

The expression *ananta virya*, "unlimited prowess", refers to the heroic power of warriors, the charisma of great leaders, and is a fitting tribute to Krishna from one of the greatest *kshatriya* of his times. Also the expression *ananta bahum* ("endless/ innumerable arms") reinforces this figure; in this regard just consider how many times in the conversation of the *Bhagavad gita* Krishna and Arjuna have called each other *maha baho*, "of powerful arms".

After the homage from the *kshatriya*, comes the appreciation that a *brahmana* could express: *dipta hutasya vaktram*, "whose mouth is the blazing sacred fire of the *agni hotra*". *Hotra* is a technical definition to indicate all those ritual sacrifices that require oblations into the sacred fire (*ahutis*), generally consisting of clarified butter (*ghi*) and grains. Still today, this particular type of Vedic ritual remains the most popular, if not the only known and practiced form of traditional sacrifice ceremony among Hindus. Again we find here the image of the immense cosmic fire that radiates and heats the entire universe, but this time it is described as a sacred fire, the supreme *homa* in which all actions and all objects are sacrificed, knowingly or unknowingly.

Here are some relevant quotes from other verses in *Bhagavad gita*:

yajnarthat karmano 'nyatra loko 'yam karma-bandhanah, tad-artham karma kaunteya mukta-sangah samacara, "Actions must be performed as sacrifice, otherwise in this world they cause bondage (and further) actions. Therefore, o son of Kunti, you should perform your activities for that (purpose of sacrifice), remaining free from (material) association." (3.9)

bhoktaram yajna-tapasam sarva-loka-mahesvaram, suhridam sarva-bhutanam jnatva mam santim ricchati, "(One who) knows me as the enjoyer/ beneficiary of *yajna* (sacrifice) and *tapas* (austerity), the great Lord of all the worlds /all people, and the dearest friend of all beings, attains peace." (5.29)

aham hi sarva-yajnanam bhokta ca prabhur eva ca, na tu mam abhijananti tattvenatas cyavanti te, "I am the Lord and beneficiary of all *yajnas*. Those who do not understand my *tattva* will have to take birth again." (9.24)

ye yatha mam prapadyante tams tathaiva bhajamy aham, mama vartmanuvartante manushyah partha sarvasah, "O Partha, as much as they surrender to me, in the same way I reciprocate with them. All human beings follow my path." (4.11)

daivam evapare yajnam yoginah paryupasate, brahmagnav apare yajnam yajnaivaopajuhvati, "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." (4.25)

srotadinindriyany anye samyamagnishu juhvati, sabdadin vishayan anya indriyagnishu juhvati, "Others offer (the activities of) the senses, such as the hearing etc, in the fire of regulated activity, others offer the objects (of the senses) such as the sound etc in the fire of the senses as an oblation." (4.26)

sarvanindriya-karmani prana-karmani capare, atma-samyama-yogagnau juhvati jnana-dipite, "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." (4.27)

dravya-yajnas tapo-yajna yoga-yajnas tathapare, svadhyaya-jnana-yajnas ca yatayah samsita-vratah, "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." (4.28)

apane juhvati pranam prane 'panam tathapare, pranapana-gati ruddhva pranayama-parayanah, "Others sacrifice the *apana* in the *prana*, and the *prana* in the *apana*, controlling both *prana* and *apana*: this method is called *pranayama*." (4.29)

apare niyataharah pranam praneshu juhvati, sarve 'py ete yajna-vido yajna-kshapita-kalmashah, "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)." (4.30)

In this regard, it is very interesting to note the description of the development of the *virata rupa* offered in *Bhagavata Purana* (3.26.52-72), from the conception as an egg to the birth from the amniotic waters of the Garbhodaka. This series of verses ends with the recommendation to meditate on the *paramatma* as present in this very body yet simultaneously distinct from it. Also, in *Bhagavata Purana* (3.25.32) we learn from Kapila that the subtle senses of the human body are non-different from the *devas* that govern/ represent them (*devanam guna linganam*).

द्यावापृथिव्योरिदमन्तरं हि व्याप्तं त्वयैकेन दिशश्च सर्वाः ।

dyāvāpṛthivyōridamantaram hi vyāptam tvayaikena diśāśca sarvāḥ ।

दृष्ट्वाद्भुतं रूपमुग्रं तवेदं लोकत्रयं प्रव्यथितं महात्मन् ॥ ११-२० ॥

dr̥ṣṭvādbhutam rūpamugram tavedam lokatrayam pravayathitam mahātman ॥ 11-20 ॥

dyau: from the sky; *a-prithivyoh*: to the earth; *idam*: this; *antaram*: between; *hi*: indeed; *vyaptam*: pervading; *tvaya*: by you; *ekena*: alone; *disah*: the directions; *ca*: and; *sarvah*: all; *dristva*: seeing; *adbhutam*: amazing; *rupam*: form; *ugram*: terrifying; *tava*: your; *idam*: this; *loka trayam*: the three planetary systems; *pravyathitam*: shaken; *maha atman*: o great Atman.

"From the sky to the earth and in between/ and the outer space, everything is pervaded by you alone in all the directions. O great Atman, by contemplating this amazing and terrifying form of yours, the three planetary systems are shaken."

Dyau and *Prithivi* are the Sky and Earth, the primeval Father and Mother of the world of human beings, in all cultures. The sky above us is the support for the Sun, the Moon and all the stars; it supplies light, rain, heat, and the coolness of the clouds. Beyond the planet's atmosphere, the sky expands unlimitedly, and includes and supports innumerable planets and other celestial bodies. Yet, the sky is ever unchanged, free, and untouched by all the manifestations we can see. Its color is a temporary superimposition due to atmospheric gases and particles of various elements, as well as the optical effects of the reflection or refraction of the light. The name *dyau* is the origin of the Greek name *Zeus* (referred to the Father of all the Gods) and the Latin *Deus*, normally translated as "God". Mother Earth is the womb from which all creatures rise, by which they are nurtured, and to which all creatures return in the end. She gives forms, and in fact she is the constituent of all forms - supporting, filling and binding the other gross elements (water, air, fire, ether). The expression *dyav a-prithivyōr idam antaram* includes all directions - space, earth, and "in between". This *antaram* ("in between") is the *antariksha*, the outer space of our solar system, or also the "intermediate" space or subtle dimensions that cannot be observed with our ordinary eyes, and where we usually travel between incarnations. This "intermediate" dimension is described in detail in the *Garuda Purana*. It is the same territory called *Bardo Thodol* in the famous *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, and "afterworld" in many cultures, including the ancient Egyptian, from which we have also inherited a version of the *Book of the Dead*. According to Vedic tradition, there are 10 directions in the universe; thus besides the

2-dimensional north, south, east and west, and the attendant north-east, north-west, south-east and south-west, we introduce the 3-dimensional perception with the up and down, or above and below. The *loka trayam*, "three planetary systems" mentioned in this verse are the higher planets of the *devas* and *upadevas*, the intermediate planet Earth, and the lower planets. Other commentators mention these *lokas* as *bhu*, *bhuvah*, *svah*, that correspond to the physical, subtle and causal dimensions.

The definition *ugra*, "fierce", "terrifying", "destructive", "angry", is normally used to refer to the fierce aspect of a Deity or Personality of God, while the same Personality in his/ her benevolent, kind, and sweet aspect is called *saumya* or *bhadra*. This does not mean that there are evil Deities and benevolent Deities: the Personality of God contains both aspects, and manifests them in different situations. Even the sweetest Personalities of God can manifest a terrifying attitude in battle against the *asuras*, while they will be compassionate and loving towards the devotees and the good people. What is this terrifying form that is scaring all the inhabitants of the universe? It is Time, Kala.

अमी हि त्वां सुरसङ्घा विशन्ति केचिद्धीताः प्राञ्जलयो गृणन्ति ।
 amī hi tvāṁ surasaṅghā viśanti kecidbhītāḥ prāñjalayo gṛṇanti ।
 स्वस्तीत्युक्त्वा महर्षिसिद्धसङ्घाः स्तुवन्ति त्वां स्तुतिभिः पुष्कलाभिः ॥ ११-२१ ॥
 svastītyuktvā maharṣisiddhasaṅghāḥ stuvanti tvāṁ stutibhiḥ puṣkalābhiḥ ॥ 11-21 ॥

ami: all these; *hi*: indeed; *tvam*: you; *sura sanghah*: the hosts of *suras*; *visanti*: enter; *kecit*: some of whom; *bhitah*: fearful; *pranjalayah*: with folded hands; *grinanti*: offer prayers; *svasti*: may everything be well; *iti*: thus; *uktva*: saying; *maha risih*: the great Rishis; *siddhah*: the Siddhas; *sanghah*: the hosts; *stuvanti*: they pray/ glorify; *tvam*: you; *stutibhih*: by prayers; *pushkalabhih*: by Vedic hymns.

"All of these hosts of Devas are entering into you. Some of them, terrified, offer prayers with folded hands, invoking auspiciousness. The crowds of the great Rishis and Siddhas sing your glories by chanting the Vedic hymns."

Arjuna continues here to describe the vision of the *visva rupa*. He sees the hosts of *devas* entering the fearsome cosmic form as its limbs and functional parts: the *devas* are personifications of the archetypal and elemental functions and components of the universe, and as such they must take their sacred job very seriously. This attitude is confirmed by *Taittiriya Upanishad* (2.8.1), *bhisasmad vatah pavate, bhisat eti suryah, bhisasmad agnis cendras ca, mrtyur dhavati panchamah*, "Out of fear of him the wind blows, the sun shines, Agni and Indra do their jobs, and the five forms of death run around (on their errands)."

Bhagavata Purana also repeats the same concept almost identically in two verses from 3rd canto (3.25.42 and 3.29.40): *mad bhayad vati vato 'yam, suryas tapati mad bhayat, varsatindro dahaty agnir, mrtyus carati mad bhayat/ yad bhavati vati vato 'yam, suryas tapati yad bhavat, yad bhayat varsate devo, bha gano bhati yad bhayat*.

However, we need to properly understand what the *shastra* mean by "fear" in this regard. It is not the senseless panic that oppressed servants feel when they approach a tyrannical and cruel ruler, who vents his anger and frustration at random. The fear the *devas* experience is like the emotion that rises in the minds and hearts of expert electricians when they approach the very high voltage transmission lines to do their work - they know they are dealing with an immense power that could instantly destroy them if they behave carelessly, so they must be extremely attentive and avoid all mistakes. So more than "fear", we could describe it as awe and respect, and complete alertness and concentration to engage in an important work for the benefit of the entire universe. This is why they chant the invocation "*svasti*" ("auspiciousness") while contemplating the universal form and engaging within it, while the Rishis and Siddhas support and encourage them by singing the Vedic hymns. Incidentally, it is interesting to note that every time we perform the *agnihotra yajna* and chant the Vedic *mantras* in honor of the *devas*, we are joining the hosts of the Rishis and Siddhas who perform the very same activities to support and encourage the mission of the *devas*. In this way, civilized human beings that belong to the category of *dvijas* ("twice born") are also participating directly to the proper functioning of the universal administration, and thus they are also called *suras*.

Other commentators have explained that *ami sura sangah* ("all these hosts of virtuous people") can also refer to the warriors that were assembled on the battlefield with the purpose of defending *dharma*, and that before the fighting are praying God for auspiciousness and dedicating their work and self-sacrifice for the benefit of the world. In this line of translation, the Maharishis and Siddhas are offering their blessings and invoking auspiciousness while watching the momentous battle at Kurukshetra. The Vedic hymns they are singing are certainly from the original collections called *samhitas* - *Rg*, *Yajur*, and especially *Sama Veda*; these are to be chanted or sung in all auspicious occasions, and also in difficult times to invoke auspiciousness. By vibrating the *sabda brahman* ("spiritual sound vibration"), the Rishis and their followers became intimately connected to the supreme Consciousness and harmonize themselves with it. Unfortunately, in Kali yuga it is practically impossible to find someone who is actually able to chant or sing such *mantras* in the correct way, therefore we should choose the humbler but much simpler and safer option of chanting or singing the holy Names of God, that are non-different from the traditional original Vedic hymns, and actually pack much more spiritual power because they are more essential and concentrated. The word *svasti*, "may everything be auspicious", is not to be confused with the similar blessing *santi*, "may everything be peaceful".

रुद्रादित्या वसवो ये च साध्य विश्वेऽश्विनौ मरुतश्चोष्मपाश्च ।
 rudrādityā vasavo ye ca sādhyā viśve'śvināu marutaśchoṣmapāśca ।
 गन्धर्वयक्षासुरसिद्धसङ्घा वीक्षन्ते त्वां विस्मिताश्चैव सर्वे ॥ ११-२२ ॥
 gandharvayakṣāsurasiddhasaṅghā vīkṣante tvāṁ vismitāścaiva sarve ॥ 11-22 ॥

rudrah: the Rudras; *adityah*: the Adityas; *vasavah*: the Vasus; *ca*: and; *sadhyah*: the Sadhyas; *visve*: the Visvedevas; *asvinau*: the two Asvinis; *marutah*: the Marutas; *ca*: and; *usmapah*: the Usmapas; *ca*: and; *gandharva*: Gandharvas; *yaksha*: Yakshas; *asurah*: Asuras; *siddhah*: Siddhas; *sanghah*: the hosts; *vikshante*: are contemplating; *tvam*: you; *vismitah*: amazed; *ca*: and; *eva*: certainly; *sarve*: all.

"The Rudras, the Adityas, the Vasus, the Sadhyas, the Visvedevas, the Asvinis, the Marutas, the Usmapas, the Gandharvas, the Yakshas, the Asuras, the Siddhas - all these crowds are contemplating you in amazement."

All the various categories of *devas* - administrators of the universe - are amazed, contemplating the immense and powerful *visva rupa* of which they are parts and parcels. In previous commentaries (10.21, 10.23, 10.26, 11.6) we have discussed about most of the categories of *suras* or *devas* mentioned in this verse, explaining how they are actually personifications of elemental energies in the cosmos. For example, the Vasus are water, the pole star, the moon, earth, wind, fire, dawn and space/ radiance.

The collective name Visvedeva ("all the *devas*") applies to a broad category of second-tier administrators, that are remembered as a class as descendants of Visva, one of the consorts of Yamaraja. The Sadhyas, too, are a class of similar cosmic officers, considered the descendants of Sadhya, another of the consorts of Yamaraja. In this verse these two categories of *devas* are mentioned together with the Usmapas ("who eat hot food"), another class of Pitris or *devas* residing on the planet of Yamaraja.

This particular information offers the opportunity to elaborate on the difference between the ritual ceremonies offered to the Pitris and the ordinary cult of the ancestors - or worship of the dead - that is found in all natural/ primitive cultures and religions. It is perfectly natural for materially identified people to feel the desire to pay homage and offer something to the departed spirits of their family members, relatives and friends. Some bring flowers and light a candle at a tomb in a cemetery, others do the same thing to a portrait they keep at home, but the idea is the same: they remember the dead, feel their absence or subtle presence, and wish to please them - out of affection, compassion or sometimes even fear.

The respectful and loving offering of pleasing articles - such as flowers, garlands, lamps etc - is called "worship" in the Vedic/ Hindu tradition, and is normally offered not only to God, but also to any person or even object that is considered worthy of respect and recognition. Sometimes ignorant people who do not understand this approach end up criticizing Hindus for "worshipping cows" or "worshipping trees", when they see the ritual ceremonies in which people offer their appreciation, respect and affection to these important elements of their lives. The same spirit of appreciation is expressed in the formal veneration or worship of sacred books, sacred rivers, or sacred images of various types, as well as to one's respected elders - such as parents - including the deceased ones.

However, the Pitris are not simply "dead people". Not all those who die become Pitris: only those great souls who attained the realization of Brahman (*brahma-vido janah*), perfectly performed all their duties and lived strictly according to *dharma* during their opportunity in the human form of life. This seriously restricts the number of likely candidates even among the descendants of the most prominent *gotras* among the contemporary "high caste" Hindu brahmins. We have discussed about this point already in the commentaries to verses 8.24 and 8.25, that described the *uttarayana* and *dakshinayana* paths into the subtle dimension at the time of death. The Pitris drink the *soma rasa* with the *devas*, help the confused departed souls and even astral travelers and shamans by giving counseling and guidance, and gather in assembly to discuss the events of the universe and how they can influence the people on earth in a positive way. They also have the power to visit earth in various shapes - as birds, as human beings etc - to test human beings and offer them blessings or curses, but they never engage directly in any conflict, either between human beings or between *devas* and *asuras*. At the end of their allotted 10,000 years, they return to this earthly dimension to take a new material body and complete their service to the Lord and mankind by spreading their wisdom and knowledge, then they get another opportunity to leave the material dimension and attain Brahman.

The word *usmapah* mentioned in this verse is generally interpreted as one particular class of Pitris, who "eat hot food". This meaning can apply to the fact that the food offerings presented to the Pitris should be cooked on the spot; this interpretation is supported by the fact that the wife of the *karta*, or head of the family, is the one who is in charge of cooking the *pinda* (food offerings) for the Pitris, and her husband immediately presents the food in the ceremonial ritual.

Another meaning could refer to the fact that the feast of food cooked on the occasion of the *sraddha* ceremonies should be consumed only by truly qualified *brahmanas*, who can withstand the "heat" and burn the negativities connected to the departed souls by eating their food without being contaminated by it. Where it is not possible to find such qualified *brahmanas*, the food cooked for the Pitris should be fed to the birds, who are often considered messengers from other dimensions.

रूपं महत्ते बहुवक्रनेत्रं

महाबाहो बहुबाहूरुपादम् ।

rūpaṁ mahatte bahuvaktranetram mahābāho bahubāhūrupādam ।

बहूदरं बहुदंष्ट्राकरालं

दृष्ट्वा लोकाः प्रव्यथितास्तथाहम् ॥ ११-२३ ॥

bahūdaram bahudamṣṭrākaraṅgam dṛṣṭvā lokāḥ pravyathitāstathāham || 11-23 ||

rupam: the form; *mahat*: very great/ universal; *te*: your; *bahu*: many; *vakra*: faces; *netram*: eyes; *maha baho*: o mighty armed one; *bahu*: many; *bahu*: many; *uru*: thighs; *padam*: feet; *bahu*: many; *udaram*: bellies; *bahu damstra*: many teeth; *karalam*: fierce; *dristva*: seeing; *lokah*: all the people; *pravyathitah*: shaken; *tatha*: as well as; *aham*: I (am).

"O mighty Lord, seeing this immense form of yours, with so many faces and eyes, legs, feet, bellies and teeth, everyone is shaken - including me."

The words *pravyathitah* ("agitated") and *karalam* ("scary") express the overwhelming feelings of amazement and fear (or awe) that everyone experiences in the contemplation of the immense universal form, that is so powerful and radiant.

The expression *rupam mahat* can be connected to the definitions of *mahat tattva* or *pradhana*, that designate the total aggregate of the material elements prior to the manifestation of the various bodies and objects in the universe. Usually these are considered direct forms of Shakti, Nature, rather than manifestations of the Purusha, but in this case we see that the focus of the teachings of *Bhagavad gita* has

moved to the oneness between Shakti and Shaktiman. There is a popular image in traditional iconography that illustrates this concept. It is the *ardhanarisvara* form, usually depicting Shiva and Shakti: literally half male and half female (*ardha* = half, *nari* = woman, *isvara* = Lord). There are also other similar images about Radha and Krishna, as two bodies united in a tight embrace, with two arms (one Krishna's and one Radha's) holding the flute.

Here lies the greatest mystery of creation, both at the spiritual and at the material level: the *acintya bheda abheda tattva* perspective (*darshana*) explains that *purusha* and *prakriti* are inconceivably one and different. Its practical application is demonstrated in the person of Chaitanya, the great teacher who propagated the *sankirtana* movement. Chaitanya is described by his agiographers and followers as the "combined form of Radha and Krishna" and in fact although he appeared in a male body, he developed the emotional sentiments called *parakiya sringara mahabhava* that are the exclusive characteristic of Radha in her love for Krishna. It is the most intense erotic love, but it is solely directed to Krishna as the only real male in all the material and spiritual universes; therefore Chaitanya's intense erotic emotions have nothing to do with the ordinary lust between conditioned souls - either heterosexual or homosexual.

To all effects, Chaitanya is Radha, and suitably enough, he is Krishna as well, although Krishna's presence in Chaitanya's body is eclipsed by the overwhelming emotions of Radha and therefore appears to be absent, triggering the intense feelings of separation (*vipralambha*). How can this be? Only through Yogamaya, the "illusion" that enables the union between God and Shakti (especially in the form of the *tatastha shakti*, or the individual *jivatmans*). For this reason, the *sadhaka* needs to engage in the process of Yoga, that is amazingly described in *Bhagavad gita*. Its explanation in a nutshell is found in verse 9.13: *mahatmanas tu mam partha daivim prakritim asritah, bhajanty ananya-manaso jnatva bhutadim avyayam*, "However, o son of Pritha (Arjuna), the great souls take shelter in the divine nature and worship/ serve me with undivided attention, knowing that I am the inexhaustible origin of everything/ all beings."

All we have to do is to take shelter in Yogamaya, the divine *prakriti* called *cit shakti*, *hladini shakti* and Bhakti Devi, and engage sincerely and lovingly in the service of the Supreme. The first step consists in understanding that material consciousness is limited and unable to fulfill our deepest thirst for happiness.

Then we must realize our own transcendental identity (as *purusha*) and nature (as *prakriti*) as the *atman*, that is male and female at the same time. We must overcome the identification with the gross material body in which we travel around, as clearly explained by Krishna in the 2nd chapter of *Bhagavad gita*. This is because ordinary conditioned souls who are still on the material platform of gross material bodily identification will never be able to actually understand and appreciate the spiritual activities of Bhagavan. To overcome this delusional bodily identification, we need to surrender to the Divine: *daivi hy esa guna-mayi mama maya duratyaya, mam eva ye prapadyante mayam etam taranti te*, "This divine energy of mine, manifesting as the three *gunas*, is very difficult to overcome but those who take shelter in me (can) cross over this illusion." (7.14).

Prakriti ("Nature") is the inherent potency of Brahman, and also manifests in the Atman. She is described as *sat*, "existence", *cit*, "awareness" and *ananda*, "happiness". But she is also *rupa*, "form", *shakti*, "power", *vidya*, "knowledge", *buddhi*, "intelligence", *trishna*, "aspiration", *tushti*, "satisfaction", *kshanti*, "benevolence", *daya*, "generosity", *shanti*, "peace", *jala*, "water" and *matri*, "the Mother". (*Devi mahatmya*, 5.9-80)

Delusional conditioned souls, hopelessly enslaved by the shackles of *ahankara* and *mamatva*, only take shelter in their ego and endless desires: they never take shelter in Maya, but they try to dominate and possess her. Foolish and confused people believe they can "conquer the witch Maya" - usually by insulting Nature and especially the feminine form that represents it - but that is impossible: they will just get beaten more and more severely. The only way to cross the ocean of the material *gunas* and finally land on the beach of transcendence, beyond the Viraja river, is to actually surrender to the Divine Mother - Tarini, Vidya, Bhakti, Buddhi, Vedamata, Yogamaya - and take shelter in her. She is the only one who can take us across.

नभःस्पृशं दीप्तमनेकवर्णं व्यात्ताननं दीप्तविशालनेत्रम् ।
 nabhaḥspṛśaṁ dīptamanekavarṇaṁ vyāttānaṁ dīptaviśālanetraṁ ।
 दृष्ट्वा हि त्वां प्रव्यथितान्तरात्मा धृतिं न विन्दामि शमं च विष्णो ॥ ११-२४ ॥
 dṛṣṭvā hi tvāṁ pravryathitāntarātmā dhṛtiṁ na vindāmi śamaṁ ca viṣṇo ॥ 11-24 ॥

nabhaḥ: the sky; *spṛśam*: touching; *dīptam*: luminous; *aneka*: many; *varṇam*: colors; *vyatta*: gaping/ open; *ananaṁ*: mouths; *dīpta*: glowing; *viśala*: fierce; *netraṁ*: eyes; *dṛiṣṭva*: seen; *hi*: indeed; *tvam*: you; *pravryathitah*: shaken; *antah*: within; *atma*: the *atman*; *dhṛitim*: steadiness; *na*: not; *vindami*: I can find; *samaṁ*: control of my mind; *ca*: and; *viṣṇo*: o Vishnu.

"O Vishnu, I feel shaken and I have lost my mental balance and peace, looking at this (immense) radiance of yours, of so many colors, reaching up to touch the sky, with immense gaping mouths and fierce glowing eyes."

Arjuna recognizes that the universal form (the *virata purusha*) is Vishnu himself, the transcendental non-manifested existence (Brahman) that appears as this world in this world. In the previous verse, he has also recognized Krishna as Vishnu, the *visva rupa* and *visva isvara*, and in the subsequent verses he will beg forgiveness for his informal behavior within their friendly relationship.

The direct perception of the meditation recommended by Krishna is a shocking realization, required to trigger the paradigm shift in consciousness towards the level of Transcendence, but it is not meant to be a constant focus. Embodied beings, who must work through the limited set of senses (including the mind, called the 6th sense) afforded by a material body, cannot concentrate on such a vision for a long time. To understand this point, we can offer the example of a high voltage power-line, into which we can plug our machinery to get it kick-started: if we tried to keep it connected to that voltage, our system would quickly burn out. Like a defibrillator (resuscitation electrical paddle) discharge, it must be maintained only as long as strictly required to bring the proper effect on our system, otherwise it will damage us.

After living the experience described here by Arjuna, many (called "impersonalists") remain engaged in *yoga* on the level of *jnana*: *ye tv aksharam anirdesyam avyaktam paryupasate, sarvatra-gam acintyam ca kuta-stham acalam dhruvam/ sannyamyendriya-gramam*

sarvatra sama-buddhayah, te prapnuvanti mam eva sarva-bhuta-hite ratah, "Those who worship me correctly and sincerely as the *akshara* (Brahman/ Omkara), indescribable, non-manifested, all-pervading, inconceivable, unchanging, never moving and eternal Existence, will achieve me by controlling their senses, remaining equally disposed to all, and working for the benefit of all beings." (12.3-4) This is confirmed in verse 12.5: *kleso 'dhikataras tesham avyaktasakta-cetasam, avyakta hi gatir duhkham devavadbhir avapyate*, "For the embodied beings it is very difficult to make progress if they remain mentally attached to the non-manifested (*avyakta*)".

To avoid or minimize such difficulties we must develop *bhakti*, devotion to the Personality of God: *Bhagavad gita* offers plenty of valuable teachings about *bhakti*, what it is, and how to engage in it. Just as Krishna has demonstrated the *visva rupa* after describing it to Arjuna, in the next verses Krishna will manifest his intimate and sweet form, the natural object of love and devotion for all the *jivas*. The overwhelming experience of Brahman realization will leave its permanent effects on our consciousness, and we will truly be able to see the intimate human-like form of God as he really is (*vetti tattvatah*, 4.9, 7.3, 10.7, 18.55).

दंष्ट्राकरालानि च ते मुखानि दृष्ट्वैव कालानलसन्निभानि ।
 daṁṣṭrākarālāni ca te mukhāni dṛṣṭvaiva kālānalasannibhāni ।
 दिशो न जाने न लभे च शर्म प्रसीद देवेश जगन्निवास ॥ ११-२५ ॥
 diśo na jāne na labhe ca śarma prasīda deveśa jagannivāsa ॥ 11-25 ॥

damstra: teeth/ fangs; *karalāni*: fierce; *ca*: and; *te*: your; *mukhāni*: (many) faces; *dristva*: seeing; *eva*: certainly; *kala*: time; *anala*: the fire; *sannibhani*: looking like/ similar to; *disah*: the directions; *na*: not; *jane*: I know; *na*: not; *labhe*: I can get; *ca*: and; *sarma*: grace; *prasida*: be pleased/ placated; *deva isa*: o Lord of the Gods; *jagat nivasa*: o abode/ shelter of the universe.

"O Lord of the Gods, o abode of the universe, be pleased and grant me grace. I am lost (having lost the sense of direction), seeing the fierce fangs of your mouths that look like the fire of time."

As we have seen also in previous verses, the universal form described by Arjuna is the perception of the non-manifested Brahman when it manifests as this world in this world. It is *purusha* and *prakriti* at the same time, and its terrifying and radiant forms are compared to fire, especially to the mouth of fire where he oblations are offered. Now gradually Arjuna is leading us to another amazing realization: this sacred universal fire is Time and Death. Everything is ultimately sacrificed into this final fire, that consumes everything: for this reason God is also called Hari and Hara ("who takes away"). If we do it consciously, we obtain greater benefits. The name *kala* ("time") also means "black". The name *krishna*, too, means "black", but the difference between *kala* and *krishna* is like the difference between the terrifying universal form and the intimate and sweet form of Syamasundara. They are one and the same, yet inconceivably different.

All our sufferings in this world are caused by the illusory dissociation of personality that conditioned souls apply both to God and to themselves, and that is mentioned many times in *Bhagavad gita* as a major obstacle (2.45, 4.22, 5.3, 7.27, 7.28, 15.5). This delusional approach of duality is a characteristic of the *asuras*; the name of the mother of the *asuras*, Diti, literally means "cutting off", "dividing".

The *Bhagavata Purana* (11.2.37) confirms: *bhayam dvitiyabhinivesatah syad isad apetasya viparyayo 'smrtih, tan mayayato budha abhajat tam, bhaktyaikayesam guru devatatma*, "Fear arises when the consciousness is focused on duality (*dvitiya*). One who separates himself from the Lord is confused by illusion and forgetfulness (ignorance). Therefore intelligent people offer a devotional worship to the Lord, who is the *atman* of the *guru* and the *devas*."

Fear of death and time is only due to the illusory identification with the material body (*Bhagavata Purana* 3.26.16), because the spirit is eternal (*sasvata*) and not subject to change (*avikara*). The fearsome fangs of mother tiger are only dangerous for her prey, while young tiger cubs are not afraid at all, because they are surrendered and affectionate to their mother. The expression *jagat nivasa* ("abode/ shelter of the universe") refers to the fact that the entire universe rests on the supreme Brahman, and will again be absorbed into him at the time of dissolution. This same expression will be used in *Bhagavata Purana* 10.2.19 to refer to Krishna's advent, the wonderful *lila* in which the shelter of the universe takes shelter in the womb of Devaki.

Arjuna prays the powerful Vishnu (the name *vishnu* literally means "powerful") to be pleased or placated (*prasida*) and to grant him grace (*sarma*). The word *sarma* or *sharma* means not only "grace" but also "happiness", "comfort", and is traditionally referred to the role of *brahmanas* in society, as they are expected to comfort and give happiness to the confused conditioned souls, helping them to overcome the ignorance of material identifications and attachments and the unlimited sufferings and ills that derive from it.

Unfortunately, with the degradation of the original system, the name Sharma has become a mere family name for "high caste Hindu brahmins" like Gosvami, Acharya, etc, and the people called by such name can hardly be expected to live up to it. Yet, this would be the only true salvation for traditional Hinduism.

अमी च त्वां धृतराष्ट्रस्य पुत्राः सर्वे सहैवावनिपालसङ्घैः ।
 amī ca tvāṁ dhṛtarāṣṭrasya putrāḥ sarve sahaivāvanipālasaṅghaiḥ ।
 भीष्मो द्रोणः सूतपुत्रस्तथासौ सहास्मदीयैरपि योधमुख्यैः ॥ ११-२६ ॥
 bhīṣmo droṇaḥ sūtaputrastathāsau sahāsmadiyairapi yodhamukhyaiḥ ॥ 11-26 ॥

ami: these; *ca*: and; *tvam*: you; *dhritarastrasya*: of Dhritarastra; *putrah*: the sons; *sarve*: all; *saha*: together; *eva*: certainly; *avani pala*: of warrior kings; *sanghah*: with the hosts; *bhishmah*: Bhishma; *dronah*: Drona; *suta putrah*: the son of the *suta*; *tatha*: also; *asau*: that; *saha*: together; *asmadiyaiḥ*: our (own); *api*: although; *yodha-mukhyaiḥ*: the most famous warriors.

"All these sons of Dhritarastra, together with the many warrior kings, and Bhishma, Drona, Karna, and the most famous warriors of our own army as well,"

The word *avani* means "earth" and *pala* means "protector", therefore the *avani palas* mentioned in this verse are the warrior kings from the various territories of the planet, who were participating to the Kurukshetra war. In the Pandavas' army, besides the 5 brothers and their 5 sons from Draupadi, we also find Abhimanyu (the 16 year old son of Subhadra and Arjuna), Irvan (son of the Nagini Ulupi and Arjuna) and Ghatotkacha (son of the Rakshasi Hidimbi and Bhima). There was the entire family of Draupadi - Drupada king of Panchala, Dhirstadyumna the son of Drupada specifically born for that war, Sikhandi(ni) the adopted son of Drupada, and the other sons of Draupada named Dhirstaketu, Yudhamanyu, Satyajit and Uttamauja. There were king Virata of Matsya desa with his sons Sveta, Uttara and Sankha, Kuntibhoja (Kunti's adoptive father) and his son Purujit, Dhirstaketu son of Sisupala and king of Cedi, Sahadeva son of Jarasandha and king of Magadha, and Satyaki and Cekitana of the Yadavas. On the Pandavas' side there were also the king of Kasi (Varanasi) who was a vassal of the kingdom of Koshala (Ayodhya), Sarangadhvaja the king of Pandya (with capital at Madurai, south of the present Tamil Nadu, from river Kaveri to Kanyakumari), the king of Telinga or Telangana (presently Tamil Nadu) and 5 princes of Kekaya, headed by the eldest Brihadkshatra, who had been exiled from their kingdom. There were also the generals of Parama Kamboja (present Tajikistan) who did not have a king; they belonged to the "external" territories or Bahlikas that did not follow the Vedic system (Kirata, Gandhara, Barbara, Yavana, Saka, etc). The Pandavas' army had 7 *akshauhinis* or battalions for a total of 1,530,900 warriors, plus a non-specified number of non-organized troops coming from the barbarians' provinces. One *akshauhini* consisted of 21,870 war chariots, 21,870 war elephants, 65,610 horses and 109,350 foot soldiers.

In the army of Duryodhana, that commanded 11 *akshauhinis* (2,405,708 warriors) there were also his 99 brothers with their sons. There was the old and extremely powerful warrior Bhishma, and there were also his uncle Bahlika (Santanu's brother), Somadatta son of Bahlika and Bhurisrava son of Somadatta. There were Drona and his son Asvatthama, and Kripa the brother of Drona's wife. Sakuni (brother of Gandhari the mother of Duryodhana) was there with his son Uluka and several other relatives from the Gandhara kingdom, and there was also Sudakshina of Kamboja (brother of Duryodhana's wife). All Duryodhana's friends were there, beginning with Jayadratha the king of Panjab, Sindhu and Sauvira (Abhira) and Sibi (this is why he was also called Saibya), Bhagadatta the king of Pragjyotisha with his war elephants, Susharma of Trigarta with his brothers and their sons, Brihadbala and Vatsaraja of Kosala, king Nila of Mahishmati, the other Kekaya princes that were the rivals of Brihadkshatra, and Vinda and Anuvinda of Avanti in Madhyadesa. King Salya of Madra, brother of Madri, had been forced to join the Kauravas, while Kritavarma and his son Matrikavat had been instructed by Krishna to fight in favor of Duryodhana leading Krishna's personal army, called Narayani sena and consisting of 1 million cowherd men coming from the district of Mathura. Among the other supporters of Duryodhanas there were the Rakshasas called Alambusha and Alayudha, the tribal king of Kalinga, and several chieftains of the barbarians' territories, such as Kamboja, Yavana, Saka, Mahishaka, Tushara, Dravida, Usinara, Pulinda and Kolisarpa. Karna king of Anga, his son Vrishasena and the other sons of Adiratha took part in the battle only after Bhishma's fall.

In this verse Karna is called "the son of the *suta*", where *suta* refers to a particular class of *sudras* serving the *kshatriya* warriors as charioteers and chariot makers. We know that actually Karna was the direct son of Surya, the Sun God, the most powerful warrior and first forefather of the Suryavamsa, but he was born from princess Kunti before her marriage, and was abandoned at birth. He was rescued by the charioteer Adiratha and his wife Radha, who accepted him as their son, therefore he developed a very deep affection for them and considered himself their son to all effects. This posed a serious problem in Karna's social identification, because by *guna* and *karma* he was certainly not a *sudra*, and could never renounce his true nature as a *kshatriya*.

वक्त्राणि ते त्वरमाणा विशन्ति दंष्ट्राकरालानि भयानकानि ।

vaktrāṇi te tvaramāṇā viśanti daṁṣṭrākarālāni bhayānakāni ।

केचिद्विलग्ना दशनान्तरेषु सन्दृश्यन्ते चूर्णितैरुत्तमाङ्गैः ॥ ११-२७ ॥

kecidvilagnā daśanāntareṣu sandṛśyante cūrṇitairuttamāṅgaiḥ ॥ 11-27 ॥

vaktrani: the mouths; *te*: your; *tvaramanah*: rushing; *visanti*: they enter; *damstra*: the teeth; *karalani*: fierce; *bhayanakani*: terrifying; *kecit*: some of them; *vilagnah*: trapped; *dasana antareshu*: between the teeth/ lips; *sandrisyante*: can be seen; *churnitaih*: smashed/ crushed; *uttama angaih*: the upper part of the bodies.

"They are rushing into your fierce mouths and between your terrifying teeth. I see some of them having their heads crushed between your jaws."

The word *dasanantaresu* literally means "in the gaps (between the teeth/ lips)", and *vilagna* means "stuck", "trapped". This verse repeats the reference to the fearsome teeth of Time (*damstra karalani*), and we are powerfully reminded of the fierce form of Kali or Chamunda, who grinds everything between her teeth (*Aparajita stotra*, chapter 7 verse 9.22 of *Devi mahatmya*). Coincidentally, the name *kali* is the feminine form of *kala*, that means "time" as well as "black". We also find a very peculiar verse in *Bhagavata Purana* in which Mother Kali is explicitly identified as Kala, or eternal Time (*kala sajanam tada devim, bibhrac chaktim urukramah, trayorvimsati tattvanam ganam yugapad avisat*, "Then the Goddess, known as Time, the amazing Power of destruction, simultaneously entered in all the 23 *tattvas*", 3.6.2).

Like moths are inexorably attracted to a blazing fire and throw themselves into it to their deaths, all people and all things constantly run towards their end, one moment after the other, whether they are aware of it or not. And the more they try to delay death or time by using the wrong means - materialistic and adharmic - the faster and deeper they slide into suffering.

We could say that everyone starts to die at the very moment they are born: the clock starts ticking, so to speak. Traditionally, it is said that the duration of life for each person is measured by a specific number of heart beats and breathing cycles, that have been already ordained as a result of each person's previous activities. This is why in the physical practices of *yoga*, the *sadhakas* strive to slow down and even stop the breathing in order to prolong the duration of their lives; however this practice will not be possible without a conscious effort in overcoming the identification with the material body. By repeatedly going through births and deaths, we finally come to understand that we are not any of the bodies we have acquired and lost so many times, and we turn our consciousness to the transcendental level. Nothing

is ever lost, just like all the various exercises and tests we face at school are not important in themselves but they are only useful as instruments for learning what we need to realize. There is a famous folk tale about a soldier who had been foretold his imminent death in three days; he immediately fled to another city, where he reached exactly three days later - only to find that he was indeed destined to die precisely in the place where he had sought shelter. All his efforts had only made his end even more certain than ever. This does not mean that we should not defend ourselves when we are attacked, or that we should not protect the good and innocent people from aggressions. Rather, it means that we should only fight for such good causes, and remain detached from the result of the battle. As Krishna has already stated in verse 2.38: *sukha-duhkhe same kritva labhalabhau jayajayau, tato yuddhaya yujyasva naivam papam avapsyasi*, "If you fight this battle while remaining equally disposed (unattached and prepared) to joy and sadness, gain and loss, victory and defeat, you will never be touched by sin."

This description of the destruction of all the warriors may seem horrible to the faint-hearted, but it is not different from the descriptions of Narasimha tearing Hiranyakasipu's body in two, disemboweling it and even wearing its intestines as a garland. Or Ravana vomiting blood after being struck by Rama's arrow, or the nine lakes filled with blood by Parasurama after killing the sons of Kartavirya Arjuna, Balarama crushing and smashing heads and bodies with his club while fighting against Rukmi and his allies (*Bhagavata Purana* 10.61.38), or the battle of Krishna with Jarasandha attacking Mathura (*Bhagavata Purana* 10.50.20-28) with the ghastly scenes of bodies chopped to pieces, rivers of blood with floating hands and heads looking like fish and turtles.

Krishna's childhood activities in Vrindavana are no less ghastly - Bakasura's body bifurcated in two starting from the beak, or the various *asuras* vomiting blood after being hit by Krishna or Balarama (Kaliya, Pralamba, Arista, and so on). However, these combative activities manifested by Krishna are not less spiritual or worshipable than his love exchanges with the *gopis*, and in fact they are enhancing the attraction felt by the *gopis* towards Krishna, as such *lilas* are remembered by them again and again.

यथा नदीनां बहवोऽम्बुवेगाः समुद्रमेवाभिमुखा द्रवन्ति ।

yathā nadinām bahavo'mbuvegāḥ samudramevābhimukhā dravanti ।

तथा तवामी नरलोकवीरा विशन्ति वक्राण्यभिविज्वलन्ति ॥ ११-२८ ॥

tathā tavāmī naralokavīrā viśanti vaktrāṅyabhivijvalanti ।। 11-28 ।।

yatha: just like; *nadinam*: of the rivers; *bahavah*: many; *ambu*: of water; *vegah*: the impact/ the current; *samudram*: the ocean; *eva*: certainly; *abhimukha*: towards; *dravanti*: are drawn; *tatha*: like that; *tava*: your; *ami*: all these; *nara loka*: of the human species; *virah*: the heroes; *visanti*: they enter; *vaktrani*: the mouths. *abhivijvalanti*: blaze radiantly.

"Just like the masses of water from the rivers rush into the ocean, all these people are drawn into you, and the great warriors enter into (your) blazing mouths."

The expression *ambu vega* means "waves", "force of water", "current of rivers", while the word *drava* indicates flowing, dropping into the ocean as attracted by the law of gravity, and it is also used in connection with the act of drinking liquids. Rivers cannot avoid rushing towards the ocean, as this is a natural law of the universe. Similarly, all things and bodies in this world must face destruction, at the destined time and place as a result of their combined previous activities. The opportunity constituted by a human life is extremely valuable and just as fragile. At any time we can be called into the blazing mouth of Time, so we should always be ready, and keep our consciousness on the proper level. Death is also a wonderful opportunity to move on towards a better situation. As Krishna has already explained in *Bhagavad gita*:

esha brahmi sthithi partha nainam prapya vimuhyati, sthityasyam anta-kale 'pi brahma-nirvanam ricchati, "O son of Pritha, this is the spiritual level. A person who has attained this level never becomes confused, and by remaining in that position, he attains spiritual liberation at the end of his time." (2.72)

sadhibhutadhidaivam mam sadhiyajnam ca me viduh, prayana-kale 'pi ca mam te vidur yukta-cetasah, "They know me and simultaneously they know the principle of material manifestation, the principle of the archetypes governing it, and the principle of sacred action. Thus they will also know me at the time of (their) death, because their consciousness is connected (with me)." (7.30)

anta-kale ca mam eva smaran muktva kalevaram, yah prayati sa mad-bhavam yati nasty atra samsayah, "One who, at the end of time (of this life), remembers me while leaving his/ her body attains my nature. There is no doubt in this." (8.5)

yam yam vapi smaran bhavam tyajaty ante kalevaram, tam tam evaiti kaunteya sada tad-bhava-bhavitah, "O son of Kunti (Arjuna), whatever state of existence/ nature one remembers at the time of leaving the body, s/he attains (precisely) that state of being/ condition, (because) of always contemplating that existence." (8.6)

prayana-kale manasacalena bhaktya yukto yoga-balena caiva, bhruvor madhye pranam avesya samyak sa tam param purusam upaiti divyam, "One who, at the time of death, (remembers the Lord) without any distraction of the mind, with devotion and powerfully connected through *yoga*, and perfectly keeping the *prana* between one's eyebrows, attains that divine/ radiant supreme Person." (8.10)

The image of the rivers rushing into the ocean brings to our mind the concept of *daivam* - usually translated as "destiny" or "fate", or even "providence" - as something inevitable, the plan of a higher intelligence and divine will. For example, in *Bhagavata Purana* (1.9.17), we find this verse: *tasmad idam daiva tantram vyavasya bhatarasabha, tasyanuvihito 'natha, natha pahi prajah prabho*, "All this is due to the power of destiny, that is according to his will. Now you should take care of those who have remained without protection".

And again (3.3.23): *daivadhinesu kamesu, daivadhinah svayam puman, ko visrambhena yogena, yogesvaram anuvratah*, "The living entities are controlled by destiny in their lives and their sense enjoyment. So only those who have been serving the Lord of *yoga* through *yoga* can really develop faith in God."

However, the Vedic idea of destiny is about *karma* (action) and *kala* (time) and not about 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.

Karma is not some inevitable sentence, a sort of punishment that we simply need to storm out in a passive and fatalistic way. Rather, it is constantly changing with each action (or inaction) we perform in this or any of our subsequent lifetimes, and it can even be neutralized or transformed by new and suitable actions. For those who want to improve their situation in the material world, the scriptures recommend pious activities such as sacred rituals of purification (*prayascitta*), worshiping God, going to pilgrimage, bathing in sacred *tirthas*, distributing charity to deserving persons, selflessly performing good deeds for the benefit of all, sacrificing one's possessions for good causes, and engaging in austerities (such as fasting etc).

यथा प्रदीप्तं ज्वलनं पतङ्गा विशन्ति नाशाय समृद्धवेगाः ।
 yathā pradīptam̐ jvalanam̐ patāṅgā viśanti nāśāya samṛddhavegāḥ ।
 तथैव नाशाय विशन्ति लोकास्- तवापि वक्त्राणि समृद्धवेगाः ॥ ११-२९ ॥
 tathaiva nāśāya viśanti lokās- tavāpi vaktrāṇi samṛddhavegāḥ ॥ 11-29 ॥

yatha: just like; *pradiptam*: burning; *jvalanam*: of flames; *patangah*: moths; *visanti*: they enter; *nasaya*: to their destruction; *samridha vegah*: with great force/ speed; *tatha*: just like; *eva*: certainly; *nasaya*: to their destruction; *visanti*: they enter; *lokah*: the worlds/ the people; *tava*: your; *api*: although; *vaktrani*: the mouths; *samridha*: full; *vegah*: the force.

"Just like moths rush at full speed to their destruction, inexorably attracted into the burning flames, so the worlds/ the people fall at tremendous speed into your mouths."

The tiny insects are forcefully pushed by *paramatma's mahamaya* towards the fire of their deaths because their time in those bodies is over. Each particular species of life has its pre-ordained duration of bodies: for some it may be hundreds of years (as for some big trees) and for others just one single day (as for some insects), in which they live a full experience of birth, growth, attainment of maturity, reproduction, decline and death. On other planets, the *devas* live still longer lives: one of their days lasts one full year on the planet Earth. The highest place in the universe, *Brahmaloka*, has a longer day still, calculated as 1000 cycles of *yugas* on the planet Earth, estimated at 8 billion 600 million of our years.

Yet, all the embodied creatures only have a limited span of time to complete their work in a particular body. Foolish conditioned souls waste the valuable opportunity of a human life to engage in materialistic activities like the lower animals like the moths and other insects - eating, sleeping, having sex and defending themselves - until their allotted time has elapsed, and they are drawn into the fire of death. They do not know the purpose of their life, and most of them are not even interested in asking questions about it, so they leave this world without any real gain. *Bhagavata Purana* (2.3.17) says, *ayur harati vai pumsam, udyann astam ca yann asau, tasyarte yat ksano nita, uttama sloka vartaya*, "Every sunrise and sunset take away a piece of the duration of life for a man, (which is lost without gain) except for those who use time to understand the Lord". *Brihad aranyaka Upanishad* (3.8.10) says, *yo va etad aksaram gargy vidtvasmal lokat praiti sa brahmanah, etad aksaram gargy avidtvasmal lokat praiti sa kripanah*, "A *brahmana* is one who leaves this world with the knowledge of the Brahman, while a *kripana* ("one to be pitied") leaves this world without learning anything about Transcendence".

The moths are throwing themselves into the fire because they are totally fascinated by it. They are thirsty for beauty and splendor and warmth, because deep inside their forgotten memory they hanker for happiness. Similarly, human beings keep running after the ideas of happiness, love, beauty, splendor and glory that resonate with their innermost nature, but because they seek them in the wrong place - in material identifications and attachments - they end up burning their time, their energies, their enthusiasm and their lives, without attaining their ideal. Then they become cynical and start to believe that no ideal can exist. But this problem is due to ignorance only: what they are seeking is not out there, but it truly exists within their own soul.

Bhagavata Purana 3.31.42 says, *tam atmano vijaniyat, paty apatyā grhatmakam, daivopasaditam mrityum, mrgayor gayanam yatha*, "The *jiva* (who has taken birth as a woman) should know that her life centered on husband, children and home making has been arranged by destiny for her destruction, like the sweet songs of the hunter (that attract the animals)." Of course the same applies to those *jivas* who have taken birth as men - simply the attachments may be a little different, but they are always outside their own *atman*, and therefore illusory. *Bhagavata Purana* (1.5.18) says, *tasyaiva hetoh prayateta kovido, na labhyate yad bhramatam upary adhah, tal labhyate duhkhavah anyatah sukham, kalena sarvatra gabhira ramhasa*, "An intelligent person should only endeavor for what cannot be obtained by traveling around, because sorrows as well as joys will come in the course of time, wherever we are staying, and even coming to us unexpectedly."

In Vedic times, the basic necessities of life were easily available for everyone. *Sukadeva* (*Bhagavata Purana* 2.2.3-5) clearly says that one could freely live in mountain caves, drink water from the rivers, eat plenty of fruits from public trees, wear abandoned old clothes or tree bark garments. Of course today this is much more difficult, because of the disgraceful degradation of society and especially because of the legislative hypertrophy created by overpaid politicians who need to show their voters they are actually doing something.

लेलिह्यसे ग्रसमानः समन्ताल- लोकान्समग्रान्वदनैर्ज्वलद्भिः ।
 lelihyase grasamanah̐ samantāl- lokānsamagrānvadanairjvaladbhiḥ ।
 तेजोभिरापूर्य जगत्समग्रं भासस्तवोग्राः प्रतपन्ति विष्णो ॥ ११-३० ॥
 tejobhirāpūrya jagatsamagram̐ bhāsastavogrāḥ pratapanti viṣṇo ॥ 11-30 ॥

lelihyase: you are licking; *grasamanah*: the devoured; *samantat*: from all sides; *lokān*: the people/ the planets; *samagran*: all; *vadanaih*: with the mouths; *jvaladbhih*: blazing; *tejobhih*: with radiance; *apurya*: covering; *jagat*: the universe; *samagram*: all; *bhasah*: the rays; *tava*: your; *ugrah*: fierce; *pratapanti*: are burning (everything); *vishno*: o Vishnu.

"From all sides you are licking these devoured people/ worlds into your mouths, whose blazing light covers the entire universe. O Vishnu, your fierce radiance is burning everything."

The world *loka*, here in the plural (*lokan*), applies to a multitude of people and is normally used to refer to inhabited planets, planetary systems or dimensions, such as Satyaloka, Janaloka, etc, down to Patalaloka in the lower regions of the universe. In the previous verse it was said that "the *lokas*" were rushing into the blazing mouths of the universal form, while in verse 28 the expression used was *nara loka virah*, "the great warriors from *naraloka*/ among the human beings".

Nothing escapes the blazing mouths of Time: Death reaches out with licking flames to draw everything in, and consumes all. The word *grasa* ("devour") is often used in propitiatory prayers for protection (generally called *kavaca*, "armor"), in which the devotee prays God's power to devour all inauspicious things. For example, we find in *Bhagavata Purana* 5.18.8, the prayer offered by Prahlada Maharaja to Narasimha: *om namo bhagavate narasimhaya, namas tejas tejas avir avirbhava, vajra nakha vajra damstra karmasayan, randhaya randhaya tamo grasa grasa, om svaha, abhayam abhayam atmani bhuyistha, om ksraum*, "Om! I offer my homage to Bhagavan Narasimha! I bow to you, o power of all powers! Please appear to us in a visible form! You have nails like diamonds/ thunderbolts. You have teeth like diamonds/ thunderbolts. Please destroy our materialistic desires! Please devour/ destroy ignorance! Om! I offer worship to you. May you appear in my mind as fearlessness. Om! Ksraum!"

A similar description is found in the *Devi mahatmya* in *Skanda Purana*, especially in chapters 7 and 8, where Mother Kali slays the *asuras* Chanda and Munda and many others, crushing the Daitya warriors between her teeth and devouring all the weapons thrown at her. In chapter 8 she faces the *asura* called Raktabija ("blood seed"), who was particularly difficult to kill because every drop of his blood that touched the earth produced a new clone of the *asura*, possessing the same strength as the original. So Mother Kali (called Chamunda after she had killed Chanda and Munda) shot her tongue out to catch every single drop of blood before it fell down, and the *asura* Raktabija was finally singled out and killed.

The word *ugra* means "fierce", "terrifying", and is also used to refer to all the ferocious forms of God, male and female, including of course Kali and Narasimha. Sometimes such forms are worshiped secretly in temples behind doors by a small group of intimate servants, while their *saumya* or *bhadra* counterpart is made accessible for *darshana* in the next room. When exploring the ancient traditions of Devi worship in India, we discover that in remote times the female equivalents of the various male Personalities of God were extremely popular - Narasimhi, Varahi, Mahesvari, Brahmani, Kaumari, Vaishnavi, Aindri, Vignesvari (also called Ganeshani) and so on.

It is important to understand that such divine Personalities are not the consorts or wives of their male counterparts, but rather the "sisters", having exactly the same powers of their male equivalents. This knowledge (Sri Vidya) went underground - so to speak - and became secret during the age of Kali, because of the patriarchalist influences that became more and more prominent in India, especially during the Islamic dominations and the Victorian British colonialistic regime. As many among the general people vaguely remembered their worship and missed their presence, various unqualified individuals started some imaginative approximation of the ancient rituals, becoming easy targets for the cheap ridicule and demonizing propaganda spread by the invaders. It is now time to clean the misconceptions up.

Particularly interesting are the Personalities of Pratyangira and Sarabha, still known only to a relatively small group of people even among the Indian Hindus. Both these Personalities are strictly connected to the Vishnu *avatara* Narasimha, as well as with the Sri Chakra. The tantric tradition that still preserves this knowledge says that when Narasimha (Vishnu appeared as the half-human half-lion form) had killed Hiranyakasipu and his Daitya warriors, and drank their blood, Shiva appeared to remove the excess anger from Narasimha's form. The particular *avatara* of Shiva in this regard is a combination of human and bird (very similar to Garuda), and his two *shakti* wings are called Sulini and Pratyangira. When Sulini ("she who holds the trident") was unable to appease Narasimha, Pratyangira ("beautifully proportioned") came forward to absorb Narasimha's ferocious mood by manifesting *satya* and *dharma*, thus restoring Vishnu's *bhadra* form.

The word *samagram* has been explained by previous commentators as a compound of *saha* ("with") and *agrena* ("from the beginning").

आख्याहि मे को भवानुग्ररूपो नमोऽस्तु ते देववर प्रसीद ।
 ākhyāhi me ko bhavānugrarūpo namo'stu te devavara prasīda ।
 विज्ञातुमिच्छामि भवन्तमाद्यं न हि प्रजानामि तव प्रवृत्तिम् ॥ ११-३१ ॥
 vijñātumicchāmi bhavantamādyam na hi prajānāmi tava pravṛttim ॥ 11-31 ॥

akhyahi: (please) tell; *me*: to me; *kah*: what; *bhavan*: you; *ugra rupah*: terrifying form; *namah astu*: all homage; *te*: to you; *deva vara*: o best of the *devas*; *prasida*: be pleased; *vijnatum*: to understand; *icchami*: I wish; *bhavantam*: of you; *adyam*: the beginning; *na*: not; *hi*: indeed; *prajanami*: I know; *tava*: your; *pravrittim*: work/ mission/ engagement.

"Please tell me, Lord, what is this terrifying form. I offer my respects to you, o greatest of the Devas! Be gracious to me! I wish to understand, but I do not know your mission or your origin."

The word *bhavan* is a very respectful address, and although we can translate it simply by "you", it would not be out of place to render it with "your grace", or "Lord". As we have already mentioned, the expression *prasida* ("be pleased") is often used in prayers to express the desire for auspiciousness and protection. It is a respectful request, and certainly not an order. It derives from the same root as *prasanna* ("satisfaction") and *prasanta* ("pacified"). Later, in chapter 17, Krishna will use the expression *mana prasada* to indicate the peace of mind that comes from inner satisfaction. Similarly, the word *prasada* (referring to the sanctified food offered to God) implies a meaning of satisfying one's senses and needs through the consumption of sacred food, that carries no impurity or karmic consequence. The senses and the mind are difficult to tame, like wild tigers, and it is not wise to either starve them completely or to give them complete freedom to prey on anything they want: the solution consists in pacifying them with *prasadam*, so they will become automatically purified. For more about this subject, we can refer to verses 2.64, 2.65, 6.14, 6.27, 18.37, 18.54, 18.56, 18.58, 18.62, 18.73, 18.74.

The word *pravritti* literally means "activity", and includes the meanings of "purpose", "mission", and applied to the human sphere, "duty". Of course God does not have any selfish purpose in performing his activities, still he acts dutifully, as Krishna states very clearly in verses 3.22-24, and as confirmed by *Svetasvatara Upanishad* (6.8): *na tasya karam karanam ca vidyate, na tat samas cabhyadhikas ca drsyate,*

parasya saktir vividhaiva srutyate, svabhaviki jnana bala kriya ca, "He has no duty to perform, and there is no one who is equal to him or greater than him. We have heard that the Supreme has many *shaktis*, and out of his nature come knowledge, power and action."

It is rather curious to see Arjuna declaring "I do not know your mission or your origin" (*bhavantam adyam nahi prajanami tava pravrittim*) after having expressed in so many previous verses the clear realization of the supreme Personality of God, and calling him *anadi*, "without beginning" (11.16, 11.19) and having heard the same from Krishna (10.3).

This means that the vision of the universal form changed while Arjuna was contemplating it. At first it was simply a majestic and powerful expanse of divine forms, radiating with the pleasing splendor of the rising sun. Then the innumerable divine faces opened as immense gaping mouths of blazing fire, and like the midday sun in its most scorching summer best, started to heat up the cosmos as at the time of the annihilation. Then again, a sort of vortex appeared, the fiery wind of death, to draw the mighty warriors into the blazing mouths. At this point, Arjuna perceives that this particular manifestation of the universal form must have some specific purpose (*pravritti*), and this must have some beginning or origin (*adi*). Furthermore, it is also apparent to Arjuna that such mission must be related to the war of Kurukshetra, as he has clearly seen the sons of Dhritarastra, Bhishma, Drona, Karna, and many others of the great warriors assembled on the battlefield before him.

His perspective is therefore changing dramatically: at the beginning, in the first chapter of *Bhagavad gita*, he expressed the feeling that he would somehow be held responsible for the disastrous effects of the war. However, the perception of the immense universal form has now broadened his horizon, and by tapping into the supreme collective Consciousness, he is coming to realize a much greater plan behind the appearances. But what is his part in this plan? Krishna has already told him to engage in the battle (2.18, 2.31, 2.38, 3.30, 4.42, 8.7) explaining that his duty of *kshatriya* requires him to protect the *prajas*. However, from this greater level of consciousness, things appear in a different light, and Arjuna can perceive there is much more in all this than simply engaging in his social duty.

श्रीभगवानुवाच ।

śrībhagavānuvāca ।

कालोऽस्मि लोकक्षयकृत्प्रवृद्धो लोकान्समाहर्तुमिह प्रवृत्तः ।

kālo'smi lokakṣayakṛtpravṛddho lokānsamāhartumiha pravṛttaḥ ।

ऋतेऽपि त्वां न भविष्यन्ति सर्वे येऽवस्थिताः प्रत्यनीकेषु योधाः ॥ ११-३२ ॥

rte'pi tvāṁ na bhaviṣyanti sarve ye'vasthitaḥ pratyānīkeṣu yodhāḥ ॥ 11-32 ॥

sri: the wonderful; *bhagavan*: Lord; *uvaca*: said; *kalah*: Time; *asmi*: I am; *loka*: the worlds/ the people; *kshaya krit*: who puts the end; *pravṛddha*: the greatest; *lokan*: the peoples/ the worlds; *samahartum*: to destroy; *iha*: here; *pravṛttah*: engaged; *rite*: without; *api*: although; *tvam*: you; *na*: not; *bhaviṣyanti*: they will become; *sarve*: all; *ye*: those; *avasthita*: situated; *prati anikeshu*: on the opposite sides/ armies; *yodhah*: the warriors/ combatants.

The wonderful Lord said, "I am Time, the greatest destroyer of all. My mission is to put an end to these people here. Except for you, all these warriors arrayed in both armies will be destroyed."

The expression *loka kshaya krit* means "(he) who destroys the worlds/ the people" and is similar to *samahartum*, "to withdraw", or "to dissolve". The word *pravṛddhah* means "very ancient", "grown in stature", "developed in fullness", while *pravṛttah* means "engaged", "acting", "working". The expression *rite api tvam* "but without/ except you", means that all will die except Arjuna; Krishna is saying that even if Arjuna chose to withdraw from the battle, still all the warriors will be destroyed anyway.

The expression *na bhaviṣyanti* means, "they will not be", indicating that they will disappear, or in other words, their present bodies will cease to exist.

Bhagavata Purana confirms that God is Time:

manye tvam kalam isanam, anadi nidhanam vibhum, samam carantam sarvatra, bhutanam yan mithah kalih, "I believe that you are the Lord, Time, without beginning or end, all-pervading, equally disposed to all and available to all. Any quarrel among the living beings is only due to their own exchanges." (1.8.28)

sarvam kala krtam manye, bhavatam ca yad apriyam, sapalo yad vase loko, vayor iva ghanavaliḥ, "I think that all this is the work of time, that controls everything and everyone, including you and all the kings, and whatever bad things happen to us all is just like when the wind carries all the clouds." (1.9.14)

pratikriya na yasyeha, kutascit karhicit prabho, sa esa bhagavan kalah, sarvesam nah samagataḥ/ yena caivabhipanno 'yam, pranaih priyatamair api, janah sadyo viyujyeta, kim utanyair dhanadhibih, "There is nothing we or anyone else can do about it, when Bhagavan arrives upon us in the form of Time. When one is overtaken by him (Time), one must give up his life airs, that are the dearest thing to everyone, what to speak of other things, such as material possessions." (1.13.19-20)

so 'yam adya maharaja, bhagavan bhuta bhavanah, kala rupo 'vatirno 'syam, abhavaya sura dvisam, "This same Bhagavan, the creator of all beings, has descended into the world in the form of Time to eliminate those who are envious of the *suras*." (1.13.49)

The principle of destruction should not be seen as evil, because it is simply the other face of creation. Krishna has already stated: *jatasya hi dhruvo mrityur dhruvam janma mritasya ca, tasmad apariharye 'rthe na tvam socitum arhasi/ avyaktadini bhutani vyakta-madhyani bhārata, avyakta-nidhanany eva tatra ka paridevana*, "Because one who has taken birth must necessarily die, and one who has died will again be reborn. There is no point in despairing over something that is inevitable. O descendant of Bharata, all the living entities/ states of being are initially non-manifested, then they become visible in an intermediate stage and then again disappear in the end. What is the point of lamenting about that?" (*Bhagavad gita*, 2.27-28)

Kala, Time, is one of the most important and primeval factors of creation. It is called eternal because it exists permanently as a continuum, in which past, present and future co-exist in their subtle form. Time is linear only in the experience of the material bodies, that inevitably undergo the 6 transformations (birth, growth, attainment of maturity, reproduction, decline and death) but the subtle consciousness is able to access all the different dimensions of time, called *tri nemi* or *kala nemi* (*Bhagavata Purana* 3.8.20). On the gross level, time can be calculated starting from the movements and aggregation of atoms (*Bhagavata Purana* 3.11.3-7) and controls the development of the creation of the universe (*Bhagavata Purana* 3.10.10-14).

On the subtle level, Time exists eternally just like the *mahat tattva* or *pradhana*. Under the power of Time, the static balance of the *pradhana* is agitated and the *gunas* start moving. From the continued movement of the *gunas*, the activities (*karma*) are created as both cause and effect, and the *atman* becomes *jivatman* (*jiva* literally means "active"). From this activity on the causal and subtle levels, the elements (*bhutas*) and the bodies are created/ manifested. It is said that *Bhagavad gita* elaborates about 5 subjects, namely: 1) Isvara, the supreme Personality of God, 2) the *jivas* or *jivatman*, that are the subordinate *purushas* or *isvaras*, 3) *prakriti* or nature, 4) *kala* or time and 5) *karma* - action and reaction, the only non-eternal factor among these.

तस्मात्त्वमुत्तिष्ठ यशो लभस्व जित्वा शत्रून् भुङ्क्ष्व राज्यं समृद्धम् ।
 tasmāttvamuttiṣṭha yaśo labhasva jītvā śatrūn bhun̄kṣva rājyaṁ samṛddham ।
 मयैवैते निहताः पूर्वमेव निमित्तमात्रं भव सव्यसाचिन् ॥ ११-३३ ॥
 mayaivaite nihataḥ pūrvameva nimittamātram bhava savyasācin ॥ 11-33 ॥

tasmat: therefore; *tvam*: you; *uttistha*: get up; *yaśah*: fame; *labhasva*: gaining; *jitva*: achieving victory; *śatrun*: the enemies; *bhunksva*: enjoy; *rājam*: the kingdom; *samridham*: prosperous; *maya*: by me; *eva*: certainly; *ete*: all these; *nihatāḥ*: killed; *pūrvam*: already/ previously; *eva*: certainly; *nimitta*: instrument; *matram*: only; *bhava*: become; *savya sacin*: o excellent archer.

"So, get up, o great archer, and achieve fame by your victory against the enemies, and then enjoy the prosperity of the kingdom. I have already killed all these (warriors): you (should) become just the instrument (of the victory)."

Many people have been led to believe that the perfection of spiritual life consists in withdrawing from the activities of the world and just meditate on theoretical philosophical technicalities or idyllic visions of beautiful dancing cowherd girls in enchanted forests. They have failed to understand the real meaning of the scriptures that encourage the devotee to fully dedicate to spiritual life, sacrificing their ordinary duties by performing them in Krishna Consciousness. The evidence is in this verse and in many other verses of *Bhagavad gita*, where Krishna clearly says after his teachings on renunciation and transcendental consciousness, "therefore, you should engage sincerely and dutifully in your work in society: so now get up and fight". The word *utthista* literally means "get up", "stand up", "wake up", and it is also used in the prayers during the Deity worship, to invite the Deities to wake up in the morning - as in the famous *Venkatesvara suprabhatam*: *kausalya supraja rama purva sandhya pravartate, uttistha narasardula kartavyam daivamanikam, utthistothista govinda utthista garuda dhvaja, uttistha kamala kantha trai lokyam mangalam kuru*, "O worthy son of Kausalya, Rama! Dawn has come, please get up. O great among men, divine ornament (of your family/ of the world), it is time to attend to your daily duties. Please get up, o Govinda, whose banner carries the image of Garuda! Please get up, o lover of Lakshmi, and bring good fortune to all the three worlds."

The expression *yasō labhasva* ("become famous") implies that fame or good reputation is not a bad thing. One should not be attached to it or make it the motivation for one's actions, but there is nothing wrong in being recognized for one's good work. Conquering the enemies is not contrary to the principles of religion, either. It is true that a devotee does not see anyone as an enemy, but there are still envious people who will behave as enemies even against the most peaceful and tolerant saint. Yudhisthira was called *ajata satru* ("one whose enemy was never born", indicating that he was nobody's enemy) but he was forced on the battlefield of Kurukshetra after many years of persecution, including various assassination attempts against him and his brothers. And he did not step back from his *kshatriya* duty, either.

The famous *Argala stotra* in *Devi Mahatmya* prays the Mother Goddess to help the devotee achieve these two - good name and victory over envious people - as well as long life in a suitable body (*rupam*) and the good things of life (*bhogam*): *rupam dehi yaso dehi jayam dehi bhogam dehi dvisho jahi*. Krishna also recommended Arjuna to pray Durga before the battle, to get her blessings for victory. The *stotra* is found in *Mahabharata*, Bhishma Parva, 23.4-16, and we have included it in the appendix to this work.

The expression *bhunksva rajyam samridham* refers to the enjoyment of the good things in life, not only for Arjuna, but for all the *prajas* in the kingdom. This is actually the most important thing in the end - the highest duty and responsibility for a *kshatriya*. We should never forget that the true *kshatriya* only fights for the protection and prosperity of the *prajas*: all the others are just war-mongers and criminals of various statures. Some ignorant people may be convinced that they can procure prosperity and wealth for their own people through the adharmic aggressions and exploitation of other innocent and good living beings, but that is a truly disastrous course of action, and the *brahmanas* are responsible for the required clarifications about *dharma* and *karma*, the hidden costs of unethical choices and actions, and the complex network of negative consequences for the entire society. If there are no qualified *brahmanas*, or if the *brahmanas* are not properly respected and followed, disaster becomes inevitable, sooner or later.

Samridhi literally means "perfect prosperity"; we may remember here that Siddhi and Riddhi are the names of the two consorts of Ganesha - personifying success respectively in spiritual and in material life. The two things are not necessarily incompatible - in fact they complete each other. The expression *nihata purva* ("already killed") indicates that time is not linear but it is a continuum where past, present and future are all existing simultaneously, and can be accessed by those who are free from the limitations of a gross material body. It is true that the future is constantly changing due to the choices we all make at each moment, but there is a critical mass of karmic consequences beyond which a particular situation cannot be avoided altogether. Another extremely important expression here is *nimitta matram bhava savya-sacin* - a frequently quoted passage, that summarizes the approach that the devotee should keep in working in devotional service. The name *savyasacin* literally means "ambidextrous archer", one who is able to shoot with both hands.

द्रोणं च भीष्मं च जयद्रथं च कर्णं तथान्यानपि योधवीरान् ।

dronam ca bhishmam ca jayadratham ca karnam tathānyānapi yodhavīrān ।

मया हतांस्त्वं जहि मव्यथिष्ठा युध्यस्व जेतासि रणे सपत्नान् ॥ ११-३४ ॥

mayā hatāṁstvam jahi mavyathiṣṭhā yudhyasva jetāsi raṇe sapatnān ॥ 11-34 ॥

dronam: Drona; *ca*: and; *bhishmam*: Bhishma; *ca*: and (also); *jayadratham*: Jayadratha; *ca*: and; *karnam*: Karna; *tatha*: as well as; *anyan*: the others; *api*: although; *yodha viran*: heroes in battle; *maya*: by me; *hatan*: (have been) killed; *tvam*: you; *jahi*: destroy/ conquer; *ma*: do not; *vyathistha*: be shaken/ waver; *yudhyasva*: (you should) engage in the fight; *jeta asi*: you are victorious; *raṇe*: in the battle; *sapatnan*: opponents.

"Drona, Bhishma, Jayadratha, Karna and all the other warriors in this battle have already been killed by me. So do not hesitate to defeat them. Engage in the fight, because you will conquer over your opponents."

The enemies mentioned in the previous verse are those warriors who have come to the battlefield of Kurukshetra to attack the Pandavas and their allies, in spite of all their attempts of reconciliation. Here they are called *yodha viran*, "the heroes who want to engage in battle", to indicate that - just like the moths that rush into the fire to their death - they have come willingly, impelled by the results of their previous activities and choices, to be killed on the battlefield.

According to the Vedic rules for dharmic fight, only active combatants may be attacked in a battle; if the enemy surrenders or is unarmed, unconscious, or unable to fight back, the use of force is condemned as asuric. However, it becomes justified against an enemy that has already broken the ethical rules of combat. For example, a cunning criminal may pretend to surrender, and then escape and attack again under stealth or deceit: in this case, the *kshatriya* is authorized to overlook the ordinary rules and deal with the situation as required to protect the *prajas*. Rules are meant to help and serve us in the performance of our duty, and not the other way around; an honest and wise person can understand how *dharma* can be better served, as Krishna himself demonstrated several times in the *Mahabharata*. Foolish and envious people sometimes claim that Krishna was a clever politician and manipulated the rules to the advantage of his family, but if we actually examine the circumstances, the facts and the results we will see that all the persons involved in the action obtained the greatest possible benefit.

Drona was the greatest expert in martial arts of his time, and for this reason he had secured the job of official trainer for the royal princes of the Kuru dynasty; Arjuna had learned everything from him, and he was seriously intimidated at the idea of having to fight against his old teacher. Bhishma was easily the strongest and greatest *kshatriya* there - the direct son of Ganga Devi, he had obviously superhuman strength and prowess, comparable to the powerful current of the river that was his mother. He had even defeated Parasurama, the *brahmana* warrior *avatara* of Vishnu.

Jayadratha was feared by all because of a curse that his powerful father had placed on anyone who killed him; he who would cause Jayadratha's head to fall to the ground would die instantly. Karna was Arjuna's arch-enemy, and being the direct son of Surya, his personal radiance (*tejas*) and prowess in battle were legendary; Duryodhana had made him king of the Anga region (present Bengal). However, Krishna is saying here that all these famous and powerful warriors have already been killed by him - by Time and destiny. This is confirmed in *Bhagavata Purana* (1.9.35), in Bhishma's prayers on his death bed: *sapadi sakhi vaco nisamya madhye, nija parayor balayo ratham nivesya, sthitavati para sainikayur aksna, hrtavati partha sakhe ratir mamastu*, "Let my loving attachment be directed to (Krishna) Arjuna's friend, who diminished the duration of life of the warriors of the opposite army simply by looking on them. On the request of his friend, he entered the battlefield in the middle of the two armies, and positioned the chariot there."

All these great warriors would have to pay the price of their adharmic choice to support the evil Duryodhana, even when he had offended the innocent Draupadi in the assembly of the Kurus. In the Sabha Parva, the dramatic chapter of the *Mahabharata* where Yudhisthira is cunningly dragged into a rigged dice game, stripped of all his properties and rights, and cruelly insulted, we see how the various persons present in the assembly react to the injustice. Among the sons of Dhritarastra, only Vikarna protested against the disgraceful behavior of Duroyodhana: as we will see later in the story, he is the only one who will survive the battle, because he will remove himself from it. Duhsasana and even Karna eagerly participated in abusing and torturing the Pandavas and Draupadi, a deeply adharmic act generating the consequences that will ultimately cause their destruction.

Even after the miracle of the unending cloth, when it became apparent to all that Draupadi and the Pandavas were protected by God, and even after the ominous oaths of revenge pronounced by Bhima, Duryodhana's supporters continued to keep their disastrous course of action. Vidura loudly protested, but he was insulted by Duryodhana, too, and he had no other choice but to leave the assembly. Drona and Bhishma, who were also present at the disgraceful assembly, failed to take proper action, and thus they signed their own death sentence. Bhishma tearfully recognized that the evil actions of the Kurus would soon bring their destruction - actually they already looked dead. Dhritarastra feebly tried to patch up the situation, but he did not stop his evil son. All he could do in his fear was to offer a warning, declaring that Duryodhana was already as good as dead,

Silence in front of injustice constitutes an indirect and passive approval of the injustice - as Vidura clearly explained to the assembly, quoting the discussion between Prahlada and Kasyapa on the subject. "One who is called as a witness and does not answer, out of fear or anger, deserves punishment.

When a good person goes to the assembly to ask for help and relief from injustice, it is the duty of every man present to take the required action: if they fail to do so, they will have to suffer the same karmic consequences."

सञ्जय उवाच ।

sañjaya uvāca ।

एतच्छ्रुत्वा वचनं केशवस्य कृताञ्जलिर्वेपमानः किरीटी ।

etatcchrutvā vacanam keśavasya kṛtāñjalirvepamānaḥ kirīṭi ।

नमस्कृत्वा भूय एवाह कृष्णं सगद्गदं भीतभीतः प्रणम्य ॥ ११-३५ ॥

namaskṛtvā bhūya evāha kṛṣṇaṁ sagadgadam bhītabhītaḥ praṇamya ॥ 11-35 ॥

sanjayah: Sanjaya; *uvaca*: said; *etat*: that; *srutva*: hearing; *vacanam*: the speech; *kesavasya*: of Kesava; *kritanjaliḥ*: with folded hands; *vepamanah*: trembling; *kiriti*: Arjuna; *namah kritva*: offering respect; *bhuyah*: again; *eva*: certainly; *aha*: said; *krishnam*: to Krishna; *sa gadgadam*: feebly/ stuttering/ with faltering words; *bhita bhitah*: full of fear; *pranamyā*: prostrating.

Sanjaya said, Arjuna listened to the words of Kesava, and trembling, with folded hands, he offered his respects. Then he again addressed Krishna with faltering words, throwing himself to his feet, full of fear.

Arjuna's strong emotions of fear (*bhita bhitah*, *vepamana*, *gadgadam*) are not due to some supposed cruelty in God. They come from the perception of the immense sufferings of the conditioned beings who hopelessly revolve in the frightening wheel of *samsara* - material life in this world - enslaved by their own identifications, attachments and desires. Later in the discussion, Krishna will declare that a wise person is one who can see the sufferings intrinsically connected with the *samsara* (*janma-mrityu-jara-vyadhi-duhkha-doshanudarsanam*, 13.9). Arjuna is overwhelmed by the perception of the sufferings and loss of all the warriors that are going to die in the war, and terrified by the relentless crushing wheel of Time and Death.

In his famous *Bhaja Govindam* song, Adi Shankara writes, *punar api jananam punar api maranam punar api janani jathare sayanam, ita samsare bahu dustare krpaya 'pare pahi murare*, "Not having to be born again! Not having to be dying again! Not having to lie in a mother's womb again! O Murari, please protect me, by your compassion, from this horrible cycle of birth and death!"

Adi Shankara also refers to the dreadful *samsara* in many verses of his *Lakshmi Nrisimha stotra*, praying for deliverance and protection. Both *sruti* and *smṛiti* describe the *samsara* - the cycle of births and deaths - variously as a burden, a dangerous ocean, a whirlpool, a thick forest, a forest fire, steep rocks or cliffs, prison or captivity, poison, a blind well, or an entangling tree grown out of the seed of ignorance consisting of bodily identification. The example of the tree - *samsara vriksha* - is mentioned in *Muktika Upanishad* (2.2.32-37) and *Svetasvatara Upanishad* (6.6), and introduces the theme of the banyan tree of material existence described in chapter 15 of *Bhagavad gita*, entitled *Purushottama yoga*. The Tree of Life is a well known symbol to all the cultures of the world, because it constitutes a powerful archetype of Reality, a figure for the Mother that manifests herself as the form of the spiritual world as well as the form of the material world. In the spiritual world she is the Kalpa Vriksha, the "wish-fulfilling tree" that produces everything is required for the service to the Supreme, while in the material world she is the illusory phantasmagoria of the ever-changing growth of material phenomena, enticing the conditioned souls to keep toiling and running after the proverbial carrot at the end of the stick.

Yet, in spite of the fear and loss and pain we all suffer in this *samsara*, a devotee, a self-realized soul, can perceive God in the experience of the material world, as Krishna has explained and then directly demonstrated especially in these last few chapters. This is the true thrill of joy (*prahrisyati*, 11.36) and ecstatic emotion we can find when we establish ourselves in the divine Consciousness, the happiness (*ananda*) that all beings are instinctively seeking, and that is only found within the *atman*. We are now approaching the most mysterious part of Krishna's teachings in *Bhagavad gita*, so deep and difficult to perceive and understand that most commentators choose to remain on the surface of the meanings. Here logic and reason fail to carry us, and must be left on the threshold: only emotion - *bhakti* - is able to take us across. This is the significance of the iconography of the Mother Goddess - Sri Vidya - in her Chinnamasta form, holding her own severed head in her hand.

What does it mean that God is beyond *sat* and *asad*? Already simply this one statement should make us understand the inconceivable depths of the ocean we are going to venture into, and the need to overcome the materially intellectual platform to attain the "wisdom of the heart". To prepare our minds for this paradigm shift, we need to remember that according to the Vedic scriptures themselves, the present version of the *shastra* - both *smṛiti* and *sruti* - was specifically compiled for the people of Kali yuga, while previously Vedic knowledge was transmitted and discussed at much greater depths, of which we can now only find hints and clouded references. Even Krishna is presenting the *Bhagavad gita* to Arjuna in this perspective, so he is making things as easy and simple as possible for us neophytes to understand, realize and practice Transcendence in the correct way. This will be particularly apparent in the 15th chapter, in which Krishna will instruct us to cut the mighty banyan tree of Vedic knowledge, but it was already surfacing in 2.42 to 2.46 when talking about the *veda vada ratah* and how they are missing the point.

Certainly Krishna is not condemning Vedic knowledge, as in the same chapter (15) he will state, *vedais ca sarvair aham eva vedyo vedanta-krid veda-vid eva caham*, "I am he who knows all the *Vedas*, I am he who created the *Vedanta*, and I am the object of knowledge of the *Vedas*" (15.15).

Vishnu is the source of the Vedic knowledge, having transmitted it to Brahma (the first created being), and he always descends in this world as *avatara* to save or rescue the *Vedas* when they appear to be lost or endangered. From time to time, he takes various forms and presents the Vedic teachings in accordance to the specific circumstances and the particular audience, and to a superficial observer it may seem that such teachings vastly differ from one instance to another. The various paths known as *bhakti*, *yoga*, *tantra*, *upasana* all stem from that place that is far beyond the ordinary experience of our contemporary lives in Kali yuga.

All the *shastras* repeat that *bhakti* - devotion - is the only path to enter into this higher dimension, and great *acharyas* have distributed this *bhakti* freely to the masses without material discriminations, through the chanting of the holy Names, activities, qualities, forms, etc, of the Personality of God, and the personal dedicated service that is beautifully explained by Krishna in *Bhagavad gita*.

Yet, we know that *bhakti* is also a very secret path (*rahasya*) and that its science is detailed in specific collections of knowledge from a tradition that existed long before the beginning of this Kali yuga and before the compilation of the present Vedic scriptures. These scriptures are called *Tantras* or *Agamas*, and contrarily to the misled opinion of ignorant and foolish people, they are not about having better sex, but about experiencing a direct contact with God, who is simultaneously and inconceivably distinct as Vishnu, Shiva and Shakti, and is present within our own body with all the worlds - material and spiritual. This is the true foundation of *upasana*, or ritual worship.

अर्जुन उवाच ।

arjuna uvāca ।

स्थाने हृषीकेश तव प्रकीर्त्या जगत्प्रहृष्यत्यनुरज्यते च ।

sthāne hr̥ṣīkeśa tava prakīrtyā jagatprahr̥ṣyatyanurajyate ca ।

रक्षांसि भीतानि दिशो द्रवन्ति सर्वे नमस्यन्ति च सिद्धसङ्घाः ॥ ११-३६ ॥

rakṣāṁsi bhītāni diśo dravanti sarve namasyanti ca siddhasaṅghāḥ ॥ 11-36 ॥

arjunah: Arjuna; *uvaca*: said; *sthane*: (proper) position; *hrishikesa*: o Hrisiksha; *tava*: your; *prakirtya*: the glories; *jagat*: the universe; *prahrishyati*: is rejoicing/ is thrilled; *anurajyate*: is becoming attached; *ca*: and; *rakshamsi*: the Rakshasas; *bhitani*: terrifying; *disah*: in all directions; *dravanti*: are drawn; *sarve*: all; *namasyanti*: offer their respects; *ca*: and; *siddha sanghah*: the hosts of Siddhas.

Arjuna said, "It is very proper, o Hrishiksha, that the universe is attracted to you and rejoicing in your glories. The Rakshasas are scared and wiped away in all directions, and the hosts of Siddhas offer you their respects."

The verse begins with the word *sthane*, "position", that establishes the foundation for the mind-blowing experience of genuine *tantra*. The word can also be translated as "it is proper", "it stands".

The word *tantra* means "power", and after contemplating the *visva rupa* in all these verses, and meditating on the meaning of *tejas*, we should have come to the point of understanding that God is *shakti* and *shaktiman*, "power" and "powerful". This is the first basic truth on which all the other names of God are manifested. Bhagavan means "having all powers - i.e. strength, wealth, beauty, fame, etc. Krishna means "all-attractive", which in the mind of a physicist easily translates into "powerful": the attraction itself is the power that pulls together. The name Hrisiksha, "Lord of the senses", also refers to the power that controls and activates the senses, at material and spiritual level. It is all about power.

So the position, or foundation, of this experience, is the knowledge of the glories of God (*prakirtya*) as power and powerful. We should never underestimate God or minimize his/ her position, because this automatically and immediately destroys the foundations of our divine experience and sends us sliding into its materialistic and illusory reflection. In this light, we can easily understand why the *Bhagavata Purana* keeps reminding us about the inconceivable power of Krishna, even in his most intimate - and apparently ordinary - *lilas*. The second point is about the senses. The *Narada Pancharatra*, quoted in *Bhakti rasamrita sindhu*, clearly states: *sarvopadhi vinirmuktam, tat paratvena nirmalam, hrishikesa hrishikena sevanam bhaktir ucyate*, "*Bhakti* is defined as serving the Lord of the senses by engaging one's senses. (This must be done) without any designation/ label/ denomination (*upadhi*), and in a perfectly pure way."

This perfect purity and freedom from designations obviously applies to the crucial pre-requisite mentioned so many times in *Bhagavad gita* and in all other scriptures: the overcoming of the ignorance constituted by *ahankara* and *mamatva*, bodily/ material identification and attachment/ possession/ affiliation. The *Bhagavata Purana* (10.84.13) states: *yasyatma buddhij kunape tri-dhatuke sva-dhij kalatradisu bhauma ijya-dhij, yat tirtha buddhij salile na karhicij janesv abhijnesu sa eva go-kharah*, "Those persons who identify the self as the gross material body, who maintain a sense of belonging to their family, who worship their native land, and who visit the sacred places simply to take a bath, are not better than animals like cows and donkeys (even if they appear to be human beings)."

It is totally impossible to actually engage in *tantric sadhana* if we remain on the platform of *ahankara* and *mamatva* - that tantric (and non-tantric) texts define as *pasutva*, "animal consciousness". Such *nara pasus* must never be initiated in the tantric knowledge and worship, because they will cause damage to themselves and to others by faulty understanding and application; it would be like allowing foolish and ignorant people to access high voltage electrical lines to "play with them" like animals do with their bodies, senses and minds to obtain cheap pleasure. Therefore the true tantric *sadhana* requires strict sexual abstinence, as well as severe restrictions on all types of sense gratification. The practice of genuine *yoga* is required as a technical support for this *sadhana*, so the two are often indicated as a single practice, of which *yama* and *niyama* constitute the first steps. We will elaborate on this subject more specifically in another dedicated publication, because this requires a considerable volume in itself.

The words *hrisha* ("joy") and *anuraga* ("attachment, attraction") clearly refer to the ecstatic immersion in the devotional meditation/ service to Shakti and Shaktiman. However, we must be very careful not to slide into their illusory material reflections - something that is much easier than it seems.

It is said that this *sadhana* is like the blade of a sharp knife, or the point of a needle, and even the slightest distraction will shift the focus from the divine to the animal level. Due to this reason, the *sadhaka* should not disclose the secrets of the *sadhana* to people who are not qualified or even speak about it with others (except with one's *guru*). Usually, tantric teachers who compile books or give lectures purposefully omit important parts in their explanations, so that foolish unqualified people will not be able to access the actual practice. In fact, there is a lot that can be told to the public, especially to dispel the many gross misconceptions and dangerous misinformation circulated by cheap pretenders and exploiters.

One of the best explanations comes from the Kashmiri Shaivite tradition, in the form of the *Spandakarika* ("sacred ecstatic tremor"). In front of this supreme Consciousness, all other levels of consciousness bow and surrender. The Siddha level of consciousness offers homage, and the Rakshasa level of consciousness dissolves.

कस्माच्च ते न नमेरन्महात्मन् गरीयसे ब्रह्मणोऽप्यादिकर्त्रे ।

kasmācca te na nameranmahātman garīyase brahmaṇo'pyādikartre ।

अनन्त देवेश जगन्निवास त्वमक्षरं सदसत्तत्परं यत् ॥ ११-३७ ॥

ananta deveśa jagannivāsa tvamakṣaram sadasattatparam yat ॥ 11-37 ॥

kasmat: why; *ca*: and; *te*: to you; *na*: not; *nameran*: they should offer respects; *maha atman*: o great Atman; *gariyase*: you are the most glorious; *brahmanah*: than Brahma; *api*: even; *adi kartre*: the first creator; *ananta*: unlimited; *deva isa*: o Lord of the *devas*; *jagan nivasa*: abode of the universe; *tvam*: you; *aksharam*: imperishable; *sat asat*: *sat* and *asat*; *tat*: that; *param*: superior; *yat*: because.

"Why shouldn't they offer their respects to you, o great Atman? You are more glorious than Brahma, the first creator (of this universe). O Lord of the Devas, abode of the universe, you are imperishable, because you are above the cause and the effect."

Why not, indeed? God is within ourselves, and everything is actually spiritual, as we can perceive when our consciousness is on the spiritual level. When *ahankara* and *mamatva* are dissolved by the immense power of Consciousness, only pure Consciousness remains, in the form of Shakti and Shaktiman. This is the level called *tat paratvena nirmalam*, "supreme purity". We do not need to lose our individuality in this ecstasy: we simply must liberate it from all material designations and limitations. We "enter" (*visate, visanti*, 8.11, 18.55) into this Consciousness and we find it full of variety, inconceivably one and different, but without the constraints of time and space. Everything eternally is, in the same "time and place", and we find that we are simultaneously *shakti* and *shaktiman*, *atman* and *brahman*, *visaya* and *asraya*. We are then so closely connected with the *param atman*, the *maha atman*, that we totally channel our consciousness into the Supreme: this is the actual Krishna Consciousness. At this level *brahma tattva*, *jiva tattva*, *prakriti tattva* are inconceivably one and distinct, eternally, beyond the scope of cause and effect.

What is the meaning of the expression *sad-asat tat param* ("above *sat* and *asat*")?

We have already elaborated on the various meanings of *sat* and its opposite *asat*. For example, in 2.16 we explained that *sat* means "existence, reality, goodness, permanence, spirit", and in its adjective form means "actual, real, true, good, right, eternal, spiritual, transcendental". Its opposite *asat* therefore means "non-existent, illusory, false, wrong, impermanent or temporary, material".

After carefully teaching us how to distinguish *sat* from *asat*, now Krishna is taking us beyond this final duality, to a platform where only very advanced spiritual intelligence can stand without falling into the abyss of disaster. We can make the example of mathematics here: in primary school we first learn that one cannot subtract a larger number from a smaller number, but then after becoming learned enough, we are told that it is actually possible to do that in algebra - only we will get a negative number. Similarly, in the beginning of spiritual development it is essential to differentiate between *sat* and *asat*, but after establishing ourselves firmly in *sattva*, we can take the final leap and fly up to *visuddha sattva*. If we try to make this passage artificially, without really understanding it and without having the required strength and stability, we will simply crash into *rajas* and *tamas*, with considerable damage.

On the *visuddha sattva* level we will be able to really understand the teachings of the *Upanishads*, such as *sarva khalv idam brahma* ("all this is Brahman", *Chandogya Upanishad* 3.14.1.) and *neha nanasti kinchana* ("nothing else exists", *Katha Upanishad* 2.2.11, *Brihad Aranyaka Upanishad* 4.4.19). So Brahman is not only spirit, but matter as well, and yet beyond both.

The word *gariyase* means "you are greater/ more glorious", and here it applies to the relationship between the creator and general manager (*adi karta*) of this universe - Brahma - and the Brahman from whom he originates.

The word *akshara* ("imperishable") applies to the original *sabda brahman*, the syllable *om*, the form of the primeval Shakti and Shaktiman, who is the abode and foundation not only of this universe, but of all universes.

त्वमादिदेवः पुरुषः पुराणस्- त्वमस्य विश्वस्य परं निधानम् ।

tvamādidēvaḥ puruṣaḥ purāṇas- tvamasya viśvasya param nidhānam ।

वेत्तासि वेद्यं च परं च धाम त्वया ततं विश्वमनन्तरूप ॥ ११-३८ ॥

vetāsi vedyaṁ ca param ca dhāma tvayā tataṁ viśvamanantarūpa ॥ 11-38 ॥

tvam: you; *adi devah*: the first *deva*; *purushah*: the *purusha*; *purānah*: the most ancient; *tvam*: you; *asya*: of whom; *visvasya*: of the universe; *param*: supreme; *nidhanam*: shelter; *vetta*: the knower; *asi*: you are; *vedyam ca*: and also the object of knowledge; *param*: supreme/ transcendental; *ca*: and; *dhama*: the abode; *tvaya*: by you; *tatam*: pervaded; *visvam*: the universe; *ananta rupa*: o endless form.

"You are the primeval God, the most ancient Purusha, the supreme shelter of the universe, the knower and the object of knowledge, the supreme abode. O endless form, the universe is pervaded by you."

The expression *adi deva* is very interesting. All the *devas* are originated and guided by the supreme Personality of Godhead in the aspects of Brahman, Paramatma and Bhagavan. At a more intimate level, we can say that the *devas* are limbs in the body of the supreme Personality of God, Narayana, Vishnu, as manifested here by Krishna. Just like all the cells of our body develop gradually from the original stem cell, all the *devas* appear from the universal form of God - first Brahma, and then all the other *devas*. This is also indicated in this verse by the expression *visvasya param nidhanam*: God is the matrix of everything and everyone, simultaneously Mother and Father of all.

It is not easy to understand the nature of the supreme Personality of God, and similarly it is not easy to understand the Personalities of the *devas*, that are eternal archetypes in the blueprint of the universe - administrative positions, if we may say so. Except for Vishnu and Shiva

and Adi Shakti (and their direct emanations), any other such administrative position in the universe can be occupied by an individual *jiva* that has developed the required qualifications, because everything is based on consciousness. However, this concept should not encourage anyone to disrespect or underestimate the *devas* and their positions, because they are way beyond the comprehension of conditioned souls.

All individual *jivas* are *amsas*, or "parts" of God (*mamaivamso jiva loke*, 15.7) and as such they have exactly the same nature or "quality" of God, although they cannot have the same "quantity". When we speak of the individual *jivas* as a category, we should not think that they are all the same in their degree of development and manifestation of powers. All the *jivatmas* start as *anu atmas*, with the same potential, but due to their choices they develop in a different way.

Some *jivas* choose to develop a spiritual consciousness immediately and therefore they become *siddhas* without the need of going through the conditioned state: these are called *nitya siddhas*, or *akshara* (*dvav imau purushau loke ksharas cakshara eva ca*, 15.16). The supreme Personality of God is beyond these *nitya siddhas* (*uttama purushah tu anyah, paramatma*, 15.17), as he is the origin of them all (*adi deva*). Such *nitya siddhas* have always been conscious of being limbs of the Supreme and have deliberately and harmoniously engaged in the functions required in the service of the Supreme.

Some other *jivas* choose to have the material experience, and they develop a material ego instead of a spiritual personality. After exhausting their experience in the material world, they become liberated (*sadhana siddhas* or *kripa siddhas*) and thereby attain the same position of the *nitya siddhas*. At that point, they can consciously function as limbs of the Supreme, exactly as any *nitya siddha*. We can remember the example of the cells or organs of our body: as long as they are connected and directed by the superior consciousness, in a healthy state, they will be simultaneously individuals and a collective body, and will be able to perform functions that are characteristic of the superior consciousness. For example, a hand by itself cannot do much. When it is properly connected to the body, it can already perform so many activities and functions, even instinctively - for example it can feel/ perceive temperature etc. When the hand is closely guided by a superior intelligence and knowledge, it can create artistic masterpieces or technological wonders, or write sublime poetry. Can we dismiss its work, by saying that "it is just a hand"?

Here Arjuna clearly confirms this point, by adding the further quality of *purusha puranah*.

We have already mentioned that the definition *purusha* applies to consciousness, as the nature of the *atman/ brahman; purusha* is the principle of perception as opposed/ integrated by *prakriti* as the principle of action.

Specifically, the word *purusha* implies the meaning of "living in the *pura*", the city of the body.

This *pura* ("city") can be the body of some unicellular organism or atom, the large body of a whale, and also the immense body of the Virata Purusha, the cosmic form. In addition, this *purusha* is *vetta asi vedyam*, "the knower and the object of knowledge" and *tatam visvam*, "pervading the entire universe".

The entire universe is God's body. As *jivatmas*, we are the cells or organs of God's body, where there are innumerable faces, eyes, mouths, arms, bellies, and legs. There is no limit to the number of organs that God's body can have: all the *jivatmas* are *amsas*, "limbs", or "parts" of God's body.

According to their individual level of development, each *jivatma* can be or/and function as a limb or another, so the *devas* are the higher functions of God's body - the heads, the hands, the mouths.

The expression *vetta asi vedyam* indicates that God is simultaneously subject and object, as his Personalities are unlimited and can interact without any limitation. God is Consciousness, and can manifest in innumerable forms and functions.

वायुर्यमोऽग्निर्वरुणः शशाङ्कः प्रजापतिस्त्वं प्रपितामहश्च ।

vāyuryamo'gnirvaruṇaḥ śaśāṅkaḥ prajāpatistvaṁ prapitāmahaśca ।

नमो नमस्तेऽस्तु सहस्रकृत्वः पुनश्च भूयोऽपि नमो नमस्ते ॥ ११-३९ ॥

namo namaste'stu sahasrakṛtvaḥ punaśca bhūyo'pi namo namaste ॥ 11-39 ॥

vayuh: Vayu; *yamah*: Yama; *agnih*: Agni; *varunah*: Varuna; *sasa ankaḥ*: Chandra; *prajāpatih*: the Prajapati; *tvam*: you; *prapitamahah*: the forefather; *ca*: and; *namah namah te*: my homage to you again and again; *astu*: there be; *sahasra kṛtvaḥ*: a thousand times; *punah ca*: and again; *bhuyah*: again; *api*: although; *namah namah te*: I offer you repeated obeisances/ salutations.

"You are Vayu, Yama, Agni, Varuna, Chandra, and Prajapati the ancestor (of all beings). I offer my respect to you again and again, a thousand times, again and again."

The divine functions mentioned in verse are closely connected to each other in a deliberate way. Vayu is life and Yama is death; Vayu is not only the wind and the air in the atmosphere, but also the *pranas* or subtle life airs within the body, that sustain and move the consciousness in the body. Yama and Agni are connected because death consumes everything like fire, and fire kills and destroys bodies (as we have seen in previous verses).

Agni is fire and Varuna is water: two apparent opposites, between which everything else is contained, as when we describe some wave lengths of light as infrared and ultraviolet we are also implicitly remembering all the wave lengths or frequencies of light we can see in the rainbow, from red to violet. Chandra is connected to Varuna because the moon moves the waters - from the tides of the oceans to the lymph of the plants and to the flows within the human body, especially the sexual fluids. Chandra and Prajapati are also connected, as they are both generating and sustaining life in all beings; Chandra is also called Soma, and in his manifestation as the plant *somalata* he constitutes the focus for many religious rituals meant to increase the mental and physical vigor of human beings and of *devas* as well.

The Prajapati mentioned in this verse is Brahma, the first created being, the ancestor of all the beings in the universe, who equally bestows his blessings on all, like the rays of the moon that shine over the great and the small alike. To give his authoritative example for us to follow, Arjuna offers his respect to the *devas* and to their origin and collective body as the Virata Purusha. To each and every divine

manifestation of Consciousness, he offers his respect again and again, a thousand times, to each and every divine form. These repetitions (*punah bhuyah*, "again and again") are specifically meant to impress us with the realization of divinity as a living, acting experience, and not just as some theoretical philosophical dream.

Knowledge is extremely important in the development of spiritual realization, but it should not remain theoretical only, otherwise it can even become an obstacle to progress, because in that case it deteriorates into material scholarship due to the inevitable influence of *maya* (7.15) and generates material pride, thus turning *sattva* into *tamas*. The method to upgrade *jnana* into *vijnana* ("theoretical knowledge" into "applied knowledge") is simple, and clearly described in practice by Krishna in verses 13.8 to 13.12.

In this regard, we need to note that many people have developed a curious misconception about the meaning of *amanitvam* ("not caring for honors") and *anahankara* ("being free from false ego"). Discussing the spiritual science and sharing one's realizations and experiences does not amount to being egotistic.

There are some imbeciles who will accuse you of being arrogant simply because you truthfully say that you are actually following the principles of *dharma* and teaching what you have learned and realized.

At the same time, they drink the footwash of someone who openly says he has no qualifications, but still demands worship and total obedience and personal service because he claims to represent his *guru*, who in his eyes was qualified only because his *guru* was qualified. This distorted idea of humility comes - guess from where - from the abrahamic concept by which all human beings are inherently sinners, and can never develop any real knowledge or qualifications in spiritual life, therefore their only hope is to be "saved" by a "prophet/Christ" and his representatives the priests/ mullahs etc in exchange for their blind allegiance and obedience. The Vedic idea of humility is very different. In the Vedic perspective, all human beings are parts and parcels of God, equal in quality, and they only need to realize it to elevate themselves to the level of perfection. This is why it is called "self-realization"

नमः पुरस्तादथ पृष्ठतस्ते नमोऽस्तु ते सर्वत एव सर्व ।
 namaḥ purastādatha pṛṣṭhataste namo'stu te sarvata eva sarva ।
 अनन्तवीर्यामितविक्रमस्त्वं सर्वं समाप्नोषि ततोऽसि सर्वः ॥ ११-४० ॥
 anantavīryāmitavikramastvaṁ sarvaṁ samāpnoṣi tato'si sarvaḥ ॥ 11-40 ॥

namah: I salute; *purastat*: at the front; *atha*: as well as; *pristhatah*: at the back; *te*: you; *namah astu*: there be salutations; *te*: you; *sarvatah*: from all sides; *eva*: certainly; *sarva*: all; *ananta virya*: of unlimited prowess; *amita vikramah*: of unsurpassable deeds; *tvam*: you; *sarvam*: all; *samapnosi*: you are encompassing; *tatah*: therefore; *asi*: you are; *sarvah*: everything.

"I salute you from the front and from the back. My homage to you from all sides! Your prowess is unlimited, and your deeds are without compare. You are encompassing everything, therefore you are everything."

Arjuna is offering respects to God from all sides, because God is present everywhere, covering all directions and the entire expanse of the universe. Traditionally in ritual ceremonies one starts from the front (*purastat*) or in the east (*purva*, literally meaning "first"), as the most visible manifestation of God in this world is the Sun, the greatest power that sustains life. Thus we offer our respect and meditation to Savitar from various directions at the different times of day - sunrise in the east, noon above, and sunset in the west.

Vedic tradition also includes the primeval and universal homage to the Sun, but takes it to a very high level, as the Savitri Gayatri mantra constitutes a meditation on the power of divinity so that we can raise ourselves to the divine dimension of consciousness. It is a search for inspiration towards personal perfection - not an expression of fear or propitiation, or glorification as we can see at more primitive levels, where the worshiper makes a huge difference, and puts a great distance, between him/herself and God.

The *Brihad Aranyaka Upanishad* (1.4.10) states very clearly, "those who worship the Gods thinking, 'He is one, I am another', does not know the facts, and he is like an animal to the *devas*".

So we can attain true *bhakti*, the supreme *bhakti* (*mad bhaktim labhate param*, 18.54) only when we have realized our divine transcendental nature, dissipating the illusion of material bodily identification. At that point, we have a *divya* or *siddha deha* by which we will be able not only to see (*divyam caksuh*, 11.8) but also to associate with Bhagavan personally in his intimate abode. This *siddha deha* is not something that we get from outside: it is simply the spiritual form of our evolved consciousness, of which the atomic seed has always existed. Of course the individual soul (*jivatman*) will never achieve exactly the same greatness of God, because constitutionally it is simply an *amsa*, a "part". As Arjuna declares yet again in this verse, God is *ananta-virya* and *amita-vikrama*, characterized by unlimited strength/power and unique deeds, because the Whole will always be greater than the parts.

There is no offensive way to show one's respect and love for God, because God eagerly accepts the *bhakti* from a devotee even when it is expressed clumsily or with some superficial mistakes. It is said that when visiting Indraprastha, Krishna was invited to a State banquet by Duryodhana, but he chose to have lunch at Vidura's house instead. Vidura was so overwhelmed by the emotions of love and happiness that in his confusion, he was offering him banana peels instead of the fruits. Krishna happily ate them, moved by his devotee's love. In the same way, Krishna snatched Sudama's bag to eat the cheap and damaged broken rice that he was carrying, as Sudama had not been able to find any better gift for his beloved friend.

In verse 9.26, Krishna clearly says that he will be delighted (*prayatatmana*) to actually eat (*asnami*) whatever a devotee offers with genuine love (*bhakti upahritam*). We have also seen this principle demonstrated quite a few times. Of course a loving devotee will only offer to Krishna things that he considers good, and will naturally try to find out what Krishna likes best, so that the offering will be as pleasing as possible.

However, God does not need our offerings, worship, or even respects or allegiance, because he is self-sufficient and independent. Whatever we offer him is for our benefit only, to develop a sentiment of love and affection towards the Supreme, so that we can establish the only perfect relationship possible, and attain the happiness we all seek. This of course does not mean that we should become sloppy or

careless in our relationship with God; it is always better to remain attentive and humble and do one's best. Traditionally, after performing formal worship, one is supposed to beg forgiveness for any impropriety or mistake:

mantra hinam kriya hinam bhakti hinam janardana, yat pujitam maya deva paripurnam tad astu me, "O Lord, whatever I have done to worship you, make it perfect and complete, correcting all faults in the chanting of *mantras*, performance of actions, or scarcity of devotion",

yad datta bhaktimatrena patram puspam phalam jalam, aviditam nivedyam tu tat grhananukampaya, "Please, out of your kindness, accept what I have offered out of devotion - leaf, flower, fruit, water and food",

ajnanad athava jnanad asubham yan maya krtam, ksantum arhasi tat sarvam dasyenaiva grhana mam, "Whatever mistake I may have committed, knowingly or unknowingly, please forgive it and consider me as your humble servant".

सखेति मत्वा प्रसभं यदुक्तं हे कृष्ण हे यादव हे सखेति ।

sakheti matvā prasabham yaduktam he kṛṣṇa he yādava he sakheti ।

अजानता महिमानं तवेदं मया प्रमादात्प्रणयेन वापि ॥ ११-४१ ॥

ajānatā mahimānam tavedam mayā pramadātpṛaṇayena vāpi ॥ 11-41 ॥

sakha: friend; *iti*: like this; *matva*: thinking; *prasabham*: presumptuous; *yat*: whatever; *uktam*: said; *he krishna*: o Krishna; *he yadava*: o Yadava; *he sakha*: o my friend; *iti*: like this; *ajanata*: ignorant; *mahimanam*: of the glories; *tava*: your; *idam*: this; *maya*: by me; *pramadat*: because of madness; *pranayena*: with dedication; *va*: or; *api*: although.

"Presumptuously thinking of you as a mere friend, I addressed you informally, as 'Krishna', 'Yadava', 'my friend', because I was unaware of your glories. I have done so out of carelessness, but with love."

Whatever formal imperfection one could find in Arjuna's behavior with Krishna, it is due simply to their loving relationship as friends and relatives and close companions. Therefore Arjuna here says, *pranayena*, "out of dedication", or absorption in the personal relationship.

As we have already mentioned, Krishna/ God does not take formalities so seriously when the devotee is acting out of love, and in fact he prefers intimate and simple exchanges directly from the heart, rather than pompous and presumptuous official worship, no matter how materially impressive.

Arjuna, however, reminds us that simple and direct or informal worship, too, can be superficial, presumptuous and careless (*prasabha*), and that we should never take God for granted. The fact that we (or our predecessors) have installed the Deity in our home or temple or city does not mean that God is bound or forced to remain there for our benefit, even if we become careless or selfish or otherwise offensive.

Offenses can be forgiven (*kshamasva*) when they are committed accidentally, unwittingly, or because of some overpowering circumstances. Cynicism and selfishness are very serious obstacles, that invalidate any plead for forgiveness, because they make it insincere. God is not stupid and is not obliged to accept our prayers or to forgive us simply because we are telling him to do so. If we continue to commit offenses out of arrogance even after asking forgiveness, and we refuse to reform our behavior and improve our spiritual position, a mere *mantra* or formula will not bring any relief from the bad consequences of our actions.

The same applies for the offerings of food or any form of ritualistic worship: the only guarantee that God will accept our offering is in the love and devotion that we are putting into it. God does not care at all for high caste birth, government appointment, social position, wealth, or even scholarship and excellence in following the details of a procedure: without genuine love and devotion, no offering will be accepted.

We should also be careful in our relationships with *devas* and *bhaktas*, and treat them according to their level of consciousness and not on the basis of bodily identification or other material considerations. In *Bhagavata Purana* (4.4.13) Sati comments about her father Daksha's offensive mentality towards Shiva: *nascaryam etad yad asatsu sarvada, mahad vininda kunapatma vadisu, sersyam mahapurusa pada pamsubhir, nirasta tejahsu tad eva sobhanam*, "I am not surprised about all this. Bad people, who identify with their material bodies, always deride the great souls because they are envious of God. It is very good that such materialists lose their glory and merits (*tejas*)." Out of pride for his own material position, Daksha had disrespected Shiva, criticizing him and demeaning his character, ignoring his spiritual glories. In *Bhagavata Purana* (10.88.38-39) Krishna addresses Shiva as the *guru* of the entire universe, saying, "If someone commits *aparadha* to such a *mahajana* and *jagat guru* as you are, they will never get any auspiciousness".

Again in *Bhagavata Purana* (11.17.27) Krishna says, *acaryam mam vijaniyam, navamanyeta karhicit, na martya buddhyasuyeta, sarva deva mayo guruh*, "One should consider the *acharya* as my self and never disrespect him by considering him an ordinary human being, because the *guru* is the manifestation of all the *devas*". Of course if the "*guru*" is teaching his disciples to disrespect, abuse and insult the *devas*, he should not expect any better treatment for himself. But we are talking here of the genuine *acharya*, not of the fake ignorant pretenders that present themselves as *gurus* in order to get cheap adoration, followers, and profit.

The word *acharya* means, "one who teaches by example", or "one who puts theory into practice by his behavior", and is here closely connected with the definition *guru*, "teacher". A person should be considered the genuine representative of the *devas* and of Krishna (who speaks this verse to Uddhava in *Bhagavata Purana*) only if he is truly functioning as *guru* and *acharya*, or in other words if he is actually taking care of his disciples and guiding them effectively and expertly on the journey of self-realization and devotion to God, and is demonstrating the goal with his personal behavior and life. The best way to avoid committing offenses to devotees, *guru*, *deva* or Bhagavan is to rise above the level of material bodily identifications and attachments/ affiliations. This is sufficient to protect us from the consequences of the fundamental ignorance that is the root cause of envy. However, there is nothing offensive in familiar dealings with devotees, *guru*, *deva* or Bhagavan when these are based on affection - we just need to know where the line lies.

यच्चावहासार्थमसत्कृतोऽसि विहारशय्यासनभोजनेषु ।

yaccāvahāsārthamasatkṛto'si vihāraśayyāsanabhojaneṣu ।

एकोऽथवाप्यच्युत तत्समक्षं तत्क्षामये त्वामहमप्रमेयम् ॥ ११-४२ ॥

eko'thavāpyacyuta tatsamakṣam̐ tatkṣāmaye tvāmahamaprameyam ॥ 11-42 ॥

yat: whatever; *ca*: and; *avahasa artham*: to have a laugh; *asat kritah*: done at a material level; *asi*: you are; *vihara*: while strolling; *sayya*: lying down; *asana*: sitting; *bhojanesu*: while eating; *ekah*: alone; *atha va*: or also; *api*: although; *acyuta*: o Acyuta; *tat samakṣam*: in the presence of others; *tat*: that; *ksamaye*: I am begging forgiveness; *tvam*: you; *aham*: I; *aprimeyam*: unfathomable.

"O Acyuta, your greatness is inconceivable. Whatever impropriety I may have committed while joking, strolling together, lying down, sitting, or eating with you, alone or in the presence of others, I beg forgiveness."

When we speak about offenses, we don't mean avoiding someone, or refusing to worship him or to submit to him, or discussing his verified factual behavior, asking questions about his statements, noticing his inconsistencies and mistakes, or behaving informally with him. These are not offenses. An offense - *aparadha* or *ninda* - consists in deliberately hurting or damaging a person with some type of aggression, such as verbal or physical insults. These also include whatever could target him/ her by mocking, dirty allusions or ridicule based on his/ her bodily appearance, slandering him/ her with false rumors and allegations, stealing or destroying his/ her property or what s/he requires for service. None of these are relevant to ethical, philosophical or spiritual points, and can only cause damage to all.

This is particularly bad when the offense is directed towards a person who has helped us and guided us in our personal development, such as the *guru*, or a good parent or respectable well-wisher (also considered on the same level of the *guru*), to whom we should be grateful. This crime is called *guru droha*, where *droha* means "hostility", "hatred", "becoming an enemy", and "enviousness", and destroys the merits and good fortune of the offender. It is inevitably caused by the ignorance of bodily identification and shows a serious lack of spiritual realization and knowledge. A decent person (what to speak of a devotee) does not cause harm deliberately to anyone, as this is one of the first requirements in *sadhana* (*yama* and *niyama*), what to speak of harming or killing one's *guru* and benefactors. In verse 2.5, such act was heavily condemned.

Actually, Arjuna has never done anything offensive towards Krishna. Simply, his behavior has sometimes seemed casual and familiar, as it is normally between friends; this is perfectly all right, because Krishna's internal potency, Yogamaya, arranges for the devotees to superficially overlook the *aisvarya* (power) of Bhagavan, so that the loving exchanges with his companions and devotees can develop with great sweetness, for Krishna's pleasure.

Similarly, other intimate companions of Krishna are happy to see him as their lover, husband, son, friend, and only temporarily they remember his greatness in a flash of realization, just like Arjuna is showing here. Such a moment of bewilderment is not disrupting their loving relationship and exchanges, but rather it enhances them because it makes them proud and increases their attachment to Krishna, just like a loving mother is thrilled to see her beloved son rise to some important position in society or achieving some extraordinary success, but at that time she can remember his sweet childhood activities even more keenly.

This feeling is described by Kunti in his prayers (*Bhagavata Purana* 1.8.28-31) and is found in many passages of the 10th canto of the *Bhagavata Purana*, describing the childhood activities of Krishna in Vrindavana with the remembrance of his divine glories, as seen by the intimate devotees there. The more intimate is the loving relationship, the greater will be the amazement and happiness of the devotee, and consequently the pleasure of Bhagavan. The fact is that God is pleased when his devotees joke with him, walk with him, sit or lie down with him, eat with him and so on, because they are expressing their love for him - the thing that Krishna loves best.

Similarly, Arjuna's regret for his great familiarity with Krishna will not last long - it will remain only as long as necessary to appreciate his glories and greatness (*mahima*) and describe them in his prayers for our benefit. Soon enough, he will ask Krishna to show his sweet human-like form again, and his natural loving feelings will return (11.51). This intimate relationship with God is an exclusive feature of Vedic tradition, as it is not found in any other religious culture.

The two names by which Arjuna is addressing Krishna in this verse are Acyuta, that means "not fallen", and Aprameya, that means "inconceivable", where *prameya* is the "object of knowledge".

पितासि लोकस्य चराचरस्य त्वमस्य पूज्यश्च गुरुर्गरीयान् ।

pitāsi lokasya carācarasya tvamasya pūjyaśca gururgarīyān ।

न त्वत्समोऽस्त्यभ्यधिकः कुतोऽन्यो लोकत्रयेऽप्यप्रतिमप्रभाव ॥ ११-४३ ॥

na tvatsamo'styabhyadhikah̐ kuto'nyo lokatraye'pyapratimaprabhāva ॥ 11-43 ॥

pita: the father; *asi*: you are; *lokasya*: of the universe; *cara acarasya*: of the moving and the non-moving; *tvam*: you; *asya*: of this; *pūjyah*: to be worshiped; *ca*: and; *guru*: the (supreme) teacher; *garīyan*: glorious; *na*: not; *tvat samah*: equal to you; *asti*: there is; *abhyadhikah*: greater; *kutah*: how (it will be possible); *anyah*: other; *loka traye*: in the three worlds; *api*: although; *apratima*: beyond compare; *prabhava*: power.

"You are the father of all beings, moving and non-moving. You are worthy of worship, as you are *guru*, and even more glorious than *guru*. There cannot be anyone equal or greater than you. How can anyone, in all the three worlds, compare with your power?"

The word *apratima* means "immeasurable", as the definition *pratima* means "measure", "comparison", "equal to". It complements the word *aprimeya* from the previous verse, meaning "not to be known or learned".

The word *idyam* means "to be worshiped". *Svetasvatara Upanishad* (6.7) states, *tam isvaranam paramam mahesvaram, tam devatanam paramam ca daivatam, patim patinam paramam parastad, vidama devam bhuvanesam idyam*, "We know God, the Lord of the universe, the supreme master, who controls everything, the supreme Deity worshiped by the Gods, who protects all those who give protection to others, greater than the greatest."

The word *gariyan* means "greater", "more glorious", "worthier of being praised"; it is a comparative term referred here to the position of *guru*, indicating to a teacher or respected elder. Krishna is the supreme *guru*, the *antaryami paramatman*, of whom all the *gurus* are simply representatives. In *Bhagavata Purana*, Narada instructs Dhruva to meditate on the *guru* of all *gurus* (*abhidhyayet manasa guruna gurum*, 4.8.44); similarly king Satyavrata addresses Vishnu as his *guru* (8.24.50) and Prithu tells his subjects that Hari is the supreme *guru* (4.21.36). Again in *Bhagavata Purana* Kapila tells his mother that his devotees consider him as son, friend, *guru*, and *ista daivam* (3.25.38), and Kavi Yogendra confirms, *guru devatatma*, "the *atman* of the *guru* and the *devas*", 11.2.37). Brahma, too, describes Vishnu in the same terms: *tad visva guru adhikritam bhuvanaika vandyam* "the universal *guru*, who is the original maker, worshiped by all" (3.15.26).

At the dawn of this creation, Brahma received the Knowledge directly from Narayana (*tene brahma hrida*, "revealed to Brahma through his heart", 1.1.1), but anyone can also be blessed in the same way: *hrdi stithah yacchati jnanam sa tattva adhigamam*, "situated in the heart, he gives the knowledge by which one can understand the truth" (3.5.4), and *hrdy antah stho hy abhadrani vidhunoti*, "situated within the heart, he destroys all bad things" (1.2.17). Particularly enlightening is verse 4.28.41, that shows how directly realizing transcendental knowledge from Bhagavan ensures it is free from sectarianism: *saksad bhagavatoktena guruna harina nrpa, visuddha jnana dipena, sphurata visvato mukham*, "as directly explained by Bhagavan, Hari, who is the original *guru*, radiating with the light of pure transcendental knowledge, from all perspectives". Therefore he is the greatest teacher of all: *jagat guru tamah*, "the supreme *guru* of the universe", (10.69.15).

Another beautiful verse is expressed by Sudama, Krishna's childhood friend: *kim asmabhir anirvritam, deva deva jagat guro, bhavata satya kamena yesam vaso guror abhut*, "O God of the Gods, o universal *guru*, what will be impossible to achieve for us, when we have been living in the same school with him whose desires are always fulfilled?" (10.80.44). In this particular verse, besides the intimate *lila* meaning of Krishna living in the *gurukula* of Sandipani Muni, we can also see the realization of the universal and eternal truth taught by the *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavad gita*, about the "two birds sitting on the same tree". The statement about Krishna being the father of all beings is also found in other verses of *Bhagavad gita*.

In 9.17 Krishna says, *pitaham asya jagato mata dhata pitamahah* ("I am the father of this (world), I am the mother, the supporter, the grandfather"), and in verse 14.4 he says, *sarva-yonishu kaunteya murtyah sambhavanti yah, tasam brahma mahad yonir aham bija-pradah pita* ("In whatever form of matrix they appear, all beings are children of the supreme Mother (*brahma mahad yoni*) and I am the father, who gives the seed.")

A popular devotional song prays, *tvam eva mata cha pita tvam eva, tvam eva bandhus cha sakhas tvam eva, tvam eva vidyam ca dravinam tvam eva, tvam eva sarvam mama deva deva*, "You are my mother and my father, my family and my friend, my knowledge and my wealth: o God of the Gods, you are everything to me". *Bhagavata Purana* confirms in several more verses:

bhavaya nas tvam bhava visva bhavana, tvam eva matatha suhrit patih pita, tvam sad gurur nah paramam ca daivatam, yasyanuvrttya kritino babhuvima, "O creator of the universe, please take care of us. You are our mother, benefactor, husband and father. You are our *guru*, our supreme Deity, and by following you we achieved success" (1.11.7),

jane tvam isam visvasya, jagato yoni bijayoh, sakteh sivasya ca param, yat tad brahma nirantaram, "O Lord of the universe, I know you as both the mother and the father of the universe - the supreme eternal Brahman that includes Shiva and Shakti at the same time" (4.6.42),

ksetra jnaya namas tubhyam, sarvadhyaaksaya saksine, purusayatma-mulaya, mula prakrtaye namah, "I offer my respect to the you, the Knower of the field, the witness, who controls everything. I offer my homage to the supreme Purusha, the root of the *atman*, and to the supreme Prakriti" (8.3.12),

yuvayor eva naivayam, atmajo bhagavan harih, sarvesam atmajo hy atma, pita mata sa isvarah, "This Bhagavan Hari is not your son only. He is the son of all, the *atman* of all, as well as the father, the mother and the ruler" (10.46.42),

narayanam tvam na hi sarva dehinam atmasy adhisakhila loka saksi, narayano angam nara bhu kalayanat tac capi satyam na tavava maya, "O Narayana, are you not the *atman* of all the embodied beings, the supreme Lord of all the planets and the witness (conscience/ consciousness)? Narayana is your *angam* (limb), because from his human-like body he manifests the waters of creation: he is real, and not a product of your illusion" (10.14.14).

तस्मात्प्रणम्य प्रणिधाय कायं प्रसादये त्वामहमीशमीड्यम् ।

tasmātpṛaṇamya pṛaṇidhāya kāyaṁ prasādāye tvāmahamīśamīḍyam ।

पितेव पुत्रस्य सखेव सख्युः प्रियः प्रियायार्हसि देव सोढुम् ॥ ११-४४ ॥

piteva putrasya sakheva sakhyuḥ priyaḥ priyāyārhasi deva soḍhum ॥ 11-44 ॥

tasmat: therefore; *pranamy*: offering respects; *pranidhaya*: prostrating; *kayam*: the body; *prasadaye*: seeking mercy; *tvam*: you; *aham*: I (am); *isam*: to the Lord; *idyam*: to be worshiped; *pita*: father; *iva*: like; *putrasya*: of a son; *sakha iva*: like a friend; *sakhyuh*: of a friend; *priyah*: a lover; *priyayah*: the beloved; *arhasi*: you should/ you are able to; *deva*: o Lord; *soḍhum*: to tolerate/ forgive.

"For that, I offer my humblest respects, throwing myself at your feet and seeking your mercy. O Lord, you are worthy of being worshiped! Please bear with me, like a father (is tolerant) with his child, a friend with a friend, and a lover to the beloved."

Such is the power of the intimate loving relationship with God, that it cannot be forgotten even in the most difficult moments. Arjuna is clearly seeing the terrifying vision of God as eternal Time devouring everything, and has already contemplated the vastness and wonder of the unlimited universal form, and he directly realizes the unfathomable divine glories of Krishna and understands that his familiarity is technically out of place. Yet, he still sees Krishna as his beloved friend, because this is what gives most pleasure to Krishna. The perception of the *mahima* (glories, opulence, powers) of Krishna is not really absent from the devotee's mind: it is simply brushed aside from time to time, so that service to God can be more effective. Similarly Krishna's personal servants restrain their feelings of ecstasy because tearful eyes and trembling hands are distracting them from effectiveness in their duties.

Everything is based on pure love: in verse 11.41 it was Arjuna's love for Krishna (*pramadat pranayena*) that caused his familiarity, and in this verse it is Krishna's love for Arjuna that finds tolerance and indeed pleasure in such familiarity.

We have already mentioned that the 5 primary *rasas* in loving devotion are *santa* (tranquil admiration), *dasya* (service), *sakhya* (friendship), *vatsalya* (affection towards a younger person) and *sringara* (erotic love). The sentiment expressed by a disciple towards the *guru* is a mixture of *sakhya* and *dasya*, and this is what we find expressed here. Arjuna's relationship with Krishna is clearly in the friendship mode (*sakhya*), but already in the second chapter (2.7) he had submitted himself to Krishna as a disciple (*sisyas te 'ham tvam prapannam*). This means that Arjuna has always been very aware of Krishna's divine nature and position.

God is extremely tolerant, and never gets angry when someone is trying to offend him. In *Bhagavata Purana* 10.89.3-12 we have read the famous story of Maharishi Bhṛigu who went to visit the three highest and most powerful authorities in this universe - Brahma, Shiva and Vishnu - testing each of them with increasingly insulting behaviors, with mind, words and body. Vishnu did not become offended at all even when Bhṛigu kicked him hard in the chest, and rather showed concern for the well-being of the Rishi, considering that Bhṛigu's foot might have been hurt. Of course Vishnu's body is totally transcendental and does not suffer any pain or damage, but the tolerance and kindness demonstrated in that episode are amazing. Yet, this is God's nature, because among the 6 perfections (*bhagas*) of Bhagavan we also find the perfection of renunciation. Projecting one's own ideas and defects on God is called anthropomorphism, and it tends to confuse people who have not overcome the ignorance of material bodily identification. The followers of anthropomorphic doctrines hear that men are made in God's image, or about the human-like activities of God when he appears in this world, and they automatically (and mistakenly) conclude that God is also a person like us, with lots of defects and limitations. Some degraded and confused people even construe a projection of God in such a way that, if such a person really existed in society, he would be considered a dangerous psychopathic criminal and would be immediately committed to some high security mental facility.

अदृष्टपूर्वं हृषितोऽस्मि दृष्ट्वा भयेन च प्रव्यथितं मनो मे ।

adr̥ṣṭapūrvam̐ hṛṣito'smi dṛṣṭvā bhayena ca pravyathitam̐ mano me ।

तदेव मे दर्शय देव रूपं प्रसीद देवेश जगन्निवास ॥ ११-४५ ॥

tadeva me darśaya deva rūpaṁ prasīda deveśa jagannivāsa ॥ 11-45 ॥

adr̥ṣṭa: not seen; *purvam*: before; *hr̥ṣitah*: overjoyed; *asmi*: I am; *dṛṣṭva*: by seeing; *bhayena*: by fear; *ca*: and; *pravyathitam*: shaken; *manah*: the mind; *me*: my; *tat*: that; *eva*: certainly; *me*: me; *darsaya*: let see; *deva rupam*: the form of the Lord; *prasida*: be pleased; *deva isa*: o Lord of the *devas*; *jagat nivasa*: o abode of the universe.

"Contemplating this extraordinary form, my mind is thrilled with joy and shaken with fear at the same time. O Lord of the Devas, abode of the universe, please let me see the form of God."

The expression *adr̥ṣṭa purvam*, "not seen before", applies to the particular experience described by Arjuna, that cannot be repeated in exactly the same way. As we have already mentioned, Krishna had already shown the universal form on various occasions during his activities, so Arjuna's reference is not about the general concept of the universal form or Virata Purusha. Other commentators have interpreted this expression to indicate that God is without compare, as stated in so many passages of the scriptures, and quoted specifically in *Svetasvatara Upanishad* (6.8) that declares, *na tat samas cabhyadhikas ca dr̥syate*, "it is impossible to see/ find one who is equal or greater (than God)".

The word *hr̥ṣitah*, "thrilled", refers to the physical symptoms experienced by Arjuna; it specifically indicates the standing of hairs, or *harsa roma*. As we have already seen, Arjuna's emotional symptoms are not actually about fear of God but rather amazement and awe in front of his immense power. We could compare it to the thrill, fear and joy that people experience for example on a high speed car race, or looking up a sheer cliff while free climbing it, or other similar experiences.

The revelation of the glories of Krishna and the vision of the universal form are the stimulus (*uddipana*) to the devotional feelings in Arjuna's *sakhya rasa*, and not simply to the *adbhuta rasa*, that is an attendant feeling and not the permanent and preminent taste in the relationship between Arjuna and Krishna. Amazement and fear (*vismaya rati*, *adbhuta rasa*) are a very useful ingredient also in many other activities of divine Personalities. This is why God mixes extraordinary deeds even to his very intimate and sweet love exchanges that appear to be based on a very simple and familiar perception of his Personality - for example with the young *gopis* and with Yasoda and Nanda, Krishna's foster parents in Vrindavana. Krishna's lifting the Govardhana hill, fighting with the great Kaliya serpent, devouring the forest fire, and killing the many *asuras* attacking him are all examples of intimate *lilas* that introduce amazement, fear, and the perception of Krishna's immense power, with the purpose of enhancing the intimate loving exchanges with his devotees. In fact God could have solved such problems without exhibiting such extraordinary deeds (*uru vikama*), but then there would not be much to be impressed about, or to talk about. This is confirmed in *Bhagavata Purana*: *kritavam kila karmani saha ramena kesavah, atimartyani bhagavan gudhah kapata manusah*, "Together with Balarama, Bhagavan Kesava manifested many superhuman activities, under the guise of a human being" (1.1.20), and *anugrahaya bhaktanam manusam deha asthitah, bhajate tadr̥sish krida yah srutva tat paro bhavet*, "The Lord manifests a human-like form out of kindness for his devotees, as one will become attracted to God by listening to the stories of his playful activities" (10.33.36).

A very interesting expression in this verse is *deva rupam*, "the form of God". Arjuna has been eminently contemplating God's forms both in meditation and in direct vision, but the universal form is not singular in number: in fact, it includes unlimited forms. Now Arjuna wants to see *the* "form of God", that is the four-armed form of Vishnu or Narayana, a single form expressing the unlimited powers of God, but in a pleasing *saumya* ("benevolent") aspect. The expression *tatha eva*, "as that", indicates that the four-armed Vishnu form is still powerful and majestic - *aisvarya* - yet all the traditional scriptures recommend the *sadhakas* to meditate and contemplate on this form.

किरीटिनं गदिनं चक्रहस्तं इच्छामि त्वां द्रष्टुमहं तथैव ।

kiriṭīnaṁ gadīnaṁ cakrahastāṁ icchāmi tvāṁ draṣṭumahaṁ tathaiva ।

तेनैव रूपेण चतुर्भुजेन सहस्रबाहो भव विश्वमूर्ते ॥ ११-४६ ॥

tenaiva rūpeṇa caturbhujena sahasrabāho bhava viśvamūrte ॥ 11-46 ॥

kiritinam: with the crown; *gadinam*: with the mace; *cakra hastam*: holding the disc in (your) hand; *icchami*: I wish; *tvam*: you; *drastum*: to see; *aham*: I; *tatha*: like that; *eva*: certainly; *tena*: by that; *eva*: certainly; *rupena*: by the form; *catur bhujena*: with four arms; *sahasra baho*: (you who have) thousands of arms; *bhava*: become; *visva murte*: o form of the universe.

"O Visvamurti, who have thousands of arms, I wish you to be(come) the four-armed form, holding the disc and the mace in your hands, and wearing a crown. I wish to see you in that form."

Krishna will show Arjuna the divine forms as he asked because he is pleased (*prasannena tava*, 11.47); earlier he asked to see the universal form (11.3), now he is asking to see Vishnu. However, Krishna is also going to manifest his sweet human-like form (11.50) without Arjuna explicitly asking for that: it was sufficient to remember their affectionate and intimate relationship of friendship and kinship. At the spiritual level, the devotional sentiment is non-different than the form or body manifested by Krishna or his devotee; of course this is difficult to understand for a person who is still immersed in material bodily identification, but existence and form are originally pure consciousness.

As consciousness can instantly transform and manifest any form, Krishna can easily manifest the universal form, the four-armed form of Narayana/ Vishnu, and the most intimate human-like form of Krishna, by which he relates with his closest devotees. The four-armed form of Narayana or Vishnu is the primary focus of all traditional Vedic scriptures, as the form of Krishna became object of meditation and worship only in these last 5000 years after his appearance, mostly based on the *Bhagavad gita* and *Bhagavata Purana*. Before that, Vedic scriptures narrated the stories of Vishnu's *avatars*, such as Matsya, Kurma, Varaha, Nrisimha, Vamana, Parasurama and Rama.

Colonial indology and the subsequent conventional academia believe that the presently existent Vedic texts have been composed rather recently, in a supposed "evolution of thought" that goes from the *samhitas* (*Rig Veda, Sama, Yajur*) to the *Upanishads* and the *Puranas*, that in spite of their name (literally meaning "ancient") would have been created well into the current era. This is certainly not the verdict of the Vedic scriptures themselves. All the knowledge contained in all the Vedic scriptures already existed much earlier, and it has been collected in specific compilations from time to time according to the requirements of the circumstances. The texts called *Tantras* or *Agamas* (two names that mean respectively "power" and "scriptures") are even more ancient in origin than the presently studied Vedic texts, and they are specifically focused on Vishnu and his Couple manifestation in this universe, known as Shiva and Shakti.

The *samhitas* (*Rig Veda, Sama, Yajur, Atharva*) speak of Vishnu only marginally because they are collections of hymns in praise of the various Personalities of God controlling this universe, meant to be chanted and sung at the ritual ceremonies to which such Personalities were remembered and called. The philosophical and theological elaboration of such hymns is contained in the commentaries, compiled in the same period and with the same vision - *Brahmanas, Aranyakas* and *Upanishads*. Although the number of hymns dedicated specifically to Vishnu is limited, everyone agrees that Vishnu - Yajna - is the ultimate purpose, foundation and personification of all the religious ceremonies. Similarly, in all groups of scriptures, Vishnu appears both as *avatara* and manifestation within this universe (and as such he is counted among the *Devas*) as well as the origin of all the *Devas*, the Personality of the supreme Brahman. These two dimensions of Vishnu's presence are found all over the *Puranas, Upanishads*, and in *Bhagavad gita* too, as we have been contemplating in these last few chapters.

The scripture that focuses most on Krishna, the *Bhagavata Purana*, explicitly recommends to meditate on the four-armed Vishnu form; we can see for example the instructions given by Krishna himself to Uddhava, considered a sort of spiritual testament left by Krishna just before his disappearance (11.11.46, 11.14.37, 11.27.38), and the instructions of another great teacher *avatara*, Kapila (3.28.12-21, 27).

Krishna manifests the four-armed form of Vishnu in many passages of the *Bhagavata Purana*, as for example in the Asvatthama episode (1.7.52), to Brahma who is meditating on him (2.9.16), to the *Devas* who pray for his help at the appearance of Vritrasura (6.9.28) and especially when he takes birth and appears to Vasudeva and Devaki (10.3.9), and to Aditi (8.17.4-6), and also to Nabhi, the father of Rishabhadeva (5.3.3-5). Krishna manifests this form for Rukmini (10.60.26). He also appears as Vishnu to Muchukunda and separately to Kalayavana (10.51.24 and 10.51.2) during the war against Jarasandha. The four-armed form of Vishnu also appears to Parikshit before his birth (1.12.9), and is the object of meditation recommended by Sukadeva to Parikshit during his final fasting (2.2.8-13). The same meditation on the four-armed Vishnu is recommended by Narada to young Dhruva (4.8.43-53) and in this form Vishnu appears to Dhruva to bless him. Shiva personally instructs the *Pracetas* to meditate on this form in 4.24.45-53, and this is how Vishnu appears to them in 4.30.5-7 (albeit with 8 arms). The eight-armed form of Vishnu also appears after Daksha's successful *yajna* (4.7.19-23) and after being called by Daksha's *Hamsa guya* prayers (6.4.40). He is also the object of meditation of the *Narayana kavacha* (6.8.12) taught by Visvarupa to Indra.

The *pancha upasana* form of worship and meditation, summarized by Adi Shankara, already existed for many thousands of years. It focuses first and foremost on Vishnu/ Narayana as the supreme Brahman, the origin, foundation and sum total of all the divine Personalities and forms. This transcendental, non-manifested (*avyakta*) supreme Personality of Godhead, the One, manifests in many (*eko bahu syam*, "I will become many", *Chandogya Upanishad*, 6.2.3) starting by two - the divine Couple of Shakti and Shaktiman. In the

material manifestation, this Couple is known as Durga and Shiva - the other two main Personalities of God traditionally worshiped, as the Mother and the Father of the cosmos, known under various names.

The other two Personalities of God in this *pancha tattva* ("five realities") meditation are Surya and Ganesha, who have been worshiped since time immemorial and express an immense wealth of symbolic meanings and forms of consciousness. Surya is the Sun, the universal manifestation of the power of God, that everybody can see and perceive every day; the most brilliant examples of Surya worship are given by Ramachandra, the Vishnu *avatara*, who chanted the famous hymn *Aditya hridayam*, and by Krishna, who instructed his son Samba to worship Surya in order to regain full health. The divine Personality of Ganesha, also called Ganapati and Vinayaka, is not easy to understand. He is most popular among virtuous materialists who worship him to propitiate success in business and wealth, but he is remembered and honored at the beginning of all enterprises, both material and spiritual, because he personifies the destruction of obstacles from the path of progress.

According to the *Skanda Purana*, Avanti kanda, quoted in *Bhakti rasamrita sindhu*, among the offenses to be avoided in devotional service, we find "to worship the Deity without worshipping Vaikuntha deities like Ganesha".

sri: the wonderful; *bhagavan*: Lord; *uvaca*: said; *maya*: by me; *prasannena*: for the happiness; *tava*: your; *arjuna*: o Arjuna; *idam*: this; *rupam*: form; *param*: supreme/ transcendental; *darsitam*: seen; *atma yogat*: by own *yoga*; *tejah mayam*: made of splendor; *visvam*: the

श्रीभगवानुवाच ।

śrībhagavānuvāca ।

मया प्रसन्नेन तवाजुनेदं रूपं परं दर्शितमात्मयोगात् ।

mayā prasannena tavārjunedaṁ rūpaṁ paraṁ darśitamātmayogāt ।

तेजोमयं विश्वमनन्तमाद्यं यन्मे त्वदन्येन न दृष्टपूर्वम् ॥ ११-४७ ॥

tejomayaṁ viśvamanantamādyam yaṁme tvadanyena na dṛṣṭapūrvam ॥ 11-47 ॥

universe; *anantam*: unlimited; *adyam*: most ancient; *yat*: that which; *me*: my; *tvat anyena*: other than you; *na*: not; *drista*: seen; *purvam*: before.

The wonderful Lord said, "To make you happy, I am now showing you this supreme form, made of splendor, manifested by my own *yoga*/ *shakti*, unlimited and primeval like the universe, that nobody has seen before you."

The expression *tava prasannena arjuna*, "for your satisfaction, Arjuna", indicates that the Lord is happy to give happiness to his devotee. This is the actual meaning of love.

God does not need anything. He does not need to accept any offering, or to perform any activity, but he always thinks about the benefit and the happiness of the devotees. This is not favoritism, because the Lord also thinks constantly about the benefit of all creatures. Krishna had already declared: *samo 'ham sarva-bhuteshu na me dveshyo 'sti na priyah, ye bhajanti tu mam bhaktiya mayi te teshu capy aham*, "I am equally disposed towards all living beings. I do not hate anyone, and I do not favor anyone. Yet, when someone offers me a sincere service in devotion, I reciprocate with love." (9.29) and *ye yatha mam prapadyante tams tathaiva bhajamy aham*, "O Partha, as much as they surrender to me, in the same way I reciprocate with them." (4.11)

And also: *ananyas cintayanto mam ye janah paryupasate, tesham nityabhiyuktanam yoga-kshemam vahamy aham*, "Those who are interested only in me and my worship are always favorably engaged. I personally carry what they need." (9.22)

The supreme form mentioned in this verse is the four-armed Vishnu form. Just like the *Visva rupa*, this form is extremely popular and recommended as the object of meditation for all the *yogis* and *bhaktas*, therefore its description is found many times in several scriptures, especially in the *Puranas* focusing on Vishnu, such as the *Bhagavata*, *Vishnu*, *Padma*, *Narada*, *Brahma vaivarta*, *Varaha*, *Matsya*, and *Kurma*. In these texts, we find that several persons actually obtained the *darshana* of Vishnu in his four-armed form.

So when Krishna says, "nobody has seen this form before", the meaning of his statement must be deeper, just like when it is said that God has no material qualities (*nirguna*): the secret is revealed in this verse itself, where we read *tejomayam visvam anantam adyam*, "the original form, without beginning and without end, made of light, that encompasses the universe".

The four-armed Vishnu form seen by Arjuna is ever fresh, *nava yauvanam*, and although it is unchanged eternally, it is eternally new. The expression *tejo mayam*, "made of light", is very interesting. We have already elaborated on the meaning of *tejas* as splendor, heat and light, and power. The transcendental body of Vishnu, or Narayana, is not an ordinary body made of gross material elements, but it is pure consciousness, manifested as light.

From Narayana all the *jivas* emanate, at first in the form of light or *anu atma* (atomic souls): just like an atomic explosion produces a blinding flash of light when atoms are dissolved and sub-atomic particles are exposed, we can understand that spirit is a sub-atomic manifestation of energy, that is naturally as bright and radiant as the sun (*brahma maya arka varnah, Bhagavata Purana*, 10.46.32). This was also stated in a previous verse in this chapter: *divi surya-sahasrasya bhaved yugapad utthita, yadi bhah sadrisi sa syad bhasas tasya mahatmanah*, "If thousands of suns were rising simultaneously in the sky, that radiance would be similar to the radiance of the great Atman." (11.12). It is reported that while watching the first modern nuclear explosion at the Trinity Test in New Mexico, on 16 July 1945, Julius Robert Oppenheimer (1904-1967), famous as the "father of the atomic bomb", emotionally quoted this verse from the *Bhagavad gita*. This transcendental form of Vishnu is manifested through God's internal *Yogamaya*, or *atma yoga*, the cohesive spiritual vibration that constitutes the higher energy or *shakti*. On the spiritual level, everything is radiant and manifested as pure energy - from the transcendental body of the Personality of Godhead to the *siddha svarupa* of the individual souls, to the *siddha vastu* of the environment, so much that all existence is self-effulgent and radiant, and there is no need for sun, moon, or electricity.

This is confirmed in *Bhagavad gita* (15.6, *na tad bhasayate suryo na sasanko na pavakah*) as well as in *Katha Upanishad* (2.2.15, *na tatra suryo bhati na chandra tarakam, nema vidyuto bhanti kuto 'yam agnih*).

न वेदयज्ञाध्ययनैर्न दानैर्- न च क्रियाभिर्न तपोभिरुग्रैः ।

na vedayajñādhyayanair- na ca kriyābhirna tapobhirugraiḥ ।

एवंरूपः शक्य अहं नृलोके द्रष्टुं त्वदन्येन कुरुप्रवीर ॥ ११-४८ ॥

evamrūpaḥ śakya ahaṁ nṛloke draṣṭuṁ tvadanyena kurupravīra ॥ 11-48 ॥

na: not; *veda yajna*: by the Vedic sacrifice(s); *adhyayanaih*: by the study of the scriptures; *na*: not; *danaih*: by giving charity; *na ca*: not even; *kriyabhih*: by *kriyas*; *na*: not; *tapobhih*: by austerities; *ugraiḥ*: very severe; *evam rupah*: this very form; *sakyah*: (one) can; *aham*: I; *nri loke*: among the human beings; *drastum*: to see; *ivat*: than you; *anyena*: by others; *kuru pravira*: o greatest among the Kuru warriors.

"O greatest among the Kuru warriors, I have allowed no other human being except you to see this form. One cannot (see it) by the performance of Vedic sacrifice, or by the study of the scriptures, or as the result of giving charity, engaging in *yoga kriyas* or *sadhana*, or even engaging in great austerities."

The expression *tvad anyena* means "other than you", and implies that the four-armed Vishnu form manifested by Krishna specifically for Arjuna is very intimate. As we know already, Arjuna is not an ordinary human being, but he is a manifestation of the Lord himself for a particular mission, an eternal expansion and companion of Vishnu, so his particular perspective must be special indeed.

We have seen from several examples related in *Puranas* that sincere devotees obtained the *darshana* of Vishnu after engaging in austerities (like Dhruva and the Pracetas), performing Vedic sacrifices (like Prithu and Daksha), and so on; therefore Krishna's statement in this verse indicates that such meritorious religious activities in themselves are simply the container or vessel for the really essential ingredient - that is *bhakti*, pure love and devotion for God. Of course we should not conclude that these auspicious religious activities are not recommended or useful, because in fact they constitute the preliminary preparation that purifies our hearts and minds from material contamination. They are required, but they are not sufficient to give us the final result. The auspicious actions listed in this verse can be summarized as *jnana* and *vairagya*, the two liberating factors that Krishna has been describing in *Bhagavad gita* from the very beginning, from the statement *gatasun agatasums ca nanusocanti panditah*, "Those who really know the truth do not grieve for the dead or for the living" (2.11). The first teaching offered by Krishna is that we should learn the difference between the temporary material body and the eternal spirit soul - the sum and substance of knowledge. The *sthita prajna*, or the person who is solidly on the level of knowledge, is presented as the example to be followed in 2.54, 2.55, 2.57, 2.58, 2.61, 2.67, 2.68. The entire chapter 4 is dedicated to explain *jnana*, and the importance of *jnana* is specifically highlighted in verses 3.3, 3.26, 3.33, 3.39, 3.40, 3.41, 4.10, 4.19, 4.23, 4.27, 4.28, 4.33, 4.34, 4.36, 4.37, 4.38, 4.39, 4.41, 4.42, 5.15, 5.16, 5.17, 6.8, 7.2, 7.16, 7.17, 7.18, 7.19, 9.1, 10.11, 13.12, 13.18, 13.28, 13.35, 14.1, 14.2, 14.11, 15.10, 15.15, 18.18, 18.50, 18.63, 18.70, 18.72.

The particular type of *jnana* that comes from *Vedas* is also called *vidya*, and it is praised in 5.18, 6.23, 9.2, 9.20, 10.17, 10.32. As long as one is immersed in the contaminating ignorance of material identification and attachment, it will be impossible to have the real *darshana* of the Lord, even if we are daily in contact with his image in the temple or in our house. In fact, one of the most notable scholars in the *bhakti* tradition, Rupa Gosvami, writes in his *Bhakti rasamrta sindhu* (1.2.101): *sruti smrti puranadi pancaratra vidhim vina, aikantiki harer bhaktir utpatayaiva kalpate*, "so-called exclusive devotion to Hari is simply a disturbance to society when it is not solidly based on the knowledge contained in *sruti*, *smriti*, *Puranas* and all the other scriptures."

Similarly, *vairagya* (6.35, 13.9, 18.52) and *tyaga* (18.1, 18.2, 18.4) are amply discussed in *Bhagavad gita*, especially at its conclusion, as a fundamental principle that we need to understand very clearly and practice correctly, and the entire chapter 5 is dedicated to *sannyasa*. *Bhakti*, devotion, is the inner motivation that must sustain *jnana* and *vairagya*, otherwise they will be simply expressions of pride and arrogance. When *yajnas* are performed to show off one's opulence or advancement in religion, or simply to obtain a material benefit, they cannot produce *bhakti* and please God. Similarly, when one studies the scriptures and explores the science of self realization merely for theoretical and academic scholarship, to get a degree or social recognition, or even simply increase one's personal pride (individual or collective, as in sectarian considerations), the door to the direct experience of God remains closed.

When there is no *bhakti*, even charity offered selflessly to meritorious persons is still incomplete and does not attract God's personal attention. Krishna has already explained that one should offer all such activities directly to him (*yat karosi, yad asnasi, yaj juhosi dadasi yat, yat tapasyasi kaunteya, tat kurusva mad arpanam*, ""O Arjuna, whatever you do, whatever you eat, whatever you sacrifice in *yajnas*, whatever you give in charity, whatever you endure in the name of austerity - do it for me." 9.27). When we perform our duty for God in a sentiment of devotion, we still get benefits from the results of our actions, but we also purify ourselves from the *ahankara* and *mamatva* that prevent us from actually perceiving God.

मा ते व्यथा मा च विमूढभावो दृष्ट्वा रूपं घोरमीदृङ्ममेदम् ।
 mā te vyathā mā ca vimūḍhabhāvo dr̥ṣṭvā rūpaṁ ghoramīdṛṅmamedam ।
 व्यपेतभीः प्रीतमनाः पुनस्त्वं तदेव मे रूपमिदं प्रपश्य ॥ ११-४९ ॥
 vyapetabhiḥ prītamanaḥ punastvaṁ tadeva me rūpamidaṁ prapaśya ॥ 11-49 ॥

ma: do not; *te*: for you; *vyatha*: fear/ disturbance; *ma*: do not; *ca*: and; *vimudha bhavah*: confusion; *dristva*: seeing; *rupam*: form; *ghoram*: horrible; *idrik*: like this; *mama*: my; *idam*: this; *vyapeta bhih*: free from all fear; *prita manah*: pleased mind; *punah*: again; *tvam*: you; *tat*: that; *eva*: certainly; *me*: my; *rupam*: form; *idam*: this; *prapasya*: look.

"Look at this form of mine, and let your mind become satisfied and free from fear. Do not be perturbed and confused by the vision of my terrifying form."

The key words in this verse are *vyatha* ("fear"), *vimudha* ("confusion") and *vyapeta bhih* ("free from fear"). God is not interested in terrorizing us into blind obedience and submission, even if this fear is caused simply by the contemplation of his powerful Virata rupa (*ghoram rupam*) and his/ her majestic glories as Time eternal (*kala* or *kali*). Our surrender should be motivated by love, not by fear. It should be the blissful abandon by which a parent submits to the whims of his/ her small child while playing, or a lover to the intimate desires of the lover, or a trusting child or disciple to the expert guidance of a venerable elder.

The first word in the verse is *ma*, "do not", and expresses the affectionate concern of Krishna for his dear friend Arjuna: "do not be upset", "do not be perturbed". When we actually realize God, we find that everything is happiness and peacefulness there - all the upsetting conditions of material existence disappear, and we truly feel home at last. This peacefulness is not the stillness and detachment that we may experience in this world due to material *sattva*, that quickly turns into *tamas* as inertia and oblivion. It is rather a bubbling fountainhead of happiness and love, that inspires us to unconditional and constant devotional service. In that consciousness, we directly participate to the supreme Consciousness and therefore we perceive the sufferings of the conditioned souls in their true meaning - as the dark nightmare of confused souls who just need to wake up in order to find their perfect happiness.

Therefore, just like God descends as *avatara* to carry the knowledge of *dharma* for the benefit of the good people (*paritranaya sadhunam vinasaya ca dushkritam, dharma-samsthapanarthaya sambhavamī yuge yuge*, 4.8), the self-realized soul, the pure devotee, also walks in this world among the confused people to bring the light of knowledge and consciousness. This work must never be done through violence or fear, because *rajas* and *tamas* actually lead the souls in the opposite direction. Violence and fear can be properly used only to stop physical aggression against innocent and good people, because they are required to counteract the violence and fear perpetrated by criminals of all kinds. This is why *kshatriyas* (who protect the people from aggressions) and *brahmanas* (who teach and guide people in spirituality, religion and ethics) are two separate groups that cooperate but never encroach on each other's work. Only *asuras* resort to material repression and coercion in the name of spirituality and religion, to pressurize people to engage in a type of worship or confession of belief - that they foolishly mistake for actual belief and religion. Such distorted ideologies and practices do not deserve the name of *dharma*, because they are fundamentally adharmic and deeply sinful.

The Vedic path to religion and spirituality is blissful attraction (*prita manah*), that is expressed through beautiful divine forms, activities, names, qualities, as well as songs, dance, flowers, colors, lights, sweet scents, delicious food, and loving service not only from the devotee to the Lord, but also from the Lord to the devotee, and from devotees to devotees, and even to all other people and beings - because God lives in the hearts of all (*sarva-bhutatma-bhutatma*, 5.7), (*suhridam sarva-bhutanam*, 5.29), (*samam sarveshu bhuteshu tishthantam paramesvaram*, 13.28), (*mamaivamso jiva-loke jiva-bhuta sanatanah*, 15.7), (*sarva-bhuta-sthitam yo mam bhajaty ekatvam asthitah*, 6.31), (*aham atma gudakesa sarva-bhutasaya-sthitah*, 10.20).

This characteristic of friendliness and affection towards all beings becomes increasingly important in Krishna's instructions in *Bhagavad gita*. It starts with equanimity, that is freedom from foolish discriminations based on bodily prejudice: *vidya-vinaya-sampanne brahmane gavi hastini, suni caiva sva-pake ca panditah sama-darsinah*, "The *panditas* (wise learned persons) look with equal (friendliness) to the *brahmana* who is learned and gentle, to the cow and the elephant, as well as to the dog and to the (uncivilized) dog eater" (5.18), and *sarva-bhuta-stham atmanam sarva-bhutanam catmani, ikshyate yoga-yuktatma sarvatra sama-darsanah*, "One who is connected through Yoga contemplates the *atman* that is situated in all living entities and all the living entities as situated in the *atman*, therefore s/he is equally disposed towards everyone." (6.29)

However, in later verses Krishna clearly indicates that equanimity is not enough: we must actively work for the benefit of all beings, overcoming all sense of duality (*chinna-dvaidha yatatmanah sarva-bhuta-hite ratah*, 5.25), and renouncing all forms of enmity and not only of attachment (*mad bhaktah saiga-varjita nirvairah sarva-bhuteshu*, 11.55). A real devotee is recognized because s/he does not hate any living being, but s/he is friendly and compassionate towards all: because s/he is free from *ahankara* and *mamatva*, s/he is tolerant and balanced in all circumstances (*adveshita sarva-bhutanam maitrah karuna eva ca, nirmamo nirahankarah sama-duhkha-sukhah kshami*, 12.13). Again the next verse says that he works actively for the benefit of all beings (*sarva-bhuta-hite ratah*, 12.4), and he is compassionate and kind to all (*ahimsa satyam akrodhas tyagah santir apaisunam, daya bhuteshv aloluptvam mardavam hrir acapalam*, 16.2).

सञ्जय उवाच ।

sañjaya uvāca ।

इत्यर्जुनं वासुदेवस्तथोक्त्वा स्वकं रूपं दर्शयामास भूयः ।

ityarjunam vāsudevastathoktvā svakaṁ rūpaṁ darśayāmāsa bhūyaḥ

आश्वासयामास च भीतमेनं भूत्वा पुनः सौम्यवपुर्महात्मा ॥ ११-५० ॥

āśvāsayāmāsa ca bhītamenaṁ bhūtvā punaḥ saumyavapurmahātmā ॥ 11-50 ॥

sanjayah: Sanjaya; *uvaca*: said; *iti*: like this; *arjunam*: to Arjuna; *vasudevah*: the son of Vasudeva; *tatha*: then; *uktva*: speaking; *svakam*: his own; *rupam*: form; *darsayam asa*: he showed; *bhuyah*: again; *asvasayam asa*: he comforted; *ca*: and; *bhitam*: frightened; *enam*: him; *bhutva*: becoming; *punah*: again; *saumya*: sweet/ kind; *vapur*: body; *maha atma*: the great Atman.

Sanjaya said, Thus speaking to Arjuna, Vasudeva manifested again his original form, comforting and relieving him from all fears. The great Atman again appeared in his sweetest body.

The word *mahatma*, or *maha atman* ("great self") is used here as the equivalent of *param atman* ("supreme self"), indicating the supreme Consciousness. This meaning has been applied already in previous verses of this chapter (11.2, 11.12, 11.20, 11.37) while it had been used to indicate individual souls in 7.19, 8.15, 9.13. It will be used again at the conclusion of *Bhagavad gita*, in verse 18.74, applied to both Krishna and Arjuna. We can therefore understand that *atman* is the quality of the self, *maha atman* is the quality of the realized self, and *param atman* is the quality of the supreme self - Brahman, Paramatma, Bhagavan. There is no contradiction or opposition between the individual and the Supreme: any such opposition is merely due to illusion (*mahamaya*), that turns the consciousness or *jivatman* "outside" (*bahir mukha*) instead of "inside" (towards the self). Of course, this does not make any sense for those who are convinced that they are the body, because when we speak of "self" they immediately think about the material coverings they are wearing. They cannot perceive themselves as the consciousness, because such consciousness is colored by the *gunas* or material qualities that constitute the body and all the objects around them.

The expression *svakam rupam* is equivalent of *svayam rupam*, "own form", and refers to the particular form in which Krishna relates with Arjuna. On the spiritual level, the *rupa* (form or body) is non-different from the *bhava* (sentiment, feeling or consciousness) generally expressed through the *rasa* or relationship. This applies both to God and to the individual soul. On the level of the supreme Brahman (Bhagavan), the differences between the various forms are not contaminated by material considerations of hierarchy, therefore there is no real difference between Vishnu and Krishna. At the same time, we can say that the form of Krishna is more intimate, and therefore more difficult to perceive and relate to, because the devotee must be totally free from all impurities. While for a conditioned soul it is relatively easy to remain respectful towards the powerful and magnificent form of Vishnu, he can easily underestimate the sweet and familiar form (*saumya vapuh*) of Krishna and therefore fail to understand his actual nature. However, the intensity of feeling (*bhava*) that a devotee can experience in the intimate relationship with Krishna is much deeper and stronger than we can find in the awed and respectful admiration and veneration for Vishnu, that keeps us at a certain distance. This is the key to understand why in the tradition of *bhakti*, Krishna is considered most important, even more than Vishnu or Narayana: the Supreme Personality of God.

The greatness of God is the greatness of Consciousness, and the stronger and more intense and complete this Consciousness is, the "more completely divine" we come to perceive it. However, Krishna and Vishnu continue to be the one and same Personality of God.

अर्जुन उवाच ।

arjuna uvāca ।

दृष्ट्वेदं मानुषं रूपं तव सौम्यं जनार्दन । इदानीमस्मि संवृत्तः सचेताः प्रकृतिं गतः ॥ ११-५१ ॥

dṛṣṭvedam mānuṣaṁ rūpaṁ tava saumyaṁ janārdana । idānimasmi samvṛttaḥ sacetaḥ prakṛtiṁ gataḥ ॥ 11-51 ॥

arjunah: Arjuna; *uvaca*: said; *dristva*: seeing; *idam*: this; *manusam*: human-like; *rupam*: form; *tava*: your; *saumyam*: sweet; *janardana*: Janardana; *idanim*: presently; *asmi*: I am; *samvrittaḥ*: settled; *sa cetah*: with my consciousness; *prakritim*: natural; *gataḥ*: (I have) come.

Arjuna said, "O Janardana, by seeing this human-like form of yours, that is so sweet, I am now pacified and my consciousness has returned to its natural state."

The *saumya vapu* (sweet and serene form) of Krishna that is manifested to Arjuna is a human-like form (*manusam rupam*), benevolent, unassuming and familiar, that does not inspire awe or reverence. The feeling or *bhava* of such form is love and affection and it can be obstructed by awe and reverence, therefore the Yogamaya of the Lord is covering his majestic glories and presenting a lovable boy or young man, who inspires affection and intimacy instead of fear and awe. In particular circumstances the *bhava* or *rasa* can be perturbed by events, visions, thoughts, and memories that are in contrast with it, but for a pure devotee this is just a temporary situation, usually provided by the Lord precisely to stimulate the emotions of the devotee. At a more primitive level of understanding of spiritual and religious life, a devotee expects a relationship with God to give material prosperity and success, good health, respect from society, and fulfillment of material desires. However, this is not sufficient to help the devotee progress in spiritual realization and *bhakti*, because once he has obtained his desired boons or blessings, an ordinary person normally loses interest in religion and forgets about God. Therefore in *Bhagavata Purana* (1.8.25) we find queen Kunti saying, *vipadah santu tah sasvat, tatra tatra jagad guro, bhavato darsanam yat syad, apunar bhava darshanam*, "O jagat guru, we don't mind having to face difficulties in life, because at such times we (most easily) find you, and this means that we will not have to take birth again."

Later (10.88.8) Krishna himself will say, *yasyaham anugrihnamī harisyē tad dhanam sanaih, tato adhanam tyajanty asya svajana duhkha duhkhitam*, "When I want to favor someone, I gradually take away everything he owns, so that he loses all relationships and goes through disappointments and troubles."

As we can easily remember, this place of grief, disappointment and perplexity towards material life was precisely the starting point of *Bhagavad gita* - Arjuna's *visada*. This does not mean that we should become crazy and suicidal masochists and hope to get more and more troubles in life: suffering is not a value in itself, and certainly we should not aspire to loss, difficulties and failures. Rather, we should develop a positive attitude, approaching difficulties as opportunities to grow and evolve, and setbacks as valuable lessons to better understand what we need to do to improve. As they say, failure can be the pillar of future success. At a more intimate level of *rasa*, this consideration becomes irrelevant, and the difficulties in life take a totally different dimension, called *vipralambha* or separation, in which the ordinary perception of life disappears and the devotee is totally immersed in the ecstasy of remembering God. We can see this transcendental madness in Radharani, as well as in mother Yasoda and mother Devaki, who undoubtedly represent the closest and most intimate relationships with Krishna. Krishna Chaitanya, too, manifested a similar ecstasy, at a level that ordinary people cannot possibly access or understand. The apparent sufferings of these great spiritual personalities are in fact a source of ecstatic happiness, in which the distinction between the lover and the loved totally disappears. However, to a superficial observer, who is identified with the material body and sense gratification, such expression of ecstasy will appear material, and even grotesque or degraded.

This is the reason why we should always be extremely careful to avoid judging the actual position of other people in regard to spirituality and religion, based on the external observation of their personal activities. Of course, this only applies to personal activities that do not cause harm, suffering or damage to others: the madness of spiritual ecstasy can cause erratic personal behaviors and in extreme case even self-inflicted damage, but it will never cause any harm, suffering or damage to others.

The word *prakritim*, "nature", refers to the natural inclination of the consciousness, that produces a comfortable feeling of balance and peace of mind. The word *prakriti* can be understood from its fundamental components, *pra-kriti*, meaning "making at first", or "creating". In this particular context, it can be explained at various levels. At an ordinary level, Arjuna's nature is the human perspective that is familiar with a sweet and affectionate human-like form, his friend and relative, with whom he has shared so many intimate moments (11.41-42). At a deeper level, it refers to the *para prakriti*, transcendental nature, known as Yogamaya, who manifests the loving *sakhya rasa* that connects Arjuna with Krishna.

श्रीभगवानुवाच ।

śrībhagavān uvāca ।

सुदुर्दर्शमिदं रूपं दृष्टवानसि यन्मम ।

देवा अप्यस्य रूपस्य नित्यं दर्शनकाङ्क्षिणः ॥ ११-५२ ॥

sudurdarśamidaṁ rūpaṁ dṛṣṭavānasi yānmama । devā apyasya rūpasya nityaṁ darśanakāṅkṣiṇaḥ ॥ 11-52 ॥

sri: the wonderful; *bhagavan*: Lord; *uvaca*: said; *su durdarsam*: very difficult to see; *idam*: this; *rupam*: form; *dristavan asi*: (that) you have seen; *yat*: that; *mama*: my; *devah*: the *devas*; *api*: even; *asya*: of this; *rupasya*: of the form; *nityam*: always; *darsana-kanksinah*: desiring to see.

The wonderful Lord said, "This form that you are contemplating is extremely difficult to see. Even the *devas* always aspire to obtain its *darshana*."

The intimate human-like form of God is certainly not more ordinary than the other divine forms. In fact, it is even more extraordinary and difficult to understand than any other form, because it remains covered by Yogamaya (7.15, 7.25) in a way that confuses less intelligent people. This magic is so amazing that it can show exactly the opposite of what really is: paradoxically, the highest level in the spiritual dimension then appears to be the lowest, so as to lead the ill-motivated persons deeper into the spell of illusion.

Vishnu is hidden - *avyakta*, "non manifested" - in more than one sense. In the second chapter of *Vedanta sutras* (aphorism 11) we find that Brahman and Atman (*atmanau*, "the two Atmans") enter into "the cave" (*guhā*) of the material body or the cosmos, that is the material body of the Virata Purusha, and Brahman in the form of Paramatma (*antaryami*, "that is inside", aphorism 1.2.18) supports the existence of the body and of all the elements, although it remains invisible to the human eye.

In the conversation between Yama and Nachiketa we find in *Katha Upanishad*, Yama says, "One who is intelligent focuses the mind to know the Atman, that is difficult to perceive, hidden within the cave of the heart, the supreme primeval Lord. Such a person goes beyond the level of joy and sorrows." (1.2.12).

Again in *Katha Upanishad* (1.3.1) we find the following statement: *ritam pibantau sukritasya loke guham pravistau parame parardhe, chayatapau brahmavido vadanti pancagnayo ye ca tri-nacitekah*, "Those who know the Brahman, who perform the five fire sacrifices and honor three times Nachiketa's sacrifice, speak about light and shadow, the two (Atmans) who have entered inside the body, the innermost cave of the heart, that is the supreme abode."

Narada Muni thus addresses Krishna after the killing of the Kesi *asura* in Vrindavana: *tvam atma sarva bhutanam eko jyotir ivadhasam, gudho guha sayah saksi maha purusa isvarah*, "You are the Self in all the beings, the One, hidden in the cave of the heart like the radiant light of fire in the kindling wood. O great *purusha*, o *isvara*, you are the witness" (10.37.11).

Krishna appears to Devaki and Vasudeva, and then he is immediately transferred to Gokula Vrindavana, to hide him from the evil Kamsa. There he remains hidden as a simple cowherd boy, playing with the village people, occasionally exhibiting amazing feats that remain like brief flashes of lightning in the peaceful and refreshing night of his daily activities and relationships.

The peak of Krishna's *lila* in Vrindavana is the *rasa* dance with the *gopis* - again, a secret and intimate episode protected by the veil of the moonlit night in the beautiful forest on the bank of the Yamuna river. At the height of the *rasa lila*, again Krishna becomes hidden even from his dearest *gopis*, creating the climax of excitement and ecstasy that fuels the emotions of love in separation.

After leaving Vrindavana, Krishna continued to act generally like an ordinary human being, while his occasionally extraordinary deeds could easily remain unnoticed by envious or ignorant people, who often underestimated him.

To understand why Krishna would want to act in this way, we may bring the example of a very great and famous personality, who chooses to travel incognito to avoid wasting time and energy with undeserving curious people, and revealing himself only in special circumstances, and only to carefully selected persons, for the sake of loving exchanges. This is precisely the case of Arjuna and his brothers.

In *Bhagavata Purana* (7.15.75) we find this statement: *yuyam nr loke bata bhuri bhaga, lokam punana munayo abhiyanti, yesam grihan avasaiti saksad, gudham param brahma manusya lingam*, "You Pandavas are most fortunate among human beings, because many great saints, who can purify the entire world, have visited your house as guests. Indeed, the supreme Brahman, appearing in the form of a human being, has been residing confidentially in your house".

नाहं वेदैर्न तपसा न दानेन न चेज्यया । शक्य एवविधो द्रष्टुं दृष्टवानसि मां यथा ॥ ११-५३ ॥

nāhaṁ vedairna tapasā na dānena na cejyayā | śakya evaṁvidho draṣṭuṁ dṛṣṭavānasi māṁ yathā || 11-53 ||

na: not; *aham*: I; *vedaih*: by the study of *Vedas*; *na*: not; *tapasa*: by austerities; *na*: not; *danena*: by charity; *na*: not; *ca*: and; *ijyaya*: by performing ritual worship; *sakyah*: (one becomes) capable; *evam*: and; *vidhah*: in this way; *drastum*: to see; *dristavan asi*: you are seeing; *am*: me; *yatha*: like this.

"One cannot see it in this way as you are contemplating it, not even by the study of the *Vedas* or through austerities or charity, or the performance of ritual worship."

This verse is almost identical to 11.48, where Krishna stated: "O greatest among the Kuru warriors, I have allowed no other human being except you to see this form. One cannot (see it) by the performance of Vedic sacrifice, or by the study of the scriptures, or as the result of giving charity, engaging in *yoga kriyas*/ spiritual *sadhana*, or even engaging in great austerities." While in verse 11.48 Krishna was speaking about the four-armed form of Vishnu, now he is speaking about his human-like form, apparently ordinary and unassuming, that is so familiar to Arjuna as his intimate friend and close relative.

As we have observed several times, repetition in Vedic scriptures is not considered a literary flaw, but it is used purposefully to show the particular importance of a statement or concept. Therefore we can conclude that these two verses constitute a key passage in the revelation offered through Arjuna about the meditation on the form of God.

In chapters 10 and 11 Krishna has manifested his universal form, the Virata Rupa, to help us understand that God is not limited by matter, time, space and individuality. Now that we have (hopefully) cleared such ignorant misconceptions, artificially built on our own material bodily identification, Krishna has returned to the apparently easier forms of Vishnu and Krishna, but he is repeatedly stating that such forms are even more difficult to see and understand than the amazing and majestic Virata rupa.

Materialists are perplexed and sometimes even horrified at the image of God having thousands, hundreds or just dozens of arms, so when the number of arms is reduced to four or to a normal-looking single pair, their minds become pacified. But that peacefulness is totally different from the feelings of Arjuna or any other genuine realized devotee, because it is based on the reinforcement of the old prejudice of bodily identification. A material human body with four arms is not a divine miracle, but a monstrous deformity, that impairs movements and causes lameness and malfunctions, and needs to be addressed through medical procedures to ease the suffering of the patient. Therefore when a materialist moves his attention from the four-armed form of Vishnu to the two-armed form of Krishna, he feels better because his mind can return to its material antropomorphic vision of God as a regular person who merely has some more power than others. On the other hand, a *jnani* (a person who has the proper knowledge) sees the many-armed forms of God as the expression of his/her multiple powers (*parasya saktir vividhaiva sruyate, Svetasvatara Upanishad*, 6.8) that appear simultaneously and not in contradiction to each other. It is easier to see these forms as manifesting a greater power and mystery than we can find in ordinary material bodies - a concept that anthropologists and psychologists have explored in the field of symbolic language.

However, the deceiving simplicity of Krishna's two armed form presents a greater challenge to the average mind, because it can be truly appreciated only through the depth of vision that is afforded by transcendental knowledge and devotional attachment. Anything less, and the observer will remain on the surface of the mystery, with the danger of being led astray in labeling Krishna as an exaggerated historical personality or an "Indian mythological figure" like the characters in fairy tales and fictional novels or comics. This temptation has already produced misleading presentations of the Gods honored in ancient cultures, and is attacking many divine Personalities from the Hindu tradition, reducing them to fictional characters in fantasy films, cartoons, and TV serials, for the purpose of entertainment and commercial profit.

Too often such productions are controlled by people who are utterly unqualified spiritually, or even ill-motivated just like the colonial indologists of mainstream academia.

Ignorant and simple minded people are unable to detect the dangerous and misleading contents of such productions, and sometimes even consider them commendable because they "propagate Indian culture". They cannot understand how the pure nutritious nectar of God's *lilas* has been poisoned, like milk touched by the lips of a venomous serpent, and the teachings originally carried by such sacred stories have been distorted or completely lost.

भक्त्या त्वनन्यया शक्य अहमेवंविधोऽर्जुन । ज्ञातुं द्रष्टुं च तत्त्वेन प्रवेष्टुं च परन्तप ॥ ११-५४ ॥

bhaktiā tvananyayā śakya ahamevaṁvidho'rjuna | jñātum draṣṭum ca tattvena praveṣṭum ca parantapa || 11-54 ||

bhaktiā: through *bhakti*; *tu*: but; *ananyaya*: nothing else; *sakya*: capable; *aham*: I; *evam vidhah*: in this manner; *arjuna*: o Arjuna; *jnatum*: to know; *drastum*: to see; *ca*: and; *tattvena*: in truth; *pravestum*: to enter; *ca*: and; *parantapa*: o Arjuna.

"O Arjuna, only through *bhakti* it is possible to know and to see me truly, and to enter into me."

Svetasvatara Upanishad (6.23) explains that *bhakti* is the key that unlocks the understanding of God (*yasya deve para bhaktir yatha deve tatha gurau, tasyaite kathita hy arthah prakasante mahatmanah*). This love and devotion should be directed towards God and also towards the spiritual teacher, who is dedicated to helping us attain God. But what is *bhakti*? In a world where the meaning of love and the meaning of devotion have been muddled and confused by so many cheap applications and superimpositions, we need to return to the basics. Love is not lust or superficial sentimentalism, and devotion is not sectarianism or blind allegiance and belief. Neither of them consists in cheering louder than others, or managing to get in the front row in the photo opportunity or parades. Actual love is a sincere and selfless service and attention to the happiness to the person we love, which obviously includes making serious efforts in trying to understand and tune in with his thoughts and feelings and desires - with his consciousness, his true self. Actual devotion means dedicating all one's energies, resources, time, and purpose of life to the service of the cause we are supporting.

We can easily understand that knowledge and renunciation are required to progress in love and devotion, but they are not sufficient to attain the ultimate purpose. Constant meditation and service can be sustained only by sincere love, that gives us the strength to overcome any obstacle - and love is the means and the end, because love is Consciousness. In *Bhagavata Purana* Krishna instructs Uddhava about the science of *bhakti*:

bhakti aham ekaya grahyah sraddhayatma priyah satam, bhaktih punati man nistha sva pakan api sambhavat, "I can be obtained only through pure *bhakti*, by those faithful saints that are in love with me. Love and firm faith in me can even purify a *chandala* from the contamination of his birth." (11.14.21)

yam na yogena sankhyena dana vrata tapo adhvaraih, vyakhya svadhyaya sannyasaih prapnuyad yatnavan api, "(This realization) cannot be attained through *yoga*, *sankhya*, charity, *vratas* and *tapas*, Vedic sacrifices, study of Vedic scriptures or teaching Vedic knowledge to others, or by accepting the order of *sannyasa* - not even with great efforts." (11.12.9)

Kapila's teachings on *bhakti*, occupying a considerable section of *Bhagavata Purana* (3rd canto, chapters 25, 28 and 29), also confirm the same truth: *asevayayam prakriter gunanam, jnanena vairagya vijrimbhitena, yogena mayy arpitaya ca bhaktiā mam pratyag atmanam ihavarundhe*, "This (person) does not engage in the service of the material *gunas*, but develops *jnana* and *vairagya* through the practice of *yoga*, offering (everything) to me with devotion. Such a person attains me, the supreme Atman, in this very lifetime/ body/ world." (3.25.27)

The same idea had already been expressed by the ladies of Hastinapura, who were contemplating Krishna as he was preparing to depart to return to Dvaraka: *sa va ayam yat padam atra surayo, jitendriya nirjita matarivanah, pasyanti bhakti utkalita amalātmana nanv esa sattvam parimarstum arhati*, "This same (Krishna) who is here (in this place) can be seen through *bhakti* by those *suras* (dharmic persons) who have conquered their senses and perfected themselves to the full purity of the self. Only this (*bhakti*) has the power to totally purify the mind/ existence." (*Bhagavata Purana*, 1.10.23).

The statement in this verse is confirmed by a verse at the conclusion of *Bhagavad gita* (18.55), that reads: *bhaktiā mam abhijanati yavan yas casmi tattvatah, tato mam tattvato jnatva visate tad-anantaram*, "One can truly know me, as I am, only through *bhakti*. Then s/he enters into me as a result."

The two words *pravestum* ("to enter") and *visate* ("enters") are indeed extraordinary in this context, as they cannot be used with reference to an ordinary person who has a material body, but make perfect sense if we apply them to the supreme Personality of God as the sum total of all Consciousness.

There is no contradiction between the concept of Brahman and the concept of Paramatma and Bhagavan, for those who have actually attained that level of realization. God is neither "impersonal" or "personal" (in the limited sense that most people give to this definition): he is "trans-personal", or "omni-personal", as he contains all beings and existences and is the source of them all.

In mainstream scientific terms, we could say that God is a sort of magnetic field created by consciousness or constituted by consciousness. Consciousness means intelligence, knowledge and will power. It can never be impersonal or void, otherwise it would not be conscious, therefore God is a person, but not limited to a material body. He can manifest any body/ form according to his will and control it perfectly, and his most intense and intimate form is naturally the Personality that is fully engaged in loving exchanges, as love is the highest expression of the unity of consciousness.

As individual *jiva atmans*, we can enter into this Consciousness field and thus become "Krishna Conscious". This complete union with the Absolute does not require the loss of our spiritual individuality or transcendental personality, because these constitute our inherent nature and cannot be destroyed (2.12). Only the *material* individuality and personality are dissolved in the process, but this is not a loss because they were always temporary and fictitious anyway. It is not easy to explain the sublime position of the liberated *atman* that enters into the supreme Existence and Consciousness, because our ordinary dealings in this material world constitute a totally different paradigm, except for a few special moments in which we experience the thrill of ecstasy that makes us forget about ourselves in love and happiness.

मत्कर्मकृन्मत्परमो मद्भक्तः सङ्गवर्जितः । निर्वैरः सर्वभूतेषु यः स मामेति पाण्डव ॥ ११-५५ ॥

matkarmakṛmatparamo madbhaktaḥ saṅgavarjitah | nirvairah sarvabhūteṣu yah sa māmeti pāṇḍava || 11-55 ||

mat: my; karma kṛin: worker; mat paramah: (seeing) me as the Supreme; mat bhaktah: my devotee; sanga: from attachments; varjitah: free; nirvairah: without enmity; sarva bhutesu: towards all beings; yah: that (person); sa: s/he; mam: to me; eti: comes; pandava: o son of Pandu.

"My devotee is engaged in working for me, and sees me as the supreme (reality). S/he has abandoned all association/ affiliation/ identification, and has no enmity towards any being. (In this way, my devotee) comes to me, o son of Pandu."

The greatest demonstration of love and devotion is practical service, or sincere work for the benefit of the object of our love. The word *karma krit* is the equivalent of the word *karmachari*, often used in Hindu religious groups or organizations to refer to activists who do not live in the *ashrama* but work for it in some way, by offering voluntary *seva*.

However, just working is not sufficient: a devotee should work with the proper consciousness, intelligence and transcendental realization. *Gopala Tapani Upanishad* (1.1) elaborates on this point: *sac cid ananda rupaya krisnayaklista karine, namo vedanta vedyaya gurave buddhi sakshine*, "I offer my respect to Krishna, the form of Existence, Consciousness and Happiness, who removes all sorrows. Knowing him is knowing the purpose of the *Vedas*. He is the (supreme) *guru*, and the witness of intelligence."

As we have seen, *bhakti* is sustained by *jnana* and *vairagya*. The knowledge and awareness of the transcendental nature of God enable the devotee to transform his sincere work into genuine devotional service to the Supreme, and to recognize God's presence in all living beings. As we elaborated in the commentary to verse 49, the devotee perceives God in the hearts of all (*Bhagavata Purana*, 5.7, 5.18, 5.29, 6.29, 13.28, 15.7, 6.31, 10.20). This is also confirmed in Kapila's teachings on *bhakti* (3.28.42, 3.29.41-34), especially in the following verses:

aham sarvesu bhutesu bhutatmavasthitah sada, tam avajnaya mam martyah, kurute arca vidambanam, "I am always (living) within the self of all beings. If a man disrespects me in that (*paramatma*), any Deity worship he may perform will remain useless." (3.29.21)

yo mam sarvesu bhutesu santam atmanam isvaram, hitvarcam bhajate maudhyad bhasmany eva juhohi sah, "If someone disregards my presence in all beings as the Lord of all creatures, and then performs ritual worship, he is an idiot (like one who) pours oblations into the ashes (where there is no fire)." (3.29.22)

dvisatah para kaye mam manino bhinna darsinah, bhutesu baddha vairasya na manah santim ricchati, "One who offers obeisances to me but is hostile towards the bodies of others, seeing these beings as separate (from me/ from himself), can never attain peace of mind, because of his hatred towards my creatures." (3.29.23),

atmanas ca parasyapi yah karoty antarodaram, tasya bhinna driso mrtyur vidadhe bhayam ulbanam, "For one who makes discriminations between himself and others based on bodily identification, I am terrifying death." (3.29.26),

atha mam sarva bhutesu bhutatmanam kritalayam, arhayed dana manabhyam maitryabhinnena caksusa, "Therefore one should worship me as the self of the self in all creatures, by offering respects, gifts and friendship, and seeing everyone with an equal vision." (3.29.27)

This is also confirmed in *Bhagavad gita* 5.25, 11.55, 12.13, 12.4, 16.2. In this verse, Krishna very clearly states that one should relate with other living beings by remaining free from attachment and enmity. Being friendly to all creatures does not mean that we need to seek their companionship or engage in materialistic pursuits or activities just to make them happy. We should remain *sanga varjitah* - free from the bondage of belonging and possessions, personal attachments, affiliations, groups, organizations, and so on. At the same time we must be *nirvairah* - free from all sense of enmity and hostility.

Chapter 12 Bhakti yoga The yoga of devotion

In the first part of the *Bhagavad gita*, Krishna has already given Arjuna all the necessary instructions to overcome the illusion of material identifications and attachments, and to perform his duty in full renunciation and in a spirit of religious sacrifice, constantly thinking about the Supreme Consciousness.

In the second part, Krishna has elaborated on this Supreme Consciousness, explaining that the purpose of life and meditation is to establish oneself on that level (*sthita prajna*). When one attains the consciousness of Brahman, Paramatma, and Bhagavan, liberation is automatically achieved, and one does not need to take birth again in a material body.

This meditation and selfless service to the Supreme Consciousness is also called Bhakti, or devotion.

Already in the previous chapters (7, 8, 9, 10, 11) Krishna has offered a series of meditation visualizations that enable us to develop a genuine appreciation for God's glories and powers, and therefore give a solid meaning to our devotional sentiments. This is an essential preliminary step for those who are sincere devotees and want to avoid the pitfall of simplistic and sentimentalism, that is based on a material perception of Bhagavan. The problem of a primitive, materialistic concept of God is a widespread and cross-cultural phenomenon, because ignorance and material identification are natural tendencies in untrained persons. Of course, the problem becomes much more serious when the individual lives in a society that reinforces such ignorant delusions, or even teaches them as genuine and legitimate religious precepts.

The last few chapters of *Bhagavad gita* should have cleared any misconception in this regard, so now the text presents us with the chapter specifically named after Bhakti. Focusing the individual consciousness on the most intimate and loving level of the Supreme Consciousness is the highest form of meditation, and it should not be taken cheaply. To reach this level, one needs to develop gradually, often along a number of lifetimes (*bahunam janmanam ante*, 7.19), and Krishna clearly indicates here the stages of this journey.

The first step is the acquisition of knowledge, that enables us to practice genuine meditation (*vijnana*) and pursue Self realization. This applied knowledge will help us to become detached from the fundamental delusion of *ahankara* and *mamatva*, and to perform our duty selflessly, offering the results to the Supreme. By dedicating all our actions to the Supreme, we become able to engage in *vaidhi bhakti* - the regulated practice of devotional service, and gradually our service becomes spontaneous devotion.

In the previous chapters Krishna was glorifying *bhakti*, while in this chapter he will explain specifically how to engage in devotional service.

अर्जुन उवाच ।

arjuna uvāca ।

एवं सततयुक्ता ये भक्तास्त्वां पर्युपासते । ये चाप्यक्षरमव्यक्तं तेषां के योगवित्तमाः ॥ १२-१ ॥

evam̐ satatayuktā ye bhaktāstvāṁ paryupāsate । ye cāpyakṣaramavyaktam̐ teṣāṁ ke yogavittamāḥ ।। 12-1 ।।

arjunah: Arjuna; *uvaca*: said; *evam*: like this; *satata*: always; *yuktah*: engaged; *ye*: those who; *bhaktah*: the devotees; *tvam*: you; *paryupasate*: (they) worship properly; *ye*: those; *ca*: and; *api*: also; *aksharam*: eternal/ transcendental; *avyaktam*: non-manifested; *tesham*: to them; *ke*: who; *yoga vit tamah*: the best of those who know *yoga*.

Arjuna said: "The devotees worship you in complete dedication, while others (meditate) on the non-manifested eternal (Reality): which (of these two approaches) is the highest understanding of yoga?"

The word *yukta* indicates the engagement of the senses in the service of the Supreme: this is the definition of *bhakti*, as offered by the *Narada Pancharatra*: *hrishikeshā hrishikena sevānam bhaktir ucyaṭe*.

However, we also know that *yukta* is from the same root from which the word *yoga* has developed. The fundamental meaning of *yoga* is therefore stated as the constant engagement in a higher and deeper level of consciousness. When *bhakti*, or loving devotion, is added to the practice of genuine *yoga sadhana*, we attain the perfection of life. It is important to understand that the definition of *yoga* does not refer to an "alternative" path or method that is not *bhakti* - in fact, *yoga* ("union") requires *bhakti* in order to attain perfection.

Krishna has applied the definition of *yoga* innumerable times in *Bhagavad gita*, and each chapter is entitled specifically after a different perspective on the multi-dimensional layers of meaning of the word "*yoga*". Therefore we should be careful not to minimize the import and scope of this definition. Other commentators have highlighted the importance of *bhakti* by opposing it to *yoga*, *karma* and *jnana*, but we need to understand that such distinction is only instrumental, and not ontological. For this reason, the same commentators speak of *bhakti yoga* as compared to *jnana yoga* and *karma yoga*, but they also translate all these definitions as "devotional service" (see for example verse 5.4). Specifically *karma yoga* is explained as "the practice of devotional service", and *buddhi yoga* is said to be "depending completely on God". Also, Krishna has already explained early in the text that *jnana yoga* (*sankhya*) is non-different from *karma yoga* (*sankhya yogau prūthag balah pravādanti na pānditah, ekam apy asthitah samyag ubhayor vindate phalam, yat sankhyaiah prapyaṭe sthanam tad yogair api gamyaṭe, ekam sankhyam ca yogam ca yah pasyaṭi sa pasyaṭi*, 5.4-5).

The word *satata* ("always", "constantly") means that such service covers all aspects of life and activities, as Krishna has already stated before (*yat karosi, yad asnasi, yaj juhosi dadasi yat*, 9.27).

By explicitly using the definition of *bhakti* in reference to a specific level of *yoga*, Krishna is establishing the fact that *bhakti* (genuine devotion to the Supreme) is the highest level of *yoga*, and not an "alternative path" opposite to *yoga* itself. When he speaks about *bhaktas* and *bhakti*, he is unequivocally referring to the sentiment of devotion in a personal relationship of love (*rasa*), so we understand why in this verse Arjuna makes a distinction between the *bhakti* and the *sadhaka* who meditates on the *akshara* - the abstract eternity and existence feature of Reality. We have already seen that *akshara* is a definition for the sacred syllable AUM, the primeval and transcendental sound vibration that is the origin and the foundation of the entire universe. As in the previous chapters Krishna has recommended meditation on the transcendental essence of the universe, in the contemplation of the *Virata rupa*, some people may equivocate and conclude that God should be worshiped only in its abstract form of majesty and power, as the existence in all existences. This is the Brahman realization, in which we clearly perceive that God is not limited by time, space or individuality.

In this verse, this non-manifested aspect of Reality is called *aksharah*, "unchangeable" or "changeless". Other synonyms often used to describe the non-manifested (*avyakta*) Brahman are *nirviseṣa* ("without variety", "without differences") and *nirakara* ("formless"). Of course these definitions apply to the non-material quality of the existence of Brahman as the Universal Consciousness. In Vedic scriptures, Brahman or *brahmajyoti* is compared to the rays of the sun, while *Paramatma* is comparable to the solar disc visible in the sky over everybody's head, and *Bhagavan* is the actual Sun, the original source of all the light, heat and power. Krishna states this fact very clearly: *brahmano hi pratistha aham* (14.27, "I am the foundation and origin of the Brahman"). Some people think that the path of *bhakti* developed later in history, during the Kali yuga, as opposed to the previous religious methods of *yoga* meditation, ritual sacrifice, and temple worship. This is not a fact. *Bhakti*, devotion, is the essential ingredient in all such religious and spiritual methods, and it has always been. The *yuga dharma* for the age of Kali is the discussion (glorification, recitation etc) about God, which includes names, forms, qualities, activities, teachings, and so on. *Bhakti* is the main factor for the proper application of this method, but also in Deity worship, ritual sacrifice and *yoga* meditation. In fact, in *Bhagavad gita* Krishna says that a genuine *bhakti* is the greatest *yogi* (*yoginam api sarvesam mad gatenantarātmana, sraddhavan bhajate yo mam sa me yuktatamo matah*, 6.47), (*bhaktiya mama abhijanati yavan yas casmi tattvatah*, 18.55), (*man mana bhava mad bhaktō mad yajī mam namaskuru*, 18.65).

The expression *yoga vit tamah* ("the highest knower of *yoga*") is the superlative degree of the quality of knowledge referred to *yoga*, while the comparative degree would be *vit tarah*. Since in this verse the comparison is made between two degrees of knowledge of *yoga*, the use of the superlative expression should be taken to mean that all the other aspects of *yoga* are included, like we usually see in the suffix *adi* (equivalent to our "*et cetera*").

श्रीभगवानुवाच ।

śrībhagavānurvāca ।

मय्यावेश्य मनो ये मां नित्ययुक्ता उपासते । श्रद्धया परयोपेताः ते मे युक्ततमा मताः ॥ १२-२ ॥

mayyāveśya mano ye mām nityayuktā upāsate । śraddhayā parayopetāḥ te me yuktatamā matāḥ ॥ 12-2 ॥

sri: the wonderful; *bhagavan*: Lord; *uvaca*: said; *mayi*: to me; *avesya*: focusing/ entered; *manah*: the mind; *ye*: those who; *mam*: me; *nitya*: always; *yuktah*: united; *upasate*: worship; *śraddhaya*: with faith; *paraya*: supreme/ transcendental; *upetah*: attained; *te*: they; *me*: me; *yukta-tamah*: the most (intimately) united; *matah*: considered.

The wonderful Lord said: "Those who are always keeping their mind in me and worship me with faith, always united with me, have attained the supreme level and I consider them as the most intimately/ highly united/ connected."

The statement in this verse is confirmed also at the conclusion of *Bhagavad gita* (18.55), that reads: *bhaktya mam abhijanati yavan yas casmi tattvatah, tato mam tattvato jnatva visate tad-anantaram*, "One can know me, as I truly am, only through *bhakti*. Then s/he enters into me as a result." Already in the previous chapter (11.54) Krishna had stated, *bhaktya tv anyanya sakya aham evam-vidho 'rjuna, jnatum drastum ca tattvena pravestum ca parantapa* ("O Arjuna, only through *bhakti* it is possible to know and to see me truly, and to enter into me").

In that verse, the word *pravestum* ("to enter", equivalent to the *visate* of verse 18.55) had established the difference between the omnipresent and unlimited Bhagavan and the ordinary living entities who are limited by space and individuality. Here we find another synonym, *avesya*, that also means "entering into". In this verse Krishna clearly states that a *bhakta*, a devotee, always keeps his/ her mind inside God (the Supreme Consciousness) and is always engaged practically in worship. We may remember here that the *upasana kanda* is defined as that part of the Vedic scriptures that deals with the worship rituals, as opposed to the *karma kanda* (the performance of prescribed duties) and the *jnana kanda* (the pursuance of knowledge).

The word *upasana* specifically indicates worship as meditation, as in "approaching and sitting", that is the literal meaning (*upa asana*). In this sense, *nitya* could mean "regularly", as in the regulated *sadhana* that we perform every day before starting our ordinary activities. However, the qualification expressed by the word *yukta* (*nitya yukta upasate*) indicates that such "constant worship" does not refer merely to the ritualistic ceremonies called *arcana* or *pujana* and centered around the offering of various substances and services to the Deity. This cannot be done by "constantly connecting/ engaging".

Arcana is only one of the nine *angas* ("limbs") of devotional service: *sravana, kirtana, smarana, arcana/ pujana, vandana, pada sevana/ paricarya, dasya, sakhya/ sakhi jana*, and *atma nivedana*. Therefore we must understand that here *upasana* extends to all the other forms of worship: hearing and speaking (that also includes reading and writing) about God, remembering God, offering ceremonial worship, paying homage, following the instructions, always being ready to serve, developing a friendly attachment, and trusting God completely.

While the first three steps (*sravana, kirtana, smarana*) can be focused also on the *akshara* and *avyakta* aspect of the Supreme, the second group of three (*arcana, vandana, pada sevana*) can be applied to the Virata rupa or the immanent manifestation of the Supreme in this world, described by Krishna in the previous chapters as the form of the Param Atman, the Supreme Soul living in the hearts of all beings. However, the last group of three (*dasya, sakhya, atma nivedana*) refers to a very personal relationship with the Supreme under the direct control of Yogamaya or Bhakti Devi. We should not think that it is impossible to have a real practical relationship with God as a Person, because Bhagavan includes both Paramatma and Brahman, and is even more than that. This union in devotion becomes possible through an act of faith (*śraddha*), by which we accept to humbly consider ourselves as simple parts of the sum total of Reality. Contrarily to what happens in some other ideologies based on dogma, the faith required in the process of *bhakti* is not blind acceptance prompted by allegiance, but an initial working hypothesis or trust, by which we shift our perception from self-centered to God-centered. It is the essential paradigm shift if we want to find a permanent center of gravity (*sankarshana krishna*) in the universe, because as long as the consciousness of reality is fragmented like rays of light pointing to different directions, each of the tiny "self-centered" beings will fight with all the others trying to conquer a central place in the universe.

As soon as we re-focus our consciousness on the actual center of the universe (Brahman, Paramatma, Bhagavan), we find our balance and proper orbit, like so many planets sailing in space through a perfect course around the Sun. All the factors must be present then: the constant consciousness of the universal presence of God in which we exist, the focusing of the mind and its functions, the practical engagement in worship and service, the faith that enables us to follow the method properly and correctly, and the direct personal connection with Bhagavan ("me"). In this regard, we should observe that the word *upeta* means "working hard", "making efforts", and "fully dedicated". *Bhakti yoga* or devotional service is not some sort of hobby or entertainment, or a part time interest that gives us some good opportunities for social interactions on Sunday afternoons or on festival days. It is a full time pursuit that demands complete dedication and constant effort - also highlighted here by the expression *nitya yukta upasate*.

ये त्वक्षरमनिर्देश्यमव्यक्तं पर्युपासते ।

सर्वत्रगमचिन्त्यञ्च कूटस्थमचलन्ध्रुवम् ॥ १२-३ ॥

ye tvakṣaramanirdeśyamavyaktaṁ paryupāsate | sarvatragamacintyañca kūṭasthamacalandhruvam || 12-3 ||

ye: those; tu: but; aksharam: eternal/ transcendental; anirdesyam: not visible (to the senses); avyaktam: non-manifested; pari upasate: worship in complete dedication/ correctly and sincerely; sarvatra: everywhere; gam: present; acintyam: inconceivable; ca: and; kuta stham: unchanging; achalam: non-moving; dhruvam: established.

"Those who offer their worship in complete dedication/ correctly and sincerely to the the akshara (Brahman/ Omkara), indescribable, non-manifested, all-pervading, inconceivable, unchanging, never moving and eternal Existence,

This verse is often studied together with the subsequent verse (12.4) as two halves of one statement. The complete statement reads: "Those who worship me correctly and sincerely as the akshara (Brahman/ Omkara), indescribable, non-manifested, all-pervading, inconceivable, unchanging, never moving and eternal Existence, will achieve me by controlling their senses, remaining equally disposed to all, and engaging in work for the benefit of all beings." (12.3-4)

The word kuta is particularly interesting here, as it has a number of different meanings that can add various levels of interpretation. The fundamental meaning is "motionless", as in a mountain; we can see the application of the term in the word annakuta, the hill of rice and other grains that is cooked and offered to the Deity on the auspicious occasion of Govardhana puja. It also means "center", as the permanent gravity center we were mentioning in our commentary to verse 12.2.

Another meaning is "unchanging". Later (15.16) Krishna will use this same expression (kutastho akshara ucyate, "it is said to be unchangeable and permanent") while describing the position of the living beings (bhutani) in the spiritual world, or at the spiritual level. In that verse, the expression kuta stham suggests a permanent existence in which nothing changes because everything exists simultaneously.

However, the same word kuta can also have a more sinister meaning, as we see for example in 4.25.6, where Prahlada speaks of the delusional duties of materialistic family life based on bodily identification and possession/ belonging: grihesu kuta dharmesu putra dara dhanartha dhih, na param vindate mudho bhramyam samsara vartmasu, "These fools always remain meditating on the deceptive duties of family life, such as children, wife, and acquisition of wealth, and are unable to see anything more important or higher than that. Thus, they continue to run around on the various paths of the material world."

A similar derivative of kuta is kaitava, a word that is used at the beginning of the Bhagavata Purana (1.1.2) to indicate deceptive or false religiosity (dharma projjhita kaitavo atra paramo nir matsaranam satam, "here (in this Purana) the false religiosity is completely rejected, and (only) the supreme (worshiped by) of those sattvik people who are completely free from envy (is discussed)"). In this application, the meaning of kuta is shifted from the comforting stability of eternal existence to the damaging stubbornness of the materialistic attachments and identifications. It is a dire warning: if we commit the fatal mistake of superimposing our material identifications and attachments to the practice of spiritual / religious life, we will be lost and crushed into a darkness that is even worse than simple ordinary selfish materialism.

Isa Upanishad (mantra 9) also warns us in the same way: andham tamah pravisanti ye avidyam upasate, tato bhuya iva te tamo ya u vidyayam ratah, "Those who worship/ serve ignorance enter into blind darkness, but those who choose to remain attached to (theoretical) knowledge (for its own sake) fall into an even greater darkness."

Sometimes a pretender cynically exploits the good name of spirituality and religiousness to pursue some materialistic goals, such as position, distinction, adoration, fame, name, profit, power over disciples and resources, etc. This disastrous choice leads to even greater darkness because these materialistic intentions harden the heart and make it cynical, heavy and deeply rooted into deceit and illusion.

In this way the definitions offered in in the verse as kuta stham ("unchanging"), achalam ("non-moving") and dhruvam ("established") become the rocky mountainous masses of the ego that crush the deluded jiva into complete immobility deep in the darkest hell. Nischala is also a synonym for achala, and dhruva ("established", "fixed") is also used to indicate the Pole Star, the only fixed light in the sky vault, around which all other stars and planets travel.

सन्नियम्येन्द्रियग्रामं सर्वत्र समबुद्धयः ।

ते प्राप्नुवन्ति मामेव सर्वभूतहिते रताः ॥ १२-४ ॥

sanniyamyendriyagrāmam sarvatra samabuddhayah | te prāpnuvanti māmeva sarvabhūtahite ratāḥ || 12-4 ||

sanniyamya: regulating/ controlling; indriya: the senses; gramam: the complete set; sarvatra: everywhere; sama buddhayah: with balanced and stable intelligence; te: they; prapnuvanti: attain; mam: me; eva: certainly; sarva bhuta: of all beings; hite: for the benefit; ratah: concerned.

(they) can attain me if they strictly control their senses and remain balanced and undisturbed in all circumstance, and especially if they are (sincerely) interested in the benefit of all beings."

A pretender engaged in kuta dharma (false religiousness) in the pursuance of some materialistic motivation is unable to control his senses and to remain happy and undisturbed in all circumstances. The fundamental interest of a materialistic person is sense gratification, which can be at an ordinary gross level as attraction towards sex etc, or on a dangerously subtle level as attachment to position, distinction, adoration, and power over persons and resources. A certain amount of healthy sattvik sense gratification, necessary to keep the mind and body in good working conditions, is naturally obtained by consuming sanctified foods offered to God and enjoying the other forms of bhagavat prasada - nice flowers and scents, clothing, etc.

For those who wish to have an active family life, there is also the legitimate and sattvik provision of marriage, that remains perfectly pure and spiritual when our family members and our home are seen and treated as God's servants and properties, and not as our own servants and properties.

However, a pretender will usually make a big show of renunciation by formally accepting the order of *sannyasa* and exhibiting some kind of superficial external austerity to impress the gullible public. His real motivations will become apparent when he engages in dirty institutional politics, viciously fights against opponents for position and control over disciples and *mathas/ ashramas*, cynically exploits followers without giving anything in return, disrespects and mistreats people on the basis of bodily identification (caste, gender, etc) and so on. We have often seen that such exploitation and disrespect can even turn into emotional, physical and/or sexual abuse especially against the most vulnerable victims. The cheater may keep such criminal activities either overt and public, or covert and hidden, but a sensitive person can perceive these negative qualities even at some distance. The only medicine for such a terminal disease is offered here by Krishna: *sama buddhaya* ("undisturbed consciousness in all circumstances") and *sarva bhuta hite* ("working actively for the benefit of all beings").

In cases like this, it is even better for the fake *sannyasi* to step down from such an artificial position and get regularly married to re-educate himself to a healthy sense of honesty and responsibility. Krishna had clearly stated in verses 3.6 and 3.7: "One who (makes a show of) controlling the senses but continues to remain attached to sense objects is called a fool and a hypocrite. One who regulates the senses through the mind, engaging the senses of action through *karma yoga* without attachment is much better."

This "*satyam* treatment" is also the only medicine that will heal the "age-old" disillusionment of many Hindus towards official, traditional and organized religiosity, where such abuse and criminal behavior have become most common.

क्लेशोऽधिकतरस्तेषामव्यक्तासक्तचेतसाम् ॥ अव्यक्ता हि गतिर्दुःखं देहवद्भिरवाप्यते ॥ १२-५ ॥

klesho'dhikatarasteṣāmayakṭāsaktacetāsām | | avyaktā hi gatirduḥkhaṁ dehavadbhiravāpyate | | 12-5 | |

klesah: difficult; *adhika tarah*: much more; *tesam*: of/ for them; *avyakta*: non-manifested; *asakta*: attached; *chetasam*: the mentality; *avyakta*: non-manifested; *hi*: indeed; *gatih*: the goal; *duhkham*: without happiness; *deha vadbhih*: those who have a body; *avapyate*: is achieved.

"Embodied beings find much more difficult and painful to make progress if they remain mentally attached to the non-manifested."

The science of *yoga* contained in *Bhagavad gita* is perfectly logical and explained most skillfully by Krishna. In this verse we find the reason why a *jnani* must be careful in regulating his sense activities, remain balanced in all circumstances and work tirelessly for the benefit of all beings: because the *jnani* still has a body, he needs to relate to his own body and to the bodies of other beings.

Meditation on the non-manifested Transcendence, the *akshara brahman*, does not give a sense of solidity to the embodied being, because the center of gravity is immensely distant and yet so intimately hidden within one's own self (*tad dure tad v antike, Isa Upanishad*, 5). It is the same sensation of being in space, with no "up" or "down", but rather floating around a powerful center of gravitation and light, that remains the only stable thing while everything else is moving and keeps changing position in space and time. In space, we are completely detached and free, a feeling that can be exhilarating for some but scary for others, who are unable to let go of their attachments. Therefore embodied beings need ties - connections, relationships, common interests, and engagement. If they cannot find such things on the spiritual level, they will inevitably fall back to the material level. *Bhagavata Purana* (10.2.32) declares this truth in the prayers offered by the Devas to Krishna at the time of his appearance: *ye anye aravindaksa vimukta maninas, tvayy asta bhavad avisuddha buddhayah, aruhya krechrena param padam tatah, patanty adho anadrita yusmad anghrayah*, "O lotus-eyed Lord, those who consider themselves liberated (as in *sannyasa*) but have no devotion for you fall back from their lofty position even if they engage in superficial austerities, as their intelligence has not been purified and they are not blessed by (the connection to) your lotus feet."

This is the only way to overcome the need of engagement on the material level. Another verse in *Bhagavata Purana* (4.22.39) confirms: *yat pada pankaja palasa vilasa bhaktiya, karmasayam, grathitam udgrathayanti santah, tadvan na rikta matayo yatayo api ruddha sroto ganas tam aranam bhaja vasudevam*, "True spiritualists have uprooted the hardened desires for selfish activities by tasting the happiness of devotion to the petals of the Lord's lotus feet. However, those who do not have the appropriate mentality are unable to do so, in spite of their great efforts to control the senses. Therefore (o king Prithu), you should serve Vasudeva, who is the true shelter." This verse mentions "embodied beings" as *deha vadis* ("those who follow the body"), and *dehinah* ("those who have a body"). The real problem is not about "having a body", but about identifying with the body and being attached to it, making it the most important thing in one's life. Because materialists equate form with matter, they cannot overcome their own material identification and vice versa, they are attached to the non-manifested (*avyaya asakta*) because they foolishly think that form must be matter. This prevents them from actually appreciating the spiritual form of the Personality of Godhead.

We have already mentioned how *kuta* also means "cheating". Here we find yet another level of meaning, referring to the elegant way in which the false spiritualists become cheated in turn, as they delude themselves about being situated in the *brahmananda* (spiritual bliss) of the *nirvisesa brahma*, but in fact they only get only sufferings (*klesa*) and sadness (*dukham*).

ये तु सर्वाणि कर्माणि मयि संन्यस्य मत्परः । अनन्येनैव योगेन मां ध्यायन्त उपासते ॥ १२-६ ॥

ye tu sarvāṇi karmāṇi mayi sannyasya matparaḥ | ananyenaiva yogena mām dhyāyanta upāsate | | 12-6 | |

ye: they; *tu*: but; *sarvani*: all; *karmani*: activities; *mayi*: to me; *sannyasya*: renouncing; *mat parah*: dedicated to me; *ananyena*: without other concerns; *eva*: certainly; *yogena*: with *yoga*; *mam*: me; *dhyayantah*: meditating; *upasate*: worship.

"But those who have surrendered all their activities to me, and are dedicated to me without any other attachment, certainly worship me through the meditation in *yoga*."

Krishna had already made a similar statement in verse 4.11: *ye yatha mam prapadyante tams tathaiva bhajamy aham*, "O Partha, as much as they surrender to me, in the same way I reciprocate with them." The Supreme Brahman offers himself as the permanent and blissful

center of our loving exchanges, because the sum total of all Consciousness is certainly conscious and capable of reciprocating our sentiments.

The word *upasate* is mentioned again in this verse as the focus of our relationship with the Supreme. We have already mentioned in previous comments how the natural propensity (*dharma*) of each being consists in serving in a sentiment of love. A healthy person feels happy when he has done something that brought happiness to his loved ones - child, wife, parent, friend, and so on - or has successfully performed an important service to society, humanity, or the world at large. Those who cannot engage in such service end up serving their own mind and senses, or some animal, or some impersonal mechanism from which they cannot escape: but we all engage in service. Worship (*upasana*) is nothing but respectful service, and attains its perfection when love and affection (*bhakti*) make it more personal and blissful.

Some people believe that Adi Shankara, the great *acharya*, was an impersonalist or taught a sort of impersonal *sadhana* or *siddhanta*, but that is not a fact. Adi Shankara wrote many devotional prayers, including the *Gita mahatmya* and the famous song known as *Bhaja govindam*, and installed many Deities and temples, including Jagannatha at Puri. Probably this misconception is due to the fact that Adi Shankara recommended the *sadhana* (spiritual practice) known as *pancha upasana* or worship of the *panca tattva*, namely Vishnu, Shiva, Shakti, Surya and Ganesha. To a mind that has been influenced by the exclusivist and intolerant monotheistic concept, it may seem that equally worshiping these apparently different forms indicates a lack of clarity in a personal relationship with the Supreme, but this is not a fact. Even the strictest *advaitin* will recognize that such Personalities of Godhead are aspects of the same Supreme Transcendental Reality, and therefore they do not contradict each other.

In this regard we need to properly understand the concept of *ista devata* ("desired Deity"), as the form of the Godhead that is most attractive for each devotee in a particular situation and according to the particular *rasa* or devotional sentiment. The best definition of Reality has been conclusively given by Chaitanya as *acintya bheda abheda*, or "inconceivably same and different", referring to the fact that spiritual Reality is not limited by any material definition of place, time and individuality.

In this verse Krishna is mentioning the word *sannyasa* again, to help us understand the real meaning of renunciation. As he had already declared (5.30), the real *sannyasi* is not someone who does not perform any practical activity, but rather one who works hard and selflessly for the benefit of all beings (*sarva bhuta hite ratah*, 5.25). Working for the real benefit of all beings means working for the Supreme: not only God is the sum total of all existences, he is also the loving friend of all beings (5.29).

Therefore, it is a very serious mistake to translate this verse (12.6) to mean that one should stop all activities and responsibilities, in a false external show of renunciation, and live as a mindless parasite priest, encroaching on the spiritual and religious life of others by posing as a legally established intermediary between the individuals and God. In the Vedic system, *brahmanas* perform ritualistic activities for the benefit of their students, but merely in a position of guides and assistants, as they could never replace the *yajamana*. The idea that one's spiritual or religious progress can be delegated to a priest is typically abrahamic, and has nothing to do with the Vedic system. If entertained or spread among Hindus, it can only have the disastrous effect of encouraging degradation and irresponsibility, moving people from the *rajas* level to the *tamas* instead of the *sattva*. In later chapters, we will see many practical examples of this ignorant confusion, and we will be offered the instruments to avoid falling in the trap.

Krishna has declared very clearly and repeatedly in *Bhagavad gita* that one should never stop performing one's dharmic duty: renunciation means dedicating all actions to the Supreme (*mat parah*).

तेषामहं समुद्धर्ता मृत्युसंसारसागरात् । भवामि नचिरात्पार्थ मय्यावेशितचेतसाम् ॥ १२-७ ॥

teṣāmahaṁ samuddhartā mṛtyusaṁsārasāgarāt | bhavāmi nacirātpārtha mayyāveśitacetasām || 12-7 ||

tesam: of them; *aham*: I; *samuddharta*: the one who raises; *mṛtyu*: of death; *samsara*: of material life; *sagarat*: from the ocean; *bhavami*: I become; *na*: not; *cirat*: after a long time; *partha*: o son of Pritha; *mayi*: on me; *avesita*: focused; *chetasam*: the consciousness.

"O son of Pritha, for those who keep their consciousness in me, I soon appear to uplift them from the ocean of repeated deaths."

A famous previous commentator has quoted here a similar verse from the *Varaha Purana*, that says: *nayami paramam sthanam arcir adi gatim vina, garuda skandam aropya yatheccham anivaritah*, "For those who are very determined in their desire (of me), I will come (personally) on Garuda's back, to take them to the supreme abode, to the light that has no beginning".

This is a very comforting verse for all those devotees who are facing difficulties in this life, and for those intelligent persons who realize the intrinsic suffering caused by the impermanent conditions of this world. However, we should be particularly careful here to avoid artificial cultural superimpositions to the meaning of the verse. Abrahamic ideologies are based on the concept that every human being is inherently a hopeless sinner, fallen into a world of sufferings (as a punishment for the "original sin" of his ancestors), and whose only salvation consists in being rescued or reclaimed by a divine figure of prophet or messiah, to whom he must pledge total allegiance. Therefore a human being can only pray and surrender to God, and in return he will be instantly purified from all sins and made perfect, and directly transported to heaven, where he will enjoy eternally. If he does not resort to God in this way, he will die and be cast into eternal hell, where the devils will torture him for his lack of obedience.

The concept expressed in *Bhagavad gita* is quite different. First of all, the ocean of repeated deaths is not a punishment (as a multiple death sentence), but a figure of speech for the impermanence of all things in this world. The perspective of Vedic tradition presents the material world as a place where suffering is merely due to impermanence; still the *Vedas* present the four *purusha arthas* ("the four purposes of human life") as *dharma*, *artha*, *kama* and *moksha*, without demonizing the world as an evil place.

Secondly, the consciousness of the devotee is described in this verse as *avesita chetasam*, "entered/ focused" on the Personality of Godhead: it is this same Consciousness that lifts the devotees out of the impermanence of the material world. This verse does not refer to the moment of death, but to a change of consciousness that can occur at any time during one's life. The idea that a person can be magically rescued by God at the time of death simply on the basis of sectarian allegiance is merely a myth. Each one of us must work seriously on his/ her

spiritual development during this lifetime and attain a stable level of consciousness, permanently abandoning all material identifications and attachments, otherwise at the time of death we will simply move on to take another body.

Hoping that somehow or other we will be able to "become liberated" by dint of our allegiance to a particular religious tradition is a dangerous delusion. Even Ajamila - who suddenly called out to Narayana on his deathbed and was miraculously "rescued" by the Vishnudutas - simply got another chance at reforming his consciousness, with a life extension sufficient to change his habits and activities.

मय्येव मन आधत्स्व मयि बुद्धिं निवेशय । निवसिष्यसि मय्येव अत ऊर्ध्वं न संशयः ॥ १२-८ ॥

mayyeva mana ādhatsva mayi buddhiṁ niveśaya | nivasiṣyasi mayyeva ata ūrdhvam na saṁśayaḥ || 12-8 ||

mayi: on me; *eva*: certainly; *manah*: the mind; *adhatsva*: focus; *mayi*: on me; *buddhiṁ*: intelligence; *nivesaya*: apply; *nivasiyasi*: you will always live/ remain; *mayi*: in me; *eva*: certainly; *atah urdhvam*: hereafter/ after that/ rise higher; *na*: no; *samsayah*: doubt.

"Keep your mind focused on me and apply your intelligence accordingly. In this way you will always reside in me, and thus you will be elevated. There is no doubt about this."

The expression *nivasa* indicates a permanent residence, a place of consciousness where our mind always lives and functions. This verse confirms the fact that by meditating on God, serving and worshipping, our consciousness will become purified and elevated, due to the constant contact with the Supreme Consciousness. Many times in *Bhagavad gita* Krishna has stated the paramount importance of intelligence and personal effort in pursuing enlightenment, realization, liberation, and devotion. Here again he repeats that we need to apply our intelligence to the cultivation of such transcendental meditation or tuning of the consciousness. Previous commentators explain that *atah urdhvam* means "after the fall of the body". In fact this was confirmed in verse 8.5: *anta kale ca mam eva smaran mukta kalevaram, yah prayati sa mad-bhavam yati nasy atra samsayah*, ("One who, at the end of time (of this life), remembers me while leaving his/her body attains my nature. There is no doubt in this.")

However, the next verse (8.6) immediately clarified: *yam yam vapi smaran bhavam tyajaty ante kalevaram, tam tam evaiti kaunteya sada tad-bhava-bhavitah*, ("O son of Kunti (Arjuna), whatever state of existence/ nature one remembers at the time of leaving the body, s/he attains (precisely) that state of being/condition, (because) of always contemplating that existence.")

We must be very careful to avoid the trap of simplistic sentimentalism by which one deludes himself into thinking that death will automatically solve all problems and instantly supply us with all the realizations that we did not bother to pursue during the time of our life. When we find out it's not going to happen, it will be too late: a very sorry state of affairs indeed.

अथ चित्तं समाधातुं न शक्नोषि मयि स्थिरम् । अभ्यासयोगेन ततो मामिच्छाप्तुं धनञ्जय ॥ १२-९ ॥

atha cittam samādhātum na śaknoṣi mayi sthiram | abhyāsayogena tato māmicchāptum dhanañjaya || 12-9 ||

atha: therefore; *cittam*: the consciousness; *samadhatum*: to establish; *na*: not; *saknosi*: you are able; *mayi*: in me; *sthiram*: steadily; *abhyasa-yogena*: by the practice of connection; *tatah*: then; *mam*: me; *iccha*: desire; *aptum*: to obtain; *dhananjaya*: o Dhananjaya.

"However, o Dhananjaya, if you are unable to firmly establish your consciousness in me, then you should practice yoga with the desire to achieve me."

Dhananjaya ("conqueror of wealth") is a name of Arjuna, that Krishna has used several times to address him during the conversation of *Bhagavad gita*. Here this name is referred to the acquisition of the greatest treasure, or *parama purusha artha*, that is *prema*, or pure devotion to Godhead. Vedic scriptures mention four main *purusha arthas*, or "goals of life for human beings", namely *dharma* ("development of ethical conscience and behavior"), *artha* ("acquisition of wealth"), *kama* ("sensual pleasure") and *moksha* ("liberation from material conditionings").

However, the *gupta* ("hidden", "secret") knowledge of the *Bhagavad gita* shows us a *pancama purusha artha* ("fifth goal of human life") that is also the highest and most important, and that can be attained only after becoming established on the liberated platform. The conclusion of *Bhagavad gita* (18.54) will confirm this: "(A person who is situated in the) Brahman realization is always satisfied in the self, never complaining or running after desires. S/he is equally disposed toward all beings and states of being, and thus attains my spiritual devotion" (*brahma bhuta prasannatma na socati na kanksati samah sarvesu bhutesu, mad bhaktim labhate param*).

The word *citta* means "consciousness" in the sense of the quality of the activities of the mind - the things we think about, the contents of our thoughts, desires, and sentiments (as in an active mode). From the same root we have the word *caitanya*, that means "consciousness" in the sense of awareness, alertness, and feelings (as in a passive mode). When the devotee engages his/ her active consciousness or meditation on the Supreme, all actions become devotional service. This is wonderfully described by Adi Shankara in his prayers: *japo jalpah, silpam sakalam api mudra vicarana, gati pradaksinya kramanam, asanady ahuti vidhih, pranamah samvesah sukham akhila atmarpana drsa, saparyaparyayas tava bhavatu yan me vilasitam*. "Let every word of mine be a prayer to you, every movement of my hands be a ritual gesture to you, every step I take be a mark of respect for your image, every morsel of food I eat be a ritual sacrifice to you, every time I lay down be a prostration at your feet, and every act I perform be an act of worship to you" (*Soundarya Lahari*, verse 27). This is also called *samadhi*, the final and highest stage of *yoga* in which meditation on the Supreme becomes firmly established and constantly undisturbed. From the same root we have the word *samadhatum*, mentioned in this verse.

The word *saknosi* ("you are able to") derives from the same root of the word *sakti* (or *shakti*, "power"). This etymological connection contains an important teaching: the power or ability to do something resides in the Prakriti, that manifests as the *para prakriti* or supreme nature supporting Isvara, and the *apara prakriti* as the material nature supporting the *jiva*. While Isvara is always in control, the *jiva* is always controlled. This Shakti or power exists eternally, and constitutes the active agent in all activities, while the Purusha (both the individual and the supreme) is the consciousness factor, expressed as knowing, feeling, and willing. The correspondent energies or *shaktis* are described in *Svetasvatara Upanishad*: (*parasya shaktir vividhaiva sruyate, svabhaviki jnana bala kriya ca*, 6.8).

The *shakti* called *bala* is also called *iccha*, or "will power". By taking shelter in Mother Shakti, we make the deliberate choice to desire to attain the spiritual level of consciousness. Even if we are completely devoid of any qualification, we can still desire: just through this sincere desire we will be blessed with success. Another definition for this desire is *lalasa*, often quoted in *bhakti* literature as the fundamental requisite to engage in the process of regulated devotional service. This means that spiritual or religious life must be a spontaneous choice, sincerely desired by each individual, and should never be imposed externally or artificially, because no benefit will come from such attempt. You cannot force anybody to love.

The expression *abhyasa yogena* means "by regular or long practice in *yoga*", where *yoga* means "connection", as in the tuning of the individual consciousness with the supreme Consciousness. Krishna had already stated (6.35) that such *abhyasa yogena* is the only way to control the restless mind: *asamsayam maha-baho mano durnigraham calam, abhyasena tu kaunteya vairagyena ca grihyate*, "O mighty armed (Arjuna), certainly the mind is restless and very difficult to manage, but it can be controlled by practice and detachment, o son of Kunti."

अभ्यासेऽप्यसमर्थोऽसि मत्कर्मपरमो भव । मदर्थमपि कर्माणि कुर्वन्सिद्धिमवाप्स्यसि ॥ १२-१० ॥

abhyāse'pyasamartho'si matkarmaparamo bhava | madarthamapi karmāṇi kurvansiddhimavāpsyasi || 12-10 |

abhyase: with practice; *api*: even if; *asamarthah*: unable to; *asi*: you are; *mat-karma*: work for me/ service to me; *parama*: dedicated to; *bhava*: become; *mad-arttham*: for me; *api*: even if; *karmāni*: activities; *kurvan*: performing; *siddhim*: perfection; *avapsyasi*: you will achieve.

"If you are unable to practice regulated meditation, then dedicate your life to me and work for me. In this way you will achieve perfection even while performing your (normal) activities."

The highest position for a *yogi* is to be constantly focused in the supreme Consciousness, in which every gesture and activity becomes perfectly aligned with the divine plan and in harmony with the entire universe. It is a position of supreme happiness, eternal and full of knowledge and awareness. Before becoming firmly established on this level of consciousness, called *samadhi*, one needs to practice meditation (*dhyana*) for a sufficient time, with sufficient intensity. In his *Yoga sutras* (1.21-22) Patanjali clearly states that the time required to achieve success is inversely proportional to the effort invested: *tivra-samveganam asannah* ("Those having an intense desire for it attain (*asamprajnata samadhi*) quite soon", 1.21), *mridu-madhyadhimatratvat tato 'pi visheshah* ("Such (desire) is variously defined as mild, medium and intense", 1.22).

It is this desire (*iccha aptum*, 12.9) that supports the *sadhaka* in his/ her *yoga* practice. Patanjali clearly explains this: *tatra sthitau yatno 'bhyasah*, "It is the practice (consisting of) being firmly established in one's own effort", 1.13), *sa tu dirgha-kala-nairantarya-satkara, sevito dridha-bhumih*, "Practice (*abhyasa*) becomes firm when it is done for a long period of time without interruption and with devotion (towards the aim in sight)", 1.14).

The expression *sevita* ("service", "devotion") in this *sutra* is echoed in verse 1.23: *isvara pranidhanad va*, "or, (success can be obtained through) devotion to God". The alternative indicated by the word *va* ("or") applies to the sentiment of surrender in full humility rather than making a personal effort through one's own will power (*tivra iccha*). We will remember here that *isvara pranidhana* is the final and supreme requirement among the *yama* and *niyama* rules or life habits.

Especially in Kali yuga, when human beings are facing so many disadvantages and weaknesses, it is certainly advisable to simply and humbly dedicate oneself to *Ishvara* and take shelter in the supreme *Ichha Shakti* rather than trying to control it. In very unfavorable circumstances, we may be unable to make the required effort intensely and constantly, therefore Krishna is suggesting that instead of artificially trying to practice meditation, we should engage practically in working for the Godhead (*mad arttham*).

The same concept had already been expressed in verses 11.55 (*mat karma krit*, "working for me") and 4.18 (*sa yukta krtсна karma krit*, "although engaged in working"). In verse 3.5 Krishna had clearly stated that in fact nobody can stay without performing actions even for one moment (*na hi kascit ksanam api jatu tisthati akarma krit*), so if one is unable to engage in active meditation (*dhyana*), it is better to engage in some practical work (*karma*) that is dedicated to the Supreme.

Such work is active engagement in devotional service, for the benefit of all beings: *mat-karma-krin mat-paramo mad-bhaktah sanga-varjitah, nirvairah sarva-bhuteshu yah sa mam eti pandava*, "My devotee is engaged in working for me, and see me as the supreme. S/he has abandoned all association/ affiliation/ identification, and has no enmity towards any being. (In this way, my devotee) comes to me." (11.55).

Service to Krishna is a full time job and gives better results when it is not hampered by adharmic stains, such as an unbecoming professional occupation (where one is forced to perform actions that are contrary to the principles of ethics), violent or impure life habits (eating of non vegetarian foods, recreational consumption of alcohol or other drugs, unethical sexual relationships, lack of cleanliness), offensive behavior against innocent and good people (both humans and animals, what to speak of *Devas*), and so on.

When a devotee sincerely wants to engage in *bhagavad dharma*, Bhagavan will directly offer suitable opportunities for maintenance and professional occupation, so that the devotee can really be a full time *karmachari* working for Krishna. This job can be in the fields of education (teaching, writing, preaching, giving courses and seminars, etc), food production and distribution (vegetarian *prasadam* restaurants and catering etc), managing or assistance (temples or *ashramas*, spiritual or environmentally friendly hospitality/ tourism sector etc), where devotional service can be very direct and intense. A devotee can also dedicate his/ her professional activities to Bhagavan in other fields, either self-employed or working under other genuine devotees - in social management and protection (the *kshatriya* work), agriculture and animal protection, production and trade of ethical objects, providing ethically valid assistance services of various kinds, and so on. Land, capital, organization, labor, knowhow and marketing will be provided by Bhagavan through various and sometimes unexpected opportunities. However, the *karmachari* who works for Krishna must clearly understand what is his/ her job description and what Krishna will not provide: there will be no space for material identifications or attachments, fear, doubt, laziness, selfishness, and other negative luggage, technically called *anarthas* ("things without value").

अथैतदप्यशक्तोऽसि कर्तुं मद्योगमाश्रितः । सर्वकर्मफलत्यागं ततः कुरु यतात्मवान् ॥ १२-११ ॥

athaitadapyaśakto'si kartuṁ madyogamāśritaḥ | sarvakarmaphalatyāgam tataḥ kuru yatātmavān || 12-11 ||

atha: however; *etad*: this; *api*: even; *asaktaḥ*: unable; *asi*: you are; *kartum*: to do; *mad-yogam*: in connection/ union with me; *asritaḥ*: taking shelter/ aiming; *sarva-karma*: all activities; *phala*: the results; *tyagam*: renunciation; *tataḥ*: then; *kuru*: do; *yata atma van*: making efforts to focus on the Self.

"If you are not even able to do that, you should confide in me and become detached from the results of all your actions, making efforts to establish yourself on the level of Self realization."

The beauty of the Vedic system, epitomized by the instructions of *Bhagavad gita*, is that it offers a suitable personalized approach for each and every individual, by which anyone can be properly engaged and situated comfortably and progressively, enjoying material happiness and spiritual development at the same time.

Some people, influenced by abrahamic concepts, have come to believe that spiritual or religious life requires complete renunciation to the "material world", spite and hatred for all the beautiful and joyful things of life, especially for the material body, to the limit of masochism and self-torture. Such people invariably develop the typically abrahamic tendency to disrespecting and mistreating women, confusing misogyny with the genuine idea of *sannyasa*. Unfortunately, this negative attachment will not help them to attain the level of liberation: in fact, they will have to take another birth, generally as a female, and in particularly serious cases even as animals, because their lusty tendencies will not disappear but will become stronger and distorted by getting superficially repressed and thus pushed deep down into the animal level of the subconscious.

This is how the otherwise healthy and sattvik desire (*kama*) is separated from any higher level of consciousness and creates disastrous consequences. We have seen many strictly "moralistic" and self-righteous religionists, thundering against innocent romance and affectionate relationships, turn into beastly perverts addicted to sexually abusing women and children, and still try to retain their artificial positions. It is important to understand that such an attitude is totally contrary to the principles of Sanatana Dharma (that we may call Hinduism or Vedic culture).

Krishna has already stated that it is much better to engage in regulated sense enjoyment (3.6-7) than to become such a criminally stupid cheater: *karmendriyani samyamya ya aste manasa smaran, indriyarthan vimudhatma mithyacarah sa ucyate, yas tv indriyani manasa niyamyarabhate 'rjuna, karmendriyaih karma-yogam asaktaḥ sa visishyate*, "One who (makes a show of) controlling the senses but continues to remain attached to sense objects is called a fool and a hypocrite. One who regulates the senses through the mind, engaging the senses of action through *karma yoga* without attachment is much better."

This verse repeats the same point: it is better to perform "all activities" (*sarva karmani*) in a spirit of renunciation, than to pretend to be already renounced. What is this "spirit of renunciation"?

It is not very easy to correctly understand the expression *phala tyaga*, especially because in Kali yuga almost all people are foolish, lazy, irresponsible, arrogant, and convinced of their own great cleverness. Thus, when *phala tyaga* is translated as "renouncing the fruits (of action)", they imagine it is about the artificial and superficial acceptance of the order of *sannyasa*, considering it as a very convenient opportunity to get free food and accommodation, and often even luxury and "executive class lifestyle", enjoying respect and adoration, name, fame, and political power. They consciously or unconsciously identify these "fruits" as marriage and family, as in the "agricultural" expressions "the fruit of one's loins" (referring to children) and "tilling one's field" (referring to sexual intercourse with wife). Consequently, they think that if they have sex with children, there will be "no fruit" in the form of pregnancy, or cultivation of a fruitful relationship. The objects of such sexual exploitation are then used and dumped, like disposable commodities, without any consideration or remorse, in the extreme delusion that in this way, the *sannyasi* will be able to continue to protect and preserve his "renunciation".

The real meaning of *phala tyaga* is exactly the opposite: it is about giving up expectation and selfishness, and acting in a spirit of love and service, in which one is able to see all creatures as children of Bhagavan and treat them accordingly with respect and affection.

On a side note, we can mention that the instructions contained in this chapter formed the core of the teachings given by Krishna Chaitanya to one of his foremost followers, Sanatana Gosvami.

श्रेयो हि ज्ञानमभ्यासाज्ज्ञानाद्ध्यानं विशिष्यते । ध्यानात्कर्मफलत्यागस्त्यागाच्छान्तिरनन्तरम् ॥ १२-१२ ॥

śreyo hi jñānamabhyāsajjñānāddhyanam viśiṣyate | dhyanātkarmaphalatyāgastyāgācchāntirnantaram || 12-12 ||

śreyah: better; *hi*: indeed; *jnanam*: knowledge; *abhyasat*: than practice/ *sadhana*; *jnanat*: than knowledge; *dhyanam*: meditation; *visisyate*: is better; *dhyanat*: than meditation; *karma-phala-tyagah*: renunciation to the fruits of action; *tyagat*: from renunciation; *santih*: peacefulness; *anantaram*: thereafter.

"Knowledge is better than regulated *sadhana* (in devotional service), meditation is better than mere cultivation of knowledge, and renunciation of the fruits of action is better than meditation, because detachment brings peace."

This verse does not contradict the previous ones. Verse 12.8 declared that full Krishna Consciousness is the highest platform of existence, because the *yogi* is constantly connected to the supreme benefit of the entire universe. Such consciousness is perfectly full of happiness, intelligence, clear awareness, knowledge and transcendental continuity, and therefore enables the *yogi* to remain detached from material designations and bondage. It is the purest form of detachment (*karma phala tyaga*) to which this verse (12.12) refers, and it brings lasting peace.

As explained in verse 12.8, Krishna Consciousness means engaging ones' intelligence (*buddhi*), that is equivalent to the *buddhi yoga* of which Krishna has been speaking from the beginning (2.39, 2.49, 2.50, 2.51-53, 2.65, 3.1, 6.43, 10.10). To attain this platform, we need to

train ourselves and control our mind, because as long as we are exposed to material sense signals, we can become distracted and confused, and lose sight of the proper consciousness. Krishna has already stated that the mind is restless by nature (*cancalah hi manah*, 6.34) and therefore it needs to be trained patiently, with constant practice and detachment (*abhyasena tu kaunteya vairagyena ca grihyate*, 6.35). Verse 12.9 repeats that constant practice (*abhyasa yoga*) supported by a sincere desire (*iccha*) is a fundamental requirement for success. It is required for the acquisition of knowledge (*jnana*) and it is also needed for the development of the proper *bhakti* consciousness.

Verse 4.33 stated that *jnana yajna*, the sacrifice that consists in engaging in the pursuit of knowledge, is better than the *dravya yajna*, the ritual sacrifice where material substances are offered, because the rituals are meant to lead us to knowledge or transcendental consciousness. Without the proper knowledge, rituals are just mechanical practice, that does not bring very good results. Knowledge of the Supreme is the purpose of *svadhya* and *isvara pranidhana*, the two conclusive steps of the system of *yama* and *niyama*. *Jnana* or knowledge enables us to practice genuine *dhyana*, leading to overcoming the ignorance of *ahankara* and *mamatva*.

However, anyone who has practiced genuine *sadhana* will agree that regulated and constant practice is not easy. We are not speaking here of the fake fantasy "meditation" offered by the fancy and trendy therapists who teach you to relax and visualize beautiful sceneries or pretty lights or serene blue skies. Genuine *dhyana* on the Supreme Consciousness is another thing altogether: it requires the total demolition of the boundary walls of our mind, so that it can "contain" the ocean. How can a mere cup contain the ocean? By removing the separation between the inside and the outside - removing the duality that focuses the attention and desires on selfish and egotic considerations. To visualize this concept, imagine a cube-shaped cup, and after immersing it in the greater reservoir of water, remove the four faces of the cup that function as small walls. The ocean will flood in and fill our being without any separation, yet the space of the cup still exists and continues to exist. Removing these walls can be very scary, because when we become accustomed to identifying with the material body and its extensions, we feel we are going to lose everything that makes us what we are. We are afraid of becoming nothing, of entering some sort of non-existence.

Since the embodied being finds this idea intolerable (12.5), Krishna is offering us the alternative to fully engage our reluctant mind and senses into practical activities (*karmani*) that are directly connected to his service (*mat karma*, 12.10, *mat-karma-krin* 11.55, *sa yukta krtana karma krit* 4.18, *mad-artham api karmani kurvan* 12.10).

This working for the Supreme is equivalent to the *karma phala tyaga*: when we act on behalf of someone else, we are simply performing our duty selflessly, without expectation of any separate gain from the success or failure of the action. Such dutiful service is based on intelligence - the clear understanding of our position in relationship to the position of the Supreme, for whom we are working. And whenever we speak of relationship, we are speaking of *bhakti*, which is why this chapter is entitled "Bhakti yoga".

How does this *bhakti yoga* concept connect with the concept of *karma phala tyaga*? As verse 6.1 explained, *anasritah karma-phalam karyam karma karoti yah, sa sanniyasi ca yogi ca, na niragnir na cakriyah*, "The real *sannyasi* and the real *yogi* is one who selflessly performs all his duties in society and takes the proper actions where required, without any attachment to enjoy the fruits of his activities - not one who escapes from action in the name of some rules and renunciation."

The word *anantaram* means "immediately", "as a natural consequence".

अद्वेषा सर्वभूतानां मैत्रः करुण एव च । निर्ममो निरहङ्कारः समदुःखसुखः क्षमी ॥ १२-१३ ॥

adveṣṭā sarvabhūtānāṃ maitraḥ karuṇa eva ca | nirmamo nirahaṅkāraḥ samaduḥkhasukhaḥ kṣamī || 12-13 ||

a-dvesta: without envy/ hostility; *sarva-bhutanam*: of all beings; *maitrah*: friendliness; *karuna*: compassion; *eva*: certainly; *ca*: and; *nir-mamah*: without sense of possession or belonging; *nir-ahankarah*: without sense of material identification, duality or arrogance; *sama-duhkha-sukhah*: with equal attitude towards distress and joy; *kshami*: forgiving.

"(One who works for me must) be free from envy or hostility, but rather friendly and compassionate towards all beings. (S/he must be) free from material attachments and identifications, tolerant and ready to forgive, and equally prepared to face joys and sorrows."

A person who is working for the Supreme (*mat karma krit*) must strictly abide by the following norms: 1. *advesa*, 2. *nirmama* and *nirahankara*, 3. *sama duhkha sukha*, 4. *kshama*. These are all connected, and develop one from another, starting with *advesa*.

The concept of *dvesa* (the opposite of *a-dvesa*) is very complex and vast. It contains all the meanings of "envy", "malice", "hostility", "hatred", "repulsion", "rejection" (as opposite of *raga*, "attraction"). This is confirmed by *Bhagavata Purana* (3.24.47), where the dutiful action in *bhakti yoga* is defined as free from *iccha* ("desire", "attraction") and *dvesa* ("repulsion", "hatred"): *iccha dvesa vihinena sarvatra sama cetasa, bhagavad bhakti yuktena, prapta bhagavati gatih*, "(He) attained the destination of Bhagavan by engaging in (genuine) *bhakti yoga*, equally (benevolent) towards everyone and free from (all) desires and hatred."

The word *dvesa* does not mean "detachment", because detachment is a neutral position towards the objects of senses, while repulsion or rejection is the other face of the "attraction" or "attachment" coin. One must apply detachment (*vairagya, tyaga*), in the sense of neutrality and positive attitude towards all beings - living entities and situations of life. This means that one should try to find the good in everything, and engage everything in the best possible way: we could say that a genuine devotee sees opportunities in all difficulties, and is able to find a suitable engagement for anybody.

In this verse, *a-dvesa* is further qualified as friendliness or benevolence and compassion towards all beings. A genuine spiritualist or religionist is favorably disposed towards all beings because s/he sees the *antaryami* in all bodies and in all existences (5.18): *vidya-vinaya-sampanne brahmane gavi hastini, suni caiva sva-pake ca panditah sama-darsinah*, "The *panditas* (wise learned persons) look with equal (friendliness) to the *brahmana* who is learned and gentle, to the cow and the elephant, as well as to the dog and to the (uncivilized) dog eater."

This is expressed by the tradition among spiritualists to greet each other by offering homage to Narayana, Hari, Krishna, or Shiva - *namo Narayana, Hari Om, Hare Krishna, om namah Shivaya, jaya Jagannatha* etc. By this, we recognize the presence of Bhagavan in the heart

of the person who is in front of us, and we offer our respect and devotion accordingly. Some people misconstrue this tradition, believing that such manner of greeting people means that we confuse the *jiva* (the individual soul) with *isvara* (Bhagavan), and therefore we are addressing the *jiva* as *isvara*, but this is not a fact. Of course, there might be confused people who have this idea, but that has nothing to do with the original tradition.

With the degradation of the system from *varna* to caste, this benevolent and positive attitude towards all beings has disappeared, and in some cases even turned to mistreatment of the lower castes and the most vulnerable members of society, such as women and children. In the degraded caste system, even brahmins and people posing as *sannyasis* arrogantly violate these fundamental principles established by Krishna, persecuting and mistreating innocent people they see as obstacles on their path. It is important to understand that such a degraded behavior is not prescribed, endorsed or even tolerated in the genuine Vedic system. In fact, later on in *Bhagavad gita* (16.14) Krishna will describe it as asuric, "demonic".

True, one has the right and duty to oppose aggressors, *asuras* and adharmic people, but there should never be any hatred or prejudice. Each and every individual should be considered according to *guna* and *karma*, and engaged accordingly. Even unevolved and degraded people can be successfully engaged in some sort of service, that will make them happy, enable them to progress in their personal evolution, and contribute some positive benefit to society at large. A genuine *brahmana*, who is wise and intelligent by definition, is responsible for this engagement and progress of all the members of society, without compromising on the good results of work for the benefit of society.

A genuine *yogi* (*bhakta*, *pandita*, or servant of the Supreme) does not hate anyone, not even those who hate or envy him/ her: s/he only wishes them well, and feels compassionate towards them. However, this does not mean that s/he should submit to injustice or to behaviors or policies that are adharmic and detrimental to the progress of society. S/he wants the bad people to understand their mistakes and reform, for their own benefit, and if other innocents or society in general are threatened, s/he will take action to stop the evil doers. Yudhisthira was called *ajata satru* ("whose enemy was never born") to mean that he was equally disposed towards everyone, and free from hostility created by prejudice and selfishness, but that does not mean that he refused to engage in battle at Kurukshetra, when the protection of the *praja* and the destiny of the kingdom were at stake. Just like Arjuna has shown at the beginning of *Bhagavad gita*, Yudhisthira was friendly and compassionate towards all, and he would happily have forgiven Duryodhana and the other members of the conspiracy that had repeatedly attempted to assassinate him and his family. However, this friendliness and compassion should not become detrimental to the real benefit of everyone: it is said that good intentions are not sufficient to bring a good result, and often well-meaning people can sometimes cause serious disasters. The key to solve the dilemma rests in the qualities and rules prescribed by Krishna in the previous verses: intelligence and wisdom (*buddhi*, 12.8), and selflessness (*karma phala tyaga*, 12.11).

The same consideration applies to the meaning of the word *kshama*, "tolerance", "forgiveness". A genuine religionist is gentle, compassionate and ready to forgive, but not submitting to injustice or damaging activities, and especially not encouraging others to commit them.

These qualities are confirmed in the direct instructions given by Krishna to Uddhava (*Bhagavata Purana*, 11.11.29 to 32: *kripalur akrita drohas titikshuh sarva dehinam, satya saro anavadyat ma samah sarvopakarakah; kamair ahata dhir danto mriduh sucir akinchana, anihomita bhuk santah sthiro mac charano munih; apramatto gabhiratma dhritiman jita sad gunah, amani mana dah kalyo maitrah karunikah kavih; ajnayaivam gunan doshan mayadistan api svakan, dharman santyajya yah sarvan mam bhajeta sa tu sattamah*). Here is the translation: "The best person is compassionate (*kripalu*), never hating/ damaging others, ready to forgive, friendly towards all embodied souls. He is one who lives by truth, free from envy, balanced, always working for the benefit of others, whose intelligence is unmoved by material desires, who controls his senses, gentle, clean, without possessiveness, free from worldly attachments, eating moderately, peaceful, stable, taking shelter in me, thoughtful, cautious, not superficial, determined, having conquered the six defects (hunger, thirst, lamentation, illusion, old age, death), not interested in honors, respectful to others, friendly (*maitra*), compassionate (*karunika*), learned, knowledgeable. Such a person offers his duties to me by detaching himself from all qualities - good and bad - and fully dedicates to me, as taught by me."

The word *karuna* (with long last *a*) is a noun, meaning "kindness, compassion to suffering creatures", while *karuna* (with a short last *a*) is the adjective form.

सन्तुष्टः सततं योगी यतात्मा दृढनिश्चयः । मय्यर्पितमनोबुद्धिर्यो मद्भक्तः स मे प्रियः ॥ १२-१४ ॥

santuṣṭaḥ satataṁ yogī yatātmā dṛḍhaniścayaḥ । mayyarpitamano buddhiryo madbhaktaḥ sa me priyaḥ ॥ 12-14 ॥
santustah: satisfied; *satatam*: always; *yogi*: the *yogi*; *yata atma*: engaged in the self; *dridha-niscayah*: with firmness and determination; *mayi*: to me; *arpita*: offering; *manah*: the mind; *buddhih*: intelligence; *yah*: s/he; *mat-bhaktah*: my devotee; *sah*: s/he; *me*: to me; *priyah*: dear.

"The bhakti yogi is always contented, engaged in the self with firmness and determination, offering his mind and intelligence to my (service). Such a person is very dear to me."

The word *santustah* ("satisfied, contented") is from the same root as *santa* ("peaceful"). Previously (2.66) Krishna had already stated that happiness can be attained only through peace (*asantasya kutah sukham*), a peace created by renouncing to expectations and selfishness. Selfishness is a manifestation of *ahankara* and *mamatva*, the sense of material identification and material attachments and belonging. This means that a devotee and a *yogi* is always focused on the transcendental consciousness (*yata atma*). This is confirmed in the famous *atmarama* verse of *Bhagavata Purana* (1.7.10): *atmaramas ca munayo nirgrantha apy urukrame, kurvanty ahaitukim bhaktim, ittham bhuta guno harih*, "Those who find happiness in the *atman*, including the *munis* and those who have gone beyond book learning, offer a loving service to Hari, whose qualities and activities are so wonderful."

The same is confirmed in 3.27.26 (*evam vidita tattvasya prakritir mayi manasam, yunjato napakuruta atmaramasya karhicit*, "One who knows Reality constantly meditates on me, and as s/he finds happiness in the self, s/he is not obstructed by material (circumstances).") Also we find similar descriptions in other verses of the *Bhagavata Purana* - 4.22.14, 5.19.11, 6.16.40, 10.32.19, 10.73.23 - and even applied to Bhagavan as in 10.30.34. Contentment also comes from feeling confident and fearless in all circumstances. This is confirmed by Shiva

Mahadeva in the *Bhagavata Purana* (6.17.28): *narayana para sarve na kutascana bibhyati, svargapavarga narakesv api tulyartha darsinah*, "The devotees of Narayana are not afraid of anything, and are equally ready to go to Svargaloka and to Naraka".

We had already seen a similar statement in verse 7.17: *tesam jnani nitya-yukto eka-bhaktir visisyate, priyo hi jnanino 'tyartham aham sa ca mama priyah*, "Of them, the person of knowledge who is constantly engaged (in *yoga*) and focused in devotion is the best. I am very dear to the *jnani*, and s/he is very dear to me". However, in this verse Krishna elaborates more on the qualities and activities (*guna* and *karma*) that can keep the devotee genuinely engaged in Krishna Consciousness.

In the previous verse (12.13) we have seen that the most important requirement is benevolence - friendliness, compassion and sympathy towards all beings. In the very least, one should avoid unnecessary violence towards innocent and harmless creatures: vegetarianism is therefore a must for all civilized persons, because it helps us follow the fundamental dharmic principles of compassion (*daya*) and cleanliness (*sauca*). These are also mentioned later in *Bhagavad gita* (18.42) as the characteristics of a genuine *brahmana*: *saucam tapas titiksam ca, maunam svadhyayam arjavam, brahmacharyam ahimsam ca, samatvam dvandva-samjnayoh*, "cleanliness, self-control, tolerance, dignity, transcendental consciousness, simplicity, purity of thoughts, non-violence, balanced attitude towards life, and freedom from dualistic concepts".

Cleanliness and compassion are two of the basic four principles of *dharma* described in the *shastra*, especially in *Bhagavata Purana*, the specialized text that elaborates on *bhagavata dharma*. When Maharaja Parikshit detects the arrival of the present age of degradation, he observes that the cow and bull personifying Bhumi and Dharma have been seriously injured: *tapah saucam daya satyam, iti padah krte krtah, adharma amsais trayo bhagnah smaya sanga madais tava*, "In Satya yuga all the basic legs of *dharma* were created - self-control, cleanliness, compassion and truthfulness - but now three of them have been broken by the increase of arrogance, delusion and bad association", (1.17.24).

This declaration by king Parikshit implies that *satyam*, truthfulness, is the only principle of *dharma* that can still remain functional in Kali yuga: everything is lost when truthfulness is grossly violated by the unqualified descendants of brahmins with the purpose of legitimizing or even extolling the virtues of the open and arrogant violation of the other basic principles of *dharma* - self control, cleanliness and compassion.

We can see that happening in front of our very eyes, when caste brahmins vociferously declare that according to the "religious authorities on vedic tradition" there is no problem in *brahmanas* and religious teachers and authorities ordinarily eating meat and other non-vegetarian substances, and continuing to pose as *brahmanas*, *acharyas* and *pujaris*. At the same time, they violently and offensively deny "low caste" people the basic right to study Sanskrit and the religious science or even to enter a public temple for ordinary *darshan* of the Deities, on the grounds that they "eat objectionable foods", when in fact such "low caste" people may have been strictly vegetarian for many decades.

And that is not the only thing we see in front of our own eyes in these very days, and that has been increasingly aggrieving the heart of the Mother Goddess from the very beginning of Kali yuga.

Bhumi was crying, and Parikshit correctly understood the reason why: *arakshyamanah striya urvi balam, socasy atho purusadair ivartan, vacam devam brahma kule kukarmany, abrahmany raja kule kulagryan*, "You are lamenting about the women and children who are left without support, and about the Goddess of knowledge being manhandled by unqualified descendants of *brahmana* families who follow the same principles/ way of life of *rakshasas* and engage in abominable activities, and about adharmic people from royal dynasties or from other most prominent families," (1.16.21), and *kim ksatra bandhun kalinopasrstan, rastrani va tair avaropitani, itas tato vasana pana vasah snana, vyavayonmukha jiva lokam*, "because unqualified people belonging to the families of *kshatriyas* have messed up with the government, so that people have completely forgotten the regulative principles of a civilized society in the matter of eating, drinking, having sex, taking bath, or other life habits" (1.16.22).

Bhagavata Purana (10.1.4) clearly states that a *pasu ghn*a (one who kills or causes animals to be killed for him) is the only human being that remains unable to truly follow the path of *bhagavata dharma*, that starts from hearing the glorification of Bhagavan. The verse reads: *nivritta tarsair upagiyamanad, bhauvasadhac chrotra mano abhiramat, ka uttama sloka gunanuvadat, puman virajeta vina pasu ghnat*, "The medicine for the disease of material existence consists in hearing about the fascinating qualities and activities of Bhagavan, who is glorified by wonderful verses. Such discussions liberate the mind from material delusion. Only one who kills animals can refuse to engage in this path."

A modicum of truthfulness (honesty) will help us to understand that the other components of traditional vedic civilization are abstention from the recreational consumption of intoxicants, such as alcoholic beverages etc, and abstention is from engaging in illegitimate sexual activities (or in other words, sex that is not in accordance to the principles of *dharma*).

A *vrata* is the observance of a religious or spiritual vow, that consists in avoiding negative activities and regularly engaging in positive activities. If one is unable to engage in positive activities, at least s/he should abstain from committing bad actions. A *dridha vrata* (7.28) is a person who is serious about engaging in *yoga* and *bhakti*: *yesam tv anta-gatam papam jananam punya-karmanam, te dvandva-mohanirmukta bhajante mam dridha-vratah*, "Those who have put an end to all bad activities/sins, perform/ have (accumulated) pious/ virtuous activities, and are completely liberated from the delusion of duality and firm in their determination, worship me." Obviously this statement implies that those people who continue to engage in sinful activities - such as eating non vegetarian things, etc - are actually unable to approach God for worship because God does not accept their worship, even if they maintain strict control over physical access to the temple and the Deity, and they regularly go through the motions of the worship rituals. They are not really worshiping God, but they only see a material form made of stone, marble, brass, wood, *panchaloha* (a traditional alloy of metals used for religious statues) and so on, believing they are its owners and controllers.

The expression *dridha niscayah* indicates a strong realization based on intelligence, sincerity, and direct experience, that cannot be confused by false conclusions proposed by opponents, or by unnecessary doubts created by the fear of displeasing aggressive people.

यस्मान्नोद्विजते लोको लोकान्नोद्विजते च यः । हर्षामर्षभयोद्वेगैर्मुक्तो यः स च मे प्रियः ॥ १२-१५ ॥

yasmānno dvijate loko lokānno dvijate ca yah | harṣāmarṣabhayodvegairmukto yah sa ca me priyaḥ || 12-15 ||

yasmat: by whom; *na*: not; *udvijate*: are agitated; *lokaḥ*: people; *lokat*: by people; *na*: not; *udvijate*: is agitated; *ca*: and; *yah*: s/he; *harsha*: excitement caused by joy; *amarsha*: distress; *bhaya*: fear; *udvegaiḥ*: anxiety; *muktah*: free from; *yah*: s/he; *sah*: one who; *ca*: and; *me*: my; *priyah*: very dear.

"One who does not cause sufferings to others, and is not affected by others, who is not overwhelmed by joy or distress, who is free from fear and anxiety, is very dear to me."

After repeatedly stating the importance of *buddhi* (intelligence), most recently in verse 12.6, Krishna expects us to utilize it properly to understand his instructions in the correct way. In this world all beings are constantly experiencing joys and sufferings, and are normally faced with causes for agitation, anxiety and fear. This material body is so fragile that a relatively small change of temperature in the environment, the absence of some substance, or many other apparently trivial events can seriously damage it. Similarly, the mind is restless, attached to temporary things that will be lost or destroyed - objects, relationships, positions, wealth, and so on. Especially in Kali yuga, the world is full of adharmic, arrogant, selfish people who do not care for the benefit of others and do not hesitate on trampling on whatever seems to be an obstacle to their materialistic goals.

Also, because we have a material body and we need to feed it and move it around, we will inevitably be responsible for a certain amount of sufferings in other beings. As *Bhagavata Purana* (1.13.47) confirms, all living bodies need to consume the bodies of other living entities as food in order to survive. A vegetarian diet saves us from the grossest forms of violence, but even the plants have some degree of sensitivity and feel anxiety and pain when they are hurt. Even if we choose to live on totally non-violent foods, such as fruits, leaves and seeds that have spontaneously fallen from the plants, we are still causing a small amount of suffering and anxiety to other beings who may be sitting on these non-violent foods, or standing on the path while we walk to collect our basic necessities. Also, we should understand that the karmic consequences of causing sufferings to other beings will affect us even when we are only "indirectly" involved, as for example when we purchase items produced without consideration of the sufferings caused to creatures. This of course applies mostly to meat and other non-vegetarian items, but in a much lesser degree can also apply to other foods, even vegetarian foods. We may even be hurting small insects and microbes without knowing it, by breathing or by the involuntary action of our immune system.

Stupid and ill-motivated people try to use this argument to prove that it is OK to eat any meat even from factory farms and slaughterhouses, because we cannot completely avoid creating sufferings and anxieties in other beings anyway, so we should not even start to bother about it. But this is like saying that since we got a little paper cut on our finger, we might as well sign up to undergo a long period of horrible torture until death, because we are already suffering.

However, we should not think that Vedic culture or Hinduism have a "taboo" on meat-eating or any other singular action, as it happens in other cultures. In specific cases of emergencies, we are entitled to consume whatever is required to continue to perform our social duties properly, because the sincere work we are contributing constitutes a sacred *yajna*, and its attending paraphernalia is considered *yajna sista*, or *prasadam*.

The Vedic system offers the solution to the ethical problem by teaching that we should accept "our share" (*tena tyaktena bhunjitha*, *Isa Upanishad*, 1), that is whatever is really and honestly necessary to keep our bodies and minds working properly so that we can properly engage in cooperating for the benefit of all beings. This is why *satyam* (truthfulness, sincerity, honesty) is the most fundamental principle of *dharma*.

To help us in balancing our karmic account, Vedic tradition prescribes the *pancha maha yajnas* (5 great sacrifices), to repay our debts to all other beings, including the animals. This is also commonly called *bali*, and it is usually offered by regularly feeding crows, dogs and cows, who are particularly useful to human society as scavengers, protectors and providers of nutrition and so many other good things respectively. Another beautiful and popular *bali* tradition consists in drawing artistic and decorative designs with rice paste, that is eventually consumed by ants and other small insects. Of course with the degradation caused by fake brahmins, this custom has lost its meaning because the drawings are now made with artificial colors that do not give benefit to any being and that may even be toxic and polluting for the environment.

The *pancha maha yajnas* are:

1. Brahma yajna: the study and the teaching of the scriptures (*svadhyaya*) and the spiritual practice (*sadhana*) for the realization of Brahman - to repay one's debt towards the Rishis and the *Vedas*.
2. Pitri yajna: the offerings to the Pitris (ancestors) during the Agnihotra, the *tarpana* etc; also, begetting at least one son who will continue the family line, and behaving in such a way to bring glory and good name to the family.
3. Deva yajna: the offerings to the Devas (the administrators of the universe) during the Agnihotra, the ritual worship to the family Deities (*upasana*), the Sandhya vandana etc.
4. Bhuta yajna: the offering of food to the animals and the living beings in general; this consumes one's past negative karmic reactions created by eating, cooking, lighting fire, drinking and collecting water, cleaning house etc. It also includes the regular practice of nonviolence, compassion and harmony with nature, and even good relationships with ghosts.
5. Nri yajna, that consists in assistance to guests (*atithi*), a category that includes all travelers, as well as in the regular practice of charity, compassion, tolerance and forgiveness towards other human beings. Of course the performance of our duties towards family and society, especially in the professional field of *varnas*, is extremely important in this regard and is usually implied as the fundamental requirement.

The word *udvijate* ("causes sufferings") is derived from *udvega*, that means "agitation, anxiety", where *vega* means "impulse". We can understand this verse better by analyzing this etymology: anxiety or suffering is whatever unsettles and creates an impulse for reaction - anger, fear, shock, despair and so on.

The two mutual opposites of *harsa* and *amarsa* should also be understood properly. *Harsa* meaning "elation, thrilling", as in *harsa roma*, meaning "standing hair" that is seen in some strong emotion. It is a happy, pleasing, enlivening, electrifying and energizing feeling, that we can call ecstasy or pleasure. However, we should not allow ourselves to be confused and sidetracked by happy feelings or by the pleasures of this world; we need to remain focused in our awareness and devotional service. *Amarsa* is just the opposite. It is the acid corrosive feeling of hostility or impatience towards others, the envy or disappointment in seeing the success of other people, or lamentation and fear about our losing something. It is the fretting and tormenting oneself about things that are actually unimportant. *Harsa* can cause anxiety or fear because we become addicted to the feeling of pleasure and joy, and we do not want to be left without, but *amarsa* is directly causing sufferings, anxiety and fear, either by our direct feelings and actions, or by the karmic reaction to our bad activities that made other beings suffer.

अनपेक्षः शुचिर्दक्ष उदासीनो गतव्यथः । सर्वारम्भपरित्यागी यो मद्भक्तः स मे प्रियः ॥ १२-१६ ॥

anapekṣaḥ śucidakṣa udāsīno gatavyathah | sarvārambhaparityāgī yo madbhaktaḥ sa me priyah || 12-16 ||

anapekṣah: detached/ neutral; *sucih*: clean; *dakṣah*: skillful; *udasīnah*: light hearted; *gata vyathah*: free from worries; *sarva arambha*: all enterprises; *parityagi*: who has renounced; *yah*: who; *mat bhaktaḥ*: my devotee; *sah*: s/he; *me priyah*: very dear to me.

"Impartial, clean, skillful, light hearted, detached from worries, uninterested in personal achievements: such a devotee is very dear to me."

The word *anapeksha* or *nirapeksha* means "indifferent", and it applies to the various conditions of life that we may encounter in our journey. It is very important to avoid misunderstanding the concept, because the degraded tendencies of Kali yuga may tempt us to think that we should become callous towards *adharma* and *ajnana*, neglectful in regards to our duties and responsibilities, and insensitive towards the sufferings of others. This would be a huge mistake.

To better understand this instruction offered by Krishna, we should also contemplate the complementary meanings of the word, as "impartial, detached, neutral", and apply them to our personal expectations and sense gratification. In brief, *anapeksha* here means that we should continue to stoically perform our true duty in the best possible way even in the most difficult and painful circumstances. Also, we should not be scared of going through situations that could be considered inauspicious (*asubha*, 2.57, 4.16, 9.1, 9.28, 12.17) as we will see in the next verse.

Another important meaning of *anapeksha* is that we should be free from sectarian prejudices, that is, we should be able to appreciate good and sound arguments and realizations even in people who belong to a different group or culture. Similarly, we should be able to recognize a mistake in our own camp, and a bad behavior in a member of our own family, and take steps to correct them. At the same time we should be able to recognize a dharmic and learned action or conclusion or choice when it is outside our camp or our family, or even among our declared enemies. This is the meaning of "impartial" or "neutral". This neutrality is also required to avoid the sin of excessive force against the associates of an aggressor, for example his family or the members of his race or community; as Krishna has already declared in verse 13, one should be *advesta*, "free from hatred". A competent and ethically healthy surgeon has no negative feelings towards his patients; he only performs the required operation in the best possible way so that the patient can get relief from suffering and disease, and recover health and functions. True, in Kali yuga there are many criminals posing as doctors and surgeons, who perform unnecessary surgeries or work in a sloppy or even cruel way, because they have other selfish interests and do not care for the benefit of the patients, but these should not be considered actual doctors. The actions and the motivations of each person are the real criteria to evaluate and judge people.

The concepts of enemy and friend should be applied through verification of the respective actions and motivations, rather than by their nationality, race, ethnic group, lineage, etc. Even the previous position of a person in actions and intentions can change suddenly, as a friend can betray us and an enemy can have a change of heart, so we need to remain neutral and impartial. There is a famous tale in the *Panchatantra*, that shows how we need to choose an intelligent and reasonable enemy over a stupid friend. To illustrate the point, the narrator of these beautiful stories brought the twin examples of the merchant and the king, who were respectively saved by an enemy and killed by a friend.

We have already encountered the word *suci* ("clean") before (6.41) and we will find it even more often later on (16.3, 16.7, 16.10, 17.14, 18.27, 18.42) as Krishna will proceed to explain how a devotee can successfully navigate life in the material world without falling back into the ocean of material degradation. Contrarily to what abrahamic ideologies believe, it is not sufficient to pledge allegiance to a particular religious sect or divine figure to remain always pure: we need to closely watch our activities and choices, and carefully avoid all contamination. This cleanliness is primarily inner cleanliness, or purity of mind and heart. Such purity is usually helped and accompanied by external bodily cleanliness, but it does not necessarily depend on it, especially when circumstances are unfavorable (*asubha*) and we do not have the power to change them. Let us make an example: in the last few decades, the traditional holy places in India have been seriously damaged by the irresponsible and adharmic behavior of the local residents, who callously discharge their sewage and garbage everywhere.

The measure of the disaster can be seen in the Yamuna river, that in 1984 was still wonderfully pure and fresh, and had sweet clear blue water perfectly fit for drinking, and only 20 years later was declared unfit even for irrigation purposes because of the incredible level of pollution. Also, the rise in availability of consumers' goods and packaging solutions has greatly increased the quantity of non-biodegradable rubbish laying around in the streets and around buildings. The local people, who were used to throw a little dust and kitchen waste in front of their house after sweeping, are now callously doing the same with greater quantities of non-biodegradable waste, including plastic, etc. When the houses of these foolish people are on a major road, the air draft caused by the fast passage of motorized vehicles blows all the dust and impurities back into the house, and the small garbage heap next to the house inspires others to contribute by dumping their own extra garbage in the same place - while there is practically no public garbage removal service. The same happens to the ponds or rivers near these houses, where the foolish local caste brahmins keep taking their "purificatory bath", believing that such exercise is making them "clean" (*suci*).

Now, when we travel to these places of pilgrimage, we should not let our minds be confused by this situation. We should apply our intelligence with detachment: if we can do something to clean the place up, we should certainly do so, as a service to the holy place (*dhama seva*). If we cannot, we should just offer our respect to the holy place that is still present under the layer of Kali yuga contamination, in the transcendental dimension beyond the trash and excrements of this material dimension. However, this does not mean that we are required to actually take bath in seriously polluted water, or to remain for a long time in a garbage dump, because that will sooner or later affect our body and mind, and eventually our consciousness, too. So we can simply sprinkle a few drops of the water on our head or body, and offer homage to whatever little portion of ground appears to be clean, and then continue in our journey.

The word *daksha* means "expert, skillful", and refers to *jnana*, the knowledge by which we become able to properly utilize the objects of the world and navigate our paths to progress and liberation, while performing our duties in devotional service. An expert person is a highly effective person, because s/he makes the best and most intelligent use of things and opportunities, focusing time and effort, as described for example in many of the popular "self-help" books that are meant to improve your effectiveness in life.

The expression *udasina* means "aloof", especially from society. In verse 6.9 it applied to a neutral person, who is impartial between factions, and in 9.9 it was applied directly to Krishna as impartial towards all the various favorable and unfavorable activities that develop in the material world and are performed by people. In verse 14.23, it is used (*udasina vad asino*) to describe a person who is established on the level of Transcendence. We find it also in the *Bhagavata Purana* used in the same way: in 6.16.5 similar to *Gita* 6.9, in 6.16.11 similar to *Gita* 9.9, and in 10.54.43 and 10.60.20 similar to *Gita* 14.23. The *Bhagavata Purana* is the natural complement to the *Bhagavad gita*, and is the most popular among the *Puranas*, traditionally recited and studied in many villages and Hindu communities.

यो न हृष्यति न द्वेष्टि न शोचति न काङ्क्षति । शुभाशुभपरित्यागी भक्तिमान्यः स मे प्रियः ॥ १२-१७ ॥

yo na hrīṣyati na dveṣṭi na śocati na kāṅkṣati | śubhāśubhaparityaḡi bhaktimānyaḡ sa me priyaḡ || 12-17 ||

yah: anyone; *na*: not; *hrishyati*: becomes overwhelmed by joy; *na*: not; *dvesti*: hates; *na*: not; *socati*: laments; *na*: not; *kanksati*: aspires (to some selfish results); *subha asubha*: both favorable and unfavorable; *parityagi*: completely detached; *bhakti-man*: one who is characterized by *bhakti* (devotion); *yah*: anyone; *sah*: s/he; *me*: to me; *priyah*: very dear.

"A devotee who is not confused by joy, does not hate anything, does not lament and does not aspire to any selfish results, who has become detached from both advantages and disadvantages, is very dear to me."

Krishna continues to elaborate on the transcendental position of a devotee who has overcome the delusion of material identifications and attachments. Such a person is not confused by joys or sorrows, but continues to perform his/ her duty faithfully and responsibly, selflessly, and even heroically.

Pleasure and pain are mechanisms by which our body and mind react to positive and negative situations, in which beneficial and damaging stimuli are created. The survival instincts of an embodied conditioned soul push him/ her to follow the stimuli and enjoy the benefits or escape the damage, but a devotee is ready to sacrifice everything for his/ her duty in the service of the Supreme. At a more ordinary level, intense pleasure or joy can confuse our mind and cloud our intelligence, and this is the first step towards material attachments. Therefore a sober person (*dhira*, 2.13) is keeping a balanced mind and does not allow his/her emotions to control his/ her actions, so that s/he can continue to work effectively. The same thing applies to the feelings of repulsion (*dvesa*) or hostility, that can prevent us from performing some unpleasant or dangerous task. Similarly, a selfless devotee does not lament about losses or disappointments, and is not attached to his/ her desires, projections and expectations, because s/he knows that the divine plan is greater than any of our small minds. So many times we find that an apparent setback was actually a blessing in disguise, or a success that we had pursued for a long time brought more problems than solutions. Problems and difficulties may prove to be wonderful opportunities for growth and evolution, and failure often teaches us better than any other type of lesson.

Therefore the ordinary understanding about *subha* and *asubha*, "auspicious" and "inauspicious" ("favorable/ unfavorable", "positive/ negative") becomes a merely relative consideration that is only superficially relevant to the organizational and logistical aspects of our work. A disease or another incapacitating physical condition is certainly inauspicious, but we can use it in a positive way - to finish paying some old bad karmic reactions, to get an easy pretext to avoid too much superficial and useless social interaction, or to prove that we cannot travel around. The loss of a near and dear person is certainly painful, but we can use it to become more detached from material circumstances and conditionings, just as Narada did in his previous lifetime (*Bhagavata Purana* 1.6.10) when he suddenly became an orphan at a very young age.

A transcendental devotee does not become attached to expectations or dreams, and he is not anxious to get disciples or to build temples or great projects. Whatever desires and aspirations s/he has, they are only for the performance of his/ her duty and the service of the Supreme, even if it is only a small part in a great play. This does not mean that we should not be attached to our service or we can perform it sloppily, lazily, or inattentively: we should just be detached from the personal gains and benefits we can derive from it, as well from the disadvantages and difficulties that it entails. This concept is presented several times in *Bhagavad gita*:

sukha-duhkhe same kritva labhalabhau jayajayau, tato yuddhaya yujyasva naivam papam avapsyasi, "If you fight this battle while remaining equally disposed (unattached and prepared) to joy and sadness, gain and loss, victory and defeat, you will never be touched by sin" (2.38),

jitmanah prasantasya paramatma samahitah, sitoshna-sukha-duhkeshu tatha manapamanayoh, sama-duhkha-sukhah sva-sthah sama-lostrasma-kancanah, tulya-priyapriyo dhira tulya-nindatma-samstutih, "Balanced in joy and sorrow, focused on his/ her own (duty), considering mud, stone and gold as equally valuable, impartial towards pleasant and unpleasant, sober, and unmoved when offended or glorified" (14.23),

"The Paramatma/ Supreme Self manifests in/ is accessible to one who has controlled himself and has attained peace/is contented in heat and cold, in happiness and in distress, and in honor/ adoration and dishonor/ spite as well" (6.7),

yadriccha-labha-santushto dvandvatito vimatsarah, samah siddhav asiddhau ca kritvapi na nibadhyate, "(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)" (4.22),

bahya-sparseshv asakatma vindaty atmani yat sukham, sa brahma-yoga-yuktatma sukham akshayam asnute, "Unattached to the contact with the external (things), s/he finds happiness in the pleasure of the Self. Such a person is engaged in Brahma yoga, and enjoys inexhaustible happiness" (5.21),

matra-sparsas tu kaunteya sitoshna-sukha-dukhka-dah, agamapayino 'nityas tams titikshasva bharata, "O son of Kunti, the contact of the senses (with the sense objects) causes joy and distress just like (cold in) winter and (heat in) summer. Such feelings are temporary: they come and go, o descendant of Bharata, and you should just try to tolerate them (without being confused and distracted from your duty)" (2.14),

yam hi na vyathayanty ete purusham purusharshabha, sama-dukhka-sukham dhiram so 'mritavaya kalpate, "O best among men, one who is not distracted by all these (feelings) and is always equally balanced in suffering and in joy, is a sober person and he can aspire to immortality" (2.15),

advesta sarva-bhutanam maitrah karuna eva ca, nirmamo nirahankarah sama-dukhka-sukhah ksami, "(One who works for me must) be free from envy or hostility, but rather friendly and compassionate towards all beings. (S/he must be) free from material attachments and identifications, tolerant and ready to forgive, and equally prepared to face joys and sorrows" (12.13),

sva-dharmam api cavekshya na vikampitum arhasi, dharmyad hi yuddhac chreyo 'nyat kshatriyasya na vidyate, "Considering your own dharmic duty you should not hesitate, because for a *kshatriya* there is nothing better than fighting a dharmic battle" (2.31),

nirmana-moha jita-sanga-dosha adhyatma-nitya vinivrita-kamah, dvandvair vimuktah sukha-dukhka-samjnair gacchanty amudhah padam avyayam tat, "Free from vanity and illusion, having vanquished all bad association, always situated in Transcendence, having dropped all (selfish) desires, free from duality, balanced in joy and sorrow: thus intelligent people attain that position that is eternal" (15.5).

समः शत्रौ च मित्रे च तथा मानापमानयोः । शीतोष्णसुखदुःखेषु समः सङ्गविवर्जितः ॥ १२-१८ ॥

samah śatrau ca mitre ca tathā mānāpamānayoḥ | śītoṣṇasukhaduḥkheṣu samah saṅgavivarjitaḥ || 12-18 ||

samah: equally disposed; *śatrau*: towards an enemy; *ca*: and; *mitre*: towards a friend; *ca*: and; *tathā*: as well as; *māna*: in being honored; *apamānayoḥ*: as well as in absence of honor; *śīta*: in cold; *uṣhna*: in heat; *sukha duḥkheṣu*: in joys as well as in sorrows; *samah*: equally balanced; *sanga vivarjitaḥ*: completely free from all association.

"Equally balanced and impartial towards enemies and friends, honor and neglect, cold and heat, joys and sorrows, and completely free from any (material) association,

When a person is situated on the transcendental level, free from selfish motivations and expectations, there is also no prejudice towards enemies or friends. The concept of enmity is only relative to material identifications and attachments, as well as to personal expectations of joys and sorrows, because in the service to the Supreme there is no consideration of enemies or friends, but only of behaviors that are favorable or unfavorable to *dharma* and to the benefit of the universe. We have already seen how it is better to have a reasonable intelligent enemy than a foolish friend, and that loyalties can change: a person from an opposite camp can come forward and help the cause of *dharma*, while a person expected to be on our side may actually make disastrous choices that are damaging to *dharma* and divine service.

If we have overcome material ego we will not have any problem in cooperating with favorable persons, or in dropping former friends or family members who have become unfavorable. Similarly, a transcendental devotee is not attached to honors and fame, or afraid of being neglected or even disrespected by the general people. The word *mana* means "respect", "consideration", and includes all the forms of attention offered to a venerable person. So *apa-mana* means "lack of respect"; it is not an act of aggression but rather a sort of inaction, omission, or neglect.

It is not a pleasant attitude, but it is certainly less aggressive than *ninda* ("insult") as we will see in the next verse. Usually respect comes from friends and lack of respect comes from enemies, and this is precisely how we are able to distinguish one from the other. A so-called friend who has no respect and affection for us is not worthy of the name, and the same consideration should be applied to family. A blood relative who disrespects us and does not care for us is actually an enemy, especially if his or her behavior creates problems: *rina karta pita satrur, mata ca vyabharini, bharya rupavati satruh, putrah satrur apanditah*.

Hitopadesha teaches that one might have four enemies in his own home: a father who is addicted to making debts, a mother who likes to go around and see other people, a wife who is too enamored of her own physical beauty, and a son who is an ignorant fool. Of course these are natural defects and not deliberate hostile choices, as such persons may still be favorably disposed towards us, and have no intention of harming us or putting us into difficulties - or to destroy our life and everything we hold dear. The situation will be even more dangerous when some of these family members are actually hostile, envious, resentful or hateful, especially if they have suffered for some injustice or mistreatment.

Women can become very vindictive when they are forced in a difficult situation - into a forced marriage, for example - or when they are subjected to humiliation and emotional damage. This applies also to events that preceded marriage, and not only to negative experiences (as victims of abuse) but also to negative training especially through example, by which they learned to abuse and mistreat others. In Vedic society these situations are extremely rare, but in Kali yuga the conditions of life become increasingly intolerable, and sane decent people actually become the exception. Foolish people tend to generalize and categorize according to the wrong parameters (usually bodily prejudice), therefore men become the enemies of women and women become the enemies of men, old people become the enemies of youngsters and young people become the enemies of elders, siblings fight each other, what to speak about in-laws.

Positive relationships, or interactions with persons who are truly favorable to us - family or friends - are extremely beneficial for our life, because they provide emotional and moral support, the warmth of affection and healing, encouragement, and practical help and assistance

as well. If we follow the system taught by Krishna in *Bhagavad gita*, we will be able to enjoy these benefits without becoming selfish and attached (2.47), therefore we will reciprocate in the same way with our friends and family.

At a higher level still, when we are firmly established in Krishna Consciousness, all material identifications and attachments will be dissolved, and we will be completely free from any conditioning defined by *sanga* or association (*tad artham karma mukta sanga*, 3.9, *gata-sangasya muktasya*, 4.23, *mukta-sango 'naham-vadi*, 18.26, *karmani sangam tyaktva*, 2.48, *karmani sangam tyaktva*, 5.10, *yoginah karma kurvanti sangam tyaktvatma-suddhaye*, 5.11, *sanga-varjitah*, 11.55, *sanga-vivarjitah*, 12.18, *nirmana-moha jita-sanga-dosha*, 15.5, *sangam tyaktva*, 18.6, *sangam tyaktva pahalm caiva*, 18.9, *niyatam sanga-rahitam*, 18.20). A clear explanation about the true meaning of detachment is also given in verses 2.51, 2.64, 5.26, 7.28, 15.4.

All along *Bhagavad gita*, Krishna is very clearly explaining that renunciation and detachment apply only to the fruits or benefits of the action, not to the action itself. Unfortunately, as we will see later on (16.6, 18.32) ignorance, foolishness and a tendency to asuric conclusions and behaviors push people exactly in the opposite direction, to mistake *adharma* for *dharma* and vice versa. So we will see delusional people claiming to be religionists or *sannyasis* or even *gurus* who remain strongly attached to the results of action (in the form of power, profit, adoration, etc) for themselves and their own faction, and "renounce" the dutiful action that they are supposed to continue doing.

To avoid this danger, one should simply give up all associations (*sanga vivarjita*), as recommended in this verse. Each and every one of us is actually alone, as no other conditioned soul can really help us or remain with us always and in all circumstances. And at the same time, we are never really alone, because the supreme Friend, Father, Mother, Lover, Maintainer and Teacher constantly resides in our hearts, lifetime after lifetime.

तुल्यनिन्दास्तुतिर्मौनी सन्तुष्टो येन केनचित् । अनिकेतः स्थिरमतिर्भक्तिमान्मे प्रियो नरः ॥ १२-१९ ॥

tulyanindāstutirmaunī santuṣṭo yena kenacit | aniketah sthīramatirbhaktimānme priyo narah || 12-19 ||

tulya: balanced; *ninda*: insult; *stutih*: glorification; *mauni*: silent; *santustah*: satisfied; *yena*: by which; *kenacit*: whatever; *aniketah*: without residence; *sthira matih*: strongly determined; *bhakti man*: one who has devotion; *me*: to me; *priyah*: dear; *narah*: a human being.

"Balanced in front of insult and adoration, silent, satisfied with whatever s/he obtains, without residence, strongly determined: a devotee is very dear to me among (all) human beings."

In the previous verse we have seen that a true devotee is balanced and remains detached both from *mana* ("respect") and *apa-mana* ("lack of respect"). The word *ninda*, "insult", is much stronger than *apa-mana*, and it indicates an active aggression, that can be mental, verbal or even physical, and consists in falsely attributing defects or criminal activities to a person who is innocent and good. Of course when we are calling "thief" an actual thief, there is no question of insult; in fact if this is done in the proper way and with the proper motivation, it could even be a public service and bring a benefit even to the thief himself. Like any aggression, *ninda* brings negative karmic reactions, especially when it is committed against a genuine devotee (*yogi* and *bhakta*) and religious person, who is always working for the benefit of all beings (*bhuta hita*, 5.25, 12.4, 12.13).

A *sadhu*, *brahmana* or *sannyasi*, is usually very respected in Vedic society, as a superior and guide to the entire society. However, such respect is earned and never demanded, because a genuine devotee or religious person is always humble and detached. If you see a religious person who gets angry and revengeful because he believes he has not been adequately honored, he is very likely a fake.

Anyone who wants to make any progress in *bhakti*, *yoga* or spiritual life should be extremely cautious and strictly avoid committing any offense towards a genuine *sadhu*, because the reactions to such crime destroy all the progress and good karmic credits. So religious people can be put to the test, but that should be done within reasonable limits and without personal arrogance from our part, because it is a very risky business. The opposite of *ninda* is *stuti*, that means "praise", or glorification. Usually *stutis* are offered to the Personalities of Godhead, to recite their glories and offer prayers, and often to ask for blessings: all this is done with great veneration, an attitude that is several notches higher than simple respect and consideration. In the Vedic system, ritual worship is offered to all venerable persons and objects, and it acknowledges and expresses their participation to the beneficial and divine qualities and activities of God. This is a natural tendency we can also find in many other cultures and even among atheists, who out of affection and respect offer flowers and lamps to their deceased relatives' picture, and bow to the portraits of their leaders. Nobody is happy when subjected to insult, but we should at least be balanced enough to be detached from criticism or even offense that will inevitably come in life, especially when we are actively engaged in spreading and defending *dharma* and knowledge. Not many people are intelligent or sincere enough to participate to a debate or other interactions in a proper way, so chances are that we will have to face many attacks, sometimes vicious and unnecessarily personal.

One of the most popular tricks used by low class people who run out of solid arguments is to attack the opponent with *ad hominem* insinuations or accusations, usually totally invented, and often very vulgar and offensive, and to try to apply the various devices of emotional manipulation. That is different from the constructive criticism that we face in a civilized confrontation or debate, when an opponent points out a defect in our reasoning or evidence.

The word *muni* refers to one who is sober and serious (*manana sila*), one who is quiet (*mauni*), an ascetic (*tapasvi*), one who is following *sadhana* (*vratī*), one in the renounced order of *sannyasa* (*yati*) and a realized soul who has the direct vision of Reality (*rishi*).

We have already elaborated on the meaning of the definition, that appears in several verses and especially in the following verses:

duhksheshv anudvigna-manah sukheshu vigata-sprihah, vita-raga-bhaya-krodhah sthita-dhir munir ucyate, "A person whose mind is not distracted by sufferings or joys and remains detached, free from attraction, fear and anger, is called a Muni who is able to maintain a steadfast meditation," (2.56)

sannyasas tu maha-baho duhkham aptum ayogatah, yoga-yukto munir brahma na cirenadhigacchati, "O mighty-armed (Arjuna), *sannyasa* (renunciation) without *yoga* (proper engagement) only produces misery/ is attained with difficulty; one who is engaged in *Yoga* is a *muni* (a wise person) and quickly attains Brahman," (5.6)

yatendriya-mano-buddhir munir moksha-parayanah, vigateccha-bhaya-krodho yah sada mukta eva sah, "Controlling the senses, the mind and intelligence, the Muni (the silent sage) who is fully dedicated to *moksha* (liberation), free from all desires, fear and anger, is certainly always liberated," (5.28).

The word *aniketana* ("without residence"), too, should be applied in the sense of detachment from *ahankara* and *mamatva*. The idea of home is the greatest attachment and comfort for all beings, including the birds and other animals, therefore overcoming the need for a fixed residence is a great demonstration of renunciation and austerity. One's home is an extension of our identifications, and so are the concepts of race, nationality, etc. A real *yogi* is detached from all this: *mata ca parvati devi, pita devo mahesvarah, bandhavah siva bhaktans ca, svadeso bhuvana trayam* ("my mother is Devi Parvati, my father is Shiva Mahesvara, the devotees of Shiva are my family, and the three worlds are my homeland", *Annapurna stotra*, 12). Of course a *yogi* has a special attachment to the holy places of Bharata varsha and considers them his/ her motherland, just as s/he worships Shiva and Parvati as his/ her own parents and family. However, s/he is always ready to move and to settle wherever his/ her service requires, preferably alone (*rahasi sthitah ekaki*, 6.10 *vivikta sevi*, 18.52), without attachment for a place over the other, and adjusting to any situation. This is confirmed by the expression *yena kenacit*, "whatever comes". In *Mahabharata* (*santi parva* 245.12) we find confirmation: *na kutyani nodake sange na caile na tri puskare nagare na asane namne ca mokshavantu sah - kuti, indaka, sanga, caila, nagare, asana, anna*, "One who knows liberation does not become attached to a particular house or village, sitting place, type of clothes, type of food, water reservoir, or even to auspiciousness".

The expression *tri puskara* literally means "the 3 lotus flowers" and refers to the higher planets (or "heaven"), the traditional places of pilgrimage on earth, and the very auspicious astronomical/ astrological configurations (*yoga*) that fall on month days 2, 7, 12, on Sunday, Tuesday and Saturday, and under the constellations named Kritika, Punarvasu, Uttara phalguni, Visaka, Uttarasadha, and Uttara bhadra pada.

ये तु धर्म्यामृतमिदं यथोक्तं पर्युपासते । श्रद्धधाना मत्परमा भक्तास्तेऽतीव मे प्रियाः ॥ १२-२० ॥

ye tu dharmyāmṛtamidaṁ yathoktaṁ paryupāsate | śraddadhānā matparamā bhaktāste'tīva me priyāḥ || 12-20 ||

ye: they; *tu*: but; *dharmā amṛtam*: the nectar of *dharmā*/ eternal *dharmā*; *idam*: this; *yatha*: as; *uktam*: said; *paryupāsate*: worship correctly; *śraddadhanah*: with faith; *mat paramah*: totally dedicated to me; *bhaktah*: devotees; *te*: they; *atīva*: very much; *me priyah*: dear to me.

"Those who worship correctly this eternal *dharmā* as explained by me, totally dedicated to me with faith and devotion, are extremely dear to me."

In this last verse of the chapter, Krishna summarizes *bhakti yoga* as the *dharmā amṛta*; this definition is extremely interesting as the word *amṛta* means "immortal", and also "nectar".

According to grammar, the most important part of the expression is the word *dharmā*, of which *amṛta* is an attribute; we therefore understand that the basis for the process described by Krishna in this chapter is *dharmā*. There is no *bhakti yoga* without *dharmā*: this is the fundamental truth that we really need to understand, because without a strong foundation in *dharmā* there cannot be any progress in *bhakti*. It is true that *bhakti* is completely independent from any other method or qualification, but when we speak of *bhakti*, we speak of *dharmā* - in this particular case, *sanātana dharmā*, the eternal and universal principles of *dharmā*.

We have already elaborated (2.8, 2.31) on the meaning of *dharmā*, that is often mistranslated as "religion", while in fact it refers to the foundation of reality itself, that supports the existence, the consciousness and the happiness of the entire universe, as well as its progress and proper functioning. In nature, it is also called *ritu*, which means "rule", "natural law", "cycle", "season", and "orbit" as in the regular movements of the planets. This same *ritu* is called *dharmā* in human society, and applies to the proper duty that each individual is meant to perform according to *guna* and *karma* (qualities, tendencies and abilities).

At a material level, based on the particular body that one is wearing and the relative qualities, tendencies and abilities, each human being is expected to engage in one of the *varnas* or professional occupations as a limb of the universal body of the Virata Purusha (4.13); this is called *sva dharmā*, or "specific duty". However, on the transcendental level, *dharmā* is *sanātana dharmā*, the eternal and universal duty of all living entities: service to the Supreme and to the totality of Consciousness. This is also called *bhagavata dharmā*, "service to God", that can be translated as "devotional service" or "Krishna Consciousness". Vedic scriptures and especially *Bhagavad gita* clearly explain that such devotional service must be based on truthfulness, compassion, cleanliness, goodness, freedom from material identification and attachments, enlightenment, selflessness, fearlessness, impartiality, and cooperation among all to support society and universe.

Genuine *bhakti* will never motivate actions contrary to *dharmā*, because *bhakti* is *dharmā* itself: *svalpam apy asya dharmasya trayate mahato bhayat* (2.40), *asraddadhanah purusa dharmasyasya parantapa, aprapya mam nivartante mṛtyu-samsara-vartmani* (9.3), *kshipram bhavati dharmatma sasvac-chantim nigacchati* (9.31), *tva avyayah sasvata-dharma-gopta sanatanas tvam purusho* (11.18). Also 14.27 and 18.31 will confirm.

The expression *mat paramā* means "having me as the supreme reality", and equals to *nirvana paramam* (6.15), *aksharam brahma paramam* (8.3), *paramam purusam* (8.8), *paramam gatim* (8.13, 8.21), *samsiddhim paramam* (8.15), *dhama paramam* (8.21), *paramam bhavan* (10.12), *paramam guhyam* (11.1, 18.67) and *paramam vacah* (10.1, 18.64), *aksharam paramam* (11.18), *dhama paramam* (15.6). A similar meaning is expressed by the word *parayana*, "totally dedicated to" (5.17, 9.34), and by the word *dharmatma*, "totally immersed in *dharmā*" (9.31).

Chapter 13

Prakriti purusha vibhaga yoga The yoga of understanding nature as distinct from the personal principle

After the scene-setting introduction (chapter 1), the first 4 chapters (2 or *sankhya*, 3 or *karma*, 4 or *jnana*, 5 or *sannyasa*) of the text of the *Bhagavad gita* were about the self (about *tvam*, or "you"), and how to evolve and progress in self realization. Krishna has explained about *karma* and duty, and how we are supposed to work in this world selflessly, without attachment and material identifications.

The second group of 4 chapters (6 or *dhyana*, 7 or *vijnana*, 8 or *taraka brahma*, 9 or *raja guhya*) were about *tat*, "That" supreme Consciousness and Reality. Krishna has explained about the meaning and practice of meditation, so from the realization of the *atman* we can move to the realization of Brahman, Paramatma and Bhagavan while we are still in this world.

The third group of 4 chapters (10 or *vibhuti*, 11 or *visva rupa darshana*, 12 or *bhakti*, 13 or *prakriti purusha viveka*) are about *tattva jnana*, the process of knowledge of Reality, and Krishna explains precisely how to apply and execute *bhakti* in the genuine way, by appreciating the transcendental nature of God and entering into the supreme Consciousness.

The fourth and last group of 4 chapters (14 or *guna traya vibhaga*, 16 or *daivasura sampada*, 17 or *sraddha traya*, 18 or *moksha*) are about liberation or the ultimate success of the entire process, and their teachings are summarized by the famous aphorism *tat tvam asi*. Krishna clarifies the dangerous traps on the road to liberation, and how to make the last steps away from material conditionings, because even a liberated soul (*jivanmukta*) still has to deal with the three *gunas* as long as s/he lives in this world.

So if we want to summarize the entire *Bhagavad gita* in four steps, we can describe them as 1. *tvam*, 2. *tat*, 3. *tattvam*, 4. *tattvam asi*.

Besides the first scene-setting chapter (1, *Arjuna visada*), there is another atypical chapter in the text of *Bhagavad gita*: the 15th, that interrupts the thread of discussion to remind us about the mystical aspect of the supreme Personality of Godhead (Purushottama), who is completely independent from the manifestation of this world and even from the knowledge contained in the Vedic scriptures.

In the 12th chapter, Krishna has given the description of the qualities and activities that a devotee must develop in order to engage in transcendental service. In this chapter, on Arjuna's request, Krishna will explain the difficult and deep science of Purusha and Prakriti, the two sides of Brahman, who are the Father and Mother of everything, both in the material and the spiritual world, and within the *jivatman* as well.

Purusha is the personal principle of perception or consciousness. Some commentators explain the etymology of the word as derived from *pura*, "city": this means that the *purusha* is the lord of the "city of the nine gates" (5.13), or the human body. We know that there are two *purushas*: the two birds described in *Svetasvatara Upanishad* (4.6) and *Mundaka Upanishad* (3.1.1) as well as in *Bhagavata Purana* (11.11.6). Another synonym for the city of the nine gates or the tree of the body is the *kshetra* or "field of action" described in this chapter. Accordingly, this *kshetra* is also called Prakriti. The etymology of this word is said to derive from the compound *pra-kriti* ("made previously"), referring to the first activity of creation.

The definitions of Prakriti and Purusha are not easy to understand, and they become clear only to those who have already established themselves on the level of Brahman realization and have developed *bhakti*, devotion, to the Supreme. Superficial, ignorant people may believe that the word *purusha* indicates a mere ordinary human being of male gender, while for them *prakriti* is simply material nature. Following this materialistic and foolish concept, they conclude that any male human being is the legitimate enjoyer of everything - from women to wealth to resources to the entire world. Conversely, they believe that anything that is not a male human being is not a *purusha*, and therefore has no rights or title to any enjoyment or even freedom or independence, and should simply be exploited carelessly. This understanding is not approved by *Bhagavad gita* or Vedic culture; in fact we will see that, in chapter 16, Krishna will call it asuric, or demoniac. Even human beings of male gender (who believe they are supposed to be the enjoyers) live pitifully under this type of distorted and anti-natural ideology, because all of them vainly attempt to individually and materially take the place of the Supreme - a foolish pursuit that causes them to keep fighting and damaging one another.

The faulty materialistic application of the meaning of *purusha* and *prakriti* can only bring serious damage and many sufferings to everyone, as we can see in the present situation of global society, after several centuries in which this delusion has been spreading around the world. Demonic (asuric) people project their demonic mentality on nature, "demonizing" it in all its forms, from the Mother Goddess herself to knowledge, earth, women, cows, body, healthy pleasure, and the natural elements. When nature is considered an enemy, the inevitable consequence is that people will try to defeat, repress, conquer, dominate and oppress it, with disastrous results. The more we try to control nature, or to oppose it, the more deeply and painfully we get ourselves in trouble.

Someone could think that since the elements that compose the sense objects, our body, the senses, the mind etc, are made of material nature, when we "control the senses and the mind" we are actually controlling nature. However, this would be mere illusion. We can only engage our consciousness (which is our actual identity) in the modalities of nature - either material or spiritual: this will be the subject of the next chapters of *Bhagavad gita*, up to the last one.

अर्जुन उवाच ।

arjuna uvāca ।

प्रकृतिं पुरुषं चैव क्षेत्रं क्षेत्रज्ञमेव च ।

एतद्वेदितुमिच्छामि ज्ञानं ज्ञेयं च केशव ॥ १३-१ ॥

prakṛtiṁ puruṣaṁ caiva kṣetraṁ kṣetrajñameva ca । etadveditumicchāmi jñānaṁ jñeyaṁ ca keśava ॥ 13-1 ॥

arjunah: Arjuna; *uvaca:* said; *prakritim:* the Prakriti; *purusham:* the Purusha; *ca:* and; *iva:* certainly; *ksetram:* the *kshetra*; *ksetra jnam:* the one who knows the *ksetra*; *eva:* certainly; *ca:* and; *etat:* this; *veditum:* to know; *icchami:* I wish; *jnanam:* knowledge; *jneyam:* what is to be known; *ca:* and; *kesava:* o Kesava.

Arjuna said: "O Kesava, I wish to know about the Prakriti and the Purusha, the *kshetra* and the *kshetra-jna*, the knowledge and the object of knowledge."

The elaboration on these two fundamental concepts will offer new illumination not only on the *kshetra* (the object of knowledge), but also on the *atman* as the *kshetra jna*, on *jnana* itself, on the *jiva atman* as compared to the *param atman*, and on the profound and complex meaning of *prakriti*. Ultimately, everything is consciousness - the *kshetra jna* as well as the *kshetra* and *jnana* itself - but with the distinction of the *prakriti* at the beginning of all manifestations (spiritual and material), when the great divine *lila* or the divine dance started. Therefore we should see that distinction (*vibhaga*) as complementarity rather than opposition of dualities, as the two sides of the same One.

In the 2nd chapter, Krishna had already explained the difference between body and the *atman* that lives in the body, saying that the body is temporary while the *atman* is eternal, and establishing the difference between the spiritual and the material. This is the first, easiest, and superficial meaning of the difference between the *purusha* and the *prakriti*: the *purusha* is the *atman*, and the *prakriti* is the body - not only the individual body, but also the universal body.

During that preliminary discussion, Krishna had made very clear that the *purusha* is the same in all bodies, male or female, and even animal or vegetable, while *prakriti* is the intrinsic nature of their manifestation, from which they can never become separated (3.5, 3.33). At the same time, the *jivas* can move from the material mode of *prakriti* (7.4, 9.7, 9.8, 9.10, 9.12) to the spiritual mode of *prakriti* (7.5, 9.13, 11.51).

Here materialistic people become confused and lose the thread of the discussion, because they believe that the nature of the *purusha* is what we can call *purushatva ahankara* or the identification with the quality of the *purusha* as enjoyer. Then if you try to tell them they are actually *prakriti* (7.5), they freak out and start behaving like schizophrenics, because they cannot understand how one can be *purusha* and *prakriti* at the same time. But it is a fact: Krishna also stated clearly that the *jivatmans* (the individual beings) are also *prakriti*, and that the spiritual world and spiritual forms are *prakriti*, too (4.6). Even the transcendental forms and names of Krishna, that are non-different from him, are *prakriti* - the most intimate manifestation of the supreme power - *para prakriti*, or *Yogamaya*.

In this chapter, Krishna will further explore this mysterious and deep subject, at a subtler level: both *purusha* and *prakriti* are intrinsically spiritual, and all differences are simply due to the mode or nature of the consciousness - in Sanskrit terms, the *prakriti* of the *purusha*. The additional definition of *prakriti* and *purusha* as *jnanam* and *jneyam*, "knowledge" and "the object of knowledge", is meant to further deepen our understanding. We know that *purusha* is the principle of consciousness, therefore on the superficial material platform it would be logical to conclude that the *purusha* is *jnana*, or knowledge, while the "field" is the *jneya*, "what is to be known". But we also know that *jnana* or *vidya* is identified as the *prakriti* or *shakti*, and the field of knowledge, or *jneya*, as the *purusha* (9.17, 11.18, 11.38, 13.18, 13.24, but also 5.29, 7.1, 7.3, 7.10, 7.30, 10.3, 10.15, 10.17, 15.15). We need to pause and meditate on this concept, in order to understand it properly.

To facilitate this understanding, we must remember that activity is the characteristic of the *prakriti*, while perception or consciousness is the characteristic of the *purusha*. In this light, we will correctly read verses 8 to 12 in this chapter, that describe *jnana*, or knowledge, as a series of activities of the consciousness (the *prakriti* of the *purusha*) that establish the consciousness on the proper level of identification - that is the spiritual level. On the other hand, we will understand that Consciousness (the *purusha* - *Ivara*, the *param atman*, of whom the *jiva atman* is simply a fragment) is the real purpose and subject of knowledge, because Consciousness is the original blueprint of everything that exists.

श्रीभगवानुवाच ।

śrībhagavānuvāca ।

इदं शरीरं कौन्तेय क्षेत्रमित्यभिधीयते ।

एतद्यो वेत्ति तं प्राहुः क्षेत्रज्ञ इति तद्विदः ॥ १३-२ ॥

idaṁ śarīraṁ kaunteya kṣetramityabhidhiyate । etadyo vetti taṁ prāhuḥ kṣetrajña iti tadvidāḥ ॥ 13-2 ॥

sri: the wonderful; *bhagavan:* Lord; *uvaca:* said; *idam:* this; *sariram:* body; *kaunteya:* o Kaunteya; *ksetram:* the field; *iti:* like this; *abhidhiyate:* is said; *etat:* this; *yah:* one who; *vetti:* knows; *tam:* that (person); *prahuh:* is called; *ksetra jna:* who knows the field; *iti:* like this; *tat vidah:* who knows this.

The wonderful Lord said: "O Kaunteya, this body is called the field, and one who knows this (body) is called the knower of the field."

To introduce the discussion in this chapter, Krishna takes us back to the beginning in chapter 2, where he had explained the difference between the *atman* and the perishable material body or *sarira* (2.17, 2.18, 2.19, 2.20, 2.21, 2.22, 2.23, 2.24, 2.25, 2.26). To refer to his

teachings about the *atman*, Krishna says *tat vidah*, "he who knows this". Now Krishna will again connect the concept of material nature with the concept of *prakriti*, as he had done previously (3.5, 3.33, 7.4) and will do so again (15.7, 18.40).

The word *kshetra* is usually translated as "field" and refers to the "field of activity", as *prakriti* is the source of all activities (3.5, 3.33, 9.10, 13.21), both at the material and at the spiritual level. Another word from the same root is *kshatriya* - the position of the royal class that protects the kingdom, that is the field of activity of a king. It is also interesting to note that the word *kshata* means "one who protects from injuries", while *kshi* means "perishing" and *kshar* means "decaying". In relationship to the *kshetra*, the *purusha* or consciousness is the *kshetra jna*, "the knower of the field". However, this definition only applies to one who has attained the transcendental realization and who knows that the eternal *atman* is simply wearing the material body. The word *jna* implies actual knowledge, so a *kshetra jna* is only one who knows he is not the body: the conditioned soul who identifies with the body is just ignorant (*ajna*) and does not know anything.

The knowledge presented by Krishna in this chapter is more advanced than the teachings presented in the previous chapters, and we should not underestimate it. The same knowledge was requested by Brahma at the beginning of creation, as reported in the *Bhagavata Purana* (2.9.25-30). Specifically in verse 27 Brahma asks, *yathatma maya yogena nana sakti upabrimhitam, vilumpan visrjan ghrnam bibhrad atmanam atmana*, "How has your Self, by the Self, through the union with Maya and the ensuing transformations, accepted many *shaktis* for the purpose of the destruction, the manifestation and the preservation (of the universe)?"

Vishnu replies with the famous *catuh sloki* (2.9.33-36) that constitutes the heart of the *Bhagavata Purana*, preceded by these verses: *jnana parama guhyam me yad vijana samanvitam, sarahasyam tad angam ca grihana gaditam maya, yavan aham yatha bhavo yad rupa guna karmakah, tathaiva tattva vijnanam astu te mad anugrahat*, "My supreme knowledge is hidden, and it is applied in practice. Try to understand it while I am explaining it, with its secrets and implications. Let this knowledge be realized by you by my kindness: as it is I who manifest the existence of all forms, qualities and activities." (*Bhagavata Purana*, 2.9.31-32). As we know that forms, qualities and activities are all produced by Prakriti, according to the direction of the Consciousness or Purusha, we see that it is not possible to divide the two. This deep knowledge is expressed in the following *catuh sloki* (2.9.33-36):

aham evasam evagre nanyad yat sat asat param, pascad aham yad etac ca yo 'vasisyeta so 'smy aham, "I am that which existed before the creation, and all that will ever exist. I am the *sat* and the *asat* (the supreme cause and effect), up to the end (of the universe), and I am what remains after all these (creations) and everything else (are dissolved)",

rite 'rtham yat pratiyeta na pratiyeta catmani, tad vidyad atmano mayam yathabhaso yatha tama, "Whatever appears to be of value or without value, is only in relationship with me. You must know that everything (in this world) is just the shadow of my Maya, like darkness is a shadow (of light)",

yatha mahanti bhutani bhutesucchavacesv antu, pravistani apravistani tatha tesu na tesv aham, "Just like the elemental powers (ether, air, fire, water, earth) are contained in all beings, both great and small, and at the same time they are not limited to them, similarly I am in all beings, and yet I am not (limited to them)",

etavad eva jijnasyam tattva jijnasunatmanah, anvaya vyatirekabhyam yat syat sarvatra sarvada, "This (that I have now said) is the most important subject of transcendental knowledge, the *tattva* that should be researched directly and directly, at all times and places and in all circumstances".

क्षेत्रज्ञं चापि मां विद्धि सर्वक्षेत्रेषु भारत ।

क्षेत्रक्षेत्रज्ञयोर्ज्ञानं यत्तज्ज्ञानं मतं मम ॥ १३-३ ॥

kṣetraññam cāpi māṁ viddhi sarvakṣetreṣu bhārata | kṣetrakṣetraññayorjñānam yattajñānam matam mama || 13-3 ||

ksetra jnam: who knows the field; *ca*: and; *api*: also; *mam*: me; *viddhi*: (you should) know; *sarva ksetresu*: in all fields; *bharata*: o descendant of Bharata; *ksetra ksetrajñayoh*: the field and the knower of the field; *jnanam*: knowledge; *yat*: that; *tat*: which; *jnanam*: (is) knowledge; *matam mama*: my opinion.

"O Bharata, you should know that I am also the knower of the field who resides in all fields. Knowing the field and the knower of the field is called knowledge. This is my opinion.

The absolute definition of *jnana*, "knowledge", is the understanding of the two fundamental factors of Reality: *purusha* and *prakriti*, and how they are one and the same, and at the same time they are two distinct *tattvas* or existences. This very subject has been at the heart of all Vedic knowledge and its commentaries by the great traditional *acharyas* - from Adi Shankara (*kevala advaita*) to Ramanuja (*visista advaita*) to Madhva (*visista dvaita*) to Nimbarka (*dvaita advaita*) to Vishnusvami (*suddha dvaita*) to Krishna Chaitanya (*acintya bheda abheda*). The fact is that God as Reality is simultaneously and inconceivably one and different from the manifestation of the universe, from his energies, and from the individual souls, too.

This verse has been largely elaborated by *advaitins* to prove that the *kshetra jna* is one only, as in the statement "I am also the same *kshetra jna*". Unfortunately, a faulty line of interpretation among the *advaitins* has come to conclude that *kevala advaita* means that conditioned souls are nothing but Brahman that has become subject to *maya* or illusion. Consequently that movement has come to be known as the *mayavada* school, as its conclusion implies that material illusion, or ordinary *maya*, is stronger than Isvara. Such conclusion is contrary to the teachings of *Bhagavad gita* and all the other genuine *shastra*, including the *Upanishads* and the *Vedanta sutras*. Of course Isvara resides in the heart of every being as *param atman*, but there is not just one bird on the tree of the body. There are *two* birds in the same tree: the *jivatma* and the *paramatma*. One is conditioned, the other is not - he never has been, and he never will be - because Isvara is above the *sat* and the *asat* (15.16). This has already been stated in verse 9.10: *mayadhyaksena prakritih suyate sa caracaram, hetunanena kaunteya jagad viparivartate*, "Under my order this *prakriti* manifests everything, both moving and non-moving; by this cause the universe is created cyclically."

This *mayavadi* deviation cannot be ascribed to Adi Shankara, who very clearly stated at the beginning of his commentaries to *Bhagavad gita* that Narayana is always transcendental (*narayanah parah avyakta*). He explains further in his commentary to this verse that the *jiva* cannot be Isvara, otherwise Isvara would be subject to *maya*, while we learn from all the *shastra* that Isvara controls *maya*, and not the other way around.

What is Isvara and what is *maya*? Isvara is the supreme Consciousness, and *Maya* is the illusion, the magic power by which this material world is manifested and the individual souls are covered. If we maintain that Isvara can be subjected to *maya*, or ignorance, the very definition of Isvara loses all its meaning.

In his questions and answers to this verse, Adi Shankara clearly states that Isvara is never subject to *maya*. If we postulate otherwise, we should conclude that ignorance does not exist at all, and that everything is just a *lila* of the Supreme that pretends to be covered by ignorance. In a sense, this is true: the material manifestation and the experiences of the conditioned souls are indeed a part of the *lila* of the Supreme, meant to lead the *anu atman* through the evolutionary process. But this is not the *lila* of the *anu atman*: it is the *lila* of the *param atman*. By definition, *lila* is a blissful activity that is totally free from any material conditioning.

In verse 4.5, Krishna had clearly told Arjuna that he knows all lives and experiences (*aham veda sarvani*) because his consciousness is unlimited, while the consciousness of the individual soul is limited, even on the liberated level. What to speak of the conditioned soul, that is covered by ignorance.

There is a clear difference (*viveka*) between *vidya* and *avidya*: if we refuse to acknowledge it, we will be forced to come to the untenable conclusion that *shastra* and *sadhana* are useless, because they are meant to lead us from *avidya* to *vidya*. The scriptures become unnecessary only when the *kshetrajna's* consciousness has directly entered the consciousness of the *paramatma* (*visate tad anantaram*, 18.55), but without the scriptures or *jnana*, one cannot reach this point. It is not simply a matter of different perception of the same situation: God cannot fall under this *tamas* of delusion, because he is *nirguna* - all the scriptures agree on this.

In a sense, also the *anu atma* is *nirguna*: material qualities (such as death, decay etc) do not belong to the *atman*, but are a manifestation of *maya* or *avidya* by illusory superimposition to the *atman*, so the *atman* is not really affected or bound by ignorance and material identification. Illusion can therefore be compared to a cloud in the sky, that cannot really affect the sky itself, but is simply covering our perception of the sky.

Liberation is the inherent quality and nature of the *atman*, while *avidya* is only a superimposition: *avidya* is therefore illusory, as darkness is the absence of light and has no existence of its own. Specifically, *avidya* means identification with *ahankara* and *mamatva*, that we could also translate as "agentship" and "enjoyership".

Defects belong to material body only, to the sense organs that are limited by the four imperfections; blindness concerns the material eyes only, as on the level of liberation there are no defects. However, even on the liberated level, the *anu atman* or *jiva atman* can only be conscious of a limited part of the total *kshetra*, while the *param atman* is eternally conscious (*jna*) of the entire totality of all *kshetras* (*sarva ksetresu*). So *isvara* and *jiva* always remain two different categories.

Svetasvatara Upanishad (1.12) confirms it very clearly: *bhokta bhogyam preritaram ca matva, sarvam proktam tri vidham brahman eta*, "Brahman is said to have three aspects: the enjoyer, the enjoyed and the controller of both". So we understand that Brahman is *atman*, *param atman* and *prakriti*: everything that can exist. And all this is fundamentally Consciousness. *Bhagavata Purana* (8.3.13) clarifies the point: *ksetra jnaya namas tubhyam sarvadyaksaya saksine, purusayatma mulaya mula prakritaye namah*, "I offer my respect to you, the *ksetra jna*. You control everything, you are the witness, the *purusha*, the root of the *atman*, and the root of the *prakriti* as well."

And again: *seyam bhavagato maya yan nanyena virudhyate, isvarasya vimuktasya karpanyam uta bandhanam*, "Some say that Bhagavan is illusion, but this is contradictory because Isvara is always liberated, and totally self sufficient. He can never be in bondage" (*Bhagavata Purana*, 3.7.9).

तत्क्षेत्रं यच्च यादृक्क यद्विकारि यतश्च यत् । स च यो यत्प्रभावश्च तत्समासेन मे शृणु ॥ १३-४ ॥

tatkṣetram yacca yādṛkka yadvikāri yataśca yat | sa ca yo yatprabhāvaśca tatsamāsenā me śṛṇu || 13-4 ||

tat: that; *ksetram*: the field; *yat*: that; *ca*: and; *yadrik*: as it is; *ca*: and; *yat vikari*: its changes; *yatah*: by which; *ca*: and; *yat*: that; *sah*: s/he; *ca*: and; *yah*: who; *yat prabhavah*: its power; *ca*: and; *tat*: that; *samasena*: in brief; *me*: from me; *srinu*: listen.

"Now listen, as I briefly tell you about the field, its transformations, and its power."

Here we penetrate even more deeply into the heart of knowledge as described in the previous verse. The core of all philosophical discussions in Vedic tradition is the correct understanding of the ontological meaning of God compared to the individual and to the world, as we have seen briefly mentioning the most prominent and famous philosophers of these last centuries. Now we will get directly at the root of the issue, by analyzing how the field (*prakriti*) is simultaneously one and different from the knower of the field (*purusha*), and how the interactions between the two are creating the entire world.

In this regard, the traditional Vedic academia presents two main perspectives, called *vivarta vada* and *parinama vada*, broadly described as "superimposition" and "transformation". We can briefly say that the difference between the two is evaluated on the concept of *maya*, "illusion", by which the individual soul is confused, so that it cannot see Reality as it is.

The *vivarta vada* approach is explained by Adi Shankara, who teaches that the manifestation of the universe is not a transformation of God, but only an appearance or illusion (*maya*) as the products of material energy are temporary and unsubstantial. The technical explanation is that the universe is *adhyasa* (with a long *a* in the second position), a superimposition over the changeless Reality of Brahman. In its original presentation, this perspective does not claim that illusion is more powerful than Isvara, as some confused people have come to believe.

Only the individual soul, the *anu atman* or *jiva atman*, can fall under the control of Mahamaya because of its tiny size. This is confirmed also in *Bhagavad gita* and in all the other Vedic texts, and can be easily verified through daily direct experience by observing the delusional state and the sufferings of conditioned persons.

Illusion means that the *jivatman* confused by *maya* falsely identifies with the material body and the material objects of this world: this is the original mistake that creates all the other problems, resulting in innumerable fears and sufferings. In this darkness of illusion, the

conditioned soul sleeps, identifying with a phantasmagoria of forms and names that appear and disappear inevitably in the course of time. Sometimes the conditioned soul experiences them as pleasurable dreams, sometimes as nightmares, but always forgetting its real, original, and permanent identity as spiritual being.

The *parinama vada* approach is usually considered a *shakta* or tantric doctrine, and as such it has been somehow overshadowed during the last centuries because of the increasing influence of patriarchal tendencies on Indian society. However, its contribution to the Vedic heritage of knowledge has continued to be lively and important, especially in the tradition of Deity worship and *bhakti*. According to this approach, the universe is real, as it is a direct transformation of God, therefore Maya Shakti is not illusion, but Reality itself. From this Maya Shakti - the original Prakriti - all the forms derive, both on the spiritual and on the material level. Strangely enough, this is the perspective that could be defined as the original *mayavada* theory, as it presents Maya as the supreme power within the universe.

However, the only people who seem to have problems with what they call "the *mayavada* perspective" (which they identify with the teachings of Shankaracharya) are two particular sects of *vaishnavas*, both presently claiming to be descending from the lineage of Madhva. One of the two sects is the orthodox Madhva *sampradaya*, whose members are also called *tattva vadis*, specifically because Madhva focused all his philosophical arguments against what he called the *maya vadis*. If we properly investigate, we will find out that Madhva's philosophy is strongly patriarchal, and reduces the importance of *bhakti* to a minimum. According to Madhva, only Vishnu is Brahman, and only this Brahman is Reality and Existence; Krishna is a temporary or partial manifestation of Vishnu, and Radharani and Lakshmi are merely ordinary individual *jiva atmans*. In Madhva's perspective, the *jiva atmans* are divided into two different ontological categories: those who can become liberated, and those who cannot (*nitya baddhas*). These *nitya baddhas* continue to take birth in the material world eternally as "bad people" (low caste human beings or *asuras*) without any hope of escaping illusion and ignorance, because their conditioning is their "eternal nature" and can never be overcome. Of course, this is not a fact and it is not confirmed in scriptures.

Ironically, the other *vaishnava* sect that continues the "war against the *mayavadis*" (identified by them as Adi Shankara and his followers) is the Gaudiya *vaishnava* lineage, claiming to descend from Krishna Chaitanya (who appeared in Gaudadesa, or Bengal). However, Krishna Chaitanya was seen by his contemporaries and especially by the Madhva followers, as a *mayavadi* himself (as reported in Krishnadasa's *Chaitanya charitamrita*, *Madhya* 9.250). In the same *Chaitanya charitamrita*, considered by the Gaudiya *vaishnavas* as the most authoritative biography of Krishna Chaitanya, we see that Chaitanya heavily criticized the Madhva lineage in unequivocal terms: *karmi, jnani dui bhakti hina tomara sampradaya dekhi sei dui cihna*, "I see that in your *sampradaya* there is an excessive attachment to *karma* and *jnana* that is obstructing the development of devotion." (*Chaitanya charitamrita*, *Madhya* 9.276). He also says, *sabe eka guna dekhi tomara sampradaye, satya vighraha kari' isvare karaha niscaye*, "The only good thing I see in your *sampradaya* is that you are accepting without any doubt the truth of the (spiritual) form of the Lord." (*Chaitanya charitamrita*, *Madhya* 9.277).

In the conversation between Chaitanya and the Madhva *sampradaya* leaders, it becomes clear that Madhva did not give any importance to *bhakti*, but only to the dutiful performance of social religious duties in the *varna ashrama* system, that according to Madhva automatically leads the eligible souls to liberation and to the attainment of Vaikuntha, the abode of Vishnu (*Chaitanya charitamrita*, *Madhya*, 9.256, 257). In reply, Chaitanya strongly preaches to the Madhva followers about the paramount importance of *bhakti* and the universal scope of the process of self-realization, by which any human being can attain the highest perfection, as confirmed by *Bhagavad gita* (9.32, 33) and *Bhagavata Purana* (6.16.43, 3.33.7, 11.14.21, 10.84.13). The same point is confirmed also by the *Upanishad*, as for example *Svetasvatara Upanishad* (2.5), that claims that all human beings are equally qualified as *amritasya putras* ("children of immortality"), and by the original *samhitas* (*Rig Veda* 5.60.5, *Yajur Veda* 16.15, *Atharva Veda* 3.30.1) that affirm the inherent equality of all human beings. In this light, we can better understand the discussion about *vivarta vada* and *parinama vada*.

Let us now return to the *parinama vada* perspective, that gives paramount importance to *bhakti* and *lila*, and worships Yogamaya as the all-powerful sister of Krishna, who can even cover Krishna's perception to enhance the ecstatic experience of loving relationships in the *lila*. According to the *parinama vada* perspective, God is simultaneously immanent and transcendent to the world, and creates all the things in the world through a transformation of the basic Existence or Brahman.

This is in accordance to what Krishna says in this verse (*yat vikari*, "transformations of Brahman"), and can be best understood when we remember that *kshetra* ("the field") is also Brahman or Consciousness, just like the two *kshetra jnas* - *param atman* and *jiva atman* (*Svetasvatara Upanishad*, 1.12). Also *Chandogya Upanishad* supports this perspective: *yatha saumy ekena mrt pindena sarvam mrnmayam vijnatam syad vacarambhanam vikaro namadheyam mrityikety eva satyam*, "Earth's transformations are merely verbal creations of the process of naming; the substance earth itself is alone real" (6.1.4).

In the *parinama vada* perspective, ignorance (*avidya*) does not have a real existence, but it is simply a temporary and confusing absence of perception of knowledge (*vidya*) experienced by the conditioned soul. For the liberated soul, who sees things as they really are, there is no ignorance, but simply the manifestation of divine *lilas* to which we participate consciously or unconsciously, willingly or unwillingly. So, on this level, illusion "transforms" as *lila* because of the action of Yogamaya, giving a totally new meaning to our perception, as it will be exemplified at the beginning of chapter 15 with the image of the banyan tree whose branches go downwards and whose roots go upwards.

This banyan tree is the *prakriti*, manifesting as Mahamaya in this world and Yogamaya in the transcendental spiritual world. The spiritual world is the supreme position (*pada, dhama*) where there is no need of sun, moon, stars or fire because everything is self effulgent. Mahamaya and Yogamaya appear to be exactly the opposite of each other, like a tree and its reflection on a clear water surface: this is because they both stem from the same root - the Consciousness or *purusha* Brahman, the great treasure that is to be found under the tree.

The main obstacle to this understanding is the widespread misconception that inert matter (*jada*) is ignorance (*avidya*). Actually material objects and phenomena, although not conscious in themselves, are *prakriti* and as such they should be understood as knowledge (*jnana*); in the macrocosm they are the energies (*shaktis*) of the Supreme, Isvara, *param atman*, while in the microcosm they are the objects of the senses (*visaya*) of the *jiva atman*. Consequently, the *jiva atman* has the power to perceive or enjoy them, as his own *shaktis*, secondary manifestations of the supreme Shakti. If we dig even deeper, we will find that such *visayas* are projected by the *jiva atman* through his senses, and therefore the *jiva atman* possesses and manifests a tiny measure of the inherent quality or nature (*prakriti*) of Isvara as the creator. In very simple terms, this power has been described by recent New Age psychology as "the law of attraction", by which our thoughts shape our world and attract events and things (positive or negative) into our lives.

Of course superficial and ignorant simpletons will conclude that it is sufficient to visualize money, properties, position etc in our "meditation" for them to magically manifest into our lives, without any work (*karma*) from our part. Conversely, these deluded people blame failures and losses simply on the "incorrect visualization" that lingers on negative events and things rather than positive events and things.

True, we will not get much benefit from a negative attitude towards life, or the habit of brooding over fears and worries and bad thoughts. In fact, such dark thoughts will distract our mind, preventing us from actually seeing and grasping the positive opportunities to obtain good things, and from rightfully enjoying the good things that we already have. Also, our general demeanor, bodily language, and the energy we project into the environment (as "vibrations" or aura) will reflect this dark and low frequency, subtly attracting people with similar or complementary attitudes and mentality. In other words, we will unconsciously seek people with a negative approach to life, always thinking about fears, disasters, loss, etc, as well as cheaters and exploiters who thrive on the fears of others and take advantage of them.

However, thinking positive, "happy thoughts" will certainly be beneficial to our life, but we will only obtain the good things that we are destined to receive by dint of our good work, performed either in previous lifetimes or in this one. A positive attitude and pleasant smiling face will certainly help a salesman in his work, but he needs to have something valuable to sell, otherwise there will be no income. If he tries to get money without giving anything valuable in return, he will become indebted and will have to pay the *karma*.

Once we have clarified the possible misconceptions about this issue, we can confidently state that - yes, our reality is determined by the mode of energy (*shakti, prakriti*) that we cultivate or "take shelter" in. We will see this concept even more clearly in the subsequent chapter explaining about the modes of *prakriti*, called *gunas*. By taking shelter in *sattva, rajas* or *tamas*, our individual *prakriti* is modified (*vikara*) and the consciousness is manifested differently, moving towards the light or the darkness. Our proper position is in establishing ourselves (our consciousness) in the light and then in the supreme and imperishable Transcendence: *tamaso ma jyotir gamaya, asato ma sad gamaya, mrtiyor ma amrtam gamaya* (*Bṛhad aranyaka Upanishad*, 1.3.28).

Just as in the apparent contradiction of *advaita* ("non dual") and *dvaita* ("dual"), the two approaches of *vivarta vada* and *parinama vada* are actually complementing rather than opposing each other, offering a multi-dimensional vision that can be directly perceived by the grace of the Mother Goddess, Sri Vidya - the *para prakriti*, to whom we must resort and in whom we must take shelter, as recommended by Krishna himself in *Bhagavad gita* (9.13).

The reconciliation of the *vivarta vada* and the *parinama vada*, besides the obviously central factor of *bhakti* (that is repeatedly and clearly presented by *Bhagavad gita* as the key to the entire process) is supported by the teachings of the *Upanishads*. In this perspective, the expression *yat vikari*, meaning "its changes" or "its transformations", refers to the transformations of *maya* or *prakriti*, that, too, is known as Brahman (*Svetasvatara Upanishad* 1.9, 12).

ऋषिभिर्वहुधा गीतं छन्दोभिर्विभिधैः पृथक् । ब्रह्मसूत्रपदैश्चैव हेतुमद्भिर्विनिश्चितैः ॥ १३-५ ॥

ṛṣibhirbahudhā gītaṁ chandobhirvidvidhaiḥ pṛthak | brahmasūtrapadaiścaiva hetumadbhirvinīścitaiḥ || 13-5 ||

ṛisibhih: by the *rishis*; *bahudha:* in many ways/ many times; *gitam:* sung; *chandobhih:* with hymns; *vidvidhaih:* various; *prithak:* again and again; *brahma sutra padaih:* by the aphorisms of the *Brahma sutra*; *ca:* and; *iva:* certainly; *hetumadbhih:* by what is the cause; *vinisicitaih:* without doubt.

"(This knowledge) has been repeatedly sung in many hymns by the Rishis. Again it has been presented in the aphorisms of the Vedanta sutras, with a clear discussion on the causes (and the effects).

Krishna again states very clearly that this knowledge is the most central issue of the entire scope of Vedic teachings, from the original *samhitas* (*Rig, Sama, Yajur, Atharva*) through the *Upanishads* and to the *Vedanta sutras*, in the traditional line of studies prescribed for a genuine student. Unfortunately, due to the degrading influence of the adharmic academic system, the current general opinion is that one should study Vedic knowledge mainly by learning about the presentations of previous "specialized" researchers and scholars (not the original Rishis, though) either in the western-oriented Indology studies, or in the officially recognized Mathas or institutions that claim to be following the teachings of one prominent teacher and scholars as opposed to the others. Whether the claims of such *sampradayas* are true or not, the fundamental fact is that such "second-hand" study is simply not the Vedic method: in the genuine Vedic tradition, each and every student is expected to directly realize the *tattva* from the original *shastra*, while the writings of famous *acharyas* should be considered simply as support consultation material. This means that each and every student should directly examine the original *shastra*, including the *samhitas*, the collections of meaning-packed hymns that are chanted and sung during the traditional Vedic rituals.

The original *shastra*, compiled by Vyasa himself, include the *Vedanta sutras* also called *Vedanta, Brahma sutras, Uttara mimamsa, Brahma mimamsa, Sariraka mimamsa, Nirnayaka shastra, Bhikshu sutras* or *Nyaya prasthanas*. *Vedanta* means "the conclusion of the Vedas", *brahma* refers to the Supreme Brahman, *mimamsa* means "pursuit", *bhikshu* refers to *sannyasis*, *nirmana* means "investigation", and *sariraka* means "of the body", intended as a body of knowledge or *jnana kanda*, as opposed to the treatises on ritual procedures or *karma kanda*.

The text of the *Vedanta* is not very large - it is only 555 aphorisms divided into 4 chapters (*adhyayas*), each consisting of 4 sections (*padas*), containing groups of sentences (*adhikarana*). The elaboration offered by the *Vedanta sutras* about the transformation (*yat vikari*) of the field (*kshetra*) or knowledge (*jnana*), is summarized by verse 1.1.12 (of *Vedanta sutras*): *anandamayah abhyasat*, "its nature is constant happiness". Here *anandamaya* refers to the description of the *Upanishads* by which the living being is "a body" made of happiness, *anandamaya*, surrounded by "bodies" that are increasingly grosser, made respectively of intelligence or knowledge (*gnanamaya*), mind (*manomaya*), life energy (*pranamaya*) and gross matter (*annamaya*) assimilated to the food.

This refers eminently to *Taittiriya Upanishad* (2.1.2) elaborating on the central issue of knowledge: *tasmad va etasmad atmana akasah sambhutah ity adina brahma puccham pratistha ity astenanna mayam pranamaya mano maya vijñana maya ananda mayah panca purusha pathitas tesv annamayadi trayam jada kshetra svarupam, tato bhinnno vijñanamayo jivas tasya bhokteti jiva kshetrajña svarupam,*

tasmac ca bhinnah sarvantara anandamaya itisvara kshetrajna svarupam uktam. Here is the translation: "Among conscious entities, there are 5 gradations of *purushas*, respectively *annamaya* (conscious only of food and sense gratification), *pranamaya* and *manomaya*: these are the modes of consciousness centered on the inert *kshetra*. Different is the *vijnanamaya purusha*, the *jiva*, who is the knower of the *kshetra*: he is the secondary or subordinate *kshetra jna*. Also different is the *isvara*, the *anandamaya purusha*, *paramesvara*, who controls and witnesses everything. He is the original *kshetra jna*."

The first verses of the *Vedanta sutras* already clarify what the text studies: *atha atah brahma jijnasa*, "Therefore, this is the moment to make an effort to understand Brahman" (1.1.1), *janmadi asya atha, tat brahma*, "Brahman is what originated all this" (1.1.2), *shastra yonivat*, "it is the origin of the scriptures" (1.1.3), *tat tu samanyayat*, "but through the agreement (of the statements of the scriptures)". The subsequent verses or aphorisms, from 5 to 11, confirm that according to the scriptures only Brahman, the intelligent and conscious principle, can be the cause of the manifestation of the universe.

महाभूतान्यहंकारो बुद्धिरव्यक्तमेव च । इन्द्रियाणि दशैकं च पञ्च चेन्द्रियगोचराः ॥ १३-६ ॥

mahābhūtānyahaṅkāro buddhiravyaktameva ca | indriyāṇi daśaikam ca pañca cendriyagocarāḥ || 13-6 ||

maha bhutani: the great elements; *ahankarah*: the sense of doership; *buddhih*: intelligence; *avyaktam*: the non-manifested; *eva*: also; *ca*: and; *indriyani*: the senses; *dasa ekam*: ten plus one; *ca*: and; *panca*: five; *ca*: and; *indriya gocarah*: the objects of the senses.

"The gross elements, ahankara, intelligence, the non-manifested, as well as the 11 senses, and the 5 objects of the senses,

In verses 6 and 7 (this one and the subsequent), Krishna describes the components of the universe, the *kshetra* that is manifested by the original *prakriti*. These elements are not very different from the 24 categories of Sankhya. We already know from verse 7.4 that the *maha bhuta* ("great beings") are the fundamental elements of matter - *bhumi* (earth), *apah* (water), *anala* (fire), *vayuh* (air) and *kham* (ether or space). Of course, when we speak of "earth" we include all solid matter, in "water" we include all liquids, and so on. Verse 7.4 also listed the 3 subtle elements, as *ahankara* (identification), *manah* (mind), *buddhi* (intelligence): together with the 5 gross elements, these constitute the eight-fold manifestation of elemental matter, or "separated *prakriti*".

This verse here (13.6) lists *ahankara* and *buddhi*, but the mind (*manas*) is included in the 11 senses, while the *avyaktam* ("non manifested") is the *pradhana*, the primordial aggregate of the *prakriti* before the manifestation of the material variety. More specifically, the 11 senses (*indriyani dasa ekam*) are the 5 senses of action (hands, feet, faculty of speech, anus and genitals), the 5 senses of perception (eyes, ears, mouth/ tongue, nose, skin), and the mind. To these, we need to add the 5 sense objects (*indriya gocarah*), also called *tan matra* (internal sense objects) or *visaya* (external sense objects) such as form, sound, taste, smell and touch.

Everything we see in this world is produced by the transformations of these basic elements, in contact with the *kshetra jna*, "the knower of the field", that is the consciousness or *purusha*. However, all activities are always played within the *kshetra* itself, as the *purusha* actually only experiences the feelings produced by the activities of the qualities and elements of nature. Such is the conclusion of chapter 13: *prakrityaiva ca karmani kriyamanani sarvasah, yah pasyati tathamanam akartaram sa pasyati*, "One who sees that all the activities are performed by nature and the self does nothing, is truly seeing" (13.30). This point had already been expressed previously: *na kartritvam na karmani lokasya srijati prabhuh, na karma-phala-samyogam svabhavas tu pravartate*, "The master (of the city of the nine gates, i.e. the body) is not the cause of the actions performed by others, therefore s/he is not engaged by the results of activities. It is only his/ her nature that acts" (5.14). In this regard, we need to remember here that the *kshetra jna* is always of neutral gender, both male and female, even when we use the term *purusha*.

Another important verse stating this concept is: *prakriteh kriyamanani gunaih karmani sarvasah, ahankara vimudhatma kartaham iti manyate*, "All activities are actually performed by the qualities of nature, but a foolish person who is confused by egotism thinks 'I am doing'." (3.27)

Even earlier, Krishna had presented the same concept at the beginning of his instructions (2.19): *ya enam vetti hantaram yas cainam manyate hatam, ubhau tau na vijanito nayam hanti na hanyate*, "One who knows this (*atman/ brahman*) does not consider himself to be killing or being killed: in both (positions) he knows that one does neither truly kill nor is truly killed."

इच्छा द्वेषः सुखं दुःखं संघातश्चेतना धृतिः । एतत्क्षेत्रं समासेन सविकारमुदाहृतम् ॥ १३-७ ॥

icchā dveṣaḥ sukhaṁ duḥkhaṁ saṅghātaścetanā dhṛtiḥ | etatḥkṣetraṁ samāseṇa savikāramudāhṛtam || 13-7 ||

iccha: desire; *dvesah*: repulsion; *sukham*: happiness; *duhkham*: distress; *sanghatah*: the aggregate; *cetana*: the awareness; *dhritih*: determination; *etat*: (all) this; *ksetram*: the *kshetra*; *samasena*: in brief; *sa vikaram*: together with their products/ interactions; *udahrtam*: as examples.

desire, repulsion, happiness, distress, the aggregate of the symptoms of life, as well as determination: all these illustrate the concept of field and its interactions.

Besides the 24 elements analyzed by *sankhya* and mentioned in the previous verse, Krishna continues here to list the components of the world, created by the interactions and transformations of the *gunas* - the three modes of material nature. The word *iccha* means "desire", as in "attraction", while *dvesa* means "hatred" as in "repulsion". We will see in later chapters that these two fundamental polarities equally apply to *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*, and have the power to bind the consciousness of the *jivatman* to the delusion of *maya*. To break this bondage, we need to become detached from both.

The same applies to *sukham* ("happiness", "joy", "pleasure", "comfort") and *duhkham* ("distress", "suffering", "pain", "discomfort"). This *sukham* type of happiness is different from *ananda*, the original genuine transcendental nature of the soul, that is not subject to polarity or

duality. There is no contrary or opposite to *ananda*, because *ananda* is an absolute concept; on the other hand, *sukham* finds its opposite in *duhkham*, and both are applied to the transformations of the three *gunas* - *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*. A *jivatman* who has taken shelter in *sattva* will feel pleasure in *sattva* and discomfort in *rajas* or *tamas*, while a *jivatman* who has taken shelter in *tamas* will feel pleasure in *tamas* but discomfort in *sattva* or *rajas*, and so on. Pleasure and pain, just like attraction and repulsion, are relative feelings that each particular individual experiences in different circumstances according to the particular mode of objects and activities that s/he wants to experience. A pig will be enthusiastic about eating excrements and remain uninterested in good sattvic food that is suitable for evolved humans. So according to the type or mode of nature we cultivate, we will develop attraction and consequently we will take birth in a suitable body whose senses will better appreciate that mode.

The *sangatah*, "the aggregate", refers to the bodies that are composed of all such elements - gross and subtle - and that are a direct result of *iccha*, *dvesa*, *sukha* and *duhkha*. This means that once we become detached from these elements, and we turn our consciousness from *cetana* to *cit*, we will not need to take a material body any more, and we will be liberated.

The word *cetana* is a special technical term derived from the root *cit*, usually translated as "knowledge", as in the intrinsic and transcendental quality of awareness that composes Brahman, together with *sat* ("existence" or "eternity") and *ananda* (absolute "happiness"). *Cetana* indicates the perception of material existence - the *kshetra* (field) and its *vikaras* (transformations). It can be translated as "awareness" and also as "symptoms of life", but on the level of duality and transformation, therefore it is also subject to the coloration of the *gunas* - *sattva*, *rajas*, *tamas*.

The last factor mentioned in the verse is *dhritih*, "determination" or "patience", that as we will see in later chapters can also be applied to any of the material *gunas* - *sattva*, *rajas*, *tamas* - thus producing a number of interactions and reactions. When directed to the ultimate transcendental purpose of life, patience can support and lead us to liberation. Similarly, *iccha* and *dvesa* can be applied to aspiring to serve the Supreme and to avoiding everything that is unfavorable to the service of the Supreme. Again, joys and sorrows and the other modes of consciousness or awareness, as well as the gross and subtle material elements, can be suitably engaged in the service of the Supreme, and therefore they will become instruments for our liberation. Therefore we should understand that all these factors can be manipulated and utilized by the *jiva atman* to experience the *kshetra* and its varieties, either towards further bondage or towards liberation. When we try to lord it over material nature (*apara prakriti*), they will lead us to bondage, while when we engage them in the service of the Supreme under the tutelage of spiritual nature (*para prakriti*), they will lead us to liberation and to pure *bhakti*.

The word *vikara*, "transformation" or "change", is also used to indicate the six stages (*sad guna*) of every manifestation in this world: birth, growth, staying, generation of byproducts, decay, and death.

अमानित्वमदम्भित्वमहिंसा क्षान्तिरार्जवम् । आचार्योपासनं शौचं स्थैर्यमात्मविनिग्रहः ॥ १३-८ ॥

amānitvam adambhitvam ahimsā kṣāntirāṛjavam | ācāryopāśanam śaucam sthairyam ātmavinigrahaḥ || 13-8 ||

amanitvam: not boasting; *adambhitvam*: lack of arrogance; *ahimsa*: freedom from hatred; *ksantih*: tolerance; *arjavam*: straightforwardness; *acarya upasanam*: approaching the *acharya*; *saucam*: cleanliness; *sthairyam*: steadfastness; *atma vinigrahaḥ*: self control.

"Freedom from the desire for honors, lack of arrogance, freedom from hatred, as well as tolerance, simplicity, the act of approaching the *acharya*, cleanliness, determination, self control,

The points mentioned by Krishna in these verses are also confirmed in several other passages of the *shastra*, for example in *Bhagavata Purana* (11.10.6), in Krishna's instructions to Uddhava: *amany amatsaro dakso, nirmamo drdha sauhrdah, asatvaro 'ritha jijnasur, anasuyur amogha vak*. A good student is not interested in "making a career", but simply in the genuine cultivation and realization of knowledge. This means he does not want to receive special honors or positions, therefore he is not envious of the honors and the positions of others; most notably he is not envious of the position of the *guru*, and he is not happily anticipating the idea of taking his place. Unfortunately in the course of Kali yuga, almost all major disciplic successions have grown into powerful institutions, where materialistic interests find scope in the pursuit of control over funds, properties, and followers. This creates opportunities for attractive careers for impostors and exploiters, especially for those who are clever or mentally imbalanced enough to prefer power games over the healthy ordinary and harmless forms of basic sense gratification that are not contrary to the principles of *dharmā*, starting from truthfulness. In turn, this explains why so many great *acharyas* who established successful lineages live short lives, sometimes poisoned by their own foremost associates and followers. Of course this scenario can be avoided if the students are properly qualified in *ahimsa*, or absence of hatred and violence: only a non-violent person can truly acquire knowledge, so we should always be very wary when we encounter "religious" people who are overtly or covertly violent towards innocent creatures.

In his instructions to Uddhava, the words *amani* and *amatsara* are very closely connected (and again recalled by the word *anasuyuh*, "free from envy") establishing the primary qualification of a true and dharmic seeker of knowledge. The word *daksha* ("skillful", "expert") summarizes in *Bhagavata Purana* a number of other qualities detailed in these 4 verses of *Bhagavad gita*, namely simplicity, self control, proper choice of residence and so on - as these are all intelligent decisions whose value was learned from experience.

The word *adambhitvam*, translated as "freedom from arrogance", is strictly connected to *amanitvam* or "freedom from the desire for honors". Very often, people are suffering from lack of self esteem and self confidence because they confuse humility with humiliation; we must therefore clarify this misconception.

The word *nirmama*, "free from sense of possession", equates with *Gita's* instructions in these verses on *vairagya*, *asakti*, *anabhisvanga*, *sama cittatva* and *nirahankara*. By and large, the *brahmana* (anyone who sincerely pursues knowledge) should remain detached from the ordinary traps of family and society. In the *brahmacharya* stage, from age 5 to 15 or 17, the student is physically too young to get entangled in social responsibilities and he remains as a son in the house of the *guru*. After graduation, at the age of 17, the student usually chooses a suitable wife and as a norm generates or adopts at least one son to repay his debt to his own ancestors. However, he does not take pride in producing many children, or flaunting his beautiful and lavishly decorated wife in social gatherings, or in accumulating

unnecessary properties or wealth. He does not even like to be an honored guest at public scholarly opportunities, to show off his learning and exalted position: all these are merely distractions, a waste of time and energy. The relationship between the disciple and the *guru* or *acharya* should always remain a personal matter, focused on the genuine transmission of knowledge, and free from any materialistic consideration. This is possible only when the disciple is truly detached from attraction to self-aggrandizement and hunger for power.

These five verses of chapter 13 (8 to 12) that describe knowledge (*jnana*) are very important to study, and we strongly recommend our readers to memorize and quote them as much as possible. Unfortunately, the current general opinion of people about knowledge is quite different, and involves arrogance, conceit, and a strong material identification and attachment for social position. A "learned scholar" especially wants to make a career in academia and society, and obtain titles and recognition, because according to the degraded present academic system, without such official institutional endorsement, one does not have fair chances to engage in his/ her proper occupation. The hypertrophy of government control and financial lobbies has created a sort of mafia that obstructs and prevents independent and unbiased thinking and learning (and teaching). Standardized school education is strictly enforced under the pretext of promoting culture and literacy, but it is actually used to restrict the field of knowledge within politically accepted limits, to better control and exploit the population. This applies to all levels of schools, from primary to the highest levels of university, as well as to the field of publications, because publishing houses are also controlled and used by the System. However, there is a way out - the growing sense of independence and the grass-root spreading of internet communication and social media, that facilitates home schooling, self-employment, self-publishing, alternative education, and free exchange of ideas, including debates.

Traditional academic institutions and commercial publishing houses are losing their power and control, and this means that individuals have now the opportunity to teach/ learn privately in courses and seminars independently from the academic system, and to publish their books privately and make them available to their contacts and to the public, without being limited by the decisions of the political and financial lobbies. The next step towards freedom in this extraordinary social evolution of our times is self sufficiency for basic requirements such as food and energy, because most genuine intellectuals today are severely limited by their ordinary financial needs, that force them to take up "day jobs" that consume all their time and energies without affording them any opportunity to actually engage in the work that would be their greatest contribution to humanity. This also applies to the ordinary teaching and research jobs - dependent or employed - within the mainstream academic system, that severely restrict the scope of studies and transmission of knowledge by setting commercially oriented and politically acceptable limits. Such jobs only appear to be a proper engagement for intellectuals, but in reality they are not different from all the other servile occupations. In the Vedic system, intellectuals - *brahmanas* - never depend on anyone else, especially not on an adharmic or asuric government, because the exploration, pursuance, preservation and transmission of knowledge must not be subjected to political control, guidelines or influence. How to re-establish the original Vedic system? We can start by reviewing our life priorities, including the desire for honors and career that push intellectuals into the trap of political subservience. We can give greater importance to simplicity, self control and frugality of life, applying also the other principles of knowledge mentioned in these verses - such as renouncing attachment and gratification (the possession and control of the sense objects), giving less importance to family life and social interaction, and more importance to solitary and peaceful life, where one can totally become dedicated to knowledge.

There is a growing body of resources, know-how and support structure opportunities, to facilitate the self-sufficiency of individuals or very small communities, through permaculture and even urban gardening, home-level renewable energy production (solar, wind, biogas), re-purposing and re-cycling materials and objects, DIY (do-it-yourself) techniques and basic requirements for daily necessities such as bread, jams, preserves, snacks, drinks, cleaning products, cosmetics, clothing and ornaments, toys, etc. It is now possible for most people to start living off-grid and without the need of a regular salary, which means that we are not bound to a regular job and all that is involved in it (social obligations etc), and we can really engage in the true purpose of human life.

इन्द्रियार्थेषु वैराग्यमनहंकार एव च । जन्ममृत्युजराव्याधिदुःखदोषानुदर्शनम् ॥ १३-९ ॥

indriyartheshu vairāgyamanahankāra eva ca | janmamṛtyujarāvyaadhiduḥkhadoṣānudarśanam || 13-9 |

indriya arthesu: in the objects of the senses; *vairagyam*: renunciation; *anahankarah*: freedom from the sense of doership; *eva*: certainly; *ca*: and; *janma*: birth; *mṛtyu*: death; *jara*: old age; *vyadhi*: disease; *duhkha*: suffering; *dosa*: the defect; *anudarśanam*: seeing clearly.

renunciation towards the objects of the senses, freedom from the sense of doership, as well as the clear perception of the inherent sufferings and problems of birth, death, old age and disease,

The importance of detachment from material identifications, possession and gratification continues to be stated in these crucial verses. Any intelligent and sincere person will understand that such material identifications and attachments are the direct cause of further entanglement in the cycle of births and deaths, the root ignorance that causes all sufferings. Deluded people, who are strongly identified with their material body, fall so deeply into ignorance that they even mistake *dharma* for *adharmā*, and *adharmā* for *dharma* (18.31-32). According to the delusional and dangerous casteist mentality, birth prejudice is the essence of all *dharma* and religious knowledge, and attachment to materialistic society and family life is considered the perfection of religious life for "high caste" Hindus. The concepts of scholarly erudition, seminal or ideological descent ("spiritual lineage"), high birth and parentage, social prestige, position of honor in gatherings and functions, are all manifestations of *ahankara* ("I am the doer") and as such, they are clear evidence of serious ignorance and confusion.

Ordinary materialistic people celebrate the birth of their children as a happy event, because they consider this physical body as the all in all, that enables one to enjoy sense gratification and all its attending circumstances. In Vedic society there are no unwanted children and there is usually no abortion, because all sexual relationships are automatically treated as marriage and everyone has access to safe herbal preventive contraception. However, even in the most favorable circumstances, birth involves a great amount of suffering for the mother and especially for the child, as described in various texts, for example in *Bhagavata Purana* (3.31.1-32). The purpose of human life is therefore liberation from the material conditionings that cause reincarnation, and this is done through the genuine realization of transcendental knowledge, as per the instructions of Krishna.

Family life is generally not favorable to spiritual progress because it reinforces bodily identification, as most of its exchanges and interactions are based on physical contact and roles. But all children are born out of sexual intercourse, and sensual gratification is considered totally legitimate and even sacred when pursued in a dharmic way. Also, a genuine devotee of Krishna will remain protected from attachments because s/he sees his/ her family members as servants of Krishna, and her/ his house as Krishna's house; s/he will consume good food and other pleasurable things as *prasadam* after offering them to Krishna, and worship the Deity of Krishna regularly as the owner and head of the household.

However, it takes a very strong spiritual consciousness to remain detached from bodily identification when our senses are fully engaged in experiencing the greatest pleasures of material life. The danger is very real, and clearly described in many scriptures, especially in the *Bhagavata Purana*, where we find warnings about material attachments and identifications for example in Kapila's teachings (3.31.29-35, 3.31.39-46) and Prahlada's teachings (7.5.5, 7.6.1-18).

Complete renunciation is not the answer, especially in Kali yuga, when taking *sannyasa* is a very risky choice, often causing degradation more than purification. Indeed, the artificial and superficial acceptance of the order of *sannyasa* can truly be the last snare of illusion, therefore it is not recommended at all: *asvamedham gavalambham sannyasam pala paitrkam, devarena sutotpattim kalau panca vivarjayet. Brahma vaivarta Purana* quoted by Chaitanya as in *Chaitanya charitamrita (Adi lila, 17.164)* states, "In this age of Kali, five acts are forbidden: the *asvamedha yajna*, the *gomedha yajna*, the acceptance of the order of *sannyasa*, the offering of oblations of flesh to the forefathers, and a man's begetting children in his brother's wife."

In order to actually understand the teachings of Vedic tradition on this and other important issues, we need to remember that the *Vedas* do not absolutely prescribe or forbid any specific action, because what is medicine for one can be poison for another, and vice versa. There are no "commandments" or blind allegiance in the Vedic system, not even to a *guru* or spiritual lineage (as in a church, for example), because *dharma* and knowledge must be based on personal self realization, and they are dynamic and not static.

In abrahamic ideologies, dogma and fatwas are handed down from the politically established "religious authorities" and the general people are obliged to accept and obey them without questioning, because they have nothing to do with intelligence or wisdom, or even with common sense, decency, conscience and fundamental ethical principles. In fact, the litmus test of one's belonging to an abrahamic faith is the willingness to go against intelligence, wisdom, common sense, conscience and ethics, in order to execute the order of the "established religious authorities". The Vedic system, summarized in the teachings of *Bhagavad gita*, is diametrically opposite. Krishna explains to Arjuna that he should not hesitate to kill his elders and teachers because they are aggressors, having come to the battlefield to wage an unjust aggressive war against him and his brothers. Such misled elders have chosen an adharmic behavior and they cannot be allowed to damage the *prajas* and the kingdom any further. Arjuna must be ready to overcome his attachments and identification and kill his own family members, but not because the priests are telling him to do so, on the basis of some pseudo moralistic fatwa. He is certainly not going to kill harmless animals, women and children or other innocent civilians, or cartoonists, intellectual dissidents, secular activists, libertarians, non-believers of any persuasion, or anyone who refuses to submit to the priests' unreasonable and adharmic demands. He is also not going to kill or harm anyone on the basis of race, ethnic group, nationality, or any other birth/ bodily consideration. It is very important that we understand that the concept of *dharma yuddha* has nothing in common with the so called "holy war" or "religious justice" or "moral police" of abrahamics. In the Vedic system, one can only use force against an aggressor - a person who has already started to attack us with dangerous weapons or clearly manifesting the intention to cause harm to us, to our dependents or to good innocent people.

As a general rule, one should also avoid all kinds of foul play even against aggressors. Krishna never told Arjuna to assassinate Duryodhana in secret, even after Duryodhana had repeatedly attempted to kill the Pandavas and their mother by stealth - by poisoning their food, by torching the house where they were sleeping, and so on. In extreme circumstances, when an adharmic aggressor is too powerful, too well protected, or too sneaky to be fought in the normal manner, a dharmic warrior can resort to stealth and extreme strategies. But these must be carefully chosen from time to time, with the utmost attention to preserving the spirit of dharmic action.

असक्तिरनभिष्वङ्गः पुत्रदारगृहादिषु । नित्यं च समचित्तत्वमिष्टानिष्टोपपत्तिषु ॥ १३-१० ॥

asaktiranabhiṣvaṅgaḥ putradāragṛhādiṣu | nityam ca samacittatvamīṣṭāniṣṭopapattiṣu || 13-10 |

asaktih: freedom from attachment; *anabhisvaṅgaḥ*: without identifying with emotions and situations; *putra dara griha adisu*: regarding the sons, the wife, the house etc; *nityam*: always; *ca*: and; *sama cittatvam*: equal attitude; *ista*: desired; *anista*: unwanted; *upapattisu*: on receiving.

freedom from attachment, detachment from all association, including the sense of belonging towards children, wife, home etc, as well as equal attitude when receiving the pleasant and the unpleasant,

The qualities of knowledge mentioned in this verse confirm the points of the previous verse and the considerations about choosing *dharma* above the sense of belonging, possession and identification that are characteristic of bodily relationships with family and society. Krishna insists so much on detachment because bodily or otherwise material identification is the root of all ignorance, and creates the divisive mentality that is characteristic of the *asuras*. The *asuras* are those who attack others to impose their own domination and to exploit people and resources; we could also call them "imperialists".

When we understand that *dharma* consists of the eternal and universal principles of natural ethics (compassion, truthfulness, cleanliness, self-control, etc) and is supported by intelligence (*buddhi*), we become able to choose *dharma* over bodily identifications and attachments, sense gratification, and political loyalties.

As we have already mentioned at the close of the previous chapter, transcendental knowledge and *bhakti* are non-different from *sanatana dharma (dharma amritam idam)*. So whatever we have discussed in these verses about choosing *dharma* over bodily identifications and attachments directly applies to choosing transcendental knowledge and *bhakti* over bodily identifications and attachments. Transcendental

knowledge, or *atma vidya*, is non-different from *bhakti*, because as soon as we realize our true spiritual nature and identity (*prakriti* and *purusha*), we immediately connect to the supreme Consciousness in an attitude of service and belonging, that we can define as love.

To rise to a higher level in the interpretation of these verses according to the *bhakti* consciousness, we can turn to one of the most famous *bhakti* literature traditions. In *Chaitanya charitamrita (Madhya, 22.78-80)*, Chaitanya is quoted to present 26 prominent qualities of a genuine devotee as follows: 1. *kripalu* (kind and accessible to everyone), 2. *akrita droha* (not hostile to anyone), 3. *satya sara* (always dedicated to truthfulness and to the essence of things), 3. *sama* (equally disposed towards everyone), 4. *nidosa* (free from bad behavior and bad qualities), 5. *vadanya* (generous, magnanimous), 6. *mridu* (with a sweet disposition), 7. *suci* (clean and pure), 8. *akinchana* (detached from all material identifications and possessions or affiliations), 9. *sarva upakaraka* (working for the benefit of all creatures), 10. *santa* (serene and peaceful), 11. *krishnaika sarana* (depending on God only), 12. *akama* (free from material desires), 13. *aniha* (selfless), 14. *sthira* (determined, stable), 15. *vijita sad guna* (having vanquished the six negative tendencies and material demands of the body and mind), 16. *mita bhuk* (eating frugally), 17. *apramatta* (free from illusion and delusion), 18. *manada* (respecting others), 19. *amani* (not demanding respect for oneself), 20. *gambhira* (deep and thoughtful), 21. *karuna* (compassionate and sympathetic towards the sufferings of others), 22. *maitra* (friendly), 23. *kavi* (poetic), 24. *daksha* (skillful or expert), 25. *mauni* (grave and silent when required).

In this light we can better understand the statement of the *Bhagavata Purana* (5.18.12): *yasyasti bhaktir bhagavaty akincana, sarvair gunais tatra samasate surah, harav abhaktasya kuto mahad guna, manorathenasati dhavato bahih*, "Wherever there is pure devotion to Bhagavan, also all the good qualities of the Devas are found, while a person who has no devotion towards Hari, and runs around pursuing external things under the dictation of the mind, can never have such great qualities". This means that a true devotee is recognized by his/her qualities as mentioned by the scriptures, and by the lack of interest towards external things such as material identifications, bodily concerns, mundane attachments and so on. On the other hand, a materialistic person may gain so many external possessions and positions, but because s/he is always ready to drop everything to run after the next illusion, all the good qualities and achievements s/he may have obtained become immediately lost and are therefore useless.

मयि चानन्ययोगेन भक्तिरव्यभिचारिणी । विविक्तदेशसेवित्वमरतिर्जनसंसदि ॥ १३-११ ॥

mayi cānanyayogena bhaktiravyabhicāriṇī | viviktadeśasevitvamaratirjanasamsadi || 13-11 ||

mayi: to me; *ca*: and; *ananya*: totally focused; *yogena*: by the connection/ union; *bhaktih*: of devotion; *avyabharini*: uninterrupted; *vivikta desa sevitam*: performing service in a solitary place; *arati*: without attachment; *jana samsadi*: to meeting people/ the company of others.

totally and constantly focusing on me through *bhakti yoga*, performing service in a solitary place, without attachment for meeting others,

Krishna's teachings never lose sight of the crucial requirement of *bhakti*, the loving connection between the individual consciousness and the supreme Consciousness.

We have already seen that the individual *jivatman* is unable to control the *prakriti*, but is forced to submit to her, engaging in activities all the time although the *purusha* is not the *karta*, the "doer" of the action. Verse 3.5 stated: *na hi kascit kshanam api jatu tishthaty akarmakrit, karyate hy avasah karma sarvah prakriti-jair gunaih*, "Never, at any time, can a person remain without acting even for one moment, because he is forced to into action by all the *gunas* born from *prakriti*."

Again verse 18.40 will conclude: *na tad asti prithiviam va divi deveshu va punah, sattvam prakriti jair muktam yad ebhish syat tribhir gunaih*, "There is not even one single person, either in this world or in the world of the Devas, who is free from the influence of the three *gunas* created by the *prakriti*".

The difference between the deluded souls and the wise souls is the conscious choice to serve the divine Consciousness: *mahatmanas tu mam partha daivim prakritim asritah, bhajanty ananya-manaso jñatva bhutadim avyayam*, "However, o son of Pritha (Arjuna), the great souls take shelter in the divine nature and serve me with undivided attention, knowing that I am the inexhaustible origin of all beings" (9.13).

By directly connecting to the supreme Consciousness in a spirit of service, we will happily be engaged on the transcendental level, because the supreme Consciousness is directing the divine *Prakriti* (4.6, 8.4, 9.8, 9.10). To be able to remain on that level of consciousness without interruption (*avyabharini*), we need to carefully manage our life habits and choices and avoid disruptions caused by others. Living in a solitary place is therefore one of the most important requirements, because everyone needs silence and peace in order to train and engage the mind in the proper way. In this verse this concept is explained with the words *vivikta desa sevitam*, that had already been mentioned in verse 6.10. This expression refers to a quiet place, free from disturbances and distractions, pure and clean, and comfortable enough so that our meditation is not interrupted by distress signals from the body and the senses. Also, verse 13.11 specifies that one should not only live in a secluded and peaceful place, but that one should also live alone (*ekaki*) in order to avoid the disturbances created by people who are not interested in the cultivation of *yoga* and spiritual life. This will certainly help us to remain *amogha vak*, free from unnecessary talking or *prajalpa*.

Again, the expression *arati jana samsadi* indicates that one should be free from the need or desire to be in the company of others. The attraction or attachment for social life is caused by a fundamental sense of insecurity and fear, by a constant unpleasant chattering and nagging of the mind, that is temporarily covered by louder noise and stronger sensory stimulation. In this way the anxious and confused person seeks the moving crowds, songs, dance, entertainment, fun, and all the various types of sense gratification that distract the mind, as well as the hypnotic effects of intoxication, foolish television shows, and so on.

There is nothing wrong with a little fun or entertainment, that can help us relax the mind and give new strength to the senses, but we should not be attached to it or allow it to control our mind. It should rather be the other way around: we should control our mind, and control the type of entertainment we allow it - sattvic or preferably pure sattvic. As we have already mentioned regarding regulated sense gratification

(2.64, 2.65, 2.68, 3.6, 3.7, 3.41, 4.22, 4.26, 5.8-11, 6.16-17, 6.24, 7.11, 9.27), the secret to remaining free from material entanglement is to accept whatever sattvic pleasures we obtain naturally and to offer them to the supreme Consciousness in a spirit of service. The practice of *bhakti yoga* is also subject to the principles of *yama* and *niyama*, the regulated prescriptions and abstentions that protect us from adharmic, rajasic and tamasic contaminations. Such rules are favorable to *bhakti*, and they are meant to support us in our development and service.

अध्यात्मज्ञाननित्यत्वं तत्त्वज्ञानार्थदर्शनम् । एतज्ज्ञानमिति प्रोक्तमज्ञानं यदतोऽन्यथा ॥ १३-१२ ॥

adhyātmaḥjñānanityatvaṁ tattvajñānārthadarśanam | etajñānamiti proktamajñānam yadato'nyathā || 13-12 ||

adhyatma: the original soul; *jñana*: knowledge; *nityatvam*: the eternity/ constant existence; *tattva*: reality; *jñana artha darsanam*: the realization of the value of knowledge; *etat*: (all) this; *jñanam*: *jñana*; *iti*: like this; *proktam*: called; *ajñanam*: *ajñana*; *yat*: that; *atah*: than this; *anyatha*: any other.

the constant awareness of the original soul, the realization of the value of knowledge: all this is called *jñana*, and anything else is *ajñana*."

These two last items in the description of true knowledge summarize its meaning and scope, showing how in fact all the other items in the list are simply expansions of the consciousness of the Supreme Self, characterized by the stability of spiritual awareness. They would be meaningless without the proper consciousness of the transcendental spiritual nature of the Supreme Self or *adhyatma*.

One who is truly situated in the supreme consciousness is free from *ahankara* and *mamatva*, and therefore is never arrogant or hateful, because he knows that all *jivatmans* are parts of the *paramatman*. The awakening of Self realization also produces a strong desire to harmonize with the Supreme in loving service, therefore one spontaneously approaches the great souls to be inspired and instructed and engaged properly. A person established in Self realization remains balanced and conscious in all circumstances, perceiving things as they are in truth beyond the superficial appearances, and keeping proper consciousness and awareness as the first priorities in life.

The word *adhyatma* ("the original soul") is particularly important here because it indicates a level of consciousness that is higher than the individual *jivatman*. We could call it *krishna chaitanya* or Krishna Consciousness, but we must be very careful not to misunderstand the definition as a superficial sectarian allegiance to some kind of organized religion. A proper realization of *adhyatma* is the key to actually understanding the original meaning of Krishna Consciousness - the *acintya bheda abheda tattva* that reconciles the apparently opposed perspectives of *dvaita* and *advaita*.

Adhyatma refers to the pure Consciousness, that is not bound by any material limitation, and that is the origin and the meaning of everything that exists. When the individual *atman* becomes truly conscious of the *adhyatma*, individuality shifts from the separatist mentality from the harmonization with the Supreme, and all activities - thinking, feeling, willing, acting - are lovingly focused in the Supreme only. The individual realizes he is simply a *shakti* of the Supreme, a limb (*amsa*) of his unlimited transcendental body, and everything else becomes irrelevant. There is no "personalism versus impersonalism" for a truly realized soul: all contradictory dualities become reconciled, because the Supreme includes all realities and all perspectives.

A pure devotee forgets himself or herself in his/ her meditation and service, immersing completely into the consciousness of the Supreme, so in a sense we can say that his/ her individuality becomes lost on the level of consciousness. Simultaneously, individuality continues to exist eternally in the loving exchanges between the *bhakta* (the devotee) and the *bhokta* (the object of devotion). There is no point in trying to intellectually understand this simultaneous truth of two apparently opposite concepts, because it is explicitly declared as inconceivable (*acintya*). People should stop wasting time and energy into childish squabbles over "who is right and who is wrong" on the subject of personal and impersonal perspectives of God.

All differences are automatically solved when one becomes able to directly see (*darshana*) truth in its greater picture, in a vision that reconciles all apparent opposites; at that point, there is nothing else except engaging in the picture itself, because we realize we are also part of the picture and we have a duty or function to perform there. This is the *tattva jñana artha darshana* described as the sum and substance at the conclusion of these verses.

Active union with the Great Picture of Reality (*yoga*) becomes the complete, constant and permanent (*ananya*) focus of consciousness, precisely because we are already connected with Everything. What else could we desire or need to search? True *jñana* dissipates or destroys the apparent changes of the *kshetra*, and our consciousness remains fully absorbed in eternity (*sat*), cognizance (*cit*) and bliss (*ananda*).

ज्ञेयं यत्तत्प्रवक्ष्यामि यज्ज्ञात्वामृतमश्नुते । अनादि मत्परं ब्रह्म न सत्तन्नासदुच्यते ॥ १३-१३ ॥

jñeyam yattatpravakṣyāmi yajjñātvāmṛtamśnute | anādi matparam brahma na sattannāsaducyate || 13-13 ||

jneyam: what is to be known; *yat*: which; *tat*: that; *pravakṣyami*: I will tell; *yat*: which; *jñatva*: by knowing; *amritam*: nectar/ immortality; *asnute*: one tastes; *anadi*: without beginning; *mat*: me; *param*: supreme; *brahma*: Brahman; *na*: not; *sat*: sat; *tat*: that; *na*: not; *asat*: asat; *ucyate*: is called.

"I will tell you what is to be known, whose knowledge enables one to taste immortality. My supreme Brahman is the beginningless reality, and it is said that it is neither *sat* nor *asat*.

The first word of this verse, *jneyam*, is directly linked with Arjuna's question in the first verse of the chapter (*jñanam jneyam ca*) and with the very identity of Vishnu, God, as we will see in verses 17 and 18 (*ca tad jneyam grasinu prabhavisnu ca*). As explained in verse 19 of this same chapter, a devotee can attain true *bhava* (devotional absorption, the nature of Brahman as consciousness) only in this realization (*mad bhakta etad vijñaya mad bhava upapadyate*). This is also reinforced by the word *asnute* ("s/he tastes") that immediately reminds us of the concept of *rasa* ("taste"), connected with the various feelings or sentiments within the consciousness, especially in relationships.

How to achieve this level? By listening or hearing the discourse (*pravacan*) of the great realized souls, the *acharyas* and the Personalities of God. It is true that normally this hearing process (*sravana*) develops in the personal presence of the *guru*, but we need to understand that it is not merely a physical activity. Just like it is not sufficient to look at the pages of a book to actually understand the meaning of its content, it is not sufficient to sit in front of a *guru* or *bhakta* and let his/ her voice into our ears in order to actually absorb the teachings. If we do not pay sufficient attention and do not accept the teachings sincerely to apply them in practice, it will take a very long time for such discourses to even make a dent into our thick layers of ignorance, and chances are that the weeds of *anarthas* (pride, arrogance, power hunger, delusional identifications etc) will actually invade our hearts and prevent any real realization with a toxic overgrowth. On the other hand, a sincere student will be able to listen to the self realized souls and the Personalities of God even without their physical presence, by associating with them on the spiritual level (through a heart connection), on the subtle or astral level, or simply by reading their books. This is certainly more effective than absent-mindedly sitting in front of the physical body of the *guru*, without the sincere resolution to try to understand and actually practice the teachings. And what should such teachings be about? The most important teachings are those presented by Krishna in *Bhagavad gita*, the first among the *prasthanaya*, the fundamental texts of Vedic knowledge.

The key words in this verse are *anadi mat param brahma*. They constitute the object of the knowledge announced by Krishna, and described by the two adjoining parts of the verse ("whose knowledge enables one to taste immortality" and "it is said to be neither *sat* nor *asat*"). As it often happens in Vedic scriptures, a sentence may contain a number of layers of meanings that can take us deeper and deeper into the realization of Reality. Literally, this sentence means: "me/ mine", "supreme", and "Brahman" (the universal Consciousness). The most popular translation of *mat param brahma* is "that Brahman of which I am supreme". In the next chapter (14.27) Krishna will state that he is the foundation and origin of the Brahman (*brahmano hi pratistha aham*), and already in 7.7 he had said, "nothing is superior to me, everything rests on me" (*mattah parataram nanyat kincid asti... mayi sarvam idam protam*). In this interpretation, the word *mat* indicates possession or relationship. As we have already seen, the definition Brahman applies both to the supreme *purusha* and to the supreme *prakriti*; when it is applied to *prakriti* it specifically indicates the *mahat tattva* ("great reality") that is the non-manifested entirety of the cosmic manifestation. This is confirmed in *Bhagavata Purana* (1.5.20): *idam hi visvam bhagavan ivetarah*, "all this universe is simply a transformation of Bhagavan". The expression *mat param* was also found at the conclusion of chapter 11, in verse 55, where it was translated as "me as the Supreme". Here is the verse: *mat karma krin mat paramo mad bhaktah sanga varjitah, nirvairah sarva -bhuteshu yah sa mam eti pandava*, "My devotee is engaged in working for me, and sees me as the supreme (reality). S/he has abandoned all association/ affiliation/ identification, and has no enmity towards any being. (In this way, my devotee) comes to me, o son of Pandu."

Therefore the next possible translation of this verse would read, "me, as the Supreme Brahman". This interpretation, too, is confirmed by Arjuna (10.12), and indirectly by all the Rishis mentioned by Arjuna to substantiate his realization. It is also found in many verses of the *Bhagavata Purana* (1.2.11, 3.24.10, 3.29.36, 3.33.8, 4.24.60, 7.1.19, 8.24.38), as well as in other passages of Vedic scriptures (for example, *vasudevah paro brahman*). Both meanings are reinforced by the word *anadi*, "beginning-less", or "eternal". The concept of eternity or freedom from death is also contained in the word *amrita*, that we find in this verse.

We become able to understand this verse only through the deep meaning of the word *param*.

On the materialistic level, *param* ("supreme") indicates the most powerful or highest among a number of individual persons or objects, presented in a comparative way. When we say that a person is the greatest, on the material level it means that his greatness (power, knowledge, ability etc) is compared to the greatness of others, and is found superior, while the others are inferior. However, on the spiritual/ transcendental level indicated by this Sanskrit word, the Supreme does not have terms of comparison, because all other existences are part of the existence of the Supreme. We can only understand this point when we give up the dualistic mentality, as confirmed very clearly by Krishna himself in *Bhagavad gita* (2.45, 4.22, 5.3, 5.25, 7.27, 7.28, 15.5) and in many other Vedic scriptures. Duality is the only source of fear (*bhayam dvitiya*, *Bhagavata Purana*, 11.2.37). Only by overcoming duality we become able to taste the nectar of that which is *na sat tan na asat*, "not *sat* and not *asat*" - where the word *sat* contains the multiple meanings of eternal, spiritual, good, positive, and so on, while the word *asat* is the exact opposite. A very similar concept was expressed in 9.19: *tapamy aham aham varsham ngrihnamy utsrijami ca, amritam caiva mrityus ca sad asac caham arjuna*, "I am the origin of the heat (of the sun), I pour down or withhold the rains. I am immortality and death as well. I am *sat* and *asat*, too, o Arjuna."

The Supreme Reality, Brahman, contains everything and is the origin and foundation of everything; the perception of this Supreme Reality is simply clouded by the illusory and temporary manifestation of *ahankara*, or material identification, that is based on duality and separation. As stated in the first verse of the *Maha Upanishad*: *eka hi vai narayana asi*, "only Vishnu exists".

Another reading of the verse ties *anadi* and *mat* in one word only, *anadimat*, where *mat* becomes the suffix *man*, "that which is", in this case, "that which is eternal". In this way, the personal pronoun *mam* is omitted, although not excluded or denied. Even without repeating it in this verse, we already had sufficient evidence from Krishna himself to the effect of the identity of Krishna as the supreme Brahman.

Another interesting point in this verse is the application of the knowledge to the transcendental realization or attainment that brings immortality (*amritam*). Of course, immortality does not refer to the indefinite extension of material life in one's body, because that is a dangerous delusion: even the residents of the highest planetary systems will eventually have to leave their bodies at the time of death.

True, there are bodies that can last much longer than a human body, but all material forms are inevitably going to dissolve. If we want to live longer, however, we need to take a different type of body, like those born on the higher planetary system, and develop the proper consciousness, mental powers and engagement, otherwise our extended years will just be a prolongation of suffering and disappointment.

सर्वतः पाणिपादं तत्सर्वतोऽक्षिशिरोमुखम् । सर्वतः श्रुतिमल्लोके सर्वमावृत्य तिष्ठति ॥ १३-१४ ॥

sarvataḥ paṇipādam tatsarvato'kṣiśiromukham | sarvataḥ śrutimalloke sarvamāvṛtya tiṣṭhati || 13-14 ||

sarvataḥ: everywhere; *pani*: hands; *padam*: feet; *tat*: that; *sarvataḥ*: everywhere; *aksi*: eyes; *sirah*: heads; *mukham*: face; *sarvataḥ*: everywhere; *śrutiman*: possessing hearing/ who listens; *loke*: in the world/ in people; *sarvam*: everything; *avṛtya*: covering; *tiṣṭhati*: remains.

"That (Purusha) has hands and feet everywhere, eyes and heads and faces everywhere. He listens everywhere, and always resides everywhere, covering everything.

The supreme Brahman is also the Maha Purusha, the Virata rupa or universal form that has been described in so many verses in the previous chapters. By understanding this Purusha we become able to understand how Isvara, Shakti and all the *jivas* are inconceivably One and individually distinct. Then the illusion of material opposition dissipates, but the loving relationship and *bhava* of devotional service do not disappear - rather, they become stronger and stronger because intelligence and consciousness are better focused (*aikantika bhakti*) as Krishna has already mentioned in 2.41 (*vyayasayatmika buddhij ekeha*).

When the *bhakta* enters (*visate*, 8.11, 18.55, *pravestum*, 11.54) the inconceivable transcendental Body of Consciousness, s/he realizes his/her nature as limb or body part (*anga*, *amsa*) of the Supreme and spontaneously functions as such, serving the Supreme Sum Total of Reality. This is not possible for those who have not attained the Brahman and Paramatma realizations and therefore continue to identify themselves and others on the basis of the material body and mind, and to think that they can obtain happiness by harming someone else. A solid and true Brahman realization will enable us to see Bhagavan as something more than a material projection, and to directly perceive and connect with the Soul of all souls everywhere.

This is why this verse explains that the realization of Bhagavan must include the presence of the Supreme everywhere (*sarvatah*, repeated several times), in each living being and even in every atom. At the level of Brahman, this presence consists of the eternal existence of consciousness (*sat*), at the level of Paramatma, this presence is knowledge and realization of the connection of all consciousness (*cit*), and at the level of Bhagavan, it is pure happiness and love. In Krishna's *avatara lila*, *sat* is represented by Balarama/ Shiva, *cit* is represented by Krishna/ Vishnu, and *ananda* is represented by the Mother Goddess. Without Radha there cannot be Krishna, without Yogamaya there cannot be Vishnu, and similarly Krishna appears after Baladeva, and the *avatars* of Vishnu appear (manifest) in this world from the root of Sadashiva, also called Sankarshana. Here the foolish materialists may fall in the trap of illusion and come to think that one of these three must be "more important" or "supreme" in regard to the other two, but that is a big mistake.

There cannot be any opposition or even division among these three; this is why Baladeva, Jagannatha and Subhadra sit on the same throne and are one and the same. Still, they manifest as three distinct Personalities of God to engage their devotees in blissful and loving exchanges (*bhava*). This will be mentioned in verse 19, where Krishna clearly states that a devotee can attain the perfection of devotional service only through this realization. No intelligent and honest person will say that such meaning supports an impersonalistic (*mayavadi*) conclusion. A *jivatma* does not have mouths and hands everywhere, neither individually nor collectively; without the Supreme Consciousness that is Isvara, all *jivatmas* would be limbs in a body where the individual soul is not present.

Jivatmas are like cells in a body: cells can have a face, eyes, hands etc only with the collective supreme consciousness within the body; similarly the *jiva* can have access to greater consciousness only as much as it enters the Krishna Consciousness. Without a clear realization of Brahman and Paramatma Consciousness, a *jiva* is *jada* ("inert") and covered by thick layers of dull ignorance in the form of the material mind and body identification (*avritya tisthati*, "remains covered"); liberation from such ignorance is a gradual process of dissipation of material identification, and culminates with the total shedding of material body and mind, replaced by the full development of the spiritual body and mind, called *siddha svarupa*.

Saying that consciousness is only possible in connection with Consciousness sounds like stating the obvious, yet most people remain unable to understand it, because they have never paused to think about the nature of consciousness itself. They continue to identify themselves as bodies and minds, and they believe that consciousness is a mysterious "function" that appears at a certain stage of material evolution; the actual fact is just the opposite - it is the eternally existing consciousness that produces matter from time to time, not matter that produces consciousness at some point along a line of progress.

In such a dangerous delusion, these people keep searching for success or "realization" - happiness, knowledge and permanent existence - in material things, attachments and identifications, and thus they slide disastrously into lower levels of consciousness and even into the asuric state of being, as we will see later.

Vedic knowledge offers us the correct perspective, supporting us with many easy and practical examples, and guiding us towards the direct personal experience of this perception of reality (*prakasa*). Consciousness manifests at a certain degree of complexity of matter only because such matter has become organized by intelligence and is therefore suitable to be used as a vehicle, and for the same reason, consciousness leaves a body when it is no more suitable for such use. If life in a material body was merely due to evolution of matter, bodies would never die but they would "evolve" continuously to become increasingly perfect and powerful, but this is not happening. All bodies - from the tiny unicellular organism to the immense whale - are vehicles for consciousness, and they only develop because of the presence of consciousness; when the consciousness overgrows that particular form, the form is simply discarded.

You can mix together all the chemicals that compose a blade of grass, but you will never be able to make it grow without the presence of consciousness. The only evolution is the evolution of intelligence that organizes matter in increasingly more complex ways and higher functions, and moves out of an old limited body to start building a new and more appropriate body through the process of reincarnation. This means that intelligence does not depend on a physical brain; a brain and a nervous system are merely the instruments used from time to time by the ever-existing intelligence, by which conscious life can express itself and perform actions.

God is described as omnipresent, but most people cannot really understand what this means. However, it is generally felt that if we pray to God, he will hear us, wherever we are. There is actually no real need to go to a temple, because we can talk to God and worship God at any time and in any place. The purpose of a holy place is to absorb the good and spiritual energy of all the spiritual people who assembled there; for this reason temples should be highly spiritual and sattvic places, where conscious recitation of the *shastra* and loving service to Bhagavan are continued constantly. Desecration of a temple or a Deity does not hurt God in any way, but it can demoralize people and break their strength, courage and dedication, while establishing a new temple constitutes a great encouragement and a fresh source of life and energy.

On another level of meaning in this verse, we see that the Transcendental Reality is described with the help of superimposition (visualization) and refutation (explanation) that spread a golden cover on the invisible (*adrista*) to make it visible to the material senses of

the ordinary people (*loke*). The *Isha Upanishad* speaks about this merciful revealing cover, meant to facilitate our approach to the transcendental journey of Self realization. Verse 16 of this *Upanishad* prays Isvara to remove it and to appear in his sweetest and most intimate essence for his devotee, just like we see in verses 11.46 and 11.50-53 of *Bhagavad gita* - the very sweet and intimate form that is behind the mind-shattering effulgence contemplated by Arjuna in the vision of the Virat Purusha (8.9, 11.12, 11.17, 11.19, 11.24, 11.30, 13.18).

All the forms manifested by the Lord are meant to interact with us, and are created by the Ananda or Hladini Shakti: he appears in a sweet and unassuming form to reciprocate with his intimate devotees, and he appears in majestic and blazing forms to impress those who need to feel such greatness.

It is precisely to interact with us, that the Supreme manifests innumerable approaches and perspectives (*sirah*, "heads"), visions and sounds (*aksih mukham*, "eyes and mouths") as well as unlimited forms of actions and service (*pani padam*, "hands and feet") called *karma yoga* or devotional service, to engage us in his worship. Yet, all such senses are not material, even if they appear to be so: this is confirmed in *Svetasvatara Upanishad* (3.19): *apani pado javano grahitam pasyati achakshuh sa srinoti akarnah*, "He moves without legs, takes without hands, sees without eyes and hears without ears."

सर्वेन्द्रियगुणाभासं सर्वेन्द्रियविवर्जितम् । असक्तं सर्वभृच्चैव निर्गुणं गुणभोक्तृ च ॥ १३-१५ ॥

sarvendriyagunābhāsaṁ sarvendriyavivarjitam | asaktaṁ sarvabhṛccaiva nirguṇaṁ guṇabhoktṛ ca || 13-15 |

sarva indriya: all the senses; *guna*: of the qualities; *abhasam*: the original source; *sarva indriya*: all the senses; *vivarjitam*: devoid of; *asaktam*: detached; *sarva bhrit*: who maintains/ supports everything/ all; *ca*: and; *eva*: certainly; *nir gunam*: without *gunas*; *guna bhoktri*: the master of the *gunas*; *ca*: and.

"(That Purusha) is the origin of all the senses and *gunas*, but is detached from all senses. He supports everything and everyone, and although he is detached from all *gunas*, he is the maintainer of the *gunas*.

The innumerable and omnipresent heads, eyes, mouths, hands and feet of the Lord are not material, or not visible to the ordinary eyes, unless they are covered by the veil of golden effulgence called *maya*, either *Yogamaya* or *Mahamaya* according to our level of consciousness.

As we have seen, the supreme Brahman, the ultimate Purusha/ Prakriti, is beyond *sat* and *asat*: he is simultaneously *sat* and *asat*, and neither the one or the other; he is the origin and foundation of both, yet he is not bound by them (4.14, 8.21, 9.9, 13.33, 13.33). This means that on the material level there are no words or concepts that can really define the transcendental form: all our dictionaries in all languages are based on the duality of synonyms and contraries, affirmative and negative, therefore they cannot express what is beyond duality. Words and concepts are simply used as a reflection or a covering veil to show a shape that we can understand.

So although Brahman is the source of all senses and all qualities, he remains free from the material limitations of the senses and the opposition of the qualities. Specifically, the word *vivarjitam* indicates the action of "leaving behind", as in renunciation; in this particular case the meaning is that Brahman is completely beyond the realm of material senses and qualities.

The word *abhasa* is also very important. It includes the meanings of "manifestation, source, radiance, reflection, glimpse, indication, shining, illumination, shadow, projection", which are applied according to the context. Here the immediate sense is "source", as "origin", just like the sun is the source of its light, heat and radiance. The senses of material bodies are originated by the primary Consciousness or perception, and similarly the qualities of material nature are originated by the modes of perception of Consciousness. We will see more about the *gunas* later in the text.

Another meaning of *abhasa* is "projection", an interpretation that moves the comparison from the light to the shadow; just like the sun is the source of the sunlight, the sun is also the source of shadows and darkness, by virtue of duality - opposition or absence. The transcendental eternal and unchangeable Brahman creates the distinction between light and darkness, but it is not limited by this duality, because it includes both, supports both (*sarva bhrit*) and remains untouched or detached (*asakta*) from both.

The word *maya*, "illusion", should not be interpreted necessarily in a negative sense. By the action of *Yogamaya*, each devotee strongly believes that Krishna is their exclusive object of affection and service - lover, husband, friend, son, father, teacher or employer - and forgets everything else. The devotees really think that Krishna needs their service, help, protection, and they even suffer feelings of sadness or despair from a separation that can only be illusory, considering that God is omnipresent by definition.

Chaitanya himself demonstrated the supreme power of *bhakti* by allowing himself to be covered by *yogamaya* - mistaking a sand dune on the beach in Puri for the Govardhana hill of Vrindavana, seeing an ordinary little boy as Krishna, mistaking the ocean for the river Yamuna, and completely losing all external consciousness during his trance periods. Should we then say that ignorance and materialistic delusion are symptoms of transcendental realization? Certainly not.

This grossly material dimension is just one among many: some dimensions are higher and purer, while some other dimensions are lower and more degraded, and tuning our consciousness into a particular dimension shapes our destiny. As the Vedas teach us, we should go from the bad to the good, from darkness to light, from death to immortality - *asato ma sad gamaya, tamaso ma jyotir gamaya, mrtyor ma amrtam gamaya* (*Bṛhad aranyaka Upanishad*, 1.3.28). It is only from the *suddha sattva*, or pure goodness, that we become able to really transcend duality.

Later on, chapter 15 will present us with the image of the Purushottama (the supreme Purusha) as the banyan tree of Reality, with branches growing downwards and roots growing upwards. This image illustrates the fact that material consciousness and spiritual consciousness appear as exact opposites, where material consciousness is the mirrored reflection of the true reality of spiritual consciousness.

So what appears to be worse, or most degraded, on the material level, is so because the individual has fallen to a lower dimension and lost the consciousness of the higher purpose of life; thus s/he remains covered and absorbed in the slavery to his/ her own senses and mind, losing memory, intelligence and dignity. On the opposite end of reality, a pure devotee also leaves the ordinary material dimension and

appears to have lost memory, intelligence and dignity, but it is because s/he has overcome the limitations of the material identifications. It is said that happiness is only attained by those who are extremely stupid and those who are extremely intelligent, but not by those who are stationed in between. A very stupid person is unable to realize his real position, and his sufferings are dulled by ignorance and insensitivity, enjoying the gross pleasures of life that are available even in the lowest states of existence, while a very intelligent person has found true and permanent happiness beyond the limitations of material existence. The happiness of the fool is very temporary, and slides him down lower and lower into sleep and darkness, into the levels of animal and plant life, or even duller bodies, while the happiness of the liberated soul is transcendently permanent and enables him to engage in the direct association with the Personality of God.

The mind can be used for our best advantage or become our worst enemy (6.5) and similarly we can use the senses (*indriya*) to carry us to liberation or to slavery: it only depends on the direction we are choosing - *dharma* or *adhama*, *vidya* or *avidya*, *sura* or *asura*.

बहिरन्तश्च भूतानामचरं चरमेव च । सूक्ष्मत्वात्तदविज्ञेयं दूरस्थं चान्तिके च तत् ॥ १३-१६ ॥

bahirantaśca bhūtānāmacaram̐ carameva ca | sūkṣmatvāttadavijñeyam̐ dūrastham̐ cāntike ca tat || 13-16 |

bahih: outside; *antah*: inside; *ca*: and; *bhutanam*: of the beings; *acaram*: non moving; *caram*: moving; *eva*: certainly; *ca*: also; *sukmatvat*: the quality of subtleness; *tad*: that; *avijneyam*: that cannot be known; *dura stham*: remaining distant; *ca*: and; *antike*: near; *ca*: and; *tat*: that.

"That (Purusha) is outside and inside all beings, moving and non-moving, and because he is extremely subtle, he cannot be known (through the gross material senses). He is very far and very near (at the same time).

The supreme Soul, the Soul of all souls, is called Param Atman. This Param Atman intrinsically exists everywhere, "inside" and "outside" (*bahih antah*), not only within the hearts of all living beings (from the Devas to the amoebas) and all atoms and subatomic particles (*anu* and *paramanu*), but even in the apparently empty spaces between atoms. He is *existence* itself - what Vedic knowledge expresses with the scientific term *sat*. Vedic science also tells us that existence itself (*sat*) is consciousness or intelligence. There is no need to search the planets and the space (or religious beliefs) for some Great Mind that organized the entire creation, because God is *existence* itself, and existence *is* intelligence and consciousness.

Foolish materialists become atheists or superstitious bigots because they expect to find some really old man with special powers who plays with human beings and other creatures like a child plays with clay dolls after making them, and therefore they become disappointed or delude themselves into believing that they must take up the jobs that God is unable to do himself - punishing non-believers, converting everyone to a particular type of worship and commands, taking over the domination and exploitation of the planet, and so on. Thus they fall easy prey to clever adharmic propagandists and turn into *asuras*, destroying and killing and causing immense sufferings to others and even to themselves, as explained in chapters 16 and 17.

This is simply due to their ignorance of the fact that God is *existence*, and therefore he exists everywhere, as Prahlada explained to his asuric father Hiranyakasipu. Devotional sentimentalists, in their immature understanding of Transcendence, picture God as an ordinary person - albeit bigger, stronger, and with some extraordinary powers - appearing magically to save Prahlada from the repeated assassination attempts committed by his father, and they need to actually see the terrifying form of Narasimha bursting out of the hall pillar to physically pick up the evil Hiranyakasipu and kill him with his own hands. They do not realize that Prahlada had not needed to see this form, because he already perceived the presence of the Lord everywhere, as explained in his exquisite prayers and in many other famous verses in regard to this wonderful episode. Narasimha did not appear to save his devotee Prahlada, because Prahlada had already been saved from all aggressions, and he was not in immediate danger at that time. Hiranyakasipu had just asked Prahlada to demonstrate Vishnu's omnipresence, and it was the devotee's word at stake, not his life. When Hiranyakasipu hit the pillar with his weapon, he was trying to kill Vishnu, not Prahlada: as Hiranyakasipu, too, was a close companion of the Lord (as Vishnu's doormen Jaya and Vijaya had taken birth as Hiranyaksha and Hiranyakasipu), the Lord responded and appeared to engage him in a fighting match. It was out of love that Narasimha appeared, to show himself to Hiranyakasipu and to liberate him from the awkward position of his asuric life.

Vishnu appeared to protect all the good people of the universe by killing the evil doer, and to establish the truth about the principles of *dharma* (4.8); Prahlada, too, appeared for this specific reason, to assist the Lord in his mission by providing the triggering event for the *avatara*, working as a catalyst in the manifestation of that particular form of Vishnu. Such catalyst is always love: Vishnu appears personally only to reciprocate the sentiments and service of his devotee, and to set him as an example for those who aspire to know God. But for the superficial and simple minded materialists, Vishnu's dramatic appearance is what matters most, and turns them towards the desire to know more about God.

Chaitanya loved to hear the story of Prahlada and often chanted this verse: *namaste narasimhaya, prahlada ahlada dayine, hiranyakasipu vaksah silatanka nakhalaye, itah nrisimhah paratah nrisimhah, yatah yatah yami tatah nrisimhah, bahih nrisimhah hridaye nrisimhah, nrisimham adim saranam prapadye*, "I offer my worship to Narasimha, who gives joy to Prahlada, and who tore the body of Hiranyakasipu with his hands. There is no higher reality than Narasimha, and everywhere I go, Narasimha is there. Narasimha is outside as well as inside the heart, and I take shelter in this primordial Existence/ Being, Narasimha."

So why did Narasimha choose to burst out from the pillar, instead of annihilating Hiranyakasipu's body by some kind of subatomic reaction, such as self-combustion, or disintegration, or turning him into a stone, at the very moment the evil king had decided to cause some troubles? Because God wanted the story to be as thrilling and interesting as possible: this is the meaning of the word *lila*, and the reason for the appearance of the *avatars* in this world. Narasimha gives pleasure to the devotees like Prahlada, by dramatically and magnificently coming to the rescue, performing such amazing activities that people will continue to talk about the story for hundreds and thousands of years. Why do we watch adventure films? Why do we read entertaining books, like the adventures of Harry Potter or the Hobbit Frodo? Because they are full of dangers and difficulties and even serious sufferings, followed by astounding events that bring an unexpected and stunning solution, filling us with joy and satisfaction. This meditation gives us strength and patience to continue our evolutionary journey, face our tests, solve our problems, and strive for perfection.

Of course the value of the story is greater when it carries good teachings for the audience, whether they are expressed by discussion or by example, and the ability of the story teller is greater when the adventure is rich in subconscious or supraconscious symbolism that can penetrate deep into our hearts and touch us intimately. This is the sum and substance of the meaning of "religion". A true religion is simply the tradition (through books, recitation, ritual re-enactment etc) of divine stories (*lila*) based on activities performed by Personalities of God or Self realized souls, that contain symbols and paradigms we need to apply to our own lives in order to evolve our consciousness. Everything else is "support material" to help us understand physics and metaphysics, and apply the fundamental evolutionary teachings to our lives, or commentaries and suggested practices to keep us in that consciousness.

In the story of Narasimha, little Prahlada clearly states that God, that is Reality and the supreme Being/ Existence, is present everywhere, even if we are unable to see him, and can perform any action, even if he does not have a conventional material body. His body is too subtle to be perceived by our gross material senses or their mechanical instruments (*sukshma avijneya*) and he does not need to move around because he is already everywhere (*acaram caram*). Subtler states of being cannot be perceived by gross instruments. For example, you cannot see a microbe with your naked eye, and similarly you cannot see the air or wind unless you observe its effects on visible objects such as colored dust, a cloth or flag on a pole, and so on. Similarly, you cannot see the mind with a microscope, although you can measure the effects of the mind on its physical vehicle, the brain and nervous system. You cannot see thoughts unless they are expressed in the form of sounds or writing, and you cannot see life unless it moves bodies through breathing, blood circulation, electrical or magnetic radiation etc. Still, what we see is just the effect and not the cause.

The supreme Being is the Cause of all causes, the Existence of existence itself, and as such it cannot be perceived by material senses. This is confirmed by the *Upanishads*:

tad ejati tan najjati, tad dure tad v antike, tad antar asya sarvasya tad u sarvasyasya bahyatah, "He (*Tat*) does not walk and yet at the same time he walks, he is very far and very near, as he is within everything and also outside everything", (*Isa Upanishad* 5),

asino duram vrajati sayano yati sarvatah, "he is everything and everywhere, but he remains very far from ignorant people", (*Katha Upanishad* 1.2.21),

durat sudure tad ihantike ca pasyatv ihaivam nihitam guhayam, "he is more distant than any far thing, and nearer than here itself; he cannot be seen because he is hidden within", (*Mundaka Upanishad*, 3.17).

In this verse of *Mundaka Upanishad* we find a very important word, *nihitam*, that means "seated in the middle", "established inside". This is the precise description of the Param Atman, the Soul of all souls, that is within the core of each being or existence.

अविभक्तं च भूतेषु विभक्तमिव च स्थितम् । भूतभर्तृ च तज्ज्ञेयं ग्रसिष्णु प्रभविष्णु च ॥ १३-१७ ॥

avibhaktam ca bhūteṣu vibhaktamiva ca sthitam | bhūtabhartṛ ca tajjñeyam grasiṣṇu prabhaviṣṇu ca || 13-17 ||

avibhaktam: without divisions; *ca*: and; *bhutesu*: regarding the beings; *vibhaktam*: divided; *iva*: as if; *ca*: and; *sthitam*: established/situated; *bhuta bhartri*: who maintains all beings; *ca*: and; *tat*: that; *jneyam*: to be known; *grasisnu*: who devours; *prabhavisnu*: the powerful Vishnu/developing; *ca*: and.

"Although undivided, he appears as if he is divided into the (many) beings where he resides. He is the sustainer of all beings, and is to be known as the powerful Vishnu, who devours everything.

This concept is echoed in the verses of the *Rig Veda samhita*: *ekah santam bahudha kalpayanti*, "he is contemplated in various forms, although he is one" (*Rig Veda*. 1.114.5), *ekam sad vipra bahuda vadanti*, "although he is one, he is described in many ways by the learned" (*Rig Veda* 1.164.46).

Here the word *jneyam* ("is to be known") is in perfect juxtaposition to the word *avijneyam* ("cannot be known") in the previous verse, highlighting a fact that is beyond duality. It is true that God cannot be known through material analysis and research, but he can be known through the perception of his effects on our intelligence and consciousness, that transcend the material level. A very important word in this verse is *avibhakta*, that means "not divided, not separated", while *vibhakta* means "divided, separated". It is interesting to note that this chapter is entitled *Prakriti Purusha vibhaga yoga*, "The Yoga of understanding nature as distinct from the personal principle", but the most extraordinary concept expressed in this chapter is that in reality there is no *vibhaga* and no *bheda*, and such divisions or separations are simply apparent and not factual.

The *maha vakyas* ("great aphorisms") of the *Upanishads* confirm this very profound truth: *sarvam khalv idam brahma*, "all this is Brahman" (*Chandogya Upanishad*, 7.25.2, *Nrisimha utara tapani Upanishad*, 7), *prajnanam brahma*, "Brahman is full consciousness/knowledge" (*Aitareya Upanishad*, 3.3), as well as *aham brahmasmi*, "I am Brahman" (*Brihad Aranyaka Upanishad* 1.4.10), *ayam atma brahma*, "this Atman is Brahman" (*Mandukya Upanishad* 2), *tat tvam asi*, "you are that (Brahman)" (*Chandogya Upanishad*, 6.8.7) and so 'ham, "I am that (Brahman)" (*Narada parivrajaka Upanishad*, 6.4).

The word *iva*, "as if", indicates the illusory appearance or the example by comparison that is only a reflection or image of reality, but it does not contain it fully. At a more intimate level, this apparent separation within the supreme Consciousness refers to the highest and most intense form of *yoga* ("union") in *bhakti*, constituted by the *vipralambha rasa*, or "feeling of separation" by which the devotee is fully and deeply immersed in the supreme Consciousness (Krishna Consciousness) in the desire to attain an apparently missing union with Krishna. This is the greatest and most inconceivable mystery, demonstrated in practice by the ecstatic manifestation of Chaitanya's sentiments, that melt the hearts of the pure devotees and completely confuse the materialists into thinking that Chaitanya was simply a mentally deranged man. Yet, we can all have a similar experience when we miss a person, an object or a situation that we really love or need: the memory of what we have lost brings a feeling of appreciation that is many times stronger than whatever we could have felt before, in the direct physical presence of the object of our love or need. We take air for granted because we breathe it constantly, day and night, so that in general we do not even notice it, but if we suddenly find ourselves without any air - as under water, for example - our awareness and appreciation for the value of air would instantly increase many times.

Again we find in this verse the concept of *acintya bheda abheda*, or "inconceivably different and non-different". All the innumerable personalities we find in the material and spiritual worlds are nothing but "parts and parcels" of God, Vishnu; they only appear to have a different or separate existence, because of the power of *maya* (illusion), that acts as *Yogamaya* in the spiritual dimension and *Mahamaya* on the material level.

The word *bhuta* literally means "being", both in the sense of "living entity" and in the sense of "situation or circumstances of existence", therefore we learn here that the three "categories" of *isvara*, *shakti* and *jiva* are actually One Reality, never really separated and never divided, as confirmed in *Vedanta sutra (sakti saktimator abheda)*. So when we say that Brahman is truth, and the material world is false (*brahma satya, jagan mithya*), certainly we do not mean that Nature (spiritual nature or material nature - meaning forms, names, qualities, activities etc) is non-existent, or delusional, or unworthy of our worship. We mean that such forms, names etc, only *seem* to change, but in fact they are eternally present in the non-manifested (transcendental, non dualistic or unitarian) state that is Brahman, or Vishnu. Adi Shankara clearly explains this all-important point at the beginning of his commentary to *Bhagavad gita: narayanah parah avyaktah*, "Narayana is transcendental and non-manifested".

Again, we need to be very careful not to fall into the trap of misunderstanding the word *avyakta*. The popular translation as "non-manifested" is probably not sufficient to help us penetrate its full meaning. We may have noticed that *vyakta* derives from the same root of the word *vibhaga*, and literally means "separated, divided", as *vyakti* means "individual" or "unit". So, when we say that *vyakta* means "manifested", it does not indicate a coming into existence, and *avyakta* does not indicate an absence or non-existence or annihilation. Therefore *vyakta* describes the individuation of a form as distinct from other forms, and implies a measure of illusion (*maya*), either spiritual or material. However this illusion only covers the subordinate being (the devotee or the materialist): Narayana is never subject to the illusion of separation, because he always contains the entirety of Consciousness. *Narayana parah avyaktah* really means that the supreme existence of Vishnu is always omnipresent as the foundation of everything, and can never be separated from his *shaktis*, spiritual or material.

The *Upanishads* confirm this: *yato va imani bhutani jayante yena jatani jivanti yat prayanti, abhisamvisanti tad vijijnasasva tad brahma*, "you should know him, from whom all beings are born, by whose support they live, and in whom they enter (in the end)" (*Taittiriya Upanishad* 3.1)

The presence of Vishnu during all the phases of the cycle of creation, preservation and destruction is highlighted by the words *grasishnu* ("who devours") and *prabhavisnu* ("who develops"). So God is not just the creator, but the preserver and the destroyer as well: this is the description of Time, Kala, that had already manifested in the vision of the Virata Rupa for Arjuna (11.32). This identification of Krishna with Kala/ Kali, on which we elaborated in the commentary to that verse, explains why the *bija mantra* for Vishnu/ Krishna (*klim*) is the same *bija mantra* for Mother Kali, who is also called Narayani.

The third aspect of the cycle of existence - maintenance or preservation - is expressed by the name *bhuta bhartri*, "who maintains all beings", and refers to Life that provides all nourishment, support, and healing to all beings.

vyotisam: in all the luminaries; *api*: also; *tat*: that; *vyotih*: the light; *tamasah*: darkness; *param*: beyond/ higher; *ucyate*: it is said; *jneyam*:

ज्योतिषामपि तज्ज्योतिस्तमसः परमुच्यते । ज्ञानं ज्ञेयं ज्ञानगम्यं हृदि सर्वस्य विष्ठितम् ॥ १३-१८ ॥

vyotisāmapi tajjyotistamasah paramucyate | jñānaṁ jñeyaṁ jñānagamyam hṛdi sarvasya viṣṭhitam || 13-18 ||

to be known; *jnana gamyam*: to be approached by knowledge; *hridi*: in the heart; *sarvasya*: of everything; *visthitam*: established.

He is described as the light in all radiant things, transcendental to darkness. He is established in the heart of everything, and he is to be known through the cultivation of knowledge.

The theme of light and radiance as the visible form of Atman/ Brahman is repeated in other verses of *Bhagavad gita*:

kavim puranam anusasitaram anor aniyamsam anusmared yah, sarvasya dhataram acintya-rupam aditya-varnam tamasah parastat, "One should remember the Lord as omniscient, primeval, who controls everything, so small that is contained inside the atom. He maintains everything and his form is inconceivable, as bright as the sun, transcendental to the darkness" (8.9),

adityanam aham visnur jyotisam ravir amsuman, maricir marutam asmi nakstranam aham sasi, "Among the Adityas, I am Vishnu. Among the lights, I am the radiant Sun. To the Marutas, I am Marici. To the constellations, I am the Moon" (10.21),

dyutam chalayatam asmi tejas tejasvinam aham, jayo 'smi vyavasayo 'smi sattvam sattvavatam aham, "Among cheaters, I am gambling. Of all that is radiant, I am the power that radiates. Of all ventures, I am victory. Of everything good, I am goodness" (10.36),

yad yad vibhutinat sattvam srimad urjitam eva va, tat tad evavagaccha tvam mama tejo 'msa sambhavam, "Anything that is good, powerful, wonderful, or glorious, that you can encounter, has come to existence as a part of my radiance" (10.41),

divi surya sahasrasya bhaved yugapad uthitha yadi bhah sadrisi sa syad bhasas tasya mahatmanah, "If thousands of suns were rising simultaneously in the sky, that radiance would be similar to the radiance of the great Atman" (11.12),

kiritinam gadinam cakrinam ca tejo rasim sarvato diptimantam, pasyami tvam durnirikshyam samantad diptanalarka dyutim aprameyam, "The luminous radiance of all those crowns, maces, and discs is everywhere, so dazzling that I can barely see you. It is like the rays of the sun or an immeasurable blazing fire" (11.17),

anadi madhyantam ananta viryam ananta bahum sasi surya netram, pasyami tvam dipta bhutasa vaktram sva tejaso visvam idam tapantam, "Without beginning, middle or end, your prowess is unlimited. Your arms are innumerable, and your eyes are the Sun and the Moon. I can see your face blazing with flames from your own radiance, scorching the entire universe" (11.19),

nabhah sprisam diptam aneka varnam vyattananam dipta visala netram, dristva hi tvam prvyathitantar atma dhritim na vindami samam ca visno, "O Vishnu, I feel shaken and I have lost my mental balance and peace, looking at this (immense) radiance of yours, of so many colors, reaching up to touch the sky, with immense gaping mouths and fierce glowing eyes" (11.24),

lelihyase grasamanah samantal lokan samagran vadanair jvaladbhih, tejobhir apurya jagat samagram bhasa tavograh pratapanti visno,

"From all sides you are licking these devoured people/ worlds into your mouths, whose blazing light covers the entire universe. O Vishnu, your fierce radiance is burning everything" (11.30),

yad aditya gatam tejo jagad bhasayate 'khilam, yac candramasi yac cagnau tat tejo viddhi mamakam , "Know that the radiance emanating from the sun, that pervade the entire universe, as well as the light of the moon and that of the fire, are mine" , (15.12).

A similar verse is found in *Svetasvatara Upanishad* (3.8): *aditya varnam tamasah parastat*, "His color is like the radiance of the sun, that is transcendental to darkness."

We also find mention of God's radiance in the most important of all Vedic *mantras*, the Gayatri (*devasya bhargo pracodayat*, "may the radiance of God inspire us") and in the famous verse *tamaso ma jyotir gamaya, asato ma sad gamaya, mrtiyor ma amrtam gamaya*, "From darkness take me to the light, from the impermanent take me to eternity, from death take me to immortality" (*Brhad aranyaka Upanishad*, 1.3.28).

Light, spirit and intelligence are always associated, also at the individual level. Many psychic travelers have described the soul as "a clear white light", and we know that the aggregate of *jivatmans* is called *brahmajyoti*, "the radiance of Brahman". The clear understanding or realization of reality is called enlightenment or illumination, because it gives us a clear vision of the world and ourselves; the references to realization as "seeing" are also extremely numerous not only in *Bhagavad gita* (2.16, 2.29, 2.59, 4.18, 4.35, 5.5, 5.16, 5.24, 5.25, 6.30, 6.32, 9.7, 10.5, 10.11, 11.3-5, 11.52-55, 13.25, 13.28, 13.29-31, 14.19, 15.11) but in all the *shastra*. Just to make a couple of major examples: the name *rishi*, indicating one of those wise self-realized souls who contributed their knowledge to the corpus of Vedic knowledge, literally means "one who sees", while the word *darshana*, indicating a particular ideological perspective on Reality, literally means "vision", as in the act of seeing. It is one step further from mere intellectual understanding: it is a life-changing paradigm shift.

The transcendental and divine nature of illuminating intelligence is also confirmed in *Svetasvatara Upanishad*:

mahan prabhur vai purusah sattvasyaaisa pravartakah, su nirmalam imam praptim isano jyotir avyayah, "The Supreme Personality of God is the Purusha, who disseminates transcendental enlightenment. Just to be in touch with him is to be in contact with the indestructible *brahmajyoti*" (3.12),

yo 'ntah-sukho 'ntar aramas tathantar-jyotir eva, "That (Brahman) is the inner happiness, the inner pleasure, and the inner light" , (3.13),

tam ha devam atma buddhi prakasam, mumuksur vai saranam aham prapadye, "desiring liberation from conditionings, we surrender to him, the Lord, who illuminates the/ through intelligence" , (6.18).

This radiance of intelligence or consciousness is so strong that it supersedes the light of the sun and all the luminaries of this universe (*Bhagavad gita* 15.6, *na tad bhasayate suryo na sasanko na pavakah*, "(In that abode) there is no (need of the) light of the sun, moon or fire/ electricity), *na tatra suryo bhati na chandra tarakam, nema vidyuto bhanti kuto 'yam agnih*, "There is (no need of) sunlight, or light of moon or stars, what to speak of the light of the fire" , (*Katha Upanishad* 2.2.15).

The *Bhagavata Purana* (3.28.40) also uses the example of the radiating light and heat to explain that God is non-different from his *shaktis*: *yatholmukad vispulingad, dhumad vapi sva sambhavat, apy atmattvenabhimataad, yathagnih prithag ulmukat*, "The blazing fire is different from the flames, from the sparks and from the smoke, although all are intimately connected because they are born from the same blazing wood." Similarly, the sun is the foundation and origin of light and heat, as well as shadows and darkness. However, darkness does not have existence in itself, but it is merely absence of light or inability to see the light, while the light is ever-existing and can never be extinguished.

The supreme Soul is established not only in all *jivas*, but inside each atom as well - becoming visible as the blinding blaze of a detonated nuclear bomb. We normally cannot see this light simply because our vision is covered by the darkness of material appearances, but we can observe and perceive its effects through intelligence and scientific knowledge (*jnana gamyam*). And where is this radiant light located? In the center (*hridi*): in the heart of every being, of every existence. This is the "beyond" where we should direct our exploration: a revolutionary new paradigm for all those who keep searching for happiness "out there" instead of inside their own hearts.

इति क्षेत्रं तथा ज्ञानं ज्ञेयं चोक्तं समासतः । मद्भक्त एतद्विज्ञाय मद्भावायोपपद्यते ॥ १३-१९ ॥

iti kṣetram tathā jñānam jñeyam coktaṁ samāsataḥ | madbhakta etadvijñāya madbhāvāyopapadyate | | 13-19 | |

iti: like this; *ksetram*: the *kshetra*; *tatha*: also; *jnanam*: knowledge; *jneyam*: to be known; *ca*: and; *uktam*: told; *samasatah*: in summary; *mat bhaktah*: my devotee; *etat*: this; *vijnaya*: by understanding; *mat bhavaya*: with/ to my nature; *upapadyate*: attains.

"Thus I have summarized the description of the *kshetra*, *jnana* and *jneya*. My devotee attains my nature/ existence by understanding this (knowledge)."

Here Krishna summarizes his answers to Arjuna's questions. In verses 6 and 7 he spoke about the world or *kshetra* or field of action (*jneya*, "the object of knowledge"), in verses 8 to 12 he spoke about the correct process of understanding and interacting with the *kshetra* (*jnana*, "knowledge"), and in verses 13 to 18 he spoke about the *param atman* (*jnana gamyam*, "that can/ should be attained through knowledge") or the reason for the entire exercise of interaction between the *kshetra* and *kshetra jna*. The expression *jnana gamyam* indicates the purpose, the goal, the destination (*pada, dhama*) that all individual souls are meant to reach through their evolution; this ultimate success is already contained in each individual in the form of conscience (virtue or goodness, and knowledge), but it must be cultivated deliberately, through an act of choice, to blossom into true love.

Love (*bhakti*) is the highest reality and the greatest happiness (*hladini sakti*), and constitutes the real meaning of life - creation, preservation and dissolution of the material bodies, as well as evolution of the consciousness towards perfection. This is why only a devotee can really understand the transcendental knowledge. At some point in their evolution, all human beings face the same question: what is the meaning of life? Why was the universe created? What is the purpose of all this? All beings instinctively search happiness, knowledge and permanent existence, yet they constantly experience sufferings, confusion and loss, of which death is usually considered the greatest tragedy.

At the animal level, the perception of sufferings is limited to the pain of the body and the mind caused by physical elements and events, especially those that are beyond the normal course of life. For example, a mother will suffer great pain for the premature death of a child, but grown up children will leave the family and may not even come to know about the subsequent death of their old parent. Similarly, a cruel death accompanied by unnecessary torture or mistreatment, as it often happens when animals fall victims to evil minded people, increases the natural sufferings of death to an unnatural level. An animal suffers intensely when trapped, imprisoned or confined, and/ or deprived of natural family or society relationships, and/ or subjected to an imposed artificial way of life. However, this natural life is the extent of the aspirations of animals, that appreciate beauty and love, but have no higher responsibilities or spiritual quests.

The more the individual evolves through increasingly complex forms of animal life, the more sensitive s/he becomes, until s/he finally attains a human form of life. At this point, the lessons in the great school of life become trickier and more difficult, and the individual is required to learn to think beyond the body and mind, beyond the material identification of family, society, or species, and to understand the unity of all life and consciousness. This is why *Vedanta sutra* says, *athato brahma jijnasa*: now, in this human life, we must learn about Brahman, the *jnana gamyam*, that is attained through the correct understanding of his manifestations, activities, qualities, names, forms, teachings, etc. A human being has already "graduated" from the introductory courses of study on nature that constituted the cycle of animal life, and after becoming qualified on the human level of consciousness, obtains the opportunity to develop higher qualifications in the management of the universe and attaining liberation from conditionings, by expanding his awareness and realization and entering the supreme Consciousness. This is the process of *jnana*, *jneya*, *jnana gamyam*. The choice of definitions for these three subjects, considered together, is truly illuminating, and reiterates the concept expressed in previous chapters about the proper meditation to realize the Supreme, through the visualization and appreciation of the Virata Rupa.

True devotion (*bhava*) to God can only be achieved through the proper knowledge and consciousness of the transcendental Reality; we must be able to outgrow the false sentimental devotion that is based on ignorance - which is clearly described not as a mere lack of proper information, but as the opposite of the principles detailed in verses 8 to 12. One of the most important practices in Yoga is *svadhyaya*, the direct personal study of Vedic knowledge, that starts from the science of the Self and covers all aspects of existence.

Of course we are not interested in mere material erudition or academic titles, because we must be extremely careful not to fall into the ignorance of arrogant identification and attachment, that carry foolish people away from Reality and deeper into illusion. Those unfortunate people who fall in the ego trap of the "great scholar" or "great religionist" remain unable to really approach God (*mayayapahrita jnana*, 7.15). Such people are not interested in knowledge, but in the selfish material advantages they could get from knowledge: they are like *asuras* who want to kidnap the Mother Goddess of Learning and enslave her to their own selfish sense gratification. On the other hand, a true devotee always keeps a respectful and loving service attitude, following in the footsteps of the great *acharyas* and realized souls, who transmitted the realizations of their predecessors and explained them according to their own realizations, but always recognizing the eternal nature of Knowledge herself. This is why we say that *Vedas* are eternal.

A true devotee is always eager to hear, study and understand the glories of God, manifested in the spiritual world and in the material world as well: therefore the Vedic scriptures, especially the *Puranas* and *Itihasas*, contain so many discussions about material creation and human interactions, as well as many important teachings on how to lead a good life. By honoring the manifestation, the forms, the qualities, and the activities of consciousness, we can truly evolve our individual consciousness and harmonize it through entering the supreme Consciousness, the Soul of all souls. This is a true mark of love. When we love someone, we give full attention to that person's properties and work, and we make sincere efforts to better understand his/ her intentions and ideas, so that we can help and assist him/ her better.

Another important point here is that all such knowledge already exists in the heart of each being, because of the presence of the Param Atman, that includes existence, knowledge and happiness. This knowledge is simply covered by various layers of ignorance in the form of prejudice, false identification, material attachments, false information and beliefs, and all other forms of *tamas* (ignorance) that we will examine in greater details in the next chapters. The proper method of learning consists in approaching realized souls (4.34) and remaining in their presence through service and exchanges of questions and answers, so that it will become clear to us how to distinguish between knowledge and ignorance - thus developing our *viveka* or *buddhi*, the sharp intelligence that can connect our consciousness with the supreme Consciousness. Some individuals are already born with a favorable disposition, as we will see in chapter 16, by which they are more inclined to perceive the guidance of the Param Atman - that people usually call "the voice of conscience" - and walk the path of self-improvement. This divine-oriented nature of the mind is built through many lifetimes in a human form (*bahunam janmanam ante*, 7.9), and the accumulation of merits (*punya karmanam*, 7.28); it is not an arbitrary gift from God to favor some people only (9.29), but it is something that anyone of us can earn through sincere effort. If someone was wondering why Krishna and Arjuna have spoken of *jnana*, *jneya* and *jnana gamyam* without mentioning the *jnata* ("the knower"), we can easily reply that the subject of *jnata* has been amply discussed from the very beginning, by explaining the nature, qualities, and activities of the *atman*.

प्रकृतिं पुरुषं चैव विद्व्यनादि उभावपि । विकारांश्च गुणांश्चैव विद्वि प्रकृतिसम्भवान् ॥ १३-२० ॥

prakṛtiṁ puruṣaṁ caiva vidvhyānādi ubhāvapi | vikāraṁśca guṇāṁścaiva vidvhi prakṛtisambhavan || 13-20 ||

prakritim: the *prakriti*; *purusam*: the *purusha*; *ca*: and; *eva*: certainly; *viddhi*: you should know; *anadi*: without beginning; *ubhau*: both; *api*: also; *vikaran*: the transformations; *ca*: and; *gunan*: the qualities; *ca*: and; *eva*: certainly; *viddhi*: you should know; *prakriti sambhavan*: born from *prakriti*.

"You should know that Prakriti and Purusha are both eternal, and that their transformations and qualities are born from the Prakriti.

Krishna is again stating that both Purusha and Prakriti are Brahman - the eternal, unchangeable and perfect Consciousness that we could call the blueprint of Reality. However, within this unchanging master plan there is ample scope for well orchestrated variety, which implies apparent change or transformation, usually in closed cycles such as creation, preservation and annihilation.

This characteristic of variety is specifically described as a function of Prakriti or Shakti, that is the Mother of all forms and qualities - both spiritual and material. This apparent transformation or change is due to the principle of action; all forms, qualities, names etc are eternally existing in the Consciousness plan of the Brahman, but they become manifested (i.e. differentiated, visible as individual states of being) through the divisions of time (Kala/ Kali) created by action. This even applies to the transcendental appearance of the Personalities of God (*avatars*) and great liberated souls (*jivan muktas*), although in their case the "change" is effected by the spiritual Nature Yogamaya, and the characteristics of these bodies remain spiritual, made of pure consciousness, and cannot be easily understood by ordinary human beings, who have limited sensory powers, unable even to perceive subtle matter, what to speak of spiritual bodies.

The ordinary/ material perception of Time is also based on change and action. Past, present and future become distinct from each other simply because of action and change in circumstances or environment, otherwise they would not be distinguishable because Time is actually a continuum and eternally exists as Brahman (11.32). Therefore Kala/ Kali is the original manifestation of creation in the universe: the primordial Father and Mother of all beings. What appears to our ignorant and limited eyes as the velvety blackness of the space is actually filled with the potential of all light and energy, but then again Mother (*shakti*, as power, energy) is the Boss here, the source of all magic, ordinary and extra-ordinary. All actions are performed by Nature, and the Purusha never really becomes entangled in them (4.14, 5.13): only the conditioned souls are tied by the consequences of their actions because they continue to identify as the doer, as the ego that appears to make a choice and invest the effort in one particular selfishly motivated action. On the other hand, a liberated person will simply guide or direct, through a simple act of consciousness/ awareness, his/ her own nature and engage it in sacred action, *yajna*, or *karma yoga*, without identifying him/ her self with the action but simply working as a matter of duty or service, as explained in the early chapters of *Bhagavad gita* (3.25, etc). What makes action sacred (*yajna*)? The sacred consciousness: when the individual consciousness is united (*yoga*) with the supreme Total Consciousness, any activity performed by Nature becomes sacred (4.25-30), even the simplest act of breathing. All bodies (material and spiritual) are made by, and of, Nature (Mahamaya and Yogamaya) and therefore they must engage in activities (3.33, 4.23, 13.21), because it is through activity that we can attain knowledge and realization, and from realization, true love will blossom.

Some commentators interpreted the expression *anadi* in this verse as "not the primeval cause" instead of "without any previous cause", but if that was the case, we should have to believe that *isvara* is also created and directly involved in the material creation and transformation, which he is not, because he is unchanging and transcendental to all dualities. Bhagavan always contains both Purusha and Prakriti: this is the reason why male Deities should be worshiped in the company of their female counterparts. Of course even when the image of the male Deity stands alone, the presence of its female component cannot be separated from it, precisely because Shakti *is* the *form* itself. Without the presence of Shakti, there would be no form - material or spiritual. At the same time, we need to understand that the forms of Bhagavan are not limited in time and space like our material bodies: they eternally exist within the Brahman, in the spiritual dimension, and can be manifested at any time and in any circumstances by Isvara simply by an act of Consciousness. Consciousness comes before any manifestation of forms, and is not limited by time or space or any material law.

Bhagavata purana (3.7.9) confirms: *seyam bhagavato maya, yan nayena virudhyate, isvarasya vimuktasya karpanyam uta bandhanam*, "This idea, saying that Bhagavan can be overpowered by illusion, is contradictory, because Isvara is ever liberated, and therefore he cannot be conditioned."

कार्यकारणकर्तृत्वे हेतुः प्रकृतिरुच्यते । पुरुषः सुखदुःखानां भोक्तृत्वे हेतुरुच्यते ॥ १३-२१ ॥

kāryakāraṇakartṛtve hetuḥ prakṛtirucyate | puruṣaḥ sukhaduḥkhānām bhoktṛtve heturucyate || 13-21 ||

karya: the action to be performed; *karana*: the origin; *kartritve*: in the making/ in undertaking action; *hetuh*: cause; *prakritih*: *prakriti*; *ucyate*: is said; *purusah*: *purusha*; *sukha duhkhanam*: of joy and distress; *bhoktritve*: in tasting; *hetuh*: the cause; *ucyate*: it is said.

"Prakriti is said to be the cause and the origin of the action, while Purusha is the cause of the perception of happiness and distress.

We find a very similar verse in the *Bhagavata Purana* (3.26.8), in the section reporting the instructions by Kapila: *karya karana kartritve karanam prakritim viduh, bhoktritve sukha duhkhanam purusam prakriteh param*, "The (wise) understand that the duties (as *guna* and *karma* constituting the body), the subtle body and the *kartritva* (the development of action) are all caused by *prakriti*. However, the experience of happiness and distress is in/ from the *purusha*, who is different from/ transcends/ the *prakriti*."

This description applies to the Principle of Consciousness (the Purusha), therefore to a certain extent it also includes the supreme Purusha (*raso vai sah*, "he is feeling/ perception", *Taittiriya Upanishad*, 2.7). In this regard, we can understand the immense importance of the science of *rasas*, the feelings/ perceptions within the field of *bhakti*, that is the highest and most intimate form of *yoga*: *purusha sa paraha partha bhaktya labhyas tv ananyaya, yasyantah sthani bhutani yena sarvam idam tatam*, "O Partha, this supreme Person can be attained by undivided devotion. Within him exist all these beings, and he pervades everything", (8.22), *bhaktya tv ananyaya sakya aham evam vidho 'rjuna, jnatum drastum ca tatvena pravestum ca parantapa*, "O Arjuna, only through *bhakti* it is possible to know and to see me truly, and to enter into me", (11.54). Of course the supreme Consciousness, Bhagavan, is beyond the duality of joy and distress, and enjoys all perceptions and feelings in harmony and bliss, even those that appear like sufferings, as in the separation from his devotees during the *lilas* of the *avatars*, and the concern for all conditioned souls toiling in the material world. For Bhagavan these are simply different tastes (*rasas*): not only the sweet tastes of direct loving devotion (*madhurya*, *sakhya*, *vatsalya*, *dasya*) but also indirectly positive such as compassion (*karuna*), heroism (*virya*), amazement (*adbhuta*, *vismaya*), humor (*hasya*), neutrality (*santa*) and apparently "negative" feelings such as fear (*bhayanaka*), anger (*raudra*) and disgust or repulsion (*bibhatsa*) that create the contrast. The faculty of perception and feeling is always present, but we can choose where to direct and focus it: this is the characteristic of the Purusha. Through the powers (*shaktis*) called desire (*iccha*), determination (*kriya*) and knowledge (*jnana*), the consciousness (*purusha*) engages the body (*rupa*, *indriya*) and its qualities (*gunas*) in transformation (*vikara*), thus creating a variety (*vaicitra*) of feelings (*rasas*).

The example with the taste of foods is particularly interesting, also considering that in Vedic terminology, the word *bhukti* indicates all types of "enjoyment", of both *sukha* and *duhkha*, from the sweetest ripe fruits to the sourest grapes. The particular type of taste we are

attracted to is determined by our set of senses, created by our previous *karma*; later on Krishna will explain that the *gunas* we choose according to our *karma* are exemplified by the different types of food and tastes we grow accustomed to, and that life habits can be changed by practice, popularly considered a "second nature". The word *bhakti*, too, comes from the same grammatical root, and refers to the exchange of "emotional food" or *rasas* between points of consciousness, ideally between the *jivatma* cell (as *bhakta*) and the supreme Sum total of Consciousness that we call God (as *bhokta*).

In the macrocosm, this perception or consciousness of the *kshetra* is the *lila* of the Purusha avatars (Karanodakasayi Vishnu, Garbhodakasayi Vishnu, Kshirodakasayi Vishnu), while in the microcosm it appears as a reflection in the activities of the individual *jivatman*. Like the supreme Purusha, the small *purusha* "cell" simply focuses his consciousness, and everything is done by nature (3.27): if the consciousness is focused in the material illusory mode of *ahankara* and *mamatva*, bondage and delusion will ensue, while by focusing one's consciousness in the spiritual mode of sacred service, liberation and happiness will be attained through the action of spiritual Nature.

Sometimes ignorant people remain confused by the existence of sufferings in this world, believing that an omnipotent and omniscient God should never allow anything bad to happen to anyone - especially to the innocent, such as children, friendly animals, and so on. Therefore these people become atheists, denying the existence of God or waging a war against the very concept of religion because they conclude that God must be cruel and evil. This is a childish mentality that should be examined dispassionately in the light of the transcendental knowledge. The sufferings inherent to the material world are difficulties set to help us learn our lessons and evolve at individual and collective levels. If we carefully observe and follow the original instructions for living in this world, our problems will be limited to the very minimum, and we will be more than capable of overcoming them by applying just a little patience and proper effort. In fact, faced with the proper attitude and education, difficulties can even become stimulating and bring a pleasant thrill - like a good fight, an exhausting hike, or a challenging obstacle. It is said that a diamond is nothing but a piece of coal that was able to handle pressure exceptionally well by re-organizing itself through a better (more harmonious) configuration: this is fundamentally the task of each and every individual *jivatma*, as we are all meant to evolve and develop into the highest perfection of consciousness.

Even on the material level, a loving parent will be happy and proud of his/ her child's first attempts at learning something new - from walking to performing more complex activities or studying difficult subjects - even if the child faces a certain measure of discomfort or even suffering. A good parent will help the child to understand that anything valuable is worthy of serious effort and even some sacrifice, and that physical or mental pain is temporary and can be overcome with the correct attitude. This of course does not mean that we should put ourselves or anyone else through disproportionate and unnecessary sufferings and difficulties, or into any procedure that can cause physical or mental damage. It simply means that we need to train to tolerate the inevitable sufferings that are inherent to the material body and mind - *adhibhautika klesa*, *adhyatmika klesa*, *adhidaivika klesa*.

All these sufferings are only temporary perceptions, and are due to the contact of the senses with their objects (2.14), and from the real perspective of the *atman*, they can be compared to illusory nightmares. A good parent will comfort the child who has had a nightmare, explaining the illusory nature of the experience, offering proper advice and instructions on how to overcome the distress, and so on. If we give too much importance to ordinary sufferings, we will only increase the damage by adding fear, anxiety, guilt, uncertainty, and other similar negative emotions; even loss of limb or death itself are not so scary when the consciousness is properly attuned and has become detached from material identifications and ties.

Of course we do not want to go looking for troubles or to create more unnecessary sufferings for ourselves or for others, because the problems that we each naturally face in life, presented by life itself during our journey, are more than sufficient for our evolution. However, we should develop the proactive attitude of seeing each problem as an opportunity for personal growth. In fact, this is the approach that God wants to teach us; if we carefully study the instructions offered by the great personalities and the *shastra*, sufferings and problems in life will be reduced to the very minimum, and we will be able to utilize them in a positive or constructive way. Most often, people unnecessarily create their own problems by acting against their good conscience and against the instructions of good teachers. The actual bulk of sufferings in this world are the karmic consequence of pain we have foolishly inflicted on others, and that we must pay back sooner or later, in this lifetime or in a next one.

Unfortunately there have been and there are still many confused people who project their own negative material qualities on God, and imagine that God actually *wants* people to suffer, to *punish* them for some disobedience or for some similar reason, just like materially attached human beings controlled by passion and ignorance can become angry and vindictive against others. This is another form of illusion, because God is certainly not on that level of consciousness, as Krishna clearly stated already: *nadatte kasyacit papam na caiva sukritam vibhuh, ajnanenavritam jnanam tena muhyanti jantavah*, "The (all) powerful (Lord) does not accept /consider the good or bad merits of anyone. It (the problem) is (only due to) the living entities, that are confused because their knowledge is covered by ignorance", (5.15) and *samo 'ham sarva bhutesu na me dvesyo 'sti na priyah, ye bhajanti tu mam bhaktiya mayi te tesu capy aham*, "I am equally disposed towards all living beings. I do not hate anyone, and I do not favor anyone. Yet, when someone offers me a sincere service in devotion, I also serve them with love and devotion", (9.29).

When we overcome this duality (2.38, 18.9, 18.28, 18.54), we attain the transcendental level of Bhagavan Consciousness. This is the greatest difference between the Vedic religion and abrahamic ideologies, where man is always an insignificant and intrinsically flawed creature, made from lowly dirt, who was insufflated with a mysterious "living soul" from God's breath and is not very good at keeping it, and therefore needs to be "saved" by blind allegiance to God's church and its priests. Thus even the greatest saint can only hope of being admitted in the "kingdom of God" to remain there as a background servant, albeit with considerable job perks; God remains unapproachable personally, a distant king demanding constant blind obedience and feared by his subjects because of his whimsical, unpredictable and often cruel behavior. But even attaining such heavenly position is not easy, because in this world, during one short lifetime, man is tossed around and victimized by God' enemy, Satan, who seems to have almost equal power to God's, and even greater power over material nature and the "things of the world". Abrahamics believe that if by any chance or smallest mistake one fails to meet the stringent requirements for admission to heaven, God will throw him/ her into the eternal fire of hell, where Satan's servants will torture him/ her in very painful, horrible, disgusting and humiliating ways forever. On the other hand, Vedic tradition teaches us that we eternally are all parts and parcels of God, and that we only need to listen to our inner Self and expand our consciousness to attain the same nature of the Supreme. This development is through intelligence and sincere effort, and we have a potentially unlimited number of lifetimes to

engage in perfecting ourselves, learning from each and every experience and becoming better persons. All along this evolutionary journey, we receive many messages, instructions, inspirations, opportunities for learning, and even warnings when we are going in the wrong direction; by focusing our consciousness from darkness to light, from temporary to eternal, from death to immortality, we can easily become successful.

The grammatical components of this verse are very interesting. *Karya* is the action to be performed, or "duty" or "task"; previous commentators reveal that here the word *karya* refers to the body, that is an effect of action and at the same time the instrument for action, determining the range of activities and choices of the individual. Generally the word *karma* is used to indicate one's duty, but as a complete action, a process that is already set as a result of previous choices, and that can only be steered by consciousness either in a good or in a bad direction through transformation or modifications of desire (*iccha, kriya, jnana*). So the difference between *karya* and *karma* is the free will that we apply to change the course of our own destiny. *Kriya* is therefore the process of creation, by which bodies are created as vehicles for opportunities to perform one's duty in the proper consciousness; this *kshetra* ("field of action") is created from the *mahat*, the non-differentiated Brahman, which through the action of Kala/ Kali develops the sense of identity and differentiation, separation or individuality. The very concept of *ahankara* is based on action: *aham* means "I" and *kara* means "who acts"; to avoid misinterpretations, we need to remember here that deliberate abstention from dutiful action is also considered an action, albeit negative in form, and brings negative consequences. From this *ahankara* (or *kartritvam*), the action of Time develops the *tan matra* (the subtle schematics of sense perception), and from this blueprint of consciousness applied to action, the *karana* (the 11 sense organs, including the mind) and the *visayas* (sense objects and bodies) will develop. All this is caused by Nature, or Prakriti, and actually constitutes the very identity of Prakriti.

So when we say, *karya karana kartritve hetuh prakritir ucyate*, it means that *prakriti* is the cause or meaning/ reason/ initiator of the *kartritva* (capacity of action) in the *karana* (senses and mind) of the *karya* (action itself as duty we choose to perform). On another level, the *prakriti* (as engagement of the qualities of one's body and mind) is the *karya* (duty), the *karana* (the cause) and the *hetu* (the meaning or reason) in the *kartritva* (principle of action itself, or impetus for creation). On yet another level, the actions (*karya*, starting with the creation of the universe) are the cause (*karana*) and the purpose (*hetu*) for the sense of doership or agency (*kartritva*) embodied by the various Devas who preside over the functions/ actions within the universe. Accordingly, the second part of the verse will indicate that the *purusha* experiences the consciousness transformations in the different tastes (sweet, salty, bitter, sour, pungent, astringent) that are variations of *sukha* (pleasure) and *duhkha* (pain). On another level, the *purusha* (as consciousness) is the *hetu* (origin, cause, purpose) of the tasting (*bhoktritva*) of the various feelings and experiences. On another level, the supreme Purusha is the supreme Master (*bhokta*) that is served by all the various personalities in the universe; the good personalities serve him favorably and the bad personalities serve him unfavorably - creating opportunities for *lila*, for the expression of teachings and the demonstration through examples that can be useful for other developing souls. So even the most rebellious *asuras* are actually playing in God's hands, and they are fully controlled by Prakriti through action.

पुरुषः प्रकृतिस्थो हि भुङ्क्ते प्रकृतिजान्गुणान् । कारणं गुणसङ्गोऽस्य सदसद्योनिजन्मसु ॥ १३-२२ ॥

puruṣaḥ prakṛtiṣtho hi bhun̄kte prakṛtijāṅgūṇān | kāraṇam̄ guṇasaṅgo'sya sadasadyonijanmasu || 13-22 ||

purusha: the *purusha*; *prakriti sthah*: situated in the *prakriti*; *hi*: indeed; *bhunkte*: enjoys; *prakriti jan*: born from the *prakriti*; *gunan*: the *gunas*; *karanam*: the origin; *guna sanga*: contact with the *gunas*; *asya*: of him; *sat asat*: good and bad; *yoni*: matrix; *janmasu*: in (various) births.

"The Purusha is situated in the Prakriti, and tastes the gunas that have originated from the Prakriti. Due to the contact with these gunas, he takes birth in various matrixes, good or bad.

The Purusha can never be separated from the Prakriti.

Consciousness exists only through the cognition of existence, and existence is the *kshetra*, as we have seen at the beginning of this chapter. The *purusha* is the *kshetra jna*, the consciousness that perceives the *kshetra*, but this *kshetra* also includes *jnana* (knowledge), *jneya* (the object of knowledge), and *jnana gamyam* (the purpose of knowledge). It is obvious that Arjuna's questions were very wisely chosen, and this indicates that he already knew the answers and the subject perfectly well.

So when Krishna replies, "the *kshetra* is the body and the *kshetra jna* is the soul", we must be very careful not to get merrily simplistic about the subject. The subsequent elaborations offered by Krishna are illuminating for those who keep their minds open, because in 13.16 and 13.17 he says that Vishnu is the *jneya* and *jnana gamyam*, the "object" of knowledge, although he is not *kshetra* but rather *kshetra jna*. So we understand that this knowledge of the field (*kshetra jnana*) applies to action (*prakriti*), as well as to perception (*purusha*), that must also be perceived and known. This also helps us to understand the difference between the two *kshetra jnas* - the *jivatma* and the *paramatma*. The *param atma* knows all *kshetras* or fields of action (bodies, etc): *ksetra jnam capi mam viddhi sarva ksetresu bhārata, ksetra ksetrajnāyor jnanam yat taj jnanam matam mama*. "O Bharata, you should know that I am also the knower of the field who resides in all fields. Knowing the field and the knower of the field is called knowledge. This is my opinion", (13.3).

The *paramatma*, the Soul of all souls, is the real *bhokta*, the cause (*hetu, karana*) of the *bhoktritva* for all *jivatmas*, while the acceptance of *rasas* by the individual souls is simply a reflection or imitation or "ripple" of the *rasas* in the supreme Consciousness. We can make a practical example with the activities of a group of children who are helping Mother prepare food in the kitchen; only if they work in the proper consciousness, following the instructions and for a higher purpose, they will be able to produce something useful, otherwise they will have to eat their own unpleasant mess. Father may enjoy having a taste of their food even if it is tasting horrible, or he may already know the taste because of his vaster knowledge, but he is not attached to it and therefore does not need to eat it all, while the conditioned souls are egotistically identifying with their action and therefore they have to eat it up and mop the plate, even if they have to cry for that.

Another very interesting point revealed by previous commentators is that the *purusha* never actually enjoys the sense objects (*visaya*) but only the *gunas* (qualities) associated with such sense objects. In the case of the supreme *purusha*, these *gunas* are the transcendental

qualities that create variety of tastes from the three basic elements of *sat* (existence), *cit* (awareness) and *ananda* (happiness), while in the case of the conditioned individual *purusha*, the three *gunas* are the fundamental qualities of material nature (*sattva*, *rajas*, *tamas*), that will be described in detail in the next chapters. To summarize them, we can say that *sattva* is goodness and happiness, *rajas* is effort and pain, and *tamas* is illusion and ignorance.

Consequently, as the verse says (*karanam guna sango 'sya sad asad yoni janmasu*), by the association with these qualities or *gunas*, the *purusha* is "caused" by the subtle body to take birth in a *yoni* or matrix. In the case of the *parama purusha*, the matrix is the spiritual form, manifested by the combination of qualities connected to the specific action or mission, that can appear as *saumya* (benevolent) or *asaumya* (terrifying), or even *sat* (eternal) or *asat* (temporary, as in *avatars* that appear for a particular mission only and then disappear).

The *jivatma* itself is one of such *avatars*, specifically described as *vibhinnamsa* ("distinct limb"), or *shaktyavesa* ("invested with power"), although of course it is only an atom (*anu atma*).

Similarly, the use of the word *janma* has previously been applied to the *svamsa avatara* appearance of the transcendental Lord (*janma karma ca me divyam*, "my divine birth and activities", 4.9, *bahuni me vyatitani janmani*, "many have been my births", 4.5, and also in 4.3, *aparam bhavato janma*, "you were born more recently").

Even the use of the word *sristi* as in *srijami aham*, "I create (my form)", (4.7) is applied to the appearance of the Lord, and this gives us a glimpse on the idea that everything is actually spiritual (including what appears to be material) and everything could indeed be directed by pure consciousness.

The cause (*karana*) for identification (*kartritva*) is action. In the *parama Purusha*, such action is *lila*, detached and blissful manifestation that is perfectly conscious and deliberate, and thus never failing (*acyuta*) or subject to actual suffering. Both *purushas* are situated (*stha*) in *prakriti*, but while the *parama purusha* controls the *prakriti*, the *jiva purusha* is controlled by the *prakriti* because of his tiny size and incomplete consciousness.

उपद्रष्टानुमन्ता च भर्ता भोक्ता महेश्वरः । परमात्मेति चाप्युक्तो देहेऽस्मिन्पुरुषः परः ॥ १३-२३ ॥
 upadraṣṭānumantā ca bhartā bhoktā mahēśvaraḥ | paramātmēti cāpyukto dehe'sminpuruṣaḥ paraḥ || 13-23 ||

upadrasta: the witness; *anumanta*: the one who gives permission; *ca*: and; *bharta*: who maintains; *bhokta*: who enjoys; *mahesvarah*: the great Lord; *paramatma*: the supreme Self; *iti*: like this; *ca*: and; *api*: even; *uktah*: it is said; *dehe*: in the body; *asmin*: this; *purushah parah*: the supreme *Purusha*/ the transcendental *Purusha*.

"However, it is said that within this body also dwells the supreme Purusha, the Paramatma Mahesvara. He is the one who witnesses the action and allows it to be performed, supports it and enjoys it.

Because the definition of *Purusha*, as pure eternal consciousness, can apply both to the supreme Lord and to the individual *jivatma*, particularly in relationship to action, qualities, forms, etc as explained in the previous verses, here Krishna elaborates on the difference between the *anu atma* (infinitesimal soul) and the *param atma* (the supreme soul).

The sectarian academic mentality divides the study of knowledge in opposite factions, creating the confused and delusional idea that we need to "pick a side" in the field of ideologies and fight against all other groups, rejecting their arguments *a priori*, out of our allegiance to our "own camp". The Vedic system, based on honoring truth (*satyam*) above all, uses philosophical debate simply to improve and expand everybody's realizations, and not for the aggrandizement or "victory" of a particular camp above the other. In this tradition, the Absolute Truth is that perspective in which all relative truths are contained and reconciled, forming a multi-dimensional vision that is the closest possible to the Sum total of Reality.

Therefore there is no need to be afraid of impersonalism versus personalism: the two perspectives can and should complement each other, because Reality is multi-dimensional. The various schools of thought that have elaborated on the subject in the last 2000 years or so have presented various perspectives that are not at odds with each other, but are meant to complement each other into a greater picture. The most recent perspective, expressed by Krishna Chaitanya, is called *acintya bheda abheda*, "inconceivably one and distinct", establishing that God is at the same time one with, and distinct from, his energies - the world and the individual souls.

The realization of the unity of all Consciousness is called Brahman realization; this Brahman is simultaneous awareness of all beings, individual souls and elements of nature, and is eternally full of happiness and peace, totally transcending all darkness of ignorance. The realization of *Paramatma* is one step further; this supreme Consciousness is also individual - a supreme Personality that is our conscience, and is immensely more intelligent and wiser than us. Krishna has stated from the very beginning: *na tv evaḥam jatu nasam na tvam neme janadhipah, na caiva na bhavisyamah sarve vayam atah param*, "Certainly there was never a time when I did not exist, and you and all these chieftains of men have always existed as well. Also, none of us will cease to exist in the future", (2.12). This is also confirmed in *Svetasvatara Upanishad* (6.13): *nityo nityanam cetanas cetananam*, "he is (the supreme) eternal among all eternal, (the supreme) conscious among all the conscious".

When we attain the *Paramatma* realization, we are not alone any more. Just sitting next to us, on the tree of our body, we find the greatest friend and lover - not simply a Great Universal Mind, containing all knowledge and awareness, but the Soul of our soul, our innermost Self, who perfectly understands us but is not limited by our weakness.

The *Bhagavata Purana* (11.11.6) confirms: *suparnav etau sadrisau sakhyau, yadricchayaitau krita nidau ca vrikse, ekas tayoh khadati pippalannam anyo niranno 'pi balena bhuyan*, "Two friend birds somehow nested on the same banyan tree; one is eating the fruits, the other is not eating any food, but he is the strongest."

This beautiful image is also found in the *Upanishads* (*Svetasvatara Upanishad* 4.6, *Mundaka Upanishad* 3.1.1): *dva suparna sayujya sakhaya samanam vriksam parisavajate, tayor anyah pippalam svady atty anasnann anyo 'bhichakasiti*.

One could remain confused by trying to reconcile the idea of the Paramatma as the bird who is not eating the fruits of the tree, with the idea of the Paramatma being the *bhokta*, or the supreme enjoyer as stated in this verse. The explanation is not difficult: the supreme Soul is on a higher level of consciousness, a sacred consciousness, where all actions are performed as *yajna* and *tapas*: *bhoktaram yajna tapasam sarva loka mahesvaram, suhridam sarva bhutanam jnatva mam santim ricchati*, "(One who) knows me as the enjoyer/ beneficiary of *yajna* (sacrifice) and *tapas* (austerity), the great Lord of all the worlds/ all people, and the dearest friend of all beings, attains peace", (5.29), *aham hi sarva yajnanam bhokta ca prabhur eva ca, na tu mam abhijananti tattvenatas cyavanti te*, "I am the Lord and beneficiary of all *yajnas*. Those who do not understand my *tattva* will have to take birth again", (9.24).

The individual soul can also enter this dimension of consciousness by tuning in accordingly:

yat karosi yad asnasi yaj juhosi dadasi yat, yat tapasyasi kaunteya tat kurusva mad arpanam, "O Arjuna, whatever you do, whatever you eat, whatever you sacrifice, whatever you give, whatever you endure in the performance of your duties - do it for me", (9.27),

brahmany adhaya karmani sangam tyaktva karoti yah, lipyate na sa papena padma patram ivambhasa, "Connecting/ dovetailing all activities to the Brahman, giving up all (identifications and) associations, one is never affected by the negative consequences, just like a lotus leaf is never affected by water", (5.10),

na mam karmani limpanti na me karma phale spriha, iti mam yo 'bhijanati karmabhir na sa badhyate, "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", (4.14),

na ca mam tani karmani nibadhnanti dhananjaya, udasina vad asinam asaktam tesu karmasu, "O Dhananjaya, I am not bound by such actions, as I am situated neutrally, without any attraction for such activities", (9.9),

janma karma ca me divyam evam yo vetti tattvatah, tyaktva deham punar janma naiti mam eti so 'rjuna, "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", (4.9).

So the bird that is not interested in eating the fruits of the tree is *atma rama* ("taking pleasure in the self") and in more than one sense. First of all, he is self-sufficient and can find all happiness and satisfaction within himself. Secondly, he is enjoying the *jiva atman* - perceiving the feelings and perceptions of the individual souls, and guiding them towards the transcendental happiness that is *bhakti*. We can make a very simple example in this regard: mouth, tongue, stomach are all eating, but it is the "I" of the body that is primarily benefitted (*bhokta*), although all the parts of the body obtain pleasure and nourishment, too.

Narada pancaratra teaches: *hrishikena hrishikeshya sevnam bhaktir ucyate*, "*bhakti* is defined as using one's senses to serve the Lord of the senses". The more we adjust the focus of our consciousness towards happiness and love, the more Paramatma is pleased enjoying these feelings in the heart of the *jiva*; conversely, Krishna will explain (17.6) that *asuras* practice austerities that cause pain and damage to the mind and the body, and the Paramatma feels them too (*mam ca iva ... sarira stham*) although he always remains detached from them and focused on the immense happiness of Brahman (*brahma ananda*). This is confirmed in *Gopala tapani Upanishad (uttara 97)*: *sakshi cetah kevalo nirgunas ca*, "the Witness is pure Consciousness, free from all material qualities". When we learn and apply this "witness meditation" approach to our own life, we can also establish ourselves in that nature (*bhava*):

apuryamanam acala pratistham samudram apah pravisanti yadvat, tadvat kama yam pravisanti sarve sa santim apnoti na kama kami, "The ocean does not move from its position, no matter how much water enters to fill it. A person who similarly (withstands the flow) of desires entering (his mind) achieves a peace that is not (achieved) by one who wants (to cultivate) desires" (2.70),

naiva kincit karomiti yukto manyeta tattva vit, pasyan srinvan sprisan jighrann asnan gacchan svapan svasan, "One who is a *yogi* thinks/ should think, 'I am not the doer of anything'. One who knows the truth (engages in) seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, eating, going, dreaming, breathing, (etc)", (5.8),

ye hi samsarsa ja bhoga duhkha yonaya eva te, ady antavantah kaunteya na teshu ramate budhah, "Those pleasures that derive from contact with (the sense objects) are the cause for future sorrow because they have a beginning and an end. Therefore, o son of Kunti, an intelligent person does not seek happiness in them", (5.22).

On another level of meaning, the Paramatman is perceived as the *prana vayu*, the life air that sustains all the other *pranas* in the body, and keeps us alive. This *prana vayu* is explicitly identified as the *omkara*, the primeval sound vibration, that is also called *pranava* ("as/ of the *prana*"). More about this concept in chapter 17. The two attributes of *upadrasta* and *anumanta*, described in regard to the Paramatma, are closely connected. The supreme Soul is the eternal witness and understands everything, therefore he guides us to fulfill our desires and to enter circumstances that will help us progress in our evolution, also reminding us about all such events - either within this lifetime, or between lifetimes, or in a next lifetime - whenever we need and want to know. Because our awareness is limited by our individual mind structure, we cannot remember everything at the same time, therefore the "superconscious" (the supreme Self) gives us messages and hints from time to time, in the form of inspiration, sudden memories, impulses and even dreams, as well as teachings and comments we hear from other people. When we become more sincere and dedicated to our spiritual evolution, we become more sensitive and open to such messages, and to the "voice of our conscience".

The next two attributes of the Paramatma described in this verse are *bharta* and *bhokta*, accompanied by the name *mahesvara*, "great Lord". We should never forget that our conscience is the voice of God - the beneficiary of all activities, the owner of all planets, and the well wisher of all beings: *bhoktaram yajna tapasam sarva loka mahesvaram, suhridam sarva bhutanam jnatva mam santim ricchati*, (5.29). It is also very interesting to notice that the name *Mahesvara* is normally used to refer to Lord Shiva, the form of Vishnu that engages material nature and begets all souls in this world. *Mahesvara* is thus Paramatma, the supreme Self of the self - a special position that is technically called *shiva tattva* in the *bhakti* literature. For those who consider themselves as *vaishnavas* followers of Krishna Chaitanya, it will be interesting to notice that *Sadashiva* ("the eternal form of Shiva") is described as directly *Narayana*, or as exemplified beautifully by the characteristic iconography, is depicted as *Hari Hara*.

The word *bhara* means "burden", as in something that we carry or sustain, as in expenditures etc. So *bharanam* means continuance of the functions, support, sustenance, and *bharta* means "sustainer", applied to all relationships where a powerful person maintains, supports and protects others.

For example, Vishnu is called Indrabharta, "the sustainer of Indra". Also, *bharta* is usually applied to the husband in a marriage relationship. Krishna had already mentioned some of these attributes (*sakshi* is a synonym of *upadrasta*) in verse 9.18: *gatir bharta prabhuh saksi nivasah saranam suhrit, prabhavah pralayah sthanam nidhanam bijam avyayam*, "I am the destination, the nourisher, the Lord, the witness, the abode, the shelter, the friend. I am the origin, the end, the foundation, the resting place and the seed that never perishes."

य एवं वेत्ति पुरुषं प्रकृतिं च गुणैः सह । सर्वथा वर्तमानोऽपि न स भूयोऽभिजायते ॥ १३-२४ ॥

ya evaṁ vetti puruṣaṁ prakṛtiṁ ca guṇaiḥ saha | sarvathā vartamāno'pi na sa bhūyo'bhijāyate || 13-24 ||

yah: one who; evam: like this; vetti: knows; puruṣam prakṛtiṁ ca: the puruṣa and the prakṛiti; guṇaiḥ saha: together with the guṇas; sarvatha: in all ways; vartamanah: established; api: although; na: not; sah: s/he; bhuyah: again; abhijayate: takes birth.

"One who knows the Puruṣa and the Prakṛiti, as well as the various ways of the guṇas, will not take another birth, irrespective of his/ her (present) situation.

Ordinary materialistic people think that the purpose of life is merely about living - surviving as long as possible and enjoying as much as possible. A famous materialist, Charvaka Muni, wrote, *rinam kṛtvā gṛhṭam pibet yavaj jivet sukham jivet, bhasmi bhūtasya dehasya kutah punar agamano bhavet*, "While you are still alive, enjoy life by eating excellent food, even if you need to make debts for that, because after the dead body has been burned to ashes, there will be no return". Some people even extend this idea beyond the borrowing and apply it to overtly or covertly fraudulent activities such as stealing or pretending to be a saintly person and begging for charity ("beg, borrow or steal").

In this perspective, religiously inclined materialists hear about the superior pleasures of paradise and develop a desire to be admitted there; accordingly they perform the required rituals to accumulate good merits. However, such position is not permanent, and after exhausting such merits one must take a new birth on the human level of life and engage in pious religious activities again to earn new credits; this applies to everyone, including those who do not believe in reincarnation and have been told that a place in paradise is a permanent settlement. The laws of nature do not stop working for those who do not "believe" in them. Some of these materialists who believe in reincarnation have heard that the individual soul develops towards perfection through a variety of increasingly evolved bodies, and conclude that liberation (*moksha*) can be attained only by those who have taken birth in a high family and social position, with a considerable amount of talents, and so on. This is not a fact: any human being can actually attain liberation and perfection simply by taking complete shelter in the Supreme (9.32). Obtaining a human birth (*manuṣya janma*) is an important turn in a *jivatma's* evolutionary journey, because the nervous system of the functional human body is complex enough to afford philosophical elaboration and spiritual realization.

The purpose of life is the attainment of spiritual realization, that is also called *moksha* or liberation from conditionings; in this verse Krishna explains how spiritual realization consists in achieving the proper knowledge - understanding the facts about *puruṣa*, *prakṛiti*, and the various qualities that constitute Nature. Already in verses 4.37 and 4.38, Krishna had stated, *yathaidhamsi samiddho 'gnir bhasma sat kurute 'rjuna, jnanagnih sarva karmani bhasma sat kurute tatha*, "O Arjuna, just like the blazing fire turns firewood into ashes, similarly the fire of knowledge turns all *karma* (reactions to action) into ashes", and *na hi jnanena sadrisam pavitram iha vidyate, tat svayam yoga samsiddhah kalenatmani vindati*, "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."

This knowledge is not merely the accumulation of theoretical data, but truly changes the life of a person: *yasya sarve samarambhah kama sankalpa varjitaḥ, jnanagni dagdha karmanam tam ahuh panditam budhah*, "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", (4.19). The reason why we keep taking birth in this world is because we still carry unresolved issues, material desires, attachments and identifications, that we could describe collectively as "karmic seeds" because they have been produced by our previous materially motivated actions. However, since material motivation is due to ignorance of the true nature and duty of the soul, all *karma* can be neutralized by proper knowledge, like seeds burned by fire cannot germinate, so there will be no more rebirth (*Mahabharata*, Vana parva, 199.107).

The expression *vartamanah api* means "although situated in the material world", and carries several layers of meanings. It refers to the *jivan mukta*, who still lives in a material body but does not identify with it: in this sense, it does not really matter which position one holds in the *varna* and *ashrama* system, because by definition transcendental consciousness is not limited by a particular material situation. Many people believe that one can attain *moksha* only by entering the order of *sannyasa*, while ordinary people, who have a regular job and family responsibilities, are excluded from this possibility, and therefore there is no point for them to make any effort in that direction. This is not a Vedic concept, and it is certainly not supported by *Bhagavad gita*. Already in verse 3.20, Krishna clearly stated that anyone can be situated in perfection (*moksha*) even in this life, by applying the science of action: *karmanaiva hi samsiddhim asthita janakadayah, 'Janaka and others (like him) became situated in perfection through the performance of activities."*

He also said, *mam hi partha vyapasritya ye 'pi syuh papa yonayah, striyo vaisyas tatha sudras te 'pi yanti param gatim*, "O Arjuna, those who have completely taken shelter in me will attain the supreme destination, even if they were born from impure intercourse, women, business people and traders, or manual workers", (9.32)

In the *Maha Upanishad* (2.14- 77) we find that when Sukadeva went to visit Janaka, on the advice of his father Vyasa, he found the famous king surrounded by all sorts of sense gratification, but perfectly detached and fully conscious of the transcendental reality. A *jivan mukta*, a soul that is already liberated even while still living in the material body, can remain in any social position without identifying with it. Krishna Chaitanya said, *naham vipro na ca nara patir napi vaisyo na sudro, naham varni na ca griha patir no vanastho yatir va*, "I am not a *brahmana*, I am not a *kshatriya*, a *vaisya* or a *sudra*, and similarly I am not a *brahmachari*, a *grihastha*, a *vanaprastha* or a *sannyasi*".

The actual purpose of life consists in attaining liberation from all conditionings and thus overcoming the need to wear a material body. At this point we can really begin to live and act on the transcendental level (*brahma bhūtaḥ prasannatma na socati na kankṣati samah sarvesu bhutesu mad bhaktim labhate param*, 18.54) where true *bhakti* can manifest.

In the preliminary stages of devotion one must acquire sufficient faith (*sraddha*) to actually abandon all other considerations and seriously engage in the process of *vaidhi bhakti* (regulated devotional service). Through service to the Supreme, regular association with liberated souls and the study of transcendental knowledge, one can directly experience a glimpse of the spiritual existence (*abhasa*) and therefore attain the level of *nistha* (strong belief). The increased enthusiasm and love produce a real taste (*ruci*) for spiritual life, and this higher taste enables us to become detached (*asakti*) from material things, as advised in verse 2.59. This is the level of Brahman realization (*brahma bhuta*) where we are fully satisfied (*prasanna atma*) with our service and union with the Supreme, and from which we can easily come to realize the presence of the Supreme in all beings as Param Atman (*samah sarvesu bhutesu*). Only from this level the true sentiments of devotion - *bhava* and *prema* - can manifest; before this point, they are simply *abhasa rupa*, a reflection or shadow of real *bhakti*.

Therefore we need to seriously engage in the process of *anartha nivritti*, "dropping whatever is not valuable", or in other words all the manifestations of *ahankara* (material identification) and *mamatva* (material attachment). One who is still carrying this material luggage will continue to be blinded by selfish desires (*kanksati*) and suffer for all losses (*socati*), and to make an egotistic distinction between one's own benefit and the benefit of all beings (*sarvesu bhutesu*), categorizing others according to the selfish benefit s/he can obtain from them. This attitude will certainly keep the conditioned soul tied to the wheel of reincarnation.

ध्यानेनात्मनि पश्यन्ति केचिदात्मानमात्मना । अन्ये साङ्ख्येन योगेन कर्मयोगेन चापरे ॥ १३-२५ ॥

dhyānenātmani paśyanti kecidātmānamātmanā | anye sāṅkhyena yogena karmayogena cāpare || 13-25 ||

dhyānena: by meditation; *atmani*: in the self; *paśyanti*: they see; *kecit*: some; *atmanam*: the self; *atmana*: by the self; *anye*: others; *sāṅkhyena yogena*: by the *sāṅkhya yoga*; *karma yogena*: by the *karma yoga*; *ca*: and; *apare*: others.

"Some see (all this) in the self through meditation, others by engaging the *atman* within the *atman*, and others through the *sāṅkhya yoga* or the *karma yoga*."

The special character of Vedic religiosity consists in the personalized approach for progress; anyone can be properly engaged and attain ultimate success simply by expertly utilizing one's *guna* and *karma*, the qualities and the activities that have been created by previous impressions (*samskaras*).

Many people speak about "meditation", but have rather foggy ideas about what exactly this is supposed to mean. Most "yoga practitioners" today believe that meditation is simply about making a deliberate effort to relax, breathe peacefully and forget daily problems - to fight stress, improve physical health, and so on. Of course relaxing and bringing silence in the mind are useful and beneficial practices, but they only serve as a preliminary preparation for real meditation; we could make the example of a man who wants to travel and sits in a vehicle. It is a very good start, but unless we actually get the motor running and drive the car to destination, we are not going anywhere, and we cannot say we have been "traveling".

The first method of realization described in this verse is *atma vidya*, the realization of the transcendental nature of *atman*, that is also called *brahman* realization because the *atman* is the individual manifestation of *brahman*. This is called *dhyana*, "meditation". By true meditation, we actually tap into the universal Consciousness and find *sat*, eternal existence, *cit*, complete awareness, and *ananda*, transcendental happiness.

The second method mentioned in the verse is *dhyana* (meditation) on the *atman* of the *atman*, the *param atman*. The individual Self becomes united with the supreme Self, and this is called *yoga* ("union"). Both the first and the second method are connected as subsequent steps of the same journey.

The third method is called *sāṅkhya yoga*, and the fourth method is called *karma yoga*. *Sāṅkhya* consists in categorizing the components of reality, specifically distinguishing what is spiritual from what is material. This method is also called *jñāna yoga*, and is based on the study of the *śāstra*; with a sincere practice of the theoretical principles thus learned, the *jñāni* becomes able to drop material identifications and attachments, and therefore attains the transcendental level (7.19). *Karma yoga* is a faster method, that can be practiced also by those who have relatively less intellectual capacities; by working selflessly and with devotion in the service of God and for the benefit of all creatures, the *sadhaka* is supported and energized by the positive karmic reactions and quickly attains spiritual realization (9.27).

However, we should not think that these methods are separated from each other. Krishna has told us already in 3.3 and 5.4 that the two roads of Sāṅkhya and Karma are actually one only; theory and practice must work side by side, just like knowledge (*jñāna*) and renunciation (*vairāgya*). When our learning does not become practical application, it remains useless, as in the case of those medical doctors who warn people about the dangers of smoking cigarettes but are unable to drop the bad habit themselves. Similarly, work without knowledge cannot bring proper fruits, as even the best intentions will fail to help us because we will commit a lot of mistakes. Philosophy without application becomes dry arrogance and cruelty, while religious dedication without philosophy becomes fanatical bigotry and dangerous sentimentality.

The key to success is the proper study of Transcendence and a sincere commitment to its pursuit, leaving behind all other considerations: our intelligence should be totally focused on the goal, and not dispersed in many other concerns (2.41). This intensity, this dedication, is called *bhakti*, and it burns like the fire of passion that we experience in this material world - but while material passion burns our intelligence and good sense (2.62-63, 3.39), the fire of *bhakti* burns all *anarthas* and karmic reactions (4.18-20). In fact, this fire of *bhakti* is the source of all blessings for those who are filled with material desires, for those who desire liberation, and for those who are already free from all desires, as confirmed in *Bhagavata Purana* 2.3.10: *akama sarva kamo va moksa kama udara dhih, tivrena bhakti yogena yajeta purusam param*.

A true devotee is anxious to learn about God and his instructions, and while s/he resides in this material world, s/he wants to understand how things work here, so that s/he will be able to offer them or engage them in divine service. Pure love is the best motivation, because it is free from selfishness, and therefore it constitutes the fundamental factor in all the paths of Yoga. At the conclusion of *Bhagavad gita* (18.55) Krishna will say: *bhaktya mam abhijanati yavan yas casmi tattvatah, tato mam tattvato jnatva visate tad anantaram*, "One can

know me truly only by *bhakti*, and by this realization one enters Eternity". The *Bhagavata Purana* (11.14.21) confirms in the teachings given by Krishna to Uddhava: *bhaktiyaham ekaya grahyah sraddhayatma priyah satam, bhaktih punati man nistha sva pakan api sambhavat*, "I can be attained through pure *bhakti* and full faith. I am the *atman*, dear to the good people (*sat jana*), and such *bhakti* in full dedication purifies anyone, even dog eaters".

Again in *Bhagavata Purana* (11.20.6) Krishna confirms the unity of the three methods: *yogas trayo maya prokta nrinam sreya vidhitsaya jnanam karma ca bhaktis ca nopayo 'nyo 'sti kutracit*, "I have described (these) three *yogas* because I wish that human beings could attain perfection. These are *jnana*, *karma* and *bhakti*: there is no other way."

अन्ये त्वेवमजानन्तः श्रुत्वान्येभ्य उपासते । तेऽपि चातितरन्त्येव मृत्युं श्रुतिपरायणाः ॥ १३-२६ ॥

anye tvevamajānantaḥ śrutvānyebhya upāsate | te'pi cātitarantyeva mṛtyuṁ śrutiparāyaṇāḥ || 13-26 ||

anye: others; *tu*: but; *evam*: in this way; *ajanantah*: who do not know; *srutva*: by hearing; *anyebhya*: from others; *upasate*: worship/ approach; *te*: they; *api*: although; *ca*: and; *atitaranti*: go beyond/ transcend; *eva*: certainly; *mṛtyum*: death; *sruti parayanah*: dedicated to hearing/ to the scriptures.

"Others still, who do not have sufficient knowledge, worship because they learn from others; they also overcome death because they are dedicated to learning from the scriptures."

The previous verse used the word *pasyanti* ("they actually see") because the direct meditation and engagement in Transcendence is the prescribed method to attain Self realization. However, it may take many lifetimes for a conditioned soul to attain that level and truly engage in *yoga* (*manusyanam sahasresu kascid yatati siddhaye, yatatam api siddhanam kascin mam vetti tattvatah, 7.3, bahunam janmanam ante jnanavan mam prapadyate, vasudevah sarvam iti sa mahatma su durlabhah, 7.9*).

In the early stages of spiritual development, when we are still ignorant (*ajanantah*), we engage indirectly in the process by attaching ourselves to the association of the *tatva darshis* (4.34): *tad viddhi pranipatena pariprasenena sevaya, upadeksyanti te jnanam jnaninas tattva darsinah*, "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 initiation or beginning of the spiritual evolution is based on sincerely listening (*sruti parayana*) to *shastra*, *guru* and *sadhus*. "Listening" is different from "hearing": the act of listening implies a certain degree of attention and an effort to understand the meaning of what one hears. Sometimes people who were born into a traditional religious family simply sit through the recitation of spiritual discourses without making any real effort at understanding and realizing what is discussed; this is also a beneficial practice but the effects will be very limited - as a hungry man cannot get real nourishment simply by smearing the food over his closed mouth. We need to actually open our minds and hearts to the transcendental knowledge with full attention, not only by listening but also by repeating and remembering (*sravanam, kirtanam, smaranam*). This absorption of the knowledge of Transcendence must also be accompanied by sincere service (*pada sevnam* and *vandanam*, as well as *pranipatena sevaya*), that constitutes the requirement of *vairagya* - abandoning one's attachments and identifications by simply becoming a servant of Yoga.

This is called worship, *arcanam*. The true meaning of worship is not tied to ritualistic ceremonies, but consists in selfless service to the object of our love and dedication. Some people are confused because they believe that "worship" constitutes a sort of acknowledgment of the absolutely (and exclusively) supremely divine position of the object of our worship, and especially in the case of abrahamic ideologies, this concept creates a mental friction, because it is believed that "worship" should only be applied to one specific personal manifestation of God. Of course each abrahamic group fights the others over this issue.

In the abrahamic perspective, such "worship" is filled with fear and is based on a pact of exclusive allegiance and blind obedience, in recognition and acceptance of the immense, exclusive and absolute power of the Divinity that is worshiped. Even if the concept of love is introduced in such religious contemplation, it remains unable to really connect the devotee and the Divinity, because it believes that a human being can never attain God but must only pay homage from a distance.

The Vedic concept is quite different. Since God is Consciousness, present in the hearts of all beings, and manifests in innumerable forms, the concept of "worship" is translated on a much more familiar and loving level. It applies to all the various forms of the one Godhead and even to its representatives and glorious creations, which constitute the expression of God's nature and concerns. When a Hindu "worships" a cow or a banyan tree, or his own parents or even a guest, s/he is expressing love, appreciation, admiration, consideration, respect, gratitude, towards a manifestation of the goodness of the Divine, that is offering him/ her an opportunity to reciprocate the blessings s/he has received.

Of course the concept of "worship" is associated with the concept of "religion" or "faith", but there are many levels of such function of consciousness. Later in the text of *Bhagavad gita* Krishna will explain about the three types of faith and religion (chapter 17, *sraddha traya vibhaga yoga*), showing that not all religious people obtain the same results. Those who practice religion without properly following the transcendental science remain bound to the material tendencies called *gunas*, explained in detail in chapters 14 and 16 (*guna traya vibhaga yoga* and *daivasura sampad vibhaga yoga*), and obtain results accordingly. The different forms of religiousness depend on the level of proper knowledge and personal evolution; all human beings have a natural tendency to religion, as religion (from the Latin word *religare*, "to connect") connects the individual with the greater existence in which s/he lives, and manifests in some expression of respect or worship offered to this greater existence. This natural tendency of the human being stems directly from the spiritual intelligence that is spontaneously present in everyone and is variously known as "the voice of conscience", "sense of ethics", "good sense" and so on, and that Vedic scriptures call *sanatana dharma*. This *sanatana dharma*, or eternal and universal sense of religion, is the primeval origin of all religious faiths.

Worship (*upasana*) is synonymous with respect and service; so when a human being perceives and acknowledges the greater existence and offers respect and service to it, this is called religion. This greater existence can be one's family or tribe or even the entire universe: the

connection and dedication to its service in positive harmony - that we call religion - is the true source of satisfaction for the soul. The greater satisfaction and benefit is obtained when worship is offered in virtue and purity (*sattva*), while the presence of greed (*rajas*) and ignorance (*tamas*) will create negative side effects that can even destroy the benefits completely. This is suggested in this verse by the reference to death (*mrityum*), that is not the physical death of the body but the spiritual death of the soul who sinks deeper and deeper into the regions of of ignorance (16.19-20). The only hope to escape from this disastrous course is to obtain the knowledge of the scriptures, the *sruti* (16.24), first by listening from the realized souls and then studying it directly.

In all cultural traditions we will find individuals who practice religion. Even atheists worship Reason and Logic, and recognize the intrinsic value of ethics and conscience, and of working for the benefit of the entire society or universe. The real problem is when a cultural tradition is hijacked by individuals who are motivated by ignorance and material greed, and consequently the spontaneous and natural religious tendencies of the people are directed towards evil and destructive beliefs and practices, characteristic of the *asuras*. This is exactly the opposite of what a *tattva darshi* does to engage rajasic and tamasic people in a progressive method of worship; the religious teachers must always be situated in genuine transcendental realization, in order to properly direct all levels of people. When the "religious authority" lacks this realization or is actually a victim of greed and ignorance, even sincere and intelligent followers become corrupted and fall on the asuric level of life, because we develop the same qualities of the object of our worship.

This verse offers us the fundamental point of religion, that can liberate us from death: learning from genuine scriptures and from qualified teachers and realized devotees. Everything else is just *laukika sraddha*, or "popular belief", that cannot give good results and in same case could even be disastrous.

यावत्सञ्जायते किञ्चित्सत्त्वं स्थावरजङ्गमम् । क्षेत्रक्षेत्रज्ञसंयोगात्तद्विद्धि भरतर्षभ ॥ १३-२७ ॥

yāvatsañjāyate kiñcitsattvaṁ sthāvarajaṅgamam | kṣetrakṣetrajñāsamyogāttadviddhi bhāratarṣabha || 13-27 ||

yavat: whatever; *sanjayate*: comes into being; *kincit*: anything; *sattvam*: *sattva* existence; *sthavara*: non moving; *jangamam*: moving; *ksetra*: the field; *ksetra jna*: the knower of the field; *samyogat*: through the union/ connection; *tat*: that; *viddhi*: you should know; *bharata rshabha*: o best of the descendants of Bharata.

"O descendant of Bharata, you should know that whatever comes to being, moving or non moving, is generated by the union between the field and the knower of the field.

After describing the knowledge of the scriptures, Krishna again repeats its sum and substance: whatever exists is generated or manifested by the union of the *prakriti* and the *purusha* - the two components of the Supreme Brahman - both at the spiritual level and at the material level. We remember how this point was highlighted in the *catuh sloka*, the four central verses of the *Bhagavata Purana* (2.9.33-36), from *aham evasam evagre* to *yat syat sarvatra sarvada*.

All we can see, and therefore all that can be the natural object of our worship, is fundamentally God - *sattvam*, Existence itself. The unlimited manifestation of the spiritual worlds and all the powerful manifestations in these material worlds are simply the *shakti*, or energies, or powers, of the supreme Existence, and we become better able to realize this eternal existence of *suddha sattva* when we situate ourselves in *sattva* or goodness by following the scientific method of Yoga.

According to our level of realization or *sva bhava* (personal nature or personal sentiments) we will connect with the Supreme through an experience of union (*yoga*, religion) that is the powerful source of bliss and satisfaction. At the most primitive level, this union between the *purusha* and the *prakriti* is attained through the physical union of the male and female energies within the material body - the fundamental pure sexual act that offers momentary freedom from the limitations of egotism and a glimpse of the ecstatic experience. This primordial union is sacred, as Krishna clearly states in 7.11, and it is found at the highest level of consciousness at the level of *madhurya rasa bhakti* in the ecstatic union of the soul (as *prakriti*) with God (as *purusha*).

Unfortunately, the understanding of this fundamental principle has been desecrated by asuric ideologies based on *rajas* (greed) that disregard the very concept of *dharma* (ethical principles) and - even worse - by those based on *tamas* (ignorance) that have consistently presented *dharma* as *adharmā*, and *adharmā* as *dharma* (18.30-32). The resulting contamination has created extreme confusion (*ajanantam*) and great sufferings for everyone, and the only medicine consists in proper knowledge and understanding (*sruti parayanam*) to transcend gross material identification (*atitaranti mrtyum*).

In this verse, the word *sattvam* refers to the supreme Existence as well as to its various manifestations, as in "beings", "situations", and "objects" - all permanent and temporary, moving and non-moving on different levels of meaning. At the grossest level, this "moving and non-moving" refers to the various species of life, from the minerals to the plants, to the animals, to human being and even to highest residents of the heavenly planets, but at the subtlest level it refers to the constant transformation of all things and circumstances, that engages the soul in its evolutionary journey in a vast array of experiences.

The *samyoga* (union) between *kshetra* and *kshetrajna* is therefore meant for our evolution and progress, carrying us from the material level to the spiritual level, from ignorance to the light, from death to immortality - *tamaso ma jyotir gamaya, mrtyor ma amritam gamaya* (*Bṛhad aranyaka Upanishad*, 1.3.28). This is represented in the previous verse by the word *atitaranti* ("they go beyond").

समं सर्वेषु भूतेषु तिष्ठन्तं परमेश्वरम् । विनश्यत्स्वविनश्यन्तं यः पश्यति स पश्यति ॥ १३-२८ ॥

samam sarveṣu bhūteṣu tiṣṭhantam paramēśvaram | vinaśyatsvavinaśyantam yaḥ paśyati sa paśyati || 13-28 ||

samam: equally; *sarvesu bhutesu*: in all beings; *tisthantam*: residing; *parama isvaram*: the supreme Lord; *vinasyatsu*: in things that will be destroyed; *avinasyantam*: in things that will not be destroyed; *yah*: s/he; *pasyati*: sees; *sah*: s/he; *pasyati*: (really) sees.

"The supreme Lord equally resides in all beings, in those that will be destroyed and in those that will not be destroyed. One who sees this, is actually seeing.

Krishna is leading us to the conclusion of this very important chapter, discussing the simultaneous difference and non-difference of the Purusha and the Prakriti. We have seen in 2.16-17 that matter and spirit are characterized respectively by destruction and non-destruction (*nasato vidyate bhavo nabhavo vidyate satah*), and that spirit can never be destroyed (*avinasi tu tad viddhi*). This spirit is the Consciousness that pervades all things (*sarvam idam tatam*); the individual spiritual fragments are the *atman*, and the sum total of all consciousness is the *brahman*. There is no difference in quality between the *atman* and the *brahman* - in fact they are one and the same - but there is a difference in quantity or vastity of such consciousness. This understanding will enable us to assimilate, realize and practice all the teachings of Vedic scriptures.

The distinction between spirit and matter is useful in the beginning of our study; however, as the student progresses and becomes more capable of understanding the subject, the vision deepens and expands, removing the support walls that were used to learn to stand up. This is not a contradiction at all.

We could make the example of mathematics: in the beginning we are taught that a greater number cannot be subtracted from a smaller number - you need to have 4 apples in your basket, in order to remove 3 apples and find that only 1 apple is left. However, when we have advanced past this elementary level, we discover that we actually could subtract a greater number from a smaller number: this is called algebra, and can be explained by the example of "borrowing more apples" from someone else and thereby incurring a debt or calculating a negative number. So there is no contradiction in the two apparently opposite statements.

When we have realized that God is Consciousness and Existence, the distinction between the personal subject of the consciousness and the manifestation of such thoughts becomes less important; this applies on the three levels of Brahman, Paramatma and Bhagavan as well. At the Brahman level, the *mahat tattva* is also consciousness because it constitutes the blue print information (i.e. knowledge) of the sum total of reality in the world. At the level of Paramatma, Isvara is present both in the hearts of the individual *jiva atmans* and in the hearts of each and every single atom of matter, and even in between such atoms. At the level of Bhagavan, the consciousness of God is lovingly focused on all creatures and creations, to manifest and support their maintenance and progress and reciprocate their devotion.

An important word here is *samam*, placed in the position of honor at the beginning of this verse and the subsequent one. The Supreme Lord is situated in all beings and situations (*sarvesu bhutesu*) in the same manner; he does not make any discrimination about the material position or body of the various beings, or even about their *guna* and *karma*. This is why a realized soul is equally well disposed towards everyone, and has no prejudice at all, and especially does not mistreat anyone.

The Vedic tradition and *Bhagavad gita* do not condemn, despise or demonize material nature - bodies and objects and resources - as some other ideologies do. On the contrary, we celebrate the beauty of Mother Nature and rejoice in healthy pleasures and joys, while still remembering that they are temporary and limited.

In this verse, the word *pasyati* is particularly important and is repeated twice at the end. It was used in the same way in previous verses, for example in verses 5.5 and 6.30. Vedic knowledge gives great importance to direct personal verification and realization, and does not rely on blind faith and allegiance, therefore it accepts the validity of different *darshanas* ("perspectives") of the same One Reality.

However, we should not think that such an open-minded approach means that we can give the same value to all opinions, including the whimsical speculations of ignorant people. There is a stark difference between a particular perspective (or angle of vision) of reality and a distorted hallucination, projection or fantasy.

It is therefore imperative that we follow the expert guidance of realized teachers and systematically clean our minds from the contamination of ignorance, so we will become able to truly see things as they are and not as we imagine them to be.

समं पश्यन्हि सर्वत्र समवस्थितमीश्वरम् । न हिनस्त्यात्मनात्मानं ततो याति परां गतिम् ॥ १३-२९ ॥

samam pasyanhi sarvatra samavasthitamīśvaram | na hinastyātmanātmānam tato yāti parāṁ gatim | | 13-29 |

samam: equally; *pasyan*: seeing; *hi*: indeed; *sarvatra*: everywhere; *sama vasthitam*: equally situated; *isvaram*: the Lord; *na*: not; *hinasti*: becomes diminished/ degraded; *atmana*: by oneself; *atmanam*: the self; *tatah*: then; *yati*: attains; *param gatim*: the supreme destination.

"One who sees the Lord as equally situated everywhere never becomes degraded/ by being controlled by his/ her mind / by engaging the self in the self, s/he ultimately attains the supreme destination.

In this verse, the expression *atmana atmanam* can be interpreted in two ways, because our mind and identification can either degrade or elevate us, based on the choices we make in regard of consciousness. This was already explained very well in verse 6.5: *uddhared atmanatmanam natmanam avasadayet, atmaiva hy atmano bandhur atmaiva ripur atmanah*, "One should raise him/ herself by his/ her own effort, and not degrade him/ herself. Certainly one should be one's own friend, and one can be one's own enemy as well."

Therefore the two possible translations of this verse are:

- "One who sees the Lord as equally situated everywhere never becomes degraded by being controlled by his/ her mind and ultimately attains the supreme destination" and
- "One who sees the Lord as equally situated everywhere never becomes degraded, and by engaging the self in the self, s/he ultimately attains the supreme destination."

In both cases, the one key factor to ensure our elevation rather than degradation is being able to see God in everything - every creature, every object, every place, every situation.

A *tattva darshi*, or *rishi* ("one who sees") cannot remain confused, because s/he has directly experienced the luminous view of Reality. It is not simply a matter of faith, that can be lost along the way. Once you have really tasted the honey, there will be no more space for doubts in your mind regarding the meaning of the word "sweet".

How to recognize a true *tattva darshi* from an ordinary non-realized person? It is actually very simple: the answer is presented again and again in *Bhagavad gita* and all the other scriptures. When someone has actually seen the presence of the Supreme Being and

Consciousness in every creature, there is no more partiality or identification based on superficial and external differences, such as bodily identification. Material bodily identification is the root of all ignorance, and the cause of all sufferings.

All the negative qualities experienced by human beings - fear, hatred, lust, cruelty, as well as greed for power, possession and domination - automatically disappear when we overcome the delusion of the identification with the temporary material body and the attachment to temporary material things. Make a list of all the crimes, injustices and horrors that have ever plagued human society, and you will find that they are all based on the delusion of separation of interests calculated in terms of identification with the material body.

For a realized soul, every situation offers an opportunity to be in contact with God - the Supreme Consciousness - through an act of sincere service. Anything and anyone can be engaged, either by our associating or dissociating with it, by treasuring or discarding it, by consuming or non-consuming it. We need to remember that action is constituted not only by the physical performance of some movement of the body and the senses, but also by the engagement of the mind and even by the deliberate choice of abstaining from a particular act. This was already explained in verses 4.16-18.

With this deeper awareness and motivation, a person never becomes destroyed or degraded (*na hinasti*) even in the most unfavorable situations including the death of the body. All these can be used as opportunities rather than problems, although of course we should not go around searching for trouble or expect never to feel pain or loss. Degradation or contamination does not depend on external factors, but on one's mind. External contamination is something temporary and can be removed easily with a bath and other purification methods, as long as the mind and consciousness are pure. On the other hand, when we allow our mind and consciousness to become polluted by making the wrong choices, we become really degraded.

प्रकृत्यैव च कर्माणि क्रियमाणानि सर्वशः । यः पश्यति तथात्मानमकर्तारं स पश्यति ॥ १३-३० ॥

prakṛtyaiva ca karmāṇi kriyamāṇāni sarvaśaḥ | yaḥ paśyati tathātmanamakartāraṁ sa paśyati || 13-30 ||

prakṛtya: by the *prakṛiti*; *eva*: certainly; *ca*: and; *karmāṇi*: the activities; *kriyamāṇāni*: are performed; *sarvaśaḥ*: in all situations; *yaḥ*: one who; *paśyati*: sees; *tatha*: also; *ātmanam*: the self; *akartāraṁ*: who is not the doer; *śaḥ*: s/he; *paśyati*: sees.

"One who sees that all the activities, under all circumstances, are performed by the Prakṛiti, and that the Atman is not the doer, really sees.

Contamination by external circumstances normally happens through the physiological functions of the body and the contact with matter, as explained in verses 5.8-10. The acts of seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, eating, moving around, dreaming, breathing (and other *prana* functions, such as sneezing etc), talking, evacuating, absorbing, opening and closing one's eyes (as in falling asleep and waking up) are associated with some type of contamination, and this is why we must bathe regularly.

One of the basic religious requirements or duties for human beings consists in washing at least once a day, and keeping oneself as clean as possible in regard to body (internally and externally), food, clothing, living quarters, etc. This is the most elementary difference between civilized people (*aryas*) and non-civilized people (*anaryas*).

Of course true cleanliness also extends to the mind and consciousness, and as we purify ourselves from the contamination of material identifications and attachments, we can truly develop and attain perfection. This is the meaning of the realization described in this verse, as well as in verses 5.10 and 3.27. Only matter (gross matter like the body and subtle matter like the mind) can become dirty or contaminated; the *atman*, the *purusha*, the original consciousness, is always pure. It is like the sun, that can temporarily be clouded by ignorance, but is never really affected.

The root itself of ignorance and stupidity is the *ahankara*, the material identification that binds us to the performance of material activities. As Krishna as clearly stated in verse 3.27: *prakṛiteḥ kriyamāṇāni guṇaiḥ karmāṇi sarvaśaḥ, ahankāra vimudhatma kartāham iti manyate*, "All activities are actually performed by the qualities of nature, but a foolish person who is confused by egotism thinks 'I am doing this'."

When our ignorance is dispelled by transcendental knowledge, we can see the distinction (*vibhaga*) between ourselves (as *purusha*) and the material energy (as *prakṛiti*) that constitutes our bodies, senses and minds, as well as the objects of our senses. Therefore verse 5.9 explained that a self-realized person (a *sthitha prajna*) knows that the senses naturally engage in the sense objects but does not identify with them. In this way s/he is never affected by material activities, just like a lotus leaf is never affected by water (5.10).

A greater degree of contamination is brought about by the fundamental sufferings we encounter in the normal cycles of life - birth, death, old age and disease - and also in situations where we are forced to suffer humiliation or insult, or even to perform actions that are contrary to our desires and intentions. The same considerations apply here, too. Only the external surface - body and senses - can be contaminated in such circumstances, and the person who is able to remain detached from all such actions (5.11) is always pure, like the lotus flower is always fresh, sweetly scented and perfectly clean in spite of its growing out of dirty mud and standing there all the time.

Since all external activities are performed by the senses in connection with the sense objects, and the *sthitha prajna* knows that his/ her own identity is not affected by them, s/he is not the *karta* ("doer") but rather the *akarta* ("non-doer") as explained in this verse. A clear awareness (*paśyati*, "truly sees") is based on this point specifically; the *atman* is never really the "doer" or the "enjoyer", and as soon as s/he actually realizes this truth, s/he becomes free from *karma*. Of course this does not mean that we should not strive to focus our consciousness or awareness in the proper modes (*gunas*) of *prakṛiti* - so that *prakṛiti* (our mind, senses and body) will function in such a way that our consciousness is purified and not degraded. The next chapters will elaborate extensively on this important point. On the transcendental level of *akarma*, the *atman* participates of the supreme Consciousness of Brahman: Krishna used this definition of *akarta* to design himself in verse 4.13, to state that he is never affected by any material contamination, or touched by action or by the consequences of action (5.12). This instruction reconnects the thread of discussion with the original question asked by Arjuna in verse 2.54: *sthitha prajñasya ka bhāsa samādhi sthāsyā keśava, sthitha dhīḥ kim prabhāseta kim asita vrajeta kim*, "O Keshava, a person who is firmly established in the consciousness of meditation is said to be in *samadhi*. How does he speak, and what does he say? How does he move, and how does he stay?"

At that time Krishna answered:

prajahati yada kaman sarvan partha mano gatan, atmany evatmana tustah sthita prajnas tadocyate, "O Partha, when someone gives up attachment towards all the desires that flow into the mind, and remains satisfied in the *atman*, he is said to be firmly situated in the correct understanding" (2.55),

duhkheshv anudvigna manah sukhesu vigata sprihah, vita raga bhaya krodhah sthita dhira munir ucyate, "A person whose mind is not distracted by sufferings or joys and remains detached, free from attraction, fear and anger, is called a Muni who is able to maintain a steadfast meditation" (2.56). We may remember here that the word *muni* is a synonym for *rishi*, as one who truly sees Reality as it is becomes liberated from material distractions, attachments and identifications.

यदा भूतपृथग्भावमेकस्थमनुपश्यति । तत एव च विस्तारं ब्रह्म सम्पद्यते तदा ॥ १३-३१ ॥

yadā bhūtapr̥thagbhāvamekasthāmanupaśyati | tata eva ca vistāraṁ brahma sampadyate tadā || 13-31 ||

yada: when; *bhuta*: of the beings; *prithak bhavam*: the separation happens; *eka stham*: situated in one; *anupasyati*: becomes trained to see; *tatah eva*: there after; *ca*: and; *vistaram*: the development; *brahma*: Brahman; *sampadyate*: attains the position; *tada*: at that time.

"When one becomes trained to see all beings as situated in one, even when they are separated, and (how all this) is developed, s/he attains the position of Brahman.

This is the conclusion of the chapter that explains the simultaneous oneness and difference of the *purusha* and the *prakriti*. The *sthita prajna* clearly sees this difference through the proper use of *viveka* (discriminating intelligence) but at the same time sees that everything that exists is part of the great Plan, conceived and manifested by the great Intelligence or Consciousness.

Brahman is the name by which Vedic scriptures call this great Consciousness - in which we participate to a greater degree and with greater happiness when our tiny awareness (*anu atman*) is not confused by material identifications based on duality and separation. This "unitarian field" of consciousness is also being discovered by the most cutting edge advanced physicists.

A wise person (*pandita*) sees with equal friendliness the *brahmana* who is learned and gentle, the cow and the elephant, as well as the dog and the uncivilized people (*vidya vinaya sampanne brahmane gavi hastini, suni caiva sva pake ca panditah sama darsinah*, 5.18). Of course the specific behavior of each individual must be taken into proper consideration, but that only refers to their particular *prakritik* nature and not to their intrinsic being (*atman*), that is spiritual and constitutes an integral part of the cosmic Consciousness (Brahman).

On the Brahman level (*brahma bhuta*) there is no separation of existence between the various beings, therefore a *yogi* who has attained that level is always a well-wisher of all beings, and never mistreats anyone, or envies anyone, or tries to exploit anyone. Only on this level one can truly engage in devotional service (*bhakti*), as Krishna will clearly state in verse 18.54: *brahma bhuta prasannatma ma socati na kankshati, samah sarvesu bhutesu mad bhaktim labhate param*.

The word *vistara* used in this verse means "manifestation", as in "development" or "transformation" or "differentiation", and applies to the creation of temporary forms and activities, intended for a specific function in time and space.

In chapter 10 we have seen Arjuna asking Krishna what is the specific meditation by which we should remember God (*katham vidyam aham yogims tvam sada paricintayan, kesu kesu ca bhavesu cintyo 'si bhagavan maya*, 10.17) and Krishna replied with the vision of the *Virata rupa*. This means that we certainly can and should meditate on God by perceiving his presence in the universal manifestation and in all beings and things, that are produced by the union of the *purusha* and the *prakriti* (13.27). We do not need to reject material nature, but simply perceive it in relation to spirit; this requires some training or practice, but such pure and focused vision is the only way to overcome ignorance and remain on the liberated level.

अनादित्वाङ्निर्गुणत्वात्परमात्मायमव्ययः । शरीरस्थोऽपि कौन्तेय न करोति न लिप्यते ॥ १३-३२ ॥

anādītvaṅnirgūṇatvātparamātmāyamavyayaḥ | śarīrastho'pi kaunteya na karoti na lipyate || 13-32 ||

anaditvat: because it has no beginning; *nirgunatvat*: because it is not subject to the *gunas*; *parama atma*: the supreme Self; *ayam*: this; *avyayah*: imperishable; *sarira sthah*: that is residing in the body; *api*: although; *kaunteya*: o son of Kunti; *na karoti*: does not act; *na lipyate*: is not affected (by the action).

"O son of Kunti, this Paramatma resides in the body but has no beginning and is not subject to the gunas. He is imperishable, he does not act and he is not affected by the action.

Brahman, Paramatma and Bhagavan are the same *Tat* or *tattva* perceived in different degrees (*Bhagavata purana*, 1.2.11), so whenever we speak of one of these three perceptions, we indicate *Tat*, the supreme Reality. This supreme Reality has no beginning, because it is always existing (*sat*); eternal existence is its defining characteristic together with *cit* (consciousness) and *ananda* (happiness). It is not produced by some evolutionary process, or created by something else.

This same eternal Consciousness resides in each body as the Soul of the soul (*param atma*), from whom the individual soul (*anu atma, jiva atma*) emanates and by whom it is supported and guided. Under his authority, the *jiva atma* connects with action, either through spiritual energy (*para prakriti*) or material energy (*apara prakriti*) constituted by the *gunas* (qualities) - respectively *sat, cit, ananda* and *tamas, rajas, sattva*.

Between this pure supreme Consciousness that is never touched by action and the individual embodied consciousness that engages in action there is an intermediate concept of identity or "I-ness" that we call *Shiva tattva* or *Sankarshana* (a name that literally means "attraction"). It is an extremely subtle existence, that is simultaneously transcendent and immanent, eternal and non-eternal, because it becomes manifest and non-manifest in the various cycles of creation although it is always existing.

This Sadashiva appears in the material universe as *param atma* to generate all beings and enable them to act, and as *param guru* to guide them. He is the Father of everyone, and attracts everyone towards either the spiritual consciousness or the material consciousness (as each individual being chooses), therefore he is the all-auspicious giver of all blessings. However, he himself is never touched by any action (*na karoti na lipyate*) and gives the same power to a pure *jiva* that attained the realization of his Consciousness by dropping all false identification and attachments. For this reason, it is said that Shiva controls the *ahankara*, and operates the mode of destruction; when the individual soul faces such destruction willingly or unwillingly, respectively elevation or degradation ensue, with consequent liberation or bondage. When we purify our identification by establishing it on the spiritual level, following the example of the greatest Yogi and Guru, Shiva Mahadeva, we enter a higher level of consciousness that is described as "*shivo 'ham*" ("I am Shiva").

Of course the *jivatman* will never be able to become the *totality* of Shiva (Sadashiva, who is none other than Vishnu), but will act like Shiva in the same nature of Consciousness. The name Shiva literally means "auspicious", and indicates that particular expression of Consciousness that out of compassion (*karuna*) manifests in this world for the benefit of all beings. Therefore, the embodied *jivatman* can aggregate his/her tiny consciousness to the supreme Consciousness of the compassionate Isvara, and act in this world for the benefit of all beings - this is, in a nutshell, the entire meaning of the instructions of *Bhagavad gita*.

Sincerely working for the benefit of all beings is called *selflessness* - and this is the key to understand how to destroy the material ignorance of *ahankara* and *mamatva*. These two roots of material *samskara* are very difficult to eliminate, because they easily creep into all *gunas*, including the noble *sattva*, expanding *selfishness* from the core of the individual being to the circle of family, community, society, or species. We can recognize them because they are inevitably based on duality and separation of interests as in sectarianism, racism, and in all forms of prejudice or discrimination based on material identification and attachment.

Shiva Mahadeva offers us the medicine in the form of renunciation (*tyaga*) based on knowledge (*jnana*), which destroys the attachment and identification with such temporary objects and positions. This does not mean that we should formally accept the social position of *sannyasa*, because that would just be another material identification and attachment. Krishna has already explained (6.1) that real renunciation has nothing to do with the externals, but is a level of consciousness in which one works selflessly and dutifully for the benefit of all beings: *anasritah karma phalam karyam karma karoti yah, sa sannyasi ca yogi ca na niragnir na cakriyah*.

A *sannyasi* can give up ordinary work and rituals only to engage more fully and deeply in the active work for the benefit of all beings, and has totally given up all identifications and attachments. Unfortunately, in Kali yuga we see many fake *sannyasis* and *sadhus* who are very much attached to separatist identification and exploitation of others, even to a greater extent than ordinary people.

As explained in *Bhagavata purana*, this happens because among the general ignorance rampant in society, a degraded fool is accepted as a *brahmana* simply because he is wearing a thread (*vipratve sutram eva hi*, 12.2.3), or as a scholar simply because he is quick with words (*panditye capalam vacah*, 12.2.4).

In the same way, any degraded person is accepted as *sannyasi* or *brahmachari* simply by external distinctive clothing (*lingam evasrama khyatav*, 12.2.4), and an arrogant hypocrite will be accepted as a *sadhu* simply because of his amassed wealth and number of followers, while a humble spiritualist who does not pursue a political career or accumulate money and properties will be considered merely an ordinary person (*anadhyataiva asadhutve sadhutve dambha eva tu*, 12.2.5).

Consequently, ignorance will be reinforced because such fake *gurus* and *sadhus* are not capable or interested to properly guide spiritual seekers, but are very anxious to procure the support and friendship of famous and wealthy people. So *dharma* and religious devotion will be honored superficially only for the sake of obtaining personal fame (*yasas rthe dharma sevanam*, 12.2.6) either individual or collective, and the sacredness of a *tirtha* will depend on how far one will travel to reach there (*dure vary ayanam tirtham*, 12.2.6) and thus on how much good business local people can do by exploiting the tourists.

यथा सर्वगतं सौक्ष्म्यादाकाशं नोपलिप्यते । सर्वत्रावस्थितो देहे तथात्मा नोपलिप्यते ॥ १३-३३ ॥

yathā sarvagatam saukṣmyādākāśam nopalipyate | sarvatrāvasthito dehe tathātmā nopalipyate || 13-33 ||

yatha: as; *sarva gatam*: all pervading; *sauksmyat*: because of the quality of subtleness; *akasa*: space; *na upalipyate*: is not affected; *sarvatra*: everywhere; *avasthitah*: situated; *dehe*: in the body; *tatha*: similarly; *atma*: the self; *na upalipyate*: is not affected.

"Just like space is present everywhere but is not affected by anything because of its subtlety, similarly the Atman is not affected even while residing in the body.

Both *param atman* and *atman* have the same transcendental nature, comparable to the sun or the space in relation with atmospheric elements. We can understand that the sun always remains untouched and unaffected by any cloud or darkness, and similarly space (*akasa*) is present everywhere unaffected and untouched by the presence of material objects - gross or subtle - that occupy a specific position in the universe. As in this verse, we can also make the example of an earthen pot - a layer of clay that appears to enclose a portion of space. If we move the pot in another position, the space previously enclosed by it remains free from all relation with the pot, and has not been changed in any way either by its presence or absence. Space supports and enables the existence of all objects, but exists independently and cannot be destroyed; it is therefore the closest example to Atman that we can perceive in this world.

In ancient time, physics and metaphysics were considered two sides of the same universal science, and people were better equipped to study and understand subtle concepts such as space - that cannot be seen or touched or smelled or tasted. Unfortunately a few centuries ago there was a fracture caused by the spreading and establishment of intolerant and dogmatic ideologies, that systematically enforced blind belief in theories presenting them as absolute and indisputable facts, to be accepted as articles of faith. Such a stupid approach undermined the proper use of intelligence and the subtle faculties of the mind, and the popular mentality dropped to the grossest level of "tangible" reality and practice as opposed to "abstract" theory. Furthermore, since such ideologies violently rejected the intrinsic value of nature and natural forces, the healthy pleasures that support life and the wholesome respect for creation became demonized and persecuted. However, as denial and repression cannot solve any problem (3.33), the natural needs of human beings that were pushed back crept up in distorted and perverted ways, loaded with suffering and guilt and fear and hatred, and creating an artificial and hypocritical condition based on

ignorance. Today our task is to reverse this pathological process, allowing the collective mind of human society to heal and recover. Vedic knowledge is the greatest medicine for this cure, because it still contains the active principles of the original pure science.

यथा प्रकाशयत्येकः कृत्स्नं लोकमिमं रविः । क्षेत्रं क्षेत्री तथा कृत्स्नं प्रकाशयति भारत ॥ १३-३४ ॥

yathā prakāśayatyekah kṛtsnam lokamimam raviḥ | kṣetram kṣetri tathā kṛtsnam prakāśayati bhārata || 13-34 ||

yatha: as; prakasayati: illuminates; ekah: one; kṛtsnam: the entire/ complete; lokam: world; imam: this; raviḥ: the Sun; ksetra: the field; ksetri: the self who lives in the field; tatha: in the same way; kṛtsnam: everything; prakasayati: illuminates; bhārata: o descendant of Bharata.

"O Bharata, just like the Sun illuminates all this world, in the same way the kshetri illuminates the entire kshetra.

Some people may have problems in understanding the nature of space, because it is so subtle and cannot be experienced through the material senses of the gross body. Yet space, or ether, can be studied scientifically as the support of light and radio waves, and the substratum of magnetic fields.

In any case, everybody knows what the Sun is. Even blind people can feel its power in the form of heat, so we can safely use this example to elaborate on the scientific study of the power of the Sun. The energy of the Sun emanates from the Sun and pervades all the universe and all bodies, even when we are not able to see or perceive it.

All forms of matter are transformations of energy, and all energy is a transformation of the primordial energy of solar fusion. It is only by the sunlight that plants grow and produce wood and coal and petrol (hydro carbons) as well as the grains (carbohydrates) that we eat to produce the cells of our bodies. Furthermore, the heat of the sun rays evaporates water from the surface of the planet, creating clouds and rain. Finally, the power of the mass of the Sun creates the planetary movements by which Earth revolves, and we experience the darkness of the night. In its essential form, the Sun is omnipresent and omnipotent, supporting the existence and development of all beings.

Katha Upanishad (2.2.11) also explains: *suryo yatha sarva lokasya caksur na lipyate caksusaur bahya dosaih, ekas tatha sarva bhutantaratma na lipyate loka duhkkena bahyah*, "The sun, that can be described as the eye of all beings (as it enables all eyes to function by perceiving light) does not become affected by the defects in our eye or the defects in what is perceived by that eye. In the same way, the one param atman is not subject to the happiness or misery of anybody, even though he is situated in all beings."

क्षेत्रक्षेत्रज्ञयोरेवमन्तरं ज्ञानचक्षुषा । भूतप्रकृतिमोक्षं च ये विदुर्यान्ति ते परम् ॥ १३-३५ ॥

kṣetrakṣetrañjayorevamantaram jñānacakṣuṣā | bhūtaprakṛtimokṣam ca ye viduryānti te param || 13-35 ||

ksetra ksetrajñayoh: of the kshetra and the knower of the kshetra; evam: thus; antaram: what is between/ the difference; jnana caksusa: with the eyes of knowledge; bhuta: of the beings; prakriti: the prakriti; moksam: liberation; ca: and; ye: those who; viduh: they know; yanti: they go; te: they; param: the Supreme.

"Those who contemplate the kshetra and the kshetra jna and the difference between the two, and how to attain liberation through/ from the nature of existence, will reach the Supreme."

The power of true knowledge is the key to liberation and perfection of life. *Bhagavad gita* is the best study guide to such knowledge, and leads us from the basic understanding of spirit and matter, to the art of action in spiritual consciousness. This knowledge is directly experienced (*pasyanti*) by those who learn to use the eyes of intelligence and knowledge (*jnana cakshu*) rather than their physical eyes that can easily be misled by external appearances and cannot see beyond them. By this deep vision we become able to really contemplate the nature of all beings, that is transcendental and eternal.

Liberation is attained in stages. The first stage is the search for knowledge (*jnana*), that gives a meaning and a purpose to life, then comes the realization (*viduh*) that finally puts everything in the proper perspective and shows us the great Picture. This usually happens after many lifetimes (7.18) of sincere search, that starts from the deliberate choice of understanding the eternal Reality (*athato brahma jijnasa, Vedanta sutra*, 1.1.1). However, such vision does not exclude the knowledge of *prakriti* - material as well as spiritual - and this will be the subject of the last chapters of *Bhagavad gita*. As Krishna has explained repeatedly, actions are performed by nature through the effect of the *gunas*; the individual soul (*jiva atman*) can only choose to focus on which modality s/he wants to function. We can choose to contemplate spiritual nature (*para prakriti*) or if we are not yet able to do that, we can learn how to use the material *gunas* in such a way that we can elevate ourselves rather than degrade ourselves. The subject of the *gunas* is gradually introduced in an increasingly stronger way, because the knowledge of the *gunas* is the key factor that will enable us to remain on the liberated level (*brahma bhuta*) even while still living in this body and in this world. And this is of paramount importance.

Some deluded ignorant fools believe that a conditioned soul can automatically attain liberation at the time of death, provided s/he has pledged allegiance or dedication to a particular Deity. This is not confirmed in any genuine Vedic teaching, and those who choose to blindly rely on such sectarian allegiance will have to face serious problems in the future. It is true that God comes to the rescue of his true devotee, but such devotion must be sincere and supported by honest work and a serious effort to attain self-realization. One cannot delegate one's own self-realization to others - *guru, sanga* or even *ista deva*. Each one of us must deliberately abandon all false identifications and attachments, and constantly practice the proper meditation on the Supreme Consciousness. There are no shortcuts, no free tickets, no cutting corners. If one claims to be a devotee of Krishna, s/he must sincerely study and understand and practice Krishna's instructions as revealed in *Bhagavad gita*. Krishna will guide us, but he will not do our work for us.

Why *Bhagavad gita* was spoken? To encourage Arjuna to engage in his proper duty. Arjuna realized that Krishna was the supreme Brahman and pledged his devotion to him, but Krishna did not exempt him from performing his duties on the battlefield. Our purpose should be to serve God for the benefit of all, not to try to use God for our own myopic selfish advantage.

Chapter 14
Guna traya vibhaga yoga
The yoga of differentiating between the gunas

At the beginning of his instructions, in chapter 2, Krishna had focused on explaining the difference between the *atman* (spirit, or consciousness) and the body (matter, or material nature). Then in verse 7.5 he stated that besides material nature (*apara prakriti*) there is a spiritual nature (*para prakriti*): *apareyam itas tv anyam prakritim viddhi me param, jiva bhutam maha baho yayedam dharyate jagat*, "O Arjuna, know that besides this inferior *prakriti* there is also another, a higher one - the living beings by which the universe is upheld."

In chapter 13, Krishna had wonderfully presented the nature (*prakriti*) of consciousness (*purusha*), to help us understand how the two factors are simultaneously One and distinct from each other, and together they constitute the supreme Brahman. Interestingly, in that context Krishna has not drawn a clear divisive line between spiritual nature and material nature, but has taken us to the higher level where material nature is perceived as that very same spiritual nature when she manifests in the material world. By defining this *mahat tattva* as Brahman (13.13, 20, confirmed more explicitly in 14.3 and 14.4, and in *Mundaka Upanishad 1.1.9, tasmad etad brahma nama rupam annam ca jayate*, "from this Brahman names, forms and matter become generated") and by recommending the contemplation of the Godhead as the *Virata rupa* (10.17), *Bhagavad gita* is introducing us to the transcendental dimension where we attain the same sentiment (*bhava*) of the Supreme. Interestingly, the word *bhava* also translates as "nature" (8.3, 8.6, 10.17, 17.16) indicating the mode of consciousness in which one deliberately focuses with full awareness. And of course, this word is amply used in the context of *bhakti* literature to indicate a state of ecstatic spiritual consciousness.

Isvara - the Lord - is characterized by the fact that he is not controlled by the *gunas*, but he rather controls them and therefore he is transcendental to them. The *jivatman* is a fragment, limb or cell (*amsa*, 15.7) of the Lord and as such s/he is also transcendental to the material *gunas*, and certainly s/he can learn how to control them and use them exactly like the Lord does - in other words, use them in the devotional service to the Lord by removing the "separatist" (dualistic) mentality that shows a difference of interests between the *jivatman* and the Lord. Like every healthy cell or limb in our body, each *jivatman* still retains a certain degree of individuality (name, different function etc) but its consciousness is solely directed to the service of the entire body and the highest consciousness in it.

This concept is beautifully simple, yet immensely profound and containing the key to liberation from all conditionings, as Krishna himself stated very clearly in the previous chapter (13.24): *ya evam veti purusam prakritim ca gunaih saha, sarvatha vartamano 'pi na sa bhuyo 'bhijayate*, "One who knows the Purusha and the Prakriti, as well as the various ways of the *gunas*, will not take another birth, irrespective of his/ her situation".

So, this chapter 14 is a manual on the modifications of the *gunas* and how to use them - the greatest knowledge (14.1). The subject will be elaborated again in chapters 16, 17 and 18, to the very conclusion of *Bhagavad gita*.

श्रीभगवानुवाच ।

śrībhagavānuvāca ।

परं भूयः प्रवक्ष्यामि ज्ञानानां ज्ञानमुत्तमम् ।

यज्ज्ञात्वा मुनयः सर्वे परां सिद्धिमितो गताः ॥ १४-१ ॥

param bhūyaḥ pravakṣyāmi jñānānāṁ jñānamuttamam । yajñātvā munayaḥ sarve param siddhimito gataḥ ॥ 14-1 ॥

sri bhagavan uvaca: the wonderful Lord said; *param*: transcendental/ supreme; *bhuyah*: again; *pravakṣyami*: I will tell; *jnananam*: of all sciences; *jnanam*: the knowledge; *uttamam*: supreme; *yat*: which; *jnatva*: knowing; *munayah*: the great sages; *sarve*: all; *param*: highest; *siddhim*: perfection; *itah*: from here; *gatah*: went/ attained.

The wonderful Lord said, "I will tell you again about this supreme knowledge among all sciences. Through this knowledge, all the great sages have attained the supreme perfection/ of transcendental realization from this world.

The first word in the verse, in the position of honor, is *param*, "the Supreme", "the Transcendental", and refers to the higher level of knowledge where we are able to see everything in God and God in everything.

Krishna says, *bhuyah* ("again, further"), because he had already explained this highest knowledge (*jnanam uttamam*) at the beginning of chapter 9:

raja vidya raja guhyam pavitram idam uttamam, pratyaksavagamam dharmyam su sukham kartum avyayam, "This is the king among all sciences, the king among all secrets, the highest purifier. It is known through direct experience, it is dharmic, it is joyful to practice and it is imperishable" (9.2),

maya tatam idam sarvam jagad avyakta murtina, mat sthani sarva bhutani na caham tesv avasthitah, "All this universe is pervaded by me in my non-manifested form. All beings exist in me, but I am not in them" (9.4),

na mat sthani bhutani pasya me yogam aisvaram, bhuta bhrin na ca bhuta stho mamatma bhuta bhavanah, "(At the same time) the beings are not in me. See my divine *yoga*! I contain all existences, but I am not contained in the various beings, although I am myself the creation of all beings" (9.5).

Some people underestimate the knowledge of the *gunas* in the dangerously false notion that one "automatically transcends them" simply by pledging allegiance and service to God and his priests, but this is not confirmed in *Bhagavad gita* or in any other Vedic text. The damage caused by such ignorant and deluded persons is immense, because they continue to indulge in abominable activities and in a degraded form of consciousness (called asuric as we will see in chapter 16) and at the same time they demand to be worshiped as God (as his direct representatives). Such a behavior would not even be acceptable in God himself, as Krishna has clearly stated (3.22-25), what to speak of individual souls.

Only those who have completely abandoned illegitimate actions (*tv anta gatam papam*, 7.27) can attain the spiritual level; therefore we need to seriously study the science of action (chapter 3) and the science of the modes of nature (chapter 14) in order to remain firmly on the correct path.

All the great sages (*munayah sarve*) have walked this road, and thus they attained the highest perfection (*param siddhim gatah*), consisting in full freedom from the bondage of rebirth (*na sa bhuyo 'bhijayate*, 13.24). Nobody is exempt from this requirement, because action is inevitable: *na hi kascit ksanam api jatu tisthaty akarma krit, karyate hy avasah karma sarvah prakriti jair gunaih*, "Never, at any time, can one remain without acting even for a moment, because s/he is forced into action by all the *gunas* born from *prakriti*" (3.5).

Not even the "transcendental devotees and stalwart *sannyasis*" are exempt: *sadrisam cestate svasyah prakriter jnanavan api, prakritim yanti bhutani nigrahah kim karisyati*, "Even a person who has the proper knowledge must engage in actions according to his own nature. All embodied beings must follow their nature: what can abstention accomplish?" (3.33), and *na karmanam anarambhan naiskarmyam puruso 'snute, na ca sannyasanad eva siddhim samadhigacchati*, "A person cannot achieve freedom from *karma* by abstaining from action, just like perfection cannot be achieved simply through *sannyasa*" (3.4).

As explained clearly, the only solution consists in performing all work as sacred action: *yajnarthat karmano 'nyatra loko 'yam karma bandhanah, tad artham karma kaunteya mukta sangah samacara*, "Actions must be performed as sacrifice, otherwise in this world they cause bondage and further actions. Therefore, o son of Kunti, you should perform your activities for that purpose of sacrifice, remaining free from attachment" (3.9).

This sacred action is always based on correct knowledge, because without the correct knowledge even the most complicated and impressive rituals remain useless (17.5-6, 17.13). The only true ingredient of all *yajnas* is the awareness of knowledge: with that proper consciousness, even the smallest and ordinary daily activities become the highest acts of worship. Verse 9.27 clearly stated: *yat karosi yad asnasi yaj juhosi dadasi yat, yat tapasyasi kaunteya tat kurusva mad arpanam*, "O Arjuna, whatever you do, whatever you eat, whatever you sacrifice, whatever you give, whatever you endure in the performance of your duties - do it for me."

As we will see in this chapter, awareness of knowledge is the most important characteristic of *sattva guna* - the quality of goodness, that illuminates and guides us in the proper direction.

The last section of the verse is also very interesting, and presents several important words: *munayah, param, siddhim, itah, gatah*.

The definition *muni* ("silent") refers to the serious effort in spiritual practice, by which one drops all other concerns and interests that are generated from the mundane identifications and attachments (2.56). When a *sadhaka* is fully immersed in divine consciousness, s/he does not talk much about useless trifles such as gossiping and political games. Of course this does not mean that s/he is not aware of the reality around him/ her or that s/he is not trying to help others to direct their activities in a positive and proactive way for the spiritual and material benefit of society and the universe in general. A true *sadhaka* continues to perform his/ her work in the world, which includes offering good advice and coaching sincere persons in their progress, but is able to understand when and where and how to invest his/ her energies and speech power.

The word *sarve* ("all") clearly indicates that this is a very scientific process, that can be experienced and duplicated by anyone by following the exact method. Some ignorant fools have been duped into believing that one can add the word "yoga" to any ordinary activity and that will be just as authoritative as the genuine original instructions by Krishna and the great Rishis. So they arrogantly claim they are engaged in *hasa yoga* ("the yoga of laughing") or *khana yoga* ("the yoga of eating" as in restaurants), or *nidra yoga* ("the yoga of sleeping"). And when questioned about the authenticity of such fancy fantasies, they get angry and accuse us of being "dogmatic". But what will be the result of such "yogas"? Certainly not the same result attained by the *munis* and *yogis* who scientifically applied the actual original method; this is also confirmed in verse 16.23.

The expression *param siddhim* is very interesting, because it can be interpreted at different levels. *Param* means "supreme" as well as "transcendental", while *siddhim* means "perfection" and it also indicates the mystic powers acquired through *yoga*. Consequently, this verse offers a sort of catalogue of all the blessings one can attain through the supreme knowledge (*jnanam uttamam*) taught by Krishna - benefits that go from the grossest material platform of increasing one's charisma and mundane success to the highest level of transcendental realization and pure love for God in full Krishna Consciousness. This ultimate goal is indicated by the word *itah*, "from here", indicating a guaranteed progress from the level of human life (*athatah brahma jijnasa, Vedanta sutra*, 1.1.1) or this material world.

The word *gatah* ("gone") states that such progress is eternal and imperishable, and that once the *muni* has attained any true level of spiritual realization, s/he does not fall back again (2.40, 4.9, 4.35, 6.30, 6.40-45, 8.15, 8.21, 13.24, 15.6).

इदं ज्ञानमुपाश्रित्य मम साधर्म्यमागताः । सर्गेऽपि नोपजायन्ते प्रलये न व्यथन्ति च ॥ १४-२ ॥

idam jñānamupāśritya mama sādharmaṃyāmagatāḥ | sarge'pi nopajāyante pralaye na vyathanti ca || 14-2 |

idam: this; *jnanam*: knowledge; *upasritya*: taking shelter into; *mama*: my; *sa dharmyam*: the same *dharma*; *agatah*: having attained; *sarge*: in the creation; *api*: even; *na upajayante*: they do not take birth; *pralaye*: in the annihilation; *na vyathanti*: they are not shaken; *ca*: and.

"Those who take shelter in this knowledge attain my same position, and they are not going to take birth in a next creation. They will also remain firmly established even at the time of the dissolution.

Krishna's words carefully maintain the balance of meaning in this verse: on one side, he clearly reminds us that as *jivatmans* we will never become God directly in the totality of Godhead, but he also declares that we can attain the same dharmic position of God - the same job, so to speak.

The word *dharma* contains a wealth of meanings, as we have already discussed in previous commentaries. It comes from the verbal root *dhr*, "to sustain", and defines the positive action that sustains existence. Therefore it can be translated as "nature", "duty", "function", "consciousness", and "position" as well. By applying each of these meanings to the translation of this verse, we obtain an expansion of true meanings. What is the *dharma* of Krishna, or Vishnu? Supporting and maintaining the universe in its material and spiritual progress, which includes protecting the good and harmless people and weeding out the evil doers, as well as explaining the principles of ethics and religion (4.8). Therefore *sa dharmyam mama* can be translated as "the same supporting nature as me". Other commentators explain that "*sa dharma*" indicates the particular form of liberation called *sarupya mukti*, that consists in acquiring a form that is similar to the Lord's. However, since on the spiritual level the consciousness/ sentiment *is* precisely the form, and the other way around, the ultimate meaning is the same. At another level, the "*dharma* of Krishna" is the *bhagavata dharma* or devotional service to the Supreme, also clearly presented in *Bhagavad gita* in so many verses; in this sense the word *dharma* here can be equated with *bhava*, in the sense of ecstatic love for God. We can easily see that there is no difference between these two levels of understanding, because devotional service is essentially about serving God and his mission, in whatever position or activity Bhagavan will present us from time to time.

This path absolutely requires *upasritya*, "taking shelter", the humility and spirit of selfless service and dedication to the Supreme. Krishna had already explained this point several times (3.30, 4.10, 7.14, 7.29, 9.13, 9.32) and will explain it again as the supreme conclusion of *Bhagava gita* (18.55, 18.57, 18.66). The *jivatman* can never be the totality of God, and therefore it needs to always "dovetail" itself to the Supreme Consciousness through the Supreme Shakti. To do this, one must be totally free from envy (*anasuya*, 3.31, 4.22, 9.1, 12.13, 16.18, 18.66, 18.71), towards the Lord or even towards the *jivatmans*, who are *amsas* of the Lord.

The second part of the verse applies both to the creation and dissolution of the universe and to the creation and dissolution of the individual body, as well as the beginning and end of the various experiences and circumstances that one comes to face in life. Accordingly, it refers to the liberated souls who take birth as *shaktyavesa avataras* to assist the Lord in his missions as well as to the *jivan mukta sadhakas* who have attained the full spiritual realization while still living in a material body. Both categories of liberated souls are never shaken by external circumstances or difficulties because they are fully conscious of God's plan. For such liberated souls there is no more birth, even if they incarnate in this world for a spiritual mission.

मम योनिर्महद् ब्रह्म तस्मिन्गर्भं दधाम्यहम् ।

सम्भवः सर्वभूतानां ततो भवति भारत ॥ १४-३ ॥

mama yonirmahad brahma tasmīngarbhāṁ dadhāmyaham | sambhavaḥ sarvabhūtānāṁ tato bhavati bhārata || 14-3 ||

mama: my; *yonih*: matrix; *mahat*: the great; *brahma*: Brahman; *tasmīn*: in that; *garbham*: embryo; *dadhami*: I give; *aham*: I; *sambhavaḥ*: birth/ possibility; *sarva*: all; *bhutanam*: beings; *tatah*: thereafter; *bhavati*: becomes; *bharata*: o descendant of Bharata.

"O descendant of Bharata, the mahat tattva is my matrix, in which I create the embryo of creation from which all beings/ situation subsequently manifest.

Brahman is the complete Reality, the One that contains everything and in which all dualities are reconciled. Therefore, it includes both the male and female aspects, as illustrated by the famous symbolic concept of *ardhanarisvara*, "the Lord that is half woman".

Here Krishna says, *mama yonih* ("my womb", "my uterus") to indicate his female nature, and *garbham dadami* ("I give the embryo") to indicate his male nature. Male and female are two halves of the same One Reality. Since the microcosm represented in the human body reflects the macrocosm of the Universal Form, our own brain and nervous system consists of two symmetric halves - the left and right hemispheres and their particular wiring. The Tradition of Hatha yoga or Kriya yoga is precisely about approaching Self realization from this angle of uniting the male and female energies within one human body in the Divine Wedding, and this primordial concept was found in many other ancient cultures at global level.

When we say that we can never separate Isvara from Shakti, we are stating a much deeper truth than usually people can understand. It is not on the same level as the foolish delusional promises of young inexperienced lovers who swear "never to leave each other", because that feeling is merely a dim reflection of the true light of the Self that eternally resides within each and every one of us. The Truth is that God is simultaneously Isvara and Shakti - and we, as God's *amsas* or limbs/ cells, are also simultaneously *purusha* and *prakriti* - male and female.

According to a particular set of karmic seeds and desires, each individual develops more female or male chromosomes and therefore is born either with a vagina or a penis, but in every male body there is a tiny vagina (the opening of the penis tip) and in every female body there is tiny penis (the clitoris) and testicles that are nested up into the body (the ovaries). Every male has a certain amount of female energy and tendencies, and every female has a certain amount of male energy and tendencies. In rigid societies, the gender role is enforced on the basis of typical dress and hair style, and characteristic behaviors that emphasize logic in males and emotion in females.

In Vedic society, such differences are not enforced but accommodated in all possible variations, even to the recognition of the legitimacy of the *tritiya prakriti*, or "third nature", of those individuals whose bodies or even minds do not fit in the ordinary male-female categorization. Even more importantly, Vedic culture is designed to lead each and every individual to the level of personal integration of both energies in a blissful balance and harmony; such position is highly respected not only at the spiritual level (where it is recognized as the purpose of *yoga*) but also at the material level.

An individual who has attained this sacred Union of the male and female energies in his/ her own body and mind is considered an auspicious character from whom we can receive blessings because of the absence of lust (the greed to possess and exploit) in his/ her mind and body. This is also the position of Isvara/ Shakti, whose union is constant and full of grace and bliss like a cosmic Dance.

This *garbha* ("embryo") mentioned by Krishna in the verse is *hiranya garbha*, the "golden seed" of the universe, also called *brahmānda* (*brahma anda*, "the egg of Brahman" or "the egg of Brahma" from which Brahma is born) worshiped by the ancient religions in the Mediterranean region. The mystic knowledge of ancient Egypt, Greece and Canaan was focused on the Cosmic Egg or Typhon's Egg, from whom Phanes - the personification of "revelation" (in Greek, *phanes* literally means "revelation" as in *theophany* or *epiphany*) also identified with Mitra or the Sun was born.

Modern physicists, too, have reached the same conclusion about the origin of the universe and express it in very similar way; they say that before the Big Bang the universe was one vast body containing all the universal mass - a Cosmic Egg or Cosm-Egg for short. This "Son" was also at the center of worship in ancient religions, together with the cosmic Mother and Father, in the fundamental Holy Triad from which the concept of Trinity was copied.

We find Vedic confirmation in the Jagannatha Tradition; the middle figure in the Triad is sometimes identified as Brahma, and not only as Lakshmi or Subhadra. In this perspective, when the Triad is seen as Vishnu, Shiva and Shakti it symbolizes the first manifestation of Brahman (Vishnu who is *avyakta*) that "becomes distinct" as Shiva and Shakti. When the Triad is seen as Shiva, Kali and Brahma, it symbolizes the second creation by which Isvara/ Shakti manifests as Time (Kala/ Kali) to give birth to Brahma, the first created being and the architect of the universe. These subjects will be amply elaborated in the *Puranas* and especially in the *Bhagavata Purana*, that describes both the primary and the secondary creations.

In this verse, Krishna clearly states that the *mahat tattva* is Brahman (*mahat brahma*). This was already hinted in the previous chapter (13.13), where it was said that the supreme Brahman is neither *sat* or *asat*, because it is both *sat* and *asat* - that is including cause and effect, eternal and temporary, spiritual and material, and male and female. Verse 13.20 again highlighted this supreme and eternal Unity of Brahman as Purusha and Prakriti at the same time: *prakritim purusam caiva viddhy anadi ubhav api, vikarams ca gunams caiva viddhi prakriti sambhavan*, "You should know that Prakriti and Purusha are both eternal, and that their transformations and qualities are born from the Prakriti."

The *Mundaka Upanishad* also confirms: *tasmad etad brahma nama rupam annam ca jayate*, "then this Brahman gives birth to names, forms and gross matter" (1.1.9), which are the basic components of the living beings and the life circumstances as well.

सर्वयोनिषु कौन्तेय मूर्तयः सम्भवन्ति याः । तासां ब्रह्म महद्योनिरहं बीजप्रदः पिता ॥ १४-४ ॥

sarvayoniṣu kaunteya mūrtayah sambhavanti yāḥ | tāsām brahma mahadyonirahaṁ bijapraḍaḥ pitā || 14-4 ||

sarva yonisu: in all matrices; *kaunteya*: o son of Kunti; *murtayah*: the forms; *sambhavanti*: become manifested; *yah*: that; *tasam*: all of them; *brahma*: the Brahman; *mahat*: the Great; *yonih*: Matrix; *aham*: I; *bija*: the seed; *pradah*: who gives; *pita*: the father.

'In whatever form of matrix they appear, all beings are children of the supreme Mother and I am the Father, who gives the seed.'

The *mahat brahma* has now distinguished itself into the two halves - Mother and Father - with two different functions: awareness and activity. Perfect success can only be attained when both energies are well balanced and work together in harmony. In the same way, we can attain the transcendental level of *bhakti* only when we sincerely worship both halves of the Godhead, each one of them helping us to receive the blessings of the other half. This is also the meaning of the famous Hare Krishna mantra, where the Triad of Jagannatha is contained in all its manifestations as Krishna, Rama and Hare or Hara. It works at the transcendental level, where the *bhakti lata bija* ("the seed of the plant of devotion") is given by Consciousness (*rasa*) as the Father, and the nourishment and development is given by the activities of devotional service as the Mother. Therefore Krishna Consciousness is meaningless without the service of Radha or Bhakti.

It works at the *sadhana* level, where the seed of spiritual desire is given by the Sat Guru as the Father, and the nourishment and development is given by the constant study of the *Vedas* and the practice of their teachings (*vidya*) as the Mother. It also works at the material level, where the genetic blueprint (Consciousness/ Knowledge/ Father) unites with the materials supplied by the matrix (amniotic fluid/ hormones etc/ Mother) to develop and grow. It even works in the non-mammal animal species and plants, where the seed of life as DNA unites with the "nourishment material" represented by the egg or by the flesh of the seed or fruit in which it grows - that is also a sort of *yonis*.

Because Isvara/ Shakti is the Father/ Mother of all living beings, a person who is on the level of divine consciousness will not be envious or hostile to any other being, but will rather consider everyone as brother/ sister.

This verse contains the most powerful statement to the effect that the Mother Goddess is Brahman in this world (*brahma mahad yoni*) and not the submissive servant-wife as she has been portrayed increasingly often under the patriarchal abrahamic influence that percolated in Hinduism in the past centuries due to the degradation of Kali yuga. In the original Vedic vision, still reflected in the iconography that was depicted in the period preceding the first abrahamic invasions and dominations, Isvara and Shakti are on the same level and of the same stature, and equally bless their devotees. In those depictions, Shakti (in all her forms, as Lakshmi, Durga, etc) does not wear a *sari* and does not cover her head in "shyness", but she rather reveals her beautiful body decorated with rich ornaments but very little clothing. She either sits or stands alone, sometimes next to Isvara, but she does not kneel or sit at his feet massaging or worshipping them.

The overpowering patriarchal influence that was imposed on Indian society from the 7th century onwards seeped into the Hindu mind contaminating it with an increasing tendency to misogyny; this disease weakened the *shakti* ("power") of Indian culture and society, both at individual and collective levels. An increasingly male-dominated society inevitably becomes unstable emotionally because of the imbalance between the two primeval forces, and the ensuing discomfort creates in everyone (including the males) a sort of subconscious anger and frustration that is vented over the incarnations of the female energy - women, nature, bodies, cows, Mother Earth, water, healthy pleasures, love, knowledge and happiness.

This pathological degeneration triggers a vicious circle that ultimately produces a sheepish mentality in the general population, dramatically lowering their self-esteem and making them easier to be controlled and exploited. In such a scenario, self-affirmation is left to petty and mean methods or dirty tricks, such as betrayal and hidden revenge, that are characteristic of weak and powerless people.

We need to understand that in the early stages of every individual's existence - during pregnancy and for a few years after birth - the child does not consider him/her self as a separate identity from his/ her mother's. The child's self esteem totally depends on the image of the mother, and his/ her future character is shaped by the concept his/ her mother has of herself and by the attitude that others show towards her. A mother that does not consider herself as worthy or deserving respect and affection, or capable of taking decisions and directing her own life, or qualified enough to independently engage in the pursuit of knowledge, prosperity and happiness will inevitably produce children who are unable to properly function as individuals or as a community. Such persons are easily dominated and exploited by ruthless rulers and "leaders" just like their mothers were dominated and exploited by ruthless husbands and "family elders".

सत्त्वं रजस्तम इति गुणाः प्रकृतिसम्भवाः । निबध्नन्ति महाबाहो देहे देहिनमव्ययम् ॥ १४-५ ॥

sattvaṁ rajastama iti guṇāḥ prakṛtisambhavāḥ | nibadhnanti mahābāho dehe dehinamavyayam || 14-5 ||

sattvam: sattva; rajah: rajas; tamah: tamas; iti: like this; gunah: the gunas; prakriti: (from the prakriti); sambhavah: manifested; nibadhnanti: bind; maha baho: o mighty armed one; dehe: in the body; dehinam: of the embodied (beings); avyayam: eternal.

"Sattva, rajas, tamas: these are the gunas manifested by the prakriti. O mighty armed (Arjuna), these (gunas) bind the eternal soul to the body.

We enter here in the specific description of the three modalities of material nature called *gunas*. The word literally means "qualities" or also "ropes", as they cause conditioning or "binding" (*nibadhnanti*) when we are overpowered by illusion, but they can also be used to climb out of the trap when we know how to handle them properly. All embodied beings (*dehinam*) are subject to these *gunas*, from the highest to the lowest species of life in the universe, as Krishna will confirm in the last chapter: *na tad asti prithivyam va divi devesu va punah, sattvam prakriti jair muktam yad ebhish syat tribhir gunaih*, "There is not even one single person, either in this world or in the world of the Devas, who is free from the influence of the three *gunas* created by the *prakriti*" (18.40).

The embodied soul (*dehi*) who is conditioned by material identifications and attachments (*ahankara-mamatva*) is hopelessly bound by these ropes, that tend to reinforce such conditionings in an apparently endless cycle, as confirmed in the *Bhagavata Purana: sa esa yarhi prakriter gunesy abhivisajjate, ahankriya vimudhatma kartasmity abhimanyate*, "Absorbed in the *gunas* of nature, the *atma* is confused by *ahankara*" and *tena samsara padavim avaso 'bhyety anirvritah, prasangikaih karma dosaih sad asan misra yonisu*, "By revolving helplessly in the situations of the *samsara*, he obtains the mixture of good and bad results of his previous activities, in different species of life" (3.27.2-3). Kapila elaborates in detail on this science: *evam parabhidhyanena kartritvam prakriteh puman, karmasu kriyamanesu gunair atmani manyate*, "So by false identification, the *purusha* becomes convinced that he is the doer, and applies to himself the actions performed by the *gunas*" and *tad asya samsritir bandhah, para tantryam ca tat kritam, bhavaty akartur isasya, saksino nirvritatmanah*, "That misconception creates the bondage to the *samsara*, by which the soul loses all independence - although the soul is the witness, untouched by any action, independent and free from attachment to action." (3.26.6-7). This *samsara* manifests as the cycle of births and deaths, that is totally centered on bodily identification, as illustrated by the couple of words *deha-dehinam*. So how can we become free from the cycle of *samsara*? Not by our own individual power, because the *jivatma's* power is pathetically insufficient to fight against the Mother Goddess. But we can establish our consciousness in the Supreme Consciousness: *daivi hy esa guna mayi mama maya duratyaya, mam eva ye prapadyante mayam etam taranti te*, "This divine energy of mine, manifesting as the three *gunas*, is very difficult to overcome, but those who take shelter in me can cross over this magic" (7.14).

This "taking shelter" (*upasritya*, 14.2) does not equate to the blind sectarian allegiance and obedience preached by abrahamic ideologies. It is rather the rising of our awareness to a divine level, in which we act as *Isvara*: selflessly - that is, without the clouds of duality that constitute selfishness. There is no selfishness at the divine level, because Bhagavan includes the consciousness or awareness of all beings and existences. By taking shelter in this awareness or knowledge (*idam jnanam upasritya*, 14.2), we rise above the play of the material *gunas* and become able to utilize them rather than being helplessly dragged around by them.

The *Bhagavata Purana* confirms: *sattvam rajas tama iti prakriter gunas tair, yuktah parah purusa eka ihasya dhatte, sthity adaye hari virinci hareti samjnah, sreyamsi tatra khalu sattva tanor nrinam syuh*, "*Sattva, rajas, tamas* are the qualities of nature; in their contact, the transcendental *purusha*, although one, accepts the forms of Hari, Brahma and Hara, for the maintenance of the universe. Of these, the personified form of *sattva* can bestow the greater benefit to human beings" (1.2.23).

It is important to understand that Bhagavan (the Supreme Purusha) is always perfectly situated in Consciousness and is detached from the activities, that only pertain to Prakriti (spiritual and material); the material *gunas* are created by *prakriti* from a state of balance. This is also explained in Krishna's instructions to Uddhava: *prakritir guna samyam vai, prakriter natmano gunah, sattvam rajas tama iti, sthity utpatty anta hetavah*, "Nature consists of the balance of the *gunas*, but the nature of the *atman* is not subject to the *gunas*. However, (the *gunas* called) *sattvam, rajas* and *tamas* are the cause of the maintenance, creation and destruction" (11.22.12).

तत्र सत्त्वं निर्मलत्वात्प्रकाशकमनामयम् । सुखसङ्गेन बध्नाति ज्ञानसङ्गेन चानघ ॥ १४-६ ॥

tatra sattvaṁ nirmalatvātprakāśakamanāmayam | sukhasaṅgena badhnāti jñānasaṅgena cānagha || 14-6 ||

tatra: there; sattvam: sattva; nir malatvat: purity; prakasakam: illumination; anamayam: freedom from defects; sukha: happiness; sangena: by the contact; badhnati: binds; jnana: knowledge; sangena: by the contact; ca: and; anagha: o sinless one.

"O sinless (Arjuna), among these, the contact with *sattva* through association binds to purity, illumination, freedom from defects, happiness, and knowledge.

The word *sattva* develops from the root *sat*, meaning "existence, reality, goodness, permanence, truth", but is often translated as "virtue", which is an ambiguous term loaded with semantic distortions that can greatly differ from one culture to the other.

In the Vedic sense, the meaning of "virtue" does not convey any sense of self-righteousness, rigidity or prudery as it usually does in abrahamic-oriented cultures. Rather, "virtue" should be understood here to mean the quality of something that is "good, valuable" in itself. Similarly, the name *anagha*, by which Krishna addresses Arjuna, should be seen in the true and original Vedic light, that expresses the meaning of "good natured, free from cruelty". This quality of fundamental goodness, that includes compassion and sympathy for all beings, is a most important requisite, and constitutes the application of *sattva* in the lives of human beings.

The quality of *nirmalatvat* (purity) is developed by regular association with cleanliness - taking bath daily, wearing clean clothes, eating clean food, living in a clean place and so on. The influence of this purity will reinforce itself and shape our character through habit, becoming our own nature.

The quality defined as *prakasakam* (enlightenment, illumination) is the clear vision that is developed when all impurities are washed away from the mind. This applies to spiritual realization and the contemplation of transcendental Reality, but also to daily activities and situations, where the habit to cleanliness helps us to remove all unnecessary considerations from our mind.

The quality called *anamayam* is translated as "calm, serene, without past debts or defects, harmless" and also derives from cleanliness, as we develop the habit of becoming detached from *anarthas* ("things devoid of value") and negative thoughts. This must become a habit because *anarthas* and negativities keep coming in the normal course of life, and we need to learn to drop them as quickly as possible. All these good habits inevitably lead to happiness (*sukha*), that is also a state of mind and a habit. We should "make up our minds to be happy", in all circumstances, which means always trying to find the positive aspects and accepting even problems as good opportunities to develop and improve.

But all these are ropes, and we must use them, not remain tied by them. Cleanliness is next to godliness and keeps us healthy and comfortable, but being obsessed by cleanliness can become a pathological disorder, and even obstruct our progress and daily functions. For example, we may become unable to get our hands dirty for the purpose of cleaning the floor or our soiled laundry, or we may feel very uncomfortable and unhappy in situations where we cannot avoid sitting in an unkempt public place or walking through some unclean area.

When we climb a mountain or walk through some dangerous place, it is a good idea to tie ourselves to a safety rope, that will protect us from falling down and getting hurt. *Sattva* is such a rope, and conditions us to those behaviors that we need to develop as habits in our personal evolution. However, even the best safety rope needs a release system, that we can choose to utilize to become free from the harness if need be. *Sattva* can also become an impediment if we remain unable to rise over it when the situation requires it, especially for the sake of *dharma* or devotional service.

रजो रागात्मकं विद्धि तृष्णासङ्गसमुद्भवम् । तन्निबध्नाति कौन्तेय कर्मसङ्गेन देहिनम् ॥ १४-७ ॥

rajo rāgātmakam viddhi tṛṣṇāsaṅgasamudbhavam | tannibadhnāti kaunteya karmasaṅgena dehinam || 14-7 ||

rajah: *rajas*; *raga atmakam*: consisting of attachment; *viddhi*: you should know; *trishna*: thirst/ hankering; *sanga*: the contact; *samudbhavam*: appeared (from); *tat*: that; *nibadhnati*: binds; *kaunteya*: o son of Kunti; *karma*: action; *sangena*: by contact with; *dehinam*: of the embodied beings.

"O son of Kuntī, you should know that the contact with *rajas* develops attachment and hankering, that bind the embodied beings to action.

Rajas, usually translated as "passion", is the active *guna* that influences creation and acquisition; it is required to carry *sattva* from theory into practice in this world, where nobody can even survive without working (3.8).

Action is not a bad thing at all, *per se*. In fact, action is the foundation for *yajna* and *dharma*, as we see in chapter 3:

karma brahmodbhavam viddhi brahmaksara samudbhavam, tasmāt sarva gatam brahma nityam yajne pristhitam, "Know that work comes from Brahma, and Brahma comes from the Imperishable, therefore the all-pervading Brahman eternally resides in sacred action" (3.15),

annad bhavanti bhutani parjanya adanna sambhavah, yajnad bhavati parjanya yajnad karma samudbhavah, "All creatures come to being thanks to food grains, and food grains come into being thanks to rain. Rain comes thanks to the performance of sacrifice, and sacrifice comes to being through work" (3.14).

The problem is actually ignorance (*tamas*), by which the conditioned soul is deluded into egotism and selfishness (*ahankara-mamatva*): *prakriteh kriyamanani gunaih karmani sarvasah, ahankara vimudhatma kartaham iti manyate*, "All activities are actually performed by the qualities of nature, but a foolish person who is confused by egotism thinks 'I am doing'" (3.27). As long as *rajas* is engaged, directed and controlled by *sattva*, everything goes very well. Desires and aspirations (*trishna*) can become purified and even bring purification to our life: *mat karma krin ma paramo mad bhaktah sanga varjitah, nirvairah sarva bhutesu yah sa mam eti pandava*, "My devotee is engaged in working for me, and sees me as the supreme reality. S/he has abandoned all association/ affiliation/ identification, and has no enmity towards any being. In this way, my devotee comes to me, o son of Pandu." (11.55). Because God is the sum total of all beings, the realized souls serve the Supreme by working for the benefit of all: *labhante brahma nirvanam risayah ksina kalmasah, chinna dvaidha yatatmanah sarva bhuta hite ratah*, "The wise seers of Reality attain the *brahma nirvana* because have been purified from all faults and have cut off dualistic illusions, engaging themselves in working for the benefit of all living beings." (5.25) Of course this means that we need to give up *raga-dvesa*, the duality of selfish attachment and repulsion: *vita raga bhaya krodha man maya mam upasritah, bahavo jnana tapasa puta mad bhavam agatah*, "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" (4.10).

It is this detachment from the fruits of activity - not from the activity itself - that leads us to perfection: *karmany evadhikaras te ma phalesu kadacana, ma karma phala hetur bhur ma te sango 'stv akarmani*, "You certainly have the right to perform actions but never the right to enjoy the fruits of your actions. Do not try to become the cause of the fruits of the action, but do not become attached to inaction."

(2.47). This early instruction by Krishna is confirmed in chapter 5: *yuktah karma phalam tyaktva santim apnoti naisthikim, ayuktah kama karena phale sakti nibadhyate*, "A *yogi* gives up the results of activity and therefore attains permanent peace. One who is not a *yogi* becomes tied by the results of the action that s/he desired to obtain through work" (5.12).

The same is true for the various applications of *rajas*, as in family and society, for this life and the next (*drista* and *adrista*). The secret is the scientific knowledge of *varnas* and *ashramas*, by which individuals are trained and enabled to perform their duties according to *dharma*. In this way, even the ordinary daily activities will become *bhagavat dharma* (14.2): *saktah karmany avidvamso yatha kurvanti bhārata, kuryad vidvams tathasaktas cikirsur loka sangraham*, "O Arjuna, just like the ignorant people who are attached to the results of actions engage in work, a person who has knowledge should work conscientiously but without attachment, for the benefit of people in general" (3.25).

तमस्त्वज्ञानजं विद्धि मोहनं सर्वदेहिनाम् । प्रमादालस्यनिद्राभिस्तन्निबध्नाति भारत ॥ १४-८ ॥

tamastvajñānajaṁ viddhi mohanam sarvadehinām | pramādālasyanidrābhistannibadhnāti bhārata || 14-8 ||

tamah: tamas; tu: but; ajnana jam: born from ignorance; viddhi: you should know; mohanam: confusion; sarva dehinam: of all embodied beings; pramada: madness/ intoxication; alasya: laziness; nidrabhih: excessive sleep; tat: that; nibadhnati: binds; bhārata: o descendant of Bharata.

"However, o descendant of Bharata, you should know that *tamas* causes ignorance and its binding results, such as confusion, madness, laziness and excessive sleep.

Tamas is the modality of nature that obscures knowledge and awareness, and therefore it is usually translated as "ignorance". It is the dark influence that covers the true nature of the being with misconceptions and error - the actual cause of bondage to the selfishness that can damage *rajas* and the self-righteousness that can damage *sattva*. Ignorance here does not refer simply to the absence of a particular knowledge or understanding, but defines the stubborn refusal to accept or even contemplate knowledge and understanding. Therefore it has very little to do with the lack of official educational or academic qualifications, and a lot to do with false identifications and attachments (*ahankara-mamatva*).

We have already elaborated on this particular point in our commentaries to verses 13.8 to 13.12 that described true knowledge: *amanitvam adambhitvam ahimsa ksantir arjavam, acaryopasanam saucam sthairyam atma vinigrahah, indriyarthesu vairagyam anahankara eva ca, janma mrityu jara vyadhi dukkha dosanudarsanam, asaktir anabhisvangah putra dara grihadisu, nityam ca sama cittatvam istanistopapattisu, mayi cananya yogena bhaktir avyabharini, vivikta desa sevitam aratir jana samsadi, adhyatma jnana nityatvam tattva jnanartha darsanam, etaj jnanam iti proktam ajnanam yad ato nyatha*, "Freedom from the desire for honors, lack of arrogance, freedom from hatred, as well as tolerance, simplicity, the act of approaching the *acharya*, cleanliness, determination, self control, renunciation towards the objects of the senses, freedom from the sense of doership, as well as the clear perception of the inherent sufferings and problems of birth, death, old age and disease, freedom from attachment, detachment from all association including the sense of belonging towards children, wife, home etc, as well as equal attitude when receiving the pleasant and the unpleasant, totally and constantly focusing on me through *bhakti yoga*, performing service in a solitary place, without attachment for meeting others, the constant awareness of the original soul, the realization of the value of knowledge: all this is called *jnana*, and anything else is *ajnana*."

Ignorance, *ajnana*, is then defined as illusion or confusion (*moha*), by which people think they will live forever in the same position or material body and keep their things forever; this causes them to ignore the karmic consequences of their bad actions and neglect. In chapter 9, Krishna had explained these as characteristics of the *asuras*, the people who have a demonic mentality: *moghasa mogha karmano mogha jnana vicetasah, raksasim asurim caiva prakritim mohinim sritah*, "Entertaining delusional desires, engaging in delusional activities, and delusionally convinced of their knowledge, such people are confused by incorrect awareness, and they certainly take shelter in the bewildering nature of *rakshasas* and *asuras*" (9.12). Chapter 16 will elaborate even further on this subject. The association with illusion and confusion (*moha*) through practice and habit causes the loss of intelligence, defined as *pramada*, or madness, and a tendency to inertia defined as *alasya* ("laziness, carelessness, neglect") and *nidra* ("sleep, forgetfulness, oblivion"). This deadly poison of ignorance contaminates the power of *rajas*, directing activity towards stupid choices, destructive actions, criminal pursuits, intoxication or various types, and the worst types of selfishness and egotism that do not care for the sufferings of others or even for one's own future sufferings resulting from the consequences of present actions.

Every care must be given to avoid falling into the traps of *tamas*, because that is the *andha kupa* (blind well) from which it is almost impossible to escape, and that drags the *jivatman* down into the lowest levels of existence, into ghostly life, animal life, plant life and mineral life, where there is no choice but one can only bear sufferings for a very long time. This is why Krishna offered us the knowledge of *karma yoga*, the proper engagement in action, in chapter 3 immediately after clarifying the difference between *atman* and material body, in chapter 2. The science of action or *karma yoga* is the easiest approach and can purify and elevate even the most degraded conditioned souls, in the most difficult circumstances where no higher consciousness is possible. We need to be always be very careful to remain detached from *tamas* by using *rajas* under the direction of *sattva*, until we become able to rise over all the *gunas* and become established in *suddha sattva*, the transcendental goodness that is the same position of Isvara or Divine Consciousness: *niyatam kuru karma tvam karma jayayo hy akarmanah, sarira yatrapi ca te na prasiddhyed akarmanah*, "You should perform the dutiful actions, because action is better than non-action. Without action, it is even impossible to maintain the body, that is the vehicle of the Self" (3.8), and *mayi sarvani karmani sanniyasyadhyatma cetasa, nirasir nirmamo bhutva yudhyasva vigata jvarah*, "You should fight this battle in the consciousness of surrendering all your actions to me, without selfish desires (*rajas* contaminated by *ahankara* and *mamatva*) and without lethargy (*tamas* in full delusion as *pramada*)" (3.30). We must be very careful because the fundamental ignorance of *ahankara* and *mamatva* will create confusion also in regard to *sattva* and *dharma*: *adharmam dharmam iti ya manyate tamasavrita, sarvarthan viparitams ca buddhih sa partha tamasi*, "When confused by ignorance, the faculty of understanding will tend to present *adharmam* as *dharmam*, and *dharmam* as *adharmam*" (18.32). This is how nonsensical ideas are created, mistaking *tamas* for *sattva*, as in the case of the famous concept of "lazy *brahmana*".

सत्त्वं सुखे सञ्जयति रजः कर्मणि भारत । ज्ञानमावृत्य तु तमः प्रमदे सञ्जयत्युत ॥ १४-९ ॥

sattvaṁ sukhe sañjayati rajaḥ karmaṇi bhārata | jñānamāvṛtya tu tamaḥ pramāde sañjayatyuta || 14-9 ||

sattvam: sattva; sukhe: in happiness; sanjayati: binds; rajah: rajas; karmani: in activities; bharata: o descendant of Bharata; jnanam: knowledge; avṛtya: covering; tu: but; tamah: tamas; pramade: in madness; sanjayati: transforms; uta: it is said.

"O descendant of Bharata, it is said that *sattva* binds through/to happiness, *rajas* through/to activities, and *tamas* transforms into madness.

All three *gunas* are dangerous, albeit in different measures, and we must always be careful how to handle them properly, without allowing ourselves to be bound by any of them. It is a very subtle science, and we must apply our intelligence to understand it properly.

Sattva - goodness - is the best instrument we can use because purity and knowledge elevate us to higher levels of consciousness, but if we become attached to it through *ahankara* and *mamatva*, ignorance creeps into the happiness and comfort created by *sattva*, and we risk sliding into self-complacency, self-righteousness and laziness, something that will certainly put us in the power of *tamas*. Goodness in itself and for itself, without a higher purpose, turns sour and falls into its opposite, because opposites are closer to each other than sometimes we like to think.

Let's make an example. Taking bath regularly gives us a taste for cleanliness, but if we become complacent and egotistic, believing that we are clean by nature and identification, we might fall into the delusional idea that we do not need to clean the place where we live or even to wash, and we fall pray to *tamas*. The same trap lays within the love for knowledge created by *sattva*. If we allow *ahankara* and *mamatva* to drag us to the level of material identification, we may delude ourselves into thinking that we are entitled to such study and knowledge because of our high birth, and then that our birth itself is the only qualification for such knowledge. At that point, madness has already developed and it will not take long before we come to believe that we do not need to study because we are already knowledgeable - or even authorities on knowledge - by dint of our birth.

The proper use of *rajas* is to engage our activities to the service of the Supreme through dedication to work that is beneficial for all beings. However, the ignorance produced by *ahankara* and *mamatva* will harden *rajas* and bind us to the selfish desire to collect for ourselves the benefit of such work, in the form of enjoyment of wealth, position and power. As a result, we will make selfish choices, and this will create a stronger tendency to selfishness, in a vicious circle. Inevitably, the attachment for the results of our actions will fan a greater desire for sense enjoyment, and on the level of materialistic vision we become confused by that illusion. As Krishna has already explained: *dhyaayato visayan pumsah sangas tesupajayate, sangat sanjayate kamah kamat krodho 'bhijayate, krodhad bhavati sammohah sammohat smriti vibhramah, smriti bhramsad buddhi naso buddhi nasat pranasyati*, "By thinking about the objects of the senses a person associates with them, by association desire develops, and from unfulfilled desire anger arises. Anger becomes confusion, and confusion becomes failing memory. Because of the loss of memory, intelligence is lost, and when intelligence is lost, one falls from his position." (2.62-63)

Tamas is the dull and dense pull of gravity that drags us down, the darkness that covers our vision if we do not keep ourselves active and clear minded by using *rajas* and *sattva* in the proper way. The influence of *tamas* is the most powerful characteristic in the material world, and comes into being already when in the beginning, *ahankara* and *mamatva* become separated by duality and direct our consciousness away from the Supreme. It is the root of the vicious circle of deaths and rebirths into delusional ventures, of the bad choices that produce bad tendencies by which bad choices will be made again and again: this is expressed by the word *sanjayate*, generating attachment and conditioning.

To summarize, we can say that *sattva* brings happiness, *rajas* keeps us active and *tamas* makes us helpless; these three qualities are the modes in which our mind can work. It is up to us to control and direct our mind for a higher purpose, powering the vehicle that can carry us through the journey of evolution.

रजस्तमश्चाभिभूय सत्त्वं भवति भारत । रजः सत्त्वं तमश्चैव तमः सत्त्वं रजस्तथा ॥ १४-१० ॥

rajastamaścābhibhūya sattvaṁ bhavati bhārata | rajaḥ sattvaṁ tamaścāiva tamaḥ sattvaṁ rajastathā || 14-10 ||

rajah: rajas; tamah: tamas; ca: and; abhibhuya: overcoming; sattvam: sattvam; bhavati: becomes; bharata: o descendant of Bharata; rajah: rajas; sattvam: sattva; tamah: tamas; ca: and; eva: although; tamah: tamas; sattvam: sattva; rajah: rajas; tatha: then.

"O descendant of Bharata, when *rajas* defeats *tamas*, it turns into *sattva*. But when *rajas* obfuscates *sattva*, it becomes *tamas*, and then *tamas* overpowers *sattva* and *rajas* as well.

The three *gunas* are always in movement, like waves in the ocean, and the predominance of one overcomes the other two, like a strong gust of wind sweeps the waves and a boat from one side to another.

However, there are only two directions - not three - in which we can move: higher or lower. So it is *rajas*, the power to act and to move, that decides the day: if it supports *sattva* and accepts to be guided by it through intelligence and pure selfless action in the service of the Supreme, then *tamas* is defeated permanently, and *rajas* also transforms into *sattva*. We then attain the level of pure *sattva* or *visuddha sattva*, the *vasudeva* state, that is the transcendental level from which we do not fall back again. Conversely, if *rajas* allows itself to be contaminated by *tamas* in the form of the delusional material identifications and attachments, we go down and remain indefinitely bound by the consequence of our foolish and cruel actions, sinking into the lowest forms of life. Then *tamas* wins and everything else is lost - hope, joy, knowledge, desires and even the ability to act that would raise us from this living death.

The word *abhibhuya* in this verse contains the meanings of "overpowering, subduing, covering, over-riding, defeating", and illustrates the dynamics of the transformations of the material world. Krishna has already explained that such power of transformation is divine and

cannot be stopped: the only solution is to remain detached from the phantasmagoria of the *gunas* and their products, and keep our consciousness strongly fixed on the Supreme on the transcendental level. The *jivatma* is not really acting: *prakriteh kriyamanani gunaih karmani sarvasah, ahankara vimudhatma kartaham iti manyate, tattva vit tu maha baho guna karma vibhagayoh, guna gunesu vartanta iti matva na sajjate*, "All activities are actually performed by the qualities of nature, but a foolish person who is confused by egotism thinks 'I am doing'. One who knows things as they really are is able to understand the various qualities and activities, and therefore he engages the tendencies in the interaction with the appropriate tendencies: this awareness keeps him free from attachment." (3.27-28).

Krishna has been explaining this from the very beginning: *traigunya visaya veda nistraigunyo bhavarjuna, nirdvandvo nitya sattva stho niryoga ksema atmavan*, "The *Vedas* deal with the various manifestations of the three *gunas*. O Arjuna, you should rather become detached from all these three *gunas*, and situate yourself in that pure goodness that is not subject to changes. One who knows the *atman* becomes free from all dualities and finds protection in detachment." (2.45)

We just need to learn to "let go", by finding the real source of happiness: *visaya vinivartante niraharasya dehinah, rasa varjam raso 'py asya param dristva nivartate*, "The embodied soul may keep the sense objects at a distance and reject them, but he can give up the taste for such objects when he finds the Supreme, that is the real taste of happiness." (2.59)

सर्वद्वारेषु देहेऽस्मिन्प्रकाश उपजायते । ज्ञानं यदा तदा विद्याद्विवृद्धं सत्त्वमित्युत ॥ १४-११ ॥

sarvadvāreṣu dehe'sminprakāśa upajāyate | jñānaṁ yadā tadā vidyādvivṛddhaṁ sattvamityuta || 14-11 ||

sarva dvaresu: at all the doors; *dehe*: the body; *asmin*: this; *prakasa*: enlightenment; *upajayate*: becomes manifest/ appears; *jnanam*: knowledge; *yada*: when; *tada*: then; *vidyat*: by (transcendental) knowledge; *vivṛddham*: increased; *sattvam*: *sattva*; *iti*: thus; *uta*: it is said.

"It is said that when all the doors of the body are enlightened by the realization of knowledge, then such knowledge increases the power of *sattva*.

The increase of *sattva* is a cause and an effect at the same time, therefore we can also translate this verse in the reverse order: "It is said that when the power of *sattva* increases, all the doors of the body are illuminated by knowledge".

The doors of the body are the 9 openings where the senses or perception and action reside: 2 eyes, 2 ears, 2 nostrils, 1 mouth, 1 genital opening and 1 anus. How can such bodily parts be enlightened by *sattva* or knowledge? By engaging in the appropriate action, choosing contact with *sattvic* habits, substances, and actions. This good choice will in turn raise the level of our consciousness and our sense perception will become clearer and liberating.

We should use our eyes to see beautiful, clean, auspicious things, and to direct all our actions in a way that is beneficial to all beings - even to the transcendental and divine level if we contemplate the form of the Personalities of Godhead. Similarly, we should listen to good and beneficial sounds, that direct our actions in the proper engagement and even towards *vidya* or transcendental knowledge. The sense of smell can also be engaged in *sattva* and even in *suddha sattva*, and so on. The two lower openings of the body should not be neglected either, but they should be kept clean and pure through good habits and by the proper awareness about the true nature of sense objects. This is called *prakasa*, illumination or enlightenment.

Here are Krishna's teachings to Uddhava:

yadetarau jayet sattvam, bhasvaram visadam sivam, tada sukhena yujyeta, dharmajnanadibhih puman, "When *sattva* overcomes the other two (*gunas*), a person becomes radiant, pure, auspicious, full of happiness and other good qualities" (*Bhagavata Purana* 11.25.13)

purusam sattva samyuktam, anumiyac chamadibhih, kamadibhi rajo yuktam, krodhadyais tamasa yutam, "A person connected with *sattva* can be recognized by his qualities, such as self control, a person in *rajas* by lust and so on, and a person in *tamas* by anger and so on". (*Bhagavata Purana* 11.25.9)

yada bhajati mam bhaktya, nirapekshah sva karmabhih, tam sattva prakritim vidyat, purusam striyam eva va, "A person - man or woman - who worships me with devotion, performing their duties without attachment, should be understood as situated in *sattva*" (*Bhagavata Purana* 11.25.10)

लोभः प्रवृत्तिरारम्भः कर्मणामशमः स्पृहा । रजस्येतानि जायन्ते विवृद्धे भरतर्षभ ॥ १४-१२ ॥

lobhaḥ pravṛttirārambhaḥ karmaṇāmaśamaḥ spṛhā | rajasyetāni jāyante vivṛddhe bhatararṣabha || 14-12 ||

lobhaḥ: greed; *pravṛttih*: engagement; *arambhah*: endeavor/ beginning; *karmaṇam*: in actions; *asamah*: uncontrolled; *spriha*: contact; *rajasi*: in *rajas*; *etani*: all these; *jayante*: appear; *vivṛddhe*: when there is an increase; *bharata rṣabha*: o best among the descendants of Bharata.

"O best among the descendants of Bharata, when the contact with *rajas* creates a tendency to greed and a lack of control in engaging in activities, then there is an increase in *rajas*.

As with *sattva*, also the increase of *rajas* is a cause and an effect at the same time, therefore we can also translate this verse in the reverse order: "It is said that when the power of *rajas* increases, there is an increase of greed, and an uncontrolled urge to begin many activities and enterprises."

A passion for action remains pure (i.e. *sattvik*) as long as we are not attached to the selfish enjoyment of the results of the action: *karmany evadhikaras te ma phalesu kadacana, ma karma phala hetur bhur ma te sango 'stv akarmani*, "You certainly have the right to perform actions but never the right to enjoy the fruits of your actions. Do not try to become the cause of the fruits of the action, but do not become attached to inaction." (2.47) When there is an increase in *rajas* without *sattva*, desire or passion takes a power of its own and contaminates the purpose of our activities. Too little *rajas*, and we slide into *tamas* through inaction. Too much *rajas*, and we slide into *tamas* as well,

but through cruelty. We find confirmation in Krishna's teachings to Uddhava: *yada jayet tamah sattvam, rajah sangam bhida calam, tada duhkkena yujyeta, karmana yasasa sriya*, "When *rajas*, causing attachment, differentiation and change, overpowers *tamas* and *sattva*, (a man) feels suffering and works hard desiring fame and opulence." (*Bhagavata Purana* 11.25.14). Even religious activities can be overshadowed by *rajas* and *tamas*: *yada asisa asasya, mam bhajeta sva karmabhih, tam rajah prakritim vidyat, himsam asasya tamasam*, "A person who worships me hoping for blessings, performing his duties to get their results, has a nature in *rajas*. A person who hopes for violence must be considered under *tamas*." (*Bhagavata Purana* 11.25.11)

The word *lobhah*, "greed" refers to the thirst (*trnsna* 14.7) for acquisitions, possessions, power, domination, and control. When such thirst is excessive and cannot be quenched by healthy dharmic and natural sense gratification, it becomes an obsession. Here too we find the influence of *tamas* or ignorance, because a person of knowledge should understand that the pleasures of the senses and material possessions are temporary and cannot give true happiness (2.14, 5.22).

The word *pravritti*, "engagement" is generally used in opposition to *nivritti*, "renunciation" as in *pravritti marga* as opposed to *nivritti marga*. In fact there is no contradiction, because one can engage in action while remaining detached from the results of the action. Here it is used together with the word *arambhah*, that means "endeavor" in the sense of "beginning an action" with a purpose of obtaining a result. When we are compelled by greed to run after many schemes and ventures, and to choose which ones seem to promise better advantages for us, *rajas* increases its power and the vicious circle downwards starts.

The word *asamah* means "uncontrolled" as in unlimited desires and engagement in action even beyond the point of exhaustion, but it also includes the meanings of "dissatisfaction, restlessness, desire, aspiration, rejection". It refers to the intrinsic nature of sense gratification and possession: when we try to find happiness in sense gratification, we become inevitably disappointed because there can be no real lasting happiness there. Krishna has already explained this point: *ye hi samsarsa ja bhoga duhkha yonaya eva te, ady antavantah kaunteya na tesu ramate budhah*, "Those pleasures that derive from contact with the sense objects are the cause for future sorrow because they have a beginning and an end. Therefore, o son of Kunti, an intelligent person does not seek happiness in them." (5.22)

The use of the word *spriha*, "to touch", is particularly interesting here. Touch is the contact of the senses with the sense objects that causes joy and distress (*matra sparsas tu kaunteya sitosna sukha duhkha dah*, 2.14). We can observe this fundamental tendency even in small children who want to touch everything, but this contact is also effected through the other senses, as our sense of sight comes in touch with the images, and so on.

अप्रकाशोऽप्रवृत्तिश्च प्रमादो मोह एव च । तमस्येतानि जायन्ते विवृद्धे कुरुनन्दन ॥ १४-१३ ॥

aprakāśo'pravṛtīśca pramādo moha eva ca | tamasyetāni jāyante vivṛddhe kurunandana || 14-13 ||

a prakasah: lack of enlightenment; *a pravritih*: absence of engagement; *ca*: and; *pramada*: madness/ intoxication; *moha*: confusion/ illusion; *eva*: certainly; *ca*: and; *tamasi*: in *tamas*; *etani*: all these; *jayante*: manifest; *vivṛddhe*: with the increase; *kuru nandana*: o beloved descendant of Kuru.

"O beloved descendant of Kuru, with the increase of *tamas* we find stupidity, laziness, madness and confusion, that tend to get worse and worse.

The word *pramada* was already used in 14.8 in association with *alasya* (laziness) and in 14.9 as the most prominent effect of *tamas*. Again it will be used to exemplify *tamas* (together with *moha* and *ajnana*) in verse 14.18, and with *alasya* and *nidra* in verse 18.39, at the conclusion of Krishna's teachings in *Bhagavad gita*. The meanings of *pramada* include "whimsical, insensitive, stupid, psychologically imbalanced or damaged". In the state of *pramada*, one remains unable to believe what is totally obvious, in front of him, and all intelligence is lost. *Pramada* is also mentioned as one of the four main defective tendencies of the conditioned souls, together with *bhrama* (mistake, misunderstanding, false knowledge), *vipra lipsa* (conscious or unconscious cheating propensity) and *karanapatava* (defective sense perception).

In his conversation with King Pracinarbarhi (*Bhagavata Purana*, 4.29.5), Narada Muni applies the concept of *pramada* in attributing it to material intelligence blinded by the identification with the body: *buddhim tu pramadam vidyan mama-aham iti yat krtam, yam adhisthaya dehe asmin puman bhunkte aksabhir gunan*, "Intelligence becomes confusing when it acts according to *aham* and *mama* ("I" and "mine"), taking shelter in the identification with this body - by which the *purusha* engages the senses in the material *gunas*."

Again, the word *pramada* is used in verse 5.14.9 in the description of material conditioning, as applied to the confusion of the mind and intelligence that one experiences in the storm of the senses in material lust. Another translation of *pramada* is therefore "intoxication", that is not limited to the abuse of psychotropic substances (alcohol, drugs etc), but includes sexual lust and all other forms of lust - power, violence, cruelty, possession, pride, egotism, etc.

The word *prakasa* means "enlightenment, illumination, realization, understanding, vision", so *a-prakasa* is exactly the opposite: a lack of vision, the inability to understand, dullness, the stupidity that prevents us from seeing even the most obvious things. It is utter foolishness, lack of knowledge as well as lack of discriminating knowledge (*viveka*).

Similarly, as *pravritti* refers to "engagement in action", its opposite *a-pravritti* points to the inability to actually perform a task properly or at all - neglect, inertia, laziness and carelessness.

This tendency is very widespread in Kali yuga, where most of the population is immersed in ignorance, and people like to "hang out" or "phase out" in front of the television or video games, or become lost in intoxication. In all such examples, people squander the valuable time of their human life in literally doing nothing - not as a necessary time of rest and relaxation to replenish one's energies, but as a precise goal of life and search for happiness. In the general opinion of tamasic people, the best occupation is considered a sort of perennial vacation, or a job where there is no real work to do, no responsibility or duty, as for example in some bureaucratic or political positions. This fundamental alienation from reality can lead to extremes such as escapism in dreaming, virtual reality, role enactment, and reciprocal delusion in couples or groups.

The leaders among the Asuras - many of whom belong to the human race as well - are eager to implement and exploit this process of idiotization of the masses, through deliberate chemical, magnetic and biological pollution in food, medicines, water, air and environment in general, drug addiction, climate control and lowering of ethical and moral standards. This process reinforces the tendency to ignorance and inertia and is reinforced by them, in a vicious circle where lack of interest for understanding the actual situation in society and one's actual position leads to poor choices or the refusal to make good choices (which is intrinsically a bad choice), which in turn aggravate ignorance and increases the tendencies to make mistakes and take the wrong decisions. This asuric scheme envisions a "new world order" where a small group of extremely powerful persons controls all the resources at global level and even the general population, treating them as animals or *untermenschen* (sub-men), a definition created by Nietzsche. In this picture, human beings like farm animals can be "culled" without any ethical consideration, in a deliberate depopulation program, if their numbers become too large. This is the bottom of *tamas*, where the conditioned soul experiences complete helplessness and cannot find any meaning in life.

It is very easy (and totally useless) to blame others for such a situation. The only solution is for each and every one of us to rise above *tamas* and utilize any strength of *rajas* we can gather, putting it under the control and guidance of *sattva*, and reclaim our own right to personal and collective evolution and realization as explained by *Bhagavad gita* and the Vedic system. Those who have already awakened from the slumber of delusional dreams should try their best to wake up others, even if only one person at a time, and for any period of time, so that the momentum can increase and the balance will be tilted away from *tamas*. To be effective in this work, we absolutely need to deeply understand the *gunas* of material nature, as Krishna is kindly teaching us here.

The most important point is to understand *tamas*, because *tamas* contaminates *rajas* and destroys *sattva*, and is therefore the real enemy from which we must guard ourselves. What is ignorance? It is not simply illiteracy, or the lack of knowledge or information (that could be easily overcome with a little effort), but it is rather the distrust towards evolution, the lack of interest towards knowledge and information, or even the opposition against knowledge and information. Such ignorance is born from fear, which in turn develops from the root cause of *ahankara* and *mamatva* - material identification and attachment.

Tamas becomes particularly dangerous when it mixes with the concept of religion, and as Krishna will clearly state later (18.32) the influence of *tamas* causes people to mistake *dharma* for *adharmā*, and *adharmā* for *dharma*. Therefore we see foolish people worshiping ignorance and *adharmā* as the "age old religious tradition" and ranting and raging against everyone else, blaming others for the consequences of their own stupid mistakes and demanding "the government" to "ban" this and that by rule of law and to persecute those who are not "in line" with such demented policies based on *tamas* and totally contrary to the teachings of Vedic scriptures.

Here is a very enlightening description in Krishna's teachings to Uddhava: *yada jayed rajah sattvam, tamo mudham layam jadam, yujyeta soka mohabhyam, nidraya himsayasaya*, "When *tamas* overpowers *rajas* and *sattvam*, the consciousness is covered by stupidity, inertia, complaining, confusion, sleep, violence, and false hopes" (*Bhagavata Purana* 11.25.15). We should remember here that *moha* indicates "attachment to illusion" and *himsa* is "hatred, violence, anger".

यदा सत्त्वे प्रवृद्धे तु प्रलयं याति देहभृत् । तदोत्तमविदां लोकानमलान्प्रतिपद्यते ॥ १४-१४ ॥

yadā sattve pravṛddhe tu pralayaṁ yāti dehabhṛt | tadottamavidāṁ lokānamalānpratipadyate || 14-14 ||

yada: when; *sattve*: in *sattva*; *pra vṛddhe*: there is an increase; *tu*: however; *pralaya*: the annihilation; *yati*: goes; *deha bhrit*: one who carries a body; *tada*: then; *uttama vidam*: of the greatest; *lokan*: the planets/ dimensions; *amalan*: pure; *prati padyate*: he attains.

"When the strength of *sattva* increases, at the time of *pralaya* the embodied soul attains the highest dimensions of the pure souls.

A similar verse is found in the instructions given by Krishna to Uddhava: *sattve pralinah svar yanti, nara lokam rajo layah, tamo layas tu nirayam, yanti mam eva nirgunah*, "Those who die in *sattva* go to Svarga, those who die in *rajas* take a new birth in the world of men, and those who die in *tamas* sink into a degraded situation, but those who have risen above the *gunas* attain me" (*Bhagavata Purana* 11.25.22).

In this verse, the word *amalam* can be translated as "pure", as it literally means "without any contamination", where contamination is the ignorance of material identification and attachments. The word *tu*, "however", indicates that when we attain a sufficient strength in *sattva*, there is no more space for *rajas* or *tamas*.

When *sattva* becomes completely pure and stable, it is called *suddha sattva* or *visuddha sattva* ("pure goodness"): this is the *vasudeva* level of transcendental consciousness, that establishes us in the spiritual world even while we are still living in this material body. In such a blissful consciousness, we will certainly rise to the highest regions of the universe to serve and assist Isvara in the managerial tasks we may be assigned, until the end of the cycle of creation. At that time, we will continue to serve Isvara in the non-manifested spiritual world, usually known as Vaikuntha.

The *pralaya* ("destruction, annihilation, dissolution") mentioned in this verse applies to the dissolution of the present body as well as to the partial dissolution of the universe at the end of Brahma's day. In either case, the *sattvik* person leaves the human body s/he was wearing and rises to the higher dimensions. The material body that we are now wearing (*deha bhrit*) will be left behind because we have already developed our divine or spiritual body (*siddha deha*) that is made of pure consciousness and works much better than anything made of material elements. The degree of power of such *siddha deha* depends on the degree of consciousness: if it still composed largely of mental constructs - thoughts, emotions, beliefs etc - it will be a subtle body suitable for the highest planets of this material universe, called Svarga or Svargaloka, but it will not rise higher. Vedic scriptures explain that within this universe there are several levels or dimensions of consciousness exemplified by the *chakras* in the body and illustrated in the descriptions of the Virata rupa.

In general, people learn (or should learn) in *yoga* classes that there are 7 *chakras* in the human body: 1) *muladhara* (at the base of the spine, between the anus and the genital opening), 2) *svadhisthana* (below the navel, in the area of the bowels), 3) *manipura* (above the navel, in the pit of the stomach), 4) *anahata* (in the middle of the chest, near the heart), 5) *visuddha* (throat), 6) *ajna* (in the middle of the forehead, a little above the area between the two eyebrows) and 7) *sahasrara* (the crown suture at the top of the skull). The 7 human *chakras* are directly connected in ascending order to: 1) survival, 2) sense gratification, 3) self affirmation, 4) compassion, 5) communication, 6) understanding and 7) inspiration. However, these 7 *chakras* and the corresponding planets or *lokas* only represent the

level of human consciousness; there are 7 lower planets and *chakras* below the *muladhara*, and 7 higher planets and *chakras* above the *sahasrara*.

The 7 sub-human *chakras*, in descending order, are: 1) *atala* (in the hips or loins, connected to fear and lust), 2) *vitata* (in the thighs, connected to anger and resentment), 3) *sutata* (in the knees, connected to envy), 4) *talatala* (in the calves, connected to doubt and confusion), 5) *rasatala* (in the ankles, connected to arrogance), 6) *mahatala* (in the toes, connected with selfishness), 7) *patala* (on the feet soles, connected with hatred and malice). Some descriptions congregate all the lower planetary systems as *Patala* (the subterranean levels).

The 7 super-human *chakras*, in ascending order, are: 1) *Svargaloka* (including *Gandharvaloka*, *Kinnaraloka*, etc), 2) *Maharloka* (also called *Pitri-loka* or *Yamaloka*), 3) *Vishnuloka* (also called *Dhruvaloka*), 4) *Siddhaloka*, 5) *Janaloka* (including the luminaries and administration manager *Devas*), 6) *Tapoloka*, 7) *Satyaloka* (also called *Brahmaloka*). Some descriptions put *Vishnuloka* (*Dhruvaloka*) at the highest position, and others congregate all the higher planetary systems/ *chakras* into "*Svargaloka*", and calculate *Bhurloka* and *Bhavarloka* as intermediate earthly or human planets, for a total of 14 planetary systems or levels of consciousness instead of 21. In any case, the dimensions of existence above the human level are difficult to understand for those who have a human mind, so we can simply meditate on the "divine consciousness" that includes all the levels above the human platform.

It is interesting to note that the traditional iconography clearly depicts these higher *chakras* in the representation of *Devas*, *Siddhas*, etc, usually translated as a towering hairdo decorated with jewels, or as a tall crown surrounded by a halo. This knowledge of the divine *chakras* or higher levels of consciousness was widespread in ancient cultures also outside India, and survived in popular folklore for example in the conical hats of "wizards and witches".

The influence of *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas* causes us to develop a mentality respectively as *sura* ("divine being"), *asura* ("ruthless being"), and *pasu* ("animal being"). At the time of death, such condition becomes permanent as there is a new opportunity to develop a suitable body according to such consciousness. Krishna has already explained this point several times:

yam yam vapi smaran bhavam tyajaty ante kalevaram, tam tam evaiti kaunteya sada tad bhava bhavitah, "O son of Kunti (Arjuna), whatever state of existence/ nature one remembers at the time of leaving the body, s/he attains (precisely) that state of being/ condition, (because) of always contemplating that existence." (8.6)

anta kale ca mam eva smaran muktva kalevaram, yah prayati sa mad bhavam yati nasy atra samsayah, "One who, at the end of time (of this life), remembers me while leaving his/her body attains my nature. There is no doubt in this." (8.5)

रजसि प्रलयं गत्वा कर्मसङ्घिषु जायते । तथा प्रलीनस्तमसि मूढयोनिषु जायते ॥ १४-१५ ॥

rajasi pralayam gatvā karmasāṅghīṣu jāyate | tathā pralīnastamasi mūḍhayoniṣu jāyate || 14-15 ||

rajasi: in *rajas*; *pralayam*: the annihilation; *gatva*: attaining; *karma sangisu*: among those who are attached to activities; *jayate*: takes birth; *tatha*: similarly; *pralinah*: one is destroyed; *tamasi*: in *tamas*; *mudha*: devoid of intelligence; *yonisu*: in matrices; *jayate*: takes birth.

"When death/ annihilation comes, those who are under the influence of *rajas* take a new birth among those who are attached to activities, while those who meet destruction while under the influence of *tamas* take birth in matrices devoid of intelligence.

The numbers of those who attain the higher spheres of existence after leaving their bodies depends on the proper functioning of society. In Vedic society, all children above 5 years of age can be entrusted to a genuine qualified Guru for the most delicate and important period of their lives, when they can learn and be trained to become worthy human beings. The first thing all students must learn is the meaning of *dharma* - the universal and eternal principles of ethics that sustain the evolution, prosperity and happiness of the individual and society as well. The Guru watches them closely because the students live in the Guru's family - the *guru kula* - and are directly engaged in a variety of tasks. The Vedic approach to education is a personalized one according to individual talents and capabilities, but there is a basic training that all students can and must receive in order to be accepted as members of a civilized society: truthfulness and honesty, compassion, cleanliness and discipline. These fundamental principles of *dharma* are also important characteristics of *sattva guna*, and become easier to follow when the predominating influence on our life is *sattvik*. Therefore, the Guru must be *sattvik* in nature, behaviors and conclusions. A *sattvik* training produces good individuals and good citizens, and prepares them for a lifetime of personal and collective progress, in whatever *varna* or occupational class they will work in the future.

As we will see later (18.41-44) the *brahmana* is a person whose mentality and tendencies are already *sattvik* by nature (*svabhava prabhavair gunaih*, 18.41) and manifest as peacefulness, self control, austerity, cleanliness, tolerance, simplicity, and a strong love for knowledge (*samo damas tapah saucam ksantir arjavam eva ca jnanam vijnanam astikyam*, 18.42). A person who has a *kshatriya* nature is influenced by *sattva* with a latent tendency to *rajas*, and therefore he needs to be trained more strictly to a harder discipline. His natural qualities of heroism, leadership, resourcefulness and generosity are *sattvik*, but if *rajas* is not controlled, they can turn into arrogance and thirst for power over people and wealth, deceitfulness, and manipulation of others through corruption and dirty politics. Therefore the Guru trains the *kshatriya* students in overcoming selfishness and egotism, through the study of the transcendental science as well as in sacrificing one's life in defense of the *prajas*. A genuine *brahmana* will live in such a way that at the end of his life, he will naturally attain the higher dimensions or planetary systems, or even the spiritual world. A *kshatriya* can also attain the same destination by remaining faithful to *sattva* and to the principles of *dharma* (that are also a manifestation of *sattva*), especially if he is killed on the line of duty. A *vaisya* can also attain the same destination by working honestly for the benefit of society and all *prajas*, and remaining detached from the sense of position, possession and sense gratification in his service of producing and circulating wealth. Even a *sudra* can attain the highest position (*tatha sudras te 'pi yanti param gatim*, 9.32) if he works in a spirit of sacred action or sacrifice. Therefore, *sattva* and the basic principles of *dharma* are also taught to those students who have a *sudra* nature and are not very good at understanding science or taking responsibilities. However, if a *brahmana* or a *kshatriya* or a *vaisya* become attached to the activities in themselves (*karma sangi*) because of some trace of material identification and attachments in *rajo guna*, they will not be able to attain the higher and pure dimensions, but they will take another birth as human beings, to continue to work sincerely in society until they evolve further. This is traditionally

described as the path of *karma kanda*, or the *pravritti marga*, and it is not condemned but it is rather considered perfectly legitimate. If the principles of *dharma* are respected, the individuals naturally reap the successes of *artha* and *karma* and finally become interested to *moksha* - that can be attained through *sattva* and then *visuddha sattva*.

The real problem is when a human being allows himself to become influenced by *tamas*, either by lack of training or lack of personal qualities. In that case, he will not be considered part of the civilized society of the *varnas*; according to the degree of stupidity and impurity he may choose a suitable occupation to obtain his livelihood for himself and his family just like animals do - by foraging, hunting and even stealing. An animal is not to be blamed for such actions because he is not able to see that they are inappropriate or unjust, and similarly a non-civilized human being lives freely and innocently without rules, like an animal.

What are the greatest concerns of animals? Eating good food, sleeping in a cozy place, finding a suitable mate and building a family, and defending; animals also give great importance to playing and having fun, as well as to establishing one's position in society and control over one's territory. We find animals often demonstrate a great sense of art (music, for example, as many love to sing and dance) and even architecture (as in building dams and intricate nests) and fanning (as some species of ants who herd and milk aphids like cattle). In the human form of life, these animal activities may be performed in a more or less technological and refined way, as this also applies to people who consider themselves very "civilized". At the time of death, one will be naturally attracted to take a new birth in a body that offers better opportunities for the activities he has developed.

Taking birth as an animal is not a punishment, but an opportunity to play out one's tendencies in an appropriate context. If one likes blood, meat and other non-vegetarian foods, taking birth as a human being is not very convenient - a birth as a carnivorous animal will be much more appropriate. If one is obsessed by sexual lust, it will be much more rewarding to take birth as a rabbit or a mouse, who can have sex many times a day and without too much difficulty in finding a sexual partner. Since the higher functions of intelligence are actually a burden in the pursuit of such activities, the conditioned soul is relieved from all complications as a *pasu* (animal) in a *mudha yoni* (a matrix devoid of intelligence). When the desire for such activities will be exhausted, the conditioned soul will again obtain an opportunity for a human birth.

At any time we have a choice to evolve or devolve, to elevate or degrade ourselves (13.29), and if we take the proper measures while we still have some intelligence, we will be saved from sinking too low into *tamas*.

The careful cultivation of awareness is therefore the prime duty of all human beings who wish to progress and obtain a better situation after death. Already Krishna has explained: *yam yam vapi smaran bhavam tyajaty ante kalevaram, tam tam evaiti kaunteya sada tad bhava bhavitah*, "O Arjuna, whatever state of existence/nature one remembers at the time of leaving the body, s/he attains precisely that state of being, because of always contemplating that existence" (8.6).

कर्मणः सुकृतस्याहुः सात्त्विकं निर्मलं फलम् । रजसस्तु फलं दुःखमज्ञानं तमसः फलम् ॥ १४-१६ ॥

karmanah sukṛtasyāhuḥ sāttvikam nirmalam phalam | rajasastu phalam duḥkhamajñānam tamasaḥ phalam || 14-16 ||

karmanah su kṛtasya: of good actions; *ahuh*: they say; *sattvikam*: in *sattva*; *nirmalam*: immaculate; *phalam*: results; *rajasah*: *rajas*; *tu*: but; *phalam*: the results; *duḥkham*: distress; *ajnanam*: ignorance; *tamasaḥ*: *tamas*; *phalam*: the result.

"They say that *sattva* gives immaculate results as properly performed duties, while *rajas* produces distress, and *tamas* produces ignorance.

The *gunas* produce causes and effects at the same time, reinforcing themselves, as actions produce reactions and these reactions in turn create the tendency to perform more similar actions. Therefore this verse can also be translated in reverse as follows: "They say that the immaculate results of properly performed duties produce *sattva*, distress increases *rajas*, and ignorance increases *tamas*."

Increase in the strength of one *guna* is obtained through a series of choices in regard to life habits - food, company, activities, mental attitudes etc - as will be explained later with practical examples. In any case, we can keep in mind the basic principle that cultivating the influence of *sattva* in our life is done by practicing cleanliness in mind and body - which includes letting go all selfishness and egotism. A person who is not contaminated by material identifications and attachments (the direct cause of egotism and selfishness) is clean and light, and more capable of tasting true happiness because of such detachment and sincerity in performing his/ her duties.

Since the original nature of the soul is loving service, the selfless performance of one's duty gives the greatest sense of satisfaction possible on the material level, and nourishes the power of *sattva* both at individual and collective level. It can be compared to the feelings of well being produced by physical cleanliness - when we take a nice warm shower and wear clean clothes and enjoy a clean and pleasant environment. Finishing one's chores and completing one's tasks is also called "discharging" one's duty; by doing so in a proper way we feel happy and light and healthy as when we remove impurities (*mala*) from our own bodies. In this regard, we may mention that the word *mala* ("impurity") refers to all those material substances that are meant to be eliminated or discharged for the sake of the body's health and purity. As we may also remember, the first duties of civilized people after they wake up every morning is to cleanse their bodies through the "bathroom rituals" that refresh them into a *sattvik* feeling of cleanliness and clarity of mind and senses.

Of course the duties we must perform should not be considered as an impurity: in this example, the impurity (*mala*) is rather the nagging uncomfortable feeling that we have not done what we were supposed to do. Due to the impure nature of this abstention or failure, the natural urge to render service and perform our functions becomes constipated and creates the toxic effects of laziness, neglect, callousness, and foolishness that increase the influence of *tamas*.

The word *su-kṛta* ("good action") used in this verse to refer to the duties of a human being (*karmanah*) that increase the influence of *sattva* is also found in association with the expression *punya karma* ("virtuous action") indicating all those good deeds that accrue one's merits. Here the concept of religious merits overlaps the concept of ethical merits, because real religion - as the favorable relationship of the individual with the entirety of Reality - is a synonym of *dharma* or ethical way of life. Religious merits are accrued by distributing charity to the meritorious people, by studying healthy and useful knowledge, by sacrificing one's wealth and work for the common good, by

showing respect to good and beneficial persons, and similar actions. Sometimes such *punya* is created without full awareness of the importance of our actions, as for example when we offer help to a person without really knowing his greatness, or we contribute to deliver valuable things (books, foods, etc) where they can really give the greatest benefit. Such actions are called *ajnata sukriti* ("unconscious good deeds") and they also increase the power of *sattva* in our life.

On the other hand, the results of *rajas* - egotism and selfishness, identification and attachment - are inevitably going to bring distress, because of the natural limits of the material world. Any position or possession will become lost in time (with considerable suffering when it happens), and even the process to acquire them is painful, stressful and exhausting. Overwork is one of the well known causes of health problems, at the physical level, at the mental level and also in the field of human relationships especially with family and friends.

Workaholics know very well that full dedication to one's "career" for its own sake is likely to cause estrangement from one's spouse and children, because there is no more time or energy to give to one's near and dear persons. All relationships are strained, especially with co-workers or competitors who are seen as opponents and enemies to defeat, and this constant fighting mentality takes its toll on blood circulation and cardiac functions, with a higher rate of strokes and heart attacks, and even on breathing, with increased incidence of asthma and similar respiratory problems. Also, an overworked and stressed person usually needs to sustain him/herself with stimulants such as coffee, cigarettes or drugs of various kinds, and all these substances cause damage to the body and the mind. Meals are also neglected, in regard to quality and environment and the relaxation required for proper digestion, so a workaholic will likely develop gastric ulcers, liver complaints, and irritable bowel syndrome. But the final and greatest suffering comes at the time of death, when loss and disillusionment appear inevitable and one is forced to question the actual value of the activities s/he pursued and their results, and the purpose of life itself. In modern times and western culture, literature and other forms of art have often elaborated on this subject - the most famous probably being Ebenezer Scrooge, a character created by novelist Charles Dickens.

When attachment to activities and their results becomes excessive, the conditioned soul becomes *a-sura* ("not nice"), and therefore indulges in ruthless acts and even criminal and destructive behaviors (brilliantly illustrated by Krishna in verses from 16.4 to 16.20), that can only create sufferings to everyone, in this life and in the next. For people who have been conditioned by this asuric tendency, there is nothing that cannot be considered "business" - from pornography to sex slavery to selling dangerous drugs, trafficking in weapons or human organs, deliberately polluting the environment, and so on and so forth.

As far as *tamas* and ignorance (*ajnanam*) are concerned, the two definitions are practically synonyms, so there is no really much to elaborate about. Ignorance is the vicious circle par excellence, in which indulgence in laziness, insensitivity, idiocy and addiction to damaging behaviors constantly and quickly aggravate the condition, leading to total incapacitation and often even death by overdose and the condition of ghost. There is a "point of no return" in *tamas*, where a conditioned soul is truly lost for a period - sometimes for several lifetimes - in utter helplessness and confusion.

सत्त्वात्सञ्जायते ज्ञानं रजसो लोभ एव च । प्रमादमोहौ तमसो भवतोऽज्ञानमेव च ॥ १४-१७ ॥

sattvātsañjāyate jñānam rajaso lobha eva ca | pramādamohau tamaso bhavato'jñānameva ca || 14-17 |

sattvat: from *sattva*; *sanjayate*: develops; *jnanam*: knowledge; *rajasa*: from *rajas*; *lobhah*: greed; *eva*: certainly; *ca*: and; *pramada*: madness; *mohau*: illusion; *tamasah*: ignorance; *bhavatah*: become manifest; *ajnanam*: stupidity; *eva*: certainly; *ca*: and.

"From *sattva*, knowledge is generated. From *rajas*, greed is born, and certainly *tamas* manifests madness, illusion, ignorance and stupidity.

The concept of knowledge (*jnanam*) must be understood in the light of the Vedic values (13.8.12), and not simply as the accumulation of information or technical skills, which could be more correctly defined as erudition. In fact, mere information or technical skill - that is not properly directed by dharmic/ ethical principles - is not *sattvik* at all, and could even become downright asuric if utilized for the wrong purposes. The difference between cleverness and intelligence is that cleverness is myopic, and is unable or unwilling to see the long term results of the action, because it is controlled by *rajas* and *tamas* (18.29-32). The results of such cleverness in action only appear to be profitable in the short run, but they are disastrous in the long run, so they cannot really help us to improve our situation either individually or collectively. So what's the benefit?

The word *lobha* is sometimes translated as "avarice", but its primary meaning is "greed" or "lust", applicable to all those positions and possessions that can be obtained through action. Of course, once such prizes are achieved, a greedy person may also become a miser and refuse to share or utilize his/ her properties for beneficial purposes outside the immediate range of his/ her selfishness. This pathological inability can even cause the miser to live in a miserable way, like a pauper, without actually enjoying the benefit of his/ her possessions and positions.

The word *kripana* ("miser") specifically applies to this particular kind of mentality, because such a narrow-minded person is pitiable, both in this life and the next. Krishna had already stated it at the beginning of his instructions: *durena hy avaram karma buddhi yogad dhananjaya, buddhau saranam anviccha kripanah phala hetavah*, "Therefore, o Dhananjaya, keep far away from all bad activities by engaging in Buddhi Yoga. Always take shelter in this intelligence. Those who work only because they are interested in the fruits of the action are pitiable" (2.49).

For those who keep their intelligence in the purity of *sattva*, the performance of actions will never become bondage: *karma jam buddhi yukta hi phalam tyaktva manisinah, janma bandha vinirmuktah padam gacchanty anamayam*, "The wise people give up the fruit born from their actions by engaging in this Buddhi Yoga and thus become free from the bondage of rebirth, attaining a position that is free from all sufferings" (2.51). This is the highest position of *sattva*, in which all actions become sacred worship to God and devotional service, in this world and in the next. Again, the influence of *tamas* is the real enemy, that we need to understand clearly so that we will not be vanquished by it. When *tamas* increases to a certain point at collective level, the situation becomes so bad, nobody believes anything can be done to improve the situation. Characteristic symptoms are depression, moroseness, cynicism, loss of self esteem and self reliance. People come to

think it is normal to be irresponsible, fighting, cheating, callous, selfish, violent, arrogant, corrupt, and ruthless, so they become alienated from the true purpose of life.

These concepts have been repeated already several times, and this should make us understand how important they are, and how we need to always remember them. We should not underestimate these verses, thinking they are redundant or unnecessary, because as long as live in this world we must guard against the danger of bondage caused by the *gunas*.

ऊर्ध्वं गच्छन्ति सत्त्वस्था मध्ये तिष्ठन्ति राजसाः । जघन्यगुणवृत्तिस्था अधो गच्छन्ति तामसाः ॥ १४-१८ ॥

ūrdhvaṁ gacchanti sattvasthā madhye tiṣṭhanti rājasāḥ । jaghanya-guṇavṛttisthā adho gacchanti tāmasāḥ ॥ 14-18 ॥

urdhvam: upwards; *gacchanti*: they go; *sattva sthah*: those who are established in *sattva*; *madhye*: on the intermediate level; *tisthanti*: they remain; *rajasah*: those who are in *rajas*; *jaghanya*: abominable; *guna*: qualities; *vritti sthah*: regularly engaged in; *adhah*: down; *gacchanti*: they go; *tamasah*: those who are under the influence of ignorance.

"Those who are established in *sattva* rise upwards, those who are in *rajas* remain on the intermediate level, but those who regularly engage in the abominable qualities of *tamas* fall downwards.

Sometimes the word *sattva* is translated as "piety" and a man who is established in *sattva* is called "pious", but this is not precisely correct. The semantic luggage of the word "pious" is filled with negative meanings created by mainstream abrahamic ideology, including a measure of self-righteousness, bigotry, self-conceit, and "holier-than-thou" attitude. The Vedic concept is certainly different, and considers religiousness as inextricably connected with the strongest principles of ethics, such as compassion, honesty, truthfulness and genuine austerity. Bigoted and self-righteous people, on the other hand, are usually hypocrites who condemn the small weaknesses of others but secretly indulge in much worse activities themselves.

The word *urdhvam*, "upwards", is also used in the expression *urdhva retam*, indicating that stage of *yoga* by which the life energy is raised through the spine, from the *muladhara chakra* up to the *sahasrara chakra*, where it unites the male and female energy at a sublimated level. This is possible when the *sadhaka* behaves like *brahman* (*brahmacharya*) and is not disturbed by lust in any form; therefore the life energy that ordinary people spend in materialistic pursuits remains inside the body of the *sadhaka* and can be sublimated, fueling his progress upwards even beyond the *sahasrara chakra*.

When the life air of a *sadhaka* leaves his/ her body through the *sahasrara chakra*, elevation to Svarga and beyond is assured; when less advanced persons die, the life air may exit the body through the other *chakras* or the openings (doors) connected - such as the mouth or nostrils, and more rarely, through the eyes or the ears. In the case of a degraded or very unevolved person, the life air often escapes through the lower doors, especially through the anus, sometimes accompanied by stool or urine, and by a shiver in a leg or foot.

Of course this *brahmacharya* cannot be compared to the forced artificial abstinence from a normal sexual life, that is merely repression and denial (3.6, 3.33) and usually brings more problems than solutions. because these are clearly a manifestation of *tamas*. What is repression, if not the foolish attempt to ignore the facts, to fight against reality and nature, to delude oneself into believing that problems will simply disappear if we ignore them?

Repression never solves any problem, it rather pushes issues down and out of sight, where they always fester and cause physical and mental diseases, and cannot be addressed straightforwardly and cleanly as they should have in the first place. This is how artificially repressed sex desires become distorted into an insane lust for power and possessions, cruelty towards others (sadism) and even towards oneself (masochism), and in some cases into an uncontrollable and diabolic need for destruction and blood. Chapter 16 will elaborate more about this asuric or demoniac mentality that is generated by *tamas* when it controls *rajas*. In the previous chapters, Krishna had already warned us that we must always strive to elevate ourselves, and be careful not to sink into the degradation of *tamas*: *uddhared atmanatmanam natmanam avasadayet, atmaiva hy atmano bandhur atmaiva ripur atmanah*, "One should raise him/ herself by his/ her own effort, and not degrade him/ herself. Certainly one should be one's own friend, and one can be one's own enemy as well." (6.5)

And because the transcendental consciousness of Bhagavan is the purest and most powerful of existences, by always remaining Krishna conscious we will establish ourselves on the *vasudeva* level: *samam pasyan hi sarvatra samavasthitam isvaram, na hinasty atmanatmanam tato yati param gatim*, "One who sees the Lord as equally situated everywhere never becomes degraded, and by engaging the self in the self, s/he ultimately attains the supreme destination" (13.29). Of course this Bhagavan Consciousness includes the Paramatma Consciousness and the Brahman Consciousness, and must be expressed through one's actions and attitude towards all beings. There cannot be any trace of tamasic influence in such Consciousness - overt or covert. Hypocrisy and deceit especially in the field of religion is the most dangerous form of *tamas* and brings the worst disasters: *andham tamah pravisanti, ye 'vidyam upasate, tato bhuya iva te tamo, ya u vidyayam ratah*, "Those who worship according to ignorance, without knowledge, will enter the darkness, but even more those who propound false knowledge," (*Isa Upanishad* 9).

On the human level, people engage in activities because they are interested in the results. This is totally legitimate and can continue indefinitely (*tisthanti*) especially if the *karmi* respects the principles of *dharma* and performs his/ her duties sincerely: a human being is respectable when he/ she is working hard and enjoying healthy pleasures, accepting only the share that s/he has been assigned.

The *Isa Upanishad* (1, 2) clearly states: *isavasyam idam sarvam, yat kim ca jagatyam jagat, tena tyaktena bhunjitha, ma grdhah kasya svid dhanam, kurvann eveha karmani jivivise chatam samah, evam tvayi nanyatheto asti, na karma lipyate nare*, "All this universe belongs to God, and each individual should accept only the share of wealth that has been assigned to him/ her, without becoming greedy. If one continues to act in this way, without deviating from this path, one can happily live for one hundred years and will never be degraded by his/ her actions".

The power of *rajas* means good actions, not bad actions. Only the influence of *tamas* can turn *karma* (action, duty) into *ugra karma* or *vikarma*, with negative consequences for everyone, creating a hellish situation. *Isa Upanishad* continues to explain (3): *asurya nama te loka andhena tamasavrtah, tam te pretyabhigacchanti, ye ke catma hano janah*, "Those who kill the *atman* slide down together with the *asuras* and the ghostly creatures, into the levels of life covered by the blind darkness of *tamas*".

Of course killing the *atman* itself is not possible, so the expression "*atma hanah janah*" refers to those who neglect the *atman* by identifying with the material body both in regard to themselves and towards others. Such foolish people chose to be deluded by *ahankara* and *mamatva*, and this deliberate choice increases their lust and greed many times. The expression *vritti sthat* ("without modifications of the activities of the mind") clearly illustrates that such unfortunate and stupid people actually make the consistent choice to degrade themselves by taking shelter in *tamas*.

The word *adhah* ("down") is symmetrically opposed to *urdhvam* ("up"), and symbolizes the downfall of consciousness to the lowest levels, both within the human body and in the cosmic scale of the planetary systems. On the level of asuric life, a human being is only interested in the qualities of the lowest *chakras* - survival, sense gratification - and remains unable to rise further. For those who linger in such mentality, Earth itself becomes hell.

नान्यं गुणेभ्यः कर्तारं यदा द्रष्टानुपश्यति । गुणेभ्यश्च परं वेत्ति मद्भावं सोऽधिगच्छति ॥ १४-१९ ॥

nānyam guṇebhyaḥ kartāraṁ yadā draṣṭānupaśyati | guṇebhyaśca param vetti madbhāvaṁ so'dhigacchati || 14-19 ||

na: no; *anyam*: other; *gunebhyaḥ*: than the *gunas*; *kartaram*: (any) *kartas*; *yada*: when; *drasta*: one who sees; *anupasyati*: s/he sees; *gunebhyaḥ*: than the *gunas*; *ca*: and; *param*: supreme/ higher; *vetti*: s/he knows; *mat bhavam*: my nature; *sah*: s/he; *adhigacchati*: attains permanently.

"One who realizes that the activities are performed merely by the *gunas* has the right vision, and by knowing my nature, attains the level of perfection.

This concept has been expressed several times already by Krishna:

prakriteh kriyamanani gunaih karmani sarvasah, ahankara vimudhatma kartaham iti manyate, "All activities are actually performed by the qualities of nature, but a foolish person who is confused by egotism thinks 'I am doing'" (3.27),

na kartritvam na karmani lokasya srijati prabhuh, na karma phala samyogam svabhavas tu pravartate, "The master (of the city of the nine gates, the body) is not the cause of the actions performed by him or by other people. Thus s/he is not engaged by the results of activities. It is only his/ her nature that acts" (5.14),

karya karana kartritve hetuh prakritir ucyate, purusah sukha duhkhanam bhoktritve hetur ucyate, "*Prakriti* is said to be the cause and the origin of the action, while *purusha* is the cause of the perception of happiness and distress" (13.21),

prakrityaiva ca karmani kriyamanani sarvasah, yah pasyati tathatmanam akartaram sa pasyati, "One who sees that all activities, under all circumstances, are performed by the *prakriti*, and that the *atman* is not the doer, really sees" (13.30).

The *atman* is consciousness, but when taking shelter in *prakriti* or *shakti* (nature or power), s/he becomes engaged in activities. The fundamental characteristic of action is movement, and therefore all activities are always moving and never stable. Even the emotions that the *purusha/ atman* experiences are in constant motion because they are mediated through the movements of the mind (*vrittis* and *vasanas*); according to Patanjali himself (*Yoga sutras*, 1.2) *yoga* is precisely the science that enables us to stop these *vrittis* and *vasanas* (*yogah citta vritti nirodhah*) and experience the eternal unchangeable Reality that is beyond the material world.

This unchangeable reality is expressed here with the words *mat bhava*, "my existence", that is pure Consciousness or sentiment (also associated with the definition *prema*). In the spiritual world/ dimension, only Consciousness exists - the eternal Existence where all things are contained in a state of non-manifestation, free from the limits of time and space and movement.

The word *drasta* ("one who watches") as opposed to *karta* ("one who does") is also extremely important. Nature or *prakriti* is the real cause of the action, and the *purusha* or *atman* is simply watching, as a witness. We can remember this word *drasta* used in verse 13.23: *upadrasta anumanta ca bharta bhokta mahesvarah, paramatmeti capy ukto dehe 'smin purusah parah*, "Within this body also dwells the supreme Purusha, the Paramatma Mahesvara. He is the one who witnesses the action and allows it to be performed, supports it and enjoys it."

The experience of the "enjoyer" (*bhokta*) indicates the awareness or feeling that is the specific characteristic of Consciousness. Therefore one of the preliminary exercises in the practical *yoga* techniques consists in the "witness meditation", by which the *sadhaka* practices detachment in the neutral observation of the movements of the mind, the *gunas* and the sense objects. Generally conditioned souls are not really aware of the movements of the mind because they identify with it, and their awareness runs after the various thoughts and emotions that drift across the mind, jumping from one to the other without even realizing it. Through the gradual practice of *pratyahara*, *dharana* and *dhyana*, the *yogi* learns to become detached from the objects contemplated by the mind, not unlike a cinema goer becomes aware of the contents of the movie as distinct from his/ her own actual reality. At some point, the spectator becomes able to appreciate the film as a work of art, see behind the special effects, and so on, and that is when s/he will not be upset emotionally by the various scenes and situations as they develop from the plot.

The *atman* is *param*, transcendental, and when we learn to remain detached from whatever is not *atman*, we attain a stable consciousness (*sthita prajna*). Such position is permanent, precisely because it is not geared into change, and therefore we will not fall down again.

गुणानेतानतीत्य त्रीन्देही देहसमुद्भवान् । जन्ममृत्युजरादुःखैर्विमुक्तोऽमृतमश्नुते ॥ १४-२० ॥

guṇānetānatītya trīndehī dehasamudbhavān | janmamṛtyujarādūḥkhairvimukto'ṁṛtamaśnute || 14-20 ||

gunan: the *gunas*; *etan*: all these; *atitya*: transcending; *trin*: three; *dehi*: the embodied being; *deha samudbhavan*: originated from the body; *janma*: birth; *mṛtyu*: death; *jara*: old age; *duhkhaiḥ*: sufferings; *vimuktah*: completely free; *amritam*: immortality; *asnute*: s/he eats/ enjoys.

"By rising beyond these three *gunas*, the embodied soul becomes completely free from the effects of the body - birth, death, old age and all their sufferings - and enjoys immortality."

The word *atitya* means "transcending, overcoming, going beyond" and refers to the attainment of the transcendental level. All the three *gunas* must be transcended: Krishna has already stated this in 2.45 (*traigunya visaya veda nistraigunyo bhava arjuna, nirdvandvo nitya sattva stho niryoga ksema atmavan*). The correct method is to firmly establish oneself in *sattva* first (*nitya sattva sthah*), and from there we can rise even above *sattva*, by completely abandoning all material identification and attachment even to good things. We have already seen that attachment to material *sattva* binds us to the material level, and because the *gunas* are always in movement, their wheel will turn and *tamas* will creep in again.

The material body is a product of the *gunas*, and is necessarily subject to them as part of the *prakriti*, but we are not. We can and should therefore remain detached from the natural activities of the body (5.8-9) while still directing them into *sattva* with our consciousness: *naiva kincit karomiti yukto manyeta tattva vit, pasyan srinvan sprisan jighrann asnan gacchan svapan svasan, pralapan visrijan grihannan unmisan nimisann api, indriyanindriyarthesu vartanta iti dharayan*, "One who is a *yogi* thinks, 'I am not the doer of anything'. One who knows the truth engages in the activities of seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, eating, going, dreaming, breathing, talking, abandoning, accepting, opening and closing one's eyes, and engages the senses in a *sattvik* manner."

The activities that pass through the nine gates of the body are particularly important in this regard; food, sleep, cleanliness habits, sense gratification, thoughts, emotions, etc should always be directed preferably towards *sattva*. In this way, the *atman* becomes free from sufferings due to body and enjoys immortality (*amritam asnute*, "eats the nectar") already while living in this body (*jivan mukta*). Of course the body will come under a certain measure of all the three *gunas* in the course of its functions. For example, closing the eyes (*nimisam*) involves accepting a small part of darkness that is required for sleep and rest (*nidra*); practicing *yoga* does not mean that we should never sleep: *yuktahara viharasya yukta cestasya karmasu, yukta svapna avabodhasya yogo bhavati duhkha ha*, "For one who consciously controls his food intake, who is controlled in moving around, who makes controlled efforts in working, and is regulated in sleeping and keeping vigil, *yoga* becomes the destroyer of sufferings." (6.17)

The sufferings of birth, death, old age are inevitably connected to the nature of the material body, that is constantly changing. All change brings the loss of a previous situation, and this creates a certain measure of suffering, proportionately greater when attachment and identification is stronger.

Obtaining a new body and leaving the old one is a shock for those who are identified with the body because of ignorance and illusion; these conditioned souls are not wise (*dhira*) and so they become confused (*muhyati*): *dehino 'smin yatha dehe kaumaram yauvanam jara, tatha dehantara praptir dhira tatra na muhyati*, "The embodied soul who lives in this body passes from childhood to youth to old age, and similarly at the end of this body he passes on. A wise person is not confused by this." (2.13)

Immortality is certainly possible, but it can only apply to the consciousness or awareness, not to the material body. Anyone who has taken birth will have to die: *jatasya hi dhruvo mrityur dhruvam janma mrityasya ca, tasmad apaniharye 'rthe na tvam socitum arhasi*, "Because what has taken birth must necessarily die, and what has died will again be reborn. There is no point in despairing over something that is inevitable." (2.27)

The *atman* / *brahman* is not touched by any of such changes. Krishna has already explained this from the very beginning: *yam hi na vyathayanty ete purusam purusarsabha, sama duhkha sukham dhira so 'mrivatvaya kalpate*, "O best among men, one who is not distracted by all changes and is always equally balanced in suffering and in joy, is a wise person and he can aspire to immortality." (2.15)

The word *dhira* ("wise") is from the same root as the words *dhyana* ("meditation") and *samadhi* ("equal consciousness"), and refer to the consciousness (*atman*) that is not subject to change (2.18-21). In verse 2.56, *dhira* is equated with *muni*: *duhkhesv anudvigna manah sukhesu vigata sprihah, vita raga bhaya krodhah sthita dhir munir ucyate*, "A person whose mind is not distracted by sufferings or joys and remains detached, free from attraction, fear and anger, is called a *muni* who is able to maintain a steadfast meditation." (2.56)

अर्जुन उवाच ।

arjuna uvāca ।

कैलिङ्गैस्त्रीन्गुणानेतानतीतो भवति प्रभो । किमाचारः कथं चैतांस्त्रीन्गुणानतिवर्तते ॥ १४-२१ ॥

kairiṅgaistrīṅguṇānetānatīto bhavati prabho | kimācāraḥ katham caitāṁstrīṅguṇānavartate || 14-21 ||

arjunah uvaca: Arjuna said; *kaih*: by which; *lingaih*: forms/ symptoms; *trin*: three; *gunan*: the *gunas*; *etan*: these; *atitah*: who have transcended; *bhavati*: becomes; *prabho*: o Lord; *kim*: how; *acarah*: s/he behaves/ acts; *katham*: how; *ca*: and; *etan*: these; *trin*: three; *gunan*: the *gunas*; *ati vartate*: goes beyond.

Arjuna said, "O Lord, what are the symptoms manifested by one who has transcended the three *gunas*? How such a person behaves, and how has s/he overcome the three *gunas*?"

This verse is similar to 2.54, in which Arjuna started the series of his questions by asking: *sthita prajnasya ka bhasa samadhi sthasya kesava, sthita dhiih kim prabhaseta kim asita vrajeta kim*, "A person who is firmly established in the consciousness of meditation is said to be in *samadhi*. How does he speak, and what does he say? How does he move, and how does he stay?"

The word *lingaih* ("forms, characteristics, signs, symbols") is particularly interesting here. It is said to derive from the expression *ligi gatyau* and it refers to movement and transformation, and its most famous definition is *lingyate jnyate anena iti lingam*, "that by which (reality) is cognized or approached". Another explanation expands the word *linga* into *lim* ("to dissolve, to merge in") and *ga* ("to emerge"), to refer to a number of philosophical and theological meanings applied to Shiva Mahesvara, who is traditionally worshiped in the form of the Lingam. More specifically, the definition applies to the subtle level or subtle body, that contains the causes (*karana*) for future manifestations, especially in the ascending direction. In other words, *lingam* is the first manifested expansion of Brahman in this world, that enables differentiation and creation for the progress of all conditioned souls.

Colonial indologists usually translate *lingam* as "male sexual organ", but that is certainly not the ordinary meaning. Of course, when we want to define the concept of "man" (as in male human being), the male sexual organ can certainly be considered a "characteristic" of some relevance, especially considering the fact that the original Vedic culture has no taboos regarding the anatomy of the human body and serenely accepts depictions of naked figures also of Deities. Shiva Mahesvara is quite often portrayed in that way because traditionally ascetics and *yogis* renounced the complications of clothing, and Shiva is undoubtedly considered the greatest ascetic.

The original shape of the Shiva lingam worshiped in temples is not phallic, but ellipsoid - egg-shaped - to represent the concept of the identity of the Consciousness that manifests at the beginning of creation as the sum total of the universe, the Hiranyagarbha. Of course, since in Hinduism there is no institutional control on the religious life of individuals or groups, anyone is completely free to create whatever depiction of Shiva lingam or any other form of the Godhead they like, based on their understanding. Such freedom of belief and expression does not mean that all those forms should be automatically accepted as genuine, because authenticity should be verified through a comprehensive and deep study of the original scriptures. However, as long as such depictions do not appear to be offensive, they are amply tolerated.

The expression *atitah* was first used in 4.22 in reference to overcoming duality (*dvandva atitah*), then it is repeated several times in chapter 14 (14.20 *gunan atityah*, 14.21 *gunan atitah*, 14.25 *gunah atitah*, 14.26 *gunan sama atityah*). Arjuna's questions are perfectly appropriate and relevant, because when we are searching for good association and guidance, there must be some precise parameters to evaluate each particular individual, some rules or characteristics that can be observed externally. Krishna has already explained how to rise above the *gunas* (2.45, 3.27, 3.28, 3.29, 7.14, 13.20, 13.24, 14.19) but still Arjuna presents a new opportunity for more elaboration.

श्रीभगवानुवाच ।

śrībhagavān uvāca ।

प्रकाशं च प्रवृत्तिं च मोहमेव च पाण्डव । न द्वेष्टि सम्प्रवृत्तानि न निवृत्तानि काङ्क्षति ॥ १४-२२ ॥

prakāśam ca pravṛtīm ca mohameva ca pāṇḍava । na dveṣṭi sampravṛttāni na nivṛttāni kāṅkṣati ॥ 14-22 ॥

sri bhagavan: the wonderful Lord; *uvaca*: said; *prakasam*: enlightenment; *ca*: and; *pravritim*: engagement; *ca*: and; *moham*: illusion; *eva*: certainly; *ca*: and; *pandava*: o son of Pandu; *na dvesti*: does not hate; *sampravrittani*: completely engaged/ developed; *na*: does not; *nivrittani*: stopping the engagement; *kanksati*: s/he desires.

The wonderful Lord said, "O son of Pandu, (such a person) does not hate enlightenment, engagement in activities or illusion, and neither becomes totally immersed in them, and does not abstain from work.

The first verb holding the sentence is *na dvesti* ("does not hate") directly connected to its opposite *na kanksati* ("does not desire"), indicating that a person who has transcended all the three *gunas* is not particularly repulsed or attracted by *sattva*, *rajas* or even *tamas*. It is not that a transcendental person loves *sattva* and hates *tamas*. Attraction and repulsion (*raga* and *dvesa*), love and hatred are two forms of the same principle of attachment - manifested in the positive or in the negative. Even hatred and spite can bind us to a dangerous object of the senses or to a bad relationship, so the real solution is to remain neutral and detached.

What is resisted, persists, because of we are investing energy into it. We can verify this very simple truth with the famous exercise "do not think about a pink elephant" - the more you strive, the more real the "pink elephant" image gets. The mind and especially the subconscious mind works with symbols and ideas, not with grammar, so by projecting an image we reinforce it, even if our intention is to remove it.

A less innocent exercise is the foolish effort made by some ignorant celibate monks to become detached from their sexual lust by investing spite and hatred into the image of women, for example. As long as they keep thinking and speaking of women - albeit in the negative way - their attachment and lust will never drop off. The only solution is *not* to think of women as objects of enjoyment, not with attraction and not with repulsion: the real *brahmacharya* consists in thinking about the *atman* that is the same whether it drives a body or another. The same concept of neutrality from both positive and negative attachment is presented in many other verses (*nabhinandati na dvesti*, 2.57, *raga dvesa vimuktas tu*, 2.64, *raga dvesau vyavasthitau, tayor na vasam agacchet*, 3.34, *yo na dvesti na kanksati*, 5.3, *iccha dvesa samutthena dvandva mohena*, 7.27, *na me dvesyo 'sti na priyah*, 9.29, *yo na hrisyati na dvesti na socati na kanksati*, 12.17, *araga-dvesatah*, 18.23, *tyaktva raga dvesau*, 18.51, *na socati na kanksati*, 18.54).

This verse describes three wrong approaches: 1) hating, 2) aspiring to become attached, 3) desiring to neglect. The first approach is rejection or repulsion as in active opposition, the second approach is active attachment, and the third approach is rejection through negative desire or passive abstention from all actions. Let's make an example directly connected to the context of *Bhagavad gita*: engagement in the battle against aggressors. Arjuna should not hate (*na dvesti*) to fight in the battle to defend the *prajas*; he should engage willingly for the sake of duty even if the action is painful. Also, Arjuna should not engage in the battle out of selfish considerations and attachment to fighting *per se* (*sampravrittani*). Finally, Arjuna should not abstain (*nivrittani*) from his dutiful action out of lack of personal interest.

The word *sampravrittani* means "fully engaged/ manifest as experiences or objects" and is a reinforced form of *pravritti* ("engagement"), indicating the activities considered as the focus of action in themselves. At the end of the verse we find the negative or privative form *nivrittani*, referring to the actions of abstinence or *nivritti*. Abstention from action is also a choice and will bring consequences - good if the action from which we abstain was bad, and bad if the action from which we abstain was good. In general, however, abstention as a systematic habit in life can increase the influence of *tamas*, while engagement in action with attachment and opposition to action in attachment will increase the influence of *rajas*. The only way to increase *sattva* is to engage in action for the sake of duty, as we will see in the last chapter (18.8-10, 18.23-28).

Prakasa (enlightenment), *pravritti* (engagement) and *moha* (illusion) are expressions respectively of *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*, and they come and go with the waves of material nature, as soon as one of the *gunas* becomes predominant even temporarily. Due to the characteristic of movement (action, change) that is inherent to *prakriti*, there will be opportunities for enlightenment even for those who normally live in *rajas* or *tamas*, and similarly there will be engagement or activities also for those who normally live in *sattva* or *tamas*,

and illusion is possible for those who live in *rajas* and even in *sattva*. The real problem is not experiencing these states, but remaining attached to them, because inertia will inevitably attract the influence of *tamas* and our perception will become clouded.

उदासीनवदासीनो गुणैर्यो न विचाल्यते । गुणा वर्तन्त इत्येवं योऽवतिष्ठति नेङ्गते ॥ १४-२३ ॥

udāsīnavadāsīno guṇairyo na vicālyate । guṇā vartanta ityevaṃ yo'vatiṣṭhati neṅgate ॥ 14-23 ॥

udasina vat: as neutral; *asinaḥ*: sitting; *gunaih*: by the *gunas*; *yah*: one who; *na*: never; *vicalyate*: is shaken; *gunah*: the *gunas*; *vartante*: following; *iti*: like this; *evam*: certainly; *yah*: s/he; *avatiṣṭhati*: always remains; *na iṅgate*: is not overwhelmed.

"One who remains sitting in a neutral position in respect of the *gunas* is never shaken, and following this (policy) regularly s/he remains firmly established and is not overwhelmed.

Neutrality is manifested in real detachment, by which we engage in our duty without attachment for action or inaction or for the results of the action: this is pure *sattva* or *visuddha sattva*.

The word *asinaḥ* derives from the same root as *asana* ("sitting place"), and therefore carries the meaning of a stable and comfortable position that can be maintained for a long time without difficulty. However, a sitting position still allows us to perform a great variety of tasks, especially those focused on intelligence and the higher faculties of the mind. This means that all ventures should first be examined "by sitting", collecting information and data, verifying the values, planning a strategy and so on, before actually walking into physical action. This is how *sattva* directs *rajas* and favors success for the benefit of all. Without the proper direction and guidance of *sattva*, *rajas* becomes erratic, whimsical and altogether dysfunctional, attracting the influence of *tamas* and sliding the conditioned soul into stupidity and illusion.

The expression *udasina vat* ("as neutral") conveys the idea that in a deepest sense the liberated soul is not really neutral or disinterested in the results of the activities, as s/he strongly desires to please Isvara and to assist in the mission of protecting the good people, destroying the evil doers and establishing the principles of religion or ethics. That desire is transcendental to each particular action or object, and therefore it is not binding us to material attachment. As the next verse will clearly state, we are eager to use everything - clay, stone and gold - for the service of the Supreme and his mission. The liberated soul actually works and makes choices, but without identifying with them in a selfish or egotistic way (*mama* and *aham*), therefore s/he is beyond emotions and thoughts and attraction. This is the healthy and auspicious way of living (*svastha*), that will bring unending blessings in this life and in the next.

The expression *na vicalyate* ("is not agitated") refers to the various emotions and thoughts we will experience in the course of action, because of the nature of change and transformation of action itself. It is reinforced by the verb *avatiṣṭhati* ("always remains established"), and by the expression *na iṅgate* ("is not overwhelmed"). Emotions are like winds that can sweep our boat over the ocean, and attachment is like a sail that catches them and connects them to our awareness. Any sailor knows that when a storm comes, all sails must be rolled up so that they do not offer resistance, but the winds should run through and go away. In this way, the ship will remain more stable. Emotions and thoughts can be positive or negative, and bring hopes or worries. We should utilize all beneficial things in the service of the Supreme and just let the negative things fall through and away, without remaining attached to either. Joy, hope, desire and aspiration are like favorable winds that push our ship on its course, but we must manage them expertly so that the sails themselves are not overwhelmed and ripped apart by an excess of "good wind". This ship that will enable us to cross the ocean of material existence is knowledge (*jnana plavana*, 4.36).

A liberated soul is not overwhelmed because s/he is surrendered to the greater Intelligence and its vast plan (11.33-34, 18.73). This is also amply confirmed in *Bhagavata Purana* (for example in 1.5.32, 1.9.16-17, 1.19.14, 3.16.26, 4.11.23, 5.1.15, 8.19.29, 10.70.38). Of course this does not mean that a liberated soul becomes passive or abandons the use of his/ her brain and intelligence; in fact a liberated soul is illuminated and guided by *suddha sattva* and therefore s/he is in a very good position to understand God's plan and to assist it in the best possible way, because his/ her vision is not clouded by the ignorance of dualism.

समदुःखसुखः स्वस्थः समलोष्टाश्मकाञ्चनः । तुल्यप्रियाप्रियो धीरस्तुल्यनिन्दात्मसंस्तुतिः ॥ १४-२४ ॥

samaduhkhasukhaḥ svasthaḥ samaloṣṭāśmakāñcanaḥ । tulyapriyāpriyo dhīrastulyanindātmasamstutiḥ ॥ 14-24 ॥

sama: equal; *duhkha*: distress; *sukhaḥ*: joy; *sva*: one's own; *sthaḥ*: is established; *sama*: with equal consideration; *lostra*: clay; *asma*: stone; *kancanah*: gold; *tulya*: equal; *priya*: pleasant; *apriyah*: unpleasant; *dhīrah*: sober; *tulya*: balanced; *ninda*: offense; *atma samstutiḥ*: glorification/ praise of self.

"The wise is firmly established (in *suddha sattva*) and equally (tolerates) his own joys and sorrows. S/he (sees) with equal consideration a lump of clay, a stone and a piece of gold, and gives the same value to pleasant and unpleasant things, remaining sober and balanced in front of insult as well as glorification (directed to him/ her).

The word *sama* is repeated twice in the verse, and reinforced by the word *tulya* ("balanced"). Already Krishna has presented this point several times (2.15, 2.48, 4.22, 5.18, 5.19, 6.3, 6.7, 6.8, 6.9, 6.29, 6.32, 10.5, 12.4, 12.13, 12.15, 12.18, 12.19, 13.10, 13.28, 13.29) and will continue to do so (14.26, 18.10, 18.50, 18.54). Therefore we can understand how important this instruction is.

Another word that is directly connected to *sama* is *samadhi* (*sama dhi*, "equal understanding"), that refers to the constant level of transcendental awareness in all circumstances. This is the ultimate goal of *yoga* as clearly confirmed by Patanjali, who entitled the first chapter of his *Yoga sutras* to the pursuance of *samadhi* (*Samadhi pada*).

In particular, verse 6.8 utilized exactly the same example we find in this verse, comparing *lostra* (clay), *asma* (stone) and *kancanah* (gold) as having the same value, as all of them can be usefully engaged in the service to the Supreme, although in different ways. Foolish and

ignorant people evaluate objects according to artificial parameters and therefore they do not engage materials and resources properly; for example we can see lazy and arrogant craftspeople who do a very bad work when using less expensive materials, because they think that such objects do not deserve their full attention and effort. These people have no self-esteem and their cynical mentality will prevent them from feeling true happiness and pride in their work.

This example of material elements mirrors the considerations offered in verse 5.18, where the equal value is given to the different bodies of the *brahmana*, the cow, the elephant, the dog and the uncivilized person who considers dog flesh as a normal food. In both cases - material elements and bodies - the fundamental value is the same because all of them can be usefully engaged in the service of the Supreme.

Clay can be used for making cooking pots or water containers, stone can be used to build houses, and gold can be used for ornaments or for trade. A Deity can be fashioned out of any of these substances and still be perfectly fit to be worshiped, because all these materials are pure and useful. Of course Krishna did not mention stool or bone in his example, because these substances cannot be engaged usefully in daily life for the same purposes. In regard to the bodies of the souls in this world, a *brahmana* can be engaged in teaching and offering consultancy and assistance in various activities, a cow can be engaged in producing milk, the elephant can be engaged in carrying heavy loads, the dog can be engaged in protecting homes, and the uncivilized person can be engaged in assisting society from the outside by supplying forest products. This does not mean that all these embodied souls must be forced into engagement, but if they are favorable and willing to be engaged, we can find the perfect service for them.

Tolerating joys and sorrows is not easy, because they raise emotions in our mind and in the minds of the people around us. Also, it is important to understand that a liberated soul does not become insensitive to joys and sorrows (especially those of others), but s/he continues to perform his/ her duties in the service of the Supreme without being really distracted.

The word *sva* can be interpreted in two ways: as connected to the word *stah* ("remains in his/ her own position") or as connected to the words *duhkha* and *sukha* (distress and happiness). In the first instance, the deeper meaning is that the liberated soul is always conscious of its real nature as *atman*, and therefore remains established on the transcendental level as its natural and permanent position. In the second instance, the meaning is that neutrality and detachment should not come in the way of compassion, and that a liberated soul should actually be concerned about the sufferings of others (*para duhkha duhkhi*). The same concept is reinforced in the last part of the verse, where *atma* ("self") is clearly connected to the pair of opposite words *ninda* and *samstuti* (offense and praise). Ordinary people are not easily upset by the offenses and praise offered to others, except for really envious people who actually enjoy seeing others offended and suffer when others are praised.

In verse 12.19 the same issue of offense and praise was mentioned: *tulya ninda stutir mauni santusto yena kenacit, aniketah sthira matir bhaktiman me priyo narah*, "Balanced in front of insult and adoration, silent, satisfied with whatever s/he obtains, without residence, strongly determined: a devotee is very dear to me among all human beings." The word *ninda* ("offense") includes several degrees of seriousness, from a mere neglect or lack of proper respect to unprovoked lethal violence, while *stuti* (and its reinforced form *samstuti*) is the praise and glorification usually offered to great personalities, beginning with the Personalities of Godhead. These are one degree stronger than *mana* and *apamana* (6.7, 14.25), meaning "respect" and "lack of respect".

Obviously any degree of offense is unpleasant, and any praise is pleasant, but a wise person (*dhira, muni*) knows that both are relative and temporary, and does not give them too much value. The other couple of opposites, *priya* and *apriya*, contain a number of meanings, that can be applied to different contexts. While *ninda* and *stuti* have universal value, *priya* and *apriya* have individual value, because what is dear to someone could be annoying for someone else and the other way around. For example, *priya* is used as "dear, darling" to indicate a very close loving relationship, such as the one between lovers or spouses. It is also applied to one's favorite food or anything we could be particularly fond of, and that give us pleasure and happiness. By extension, we can use it to summarize all the good things that are desirable, favorable, or valuable to us specifically - the things we like as distinct from the things we dislike personally. On the opposite side, *apriya* is the exact contrary, and any contact with such unpleasant things or people is expected to create feelings of discomfort, annoyance and even distress.

The word *tulya* literally means "balance", as in the instruments that is used to weight objects, especially to ascertain their value.

मानापमानयोस्तुल्यस्तुल्यो मित्रारिपक्षयोः । सर्वारम्भपरित्यागी गुणातीतः स उच्यते ॥ १४-२५ ॥

mānāpamānayostulyastulyo mitrāripakṣayoḥ | sarvārambhaparityāgī guṇātītaḥ sa ucyate || 14-25 ||

manah: in being honored; *apamanayah*: in being neglected; *tulyah*: balanced; *tulyah*: equally disposed; *mitra*: friends; *ari*: enemies; *paksayoh*: to the divisions; *sarva arambha*: all personal enterprises; *parityagi*: who has completely renounced; *guna atitah*: beyond the *gunas*; *sah*: s/he; *ucyate*: is said (to be).

"(A person who) remains equally disposed in being honored and in being neglected, and is equally disposed towards the categories of friends and enemies, who has completely renounced the idea of pursuing egotistic material enterprises, is said to be beyond the *gunas*.

In this material world and especially in Kali yuga it is easier to be neglected, blamed or insulted even without any reason or against all reason. The odds of getting mistreated become greater for those who are sincerely engaged in fighting against the ills of a corrupt and ignorant society, because as we will see later in chapter 16, asuric people are very expert in insulting others and enjoy inflicting pain on their innocent victims.

A person who has abandoned the illusion of *ahankara* and *mamatva* remains detached and is not distracted by adulation or slandering; if there is anything useful s/he will engage it, otherwise s/he will let everything flow by without much concern. Of course, one should avoid the situations such adulation and offenses are likely to be produced, and this is why one should live alone, independently and detached from social life. We should know what is the limit of what our mind and body can bear, and make the suitable choices to avoid exposing ourselves to excessive stress. The martyr syndrome is a psycho-pathological problem, not a spiritual qualification; we do not need to lay down and act like a door mat so that everyone can wipe their feet on our head. When we say that we should be as humble as a blade of

grass and as tolerant as a tree, we should remember that even grass and trees have limits in humility and tolerance, and they are not exempt from suffering serious damages from excessive mistreatment. Fortunately, a human body has the ability to move around (unlike grass and trees) and step aside from the stampeding rhinos to avoid being beaten to a pulp. Some people may easily mistake our tolerance and friendliness for stupidity or masochism, and they may even come to believe we like being exploited, mistreated, stabbed in the back and persecuted. There is no vedic injunction that forbids us from making them understand they are seriously wrong.

Also, to be friendly with someone you do not need to support and help them engage in *ugra karma*, or even engage ourselves in such criminal activities to keep them company. Quite the opposite: a true friend, a *mitra*, will try to save us from committing some big mistake. There is a difference between *maitra* ("friendship") and *sanga* ("association, company"): while friendship is always a positive beneficial sentiment, *sanga* could be good or bad - to remain on the transcendental level, it should only be true *sat sanga*.

The word *paksha* (*pakshayoh*) refers to divisions or categories, as in the moon fortnights, called *sukla* ("white") and *krishna* ("black"), respectively translated as waxing and waning moon. Applied to human society, *paksha* means party or camp, when one group is opposed to the other by dint of allegiance or nature, as in *mitra* ("friends") and *ari* ("enemies"). This equal disposition to all camps is easily described as non-sectarianism and freedom from the party mentality, something that is sorely required especially in the camp of materialistic religiosity, among organizations and institutions, such as churches or *mathas*. Material religiosity will not be able to take us to the supreme level.

The *Bhagavata Purana* (1.1.2) clearly says: *dharmah projjhita kaitavo atra paramo nirmatsaranam satam*, "Rejecting the so-called illusory religion, we are discussing here only about transcendence, that is for good people who are free from envy". What is envy (*matsara*)? The dualistic and separatist mentality that divides people into camps (*pakshas*).

These professional sectarian religionists, who claim to speak as authorities - as representatives of God - should give the good example and behave as devotees of God, and not as devotees of their own organization or sect. If they were truly transcendental or even just sattvic, they would welcome the idea of fair cooperation and recognize and appreciate the good work done by others and the *guna* and *karma* demonstrated, and join forces. The danger for such people is to become victimized by *tamas* through material identification and separatism; this is particularly disastrous because they can turn into *asuras* if they try to exploit God's name and words to better manipulate and cheat or bully people into submitting to them by material oppression, repression and depression, or accusing them of not being humble or cooperative enough. *Asuras* will consider such lack of submission to their tyranny as hostility against them or even against God, but they are being fooled by illusion and will end not in paradise, but in lower births. Instead of God-brothers they turn into Godfathers: mafia is based on hierarchy and blind allegiance to bosses even against *dharma*, *vidya*, *satya* and *sattva*. There is no such concept in genuine Vedic knowledge. Verses 7 to 20 of chapter 16 of *Bhagavad gita* clearly explains how the *asuras* disregard the genuine knowledge from the scriptures, and how their religious activities are useless because they are not supported by *dharma*, beginning with truthfulness, compassion, and purity from the contamination of material identification.

We should not cultivate hatred (*dvesa*) or envy (*matsara*) towards these unfortunate people. We must recognize that *asuras* and *adharma* and *avidya* also have a role to play in the world, and we are not interested in going after them or "stopping" them. We actually wish them well in detached friendship (*maitra*), and we pray that they may realize their mistake, for their own benefit. We will not try to take away their properties or followers: let them enjoy whatever success is due to their previous *karma*, but if someone is interested to hear or learn the truth, and improve their life, we should be ready to do our duty. We need to defend our own service, and we do it independently and in accordance to the true teachings of the scriptures. There is no religious monopoly to be enforced: this pursuit of spiritual perfection is everybody's birthright, just like everybody has a right to take a cold bath in the month of *magha*. If we cannot find any genuine devotee of God, it is better to directly take shelter in the *param guru* rather than supporting *asuras* and their organizations. The expression *sarva arambha parityagi* ("abandoning all egotistic pursuits") does not mean that we should not start dharmic ventures or preaching missions. It means we do not identify them as "ours" in a separatist mentality.

मां च योऽव्यभिचारेण भक्तियोगेन सेवते । स गुणान्समतीत्यैतान्ब्रह्मभूयाय कल्पते ॥ १४-२६ ॥

mām ca yo'vyabhicāreṇa bhaktiyogena sevate | sa guṇānsamatityaitānbrahmabhūyāya kalpate | | 14-26 | |

mam: to me; *ca*: and; *yah*: one who; *avyabhicarena*: without deviating; *bhakti yogena*: through *bhakti yoga*; *sevate*: offers service; *sah*: s/he; *gunan samatitya*: having transcended the *gunas*; *etan*: all these; *brahma bhuyaya*: on the level of *Brahman*; *kalpate*: desires.

"One who truly serves me in *bhakti yoga* without deviation develops desires on the Brahman level, transcending all these *gunas*.

Krishna immediately clarifies that *sarva arambha parityagi* does not mean that we should not work sincerely for the benefit of all beings and in the service of the Supreme. Such desire (*kalpate*) is transcendental and does not bind us to the material *gunas*, but rather propels us forward and upward, nearest to Krishna's Consciousness.

The desire for immortality is the inspiration that carries us from the darkness to the light: *asato ma sad gamaya, tamaso ma jyotir gamaya, mrtyor ma amrtam gamaya* (*Bṛhad aranyaka Upanishad*, 1.3.28) because it removes our identification with the material body, that is inevitably going to die. Krishna had already explained that such desire is a legitimate pursuit even on the level of transcendence after rising above the *gunas*: *yam hi na vyathayanty ete purusam purusarsabha, sama dukkha sukham dhiram so 'mritatvaya kalpate*, "O best among men, one who is not distracted by all these and is always equally balanced in suffering and in joy, is a wise person and he can aspire to immortality" (2.15). Another very similar verse is found at the conclusion of the *Bhagavad gita* (18.53): *ahankaram balam darpaṁ kamam krodham parigraham, vimucya nirmamah santo brahma bhuyaya kalpate*, "One who has become completely free from *ahankara* and *mamatva*, from the sense of material strength, pride, lust, anger and greed, and is peaceful, focuses his/ her desires towards Brahman."

The *Bhagavata Purana* (11.29.34) confirms: *martyo yada tyakta samasta karma, niveditatma vicikirsito me, tadamrtatvam pratipadyamano, mayatma bhuyaya ca kalpate vai*, "If a mortal has renounced all his activities by fully dedicating him/ herself to me, desiring to serve me, such desire qualifies him/ her to attain my same nature, and immortality, too".

And also: *harir ni nirgunah saksat, purusah prakriteh parah, sa sarva drg upadrasta, tam bhajan nirguno bhavet*, "Hari is above the *gunas*. He is the Purusha himself, transcendental to material nature. He is the witness who sees everything. By worshiping him, one also becomes free from the *gunas*" (*Bhagavata Purana* 10.88.5) and *bhakti aham ekaya grahyah sraddhayatma priyah satam, bhakti punatin man nistha sva pakan api sambhavat*, "I can be acquired only by pure *bhakti* and I am dear to people who have deep faith. Such devotion and faith purifies anyone from the contamination of birth, including dog eaters", (*Bhagavata Purana*, 11.14.21).

The word *avyabhicarena* ("without deviation", "without change", "without interruption") refers to a firmly established consciousness or *samadhi*, and is found also in verses 13.11 and 18.33 with the same meaning. True service in *bhakti yoga* (*bhakti yogena sevate*) is not a part-time concern, a function we attend once a week or a couple of hours a day: it is a constant uninterrupted dynamic meditation. Anything less than that is merely imitation or practice aimed at attaining "the real thing", and it will not give the expected results, such as happiness, full consciousness and all the other divine qualities. This is confirmed in *Bhagavata Purana* (1.2.6): *sa vai pumsam paro dharmo yato bhaktir adhoksaje ahaituki apratihata yayatma suprasidati*, "The supreme *dharma* for human beings is selfless and uninterrupted devotional service to Transcendence: this gives complete satisfaction to the soul."

The expression *brahma bhuyaya* ("on the level of Brahman") should not be overlooked or underestimated. Without the transcendental realization of Brahman as universal Consciousness there can be no real *bhakti* - at most, there will be some sentimental attachment to a cultural or affective idea, that most people may call "devotion". In this sense, one can be devoted to one's family or career, to scientific research, or to other causes. On the level of material religiosity, one can be a devotee of any religious figure or teaching or group, but usually this boils down to keeping pictures in one's house, saying a little prayer now and then, attending some congregational function to establish one's belonging to the social group. The spirit of service (*sevate*) is usually absent, or directed to the distribution of food and clothing to "the poor" or to the aggrandizement of the material position of one's chosen group by building large churches or temples or *mathas* and decorating them with gold or other impressive features. All these activities remain on the materialistic level, and at most they can give some *punya*.

The real *bhakti* starts from the level where we have overcome the materialistic mentality (*dharmah projjhita kaitavo*, *Bhagavata Purana*, 1.1.2) as decisively confirmed at the conclusion of *Bhagavad gita* (18.54).

ब्रह्मणो हि प्रतिष्ठाहममृतस्याव्ययस्य च । शाश्वतस्य च धर्मस्य सुखस्यैकान्तिकस्य च ॥ १४-२७ ॥
brahmaṇo hi pratiṣṭhāhamamṛtasyāvyaśyasya ca । śāśvatasya ca dharmasya sukhasyaikāntikasya ca ॥ 14-27 ॥

brahmanah: of Brahman; *hi*: indeed; *pratiṣṭha*: the foundation; *aham*: I am; *amṛtasya*: of the immortal; *avyayasya*: of the unchangeable; *ca*: and; *sasvatasya*: of the eternal; *ca*: and; *dharmasya*: of *dharma*; *sukhasya*: of happiness; *aikantikasya*: of the One; *ca*: and.

"I am the foundation of the Brahman, the immortal, unailing/ imperishable, eternal (Brahman), that is the ultimate *dharma* and happiness, the One Reality."

This is the most explicit verse establishing the supreme position of Krishna as Bhagavan, the Personality of Godhead. There is nothing impersonal in the pronoun *aham*, ("I"), that Krishna uses many times in *Bhagavad gita* to refer to the Godhead.

However, we should not think that this is "a victory over impersonalism", because there has never been a war between Brahman, Paramatma and Bhagavan, that are all one and the same (*vadanti tat tattva vidad tattvam yaj jnanam advayam*, *Bhagavata Purana* 1.2.11). Bhagavan is knowledge (*jnanam advayam*), consciousness, and Brahman and Paramatma are the same consciousness - the only difference is *our* perception.

Ignorant and foolish persons who have no realization or even understanding of Brahman cannot possibly love or even understand Bhagavan, and *maya* will accommodate them by projecting a vast array of fantasies by which the conditioned soul "creates" his own God in his own image. It is easy to expose such useless mental speculations because they do not correspond to the fundamental qualities of God, that we can find described in the original scriptures and by many realized souls as based on *dharma*, the universal ethical foundation of existence. So when you are presented with an image of God (or religion) that goes against compassion, happiness, truthfulness, intelligence and knowledge, ethical principles, transcendence, equanimity and so on, you can be sure that someone is trying to dupe you into buying their foolish fantasies. It is particularly dangerous when such "preachers" are evidently engrossed into the *ahankara* and *mamatva* concept of life and are following the conclusions and behaviors described in chapter 16 as characteristic of the *asuras*. *Asuras*, or "demoniac people", can very well appear to be religionists, and especially claiming monopoly over religion, so we need to watch them carefully to avoid being confused by them.

We can remain safe if we sincerely cultivate the proper *sattvik* knowledge, that enables us to distinguish *dharma* from *adharma*: *pravrittim ca nivrittim ca karyakarye bhayabhaye, bandham mokṣam ca ya vetti buddhih sa partha sattviki*, "Sattvik understanding knows what should be accepted and what should be abandoned, what should be done and what should not be done, what should be feared and what should not be feared, what will bring bondage and what will bring liberation" (18.29).

And the highest level of *sattva* takes us beyond the material identification: *jnanam visuddham paramartham ekam, anantaram tv abahir brahma satyam, pratyak prasantam bhagavac chabda samjnam, yad vasudevam kavayo vadanti*, "The purest knowledge about the supreme purpose of life does not have an inside or an outside. Brahman is described as the inner Truth, the serene Bhagavan, whom the *kavis* call Vasudeva" (*Bhagavata Purana* 5.12.11).

The word *pratiṣṭha* means "foundation" but also "establishment", "beginning", and "origin". In other words, Consciousness exists because there is a Conscious "I" (*aham*) who contemplates the Existence. It is a concept that many wise people have grasped in some measure, even intuitively without the benefit of previous knowledge, but Vedic scriptures elaborate on it scientifically and objectively, presenting it as the purpose of spiritual realization as well: *atma vidya*, "the science of the self". We as *jivatmas* have a sense of self because awareness is a

fundamental function of the self. When there is no self, there cannot be any awareness; all sentences require a subject, all observations require an observer.

Brahman, Paramatma, Bhagavan, are *jnana*, knowledge, and so are the Atman and the Prakriti. Is there anything that is not originally knowledge? No. This knowledge or consciousness always exists, even when it is covered or distorted. A madman may believe he is Napoleon or Joan of Arc, but this does not mean that in fact he is nothing; his consciousness exists, but it is distorted in a superimposed image where inapplicable identifications are introduced. The consciousness always exists, even during a coma or at death, because when we leave the body we continue to remain conscious, in this or in different dimensions. Now the Consciousness of God is non-different from our own minuscule consciousness, except for the fact that Brahman/ Paramatma/ Bhagavan Consciousness is *pariyapti*, "most complete", while our own consciousness is limited by the concept of separation through time, space and individuality. Therefore the divine Consciousness is *amritam* (immortal), *avyaya* (unchangeable), *sasvat* (eternal), and it is also *dharma* (ethical sense, or "conscience"), and *sukha* or *ananda* (intrinsic happiness).

Each and every one of us can easily experience this supreme Consciousness (in quality if not in quantity) by removing from our awareness all the temporary things that will eventually die or change (such as material identifications and attachments) and by tuning in with the qualities that constitute the principles of *dharma*. Then we will certainly experience the happiness of Brahman (*brahma ananda*).

Chapter 15

Purushottama yoga

The yoga of the Supreme Person

The name Purushottama is composed by the words *uttama* ("supreme, highest") and *purusha*, a noun that expresses a very complex and deep concept, as we have already commented in previous chapters. In ordinary modern language, *purusha* is used to mean "man" as in the expression *stri-purusha* ("women and men"), but according to Krishna's teachings, all *jivatmans* are *purushas*, because they consist of consciousness and feelings just like the supreme Purusha.

Usually the term *purusha* is translated as "enjoyer", as the characteristic of consciousness focuses on feeling or tasting all the manifestations of existence. In the case of the embodied conditioned soul, the *purusha* tastes the material objects of the senses, while in the case of the liberated soul or the supreme Purusha, he tastes the spiritual sentiments. We have seen in the previous chapters how Krishna has explained the knowledge about *purusha* and *prakriti*, and here we will rise of yet another level, applying the science of *bhakti* to the supreme Purusha. Purushottama is the Supreme Person, "the best of the *purushas*", and is famous especially in connection with the tradition of Purushottama kshetra, also known as Jagannatha Puri, in Orissa.

The *Vishnu Purana* states: *hiranyareta samdiptam puranam purushottama, sakalam niskalam suddham nirgunam guna sasvatam*, "Lord Purushottama is described in the *Puranas* as effulgent as the Sun. He is all-pervading and transcendently pure, simultaneously undivided and manifesting in innumerable forms, beyond the *gunas* and yet the personification of all qualities."

The *Artha shastra* written by Brihaspati mentions Purushottama kshetra as one of the 8 *vaishnava tirthas* in India, and the *Kriya yogasara* speaks about the "three Deities of Purushottama". The *Vishnu dharmottara* (3.125.21) mentions *udreshu purushottamam*, "Purushottama who resides in Orissa", and the *Kalika Purana* mentions Jagannatha as the consort of Goddess Katyayani. The *Devi Mahatmya* of *Markandeya Purana* mentions Vishnu as Jagannatha in its first chapter: *uthastau ca jagannathas taya mukto janardanah, ekarnave 'hisayanat tatah sa dadrse ca tau*, "The Universal Lord, supporter of all living entities, arose from the Ocean."

In the *Vishnu Purana* (V.33.41) Krishna is called Jagannatha and Purushottama (*krishna krishna jagannatha janetvam purushottama, pasham paramatmanam anadi nidhanam harim*); in the *Vamana Purana* Aditi glorifies Vishnu with the name of Jagannatha, and Purushottama is also mentioned there in connection with Prahlada's pilgrimage. Many other scriptures mention Purushottama as a definition of God the Supreme Person: *Vamadeva Samhita, Skanda Purana, Niladri Mahodaya, Brahma Purana, Kapila Samhita, Padma Purana, Matsya Purana, Vishnu Purana, Vamana Purana, Garuda Purana, Agni Purana, Naradiya Purana, Ramayana, Mahabharata*.

In the *Purusha sukta* the Supreme Purusha is glorified as the omnipresent Soul of the Universe (Virat Rupa or Jagat): *sahasra sirsa purusha sahasraksah sahasra-pat, sa bhumim visvato vrttyathisthad dasangulam, purusha evedam sarvam yad bhutam yac ca bhavyam, utamritavasyesano yad annenatirohati*, "The Lord of the Universe has thousands of heads, eyes and feet, and entirely encompasses the cosmic creation, surpassing it to a distance of ten *angulas*: he is thus existing everywhere both within the universe and outside the universe. This visible universe (*vyakta*) is the form of the Virata Purusha, the universal Lord that contains everything that existed and that will ever exist in the future. Although immortal, he manifests this form to grace the living entities and offer them the opportunity to reap the results of their own actions."

The *Mahabharata* (*Anusasana parva*, 135.12) contains the famous *Vishnu sahasra nama stotra* ("the thousand names of Vishnu") where Jagannatha Purushottama has a special position in the initial presentation of the whole *stotra* by Bhishma (*jagat prabhum deva devam anantam purusottamam stuvan namasashrena purusa satatottamah ... tasya loka pradhanasya jagannathasya bhupate visnor nama sahasram me srinu papa bhayapaham ... vishnum vishnum maha vishnum prabhavishnum mahesvaram aneka rupa daityantam namami purushottamam*), besides being mentioned in the text of the *stotra*.

A more technical description of the form of Vishnu called Purushottama is found in the Vaishnava Agamas, specifically in the *Sarada tilaka*, where Isvara is described in three broad categories: the majestic Vishnu, the terrifying Nrisimha and the loving Purushottama.

Purushottama is the consort of Lakshmi and is therefore also called Madhava (*ma*, “of the Mother Goddess”, *dhava* “husband”). The particular form of Nila-Madhava that is found at the origin of the story of the manifestation of the Jagannatha Deities is a Vishnu form holding in his hand a lotus flower on which Mother Lakshmi sits (not to be confused with Brahma, who sits in the lotus born from the navel of Vishnu). This loving aspect of Jagannatha unites the three concepts of conjugal love (as Sridhara for Lakshmi Devi), paramour love (as Krishna for Radha and the *gopis*) and mystic love (as Kama or Bhairava in *tantra*). It is important to remember that all these three aspects must be analyzed on the transcendental level. The *Brahma Purana* confirms that Purushottama is inconceivable through material parameters, and can only be understood by one who overcomes the dualistic mentality in reference to Dharma.

श्रीभगवानुवाच ।

śrībhagavānuvāca ।

ऊर्ध्वमूलमधःशाखमश्वत्थं प्राहुरव्ययम् ।

छन्दांसि यस्य पर्णानि यस्तं वेद स वेदवित् ॥ १५-१ ॥

ūrdhvamūlamadhahśākhamaśvattham prāhuravyayam । chandāmsi yasya paṇāni yastam veda sa vedavit ।। 15-1 ।।

sri bhagavan: the wonderful Lord; *uvaca*: said; *urdhva*: upwards; *mulam*: the roots; *adhah*: downwards; *sakham*: the branches; *asvattham*: *asvattha* tree; *prahuh*: it is said; *avyayam*: eternal; *chandamsi*: the Vedic hymns; *yasya*: of which; *panani*: the leaves; *yah*: one who; *tam*: that; *veda*: who knows; *sah*: s/he; *veda vit*: one who knows the *Vedas*.

The wonderful Lord said, "It is said (there is) an *asvattha* tree whose roots grow upwards and whose branches grow downwards. Its leaves are the eternal Vedic hymns. One who knows it, knows the *Vedas*.

The example of the tree - as the *samsara vriksha* - is mentioned in *Katha Upanishad* (2.3.1) as the banyan whose roots go upwards, but also in *Muktika Upanishad* (2.2.32-37) and *Svetasvatara Upanishad* (6.6). This chapter describes the Supreme Lord as the root of this imperishable banyan tree of the Universe, and explains how to go beyond and find the original treasure.

It is important to understand that there is no contradiction or opposition between the *pravritti marga* of *karma kanda* and the *nivritti marga* of the various aspects of *yoga*. Krishna has already explained that Sankhya (chapter 2) is simultaneously different and non-different from Yoga: *loke 'smin dvi vidha nistha pura prokta mayanagha, jnana yogena sankhyanam karma yogena yoginam*, “O Arjuna, as I have already explained to you, in this world there are two types of beliefs: those who follow Sankhya are connected through knowledge, while *yogis* are connected through action" (3.3), and *sankhya yogau prithag balah pravadanti na panditah, ekam apy asthitah samyag ubhayor vindate phalam*, "Only childish people, and not *panditas*, speak of Sankhya and Yoga as two different paths. In fact one who is firmly situated on either of these attains the final purpose of both" (5.4).

Similarly, the concept of *yajna* is not limited to the ritual ceremonies but encompasses all dutiful actions of human beings: *niyatam kuru karma tvam karma jyayo hy akarmanah, sarira yatrapa ca te na prasiddhyed akarmanah, yajnarthat karmano 'nyatra loko 'yam karma bandhanah, tad artham karma kaunteya mukta sangah samacara*, “You should perform the dutiful actions, because action is better than non-action. Without action it is even impossible to maintain the body, that is the vehicle of the Self. All actions must be performed as sacrifice, otherwise in this world they cause bondage and further actions. Therefore, o son of Kunti, you should perform your activities for that purpose, remaining free from attachments." (3.8-9)

Even the *sannyasis* and *yogis* who have renounced the conventional rituals need to engage in *yajna*, each in their own specific way according to the activities they have chosen to perform: some worship the Devas, others offer sacrifice itself in the fire of Transcendence, others offer the activities of the senses or the objects of the senses, or the control of the *prana*. Others sacrifice their wealth, or engage in studying the scriptures or following strict vows or austerities," (4.25-30).

In chapter 11 we have seen the description of the Virata Purusha or Virata Rupa as the manifestation of God in this universe, on whom we should meditate according to Krishna's instructions. The *asvattha* (banyan) tree described in this chapter 15 is another perspective of this Supreme Purusha (Purushottama), that manifests as the entire corpus of Vedic knowledge. The *asvattha* tree is particularly interesting because it is practically immortal. It originally starts from a seed, but since the branches become new roots, and the roots spread around and upwards to become branches, the tree can grow very wide and constantly renews itself. So even if some parts of the tree may die, the other branches and root continue to survive and thrive and propagate, expanding the same body constantly. This is a wonderful example to depict Vedic knowledge, that is and remains One as it keeps growing from the same fundamental principles, but readily adapts to time, place and circumstances with new branches carrying the same vital lymph.

Like the ellipsoid stone or pillar called Lingam, the Tree is a very ancient and universal symbol of Reality in this world, and has been honored as a sacred image by all ancient dharmic cultures. The *stambha* or *jupa shakti* is still installed in the traditional orthodox *yajna salas* as the seat and representation of all Devas, and it is considered that all the *ghi* offered in the sacrificial fire is eaten by this *jupa shakti*. We have already noticed the close connection between Purushottama and Jagannatha ("the Lord of the Universe"), but even more interesting is the connection between Jagannatha and the Universal Tree. Another name of Jagannatha is *daru brahman*, "the incarnation of God as a tree". The word *daru* means both "tree" and "wood" (which is obtained from a tree).

This mention of the *daru* is found in *Rig Veda* (10.155.3): *ado yad daru plavate sindhoh pare apurusham, tadarabhasya durhano tena gaccha parastaram*, “In the beginning, the primeval Lord manifested as the transcendental Daru on the shore of the Ocean, and those who go to take shelter in this Supreme Lord are delivered from all difficulties.”

A famous commentator of the *Vedas*, Sayana Acharya (1300-1380 CE), offers this explanation: *ado viprakrista dese kartumanam apurusham nirmatra purushena rahitam, yad daru darumayam purushottamakyam devata sariram sindhoh pare, samudra tire plavate jalasyopari vartate tad daru he durhano dukhena, hananiya kenapi hantum asakya he stotah arabhasva alambasva upasvety, arthah tena darumayena, evenopasyamanena parastavam atisayena, taraniyam utkristam vaishnavam lokam gaccha*, “On the sea shore, in a place that is not accessible to material vision, God who is beyond the perception of the senses, exists in a tree form and is called Purushottama. He

delivers his devotees from the ocean of material sufferings. O great scholars, take shelter in that tree form of the Lord, and through his worship attain the supreme abode of Vishnu.”

The *Sankhyayana brahmana* also contains a similar verse: *adau yad daru plavate sindhoh pare apurusham, tad alambasva durduno tena yahi param sthalam*, “On the shore of the ocean, the Primeval Lord has manifested as a tree/ wood that is not human. By taking shelter in him, you will attain the supreme abode.”

The *Sankhyayana bhashya* comments: *adau viprakrista dese vartmanam yad daru daru-mayam, purushottamakhyam devata sariram plavate jalasyopari vartate apurusham, nirmatri rahitavena apurusham tad alambhasva durduno he hotah tena, darumayena devana upasyamanenaiva param sthalam, vaishnavam lokam gacchety arthah*, “The Supreme Lord known as Purushottama has taken a form of tree/ wood and resides on the ocean shore, although he transcends the human level and he is beyond the perception of the senses. O great scholar, you should worship this form of the Lord with the purpose of going to the supreme abode of Vishnu.” A similar verse is also found in the Utkala Khanda of *Skanda Purana* (21.3): *ya esa plavate daruh sindhu pare hy apaurushah, tam upasya duraradhyam muktim yati sudurlabham*, “One who venerates that transcendental tree that floated to the ocean shore, and that is so hard to worship properly, will attain the rarest form of salvation.”

In the Utkala Khanda of *Narada Purana* (52.12) the Lord answers a question by Lakshmi Devi: *pratimam tatra tam dristva svayam devena nirmitam, anayasena vai yanti bhavanam me tato narah*, “In the greatest of all the holy places there is an image of the Lord that was directly manifested. Anyone who sees this form attains my abode.”

The definition of Jagannatha as *daru brahman* also appears in *Padma Purana*, *Brihad Vishnu* and *Tattva Yamala: samudrasvayambhuvane* *aste sri purushottame, purnananda mayam brahma daru vyaja sarira bhrit*, “In the land of Purushottama on the north shore of the sea, Brahman, the full manifestation of happiness, plays at taking a wooden/ tree body”, *niladrau chotkale dese kshetre sri purushottame, daruny aste cidanando jagannathakhyam murtina*, “At Niladri, in the holy place known as Sri Purushottama kshetra in Orissa, the Supreme embodiment of happiness and knowledge manifests in a form of tree/ wood, known as Jagannatha/ the Universal Lord”, *bharate chotkale dese bhu svarge purushottame, daru rupi jagannatho bhaktanam abhaya pradah, nara ceshtam upadaya ya aste mokshaika karakah*, “In Bharata Varsha (India), in the kingdom of Orissa, in that heaven on Earth known as Purushottama, Jagannatha/ the Universal Lord manifests to take away all the fears of his devotees. Although he seems to act like a human being, he is the only one who can give liberation.”

अधश्चोर्ध्वं प्रसृतास्तस्य शाखा गुणप्रवृद्धा विषयप्रवालाः ।

adhaścordhvaṁ prasṛtāstasya śākhā guṇapraṁvṛddhā viṣayapraṁvalāḥ ।

अधश्च मूलान्यनुसन्ततानि कर्मानुबन्धीनि मनुष्यलोके ॥ १५-२ ॥

adhaśca mūlānyanusantatāni karmānubandhīni manuṣyaloke ॥ 15-2 ॥

adhah: downwards; *ca*: and; *urdhvam*: upwards; *prasṛtah*: extending; *tasya*: its; *sakhah*: branches; *guna*: the *gunas*; *pravṛddhah*: developed; *visaya*: the sense objects; *pravalah*: twigs; *adhah*: downwards; *ca*: and; *mulani*: the roots; *anusantatani*: spread out; *karma anubandhini*: bound by *karma*; *manusya loke*: in human society.

"Extending downwards and upwards, its branches develop the *gunas*, the twigs become the sense objects, and grow downwards to become roots and spread even more to bind human beings with duties.

The tree of the universal manifestation is the Tree of Life, also known as the wish-fulfilling Tree (*kalpa vriksha* or *kalpa taru*). It is the manifestation of God's opulence and compassion for the conditioned souls who have so many desires to fulfill, and gives all sorts of fruits. Contrarily to what some people believe, the fulfillment of material desires and the ordinary life in the world are not detrimental to spiritual life or contrary to the religious spirit. In fact, devotional service or the worship of the Supreme is open to all - those who have overcome all desires, those who have unlimited desires, and those who desire liberation (*Bhagavata Purana*, 2.3.10). However, the universe is a complex and sophisticated project, and a good knowledge of its mechanisms, dynamics and laws is necessary in order to move around effectively and obtain the results we desire. The Vedic scriptures are the "Operating Manual" for the universe, and elaborate clearly and in detail about the proper procedures (or duties, *karmani*) that human beings are expected to follow. The possibilities are endless, with millions of varieties of bodies in which we can incarnate, each with their particular set of senses of perception and action, as well as millions of sense objects, all produced by the infinite combinations of the *gunas* of material nature. For each desire we want to get fulfilled, there are duties that we must perform as payment of the debt (*rina*) we incur in. As already explained in the previous chapter (14.18), one can climb upwards or downwards, and each action will develop into further actions carrying us up or down. The branches of this Universal Tree keep producing the permutations and interactions of the *gunas*, and each specific mixture creates the sense objects like innumerable twigs, providing livelihood to all creatures. The leaves of the tree are the Vedic hymns (*chandamsi*, 15.1), that guide us in the pursuit of our desired sense objects according to the particular set of duties determined by our *guna* and *karma* (3.28, 3.29, 4.13). If we try to acquire the sense objects we desire without following and discharging the prescribed duties, we will become bound by the reactions of our activities and the interaction of the *gunas* will make us fall to the lower branches, towards the selfish and degraded activities, where the taste of the fruits becomes bitter.

Previous commentators explain the fruits of this Tree as *dharma*, *artha*, *kama*, *moksha*, but these are only the best and healthiest fruits, growing on the upper branches; on the lower branches we find the opposite type of fruits, such as *adharma* and *anartha*, with the abundance of unhealthy, illusory and temporary joys and sorrows that grow out of them. All positions on this tree remain temporary (8.16); this is indicated by the very name of the *asvattha*, that is explained as *na svah sthasyati*, where *svah* means "tomorrow". The tree in itself is eternal and manifests in cycles, but we will not be able to stay forever on any of its branches: in the human form of life we get the opportunity to climb up towards the primeval original root, and discover the treasure that is hidden there, beyond Brahma who was the first created being and expanded the universe downwards through the process of secondary creation.

The expression *urdhva mulam* ("roots upwards") indicates that the roots grow upwards and also that the original root is at the top of the tree; previous commentators have observed that such an "upside down" tree is merely a reflection of a real tree on the water, so whatever is lowest here in the material world will be highest in the spiritual world. There is some deep hidden truth in this statement, but it needs to be understood correctly, because someone who has not attained the transcendental level of life could misinterpret it disastrously and even create confusion and scandals among the general public. We should proceed gradually and carefully in the study of the transcendental science, without jumping over important points or cutting corners, because the results will not be the same as those obtained through the proper process.

The *asvattha* tree of Vedic knowledge is not a contradiction of the fundamental principles of ethics and logic; what is ethical in this material world is also ethical in the spiritual world. Truthfulness, compassion, cleanliness and self-control do not lose their value and certainly do not become negative qualities or cause for degradation on the spiritual level: this must be understood very clearly. Therefore we should stick to what Krishna is actually saying in *Bhagavad gita*, and understand that the roots growing upwards and from the top at the same time refer to the fact that the universe develops from a single root at the highest level (Brahma) and then branches down in so many ramifications. If we want to discover the root, we must therefore rise upwards, and not downwards as we would do with an ordinary tree.

This *asvattha* tree is also very real, and not a mere reflection or illusion. Those who consider this universe as mere illusion are *mayavadis* - people who believe that illusion is the strongest power, and buckle under such power to non-sustainable conclusions described as asuric by Krishna (*asatyam apratistham te jagad ahur anisvaram*, 16.8). Saying that the *asvattha* tree of Purushottama, the Virata Purusha, is merely an illusory reflection is a very dangerous and misleading statement indeed.

न रूपमस्येह तथोपलभ्यते नान्तो न चादिर्न च सम्प्रतिष्ठा ।
 na rūpamasyeha tathopalabhyate nānto na cādirna ca sampratiṣṭhā ।
 अश्वत्थमेनं सुविरूढमूलं असङ्गशस्त्रेण दृढेन छित्त्वा ॥ १५-३ ॥
 aśvatthamenam suvirūḍhamūlam asaṅgaśastreṇa dṛḍhena chittvā ॥ 15-3 ॥

na: not; *rupam*: the form; *asya*: its; *iha*: here; *tatha*: also; *upalabhyate*: can be perceived; *na*: not; *antah*: the end; *na*: not; *ca*: and; *adih*: the beginning; *na*: not; *ca*: and; *sampratistha*: the foundation; *asvattham*: *asvattha* (tree); *enam*: this; *su virudha*: very strong; *mulam*: the root; *asanga*: (of) detachment; *sastrena*: with the weapon; *dridhena*: determined; *chittva*: cutting.

"Its form cannot be perceived from here, as it has no end or beginning or foundation. Its very strong root should be cut with the weapon of determined detachment.

This verse is also very easy to misunderstand. We cannot cut and destroy the tree of the Universal Form: that would be completely impossible. Not only it cannot be perceived (*upalabhyate na*) from our position (*iha*), but it spreads everywhere for all the innumerable billions of *jivatmans* in the past, present and future - an endless expanse of extremely strong roots and branches. Even if one soul breaks free from the tangle, there would still be innumerable other souls who still live in the tree and will not become liberated until their desires and karmic consequences have been fully exhausted.

This *asvattha* constituted by Vedic knowledge is eternal (has no beginning or end) and cannot be destroyed. Also, it should not be destroyed, and in fact Bhagavan descends personally from age to age, or sends his assistants, to save Vedic knowledge and re-establish its vigor for the benefit of all beings, in accordance to the specific circumstances and the particular audience, so much that to a superficial observer it may seem that such teachings vastly differ from one instance to another.

For example, in *Bhagavata Purana* (3.31.36) we see that Brahman appeared as a stag (*riksha*) to mate with her consort and daughter the Earth, exactly like in the Celtic and pre-Celtic tradition. Varaha appeared in a very distant age, and at that time Varahi was even more popular than him; we know that in vast regions of the planet, Mother Boar was worshiped, and we can still find the traces of that worship. In *Bhagavata Purana* (2.7.37) we also find a verse speaking of a space traveler Buddha dressing in a very attractive way to distract the *asuras* from their galactic wars of conquest. Therefore a thoughtful person who has attentively studied all the available *shastra* and honestly and faithfully practiced and applied their teachings by constantly meditating on the Vedic instructions will notice many small jewels scattered here and there, like stars in a clouded night, that observed in the proper perspective reveal a secret map to a higher dimension of Consciousness that goes completely beyond the intellectual level and into a realm that many will find unbelievable (*acintya*). Our determination and detachment are required to sharpen our individual intelligence and use it to cut *ourselves* away from the tangle of the tree, becoming able to trace its original root and even go beyond that. It is a major paradigm shift that we can effect only when we understand the nature and identity of the Supreme Purusha, the Purushottama.

There is a famous scene in the film "Matrix", where the protagonist, Neo, is visiting the home of the Oracle, and meets a young boy who is practicing the control of consciousness. The boy, with shaved head and clad in *sannyasi*-like clothing in spite of his obvious Caucasian origin, is bending a spoon by applying the power of the mind, and explains to Neo that he should not try to physically bend the spoon - because that would be impossible. He should rather realize that the spoon does not exist as it appears to be, and the paradigm shift in the consciousness will do the needful. This brilliant artistic inspiration is not far from reality, as we can see in many cutting edge research works both in physics and psychology: when our perception changes, the situation changes around us. We are consciousness, just like the Supreme Purusha is Consciousness. The Tree of the Universe is simply the expansion or manifestation of consciousness, and the elementary laws of physics only apply to time, space and individuality. Once we cut through the thick layers of *ahankara* and *mamatva* that define time, space and individuality, we are not subject to such laws any more, and we become disentangled from the tree itself.

The weapon required to cut ourselves free is the sharp intelligence that shows us how all the fruits of the tree are temporary and cannot give real happiness (5.22); this realization is called detachment (*asanga*). We have already commented on the particular meaning of the

word *sanga* and its opposite *asanga*, because they appear many times in the verses spoken by Krishna (2.47, 2.48, 2.62, 3.9, 3.26, 4.20, 4.23, 5.10, 5.11, 11.55, 12.18, 13.22, 14.6, 14.7, 14.15, and 15.5, 18.6, 18.9, 18.23, 18.26).

The literal meaning of the word *sanga* derives from *sa* ("together with") and *anga* ("limb, member, part of a body") and extends to all those things that are related to the material body, such as identifications and attachments, especially in regard to activities and qualities. Religious Organizations insist much on the value of *sanga*, o "association", "affiliation", "membership", because of the encouragement and support that the company of good people and favorable social structures can give to individuals, especially in Kali yuga. Therefore *sadhu sanga* ("the association with good people") is recommended as a principle of devotional practice by many teachers.

However, the word *sanga* is not used in *Bhagavad gita* for this purpose; rather Krishna insists that we should become "free from all association" (or anyway, "associated with liberation" only). This is an extremely important point that we need to understand if we want to graduate from materialistic religiosity to the pure transcendental level of *dharma* and true spiritual life.

Genuine *bhagavat dharma*, taught in *Bhagavad gita* and *Bhagavata Purana*, is beyond this materialistic level of religiosity: *dharma projjhita kaitavo atra parama*, "Here we completely reject materialistic religiosity, that is deceitful, and only pursue transcendence", (*Bhagavata Purana* 1.1.2). Of course, not everybody is able to rise to this level, and it would be unwise to try to push people to take this position artificially, out of positive or negative compulsion. Krishna explicitly forbids us to do so: *na buddhi bhedam janayed ajnanam karma sanginam, josayet sarva karmani vidvan yuktah samacaran*, "A person who has knowledge should not confuse the understanding of the ignorant who are attached to their actions, but should rather help them to engage in all activities in a spirit of cooperation, giving a good example personally" (3.26).

People who still have material desires should not be pressurized to "give them up" artificially, but rather to pursue them in a dharmic way, according to the detailed instructions (the "Operating Manual") supplied by the *Vedas*. In this way, the natural progression of evolution will carry the conditioned soul through *dharma* to *artha*, *kama* and finally *moksha*, without the danger of degradation.

The roots of the Universal Tree are very strong (*su virudha mula*), and very rightly they should be, because they keep the conditioned souls engaged according to the perfect plan of the divine Consciousness. We should advise and encourage each and every individual in their particular personalized way, because what is powerful medicine for someone will be lethal poison for another, or even for the same person in different circumstances. Therefore the *dridha* (determination) mentioned in this verse in connection with the cutting of the roots of attachment should be applied with intelligence, and not under the influence of *rajas* or *tamas*. This surgery is extremely delicate, and will bring disaster is performed by unqualified "doctors", who deliberately or unwittingly ignore relevant factors due to carelessness or impersonalism, or because of an overpowering desire for personal selfish advantages, such as increasing the number of disciples and followers, possessions, name and fame, etc.

Spiritual evolution is not a "one size fits all" T shirt. Trying to make everyone fit into the mold by cutting off pieces of bodies or by stretching them to breaking point is not a good idea. The guidance of qualified teachers is required to continue progressing in our dharmic duties and engagements, without losing sight of the final purpose - transcending the cosmic manifestation and attaining the supreme position. Dutiful religionists should not forget this, to avoid becoming self-complacent and self-righteous: Krishna had already given the warning in verses from 2.42 to 2.46 talking about the *veda vada ratah* and how they are missing the point. Therefore the learned *brahmanas* must always remember the supreme position of Vishnu in all their rituals and in the performance of all duties: *om tad visnoh paramam padam sada pasyanti surayah diviva caksur atatam visnor yat paramam padam*. This is the verdict of the *Rig Veda samhita* (1.22.20), repeated in several *Upanishads* (*Paingala*, 4.30-32, *Subala*, 6.6, *Tara sara*, 3,9, *Tripura tapani*, 4.13).

ततः पदं तत्परिमार्गितव्यं यस्मिन्गता न निवर्तन्ति भूयः ।
 tataḥ padam tatparimārgitavyam yasmingatā na nivartanti bhūyaḥ ।
 तमेव चाद्यं पुरुषं प्रपद्ये । यतः प्रवृत्तिः प्रसृता पुराणी ॥ १५-४ ॥
 tameva cādyam puruṣam prapadye | yataḥ pravṛtīḥ prasṛtā purāṇī || 15-4 ||

tatah: then; *padam*: position; *tat*: that; *parimargitavyam*: must be searched; *yasmin*: where; *gatah*: having reached there; *na*: not; *nivartanti*: come back; *bhuyah*: again; *tam*: that; *eva*: certainly; *ca*: and; *adyam*: primordial; *purusam*: the *Purusha*; *prapadye*: taking shelter; *yatah*: from whom; *pravrittiḥ*: creation/ development/ engagement; *prasrita*: extended; *purani*: very ancient.

"Then, one should search that position from which one does not fall back again, taking shelter in (God), the primeval (being), from whom all this creation has developed.

The word *tatah*, "then", indicates the position of complete detachment, attained by cutting one's material identifications and attachments, including the good and dutiful ones. One can reach this point by sincerely and carefully following Krishna's instructions in *Bhagavad gita* and the other Vedic scriptures; we should remember that it is the tree itself that supplies the handle for the ax to cut through it.

Disentangling oneself from the many branches and twigs does not mean one should abandon it and run away somewhere else. Rather, the freedom we achieve through detachment should serve us truly in our quest for the original root - the Virata Purusha, the Purushottama, who is at the highest position in the Universal Tree. This is indicated by the expression *adyam purusha prapadye*: Vishnu is the real root and cause of *pravritti* as dutiful action (*yatah pravrittiḥ prasrita*) since the dawn of creation (3.10 to 3.16). So cutting this tree to find the root is more like the final harvesting of the very valuable result of all the cultivation - the ultimate purpose of the useful plant itself from the very beginning.

All the activities supported by the Vedic hymns have the ultimate purpose of pleasing Vishnu: *dharmah svanusthitah pumsam, visvaksema kathasu yah, notpadayed yadi ratim, srama eva hi kevalam*, "The occupational duties of a person become simply tiring labor if they do not give rise to the desire to hear about God," (*Bhagavata Purana* 1.2.8), and *atah pumbhir dvija srestha, varnasrama vibhagasah*,

svanusthitasya dharmasya, samsiddhir hari tosanam, "Thus, o best among the twice-born, the prescribed duties according to the *varna* and *asrama* system find their perfection in pleasing Hari" (*Bhagavata Purana* 1.2.13)

Another very interesting word in this verse is *parimargitavyam*, a compound including the word *marga*, meaning "road". The search for the Supreme is like a journey, and once we embark on this road, the final success is guaranteed (6.37 to 6.45). From a practical perspective, we can search this Universal Tree like a genealogical tree, tracing its origin up to Brahma, the first created being, and to his origin, Maha Vishnu. Brahma is the *prapitamaha*, the great forefather of all human beings as well of all other living entities, and therefore he is considered the prime authority in the universe. At each manifestation cycle, Brahma expresses the Vedic knowledge from within his heart through the direct instructions of Vishnu (*tene brahma hrída yah adi kavaye*, *Bhagavata Purana* 1.1.1). This direct transmission of knowledge is also possible for all individual souls (10.11) who are sincere enough.

Krishna has already declared that he (Vishnu) is the origin or root of all existences, although he cannot be perceived materially (as he says here, *na rupam asyeha tathopalabhyate*, 15.3) in chapter 10: *aham sarvasya prabhavo mattah sarvam pravartate, iti matva bhajante mam budha bhava samanvitah*, "I am the origin of existence of everything, as everything emanates from me. Intelligent people remember this, and worship me with intense attention", (10.8). The position of Vishnu is therefore higher than Brahma and transcendental to this world, yet omnipresent and perfectly aware of everything. Vishnu resides in the hearts of all beings (10.11, 10.20, 13.18); this chapter will state it again and more forcefully (15.15) and the conclusion of *Bhagavad gita* will again declare it definitely (18.61).

But we also know that Vishnu always resides in his *param dhama*, his supreme abode or position. So if Vishnu is present in the hearts of all living beings, does this mean that all the spiritual world is also present within the hearts of those beings, together with Vishnu? It certainly is. We should not apply the material limitations of time, space and separation to the transcendental Godhead, because he is beyond the grasp of the material senses and mind not only in his aspects of Bhagavan, Paramatma and Brahman (8.9, 11.42, 12.3), but even as Atman (2.25). A very interesting word in this and other verses (2.51, 8.11, 15.4, 15.5, 18.56) is *padam*, that conveys the meanings of "position, abode, place" and its reinforced form *sampada*, as in 16.3 etc. An extension of this meaning of "position" is "a passage from the scriptures", as in verse, 13.5 (*brahma sutra padais*). Another connected word is *pada* (with a long *a* in first position), that means "feet" or "legs" (see verse 13.14 for example). From this word we also get the word *prapadye* ("taking shelter"), an action that is traditionally symbolized by the gesture of touching the feet or legs of the person we surrender to. The *pada* or position of Vishnu, the *paravyoma* or spiritual space, is beyond the root of the Universal Tree. In this meaning, the synonym *dhama* is used several times (8.21, 10.12, 11.38, 15.6). When the *jivatman* attains this supreme abode, there is no danger of falling back. This is also confirmed again in 15.6 and had already been stated in 8.21: *avyakto 'kshara ity uktas tam ahuh paramam gatim, yam prapya na nivartante tad dhama paramam mama*, "That is said to be non-manifested, non subject to change, and the highest destination. By attaining it, one does not fall back. That is my supreme abode." On the other hand, those who do not take shelter in the Supreme will have to continue moving around in the Universal Tree, as confirmed in *Bhagavata Purana*: *ya esam purusam saksad, atma prabhavam isvaram, na bhajanty avajananti, sthanad bhrastah patanty adhah*, "One who does not worship Isvara, who is the Purusha himself, the source of the *atman*, will fall from his position", (*Bhagavata Purana* 11.5.3).

This had also been explained in chapter 9: *traī vidya mam soma pah puta papa yajnair istva svar gatim prarthayante, te punyam asadya surendra lokam asnanti divyan divi deva bhogan, te tam bhuktva svarga lokam visalam ksine punye martya lokam visanti, evam tryi dharmam anuprapanna gatagatam kama kama labhante*, "Those who know the three *Vedas*, who drink the *soma* and who are purified from all wrongs through the acts of sacrifice, worshiping me in this way pray to attain Svarga. After reaching the pious planets of Indra in heaven they enjoy the celestial pleasures of the Devas. After a long time spent in the enjoyment of Svargaloka, those who have exhausted their virtuous merits fall down again to the level of mortals. In this way, following strictly the path of the three *dharmas* (*brahmana, kshatriya, vaisya*), they develop a lust for desires and they continue to take birth and die" (9.20-21).

निर्मानमोहा जितसङ्गदोषा अध्यात्मनित्या विनिवृत्तकामाः ।

nirmānamohā jitasāṅgadoṣā adhyātmanityā vinivṛttakāmāḥ ।

द्वन्द्वैर्विमुक्ताः सुखदुःखसंज्ञैर्-

गच्छन्त्यमूढाः पदमव्ययं तत् ॥ १५-५ ॥

dvandvairvimuktāḥ sukhaduḥkhasaṅjñair- gacchantyamūḍhāḥ padamavyayaṁ tat ॥ 15-5 ॥

nih: without; *mana*: sense of prestige; *mohah*: illusion; *jita*: having conquered; *sanga doshah*: the defects due to association; *adhyatma*: in the original Self; *nitya*: constantly; *vinivrita*: detached; *kamah*: desires; *dvandvaih*: from dualities; *vimuktah*: completely liberated; *sukha duhkha*: joys and sorrows; *samjñaih*: understood/ known as; *gacchanti*: they go; *amudhah*: those who are not stupid; *padam*: position; *avyayam*: eternal; *tat*: that.

"This eternal position is attained by those who have conquered and eliminated the sense of prestige, illusion, and the defects due to identification and attachment. These intelligent persons are always conscious of the true self (*adhyatman*) and so they are completely free from desires, as well as from the joys and sorrows created from duality.

The word *nirmana*, placed in a special position at the beginning of the verse, is particularly interesting. Since *mana* means "honor" and the negative prefix *nih* or *nir* indicates the absence, the general meaning of the word is "lack of honor". Of course, this does not mean that a liberated soul enjoys being disrespected or insulted: it means that s/he does not like being showed special honor, because this could reinforce the *ahankara* and attachment to position and the danger of intoxication that it carries. Therefore genuine devotees and liberated souls only accept those honors that are favorable to the performance of their specific mission, and never demand or even welcome anything more than that. Actually, even a king or a *guru* should show a healthy dose of genuine humility and detachment from honors, because this behavior is inspiring and sets a very good example for their followers. Krishna has already stated: *yad yad acarati sresthas tat tad evetaro janah, sa yat pramanam kurute lokas tad anuvartate*, "Whatever a great leader does, the general common people follow the example as his activities are implicitly accepted as the authoritative standard by the public" (3.21).

Such consideration is not merely based on good personal character, but it also help preventing the opinion that a leadership position entails special material benefits, such as worship, power, sense gratification, etc, and therefore it should be pursued with such material motivations. Of course this idea is created by illusion, but as we have seen in the previous chapter, *tamas* can easily creep into the best plans and spoil them. A person who is totally free from illusion is naturally modest and humble, because s/he sees clearly that his/ her role in God's plan is merely a small service, enabled by a greater power that supplies all ingredients for the action (18.13-14, 18.19). The same negative prefix *nih* or *nir* applies here to the word *moha* (illusion), as in this verse *mana* and *moha* are compounded in a single expression.

This clear consciousness of one's true position is exactly the opposite of the illusion of *ahankara* and *mamatva*, the defects (*dosa*) of association or identification (*sanga*). Therefore Krishna connects all three factors as one and the same requirement: *nirmana-moha jita-sanga-dosa*, saying very clearly that one needs to become free from the illusion of demanding recognition as the *karta* ("doer") based on *ahankara* and *mamatva*. This point was already stated very forcefully in verse 3.7: *prakriteh kriyamanani gunaih karmani sarvasah, ahankara vimudhatma kartaham iti manyate*, "All activities are actually performed by the qualities of nature, but a foolish person who is confused by egotism thinks 'I am doing'."

So now we have clarified what should be eliminated (*neti neti*). What is the positive activity we should engage in? Krishna explains, *adhyatma-nitya vinivrita-kamah*: always focus on the *adhyatma*, the Supreme Soul, the original Atman, and cultivate desires that are perfectly renounced - desires for renunciation and transcendence that are pertaining to the *adhyatma*.

We should notice that here the word *kamah* is expressed in the plural form ("desires"); this expression has two meanings, indicating that one should "be free from engagement in cultivating all the different desires", and at the same time one should "desire all those thing that are favorable to detachment".

There is nothing wrong in desire in itself, as in fact desire is the natural quality of the *jiva* who strives to reunite with God; the problems come when such primeval desire is not properly directed through consciousness and jumps around without control, running after the sense objects. We could compare desire to a beam of light, that can be focused intensely into a laser effect and perform astounding things, cutting through the thick darkness of illusion and egotism.

However, if the beam is not focused enough, we will only be able to see what it shows - the theories and possibilities and the work to be done. On the other hand, if the beam is very concentrated and keeps jumping and running around without control, it will bring destruction and suffering (2.63). If it jumps around without control but is not strongly focused, it will simply dazzle and blind us into a vague confusion typical of *tamas*.

The third line is also logically connected to the previous two. One needs to become free from *ahankara* (*mana*, *moha*, as born from *sanga dosa*) and also from the dualities that are known as joys and sorrows (*sukha dukkha samjnair*), by focusing on the *adhyatma* and directing one's desires towards transcendence only.

Duality is presented as a fundamental defect in many verses (2.45, 4.22, 5.3, 7.27, 7.28), and the solution is to tolerate the constant changes and transformations created by duality, such as joys and sorrows. Trying to avoid the sorrows or increase the joys artificially (with "forceful action" generally adharmic in nature) is not a good solution, because joys and sorrow automatically come as the results of our good and bad deeds, and only good deeds can really neutralize sorrows. So while we sincerely perform our dutiful dharmic actions, we need to tolerate whatever remains of negative consequences are still coming to us. Not only sorrows, but joys as well can be distracting, therefore one should become detached from them all.

The word *amudha* ("not stupid") is particularly interesting because it implies that *mana*, *moha*, *sanga dosa* and *dvandva* are symptoms of foolishness. Only intelligence (*buddhi yoga*, 2.39, 2.41, 2.44, 2.49, 2.50, 2.51, 2.52, 2.53, 2.63, 4.18, 5.20, 6.9, 6.21, 6.43, 8.7, 10.10, 12.8, 12.14, 15.20, 18.16, 18.29, 18.30, 18.36, 18.57) as the main characteristic of *sattva* can lead us out from illusion and to the supreme position of eternal Transcendence (*padam avyayam tat*).

न तद्भासयते सूर्यो न शशाङ्को न पावकः । यद्गत्वा न निवर्तन्ते तद्धाम परमं मम ॥ १५-६ ॥

na tadbhāsayate sūryo na śaśāṅko na pāvakaḥ | yadgatvā na nivartante taddhāma paramam mama || 15-6 ||

na: not; *tat*: that; *bhasayate*: illuminates; *suryah*: the sun; *na*: not; *sasankah*: the moon; *na*: not; *pavakah*: fire/ electricity; *yat*: where; *gatva*: having gone; *na*: not; *nivartante*: they come back; *tat*: that; *dhama*: abode; *paramam*: supreme/ transcendental; *mama*: mine.

"That (supreme position) is not illuminated by the sun, the moon or fire/ electricity. Those who reach that supreme abode, my abode, will not return (here).

Katha Upanishad (2.2.15) contains a very similar verse: *na tatra suryo bhati na candra tarakam, nema vidyuto bhanti kuto agni*, "In that (dimension) there is no (need of light from) sun, moon, stars, lightning or fire". We should not foolishly conclude that because in the spiritual dimension there is no specific source of light, darkness reigns unbroken - it is rather the opposite, as spirit itself is the origin of all the light even in this world. When we speak about the light of sun, moon, stars, fire, lightning and electricity, we automatically imply the existence of darkness that thrives in their absence, because their presence is limited. All such objects are material, and as such they are subject to the law of constant movement and transformation - appearance and disappearance, creation and dissolution. The supreme position (*param dhama*) is beyond such duality.

The word *tat* mentioned in this and the previous verse clearly indicate the supreme Transcendence. The Personality of Godhead is non-different from his abode or position, because the *param dhama* is pure consciousness, the supreme light of intelligence and existence of *visuddha sattva*. There is no shadow or darkness in the supreme Consciousness: everything is clear and thoroughly understood, without limits of separation, time or place. When we become free from the dualistic mentality, we will be able to see this.

This is the reason why there is no need for separate or distinct illumination in this transcendental dimension. The sun (*surya*), the moon (*sasanka*) and fire (*pavaka*) are the sources of light we know in this world, and enable us whatever faculty of sight and understanding our senses can have in this dimension obscured by the cloud of *ahankara* and *mamatva*. The fact is that the spiritual dimension, the *param*

dhama, is already present everywhere in the universe, and the material world is merely the region we perceive as covered by the *ahankara* cloud - but it is our vision that is covered, not the eternal light. This is confirmed by many verses in various scriptures, including *Bhagavad gita*:

divi surya sahasrasya bhaved yugapad utthita, yadi bhah sadrisi sa syad bhasa tasya mahatmanah, "If thousands of suns were rising simultaneously in the sky, that radiance would be similar to the radiance of the great Atman." (11.12)

vyotisam api taj jyotis tamasah param ucyate, jneyam jnana gamyam hridi sarvasya vishthitam, "He is described as the light in all radiant things, transcendental to darkness. He is established in the heart of everything, and he is to be known through the cultivation of knowledge." (13.18)

kiritinam gadinam cakrinam ca tejo rasim sarvato diptimantam, pasyami tvam durniriksyam samantad diptanalarka dyutim aprameyam, "The luminous radiance of all those crowns, maces, and discs is everywhere, so dazzling that I can barely see you. It is like the rays of the sun or an immeasurable blazing fire." (11.17)

yo 'ntah sukho 'ntar aramas tathantar jyotir eva yah, sa yogi brahma nirvanam brahma bhuto 'dhigacchati, "One who is happy within the self, who finds pleasure within the self, who finds the light within the self is a *yogi* who attains the *brahma nirvana* and the existence of Brahman." (5.24)

yatha prakasayaty ekah kritsnam lokam imam ravih, ksetra, ksetri tatha kritsnam prakasayati bhārata, "O Bharata, just like the sun illuminates all this world, in the same way the *kshetri* illuminates the entire *kshetra*." (13.34).

Attaining this *pada* or *dhama* that is constituted by pure light and consciousness requires a radical change of perspective, a true realization of the deepest nature of Reality. It is not sufficient simply to dress up in saffron cloth or white cloth or shaving one's head, because these are merely externals with the only purpose of alerting the public that we are not interested in ordinary mundane pursuits and subjects.

There are several other verses that state how a *yogi* who has attained this supreme position never falls back again on the material level of understanding (8.15, 8.16, 8.21, 15.4). The liberated personalities who descend in this world from time to time as *avatars* - *svamsa* or *vibhinmamsa*, either direct Personalities of Godhead or his servants - are not falling in material consciousness, and therefore they never leave the *param dhama*.

It is also interesting to note that the word *bhasayate* ("illuminates") is from the same root as *bhasya* or "commentary", meant to illuminate the understanding of the readers. The same meaning is contained in the word *dipika* ("lamp") often used in the titles of commentaries. We should not foolishly think that commentaries are meant to illuminate the original text on which they elaborate: the illumination applies to the intelligence or understanding (*buddhi*) of the readers, who need more explanations to grasp the full meaning.

ममैवांशो जीवल्लोके जीवभूतः सनातनः । मनःषष्ठानीन्द्रियाणि प्रकृतिस्थानि कर्षति ॥ १५-७ ॥

mamaivāṁśo jīvaloke jīvabhūtaḥ sanātanaḥ | manahṣṣaṣṭhānīndriyāṇi prakṛtiṣṭhāni karṣati || 15-7 ||

mama: my; *eva*: certainly; *amsah*: limb/ part; *jiva loke*: in the world of *jivas*; *jiva bhutah*: the living beings; *sanatanah*: eternal; *manah*: the mind; *sastani*: the six; *indriyani*: the senses; *prakriti*: in *prakriti*; *sthani*: established; *karsati*: cultivates/ attracts.

"The living being in this world is certainly a limb of my (body), and as such he is eternal. He toils in the material world, struggling with the mind and the senses that are the norm here.

The word *amsa* is particularly interesting. This verse clearly states that all the living entities are eternally "limbs" or "parts" of the body of the Supreme Lord. Not simply children or creatures of God, but parts of his own body. We can probably understand the concept better if we translate *amsa* as "cell" like the cells of our body. It is common knowledge that an average adult body is composed by approximately 100 thousand billions of living cells, all originated from the single cell of the fertilized egg, carrying the same genetic information but adapted in different forms according to their specific function - bones, muscles, nerves, etc. A body cell can continue to live only temporarily if it is separated from the body, like a spark from a fire that slowly becomes extinguished if it flies out of it (an example offered by *Brihad aranyaka Upanishad*, 2.1.20, *yathagneh ksudra visphulinga*, "just as tiny sparks of fire fly in all directions").

On the spiritual level, of course, there is no real distance or separation and the cell can never die, because God's body is spiritual and omnipresent. The illusion of separation simply covers the light (the consciousness) of the spiritual cell, called *jivatman*, and can be overcome and reverted easily with the return to the proper consciousness. In fact, there is never any real separation - separation is simply perceived due to *avidya*: how can there be *bahir mukha* (a *jivatman's* turning his face away from God) if Bhagavan is *sarvato mukha* (God's face is everywhere)? So the difference between *svamsa* and *vibhinmamsa* cells is the quantity and not the quality of consciousness. Therefore there is division (*pariccheda*, *vibhinna*) and non-division at the same time. The same definition (*amsa*) is confirmed in Krishna's teachings to Uddhava: *ekasyaiva mama amsasya, jivasyaiva maha mate, bandho 'syavidyayanadir, vidyaya ca tathetarah*, "The *jiva* is a part of me, but is bound by timeless ignorance. However, it can change its position through knowledge" (*Bhagavata Purana* 11.11.4).

Like every healthy cell or limb in our body, each *jivatman* still retains a certain degree of individuality (name, different function etc) but its consciousness is solely directed to the service of the entire body and the highest consciousness in it. When the consciousness of the individual cell becomes distorted and does not function in a favorable mode of service, we understand that the cell has become diseased. A cell in our body can only subordinate its individual enjoyment to the enjoyment of the entire body. When all the cells of a body cooperate properly to nourish the body and to keep it in good health, they can automatically obtain the enjoyment and well being they naturally aspire to. Therefore the *jivatman* needs to subordinate his enjoyment to the enjoyment of the Supreme.

Each single cell has a different function in the body, but all cells need to be treasured, protected and nurtured according to their specific needs. This practical consideration of different engagements and requirements, however, is not based on prejudice, but on actual observation of the true potential of each individual. In this sense, the *varnashrama* system is the scientific knowledge that enables us to understand the specific functions of the individual cells in this world, and how they should be nurtured and engaged for the perfect health of the body of the Virata Purusha, that is clearly described as the incarnation of human society.

The key to understanding the nature of the *jivatman* is the fact that it is constituted by both the *purusha* principle and the *prakriti* principle: each individual living being is both male and female at the same time. The perfect balance of these two principles, that enjoy and support each other within the individual soul, mind and body, is the secret of the *hatha yoga* and of all the similar sciences that existed in the world, such as alchemy, or the Mysteries of ancient Egypt and Greece, the Divine Marriage, and other secret doctrines and practices that were revealed only to a small group of initiates.

The living entity emanates from the Godhead as a seed (*bija*), an atomic (*anu atman*) spark of the Fire, as a minuscule cell of the body of the Parama Purusha, but it contains the "spiritual DNA" (so to speak) by which he will be able to perfectly develop into a fully fledged spiritual form and personality like Bhagavan.

This is confirmed by the famous *mantra* that we find as invocation in several *Upanishads* of the *Sukla Yajur Veda*, including *Isa Upanishad*: *om purnam adah purnam idam, purnat purnam udacyate, purnasya purnam adayah, purnam evavasisyate*, "From this (Brahman) who is eternally complete (in itself), all complete (*jivatman*) emanate, and even after that, what was complete remains complete." Each and every emanation is complete and perfect in itself, yet the Supreme remains complete and perfect.

Each *jiva* is eternally individual (*jiva bhuta sanatanah*) as confirmed by Krishna already at the beginning of the *Bhagavad gita* (2.12), and can never be destroyed (2.23-24). However, when the *jivatma* enters this *jiva loka*, the world of the *jivas* or the collectivity of the *jivas*, he is under-developed and merely an atomic soul (*anu atma*) that will grow through experience and evolution to a fully fledged spiritual body (*siddha deha*). Its atomic dimension is described by *Svetasvatara Upanishad* (5.9): *balagra sata bhagasya satadha kalpitasya ca*, "if the tip of a hair is divided into 100 parts, and then again into 100, this can be compared to the size of the *jivatman*".

The *anu atma* can grow into maturity by cultivating his own evolution; this is indicated in the second part of the verse especially by the word *karsati*, that contains a variety of meanings, that include "cultivating" (as in farming and tilling the soil), "struggling", "being aggrieved". For example, farmers are called *karsakas* in *Bhagavata Purana* (10.2041). However, *karsati* also means "attracting", as in the name of Sankarsana, the first emanation of Vasudeva in the material world, who presides over the sense of identification.

This function attracts the conditioned soul to the matrix where he will take birth, like a magnet attracts various material elements, beginning from *ahankara*. The growth of the microcosmic human body is in fact a reflection of the macrocosmic body of the Virata Purusha in the process of universal creation.

After the manifestation of *ahankara* (the sense of identity and doership), material understanding or intelligence (*buddhi*) develops, and from it the mind (*manah*) is manifested. In turn, the mind manifests the five senses of perception (*indriya*) and so on. The *anu atma* is thus attracted into this rich matrix full of opportunities and elements, and develops a body that will enable him to work on his further evolution. The subtle body consisting of the mind and the five primary senses of perception is therefore considered the "establishment" of *prakriti* or material nature, a sort of agricultural or business enterprise in which the *anu atma* becomes engaged as an apprentice worker.

The mind and senses constitute the subtle body of the conditioned soul, and are developed through the activities (*karma*) and association with the material qualities (*gunas*). This subtle body is also called *karana* body because it is the cause of the particular type of gross body that the conditioned soul will develop for his next birth, based on affinities and tuning. The same will attract the same, and the *guna* and *karma* carried by the subtle body will get an opportunity to manifest on the gross level. In chapter 7, Krishna had described the *jivatmans* born in this world as *para* (spiritual) *prakriti* (nature), by whom the universe is upheld (7.5).

शरीरं यदवाप्नोति यच्चाप्युत्क्रामतीश्वरः । गृहित्वैतानि संयाति वायुर्गन्धानिवाशयात् ॥ १५-८ ॥

śarīraṁ yadavāpnoti yaccāpyutkrāmatisīśvaraḥ । gṛhitvaitāni samyāti vāyurḡandhānivaśayat ॥ 15-8 ॥

sariram: the body; *yat*: that; *avapnoti*: obtains; *yat*: that; *ca api*: and also; *utkramati*: gives up; *isvarah*: the Lord; *grihitva*: accepting; *etani*: all these; *samyati*: goes away; *vayuh*: air; *gandhan*: smells; *iva*: like; *asayat*: from their source.

"The Lord who has entered a body and accepted all these (the mind and senses), then goes out again (with them), like the air carries the scents.

The subject in the verse is called *isvara* ("the Lord"), just like he was called *prabhu* ("the Lord") in verse 5.14 with reference to the same issue (*na kartritvam na karmani lokasya srijati prabhuh, na karma phala samyogam svabhavas tu pravartate*, "The Lord does not create/manifest the idea of being the cause of the actions performed by other people. Thus he is not engaged by the results of activities. It is only his nature that acts"). We should remember that the *param atman* is the soul of the soul, and therefore he is the one directing the movements of the *jiva atman* and always accompanying him from one body to the other, residing with him in each and every body, one after the other. The *jiva atman* is only the subordinate *atman*, emanation (*prabha*) of the supreme Lord, but since he is of the same nature (*prakriti*), he also can be called Lord, especially in connection with the material body and senses that constitute his own *prakriti*. Both the *isvara* and *atman* are *kshetra jna*: *idam sariram kaunteya ksetram ity abhidhiyate, etad yo veti tam prahuh ksetra jna iti tad vidah, ksetra jnam capi mam viddhi sarva ksetresu bhārata, ksetra ksetrajñayor jñanam yat taj jñanam matam mama*, "O Kaunteya, this body is called the field, and one who knows this body is called the knower of the field. O Bharata, you should know that I am also the knower of the field who resides in all fields. Knowing the field and the knower of the field is called knowledge. This is my opinion." (13.2-3)

We know from the *Upanishads* (*Mundaka* 3.1.1,2, *Svetasvatara* 4.6,7), that the two *purushas* (the *jivatman* and the *paramatman*) like two birds of the same nature, are sitting on the same tree (the body). One of the two is engrossed in contemplating and eating the fruits of the tree, while the other is simply watching him and waiting for him to realize his glories, which will put an end to all worries (*samane vrikse purusho nimagno anisaya socati muhyamanah, justam yada pasyati anyam isam asya mahimanam iti vita-sokah; dva suparna sayujya sakhya samanam vrikksam parisavajate tayor anyah pippalam svadv atty anasnann anyo 'bhichakasiti*). The same is confirmed by Krishna while instructing Uddhava: *suparnav etau sadrisau sakhya, yadricchayaitau krita nidau ca vrikse, ekas tayoh khadati pippalannam anyo niranno 'pi balena bhuyan*, "Two similar birds somehow nested on the same banyan tree; one is eating the fruits (*annam*), the other is not eating, but he is the strongest" (*Bhagavata Purana* 11.11.6).

This is also confirmed in *Vedanta sutras: sariras cobhaye api hi bhedena enam adhiyate*, "Both (the *jivatman* and the *paramatman*) are present within the body, as distinct from each other" (*Vedanta sutra* 1.2.20) and *guhāṃ pravistav atmanam hi tad darsanat*, "Both (*jivatman* and *paramatman*) have entered the cave (of the body), but the *atman* is distinct from that (supreme)" (*Vedanta sutra* 1.2.113).

Although the transcendental bird does not get entangled in the fruits of the tree, he still moves from one body to another to accompany the conditioned bird, out of friendship and love. With the same affection, the *jivatman* who is sincerely devoted to the *paramatman* focuses all his attention on the supreme Friend: this is the meaning of the statement *ekam eva dvitīyam*, "one without second".

The word *samyati* means "leaves, travels"; we find it in the same context in verse 2.22: *vasamsi jirnani yatha vihaya navani grihnati naro 'parani, tatha sarirani vihaya jirnany anyani samyati navani dehi*, "Just like a man abandons clothes that have become torn or worn out and acquires other and new clothes, in the same way one leaves the damaged body and accepts another new body."

As we mentioned in the commentary to the previous verse, the *karana* ("causal") body is the subtle sheath composed by the mind and senses according to the *guna* and *karma* developed in previous lifetimes. The word *etani* ("all these") refers specifically to the *guna* and *karma* developed by the conditioned souls, as well as the desires, the memories, the lessons learned, and all the other luggage. Carrying this luggage around (*grihitva*), the conditioned soul moves out of the old body and into the new one, accompanied by the *param atman*.

It is important to understand that the *atman* is never really tied by all this luggage, just like the nature of air is not actually touched by any scent - pleasant or unpleasant. The odors of air are due to the particles of matter that are carried temporarily, and that easily precipitate back to the ground when they are washed by the rain or sublimated by the heat and light of the sun. The comparison here can be applied to the remembrance, discussion and study of the transcendental science of Godhead, that are like the radiant sunlight and a beneficial rain produced by the correct performance of *yajnas* or sacred actions.

Krishna confirms this same point in his teachings to Uddhava: *manah karma mayam nrinam, indriyah pancabhir yutam, lokal lokam prayaty anya, atma tad anuvartate*, "The mind of the human beings is constituted by *karma*. It moves from one *loka* to another, together with the five senses, and the *atman* follows them, although it is separate from them" (*Bhagavata Purana* 11.22.37).

The teachings of Kapila to Devahuti offer the same view: *dehena jiva bhutena, lokal lokam anuvrajan, bhunjana eva karmani, karoty aviratam puman*, "The *purusha* constantly moves from one *loka* to another, reaping the fruits of its previous actions, because of the bodies designed for the *jivas*" (*Bhagavata Purana* 3.31.43).

The time of death is the most crucial moment of one's entire life, like the final examination test is the most crucial moment of an entire course of studies. One should be ready to face the challenge constituted by this passage, and pass the test. Another very important verse in this regard is from chapter 8: *yam yam vapi smaran bhavam tyajaty ante kalevaram, tam tam evaiti kaunteya sada tad bhava bhavitah*, "O Arjuna, whatever state of existence one remembers at the time of leaving the body, he attains that state of being, because of always contemplating that existence." (8.6). To be on the safe side, we should always keep our consciousness focused on the supreme Consciousness, so that we will always be established on the transcendental level, in any circumstance (8.7).

श्रोत्रं चक्षुः स्पर्शनं च रसनं घ्राणमेव च ।

अधिष्ठाय मनश्चायं विषयानुपसेवते ॥ १५-९ ॥

śrotraṃ cakṣuḥ spāśanaṃ ca rasanam ghrāṇameva ca | adhiṣṭhāya manaścāyam viṣayānupasevate || 15-9 ||

srotam: the organ of hearing; *cakṣuḥ*: the eyes; *spāśanam*: the organ of touch; *ca*: and; *rasanam*: the organ of taste; *ghranam*: the organ of smell; *eva*: certainly; *ca*: and; *adhiṣṭhaya*: situated in; *manah*: the mind; *ca*: and; *ayam*: s/he; *viṣayan*: the sense objects; *upasevate*: renders service.

"He becomes settled (there) with the mind and the senses organs - hearing, sight, touch, taste and smell - and renders service to/ through the sense objects.

The most interesting word in this verse is *upasevate*, that should not be translated simplistically as "enjoys" (the sense objects). As we know, the word *seva* mean "service", and *upaseva* is a reinforced form of the definition, as we find for example in *Bhagavata Purana* 5.1.6 with *upasevaya*, "by serving" in connection with the devotional service rendered by king Priyavrata. The Sanskrit word for "enjoys" is *bhunkte* (used for example in verse 3.12 of *Bhagavad gita*), closely related to the word *bhoga* ("pleasure, sense enjoyment, food").

According to the level of consciousness of the *jivatman*, this verse can be therefore interpreted in two different ways, that are not contradictory at all. When the conditioned soul is under the spell of illusion, he serves the sense objects by constantly associating with them - talking about them, hearing about them, remembering them, working to acquire the credits to attain them, and so on. When the soul turns his desires and consciousness to the supreme Personality of Godhead, he engages his minds and senses in the service of God, as clearly stated in *Narada Pancharatra*: *hrisikesha hrisikena sevnam bhaktir ucyate*, "*Bhakti* is the service rendered by using the senses for the pleasure of the Lord of the senses".

As we have seen through Krishna's teachings in *Bhagavad gita*, there are different levels on which we can perform this devotional service (4.23, 4.24, 9.27). When our consciousness is still on the neophyte platform we need to support our meditation with material objects, ritual ceremonies, elaborate offerings, etc. However, with constant practice and meditation we can internalize this consciousness and remain always situated in remembering the supreme Personality of Godhead and serving him in our heart, turning our senses and mind into the sacrificial instruments required for the rituals. This is possible only when we have risen above all the three *gunas* of material nature, and our consciousness has become free from all material identifications and attachments. As long as we have *anarthas* ("useless luggage") we will be distracted from this *samadhi* ("constant meditation"). This is confirmed in *Bhagavata Purana* (1.7.5): *yaya sammohito jiva, amanam tri gunatmakam, paro 'pi manute 'nartham, tat kritam cabhipadyate*, "The *jiva* is transcendental to the 3 *gunas*, but still it can be confused into the false identification with them, and thus it has to suffer the consequences of *anarthas*".

The specific set of senses acquired by the conditioned soul in the new body is directly connected to the particular mixture of the *gunas* and the cumulative effect of the previous activities (*karma*), therefore the combinations can be almost endless: *yah sarvesu bhutesu tisthan sarvebhyo bhutebhyo antaro*, "(the *atman*) in all beings remains within various conditions" (*Brihad aranyaka Upanishad*, 3.7.15).

See for example the huge difference in sense perception and taste between human beings and animals of various species, demonstrated daily by their behaviors and choices. Colors, smells, sounds, tastes are not the same for all bodies; dogs can hear sounds that are above the hearing range of humans (special whistles are made for this reason), and hogs whet their appetite by the smell and taste of excrements. Insects have multiple eyes and feelers that "read" small traces of substances suspended in air, bats use a kind of radar or sonar to avoid obstacles while flying, and cats can see in the dark much better than us and are fond of magnetic fields. Wolves and lions and other predators can recognize the smell the urine of each other at a distance of kilometers and so they can establish the boundaries of their hunting territories. Some animals (such as cats) can be killed by a relatively small dose of vitamin C, which they do not require at all, others (such as cockroaches) do not suffer from the effects of radiation as in nuclear fallout. And there are many more examples like that.

In the scale of evolution, the sense of hearing (*srotram*) is the most important because it works even during our sleep when the other senses are inert, and travels even through ether in the absence of other elements; it also carries the most delicate and complex messages including the transcendental science (*sabda brahman*). This is the reason why in the process of primary creation the sense of hearing is the first to manifest, together with space (also called ether, or *akasha*) and sound.

The sense of sight is based on the development of form and fire and light, represented by the Sun as the main source of radiance in the material universe. The sense of touch is generated by the development of air from space and sound, and creates the feelings of heat from which fire appears. From fire, water manifests with the faculty of taste, and from water earth is created, with the faculty of smell.

Here again we can apply the meaning of *upasevate* as recommended by Krishna in chapter 10 in response to Arjuna's question (10.17): *katham vidyam aham yogims tvam sada paricintayan, kesu kesu ca bhavesu cintyo 'si bhagavan maya*, "O Yogi, how should I know you through constant meditation? O Lord, in which different ways and sentiments should I contemplate you?" (10.17).

As stated in verse 13.18, Brahman is also the object of perception, present not only as the Friend in each living being's heart, but also in every single atom (*jyotisam api taj jyotis tamasah param ucyate, jneyam jnana gamyam hridi sarvasya visthitam*, "He is described as the light in all radiant things, transcendental to darkness. He is established in the heart of everything, and he is to be known through the cultivation of knowledge.")

When we say that the material elements and non-animated objects are *jada* ("inert matter") we are simply making a distinction in relation to the *jiva* ("living being"), but in fact there is no *jada* - everything is Brahman, because *shakti* and *shaktiman* are not different, and even atoms are full of consciousness and intelligence. Paramatman is there within every atom and even in the "void" between atoms, and the elements and all material nature are also *mahat tattva* or *mahat brahma*. According to the *shastra*, the 5 *mahabhutas* (the fundamentals material elements) are also reflections or manifestations (*pratibimba*) of the consciousness of the presiding Devas who are parts of the supreme consciousness.

Thus we return to the symbolism of the Tree of the Universe offered in the first verse of the chapter, that could be interpreted as a reflection of Reality, like the image of the material tree on water. But instead of being separate from the real thing, like an ordinary reflection, the Universal Tree is a reflection-emanation, an image of the original that contains its symbolism and a considerable part of its potency.

The first original Reality is *parabrahman* Vishnu, the non-manifested: from this seed (*bijam mam sarva bhutanam viddhi partha sanatanam*, 7.10) many sprouts appear as the *amsas*, or direct manifestations of the Godhead, that constitute the various aspects (qualities, forms, functions etc) of God. The first separated (*vyakta*) manifestation (*vibhinnamsa*) is Brahman, who is therefore considered the root of the Universal Tree. After Brahman many other separated manifestations are created, and the *jiva atmans* or *anu atmans* come to occupy such bodies or conditions of the being: they attract material elements, and use them as emanations in turn. The process of creation of the individual material bodies and the objects of the senses is similar to the creation of the Universal Tree; each *jiva* travels carrying the subtle body, composed by the mind and senses (15.7-8).

उत्क्रामन्तं स्थितं वापि भुञ्जानं वा गुणान्वितम् । विमूढा नानुपश्यन्ति पश्यन्ति ज्ञानचक्षुषः ॥ १५-१० ॥

utkrāmantam sthitam vāpi bhujñānam vā guṇānvitam | vimūḍhā nānupaśyanti paśyanti jñānacakṣuṣaḥ || 15-10 ||

utkrāmantam: leaving the body; *sthitam*: situated; *va*: or; *api*: although; *bhujanam*: experiencing actively; *va*: or; *guṇa anvitam*: under the influence of the *gunas*; *vimudha*: stupid people; *na anupaśyanti*: are unable to see; *paśyanti*: they can see; *jnana caksusah*: those who have the eyes of knowledge.

"Whether they are leaving the body or remain situated in it, whether they are directing their experiences or passively following the influences of the *gunas*, those who are stupid are unable to understand (their situation), while those who see with the eyes of scriptural knowledge are able to understand.

Foolish people cannot see the *atman*, because they believe they are the body and mind. This is not merely ignorance, but stupidity as well, because illiterate or totally uneducated persons, too, can feel the radical change that happens when the *atman* leaves the body - even animals can spot the difference between a living being and a dead being. However, simple natural intelligence will not be able to give us the full understanding of the process of transmigration of the soul, because the *atman* and the subtle body (consisting of mind and senses) are not visible to the eyes. This is why the opposition is between stupidity and knowledge, and not between stupidity or intelligence, or between ignorance and knowledge.

Why is Krishna using this particular expression, instead of just saying "one who has correct knowledge"? Why does he involve the act of seeing? Because there is a big difference between theoretically *knowing* something and actually *realizing* it as if we were seeing it with our own eyes in front of us.

This importance of direct realization is highlighted in many verses of *Bhagavad gita* with the use of the word *paśyati* ("s/he sees") as in 2.29 (to see the soul), 2.69 (to see the night as day and day as night), 5.5 (to see Sankhya and Yoga as one only), 6.30 (to see me - Krishna - everywhere and everything in me), 6.32 (to see everyone as non-different from oneself), 13.28 and 14.19 (to see the Lord in all beings

and circumstances), 13.30 and 18.16 (to see all actions are performed by *prakriti*), 13.31 (to see all beings situated in one although appearing separated), and *darshati* as in 2.16 (to see that real is eternal and false is temporary), 4.34 (to see the *tattva* directly), 5.18 and 6.29 (to see all beings equally), 11.4, 11.9, 11.10, 11.45 and 11.47 (to see the Universal Form), 11.50 and 11.52 (to see Krishna's form), 13.9 (to see the sufferings of birth, death etc), 13.12 (to see the value of knowledge).

These *jnana chaksu* ("eyes of knowledge") have been mentioned in other verses as well, both directly and indirectly:

ksetra ksetrajnora evam antaram jnana caksusa, bhuta prakriti moksam ca ye vidur yanti te param, "Those who see - with the eyes of knowledge - the *kshetra* and the *kshetra jna* and the difference between the two, and how to attain liberation from the nature of existence, will reach the Supreme." (13.35),

na tu mam sakyase drastum anenaiva sva caksusa, divyam dadami te caksuh pasya me yogam aisvaram, "However, you will not be able to see me with your physical eyes, therefore I am giving you divine eyes. Look at the wonders of my *yoga* power" (11.8),

sparsan kritva bahir bahyams caksus caivantare bhruvoh, pranapanau samau kritva nasabhyantara carinau, "Keeping outside (his/her concern/ attention) the external (objects/ concerns) and fixing one's eyes to the internal space between the eyebrows, balancing the *prana* and *apana*, controlling the breathing within the nose," (5.27).

By considering the use of these definitions in context with the other verses, it will be easier for us to understand what Krishna means in this verse about the contemplation of the movements of the *atman*. The proper knowledge we have studied in the genuine original scriptures and applied through our own experience is the clear vision that makes us understand when and how a *jivatman* has left the body, and to go where. To know the next destination of the *atman* in its transmigrations is even more important than simply realizing that it has left the body; life in each particular body is nothing but learning and practice for the final test - the moment of death - when our actual progress will be evaluated and we will get admission in the next class.

We can see in any school that there are different levels of interest for studies in each particular student. This is why Patanjali in his *Yoga sutras* (1.22) explains that a student will attain good results proportionately to the effort invested (*mridu madhya adhimatratvat tato 'pi visesah*, "there is a difference according to the intensity of the effort - mild, moderate or strong").

Applied to the present verse, this means that the lazy students just float along passively following the river flow according to the influence of the *gunas*, with a very weak effort, and the results are not very good. On the other hand, a student who makes a sincere effort in actively experiencing the lessons - studying and practicing in a systematic and enthusiastic way - obtains good results more quickly. To see this, we need the proper vision of knowledge (*jnana chaksu*) because foolish ordinary people will think that the lazy student is "cool" and the sincere student is a "nerd". Such idiots (*vimudha*) have no understanding of the purpose of the activities offered by the school, and are actually prolonging their sufferings unnecessarily as they put themselves in a condition in which they will fail their tests and therefore they will have to repeat them again and again. These stupid students simply hate and fear the examinations and tests along the course and at the end of the course, but remain unable to take the proper actions that would lead them more quickly to liberation from what they fear and hate. Fear is one of the prominent symptoms of *tamas* (18.35) and is considered by Krishna a disgraceful contamination (2.35, 2.56, 4.10, 5.28, 12.15, 16.1, 18.8). It confuses the mind and the intelligence, and even the senses (to the point of hallucinations), paralyzes the body and exposes us most vulnerably precisely to those dangers that we are so afraid of. No genuine religion or education can be based on fear.

यतन्तो योगिनश्चैनं पश्यन्त्यात्मन्यवस्थितम् । यतन्तोऽप्यकृतात्मानो नैनं पश्यन्त्यचेतसः ॥ १५-११ ॥

yatanto yoginaścainam paśyantyātmanyavasthitam | yatanto'pyakṛtātmāno nainam paśyantyacetasah || 15-11 ||

yatantah: endeavoring; *yoginah*: the *yogis*; *ca*: and; *enam*: this; *paśyanti*: they see; *atmani*: in the self; *avasthitam*: situated; *yatantah*: endeavoring; *api*: although; *akṛita atmanah*: those who have not realized the Self; *na*: not; *enam*: this; *paśyanti*: they see; *a cetasah*: without awareness.

"The sincere *yogis* see this *atman* situated (in the body), while those who are not engaged in the Self remain unable to see in spite of all their efforts, because they do not have the proper awareness.

After establishing the importance of one's sincere efforts (*bhujanam va gunanvitam*) in acquiring the proper realization (*jnana caksusah*), Krishna immediately clarifies that effort alone is not sufficient - it must be guided by intelligence and proper awareness. Here we could equate effort with *karma* or *yoga*, and awareness with *jnana* or *bhakti* or *buddhi*.

We can push against a door with all our might, and break our fingers or toes trying to tear it down, but the same door can be opened very easily if we know where the key is. Action (*karma*) must always be supported by intelligence (*buddhi*) and knowledge (*jnana*). Similarly, renunciation (*sannyasa*) must be supported by dutiful action (*karma*) and intelligence (*buddhi*). Otherwise it will all be a waste of time and energy, as confirmed in *Bhagavata Purana*: *srama eva hi kevalam* (1.2.8), *sramas tasya srama phalo* (11.11.18) and especially *sad varga samyamaikantah, sarva niyama codanah, tad anta yadi no yogan, avahyuh srama avahah*, "All the rules for the control of the mind and senses and body are merely a waste of time and energy if they do not bring us in contact with Reality" (7.15.28).

One needs to follow the proper scientific method clearly described in the original scriptures, as confirmed in *Bhagavad gita* (17.5) and *Bhagavata Purana* (4.18.5): *tan anadṛitya yo 'vidvan, arthan arabhate svayam, tasya vyabharanty artha, arabdhas ca punah punah*, "Those ignorant people who neglect the instructions of the *shastra* begin so many new schemes created by their minds, but they do not achieve success, no matter how long they try."

It is therefore pathetic to see so many so-called "yoga practitioners" putting so much effort in their gymnastic exercises to keep the body healthy and fit, and totally ignoring the actual purpose of *yoga* as explained so clearly in all the genuine original *shastra*. Such poor people are blind because they have no *jnana chaksu* and they can only see physical bodies, because they are *yatanto 'pi akṛita atmanah*, "not endeavoring in the work of *atman*" and *acetasah* ("without awareness"). They are *vimudhas* (idiots), no matter how many certificates or even followers they have accumulated to "prove" their proficiency in "yoga".

The expression *akrita atmanah* indicates the absence of spiritual cultivation or spiritual activity, or transcendental realization; used together with *yatanto api* ("in spite of much effort") it highlights the lack of fundamental knowledge and proper guidance and training.

The word *yatah* ("effort", "control") is also the foundation of the expression *yatantah yoginah* ("those who strive for *yoga*"), indicating the genuine *sadhakas*, who take *yoga* seriously. We find it in verses 2.60, 4.21, 5.26, 6.10, 6.12, 6.15, 6.19, 6.36, 6.43, 6.45, 7.3, 7.29, 8.11, 9.14, 12.11, 12.14, 18.7, 18.9, 18.23, 18.46, 18.47, 18.52, and especially in the following context: *asamyatna yogo dushprapa iti me matih, vasyatmana tu yatata sakyo 'vaptum upayatah*, "I say it is very difficult to attain *yoga* when the mind is not engaged, but there are appropriate methods by which one will be able to control the mind." (6.36), and *santustah satatam yogi yatatma dridha niscayah, mayy arpita mano buddhir yo mad bhaktah sa me priyah*, "The *bhakti yogi* is always contented, engaged in the self with firmness and determination, offering his mind and intelligence to my service. Such devotee is very dear to me." (12.14)

The word *akrita* is the contrary of *krita* ("determined, performed, perfected") that we find in the context of the following verses: 2.50, 4.15, 6.41, 14.16, 15.20, 17.21, 18.13, 18.16. The word *samskrita* (referring to the Sanskrit language) is also in the same etymological area, meaning "completely perfected". In this way we can better understand what Krishna is saying in this verse.

The genuine *yogis* are sincerely engaged in developing the *atman*, from *anu atman* to *svarupa siddhi*, and therefore they always keep their awareness or consciousness (*chetasah*) firmly focused on the realization of Transcendence. What is "situated in the self" (*atmani avasthitam*)? The subject of these verses is *ayam* ("this"), expressed in verse 9, and refers to the *atman* that travels within the subtle body from one gross body to another, always in the company of the *param atman*. Other verses that express this concept of the *atman* engaged or situated in the *atman* are 2.55, 3.17, 3.43, 5.25, 6.5, 6.6, 6.7, 6.10, 6.15, 6.18, 6.19, 6.20, 6.25, 6.26, 6.28, 6.29, 6.36, 6.47, 7.18, 8.12, 13.25, 13.29. This shows the central place of importance that self realization has in the tradition of *yoga* and Vedic knowledge. Abrahamic ideologies focus on establishing an official allegiance to a particular set of beliefs, rules and dogma in the worship of God as a separate Being, who has created us and demands our obedience. On the contrary, Vedic knowledge gives the special emphasis on the progressive development of the individual soul and the realization of its nature as a part of the supreme Soul. Those who do not understand the self (*atman*) will never attain perfection, no matter how hard they strive, especially in regard to rules and regulations or allegiances.

यदादित्यगतं तेजो जगद्भासयतेऽखिलम् । यच्चन्द्रमसि यच्चाग्नौ तत्तेजो विद्धि मामकम् ॥ १५-१२ ॥

yadādityagatam tejo jagadbhāsayate'khilam | yaccandramasi yaccāgnau tattejo viddhi māmakam || 15-12 ||

yat: that; *aditya gatam*: the rays of the sun; *tejah*: radiance; *jagat*: the universe; *bhasayate*: is illuminated; *akhilam*: entire; *yat*: that; *candramasi*: in the moon; *yat*: that; *ca*: and; *agnau*: in the fire; *tat*: that; *tejah*: radiance; *viddhi*: you should know; *mamakam*: from me.

"Know that the radiance that illuminates the entire universe, emanating from the sun, and seen in the moon and in fire, is (actually coming) from me.

The word *aditya* refers to the sun, Surya, the first and foremost among the sons of Aditi, the original Mother Goddess. The word *gatam*, "gone", can be applied in more than one meaning: in this case, the radiance that we perceive as coming from the sun is originally emanating from the supreme Brahman. The light is coming through the sun, not just from the sun, as all radiance originally comes from the *atman*. Only now mainstream scientific researchers are discovering (or re-discovering, more likely) the actual nature of matter and energy, and the secrets of the light within the atom. Even laymen know that atomic explosions liberate a huge amount of light when energy deploys, and that solar rays generate endless electrical power through photo voltaic cells and other methods. Already from antiquity, men had discovered how to instantly produce fire from sun rays through a system of lenses that focused the light.

All the radiance - light and heat - in the universe is ultimately coming from the Sun, including the radiance of the fire and the moon. Ancient cultures at global level worshiped (honored, respected, loved) the Sun, together with Fire: both sun and fire were strong symbols of God, power, and by extension, Time, as they can give life and death, too.

Surya is *sattva* and *satya*, and its *tejas* is God's *vibhuti* providing all necessities of life, directly and indirectly. The sun stirs the activities of creatures and men, and the fire is essential for us to cook, heat, power machines and perform *puja*. The moon is the other side of the power of the sun - the energy that cools and gives juice to the plants, while the direct hot energy creates the solid nutrients. Like the sun produces heat, light, sun rays, the light of the moon and even shade and shadow, the Supreme Consciousness has many apparently different energies (*parasya shaktir vividhaiva sruyate, svabhaviki jnana bala kriya ca, Svetasvatara Upanishad*, "It is said that the Supreme has a variety of energies from his own nature - specifically knowledge, strength and will power", 6.8).

Vishnu Purana (1.3.2) confirms: *saktayah sarva bhavanam, acintya jnana gocarah, yato 'to brahmanas tas tu, sargadya bhava saktayah, bhavanti tapatam srestha, pavakasya yathosnata*. "The energies in all creations are inconceivable for the human capacity of knowledge. They emanate from Brahman, but manifest the creation and all the rest. Such creative energies are comparable to the heat emanating from fire."

The original transcendental light of Brahman (*jyoti*) shines through the sun, the moon and the fire in this universe. The important concept of *tejas* has also been discussed in the commentaries to verses 7.9 and 10.36, where we have quoted the famous verse from *Brihad Aranyaka Upanishad* (1.3.28): *asato ma sad gamaya, tamaso ma jyotir gamaya, mrityor ma amritam gamaya*, "from what is temporary lead me to what is eternal, from darkness lead me to the light, from death lead me to eternal life".

This dazzling light (*jyoti*, *tejas*, etc) of the Brahman constitutes only the rays, or the emanations, from the Supreme Personality of Godhead, manifesting his majestic glories (*aisvarya vibhuti*). Such radiance is difficult to contemplate for the embodied souls; this was clearly stated in verse 12.5 (*kleso 'dhikataras tesham avyaktasakta-cetasam, avyakta hi gatir duhkham devavadbhir avapyate*). Therefore, *Isa Upanishad* (15) prays, *hiranmayena patrena, satyasyapihitam mukham, tat tvam pusann apavrnu, satya dharmaya dristaye*, "O sustainer of life, the face of Truth is covered by a golden veil. Please remove it, to show yourself to the true *dharma*".

The same nature of light and radiance is characteristic of the individual *atman*: *yatha prakasayaty ekah kritsnam lokam imam ravih, ksetra, ksetri tatha kritsnam prakasayati bhārata*, "O Bharata, just like the Sun illuminates all this world, in the same way the *kshetri*

illuminates the entire *kshetra*." (13.34), *apareyam itas tv anyam prakritim viddhi me param, jiva bhutam maha baho yayedam dharyate jagat*, "O Arjuna, know that besides this inferior *prakriti* there is also another, a higher one - the living beings by which the universe is upheld." (7.5), *yad yad vibhutinat sattvam srimad urjitam eva va, tat tad evavagaccha tvam mama tejo 'msa sambhavam*, "Anything that is good, powerful, wonderful, or glorious, you should encounter, has come to existence as a part of my radiance." (10.41)

गामाविश्य च भूतानि धारयाम्यहमोजसा । पुष्णामि चौषधीः सर्वाः सोमो भूत्वा रसात्मकः ॥ १५-१३ ॥
gāmāviśya ca bhūtāni dhārayāmyahamojasa | puṣṇāmi cauśadhīḥ sarvaḥ somo bhūtvā rasātmakaḥ || 15-13 ||

gam: the planets; *avisya*: entering; *ca*: and; *bhutani*: the beings; *dharayami*: I sustain; *aham*: I; *ojasa*: by my strength; *pusnami*: I give nourishment; *ca*: and; *ausadhih*: the herbs and plants; *sarvah*: all; *somah*: the moon; *bhutva*: becoming; *rasa atmakah*: I am the juice/ taste.

"Entering the planets and all beings, I sustain them. By my strength, I nourish all the herbs and plants, and as the moon I become the juice of everything.

The first word in this verse - *gam* - is extremely interesting. In Sanskrit, it applies to the cows as well as to the planets, especially to Earth, the most important planet in this universe, where the destiny of the conditioned souls is created through choices. Only the human species of life can make karmic choices; the species both under and above the human level are simply collecting the results of their past activities, for the good or the bad.

God is Consciousness and Existence: from within all states of beings - at macrocosmic and microcosmic level - he sustains their existence according to the plan of the supreme Intelligence. As this Existence is light and radiance, we understand that in this universe all things exist because of the energy and matter from the sun. The word *avisya* ("entering") indicates that the Supreme manifests within the blueprint of each existence, bringing it to being. We should not think that God enters objects that have been already in existence, because that would be a contradiction in terms.

Gam is similar in origin to the Greek word *gea* ("earth"), and it sheds a special light on the deep symbolic meaning of the sacrifices and rituals described in the Vedic *samhitas* and *brahmanas*. The connection between Earth and cows is very strong, as Mother Earth nourishes all her children with her milk in so many forms - see for example the description of the kingdom of Maharaja Prithu in chapter 18, canto 4 of *Bhagavata Purana*. In verses from 9 to 28, Mother Earth supplies all the different types of food that are characteristic of the great *rishis* and *devas*, as well of the human beings, animals, plants and so on.

The term *dharayami* ("I support") also applies to the law of gravity, personified by Sankarshana, also known as Ananta Sesha - whose iconography shows him in the form of a huge many-headed snake. Each and every planet rests on one of his heads, as small as a mustard seed compared to the immense body of Ananta. The power of gravity supports each planet in its orbit and floating and sticking together with the other planets.

Another very interesting word in this verse is *ojas* (*ojasa*). *Ojas* is the *maha dhatu*, the essence of health and power in the *dhatu*s. According to *Ayur Veda*, the main components or factors in the body are called *doshas*, *dhatu*s and *malas*. The *malas* ("impurities") are the waste materials that the body expels regularly - feces, urine, sweat etc - and serve as carriers to rebalance the system. The *doshas* are the "humors", such as *vata* (wind or air), *pitta* (bile or fire) and *kapha* (mucus or water/ earth), that balance each other rather like the three *gunas* (*sattva*, *rajas*, *tamas*): when all the *doshas* are working properly and in a quiet state, the body is healthy. Any imbalance or vitiation of the *doshas* results in suffering and disease. The seven *dhatu*s are *rasa* (lymph, digested fluid), *rakta* (blood), *mamsa* (flesh and muscles), *medas* (fat), *asthi* (bone), *majja* (bone marrow and nerves) and *sukla* (menstrual fluid and sperm, or hormones). The sum total of the energy of all *dhatu*s is called *ojas*; at universal level this same *ojas* nourishes all medicinal principles that bring health (*pusnami ausadhih*). *Bhagavata Purana* (2.10.26) confirms this in the description of the Virata Purusha.

The three vital principles in the body are *prana*, *tejas* and *ojas*, as the subtle counterparts of *vata*, *pitta* and *kapha* and manifestations of air, fire and water. So *prana* is carried mostly by air, *tejas* radiates and heats like fire, and *ojas* gives nourishment and coolness. The original principle of *ojas*, representing God, is present in all creation and especially in medicinal herbs, in the moon and in the juices of life. It is a complement to *tejas*, that represents God as the sun and fire.

We have already seen (4.29-30, 7.8, 10.9) how God is present in the *prana* as the *pranava omkara*, the original nature of the *atman*; we know that *prana* is carried by airs (gross and subtle) in the body. We have also seen (7.9-10, 10.36, 11.19, etc) how God is present as *tejas*, which is also the light and fire to which the *atman* is part - and we will also see in the next verse. Now we see (*rasa atmaka*) that God is present as the *ojas*, that is the *rasa* or taste and the power of Soma, the moon. *Taittiriya Upanishad* (2.7.1) confirms: *raso vai sah, rasam hy evayam labdhvanandi bhavati*, "That (Brahman) is *rasa*, and by attaining it, one also becomes *rasa*."

Soma is one of the main names of the Godhead in the Vedic *samhitas*, and his worship is at the center of an entire set of Vedic *yajnas* - that have unfortunately been neglected in the course of the centuries. The health of the universe rests on the balance between Soma and Surya, *ojas* and *tejas*, water and fire - a couple of apparent opposites considered very much central in worship and theology in all ancient cultures, and still in the concepts of *yin* and *yang*.

In particular, *Bhagavata Purana* (5.22.10) speaks about Soma as the source of *amrita*, the nectar of immortality; this confirms the verse from the *Rig Veda* (8.43.3) *apama somam amrita babhuma*, "We have drunk the *soma* (*rasa*) and we have become immortal". Of course the same applies to the transcendental level of *bhakti* - by which the Personality of Godhead is invoked with reference to the Moon, as Rama chandra and Krishna chandra.

The deeper level of the concept of *soma* as *rasa atmaka* is the foundation of the science of *bhakti*. *Rasa* is the taste or feeling or nature of consciousness that constitutes the very nature of Brahman and Atman; it manifests in various sentiments as *santa*, *dasya*, *sakhya*, *vatsalya*,

madhurya etc. The all-transcendental *ojas* that nourishes these *rasas* is the *amrita* (nectarine juice) of the names, activities, teachings, qualities, of the Godhead manifested in his *lilas* (*Bhagavata Purana* 1.1.3, 3.5.10, 3.16.6, 3.21.48, 4.7.44, 4.16.1, 4.16.3, 4.16.9, 4.29.41, 5.3.3, 6.9.39, 6.9.41, 7.9.43, 10.14.33, 10.15.50, 10.29.35, 10.85.59, 10.87.16, 10.87.21, 10.88.31, 11.6.19, 11.19.9, 11.19.20, 11.21.39, 12.10.26, 12.13.11, 12.13.14).

अहं वैश्वानरो भूत्वा प्राणिनां देहमाश्रितः । प्राणापानसमायुक्तः पचाम्यन्नं चतुर्विधम् ॥ १५-१४ ॥

aham vaiśvānaro bhūtvā prāṇinām dehamāśritaḥ | prāṇāpānasamāyuktaḥ pacāmyannaṁ caturvidham || 15-14 ||

aham: I am; *vaiśvanarah*: the fire (in the body); *bhūtvā*: becoming; *prāṇinām*: of all the living beings; *deham*: in the body; *śritaḥ*: situated; *prāṇa apāna*: *prāṇa* and *apāna*; *samāyuktaḥ*: keeping in balance; *pacami*: I cook/ digest; *annaṁ*: the food; *catur vidham*: that is of four types.

"I am the the presence of the Vaisvanara, situated in the bodies of all living beings, that keeps the balance between *prāna* and *apāna* and digests all the food, that is of four types.

This verse is confirmed by *Bṛihad aranyaka Upanishad* (5.9.1) in very similar words: *vaiśvanaro yo 'yam antah purusa yenedam annam pacyate*, "that is present as Vaisvanara (Agni) within man and digests the food".

The word *bhūtvā* ("becoming") is particularly interesting here, as it indicates a secondary manifestation of *tejas*, which also is a secondary manifestation, emanation or energy of the Godhead. Of course there is no real difference in quality between the source and the emanations; this Vaisvanara is to Agni what the *jīvatman* is to *paramatman*, and the *manipura chakra* within human bodies is to Surya. This *vaiśvanara* is also called *jataragni*, "the fire within the belly". As the *atman* resides in the individual body together with the *param atman*, so the *vaiśvanara agni* resides in the individual body together with the source of the original Fire. In this regard, we should remember that according to the Vedic categorization, within the description of "fire" we also find all the substances that burn and consume, such as strong acids and metabolic enzymes. This *Jataragni* or Vaisvanara Agni can therefore be assimilated to the hydrochloric acid and the enzymes of digestion that "cook" the food we consume and dissolve it into their fundamental nutrients and calories.

Agni (corresponding to Pitta) is one of the main names of the Godhead in the Vedic *samhitas* as well, together with Soma (corresponding to Kapha) and Vayu (corresponding to Vata), the Asvini kumaras (the healing principle), Surya (power of life), Indra (direction), Varuna (cleansing), Ritu (the seasons), Aryaman (death), Rudra (destruction), Usha (dawn, the beginning) as well as Vishnu (the transcendental principle).

Within the human body, the eater is *vaiśvanara*, Surya, and fire, while the eaten is *soma*, Chandra, and juice or water. Without God we would not even be able to digest and assimilate our food, transforming it into energy. The 4 types of foods mentioned in this verse are those that are swallowed, chewed, licked, and sucked: the criteria of categorization are the amount and balance of the fire (*tejas*) and water (*ojas*) in each type of food. The same logic applies to the function of balancing (*samāyuktaḥ*) of *prāna* and *apāna* in the body. The two functions of *agni* or digesting and *vayu* or breathing are strictly connected in the process of metabolism or assimilation of nourishment. The symbolism of the Sun and the Moon is not merely a "primitive" idea of "worshiping nature" - it indicates the deepest nature of our bodies and our world as manifestations of the Godhead. This concept has been affirmed in ancient cultures as the microcosm as reflection of the macrocosm, and is in stark contrast with the abrahamic ideologies that demonize the body and the world and deny their spiritual value.

The key of prosperity, happiness and realization is not "the good side winning", but the proper balance of the two halves of Reality - this applies to all the apparent opposites and dualities in the world, such as male-female, etc. This is why *Bhagavad gita* speaks so often about the importance of "overcoming duality" (2.45, 4.22, 5.3, 7.27, 7.28, 15.6, etc).

We need to read this verse in connection with 15.12: *yad aditya gatam tejo jagad bhasayate 'khilam, yac candramasi yac cagnau tat tejo viddhi mamakam*, "Know that the radiance that illuminates the entire universe, emanating from the sun and seen in the moon and in fire, is from me." This brings us to the other meaning of the word *samāyukta* in this verse: the life airs (*prāna* and *apāna*) are directly cooperating with *tejas* and *ojas* for the life and health and power in the body. In the first meaning *samāyukta* can be translated as "keeping the balance", while in the second meaning it can be translated as "engaged together with". There is no contradiction between the two meanings.

सर्वस्य चाहं हृदि सन्निविष्टो मत्तः स्मृतिर्ज्ञानमपोहनञ्च ।

sarvasya cāham hṛdi sanniviṣṭo mattaḥ smṛtirjñānamapohanañca |

वेदैश्च सर्वैरहमेव वेद्यो वेदान्तकृद्वेदविदेव चाहम् ॥ १५-१५ ॥

vedaiśca sarvairahameva vedyo vedāntakṛdvedavideva cāham || 15-15 ||

sarvasya: of all; *ca*: and; *aham*: I am; *hṛdi*: in the heart; *sannivistah*: situated; *mattah*: from me; *smṛtiḥ*: memory; *jñanam*: knowledge; *apohanam*: forgetfulness; *ca*: and; *vedaiḥ*: through the *Vedas*; *ca*: and; *sarvaiḥ*: all; *aham*: I am; *eva*: certainly; *vedyah*: I am to be known; *vedanta krit*: the author of *Vedanta*; *veda vit*: he who knows the *Vedas*; *eva*: certainly; *ca*: and; *aham*: I am.

"I am situated in the heart of all/ everything, and from me come memory, knowledge and forgetfulness. I am the purpose of the study of all the *Vedas*. I certainly am the creator of *Vedanta*, and the one who knows the *Vedas*.

Being Existence and Consciousness, God is present in everything and is the source of all knowledge. Just like the sun is the source of light, heat and shadow as well (as the temporary absence of light), Consciousness is also the cause of forgetfulness: the contrast must be present in this material world so that the conditioned souls may have the opportunity to make choices and thus learn and develop. The principle of memory is in the process of desire and choice, by which we are able to learn from our mistakes.

People who do not understand Vedic knowledge are usually baffled by the existence of evil and darkness in the world. Typically they do not believe in reincarnation or in the divine nature of the human soul, and believe that bad things happen to people because God is "inducing them in temptation" in order to test their faith and loyalty and subsequently sentence them to eternal paradise or hell. Since only the brief span of a lifetime is observed, such "testing" appear to be done whimsically, at random, and often with much cruelty and injustice. The professional class of priests in materialistic organized religions aggravate the problem by presenting their congregation with clever ways to solve the problem, mostly through bribing God and the priests with donations or offerings and prayers, or appeasing them with the practice of punishment they call "penance" (17.6) applied on oneself or others, especially their dependents (children, women etc) for "atonement" or "purification". The first method is inspired by *rajas*, and the second by *tamas*. Another popular trick to "protect oneself from evil", inspired by material *sattva*, consists in wearing talismans or sacred images or objects. However, all these methods are ultimately useless because they do not address the actual issue, that is about the soul's evolution.

We are all required to develop from the stage of *anu atman* (atomic soul) to a fully fledged *siddha deha* (spiritual body). What we learn, remember or forget determines what joys and sorrows we come to face, and all this is part of a plan based on past *karma* - created by our own choices. At each moment, however, we have the opportunity to apply different choices to change our destiny, to deliberately try to remember or forget different things and therefore to change our *karma*. So although memory and forgetfulness come from the supreme Consciousness, we still have a choice about them; all our past choices and experiences are stored in our subconscious (causal) mind, even if we may not remember consciously. By integrating our subconscious mind with the conscious mind, we can better understand our karmic journey and what we need to do to improve our evolution - in other words, "what is the right thing to do". At that point we may choose.

When we have made our choice, either in the positive or the negative, material nature carries on the activity under the control of God (Consciousness) who is the *antaryami upadrasta* - that we might call the "superconscious" mind or self. God is therefore the supreme Teacher, the *param guru*, at the same time the Knower and the supreme object of Knowledge (*tattvam yaj jnanam advayam, Bhagavata Purana* 1.2.11). Since he is supreme Knowledge and all knowledge comes from him, he is the original author of all Vedic scriptures as well as every other bit of wisdom and science that will ever exist, long before even Vyasa or any other Rishi appeared. He is the *veda-vit* ("he who knows knowledge") and the *vedanta-krit* ("he who makes the purpose of knowledge").

The purpose of all *Vedas* (a word that literally means "knowledge") is to attain the knowledge of Consciousness, or the consciousness of Knowledge, as these two are actually One. The entire Universal Tree of knowledge and material manifestation, with all the rituals and duties and sciences, ultimately leads to the supreme Consciousness only. Therefore the *Bhagavata Purana* clearly says: *naiskarmyam apy acyuta bhava varjitam, na sobhate jnanam alam niranjanam, kutah punah sasvad abhadram isvare, na carpitam karma yad apy akaranam*, "When devoid of love for God, scholarship is not beneficial even if it is selfless and free from vanity. This is exactly like the result of one's duty: even if selfless, when is it not offered to Isvara, it is not really auspicious" (*Bhagavata Purana* 1.5.12) and *kim va yogena sankhyena, nyasa svadhyayayor api, kim va sreyobhir anyais ca, na yatatma prado harih*, "What is the use of *yoga* or *sankhya*, *sannyasa*, the study of the scriptures, the auspicious activities, or anything else: if Hari is never remembered, the self will never be appreciated" (*Bhagavata Purana* 4.31.12). This study of Vedic knowledge must be practiced in the proper way, through sincere dedication and practice, and not merely in an academic approach:

tat sadhu varyadisa vartma sam nah, samradhito bhagavan yena pumsam, hrdis thito yacchati bhakti pute, jnanam sa tattvadhighamam puranam, "Therefore, o great among saints, please instruct us on the auspicious path by which a human being can properly worship Bhagavan, who is situated in one's heart, and after having purified oneself with *bhakti*, receive from him the knowledge of reality transmitted by the ancient *rishis*," (*Bhagavata Purana* 3.5.4),

yac chraddhaya srutavatya ca bhaktya, sammrjyamane hrdaye avadhaya, jnanena vairagya balena dhira, vrajena tat te anghri saroja pitham, "Simply by listening with faith and love about your instructions, and meditating on them within one's heart, by the strength of knowledge and detachment we will become pacified and attain your lotus feet" (*Bhagavata Purana* 3.5.42),

bhuyas tvam tapa atistha, vidyam caiva mad asrayam, tabhyam antar hrdis brahman, lokan drakasyasi apavritam, "Engage again in the austere search for knowledge, and under my protection, these will disclose all the worlds to you, within your heart, and you will be able to see them" (*Bhagavata Purana* 3.9.30).

Genuine knowledge is revealed through one's heart: this is how the sincere student can perceive the truth of the teachings s/he is receiving externally. This had already been clearly stated by Krishna in chapter 10: *tesam evanukampartham aham ajnana jam tamah, nasayamy atma bhava stho jnana dipena bhasvata*, "Out of my kindness for them, I destroy the darkness of ignorance from within their hearts, by the radiant light of knowledge" (10.11) and *tesam satata yuktanam bhajatam priti purvakam, dadami buddhi yogam tam yena mam upayanti te*, "To those who are always connected to me by serving me with love and devotion, I give the understanding by which they will come to me" (10.10).

This has been the orthodox method since the very beginning of time: *janmady asya yato 'nvayad itaratas carthesv abhijnah svarat, tene brahma hrda ya adi kavaye muhyanti yat surayah, tejo vari mrdam yatha vinimayo yatra tri sargo 'mrta, dhamna svena sada nirasta kuhakam satyam param dhimahi*, "I offer my respect to Bhagavan Vasudeva, from whom the creation of this universe proceeds. He is fully independent, fully conscious of purpose, directly and indirectly. He inspired knowledge in the heart of Brahma. His nature overpowers even the Devas just like the optical illusions created by heat, water and earth. In this way by action and reaction he always manifests himself as the 'almost reality' of the three creations and all their places of existence. I meditate on him, the supreme truth, always self-sufficient, of whom illusion is just the absence of perception." (*Bhagavata Purana* 1.1.1).

द्वाविमौ पुरुषौ लोके क्षरश्चाक्षर एव च । क्षरः सर्वाणि भूतानि कूटस्थोऽक्षर उच्यते ॥ १५-१६ ॥

dvāvimau puruṣau loke kṣaraścākṣara eva ca | kṣaraḥ sarvāṇi bhūtāni kūṭastho'kṣara ucyaṭe || 15-16 ||

dvau: two (kinds of); *imau*: these; *puruṣau*: *purushas*; *loke*: in the world; *kṣarah*: mortal; *ca*: and; *akṣara*: immortal; *eva*: certainly; *ca*: and; *kṣarah*: mortal; *sarvani*: all; *bhutani*: beings; *kuta sthah*: permanently established; *akṣara*: immortal; *ucyate*: it is said.

"In this world there are two types of *purushas*: those who are mortal and those who are immortal. All the living beings are called mortal, and the immortals are those who have a permanent position.

The focus of this verse is in the two categories of *kshara* and *akshara*. The word *kshara* carries the meanings of "change, modification, failure, falldown, destruction, death" and certainly applies to the material bodies in which the living entity has taken birth. We may remember here that the word *bhuta* means "having come to being", and that the six major changes of such beings are birth, growth, duration, reproduction, dwindling, and death. Conversely, *akshara* means "unchangeable, eternal, perfect, established, infallible, always existing, immortal". This definition has not been applied to the description of the *jivatman* in chapter 2, because the conditioned souls who have taken birth in a material body are indirectly subject to its changes and to the failures it entails. This verse presents 2 categories of *purushas*: 1) the *nitya baddhas*, or individual conditioned souls who identify with the body and therefore suffer for its modifications life after life, 2) the *nitya siddhas*, or individual personalities that are established in their eternal position, from which they never fall down.

Some commentators believe that the definition of *nitya* ("always") refers to an ontological difference in nature of the two categories, and infer that the *nitya baddhas* can never attain liberation (*moksha*). This is incorrect, because such notion is opposed to the fundamental dharmic principle of compassion.

The actual meaning of this application of the term *nitya* is relative, just like we see sometimes the word *bhagavan* applied to great personalities who belong to the *vibhinnamsa* category (but whose consciousness is totally immersed in the supreme Consciousness), or the word *amara* ("immortal") applied to the Devas (for example, in *Bhagavata Purana* 1.15.8, 1.17.15, 2.7.13, 2.7.39, 4.2.4) who live a long life but ultimately will die, too, to leave their post to someone else. Therefore, the *nitya baddhas* can remain conditioned forever if they continue to choose illusion, but they will be able to gradually attain liberation from all conditionings if they consistently make progressive choices. On the other hand, the *nitya siddhas* may also have graduated to *moksha* from a conditioned position of *nitya baddha* through a sincere and correct *sadhana*, but they are described as "eternally perfect" or "eternally liberated" because they will not fall down again.

In the next verse (15.18), Krishna will state that God is above both categories, therefore we can understand that both such *nitya baddhas* and *nitya siddhas* are individual souls or *vibhinnamsas*, "distinct limbs/ cells" of the supreme Body of Consciousness. On the other hand, God himself in his many direct manifestations is defined as *svamsa*, "own limb", or maybe "clone".

The *nitya siddhas* do not have a material body made of material elements, not even subtle elements such as the bodies of the Devas. Their bodies (*siddha deha*) are made of pure consciousness, just like the body of the supreme Purusha, and just like everything else on the spiritual or transcendental level, including the objects (*siddha vastu*). This is confirmed by several verses:

avyakto 'ksara ity uktas tam ahuh paramam gatim, yam prapya na nivartante tad dhama paramam mama, "That is said to be non-manifested, non subject to change, and the highest destination. By attaining it, one does not fall back. That is my supreme abode." (8.21),

yad aksaram veda vido vadanti visanti yad yatayo vita ragah, yad icchanto brahmacharyam caranti tat te padam sangrahe pravyakshye, "I will tell you in summary about that imperishable destination described by those who know the *Vedas*. That destination is entered by the great *sannyasis* who have become fully detached from material illusion, and who practice *brahmacharya* with the purpose of attaining that position" (8.11).

In this world (*iha loka*), this *akshara brahman* is perceived as the all-pervading Consciousness:

karma brahmodbhavam viddhi brahmaksara samudbhavam, tasmad sarva gatam brahma nityam yajne pratisthitam, "Know that work comes from Brahma, and Brahma comes from the Imperishable, therefore the all-pervading Brahman eternally resides in sacred action" (3.15),

evam satata yukta ye bhaktas tvam paryupasate, ye capy aksaram avyaktam tesam ke yoga vittamah, "The devotees worship you in complete dedication, while others meditate on the non-manifested eternal Reality: which of these two approaches is the highest understanding of *yoga*?" (12.1),

ye tv aksaram anirdesyam avyaktam paryupasate, sarvatra gam acintyam ca kuta stham acalam dhruvam, "Those who offer their worship correctly and sincerely to the *akshara*, the indescribable, non-manifested, all-pervading, inconceivable, unchanging, never moving and eternal Existence," (12.3).

Arjuna has recognized Krishna as the personification of this Consciousness: *tvam aksaram paramam veditavyam tvam asya visvasya param nidhanam, tva avyayah sasvata dharma gopta sanatana tvam puruso mato me*, "I believe you are the imperishable Reality, the supreme object of knowledge, the supreme foundation of this universe, the protector of the eternal unchangeable *dharma*. You are the eternal Purusha" (11.18) and *kasmad ca te na, nameran mahatman gariyase brahmano 'py adi kartre, ananta devesa jagan nivasa tvam aksaram sad asat tat param yat*, "Why shouldn't they offer their respects to you, o great Atman? You are more glorious than Brahma, the first creator (of this universe). O Lord of the Devas, abode of the universe, you are imperishable, because you are above the cause and the effect" (11.37).

We have also seen that the word *akshara* is normally used to indicate the *pranava omkara*: *om ity ekaksaram brahma vyaharan mam anusmaran, yah prayati tyajan deham sa yati paramam gatim*, "Vibrating 'Om", this one transcendental syllable/ the syllable form of the Brahman, and remembering me, one who departs leaving the body attains the supreme destination" (8.13), and *maharsinam bhrigur aham giram asmy ekam aksaram, yajnanam japa yajno 'smi sthavaranam himalayah*, "Of the great Rishis, I am Bhrigu. Among the words, I am the one syllable. Of the sacrifices, I am the *japa*. Among the established things, I am the Himalaya" (10.25). By extension, because they emanate from the *akshara pranava omkara*, all letters of the alphabet (or sounds) are also considered imperishable: *aksaranam a karo 'smi dvandvah samasikasya ca, aham evaksayah kalo dhataham visvato mukhah*, "Of the letters, I am the A. Of the compound words, I am the *dvandva*. I am Time eternal, the creator, and the omnipresent (consciousness of the universe)" (10.33).

The *Bhagavata Purana* confirms: *tato aksara samannayam, asrjad bhagavan ajah, antasthosma svava sparsa, hrasva dirghadi laksanam*, "From that *omkara*, the unborn Lord created all the vast range of sounds, the vowels short and long, the semi-vowels, the consonants and so on" (*Bhagavata Purana* 12.6.43).

उत्तमः पुरुषस्त्वन्यः परमात्मेत्युदाहृतः । यो लोकत्रयमाविश्य विभर्त्यव्यय ईश्वरः ॥ १५-१७ ॥
 uttamah puruṣasivanyaḥ paramātmetyudāhṛtaḥ | yo lokatrayamāviśya bibhartavyaya īśvaraḥ || 15-17 ||

uttamah: the supreme; *puruṣaḥ*: *puruṣa*; *tu*: but; *anyaḥ*: another; *param atma*: the *paramatman*; *iti*: like this; *udāhṛtaḥ*: it is said; *yah*: who; *loka trayam*: the three worlds; *aviśya*: entering; *bibharti*: maintains/ supports; *avyaya*: imperishable; *īśvaraḥ*: the Lord.

"But there is another *puruṣa*, the Purushottama, the imperishable Lord. It is said that he maintains the three worlds by entering into them.

As we know from *Mundaka Upanishad* 3.1.1,2, *Svetasvatara Upanishad* 4.6,7, and *Bhagavata Purana* 11.11.6, within each body live the two *puruṣas* - the *jivatman* and the *paramatman*; the *paramatman* is Purushottama, always untouched by activity or its results, but supporting the *jivatman* and all the material manifestation that is required to facilitate the *jivatman*'s evolution.

While the conditioned soul eats the fruits of the tree of the body, the liberated soul has moved its attention to the supreme Soul and therefore remains on the same permanent position. However, the supreme Soul remains *uttama*, superior, even to the liberated or perfected soul.

This supreme *puruṣa* is Purushottama, also known as Isvara ("who controls") and Bhagavan ("who contains all perfections"). Individual souls can only participate to a marginal measure of such glories, either in the conditioned (*baddha*) or in the liberated state (*siddha*). In the spiritual dimension (*vaikuntha*, *goloka*) the *nitya siddhas* have entered (*aviśya* 8.11, 11.54, 18.55, etc) the supreme Consciousness and therefore they participate to this Krishna Consciousness, but they still remain *vibhinnamsas*, or "distinct limbs", as confirmed in 2.12. Isvara is still the supreme, as confirmed in the *Upanishads*: *nityo nityanam cetanas cetanam*, "the supreme eternal and the supreme conscious" (*Katha Upanishad* 2.2.13 and *Svetasvatara Upanishad*, 6.13). Like different cells in our bodies, each individual *vibhinnamsa* participates to the total Consciousness but in its particular function. We cannot say that the hands are more "us" than our feet, or that our stomach is not really part of us, or less important than our head. Even more so, on the transcendental level the various parts of God's spiritual body can function in different ways without the limitations imposed by material consciousness. The *bhava* or *rasa* is one and full of happiness, knowledge and eternity, but still there are subtle hues that enhance the taste of spiritual relationships in *bhakti*. The form of our sentiments for God can be expressed as servitude, friendship, parental affection, conjugal affection and so on, but the fundamental *bhava* is always love that makes us forget everything else.

In this verse, the word *aviśya* ("entering") can be connected with the definition of *avatara* ("who descends into this world"). The next word in the verse, *bibharti* ("sustains") is from the same family of the words *bhrit* and *bharta* ("sustainer, support") and illustrates the purpose of the *lilas* of *bhagavan* in this world. How do the *avatars* sustain the world? *Bhagavad gita* has explained: *paritrāṇāya sādhuṇāṃ vinasāya ca duṣkṛitāṃ, dharma samsthāpanārthāya sambhāvāmi yuge yuge*, "I manifest myself *yuga* after *yuga*, to protect the good people, destroy the evil doers and to establish *dharma*" (4.8).

We should not remain confused by the variety of forms, names and activities of the divine *avatars*, because Isvara is *avyaya*, "without modification". All such forms, names and activities exist simultaneously and eternally within the supreme Consciousness, and they become manifested temporarily only because of the nature of this material world, that is subject to time, space and duality.

The word *udāhṛtaḥ*, "he is described", refers to the wealth of knowledge contained in Vedic scriptures, especially the *Upanishads*, as well as the *stutis* and prayers that celebrate the greatness of Isvara and his powers.

यस्मात्क्षरमतीतोऽहमक्षरादपि चोत्तमः । अतोऽस्मि लोके वेदेच प्रथितः पुरुषोत्तमः ॥ १५-१८ ॥
 yasmātkṣaramatīto'hamakṣarādapi cottamaḥ | ato'smi loke vedeca prathitaḥ puruṣottamaḥ || 15-18 ||

yasmāt: because; *ksaram*: mortal; *atītaḥ*: beyond; *aham*: I am; *akṣarat*: than the immortal; *api*: even; *ca*: and; *uttamah*: superior; *ataḥ*: therefore; *asmi*: I am; *loke*: in the world; *vede*: in the *Vedas*; *ca*: and; *prathitaḥ*: celebrated; *puruṣa uttamah*: the supreme *puruṣa*.

"Since I am beyond both the fallible and the infallible beings, I am the supreme Personality of Godhead. For this reason I am known both in the Vedic literature and among the people of the world as the Purushottama.

This chapter explains how the supreme Personality of Godhead manifests in this world for the benefit of the conditioned souls. By following his instructions and remembering his names, qualities and activities, a conditioned soul can become purified and attain perfection. We have seen that the Supreme Personality of Godhead is the very same Consciousness that is also called Brahman and Paramatma: *vadanti tat tattva vīdas tattvam yaj jñānam advayam, brahmeti paramatmeti bhagavan iti sabbdyate*, "Those who know Reality say that Transcendence is Reality, the non-dualistic Knowledge that is called Brahman, Paramatma and Bhagavan" (*Bhagavata purana*, 1.2.11). Just like Brahman is *avikāri* ("without transformation"), Bhagavan is also eternally the same although he manifests in many names, forms, activities etc. Because in the transcendental dimension there is no time and space, everything is eternally and simultaneously one, like the Virata Rupa seen by Arjuna (11.13).

Bhagavan enters into the world and spreads like the Universal Tree, but is never entangled in it: *taya vilasitesv esu gunesu gunavan iva, antah pravista abhati, vijñānena vijrīmbhitaḥ*, "Although he enters within the function of the *gunas*, and seem to be defined by them, he is never affected, because he is always fully conscious of the perfect knowledge (*vijñāna*)" (*Bhagavata Purana*, 1.2.31).

We could say that Bhagavan is the "concentrated" form of Brahman: *brahmano hi pratishthāham amṛtasyavyayasya ca, sasvatasya ca dharmasya sukhasyaikāntikasya ca*, "I am the foundation of the Brahman, the immortal, imperishable, eternal Brahman, that is the ultimate *dharma* and happiness, the One Reality" (14.27).

Purushottama is therefore *ksaram atīta* and *akṣarat uttamah*, because for him there is actually no *kshara* or *akshara* - just like the sun is always radiant and luminous, day and night. We, too, will be able to see this constant radiance when we penetrate through the cover of the

clouds and we break free from gravity and rise into space, closer and closer to the sun. This is the real purpose of *yoga*, as Krishna has stated very clearly: *yoginam api sarvesam mad gatenantar atmana, sraddhavan bhajate yo mam sa me yuktatamo matah*, "Among all *yogis*, one who serves me with faith and full concentration, is considered by me as the greatest *yogi*" (6.47).

The real meaning of *bhakti* is to constantly focus on the supreme Consciousness and engage all activities on that level, just like each and every cell of our bodies function properly only when they work selflessly to carry out the activities of the entire body. This is why *bhakti* and *yoga* are totally incompatible with the dualistic mentality that separates us from the other beings and creates envy, cruelty, callousness, hatred, and so on. A true *yogi* and *bhakta* can never have these feelings towards other living beings or behave in such a way as to damage them. Of course this does not mean that s/he cannot hate ignorance and stupidity or cruelty, or s/he cannot kill an aggressor or eliminate what obstructs the material and spiritual progress of people. But the idea of beating someone up because they want to have the *darshan* of the Lord, or stopping the spiritual progress of others in any other way, is inconceivable for a true servant of Jagannatha.

यो मामेवमसम्मूढो जानाति पुरुषोत्तमम् । स सर्वविद्भजति मां सर्वभावेन भारत ॥ १५-१९ ॥

yo māmevamasammūḍho jānāti puruṣottamam | sa sarvavidbhajati mām sarvabhāvena bhārata || 15-19 ||

yah: one who; *mam*: me; *evam*: thus; *asammudhah*: without confusion; *janati*: knows; *purusa uttamam*: the supreme *purusha*; *sah*: s/he; *sarva-vit*: one who knows everything; *bhajati*: worships; *mam*: me; *sarva bhavena*: in all *bhavas*; *bharata*: o descendant of Bharata.

"O descendant of Bharata, one who knows me in this way, without any confusion, as the Purushottama, knows everything and worships me in all beings/ sentiments.

A neophyte in the practice of *yoga* must remove himself from the company of others (6.10), but after attaining the level of Brahman realization (*brahma bhuta*, 6.27), one should overcome the limitations of duality: *sarva bhuta sthitam yo mam bhajaty ekatvam asthitah, sarvatha vartamano 'pi sa yogi mayi vartate*, "The *yogi* who worships me as the One who resides in all existences is situated in me; wherever s/he may go, s/he always remains in me" (6.31). This is the proper vision.

The most important part of the verse is *yah mam*, "s/he to me", expressing the union of consciousness and the focus of our awareness and work. We should train our mind (6.35) to focus on this *advaita jnana* that is Brahman, Paramatma, Bhagavan, and includes all states of being. This is only possible when we drop the delusions (*asam mudha*) that keep us in the foolishness of material identification and attachment, characterized by the limitations of time, space and duality. In fact, this is the one and only point of *Bhagavad gita* and the entire corpus of Vedic knowledge, that develops the endless variety of situations and lessons and tests we face in the "school of life".

Yoga is not about learning how to twist your body into a pretzel or lose weight so that you can enjoy more sense gratification and social acceptance - that is for *mudhas*, who are easily trapped by illusion. No amount of academic titles will help either, as long as we maintain an asuric mentality: *na mam duskritino mudhah prapadyante naradhamah, mayayapahrita jnana asuram bhavam asritah*, "The evil doers, the foolish, the most degraded, those whose knowledge has been covered by delusion, and those who have chosen an asuric existence do not approach me" (7.15). We are going to learn more about the asuric mentality in the next chapter. The last part of this verse (*bhajati mam sarva bhavena*) has two levels of meanings: one meaning is the immediate understanding of the presence of God in all beings and situations, and the other meaning refers to the intimate *bhakti rasa* that we can develop in our personal relationship with Bhagavan. In this deeper meaning, *sarva bhavena* can be translated as "in all *bhavas*, with all *bhavas*", where *bhava* means "nature, feeling, sentiment".

There is no limit in approaching Purushottama through the *rasas* or *bhavas*: this relationship is exquisitely personal (*yah mam*) and does not depend on anything external - not even on the *guru's* instructions or lineage, that is merely indicative. The *siddha deha* develops from the *anu atma* according to its original nature, and is only determined by our full satisfaction - when we perceive that we have "grown enough" and that is the position we want to keep. In this perspective, the realization of Brahman is *sambandha* ("connection") through the supreme Consciousness, Paramatma is *abhidheya* ("knowledge") through the constant instructions we receive from the supreme Guru from within our hearts, and Bhagavan is *prayojana* ("engagement") in the functions of service to the Supreme as his limb or cell (*amsa*).

इति गुह्यतमं शास्त्रमिदमुक्तं मयानघ । एतद्बुद्ध्वा बुद्धिमान्स्यात्कृतकृत्यश्च भारत ॥ १५-२० ॥

iti guhyatamaṁ śāstramidamuktaṁ mayānagha | etadbuddhvā buddhimānsyātkṛtakṛtyaśca bhārata || 15-20 ||

iti: thus; *guhyatamam*: the most secret; *sastram*: the *shastra*; *idam*: this; *uktam*: explained; *maya*: by me; *anagha*: o sinless one; *etat*: this; *buddhva*: by understanding; *buddhiman*: intelligent; *syat*: one becomes; *kṛta kṛtyah*: the most successful in accomplishments; *ca*: and; *bharata*: o descendant of Bharata.

"O sinless descendant of Bharata, I have thus explained the greatest secret that is contained in all scriptures. By understanding it, one becomes (most) intelligent and accomplishes the greatest task (in life).

In this verse Krishna addresses Arjuna calling him *anagha* and *bharata*, usually translated as "sinless" and "descendant of Bharata". The meaning of *anagha*, however, should be understood carefully and not superimposed with concepts that are alien to Vedic culture. Just like its synonym *papa*, the word *agha* does not correspond exactly to the English "sin", because it is not based on the same abrahamic ideology, where a human being is condemned because of disobeying the orders of God or the priests. In the Vedic logic, *agha* or *papa* is a black spot on one's character caused by a bad choice, a mistake, an act of weakness, selfishness or ignorance that needs to be counteracted and purified by positive actions. It is also a debt to be repaid, a duty that has not been fulfilled yet: this is the meaning to which we should connect the expression *kṛta kṛtyah* "accomplished duties", referred to the supreme success in life.

This chapter has summarized the message of *Bhagavad gita*, showing the realization of Purushottama as the purpose of the entire Universal Tree, the Vedic knowledge and the cosmic manifestation. This was also stated in chapter 4: *sreyan dravya mayad yajnah jnana yajnah parantapa, sarvam karmakhilam partha jnane parisampyate*, "O Arjuna, better than the sacrifice of one's wealth is the sacrifice of knowledge. O Arjuna, the entire scope of all the activities must culminate in knowledge" (4.33).

This knowledge is the same explained in *Bhagavata Purana*, where the Lord had stated: *jnana parama guhyam me yad vijnana samanvitam, sarahasyam tad angam ca grihana gaditam maya, yavan aham yatha bhavo yad rupa guna karmakah, tathaiva tattva vijnanam astu te mad anugrahat*, "My supreme knowledge is hidden, and it is applied in practice. Try to understand it while I am explaining it, with its secrets and implications. Let this knowledge be realized by you by my kindness: as it is I who manifest the existence of all forms, qualities and activities." (*Bhagavata Purana*, 2.9.31-32). This deep knowledge is expressed in the following *catuh sloki* (2.9.33-36):

aham evasam evagre nanyad yat sat asat param, pascad aham yad etac ca yo 'vasisyeta so 'smy aham, "I am that which existed before the creation, and all that will ever exist. I am the *sat* and the *asat* (the supreme cause and effect), up to the end (of the universe), and I am what remains after all these (creations) and everything else (are dissolved)",

rite 'rtham yat pratiyeta na pratiyeta catmani, tad vidyad atmano mayam yathabhaso yatha tama, "Whatever appears to be of value or without value, is only in relationship with me. You must know that everything (in this world) is just the shadow of my *maya*, like darkness is a shadow (of light)",

yatha mahanti bhutani bhutesucchavacesv antu, pravistani apravistani tatha tesu na tesv aham, "Just like the elemental powers (ether, air, fire, water, earth) are contained in all beings, both great and small, and at the same time they are not limited to them, similarly I am in all beings, and yet I am not (limited to them)",

etavad eva jijnyasam tattva jijnasunatmanah, anvaya vyatirekabhyam yat syat sarvatra sarvada, "This (that I have now explained) is the most important subject of transcendental knowledge, the *tattva* that should be researched directly and directly, at all times and places and in all circumstances".

Chapter 16

Daivasura sampada vibhaga yoga

The yoga of differentiating between the characteristics of the divine and the demoniac personalities

This chapter of *Gita* is most useful practically in our daily life and personal progress, and continues the extremely valuable instructions that Krishna has given in chapter 14 about the three *gunas*. It will be followed by chapter 17, that explains more specifically how religious people can be classified according to the principles of *daiva asura sampada* and the three *gunas*. Finally, chapter 18 will again summarize the contents of *Bhagavad gita*.

By a general overview of Krishna's logical thread in the dialogue with Arjuna, we can see that he starts by addressing Arjuna's feelings of depression and discouragement, and then he leads him away from the faulty and materialistic ideas about religion (*laukika sraddha*) and towards the correct teachings of the *shastra* about the realization of *atman* and *brahman* and the science of *yoga* in its various aspects. This is the same journey each one of us needs to take, both at individual and collective level. Still today, many people are confused by foolish and misleading ideas about religion and end up creating a lot of problems, in spite of their good intentions. This chapter will clarify everything.

The famous saying, *sarva dharma sama bhava*, has been very badly misinterpreted by foolish and ignorant people to mean that any belief is equally good, as long as we call it "religion" and contains some notion of "God". The mistake originally comes from a serious lack of understanding about the word *dharma*, that is stupidly translated as "religion" in the abrahamic sense - a definition that does not include the fundamental respect for the universal and eternal principles of ethics that constitute *dharma*. Indeed, abrahamic ideologies are characterized by the absolute necessity to subordinate these universal and eternal principles of ethics (usually called "conscience" or "human values") in favor of the sense of blind and absolute loyalty and obedience to the orders of God and his priests. Therefore, such ideologies may be called "religions" but certainly not *dharma*.

A widespread ignorance of the actual Vedic knowledge has brought many Hindu activists to try to "reinvent the wheel" by offering novel solutions to the problem of incompatibility between abrahamic ideologies and the concept of *dharma*, so we have seen a vast range of foolish propositions - from "banning the name 'religion'" (that is, banning the use of English language in this particular instance) to "creating new *shastra* to fit the times" to "denying the idea of a God in Hinduism". At best, these are naive and simplistic ideas that will not solve the problem.

True, we need to stop using words without understanding their meaning, and we need to approach the original *shastra* (*sruti*) without being distracted by obsolete interpretations limited by time, place and circumstances that do not exist any more. But just using the name '*dharma*' will not solve the problem if we keep giving it the same old faulty meaning of 'religion': the problem is not merely in the language, the problem is in the meaning.

The same applies for the real meaning of the terms *daiva* and *asuri*, that are normally translated as "divine" and "demoniac". We can choose to use the original Sanskrit without translation, just as we normally do with difficult definitions such as *yoga*, *karma*, *rishi*, *vigraha*, *sannyasa*, *brahmachari*, etc, but that does not exempt us from making an effort to understand the actual significance of the original Sanskrit words.

To do that, we need to disengage the words "divine" and "demoniac" from their abrahamic sense, that indicates separate entities who are distinct from human beings and who determine *from the outside* what the behavior of human beings will be. This particular perspective is due to the fact that in abrahamic ideologies a human being can never progress or evolve in consciousness but is always only a helpless sinner, subject to either God (Yahweh, Allah etc) or the Devil (Satan) and their representatives.

In Vedic terminology, *daiva* and *asura* indicate qualities (*gunas*) that are expansions of the original three *gunas* described in chapter 14. The idea that some specific super-human beings come to be called *devas* and *asuras* indicate that such individuals have considerably

developed the corresponding qualities and mentality in their own behavior and attitude. This is the meaning of the word *sampada*, "characteristics".

It is important to understand that such *devas* and *asuras* are separate individual *atmans* who are only responsible for their own behavior, and not for the behavior of human beings. Both the divine and demoniac natures are merely combinations of the neutral energies of the Supreme. Taking birth in a human body constitutes an intermediate position between *devas* and *asuras* because it enables us to choose in either direction, and therefore we will then become a *daiva* or an *asura* person individually because of our choices, as explained in 2.32, 2.43, 7.23, 9.20-21, 9.25, 14.14-15, 14.18, 16.20, 16.22.

Krishna had already briefly introduced the subject in chapter 12: *moghasa mogha karmano mogha jnana vicetasah, raksasim asurim caiva prakritim mohinim sritah*, "(Those people who) entertain delusional desires, engage in delusional activities, and are delusionally convinced of their knowledge but are confused by incorrect awareness, certainly take shelter in the bewildering nature of *raksasas* and *asuras*" (9.12).

Some materialistic speculators have manufactured a theory according to which the definitions of *deva* and *asura* merely indicate two human racial groups, respectively characterized by white and black complexion and identified as the "Aryan" invaders who brought Sanskrit to India, and the original Dravidian inhabitants of the subcontinent. According to this colonial speculation, all the Vedic and Puranic stories and references are reduced to clever and biased propaganda created by the victorious invaders who demonized the conquered and enslaved indigenous peoples and distorted the original historical facts. In this hallucinated perspective, they proceed to "reinterpret" for example the story of Rama versus Ravana as the romanticized adventure of a Caucasian nomadic marauder who needed some good excuse to vandalize the peaceful and happy land of a beloved chief of black-complexioned peoples. They conveniently forget important details of the story - i.e. Rama is always described as black in complexion, and hailing from a highly urbanized civilization with an extremely ancient settlement in Ayodhya. But over and above all, these superficial scholars neglect to notice that the strict ethical code of Vedic civilization and the divine qualities it values so much.

श्रीभगवानुवाच ।

śrībhagavānuvāca ।

अभयं सत्त्वसंशुद्धिर्ज्ञानयोगव्यवस्थितिः ।

दानं दमश्च यज्ञश्च स्वाध्यायस्तप आर्जवम् ॥ १६-१ ॥

abhayaṁ sattvasamsūddhirjñānayogavyavasthitiḥ । dānaṁ damaśca yajñaśca svādhyāyastapa ārjavam ॥ 16-1 ॥

sri bhagavan: the wonderful Lord; *uvaca*: said; *abhayam*: fearless; *sattva samsuddhih*: complete purification of *sattva*; *jnana yoga*: *jnana yoga*; *vyavasthitiḥ*: the specific position; *danam*: charity; *damaḥ*: restraint, control of the senses; *ca*: and; *yajnah*: sacrificial action; *ca*: and; *svadhyayah*: study of the science of the self; *tapah*: austerity; *arjavam*: simplicity.

The wonderful Lord said: "Fearlessness, the purification of one's existence, the constant application of knowledge, generosity, control of one's senses, engagement in sacred activities and study of *atma vidya*, austerity and simplicity,

The previous chapter ended (15.19) with Krishna telling Arjuna, "One who knows me as the Purushottama knows everything and worships me in all beings."

However, we need to understand what are the external symptoms of such a great soul, as Arjuna had mentioned before (2.54, 14.21). Krishna has listed such qualities in 2.56-57, 12.14-19, 13.8-12, 14.22-25 and in 14.6 he has explained the external symptoms of *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*. The description will become even more detailed in this chapter and continue in chapters 17 and 18.

The first quality listed in this verse is *abhaya*, "fearlessness". We have already found it as a fundamental requirement in verses 2.56, 4.10, 5.28, and 12.15. Also, verse 2.35 mentioned fear as a cause for disgrace. But what is fear? *Bhagavata Purana* (11.2.37) explains: *bhayam dvitiiyabhinivesatah syad isad apetasya viparyayo 'smritih, tan mayayato budha abhajat tam, bhaktyaikayesam guru devatatma*, "Fear arises when the consciousness is focused on duality (*dvitiiya*). One who separates himself from the Lord is confused by illusion and forgetfulness (ignorance). Therefore intelligent people should offer a devotional worship to the Lord, who is the *atman* of the *guru* and the *devas*."

The same is also confirmed by the *Brihad aranyaka Upanishad* (1.4.2), *dvitiiyad vai bhayam bhavati*, "fear is born of duality", and *brahman* is *abhayam*, "free from fear" (4.4.25). So we can understand that fear originates from the ignorance constituted by *ahankara* and *mamatva*, and focuses on the possibility of a loss in these areas of the consciousness. We are afraid of damage to our bodies and mind, or to the bodies and minds of those persons we consider "ours" (family, friends, etc), or to "our" objects (wealth, social position, safety of one's home, etc) or even to "our" mental certainties and beliefs that may be proven false and illusory. Fear usually generates hatred and violence, and is described as a major symptom of *tamas* (ignorance).

On the practical level, such losses may be caused by the mistakes of our own mind and body (*adhyatmika klesa*), by the actions of other creatures (*adibhautika klesa*) or by the conditions created by the higher powers of the universe (*adhidaivika klesa*), and therefore our mind creates the duality between enemy and friend.

In this perspective, the enemy is someone who gives us sorrow by taking something good away from us (or giving us something unpleasant) and the friend is someone who gives us joy by gifting us with something good (or relieving our sufferings due to unpleasant things). One who has realized Brahman knows very well that both positions are illusory. Each living entity receives the joys and sorrows that are due to his own previous activities (*karma*), and the *atman* is never really touched by any loss, or even by separation of consciousness and interests from the Supreme. If we lose something, it means it was never really ours to begin with (2.16). These were the first elementary teachings offered by Krishna at the beginning of the *Bhagavad gita*.

The expression *sattva samsuddhi* has various levels of meanings, because *sattva* can indicate the *sattva guna*, one's existence (the nature of *sat*), the mind (as a form of existence that survives the gross body), and the *atman* (that exists eternally). The word *samsuddhi* means "complete purification", which applied in this context produces the following translations: 1) "purification of material *sattva guna* into *visuddha sattva* or transcendental goodness", 2) "purification of one's existence through the proper activities and prescribed duties", 3) "purification of one's mind and heart through the proper consciousness and realization" or "a pure heart", 4) "purification of the identity from all material superimposition".

The next expression is *jnana yoga vyavasthiti*. We know that *jnana* means "knowledge", *yoga* means "union, engagement, connection", and *vyavastha* means "position", also used with reference to the *varna vyavastha* (the "occupational position in society"). So *vyavasthiti* means "established position". The translation of the complete expression can therefore be, "being established in union with the Supreme through knowledge", "being consistently engaged in the study of the scriptures", and "being in the category of those people who cultivate knowledge". Connecting all the three elements of the first line, we understand that a person who has purified his/ her mentality from material identification and realized the Self (*atman/ brahman*) is free from fear and always situated in the consciousness of Reality. By connecting the last element of the first line and the first element of the second line we also obtain something very interesting: *jnana yoga vyavasthiti danam*, that is the gift of distributing solid knowledge - the greatest possible form of charity, as Krishna will state at the conclusion of *Bhagavad gita* (18.68-70). However, this little jewel is very appropriately hidden in the fold between the two lines, because such knowledge is the greatest secret (9.1, 9.2, 11.1, 15.20, 18.63, 18.64, 18.67) and it should not be given to those who are not able to appreciate it (18.67).

The second line of the verse connects *danam* ("generosity" or "charity"), *dama* ("restraint"), *yajna* ("performing the sacred duties", and also "spirit of sacrifice"), *svadhyaya* ("personal study of *shastra*"), *tapas* ("austerity"), and *arjavam* ("simplicity"). While the first line speaks about the mentality or activities of the mind and consciousness, the second line speaks about behavior or the activities of the body. One should be the mirror of the other (due to *satyam* and *arjavam*).

The *danam* recommended in this verse must be supported by *suddha sattva* or at least by *sattva*, and so are the practices of self control, the ritual performances and worship, the austerities and so on. Therefore they are mentioned together with *svadhyaya* and *arjavam*. *Svadhyaya* is the personal study of *shastra* especially about *atma vidya*, while *arjavam* is simplicity, in the sense of honesty, truthfulness and straightforwardness: these two qualities are transcendental and powerful enough to protect us from all material contamination. As we will see in the next chapter (17), even charity, austerity and religious worship can be categorized according to the three *gunas* as *daivi* or *asuri* (divine or demoniac), and bring results accordingly.

Previous commentators have highlighted the fact that the requirements listed in this verse can be applied electively by category according to the *ashramas* or stages of life. In this perspective, a *brahmachari* must first learn fearlessness and purification of one's existence by firmly establishing himself in *jnana yoga* (applied knowledge, spiritual and material) and by strictly observing the dharmic principles of *yama* and *niyama*.

Then he enters family life as *grihastha* and engages in charity, self control and performance of his sacred duties (ritualistic ceremonies and professional work), and at the onset of old age (*panchasa urdhvam vanam vrajet*, "after the age of 50 one should move to the forest") he enters the order of *vanaprastha* and then *sannyasa*, two stages in which he must concentrate on *svadhyaya* (the study of transcendental *atma vidya* only, foregoing material knowledge), as well as on austerity and simplicity.

Family life, called *grihastha ashrama*, is the most important stage of life because a family man's first duty is to feed and protect all the other members of society, just like the king protects and feeds all the *prajas*. And just like a king, a *grihastha* is entitled to enjoy all types of dharmic sense gratification, but he pays for such goodies by properly discharging his duties.

He is entitled (*adhikara*) to kindle the fire for cooking meals for himself and his family (which includes servants and household animals), but he must honor the fire with a daily *homa*, and must also distribute sufficient food to guests and mendicants - mostly *brahmacharis*, *vanaprasthas* and *sannyasis*, but also all meritorious and needy people, as well as stray cows, dogs, crows, and so on.

Similarly, *dama* (restraint) is required specifically for a *grihastha* because of the dangerous nature of *kama* (desire), very well explained in verses 2.62 to 2.64 and 3.37 to 3.40. Desire in itself is not to be condemned (7.11), but our desires should always be purified by the association with the divine that turns sense gratification into *prasada* (2.64, 2.65). This is the meaning of *yajna*, sacred action. Especially in Kali yuga, it is not necessary to engage in very complicated and expensive ritualistic ceremonies; we can successfully perform *yajna* by investing time and resources in any sacred action, including the *japa yajna* (10.25) and the *sankirtana yajna* (10.9), considered the best by Krishna. However, we should not think that all religious activities (*yajna*, *dana* and *tapas*) will bring the same results. As we will see in the next chapter, especially in verses 17.3 to 17.6 and 17.11 to 17.28, only some religious activities are actually beneficial, while some are useless or even detrimental to our progress and to the progress of others.

We should be very careful to avoid misunderstanding about the concept of *arjavam*. True simplicity is born from *sattva*, not *tamas*. Simple does not mean stupid, ignorant, dull, lazy or careless: it means brilliant - clean, beautiful, true, effective. There is a great difference between "simple" and "simplistic". A person who is truly simple-minded is honest and affectionate or friendly to all (*satya saralata prema*). In a society controlled by *asuras*, however, these qualities are usually treated as defects. As *saralata* ("grasping the essence of the issue") and *akapatya* ("freedom from hypocrisy"), *arjavam* ("simplicity, straightforwardness") protects all our religious activities from the evils created by *rajas* and *tamas* as explained in chapter 17.

It is important to understand here that the *devas* who reside on the higher planets are not conditioned souls. They are defined by the same divine qualities that characterize Vishnu, who is also a *deva*. Those who still have a separate feeling in their consciousness/ nature, but are situated in *sattva* (the material *guna* of goodness) are allowed to take birth on the higher planets, where they live for a certain number of celestial years, and if they have not graduated to *suddha sattva* (transcendental goodness), they return to the human level to continue their progress (9.21). However, the primary Devas (the Adityas, Vasus, Rudras, Asvini, Marutas etc, what to speak of Shiva and Brahma) who are in charge of the administration of the universe are direct manifestations of the supreme and complete Consciousness - directly God. They are the various Personalities of the Godhead.

अहिंसा सत्यमक्रोधस्त्यागः शान्तिरपैशुनम् । दया भूतेष्वलोलुप्त्वं मार्दवं ह्रीरचापलम् ॥ १६-२ ॥

ahimsā satyamakrodhastyāgaḥ śāntirapaisunam | dayā bhūteṣvaloluptvaṁ mārdaṁ hīracāpalam || 16-2 ||

ahimsa: freedom from hatred; *satyam*: truthfulness; *akrodhah*: freedom from anger; *tyagah*: renunciation; *santih*: peacefulness; *apaisunam*: freedom from wickedness; *daya*: compassion; *bhutesu*: towards (all) beings; *aloluptvam*: freedom from greed; *mardavam*: kindness; *hrih*: modesty; *acapalam*: determination.

"freedom from hatred, truthfulness, freedom from anger, renunciation, peacefulness, freedom from wickedness, compassion towards all creatures, freedom from greed, kindness, modesty and determination,

The list of the symptoms of a beneficial personality (*sivam*) continues; it applies both to Bhagavan himself and to all those who have divine qualities. A person who has realized the *jnana tattva* (*Bhagavata Purana* 1.2.11) as Brahman, Paramatma and Bhagavan, and has become One with God, has no reason for fear, and is always detached from material possessions and engaged in sacred activities (16.1). In this verse we see the other symptoms of such realization, in one's external behavior towards other beings (*ahimsa, satya, akrodha, tyaga, santi, apaisuna, daya*) and in one's attitude towards oneself (*aloluptvam, mardavam, hri, acapalam*).

The first and arguably the most important definition in this verse is *ahimsa*, usually translated simplistically as "non violence". We have elaborated on this word already, as the definition is also found in verses 10.4 and 13.8 (and it will be mentioned again in 17.4). The importance of *ahimsa* is also confirmed in *Bhagavata Purana* (1.18.22, 3.28.4, 4.22.24, 7.11.8, 11.3.24, 11.17.21, 11.18.42, 11.19.33). *Ahimsa* is also mentioned in the *yoga shastra* as one of the fundamental requirements in the *yama* and *niyama* regulations, so much that some saints and teachers have come to present it as "the highest *dharma*" (*ahimsa paramo dharmo*). In this sense, it is equated with *daya* ("compassion") and similar qualities such as *maitri* ("friendliness") etc.

However, the concept of *ahimsa* can be dangerously misunderstood due to the influence of *tamas* (ignorance, laziness, stupidity, inertia, callousness, carelessness, fear, etc). The word *ahimsa* derives from the verb *himsati* ("to hate"), and therefore it applies to the consciousness or mentality or motivation, and not to the action in itself. Therefore one can remain perfectly situated in *ahimsa* even while killing thousands of beings and destroying objects, if such forceful action is directed against aggressors and obstacles to the progress of people and is applied without personal selfish motivations. In fact, in some circumstances *ahimsa* actually demands sufficiently forceful and even lethal action (that some people could call "violence") in order to protect good and harmless persons and creatures.

However, we need to be honest about our motivations (*satyam*) and apply force without anger (*akrodha*), just like a good surgeon uses a sharp knife to remove a tumor but always keeps a cool head and does not damage healthy cells. We must always be extremely careful not to cause unnecessary pain, injury or death, because such damage will create a karmic debt that must be paid sooner or later.

Satyam ("truthfulness") is actually the supreme and most fundamental principle of *dharma*, the last that remains to support the progress of the universe when all others have disappeared, as clearly stated in *Bhagavata Purana* (1.17.24-25). Without *satyam* ("truthfulness") no other ethical or religious principle can survive or support one's progress. The word *akrodha* ("freedom from anger") is also very important, and directly connected with *ahimsa* ("freedom from hatred"). The actual meaning of *krodha* applies to the vindictive anger that is born out of frustration of one's selfish desires in attachments and identifications, as beautifully explained in verses 2.62 to 2.63, and in verses 3.36 to 3.41. When there is no selfish desire for one's sense gratification or egotism, the definition of *krodha* does not apply. This freedom from anger is mentioned as a major requirement for *yoga* in verses 2.56, 4.10, 5.23, 5.26, 5.28, and again in 18.53, and *krodha* ("rage") is mentioned many times in this chapter as a key characteristic of *asuras* or people with a demoniac mentality. Just like *ahimsa*, the divine quality of *akrodha* does not contradict forceful action against aggressors or obstacles to the progress of society. Sometimes we need to display anger to shake people out of their complacency and stupidity, and convince them to stop their wrongful and damaging activities. This is applied especially to the roles of king, *guru*, teacher and parent, when they are facing stubborn subordinates who will not listen to proper reason and logic. But such anger is only external and temporary, never internal or prolonged, because it is not fed by selfish attachments. Stupid people are often incapable of understanding this point and therefore they praise the behavior of those who externally remain quiet and even smiling, but internally cultivate a seething rage, that is bottled up and festers into poison to emerge later with much greater damage to everyone, exploding into *himsa* ("violence, hatred, injury").

We can see many cases in which great *rishis* and *brahmanas*, as well as *avatars*, openly displayed anger towards aggressors or offenders who were obstructing the progress of the universe, and even cursed them in order to teach them a lesson. However, these great souls were not victims of confusion and frustration, but remained fully conscious and balanced internally, and they were always acting for the benefit of all those who were involved, and never caused any real damage. This of course does not apply to the anger and violence of a so-called God who sentences his creatures to the eternal torture of hell or kills them indiscriminately and untimely in a flood (or in any other disaster, war etc) when believing that they only have one single life (no reincarnation). There is certainly nothing *daiva* ("divine") in that - there is just hypocrisy (*asatyam, kapatya*). This is why the next four divine qualities are described as *tyaga* ("renunciation"), *santi* ("peacefulness"), *apaisunam* ("freedom from wickedness") and *daya* ("compassion") towards all beings (*bhutesu*), especially towards innocent animals and all harmless creatures. A so-called religion that does not develop these characteristics visibly, deeply and consistently in all its followers (what to speak of its "authorities") is nothing but a dangerous fraud.

The divine quality of *santi* ("peacefulness") is created through *dama* (restraint) connected with *tyaga* (renunciation to identifications and attachments, especially regarding the lower *gunas*). The *santi mantra* of *Yajur veda samhita* (36.17) evokes this peacefulness in the entire universe: *om dyauh santir antariksam santih, prthivi santir apah santir ausadhayah santih, vanaspatayah santir visvedevah santir brahma santih, sarvah santih santir eva santih, sa ma santir edhi, om santih, santih, santih*. Here is the translation: "Peace in the sky! Peace in deep space! Peace on earth! Peace in water! Peace in the medicinal plants! Peace in the forests! Peace among all the Devas! Peace in Brahman! Everywhere is peace, peace, peace, only peace."

The word *apaisunam* can be translated as "freedom from wickedness", but it covers a lot of meanings, as under "wickedness" it includes fault finding, backbiting, slandering, and the intention to hurt others. The word *aloluptvam* also conveys several meanings, as *lupta* can

refer to booty, or things that have been stolen, destroyed, violated, hurt, lost, and broken. So *alohuptvam* refers to the character of a person who would never commit such bad actions. The word *mardavam*, "kindness", derives from *mridu*, that contains the meanings of gentle, soft, smooth, and benign.

The word *hri* (*hrih*) is translated as "modesty", and contrarily to what many people would expect, it was not listed in the qualities of ideal women (10.34). This word, and its synonym *lajja*, indicate freedom from arrogance and vanity, and a mild and humble disposition, that enhances the glory of divine personalities. Unfortunately, sometimes it is misinterpreted as "shyness", as in a tendency to hide oneself out of shame, scarce self esteem or even out of fear. We should carefully avoid this mistake, especially because here the word *hri* is coupled with *acapalam*, that means "determination".

A person who is modest but determined is reliable and sees things through, no matter what it takes - not because out of some *ahankara* and *mamatva*, but because of a sense of selfless duty and responsibility. This was confirmed by Krishna in verses from 3.21 to 3.26.

तेजः क्षमा धृतिः शौचमद्रोहो नातिमानिता । भवन्ति सम्पदं दैवीमभिजातस्य भारत ॥ १६-३ ॥

tejaḥ kṣamā dhṛtiḥ śaucamadroho nātimānita । bhavanti sampadam̐ daivīmabhijātasya bhārata ॥ 16-3 ॥

tejah: radiance; *ksama*: forgiveness; *dhritih*: consistency; *saucam*: cleanliness; *adrohah*: freedom from enmity; *na*: not; *ati manita*: expecting great honors; *bhavanti*: they become; *sampadam*: great qualities; *daivim*: divine; *abhijatasya*: of one who has taken birth; *bharata*: o descendant of Bharata.

"radiance, forgiveness, consistency, cleanliness, freedom from enmity, not expecting great honors: these, o descendant of Bharata, are the characteristics of one who was born with a divine nature.

The word *tejas* has already been explained many times, because it has been used as a symptom of divinity in many verses (7.9, 7.10, 10.36, 10.41, 11.17, 11.19, 11.30, 11.47, 15.12). It will also be listed in 18.42 in the characteristics of the *kshatriyas*, while the characteristics of the *brahmanas* are mentioned as *dama* (restraint or control of the mind and senses), *tapas* (austerity), *saucam* (cleanliness), *kshanti* (tolerance), *arjavam* (simplicity), *jnana* and *vijnana* (theoretical and practical knowledge). Therefore we cannot simply translate *tejas* as "vigor", although certainly the divine radiance of power and charisma constitutes a great strength.

The word *kshama* has also been mentioned already in 10.4 and 10.34, with the meanings of "forgiveness", "tolerance" and "patience". In 10.34 it was mentioned together with *dhriti*, a word that is also contained in this verse. *Dhriti* is almost a synonym for *acapalam*, that appeared in the previous verse. The meanings of *dhriti* include courage, steadiness, firm bearing, firmness, stability, joy, satisfaction or contentment, will, resolution, constancy and consistency, as well as reliability. It also indicates any offering or sacrifice performed with clear deliberation. We may remember that *Dhriti* is the name of one of Dharma's wives (a daughter of Daksha). The word *acapala* is less common, and includes the meanings of steady, not fickle, not oscillating, even unmovable - which makes it much stronger than *dhriti*.

The word *saucam* means "cleanliness, sanctity", and it is also one of the fundamental principles of *dharma* as well as a rule of the *yama-niyama* system. It also applies to the cleanliness of the mind, and in this sense it is connected to the other divine qualities mentioned in the verse.

The word *adroha*, which is the opposite of *droha*, means "freedom from enmity and ungratefulness". We found the word *droha* in verse 1.38 in the compound *mitra droha*, "hostile and envious towards friendly people". Other applications are for example *praja droha* and *guru droha*, where *praja* indicates the subjects of the State and *guru* includes all teachers and well-wishers who are superior to us. In all these cases, we understand that *droha* refers to any unjustified negative attitude and behavior characterized by envy, wickedness, hostility, hatred, ungratefulness - all against innocent and good persons, even against affectionate friends, family members or benefactors.

The expression *na ati manita*, "not expecting great honors", is similar to *apamana* ("lack of respect", as in 6.7, 12.8, 14.25), and *amanivam adambhitvam* (13.8). A divine personality is not attached to receiving honors or a special position, although he understands when he is being disrespected, especially when such negative attitude is created by ignorance and foolishness - characteristically due to material identification.

Krishna specifically mentions this point in verse 9.11: *avajananti mam mudha manusim tanum asritam, param bhavam ajananto mama bhuta mahesvaram*, "Foolish people disrespect me when I appear in a human form. They have no knowledge of my transcendental nature as the great master of all existences." Krishna is not expressing personal sadness because he has not been worshiped. On the contrary, what he regrets is the fact that ignorant people waste a valuable opportunity to learn something and progress in transcendental realization because they underestimate his teachings.

This lack of attachment to special honors does not mean that one should underestimate the value or importance of one's service or mission, what to speak of disparaging or offending transcendental knowledge. We can see a brilliant demonstration of this point in Jada Bharata's episode in *Bhagavata Purana*, canto 5, from chapter 9 to chapter 14. Under all aspects, Jada Bharata was the personification of humility and detachment from any material considerations of position and respect, but when king Rahugana scolded him (5.10.6-7) for his irregular walking in carrying the palanquin and threatened to punish him, Jada Bharata replied fearlessly and solemnly, authoritatively correcting the king's attitude and imparting him appropriate teachings about the transcendental science (5.10.9-13). And then he continued to walk irregularly just as he had been doing before, because that was the right thing to do.

Foolish people would probably have expected Jada Bharata to show his humility and lack of attachment to honors in a very different way - specifically apologizing to the king without daring to talk back to him, and starting to walk normally as the king was demanding. But Jada Bharata did not submit to ignorance and arrogance and material considerations of social etiquette, because his knowledge was very clear. We should never confuse humility with lack of confidence or shyness or low self esteem.

Some emotional people are anxious to present themselves as very fallen, or very stupid, or very ignorant, but such propositions are useful only in rare and extreme situations. They should never be used as cheap excuses for escaping from one's duty and justifying laziness and irresponsibility, or even worse, as pretexts to indulge in masochism and self-loathing, and/ or in sadism and emotional abuse enforced on

others as "religious training", especially when they are accompanied by hypocritical behavior that belies such great protestations of personal humility. In such cases, we see the humiliation of subordinates, such as lay people, students, women and children, while the "religious authorities" demand exaggerated honors for themselves, although claiming to be "very renounced and detached".

We see for example the attitude of *sannyasis* who sign their names accompanied by the grandiose titles of *svami* and *maharaja* (respectively "Lord" and "Great King"), but call (and refer to) women devotees with the epithet of *dasi* ("servant") or at most *devi dasi* ("lady servant").

This is disgraceful especially in India, where the definition of *dasi* is traditionally applied to female house servants, popularly considered in the category of ordinary prostitutes. We have seen that such bad habit is invariably accompanied by other forms of humiliation and mistreatment towards "ordinary persons" for example in accommodation, food, transportation, and all the other instances in which respect or lack of respect are characteristically shown, including access to direct service to the Deities, leadership positions, and teaching/preaching engagements.

The last part of this verse explains that such divine qualities appear, or are developed (*bhavanti*), in a person who was born with under the influence of divine nature (*daivim prakritim asritah*, 9.13). Krishna has already explained that a person who consistently associates with *sattva* or *suddha sattva* through sincere service to God obtains a suitable body after death (8.6).

It is important to understand that such divine qualities are individual, and not merely inherited genetically, therefore we see from many scriptural examples that great divine personalities were born from *asuras* and the other way around. According to Vedic tradition, the *garbhadhana samskara* should be properly performed at the time of conception to attract an elevated soul into the matrix that is sanctified by a higher level of consciousness and auspicious activities.

Astrology can give us some good indications of the character of a person based on the particular time and place of birth, but for all practical purposes it is much better to directly observe the behavior and mentality of each individual, because astrologers can always make mistakes and the birth information could be incorrect.

दम्भो दर्पोऽभिमानश्च क्रोधः पारुष्यमेव च । अज्ञानं चाभिजातस्य पार्थ सम्पदमासुरीम् ॥ १६-४ ॥

dambho darpo'bhimānaśca krodhaḥ pāruṣyameva ca | ajñānaṁ cābhijātasya pārtha sampadamāsurīm || 16-4 ||

dambhah: hypocrisy; *darpah*: impudence; *abhimanaḥ*: conceit; *ca*: and; *krodhah*: rage; *parusyam*: cruelty in insulting; *eva*: certainly; *ca*: and; *ajnanam*: ignorance; *ca*: and; *abhijatasya*: of one who has taken birth as; *partha*: o son of Pritha; *sampadam*: notable characteristics; *asurim*: *asurika* nature.

"O son of Pritha, the characteristics of those born of asuric nature are hypocrisy, impudence, conceit, rage, rudeness, and of course ignorance.

The most important word in the verse takes here the place of honor in the first position, and again it will be mentioned in verses 16.8, 16.17, 17.5, 17.12 and 17.18 as a key concept. Mistranslated by other commentators as "vainglory", *dambha* actually means "hypocrisy, false morality, fraud, deceit, feigning, religious ostentation", and applies specifically to false religionists, who are therefore declared by Krishna himself to be not simply "imperfect", but downright asuric. They are a serious and unnecessary disturbance to society, especially when their conclusions and behavior are contrary to the teachings of genuine *sruti* and *smriti*. This is the reason why the only solution to all the problems of human society consists in defeating ignorance (*ajnanam*), here placed at the conclusion of the list as the summary and root of all evils. And ignorance is defeated only through the appropriate study and application of *shastra*.

Unfortunately this symptom of *dambha* is presently observed in the vast majority of so-called religionists in all sects. The *Bhagavata Purana* (7.15.12) specifically elaborates on the various forms of false religion: *vidharmah para dharmas ca, abhasa upama chalah, adharmah sakhah panchemah, adharmah jno 'dharmavat tyajet*, "There are 5 branches of *adharmah*: religion that is against the principles of *dharma*, religion against one's nature, religion based on hypocrisy, religion that is not progressive, and religion that is based on lies". According to this verse, false religion is anything that is against the principles of universal ethics such as compassion, cleanliness, etc, or forces people into duties that are against their true individual nature (as in birth prejudice), or relies on theatricals or feigned demonstrations (or a false facade for public relations), or disconnecting theory from practice. Also, a "religion" is false when it is not progressive (moving from lower standards or *upa dharma* to higher levels), or it is based on lies and deceit - for example teaching that lying is good, or manufacturing false teachings for materialistic purposes.

The abrahamic concepts of *taqqiya* (islamic) and *kol nidre* (jewish) are obviously a symptom of their belonging to this category of *vidharma*. Christianity also presents various examples, from its early days in 4th century with Bishop Eusebius (the official propagandist for Constantine); he entitles the 32nd Chapter of his 12th *Book of Evangelical Preparation* as "How it may be Lawful and Fitting to use Falsehood as a Medicine, and for the Benefit of those who Want to be Deceived". To quote another famous ideologist of Christianity, Ignatius Loyola (1491-1556, founder of the Society of Jesus): "We should always be disposed to believe that which appears to us to be white is really black, if the hierarchy of the Church so decides."

Hinduism itself has not been exempt from this contamination, especially in the last few centuries, so much that in the popular mentality (*laukika sraddha*) hypocrisy has become established as a social and religious virtue, and most people are totally disconnected with the idea of truthfulness and honesty, and cannot even understand that theory is supposed to be put into practice. Other commentators have quoted a verse from the *Varaha Purana* to this effect: *raksasah kalim asritya jayante brahma yonisu*, "in the age of Kali, (many) *rakshasas* (*asuras*) will take birth in *brahmana* families".

The word *darpa* pushes *dambha* even one step further. It means "arrogance, insolence, impudence, haughtiness, desire to be worshiped" and is connected to egotism. The hypocrite *asuras* are not bothering to study (what to speak of practicing) the teachings of genuine *shastra* (16.17, 16.23, 17.6, 17.13) to understand the principles of *dharma*. However, they arrogantly take the position of teachers, and they are so impudent that they declare themselves as the only legal representatives of religion, and demand that their "monopoly of teaching" be acknowledged and enforced by all means, including physical violence, overt or covert. The word *abhimana* also contains more meanings

besides the usual "conceit": it is normally used to refer to arrogance, intention to injure, hostile intention, insidiousness, so it perfectly completes the picture. And the more ignorant one is, the more he is likely to be arrogant and overbearing, in a subconscious effort to compensate for his obvious weakness.

We need to understand what is arrogance by including all the above meanings, because many people tend to apply the label of "arrogance" to healthy qualities such as self-esteem, self-reliance, awareness of the importance of one's good work, clear vision of facts, and firm realization of theoretical and practical knowledge, and so on. These qualities are never harming others, but are actually beneficial to all, individually and collectively. A person who has a healthy measure of self-esteem will not think that he can teach shastric knowledge without bringing any shastric evidence, but will confidently engage in a deep and sincere study of the texts, and will not be afraid of questions and genuine philosophical debates.

Standing up and speaking up against injustice, untruth or ignorance cannot be categorized as arrogance, even when we are questioning those who are considered established authorities in society. Calling "thief" a thief (when there is actual evidence of the theft) is not arrogance at all. Pointing out a mistake or wrong conclusion or reasoning or some inconsistency is not arrogance - it is a sattvic action based on cleanliness and truthfulness. It is a service to society - that is the body of Purushottama himself.

The actual arrogance is rather in the angry and cruel (*krodha*) reaction of those who feel outraged at the idea that anybody would dare question them or refuse to blindly believe or follow and worship them (or their group, or their leaders). In fact nobody is unquestionable, especially those who occupy a higher position in society and direct or instruct others particularly in the field of religion and spirituality.

The relationship between *guru* and disciple is based firstly on questioning (*pariprasnena*) and only secondarily on service (*seva*), as stated in verse 4.34. Of course, we must present questions in a civilized way, and in the form of interrogation rather than accusation, especially when we do not have actual evidence of wrongful behavior or motivations or conclusions. A truly spiritual or religious person will not refuse to answer questions to explain apparent inconsistencies or mistakes, and certainly will not get angry about such questions or try to take revenge on "upstarts and non-believers" with materialistic means such as violence of any kind, direct and indirect, including police action, court cases, destruction of writings or property etc.

Another important symptom listed here is *parusyam*, that indicates the harsh words and actions that are meant to viciously hurt people on a personal level. The Sanskrit dictionary lists its meanings as "insult, squalor, cruelty, violence, variety (as in special skills)".

Bhagavata Purana offers more elaboration on the subject: *na tatha tapyate viddhah puman banais tu marma gaih, yatha tudanti marma stha, hy asatam parusesavah*, "Arrows that hit and pierce sensitive points in the body cause less suffering than the cruel words of evil persons that strike and become lodged in the sensitive points of the heart", (11.23.3). *Asuras* are specialized in *ad hominem* attacks against those they perceive as "enemies", usually accusing their victims of being "offensive and envious", "full of hatred" or even "mentally unbalanced". They also try to hit what could be vulnerable points (*marma*) in the victim, especially based on their bodily conditions, taking full advantage of any physical disability or disease, or even gender, race, caste, financial status, etc. And because they have no consideration for truth, they are particularly fond of inventing the most outrageous falsities to slander their victims.

All this comes down to *tamas* and *ajnana* - ignorance - as concluded in this verse as well as in the last chapter of *Bhagavad gita* (18.22 to 18.32), where Krishna will explain that due to *tamas*, people mistake *dharma* for *adhama*, and *adhama* for *dharma* (18.32). So to distinguish between proper forceful action and asuric action we need to carefully study the *shastra*, including the *Puranas* and *Itihasas*, that are full of practical examples from the lives of great personalities.

दैवी सम्पद्धिमोक्षाय निबन्धायासुरी मता । मा शुचः सम्पदं दैवीमभिजातोऽसि पाण्डव ॥ १६-५ ॥
 daivī sampadvimokṣāya nibandhāyāsūrī matā । mā śucaḥ sampadam daivimabhijato'si pāṇḍava ॥ 16-5 ॥

daivi: divine; *sampad*: characteristics; *vimokṣaya*: leading to complete liberation; *nibandhaya*: leading to complete bondage; *asuri*: *asurika*; *mata*: are considered; *ma*: do not; *sucaḥ*: worry; *sampadam*: characteristics; *daivim*: divine; *abhijataḥ*: one who has taken birth; *asi*: you are; *pandava*: o son of Pandu.

"The divine characteristics lead to complete liberation, while the asuric characteristics cause complete bondage. Do not worry, o son of Pandu: you were born with divine qualities.

The *daivi sampada*, divine characteristics, listed in these verses are very similar to the characteristics of knowledge listed by Krishna in verses from 13.8 to 13.12: *amanitvam adambhitvam ahimsa ksantir arjavam, acaryopasanam saucam sthairyam atma vinigrahaḥ, indriyarthesu vairagyam anahankara eva ca, janma mṛityu jara vyadhi duhkha dosanudarsanam, asaktir anabhisvangaḥ putra dara grihadisu, nityam ca sama cittatvam istanistopapattisu, mayi cananya yogena bhaktir avyabhicarini, vivikta desa sevityam aratir jana samsadi, adhyatma jnana nityatvam tattva jnanartha darsanam, etaj jnanam iti proktam ajnanam yad ato 'nyatha*, "Freedom from the desire for honors, freedom from hypocrisy, freedom from hatred, as well as tolerance, simplicity, the act of approaching the *acharya*, cleanliness, determination, self control, renunciation towards the objects of the senses, freedom from the sense of doership, as well as the clear perception of the inherent sufferings and problems of birth, death, old age and disease, freedom from attachment, detachment from all association, including the sense of belonging towards children, wife, home etc, as well as equal attitude when receiving the pleasant and the unpleasant, totally and constantly focusing on me through *bhakti yoga*, performing service in a solitary place, without attachment for meeting others, the constant awareness of the original soul, the realization of the value of knowledge: all this is called *jnana*, and anything else is *ajnana*."

In fact Vedic knowledge is non-different from God and the divine position of God. A very famous verse of *Rig Veda* (1.22.20) clearly teaches: *om tad vishnoh paramam padam sada pasyanti surayah diviva caksur atatam, tad vipraso vipanyaya jagrivam sah samindhate vishnor yat paramam padam*, "That position of Vishnu is always contemplated by the divine personalities (*suras*) who have divine eyes/ see it in the divine radiance of the Sun (eye of the Virata Rupa). The qualified *brahmanas* who are awakened can reveal this supreme position of Vishnu."

The *suras* mentioned in this verse are the opposite of the *a-suras* described in this chapter as demoniac personalities. Within the category of *suras*, Vedic scriptures list all the Devas who rule the administration of the universe, as well as the qualified *brahmanas* (*bhu-devas*) who are those who know Brahman and behave as Brahman. Of course within this category of *suras* we will not find false religionists who are characterized by *dambha*, because they are *asuras* by definition. We have already seen in chapter 10 that Krishna recommends the contemplation of the radiant Virata Rupa, by which we will remain always in the supreme Consciousness. Chapter 15 has further expanded this vision of the Virata Rupa as Purushottama, Daru Brahman, the immense banyan tree of the universe. This is confirmed in *Svetasvatara Upanishad* (3.8-9): *vedaham etam purusam mahantam, aditya varnam tamasah parastat, tam eva viditvati mriyum eti, nanyah pantha vidyate ayanaya, yasmat param naparam asti kincid, yasman naniyo no jyayo asti kincit, vriksha iva stabdho divi tisthaty ekas, tenedam purnam purusena sarvam*, "I know that Purushottama, whose effulgence is the color of the sun that transcends all darkness. One who knows him overcomes death. There is no other path to perfection. There is nothing greater than him, because he is the greatest and the smallest. Like a tree covering the sky, he is alone established in the entire universe, and from him everything becomes manifest."

This supreme Knowledge or Consciousness (*tattvam yaj jnanam advayam, Bhagavata Purana* 1.2.11) is the only path to liberation or freedom:

na hi jnanena sadrisam pavitram tha vidyate, tat svayam yoga samsiddhah kalenatmani vindati, "In this world there is nothing as sacred as knowledge. One who achieves perfect union in this knowledge comes to find full happiness in the Self in the course of time" (4.38),

jnanena tu tad ajnanam yesam nasitam atmanah, tesam aditya vaj jnanam prakasayati tat param, "Those for whom *ajnana* is destroyed in the Self as *jnana*, that Knowledge, as the Sun, reveals that highest reality" (5.16),

tad buddhayas tad atmanas tan-nisthas tat parayanah, gacchanty apunar avrittim jnana nirdhuta kalmasah, "Those who realize That, identify with That, remain faithful to That, and fully dedicate themselves to That, attain that liberation from which one never falls back, because their impurities have been cleansed by Knowledge" (5.17).

If we want to become liberated, we must surrender to this supreme Consciousness: *tam ha devam atma buddhi prakasam, mumuksur vai saranam aham prapadye*, "desiring *moksha*, I surrender, illuminating the intelligence" (*Svetasvatara Upanishad* 6.18).

द्वौ भूतसर्गौ लोकेऽस्मिन्दैव आसुर एव च । दैवो विस्तरशः प्रोक्त आसुरं पार्थ मे शृणु ॥ १६-६ ॥

dvau bhūtasargau loke'smindaiva āsura eva ca | daivo vistaraśaḥ prokta āsuram pārtha me śṛṇu || 16-6 ||

dvau: two; *bhuta*: beings; *sargau*: (two) creations; *loke*: in the world; *asmin*: this; *daivah*: divine; *asura*: demoniac; *eva*: certainly; *ca*: also; *daivah*: divine; *vistarasaḥ*: elaborately; *proktaḥ*: described; *asuram*: the demoniac; *partha*: o son of Pritha; *me*: me; *srinu*: listen to.

"In this world there are two (types of) created beings - the divine and the demoniac. I have explained about the divine creation. O son of Pritha, listen to me: I will now describe elaborately the characteristics of the asuras.

The *daiva* and the *asura* are two two states of incarnated consciousness. When consciousness (*atman*) becomes incarnated, the condition of a living being is created, therefore the *jiva atman* is superimposed with the definition of creature (*bhuta*). At a certain point in the evolution of the *jivatman*, it takes birth as a human being, and from this position it can develop towards the daivic nature or the asuric nature, and continue in that direction. This is called *asritya o prapadye* "taking shelter", and it is a matter of individual choice. The word *asraya* derives from *asri* (with a long *a*), meaning "to join, to adhere".

Krishna clearly says that the people who take shelter in the asuric nature never approach him: *na mam duskritino mudhah prapadyante naradhamah, mayayapahrta jnana asuram bhavam asritah*, "The evil doers, the foolish, the most degraded, those whose knowledge has been covered by delusion - those who have chosen an asuric existence do not approach me" (7.15). All these characteristics are typical of the *asuras*. This is confirmed in verse 9.12: *moghasa mogha karmano mogha jnana vicetasah, raksasim asurim caiva prakritim mohinim asritah*, "Entertaining delusional desires, engaging in delusional activities, and delusionally convinced of their knowledge, confused by incorrect awareness, they certainly take shelter in the bewildering nature of *rakshasas* and *asuras*".

On the other hand, those who take shelter in the divine nature are the *suras*: *mahatmanas tu mam partha daivim prakritim asritah, bhajanty ananya manaso jnatva bhutadim avyayam*, "However, o son of Pritha, the great souls take shelter in the divine nature and serve me with undivided attention, knowing that I am the inexhaustible origin of all beings" (9.13). These divine personalities are already advanced in the journey to liberation: *jara marana moksaya mam asritya yatanti te, te brahma tad viduh kritnam adhyatmam karma cakhilam*, "They take shelter in me, endeavoring to attain liberation from the cycle of birth and death, and come to know that Brahman is everything transcendental. They know transcendence and the duties to be performed" (7.29). This liberation is *tad vishnoh paramam padam*, "the position of Vishnu", as confirmed in verse 14.2: *idam jnanam upasritya mama sadharmyam agatah, sarge pi nopajayante pralaye na vyathanti ca*, "Those who take shelter in this knowledge attain my same position (of *dharma*), and they are not going to take birth in a next creation. They will also remain firmly established even at the time of the dissolution."

However, we should not hastily conclude that all those who are called atheists are *asuras*, especially when the concept of God that is presented to people is asuric in itself, as we see in abrahamic ideologies. See for example the ritual requested to evoke Yahweh described in the Bible (*Genesis*, 15.9-12): a number of animals were slaughtered and their dead bodies put on an altar - a heifer, a she goat, a ram, a turtle, a dove and a pigeon. The text says, "When the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abraham, and lo, an horror of great darkness fell upon him". And again we see in *Genesis*, 22.1-2, that Abraham is accepted as a true servant of Yahweh when he accepts to slaughter an innocent child, his own and only son, merely to please his master by showing absolute obedience.

The definition of *asura* is explained as *asusu rata asurah*, "*asuras* are those who are (only) attached to their immediate selfish gratification" (gross and subtle). This is also called *indriya trishna*, "thirst for sense gratification", which connects *kama* and *krodha*, the lust for possession, control and domination and the anger that comes when such lust is challenged and frustrated. The height of *dambha* or religious hypocrisy is to call such characteristic as divine, and brand as "demoniac" anyone who does not agree to that.

The genuine concept of God as Vishnu presented in *Bhagavad gita* (13.17) has nothing to do with the character described in the Bible and worshiped by Hebrews, Christians and Muslims.

Some people believe that persons with divine characteristics live on different planets from people with asuric qualities, or in different races or families, but this is not necessarily so, as demonstrated by many stories narrated by the *shastra*. Even within families and races that traditionally choose asuric values, we find brilliant divine personalities such as Prahlada, Vibhishana, and Bali. However, divine qualities cannot coexist in the same person with asuric qualities: one cannot be on the side of *dharma* and *adharma* at the same time. One could move from the shelter of one nature to the other, by making different choices, but the two natures cannot coexist simultaneously without neutralizing each other. It's like trying to go upwards and downwards at the same time: the result is that one does not go anywhere at all.

Granted, *asuras* can have good material qualities. They may be clever and have considerable knowledge about science and even about the scriptures (as shown in many Puranic stories), but they are not behaving in according to *atma vidya*, transcendental knowledge, and we know that mere erudition is not sufficient (7.15). In fact, false religiousness (*dambha*) and erudition that does not respect *dharma* are much more dangerous than plain honest materialism, as confirmed for example in *Isa Upanishad* (9): *andham tamah pravisanti, ye 'vidyam upasate, tato bhuya iva te tamo, ya tu vidyayam ratah*, "Those who engage in ignorant activities shall enter into the dark region of *tamas*. Worse still are those engaged in the culture of false knowledge."

Dambha (false religiosity based on hypocrisy) is influenced by *rajas* and *tamas*, as we will see more specifically later. As we have seen in the previous verse, the asuric quality of *dambha* tends to build up arrogance (*darpa* and *abhimana*) due to one's external social position or accomplishments. Therefore we will find that *asuras* often boast, "I am a great *sannyasi*", "I am a great *brahmana*", "I am an *asvamedhi*", "I am a great scholar", "I am a great preacher", "I am a great *yogi*", "I am a great *guru*", "I am a senior devotee", "I am a senior/ direct disciple of that great *acharya*", "I am a great *pujari*", and love to be presented as such by others. However, invariably such claims are nothing but a shallow external identification, a theatrical show.

One cannot really worship or serve God and at the same time callously create sufferings to innocent beings in the pursuit of one's selfish material advantage, either individual or collective, because that is the hallmark of the asuric mentality. As Krishna himself states in *Bhagavad gita*, he is the best friend of all living entities (*suhridam sarva bhutanam*, 5.29, *isvarah sarva bhutanam hrid dese tisthati* 18.61) and remains present in the hearts of all beings (*sarvasya caham hridi sannivisto*, 15.15, *sarva bhuta shritam*, 6.31).

प्रवृत्तिं च निवृत्तिं च जना न विदुरासुराः । न शौचं नापि चाचारो न सत्यं तेषु विद्यते ॥ १६-७ ॥

pravṛttim ca nivṛttim ca janā na vidurāsuraḥ | na śaucam nāpi cācāro na satyam teṣu vidyate || 16-7 ||

pravrittim: engagement; *ca*: and; *nivrittim*: renunciation; *ca*: and; *janah*: the people; *na*: do not; *viduh*: they know; *asurah*: who are *asuras*; *na*: not; *saucam*: purity; *na*: not; *api*: even; *ca*: and; *acarah*: behavior; *na*: not; *satyam*: truthfulness; *tesu*: in them; *vidyate*: is known (to be).

"Asuras do not have (correct) knowledge about engagement in duties and renunciation. They have no purity, or (proper) behavior, or truthfulness.

This is also confirmed at the conclusion of *Bhagavad gita* (18.30): *pravrittim ca nivrittim ca karyakarye bhayabhaye, bandham moksam ca ya veti buddhih sa partha sattviki*, "O Arjuna, only a sattvic person really understands about engagement in duties and renunciation (what should be accepted and what should be abandoned), what should be done and what should not be done, what should be feared and what should not be feared, what is binding and what is liberating". Everything depends on overcoming ignorance (*tamas*). Whenever *tamas* is present, there cannot be any real advancement, only the delusion of superiority (*hrta jnana*, *darpa*, *ati manita*) and false religiosity (*dambha*). Such delusion is a not a "small imperfection", but rather a very serious danger both for the individual and for the entire society, because it teaches *adharma* as if it were *dharma*, and condemns *dharma* by presenting it as *adharma* (18.32).

Deluded people, who have not understood the teachings of *Bhagavad gita*, believe that false religionists controlled by *tamas* are established on the good path anyway, because they somehow speak of God and perform religious activities, but false religionists are walking on a very different road that leads to the opposite direction, and they are not evolving towards higher levels but sliding into complete degradation (14.13, 14.15, 14.18, 16.20).

Sometimes false religionists even quote *Bhagavad gita* to manipulate people into supporting them. One of their favorite verses is used to justify their adharmic conclusions and behaviors: *api cet suduracarō bhajate mam ananya bhak, sadhur eva sa mantavyah samyag vyavasito hi sah* (9.30). The meaning that they give to this verse is very misleading, and borrowed from abrahamic ideologies. It implies that if one is "praying to God" or "chanting the name of God" and is officially recognized as a member "in good standing" of their church, he must be considered "a saint" even if he is found to be committing the most abominable actions. They say, "it's just a small mistake, a small imperfection". So they demand that such person should be worshiped, followed, served and obeyed as a saint, who is non-different from God and superior to all the Devas. What is more, they believe that such "saint" has the right to make disciples all over the world and expect everyone to surrender to him and worship him like God himself because he is God's representative or priest (or bishop, cardinal, etc). In this regard, they sometimes quote *Bhagavata Purana* (11.17.27): *acaryam mam vijaniyam navamanyeta karhicit, na martya buddhyasuyeta sarva deva mayo guruh*, "The *acharya* should never be disrespected, rather he should be considered non-different from me (God). He should never be considered a mortal being, because the *guru* represents the sum total of the divine Consciousness". Of course when the position of "*guru*" or "*acharya*" is assigned solely on the basis of political vote, affiliation to an organization or similar materialistic considerations - and especially when such position does not involve any responsibility towards the disciples - the name is wrongfully applied, because that is not the standard prescribed by the *shastra* for the definition of *acharya*.

As we have explained in the commentary to verse 9.30, the *duracara* or "bad behavior" that we could overlook can only refer to a mere breach in social conventions or to the difficult choice of a lesser damage, not to systematic and consistent wicked and cruel asuric behaviors and conclusions, that are immensely more serious. Also, verse 9.30 uses the noun *acarah* ("the doer"), and not the verb *acarati* ("who does"), therefore it is not stating that the person described in the verse is still committing objectionable acts.

Actually, Krishna has already stated very clearly that one can approach him only after giving up all forms of wickedness: *yesam tv anta gatam papam jananam punya karmanam, te dvandva moha nirmukta bhajante mam dridha vratah*, "Those who have put an end to all wicked actions, have accumulated good merits, are completely liberated from the delusion of duality and are firm in their determination, actually worship me" (7.28). For this reason, we have given a more appropriate translation of verse 9.30 as follows: "When a person is fully immersed and engaged in true devotional service, without any other concern or desire, must be considered a *sadhu*, even if he used to have a very bad behavior."

The word *sadhu* is also a tricky one, and it should not be used superficially. It certainly does not mean "*acharya*", "*guru*", or even "*saint*". It simply means "good person", and is generally used to refer to seekers of spirituality, as a synonym for *sannyasi*. There are lots of *sadhus* in India who are certainly not saints, and in fact many of them are using the garb of *sadhu* or *sannyasi* (renounced spiritualist) merely to get some personal material advantages.

In this age of degradation, the position of *sadhu* will be merely based on the arrogance of false religiosity (*sadhutve dambha eva tu, Bhagavata Purana* 12.2.5) and the impressiveness of material opulence (*anadhyataivasadhutve, Bhagavata Purana* 12.2.5). The incredibly stupid people of Kali yuga (*manda sumanda matayo manda bhagya, Bhagavata Purana* 1.1.10) will blindly worship any fraudster who can boast of a big organization, *ashrama* or church - no questions asked, even in front of blatant asuric behavior. Of course, such material success in terms of wealth, followers and political power is gained because these "religious authorities" are very cleverly catering to the expectations and illusions of ignorant people. They do not want students but customers, and they milk them for every penny without taking any responsibility for their spiritual evolution or even their training in knowledge and ethics. In fact they are very careful never to mention the real basic requirements for spiritual progress (*yama* and *niyama*) because all their followers would quickly stop giving money and disappear.

With such disgraceful example from those who are supposed to be the best religionists in society (3.21), the same asuric values become the standard for everyone. Material wealth becomes the only criteria to evaluate a person's nature, behavior, religious position, eloquence and social position (*vittam eva kalau nrinam, janmacara gunodayah, dharma nyaya vyavasthayam, karanam balam eva hi, Bhagavata Purana* 12.2.4). One will be considered a *brahmana* simply because he wears a thread (*vipratve sutram eva hi, Bhagavata Purana* 12.2.3). A person's religious merits and position will be evaluated superficially, merely by the clothes he wears and by his material success, and one will be called a *pandita* just because he is clever and quick in word jugglery and slogans (*lingam evasrama khyatav, anyonyapatti karanam, avriitya nyaya daurbalyam, panditye capalam vacah, Bhagavata Purana* 12.2.4). People will give greater value to pilgrimages to distant and touristic places (*dure vary ayanam tirtham, Bhagavata Purana* 12.2.6), and good activities will be performed only for the purpose of getting a reputation (*yaso arthe dharma sevanam, Bhagavata Purana* 12.2.6).

The conclusion of the verse (*na satyam tesu vidyate*) highlights the most important point of all, as without *satyam* there can be no true form of religion or progress. *Asuras* consider lying and deceit as perfectly legitimate instruments to obtain selfish material advantages, at individual or collective level. Sometimes they try to justify such tricks by bringing legitimate examples, such as the small half-truths that bring no harm to anyone but might make people happy or even save innocent lives. But then they quietly extend the scope and motives to over-rule compassion and justice, and to take advantage of the good faith and vulnerability of others with false promises or hiding dangerous facts or plans.

When we see contradictions or inconsistencies in the teachings or behaviors of some religious people, we cannot automatically assume that the wrongful actions are due to "human error", especially if the cases are numerous and include a good number of leaders of that religion. If a religion officially says, "do not kill", and then we see that in its history the vast majority of its leaders have systematically killed several millions of people, and still kill people in the regions under its control, we should understand that we are dealing with *asuras*. If it speaks of love and charity and yet it approves or condones slavery, rape, corporal punishment and persecution of dissenters, we should understand we are dealing with *asuras*.

असत्यमप्रतिष्ठं ते जगदाहुरनीश्वरम् । अपरस्परसम्भूतं किमन्यत्कामहैतुकम् ॥ १६-८ ॥

asatyamapratistham te jagadāhurānīśvaram | aparasparasambhūtaṁ kimanyatkāmahaitukam || 16-8 ||

asatyam: false; *apratistham*: without foundation; *te*: they; *jagat*: the world; *ahuh*: they say; *anisvaram*: without God; *aparaspāra*: without cause-effect system; *sambhutam*: come to being; *kim anyat*: what else; *kama*: lust/ desire; *haitukam*: reason.

"They say that the universe is false and temporary, and there is no God and no creation based on cause and effect. For them, the only reason for the existence of the world is mere sense gratification.

We must be very careful in studying this verse, and clear our minds from all possible contaminations from other and non-compatible ideologies, because there is a serious danger of misunderstanding it.

The universe (Virata Rupa) is the direct manifestation of Brahman/ Paramatma/ Bhagavan in this world, and all Vedic scriptures recommend that we meditate on this glorious universal form of Purushottama. However, we have also seen that all material manifestations are temporary and illusory and as such they have no real existence as we see them (2.16, 8.15). For this reason it is said, *brahma satya, jagan mithya*: Brahman is the only permanent Reality, while the material universe is deceiving because it appears permanent but it is in constant change. However, only the *asuras* will say that the world is *asatya*, "false", that is fundamentally "bad" in itself, as diametrically opposed to a "paradise" or "spiritual world" that is perfectly good and pure and from which we have somehow "fallen" (as exemplified by the story of Adam and Eve). Only the *asuras* will believe that this world is controlled by an evil power - "the witch Maya" or "the Prince of Darkness" - that is considered "the opposite" of God, always trying (and largely succeeding) to enforce its will upon human beings against the will of God. Based on this misconception, *asuras* launch "holy wars" against "other Gods" with the intention to "destroy" them, by killing their worshipers, annihilating their temples, and obliterating their sacred scriptures and knowledge, and even their memory.

By the way - this practically equates with saying that this world is *anisvarah* ("without God"), because if God is the Absolute, omnipotent and omniscient, nothing can happen outside his plan, and his existence must necessarily include the existence of all forms. If the existence

of "other Gods" (*elohim*, in plural form as in the beginning of the Bible) is admitted, then the idea of abrahamic monotheism is not about the universality and the absolute power of one of such Gods (an oxymoron in itself), but rather about the tyrannical imposition of merely one form (or non-form) and the destruction of all other forms. And if this "one God" is omnipotent, why does he need human beings to do his dirty work and destroy "the other Gods" (even considering such a thing as possible)? If this "one God" wants to send to hell all those who do not believe in him, why do his followers have to persecute, attack and kill such non-believers already in this life? It does not make any sense. We will not find any such nonsense in Vedic scriptures.

The *asuras* who present themselves as "the only true religionists" propagate these nonsensical ideas to justify their own horrible, cruel and destructive activities meant to exploit the world and the creatures who live in it, and they blame "nature" and "the world" for the damage they are making. When the *asuras* claim that the world is *asatya*, *apratistha*, *anisvara*, they mean to say that there is no *dharma* (ethical principles, or conscience) or that *dharma* is irrelevant, and that life in this world has no purpose or meaning. This is a convenient excuse for them to commit any abominable activity for their own selfish material advantage - individual or collective. They even have the impudence to claim that the criminal acts they commit are the only religious work, service to the Supreme Lord.

While sincere and wise scientists recognize the principle of cause and effect, *asuras* claim that the world is *aparaspara sambhutam* - it has no cause, and therefore there is no connection between cause and effect. They claim that everything happens simply by chance, and is automatically produced for no higher purpose, therefore they can destroy whatever they like for their own purposes - that in their eyes have become the supreme purpose by default. Because they believe that things and people come to existence merely for lust, gratification and enjoyment (*kama hetu*), they might as well as use everything for their own advantage and enjoyment. According to this perspective, a living being is just a product - a commercial resource - and can be genetically constructed, modified, cloned, sold, owned, exchanged, rented, destroyed, and so on. And *asuras* believe they are entitled to do so out of mere curiosity or experiment, to further their career, increase their wealth and possessions and social position, etc. Of course this madness is first applied to animals, but then it can easily be used for human beings, especially the "lower ones" such as people of other races, prisoners, women, children, or persons who are weaker for some other reason - old age, disease, poverty etc. Because for *asuras* any opinion is as good as any other, they pick whatever best suits their immediate material selfish interest. Even when *asuras* do believe in God (as we will see in chapter 18), they are actually contemplating their own projection and calling it "God". As they create such "God" in their own image, they claim that God created the world and human beings out of selfishness, and that he enjoys cruelty and exploitation. In this way they hope to legitimize their own crimes.

एतां दृष्टिमवाश्लभ्य नष्टात्मानोऽल्पबुद्धयः । प्रभवन्त्युग्रकर्माणः क्षयाय जगतोऽहिताः ॥ १६-९ ॥

etām dṛṣṭimavaślabhya naṣṭātmāno'lpabuddhayaḥ | prabhavantiugrakarmāṇaḥ kṣayāya jagato'hitāḥ || 16-9 ||

etam: this; *dristim*: vision; *avastabhya*: accepting/ adopting; *nasta*: having lost; *atmanah*: the self; *alpa buddhayaḥ*: very little intelligence; *prabhavanti*: develop/ build; *ugra*: horrible; *karmanah*: activities/ jobs/ enterprises; *ksayaya*: for the destruction/ that will bring damage; *jagatah*: of the world; *ahitah*: without benefit.

"Because they are not intelligent, they accept these beliefs, losing the consciousness of the true self. (On that basis) they develop horrible activities, that unnecessarily cause damage to the world.

The word *dristi* ("vision") comes from the same root as *darshana*, but *dristi* refers here to a delusional vision or hallucination, while *darshana* indicates a particular but valid perspective of reality. Since *asuras* have concluded that the world is false and without a purpose, they believe that any opinion is as good as any other, and they endorse the legitimacy of an ideology merely based on its material success and popularity - on how many people accept and follow it, and how much material benefit it seems to offer to those who accept it. This is why false religionists easily get so many followers. The two main reasons for the disaster are the lack of intelligence (*alpa buddhaya*) and the loss of the consciousness of the real self (*atman*). Both intelligence and consciousness of the self are presented all over *Bhagavad gita* as extremely important.

The expression *nasta atmanam* ("having lost the Self") has various levels of meanings. One is directly connected to the lack of intelligence, because it is intelligence (*buddhi*) that keeps us conscious of who and what we are, of what is our duty and what is unworthy of our purpose in life (*pravrittīm ca nivrittīm ca*, 16.7, 18.30). Once this intelligence is lost, we forget ourselves and we fall into delusion, as confirmed in verse 2.63: *krodhad bhavati sammohah sammohat smṛiti vibhramah, smṛiti bhramsad buddhi naso buddhi nasat pranasyati*, "Anger becomes confusion, and confusion becomes failing memory. Because of the loss of memory, intelligence is lost, and when intelligence is lost, one falls from his position". On the level of delusion or *tamas*, the conditioned soul becomes victim of asuric tendencies and falls lower and lower into degradation and confusion and suffering.

Scarce intelligence is also the reason why *asuras* cannot really understand knowledge properly; due to delusion, knowledge becomes confused, half baked or half digested, and fails to deliver the desired results in the end. *Asuras* are as irresponsible as children playing with matches without having the first idea of how to put out a fire, and they keep scheming and laboring to make bigger and bigger fires they call "advancement" or "progress" or "development". Instead of creating, they can simply destroy (*kshaya*) without any need or real benefit (*ahitah*), and all their activities are ugly and disastrous (*ugra karma*). They do not even leave the most sacred and pure things alone. They deliberately pollute sacred rivers and ponds with sewage and industrial waste of all kinds, they destroy sacred mountains and hills, and bulldoze off ancient temples and holy places. They knowingly contaminate the milk of cows with blood and pus and toxic chemicals under the pretext of "better production", and even add gelatin and lard to yogurt and butter to make them "more attractive". They make sugar whiter by bleaching it with baked bones from slaughterhouses, and obtain golden and silver foil by hammering sheets of these metals between thin layers of the entrails of slaughtered animals. These *ugra karma* enterprises can flourish only because the general mass of people are also fully immersed in *tamas*, and say, "ignorance is bliss".

Those who use the world as a garbage dump or a quarry without caring for the benefit of all creatures cause untold damages with the destruction of the environment. These imbalances cause irregular changes in climate on the whole planet and terrible consequences including cyclones, floods and drought, the melting of glaciers and ice caps at the poles and the consequent rising of the levels of the

oceans. The worst situation for the planet and for human society is when such *asuras* artificially take up the positions of *brahmanas* and *kshatriyas* and control society for their own materialistic and demoniac purposes.

Destruction in itself is not a bad thing. It is required from time to time to clean up the place and eliminate old things that have lost their utility for the progress of all beings, or constitute an active threat. However, there must always be some benefit (*sivam*, "auspiciousness") connected with such destruction, otherwise it is condemned by Vedic knowledge as *ahitah*, "unnecessary". This concept also applies to the antics of the *asuras* in this world, that are allowed in a certain measure and for a certain period of time so that the conditioned souls (*jivatmans*) can develop through experience and choice.

This idea could seem similar to the abrahamic concept, but it is not. While abrahamics believe that the Devil is the incarnation of disobedience to God ("the Rebel Angel"), Vedic knowledge explains that the asuric tendency or nature is merely a lack of enlightenment (*buddhi* and *atma vidya*), just like darkness has no existence of its own and is merely absence of light. Therefore, while abrahamics stupidly invest their energies to fight darkness with sticks and stones and bombs and moralistic legislation, Vedic civilization simply solves the problem by turning on the light of intelligence and knowledge of the *atman/ brahman*. Of the two attempts, the violent exercise of persecution of ideological dissent can only bring more harm to individual and society, causing even more darkness in the form of fear, hatred, hypocrisy, illusion etc, but the Knowledge approach enables us to engage each and every individual or group in a progressive and useful way for society (3.26).

Regarding the concept of *ugra karma* ("horrible activities", "horrible enterprises"), anyone who has information about what is happening in the world today will understand the meaning. We know about bad doctors and iatrogenic damage, bad lawyers and corrupt magistrates, bad politicians and bad governments, and bad teachers at all levels. We know about bad financial systems and industry creating mindless consumerism, pollution and destruction of resources, artificial organisms and toxic medicines, dangerous genetic engineering and extreme technology for war (chemical, biological, nuclear etc). We also know about artificial junk food and its effects, and also about cruelty to animals and abuse on children and women and relatively weaker human beings. Not many know about the horrors of sex slavery or the kidnapping of little girls and pumping them with hormones so they look sexier to the brothel customers. Or about human organs trafficking. Or about the deliberate "thinning of the human herd" called de-population, obtained through carefully planned wars and other devices and campaigns. Many skeptics label this type of information as "conspiracy theories" and refuse to consider it seriously, but such an attitude could be dangerous. Some of the perpetrators of such horrible crimes may claim that the destruction they create is not "without benefits", because it generates financial gains, job opportunities, and commercially valuable products and services, but people are not aware of the very heavy karmic price they will have to pay for such activities. Their foolishness can be compared to the classical example of the lumberjack who was sawing at the branch where he was sitting high on the tree.

What should we do then? Of course we must not blindly believe anything that is told us, but we can and should certainly try to investigate and verify rumors about serious dangers. Merely dismissing unpleasant rumors without trying to investigate about them is a clear symptom of ignorance: *aprakaso 'pravrittis ca pramado moha eva ca, tamasy etani jayante vivriddhe kuru-nandana*, "O Arjuna, with the increase of *tamas* we find foolishness, laziness, madness and confusion, that tend to get worse and worse" (14.13).

काममाश्रित्य दुष्पूरं दम्भमानमदान्विताः । मोहाद्गृहीत्वासद्ग्राहान्प्रवर्तन्तेऽशुचिव्रताः ॥ १६-१० ॥

kāmamaśritya duṣpūraṁ dambhamānamadānvitāḥ | mohādgṛhītvāsadgrāhānpravartante'śucivratāḥ || 16-10 ||

kamam: lust; *asritya*: taking shelter of; *dusapuram*: insatiable; *dambha*: religious hypocrisy; *mana*: false prestige; *mada*: illusion; *anvitah*: absorbed in; *mohat*: because of confusion; *grhitva*: accepting; *asat*: non permanent; *grahan*: acquisitions; *pravartante*: they engage; *asuci vratah*: in impure vows.

"Taking shelter in insatiable lust, religious hypocrisy and false prestige, immersed in confused and delusional beliefs, they dedicate themselves to adharmic achievements, and engage in impure religious vows.

Sexual lust as a value in itself (or even the supreme value) is the biggest trap of all. It ensnares our rajasic tendencies and turns them into *tamas*, because it corrupts the genuine and healthy desire for pleasure and happiness into a dark, diseased, selfish and insensitive engagement in exploitation, possession and control of material objects and bodies that is the exact opposite of love. In extreme cases, this obsession for domination can also extend to a subtler mental level, where the *asura* especially enjoys the pain, anguish, fear, horror and despair he has created in other beings.

Sometimes this sadistic thrill even substitutes the normal sexual copulation act, as for example in sexual aggressions where the victim is violated with objects, or is treated like a hunter's trophy, disfigured or paraded around as a collectible item, a piece of property or the booty of victory. At this point of degradation, the criminal becomes firmly bound by the chains of *tamas* and is unable to find the way out from his madness - in fact, he comes to see it as the only possible reality, applicable to everyone.

There is no end to this distorted lust, because it is not connected to genuine healthy physical needs that can be easily satiated. It is a form of greed that feeds on itself, like a fire (*duspurena analena ca*, 3.39), instead of being appeased by the healthy and normal fulfillment of desire (as in eating a wholesome meal) because it is mixed with anger and cruelty and drags the mind from *rajas* to the darkest regions of *tamas*. Healthy normal sexual desire contains no anger or cruelty, but it grows from love and admiration and respect, and desire to please rather than being pleased, and is never directed to "objects" (or persons treated as objects) but to the soul and beauty as a divine manifestation worthy of worship. It's not about "scoring", "screwing" or "getting laid", and certainly it is not "nasty".

Krishna has already said that while *kama* supported by *dharma* is divine (7.11), the diseased and angry lust is the root cause of all crimes: *kama esa krodha esa rajo guna samudbhavah, mahasano maha papma viddhy enam iha vairinam*, "This is a mixture of desire and anger, originated from *rajas*. It is all-devouring, the cause of great crimes, and the real enemy in this world" (3.37). This "great sin" is the realm of diseased pornography, sado-masochism, "bondage" and humiliation/ punishment sex, performance syndrome and loser syndrome, artificial (usually chemical or medicinal) induction of sexual excitement, and artificial status symbols based on unnatural bodily appearance and sexual "prowess".

In the minds of these pathological psychiatric cases (*mana mada anvitah*), sexual insatiability is considered a virtue and a matter of pride especially at an advanced age. In extreme cases, they even come to consider rape and torture as a "religious merit" or an "instrument for social order", or claim that it should be a "legal right" (for example to have sex with small children).

It is not uncommon to find fake religionists in this category of lust-obsessed perverts, although in the case of so-called religious leaders such activities are generally performed behind closed doors and denied, minimized or dismissed in front of the public. Of course, in some cases it is also possible that unfounded accusations and rumors are circulated by enemies because of envy and spite. So how can we evaluate each particular situation? It is not difficult. We can ascertain the actual facts simply by examining the level of spiritual realization and the *gunas* of the particular individual as per the teachings of Krishna in *Bhagavad gita*.

A person who is firmly situated in *sattva* or *visuddha sattva*, and has realized *atma vidya*, is transcendental to material bodily identifications and attachments, and demonstrates his knowledge and divine characteristics (*daiva sampada*) in all other aspects of his life. If, on the other hand, we can directly observe asuric characteristics in some other sector of his life, we can legitimately believe that there could be some truth in rumors and accusations about his lustful behavior.

Of course, a sattvic or transcendental person's approach to sex is based on the fundamental principles of *dharma* - i.e. truthfulness/ honesty, compassion/ nonviolence, cleanliness/ simplicity, self restraint and ethical values. He may have a healthy consensual conjugal relationship based on love and affection, because spiritual or religious life does not require celibacy, but he will never take advantage of his position to solicit any type of physical or mental pleasure from his disciples or followers or anyone who is entrusted to him. Such behavior is only found in *asuras*.

Within the *arya* (civilized) Vedic society, *sudras* have no particular religious duty, therefore they can legitimately have whatever sexual relationship they like, as long as it is not against the fundamental principles of *dharma*, and their employers will take care of the *sudra*'s offspring together with the *sudra* servant himself/ herself as members of the family. A *vaisya* can have as many wives he wants and is able to maintain satisfactorily, and treats wives and children well, engaging them according to their specific abilities and inclinations. A *kshatriya* is bound by religious duty to satisfy any woman who requests sex from him, unless he has previously taken religious vows (*vratas*) that prevent him to do so - the *eka-patni vrata* (monogamous marriage) or in rare cases, total sexual abstinence that can be temporary or permanent (as in the case of Bhishma).

However, the *kshatriya* cannot reject a woman because he does not find her attractive enough; temporary abstinence only applies to specific periods or circumstances, and never depends on the man's preference of one woman rather than another. On the other hand, a *kshatriya* can also legitimately have sexual relationships with any number of women of his choice, provided the principles of *dharma* are not violated; no official ceremony or cohabitation is required, and all children are considered legitimate offspring. However, for the protection of the kingdom, a *kshatriya* king will try to find a suitable wife of appropriate character and disposition, a noble queen who will likely produce a worthy heir to the throne. For this reason, the most qualified *kshatriya* princesses used to choose their husbands in the *svayamvara* tournament, preferring warrior-like prowess over sentimental attraction.

A *brahmana* will only have sexual contact with his *dharma patni*, in the proper frame of religious consciousness, in order to generate children who are endowed with divine qualities. Such a wife was usually found with the help of qualified and wise astrologers who examined the birth horoscopes and verified the compatibility of the union. The father of the bride then entrusted the girl to the care of the husband, and the newly weds started their religious and spiritual life together in full cooperation, as two halves of the same body.

The expression *grihitva grahan* indicates *lobha* (greed) for non permanent/ material things (*asat*). The desire to acquire permanent/ spiritual things (*sat*) is good, because through an ardent desire for God we attain liberation and perfection. The word *grihitva* literally means "accepting, adopting, taking", while *grahan* means "objectives, achievements".

A *griha* ("home") is not a building but a family circle that grows from the mutual acceptance of husband and wife, children, relatives, friends, professional occupation, etc. Sattvic people have a *sat griha* that facilitates spiritual progress, ethical values, cooperation, love, trust and happiness, while asuric people have *asat grihas*, where lust, greed, sufferings, frustration, deceit, despair, hatred and envy proliferate, causing disasters at individual and collective level. It all depends on our choices.

We should not delude ourselves into thinking that someone cannot be an *asura* simply because s/he is externally engaged in religious vows or practices. Here Krishna clearly states that *asuras* are characterized by religious hypocrisy and normally engage in religious vows based on false prestige (*mana*) and greed (*kama*) for material results. In some cases, *asuras* even resort to the external chanting of spiritual *maha mantras* composed by the Names of God, but their intentions are dirty and they remain unable to open their hearts to spiritual blessings and become purified - so they continue in their abominable activities even after decades of "spiritual *sadhana*".

These impure vows in which *asuras* engage (*pravaritante asuci vratah*) are mostly those meant to obtain the power to harm innocent and harmless people and exploit them for one's selfish material lust and greed. This also includes "child marriages" and all non-consensual unions, irrespective of the official ceremonies involved. Another type of impure vow is based on deceit, false prestige and religious ostentation, such as the impressive austerities or grand donations to some particular religious institution or church/ temple on the basis of personal advantage, such as name and fame or profit. In these religious activities there is no space for actual shastric knowledge or *atma vidya* (16.23, 17.4-6, 18.31-32) and society at large is not benefited. In fact, the wealth donated (especially gold or money) will in some case be used for unethical purposes or inspire criminal activities such as embezzlement, theft, etc.

A classical example of impure religious activity is blood sacrifice of all kinds, especially in the killing of harmless animals. Vedic civilization never required such rituals, but allows them in special cases and it regulates them so that degraded people in *rajas* and *tamas* who crave for meat can satisfy their desire in a controlled way. Contrarily to what many people believe, the ancient Vedic rituals called *gomedha* and *asvamedha yajna* were not ordinary animal sacrifices, but involved a very complex and deep symbolism that can be easily detected in the original descriptions, where the "animal" of the sacrifice is clearly described as the *Virata Rupa* itself. In their biased speculations, colonial writers have mistranslated and in some cases even manipulated the original texts to present Vedic religion as a barbarous, immoral and violent superstition whose substitution with Christianity would save the Indian people, but we know that they had no respect for the basic principles of *dharma*, and their teachings must be discarded without hesitation.

चिन्तामपरिमेयां च प्रलयान्तामुपाश्रिताः । कामोपभोगपरमा एतावदिति निश्चिताः ॥ १६-११ ॥

cintāmaparimeyāṃ ca pralayāntāmupāśritāḥ | kāmopabhogaparamā etāvaditi niścītāḥ || 16-11 ||

cintam: worries; *aparimeyam*: endless; *ca*: and; *pralaya antam*: even to the end; *upasritah*: having taken shelter; *kama upabhoga*: enjoyment of sense pleasures; *parama*: the supreme (goal of life); *etavat*: thus; *iti*: like this; *niscitah*: without doubt.

"They certainly remain immersed in endless worries up to the very end of their lives, because they have taken shelter of mere sense gratification as the supreme purpose of life.

The word *cintam* literally means "fear for worries" and refers to the impermanence of the results obtained through material efforts. *Aparimeyam* means "endless, huge, immeasurable, infinite", and refers to a disproportionate and pathological attachment to materialism and its inherent fears.

In the case of *asuras*, this fear is not just the normal preoccupation about the loss of property and position that inevitably occurs in the course of time or even the danger of untimely losses, but it expands into the conscious or subconscious anticipation of the negative karmic consequences that they will have to pay for the adharmic (*asat*) actions that were performed to obtain such property or position. *Asuras* are always terrified because of their dirty conscience and have a tendency to see enemies everywhere, even when other people have no intention of attacking them. Each *asura* is naturally an enemy to the others, because they pretend to cooperate and ally but they are just waiting for the opportunity to stab each other's backs and grab the loot. Because they become accustomed to this mentality, they end up projecting it over everyone, including innocent and harmless people (*atmavan manyate jagat*, "everyone thinks that others have his same mentality"). This will be elaborated in the next verses in more details.

Over and above all, they are terrified by death, because they strongly identify with their material body, possessions and position, and they are uninterested, if not strongly opposed, to the genuine religious life that is based on the transcendental realization of the *atman/ brahman*. They know that the particular type of degraded sense gratification, lust and greed they have chosen to pursue is only available in a gross material body, and they are willing to go to any length to prolong their own lives in their miserable bodies. This mentality brings to organ transplants, artificial life support, and similar practices including genetic engineering - all asuric practices that do not give any actual improvement in one's life but easily distract one from the real purpose of life.

The word *upabhoga* means "lower pleasures", and specifically refers to the inferior quality of tamasic and rajasic pleasures compared to sattvic or transcendental pleasures (*brahmananda, spanda*). This will also be elaborated in chapter 17 (17.7-10) with reference to the food choices influenced by the various *gunas*. In the specific case of *asuras*, such pleasures are truly abominable and normally inspire disgust, horror and revulsion to any naturally healthy and sane person.

There are several level of asuric consciousness. Some poor conditioned souls are so far gone into the asuric consciousness that we cannot do anything to help them; in fact trying to help them will excite even more anger and violence from their part. Their only salvation lies in repeated births in lowly and difficult positions, by which they will exhaust their greed for degraded pleasures and at the same time experience a measure of suffering that will gradually teach them to avoid causing pain to others in the future.

Others, who still have some measure of human consciousness, can be helped in this very lifetime by our good example and inspiration, and by the establishment of a positive social environment where sense gratification is available on a more sattvic level. After all, as Krishna has already declared (*param drstva nivartate*, 2.59), one can give up a bad habit only when he finds something better to focus on. Prohibition, repression or artificial abstinence will be of no use (3.33) and corporal punishment based on inflicting pain and/ or humiliation on the transgressor will only aggravate the situation because it increases *tamas*, even to the risk of degrading the "punishers" as well, and bonding them into a pathological relationship to their victims, with disastrous karmic consequences.

At a more superficial level, a normal human being can also feel the influence of asuric nature, especially when society is badly directed and everyone is subject to constant aggressions at all levels. It is a temptation and occasionally a good human being might fall into the sticky marshes of *tamas*, thus becoming confused by fears and worries, identifications and attachments, and inferior pleasures. But we all have a choice, at all times, whether we want to take further shelter in divine consciousness or asuric consciousness, and each and everyone of us is responsible for his/ her own choices. With a very careful balancing act, we can remain in an intermediate position (*tisthanti*, 14.18) for some time and even temporarily escape to safer grounds into material *sattva* (2.43, 6.41, 8.16, 9.20), but if we do not progress further towards liberation from material identifications and attachments, we will again fall to the level of *rajas* and risk sliding further into *tamas*. Even on the level of material *sattva* and *rajas* there will be worries (*cintam*) and a relatively inferior quality of pleasure, therefore the best solution is to elevate ourselves to the level of transcendental realization, that is characterized by *sat* (eternity), *cit* (knowledge) and *ananda* (happiness). Nothing less will really satisfy the soul.

आशापाशशतैर्बद्धाः कामक्रोधपरायणाः । ईहन्ते कामभोगार्थमन्यायेनार्थसञ्चयान् ॥ १६-१२ ॥

āsāpāśaśatairbaddhāḥ kāmakrodhaparāyaṇāḥ | ihante kāmabhogārthamanyāyēnārthasañcayān || 16-12 ||

asa: wishes; *pasa*: ropes; *sataih*: by hundreds of; *baddhah*: bound; *kama*: lust; *krodha*: rage; *parayanah*: always focused on; *ihante*: they desire; *kama bhoga*: the enjoyment of lust; *artham*: for the purpose; *anyayena*: by any means; *artha*: wealth; *sancayan*: accumulation.

"Bound by hundreds of ropes in the form of desires, always immersed in lust and anger, they strive to increase their desires and for that purpose they adopt any means to accumulate wealth.

All these desires are actually ropes that tie the conditioned soul to worries (*cinta*), fear (*bhaya*) and anger (*krodha*), but the deluded fool is proud of them as if they were valuable and prestigious ornaments. The word *baddha* literally means "bound, conditioned", and is the exact opposite of perfection in life (*siddha*).

A prisoner actually has no control over properties or powers or position, but because he is mentally deranged he becomes all the more attached to the things he considers his properties, powers or position, and is ready to commit any crime for their sake.

The word *anyayena* contains the meaning of "by any means" (including illegal means such as begging, borrowing or stealing or robbing) and "from others" (as "from anyone" without consideration of justice or compassion). *Asuras* believe in the principle of scarcity - that the amount of power and opulences in this world is limited and the strongest must appropriate them before someone else does, even if this means violating the rights of others. For them, "might is right" enough.

Since the *asuras* believe that *kama* and *krodha* are values for, and in themselves, they engage completely in pursuing them (*pravartante*, 16.10). Because they have dedicated their life (*parayana*) to this purpose, they become overly attached to their plans, one after the other, always worried about their implementation (*cinta*). Good people make plans too, but they are not excessively attached, because they know that honest and constructive work will produce positive results sooner or later, and if one attempt fails, we can try again and success will come eventually. On the other hand, the *asuras'* work is neither honest nor constructive (*ugra karmani*), and is more an uncertain gamble than a true enterprise, so the amount of fear created is much greater.

One may think that *asuras* are cleverly saving energies and resources by cutting corners, exploiting and cheating others, but it is not so. The word *ihante* means "they desire, strive, work hard" and in fact we observe that abominable enterprises entail a greater deal of effort and sufferings and expenditures, and greater risks of loss, than dharmic professional enterprises. A lot of this effort is spent in fighting against other *asuras* and cheaters of all sorts, and being beaten by each other.

The purpose of the *asuras* is to amass as much wealth as possible, beyond the actual needs of their operations and livelihood, and even more than they will possibly be able to spend, because they lose sight of reality and slide into delusion. What will the *asura* do with 50 personal cars? One or two vehicles are more than sufficient, and the rest will simply sit in the garage and gather dust. Why should someone have 500 pairs of shoes? Good food can be expensive, but it does not cost millions. Most of the objects acquired by very rich people are stowed away and quickly forgotten, never to be used.

In fact, the accumulation of wealth and hoarding of resources (*artha sancayam*) becomes an end in itself, a bitter surrogate to real happiness, and it often causes unnecessary loss and damage and waste of property and materials. The miser sits on a mountain of food and watches it slowly rotting away, because he cannot eat more than what will fill his stomach every day, but he will not tolerate the idea of distributing the excess food to those who are starving and were deprived by him in the first place. And still his greed is not satiated, and he feels frustrated and angry, and prefers to destroy things rather than allowing others to have them.

The example of the ropes (*asa pasa*) is also used to describe the *gunas* or main influences of material nature (*sattva, rajas, tamas*), that create a tangled net in which the conditioned soul is trapped. However, both the categories of desires and *gunas* can be used for our progress and evolution towards liberation and the attainment of perfection in the purpose of life. It is all a question of knowledge.

The adharmic asuric tendencies are the real reason why a society becomes degraded and people face so many problems in their individual and collective lives. Greed and delusional hopes goad the conditioned souls to engage in abominable activities, even against their wishes (3.36), accepting jobs that are contrary to their principles or abilities, and that make them sick physically and mentally. The same greed and delusional hope attracts foolish people to support depraved politicians in a dirty game of populism and deceit that passes for democracy, and to betray their own family and friends and even their own selves.

इदमद्य मया लब्धमिमं प्राप्स्ये मनोरथम् ।

इदमस्तीदमपि मे भविष्यति पुनर्धनम् ॥ १६-१३ ॥

idamadya mayā labdhamimam prāpsye manoratham | idamastidamapi me bhaviṣyati punardhanam | | 16-13 | |

idam: this; *adya*: today; *maya*: by me; *labdham*: accumulated; *imam*: this; *prapsye*: I will obtain; *manah ratham*: whatever the mind can imagine; *idam*: this; *asti*: there is; *idam*: this; *api*: also; *me*: mine; *bhaviṣyati*: it will become; *punah*: more; *dhanam*: wealth.

"Today I have acquired all this, and I will get even more, as much as my mind desires. This wealth is mine, and it will increase more and more.

This is the picture of capitalistic society, where the accumulation of resources is considered a value in itself, and new extravagant needs are created artificially just to please the mind that is conditioned and deluded by insatiable greed, lust and anger.

Asuric capitalism is hugely different from the Vedic system of wealth production by *vaisyas* and *kshatriyas*, where accumulation of resources is temporary and instrumental to the benefit of the entire kingdom and all the *prajas*. The excess wealth produced by the *vaiśya grihasthas* is distributed to all other sections of society, as we have explained in the commentary to the verse 1 of this chapter. The treasury of the king and other *kshatriyas* is also used for the common good - to equip the defense department, build roads, and further the progress of all subjects. Whatever the *brahmanas* obtain as donations, they use only the strict requirements for their modest maintenance, and they distribute the rest to meritorious and needy people in the form of *prasadam*. Under the guidance of *brahmanas*, all *kshatriyas* and *vaisyas* regularly become the *yajamanas* of *yajnas* or religious rituals for the well being and prosperity of all the *prajas*, and in such ceremonies there is always a substantial distribution of good food and other wealth to all, including the animals.

In the asuric economic system, the subjects are exploited and left unprotected: this is a behavior characteristic of thieves, not of rulers, as explained clearly in *Bhagavata Purana*: *praja hi lubdhai rajanyair, nirghrinair dasyu dharmabhih, acchinna dara dravina, dasyanti giri kananam*, "Losing their wives and properties to such avaricious and merciless rulers, who will behave no better than ordinary thieves, the citizens will flee to the mountains and forests" (12.2.8) and *dasyu prayesu rajasu, cauryanrita vritha himsa, nana vrittisu vai nrisu, sudra prayesu varnesu*, "The kings will mostly be thieves, the occupations of men will be stealing, lying and needless violence, and all the social classes will be reduced to the lowest level of *sudras*" (12.2.13-14). The Kali yuga *avatara*, Kalki, will specifically appear to eliminate all such false rulers: *vicaran asuna ksaunyam, hayenapratima dyutih, nripa linga cchado dasyun, kotiso nihanisyati* (12.2.19). This characteristic of Kali yuga was already detected by Parikshit (*Bhagavata Purana*, 1.17.1-6) when he met the degraded *sudra* dressed as a king, who was cruelly beating a cow and a bull. The present economic and political system is fundamentally a cheating system, that exploits the weakest *prajas* instead of protecting them. It is made of multinational corporations that control the fundamental needs of the

people - food, medicines, living quarters, energy, basic supplies - in all their stages, from production to retail sales (called "distribution"). The system is carefully engineered as to set lower prices on low quality industrial products that actually damage the health of the consumers and the environment as well, thus creating new business opportunities for the "remedies" to the ensuing problems.

Over and above all, the bank system has taken control of the various world governments, making money without producing anything and encouraging or supporting adharmic enterprises of all kinds, favoring allies and punishing adversaries by manipulating the stock market, lobbying and forcing unjust legislation - especially by making cheap and good healthy things illegal. Racketeering, insider information leaks, black market, usury, financial slavery through debts become normal practices. Wars are carefully planned simply to create business opportunities for weapon manufacturing and civil reconstruction, and to take control of valuable resources of the invaded regions.

The general masses are brainwashed with the myth of consumerism as prosperity, but the quality of life of the members of society steadily decreases. In the end, huge dumps of garbage are created, especially by planned obsolescence and unnecessary complex packaging, while the things that are really important and vital become increasingly difficult and rare, if not impossible to find. The system implacably devours land, water, fuel, mineral resources, food, animals and people through various types of *ugra karma* business, especially with the production of non vegetarian food, that causes immense loss of land and water, as well as numerous diseases.

There is nothing wrong in acquiring valuable resources and objects, because *artha* is one of the main goals of human life according to Vedic scriptures. However, *artha* must be acquired only after a strict training in *dharma*, and must always avoid violating the principles of *dharma* such as *satya* (truthfulness/ honesty), *daya* (compassion), *sauca* (cleanliness) and *tapas* (restraint). Some people believe that a *vaisya* cannot do business without cheating and lying, but this is a dangerous delusion because it opens the doors to *adharma* and *tamas*, with disastrous consequences for the entire society. It is undoubtedly the result of a slave mentality, because under a colonialist government or any predatory government, people are forced to lie and hide their actual wealth and profit, otherwise they will be utterly stripped of everything by their greedy rulers, and maybe even killed.

On the other hand, when the government is based on dharmic (ethical) principles, *vaisyas* can prosper openly without fear, and without any need for cheating or lying. Also, the citizens will not feel the need to accumulate excess wealth because they have no fear for the future, as the entire social system is engineered to support all its members at all times, and the happiness of the people does not depend on tamasic pursuits.

असौ मया हतः शत्रुर्हनिष्ये चापरानपि । ईश्वरोऽहमहं भोगी सिद्धोऽहं बलवान्सुखी ॥ १६-१४ ॥

asau mayā hataḥ śatruḥhaniṣye cāparānapi | īśvaro'hamahaṁ bhogī siddho'haṁ balavānsukhī || 16-14||

asau: that; *maya*: by me; *hatah*: killed; *satruh*: enemy; *hanisye*: I will eliminate; *ca*: and; *aparan*: others; *api*: also; *isvarah*: the Lord; *aham*: I am; *aham*: I am; *bhogi*: enjoyer; *siddhah*: perfect; *aham*: I am; *bala van*: powerful; *sukhi*: happy.

"I have killed that enemy of mine, and I will kill others, too. I am the Lord and master (of all I survey). I am the enjoyer. I am perfect, powerful and happy.

Asuras have strange ideas about enemies. Their motto is, "one who is not with me is against me". Vedic scriptures define "enemy" as someone who is physically attacking us with hostile intent, but *asuras* consider as enemies not just those who physically attack them, but all those who refuse to submit and worship them, or could be considered competition. Krishna has stated (12.18) that a devotee should be equally balanced and impartial towards enemies and friends (*samah satrau ca mitre ca*), but of course this does not mean that we should never fight back those who attack us or our subordinates.

The meaning of *dharma yuddha*, often mistranslated as "holy war", has nothing to do with the attempt to materially enforce some religious ideology, but it is simply to protect the fundamental principles of ethics and the life of the *prajas* - the harmless, innocent, and good people that support society. A *kshatriya* who dies in such selfless line of duty is immediately elevated to a higher level of existence (2.37, 11.33).

There are precise rules in dharmic battles: a warrior can only fight against an equal opponent, and never attack one who is not willing to fight, including those active warriors who have lost weapons or armor, or are wounded or incapacitated. It is considered adharmic to attack any non-combatants, or to destroy trees or houses or crops. Women, children, farmers and civilians in general are never touched or threatened in any way; there is never any "collateral damage" or "reprisal".

On the other hand, the *asuras'* idea of war is not limited by ethical considerations, and in fact they usually resort to cynical terrorism by attacking, kidnapping and raping women and children, destroying cities and villages, tormenting all peaceful civilians, and resorting to dirty tactics and devious mean such as deceit, political games, assassination, slandering and character assassination, blackmailing, betrayal and back stabbing, destruction of innocence and demoralization of the adversaries.

And the scope of their greed is unlimited: they are not content with one village, one city, one kingdom, one nation, or even one planet: they even try to artificially reach other planets to establish their dominion there, too. Ravana planned to build a staircase to Svarga, and our contemporary *asuras* delude themselves and their followers into thinking that if they totally destroy or "consume" this planet, it will still be possible to "export" their way of life on other planets or space stations.

When we speak of "emperor" and "empire" in Vedic civilization, it is about a federation of smaller kingdoms that recognize a leader to whom to rally in times of danger and need, and who will resolve their disputes and guide them in cooperating for the common benefit. The emperor never interfered with the internal affairs of the vassal kingdoms, that freely chose their own kings, social systems, religious institutions and cultural customs.

On the other hand, *asuras* want to completely control the land and the peoples they conquer, and demand to be worshiped above all Deities and authorities, thus uniting both religious and material power directly under themselves. They cannot tolerate dissent or questioning of any kind, and they take all opportunities to avenge themselves of any real or imagined offense, and even to conduct preventive strikes against any potential future opponents. For example, Kamsa tried to kill his own sister Devaki when he suspected that her unborn son could one day threaten his position, and even if he was finally persuaded to abstain from such an abominable action, he nevertheless kept

Devaki and her husband Vasudeva locked up for many years and systematically killed their children at birth. By reading the many stories of *asuras* in the *Puranas*, we notice that they demanded to be worshiped as God, and actively persecuted anyone who refused to do so. *Asuras* are characterized by impudent hypocrisy and arrogant belief of their own egotistic divinity, as *isvara* (the Lord) usurping God's position as the owner of all planets, the enjoyer or beneficiary of all actions and the object of worship for all beings (*bhoktaram yajna tapasam sarva loka mahesvaram, suhridam sarva bhutanam, 5.29*).

It is easy to spot the *asura* in the religious field because he invariably usurps the position of God in the worship of his followers, putting up his own pictures and images in the temple and demanding that regular rituals to be performed to them. It becomes normal for his followers to declare themselves *his* devotees or devotees of *his* organization rather than devotees of God, to chant his name instead of God's names, and to follow only the books written by him instead of studying genuine *shastra*. He arranges their marriages, tries to control their sexual life, and holds complete power over their income and possessions - assuming total control over their personal lives, demanding to be given all their wealth and service at any time, in "full surrender".

A genuine *guru*, on the other hand, always keeps a secondary position in the spiritual practices of his followers, and teaches them how to worship God. Sometimes, to facilitate neophytes who have some tamasic tendencies and expectations, a genuine *guru* will allow them to focus on his person in order to develop affection and gratitude for his tutoring, but such leniency should never be allowed to affect the development of self realization of the disciple or his/ her direct relationship with the Supreme Consciousness. Besides, it should always remain on the level of affectionate family dealings, and not develop into the fearful formal worship demanded by a dictator.

Foolish and ignorant people can easily be misled by clever manipulators who present demons as good people or even as saints, criminals as victims, friends as enemies, and the other way around. For those who are afflicted by a materialistic vision, the enemy is simply someone who seems not to belong to our camp: this perspective gives no space for consideration of *dharma*, justice, or even decency or common sense, but the *asura* still believes he is in a perfectly moral, rightful and legitimate position, because his opinion constitutes the absolute religious truth. For example, for a hardened rapist, the "enemy" will be a child who finds the courage to subtract him/ herself from his predatory clutches, and who might expose his violent habits by revealing his actions to the public. Therefore in the distorted mind of the criminal, the child "should be eliminated". Anyone else who may protect the child from him will also become his "enemy". Similarly, a witness to a heinous crime will be considered as an enemy by a mafia boss, and in totalitarian regimes anyone who does not subscribe to the government dogma becomes an "enemy of the State" by that very reason, even if he does not take any aggressive action.

Can the mere fact of existing independently be considered an aggressive crime punishable by death? Can asking questions about obviously incorrect actions and conclusions be considered an aggressive crime? Can the mere fact of having different religious/ spiritual beliefs be considered a crime punishable by death? Or in other words, is freedom of thought a crime? According to the demoniac mentality, it is. According to the divine mentality, it is not.

Religion should be a personal matter. Religious leaders or *brahmanas* (and especially *sannyasis*) should have zero material power in society, politics, law making, or even possess any property. Whatever donation they are given in the form of land, cows, wealth, grains etc, they should only use what is necessary and dispose of the rest for the benefit of society at large. Religious imperialism has nothing to do with God, and everything to do with asuric mentality: it aims to control more people by deceit or violence, and preaches that we can get more pleasure in paradise if we eliminate all those who do not convert and submit to our own group.

True *brahmanas* should merely teach and offer consultancies, both in public and in private, and if required, oppose incorrect and detrimental opinions presented as genuine truth. An opinion is physically dangerous only when it presents violent aggression as a legitimate (or the only legitimate) way of life. Bad actions must be counteracted by prevention and forceful opposition, but bad opinions must be counteracted by opinions only - by discussion and debate, preferably in public. This is the Vedic system. In this regard, out of humility one could feel hesitant in entering such a debate against great personalities - heads of famous religious institutions, teachers with many followers, or powerful social figures. But if these people are taking an adharmic position, no matter what their reasons are, they must be fearlessly challenged and opposed in debate, just like Krishna instructed Arjuna to take arms against his elders on the battlefield of Kurukshetra.

आढ्योऽभिजनवानस्मि कोऽन्योऽस्ति सदृशो मया । यक्ष्ये दास्यामि मोदिष्य इत्यज्ञानविमोहिताः ॥ १६-१५ ॥

āḍhyo'bhijanavānasmi ko'nyo'sti sadṛśo mayā ।

yakṣye dāsyāmi modīṣya ityajñānavimohitāḥ ॥ 16-15 ॥

adhyah: prosperous; *abhijana van*: one who has many followers; *asmi*: I am; *kah*: who; *anyah*: other; *asti*: there is; *sadrishah*: comparable to; *maya*: me; *yakṣye*: I will perform rituals; *dasyami*: I shall give charity; *modisye*: I will be happy; *iti*: like this; *ajnana*: by ignorance; *vimohitah*: confused.

"Confused by ignorance (he thinks): I have many followers, I am successful and wealthy. Who can be compared to me? I shall perform rituals, I shall distribute charity, and I shall be pleased by the results.

It is said, "power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely". However, as it was noticed by the brilliant author of *Dune*, power itself does not corrupt, but attracts people who are already corrupt or corruptible - individuals that can be considered pathologically imbalanced (*mada anvitah*, 16.10). These are the *asuras*.

Because in Kali yuga the general masses of people are immersed in *tamas*, and believe that wealth and material success are the self-explanatory evidence of sanctity (*Bhagavata Purana* 12.2.2-6), naturally *asuras* will tend to demonstrate their exalted spiritual and religious position and become popular by accumulating wealth, building impressive expensive *ashramas* and temples, gaining as many followers as possible, conducting grandiose and very visible religious rituals with complex and pompous celebrations, and making a big show of charity distribution. All this, however, is done for the selfish pleasure (*modisye*) and for the aggrandizement and commercial advertisement of himself or his group or organization, with the purpose of increasing the business - getting more followers, more donations, more political weight. In a smaller degree, these asuric tendencies can be observed among the general population during the traditional religious festivals. Those who are largely influenced by *tamas* are anxious to make a bigger *pandal* than their neighbors, to get

the most powerful loudspeakers to make sure everybody notice it, and to purchase the largest and more decorative temporary statues and to conduct the most impressive rituals and processions. However, these *pandal* festivals often become a pretext to unlawfully collect money from the public, purchase food (and usually liquors and other intoxicants) for a small group of organizers, play noisy materialistic music for a few days, and create a sort of temporary social club, while at the end the "used idol" is discarded into the garbage dump.

A much better way to observe such festivals would be for all the local people to unite in cooperation and organize meetings and celebrations at a permanent temple, where the Deity is regularly worshiped all year round. There people will sit together to actually sing devotional songs and especially to discuss about the divine glories, activities, qualities, and teachings. At the end of each such meeting all the participants should be served good quality but simple pure vegetarian *prasadam* food, and offered whatever gifts will be appropriate to the occasion, such as booklets, *malas* etc. In this way there will be no waste or public inconvenience, and the community sense will become stronger.

The importance of permanent temples in the life of civilized society should not be underestimated, but such temples should not become centers of asuric mentality.

The Deities should be served with love and respect, but their decoration is less important than the distribution of spiritual knowledge and consciousness among the members of the community. Putting too much emphasis on expensive materials, paraphernalia and decorations will stimulate the *rajas* and *tamas* (lust and greed) of people, including the priests, and the level of consciousness will fall immediately.

In Vedic times, the *vigrahas* of the Deities were sculpted already complete with clothing and ornaments, and the decoration of the temples was relatively austere although the architecture could be impressive. There was a lot of imagery, but mostly in stone and paintings. People went to visit the temple to raise their consciousness by listening to the chanting of the *mantras* and *stutis*, and by receiving the simple *prasadam* consisting in offered flowers, leaves, *chandana*, and fruits.

The ideal - and transcendental - level of religiosity (*visuddha sattva*) is that large temples should not be built or managed in the name of a group or organization or even a king, but in the name of God only, and everybody could have access and be allowed to serve and worship there. Otherwise it is a private temple and it is not for the glory of God but for one's own pleasure and glory (*modisye*).

People who do not have sufficient knowledge and understanding about the purpose of religious life usually believe that it should be about "doing good deeds", and earning pious merits to counteract the consequences of their bad actions. Therefore they only offer financial support to those spiritualists who make a big show of such public activities, even if only with a few photos and very rare events. This stimulates and reinforces the tamasic and rajasic tendencies of the donors, who can boast - albeit as subordinate doers - of being great and powerful above all others, advertise themselves as important people in society, and feel "pious" because of the wealth they gave in charity and "earning elevation to paradise" that is a place full of heavenly pleasures. However, this charity is rarely done with respect and the proper consideration. All too often the donors give only stuff they cannot use any more and want to get rid of - stale or damaged food, old clothes, shoes, and other garbage. The actual sattvic or transcendental charity, however, is something else. It is performed quietly and without boasting about it, because it is needed and useful, and to please God as the sum total of human society, without expecting anything in return (17.20-22, 18.25).

The word *abhijanavan* specifically refers to noble ancestry, prominent family, or high caste. This vainglory is found in many other groups who have no understanding of the transcendental science, *atma vidya*, and who identify with the material body. As we have seen many times, this *ahankara* and *mamatva* is the root of all ignorance, and as such, it generates an asuric tendency.

अनेकचित्तविभ्रान्ता मोहजालसमावृताः । प्रसक्ताः कामभोगेषु पतन्ति नरकेऽशुचौ ॥ १६-१६ ॥

anekacittavibhrāntā mohajālasamāvṛtāḥ | prasaktāḥ kāmabhogeṣu patanti narake'śucau || 16-16 ||

aneka: many; *citta*: worries; *vibhranta*: tormented; *moha jala*: by a net of illusions; *samavritah*: covered; *prasaktah*: attached; *kama bhogesu*: in the enjoyment of lust; *patanti*: they fall down; *narake*: in a hellish condition; *asucau*: impure.

"Tormented by innumerable anxieties and covered by a net of illusion, (hopelessly) attached to the enjoyment of lust, they fall into a dirty hellish condition.

The word *citta* literally means "thoughts", as in "mental activities". Because this word is coupled with *vibhranta* ("tormented", "burned"), we understand that such laboring of the mind is painful and debilitating. It is not just anxiety, but it also includes schemes, hopes, desires, and resentments, all in a tangled net that completely binds the conditioned soul to ultimate anxiety.

Another word for "anxiety" is *kuntha*, that also means "thorn", as mentioned for example in *Bhagavata Purana* (3.32.17): *rajasa kuntha manasah, kamatmano ajitendriyah*, "their minds full of anxieties because of *rajas*, they remain immersed in lust without restraint". The level of transcendental consciousness is called *vaikuntha* ("without anxiety") or *vigata kuntha yatra* ("where all anxieties are gone") because a self realized soul is satisfied with whatever joys and opulences life delivers, and serenely accepts the fact that he will have to let them go one day. This is possible only when we have overcome the material identification (*ahankara*) and attachments (*mamatva*).

On the contrary, *asuras* have no other purpose than enjoying this body in this lifetime, so their anxiety is all-devouring. It was already mentioned in verse 11 (*cinta*) as a major characteristic of their lives, and here it is repeated again. The expression *moha jala samavritah* literally means "caught in the fishing net of illusion", and illustrates how *asuras* keep very busy trying to weave their schemes and theories and systems, but inevitably end up tangled in their own traps. Under their false and delusional fantasies of religion (*dambha*), they imagine that they are going to enjoy in heaven because of their righteousness, but even if they call this world "a valley of tears", they are never really eager to leave it. And when the danger of death approaches, they frantically seek the help of hospitals and doctors to get a few more days of a miserable life. In their deepest heart of hearts, where their silenced conscience sits, they know that they are not going to paradise or Vaikuntha, but they have already sunk into a hellish existence (*patanti narake*), as they have created thousands of Vaitaranis (the symbolic hellish river full of all impure stuff such as blood, pus, bones etc) already on this Earth. Their condition is characterized by *moha* (illusion), *prasaktavya* (excessive attachment) and *asaucam* (uncleanliness). Their *ugra karma* is religious only superficially, and in fact

their rituals and ceremonies are impure because they give more importance to a big show of opulence than to simplicity, honesty and purity. At the moment of death, such position only becomes more apparent, because they lose the shelter of the gross material body they used to hide their bad conscience. What will they do? They have already developed tamasic qualities, and they cannot switch to divine consciousness automatically, even with all the blessings of the priests and churches of the world.

A soul's next destination at death is not determined by any external authority, but only by its actual individual consciousness, determined by its actions during life: *yam yam vapi smaran bhavam tyajaty ante kalevaram, tam tam evaiti kaunteya sada tad bhava bhavitah*, "O Arjuna, whatever nature one remembers at the time of leaving the body, s/he attains precisely that state of being, because of always contemplating that existence" (8.6).

This is particularly true for materialists: *rajasi pralayam gatva karma sangisu jayate, tatha pralinas tamasi mudha yonisu jayate*, "When death comes, those who are under the influence of *rajas* take a new birth among those who are attached to activities, while those who meet destruction while under the influence of *tamas* take birth in matrices devoid of intelligence" (14.15).

आत्मसम्भाविताः स्तब्धा धनमानमदान्विताः । यजन्ते नामयज्ञैस्ते दम्भेनाविधिपूर्वकम् ॥ १६-१७ ॥

ātmasambhāvitaḥ stabdhā dhanamānamadānvitāḥ | yajante nāmayajñāiste dambhenāvidhipūrvakam || 16-17 ||

atma sambhavitah: egotistic; *stabdhah*: impudent; *dhana*: wealth; *mana*: false prestige; *mada anvitah*: deluded by; *yajante*: they perform rituals; *nama yajnaḥ*: that are sacrifices only in name; *te*: they; *dambhena*: because of arrogance; *vidhi purvakam*: devoid of knowledge and proper rules.

"Deluded by egotism, impudence, false prestige and (the possession of) wealth, they celebrate rituals and sacrifices that have no real value, because of their hypocrisy and ignorance of the proper purpose and rules.

Krishna continues to describe how the typical *asuras* make a big show of religiosity to impress the foolish and ignorant people and obtain their support, obedience and allegiance.

The expression *atma sambhavitah* could be translated as "self-made man", someone who considers himself not accountable to anyone else, even to God, and therefore becomes irresponsible in his actions. Such an *asura* is very opinionated - we could say "over-opinionated and under-informed". He firmly believes he does not need to learn anything, not caring for scriptures, and in his self conceit he does not hesitate to preach principles that are blatantly against the genuine scriptures, against *dharma*, *jnana*, and *vidya*, but he presents his own speculations as "the age-old religious tradition". Another translation of *atma sambhavitah* is "having a very high opinion of oneself"; this indicates that they consider themselves to be worshipable, so they hijack the people's worship from God to themselves and/ or their group, organization etc. Some of such false preachers even claim to be divine *avatars*, misappropriate "by proxy" the authority of some genuine *acharya* of the past, or manufacture their own God figure or ideology for political material purposes, to better exploit people and resources, and thrive on the general ignorance among the masses about the fundamental principles of *dharma* and *vidya*. It is true that we cannot put any limit on the number and activities of genuine divine *avatars*: *avatara hy asankhyeya, hareh sattva nidher dvijah, yathavidasinah kulyah, sarasah syuh sahasrasah*, "The manifestations of Hari in this world are innumerable, like the thousands of lakes, rivers and creeks that flow from the ocean of *sattva*" (*Bhagavata Purana* 1.3.26). But all such *avatars* are always characterized by the same fundamental dharmic mission: *paritranaaya sadhunam vinasaya ca duskritam, dharma samsthapanarthaya sambhavami yuge yuge*, "I manifest myself *yuga* after *yuga*, to protect the good people, destroy the evil doers and to establish *dharma*" (4.8). Since the principles of *dharma* are eternal and universal (*sanatana*), a true *avatara* is recognized by the fact that he protects the good (harmless, innocent) people, destroys the evil doers and brings back the consciousness and application of the original *dharma*. If some "*avatara*" is not demonstrating these characteristics or his teachings are not compatible with the fundamental principles of *dharma* and the transcendental knowledge contained in the genuine original scriptures, it's better to give him a large berth.

Even those who keep their profile a bit lower, and merely present themselves as *sannyasis* or *babajis*, should be considered *asuras* if their teachings and behavior are against the eternal and universal principles of *dharma* and *vidya*. We should certainly be very cautious about accepting the authenticity of *sannyasis* who engage in adharmic activities against the rules of *sannyasa*, such as political wrangling and institutional power games, persecution of dissenters or competitors, or even if they simply claim all rights and no duties, living and behaving like kings without bothering to honor the responsibilities that come with a royal position.

A genuine *sannyasi* has no house, no personal properties, no bank account, no pride, no personal servant. He is always happy only to hear and speak about Transcendence. A *sannyasi* cannot engage in politics, trade, business or any material activity to maintain himself, but rather he should simply accept whatever alms are coming spontaneously. If he is not able to face such austere and difficult life, he should humbly step down, as recommended in *Brahma vaivarta Purana*: *asvamedham gavalambhām sannyasam pala paitrkam, devarena sutopattim kalau panca vivarjayet*, "In this age of Kali, one should skip five religious traditions: the *asvamedha yajna*, the *gomedha yajna*, the acceptance of the order of *sannyasa*, the oblations to the forefathers, and begetting children in one's brother's wife."

The word *stabdhah*, from the root *stha* ("established"), literally means "motionless", and it indicates the foolish, dull and obstinate conceit caused to one's established position, wealth, hierarchy, government recognition, political support, number of followers, race, nationality, antiquity of lineage, caste, etc. It is also translated as "puffed up", or "foolish". This meaning is reinforced by the expressions *dhana mana*, literally "with consideration/ respect to wealth", and *mada anvitah*, meaning "filled with madness, engrossed, absorbed in madness" and indicating some delusion of grandeur that has nothing to do with genuine transcendental realization and Vedic knowledge. The last part of the verse confirms: *vidhi purvakam* literally means "lack of knowledge" and "disregard for rules".

One of the grossest transgressions to the fundamental rules of *dharma* and *vidya* is the consumption of non-vegetarian foods, that is contrary to *daya* and *ahimsa* (compassion and non-violence) as well as to *saucam* (cleanliness and purity) and *tapas* (restraint, self-control). No genuinely religious person will indulge in such *adharmic*. Another serious flaw indicated by *vidhi purvakam* is the lack of understanding of the meaning of the *mantras* chanted (and therefore the frequent choice of the appropriate *mantras*), the gross mispronunciation, and the neglect of important parts of the rituals. Krishna clearly says here that the *yajnas* performed by such foolish

people are only for show and name, to become famous and obtain a reputation of religiosity (*yajante nama yajnaih*), and as such they have no real value (17.5-6, 17.11-13, 18.25, 18.32).

अहंकारं बलं दर्पं कामं क्रोधं च संश्रिताः ।

मामात्मपरदेहेषु प्रद्विषन्तोऽभ्यसूयकाः ॥ १६-१८ ॥

ahañkāraṁ balaṁ darpaṁ kāmaṁ krodhaṁ ca sañśritāḥ | māmātmaparadeheṣu pradviṣanto'bhyaśūyakāḥ || 16-18 ||

aham karam: I am the doer; *balam*: strength; *darpaṁ*: pride; *kamam*: lust; *krodham*: rage; *ca*: and; *samsritah*: having taken residence; *mam*: me; *atma para dehesu*: in their own body and in the bodies of others; *pradvisantah*: they hate; *abhyasuyakah*: envious.

"Taking shelter in ahankara, physical/ material strength, arrogance, lust and anger, they show envy and hatred against me, as I reside in their own bodies and in the bodies of others.

The root of the problem is immediately identified in the first word of this verse. It is the *ahankara*, the egotism that deludes the conditioned soul into believing that he is indeed the supreme controller of his life, and the legitimate owner and enjoyer of everything. This *ahankara* is the sense of material identity and is inevitably attached to social position, family position, material qualities and activities, possessions, affiliations, and everything else that pertains to the material body. Therefore it is only natural that the foolish materialist confused by this delusion (*ahankara vimudhatma kartaham iti manyate*, 3.27) gives great importance to physical strength, fitness and stature and/ or material power of any kind (*bala*) as well as to lust for sense gratification and material acquisitions (*kama*), because these are the pride (*darpaṁ*) of his life. Because bodies are separate from one another, and the pain suffered by one is not easily perceived by another, this identification with the material body causes a strong feeling of duality and selfishness. So whenever one's gratification and domination seems to be threatened, rage (*krodha*) ensues due to hostility (*dvisa*) and envy (*abhyasuya* - as opposite of *anasuya*).

As we have seen in verse 16.14, the *asura* thinks, "Why should someone else enjoy what is supposed to be rightfully mine? Why should someone else be the lord and master (*isvara*) instead of me? I am the legitimate enjoyer (*bhogi*), and I will eliminate any competition."

This is the evidence of his lack of understanding about God. The *asura* thinks that God is a separate person, maybe one more powerful than others, but still an individual person. We see for example in the extensive narration of the Narasimha *avatara* that the *asura* Hiranyakasipu wanted to see Vishnu directly, because he did not believe that Vishnu is in everyone's heart as Prahlada had said. The main problem of *asuras* has been brilliantly solved there by Prahlada (who was Hiranyakasipu's son): "give up the asuric tendency of seeing others as enemies, because the only enemy is your own mind" (*jahi asuram bhavam imam tvam, Bhagavata Purana 7.7.9*). Hiranyakasipu was so arrogant that he in fact accused his son Prahlada of being an impudent upstart (*durvinita*), the disgrace of the family (*kula bheda kara*), and a degraded (*adhama*) stubborn (*stabdham*) fool (*manda*), because he did not worship Hiranyakasipu's established position (*sasana* - *sa asana*), as we can see in verse 7.8.5.

So this is the litmus test for all of us, clear as the sunlight in a beautiful day: no matter how religious an *asura* will appear to be, and how boldly he will try to present his official "established" rights and privileges, if he wants to control everyone and considers any dissenters as enemies and tries to destroy them, he is exposing his true demoniac nature. The only external enemy is one who physically attacks us: one who refuses to worship us and to be controlled by us is certainly not an enemy. The very fact that one physically attacks others with such a stupid motivation exposes his lack of spiritual realization, as anyone who becomes violent against a creature is actually violent against God who is present in the hearts of all creatures.

It is a fact that *asuras* are usually considered religious people and offer traditional rituals sacrifices and worship God in their own way - not out of love and devotion, but because they want something in return. Usually *asuras* do not approach Vishnu (7.15) because Vishnu is very strict and does not give blessings to those who are contaminated by asuric qualities. Materialistic persons usually feel it safer to approach more compassionate Personalities of Godhead, especially Shiva Mahadeva, who is also known as Pasupati or "the protector of *pasu*", that are people whose consciousness is on an animal level. Shiva Mahadeva is also known a Asutosha ("quickly pleased"), and Bholenatha ("the protector of simple-minded people"). Of course this does not mean that Shiva himself is simple-minded, or lower in position than Vishnu: it simply means that he is more compassionate. He is also known as Nilakantha ("blue/ black throat") because of the black stain left by the dreadful *halahala* poison, that Mahadeva deliberately swallowed to save the universe from its lethal effects.

We know that Vishnu is Yajna, the personification of sacrifice, and therefore during their rituals *asuras* will formally offer their homage to Vishnu hoping to get material benefits. However, they will not be able to really approach Vishnu because they are not pure enough to understand him, so they can only come in contact with his manifestations in the material world, such as Mahadeva, Agni, Yajna, the Virata Rupa itself and the various Vishnu *avataras* - such as the Purusha *avataras* (the Vishnus reclining on the 3 oceans), Narasimha, Varaha, etc.

We see that sometimes people who correspond to the description of the *asuras* by *guna* and *karma* are found to be engaged in the worship Vishnu or Krishna, but such worship is merely external (*nama yajna*) or a simple offering of superficial homage (*namah*) without real surrender (*na prapadyante*). The defining characteristic of *asuras* is that they want to take God's position, and therefore they do not recognize God's supreme position. They only see God (in any form) as a provider of blessings and benefits and forgiveness; they believe they can "use" God for their own purposes, and generally Vishnu appears to them as too powerful to be duped in that way.

Of course *asuras* would have no fear in approaching an *avatara* of Vishnu if this *avatara* appears to be sweet and harmless enough: for example, all the *asuras* flocked around Mohini, and were certainly more than ready to worship and please her so that they could get from her what they wanted. The envy and hatred against others that is found in *asuras* is certainly not directed against "saints" only, as some have claimed. Such an interpretation is dangerous because in itself can feed the asuric tendency of dividing people into separate camps and see "enemies" in those who do not submit to such "saints", whether genuine or fake.

Too often this trick has been played to defend fake spiritualists and *asuras* by claiming that those who did not submit to their adharmic demands and ignorant conclusions were simply "envious". In fact, it is very difficult to see how any sane person would be envious of *asuras*, considering the unholy and unhappy life they are leading and the disastrous course that *asuras* are setting for themselves in the future. They should rather be pitied.

Truth has no agenda: a whistle blower who alerts the public against the danger created by powerful criminals should be taken seriously, not superficially condemned as "envious". Proper investigation and analysis should be conducted on the basis of direct observation of the characteristics as explained by Krishna in this chapter. Then after being duly warned of the danger, each person will make their choice and be responsible for them. No other course of action is required for a sattvic person than making the proper shastric knowledge available to everyone.

तानहं द्विषतः क्रुरान्संसारेषु नराधमान् । क्षिपाम्यजस्रमशुभानासुरीष्वेव योनिषु ॥ १६-१९ ॥

tānaḥaṁ dviṣataḥ krurānsamsāreṣu narādhamān | kṣipāmyajasramasubhānāsuriṣveva yoniṣu || 16-19 ||

tan: them; *aham:* I; *dviṣataḥ:* the hateful; *kruran:* the cruel; *samsaresu:* into the *samsara*; *nara adhaman:* the most degraded human beings; *ksipami:* I send; *ajasram:* for a very long time; *asubhan:* inauspicious; *asurisu:* *asurika*; *eva:* certainly; *yonisu:* into wombs.

"I send these hateful and cruel people, the most degraded among human beings, into a long imprisonment in the *samsara*, to take birth in inauspicious asuric wombs again and again.

There is absolutely no need for anyone of us to run around looking for *asuras* to eliminate them, because God himself in the form of Time will bring them to face the consequences of their bad choices. Again, the only action we are allowed to take is to defend ourselves and our subordinates from physical attacks and to do our best to spread the correct knowledge and understanding of Vedic knowledge. Under no circumstances we should take the initiative of attacking people - go into war, court cases, or any similar action - because we believe them to be *asuras*. If these people actually become aggressors (*agnido garadas caiva sastrapanir, dhanapahah, kshetra darapahari ca shadete atatayinah*) and attack us or our subordinates with fire, with poison, or holding weapons in hands, or by taking away possessions, land or wife (or other family members), we have all rights to legitimate defense even with the application of lethal force, but otherwise nobody should be attacked simply because of what they believe or do not believe. If we committed such a mistake, we would become *asuras* in our own right.

Of course exposing the actual crimes of an *asura*, by bringing sufficient evidence to the knowledge of the public, cannot be considered an aggression. Wrong opinions and teachings must be counteracted by correct information, opinions and teachings. Slandering can be counteracted by proving it wrong by one's dharmic behaviors and conclusions. Direct physical aggression should be counteracted by physical force, and indirect physical aggression should be counteracted by preventive measures.

The words *dvisa* ("hateful"), *krura* ("cruel, evil doer") and *nara adhama* ("depraved") are the characteristics of the *asura*, who attacks others unnecessarily and viciously, without any considerations for the fundamental dharmic principles such as compassion, truthfulness, and so on. There is no justification for hatred and cruelty, even towards criminals. Even in extreme cases, when evil and cruel *asuras* attack us, we should always behave with restraint and compassion; this means for example that the women and children of our aggressors should not be harmed in any way, and the amount of force applied against the aggressor himself should be limited to what is really necessary. We see in *Bhagavata Purana* the example of Indra, who took advantage of the temporary absence of the *asura* Hiranyakasipu to get back the control of the heavenly planets. Having seized the royal palace, Indra captured Hiranyakasipu's wife, who was pregnant, and contemplated the idea of killing the baby before he could grown into a dangerous *asura* like his father. Narada Muni immediately appeared and scolded Indra severely for that unworthy thought; he took the lady under his personal protection in his *ashrama*, and in that spiritual environment the unborn baby was able to absorb the feelings of love and devotion to God and to listen to his qualities, activities and teachings. So it was that Prahlada became a great divine personality in spite of being the son of a great *asura*.

This is also a warning for us. God (who is none other than Dharma itself) only protects the *devas* because they remain within the boundaries of *dharma* (*dharma eva hato hanti, dharma rakshati rakshitah, "dharma kills those who try to kill it, and protects those who protect it"* (*Manu Smriti* 15.8). The moment we become opposed to *dharma*, *dharma* will start destroying us even if we were situated in a high position, and the moment we become supportive to *dharma*, *dharma* will start protecting us even if we were situated in a lower position. At any moment we can change the course of our life in this way.

Of course, self defense is always justified. If our opponents have already committed a serious violation of the fundamentals of ethics, we can respond in a similar fashion to prevent further damage especially to innocent and good people. If the only way to stop an aggressor is to terrorize him with an impressive display of ferocity from our part, that is what we must do: to fight against a *rakshasa* we can engage a *rakshasa* or use *rakshasa* strategies, if the human manner of fighting proves insufficient. But when we set out to destroy monsters, we must be very careful not to become monsters ourselves: this is why Krishna says *balam balavatam caham kama raga vivarjitam, dharmaviruddho bhutesu kamo 'smi bharatarsabha, "O Arjuna, I am the strength of the strong who is free from selfishness and attachment. In all beings, I am desire that is not contrary to dharma"* (7.11).

आसुरीं योनिमापन्ना मूढा जन्मनि जन्मनि । मामप्राप्यैव कौन्तेय ततो यान्त्यधमां गतिम् ॥ १६-२० ॥

āsurīm yonimāpannā mūdhā janmani janmani | māmaprāpyaiva kaunteya tato yāntyadhamāṁ gatim || 16-20 ||

asurim: asuric; *yonim:* wombs; *apannah:* attained; *mudhah:* the fools; *janmani janmani:* birth after birth; *mam:* me; *aprapya:* unable to approach; *eva:* certainly; *kaunteya:* o son of Kunti; *tatah:* then; *yanti:* they go; *adhamam:* degraded; *gatim:* destination.

"O son of Kunti, even after taking birth from asuric wombs lifetime after lifetime, these fools remain unable to attain me, because they slide constantly into degradation.

It is important here to understand that the Supreme has no hatred for anyone: *samo 'ham sarva bhutesu na me dvesyo 'sti na priyah, ye bhajanti tu mam bhaktya mayi te tesu capy aham, "I am equally disposed towards all living beings. I do not hate anyone, and I do not favor anyone. Yet, when someone offers me a sincere service in devotion, I also serve them with love and devotion"* (9.29). God is not interested in punishing anyone: *nadatte kasyacit papam na caiva sukritam vibhuh, ajnanenavritam jnanam tena muhyanti jantavah, "The all-*

powerful Lord does not consider the good or bad merits of anyone. The problem is only due to the living entities, that are confused because their knowledge is covered by ignorance" (5.15).

The *asuras* determine their own destiny by consistently making disastrous choices, and then God in the form of Time brings them to the consequences of their own actions. This is why Krishna says, "I cast them into degraded births, lifetime after lifetime". Such *asuras* remain unable to approach God simply because they do not want to. God is not abandoning them - in fact God never abandons anyone, as the *param atman* continues to accompany the *jiva atman* in all its incarnations, including the most degraded forms of life and even in asuric bodies. At any time, even the worst *asura* is allowed to change the course of his life. Unfortunately, the weight of his previous bad actions has a very heavy inertial mass, and will keep pulling down, lower and lower, and progress in the opposite direction will be extremely difficult and taxing, but it will still be possible. It is said, *kartum akartum anyatha kartum samartha*, "one who can do something can also undo it". Of course, this freedom of choice exists only at certain levels of life, because in animal and vegetal species the conditioned soul can only exhaust its bad *karma* by enduring hardships, yet this is a progress, too. We could say that this category of *asuras* are the *nitya baddhas* ("eternally conditioned souls") that are sometimes described in Vedic literature. But even for them there is hope, as the opportunity for purification and progress is presented to everyone, even for those who have already taken birth in asuric and inauspicious wombs. To move from the vicious circle to the virtuous circle we must simply follow the instruction of Prahlada to his father: "give up the asuric tendency of seeing others as enemies, because the only enemy is your own mind" (*Jahi asuram bhavam imam tvam, Bhagavata Purana 7.7.9*).

When big *asuras* are blessed with the personal presence and contact of an *avatara* of the Lord, as we see in the stories of *Puranas* and other Vedic literature, we are to understand that such *asuras* are actually special souls and personal companions of Isvara, who appear with him to assist his activities. Whether they are simply playing the role of Bhagavan's adversaries, or they have obtained such special opportunity because of some extraordinary *punya* or *sukriti*, these souls become instantly purified by the contact with the Personification of Dharma, and attain liberation. This is seen in many episodes of the *Puranas*, from Hiranyakasipu himself to Putana and several others. Many *asuras* were saved by the kindness and compassion of great devotees and self-realized souls such as Narada Muni and others.

Since the root cause of the *asuras'* delusion is ignorance, the best medicine to heal them is genuine knowledge, *daivim prakriti asritah*, that consists in taking shelter in divine knowledge. We have already seen in chapter 9: *moghasa mogha karmano mogha jnana vicetasah, raksasim asurim caiva prakritim mohinim asritah*, "Entertaining delusional desires, engaging in delusional activities, and delusionally convinced of their knowledge, they are confused by incorrect awareness and take shelter in the bewildering nature of *raksasas* and *asuras*" (9.12). Genuine knowledge is therefore the solution to the problem:

api ced asi papebhyah sarvebhyah papa krit tamah, sarvam jnana plavenaiva vrinam santarisyasi, "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" (4.36),

yathaidhamsi samiddho 'gnir bhasma sat kurute 'rjuna, jnanagnih sarva karmani bhasma sat kurute tatha, "O Arjuna, just like the blazing fire turns firewood into ashes, similarly the fire of knowledge turns all *karma* into ashes" (4.37),

jnanena tu tad ajnanam yesam nasitam atmanah, tesam aditya vaj jnanam prakasayati tat param, "To those for whom *ajnana* is destroyed in the perception of the self by *jnana*, that Knowledge, similar to the radiant Sun, reveals that highest reality" (5.16).

त्रिविधं नरकस्येदं द्वारं नाशनमात्मनः । कामः क्रोधस्तथा लोभस्तस्मादेतत्त्रयं त्यजेत् ॥ १६-२१ ॥

trividham narakasyedam dvaram nashanamatmanah | kamaḥ krodhastathā lobhastasmādetatrayam tyajet || 16-21 ||

tri vidham: threefold; *narakasya*: of hellish life; *idam*: this; *dvaram*: the gate; *nasanam*: of destruction; *atmanah*: of the self; *kamah*: lust; *krodhah*: rage; *tatha*: and also; *lobhah*: greed; *tasmat*: therefore; *etat*: these; *trayam*: three; *tyajet*: one should abandon.

"The threefold gate to hellish life and to self-destruction consists of the mixture of lust, greed and anger. Therefore one should abandon these three.

The mixture of lust and anger (or attachment, or greed) is an explosive one, as Krishna has already explained in several verses:

kama esa krodha esa rajo guna samudbhavah, mahasano maha papma viddhy enam iha vairinam "This power is a mixture of desire and anger, and it is born from the quality of passion. Know that it is all-devouring, the cause of great sins, and the greatest enemy in this world." (3.37),

avritam jnanam etena jnanino nitya vairina, kama rupena kaunteya duspurenanalena ca, "O Arjuna, this mixture of lust and anger can cover even the knowledge of wise persons. It is the perpetual enemy, the all-consuming fire" (3.39),

saknotihaiva yah sodhum prak sarira vimoksanat, kama krodhodbhavam vegam sa yuktah sa sukhi narah, "One who becomes capable of withstanding the onslaughts of this lust and anger before leaving the body is a *yogi* and a happy human being" (5.23),

kama krodha vimuktanam yatinam yata cetasam, abhito brahma nirvanam vartate viditatmanam, "The saintly persons who are completely free from lust and anger and have their consciousness steadily fixed in Brahman, who have realized the Self: for them there is *brahma nirvana* very soon" (5.26),

balam balavatam caham kama raga vivarjitam, dharmaviruddho bhutesu kamo 'smi bhatarasabha, "O Arjuna, I am the strength of the strong who is free from selfishness and attachment. In all beings, I am desire that is not contrary to *dharma*" (7.11),

asa pasa satair baddhah kama krodha parayanah, ihante kama bhogartham anyayenartha sancayan, "Bound by hundreds of ropes in the form of desires, always immersed in lust and anger, they desire to increase their desires and for that purpose they adopt any means to accumulate wealth" (16.12),

ahankaram balam darpam kamam krodham ca samsritah, mam atma para dehesu pradvisanto 'bhyasuyakah, "Taking shelter in *ahankara*, physical strength, arrogance, lust and anger, they show envy and hatred against me, as I reside in their own bodies and in the bodies of others" (16.18),

asastra vihitaṃ ghoram tapyante ye tapo janah, dambhahankara samyuktah kama raga balanvitah, "These people engage in terrible/ horrible austerities, not prescribed by *shastra*, and remain immersed in hypocrisy and egotism, under the sway of lust and attachment" (17.5),

ahankaram balam darpam kamam krodham parigraham, vimucya nirmamah santo brahma bhuyaya kalpate, "One who has become completely free from *ahankara* and *mamatva*, from the sense of material strength, pride, lust, anger and greed, and is peaceful, focuses his desires towards Brahman" (18.53).

We can give up these characteristics of *tamas* by using *rajas* to climb our way up to *sattva*. In other words, one can engage *rajas* in the service of *dharma* through the system of *varnas* and *ashramas* as it will be explained further in the last chapters of *Bhagavad gita*, and remain detached and free from *ahankara* and *mamatva*. The process may be long and difficult, but it is the only solution.

It is also important to understand that the concept of *naraka* is different from the abrahamic concept of hell. *Naraka* is a subtle dimension (known in Vajrayana buddhism as *bardo*) where asuric conditioned souls, who committed violent acts against innocent and harmless creatures, remain for a period between two lifetimes, immersed in a sort of horrible nightmare that runs on their habitual fears and guilt. At some point in time, the confused soul who has become softened and purified by this experience is "fished out" and directed towards a new birth. On the other hand, abrahamic ideologies consider hell as a real and definitive place, where the unfortunate people who have failed to totally obey and please God and his priests are horribly tortured for all eternity, without any hope of redemption. The solution recommended by Krishna is very simple: just drop the asuric luggage of material identifications and attachments, renouncing the greedy lust and the hateful anger. This is already sufficient in itself to break the shackles of *tamas* and asuric nature.

एतैर्विमुक्तः कौन्तेय तमोद्वारैस्त्रिभिर्नरः । आचरत्यात्मनः श्रेयस्ततो याति परां गतिम् ॥ १६-२२ ॥

etaivimuktaḥ kaunteya tamodvāraistribhīrnaraḥ | ācaratyaātmanah śreyastato yāti parāṃ gatim || 16-22 ||

etaih: from these; *vimuktaḥ*: completely liberated; *kaunteya*: o son of Kunti; *tamah dvaraih*: from the gates of ignorance; *tribhih*: the three; *narah*: a human being; *acarati*: performs; *atmanah*: for the self; *sreyah*: the benefit; *tatah*: then; *yati*: s/he goes; *param gatim*: to the supreme destination.

"O son of Kunti, a human being who becomes completely free from this threefold gateway to *tamas* is really acting for his own benefit/ is engaged in the transcendental activities, and attains the supreme destination.

By avoiding ignorance (*tamas*), one automatically remains free from lust, anger and greed (*kama*, *krodha*, *lobha*). Desire will always be there, because desire is a natural tendency of the soul who wants to engage in union with the supreme eternity, consciousness and happiness (*sat*, *cit*, *ananda*), but under the influence of *sattva* or *visuddha sattva* such desire is liberating and elevating the consciousness.

Under the influence of *rajas*, desire ties the conditioned soul to endless activities, that can be directed either to elevation or degradation. When *rajas* is touched by *tamas*, it generates greed and desire (*kama*) becomes lust. Since lust can never be appeased by selfish sense enjoyment, like a fire cannot be extinguished by dousing it with oil, the feeling of frustration creates anger (*krodha*), and anger causes the loss of memory: *kamat krodho 'bhijayate* (2.62), *krodhad bhavati sammohah sammohat smriti vibhramah, smriti bhramsad buddhi naso buddhi nasat pranasyati* (2.63), "anger is born from (frustrated) lust, then anger becomes confusion, and confusion becomes failing memory. Because of the loss of memory, intelligence is lost, and when intelligence is lost, one falls from his position."

Because it is impossible to become totally free from all trace of desire, the solution recommended by Krishna is to remain detached and to soberly accept the pleasant and unpleasant things that life brings: *raga dvesa vimuktas tu visayan indriyais caran, atma vasyair vidheyatma prasadam adhigacchati*, "A person who has become free from the attraction and repulsion for the objects of the senses, maintains the control of himself in his actions and regulates himself (in body, mind and senses) obtains the blessing (of the Lord)" (2.64).

The rules prescribed by Vedic civilization are meant for gradual purification of the conditioned souls, and must be applied scientifically after careful observation of the actual position of the individual in regard to *guna* and *karma*. This is why the distortion caused by birth prejudice creating the degraded caste system is so detrimental to the progress of the individual and society at large: because people are forced into duties and positions that are not suitable to their real nature, and there is no progress. We will see this point in greater detail later in chapter 18.

The expression *acarati atmana sreya* ("acts for his own benefit") is in direct contraposition to *nasta atmanah* ("destroying the self") found in verse 16.9. Krishna had already said very clearly that one should be one's own best friend, and not act as one's own enemy: *uddhared atmanatmanam natmanam avasadayet, atmaiva hy atmano bandhur atmaiva ripur atmanah*, "One should raise him/ herself by his/ her own effort, and not degrade him/ herself. Certainly one should be one's own friend, and one can be one's own enemy as well" (6.5). As the word *atma* can be applied at several levels according to the individual consciousness to one's identity as body, mind or soul, the benefit indicated in this verse covers all the aspects of the being. Of course the highest and truest benefit of the self is the realization of spiritual life.

When we make efforts to convince people to stop harming innocent and harmless creatures, and to give up their asuric tendencies, beliefs and behaviors, we are actually thinking more about the benefit of the criminals rather than the benefit of their victims. Of course we are also concerned about the sufferings of the innocent and harmless creatures, but we know that such sufferings have already fructified on the manifested level, and are more difficult to dispel. It is much easier and effective to prevent the creation of further bad results (*ugra karma*) by stopping the criminal before he can commit more damage.

The Sanskrit word *karma* stems from the root *kr*, which means, "to do", "to take action". Therefore it means "action". In a wider sense, it is also used to indicate "reaction" and "connection between action and reaction". These three are actually very strictly connected: according to the universal laws, each action is followed by an equal reaction in the opposite direction. What we saw, we reap. *Karma* can be compared to agricultural products: the plant that has already sprouted from the seed, but has not produced fruits yet is called *sanchita*, which means "accumulated". It refers to the causal body or karmic body that contains all the karmic reactions; they are also called *kuta*

("established"). They can be destroyed quickly by spiritual knowledge, and more slowly and with more difficulty, by *prayascitta* ("atonement") and *punya* ("meritorious actions").

The fruits of the fully grown plant are called *prarabdha*. The definition refers to the reactions of activities of previous lifetimes, that have already fructified into the present material body, life circumstances, nature tendencies, etc. They cannot be avoided because they have already manifested; they must be tolerated and can be modified only partially by hard work. The seeds produced by the fruits are called *vartamana* (or *kriyamana*, respectively "present" and "which are being created"). The definition refers to the reactions to the activities that we are performing now, in this present lifetime, and that have not developed yet. And maybe will not develop at all, if we "roast" them through the process of *bhakti* and *vidya*. The karmic seeds can be destroyed very easily, because each day we can change our choices, and habits formed recently can be changed quickly. The *agami karma* consists of that *sanchita karma* that has not manifested yet in the form of fruits, but is going to (*phalonmukha* "towards fructifying") in the near future. Actually there is no injustice, nothing happens "by chance": life and destiny follow a scientific law of perfect justice which, once we understand it, will help us get free from all ties and even to close the karmic account once and for all. In fact, the proper understanding of the laws of *karma* and reincarnation give the greatest power to the individual on his/ her own life, facilitating a sense of responsibility and a greater awareness about the consequences of each action we are contemplating.

यः शास्त्रविधिमुत्सृज्य वर्तते कामकारतः । न स सिद्धिमवाप्नोति न सुखं न परां गतिम् ॥ १६-२३ ॥

yaḥ śāstravidhimutsṛjya vartate kāmakārataḥ | na sa siddhimavāpnoti na sukhaṁ na parāṁ gatim || 16-23 ||

yah: one who; *sastra vidhim*: the knowledge of the *shastra*; *utsrjya*: abandoning; *vartate*: goes; *kama karatah*: acting out of lust; *na*: not; *sah*: s/he; *siddhim*: perfection; *avapnoti*: will obtain; *na*: not; *sukham*: happiness; *na*: not; *param gatim*: the supreme destination.

"One who neglects the knowledge of the scriptures and takes up actions based on whimsical desires will not attain perfection, happiness, or the supreme destination.

This verse again highlights the absolute importance of genuine knowledge, that is detailed scientifically and practically in the original scriptures (*shastra vidhi*).

The word *utsrjya* means "neglecting, giving up, ignoring, disregarding", indicating a deliberate choice. The arrogant and egotistic *asuras* believe they are on a perfect position, above the study of the scriptures, and believe that their own foolish and ignorant opinion is at least as much as valid - if not more valid - than the original teachings of the *rishis* and *acharyas* who compiled the *sruti* and *smriti*. Therefore they create new methods and systems and *mantras* and worship rituals, based on their own whimsical desires or the whimsical desires of other conditioned souls, neglecting the actual purpose of Vedic knowledge, and they hope they will be able to attain perfect results, although on the subconscious level they are afraid to be faced with teachings that condemn their adharmic activities. We should be careful not to misunderstand this point, because there is a deep difference between Vedic tradition and the abrahamic ideologies, known as historically revealed religions and based on specific scriptural texts that are considered the evidence for their own truth and value. Especially in the hands of asuric persons, such "historical" scriptural texts can be considerably manipulated, if not fabricated altogether, and used to deny the fundamental importance of intelligence, ethical conscience and personal experience.

Even within the Indian cultural and historical sphere, ancient written texts have sometimes been misappropriated and tampered, if not forged, with asuric intentions, but Vedic tradition has a wonderful advantage over other ideologies, because it does not depend solely on some written documents. The tradition of Vedic knowledge is transmitted at a subtler level (*sabda brahman*) and is put into writing cyclically in various ages and according to the time, place and circumstances in which it is presented, so that the people will be able to understand it. *Veda* (knowledge itself) is eternal and cannot be destroyed by burning libraries, because it is inspired again and again at every creation in the hearts of the *rishis* ("those who directly see reality").

This is the reason why Vedic knowledge and realization must be disseminated as much as possible, so that the proper understanding of the principles of *dharma* and *vidya* will be carried and preserved in the living hearts of the self-realized souls. The *Rig Veda* (9.63.5) clearly orders: *krinvanto visva aryam*, "Let us make everybody an *arya*". The word *visva* is uncompromising, indicating that genuine Vedic knowledge is a birthright of all human beings, irrespective of the particular circumstances of their birth - and this universality is the key for the success of the entire mankind. When only a small number of "high caste" Indians have access to the study and practice of Vedic knowledge, the danger of degradation and loss increases exponentially, and adharmic forces will certainly take advantage of the situation, as it has been amply demonstrated in the history of the Indian subcontinent. But when such knowledge is made available to a greater number of people and at global level, it will reverberate stronger and stronger, and raise the general consciousness in India, too: this has also been demonstrated by the Hindu resurgence that started to develop after the 1970s.

This mission of spreading *arya* consciousness cannot be conducted without the knowledge of the scriptures, because the *shastra pramana* (scriptural evidence) is required to support the teachings of the *guru* and the direct realization or experience of the *sadhu*, the good person who is engaged in the spiritual *sadhana*. A *sadhu* - what to speak of a *guru* - must be the incarnations of Vedic knowledge, both *dharma* and *vidya*, so the general people must have some parameters to recognize a genuine teacher from an asuric speculator.

Vedic knowledge is not based on mere faith (*sraddha*), although it is a fact that sufficient faith is required initially in order to actually start practicing the method in the proper scientific way. The process is called "self realization" (*atma darshana*) or direct verification of "self knowledge" (*atma vidya*), therefore it needs to be applied individually in practice (*vijnana*) and not in theory only. This is the reason why the scriptural knowledge must be received from a realized soul (*tattva darsi*, 4.34), if possible from more than one, because mere words cannot actually convey its full meaning, and observation from a number of different perspectives can really help. A genuinely realized soul will be able to facilitate the student to actually experience the transcendental knowledge for him/ her self, and thus become realized in turn.

When a person has established him/her self on the level of genuine transcendental realization, and this realization can be practically observed in his/ her behavior (2.54), then only the meaning of the scriptural descriptions becomes clear and consistent, and one is able to

see the difference between apparent contradictions (that can be reconciled in a greater picture) and actual inconsistencies (that expose manipulation or forgery). This means that individual realization is more important than the manuscripts that are historically available to us, and that might have been tampered with.

So whenever we find texts presented as Vedic, where the fundamental principles of *dharma* and *vidya* are disregarded or opposed, we know that they have been forged or tampered with. No genuine *shastra* will give teachings or orders that go against compassion, honesty, selflessness, personal evolution, the search for knowledge, liberation from conditionings, spiritual realization, universality of consciousness and life, the necessity to overcome material identifications and attachments, the importance of understanding the universe and the *gunas*, and the difference between divine and asuric characteristics.

When we speak about Vedic scriptures we refer not to the palm leaves or any other physical support or medium on which words have been written, but to these eternal and universal truths that were transmitted from *rishi* to disciple since the dawn of time. The word *rishi* literally means "seer", and refers to the fact that the compilers of the Vedic texts contemplated Knowledge through a direct act of perception and personal experience, just like Arjuna has seen the Virata Rupa in chapter 11.

It is not simply some theoretical stories or folk lore or record of ancient facts, but it is a genuine revelation of the nature of reality, that is achieved individually by all the sincere students of Vedic knowledge - a fundamental paradigm shift that is called illumination or enlightenment or awakening. After that point, one cannot simply go back to sleep, because his/ her perception of reality has become extremely clear and cannot be confused by anyone or anything. This experience is explained at the beginning of *Bhagavad gita: yada te moha kalilam buddhir vyatitarisyati, tada gantasi nirvedam srotavyasya srutasya ca*, "When this understanding will lead you out of the dense swamp of illusion, you will come to a point where you will be indifferent to whatever has been heard or will remain to be heard" (2.52).

The knowledge contained in Vedic scriptures is not "religious" in the abrahamic sense; it does not present dogma (articles or faith) or give orders to be followed, but it explains how the universe works, at the material and at the spiritual level, and it encourages all students to experiment and verify the theory by putting it into practice. Therefore it is scientific in nature. On the contrary, abrahamic scriptures are considered an absolute authority in itself even when their contents blatantly contradict the universal and scientific experience and verification, therefore abrahamic ideologies are sworn enemies of science and personal research. The word "heretic", for example, literally means "one who chooses what to believe", or in other words, one who wants to personally verify the merit of the statements given in the scriptures or by the religious leaders, because s/he does not give value to blind faith. Since the entire abrahamic ideology is built on the covenant or pact of allegiance and obedience over any other consideration, the use of intelligence and free will is condemned by abrahamic just like the respect for ethical values and for one's conscience. This is certainly not the case with Vedic knowledge. Krishna will say at the conclusion of *Bhagavad gita* (18.63): *iti te jnanam akhyatam guhyad guhyataram maya, vimrisyaitad asesena yathecchasi tatha kuru*, "I have explained to you this secret knowledge; now think about it and then do whatever you like".

From all this, we can better understand what Krishna is saying in this verse. He is not condemning free thinking and scientific questioning, but rather he is speaking about *asuras* (persons who do not care for ethical considerations) deliberately and stubbornly neglecting or rejecting *a priori* the knowledge contained in the genuine scriptures because it contradicts their personal whimsical plans, selfish interests and desires (*kama karatah*).

Also, we should notice that Krishna does not say that one who neglects the authority of the *shastra* is cursed or should be punished. He is simply saying that such person will not achieve perfection, happiness or the supreme destination. In Vedic tradition, a person who does not recognize the authority of Vedic scripture is called a *nastika* (agnostic) and three of such *nastika darshanas* are considered traditional perspectives - Buddhism, Jainism and Charvaka's materialism. As long as such *darshanas* are not in violation of the universal and eternal principles of *dharma* and *vidya* they are not in opposition to Vedic knowledge, and they are respected in the spirit of plurality of perspectives. If the contents is good, the package is not so important.

तस्माच्छास्त्रं प्रमाणं ते कार्याकार्यव्यवस्थितौ । ज्ञात्वा शास्त्रविधानोक्तं कर्म कर्तुमिहार्हसि ॥ १६-२४ ॥

tasmācchāstram pramāṇam te kāryākāryavyavasthitau | jñātvā śāstravidhānoktaṁ karma kartumihārhasi || 16-24 ||

tasmāt: therefore; *sastram*: the scriptures; *pramanam*: the evidence/ authority; *te*: your; *karya*: of what must be done; *akarya*: of what must not be done; *vyavasthitau*: in determining; *jnatva*: knowing; *sastra vidhana*: the instructions of the scriptures; *uktam*: (as they are) explained; *karma kartum*: to perform activities/ duties; *iha*: in this world; *arhasi*: you should.

"Therefore you should perform your activities in this world according to the directions offered by the *shastra* about determining one's duty.

Vedic scriptures cover both the material and the spiritual knowledge that is required to work and live in this world and achieve success (*siddhi*) and happiness (*sukha*) as mentioned in the previous verse. This progressive path of human evolution is summarized by the four *purusha arthas* or purposes of human life, described as *dharma*, *artha*, *kama* and *moksha* (see for example *Bhagavata Purana* 4.8.41).

This verse is introducing the contents of the next two chapters, elaborating more about the three *gunas* and how they determine the qualities and tendencies and therefore the duties of each category of human beings.

The expression *karma kartum arhasi* mean "you should do your duty", indicating that the most important thing to progress in life consists in performing one's duty according to *guna* and *karma*, by making an effort to attain one's full potential. This is the process that we follow in any school: each student is examined to ascertain the difference between his development and his potential, and is trained to overcome his shortcomings and defects until he is fully qualified.

All human beings are naturally endowed with some qualities and tendencies due to previous *karma* and association with *gunas*; in all societies we have intellectuals, warriors, merchants and craftspeople, but Vedic society is different because it prescribes a strict training so each individual will become able to perform his duties perfectly. Without such knowledge and training, the human potential will be wasted

and lost, damaging both the individual and society. Intellectuals will be pushed into serving materialistic and degraded rulers, and will be forced to re-discover scientific truths about physics and metaphysics empirically by themselves, a bit at a time, with the danger of mistaking hallucinations for visions and losing track of the importance of ethical principles and conscience. Warriors and kings will be confused by the influence of *rajas* and fall slaves to their own senses and minds or to adulation and manipulation by clever courtiers, forgetting the well being and protection of the *prajas* and blindly pursuing material conquests and acquisitions out of mere egotism.

Entrepreneurs will become greedy and miserly, accumulate wealth without sharing it with the rest of society, and inevitably come to the point where such material clout will delude them into believing that they are the lords and masters of the world - thus becoming full fledged *asuras*, as we can see very clearly today. *Sudras* will be abandoned to their own devices and will become selfish, arrogant, and violent as only *sudras* can be, and will provide useful mobs ready to be manipulated and exploited. The influence of *tamas* generated by their beliefs, behaviors and choices will grow exponentially because of their sheer numbers and contaminate the other classes too with the asuric mentality, so that the entire society will become hellish.

All this can be avoided and mended simply by the genuine knowledge of *dharma* and *vidya* contained in the original Vedic scriptures, that scientifically explain the cause and effect mechanism (16.8). By understanding this knowledge and using intelligence (*buddhi*), human beings can realize what should be done and what should not be done (*karya akarya, karma kartum*) and become free from the foolishness created by lust, greed and anger. This is the meaning of becoming *arya*, "civilized people". The next two chapters will further elaborate on this essential point.

The word *vyavasthita* means "discussion, debate", as well as "treatise, commentary" and can be applied to the modern definition of "publication", as it refers to the theoretical and practical study of the instructions contained in the scriptures (*shastra pramana*). Our only purpose in life is to help people to know, understand and apply the genuine original knowledge of the *shastra*, and we do not care much if some *asuras* or confused people accuse us of being their enemies because of that.

There is a fundamental difference between the Vedic approach and the mainstream academic approach created in the last few centuries by adharmic forces and ideologies. We will find that Vedic scriptures are also studied in the various "Indology" departments of prestigious non-Vedic universities around the world, but the purpose and conclusions are certainly different.

It was pope Onorius IV (1286-1287) who inaugurated in the West the study of oriental languages - not to learn from them about better ideas, but to understand how to fight against the opponents and competitors (enemies) of the Church. The Ecumenic Council of Wien (1311-1312) recognized the importance of Onorius' strategy and encouraged the creation of suitable departments in all the other European universities. Its motivation and inspiration has always been about "learning knowledge to oppose knowledge", or in other words, controlling and manipulating the search for knowledge, and using it for political purposes. With the Protestant reformation started by Martin Luther in 1520, a vast region of Europe rebelled against the power of the Church of Rome but continued to oppose Vedic knowledge - *dharma* and *vidya* - as it was not in accordance with the Christian doctrine and in fact came to be considered as "the last and the most subtle and powerful foe of Christianity" (in the words of evangelist A.H. Bowman).

All the academic constructions studied and expanded under the "Indology departments" of mainstream universities are in pursuance of the work of colonial scholars, whose declared aim was to deliberately destroy Vedic knowledge with bad and biased translations and presentations. Sir Monier-Williams (1819-1899, author of the most famous and still popularly used Sanskrit/ English dictionary), wrote, "For what purpose then has this enormous territory been committed to England? Not to be the 'corpus vile' of political, social, or military experiments; not for benefit of our commerce, or the increase of our wealth - but that every man, woman and child, from Cape Comorin to the Himalaya mountains, may be elevated, enlightened, Christianized... When the walls of the mighty fortress of Brahmanism are encircled, undermined, and finally stormed by the soldiers of the cross, the victory of Christianity must be signal and complete."

Indian academia has been built on the same foundations. The famous Scottish Churches College was envisioned by its founder missionary Alexander Duff (1806-1878) as a "headquarters for a great campaign against Hinduism." All educated "high caste" Hindus have studied in expensive Christian academic Institutes, beginning with those dedicated to the "saint" Xavier. We should not be surprised if the students of such schools have developed a maimed, distorted and depraved vision of Vedic knowledge.

Let it be clear to one and all: the study of the Vedic scriptures must be conducted in the proper manner as instructed by Vedic scriptures themselves, according to the *yama* and *niyama* method and from a genuinely realized *guru* who clearly demonstrates by example and precept that he has overcome *ahankara* and *mamatva*, otherwise there will be no proper result - no perfection, no happiness and no attainment of the supreme destination. Only further delusion and development of asuric characteristics and degradation.

Chapter 17

Sraddha traya vibhaga yoga The yoga of differentiating between the three forms of faith

Krishna continues here to dispel the wrong and dangerous notion according to which "all religions are the same". This problem is particularly acute in India, where the concept of secularism is not the usual idea of "separation of Church and State", but an attempt by the State to embrace all religions, with special facilities and favors shown to "minority religions", which in practice means abrahamic ideologies, that are intrinsically adharmic. This faulty approach causes the State to become "beyond *dharma*" (*dharma nirapekshita*) rather than beyond the various types of religious faith (*sradhdha*) or lineages (*sampradaya*), institutions or groups (*matha*).

We have already elaborated on the subject of "*sarva dharma sama bhava*" in the introduction to the previous chapter (16), and we will see the subject even more elaborately in this chapter. Obviously Krishna considers it very important, as he is talking about it in such details and at the conclusion of *Bhagavad gita*, indicating that its knowledge is more advanced and final than the teachings he had offered in the previous chapters. Why?

Because it enables us to actually put theory into practice and change our lives by making the proper choices, at each moment. This is the real test of our understanding and realization of the transcendental science, and the foundation of *viveka* (discriminating intelligence) by which we can distinguish divine personalities from asuric personalities, beyond any clever disguise or propaganda they may utilize.

Verification through scriptural evidence is extremely important (13.26, 15.20, 16.23-24, 17.5, 18.40). It supplies the precise guidelines and training in the development of knowledge and understanding that we need for our personal evolution, at least until we come to the point where we directly see (*darshana*) Reality (6.44) with our own intelligence and conscience. Such direct perception of Knowledge is perfectly within the possibilities of all human beings, but in the conditioned state, intelligence is covered by so many layers of ignorance and confusion that ordinary non-evolved persons remain unable to see anything, and may even perceive the opposite of reality, as a distorted reflection (18.32) that is upside down.

We should note that Krishna uses the definition "*sraddha*" rather than "*dharma*" to indicate the different religious practices of people. It is true that all manifestations of *dharma* have the same nature, because *dharma* is *sanatana*, the eternal and universal foundation of natural ethics. However, *sraddha* or *faith* is not necessarily in line with *dharma*, and in fact it can easily become opposed to *dharma* because of ignorance (18.32). The original concept of religion is certainly dharmic because it consists in the natural desire of the soul to know and connect with the Supreme, but the various opinions on how to fulfill such need can be very different.

This is the foundation of the statement, *ekam sad vipra bahudha vadanti*, "God is one but the learned call it with many names" (*Rig Veda* 1.164.46). The complete quote is as follows: *indram mitram varunam agni ratho divya sa suparno garutman, ekam sad vipra bahudha vadanty agnim yamam matarisva nama ahuh*, "He who is called Indra ("the glorious"), Mitra ("the friend"), Varuna ("the best"), Agni ("the worshipable"), Rahu ("the seizer"), Surya (*ratho divya*, "who travels in the celestial chariot") and Garuda the bird, is one eternal being, but the learned also call him as Yama ("the controller") and Matarisva ("the powerful blowing wind")."

The mistake in the equation is that the abrahamic ideologies do not support the conclusion of "all religions are the same", as each abrahamic faith makes a stark separation between itself as the absolute truth and all other faiths as false and diabolic, and therefore unacceptable. Thus abrahamics insist that only their God (that they call "the only true God" while the others are false) should be worshiped according to their particular rules, and nobody should be allowed to worship any other God (or any other form/ name of the one God).

The example of food and nourishment offered by Krishna in this chapter is perfect. Having religious feelings is like being hungry: all beings feel hunger and desire to find food, but not everyone will prefer to eat the same things, and some crazy people may even choose to eat toxic or poisonous stuff. The choice will be determined by knowledge (or lack thereof), as well as by the particular taste afforded by one's set of physical senses, and by the previous association with a *guna* or fundamental quality of nature - *sattva*, *rajas* or *tamas*. For this reason this chapter gives a detailed explanation on the different types of foods preferred by people controlled by each *guna* or feeling or emotion.

We should notice that *guna* and *bhava* ("perception, emotion, feeling, nature, sentiment") are strictly connected to each other. The influence of the three *gunas* is not subject mainly to logic or the conscious mind, but to emotion or the subconscious mind, because of the accumulation of the previous impressions and habits (*samskaras* and *vasanas*). So the nature (*prakriti*) of beings is indistinguishable from the *gunas*; not only on the material level, but even on the spiritual level, where the *gunas* are present in their original transcendental form (respectively as *ananda*, *cit*, *sat*).

It is said, *de gustibus non disputandum (est)*, "one should not argue about personal tastes", and in fact this is perfectly true because discussion or logic or common sense do not have much power in convincing people to change their tastes, because tastes are based on feelings, emotions and nature. So the only way to change the situation for the better consists in discovering a better taste (2.59). To get there, we need to follow the method offered by the scriptures, under the guidance of those who are already realized (*tattva darsis*, 2.16, 4.34) and change our habits with a conscious effort of practice and detachment (*abhyasa*, 8.8, 12.9, 6.35).

It is said that habit is second nature, so we can understand that by consciously making choices in what to do and what not to do (16.7, 16.24, 18.30) we can take shelter in a different nature (*sattva*, *rajas*, or *tamas*), and then the new configuration of nature will carry out the actions, as explained in 13.21. In this 17th chapter, *abhyasa* is defined as *sadhana* (17.15), but to understand it better we can refer to verse 6.26 and especially in verses 18.37-39, as we will see in that purport.

The definition of *religion* we can find in the English dictionary is "the belief in a god or in a group of gods", "an organized system of beliefs, ceremonies, and rules used to worship a god or a group of gods", "an interest, a belief, or an activity that is very important to a person or group". By itself, *religion* has nothing to do with *dharma* and *vidya*, and therefore Vedic tradition cannot be defined *simply* as a religion. However, we should not deny Hinduism the legal definition of religion, because this would deprive the Hindu population of the right to religious freedom, officially recognized at international level as one of the most important human rights.

अर्जुन उवाच ।

arjuna uvāca ।

ये शास्त्रविधिमुत्सृज्य यजन्ते श्रद्धयान्विताः । तेषां निष्ठा तु का कृष्ण सत्त्वमाहो रजस्तमः ॥ १७-१ ॥

ye śāstravidhimutsrjya yajante śraddhayānviṭāḥ | teṣāṃ niṣṭhā tu kā kṛṣṇa sattvamāho rajastamaḥ || 17-1 ||

arjunah: Arjuna; *uvaca:* said; *ye:* those who; *sastra vidhim:* the knowledge of the scriptures; *utsrjya:* abandoning; *yajante:* worship/perform sacrifices; *śraddhaya:* with sincere faith; *anvitaḥ:* taking shelter; *tesam:* of them; *nistha:* the faith; *tu:* but; *ka:* what (is); *kṛṣṇa:* o Krishna; *sattvam:* *sattva;* *aho:* or; *rajah:* *rajas;* *tamah:* *tamas.*

Arjuna said, "Krishna, those who neglect the knowledge of the *shastra* but sincerely engage in rituals, taking shelter in them because of their faith, are they (to be considered) in *sattva*, *rajas* or *tamas*?"

Arjuna had already asked similar important questions in verses 2.54 (about the symptoms of a *sthita prajna*, a person established in knowledge) and 14.21 (about the symptoms of persons acting according to the different *gunas*).

The first point in the present verse (*sastra vidhi utsrjya*) mirrors the point presented in the last verses of the previous chapter: *yah sastra vidhim utsrjya vartate kama karatah, na sa siddhim avapnoti na sukham na param gatim, tasmac chastram pramanam te karyakarya vyavasthitau, jnatva sastra vidhanoktam karma kartum iharhasi.* "One who discards the knowledge of the scriptures and takes up actions based on whimsical desire will not attain perfection, happiness, or the supreme destination. Therefore you should perform your activities in this world according to the directions offered by the *shastra* about determining one's duty." (16.23-24).

We therefore understand that the enlightened persons who are actually following the teachings of the *shastra* are not going to be described in the following verses according to their tendencies in *sattva*, *rajas* or *tamas*. What will be their faith then? It will be explained at the end of the chapter, in verses 17.23 to 17.28: those who know Brahman (and are therefore called *brahmanas*) have the knowledge of the *Vedas* (2.46) and transcend the level of the material *gunas* (2.45, 14.20, 14.25, 14.26). Such liberated souls worship Yajna, sacrifice itself, as the Soul of their souls (Paramatma) and as the Supreme Personality (Purushottama); they know that God is One, although he appears in many forms and names, and therefore they are not confused by the illusion of duality. This is indicated by the expression *om tat sat*, that refers to the union (*yoga*) of *atman* with *brahman* described in all the chapters of *Bhagavad gita*.

This was confirmed already in chapter 4: *gata sangasya muktasya jnanavasthita cetasaḥ, yajnyacarataḥ karma samagram pravilyate, brahmarpanam brahma havir brahmagnau brahmana hutam, brahmaiva tena gantavyam brahma karma samadhina.* "One who has finished with all association (with the material *gunas*) and whose consciousness is firmly established in knowledge, works in a spirit of sacrifice. The entirety of his *karma* is thus destroyed. 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" (4.23-24).

Faith is an important first step in one's development, but it is certainly not sufficient to achieve the supreme destination (*param gatim*). In Sanskrit, "faith" is defined as *śraddha* or *nistha*, where *śraddha* is the initial acceptance of a proposed hypothesis, that is required in order to engage in its verification, while *nistha* is the firm belief that develops after the verification has given the demonstration of the correctness of the hypothesis.

The stage of hypothesis is common to all forms of learning, so those people who do not recognize the universal value of truth may conclude that all beliefs - including whimsical unverified speculations and baseless fantasies - are equally valid. This particular perspective is called relativism, and it is condemned by abrahamic ideologies as well as by the Vedic tradition - but for very different reasons. Abrahamic ideologies reject relativism because they teach that their perspective is the only acceptable truth that excludes all others as falsities (*asatyaṃ*, 16.8), while the Vedic tradition considers relativism simply an incomplete vision, that needs to be reconciled in the Greater Picture. Just like a piece of a jigsaw puzzle is real within itself, but it can make proper sense only when inserted in the correct position within the complete image, a relative truth that is not put in the correct perspective with everything else remains fragmented and could even be grossly misinterpreted by looking at it upside down.

What's more, relativism does not respect the universal and eternal value of the ethical principles or conscience we call *dharma*. There can be many different ways of life, but we cannot have a criminal *dharma*, because such a concept would be an oxymoron. *Dharma* is what supports the individual and society and the universe at large, so unnecessary violence, ignorance, and asuric conclusions and behaviors can never be called *dharma*. One could argue that *shastras* are written from time to time in different presentations, according to *desa* (place), *kala* (time) and *patra* (recipients), and that we can only understand the *shastra* properly by the qualified guidance of a realized soul, the *guru* (4.34). However, the genuine *guru* does not invent new teachings that are different from those taught in the *shastra*, but simply presents the old teachings in a new package, that must ultimately be distinguished from the contents. Otherwise, we might find ourselves in the funny predicament of the disciples of that *acharya* who had listed "a basket for the cat" among the requirements for the *puja* in his *ashrama*.

This popular parable was repeated by several teachers in slightly different versions. One *acharya* established a temple in a village, but shortly afterwards he found that the area was infested by rats, so he decided to keep a cat within the *ashrama* premises to scare the rats away and avoid the damages that such pests usually cause. However, the cat was very curious about the worship rituals in the temple and at the times of *arati* he would sneak into the Deities' room and try to play with the *puja* articles. So the *acharya* instructed his disciples to put the cat in a closed basket just before the *arati*, and then release it when the worship was completed. After the *acharya's* death, the disciples continued the system and gradually forgot its purpose; at some point there was no cat in the *ashrama* but before each ritual the *pujari* went out around the village to catch a stray cat to put in the basket, because that item was written in the *acharya's* instructions.

श्रीभगवानुवाच ।

śrībhagavānuvāca ।

त्रिविधा भवति श्रद्धा देहिनां सा स्वभावजा । सात्त्विकी राजसी चैव तामसी चेति तां शृणु ॥ १७-२ ॥

trividhā bhavati śraddhā dehinaṃ sā svabhāvajā । sāttvikī rājasī caiva tāmasī ceti tāṃ śṛṇu । । 17-2 । ।

sri bhagavan: the wonderful Lord; *uvaca*: said; *tri vidha*: of three types; *bhavati*: becomes; *śraddha*: faith; *dehinam*: of the embodied beings; *sa*: that; *sva bhava ja*: born from one's own nature; *sattviki*: *sattvika*; *rajasi*: *rajasika*; *ca*: and; *eva*: certainly; *tamasi*: *tamasika*; *ca*: and; *iti*: like this; *tam*: that; *srnu*: listen.

The wonderful Lord said, "Embodied beings can develop faith of three types, according to their nature either in *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*. Listen, as I will explain to you.

It is said, "Sow a thought, reap an act; sow an act, reap a habit; sow a habit, reap a character; sow a character, reap a destiny". This is the mechanics of human nature: when we make the choice to contemplate something (2.62, 6.17, 6, 7.17, 8.6, 8.14, 14.23), we develop attachment and desire, and these shape our nature (*sva bhava*). In technical Sanskrit terms, a thought (as referred to in the above saying) is a *vasana*, and the ensuing action is called *karma*; in turn the reaction or consequence to the action goes to reinforce or modify the original *vasana* thereby creating a quality or characteristic or *guna*, and in turn the *guna* pushes us under the shelter of a particular *prakriti* or nature. Finally, *prakriti* carries out the action (3.5, 3.27, 3.29, 3.33, 9.10, 13.21, 13.30, 18.59).

As individual souls (*jivatmas*) we cannot individually control the *prakriti* and the *gunas*, but we can choose where to take shelter. We can make an example: a glider or a sailboat cannot change the direction of the wind, but it can regulate and manoeuvre itself in such a way as to "take shelter" of the proper wind and ride it. This is the reason why Mother Durga is depicted as riding the tiger or the lion as her *vahana*; both these animals are symbols of great power and strength, and not easily controllable, but once we ride them on the lap of Mother, we will be in the safest place possible. This was indicated in verse 9.13: *mahatmanas tu mam partha daivim prakritim asritah*, "The great souls take shelter in the divine nature".

The divine nature is the nature of God. We have seen, especially in chapters 11 and 15 that God is the Virata Rupa, or the form of the universe, and therefore serving the universe constitutes the meaning of *dharma* - each one of us in our own specific capacity or *sva dharma*. What is known as *dharma* in human society is called *ritam* ("cosmic rule") at macrocosmic level, and includes all the natural laws that regulate the movements of the planets and stars and everything else. We, as spiritual cells in the spiritual body of God, constitute this divine *prakriti* (7.5, 9.8); we are *atman* and as such we are parts and parcels of *brahman*. Through this divine consciousness, we can attain the Supreme (13.35) and function perfectly in our own nature.

There is a supreme Intelligence and Consciousness (*brahman*) that guides and controls us (4.6, 9.8) and carries us through the process of evolution up to the highest perfection. All journeys begin with a first step. The first thing we need to do is to ascertain what is our present position, within the *daivi* or *asuri prakriti*, and in relationship to the *gunas*. Under the expert guidance of the *guru* and the scientific knowledge of the *shastra*, anyone can make progress - gradually but not necessarily slowly. But we can progress only when we have truly understood what is our present position in the Greater Picture, so that we can walk in the correct direction, and not simply wander around senselessly.

According to one's specific *guna* and *karma*, created by *vasanas* and *samskaras*, we can engage in the scientifically engineered duties and training that will enable us to move from the lower *gunas* to the highest and then to the transcendental level. Thus everything starts with understanding one's *sva bhava* or nature.

The next step from *sva bhava* is *sva dharma*, or the particular dharmic plan of activities (duties) that is engineered to carry us forward and upward in our individual evolution, for the benefit of the entire universe. This *sva dharma* is also called *varnashrama dharma*, because it contains all the various stages of individual *sva dharmas* as determined by the particular mixture of *guna* and *karma* of each human being, as we will see in chapter 18. Specifically, the *varnas* are planned scientifically in such a way that at each stage the individual is encouraged and supported in evolving from *tamas* to *rajas* to *sattva* and then to *suddha sattva*, the transcendental position of consciousness.

This knowledge is not destined only for those who are unevolved, because as long as we have a material body we will be subject to the power of the *gunas*: *na tad asti prithivyam va divi deveṣu va punah, sattvam prakriti jair muktam yad ebhih syat tribhir gunaih*, "There is not even one single person, either in this world or in the world of the Devas, who is free from the influence of the three *gunas* created by the *prakriti*" (18.40).

Also, a *jivatma* can never have sufficient power to overcome the *prakriti* consisting of the *gunas*, unless he renounces duality and enters the supreme Consciousness: *daivi hy esa guna mayi mama maya duratyaya, mam eva ye prapadyante mayam etam taranti te*, "This divine energy of mine, manifesting as the three *gunas*, is very difficult to overcome but those who take shelter in me will cross over this illusion" (7.14).

One may neglect the knowledge of the *shastra*, but the laws of nature will continue to work. We will be subject to the law of gravity and the other mechanisms of physics even if we do not believe in them or we have no knowledge about them; the same applies to the law of *karma*, to the transmigration of souls (reincarnation) and to the play of the three *gunas* of material *prakriti*. Someone who is under the influence of *sattva guna* will make sattvic choices applying the characteristic tendencies of *sattva* out of his own nature.

To situate oneself in *sattva*, one simply needs to eat sattvic food, practice sattvic habits in the activities of body and mind, and value sattvic qualities. This is totally scientific and can be observed by anyone in any place, time and circumstance, in any individual and any culture; we do not need to believe or even to know what is taught in *shastra*. We just need to listen to our conscience - to ethical sense, healthy mind, common sense, decency, sincerity... in one word, to goodness.

This natural knowledge is contained by birth in the hearts of all human beings, because the supreme Soul naturally resides in everyone - those who believe and those who do not believe. When we say that Vedic scriptures present God as *satya* and *dharma*, we do not mean that we believe that there is one very powerful individual who demands to be worshiped as the supreme Truth and Ethics. Rather, it means that we honor and recognize Truth and Ethics as God, as the sum total of all existence and consciousness. We include all beings in this divine truth, and therefore we engage in the service of all beings and existences through the expansion of our consciousness, by removing the enclosing walls of duality and separation.

सत्त्वानुरूपा सर्वस्य श्रद्धा भवति भारता । श्रद्धामयोऽयं पुरुषो यो यच्छ्रद्धः स एव सः ॥ १७-३ ॥

sattvānurūpā sarvasya śraddhā bhavati bhārata । śraddhāmayo'yaṁ puruṣo yo yacchradhaḥ sa eva saḥ ॥ 17-3 ॥

sattva anurupa: according to the existence; *sarvasya*: of all; *śraddha*: faith; *bhavati*: becomes; *bharata*: o descendant of Bharata; *śraddha mayah*: made of that faith; *ayam*: this; *purusah*: the *purusha*; *yah*: who; *yat*: which; *śraddhah*: faith; *saḥ*: s/he; *eva*: certainly; *saḥ*: s/he.

"O descendant of Bharata, everyone develops faith according to their (particular) way of life. Each *purusha* is categorized according to such type of faith.

Faith is something that we develop gradually, through experience, impressions, and especially training and education. *Śraddha*, or the initial form of faith, comes from *sattva*, that is the foundation of the mind or subtle body, also called *linga sarira*.

All the various perspectives of Vedic knowledge study the anatomy and the mechanics of the subtle body and explain exactly how to use it. The *purusha* is the *atman* (the soul), that can wear either a male or female body, or even a neuter or androgynous body, and is characterized by consciousness and feelings. It is transcendental to all material elements, including the subtle elements that surround it. This *purusha* is also known as *cit* ("consciousness"), *kshetrajna* ("knower of the field"), *drishta* ("the observer"), *sakshi* ("the witness"), and *kutastha* ("the immovable"). At macrocosmic (*samasthi*, or *para*) level as related to the microcosmic level (*vyasthi* or *apara*), the Purusha is the Purushottama, the manifested form of Consciousness called Brahman.

Initially, the microcosmic *purusha* is "turned inwards" (*antarmukha*) and it is conscious of a good desire or aspiration directed towards its source in service and happiness (*vimoka*). Such transcendental feelings reverberate Isvara's own feelings, and include compassion (*daya*), non-violence (*ahimsa*), desiring the good of others (*kalyana*), and contentment (*anavasada*). When such desire becomes distracted and turns outwards (*bahirmukha*), the *purusha* projects its attention towards material nature, where the *pradhana* is activated by Time through a movement of the *gunas*. This movement (*vriddhi*) is compared to a wave in a pond, that makes ripples and confuses the vision of the clear surface, creating superimposition (*adhyasa*) in the form of *ahankara*, of separate identification of the ego as the subject and beneficiary of action, also called *cid abhasa* ("reflection of consciousness"). At this point the *atman* "starts to live" in this world and is therefore called *jivatman*.

The *jiva*'s desires are still good (*sat*), but coming in contact with *rajas* it develops a separate interest and an impetus for action (*kriya*); to keep this tendency from degrading further, one should engage discernment (*viveka*), simplicity (*arjavam*), generosity (*dana*) and a conscious effort (*abhyasa*).

The material power of concentration of the *purusha* is called *citta*, and it is compared to the light of the sun reflected on the water. When directed towards the *paramatma*, *citta* is usually called *chaitanya* or the consciousness function of the *atman*. For everyone, however, *citta* is the power of memory, stored into the *karana sarira* (causal body) and known by western psychology as the subconscious. It contains the imprint of all the impressions of all the previous lifetimes; it is already influenced by the three *gunas* and can be directed through *sadhana*, constant practice and detachment. In this work, if we analyze its tendencies and acknowledge its messages, we can get clues on how to address the problems that need to be solved - especially the karmic debts, trauma and attachments that still influence our behaviors, obstructing our evolution.

The *karana sarira* (causal body, also called *karmasaya*) further develops functions in order to act in the material world, and their aggregate is called *linga sarira* (subtle body). Sometimes these functions overlap, and therefore the definitions can include more than one meaning, but in general it is understood that *buddhi* (intelligence, the faculty of understanding) is the function that is largely powered by *sattva guna* and can raise and purify our consciousness.

In contact with *rajas* and *tamas*, *buddhi* becomes the "internal cause" (*antah karana*) of interaction with the material elements of the universe. In this regard, it is interesting to note that for this *antah karana* there is little difference between the perception of the external objects and the perception of the internal objects such as memories, thoughts and emotions. Generally, this *antah karana* is described as the "aggregate of the internal senses", that include the mind, the five senses of perception and the five senses of action. The contact with sense objects (internal or external) belonging to *sattva*, *rajas* or *tamas* creates impressions and therefore modifies the nature of the consciousness.

These functions of modification include consideration of the consequences of action (*sankalpa* and *vikalpa*), reflection (*cinta*), decision (*adyavasaya*, *niscaya*), egotism (*abhimana*, *garva*), memory (*smarana*) and perception (*samsparsha*). These will be analyzed in this concluding section of *Bhagavad gita* specifically in regard to the action according to the *gunas*.

Since the cosmic mind is called Hiranyagarbha (the "Golden Egg", or "Golden Fetus", the Purusha avatara that is the origin of Brahma the creator), we can understand that at the microcosmic level, this is the beginning of the development of the gross body or *sthula sarira*, through the process called *anurupa* ("following the form").

यजन्ते सात्त्विका देवान्यक्षरक्षांसि राजसाः । प्रेतान्भूतगणांश्चान्ये यजन्ते तामसा जनाः ॥ १७-४ ॥

yajante sāttvikā devānyakṣarakṣāṁsi rājasāḥ | pretānbhūtagaṇāṁścānye yajante tāmasā janāḥ || 17-4 ||

yajante: they worship; *sattvikah*: those who are in *sattva*; *devan*: the Personalities of God; *yaksa*: the *yakshas*; *raksamsi*: (and) the *rakshasas*; *rajasah*: those who are in *rajas*; *pretan*: the ghosts; *bhuta ganan*: the various types of beings; *ca*: and; *anye*: others; *yajante*: offer sacrifices; *tamasa janah*: people who are in *tamas*.

"Those who are sattvic worship the Personalities of God, those who are in *rajas* worship the *rakshasas* and the *yakshas*, and those who are in *tamas* offer sacrifices to ghosts and other types of lower beings.

We have already mentioned that transcendently realized souls, who follow the purpose of the *shastra*, worship the One Reality of *atman/ brahman*, also called *om tat sat*. This *avyakta* ("non manifested") Narayana becomes manifest in this universe in all the various forms that are categorized according the three *gunas* - directly in the dimension of *sattva*, and indirectly in the dimensions of *rajas* and *tamas*. These manifestations can be perceived even without shastric knowledge.

The sattvic manifestation of God in this world consists of the many Personalities of the supreme Consciousness, called *Devas* - the supporters of the universe, who incarnate the functions of existence. Some even say that the total number of such aspects of God amounts to 33 millions (because the universal Godhead has innumerable forms perceived by different types of people), but we should not imagine that one is expected to worship all of them separately, because they are simply different aspects of the same Person. We can make the example of some important person in human society, who has several roles in his family, community, professional milieu and so on. So according to the functions he performs, this one man will have different names, different aspects and different activities; he will be called "daddy", "grampa", "brother", "son", "husband", "doctor", "professor", "sir", "or even "darling", or with his first name, family name, nickname, titles and so on. His apparel will also be different whether he goes to the surgery room, or to a formal dinner, outside gardening, to a children's party, for a swim, and so on. Yet, he is always the same person.

In a similar way, the supreme Consciousness we call God manifests in many forms and with many names - in a much greater measure compared to an ordinary embodied soul, who has serious limitations. The *Devas* are not mere abstractions or psychological archetypes or symbolic representations of the powers of nature; they are certainly not fantasy characters or mythological figures, or even ordinary *jivatmas* as some people believe. We have discussed this topic already in commenting other verses, because the *Devas* are mentioned many times (3.11, 3.12, 4.12, 4.25, 7.20, 7.23, 9.20, 9.23, 9.25, 10.2, 10.14, 11.11, 11.15, 11.22, 11.31).

This unity of all the *Devas* as Personalities of the same Godhead is confirmed in a famous passage of *Brihad aranyaka Upanishad* (3.9.1-9) that narrates the conversation between Yajnavalkya Rishi and Vidagdha the son of Sakala, who had asked him about the number of the *Devas*. Yajnavalkya gave a series of answers, all perfectly valid, and the last and final conclusion indicated the One supreme Reality.

The sattvic worship of the *Devas*, that is recommended by Krishna in *Bhagavad gita* for all those who are engaged in regular duties in society, includes both the *saumya* and *asaumya* forms ("sweet" and "harsh"), the *bhadra* and the *ugra* ("benevolent" and "terrifying") of the Personalities of God. For example, Mother Kali, Bhairava, Narasimha, are each portrayed in both aspects, according to the particular sentiment they manifest.

Those who sincerely worship the *ugra* forms of the *Devas* are therefore established on the level of *sattva*, not of *rajas* or *tamas*, and they can further develop by studying and practicing the instructions of the *shastra* called *Tantras* or *Agamas*. There are *vaishnava Tantras*, *shaiva Tantras*, and *shakta Tantras*, and they are all the basis for the correct ritual worship, that will gradually bring the devotee to the realization of the Supreme Transcendence.

Some people (usually presenting themselves as *vaishnavas*) argue that the *pancha upasana*, the worship of the five main Personalities of God (Vishnu, Shiva, Durga, Surya and Ganesha) is "impersonalist", because this practice is not presenting a monotheistic vision of God that is typical of abrahamic ideologies. These people believe that God must be one, and if we worship more than one form of God we automatically reject the existence of the supreme Person. However, this is a foolish position.

Vishnu himself, that is recognized by all Vedic scriptures and specifically by *Bhagavad gita* as the sum total of all Personalities of God, has many forms - some of which appear dramatically different from each other. Who is then the "only real God" for *vaishnavas*? Can a *vaishnava* worship Krishna exclusively and neglect the worship of Vishnu in his various *avatars*? Why should he call himself a *vaishnava* then?

And how can there be an impersonal form? The very definition of form is personal *par excellence* - it goes with name, qualities, activities, entourage and so on, and no functioning brain can consider it impersonal. The confusion can only come from a materialistic mentality that sees material differences between the various forms of God, and therefore tries to impose limits on God.

On the other hand, there are several people blinded by *tamas* who believe they are Tantrics and are worshiping *ugra* forms of Bhairavi and Bhairava, but in fact their worship is channeled towards the *ganas* or servants of Shakti and Shiva. This is particularly true when the rituals are trying to "control" or "use" the object of worship, in order to obtain selfish material advantages, often with the intention of harming other people. No *jivatman* can ever control any Personality of God (except through *bhakti*, of course) because the power of God is immensely superior to the power of the tiny human beings. Out of their kindness, Bhairava and Bhairavi may allow the foolish worshiper to interact with a *gana* who represents them, and who accepts the offerings and carries out the required tasks. However, this is different (in better) from the position of those who knowingly and directly worship ghosts in the hope of acquiring material powers.

The worship of *rakshasas* and *yakshas* is usually not very visible in religious traditions, because it does not have temples proper or open rituals. It is much darker as it requires causing pain, fear and despair to innocent creatures, and directly attracts the presence of these terrifying *asuras*, who are able to take human-like form or any form at will, or to remain concealed in a subtle form. Many cultures around the world recognize the existence of powerful wizards and shape shifters, who are fond of blood and flesh and consider human beings like cattle to be enslaved and exploited. From within such human herds, some ruthless individuals who desire great wealth and power over their

fellow creatures may accept to worship the *rakshasas* and are thus placed in supervising positions, with great privileges compared to the other humans. Sometimes they offer their own women to be impregnated by such *rakshasas* and *yakshas*, to strengthen their position with blood alliances and a shared progeny of hybrids, that are considered as very powerful physically and mentally. Within this category of *rakshasa* worship we can also include the service that materialistic people offer to powerful men (politicians, kings etc) with the intention of obtaining selfish advantages.

The worship of ghosts of all kinds is even more popular in many cultures, and is even lower than the worship offered to *asuras* because it is inspired merely by fear, blind submission, madness and masochism and self-inflicted damage. This will be explained in further details in the description of the different types of austerities inspired by *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas* (17.17-19).

We may mention here that according to tradition, ghosts or spirits are categorized according to their powers. Most spirits are not evil, they are just frustrated and miserable, they attack only if provoked, and if they try to communicate with living people, they do so out of their anguish hoping to get some help, but they easily come when invited or evoked and when they are presented with some offerings (usually they eat by smelling and seeing). These ghosts are known as *pretas* and *bhutas* - people who died without any relative performing the rituals for them, and newly dead people who are still attached to their bodies and material lives. They are usually bound to graveyard or crematorium grounds, or to the places where they died or lived. The spirits known as *dakinis* are often women who died in childbirth or similar circumstances; they are attracted to small children.

The *pisacha* or *pisachini* can easily be attracted to keep constant company with their worshiper and whisper in his ear, supplying information about the present or the past, especially about hidden things; however they cannot predict the future. *Yakshas* and *yakshinis* (also known as goblins, gnomes and cruel fairies) are on a higher level, but they are still very dangerous; they like to mingle with human beings and even have sex with humans, developing a strong selfish attachment to them, and usually taking revenge if neglected. The most powerful and dangerous type of spirit is called *brahma rakshasa* - usually the ghost of a knowledgeable *sadhaka* who degraded himself in some way during his life and remains unable or unwilling to continue his purification and evolution. A *brahma rakshaka* can easily trick gullible people by pretending to be a Deity or Personality of God and giving confusing and even dangerous instructions or information. This is why 99 times out of 100 *aghoris* go bad and people become crazy and die, thus becoming ghosts in turn.

अशास्त्रविहितं घोरं तप्यन्ते ये तपो जनाः । दम्भाहंकारसंयुक्ताः कामरागबलान्विताः ॥ १७-५ ॥

asāstravihitam ghoram tapyante ye tapo janāḥ | dambhahānkārasamyuktāḥ kāmarāgabalanvitaḥ || 17-5 ||

asastra: not according to the scriptures; *vihitam*: directed; *ghoram*: horrible/ harmful; *tapyante*: submit themselves; *ye*: those who; *tapah*: austerity; *janah*: people; *dambha*: pride; *aham kara*: egotism; *samyuktah*: engaged; *kama raga bala anvitah*: compelled by the force of lust and attachment.

"Those people who do not follow the directions of the *shastra* submit themselves to terrible practices, out of egotism and false religiousness/ hypocrisy, and engage (in such activities) under the sway of lust and attachment.

We find confirmation in the discussion between king Prithu and Mother Earth: *tan anadriya yo 'vidvan, arthan arabhate svayam, tasya vyabhicaranty artha arabdhas ca punah punah*, "Those ignorant people who disrespect the instructions of the *shastra* begin so many new schemes created by their minds, but they do not achieve success, no matter how many times they try" (*Bhagavata Purana* 4.18.5).

The verse we are reading now is similar to verse 16.18: *ahankaram balam darpam kamam krodham ca samsritah, mam atma para dehesu pradvisanto 'bhyasuyakah*, "Taking shelter in *ahankara*, physical strength, arrogance, lust and anger, they show envy and hatred against me, as I reside in their own bodies and in the bodies of others". Deliberately neglecting the teachings of the *shastra* (*ashastra vihitam*) is certainly not a symptom of *sattva* (goodness) and freedom from egotism. So the religious practices that are not supported by the proper knowledge of the scriptures may try to compensate their weakness by impressing the ignorant and the gullible with great demonstrations of austerity and pomp. The real motivation of such practices is the desire for power, name, fame, adoration, and profit - all falling into the category of lust and attachment, egotism and self-righteousness. We sometimes see people making a show of terrible austerities, such as lying on beds of thorns or nails, or forcing their limbs into unnatural positions and atrophy, and so on, for the purpose of attracting followers and supporters, intimidating and impressing common people and getting cheap adoration.

In some extreme cases the influence of *tamas* creates very serious mental disorders because the explosive mixture of lust and attachment produces increasing frustration, and the rage and violence can be turned against others and even against oneself. This is the reason why we see sadistic and masochistic perverts engaging in torture, corporal punishment, flagellation, even using spike belts and cilices, that cause damage to the body and to the mind. Because normal healthy pleasures are too mild for them, they need extra stimulation for their thickly encrusted senses in order to feel something.

One could object by observing that some extraordinary personalities - for example Dhruva and Bhagiratha - were able to please God by sincerely engaging in strict austerities that involved full control of the body position and abstention from food. We need to understand that God was pleased by the sincerity and the concentration by which the devotee was meditating, and not by the amount of deprivation and suffering that he caused himself, because that is not the meaning of austerity (*tapah*).

The word *ghora* is particularly important in this verse, as it conveys the meanings of "harmful, horrible, violent". Sometimes we see a particular category of *sadhus* called *aghoris* (also known as *kapalikas*, "bearers of the skull") who seem to be immersed in tamasic activities - drinking from skulls, sharing food with dogs and sometimes even eating human flesh and all sorts of disgusting things, living in crematorium grounds, uttering obscenities, consuming intoxicants, having sex with dead bodies, and breaking all cleanliness rules.

However, the actions of the *aghoris* ("not horrible") are never violent, and never aim at satisfying their own senses. They rather constitute a "crash course" to attain the purpose of totally controlling their senses and becoming detached from any material identification and association. They do not kill or harm anyone, as they collect skulls, bones and human flesh from abandoned corpses and usually from the remains of *sadhus* and *sannyasis*, who are generally not cremated as a tradition and who wouldn't mind their remains to be used like this

(following Dadhici's example). They are kind to all animals and other creatures, and they only show a shocking behavior to shake self-righteous people out of their complacency and delusions. They never hate or despise or mistreat anyone, and in fact as a norm they selflessly help all those who approach them, healing their diseases by absorbing their bad karmic reactions, just like the fire they worship consumes all impurities. The only help they will refuse is when they are asked to do something to harm others by "black magic". They never damage their own body either, nor subject it to pain or actual deprivation. Their sexual practices are conducted in total detachment, so much that uncontrolled ejaculation would nullify the value of their *sadhana*; just like the consumption of intoxicants, sexual intercourse is used to access another dimension of consciousness that is totally detached from the material body and mind. However, their awareness always remains sober and clear. Of course, not all who claim to be *aghoris* are genuine, but those who sincerely and knowingly follow this path are to be classified under the transcendental category, as they are not controlled by *tamas*.

On the other hand, those who perform animal sacrifices by killing innocent creatures are to be categorized under *tamas*, whether they will consume the flesh of the sacrificed animal or not. We should remember here that the colonial misinterpretation of *asvamedha* and *gomedha yajnas* was specifically engineered to present Hinduism and Vedic tradition as a cruel and barbaric superstition that only deserved to be despised and abandoned, and even opposed and destroyed. Also under *tamas* are those who prescribe hurtful and damaging *prayascitta* (atonement or purification) practices such as drinking hot *ghi* or molten lead; the colonial translations of *Manu smriti* and similar texts in that regard are certainly a fabrication because they are opposed to the fundamental dharmic principles as indicated in the next verse by the word *karsayanta* ("torturous").

कर्षयन्तः शरीरस्थं भूतग्राममचेतसः । मां चैवान्तःशरीरस्थं तान्विद्ध्यासुरनिश्चयान् ॥ १७-६ ॥

karṣayantaḥ śarīrasthaṁ bhūtagrāmamacetasah | māṁ caivāntaḥśarīrasthaṁ tānviddhyāsuraṇiścayān | | 17-6 | |

karṣayantaḥ: causing suffering and damage; *sarira stham*: situated in the body; *bhuta gramam*: all beings/ all the material elements; *acetasaḥ*: foolishly; *mam*: me; *ca*: and; *eva*: certainly; *antah*: inside; *sarira stham*: residing in the body; *tan*: them; *viddhi*: you should know; *asura*: *asuras*; *niscayan*: certified.

"You should know that they are certainly *asuras*, because they foolishly cause suffering and damage to all beings, and to me as well, since I reside within the body.

In our commentary to the previous verse, we quoted: *ahankaram balam darpam kamam krodham ca samsritah, mam atma para dehesu pradvisanto bhyasuyakah*, "Taking shelter in *ahankara*, physical strength, arrogance, lust and anger, they show envy and hatred against me, as I reside in their own bodies and in the bodies of others" (16.18). Of course nobody can really hurt God, because perfect detachment is one of his characteristics (4.13, 7.12, 9.4, 13.15), and Krishna also instructs us to develop the same quality (2.45, 2.56, 2.57, 6.35, 8.11, 12.11, 12.12, 12.16, 12.17, 13.10, and 15.3).

However, even if God, the realized/ pure souls, and even the material elements cannot be damaged by the *asuras'* behavior, it is the *asura* himself that becomes bound by the results of his activities. *Ahimsa* (absence of hatred) remains therefore the crucial factor in sattvic religious practices. All along *Bhagavad gita*, Krishna states again and again that *yoga* and spiritual realization cannot be separated from compassion and respect for all creatures and service to all beings as parts of the Supreme. To better understand this point, we should also consult verses 3.24, 3.26, 4.35, 5.7, 5.18, 5.25, 5.29, 6.9, 6.29, 6.30, 6.31, 6.32, 7.6, 10.20, 11.43, 11.55, 12.4, 12.13, 12.15, 12.17, 13.3, 13.8, 13.16, 13.17, 13.18, 13.23, 13.28, 13.29, 13.31, 14.4, 15.7, 15.8, 15.13, 15.14, 15.15, 15.19, 16.2, 16.3, 16.18, 17.14, 17.19, 18.46, 18.54, and 18.61.

This instruction also comes at the conclusion of Krishna's *lila* on this planet, leaving his spiritual legacy to the great devotee Uddhava: *ahimsa satyam asteyam, akama-krodha-lobhata, bhuta priya hiteha ca, dharmo ayam sarva varnikah*, "This is the *dharma* for all *varnas*: freedom from hatred, truthfulness, honesty (non-stealing), freedom from the mixture of lust anger and greed, and the work for the benefit of all beings" (*Bhagavata Purana* 11.17.21). The same crucial instruction was also given to the greatest king of ancient times, Prithu, a direct *avatara* of Vishnu, by the famous Sanat kumara, direct son of Brahma, as the essential principle to govern society. These four verses (17.5, 17.6, 17.19 and 16.18) clearly establish the parameters to ascertain whether a religion is genuine or not. Only fools (*mudha*, 17.19) or people who have no other choice (because they are being forced, blackmailed, etc) will engage in such adharmic religions.

Tamasic austerities and religious practice are damaging and hateful, meant to procure bloodshed and pain as a form of punishment; this is typical of the *asuras*. If we happen to find some passage in Hindu scriptures or teachings that seem to support asuric or tamasic conclusions and principles, we must need to consider that there has been some tampering and fabrication, because genuine Vedic scriptures can never support *adharmam*. This is confirmed at the end of this verse: *asuran niscayan*, such people and practices are "certified asuric".

On the other hand, there are some austerities or religious practices that seem to be painful in the beginning, but they bring health and happiness, as explained in verses 18.36 to 18.39. Such beneficial austerities are certainly influenced by *sattva* as they are meant to develop good habits - to make a few examples, bathing regularly, eating proper food, following a healthy schedule for work and rest, and controlling the urges of one's senses and mind.

Another important meaning in the verse is indicated by the second interpretation of the word *bhuta*, that also refers to the elements or elemental beings, and not just to the living beings. This meaning is connected to another point presented by Krishna in the previous chapter: *asatyam apratistham te jagad ahur anisvaram, aparaspara sambhutam kim anyat kama haitukam*, "They say that the universe is false and temporary, and there is no God and no creation based on cause and effect. For them, the only reason for the existence of the world is mere sense gratification" (16.8).

As we have already commented in the chapter describing the Virata Rupa, the material universe, the material elements, and material nature in general are a direct manifestation of God, and should be respected. Paramatma is present in the heart of all beings - all living beings as well as all the atoms of material elements, and in the space between atoms.

आहारस्त्वपि सर्वस्य त्रिविधो भवति प्रियः । यज्ञस्तपस्तथा दानं तेषां भेदमिमं शृणु ॥ १७-७ ॥

āhārastvapi sarvasya trividho bhavati priyaḥ | yajñastapastathā dānaṁ teṣāṁ bhedamimam śṛṇu || 17-7 ||

aharah: food (and drinks); *tu:* but; *api:* also; *sarvasya:* of all; *tri vidhah:* three types; *bhavati:* becomes; *priyah:* desired; *yajnah:* ritual sacrifice; *tapah:* austerity; *tatha:* also; *danam:* charity; *tesam:* in them; *bhedam:* the difference; *imam:* this; *srnu:* listen.

"Food is also categorized into three types, as are all the things desired (by people), the ritual sacrifices, austerities and charity. Listen, as I explain their different categories.

Food is dear (*priya*), because it is the first and most fundamental reality of existence for all beings. Food is the basis for *yajna*, because no religious ritual can be successful without the offering of food (as the oblations of clarified butter, grains, fruits, herbs, *soma* juice etc) and the distribution of *prasada* (1.42, 17.13). Such *yajnas* are mandatory for all family people - if not every day at least once a month on *sankrantis* or *purnimas*, or even once a year on Makara sankranti. By engaging in *yajna* we get the opportunity to perform genuine *tapah* (austerity), and genuine *dana* (charity) ensues naturally. Therefore this chapter is actually based on food. The word *ahara* includes not only food, but also drinks and all the other substances that we assume into our bodies, to build the gross and subtle tissues of our vehicle and instrument for life and work in this world. Some people say, "you are what you eat", and certainly there is a lot of truth in this. The material body, *sthula sarira*, is also called *annamaya kosa*, or "sheath made of food".

In *Chandogya Upanishad* Uddala Aruni instructs his son Svetaketu on how the food we eat builds up not only our body tissues, but our mind as well: *annamayam hi saumya manah*, "My good boy, the mind is made of food" (*Chandogya Upanishad* 6.5). The substance of the food is composed by three elements: the grossest component is used to build the hard tissues such as bone, teeth, hair, nails etc; the excess material is eliminated as waste and in the process it also carries all other impurities out from the system. The nutritious component becomes flesh, blood (and other bodily fluids) and marrow (and other tissues), while the subtle component becomes breath (*prana*), mental substance (*manas*) and speech (*vak*), much like the butter is produced by churning yogurt (*annam asitam tridha vidhiyate, tasya yah sthavistho dhatus tat purisam bhavati, yo madhyamas tan mamsam, yo 'nisthas tan manah, dadhnah saumya mathyamanasa yo 'nima sa urdhvah samudishati, tat sarpir bhavati, evam eva khalu, saumya annasasyamanasya yo 'nima sa urdhvah samudishati tan mano bhavati, Chandogya Upanishad* 6.6). To illustrate the religious importance of food, Uddala Aruni asked his son to make an experiment by abstaining from food for 15 days, while still drinking water to support the *pranas* (*sodasa kalah saumya purusah pancadasahani masih kamam apah piba, apomayah prano na pibato vicchetsyata iti*). At the end of the fasting period, Svetaketu found that he had great difficulties in remembering the verses of the Vedic *samhitas*, because the fire of the mind had been reduced to a small hot ember only. After taking some food, he felt happiness and strength of mind returning (*sa hasa, atha hainam upasada, tam ha yat kim ca papraccha sarvam ha pratipade*). Thus he was able to understand the meaning of food (*Chandogya Upanishad* 7.1-3).

In *Taittiriya Upanishad* (Brighu valli), Varuna speaks to his son Brighu, giving him the famous aphorism, *annam parabrahma svarupam*, "food is Brahman itself". Varuna said, "Food, *prana*, sight, hearing, mind and speech are the means by which one can know Brahman (3.1.1). One must never disrespect food, because *prana* is food, and the body consumes food to feed the *prana*; therefore both the body and *prana* are made of food (3.7.2). One must observe the vow/ take the responsibility never to throw away food (3.8.1). One must observe the vow/ take the responsibility to produce an abundance of food (*annam bahu kurvita, tad vratam*, 3.9.1). Food is prosperity. One must observe the vow/ take the responsibility to give food to anyone who asks for it, and because as a young man he respectfully offers cooked food, he will get respect and cooked food in his old age (3.10.1). The *Sama Veda* says, "I am the food, I am the one who consumes the food... One who offers me as food protects my existence. Although I am food, I eat those who consume food without offering it first" (3.10.6). This offering refers both to the *yajna* and to the distribution of food.

Another important statement in *Taittiriya Upanishad* is, *annad vai praja prajayante, yah kas ca prithivim asrita atho annenaiva jivanti, atha ened apy antyantatah*, "From food all living beings are born on this earth, they live by food and at the end they enter into food again/ become food again" (Brahmananda valli, 2.2.1). The invocation of *Taittiriya Upanishad* says, *sahana bhavatu, sana nau bhunaktu, saha viryam karavahai, tejasvi navadhita mastu ma vidvishavahai*, "May we become united, may we be fed together, may we walk bravely together and be enlightened together. May we never be divided by quarrel or selfishness".

In the second chapter we find the following verse: "All beings on earth are born from food, they live on food and then return to being food. Food was born before the creatures were born, therefore it is considered the supreme medicine. Those who honor food as Brahman obtain plenty of food. Since food exists before the creatures and is medicine for all, all creatures are born from food and grow with food. Food is eaten, and eats the creatures, therefore it is called *ahara*, 'eating'" (2.2.1). We had already seen this point in the chapter of *Bhagavad gita* that explains about *yajnas*: *annad bhavanti bhutani* (3.14).

Prasna Upanishad states that "food is Prajapati" (1.14). It starts the explanation by saying that Prajapati (Brahma) was meditating about creating a descendance, and he generated Anna and Prana (food and life air), and they produced all sorts of creatures (1.4).

In *Brihad aranyaka Upanishad* (1.4.7) we find, "All Devas are projections of the Purusha. The entire universe can be reduced to the fundamental elements: food and the *prana* that consumes the food. The life energy takes different names according to its functions, but we must track it as the *atman*" (1.4.7).

आयुःसत्त्वबलारोग्यसुखप्रीतिविवर्धनाः । रस्याः स्निग्धाः स्थिरा हृद्या आहाराः सात्त्विकप्रियाः ॥ १७-८ ॥

āyusṣattvabalārogyasukhaprītivivardhanāḥ | rasyaḥ snigdhaḥ sthira hṛdyā āhāraḥ sāttvikapriyāḥ || 17-8 ||

ayuh: (duration and strength of) life; *sattva:* *sattva*; *bala:* strength; *arogya:* good health; *sukha:* happiness; *priti:* pleasure; *vivardhanah:* increasing; *rasyah:* juicy/ sweet; *snigdha:* fatty; *sthira:* substantial; *hrdyah:* satisfying; *aharah:* food; *sattvika priyah:* preferred by people in *sattva guna*.

"The food preferred by people who love *sattva* are juicy/ sweet, fatty, substantial and satisfying, and they increase pleasure, happiness, good health, strength, goodness and duration of life.

Krishna also gave instructions on food to Uddhava: *pathyam putam anayastam, aharyam sattvika smritam, rajasam cendriya prestham, tamasam cartidasuci*, "Food that is beneficial, pure, obtained without too much difficulty, is sattvic food. Food that gives a strong hit on the senses is rajasic, and food that is impure and creates suffering is tamasic" (*Bhagavata Purana*, 11.25.28).

Good food is full of life (*ayuh*): this refers to the effect on the body and mind, but also to the symptoms we observe in the ingredients themselves. In other words, good food is fresh, and consists especially of recently harvested fruits and vegetables, consumed without cooking them (raw) as much as possible, to ensure that we get sufficient vitamins, enzymes, and the other volatile elements that support a healthy diet. Grains can be consumed as sprouts that do not require much cooking, but even when they are prepared as a steamed or boiled staple dish as composite carbohydrates (rice, wheat, barley, etc) they should not be overcooked or kept aside for too long before consuming them. Freshly cooked grains are much tastier and healthier. Also, whole grains are better than refined grains (that have been deprived of the germ). Good food gives strength (*bala*), and this is how we can immediately recognize the quality of the food we have consumed: after eating, we should feel stronger, not weaker or sleepy. The word *restaurant* derives from "restoring" (energies and strength). Good food is beneficial for health in general (*arogya*), as the greater part of our immune system resides in our digestive tract. Also, we need to learn about the proper combination of ingredients, and how to consume them in accordance to the time (of the day, of the year, as *kala*), place (climate, environmental circumstances, as *desa*) and our specific *tri-dosa prakriti* (individual bodily nature, as *patra*).

Good food gives happiness (*sukha*), as it makes us feel good not only physically but mentally as well. This is also connected to the next quality listed, "pleasing" (*priti*); when food is attractive to us, our body produces enzymes more easily to facilitate digestion. We can immediately notice because we start salivating, as salivary glands in our mouth are the first and most important source of self produced enzymes. Food is attractive to us because of our particular preference and because of its nice smell, look, texture, taste, etc, so the art of cooking should never be underestimated, because good food and good digestion not only support our physical health, but also our mental health and our spiritual development. Another very important factor in food is variety; by consuming a wide range of fresh seasonal agricultural and forest products, we ensure a proper supply of the different nutritional elements and medicinal properties. Variety in preparation and presentation also makes food more attractive (*sukha, priti*), and therefore more sattvic.

Good food is juicy/ sweet (*rasya*), fatty (*snigdha*), and as such it is hearty (*hridaya*) and substantial (*sthira*); that also means its beneficial effect lasts longer. Juicy foods contain more vitamins and minerals; they are not necessarily watery, although they were originally (such as sugar that was originally sugarcane juice). A certain amount of fat is required for the proper functioning of the brain, that is constituted by fat for a considerable percentage of its weight. To explain these qualities of sattvic food, we can say that *rasya* is (for example) sugar; when sugar is mixed with milk cream, we have a mixture of *rasya* and *snigdha*. When *rasya* and *snigdha* are enriched with *sthira* (made more substantial), we have milk sweets. To make another example, we can look at a savory recipe: for perfect balance of a sattvic dish we need some juicy vegetables, some fat, and some substantial ingredients such as pulses or grains.

One of the most famous sattvic preparations is called *charu* (also known as *payasa*); it is made with rice boiled in milk with the addition of a little sugar and clarified butter. Milk and milk products (such as yogurt, butter, clarified butter, fresh cheese etc) are considered to be sattvic; however they should not involve any suffering for the animals and they should be collected and prepared with great concern for cleanliness and purity. Milk products that are contaminated by blood, pus, chemicals and various polluting substances, and/ or have been obtained by mistreating animals are not vehicles of *sattva* but of *tamas* and *rajas* and may have bad effects on our health as well. However, we should not fall in the wrong conclusion that milk in itself is bad, unhealthy or unfit for human consumption: it would be like saying that the very idea of taking bath in a river is bad, unhealthy or contaminating because the rivers around us are all polluted. The concept of bathing in a river is very good in itself, because originally/ normally rivers are clean reservoirs of fresh sweet drinking water, and their swift current has the effect of purifying and energizing body and mind. Until about 20 or 30 years ago the majority of rivers on the planet were still clean enough to bathe in, the most brilliant example being the sacred river Yamuna that goes through Mathura and Vrindavana, and that today is so polluted that its waters have been declared unfit even for agricultural irrigation. It is true that things can become polluted from time to time, and that presently the planet is facing a serious emergency, but this situation is merely a small fraction of time and does not change the eternal ontological nature of things but rather simply covers it. The same applies to milk and fresh milk products.

Besides rice, barley and wheat, all fruits and berries, nuts, sugar, honey and milk products, the ingredients especially increasing *sattva* are sesame, *mung dal* (green soya beans), *chana dal* (small chickpeas), all leafy vegetables and medicinal herbs, as well as most other vegetables, including jackfruit, cucumber, aubergine (eggplant), plaintain (green banana), pumpkins of all kinds, *bhindi* (lady's fingers) etc. Also, to the ancient lists we can add many new "foreign" vegetables - such as maize, tomato, capsicum, avocado, green beans, celery, asparagus, fennel, and so on. Edible roots such as potato, carrot, yam, beetroot etc are usually considered sattvic and suitable for fasting days, although some people believe they are tamasic because by harvesting them the entire plant is killed (with the exception of potatoes).

To elevate sattvic food to the level of *suddha sattva*, *yogis* and *brahmanas* remember the *om tat sat*, by chanting or reciting *mantras* or *stutis* that are appropriate to the situation. One of the most popular among traditional Hindus is verse 4.24 of *Bhagavad gita: brahmarpanam brahma havir brahmagnau brahmana hutam, brahmaiva tena gantavyam brahma karma samadhina*, "The purpose 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."

Many traditional Hindus pray to the food itself as the form of the Mother Goddess, Annapurna: *annapurne sadapurne, sankara prana vallabhe, jnana vairagya siddhy artham, bhiksam dehi ca parvati*, "Devi Parvati, you are the fullness of food, eternal prosperity, and the beloved of Shiva. Please give me alms, to establish me in the perfection of knowledge and renunciation".

The offering of the food can be done in several ways; the most popular among traditional Hindus is inspired by *Chandogya Upanishad*: "The first oblation is *om pranaya svaha*, to feed the *prana*, and with it, the eye, the sun, the sky, and everything under the sky including the person who is eating. The second oblation is *om vyanaya svaha*, to feed the sense of hearing, the moon, the directions, and everything in the four directions, including the person who is eating. The third oblation is *om apanaya svaha*, to feed fire, earth, and everything that is ruled by fire and earth, including the person who is eating. The fourth oblation is *om samanaya svaha*, to feed the mind, Indra (Parjanya),

lightning and everything under it, including the person who is eating. The fifth oblation is *om udanaya svaha*, to feed the skin, air, and space (ether), and everything that exists in space, including the person who is eating" (*Chandogya Upanishad*, 5.20.1-2, 5.21.1-2, 5.22.1-2, 5.23.1-2). To this, the *mantra brahmane svaha* (equivalent to *om tat sat*) is usually added to connect *prana* directly with *atman* and *brahman*. Another important teaching from *Chandogya Upanishad* is about the purity of food: *ahara suddhau sattva suddhih sattva-suddhau dhruva smrtih smrti lambhe sarva granthinam vipramokshah*, "when the food is pure, one's mind/ existence becomes pure as well, memory becomes stronger, the knots of the heart are dissolved and one attains liberation" (7.26.2).

Such purity is ensured by the non-violent manner of acquisition and the cleanliness of the nature of the ingredients, and also by the level of our consciousness while we consume our foods. We should eat consciously, chewing carefully, appreciating the good qualities of the food and feeling grateful for all the work that went into its production and preparation.

कट्वम्ललवणात्युष्णतीक्ष्णरूक्षविदाहिनः । आहारा राजसस्येष्टा दुःखशोकामयप्रदाः ॥ १७-१८ ॥

kaṭvamlalavaṇātyuṣṇatīkṣṇarūkṣavidāhinaḥ । āhārā rājasasyeṣṭā duḥkhaśokāmayapradāḥ ॥ 17-18 ॥

katu: bitter; *amla*: sour; *lavana*: salty; *ati usna*: very hot; *tikṣna*: pungent; *rukṣa*: dry; *vidahinah*: burning/ spicy; *aharah*: food; *rajasasya*: of one who is in *rajas*; *ista*: desired; *duḥkha*: distress; *soka*: mental anxiety; *amaya*: disease; *pradah*: that give.

"The food desired by those who belong to *rajas* cause discomfort, mental anxiety and pain, and are spicy, dry, pungent, very hot, salty, sour and bitter.

The Vedic system to categorize foods is based on taste and effect on the body. Typically, rajasic foods are addictive, but the first time we taste them we experience a painful or unpleasant feeling, like burning (*vidahina*) or some other form of discomfort in the tongue and even in the teeth, if not in the throat and in the stomach. This does not mean that they are unhealthy, as in fact many rajasic ingredients have medicinal properties, such as *karela* (bitter gourd), *nim* leaves, lemons and other citrus fruits, *amalaki* (amla), yogurt, tamarind, *muli* (also called daikon or radish), cruciferous vegetables (cauliflower, cabbage, etc), onion, garlic, vinegar, black molasses, ginger, *hing* (asafetida), chilli pepper and all hot spices, as well as coffee and tea and other stimulants such as tobacco, betel, coca leaves etc, and even alcoholic beverages. If consumed in moderate quantities and manner, and at the appropriate times, these ingredients stimulate the fire of *rajas* in the body and mind, accelerating digestion and metabolism and even burning impurities and fighting disease. However, if consumed in excessive quantity (*ati*), they imbalance the body and create anxiety and pain.

The word *amaya* derives from *ama* (with a long first *a*), that means "unripe, immature, crude, unbaked (as in clay containers)", but also "causing disease", and more specifically, "causing constipation". It is a well known fact that astringent substances can dry out the contents of the bowels and make evacuation more difficult. Hot spices can also damage the bowels and the stomach, and cause hemorrhoids and similar problems. Pungent vegetables such as onions and garlic leave heavy residues in the body, that can be easily detected by their smell, and that bog down the mental processes, clouding the vision of intelligence. *Ama* is also the technical term used in *Ayur Veda* to indicate the undigested residue that is left in the stomach, and that may produce toxins by rotting and contaminating the next batches of food. Therefore *Ayur Veda* strongly recommends that we eat only after the previous meal has been completely digested.

Another group of rajasic foods are the dry and salty preparations that are often used as snacks or appetite stimulants, like fried foods (chips, *pakor*s, etc), roasted or parched foods (especially grains and nuts), strong legumes (such as *urad dal* etc), preserved foods (such as olives, pickles etc), and spicy foods of all kinds. In comparison, the sattvic foods are sweet and soothing, and slow the metabolism down. Contrarily to what many people think, the purpose of the yogic diet is not to stimulate the metabolism but to slow the metabolism down, so that less food will be needed to keep the body strong and active. Sattvic food is not to be consumed in great quantities, because sattvic people are able to control their senses and have vanquished greed and lust for sense gratification. As always, an uncontrolled excess of *sattva* slides us down straight into *tamas*, so we see that sattvic foods consumed in excess make the body and mind heavier, and induce sleep and indigestion, resulting into disease and suffering.

On the other hand, rajasic foods raise the metabolic rate and stimulate lust and engagement in sense gratification; people who want to "lose weight" can find that quite useful. However, this increased stimulation of the body's activities (all activities are controlled by *rajas*) causes a shift of the consciousness to the lower level of identification with the material body and attachment to material possessions and positions, as they tend to anchor the life airs to the lower *chakras* (survival and sense gratification). This is the reason why *yogis* and devotees are not supposed to consume these foods; particularly onion and garlic are considered the most powerful in lowering the spiritual consciousness among all the vegetarian ingredients, and many spiritualists abstain from their use, especially on fasting days.

We should remember what Krishna said in verses 14.7 and 14.9 about *rajas*. Here is the description about the effects of the three *gunas*: *tatra sattvam nirmalatvat prakasakam anamayam, sukha sangena badhnati jnana sangena canagha*, "O Arjuna, the association with *sattva* binds to purity, illumination, freedom from defects, happiness, and knowledge" (14.6.), *rajo ragatmakam viddhi trisna sanga samudbhavam, tan nibadhnati kaunteya karma sangena dehinam*, "You should know that the contact with *rajas* develops attachment and hankering, that bind the embodied beings to action" (14.7), *tamas tv ajnana jam viddhi mohanam sarva dehinam, pramadadasya nidrabhis tan nibadhnati bharata*, "However, you should know that *tamas* causes ignorance and its binding results, such as confusion, madness, laziness and excessive sleep" (14.8).

यातयामं गतरसं पूति पयुषितं च यत् । उच्छिष्टमपि चामेध्यं भोजनं तामसप्रियम् ॥ १७-१८ ॥

yātayāmaṁ gatarasaṁ pūti paryuṣitaṁ ca yat । ucchiṣṭamapi cāmedhyam̐ bhōjanam̐ tāmasapriyam̐ ॥ 17-18 ॥

yata yamam: stale; *gata rasam*: dried out; *puti*: stinky; *paryusitam*: rotten; *ca*: and; *yat*: that; *ucchistam*: leftovers; *api*: also; *ca*: and; *amedhyam*: impure; *bhojanam*: eating; *tamas priyam*: preferred by those who are in ignorance.

"The foods loved by people in *tamas* are unclean, such as leftovers, or stuff that is stale, dried, rotten and smelly.

We need to remember here that the influence of the *gunas* works both ways - people who are already immersed in *tamas* are attracted to such foods, and the habit of consuming such foods also causes the power of *tamas* to increase in one's life. However, we should not forget that wasting food is a very serious fault, as we must respect food as the manifestation of Brahman itself. Just throwing the leftovers into the garbage is not the solution to the problem of *tamas* inherent in consuming leftovers.

The Vedic tradition gives great importance to cleanliness and hygiene, both for physical and for mental health, and has a deep understanding of the effects of food at all levels. The word *ucchista*, "leftovers", refers to the fact that the mouth of any person (including relatively healthy people) contains a great number of bacteria and therefore the food that has been already been in contact with someone's mouth directly or indirectly (by contact with licked fingers or spoon etc) is potentially carrying germs of many diseases. Besides that, on a subtler level the food that has been in such close contact with a person also absorbs his/ her energy, and it will also pass it on to those who consume it. If the leftovers are coming from a very elevated spiritual personality, this transfer of energy will be to our advantage, but usually this occurrence is extremely rare, so it is better not to risk consuming leftovers.

The expression *yata yaman* means "spoiled", and refers to food that has been sitting around too long; in hot climates and without refrigeration, cooked preparations can turn bad quickly, and usually the time limit is 3 hours. *Yata yaman* can also refer to preparations that have gone wrong - burned, lumped up, or curdled, or were added too much salt or a bad mixture of ingredients, or were processed with a poor cooking technique, resulting in bad taste, bad smell, and bad appearance. Overcooked foods belong this category, as one can hardly make out the original ingredients because everything looks and tastes the same, or has no actual taste. The excessive use of spices and heavy oils (especially mustard oil) covers all ingredients and spoils the dish, too, thus manifesting two prominent qualities of *tamas*.

When cooked grains or vegetables are stale, they dry out and become hard (*gata rasam*), or they start to ferment (*pariyusitam*) and give off an unpleasant smell (*puti*). This includes all kinds of alcoholic fermented beverages - wine, beer, liquors (even distilled ones) - as we see that their consumption dulls out the consciousness, increasing ignorance, laziness, sleep, confusion and madness. In those individuals who are already prone to *tamas*, inebriation can also cause violence and destructive behaviors.

In some cultures, people have learned to preserve foods by drying and fermentation, developing carefully controlled methods that maintain the preparation within the limits of edibility. In this category we have fermented (stinky and moldy) cheeses, sauerkraut and other vegetable preserves obtained by lactic fermentation - to remain within the field of vegetarian ingredients. Non-vegetarian ingredients preserved through drying and fermentation are even more decomposed and stinking, as for example the various versions of fish sauces, the "green eggs" (aged for many days), meat jerky, and other similar things. Some people even eat insects (from land or sea) that normally subsist on garbage and impurities and are therefore useful in nature because they clean up the environment. This includes also the so-called "flowers or fruits of the sea", that are a particular type of insects that do not move around.

Meat, fish and eggs are impure foods by nature, as they normally decompose more quickly than vegetarian foods. This is the reason why carnivorous animals have a very short intestine (3 times their body length, that can quickly expel the remains of the ingested meals), and why colon cancer and similar diseases in human beings are normally associated with regular consumption of non-vegetarian foods. In human beings, the intestine length is 12 times the body length, and the concentration of acid produced by the stomach is only 1/20 of what is produced by the stomach of carnivore animals.

Any normal human being, and especially innocent children, will be immediately attracted by fresh fruit even when they are still on their plant, but will be naturally disgusted at the sight of a dead animal; this is confirmed by Vedic tradition, that recommends taking a full bath for purification in case we have come in the presence of a dead body (even without touching it, what to speak of eating it). We know that toxicity in the blood and body usually causes the clouding of the higher faculties of intelligence, together with headaches, dizziness, fatigue, and similar symptoms.

All non-vegetarian foods are covered by ignorance and deceit because they need considerable manipulation, cooking and the addition of other ingredients in order to hide their natural appearance and thus become acceptable by the average human palate and stomach. Also, it is extremely difficult to find a meat eater who does not feel irritated and disturbed if we remind him of the nature of what he is actually eating. Obviously meat eaters prefer to remain in ignorance or forgetfulness about the origin of their food. Those who actually know what they are eating and still enjoy eating it anyway are even worse, because they have forgotten all compassion, moral sense, decency, cleanliness, intelligence and good sense. They truly are *asuras*.

We will not list here the many instructions from several scriptures that recommend a vegetarian diet, because that would require a book in itself. However, we need to clarify that Vedic tradition does not prescribe the absolute prohibition on the consumption of non vegetarian foods or other tamasic foods: it simply gives good reasons and knowledge so that each and every individual will be able to make an informed and responsible choice, and to face its consequences. There are no taboos in Vedic culture, and no "religious restrictions" as we can observe in other religions. People who still want to eat meat should certainly be allowed to do so, provided they do not harm innocent and useful creatures, and they clean up after themselves.

Also, we need to understand that emergency situations fully justify choices that normally should not be done; this is called *apat kala dharma*, or "*dharma* in times of distress". So for example *sannyasi* beggars do not have much choice regarding the quality of the food they receive as alms, and although they usually try to approach sattvic people to ask for food, they may have to make do with what they get.

अफलाङ्क्षिभिर्यज्ञो विधिदृष्टो य इज्यते । यष्टव्यमेवेति मनः समाधाय स सात्त्विकः ॥ १७-११ ॥

aphalāṅkṣibhiryajñō vidhidṛṣṭo ya ijjate | yaṣṭavyameveti manaḥ samādhāya sa sāttvikaḥ || 17-11 ||

aphala akanksibhih: by those who are not anxious to enjoy the results; *yajnah:* ritual sacrifice; *vidhi distah:* directed by proper knowledge; *yah:* which; *ijyate:* is performed; *yastavyam:* that must be performed out of duty; *eva:* certainly; *iti:* thus; *manah:* the mind; *samadhaya:* well focused; *sah:* that; *sattvikah:* in *sattva guna*.

"The *yajna* that is performed without aspiring to obtain (selfish) results, but is directed by proper knowledge, out of sense of duty, and with full concentration of the mind, is in *sattva*.

The definition of *yajna* is very broad and covers all those activities that are performed with a sacred consciousness, as sacrifice or duty or ritualistic ceremony. The concept of sacredness is inherent in the human psyche, even without the understanding or knowledge of scriptures, and therefore we can find it in all cultures, in all regions and at all times, directed towards the greatest manifestation of power and consciousness that people call God. Krishna has elaborated on the various forms of *yajna* starting from 3.9: *yajnarthat karmano 'nyatra loko 'yam karma bandhanah, tad artham karma kaunteya mukta sangah samacara*, "Actions must be performed as sacrifice, otherwise in this world they cause bondage. Therefore you should perform your sacred duties remaining free from material association" (3.9). So the fundamental form of *yajna* is the performance of one's duties to support the universe (*dharmā*); in the smallest scale these duties refer to our body, our family, our professional community and our society, and they are called *sva dharmā*. On a larger scale, our duties apply to our part for the support of the universe, in cooperation with the Devas, and are performed through various rituals. Verses 3.10 to 3.15 illustrated this point, also connecting the birth and development of all beings to the food and the rains or the proper order of the seasons and universal laws (*ritam*).

The traditional rituals performed by the family holders of the three higher *varnas* are aimed at reinforcing the natural harmony in the universe, where humans feed the Devas and the Devas feed the humans as parts of the same great family. The concept of *karma* as duty is evidence of the deep sense of responsibility of Vedic culture, that teaches human beings to be guardians and protectors of the world and all the creatures, rather than their masters and exploiters (as we see in the abrahamic ideology and its derivatives).

In fact, verse 3.13 clearly stated that one should only consume what has been sanctified by *yajna*, as *prasada* or blessing, just like a big family partakes of the food that has been served to all the assembled members.

We have seen more about *yajna* as the *samagram* ("collective form") of one's duties in verse 4.23, and after verse 4.24 (*brahmarpanam brahma havir brahmagnau brahmana hutam, brahmaiva tena gantavyam brahma karma samadhina*), Krishna continues in verses 4.25 to 4.27, explaining the concept of *yajna* as ritual worship, as renunciation (of the results of our actions), as the practice of *sadhana* and control of the senses, the *prana* and the mind. In 4.28 *yajna* is presented as charity, spiritual search, austerity, cultivation of knowledge and observance of *vratas*, and in 4.29 and 4.30 it is described as the practice of meditation supported by *pranayama*. From 4.31 to 4.34, there is more elaboration on the concept of *yajna* itself.

In 5.28 and 5.29, *yajna* is explained as directly connected to Bhagavan, and then in 7.30, 8.4 and 9.16 the principle of *yajna* (*adhiyajna*) is recognized as Bhagavan himself. However, as both meanings are valid, the definition of *yajna* will again be used as sacred action in 8.28, 9.20, 16.1, 18.3, 18.4, 18.5, 18.6, and verse 9.24 says that God is the beneficiary of all sacred actions (*sarva yajnanam bhokta*).

All this knowledge of sacred action is inherent in the heart and conscience of each human being, irrespective of his culture, and therefore it is called *sanatana dharmā*. The Vedic scriptures (*shastra*) offer added knowledge and understanding of this natural propensity, and here Krishna explains that people who are naturally good (*sattvic*) perform all sacred actions out of a sense of responsibility and duty (*yastavyan*), without expecting selfish advantages (*aphala akanksibhih*) and with a good understanding of the purpose of the action (*vidhi distah*). The word *vidhi* also conveys the meaning of "rules", and here (in absence of specific shastric instructions) it applies to the ethical principles and rules of good conduct that is naturally perceived by *sattvic* people as cleanliness, kindness and compassion, etc.

अभिसन्धाय तु फलं दम्भार्थमपि चैव यत् । इज्यते भरतश्रेष्ठ तं यज्ञं विद्धि राजसम् ॥ १७-१२ ॥

abhisandhāya tu phalam dambhārthamapi caiva yat | ijyate bhārataśreṣṭha taṁ yajñam viddhi rājasam || 17-12 ||

abhisandhaya: desiring; *tu*: but; *phalam*: the result; *dambha*: out of self-righteousness; *artham*: for the sake of; *api*: also; *ca*: and; *eva*: certainly; *yat*: which; *ijyate*: is performed; *bharata srestha*: o best among the descendants of Bharata; *taṁ*: that; *yajnam*: sacrifice; *viddhi*: you should know; *rajasam*: in *rajas*.

"O best among the descendants of Bharata, know that the ritual sacrifice that is performed out of self-righteousness or to get (selfish materialistic) results, is classified under *rajas*.

Even those people who are under the influence of *rajas* and *tamas* usually perform sacred actions, duties and religious rituals, because the religious instinct is a fundamental part of the human spirit and cannot be destroyed. It can be covered by other motives, forgotten, or more frequently misdirected towards objects of worship that are more attractive to ignorant and greedy people, as we have already seen at the beginning of the chapter, especially in verses 17.4 and 17.5. If they cannot find anyone else to worship, *rajasic* and *tamasic* people will worship political leaders, cinema stars, famous singers and musicians, professional sports figures, or even themselves (or more precisely, their own ego, mind and senses). Some worship mere fantasy projections, such as idealized persons, fiction characters, and so on. In any case, the religious activities and the performance of duties carried out by *rajasic* people are motivated by selfishness and greed; in the very least they want to get a special social position and a sense of self-righteousness and superiority. Even if they happen to worship some form of God, their purpose remains selfish, as they want special powers or favors - from passing a school exam to finding a good husband, to winning the lottery to obtaining admission to paradise and its pleasures. This is indicated at the beginning of the verse by the word *abhisandhaya* ("for a specific purpose").

Here we need to draw a line between the two adjacent territories of praying God for help (on one side) and specifically worshiping God only when we want to obtain some favor (on the other side). The difference may not be immediately visible to some people, but it is the same situation we can experience in our personal lives when we have some people who only remember us when they need favors, and they never bother to show up on other occasions. Such people are obviously greedy and selfish, and have no genuine affection for us, and therefore the relationship cannot be very good. On the other hand, we may have sincere friends who really love us and occasionally tell us about their concerns when they are in trouble. Because we are part of their lives, they trust us and have a great opinion of us, they may ask for our help: this is how a devotee approaches God to offer his problems to his feet. A real devotee does not give a "shopping list" to God to ask him to fulfill his wishes, because he trusts that God knows better.

The religious ceremonies of rajasic people are performed out of egotism and ostentation (*dambha artham*), or even as a business (*phalam*), where the Deity is "used" as an instrument to make money (as a salary or in the form of donations), acquire followers, and/ or to glorify oneself or one's own organization, group etc. These wretched people really believe they "own" the Deity (sometimes even on "monopoly" or "franchising" basis), and usually calculate the "value" of the Deity in terms of material elements such as size, quality and price of the metal or stone, and so on. They even set a tariff for the *darshana* of the Deity, and sell the Deities' *prasadam* and favors to the public for a price they consider their legitimate earning. They do not ask for free donations but for a specific price, and they use the "spiritual value" of the item to improve their business.

Rajasic people also do not give much importance to rules as far as their own personal conduct is concerned. Of course, they will be intolerant and very rigid about "following the rules" when using this pretext to mistreat and exploit others, but because they are hypocrites (*dambha artha*) they conveniently forget the fundamentals of cleanliness, humility, proper behavior, abstention from objectionable foods, etc when they do not want to bother observing them in their own personal lives.

The same thing applies to the religious rituals based on fire sacrifice (*homa*), by which one aspires to acquire the prestigious titles of Agnihotri, Asvamedhi, Vajapayi, etc, and even pass them on to children and descendants who will take pride in such denominations generation after generation, even if in the future they will never observe any other ritual or fulfill any duty.

We should remember here a verse from the previous chapter: *atma sambhavitah stabdha dhana mana madanvitah, yajante nama yajna is te dambhenavidhi purvakam*, "Deluded by egotism, impudence, false prestige and wealth, they celebrate rituals and sacrifices that have no real value, because of their hypocrisy and ignorance of the proper purpose and rules" (16.17).

विधिहीनमसृष्टान्नं मन्त्रहीनमदक्षिणम् । श्रद्धाविरहितं यज्ञं तामसं परिचक्षते ॥ १७-१३ ॥

vidhihinamasṣṭānnaṁ mantrahinamadakṣiṇam | śraddhāviraḥitaṁ yajñaṁ tāmasaṁ paricakṣate | | 17-13 | |

vidhi hinam: without knowledge; *asrista annam*: without sanctification of food; *mantra hinam*: without the proper *mantras*; *adaksinam*: without offering gifts to the teacher; *śraddha virahitam*: without faith; *yajnam*: sacrifice ritual; *tamasam*: in *tamas*; *paricaksate*: it must be considered.

"A religious ritual that is performed without knowledge, without chanting the (proper) mantras, without faith, without the sanctification of food or without offering gifts, must be considered as belonging to *tamas*.

Rajasic people engage in the performance of *yajna* and *upasana* in order to obtain some selfish material results, but at least they put some effort in doing things nicely. They organize a good choreography of activities, with processions, songs and chants, they pick impressive *mantras* and ritual procedures, they invest in materials for decorations and offerings, and they often put much effort in building temples or even temporary structures, like the festival *pandals*. They solemnly sit through the recitation of traditional *stutis* and *pathas* hoping to get the benefits described in the *phala sruti*, and they try to impress the public with lavish distribution of foods, garlands, and other gifts - usually to donors or prospective future donors.

Tamasic people do not even bother to do that. It is too much work and investment for them, so if they really need to do something (because others are pushing them), they put up a cheap show, with the minimum of materials procured by hook or by crook, often by stealing them (especially flowers from neighbors' trees) and generally without caring much for their cleanliness. For the *homa* they use any type of wood - even pieces of old discarded furniture - and purchase cheap artificial surrogates for valuable ingredients such as camphor, clarified butter, grains, medicinal herbs and so on. The officiating priests (*ritviks*) are sloppy and casual, not very concerned about the correct procedures, and above all, abysmally ignorant about the purpose of the entire exercise.

As *mantras*, they whimsically mumble some lines, often grossly mispronouncing them and usually without understanding anything of their meaning, but nobody cares and so there is no questioning. Anything goes, even funeral *mantras* chanted for marriages. The *yajna sala* is unprotected and all sorts of people are sitting or walking around, including vomiting drunkards, gossiping ladies, silly girls combing their hair, children shrieking and running into mischief, among various types of garbage and discarded items, and what not. The procedure is conducted without real respect or faith, but simply because "it is the unquestionable tradition" that must be followed blindly as there is no escape. Here we need to be very careful about the delusional idea that such passive submission is actually *sattvic* and can be regarded as the selfless performance of one's duty, because in many cases *tamas* could be confused with *sattva*. To better clarify the point, we may remember the example of the "high caste" fool who believes he never needs to take a bath or clean his clothes because he is already and always pure "genetically, by birth".

The expression *asrista annam* is particularly interesting. The fundamental purpose of all *yajnas* is the distribution of food, not only as offerings to the Devas but also to all participants and to the public in general, including the animals. This is because the three higher *varnas* - *brahmanas*, *kshatriyas* and *vaisyas* - have the responsibility of feeding the rest of society, starting from the *sudras*, who assist them faithfully, and the *yajna* rituals are the perfect opportunity.

This distribution of *prasada* does not necessarily need to be done as a meal proper, or even in the form of cooked foods; it can consist of the fruits, vegetables and grains arranged around the sacrificial altar. In tamasic rituals, such "decorations" are not provided, or they are stolen or still worse, swept away and thrown into the garbage dump at the end of the ceremony, sometimes together with the "used idol". If we read the description of the *Puranas* and other ancient texts, we will see what a real *yajna* looks like, and what is its purpose.

The word *paricaksate* indicates that all *yajnas* should have a responsible person (*acharya*) who is examining all the aspects of the procedure and correcting them at the proper time, giving instructions to the participants and ensuring that the ritual becomes successful. Otherwise, the entire exercise will be completely useless. Some superficial people would like to believe that such tamasic rituals simply have "some small defects", like the fire is often covered by smoke, but Krishna does not agree with such conclusion: *asraddhaya hutam dattam tapas taptam kritam ca yat, asad ity ucyate partha na ca tat pretya no iha*, "O son of Pritha, any action of ritual offering, charity or austerity that is performed without faith and in a material consciousness, does not bring good results after death or even in this life" (17.28). It is much better to engage in simpler but more sincere activities, as Krishna has already stated: *patram puspam phalam toyam yo*

me bhaktya prayacchati, tad aham bhakty upahritam asnami prayatatmanah, "If someone, with sincere love and devotion, offers me even one leaf, one flower, one fruit or some water, I will accept the offering because of that love and devotion" (9.26).

If in spite of our shortcomings and the objective difficulties of Kali yuga, we still want to honor the Devas and society with a traditional religious celebration on some special occasion, we should make a sincere effort to observe at least the rules of cleanliness and respect, and try to understand the *mantras* and the purpose of the sacrifice. And above all, we should be humble enough to realize our defects and apologize for any mistake or omission: *mantra hinam kriya hinam bhakti hinam janardana, yat pujitam maya deva paripurnam tad astu me, vidhi hinam mantra hinam yat kincit upapadhitam, kriya mantra vihinaniva tat sarvam ksantum arhasi, ajanad athava jnanad asubham yan maya krtam, ksantum arhasi tat sarvam dasyenaiva grhana mam, aparadha sahasrani kriyante 'har nisam maya, daso 'ham iti mam matva ksamasva madhusudana,* "O Vishnu, please correct any omission or mistake in *mantras*, procedures or devotion in my worship. Please forgive whatever mistake or omission I have done, or any bad things I may have done, knowingly or unknowingly, and accept me as your humble servant. I know that I have committed many offenses, but please forgive me because I only want to serve you."

देवद्विजगुरुप्राज्ञपूजनं शौचमार्जवम् । ब्रह्मचर्यमहिंसा च शरीरं तप उच्यते ॥ १७-१४ ॥

devadvijaguruprajñapūjanam śaucamārjavam | brahmacaryamahimsā ca śārīram tapa ucyate || 17-14 ||

deva: to God; *dvija:* to the twice born; *guru:* to the teacher; *prajna:* to the wise and knowledgeable; *pujanam:* worship; *saucam:* cleanliness; *arjavam:* simplicity; *brahmacaryam:* abstaining from lusty activities; *ahimsa:* abstaining from hatred; *ca:* and; *sariram:* of the body; *tapah:* austerity; *ucyate:* it is said.

"It is said that the austerities of the body are the worship offered to God, to the twice-born, to the teacher, to the wise and knowledgeable, as well as cleanliness, simplicity, functioning on the transcendental level and abstaining from hatred.

Tapah or *tapasya* (austerity) is the conscious and deliberate effort that we invest in any sacred activity, and includes the choice to tolerate all difficulties and problems that may present themselves in the course of our service. We could also define it as the sense of responsibility and duty that sustains us in the performance of our tasks, and also the concentration or meditation that leads us to understanding and realization. Together with *satya*, *daya* and *sauca*, *tapah* is considered one of the four legs of Dharma. We have seen Krishna speaking about the importance of *tapasya* in verses 4.10, 5.29, 9.27 and 16.1, because without hard work and endurance of the difficulties that we come to face on our path, we cannot achieve much.

In *Bhagavata Purana* 2.7.5 and 2.7.39, Brahma the creator of this universe explains that he engaged in *tapasya* in order to become able to manifest all the various creations after the previous dissolution. This is also repeated in 2.9.8 and in 2.9.23-24, where Vishnu states, *tapo me hridayam saksad, atmaham tapaso anagha, srijami tapasaivedam, grasami tapasa punah, bibharmi tapasa visvam, viryam me duscaram tapah,* "*Tapasya* is my own heart, and I am the soul of one who engages in *tapasya*. I create, maintain and dissolve the universe all by the same power of *tapasya*: therefore *tapasya* is power itself".

Here Krishna is still speaking about the people who have no knowledge of the *shastra*, and are spontaneously attracted to a particular type of religious activities according to their prevalent *gunas*. Good people, who are under the influence of the *sattva guna* or mode of goodness, are naturally in touch with their conscience and common sense, that is the inner *guru* (*paramatma antaryami*). They already feel that austerity is about controlling their own mind and senses for the purpose of evolving towards higher levels of consciousness. Therefore they feel attracted to God (or whatever we want to call the Supreme - *brahman*, *paramatma*, *bhagavan*, *isvara*, *hari* etc) as the original and complete source of everything that is good. Because of the *sattva* that is naturally in them, they want to participate to the ocean of *sattva* (*hareh sattva nidher, Bhagavata Purana* 1.3.26) that is God.

Similarly, the *sattva* in them instantly recognizes the *sattva* in spiritually advanced people, in the form of wisdom and knowledge (*prajna*), compassion and ability to guide others on the path of progress (*guru*), and sense of responsibility in taking care of society (*dvija*). The *dvija*, or "twice born", are those persons who have been adequately trained by a genuine *guru* for a certain number of years, and have become qualified to work in responsible positions in society - as teachers and consultants (*brahmanas*), administrators, rulers and warriors (*kshatriyas*) or entrepreneurs (*vaisyas*).

These professional occupations require a good deal of training, not just on the material level, but on the religious and ethical level as well, because the behavior and choices of the individuals in such positions can direct the entire society towards progress and prosperity, or towards disaster and sufferings. A genuine *guru* is not merely a *brahmana* who knows how to teach, but a *brahmana* who deeply understands the needs of each professional position and the solutions to all possible problems of society. In Vedic times, there were many such *gurus*, who independently and individually managed residential schools in their own homes (*guru kula*). Any child could be admitted in such schools at the sole discretion of the *guru* himself, because it was the responsibility of the individual *guru* to bring each disciple to the level of qualification that his particular potential could afford him. When the *guru* estimated that a particular disciple was ready to begin his duties in society, he officially recognized him as a "twice born", awarding him the *varna* position that he was able to occupy.

This ceremony is very aptly called the "second birth", because it gives official recognition of the proper position of an individual in society. The first birth assigns the child to the *varna* of his parents, through a series of *samskaras* (psychological imprints) that start even before conception, but the original *guna* and *karma* that were carried from previous lifetimes are not sufficient to perform one's duty properly. The son of a surgeon may feel more comfortable around an operation room and medicine books than a boy who was born in a family from a different professional community, but no sane man will expect that he will be able to operate successfully without the long training and education that his father had. Also, a surgeon's son who wishes to become a surgeon like his father should not be trained just by his father, because a good surgeon is not necessarily a good teacher, and certainly he could be unable to correctly evaluate the potential and qualities of his son, due to attachment, projections and expectations.

The *gurukula* system focuses first on the general approach to life and the development of each individual's potential, the ethics of work and social interactions, and on learning "how to learn". It is not necessary for a *guru* to know all the particular details of all professions,

because the Vedic system of education is open, and any graduate student can continue to search for knowledge by finding other *gurus* who are more specialized in the field, and also by associating with successful practitioners of their professional area (*prajnas*) as apprentices. All such people must be respected (worshiped) because respect and appreciation for their knowledge and realizations will greatly facilitate our own learning. Not only the teachers will be encouraged and inspired to give us more treasures, but we will also be more attentive and receptive in obtaining them. This can only happen when the teachers are qualified, the students are genuinely interested in learning and not distracted by other interests and pursuits, and each individual is given a personalized education that is neither below nor above his real potential.

Austerity also means developing good habits and following some basic rules that will help us keep control on our mind and senses. It is not difficult for a naturally good person to understand that he needs to cultivate cleanliness (*saucam*), as contamination obfuscates the mind and causes diseases that constitute a serious distraction to progress. Simplicity (*arjavam*) protects us from the distraction of unnecessary complications and superfluous desires and activities, and abstinence from hatred (*ahimsa*) protects us from the distraction of unnecessary fighting and from the danger of falling down into *rajas* and *tamas*, with very bad results for our progress. The austerity called *brahmacharya* is a little more difficult to understand because the idea of sexual abstinence has been tainted by the cultural superimposition of abrahamic concepts of "mortifying the body". The word *brahma acara* literally means "functioning as *brahman*", therefore it does not contain the idea of sex, not even to condemn it. The mistake of abrahamic ideologies (and their derivatives) is to continue thinking about sex in a negative way until it becomes a real obsession, loaded with negativity (spite, hatred, fear etc) that is only waiting to explode. Any intelligent person will understand that such a policy is a disaster in the making. Granted, a *brahmachari* will follow rules for avoiding lusty opportunities, but with the proper environment and engagement, a normal human being only needs relatively less sexual encounters to satisfy his healthy needs *after* these have actually manifested. So the practice of *brahmacharya* is not about repressing sexual urges after they have manifested, but about living free from the sex-obsessed social and cultural pressure and peer expectations that are so detrimental to the lives of many people in the present asuric society. Especially when we function on the transcendental level, we develop the habit of seeing people as spiritual beings, and not as bodies from which we could obtain a greater or smaller amount of sexual pleasure. It is a kind of innocence (as lack of malice) by which we focus on the individual's intelligence, talents, qualities, activities, and not on their gender and sexual characteristics. This will also help us in our progress because it enables us to learn from others without being hampered by the particular type of body they have.

अनुद्वेगकरं वाक्यं सत्यं प्रियहितं च यत् । स्वाध्यायाभ्यसनं चैव वाङ्मयं तप उच्यते ॥ १७-१५ ॥

anudvegakaram vakyam satyam priyahitam ca yat | svādhyāyābhyasanam caiva vāṅmayam tapa ucyate || 17-15 |

anudvega karam: that does not cause (unnecessary) agitation; *vakyam*: speech; *satyam*: truthful; *priya hitam*: pleasing; *ca*: and; *yat*: which; *svadhyaya*: study of the science of the self; *abhyasanam*: practice/ *sadhana*; *ca*: and; *eva*: certainly; *vak mayam*: concerning speech; *tapah*: austerity; *ucyate*: it is said.

"It is said that the austerities of speech are the practice of *sadhana* and the study of *atma vidya*, and speaking in a truthful but pleasing and peaceful way.

The previous verse explained how naturally good people manage to control their minds and senses to facilitate their own progress and contribute to the progress of society, by actions and attitudes manifested by bodily activities. Here we are reminded that not only physical actions, but words as well can have a great impact on our own lives and on the lives of others around us, so we need to learn to control our power of speech, too. The tongue is the most fundamental and powerful of senses, because it recognizes and accepts the food (*anna*), that is the first and foremost factor of life, as we have already seen in verses 17.7 to 17.10 and their commentaries. Food is *brahman*, and speech is also *brahman* (*sabda brahman*), therefore the tongue is our most important instrument for elevation or degradation (6.5).

Food and speech can greatly influence our consciousness, establishing us on the transcendental level of the *atman/ brahman* realization to which the scriptures lead us, or on the level of natural goodness (*sattva*), or also downwards, to the level of materialism (*rajas*) and to the level of stupidity (*tamas*), down to the level of asuric life (*naraka*). The two extremes of daivic and asuric nature are the opposite poles of consciousness, and the conditioned soul can move between them, upwards or downwards.

A sattvic person will spontaneously feel that spoken words can have powerful effects on his own progress and on the progress of others, therefore he will make an effort to control his tongue. The expression *anudvega karam* indicates an effect of agitation on the mind, as *vegam* means "urge, impetus", as a rush of emotion that excites and spurs one to action. This effect can be directed towards others or even towards oneself, and the prefix *anu* here indicates an excess of stimulation, that is usually negative. Sometimes it may be necessary to use strong words to stimulate ourselves or others into awareness or action, just like it is sometimes necessary to display anger for the same purpose, but there must always be conscious control and channeling the power in the proper direction and in the appropriate amount. When we work with raw power such as emotions and words, we must always remain aware of their potential danger and act accordingly. We must proceed gradually. To crack a coconut we do not need to use dynamite, and if we use excessive strength we could easily damage or destroy the very thing we are trying to save. So we should try not to hurt anyone with our words - exactly the opposite of what *asuras* usually like to do (*krodhah parushyam*, "angry and cruel with their words", 16.4).

When we speak to civilized and learned people, or even simply innocent, respectful, sincere and intelligent people, a few mild or delicate words should be sufficient to convey the full import of what we want to communicate ("a word to the wise"). Therefore it is said, *satyam bruyat priyam bruyat*, "truth should be told in the most pleasing way possible". However, the word *priya* not only means "pleasant, agreeable", but also "loving, affectionate", and we know that in some difficult cases love needs to be a little tough. So the expression *priya hitam* also refers to the actual benefit of the persons involved, which may not be immediately pleasing if they are immersed in *rajas* and *tamas*. To guide us properly in the difficult task of applying this concept, Krishna will elaborate more on the subject in verses 18.36 to 18.38, and in general all over the last chapter of *Bhagavad gita* at the conclusion of his teachings. Here we will simply quote verse 18.36: *yat tad agre visam iva pariname 'mritopamam, tat sukham sattvikam proktam atma buddhi prasada jam*, "That happiness that starts as unpleasant as poison but soon becomes like nectar, is sattvic and derives from the satisfaction of intelligence and the self".

Applied to the difficult job of training and educating people, this means that a *guru* (or a parent, a friend etc) should always try first to appeal to the intelligence and self (conscience) of the person that needs correction, using affectionate and pleasing words. This is also what Life does with each one of us: the early messages we receive are always whispered softly, and they become forceful and agitating only gradually, if we continue to choose to ignore them.

It is true that we should never correct people if we are not asked to do so, because it is likely that our words will not be heeded anyway. Friends do not let friends stay ignorant, but good advice is a difficult merchandise to distribute, even without charging any money. The line to draw is where the actions of ignorant people start to damage not only themselves but also others (in various types of aggression); at that point we should be prepared to intervene with appropriate explanations and actions, even if this will attract the violent attention of the evildoer on us directly. Also, some will get agitated and offended even without any provocation, simply when the pure factual objective truth is expressed and made known, so we should really evaluate the factors involved in the situation before we take action.

Controlling one's power of speech also means telling the truth (*satyam*), something that *asuras* are unable to do (*na satyam*, 16.7). *Satyam* (truth) is also *sivam* (auspicious, beneficial) and *sundaram* (beautiful), but we see that ignorant people have wrong ideas about these principles, and they cannot understand how destroying ignorance can be an auspicious and beautiful action. The foremost example in this regard is the foolish behavior exhibited by Prajapati Daksha on the occasion of his *yajna*, where he offended Shiva Mahadeva by calling him "inauspicious" and "ugly". Of course that was a dramatic enactment for our education, because a great personality such as Daksha is certainly not on such a degraded level of consciousness, but still the story is very interesting, and contains some excellent conclusions. Another important aspect of truthfulness consists in keeping promises and vows in spite of personal difficulties.

The word *svadhyaya*, "study of the science of the self", does not necessarily refer to the *shastra*, but certainly points in that direction. A person who is naturally sattvic will be very interested in acquiring the genuine and original knowledge of the *shastra*, by which he will be able to strengthen and purify his own natural knowledge and conscience, and become more expert and skillful in speaking. He will instantly recognize the truth and value of the shastric teachings, and will quote them in his speeches.

The word *abhyasanam* indicates that the study of spiritual science should be a regular practice (*sadhana*), and that it should move from theory (*jnana*) to application (*vijnana*) in order to become really effective.

मनः प्रसादः सौम्यत्वं मौनमात्मविनिग्रहः । भावसंशुद्धिरित्येतत्तपो मानसमुच्यते ॥ १७-१६ ॥

manah prasadah saumyatvam maunamatmavinigrahaḥ | bhāvasamsuddhirityetattapo mānasamucyate || 17-16 ||

manah prasadah: mental satisfaction; *saumyatvam*: kindness; *maunam*: being able to remain in silence; *atma vinigrahaḥ*: self control; *bhava samsuddhiḥ*: purification of one's emotions; *iti*: thus; *etat*: this; *tapah*: austerity; *manasam*: of the mind; *ucyate*: it is said.

"It is said that the austerities of the mind are the purification of one's emotions/ nature, self-control, kindness, serenity, and the ability to remain in silence.

All the activities of the body and all the words we speak ultimately derive from the activities of our minds, and therefore if we want to progress in our evolution and properly perform our duties to society and to the universe at large, we need to make an effort (*tapah*) to discipline our mind - thoughts, emotions, memories etc.

Some people foolishly claim that "it is not possible to control the mind", and certainly this might well apply to themselves because they do not have the proper method. However, the entire science of *yoga* is aimed at controlling the mind by the process of *pratyahara*, *dharana* and *dhyanam*. Patanjali's very definition of *yoga* is *citta vritti nirodha* (*Yoga sutras*, 1.1.2), "control of the activities of the mind". Other meanings of the word *nirodha* are "stopping, dissolution", as control certainly includes the destruction of the thing that is controlled. However, the purpose of *yoga* is not the complete dissolution of all activities of the mind, but rather the dissolution of its material movements. This enables the mind to really focus on the *atman*, as steadily as the flame of a lamp where there is no wind (*nir-vana*). Those who claim that the mind and all mental processes must be dissolved completely are telling us that the only way for a lamp to shine steadily is to put out the light - but that is *tamas*, and certainly not *sattva* or *visuddha sattva*.

Krishna also clearly states that controlling the mind (*manah samyamya*) is not only possible, but it is the instrument and purpose of one's personal evolution through *yoga*, as we can see in verses 2.64, 3.7, 4.21, 4.27, 5.7, 5.28, 6.6, 6.7, 6.10, 6.12, 6.14, 6.15, 6.19, 6.24, 6.26, 6.27, 8.12, and 18.52. Specifically, Krishna recognizes that controlling the mind is very difficult, because it is powerful and restless. Arjuna said, *cancelam hi manah krisna pramathi balavad dridham, tasyaham nigraham manye vayor iva su duskaram*, "O Krishna, the mind is indeed restless, turbulent, powerful and stubborn. I think that controlling it would be more difficult than controlling the wind" (6.34). To that, Krishna had replied, *asamyatna yogo dushprapa iti me matih, vasyatmana tu yatata sakyo 'vaptum upayatah*, "My opinion is that it is indeed very difficult to attain *yoga* when the mind is not controlled, but there are appropriate means by which with a little effort one will be able to control the mind" (6.36).

So what are these appropriate means by which we can control the mind? Krishna lists them here in perfect clarity, in such a way that any good (sattvic) person can apply them, even without bringing the *shastra* into the picture. The first is the good sense of realizing how many good things we have; the technical Sanskrit definition is *manah prasadah*, "mental satisfaction", and clearly indicates a deliberate act of the consciousness by which we tell the mind to be reasonable and recognize the good things we already have. In "new age" terms, this is called "being positive" or "being proactive". One of the greatest secrets of life is that contentment and happiness do not depend on external circumstances, but they are a choice that each of us can make at any time. Every situation in which we find ourselves in this world has advantages and disadvantages, and a positive person can find the "silver lining" in almost any circumstance. Of course, at times we seem to be totally overwhelmed by disaster and hopelessness, but we should always remember that such situations are temporary, and that by going through them (one way or another) we get the opportunity to burn our old karmic debts and purify ourselves. This is certainly a consolation that should pacify the mind.

The word *saumyatvam*, from the adjective *saumya* ("kind, sweet"), indicates a kind and sweet attitude, a gentleness of the character that is benevolent towards all creatures, that usually wins the hearts of innocent persons including most animals. This quality is strictly connected

with *ahimsa* and *para upakara*, the work for the benefit of all creatures, that we have discussed already many times in previous comments. Of course, this must be a general attitude towards one and all, a beneficial practice for our own mind, that can attract positive persons in our life. It is not an absolute rule to follow in all our dealings with particular individuals, and certainly not when we are faced with aggressors and ill-motivated materialistic people who want to exploit or harm us.

The practice called *maunam* ("silence") refers to the choice of peacefulness and quiet, that is necessary to pacify the mind and focus it on the sattvic or transcendental level. It means we should deliberately avoid *prajalpa* or unnecessary/ nonsensical talking, and appreciate the virtues of silence and gravity, as Krishna also recommended to Uddhava in *Bhagavata Purana* 11.10.6. We should observe that here Krishna has listed *mauna* among the austerities of the mind, and not among the austerities of speech, because *mauna* does not consist in chatting and gossiping away in sign language, or becoming lost in fantasies and day dreaming, or watching TV etc without speaking to other people. *Maunam* is the practice of dropping what is not essential and focusing our attention exclusively on the inner reality of the *atman*, and as such it is connected to the *yoga* practice of *pratyahara*, "withdrawing the senses from the sense objects", that is also described by the expression *atma vinigraha*, the withdrawal of the mind from the external and internal sense objects that belong to the temporary level.

All these practices are summarized by the expression *bhava samsuddhi*, or "purification of one's nature". The word *bhava* contains the meanings of "nature, existence", as well as "emotions, feelings, attitude". When our attitude and emotions are purified by a deliberate act of elevation of the consciousness through the practices listed above, and directed towards *sattva* or *visuddha sattva*, our entire existence rises to a higher level and approaches the divine nature.

श्रद्धया परया तप्तं तपस्तत्रिविधं नरैः । अफलाकाङ्क्षिभिर्युक्तैः सात्त्विकं परिचक्षते ॥ १७-१७ ॥

śraddhayā parayā taptam tapastattrividham naraiḥ | aphalākāṅkṣibhiryuktaiḥ sāttvikam paricakṣate || 17-17 ||

śraddhaya: with faith; *paraya*: transcendental; *taptam*: performed; *tapah*: austerity; *tat*: that; *tri vidham*: of three types; *naraiḥ*: by human beings; *aphala kanksibhih*: without desiring any selfish result; *yuktaiḥ*: engaged; *sattvikam*: in *sattva guna*; *paricakṣate*: it is considered.

"Religious austerities that are performed by human beings can be of three types. Those (austerities) that are not aimed at obtaining a selfish result are considered sattvic.

This verse is directly related to verse 17.11, that explained that sacred actions (*yajna*) that are not aimed at obtaining a selfish result are considered sattvic, and to verse 17.20 about charity (*dana*) that is naturally inspired by *sattva*. Only the sattvic type of austerities (and other religious practices) are endorsed by the *shastra*, because they are naturally inspired by one's conscience and goodness, that come from the *paramatma antaryami*. This spontaneous attraction towards the good is sometimes called natural ethics, human values or common sense - not because it is very common among all people, but because it can be found in any sincere and intelligent (sattvic) people from all walks of life and all cultures, all times and all places. The special character of the genuine Vedic tradition is that it is perfectly in accordance to these natural sattvic values.

In the Vedic tradition of *yoga*, the various practices of austerity are called *yama* and *niyama*, and are considered the fundamental rules for all *sadhakas*. The *yama* ("restraining") rules are *ahimsa* (abstaining from violence), *satya* (abstaining from lying), *asteya* (abstaining from stealing), *brahmacharya* (abstaining from lusty activities), *aparigraha* (abstaining from accepting superfluous things), while the *niyama* ("engagement") rules are *sauca* (cleanliness), *santosa* (contentment), *tapah* (discipline), *svadhyaya* (search for knowledge), and *isvara pranidhana* (dedication to the Supreme). All these should be applied at the activities of the body (*saririka*), the speech (*vacika*) and the mind (*manasika*). The three types of austerities are those inspired respectively by *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*. We have already examined in detail how the sattvic austerities of the body, speech and mind are performed (17.14 to 17.16), and now we will see the motivations and the results - remembering that we are still speaking of the very same practices and of the natural inclination of the individuals according to their material nature (constituted by the *gunas*). Such austerities are the worship offered to the Supreme, the respect to good people, the search for knowledge and purification of one's consciousness, as well as the practice of cleanliness, simplicity, benevolence towards all beings, kindness, serenity and self-control. These are already sattvic, because *tapas* (austerity) is a quality of natural *sattva* or goodness.

The influence of *rajas* and *tamas* can pollute even austerity and create the desire for recognition, honor, adoration, fame and other material advantages. Under this influence, one enjoys the worship he receives from subordinates and the distinction among his peers, and if the consciousness is not purified quickly, the practice of *sadhana* or *tapah* slides into *dambha*, religious ostentation and hypocrisy. When we are enlightened by the proper knowledge and consciousness that are characteristic of *sattva*, we remember the real purpose of our religious activities, including *tapah*: it is *śraddha paraya* - the supreme faith, or faith in the Supreme.

In chapter 14 we had already seen similar instructions: *karmanah sukritasyahuh sattvikam nirmalam phalam, rajasas tu phalam dukkham ajnanam tamasah phalam, sattvat sajayate jnanam rajaso lobha eva ca, pramada mohau tamaso bhavato jnanam eva ca*, "They say that *sattva* gives immaculate results as properly performed duties, while *rajas* produces distress, and *tamas* produces ignorance. From *sattva*, knowledge is generated. From *rajas*, greed is born, and certainly *tamas* manifests madness, illusion, ignorance and stupidity" (14.16, 14.17). These repetitions are not a literary defect, but rather they are meant to impress on us the great importance of understanding the difference between the various motivations and effects in religious activities.

सत्कारमानपूजार्थं तपो दम्भेन चैव यत् । क्रियते तदिह प्रोक्तं राजसं चलमध्रुवम् ॥ १७-१८ ॥

satkāramānapūjārtham tapo dambhena caiva yat | kriyate tadiha proktam rajasam calamadhruvam | | 17-18 | |

sat kara: for admiration; *mana*: for prestige; *pūja*: worship; *artham*: for the sake of; *tapah*: austerity; *dambhena*: out of self-righteousness; *ca*: and; *eva*: certainly; *yat*: which; *kriyate*: is done; *tat*: that; *iha*: in this world; *proktam*: it is said; *rajasam*: in *rajas guna*; *calam*: restless; *adhruvam*: unstable.

"Austerities that are performed in this world to obtain prestige and admiration, and to be worshiped (by others), out of self-righteousness, are said to be in *rajas* and are unstable.

This verse is also connected with verse 17.12, that described ritual sacrifices (*yajna*) influenced by *rajas*: *abhisandhaya tu phalam dambhartham api caiva yat, ijjate bhārata srestha tam yajnam viddhi rajasam*, "O Arjuna, know that the ritual sacrifices performed out of self-righteousness or to get selfish materialistic results, are classified under *rajas*". The influence of *rajas* produces greed and selfishness. Sometimes the technical term *rajas* is translated as "passion", but it seems that this definition is not really covering the subject, because one can have a passion for spiritual life, *dharma* etc, without any trace of selfishness or greed, and that passion could not be called rajasic under any circumstance. Also, we need to differentiate between *rajas* proper and the mixture of *rajas* and *tamas* (greed and rage) that has already been described as asuric, and that constitutes the greatest enemy in this world (3.37). While religious activities influenced by *rajas* are simply unstable and do not bring permanent results (*calam adhravam*), those influenced by *rajas* and *tamas* together are useless or worse, they bring negative results (16.10, 16.15, 16.17).

Let's now analyze the austerities in *rajas*, their motivations and results: the motivations of *rajas* are based on greed, so they are aimed at the selfish acquisition of objects, positions or some other material advantages related to the *ahankara* and *mamatva* delusion. The word *artham* means "acquisition of something valuable", and also "purpose" or "meaning", and indicates that ordinary people cannot even understand why someone should practice austerities (or *yajna*, or *dana*) for selfless spiritual purposes only. Therefore someone who has risen above the opportunistic level is already beyond the human platform and is rising towards the divine dimension. The three selfish desires created by *rajas* in the religious field are listed here as *satkara*, *mana* and *puja*. *Satkara* means "recognition" and refers to the good name and fame or credit that one can obtain by performing impressive austerities and other religious activities. In a reasonable measure, this can also apply to the normal healthy validation that a student receives from the teacher, or to a reasonable amount of encouragement we receive from other people in general so that we can heal any shortcoming in our normal self esteem. But these are crutches for cripples, and as we grow stronger, we are expected to abandon them and purify our motives completely. Also, name and fame is a good investment for a career in preaching, but the benefit stops there and is short-lived; if we want to make the most of it, we should use it for spiritual progress and then discard it. For example Chaitanya, Adi Shankara and other great personalities accepted the order of *sannyasa* (which is a huge form of austerity) to make themselves noticed by society, so that people would be attracted to listen to what they wanted to teach. *Rajas* can and should certainly be engaged in transcendental work if required, but we should never become attached to it for its own sake.

On the other hand a negative use of *satkara*, that contaminates *rajas* with *tamas*, precipitates us into the foolish pride of having become famous, and starting to think that it is all our merit and we should get some profit out of it. This is the reason why one should never condition the distribution of spiritual knowledge to the payment of fees; showing gratitude to the teacher with some offering (*guru dakshina*) is a must, but it does not have to be a specific amount of money - it could be any form of sincere service.

The word *mana* ("honor") has been already analyzed in other verses (6.7, 12.18, 14.25, 15.5, 16.10, 16.17) as the dangerous desire for special attention, that could easily increase *ahankara* or false identification, even more than *satkara*. Therefore, *mana* should be directed to the Supreme only: *man mana bhava mad bhakto* (9.34, 18.65). Traditionally, this special respect is shown by standing up to receive the persons we are honoring, greeting them with folded hands, praising them for their qualities, following them to the door when they are leaving etc. The difference between *satkara* and *mana* is that *mana* does not depend on a person's true accomplishments, but is generally based on adulation. This is particularly dangerous because the foolish victims of such flattery become vulnerable to emotional manipulation by people who are actually interested in exploiting them. There is a famous saying, *ati bhakti chori lakshana*, "too much devotion could be the symptom of a thieving mentality".

The word *puja*, "worship", in this case indicating the desire to be worshiped, is one further step into the danger of sliding from *rajas* to *tamas* and straight into the asuric mentality. In traditional Hinduism, worship is a special mark of respect and affection that is offered not only to God but also to God's representatives, such as the *guru*, our superiors, sacred scriptures, holy places, and even beneficial plants and animals that enrich our lives with their blessings. The difference between *puja* and *mana* is service; while *mana* is simply offered with words and symbolic gestures of respect, *puja* is active engagement of energy and resources, such as offering riches for the personal use of the persons we are worshipping.

The austerities performed with the purpose of obtaining such benefits already find their reward in these petty gains and are temporary because people forget easily. Those same followers who worshiped you today will leave tomorrow to find someone more interesting and impressive, or even make some plans to eliminate you and take your place. The mind of a rajasic person is always very active, running after new ideas and desires; because he performs the austerities only to get a particular material result, with the next mind wave he will try a different practice that seems to offer more advantages or to be more specifically recommended for the next result he wants to get. He thinks he can choose the *mantras* and the *devas* to "use" to obtain the desired results - like one looks for a better shop to purchase goods - as he believes that one form of God is different from another. So the rajasic person is not able to engage in one specific method for a longer period, but he always wants to change *sadhana*, to try new *mantras* or new *ista devas*, and consequently the results will be very temporary and limited. On the other hand, the real permanent result of austerity is the realization of the *atman* through the sattvic concentration of the mind; in this way we can end the cycle of births and deaths, confirmed in *Maitreya Upanishad* (1.6): *cittasya hi prasadena hanti karma subha asubham, prasannatmatmani sthitva sukham aksayam asnute*, "The happiness found in the contentment of the consciousness destroys all the consequences of actions".

मूढग्राहेणात्मनो यत्पीडया क्रियते तपः । परस्योत्सादनार्थं वा तत्तामसमुदाहृतम् ॥ १७-१९ ॥

mūḍhagrāheṇātmano yatpīḍayā kriyate tapaḥ | parasyotsādanārtham vā tattāmasamudāhṛtam || 17-19 |

mudha: stupid; *grahena*: with much effort/ greedy; *atmanah*: self; *yat*: that; *pidaya*: by torture; *kriyate*: is performed; *tapah*: austerity; *parasya*: of others; *usadana artham*: to cause damage; *va*: or; *tat*: that; *tamasam*: in *tamas guna*; *udahritam*: it is said.

"The foolish austerities that are performed with great effort, by torturing oneself, or to cause damage to others, are said to be in *tamas*.

Two categories of people are attracted by tamasic austerities: the *asuras* and the imbeciles. This verse starts with the imbeciles (*mudhas*), because they are not as degraded as the *asuras*, who have deliberately chosen evil. Generally *mudhas* as a class are followers or worshipers of the *asuras*, because fools can easily be manipulated into worshiping apparently powerful persons: *yajante sattvika devan yaksa raksamsi rajasah, pretan bhuta ganams canye yajante tamasa janah*, "Those who are sattvic worship the Personalities of God, those who are in *rajas* worship the *rakshasas* and the *yakshas*, and those who are in *tamas* offer sacrifices to ghosts and other types of secondary beings" (17.4). In the next two verses Krishna had also explained that austerities that are not recommended in the scriptures, performed out of pride, egotism, lust and attachment, and that torture one's body, are actually demonic in nature because they are averse to the Paramatma residing within one's body: *asastra-vihitam ghoram tapyante ye tapo janah, dambhahankara-samyuktah, kama-raga-balanvitah; karsayantah sarira-stham bhuta-gramam acetasah mam caivantah sarira-stham tan viddhy asura-niscayan* (17.5-6). This is clearly defined as madness (14.13) and complete confusion (18.32).

The word *mudha* indicates here the obtuse obstinacy of those who embrace foolishness in beliefs and behaviors; this category includes all those austerities that are meant to damage oneself or others, because they are really stupid. Only foolish children throw tantrum scenes, hurting themselves to attract the attention of the parents and to blackmail them into giving what should not be given. This is confirmed by the word *grahena*, that conveys a strong greed, almost a violent action to grab or snatch something, as we saw in the chapter that described the activities of the *asuras*. The expression *grihitva grahan* ("grabbing acquisitions") in verse 16.10 referred to greed for non permanent material things, where *grahan* means "objectives, achievements", as something that is very difficult to obtain and brings a lot of problems even after getting it. Here is the complete verse: *kamam asritya duspuram dambha mana madanvitah, mohad grihitvasad grahan pravartante 'suci vratah*, "Taking shelter in insatiable lust, religious hypocrisy and false prestige, immersed in confused and delusional beliefs, they dedicate themselves to adharmic achievements, and engage in impure so-called religious vows" (16.10).

The word *pidaya* ("by suffering, torture") is mentioned here together with *atmanah*, that means "self", so the idea of masochistic practices is very obvious. We need to draw a clear line between the austerities that are meant to help us transcend the identification with the body (that are actually good for the *atman*), and the self-damaging austerities in *tamas*. The difference is that in the first category there is no damage inflicted to the body, no blood, no burning, no scarring, no mutilation, no disabling. We can see for example the traditional festival of Thaipusam, in which devotees get their bodies pierced with small spears or hooks, but there is never any bleeding. Another example is the famous fire walking, in which devotees walk barefoot over a stretch of live coals, and nobody gets any burn or damage. In both cases, the devotees are immersed in a deep trance and their spiritual sentiments completely control the reactions of their bodies; this is actually the only purpose of the entire exercise. On the other hand, the asuric austerities are performed by spilling blood sometimes even in very small children, or also mutilating body parts (often in the sensitive genital area), flogging etc, all for the purpose of causing pain as a form of punishment or atonement or as a sign of loyalty and obedience.

Krishna has already said that such activities are demonic in nature: *dambhahankara samyuktah, kama raga balanvitah*, "Those people who do not follow the directions of the *shastra* submit themselves to terrible practices, out of egotism and false religiousness, under the sway of lust and attachment" (17.5). This is also confirmed in *Niralamba Upanishad: mudha iti ca kartritva ady ahankara bhava rudho mudhah, asuram iti ca brahma visnv isana indradi nama isvarya akamanaya nirasana japa agnihotra adisvantara atmanam santapayati ca aty ugra raga dvesa vihimsa dambhady apeksitam tapa asuram*, "The foolish *asuras* engage in austerities with a strong sense of *ahankara* and with great outcry, but they are filled with attachment and repulsion (duality), hypocrisy and self-righteousness, and violence. Sometimes they chant the *japa* of the names of Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva, Indra and other Devas, because they want to obtain special powers from them. They stand for a long time, observe long fasting, perform fire sacrifices, and submit themselves to horrible sufferings."

The expression *parasya usadana artham*, "to damage or destroy others", is particularly interesting here. Not only tamasic people inflict suffering and damage to themselves, but they also want to cause damage and sufferings to others, and therefore they must be stopped. There is nothing brahminical or spiritual in black *tantra*, even if those who resort to these horrible practices are convinced that "their motivation is good". Only ghosts and other similar creatures respond to such worship, and establishing a relationship with them will certainly cause the worshiper to join them after death (9.25, 17.4) and share their horrible condition.

दातव्यमिति यद्दानं दीयतेऽनुपकारिणे । देशे काले च पात्रे च तद्दानं सात्त्विकं स्मृतम् ॥ १७-२० ॥

dātavyamiti yaddānaṁ dīyate'nupakāriṇe | deśe kāle ca pātre ca taddānaṁ sāttvikam smṛtam || 17-20 ||

datavyam: that must be given, out of duty; *iti*: thus; *yat*: which; *danam*: charity; *diyate*: is given; *anupakarine*: without considering one's benefit/ any return; *dese*: in a proper place; *kale*: at a proper time; *ca*: and; *patre*: to a proper recipient; *ca*: and; *tat*: that; *danam*: charity; *sattvikam*: in *sattva guna*; *smrtam*: is remembered.

"Charity that is given out of duty, in a proper place and at the proper time, to a proper recipient, without considering one's selfish advantage, is remembered as sattvic.

The definition of charity includes the donation of any amount of cash money, valuable items of various types and especially food, clothing and necessity accessories such as umbrellas or shoes, work instruments, useful objects, useful animals (especially cows), or even one's service as in the *pro bono* activities of doctors, lawyers, consultants and other professionals. The value of the donation should not be calculated monetarily, but from the spirit or motivation that prompts it, and from the amount of self-sacrifice one puts into it. For example, a charitable gift offered by a man who has limited financial means will bring better results than a large amount of money or other valuables offered by a thief who stole them without being apprehended. We have already seen that actions in goodness bring happiness and purification, actions performed in greed bring sufferings and anxiety, and actions performed in ignorance bring degradation, illusion and madness. In this chapter, Krishna illustrates the "spontaneous religious inclinations" of people who have no knowledge about the *shastra* and simply follow their *gunas*, or natural qualities (goodness, greed or foolishness). Charity is certainly a big factor in religion, and if we want to situate ourselves in *sattva*, when we give something it is important to know to whom we are giving, and how our gift will be used, because we will share the results of the actions that were enabled by our act of charity.

This verse clearly mentions the three principal factors of the action: *desa* (place), *kala* (time) and *patra* (person involved), because different circumstances require different actions. The *patra* factor is the most important of all: for example, the best charity to give to someone who is hungry is to offer proper food. If we give money to a person who claims to be hungry, we cannot be sure that he will actually purchase proper food; in degraded societies beggars prefer to buy booze or addictive toxic drugs, gamble away the money, or are forced to pay heavy percentages of their collection to organized criminals, so our well-intentioned action will bring bad karmic results. If a beggar is pretending to be hungry but refuses proper food (as it usually happens), or deliberately mistreats children to use them as props for his emotional manipulation of the sentimental public, your donation will make you his supporter and accomplice.

The time and place of the act of charity are also important. The *smriti shastras* explain that there are auspicious times and holy places where charity becomes more powerful, because it encourages people to meet with a good purpose and establish relationships of respect and affection that are not based on material identifications and attachments. Such conventional times are listed mainly as the eclipses (solar and lunar), the beginning of the solar month (*sankranti*), the full moon (*puṇnima*), or the great festivals or *yajnas*. In this verse the word *smritah* ("are remembered") also indicates that genuine good charity remains forever in the memory of the people to inspire many more to follow the good example.

Generally people simply believe that charity should be given to the poor, the handicapped, the abandoned, the suffering and the downtrodden, to relieve their misery; so they give money to any beggar they meet, without asking any questions, because they feel it is their duty to help their fellow men in need. Charity is also a major source of income for the various religious denominations, and it is sometimes presented as obligatory, as the *tithe* (generally 1/10 of one's income) or *halal* tax (on various foods) demanded by the abrahamic faiths. A member of the congregation feels it is his duty to contribute money regularly and also for special occasions from time to time. In principle, this is a good thing, because charity is recommended universally as a deeply religious practice - the sacrifice of one's hard earned resources to the service of society as the body of God. Sharing one's wealth with the right people (*patra*, "recipient") is a source of inner satisfaction, happiness, and good fortune. This is how we create good *karma* that will come back to us in our own times of need.

However, in order to bring these benefits to society and to the individual, charity must be done carefully, and in accordance to the principles of goodness (*sattva*) without the influence of greed or ignorance (*rajas* and *tamas*). The main quality of *sattva* is wisdom, knowledge or intelligence, therefore we need first of all to understand what is our actual duty, and how to perform it properly. It is said that the road to hell is paved with good intentions, and certainly good deeds that are not supported by the proper intelligence and knowledge can backfire horribly and damage everyone involved.

Here we need to make a clear distinction between a healthy society and a degraded society, because in a healthy society ordinary citizens can confidently donate food and wealth to beggars, knowing that they are genuine people in distress who temporarily need a little help. In a healthy society there are no professional beggars thriving on manipulating people's compassion, because the King makes sure that everyone is properly engaged in their social duties. The only accepted habitual mendicants are renounced religious persons such as *brahmacharis* and *sannyasis*, who behave in a sattvic and saintly way and never appeal to people's pity with some show of personal degradation. Quite the opposite: *brahmacharis* and *sannyasis* dedicate all their time and energy to spiritual knowledge - studying and distributing the essence of the *shastra* - and therefore they constitute an important part of the great family that is human society. They are the children and the grandparents of all, and the *grihasthas* (family people) feed them respectfully and affectionately, out of duty, establishing a sattvic relationship that is not marred by material identification and attachment (as it would be if such children and elders remained in their own homes). This charity is very beneficial to the *grihasthas* too, because they learn to take care of others without exercising selfishness, greed, or need to control the people who depend on them.

The word *datavyam* ("that must be given as a duty") is important because it defines the boundaries of appropriate duty, according to one's position in society, to justice and proper functioning of society, to one's natural debt (*rina*) to the world that is paid through the five great *yajnas* (*brahma yajna*, *pitri yajna*, *deva yajna*, *bhuta yajna*, *nara yajna*), and so on. Our duty is to support good people (our personal family and our extended family and even our ancestors or *pitris*) in a reasonable number, to reciprocate the gifts and favors we receive (with the *dakshina* to the *guru* and the *brahmanas*), to take care of the travelers (*atithi seva*) and other good people who may occasionally need assistance (*manava seva* or *nara yajna*), to feed the good animals (*bhuta yajna*) and to participate to the collective life of the universe, each in our small way. These activities are sufficient, and we do not need to burden ourselves with more than what we can carry. It is said, "charity begins at home", and we should never neglect our own personal evolution or the true needs of our family and community, to run after some idealistic crusade aimed at "saving the world out there".

Working to fight poverty in society and at global level is a full time job, the duty of *kshatriyas* and *brahmanas* who are competent and intelligent enough to take the proper actions. The same applies to alleviating the sufferings of the victims of natural disasters or other great calamities such as wars and persecutions. An intelligent person will be able to see the dangers of uninformed donations that can easily be misappropriated by devious individuals or organizations, to the extreme of greedy asuric schemes played on the foolish public, aimed at actually causing more sufferings and victims in order to create more demand in the "charity market" for their profit. Some "religious leaders" flock like vultures in a frenzy of anticipation whenever they find some natural disaster, because the bereavement and despair of the victims make them weak and vulnerable to aggressive conversion campaigns based on blackmailing and emotional manipulation.

The King of the land is the only person responsible and qualified to conduct relief work in his own kingdom, and he should not allow anybody else to act independently in this regard, including the international organizations. Local people may help their neighbors, but simply out of duty towards the members of their community as a family. In this regard we need to clarify that the word "community" indicates "people with common interests living in a particular area" as neighbors, and has nothing to do with people's birth categorization (social class, caste, religion of birth, etc). Restricting social cooperation by means of birth prejudice or ideological/ political allegiance to a particular group is a sinful activity that must be curbed, because it perpetuates artificial divisions, resentment, hatred and envy, and gives people the wrong motivations to participate in charity. This brings us to the second factor mentioned in this verse: *anupakarine*, or "without expecting anything in return for oneself", that is the exact opposite of *dambhena* ("with ostentation and hypocrisy", 16.17, 17.18).

Political charity (including political charity dressed as religious charity) is meant to create or reinforce vote banks and is certainly not selfless, therefore it will not bring good results. On the contrary, it will encourage the general people to become irresponsible and

depending on handouts, developing a beggar's mentality when instead they could work honestly and take care of themselves and their own subordinates. In extreme cases, such political beneficiaries will even become arrogant and demand special privileges as in the notorious "reservation system" enforced in India to favor the so-called "minorities" without any consideration of merit or need.

The Government's duty (the King's duty) is to engage everyone in their own *sva dharma* according to their individual *guna* and *karma*, and support them in developing their true potential. The first foundation for this work is the concept of *dharma*, or selfless work performed to support society. Without teaching this concept in theory and practice (through the example of the *srestha*, 3.21), a Government is simply a failure. Government people and leaders must be shown as having very specific professional duties and fulfilling them in the proper spirit, otherwise no legislation or scheme will ever improve the conditions of society. More laws will only create more difficulties to good people, because of the bureaucracy involved and the blind restrictions that can easily be exploited by ill-motivated people, and corruption can only increase. Good people do not need laws in order to behave properly, and bad people will always find a way to circumvent the laws or will even break the laws regardless of the severity of the punishment promised. In fact, too many laws will keep the Government servants busy with petty matters while criminals remain free to commit any aggression or damage, protected by shameless lawyers and corrupt police and magistrates.

There should be one law only: that anyone who attempts any type of aggression against a peaceful person (human or animal) should immediately be stopped, and the *kshatriyas'* duty is to help the weak who are personally unable to fight off such aggressors (*atatayinah*). If this one law is respected, all the members of society will be free to work selflessly, each in their own capacity or *sva dharma*, for the benefit of the entire society, and there will be no poverty and no injustice. This means there will be no needy people, no downtrodden, homeless, poverty-stricken, abandoned, degraded or marginalized people - and therefore the ordinary citizens will not have to take care of them. Charity to the destitute and victims of tragedy is a duty of the *kshatriyas* only, because they are responsible for the protection and maintenance of the *prajas*; ordinary citizens already contribute to this work by paying reasonable taxes and tributes to the Government, and should not be asked to take more responsibility than that. If a private citizen has wealth in excess and wants to share it with society after having fulfilled all his personal duties, he can make a donation to a qualified *brahmana*, who will not only distribute appropriate food and other necessities to the deserving and needy people, but will also be able to teach and guide these unfortunate people in their personal development, so that they will not remain in need indefinitely.

Again, it is important to understand here that *brahmanas* never condition their social assistance to sectarian allegiance or conversion, but support individuals according to their merits and needs so that they can become self-sufficient and useful members of society. These merits are evaluated on the basis of the universal and natural principles of ethics only. Furthermore, any twice-born (*dvija*, including *brahmanas*, *kshatriyas* and *vaisyas*) can conduct a traditional *yajna*, as that is the best opportunity to distribute good food, clothing and useful articles to all participants, thus encouraging the general population to participate and absorb dharmic knowledge and sentiments. Participation to such events is traditionally open to all people, without consideration of qualifications or position. We see that in the puranic stories, even dogs and other animals were sumptuously fed and honored during *yajnas*. Again, the *karta* (promoter of the *yajna*) should perform this duty selflessly, without expectation of returns or any service, restitution or even gratitude from the beneficiaries, because such motivation would destroy the eternal results of his piety. He should not even expect to obtain name, fame and glory, or to earn paradise for himself or his kith and kin, because that would not be charity, but a business transaction or payment. We will see in the next verse that this type of rajasic charity brings only temporary results.

यत्तु प्रत्युपकारार्थं फलमुद्दिश्य वा पुनः ।

दीयते च परिक्लिष्टं तद्दानं राजसं स्मृतम् ॥ १७-२१ ॥

yattu pratyupakārārtham phalamuddiśya vā punaḥ | dīyate ca parikliṣṭam taddānam rājasam smṛtam || 17-21 ||

yat: which; *prati upakara*: to get something in return; *artham*: for the sake of; *phalam*: result; *uddiśya*: desiring; *va*: or; *punaḥ*: again; *dīyate*: is given; *ca*: and; *pariklistam*: without a good sentiment; *tat*: that; *danam*: charity; *rajasam*: in *rajas guna*; *smrtam*: it is remembered.

"Charity performed with the desire of obtaining something in return, to get a material advantage, or without a good sentiment, is remembered as being in *rajas*.

Charity given at the proper time, in the proper place and to a worthy person, without expecting anything in return, is considered in the mode of *sattva* and giving eternal benefits, while charity performed in expectation of some return, or given unwillingly, is in the mode of *rajas* and will bring temporary results. Charity given without considering time, place and recipient, without respect and affection, is under the mode of *tamas* and will not bring any good results. Usually *rajas* and *tamas* tend to overlap, because greed and selfishness make people blind and deaf to reason and knowledge, therefore a materialist ends up behaving very foolishly and to his own disadvantage, still strongly convinced he is acting for his own good interest. The word *prati upakara*, indicating the intention to get some benefit in return, some reciprocation or advantage, is opposed to the word *anupakara* expressed in the previous verse. Foolish people may misinterpret this concept by claiming that selfless charity requires the donor not to verify how his money is spent and who will get the benefits, because in this way there will be no complications due to personal contact and interests. However, ignorance is not a symptom of *sattva*: it is *tamas*, and will not bring positive results. Since foolish people are regularly targeted for exploitation by the *asuras* (17.19), acting in *tamas* will immediately attract the attention of fraudsters. Cheaters would not be so successful if there were not so many people who are ready to be cheated, and conversely, when *asuras* and cheaters come to power, their first concern is to idiotize the mass of people with all possible means - brainwashing propaganda, withdrawal of information and circulation of misinformation, restrictions on education, and even physical brain damage through toxic polluting substances administered through drinking water, industrial food and even toothpaste.

This verse again highlights the fact that the motivation of the action is the real crucial point. The action in itself, as people can observe it externally, is not the only factor in the karmic results, as ignorant people usually believe. A sharp knife can be used to cut the abdomen of a human being, but if the action is performed with the proper knowledge, to remove a malignant tumor or an acutely inflamed appendix, the

result will be saving the life of the patient. On the other hand, if the knife is used by a murderer who wants to inflict a painful death to an innocent person, the action will bring terrible karmic results. Similarly, the act of donating something in charity may superficially seem the same in all cases, but the motivations of the donor will make all the difference for all the persons involved.

Most human beings live under the influence of *rajas*, with some hues of *sattva* or *tamas*, therefore charity is usually subject to greed motivations, gross or subtle. On the lowest level, one gives charity to become famous and respected, and to get a higher position in society - as we have seen in the example of politicians. The results of such charity are quickly consumed by the immediate material advantage one gets. Another popular motivation for charity is the purification or atonement for some bad actions one has committed, knowingly or unknowingly; even bosses of organized crime gangs are anxious to make donations especially to the religious affiliation to which they belong, hoping that such charity will counteract the bad karma they have created. It is a sort of "divine money laundering service" they seek, but since they will continue to commit the same crimes and sinful activities, the good results are negligible. Most people just want to feel good about themselves and get a boost to their ego and vanity, especially if they suffer from low self esteem. On a higher level than these, we have people who give charity only because they get some tax exemption or benefit; however, this particular motivation can be raised to a sattvic level if they choose to channel their donations to people they actually know as honest and qualified, and for causes that are actually dharmic.

On a slightly higher level yet, we find people who want to get religious merits (*punya*) to improve their condition and good luck in this life and in the next. All the famous prayers and recitations from the *shastras* are traditionally accompanied by some *phala sruti* verses illustrating the blessings and material advantages one can obtain by practicing the pious reading. The same applies to charity. For many people, this desired result is the attainment of paradise or *svarga*, the higher planetary systems where they will be able to live very long lives in a perfect body and surrounded by heavenly pleasures. This motivation is also material, and once one has exhausted such pious merits, they will have to return to the human condition to earn some more: *te tam bhuktva svarga lokam visalam ksine punye martya lokam visanti, evam tryi dharmam anuprapanna gatagatam kama kama labhante*, "After a long time spent in the enjoyment of Svargaloka, those who have exhausted their virtuous merits fall down again to the level of mortals. In this way, following strictly the path of the three *dharmas*, they develop a lust for desires and they continue to take birth and die" (9.21).

Charity can also be motivated by a mixture of *rajas* and *tamas*, indicated here by the word *pariklistam*, "without a good sentiment", or even "begrudgingly" or "unwillingly". One may be forced to give charity by the order of a superior (parents, teacher, government officer, religious leader etc) or even by the request of a spouse or friend, or because everybody else is giving and one is afraid of being criticized. This is often the case for the presents offered to bad people for birthday parties or other similar occasions; one feels obligated to buy something to give, but there are no good sentiments involved. Quite often, one is forced to give something to a beggar to get rid of the disturbance, especially when professional beggars resort to the "annoying" strategy, by calling out loudly for a long time, walking around following people or by touching and pulling people's clothes or hand or leg and so on. In this strategy, the professional beggar can also make good use of a repulsive appearance or offensive smell deliberately created, that makes his presence and contact very unpleasant. In both such cases, there is no affection and respect or good sentiment involved in the act of giving, and rather the opposite is created on both sides - resentment, envy, spite, hatred, and so on. This particular situation is illustrated also in the next verse that discusses charity performed under the influence of *tamas*.

अदेशकाले यद्दानमपात्रेभ्यश्च दीयते । असत्कृतमवज्ञातं तत्तामसमुदाहृतम् ॥ १७-२२ ॥

adeśakāle yaddānamapātrebhyasca dīyate | asatkṛtamavajñātaṁ tattāmasamudāhṛtam | | 17-22 | |

adesa kale: without consideration for place and time; *yat*: which; *danam*: charity; *apatrebhyah*: without considering the recipient; *ca*: and; *dīyate*: is given; *asat kritam*: without respect; *avajnatam*: without knowledge/ awareness; *tat*: that; *tamasam*: in *tamas guna*; *udahrtam*: it is said (to be).

"Charity that is given without proper consideration of time, place and recipient, without respect or without knowledge, is considered to be in *tamas*.

Charity influenced by ignorance does not bring benefits, and it should be avoided. We see that often foolish people mistake *tamas* for *sattva*, and believe that their acts of charity are the best because they do not know where their donations go ("your right hand should not know when your left hand gives"), when in fact they are merely deluding themselves and actually causing damages to everyone, as we were mentioning earlier. Recipient of ill-advised charity will be encouraged to develop a servile, dependent and irresponsible mentality, to tell lies and misrepresent facts, to participate to corruption, to become arrogant and exploitative, and so on. In some cases, the beneficiaries will feel humiliated, scared and impotent because of their dependency and servility, lose their self-esteem and therefore suffer in their personal relationships and become depressed, or they will develop rage, envy and resentment towards the donors, thinking that the difference in position between him and the donor is due to some social injustice, and that he is been exploited and used. This may trigger social unrest and even encourage aggressions and violent crimes, as well as drug abuse, alcoholism and other social problems. This happens especially when such charity is given without respect or even spitefully (*asat kritam*), in extreme cases even with the intention of insulting the recipient of the gift. The *asat karah* thinks, "Look at this miserable person, this rejected human waste. I have pity because he is so degraded and I am such a good person, so I will give him some charity". Sometimes this exercise in self-righteousness is prompted by some little unconscious sense of guilt, that is quickly put to sleep with a small bribe from the ego.

The insult can be conscious or unconscious, expressed verbally or non-verbally or implied, or demonstrated by the action itself, by giving something to a person who cannot utilize it - a comb to bald people, for example, or a bicycle to a paralyzed person, illustrated books to the blind, sexually provocative clothes to a modest woman, or a beef burger to a vegetarian. Of course this includes the charity acts of people who donate expired toxic medicines, rotten food, broken objects and garbage of various kinds. In the Vedic tradition, according to etiquette one should also be careful about offering one's old used shoes and clothes, because such action is considered an official statement of the inferior social position and lower respectability of the recipient of the gift.

The word *avajnatam* means "without attention, without caring, without bothering to know", as *avajna* means "lack of attention" and even "contempt" towards the *patra* ("recipient"). This closely links the action to the three key words *adesa akale apatrebyah*, that are evidence of such carelessness. *Adesa* ("in a bad place" and *akale* ("at a bad time") refer to the casual behavior of a donor who throws his gift to the ground or keeps it in some inappropriate container (dirty, contaminated, leaky etc), or gives the donation in front of unsympathetic people, or approaches the recipient at some inconvenient time - in the night, while he is sleeping, while he is engaged in bodily functions etc.

The word *apatrebhyah*, "to those who should not be given", is referring to the spiteful gifts above mentioned but also to the unworthy recipients, such as the false beggars and the adharmic organizations that present themselves as charities but have different motivations. In this case, *apatrebhyah* could also be translated as "without a beneficiary", or "an unknown beneficiary". As we have already mentioned, unfortunately in degraded societies there are professional beggars who exploit the good sentiments of the public and sometimes collect large amounts of money, often by pretending to be physically handicapped or by carrying a sleeping infant (usually heavily drugged and sometimes kidnapped from its actual family). Giving "charity" to such people does not create good karma for anyone, because fraudsters and manipulators are encouraged to continue in their activities without progressing in their personal evolution. Especially if a beggar says he is hungry but he does not want pure and healthy food, do not give him anything at all. To test the character of a street beggar, give him a very small coin and see his reaction: if he appreciates the gift you may give more, but usually professional beggars will show disdain and refuse to accept the small change, demanding a more substantial gift.

Often people donate money to some relief organizations, governmental or non-governmental, and believe they have done their part, or their duty. They implicitly trust such organizations to utilize the funds in the best possible way, and they never attempt to verify the facts beyond the propaganda, or to question the policies and their implications. Usually the feeling of duty is determined by the donor's personal allegiance to the Organization or its presented ideology, either religious or non-religious. Sometimes the sentiment of duty is fulfilled by choosing an Organization that is endorsed by the Government or by international Agencies, or is big and famous enough.

Unfortunately, these are not sufficient guarantees that your donation will bring you good karmic results, because you do not really know how your money will be used (and inquiries are discouraged). Among the professionals in the field, it is common knowledge that the largest organizations normally spend a huge percentage of their income in advertisement, political lobbying and power games, or in even shadier business.

Usually, only 1/4th of the collected donations actually reaches the intended beneficiaries or is used for them, and even so, those who receive aids are often blackmailed into religious conversion or paying sexual favors to the field workers of the organizations. Sometimes the bulk of the donations is used for something even more sinister, as in the case of covert terrorist organizations (often based on abrahamic ideologies) that commit serious crimes, including murder, rape, destruction of property, persecution of dissidents, acquisition and use of weapons of various kinds, and so on. It is important to understand that the people who contributed funds to such organizations are accomplices of such crimes and will share the karmic consequences. Ignorance is no excuse.

ॐ तत्सदिति निर्देशो ब्रह्मणस्त्रिविधः स्मृतः । ब्राह्मणास्तेन वेदाश्च यज्ञाश्च विहिताः पुरा ॥ १७-२३ ॥

om tatsaditi nirdeśo brahmaṇastrividhaḥ smṛtaḥ | brāhmaṇāstena vedāśca yajñāśca vihitaḥ purā || 17-23 ||

om tat sat: om tat sat; iti: thus; nirdesah: indication; brahmanah: of Brahman; tri vidhah: three types of; smrtah: it is remembered/ according to smrti; brahmanah: those who know Brahman; tena: by that; vedah: the Vedas; ca: and; yajnah: sacrifice; ca: and; vihithah: prescribed; pura: from ancient times.

"Om tat sat: these are remembered as the three references to Brahman. Since very ancient times, brahmanas (apply them) in the (study of the) Vedas and in the performance of ritual sacrifices.

In this chapter, Krishna has illustrated the religious activities spontaneously performed according to the three material *gunas* by those who do not know the teachings of the *shastra*, showing that sattvic people naturally behave in a good way according to the universal and eternal principles of natural ethics called *dharma*, that are the very same foundation of the knowledge offered by the *shastra*. However, the Vedic scriptures contain much more than instructions and explanations about natural ethical principles. The *shastras* contain the record of the activities and teachings of extraordinarily powerful spiritual personalities dating back from the beginning of creation, as well as the direct findings, realizations and experiences of the great Rishis who compiled the texts. These great sages perfected their full potential and attained the supreme goal of life, so when we study their compilations we can benefit from their success both in the material field and in the spiritual field. The Vedic scriptures offer a vast number of perfectly engineered scientific techniques and methods for personal development, a precise and integrated system of social/ global cooperation, many stories and conversations illustrating the knowledge of *dharma* and the laws of the universe and nature, examples of good and bad actions and their results, and so on. Above all, they speak about the purpose of human life (*purusha arthas*), explained as *dharma*, *artha*, *kama* and *moksha* - respectively ethical behavior (or social cooperation), acquisition of valuable things, fulfillment of sensual desires, and liberation from conditionings. However, there is a higher *purusha artha*, that one can attain after *moksha*, and is illustrated by Krishna in verse 18.54 at the conclusion of his teachings in *Bhagavad gita*. This supreme purpose of life consists in *yoga* (union) of *atman* and *brahman*, and it is also called "self realization" because it constitutes the fulfillment of the inherent and original nature of the self. *Moksha* in itself is simply liberation from material conditionings (identifications and attachments) and freedom from the influence of the material *gunas*, therefore it cannot be the highest purpose of life.

We can make an example: a conditioned soul is like a prisoner bound by shackles and confined in a dark dungeon, without any power over his own life and situation. By cultivating the proper activities and attitudes, the prisoner can become qualified for release from jail, and that is called "liberation" or freedom. However, being free is not enough to make him permanently happy. The idea of freedom is that it should be used to engage in meaningful and joyous activities, so after leaving the prison he needs a supporting community, constructive interests, a fulfilling job, a nice place to live, good relationships and so on, otherwise he will become bored and even risk falling down again into bondage.

We find a clear warning in Krishna's instructions to Uddhava: *ya esam purusam saksad atma prabhavam isvaram, na bhajanty avajananti sthanad bhrastah patanty adhah*, "One who refuses to serve the Supreme Lord, the Purusha that is the source of the individual soul, will fall down from his position" (*Bhagavata Purana* 11.5.3). The same point had been highlighted by the Devas in their prayers to Krishna before his appearance: *ye 'nye 'ravindaksa vimukta maninas, tvayy asta bhavad avisuddha buddhyah, aruhya krcchrena param padam tatah, patanty adho 'nadrtā yusmad anghrayah*, "O lotus-eyed Lord, those who consider themselves as liberated but have not elevated their intelligence to the level of *visuddha satva* may attain a very high position through their efforts, but they will ultimately fall back (into material conditioning) if they are not interested in knowing and serving your feet" (*Bhagavata Purana* 10.2.32).

This instruction was also found at the beginning of the *Bhagavata*: *sa vai pumsam paro dharmo, yato bhaktir adhoksaje, ahaituki apratihata yayatma suprasidati*, "The supreme duty for all humanity is that by which men can attain loving devotional service to the transcendental Lord. Such devotional service must be unmotivated and uninterrupted to completely satisfy the self" (*Bhagavata Purana* 1.2.6), and *dharmah svanusthitah pumsam, visvaksena kathasu yah, notpadayed yadi ratim, srama eva hi kevalam*, "Performance of one's duties becomes a burden if it does not inspire us to become attached to the Supreme" (*Bhagavata Purana* 1.2.8).

So from the very dawn of creation (*pura*, "in ancient times"), the traditional teaching (*smriti*) of Vedic knowledge has always pointed (*nirdesah*) all students towards the meditation on the Supreme, the eternal Brahman, with the three words *om, tat, sat*, indicating the *atman/ brahman* and the transcendental consciousness, that are personified in Yajna, Vishnu. This is the sum and substance of the concept of *vedanta*, "the conclusion/ end/ purpose of the *Vedas*".

It is important to understand that all three of these syllables refer to the Supreme. The sacred syllable *om*, the *pranava omkara*, is the most famous and powerful, because it constitutes the primeval sound of creation and life and is composed by the fundamental blocks of existence or *tatvas* (A, U, M, and *anusvara*). However, the chanting of the *omkara* evokes the memory of the Supreme, rather than constituting an explicit offering of one's actions; this is done by uttering the syllables *tat* and *sat*. The word *tat* literally means "that", and can be applied to a vast territory of meditation, to focus on Atman, Brahman, Paramatma and Bhagavan in his many forms and functions. Together with *om, tat* reinforces the awareness of the higher purpose of life as full dedication to the Supreme Consciousness; in current terms, we could say, "realization of God is the purpose of my life and actions". The word *sat* indicates goodness, existence, eternity, transcendence and spirit, as we have commented several times; together with *om* and *tat*, it expresses the eternal and transcendental purpose of our actions, raising them above the three *gunas* and the cycle of births and deaths in the material universe. This was also confirmed in verse 4.24: *brahmarpanam brahma havir brahmagnau brahmana hutam, brahmaiva tena gantavyam brahma karma samadhina*, "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."

The word *pura*, "since ancient times", demonstrates that the standard Vedic system had been practiced for a very long time before Krishna's appearance, that is calculated about 5000 years ago.

तस्मादोमित्युदाहृत्य यज्ञदानतपःक्रियाः । प्रवर्तन्ते विधानोक्ताः सततं ब्रह्मवादिनाम् ॥ १७-२४ ॥

tasmādomityudāhṛtya yajñādānatapahkriyāḥ | pravartante vidhānoktāḥ satatam brahmavādinām || 17-24 ||

tasmat: therefore; *om*: *om*; *iti*: thus; *udahrtya*: indicating; *yajna*: in sacrifices; *dana*: in charity; *tapah*: in austerities; *kriyah*: in all religious practices; *pravartante*: they begin; *vidhana uktah*: according to the indications of the scriptures; *satatam*: always; *brahma vadinam*: of those who follow Brahman.

"Therefore those who follow Brahman in accordance to the teachings of the scriptures always begin their duties - rituals, charity, austerities etc - with *om*.

Those who follow Brahman (*brahma vadinah*) are called *brahmanas*. The expression "following Brahman" includes (progressively) "knowing Brahman", "realizing Brahman", "identifying with Brahman" and "functioning as Brahman", as Brahman is the universal consciousness field of which we are all parts.

In verse 18.42, Krishna will detail the symptoms, the required qualifications and the duties (*guna* and *karma*) of the *brahmanas* as a professional class, but the most important definition of the term is traditionally attributed to Atri Rishi: *janmana jayate sudra, samskarad bhaved dvijah, veda-pathad bhaved viprah, brahma janati iti brahmanah*, "By birth everybody is simply a *sudra*, while through ritual purification one becomes a twice-born, through the study of Vedic knowledge one becomes learned, but *brahmana* is one who knows Brahman."

Since the union with Brahman is the ultimate purpose of the *Vedas* (the *veda anta*), a genuine *brahmana* engaged in *brahma yoga* is the only qualified person to teach Vedic knowledge: *yavan artha udapane sarvatah samplutodake, tavan sarvesu vedesu brahmanasya vijanatah*, "Whatever value is found in a pond is also found, for all purposes, also in a large lake, and similarly whatever is contained in all the *Vedas* can be found in a person who has realized the knowledge of Brahman" (2.46).

Krishna has already explained that such realized knowledge is a dynamic consciousness focused on service to the Supreme Transcendence: *mam ca yo 'vyabhicarena bhakti yogena sevate, sa gunan samatityaitan brahma bhuyaya kalpate*, "One who truly serves me in *bhakti yoga* without deviation develops desires on the Brahman level, transcending all the three *gunas*" (14.26). This works both as cause and effect, as genuine *bhakti* maintains a clear transcendental consciousness, and transcendental consciousness enables and supports genuine *bhakti*. Actual transcendental *bhakti* to Bhagavan (*mad bhaktim param*, 18.54) can only begin after attaining the level of liberation (*moksha*), that constitutes transcendental consciousness, free from material identifications and attachments. This transcendental consciousness, the realization of the Self in the intimate union between *atman* and *brahman*, is the ultimate purpose of the *Vedas* (*vedanta*), that is regularly remembered by qualified *brahmanas* in all ritual ceremonies through the meditation and utterance of the sacred syllable *aum*, and sometimes with more explicit pronunciations, such as "*krishna arpanam astu*" ("I am doing this action as a service to Krishna"). Without the remembrance of the supreme goal of life, all the religious activities of Vedic hymns and ritual ceremonies remain simply within the temporal realm of the *tri-guna* and the four *purusha arthas*, that is to say, on the material level within this universe.

The realm of the three material *gunas* is characterized by relativity and by the law of cause and effect (*karma*); beyond the level of the *gunas* we find the eternal, unchangeable, absolute Existence, free from all conditionings and encompassing all consciousness, that is the pure happiness of the Self. This is indicated by the words *sat* (existence, eternity), *cit* (awareness) and *ananda* (bliss). This happiness is unconditional and is not disturbed by the contact (or lack of contact) with the external objects: *bahya sparsesv asaktatma vindaty atmani yat sukham, sa brahma yoga yuktatma sukham aksayam asnute*, "Unattached to the contact with the external (things), s/he finds happiness in the pleasure of the Self. Such a person is engaged in the union with Brahman, and enjoys inexhaustible happiness" (5.21). In *Bhagavad gita*, the ultimate purpose (*anta*) of the *Vedas* is called *yoga*, a definition that indicates this union with Brahman: *yunjann evam sadatmanam yogi vigata kalmashah, sukhen brahma samsparsam atyantam sukham asnute*, "Concentrating always on the Self, the *yogi* who has become free from all contaminations attains the highest happiness because s/he easily remains connected with the Brahman" (6.28). True *brahmanas* are perfectly aware of this ultimate truth, therefore they perform all their activities as an offering to the Supreme: *yajna* (ritualistic ceremonies and professional duties), *dana* (charity), *tapasya* (austerities), and *kriyas* (spiritual practices), and even the final duty of leaving the material body: *om ity ekaksaram brahma vyaharan mam anusmaran, yah prayati tyajan deham sa yati paramam gatim*, "Vibrating 'om", the syllable form of the Brahman, and remembering me, one who departs from the body attains the supreme destination" (8.13).

The word *satatam* ("always") indicates that all actions - great and small - must be offered to the Supreme, in a constant meditation (*samadhi*). This was already explained by Krishna: *yat karosi yad asnasi yaj juhosi dadasi yat, yat tapasyasi kaunteya tat kurusva mad arpanam*, "O Arjuna, whatever you do, whatever you eat, whatever you sacrifice, whatever you give, whatever you endure in the performance of your duties - do it for me" (9.27). How to do it in practice? By uttering these simple words before starting any action (*pravartante*, "they begin") to refresh our memory and keep our consciousness on the proper level.

The expression *vidhana uktah* ("according to the rules") echoes the words *udahrtiya* ("indicated", 17.24) and *nirdesa* ("designated", "ordered", 17.23). Specifically, it is composed by *vidhana*, derived from *vidhi* (meaning "rules", "method", "knowledge") and *uktah*, meaning "said", "explained". It refers to the tradition of *smriti*, to the instructions of the *guru* and to the many teachings of the great personalities of the past and especially the *avatars*. Above all, it refers to the direct instructions of the *sruti*, or *shastra pramana*, as for example in the following aphorisms: *om tad vishnoh paramam padam (Rig Veda 1.22.20)*, *om iti brahma (Taittiriya Upanishad, 1.8.1)*, *tat tvam asi (Chandogya Upanishad 6.8.7)*.

The sound *om* represents the Supreme Lord in all Vedic scriptures: *om iti brahma (Taittiriya Upanishad 18.1)*, *om ity etad brahmano nedisthan nama (Rig Veda)*. This is confirmed by Krishna in verse 7.8: *raso 'ham apsu kaunteya prabhasmi sasi-suryayoh, pranavah sarva-vedesu sabdah ke paurusam nrisu*. The Lord manifests in the liquidity and taste of water, in the splendor and light of the sun and moon, in the vital force of living beings, and in the primordial sound which permeates ether and space, which is the sacred vibration *om*. This very same sound is constantly vibrating in all space, inside and outside all bodies, and by developing our perception power we can hear it distinctly. The *pranava omkara* is the beginning, middle and end of all creation, and by remembering the transcendental form of sound vibration of the Godhead, everything we do becomes perfect.

तदित्यनभिसन्धाय फलं यज्ञतपःक्रियाः । दानक्रियाश्च विविधाः क्रियन्ते मोक्षकाङ्क्षिभिः ॥ १७-२५ ॥

tadityanabhisandhāya phalam yajñatapaḥkriyāḥ | dānakriyāśca vividhāḥ kriyante mokṣakāṅkṣibhiḥ || 17-25 ||

tat: that; *iti*: thus; *anabhisandhaya*: without selfishness; *phalam*: the results; *yajna tapah kriyah*: the activities of sacrifice and austerity; *dana kriyah*: the activities of charity; *ca*: and; *vividhah*: various; *kriyante*: are done; *moksa kanksibhih*: by those who desire liberation.

"In this way, those who desire liberation perform the dutiful activities of rituals, austerities and charity without selfish desire for the results.

The word *anabhisandhaya* ("selflessly") refers to *phalana* ("the fruits"), so that the meaning is "not selflessly attached to the fruits"; exactly the opposite of the expression *abhisandhaya tu phalam* we found in verse 17.12. This indicates that our actions must be purposeful and intelligently aimed at attaining a good result, but not for our own selfish advantage only. We had already seen that such attitude is the hallmark of *sattva* or natural goodness (17.11, 17.17, 17.20), and now we see that it is the characteristic of the Brahman consciousness exemplified in genuine *brahmanas*. Therefore the religious activities (*yajna, tapa, kriya, dana*) performed according to the natural principles of *sattva* and focused on the remembrance and consciousness of the transcendental Brahman are the proper method to attain the four *purusha arthas*, including liberation (*moksha*).

This is confirmed by Sukadeva: *akama sarva kamo va moksa kama udara dhih, tivrena bhakti yogena yajeta purusam param*, "Whether one has no desires, or is full of desires, or desires only liberation, if s/he is really intelligent, s/he will worship Purushottama with genuine devotion" (*Bhagavata Purana*, 2.3.10). As *moksha* is the highest attainment in the material sphere, it includes all other perfections and forms of success rather than substituting them; it is important to understand this point because ignorant people confuse *tamas* with *sattva*, and mere material frustration (due to general personal failure) with *moksha*. This is a very dangerous idea, because it tends to create utterly unqualified, fake and degraded *sannyasis* and *sadhus*, that will easily jump on sense gratification at the first opportunity, thus showing their true colors, just like the blue jackal of the educational tale.

The word *tat* is related to *tattva*, a technical term that could be translated as "ontological reality", both at the absolute level and at the level of categorization. We have already seen that in many verses *Bhagavad gita* mentions the word "*tat*" as a reference to Transcendence; to better understand its meaning, we can review verses 2.17, 3.9, 4.34, 4.39, 5.5, 5.16, 5.17, 6.21, 7.29, 8.1, 8.11, 8.21, 10.39, 11.37, 11.45, 11.49, 13.13, 13.14, 13.16, 15.5, 15.6, 15.12, 17.23, 17.25, 17.27, 18.55, 18.62. This meaning is also confirmed in many other texts, as for example in *Chandogya Upanishad 6.8.7 (tat tvam asi)*. So when we say, "*om tat sat*", we are remembering the eternal transcendental nature of Brahman/ Atman as the actual reality and purpose of life and of Vedic teachings, beyond the temporary material benefits we can enjoy in this world as perks of our proper engagement in its administration.

Already in the beginning of *Bhagavad gita*, Krishna had stated:

vyavasayatmika buddhir ekeha kuru nandana, bahu sakha hy anantas ca buddhayo 'vyavasayinam, "O Arjuna, the understanding that is constantly focused on the *atman* is the only true one in this (world). Those who do not concentrate (on the soul) disperse their intelligence in innumerable minor ramifications" (2.41),

yam imam puspitam vacam pravadanty avipascitah, veda vada ratah partha nanyad astiti vadinah, "O Arjuna, those who do not have a full understanding preach about these things with many flowery words, and those who are attached to the letter of the *Vedas* are unable to recognize anything else" (2.42),

kamatmanah svarga para janma karma phala pradam, kriya visesa bahulam bhogaisvarya gatim prati, "They aspire to the pleasures of the higher planets and to the fruits of their actions to be reaped in a next lifetime, therefore they perform a great variety of complicated rituals to achieve the purpose of a high position and sense gratification" (2.43),

bhogaisvarya prasaktanam tayapahrta cetasam, vyavasayatmika buddhih samadhau na vidhiyate, "Because they are attached to pleasure and a high position (of power and opulence), and their minds are confused by such things, they remain unable to focus their understanding on the Self and to attain *samadhi*" (2.44),

traigunya visaya veda nistraigunyo bhavarjuna, nirdvandvo nitya sattva stho niryoga ksema atmavan, "The *Vedas* deal with the various manifestations of the three *gunas*. O Arjuna, you should rather become detached from these three *gunas*, and situate yourself in that pure goodness that is not subject to changes. One who knows the *atman* becomes free from all dualities and finds protection in detachment" (2.45).

सद्भावे साधुभावे च सदित्येतत्प्रयुज्यते । प्रशस्ते कर्मणि तथा सच्छब्दः पार्थ युज्यते ॥ १७-२६ ॥

sadbhāve sādhubhāve ca sadityetatprayujyate | praśaste karmaṇi tathā sacchabḍhaḥ pārtha yujyate || 17-26 ||

sat bhava: in spiritual consciousness; *sadhu bhava*: with the sentiment of a good person; *ca*: and; *sat*: *sat*; *iti*: thus; *etat*: this; *prayujyate*: is engaged; *prasaste*: in good faith; *karmani*: the activities; *tatha*: also; *sat sabdah*: the word *sat*; *partha*: o son of Pritha; *yujyate*: is engaged.

"O son of Pritha, one who engages sincerely in all duties with a transcendental consciousness and the sentiment of a good person, is indicated by *sat*.

We have already discussed the meanings of *sat* in previous chapters, because this small word contains a wealth of knowledge and is central to the realization of Transcendence. The *Upanishads* state: *sad eva saumya idam agra asit*, "o gentle one, in the beginning there was only *sat*" (*Chandogya Upanishad* 6.2.1).

The triad *sat, cit, ananda* is the illustration of the inherent qualities of Brahman, that is beyond the *gunas* or material qualities. As we mentioned in 2.16, *sat* means "existence, reality", and hence "essence, ontological being", "eternity, permanence" but also "spiritual, transcendental", "good, positive, virtuous", because whatever is good is supporting the existence of the universe for the progress of all the beings. As the highest form of good is the performance of one's duties, the word *sat* has also come to mean "determination, sincerity, positiveness". In its adjective form, *sat* means "actual, real, true, good, right, eternal, spiritual, transcendental". Its opposite *asat* therefore means "non-existent, illusory, false, wrong, impermanent, temporary, material".

From the root word "*sat*" we derive *satya* ("truth") and *sattva* ("goodness"), that are fundamental concepts in Vedic knowledge, as well as the word *sadhu* ("good person"). Grammatically speaking, *sadhu* is one who is on the level of *sat*, therefore the word is used to refer to all classes of spiritualists. In this direction, we can observe the use of expressions such as *sat guru* (the transcendental teacher, as compared to ordinary *gurus* or teachers) and of course *sat sisya* (the true and sincere student who is interested in *atma vidya*, or *sat vastu*, "spiritual things"), as well as *sad anusthana* (transcendental teachings or initiation in *atma vidya*) as compared with mere *anusthana* ("establishment, position" generally in society or professional class). Therefore the presence of *sat* indicates the proper transmission of knowledge according to the method explained by the scriptures (15.20, 16.24, 17.24) as opposed to the practices of those who do not follow the scriptures (16.23, 17.1, 17.5).

The utterance of *om tat sat* is a mandatory reminder during the traditional ceremonies of *diksha* and *upanayana*, in which the *guru* confers the sacred thread to the disciple as a token of his qualification in studying the *Vedas*. As in the expression "*om tat sat*", the word *sat* is directly connected to Brahman and Transcendence, the presence of the supreme consciousness is evoked eternally (*satatam*, 3.19, 6.10, 8.14, 9.14, 12.14, 17.24, 18.57, and *sada*, 5.28, 6.15, 6.28, 8.6, 10.17, 18.56). In other words, transcendental consciousness is not a part time job, a hobby, or a relaxation practice we use to become better able to deal with our busy lives. It is the meaning of life itself, and we are meant to remain constantly situated at that level (*samadhi*).

In this verse the expression *sat bhava* ("transcendental consciousness") can be explained as the consciousness or feeling/ emotion (*bhava*) of Reality as the eternal existence of God; this feeling or consciousness is ecstatic, full of bliss (*ananda*) and shows everything clearly in its true light (*cit*). On another level, *sat bhava* plays on the meaning of *bhava* as "creation, manifestation" as the blossoming of the eternal (*sat*) existence in our consciousness: Reality is eternal but we as *anu atmans* only become conscious of it gradually as we develop towards full self-realization. In this sense, we could translate the expression as "the sense of the nature of Reality, the feeling that something is coming into being or happening". Similarly the twin expression *sadhu bhava* fundamentally means "with the attitude of a good person", indicating that one should remain established at least on the level of *sattva* if not of *suddha sattva*.

This was one of the earliest instructions offered by Krishna: *traigunya visaya veda nistraigunyo bhavarjuna, nirdvandvo nitya sattva stho niryoga ksema atmavan*, "The objects described by traditional knowledge are made of the three *gunas*. O Arjuna, transcend the duality of these three *gunas* and remain always situated in *sattva*, protected by detachment" (2.45).

It was again confirmed at the conclusion of the chapter specifically discussing about the *gunas*: *sama duhkha sukhah sva sthah sama lostrasma kancanah, tulya priyapriyo dhiras tulya nindatma samstutih*, "The wise is firmly established in *suddha sattva* and equally tolerates his own joys and sorrows. S/he sees with equal consideration a lump of clay, a stone and a piece of gold, and gives the same value to pleasant and unpleasant things, remaining sober and balanced in front of insult as well as glorification directed to him/ her" (14.24).

Therefore a good translation of "*sadhu bhava*" could also be "improving one's good attitude and behavior", or "becoming purified", indicating a dynamic and constant engagement in *sattva* to keep ourselves detached from static identifications (transforming *sattva* into *tamas*) and away from *rajas* and *tamas* in themselves, that are always lurking and pulling at our material mind and body. This is also confirmed by the expressions *prayujyate*, as "is engaged, working, connected", *karmani*, "in all dutiful activities", and by *prasaste* ("in good faith, auspicious, genuine, authentic").

Another interesting observation in this regard is that the concomitant distinction of *sat bhava* and *sadhu bhava* reminds us that *atman* is part of *brahman*, and even in their complete union these two identities remain distinct (2.11) just like each molecule of water retains its atomic identity even after merging into the ocean. Therefore *sat* refers to the supreme Brahman, while *sadhu* refers to the embodied *atman* or *jivan mukta*.

The expression *sat sabda* found in the last part of this verse has at least two levels of meanings. The practical meaning is "the word *sat*", and in this case the accompanying expression *yujyate* means "is used, refers to", as in a dictionary meaning. However, if we take *sat sabda* as a synonym of *sabda brahman* (the spiritual sound constituted by the Vedic scriptures), the word *yujyate* can be taken to mean "is engaged, is connected", echoing the previous expression *prayujyate* ("is engaged") referring to the sincere and selfless engagement in one's duties. Interestingly enough, the two meanings reinforce each other, because here we are discussing about the performance of religious duties on a transcendental level as prescribed by the genuine *shastra*. A corollary of this "confluence meaning" will protect us from the delusion of neglecting to apply theory into practice - a major defect of habitually religious people.

Other commentators have explained the expression *prasaste* ("honestly, properly") as *satam prasangam* ("in the association of *sadhus*", or *sat sanga*), based on Kapila's instructions in *Bhagavata Purana*.

The verse reads: *satam prasangam mama virya samvido bhavanti hrt karna rasayanah kathah, taj josnad asv apavarga vartmani, sraddha ratir bhaktir anukramisyati*, "Through the contact of *sadhus* and the discussions with them, one develops a taste for hearing and remembering my wonderful activities. By cultivating this taste, one quickly finds the path of liberation, developing faith, attachment and pure devotion" (*Bhagavata Purana* 3.25.25).

Other commentators have translated *prasaste karmani* as "prescribed duties" and "bona fide duties". Both interpretations can be reconciled through the next verse, in which *sat* indicates the Supreme, whose Personality is not different from his teachings and the narration of his *lilas* (*sat sabda*) reported in the scriptures. And as we know, this supreme Personality of Bhagavan as *Yajna* is not different from the performance of sacrificial action (*yajna*), to which this verse refers (*prayujyate prasaste karmani*).

यज्ञे तपसि दाने च स्थितिः सदिति चोच्यते । कर्म चैव तदर्थीयं सदित्येवाभिधीयते ॥ १७-२७ ॥

yajñe tapasi dāne ca sthitiḥ saditi cocyate | karma caiva tadarthīyaṁ sadityevābhidhīyate || 17-27 ||

yajne: in sacrifices; *tapasi*: in austerity; *dane*: in charity; *ca*: and; *sthitiḥ*: the position; *sat*: *sat*; *iti*: thus; *ca*: and; *ucyate*: it is said; *karma*: action; *ca*: and; *eva*: certainly; *tad arthīyam*: for that purpose; *sat*: *sat*; *iti*: thus; *eva*: certainly; *abhidhīyate*: is indicated.

"It it also said that *sat* indicates the characteristic of the action, or the purpose for which it is performed.

Krishna clarifies further that by uttering "*sat*" one is explicitly declaring the purpose of the religious activity - ritual ceremony, austerity, charity etc - as eternal and spiritual in nature, because it is dedicated to *sat*, or Brahman (*om*). The expression *tad arthīyam sat* literally means "for the sake of *sat*". Another equivalent expression is *sat iti*, "this is *sat*".

The difference between *yajna*, *tapas*, *dana* performed for the sake of spiritual Reality and the same activities performed by *sattvic* people who do not have the benefit of Vedic scriptural knowledge is that material *sattva* still remains on the material level and therefore its results are limited, although they are still better than the results produced by the same religious activities greedily and ignorantly performed under *rajas* and *tamas*.

The word *sthiti* ("position") is sometimes interpreted as referred to the traditional rites of passage such as *samskaras* (purification rituals meant to give a good impression to the mind to start a new phase in life) and *pravesa* (purification ritual before starting to utilize a house or temple). This is because it marks our position in a phase of life, a social and professional category, and a place where we live and worship, so that our *sva dharma*, or *karmani* (duties) can be easily pinpointed. According to our particular position at each moment, our duties may vary even considerably in regard to the effectiveness of our actions in support to the totality of being. However, at a deeper level *sthiti* indicates here that we are always conscious of our position of bodily limbs and loving servants of the Supreme: all our activities can be spiritualized by this deliberate act of consciousness, so that our life in this world becomes life in *vaikuntha* (free from anxieties).

This had already been stated by Krishna: *bhoktaram yajna tapasam sarva loka mahesvaram, suhridam sarva bhutanam jnatva mam santim ricchati*, "One who knows me as the beneficiary of *yajna* and *tapah*, the great Lord of all the worlds and the dearest friend of all beings, attains peace" (5.29), and *aham hi sarva yajnanam bhokta ca prabhur eva ca, na tu mam abhijananti tattvenatas cyavanti te*, "I am the Lord and beneficiary of all *yajnas*. Those who do not understand my *tattva* will have to take birth again" (9.24).

Since *sat* has been established as the indication of the eternal transcendental reality as opposed to the temporary and illusory material manifestations, *sthiti* can best indicate the permanent and inherent position or nature of the *atman*, that will never change (2.20 to 2.24): this is what we call "self realization".

The mention of *yajna* at the beginning of the verse also indicates that all other religious activities are sacred acts or sacrifices, originated from the fundamental concept of *yajna*. In this sense, sacred action is personified by the Vishnu tattva himself: *adhibhutam ksaro bhavah purusas cadhidaivatam, adhiyajno 'ham evatra dehe deha bhritam vara*, "Adhibhuta is the existence that is subject to changes, and the Adhidaiva is the *purusha*, the controlling principle. O best among the embodied beings, I am the Adhiyajna, that resides in this body" (8.4).

And again: *yajnarthat karmano 'nyatra loko 'yam karma bandhanah, tad artham karma kaunteya mukta sangah samacara*, "Actions must be performed as offerings to *Yajna*, otherwise in this world they cause bondage. Therefore you should perform your activities for that,

remaining detached" (3.9). Here we find a direct connection with the expression *tat arthiyam* ("for him/ for that") as referred to *karma* (action, duty), to indicate the perfection of one's duties as an offering in devotional service to God. This worship of Yajna through *yajna* is considered the highest activity for those who are already liberated: *gata sangasya muktasya jnanavasthita cetasah, yajnayacaratah karma samagram praviliyate*, "One who has become free from all attachments and identifications, and whose consciousness is firmly established in knowledge, worships Yajna (Vishnu) through his actions. All his *karma* is thus destroyed" (4.23).

अश्रद्धया हुतं दत्तं तपस्तप्तं कृतं च यत् ।

असदित्युच्यते पार्थ न च तत्प्रेष्य नो इह ॥ १७-२८ ॥

asraddhaya hutam dattam tapastaptam krtam ca yat | asadityucyate partha na ca tatprepya no iha | | 17-28 | |

asraddhaya: without faith; *hutam*: offered in sacrifice; *dattam*: offered in charity; *tapah taptam*: performed as austerity; *kritam*: actions; *ca*: and; *yat*: which; *asat*: material/ temporary; *iti*: thus; *ucyate*: it is said; *partha*: o son of Pritha; *na*: not; *ca*: and; *tat*: that; *pretya*: after death; *na u*: and not even; *iha*: in this life.

"O son of Pritha, whatever action of ritual offering, charity or austerity is performed without faith and in a material consciousness, it does not bring good results after death or even in this life.

We have seen that religious activities (*yajna*, *tapah*, *dana* etc) performed in transcendental consciousness, according to the teachings of the genuine scriptures, bring the highest and permanent benefits, not only in regard to the material achievements in *dharmā*, *artha* and *karma*, but also towards *moksha* and beyond. On the other hand, the same religious activities performed without scriptural knowledge or transcendental realization, but inspired and sustained by *sattva* (natural goodness) bring good karmic results, happiness and progress towards purification and knowledge. Religious activities performed with faith (*sraddha*) but without scriptural guidance and under the influence of *rajas* bring temporary results that are limited to the specific selfish purpose that is sought, and that will ultimately bind the worshiper to material attachments and identifications. The same religious activities performed with faith but influenced by *tamas* may (or may not) bring material temporary benefits, but they always entail negative karmic consequences and entangle the worshiper in a delusional and asuric mentality by destroying intelligence and good sense.

Now Krishna shows an even starker contrast between the highest level (*om tat sat*) and the lowest possible level indicated in this verse. Religious activities performed without faith are even less beneficial than the same religious practices influenced by greed and ignorance but supported by a measure of sincere faith. Here the borders tend to overlap (*sraddha virahitam*, 17.13) because we have seen in previous verses that religious activities motivated by greed and ignorance may be performed without faith, for example when a person is forced to such action by others even against his/ her will or beliefs. Abrahamic ideologies present the perfect example of such situation, as they do not recognize the freedom of choice of individuals in the field of religious activities, as they have amply demonstrated in the course of their history, especially in times and places where they have acquired sufficient political and financial power to control society.

The expression *na ca tat pretya no iha* is a clear statement that covers all the three worlds - this dimension of gross manifestations (*iha*, "here", that refers to the body), the dimension of subtle manifestation (*pretya*, the world of the departed) and the transcendental dimension (*tat*, indicated by *om tat sat*). So at the end of this chapter we have Krishna's conclusion: an embodied soul can choose where to take shelter, either in the divine (9.13) or in the asuric nature (7.15), and thus become a *nitya siddha* or a *nitya baddha* (15.16, 15.18).

Whatever condition of being is found between these two - the realm of the material *gunas* - is only going to push us in one of these two directions. There really is no middle ground to hold, if not temporarily and with much effort and suffering (8.15, 8.16, 9.21). If we do not want to become forever trapped on a degraded demoniac level of life (16.19, 16.20), the only real solution is *moksha*, liberation from material identifications and attachments, that will be the focus of the next and last chapter of *Bhagavad gita*.

Here is a summary reminder of the dynamics: the qualities that are characteristic of the divine nature lead to liberation, while the qualities of the asuric nature cause bondage (16.5). The asuric qualities are a mixture of *rajas* and *tamas* (3.37, 3.43, 16.10, 16.12, 16.16, 16.18, 16.21), such as greed, ignorance, egotism, hypocrisy, impudence, conceit, rage, rudeness, false prestige and arrogance do to one's position and wealth (16.4, 16.17). Those who have taken shelter in the asuric nature (7.15, 9.12) are unable to evolve and lose all intelligence, sense of reality and truth, and proper understanding (7.5, 16.7, 16.20), so they engage in disastrous choices and activities that damage themselves as well as others and the world in general (17.6, 9.12). There is a way out of this mess: we can honestly approach the knowledge of the *shastra* (16.23) that will gradually lead us in the proper direction through the correct performance of our duties (16.24) that purifies us from material attachments, and especially from the toxic tamasic mixture of lust, greed and anger (*kama krodha lobha*, 16.21). Any embodied soul who becomes capable - in this very body - of withstanding the onslaughts of angry lust can find liberation and true happiness (5.23, 5.26, 16.22). Such a person remains neutrally situated in *suddha sattva*, and tolerates the various conditions of embodied life created by the *gunas* without being attached to positive things and without hating negative things; he continues to work dutifully and selflessly and is impartial towards friends and enemies (14.22, 14.23, 14.24, 14.25). His only interest is on the transcendental level of *brahman*, where action is pure devotional service to the Supreme (14.26). And this is the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter 18
Moksha yoga
The yoga of liberation

The wonderful journey of knowledge in the company of Krishna and Arjuna has led us from the awareness of disappointment and confusion of *Visada yoga* to the first step in transcendental realization - the concept of *atman*, the spiritual Self that incarnates in this world by wearing material bodies in order to evolve towards perfection or realization, culminating in the fully fledged spiritual form or *siddha deha*.

While the second chapter (*Sankhya yoga*) showed us how to distinguish between spirit and matter (the subject and the object of the action), the third chapter has taught us what to do with them both: this is the *Karma yoga* (the action or verb or predicate that sustains the statement according to syntax). In the 4th chapter we have come to the discussion about the purpose of life, that is the acquisition of knowledge (*jnana*), the direction in which we should channel our actions and efforts to elevate ourselves from the level in which we merely do our work because we are supposed to do it.

Through the instrumental factors of knowledge and detachment (*vairagya*, *tyaga* or *sannyasa*, chapter 5) we have become able to focus our mind into the proper state of consciousness or spiritual realization (*dhyana*, chapter 6) and to apply this vision to our practical daily life (*vijnana*, chapter 7), relationships and choices.

In chapter 8 (*Taraka yoga*) we have seen that spiritual realization is at the same time the instrument, the purpose and the essence of liberation, by which we become able to constantly contemplate the Supreme Brahman in ourselves: this is the sum and substance of all the teachings and practices of Yoga. This is the great secret (*raja guhya*, chapter 9): how to see God in oneself and in all beings, and yet as the unchanged source and foundation of all existence. By constant meditation on God, one attains the highest perfection. We have thus seen that the concepts of renunciation (*sannyasa*) and liberation (*taraka*) are connected by the concentration and application of proper consciousness in all our actions (*dhyana*, *vijnana*). But what should we meditate (*dhyana*) on?

In chapters 10 (*Vibhuti yoga*) and 11 (*Visva rupa darshana yoga*) Krishna clearly explained how one should meditate on the universal powers and form of God (the *Virata rupa* or *Visva rupa*) and in chapter 12 we learned that such meditation is not just theoretical, but it must develop into a sincere service in love and devotion (*bhakti*), that consists in performing all dutiful actions in transcendental consciousness. In the course of this loving service, the most important thing is to clearly understand our duty - in which position we are and how we should relate with everything. For this, we must realize how the personal principle (the self, or the *purusha*) relates to nature (spiritual and material, the *prakriti*) and how they are actually one and the same although they appear to be distinct. Chapter 13 has been a real eye opener in this regard.

Similarly, chapter 18 will declare that all duties (*sarva dharman*, 18.66) are actually one and the same - and that is the intimate union with the Supreme (18.65). This is the supreme secret (*paramam guhyam*, 18.67) and the conclusion of *Bhagavad gita*.

The discussion about the *gunas* or modes of material nature was therefore interrupted by chapter 15 to remind us about the ultimate purpose of all the other instructions of *Bhagavad gita*: the realization of the Supreme Personality of Godhead, Purushottama.

After discussing the characteristics and the effects of the material qualities or *gunas* (that we need to navigate in this world to perform our duties) we are now going to study the last chapter of *Bhagavad gita*, that summarizes its general contents and purpose - much like the second chapter had done - and offers a conclusion that is the next stepping stone for further progress into the science of Transcendence. *Moksha*, liberation from material conditioning, is not the final destination in our journey, but rather it marks the beginning of real life, of truly meaningful action, and of the full realization of the spiritual dimension introduced in the beginning of the dialog by Krishna's teachings on the *atman*. This is confirmed in verse 18.54.

For those who want to continue their evolution in Transcendence, we recommend that after *Bhagavad gita* they should study the 108 *Upanishads* and the 18 *Puranas*. As *Bhagavad gita* is part of the text of the *Mahabharata*, a sincere student will make an effort to read this voluminous work, too, and its counterpart the *Ramayana* written by Valmiki Rishi. At that point one will be ready to study the famous *Vedanta sutra*, that is considered the purpose, sum and substance of all the Vedic hymns of the *Samhitas*.

In this work we are offering an Appendix including a short summary of the *Mahabharata* and the famous *Gita mahatmya* ("the glories of *Bhagavad gita*") written by Adi Shankara Acharya.

अर्जुन उवाच ।

arjuna uvāca ।

संन्यासस्य महाबाहो तत्त्वमिच्छामि वेदितुम् । त्यागस्य च हृषीकेश पृथक्केशिनिषूदन ॥ १८-१ ॥

sannyāsasya mahābāho tattvamicchāmi veditum | tyāgasya ca hr̥ṣīkeśa pṛthakkeśiniṣūdana || 18-1 ||

arjunah uvaca: Arjuna said; *sannyasasya:* of *sannyasa*; *maha baho:* o powerfully armed one; *tattvam:* the truth; *icchami:* I desire; *veditum:* to know; *tyagasya:* of *tyaga*; *ca:* and; *hrisikesa:* o Hrishikesha; *prithak:* difference; *kesi nisudana:* o slayer of Kesi.

Arjuna said: "O powerful Krishna, o Lord of the senses, o slayer of Kesi, I wish to know the truth of the difference between *tyaga* and *sannyasa*."

The chapter on the *yoga* of liberation begins with the crucial subject of renunciation: *moksha* is simply freedom from material conditionings, and it can be attained only by renouncing to the material identifications and attachments (*ahankara* and *mamatva*) of which Krishna has been talking all along the *Bhagavad gita*. These are symbolically personified by the *asura* Kesi, who was killed by Krishna in his Vrindavana lila.

We have seen that chapter 5 was dedicated to the science of renunciation (*sannyasa yoga*) and specifically in verses 5.1 to 5.6 and 5.13, and therefore in the introduction to that chapter we have given a brief summary of the history of the order of *sannyasa* in Hindu tradition or *varna ashrama dharma*. Since that subject is also connected to the contents of chapter 18, we invite our readers to refresh the topic by consulting chapter 5. The subject of *sannyasa* was discussed also in 3.4, 3.30, 4.41, 6.1, 6.2, 6.4, 8.11, 9.28, 12.6, while *tyaga* was discussed in verses 12.11, 12.12, and 16.2. The concept of renunciation is thus presented on two levels, respectively external and internal, or we could say regulated and spontaneous.

Krishna has clearly stated that mere external *sannyasa* is not sufficient (3.4, 5.2), but one should attain a deeper consciousness of renunciation even without the need for the external requirements of the *sannyasa ashrama* (5.3, 5.4, 6.1, 6.2). It has been made abundantly clear that mere regulations are not only insufficient in themselves but also extremely difficult and painful to follow especially in Kali yuga (5.6), just like it is difficult and painful (and insufficient as well) to simply meditate on the impersonal and non-manifested (12.5). Therefore active service to the Supreme and to all beings (*sarva bhuta hite*) is indispensable (12.13-14, 12.6).

As we will see in the next verse, *sannyasa* refers to physically abandoning those actions that are not considered directly useful to the transcendental service, while *tyaga* refers to a state of consciousness by which one performs any activity in a completely selfless spirit. This level is also known as *avadhuta*, and it is higher and more difficult to attain than the conventional position of *sannyasis*, because an *avadhuta* is not bound by any rule or regulation, while *sannyasis* are expected to strictly follow the scriptural injunctions for their specific order of life. For example, a *sannyasi* cannot have a residence, a bank account, a regular source of income, or more possessions than the traditional things he can carry by hand - more specifically, a walking stick (*danda*) and a small container for water (*kamandalu*). The *digambari* ("clothed by the directions of space") *sannyasis* do not wear any clothes, but if a *sannyasi* wants to wear something, it should be a simple loincloth made from old and worn out cloth discarded by others, and he should eat simple food by begging from door to door, without depending on anyone and without keeping anything aside for the next day. He cannot stay in one place for more than 3 days, and he should travel alone and on foot, without using palanquins or other vehicles, riding animals etc. Even if insulted or attacked, he cannot defend himself but he should always behave as a friend of all beings, and remain firmly situated in the transcendental consciousness without any material identification, affiliation or attachment, simply preparing himself to die at any moment. He cannot become a professional teacher, engage in debates, or take shelter of any cause, faction or sect. Special exceptions to these rules can be made in case of emergency or extraordinary circumstances, but still the principle of renunciation must be understood properly and applied honestly.

To better explore the topic, one should also read the *Upanishads* specifically dedicated to *sannyasa* or renunciation, listed hereafter: *Nirvana Upanishad*, *Maitreya Upanishad* (or *Maitrayaniya Upanishad*), *Sannyasa Upanishad*, *Kundika Upanishad* and *Aruneya Upanishad* in *Sama Veda*; *Yajnavalkya Upanishad*, *Satyayani Upanishad*, *Jabala Upanishad*, *Paramahansa Upanishad*, *Bhikshaka* (or *Bhikshuka*) *Upanishad* and *Turiyatita Upanishad* in *Sukla Yajur Veda*; *Teji bindu Upanishad*, *Avadhuta Upanishad*, *Katha rudra Upanishad*, *Varaha Upanishad* and *Brahma Upanishad* in *Krishna Yajur Veda*; *Parivraha (Narada parivrajaka) Upanishad*, *Paramahansa parivrajaka Upanishad* and *Para brahman Upanishad* in *Atharva Veda*. Also verses 2 and 3 of *Kaivalya Upanishad*, and verses 3.2.5 to 3.2.9 of *Mundaka Upanishad* speak about *sannyasa*. Since it is impossible to quote all the relevant passages from these very important texts, we invite our readers to peruse our complete translation of the 108 major *Upanishads*, published by our Jagannatha Vallabha Vedic Research Center.

श्रीभगवानुवाच ।

śrībhagavānuvāca ।

काम्यानां कर्मणां न्यासं संन्यासं कवयो विदुः । सर्वकर्मफलत्यागं प्राहुस्त्यागं विचक्षणाः ॥ १८-२ ॥

kāmyānām karmaṇām nyāsam sannyaśam kavayo viduḥ । sarvakarmaphalatyāgam prāhustyaḡam vicakṣaṇāḥ ॥ 18-2 ॥

sri bhagavan uvaca: the wonderful Lord said; *kamyānam karmanam*: the activities performed to fulfill some desire; *nyasam*: renunciation; *sannyasam*: *sannyasa*; *kavayah*: learned scholars; *viduh*: know; *sarva karma phala tyagam*: renunciation to the fruits of all actions; *prahuh*: they call; *tyagam*: *tyaga*; *vicaksanah*: expert people.

The wonderful Lord said,

"Learned scholars know that *sannyasa* is non-engagement in activities aimed at fulfilling some personal desire, while expert people say that *tyaga* consists in being detached from the results created by all sorts of actions.

In other words, one should renounce the selfish attachment to the benefits that derive from one's actions, not renounce the actions themselves: *karmany evadhikarā te ma phalesu kadacana, ma karma phala hetur bhur ma te sango 'stv akarmani*, "You certainly have the right to perform actions but not to enjoy the fruits of your actions. Do not try to become the cause of the fruits of the action, but do not become attached to inaction" (2.47).

Krishna establishes here a distinction of consciousness by utilizing two different definitions: *kavayah* and *vicaksanah*, respectively "scholars" and "realized persons" (or "expert persons" as in someone who has directly experienced). The singular form of these nouns are *kavi* and *vicaksi*; the word *kavi* also means "poet" or "literate", while the word *vicaksi* is a compound of *vica* ("comprehensively") and *aksi* ("who sees"). We therefore understand that the definition of *sannyasa* is used more theoretically or technically as a scientific instrument for social and religious categorization, while the definition of *tyaga* applies specifically to one's personal spiritual development, as practiced daily in all activities. *Sannyasa* is therefore merely an external support for *tyaga*, and it cannot be considered either sufficient or

indispensable to attain success. We find confirmation of this concept in the description of the *varna-ashrama dharma* system in *Bhagavata Purana* (11.18.28): *jnana nistho virakto va, mad bhakto vanapeksakah, sa lingan asramams tyaktva cared avidhi gocarah*, "One who is firmly established in knowledge and perfect detachment, who is completely devoted to the Supreme and has no other desire or aspiration can rise above the rules and regulations and distinctive apparel of the *ashramas*".

The word *caret* in this verse actually contains a clear encouragement to follow this path, and could also be translated as "should rise". Why? Because the strict observance of the rules and regulations of social classes is very useful in the early stages of one's spiritual development, but as one progresses into liberation, it becomes cumbersome and even obstructs one's real work. Rules are just like crutches, that are essential for invalids but become an unnecessary burden for healthy people who are traveling and working. Therefore Krishna will clearly say in 18.65 that one should leave behind all the different *sva dharmas* or rules and regulations of the social and religious system and simply focus on *yoga*, and the transcendental union with the Supreme. Actual renunciation or *sannyasa* consists in giving up the desire for selfish activities, or *kamya* and *naimittika karma*. Later on (18.5-6) Krishna will clearly say that the *nitya karmani* (*yajna, dana, tapas*) should never be abandoned; in fact, one should simply renounce the fruits of all activities, as this is defined as renunciation (*tyaga*, 18.6). This is also confirmed in Valmiki Rishi's *Yoga Vasistha: na karmani tyajeta yogi karmabhist yajate hy asav iti*, "a *yogi* should not give up prescribed duty, as the duty itself will renounce the *yogi* (drop away from him) when he has reached the proper level".

In this regard we may quote a famous verse that is attributed to Krishna Chaitanya: *naham vipro na ca nara-patir napi vaisyo na sudro, naham varni na ca griha-patir no vanastho yatir va, kintu prodyam paramananda purnamrtabdher, gopi bhartuh pada kamalayor dasa dasa anudasa*, "I am not a *brahmana*, a *kshatriya*, a *vaisya* or a *sudra*, I am not a *brahmachari*, a *grihastha*, a *vanaprastha* or a *sannyasi*. I am simply the servant of the servant of the lotus feet of the husband of the *gopis*, the ocean of supreme ecstatic happiness".

On the material platform, the natural pursuit of happiness and pleasure takes different forms. The greatest pleasure in the material world is sex, but when this energy is not properly channeled, it can turn into the lust for name, fame, power, adoration, prestige, profit and position, that are not more meritorious or spiritual, but simply subtler and more hidden (and therefore more dangerous). Since this is due to the action of the laws of nature, like gravity, no one can escape from this danger. Even religious institutions and spiritualists in high positions are subject to this great danger. Politics has often been compared to sex and has the same devices and purposes; indeed, politics is especially dangerous for those who have accepted the renounced order of sex of life. How many times we have seen godbrothers turn into godfathers? The problem is that, since we are eternally loving servants of God, when we do not love we inevitably fall into lust. And thus we are trapped in the last snare of illusion: false liberation in the form of artificial *sannyasa*.

In such position, the tendency to act in search of pleasure can easily bring a conditioned soul to various hidden or secret perversions, and then cover everything up with a tight lid in the name of public image, decency, social order and respect for religion and tradition. Often this leads to pursue enjoyment and pleasure in a very negative way, through degraded sadistic and masochistic practices that are disgusting for any normal people. These forms of sense gratification are not meritorious or sinless as some people believe, and in fact they are much more dangerous than ordinary healthy sense gratification: such a course of action will not lead to evolution, it will bring total disaster.

We find the word *vicaksanah* also at the conclusion of Krishna's instructions to Uddhava (*Bhagavata Purana* 11.25.33): *tasmad deham imam labdhva, jnana vijñana sambhavam, guna sangam vinirdhuya, mam bhajantu vicaksanah*, "Therefore as they have obtained a suitable material body that enables knowledge and wisdom, experienced and intelligent people wash themselves clean of all the material *gunas* and should engage in my service".

The original purpose of *sannyasa* is expressed by its literal meaning as a compound of *sat nyasa*, "consecrating one's body to *Sat* (Transcendence)". In Vedic tradition and especially in the teachings of the *Tantras* we find that the worshiper of the Deity performs the *kriya* ("duty") called *nyasa*, that consists in placing *mantras* (*bija mantras* and *nama mantras*) on the various parts of his/ her body to purify and spiritualize it, thus making it suitable to come in contact with the Deity. *Kara nyasa* is the application to the hands (fingers tips and finger joints), while *anga nyasa* is the application to the main limbs and even the organs of the body. *Utpatti* and *samhara nyasa* consist in the complete cycle of sanctification or dedication of one's body. An example offered in *Bhagavata Purana* is in reference to the Narayana kavaca (6.8.4-11).

All these rituals and practices are superseded when the power of the transcendental consciousness has destroyed all material identifications and attachments, and thus it has completely spiritualized the body. However, one should be extremely careful not to fall in the trap of false ego disguised as the "great *avadhuta*" or "great devotee" who believes he can do anything he pleases - including grossly adharmic actions - because he is "transcendentally above the rules", sometimes even while exhibiting the garb of *sannyasi*. Any adharmic action (*papa*) is in itself the evidence that the person is not at all on the transcendental level (7.28).

त्याज्यं दोषवदित्येके कर्म प्राहुर्मनीषिणः । यज्ञदानतपःकर्म न त्याज्यमिति चापरे ॥ १८-३ ॥

tyājyam doṣavadityeke karma prāhurmanīṣiṇaḥ | yajñādānatapaḥkarma na tyājyamiti cāpare || 18-3 ||

tyajyam: *tyaga*; *dosa vat*: defective; *iti*: thus; *eke*: some people; *karma*: activity; *prahuh*: they say; *manisinah*: great thinkers; *yajna dana tapah karma*: the (dutiful) activities of sacrifice, charity and austerity; *na*: not/ never; *tyajyam*: to be given up; *iti*: thus; *ca*: and; *apare*: others.

"Some philosophers say that all activities are fraught with defects and must therefore be abandoned. Others say that *yajna, dana, tapas* should never be abandoned.

In our introduction to chapter 3 (*Karma yoga*) we have discussed about the old controversy between the supporters of the *Purva mimamsa* and those of the *Uttara mimamsa*, also known as respectively *karma kanda* and *jnana kanda* or *advaita*. Krishna has referred to the *karma kanda* category as *veda vada ratas* (2.42, 2.43, 2.44, 2.45) or those who are attached to the letter of the *Vedas* and are unable to see beyond the cycle of *samsara* and thus attain liberation. Colonial academics believed that the *Purva mimamsa* refers to more ancient times when the entire Vedic society was focused entirely on the ritualistic path, worshiping the Devas for the purpose of elevation to the higher planets, and that only in relatively recent times Vedic philosophy developed the subtler metaphysical understanding expressed in the *Upanishads*,

and finally the personalistic (almost "monotheistic") worship of Purushottama as we find in the *Puranas* and *Bhagavad gita* (contained in *Mahabharata*), that usually they relate to the abrahamic concept of God.

Mainstream academicians even assigned a temporal frame to each of these "periods" calculated on the conventionally taught "linear progress" of mankind, in which civilization proper started only about 5000 years ago in the Middle East with the first Sumerian cities. This old paradigm is based on the infamous Aryan invasion theory, according to which Sanskrit, together with Vedic knowledge and Vedic civilization, was introduced in India only around 2000 BCE by the marauding Caucasian nomads that invaded the Indian subcontinent and enslaved the primitive but pacific Dravidians. This is generally labeled as the "Rig Vedic period", in which *brahmanas* were a sort of black wizards performing weird animal sacrifices to please blood-thirsty and primitive gods of war such as Indra and Rudra.

A sincere student of Vedic knowledge will not be confused by this colonial garbage, declaredly engineered for the purpose of demolishing the authority of the original Vedic tradition. The fact is that the entire Vedic knowledge is a consistent and articulated system, that exists simultaneously and eternally in its entirety but offers different degrees of approach to each individual in accord to their specific and particular level of evolution. Thus, the word *purva* ("before", "initial") does not apply to some earlier historical period of the Indian subcontinent, but to the earliest stages of development of each individual, that must be supported and nurtured by society through the proper *varna-ashrama* system, with the promise of material benefits (in this life and in the next) that can best attract unevolved souls. In this connection, the word *uttara* ("higher") that juxtaposes *Uttara mimamsa* to *Purva mimamsa* must be understood as the "higher course of studies" that develops into *yoga* or *advaita* as clearly explained by Krishna in *Bhagavad gita*. This is also confirmed by the very name of the category of *Puranas* ("ancient"), that colonial indologists risibly consider "the most recent Vedic literature". If they are called "ancient", how can they be the most recent? It does not make any sense.

Krishna offers the perfect synthesis between the two perspectives in the form of Karma yoga or *tyaga*, that is the dutiful performance of prescribed duties as required by time, place and circumstance, for the higher purpose of serving the Supreme, without any selfish attachment or identification. This position has been explained under all possible perspectives all along the *Bhagavad gita* and will be again summarized in this last chapter. When a *mimamsaka* becomes purified after so many lifetimes of sattvic activities, he starts to see that even pious actions involve some measure of defects, or greed and violence (3.38). This will be clearly stated in verse 18.48 with the example of fire and smoke; obviously this is even more applicable to the situation of the unfortunate people living in Kali yuga.

निश्चयं शृणु मे तत्र त्यागे भरतसत्तम । त्यागो हि पुरुषव्याघ्र त्रिविधः सम्प्रकीर्तितः ॥ १८-४ ॥

nīścayaṁ śṛṇu me tatra tyāge bharatasattama । tyāgo hi puruṣavyāghra trividhaḥ samprakīrtitaḥ ॥ 18-4 ॥

niscayam: certainly; *srnu*: listen; *me*: to me; *tatra*: there; *tyage*: in the matter of renunciation; *bharata sat tama*: o best among the descendants of Bharata; *tyagah*: *tyaga*; *hi*: indeed; *purusa vyaghra*: o tiger among men; *tri vidhah*: three types of; *samprakirtitah*: it is declared officially.

"Listen to me, o best among the descendants of Bharata, o tiger among men. Indeed it is declared that there are three types of renunciation.

The three types of renunciation that Krishna will describe in the next verses are determined by the influences of the *gunas* explained in previous chapters (14, 16, 17); renunciation in *sattva* or goodness (or even in *suddha sattva*) is always beneficial, while renunciation in *rajas* or greed has temporary and limited results, and renunciation in *tamas* or ignorance actually brings bad results.

Ideally, *sadhus* in the renounced order of life should be real saints (situated in *suddha sattva*), persons who have attained the platform of *brahma bhuta*, and whose association is the most valuable, blessed and pure treasure any human being can find in this world. Such persons do not see other people sexually, as males or females, but simply as spirit souls, parts and parcels of the Supreme, spiritual servants of Purushottama. These great souls are perfectly satisfied in themselves and do not need, expect or ask anything for themselves: they are not interested in sense gratification. They practice self discipline naturally and easily and are engaged 24 hours a day in selfless service to the Supreme and all beings.

A second group of celibate religionists is slightly less advanced but nonetheless very respectable: it is composed by sincere spiritual practitioners situated in *sattva* or material goodness, who are diligently trying to engage in self discipline for restraining their senses and do their best to serve the Supreme. This is a good position for a *brahmachari*, but not so safe for a *sannyasi*, because while a *brahmachari* can eventually take to family life if needed, a *sannyasi* is not supposed to renounce renunciation and become a *vantasi* ("one who eats his own vomit").

The third group is typically composed by men who have been frustrated in material life - they tried but did not succeed - or think that, in order to be spiritualists (and obtain the spiritual benefits or success) they must give up all pleasures and happiness. They consciously or unconsciously follow the philosophy of the sour grapes. But will they be able to engage positively in some good spiritual work, or will they simply become a nuisance for themselves and for others? If they rise to *sattva* and *suddha sattva*, they will be able to make progress, but if they become established in *rajas* (selfishness and greed) and *tamas* (ignorance), they will become dry, cruel, insensitive, rough, proud and vainglorious, thus spoiling their own chances for spiritual progress and giving a very bad and misleading example to others. If they think they have reached some elevated platform simply because of the external trappings (color or shape of dress, etc) they will not realize their foolishness until Mother Maya arranges for their noisy downfall. Usually these people are attracted by the idea of getting power over others (i.e. telling them what to do with their private lives), as well as attaining a worshipable position in society, special opportunities for name, fame and profit and other similar material benefits.

The fourth (utterly tamasic) group is not actually worth of the name of renunciates at all, as it is composed by frauds and hypocrites, who deliberately and cynically take advantage of their artificial dress to shamelessly exploit innocent and ignorant people for their own personal sense gratification and profit. These people think of themselves as very clever and choose the life of a religionist simply because it ensures easy food, quiet sleep, very little or no work, sufficient respect from the society and sometimes very good opportunities for sense

gratification. When these people do not obtain money, facilities or adoration (which they think is due to them simply because of their dress), they get angry and revengeful.

यज्ञदानतपःकर्म न त्याज्यं कार्यमेव तत् । यज्ञो दानं तपश्चैव पावनानि मनीषिणाम् ॥ १८-५ ॥

yajñadānatapaḥkarma na tyājyaṁ kāryameva tat | yajño dānaṁ tapaścaiva pāvanāni manīṣiṇām | | 18-5 | |

yajna dana tapah karma: the activities of sacrifice, charity and austerity; *na*: never; *tyajyam*: to be given up; *karyam*: duty; *eva*: certainly; *tat*: that; *yajnah*: sacrifice; *danam*: charity; *tapah*: austerity; *ca*: and; *eva*: certainly; *pavanani*: purifying; *manisinam*: even for great sages.

"The dutiful activities of sacrifice, charity and austerity should never be given up, because sacrifice, charity and austerity certainly purify even great philosophers.

The sacred actions that are prescribed in the scriptures and performed for the real benefit of the people (*yajna*, or sacrifice), the distribution of necessities for life to deserving people (*dana*), and the hard work in the service of the Supreme (*tapas*) should never be given up.

Some deluded men take up the position of *sannyasa* in order to live as a parasite of the society without actually working, with the idea that they will automatically get respect, service and special material facilities from the general mass of people, obtain a free ticket out of family responsibilities or acquire power in a religious institution: such renunciation never brings the real fruits of *sannyasa*. On the contrary, it only brings sufferings to everyone and will certainly end in a disastrous downfall in the future.

According to the original genuine *varna* and *ashrama* system, the duties of *yajna*, *dana* and *tapas* may take different shapes that best serve the purpose of one's activities. *Brahmanas* are expected to perform all the required duties in each subsequent *ashrama* (as *brahmachari*, *grihastha*, *vanaprastha* and *sannyasi*), while *kshatriyas* are only expected to perform the duties of the *ashramas* up to the *vanaprastha* stage. *Vaisyas* are expected to remain in the *grihastha ashrama* to advise and support their descendants, while there are no expectations of renunciation for *sudras*. This does not mean that these lower *varnas* are forbidden to enter further *ashramas*, because they certainly can make such choice if they so desire, if they are qualified and strong enough, and if they have properly understood the rules and regulations they will have to follow.

In the *brahmachari ashrama*, the performance of *yajna* is a learning practice and is done in turn and together with other students under the careful watch of the *guru*. Its *dana* only consists in offering one's service and daily begging collections to the *guru*, and *tapas* only consists in following the *guru's* instructions. In the *grihastha ashrama*, *yajna* must be performed regularly every day in accordance to one's possibilities, and must include the selfless performance of one's social and professional duties in the service of society.

More specifically, it is meant to repay one's debts (*rina*) with the *pancha maha yajnas* to serve God, the Devas, the Rishis, one's ancestors, guests (including meritorious human beings) and useful animals. *Dana* consists in feeding and clothing and in general taking care of the other 3 *ashramas*, while *tapas* consists in disciplining one's sense gratification to remain in *sattva* and within the limits of *dharma* (*satya*, *daya*, *sauca*). In regard to ritual ceremonies, one is only required to perform sattvic procedures, as there is never any compulsory prescription for animal sacrifices or other procedures influenced by *rajas* or *tamas*.

In the *vanaprastha* and *sannyasa ashramas*, the practice of *yajna* becomes increasingly focused on inner meditation, as elaborated in the *Aranyakas* and *Upanishads*; in this regard we may comment that *aranya* and *vana* are exact synonyms for "forest", indicating that after exhausting the need for the ritualistic worship of *naimittika* and *kamya karmani*, a sober person moves from the swamp of material entanglement (2.52) to the transcendental forest of freedom. This was indicated by the passage from verse 3.9 to verse 3.17 and from verse 3.18 to 3.20. The stage of *sannyasa* totally focuses on inner spiritual activities as *yajna*, *dana* and *tapas*, totally abandoning all material concerns. However, *sannyasis* too are supposed to work hard in the service of society, engaging in the assistance of those who are in need with all the resources they can utilize.

There is no contradiction between the *Purva mimamsa* and the *Uttara mimamsa*, as both are stages of the journey of transcendental realization, and both will be overcome and integrated when we move to Yoga. Krishna has already declared: *tapasvibhyo 'dhiko yogi jnanibhyo 'pi mato 'dhikah, karmibhyas cadhiko yogi tasmad yogi bhavarjuna*, "The *yogi* is superior to the ascetic and is considered also greater than the scholar, and greater than those who perform ritualistic activities. Therefore, o Arjuna, you should be a *yogi*" (6.46). The ascetic is the *sannyasi*, the scholar is the *vanaprastha* and he who performs the ritualistic activities is the *grihastha*; similarly the perfection for a *brahmanas* is asceticism, detachment from material wealth and position, and abstaining from sense gratification, while perfection for the *kshatriya* is the material and spiritual knowledge he needs to rule well, and perfection for a *vaisya* is the performance of the ritualistic ceremonies by which he regularly purifies and distributes the wealth he has amassed. A *brahmachari* is not qualified yet as *adhikari* and the *sudra* is only required to sincerely serve others.

एतान्यपि तु कर्माणि सङ्गं त्यक्त्वा फलानि च । कर्तव्यानीति मे पार्थ निश्चितं मतमुत्तमम् ॥ १८-६ ॥

etānyapi tu karmāṇi saṅgaṁ tyaktvā phalāni ca | kartavyānīti me pārtha niścitam matamuttamam | | 18-6 | |

etani: all these; *api*: certainly; *tu*: but; *karmani*: activities; *sangam*: association; *tyaktva*: abandoning; *phalani ca*: and the results; *kartavyani*: should be performed as duty; *iti*: thus; *me*: my; *partha*: o son of Pritha; *niscitam*: without a doubt; *matam*: opinion; *uttamam*: the best.

"O son of Pritha, I tell you without any doubt that the best course is to perform all sacred activities as duties, abandoning the identification and the fruits of such actions.

To properly understand this verse, we need to focus on three words: *sangam*, *phalani*, *kartavyani*.

All along *Bhagavad gita*, Krishna has said numerous times that *sanga* ("association", "contact", "belonging", "affiliation") must be free from the material delusions of identification and attachment. In this regard, we should consult verses 2.46, 2.47, 2.48, 3.9, 4.20, 4.23, 5.10,

5.11, 11.55, 12.18, 15.3, 15.5, and also (in the negative perspective) 2.62, 3.26, 13.22, 14.6-8, 15.4. So the concept of contact or association boils down to the identification as the *karta* ("the doer"), as expressed in verse 3.27. In that context we can see that the idea of remaining free from the contact or identification with the action automatically applies to the results or benefits of one's dutiful activities, and this means that one should perform dutiful actions selflessly, without being attached to the gross and subtle benefits that derive from it.

This is a totally revolutionary concept for those who come from a pragmatist (i.e. selfish) society, where profit and personal advantage (individual or collective) is the norm, and the idea of someone working without any expectation of personal benefit or credit is considered stupid or risible, and even natural creatures and eternal knowledge are subject to legal appropriation, patent registration and payment of royalties. Yet, this selfless performance of one's duties is the only method by which human society can thrive and prosper and guarantee the progress and evolution of all its members. Any honest and intelligent sociologist can create study projections based on such scenario, and invariably it will be found perfect and successful. In Vedic society nobody gets paid - salary or fees or commission or compensation - for any specific work; everybody works for free and only gets the proper necessities of life because that is fair and natural, and obtains wealth (*artha*) as general recognition for their personal value.

Vaisyas directly produce food (*annam bahu kurvita, tad vratam, Taittiriya Upanishad*, Brighu valli, 3.9.1) and consume the amount they require for themselves and for their subordinates (*sudras*, etc), not only in its direct form but also in the form of other necessities that can be obtained by bartering from other producers and entrepreneurs and craftsmen, such as clothes, pots and vessels, tools and instruments, etc. Then they give a proper amount of the surplus wealth (food products and other goods) to the *brahmanas* as donation (*dakshina, bhiksha*) and to the *kshatriyas* as tribute. Some amount is stored for emergencies and further agricultural development, and if there is still a surplus, it is used to barter for other goods and valuables to be stored for the future benefit of the society at large. There are no loafers because the *brahmanas*, the *gurus* and the *kshatriyas* make sure that everyone is properly and happily engaged according to their actual *guna* and *karma* and training. At the same time, everyone is taken care of, and taking pride and joy in their work for the benefit of the entire social body. As in the healthy and natural functioning of the body and its limbs, the various organs work without any selfish attachment but automatically obtain everything they need; the mouth enjoys the food but immediately sends it down to the stomach so that it can be properly digested (and the stomach also enjoys full satisfaction) and distributed to each and every organ and cell of the body. In this way there is no place for fear, hatred, envy, laziness, stress, or dissatisfaction, because communication and cooperation are perfect.

The definition of *phala* as "the fruit of the action" in reference to *karma yoga* and *sannyasa yoga* brings to mind the beautiful example of a person who plants a fruit tree in a public place, so that everyone will get its blessings and benefits. The situation in human society is now so degraded that people not only jealously guard their own orchards and trees, but avoid planting fruit trees even on their own land property because they are tired of getting their fruits stolen and destroyed by looters, thieves and envious monkeys. As a result, everybody suffers and is deprived, including the stupid monkeys. *Phala* as fruit of the action is explained in verses 2.43, 2.47, 2.49 (*kripanas* are those attached to such fruits), 2.51 (*manisinah* are those who are not attached to such fruits), 4.20, 5.4, 5.12, 5.14, 6.1 (*anasritah*, "not taking shelter" in such fruits), 7.23, 9.28 (detachment from such fruits as being called *sannyasa yoga*), 12.11, 12.12, 17.11, 17.12, 17.17, 17.20, and 17.25.

The word *kartavya*, "what is to be done", describes the dutiful action on the basis of *dharma*, ethical considerations, or conscience. Contrarily to despotic and ignorant ideologies where one is ordered and forced to carry out actions even against one's better judgment and ethical conscience, in *sanatana dharma* or Vedic culture the concept of duty is always based on the intelligent choice of a conscious act of personal free will. Without freedom, there cannot be any evolution or progress, and certainly no satisfaction or happiness.

नियतस्य तु संन्यासः कर्मणो नोपपद्यते । मोहात्तस्य परित्यागस्तामसः परिकीर्तितः ॥ १८-७ ॥

niyatasya tu sannyāsaḥ karmaṇo nopapadyate । mohāttasya parityāgastāmasaḥ parikirtitaḥ ॥ 18-7 ॥

niyatasya: of the prescribed duty; *tu*: but; *sannyasah*: renunciation; *karmanah*: the activities; *na*: never; *upapadyate*: should be done; *mohat*: due to illusion; *tasya*: of them; *parityagah*: abandoning; *tamasah*: because of *tamas guna*; *parikirtitah*: has been explained.

"One should never renounce the activities of his/ her proper engagement. It has been explained that one who abandons them out of illusion is under the influence of ignorance.

We have seen that *tamas* (ignorance) produces laziness, stupidity, confusion and inertia, and that sometimes foolish people confuse such symptoms for noble sattvic characteristics. Later (18.32) Krishna will very clearly say that *tamas* deludes people into mistaking (and presenting) *dharma* as *adharma*, and *adharma* as *dharma*. It is very easy to observe this fact in the present degraded asuric society, that is ruled largely by *tamas* with some measure of *rajas*.

Speaking of *sannyasa*, we have seen many men dressed in saffron, red and pink robes presenting themselves as staunch renunciates, who live perpetually immersed in apathy, irresponsibility and laziness, sleepily rambling now and then about the sexual life of married people, and are roused only when they see some opportunity to collect donations from the public by exploiting the good name and merits of the founder of their organization, to get followers who will worship and serve them, or to engage in political power games and institutional fighting, or to actively persecute dissenters especially those who bring good logical arguments or present the original genuine Vedic version. And also all of the above, if time and energy suffice.

Some of the most malicious ones may object that such activities of persecution of heretics and infidels constitute their specific service to society, but there is no such provision in the Vedic system. Unlike abrahamic ideologies and other totalitarian and imperialistic systems, Vedic civilization clearly teaches that renunciates and spiritualists must never try to enforce religious or ideological beliefs and behaviors on people, or encroach on people's personal lives and choices (or instruct others to do that). *Sannyasis*, *sadhus* and *brahmanas* can only offer teachings and advice, in speech and writing and by personal example.

On the other hand, *kshatriyas* and other government people, who enforce law and order, can only take material physical action to stop violent aggressions against the *prajas* - human and animal members of society. There should be no moral policing or persecution of

dissenters or forced conversions. If false religionists become a nuisance for society by openly preaching in favor of violent aggression against innocent people, they should be challenged to debate by *brahmanas*; their followers should be prevented from putting such teachings into practice, and their targeted victims should be helped to defend themselves even to the extreme consequences (by killing the aggressor).

Only in extreme emergencies the assembly of the *brahmanas* can use their spiritual power (*brahma tejas*) to curse and remove an evil adharmic ruler who has not been defeated in duel by dharmic *kshatriyas*, but after the bad king has been deposed, the *brahmanas* will never step in and take control of the government, individually or collectively, even if they were capable of doing a good job as rulers. If a *grihasitha brahmana* takes this step, he will lose his position as *brahmana* and become a *kshatriya* to all effects, with the attending rights and duties and limitations, but his position will still be respectable.

A *sannyasi* however (whatever *varna* he used to belong to) is strictly forbidden from having anything to do with government or politics, because by so doing he automatically becomes the object of ridicule for the entire society. Therefore one should think very carefully before entering the renounced order, especially considering that in Kali yuga nobody is required or even expected to take *sannyasa*. In case of extreme emergency and very serious danger for innocent and good people, a *sadhu* or *sannyasi* can temporarily take a *kshatriya* role to fight back violent invaders or criminals if there are no qualified *kshatriyas* left. However in that case the *sadhus* will only perform that duty without getting entangled in any measure of political power mongering, luxury, and attempts to control the personal lives and beliefs of the subjects.

An arrogant person who demands worship, service, sense gratification, profit and special material position and facilities because of his wearing the garb of a *sannyasi* or *sadhu* and refuses to engage in useful activities for the benefit of all beings (claiming to be "renounced") actually has no transcendental realization and is controlled by *tamas*. Therefore those who accept him as *guru* or superior and offer him wealth and service will share his negative karmic consequences and develop the same mentality and attitude, perpetuating the social disaster. As Krishna has already said very clearly, everyone should work seriously and honestly for the benefit of society: *niyatam kuru karma tvam karma jyayo hy akarmanah, sarira yatrapi ca te na prasiddhyed akarmanah*, "Engage in your dutiful work, because action is better than non-action. Without action, it is even impossible to maintain the body" (3.8). The only creatures who do not perform useful work in the universe but subsists at the expenses of others without giving anything valuable in return are called parasites.

In this verse we notice the word *niyatam* as a derivative from *niyama*, or "regulated activities in which one should engage", as the counterpart of *yama* or "regulated abstentions". We have found the same word in verse 7.20 to indicate the prescribed method to worship the Devas, in verse 4.29 to indicate the proper scientific practice of *pranayama yoga* and in verse 6.15 to indicate the proper practice of meditation (*dhyana yoga*) on the *atman*.

As we have seen in the scientific system of the *varnas* and *ashramas*, these *niyata* (or *nitya*, "eternal") *karmani* or *kartavyani* can vary according to one's *guna*, *karma*, training and circumstances, but still one needs to always remain fully engaged and without selfishness, otherwise the mind and the soul will not be satisfied. This is confirmed in *Bhagavata Purana: sa vai pumsam paro dharmo yato bhaktir adhoksaje, ahaituki apratihata yayatma suprasidati*, "The highest perfection of one's *sva dharma* is to perform one's duties in a spirit of loving dedication and service, without interruption and without selfishness" (1.2.6).

The word *upapadyate* ("it is not justified", "it is not befitting", "it is unworthy", "it is below one's position") was found in verse 2.3 when Krishna told Arjuna that withdrawing from the battlefield would be disgraceful for him, and in verse 6.39 when Arjuna tells Krishna that others are less qualified than him to dispel his doubts. Many people born in families of great ancestry have neglected or dropped their duties because of ignorance and greed, and their descendants have become so degraded that their behavior and conclusions can be easily recognized as asuric, yet in their delusion and confusion they continue to believe they are situated in a high position in society as *brahmanas*, *acharyas*, *gosvamis* etc, even without making any effort in performing their duties or purifying their existence. They eagerly spend plenty of time in watching stupid TV shows and immoral films, but they have no time to read the scriptures or practice even the shortest meditation in *sandhya vandana* and they do not follow any rule or restriction in their diet. What to speak of consecrating their food, they develop a habit of eating non-vegetarian stuff and even become aggressively offensive towards those who dare expound the benefits of vegetarianism. Thus they have lost all intelligence and good sense, and slide into a hellish way of life.

दुःखमित्येव यत्कर्म कायक्लेशभयात्त्यजेत् । स कृत्वा राजसं त्यागं नैव त्यागफलं लभेत् ॥ १८-८ ॥

duḥkhamityeva yatkarma kāyakleśabhayātyajet | sa kṛtvā rājasam tyāgam naiva tyāgaphalam labhet || 18-8 ||

duhkham: distress; *iti*: thus; *eva*: certainly; *yat*: which; *karma*: work; *kaya klesa*: physical trouble; *bhayat*: because of fear; *tyajet*: gives up; *sah*: s/he; *kritva*: doing; *rajasam*: under the influence of *rajas*; *tyagam*: renunciation; *na*: not; *eva*: certainly; *tyaga phalam*: the results of renunciation; *labhet*: obtains.

"Certainly one who gives up his duties because of fear of physical trouble or distress is acting under the influence of *rajas*, and cannot obtain the results of renunciation.

We have mentioned this category of renunciates in the commentary to verse 4 as those who have embraced the "sour grapes" ideology. Many celibates - *sannyasis* or life long *brahmacharis* - choose their position because they know that getting married and working at a regular job require a lot of effort and commitment, and entail many difficulties and hardships. In the best scenario they remain as children and innocent about what many people call "the ways of the world", but this usually makes them immature and irresponsible, unless of course they have developed spiritually beyond material identifications and limitations, and consistently demonstrate the symptoms described in the *shastra* in this regard. Not everyone can claim of being on the same platform as Narada Muni and his brothers the four Kumaras, who remained celibates but were certainly not immature in their realizations. The measuring rod is offered here by Krishna: the difference between a responsible mature person and an irresponsible child is that the adult will engage in the dutiful actions even if he is not attracted to them for some reason - when he is tired, or when the action entails some degree of suffering and unpleasantness, *kaya klesa* (bodily suffering or fatigue) or *dukha* (mental suffering), and so on.

Childish wannabe spiritualists will generally behave foolishly like children, whimsically moving from one engagement to the other or trying to avoid work in general, and exchange positions whimsically by claiming only rights and no duties. They like to gossip about each other and about outside people, try to get better toys than their mates, use Deities as dolls and the *divya lila* as nice fairy tales for their entertainment. They may play roles such as the big devotee, the *guru*, the king, the general secretary, the president, the scholar and so on, but without truly understanding what these roles entail in the real world as they are always abandoning their responsibilities and never cleaning up their own mess.

Children scare easily and need to be protected and reassured by elders, and get bored especially about reading and studying and other tedious but productive work, which they generally try to avoid as much as possible. They do not really care to produce actual good results with their work but rely on fantasy and daydreaming or outright lies. Superficial materialistic people, who are usually rather immature themselves, tend to confuse a childish mentality with a transcendental one - in this way the entire society easily falls prey to ruthless and manipulative tyrants and conquerors who have no qualms in misleading, mistreating, cheating and exploiting children of all ages.

Those who renounce the proper duties because of fear of difficulties and strain are not really renunciates and therefore they will not attain the result of renunciation (*tyaga phalam*) described in the *shastra*. At most they will get some cheap adoration from ignorant people and an easy life at the expenses of the public, but at the time of death they will have to take a new birth, to pay their debts and make up for the wasted time by working twice as hard and facing twice as many hurdles as normally human beings have to deal with.

We have personally experienced this fact, and we are very concerned about those who are not aware of what is waiting for them in the future; it is not our intention to criticize anyone but rather we want to offer precious information and warnings to help people avoid unnecessary future sufferings caused by uninformed choices in this lifetime.

This verse shows that fear is a result of *rajas*, because it originates from the desire to obtain what is pleasurable and the desire to avoid what is not pleasurable. Fear has been associated with anger in verses 2.56, 4.10 and 5.28, where Krishna has clearly stated that is must be overcome and abandoned. A person in *tamas* will remain lazy and callous and avoid to perform any real beneficial work; as s/he is only interested in immediate sense gratification and violence, s/he will usually be unaware of dangers and therefore may seem to be fearless. A person situated in *sattva* is emotionally and mentally an adult, who deliberately and serenely sacrifices him/her self to perform the prescribed duty, without fear for the consequences, because s/he is detached from joys and sorrows as the fruits of action (*phalan*) as Krishna has repeatedly stated in *Bhagavad gita*.

कार्यमित्येव यत्कर्म नियतं क्रियतेऽर्जुन । सङ्गं त्यक्त्वा फलं चैव स त्यागः सात्त्विको मतः ॥ १८-९ ॥

kāryamityeva yatkarma niyatam kriyate'rjuna | saṅgam tyaktvā phalam caiva sa tyāgaḥ sāttvikō mataḥ || 18-9 ||

karyam: the duty to be performed; *iti*: thus; *eva*: certainly; *yat*: which; *karma*: work/ action; *niyatam*: prescribed; *kriyate*: is performed; *arjuna*: o Arjuna; *sangam*: association; *tyaktva*: giving up; *phalam*: the result; *ca*: and; *eva*: certainly; *sah*: that; *tyagah*: renunciation; *sattvikah*: in *sattva guna*; *matah*: considered.

"O Arjuna, one should certainly perform the activities of one's prescribed duties, but renouncing the result (of such actions). This is truly considered renunciation in *sattva*.

For most people in our present society the idea of renunciation is based on celibacy or freedom from marriage and family responsibilities, so in general one is considered a *sannyasi* if he is not officially married and has no progeny. However, we should notice that here Krishna is using the word *tyaga* and not *sannyasa*, as a person who has already officially entered the order of *sannyasa* cannot possibly engage in any activity that could create fruits or duties in regard to marriage, children, or professional pursuits. One can enter *sannyasa* only after completing and resolving all such duties and past pending matters, and the very strict rules of *sannyasa* ensure that no new karmic debts will be initiated. In other words, Krishna gives much more importance to *tyaga* than to *sannyasa*.

According to the traditional Vedic culture, every man has a natural debt (*rina*) to pay to his parents and ancestors for the benefits he obtained by taking birth - a good caring home, emotional and financial support, fundamental training in self-preservation and ethics, etc. This debt is paid by keeping up the good name of the family (with one's good behavior) and by producing at least one child to continue the lineage and perform the rituals for the departed ancestors. Therefore marriage is a specific duty for all the members of the higher *varnas* - *brahmanas*, *kshatriyas* and *vaisyas*. *Sudras* do not have such duty because they are not able to fulfill it, or in other words, they individually lack the *guna* and *karma* required for the job; they usually perform the very simple ritual of *gandharva* marriage and have children out of affection and not out of duty, but still they loyally take care of their family.

This brings us to an extremely important point: generating an offspring is not something that one should do lightly, as a natural biological instinct (like ordinary animals do) or as a mere social or cultural custom or expectation. The *Bhagavata Purana* (5.5.18) clearly states: *gurur na sa syat, sva jano na sa syat, pita na sa syaj janani na sa syat, daivam na tat syan, na patis ca sa syan, na mocayed yah samupeta mrtyum*, "One should not (dare to) become a *guru*, a kinsman, a father or mother, a worshiped superior or a husband/ protector if s/he is not able to deliver his/ her subordinates from death".

What does this mean? Everyone who has taken a material body will have to die (2.18, 2.27), so how can one deliver him/ her from death? Here "death" indicates the identification with the material body, because it is only the material body that will die (2.13, 2.17, 2.18, 2.20, 2.30). So we can only be saved from death if our superiors see us and treat us as eternal spirit souls (*atman/ brahman*), not as bodies: this means that before venturing to take up the responsible position as guardian of another creature, one should be fully established on the transcendental level, or at least able to treat people on that level (*brahma achara*).

We see here that father and mother are mentioned on the same level of *guru*, and in fact the role of parent is even more decisive and crucial than the role of any teacher. One is not a genuine religious teacher if he encourages people to beget many children just to increase the numbers of a materially identified community, without the proper ethical and spiritual preparation, and sometimes without the minimum of education and affectionate care that even animals provide to their young.

"Delivering" a baby is not a mere physical action like "delivering" a pizza, human beings are no "breeding" animals, and no pregnancy should be considered a "mistake" or a "nuisance" or "disturbance" so that one wants to "dump the load and hit the road". If a person feels a strong desire for romantic love and sex, s/he should marry, get healthy intercourse and happily have a baby if a pregnancy ensues. Renunciation in *sattva* consists in dutifully taking care of wife and children for as long as necessary, without expecting their service and worship in return. Under no circumstance the idea of religious or spiritual renunciation can be used to justify running away from wife and especially young children and refusing to take responsibility for their maintenance and protection.

This also brings us to the sensitive issue of birth control and abortion; if a person simply suffers from a hormonal lust problem and is not ready to take the responsibility for a family, contraceptive means should be used to avoid pregnancy. Before the advent of abrahamic ideologies, many natural methods (especially herbal medicines) were used to prevent unwanted pregnancies, and nobody ever thought they were immoral in any way. They were not considered something "against the laws of nature assigning the punishment of pregnancy for the sin of sense gratification". They were just a medicine like any other. Claiming that birth control is against God's laws because it allows sinners to escape the consequences of their actions is like saying that digestive aids are sinful and should be criminalized and their use punished, because they help gluttons to escape the rightful sufferings and damages of occasional consumption of excessive or inappropriate food, or that it is against God's laws to mend a broken bone that was the consequence of a bad judgment in jumping over an obstacle or running downhill.

In ancient times it was extremely rare (if not unheard of) for women to actually chose to abort their baby, but not because abortion was banned or punished by law or social persecution. First of all because there was no concept of "illegitimate child": the very fact of having been conceived made a child perfectly valid, true and legitimate, and nobody would even dare to think of mistreating or disrespecting such a child or his/ her mother on the so-called "immoral" basis of that birth. In all non-abrahamic cultures, motherhood is revered as sacred in itself, and not considered a "contamination" or "loss of honor" in any case. Also, abortion is a very serious matter, because it always entails acute physical and mental sufferings for the mother as well as considerable risks even when it is legally allowed and performed in a medically safe way, and if a woman makes this extreme choice, it is to be understood that she has no better alternatives and she is really desperate.

In Vedic civilization, any woman who for some reason does not have the active support of a husband to raise a child can take shelter in an *ashrama* (like for example the mother of Lava and Kusha, and the mother of Prahlada) without having to officially become a lifelong and exclusively dedicated disciple of the *guru* of the *ashrama* or take vows of strict discipline or penance for the rest of her life. Also, there was no such thing as "pre-marital sex" or "extra marital sex", simply because sex itself was considered a legal and legitimate form of marriage *per se* (see the Gandharva marriage, for example).

Husbands and wives who married in this way were free to live together or apart as they consensually saw fit, without being censored by "society" or even worse, by "religious authorities". Multiple marriages (that did not violate the basic principles of ethics such as truthfulness and compassion) were also accepted as normal and legitimate, and not condemned.

We know that Veda Vyasa was born of the casual sexual encounter of his mother Satyavati with the Rishi Parasara, and that his parents never lived together and apparently never had any further contact; certainly when king Santanu asked Satyavati to marry him, there is no record of anyone asking Parasara's opinion or permission, and Satyavati became the official queen mother for the future heirs to the throne. Nobody thought even for one moment that she should have hidden the existence of a previous son, and rather Vyasa was respectfully called to the court to help his step-brothers to get children who could continue the dynasty.

Even prostitution was considered normal and acceptable in Vedic times; it was a perfectly legal and respectable occupation, not persecuted or subject to any constraint or sanction, and did not have any parasitic "protectors" that exploited the girls, because nobody would even dream about trying to hurt a prostitute. And of course there was no human trafficking or sexual slavery. All prostitutes could easily and freely move to different occupations and social positions, so their children had all opportunities to get a good education and engage in different professional occupations than their mother's. In such a civilized society, there was no need for a woman to kill her unexpected baby, and if ever she did do that (like Gandhari and Ganga), nobody criticized her.

In this verse, *karya* ("duty") is the proper ethical action that should be taken in any given circumstance, and it refers to the constructive or productive work as well to the acceptance of the difficulties and sufferings connected to that particular situation.

The expression *sanga tyaktva*, "giving up the association", means that one should not identify or be attached to the actions or its consequences; in the example of marriage and family, a truly renounced man sees his wife and children as parts of God's body, God's creatures and servants, and not as parts of his own body, his own creatures or servants. Only in this way he will be able to protect them from death. Of course this also applies to mothers, not to fathers only, but we have hardly ever seen any woman abandoning her child under the pretext of religious or spiritual renunciation - except when forced to do so by others.

न द्वेष्ट्यकुशलं कर्म कुशले नानुषज्जते । त्यागी सत्त्वसमाविष्टो मेधावी चिन्नसंशयः ॥ १८-१० ॥

na dveṣṭyakuśalaṁ karma kuśale nānuṣajjate | tyāgī sattvasamāviṣṭo medhāvī chinnaśaṁśayaḥ || 18-10 ||

na dvesti: does not hate; *akusalam*: unpleasant; *karma*: work; *kuśale*: pleasurable; *na anusajjate*: does not become attached; *tyagi*: the renounced person; *sattva samavistah*: focused on *sattva*; *medhavi*: who is intelligent; *chinna samsayah*: having cut off all doubts.

"A renounced person who is situated in *sattva* does not hate what is unpleasant and does not become attached to what is pleasant. Through intelligence, s/he overcomes all doubts (regarding duty).

The point of dutiful and detached action is repeated here for further clarity and associated with the expressions *dvesti* and *anusajjate*. The words *dvesti* and *dvesa* ("s/he hates" and "hatred" as in the opposite of *raga* or "attraction") were mentioned in verses 2.57, 2.64, 3.34, 5.3, 7.27, 9.28, 12.13, 12.17, 13.7, 14.22, and we certainly recommend our readers to refresh their memory by reading those verses and observing the usage of opposite terms of comparison, in a range from *abhinandati* ("praises"), *raga* ("attachment", "taste"), *kanksati*

("aspires", "desires"), *iccha* ("wishes", "dreams"), *priya* ("pleasing", "beloved"), and *hrisyati* ("enjoys pleasure/ happiness"). We find the word *sajjamanah* for example in *Bhagavata Purana* as "mentally attached" to the material objects created by the *gunas* (11.25.12), or attached to the activities of the material world (8.5.44).

The addition of the prefix *anu* reinforces the concept, indicating consistency or a prolonged situation.

The word *kusala* indicates "joy, pleasure, happiness", but also "expertise, good fortune, auspiciousness, a favorable situation, a religious situation, good discrimination". Of course *akusala* is the exact opposite, and it can come to cover a vast range of unpleasant and bad things, including what we could call "a bad job" with reference to situations and people. This verse clearly states that one should perform one's duty in a selfless way even when it entails unpleasantness or even the possibility of failure. In this regard, we can apply the same considerations we made about whimsical childish behavior versus the responsible behavior of brave and strong-minded adults.

Krishna had already mentioned the need to overcome the attachment to auspiciousness in verses 2.57, 9.28 and 12.17; this does not mean that we should not make any difference between *subha* and *asubha* (auspiciousness and inauspiciousness) but rather that we should not be attached to either in the fulfillment of our duties (*karma, karmani*). A corollary of this instruction implies that astrology and astrological remedies are not to be trusted excessively or depended on, but merely utilized as general indications or supports.

While the first part of the verse focuses on the determination in performing one's dutiful activities selflessly, without repulsion or attachment, the second part of the verse connects this attitude with true renunciation (*tyaga*), a firm position in goodness (*sattva samavistha*), intelligence or wisdom (*medha*), and the clarity of thought that dispels doubts (*chinna samsaya*) with the light of knowledge and realization. It is important to understand that doubts (*samsaya*) should be addressed and solved in the appropriate way and not merely dismissed or ignored, because that is the difference between *sattva* and *tamas*.

One who never doubts anything is not using sufficient intelligence (*medha*), but one who is never able to overcome doubts through the appropriate research and verification is foolish and lazy (2.7, 2.37, 3.2, 4.40, 4.41, 4.42, 5.1, 5.25, 6.23, 6.39, 7.1, 8.5, 10.7, 12.8, 18.6).

The word *medha* ("intelligence", "wisdom", "understanding") is particularly interesting, also with reference with the famous *yajnas* called *asvamedha* and *gomedha* that colonial indologists deviously and mistakenly described as ordinary animal sacrifices, respectively of a horse and a cow. The fact is that such *yajnas* were meant to worship and serve the principles called *asva* and *go* and not to slaughter the animals associated with those names, as we see for example in the expression *pitri medha* used to indicate the offerings to the *pitris* or ancestors (*Bhagavata Purana* 9.10.29, referring to Ramachandra). We find in *Atharva Veda* (*suktas* 52, 53 and 54) a long elaboration on the fact that the word *asva* indicates *kala*, time, "a horse which flows continuously with seven rays and thousands of axes (as plural form of "axis")" as the different planets, solar systems and galaxies (*sahasra aksha*). As the horse *Kala* is the father, the cow *Bhumi* (planet Earth, and by extension all planets) is the mother; the "coming home" of the cows therefore indicates the point in which the revolving planetary systems return in a particular position or "home". The word *bhumi* is closely connected to *bhuta*, meaning "being", "existent", or "element", indicating specifically an existence that has come to be by the aggregation of the various material elements of the universe.

A clear confirmation of the deep symbolic meaning of such rituals is given by the very famous *Purusha sukta* (*Rig Veda*, 10.90), that still today must be chanted in all ritual performances: "The Purusha has a thousand heads, a thousand eyes and a thousand feet. He fills the universe everywhere, although he is ten fingers tall. This Purusha is everything that has been and everything that will be, even greater than the powerful Lord of immortality, that grows with nourishment. All the creatures are one fourth of his existence, while the three fourths are the eternal life in the world that is not subject to destruction... From him, Viraja has come to existence, and again from Viraja has the Purusha appeared... The Gods prepared the sacrifice and the sacrificial offering was the Purusha himself: they nourished him with grass, anointed him with balms. From the flesh of the sacrificial victim, clarified butter was created, the creatures of the air, the wild and domestic animals, the hymns of the *Rig* and the *Sama*, and the *mantras* and the rituals, from which the *Yajur* was born. From the body of the Purusha came forth the horses and the cattle with two rows of teeth... when they divided the flesh of the Purusha, how many portions did they prepare? The *brahmanas* were his mouth, his arms were the *kshatriyas*, the legs the *vaisyas*, and the feet the *sudras*. The moon was born from his mind, the sun from his eye, Indra and Agni from his mouth, Vayu from his breath. From his navel came the interplanetary space, the heavenly planets from his head, earth from his feet, and the planetary systems from his body... I know this great Purusha, who shines like the sun and transcends the darkness, and one who knows him in this way attains liberation in this very lifetime - indeed, there is no other road to liberation. The Lord of the universe lives in the universe, and he appears in many forms without ever taking birth... I offer my homage to the eternally resplendent Brahman, who gave the divine power to the Gods, who is the *guru* of the Gods and their Elder."

To reinforce the connection between this concept and the topic of *sannyasa* and *tyaga*, we would like to mention here a verse quoted from *Brahma vaivarta Purana: asvamedham gavalambham sannyasam pala pairkam devarena sutotpattim kalau panca vivarjayet*, "In this age of Kali, five acts should be abandoned: the *asvamedha yajna*, the *gomedha yajna*, the acceptance of the order of *sannyasa*, the offering of oblations to the forefathers, and a man's begetting children in his brother's wife." Of course, this is because human society has lost its best qualifications and are unable to perform them correctly, not because such practices were too primitive or immoral for the "evolved civilized human beings" of our times, as some foolish ignorant people would believe.

न हि देहभृता शक्यं त्यक्तुं कर्माण्यशेषतः । यस्तु कर्मफलत्यागी स त्यागीत्यभिधीयते ॥ १८-११ ॥

na hi dehabhṛtā śakyaṃ tyaktuṃ karmāṇyaśeṣataḥ | yastu karmaphalatyāgī sa tyāgītyabhidhiyate || 18-11 ||

na: not; *hi*: indeed; *deha bhrita*: by those who carry a body; *sakyam*: it is possible; *tyaktum*: to abandon; *karmani*: all activities; *asesatah*: endless; *yah*: one who; *tu*: but; *karma phala tyagi*: one who renounces the results of actions; *sah*: s/he; *tyagi*: (real) renouncer; *iti*: thus; *abhidhiyate*: it is said.

"Indeed for those who are embodied it is not possible to give up the vast numbers of the dutiful activities, therefore one who remains detached from the results of the activities is considered the real renouncer.

The key word in this verse is *deha bhrita*, "those who carry a body", indicating the complex network of needs, influences, qualities, activities and consequences that we need to negotiate while still embodied in this universe. This will be again confirmed in 18.40: *na tad asti prithivya va divi devesu va punah, sattvam prakriti jair mukta yad ebhih syat tribhir gunaih*, "There is not even one single person, either in this world or in the world of the Devas, that is free from the influence of the three *gunas* created by the *prakriti*". In verse 3.8 Krishna had also stated: *niyatam kuru karma tvam karma jyayo hy akarmanah, sarira yatrapi ca te na prasiddhyed akarmanah*, "You should perform the dutiful actions, because action is better than non-action. Without action, it is even impossible to maintain the body, that is the vehicle (of the Self)." This idea is reinforced by the use of the word *bhrit*, that is closely related to the verb *bibharti*, "to maintain/ is maintaining".

Even those who claim they have ceased all activities still have to find some sort of food (air, light etc) and shelter, and their minds will continue to create presentations and distractions or focus on something, even if it is only complete ignorance. And why should they keep a body if they are not using it to do something good in this world? If they don't need a body, it is better for them to leave it and stop being a waste of space on this crowded planet, because their so-called abstention from karmic entanglement is simply a vegetative life immersed in the laziness of *tamas*. The body is given to us as a valuable instrument and vehicle, and we are supposed to use it properly for the service of all beings, in payment of our debt (*rina*) to the Devas, the Rishis, the Pitris and all the other benefactors of the world.

The expression *karmani asesatah* indicates that dutiful activities are innumerable and never ending. Of course this does not mean that each and every individual must perform all those activities at the same time, because the immense number refers to the possibilities or opportunities of engagement in the administration of the universe in accordance to one's individual *guna* and *karma*. *Karma* as duty is determined by *guna* or qualification, as we will see later in this chapter especially applied to human society, but even the Devas and the creatures that are below the human levels have duties to perform, as we can easily see every day. The sun dutifully shines, the wind dependably blows, and even a small ant works indefatigably to carry its loads for the benefit of the community - not only to secure food and provisions to its community in the anthill, but also to clean up dead bodies and debris from other places. Even a dung beetle or an earthworm have a very important and respectable job in the world's administration, because they break down waste and make it available again in the form of usable fertilizer for the growth of plant food.

In human society as among all beings, the Soul of the soul (*antaryami paramatma*) guides the *jivatman* to seek the circumstances and experiences that are appropriate for his/ her development, so we can see that naturally and spontaneously our conscience tells us that we are attracted to a particular occupation rather than another.

Of course this attraction could simply be temporary and instrumental to one's education, as for example a short experiment in some occupation that appeals to our fantasy in an excessively idealized way, filled with misconceptions that need to be cleared out by direct verification. This is ideally done at an early age in the home of the *guru* (*guru kula*) where the students live as his adopted children, all on the same level, and are engaged in all sorts of tasks and can access all types of training at least tentatively. But it can also occur later in life.

Ultimately it is the *guru*, the assembly of *brahmanas* and the *king* who have the responsibility to assess or verify the *sva dharma* of each individual according to his/ her *guna* and *karma*, or natural inclinations and capabilities, and to help and support each individual to develop his/ her full potential and remain properly engaged. We can therefore understand that having unqualified persons in such crucially responsible positions constitutes an extreme threat to the entire society and could devastate the lives of everyone. Intelligent people should always be attentive and carefully scrutinize the conclusions and behaviors of *gurus*, *brahmanas* and government representatives to make sure that they are doing their job properly, otherwise they must be removed from their positions.

In the Vedic system this is usually done passively by ostracism, as the unqualified individuals are exposed and the public simply avoids them. We can see the demonstration for example when the subjects of Hastinapura were eager to leave Duryodhana and the capital city, and move to the new city of the Pandavas, Indraprastha. The citizens of Ayodhya were going to do the same thing when Rama was exiled, and were dissuaded only by the order of Rama himself, who explained that he was going to live like an ascetic in the forest for a few years and then he would come back.

In our times, the situation has become so degraded that we need to start almost from scratch to rebuild the foundations of a healthy society, and this must begin with the head. We need a new body of *sresthas* (3.21), qualified *brahmanas* who have the proper knowledge and realizations and visibly apply them in practice in their own lives; these will act as the *gurus* of the entire society and train and engage anyone freely and without prejudice, simply on the verification of their actual *guna* and *karma*. The blind birth prejudice of the caste system has nothing to do with the *varna* system of genuine Vedic civilization and should be discarded from any government legislative or administrative process.

अनिष्टमिष्टं मिश्रं च त्रिविधं कर्मणः फलम् । भवत्यत्यागिनां प्रेत्य न तु संन्यासिनां क्वचित् ॥ १८-१२ ॥

aniṣṭamiṣṭam miśraṁ ca trividhaṁ karmaṇaḥ phalam | bhavatyatyāgināṁ pretya na tu saṅnyāsīnāṁ kvacit || 18-12 ||

anistam: non desirable; *istam*: desirable; *misram*: mixed; *ca*: and; *tri vidham*: three types; *karmanah*: of activities; *phalam*: result; *bhavati*: becomes; *atyaginam*: for those who are not renounced; *pretya*: after death; *na*: not; *tu*: but; *sannyasinam*: for the *sannyasis*; *kvacit*: at any time.

"After death, those who were not renounced are faced with the consequences of their activities - non-desirable, desirable and mixed. However, *sannyasis* are not bound by them.

A genuine *sannyasi* has already experienced and overcome death when he has given up all material identifications, attachments, relationships and affiliations, desires, enterprises, and so on. Whatever residual karmic reactions resulted from his previous activities have been consumed by the austerities he accepted while still in the body, so at the time of death there are no more ties with his material body. This is the real reason why *sannyasis* are not bound by *karma*.

We see in this verse that Krishna uses the two terms *tyaginam* and *sannyasinam* simultaneously, to signify that both factors should be there - the spiritual renunciation to the fruits of the actions and the physical renunciation to the position of *karta* ("doer") and to the activities that

are not strictly necessary. In the traditional Vedic system, an evolved person must leave home after attaining the age of 50 (*pancasa urdhvam vanam vrajet*). This is also confirmed by the personal example of innumerable great personalities - generally *brahmanas* and *kshatriyas* and especially kings - offered in the stories of *Puranas*, *Upanishads* and other Vedic texts. After spending a sufficient period as a resident of the forest (*vana prastha*) living a quiet, simple and solitary life, one should formally prepare for death by entering the order of *sannyasa*, that is already considered social death. Usually this ceremony is performed at the age of 75, when the expectation of further survival is rather short, and family life has lost much of its meaning. The *sannyasi* changes his name and makes himself totally unrecognizable by his former relatives and friends, and gives up all connection to his professional and ritual engagements. He stops cooking and taking care of his body and personal possessions, and survives from moment to moment and from day to day, always ready to leave his body at any time. This is the real meaning of *sannyasa*.

A person like that is not bound by anything. It is easy to understand how the concept of *sannyasa* came to be associated with the concept of the world as mere illusion (*brahma satya, jagan mithya*). A *sannyasi* perceives the remaining period of his life in the body as a mere dream, a temporary illusion that will soon crumble away and from which he will awaken to the eternal reality of pure spiritual existence. Some commentators in the impersonalistic line explain the word *phala* (as in *karma phala*, or "result of the actions") as a compound of *pha* from *phalgu* ("unsubstantial") and *la* from *layam* ("disappearance", also related to *pralaya*, "destruction"). Thus, because the *sannyasi* has already realized that the *karma phala* are merely illusory, he will not be bound by them at the time of leaving his body.

From one dream he will move to another dream with a new birth, or hopefully he will awaken to *nirvana*.

This however is a very simplistic position, that resembles the conclusion of the sour grapes or the fantasies of immature children; a consciousness based on dreams and illusions does not belong to *sattva* or *visuddha sattva* but to *tamas*, and if it spreads among people in general it can seriously damage society at large because it confuses *grihasthas* into believing that absenteeism and irresponsibility are legitimate or even nobler spiritually than proper engagement in dutiful action. This is the reason Krishna explained in chapter 3, when he said that he also engages in action, simply to give a good example to society (3.22-26), because personally he has no selfish interest in obtaining any result from actions. This is also why *sannyasis* should never be in contact with *kshatriyas*, government representatives, active leading members of the society and married people; at most they can approach their homes once a day and remain outside the door for the time required to receive the leftovers of the family meal. Therefore there is no need to see the *karma phala* as mere phantasmagoric illusion, and a much better course of action (*yoga*) has been repeatedly stated by Krishna all along *Bhagavad gita*, as we can easily see in verses 2.47, 2.51, 4.20, 5.12, 5.14, 6.1, 9.28, 12.11, 12.12, 17.11, as well as in verses 2.39, 2.48, 2.50, 3.9, 3.19, 3.28, 3.31, 4.14, 4.15, 4.21, 4.23, 4.24, 4.32, 4.37, 4.41, 5.2, 5.3, 5.10, 6.1, 9.27, 11.55, 12.6, 13.30, 16.24, and 17.23.

The word *pretya* ("after death") is closely connected to the word *preta* ("dead people" as ghosts), as at the time of death one leaves the gross body but normally retains the subtle body that we could call "ghost". In a sense, everybody becomes a ghost for some time, because reincarnation is usually not immediate; the deceased spirit can remain around his/ her dead body and the places and people of his previous lifetime if s/he is too attached to them, and in this way s/he misses a crucial opportunity for progress and evolution. If at the time of death we are able to leave all these identifications and attachments behind and move on, we will be obtain a new opportunity for reincarnation according to the result of our past activities and desires (*karma phala*), otherwise we might remain stuck between two lifetimes as a ghost proper, even for a very long time, and this is certainly unpleasant.

The circumstances created by our past *karma* can be pleasurable (*ista*), non pleasurable (*anista*) or more likely, a mixture (*misra*) of the two. The word *istam* is very interesting because it means "pleasurable" but also "desired", "preferred", "chosen". So Krishna is saying here that after death we will be faced with expected and unexpected circumstances, both the manifestation of our desires and fears, because attraction (*raga*) and repulsion (*dvesa*) are equally magnetic poles for the materialization of events.

For this reason we must become established on a level of neutrality, and not simply reject material life and objects as negative and undesirable - because what we deny and repress can easily become stronger in our mind and attract exactly what we do not want to get. Hatred, resentment and fear bind the conditioned soul with even stronger ties than love and attachment, and it is frequent for arch-enemies to be reborn as twins, or to become husband and wife or parent and child in a next lifetime. A racist or a person who actively hates a particular nationality, community or caste will very likely take a new birth there, and a man who hates women (or a woman who hates men) is preparing a next birth as a member of the opposite sex. Of course this applies to the birth circumstances only, and it does not change the individual's attitude and beliefs automatically. This certainly creates a very good learning opportunity.

When we apply this concept to the practice of celibacy or renunciation to sexual life, it is easy to understand that a true *sannyasi* must be neutral and undisturbed, and not obsessed by negative sexual thoughts entertained or expressed to condemn or hate sexuality. When *tyaga*, renunciation, is considered in a dualistic way as the opposite of *bhoga* ("enjoyment of pleasure"), it is still on the conditioned platform and the unfortunate victim of this delusion will swing back and forth from one to the other and back. This happens because one still considers himself the enjoyer (*purusha*) and believes that he is renouncing to something that is actually his legitimate right or property; this ego is based on the false identification with the material body and position, for example as "man", while "women" are seen as bodies and objects of enjoyment. The fact that a celibate is not physically engaging in sexual activities is totally secondary and certainly not sufficient (3.6) to solve the problem. When we are neutral, we do not think of ourselves as the *karta, isvara* or *bhogi* (16.14), not even to believe that we have the credit of renouncing action, domination or enjoyment. We do not even think of ourselves as men or women, but as *atman* only.

A true *sannyasi* does not speak about women or think about women, because he sees all embodied beings as *jivatmans*, spirit souls, parts of God's body, therefore he sees no "women". He does not condemn or fear women or forbid them to move or sit around when he is walking or sitting in some place. He does not speak disparagingly about women, he does not treat women disrespectfully, he does not hate women. For him, there are no "women" or "men", but only spirit souls wearing various types of bodies.

Some commentators have tried to relate *istam* with heaven or *svarga*, *anistam* with hell or *naraka*, and *misram* with earth and human society, but this is an attempt to justify and validate Vedic concepts by associating them with abrahamic concepts. It is not necessary, and in fact it can be very misleading.

पञ्चैतानि महाबाहो कारणानि निबोध मे । साङ्ख्ये कृतान्ते प्रोक्तानि सिद्धये सर्वकर्मणाम् ॥ १८-१३ ॥

pañcāitāni mahābāho kāraṇāni nibodha me | sāṅkhye kṛtānte proktāni siddhaye sarvakarmaṇām | | 18-13 | |

pañca: five; *etani*: these; *maha baho*: o mighty armed one; *karanani*: the causes; *nibodha*: understand; *me*: from me; *sankhye*: in the science of Sankhya; *krita ante*: at the conclusion; *proktani*: described; *siddhaye*: for the perfection; *sarva karmanam*: of all activities.

"O mighty (Arjuna), you should understand that according to Sankhya there are five factors required for the perfection of all activities.

In verse 1, Arjuna had called Krishna *maha baho*, "mighty armed one", and now Krishna is returning the compliment, after calling him *bharata sattama* and *purusa vyaghra*, respectively "best among the Bharatas" and "tiger among men". In this chapter Krishna is explaining how *moksha* (liberation) can be attained by working sincerely and selflessly for the universal good, and the references to physical strength are an indication that such work must be done by investing sufficient energy and effort in practice, and not just in theory and vague meditation.

The word *nibodha* ("you should understand") is related to the word *buddhi*, and therefore indicates the proper use of intelligence. Physical force by itself is not very effective, if it is not coordinated and directed by the proper use of intelligence and strategy - exactly the subject that Krishna is going to explain in these verses.

What is strategy? It is the art and science of planning resources for their effective use in achieving a goal; as the expression is *nibodha me* ("you should understand from me") we can conclude that it is best to learn the science of strategy directly from the best authorities or expert people. We have seen that Sankhya ("counting, enumeration") is the science of combined physics and metaphysics that categorizes the elements of the universe and their connections. It is said that the word *sankhya* is a compound of two roots - *san* from *samyak* ("completely") and *khyā* from *khyayante* ("described"). The expression *kṛta ante* ("at the end of the work") can be applied at different levels; one meaning can indicate the end or purpose of the actions or activities themselves, and another meaning can indicate the conclusion of the work of compilation of the Sankhya literature. In both cases it involves a sense of finality that is directly connected to the idea of strategical planning. One should take proper advantage of the opportunity of a human body (18.11) because ghosts (18.12) are unable to work for their own progress or for the benefit of the universe and the service of the Supreme.

The science of action is certainly not an easy subject, as Krishna had already remarked: *kim karma kim akarmeti kavayo 'py atra mohitah, tat te karma pravakasyami yaj jnatva moksyase 'subhat*, "Even scholars can become confused about what is *karma* and what is *akarma*. I will tell you this science of *karma*, by knowing which you will become free from all inauspiciousness" (4.16). This chapter is dedicated to liberation (*moksha*), and it started by discussing about renunciation (*sannyasa* and *tyaga*), but we should not be surprised to see that Krishna continues the discussion by elaborating about action and work: *sannyasah karma yogas ca nihsreyasa karav ubhau, tayas tu karma sannyasat karma yoga visisyate*, "Both these paths - *sannyasa* and *karma yoga* - will bring the best benefit, but *karma yoga* is better than *sannyasa*" (5.2).

अधिष्ठानं तथा कर्ता करणं च पृथग्विधम् । विविधाश्च पृथक्केष्टा दैवं चैवात्र पञ्चमम् ॥ १८-१४ ॥

adhīṣṭhānaṁ tathā kartā karaṇaṁ ca pṛthagvidham | vividhāśca pṛthakceṣṭā daivaṁ caivātra pañcamam | | 18-14 | |

adhīsthanam: the place; *tatha*: similarly; *karta*: the doer; *karanam*: the instruments; *ca*: and; *pṛthak vidham*: of different types; *vividhah*: various; *ca*: and; *pṛthak*: different; *cestah*: efforts; *daivam*: destiny; *ca*: and; *eva*: certainly; *atra*: here; *pañcamam*: the fifth.

"The position, the doer, the instruments and the effort can be of different types. The fifth factor is destiny.

The word *adhīsthana* means "place", and it includes the body, its natural *guna* and previous *karma*, the position in time and space, the specific circumstances of community or society and culture, place and time, the facilities offered by a good or bad birth (both can be very useful), and so on. It is the starting point from which we can begin our journey and work, and therefore it is extremely important to understand and verify where we are actually standing.

The word *karta* means "doer", "one who does", and indicates the motivation or deliberation of the action, so we see this definition normally used in the *sankalpa* or official declaration of purpose at the beginning of religious rituals. Several people can be engaged in the performance of a ritual, especially a complex and important one, but the merit of the sacrifice and the good results go to the *karta*, the person who has taken the initiative to make it happen and is supplying all the materials and remunerating the priests.

We know that the concept of *karta* is relative: *prakriteh kriyamanani gunaih karmani sarvasah, ahankara vimudhatma kartaham iti manyate*, "All activities are actually performed by the qualities of nature, but a foolish person who is confused by egotism thinks 'I am doing'" (3.27). In this verse, however, the definition is used to indicate the subjective agent, that is the origin of the choice to engage in action, not the force that determines the particular type of action - which is conducted by *prakṛiti*. The *jivatman* still has a measure of free will, by which s/he can choose whether to engage in action or not, while the modality of the action is controlled by the *gunas* or nature.

The word *karana* ("instruments") refers to the sense organs - those of perception and those of action - that constitute the inner or personal instruments of our work. One can be born in a good family of skilled surgeons and have sufficient intelligence and inclination for the job, but if he is blind or deaf he will not be able to get the same results he would obtain with properly functional visual and auditive senses. So this is an important factor. We need to remember here that *karana* (with a long first *a*) means "cause". In this regard, we may remember verse 13.21: *karya karana kartrive hetuh prakritir ucyate, purusah sukha duhkhanam bhoktrive hetur ucyate*, "*Prakṛiti* is said to be the cause and the origin of the action, while *purusha* is the cause of the perception of happiness and distress" (13.21); this can help us put the *karta* and the *karana* into perspective.

The word *cesta* means "endeavor, effort, attempt, movement," and indicates the amount of energy that the *karta* invests in the action. Some commentators say that the word is a compound of *ca* ("and", "again") and *ista* ("desired", "chosen"), indicating that one needs to try

again and again to obtain the purpose or aim that he is seeking. As the quote goes, success is obtained with some percentage of inspiration and a much greater amount of perspiration.

The word *daivam* is very interesting. It is usually translated as "destiny", and as such, *daivam* includes the sum total of the karmic reactions of our previous activities and desires, but it is not limited to a mechanical result of events. In the Vedic perspective, nothing is truly impersonal, not even the laws of material nature, because the blueprint of every existence is knowledge. Therefore destiny is non-different from the consciousness or plan of God (*deva*), although certainly not in the same sense presented in abrahamic ideologies; God does not reward or punish anyone, does not absolve sins or judge people, and does not sentence or condemn anyone to any particular situation. A reaction to our previous action is simply meant to instruct us, demonstrating the reciprocity of all existence and perception. With each choice and decision, either in positive or negative, we put consequences in motion and obtain results - *ista*, *anista* and *misra* - that will either fulfill our desires or teach us that such desires were not a very good idea in the first place.

Some commentators translate *daivam* here as *paramatman*, the Soul of the soul, that always accompanies the *jivatman* in all his subsequent incarnations and guides him towards the actions and reactions that are required for his evolution. In this regard, they have quoted the aphorism *esa hi drasta srasta*, "he who is the witness is the creator" (*Prasna Upanishad* 4.9), indicating that *antaryami paramatman*, the creator and origin of the *jivatman*, can see and understand all the desires of the heart of the soul, and arranges for the suitable circumstances and experiences to materialize, and then guides the *jivatman* towards them and through them. However, in the Vedic perspective a human being still has some amount of freedom to choose in which actions s/he wants to engage.

We can compare destiny to a mighty river on which we are traveling. The current is strong and it carries us in a specific direction and therefore it is an important factor to be reckoned with, but we still have the freedom to row our boat and steer it at will, for example towards the bank where the current slows down. Along the course of the river there will be waterfalls, where we can only focus on surviving the jump and keeping our head above the water as much as possible, but there will also be shallow waters and fords (*tirthas*) where we will be able to get out of the river altogether and rest on the shore, and maybe build a new and better boat. With sufficient investment of effort and time, we can even build dams or dig a new stream for the river in which other people after us will be able to travel, but the water will always flow to the ocean, no matter how we try to divert its course. So the purpose of life and the basic process of reincarnation and liberation will always remain the same for everyone.

शरीरवाङ्मनोभिर्यत्कर्म प्रारभते नरः । न्याय्यं वा विपरीतं वा पञ्चैते तस्य हेतवः ॥ १८-१५ ॥

śarīravāṅmanobhiryatkarṇa prārabhate naraḥ nyāyyaṁ vā viparitaṁ vā pañcaite tasya hetavaḥ || 18-15 ||

sarira: by the body; *vak*: by the speech; *manobhiih*: by the mental actions; *yat*: which; *karma*: action; *pra arabhate*: begins (with a purpose); *narah*: a human being; *nyayyam*: appropriate; *va*: or; *viparitam*: otherwise/ contrary; *va*: or; *panca*: five; *ete*: these; *tasya*: of this; *hetavaḥ*: the causes.

"Whatever good or bad action is performed by a human being with body, speech or mind, is caused by these five factors.

The word *nara* means "man", but we can safely believe that it includes here both men and women, considering that human beings as a species are allowed a certain degree of free will and instruments for actions performed by body (*sarira*, *tanu*, or *kaya*), speech (*vak*) or mind (*manasa*). Here *manas* is expressed in the plural form (*manobhiih*) as in 2.56, 7.1, 9.34, 11.49 and 18.65, to indicate the different levels and modalities of mind functions - for example conscious and subconscious,

The technical Sanskrit terms for actions performed by body, speech and mind are *saririka* or *kayika*, *vacika* and *manasika* respectively and apply to all activities including the practice of the spiritual or *yoga sadhana* and the calculation of karmic reactions according to the different circumstances. For example in Kali yuga or in particularly difficult circumstances, mental activities performed with a good motivation and of good nature have the same or better effect than speech or bodily activities with the same purpose, while mental offenses (i.e. bad activities performed in the mind only) are considered much less serious than bodily offenses. This is because the physical environment including the body and senses is creating negative influences, and it is far easier for a person to actually commit bad actions than good ones. Of course, when one chooses to keep thinking of some action, s/he is also creating a certain amount of karmic reaction and associating with the object of the action (2.62), and the accumulation of such reactions and association will have an increasingly greater influence on the subsequent manifestation of actions through speech and then on the bodily level.

The individual's responsibility and the results for each action depend on the exact amount of free will that one enjoys at the time when the action is performed. For example, a slave who is forced to steal or kill, or a child or a jail convict who is forced to eat non vegetarian food are not held responsible for the karmic consequences of their actions. Those who put them in such situations are responsible and will have to face the karmic consequences. Even a woman who is forced to kill her own child through abortion by the pressure of family or society will not have to suffer the same karmic reactions of the killing of a child in ordinary circumstances. Conversely, if a person who is in a position of power - health, wealth, energy, time, position, instruments, etc - neglects to honor even a small duty or good action, or chooses to commit even a small bad action, the karmic reaction will be much more severe.

The expression *pra arabhate* means "starts to perform, enterprise, undertake", and indicates that the important thing in any action is not so much the successful completion, but the deliberate choice to initiate it and invest time and energy into it. This is already creating the good or bad karmic reaction, and accruing the merit or demerit of it, because the successful completion does not depend solely on the *karta* (subjective actor) and the *cesta* (effort). This is confirmed in 3.7, 4.19, 14.12, 14.25, 18.25, 18.48.

The two types of action described in this verse are *nyayyam* and *viparitam*. *Nyaya* means "reason, logic", and indicates the intelligent and reasonable actions that are called dharmic, or righteous in a positive way. The word *viparitam* means "opposite, reverse", and refers to the contrary of reasonable activities, that according to the Vedic perspective is called *vikarma*, bad actions or adharmic actions.

These definitions are very interesting, because contrarily to other ideologies, Vedic tradition considers the merit and demerit of actions on the basis of ethical values, conscience, and especially intelligence and reason. Krishna has already presented *buddhi yoga* (the *yoga* of

intelligence) as the highest criteria for action (2.39, 2.49, 2.50, 2.51, 2.53, 3.1, 4.18, 6.43, 8.7, 10.10, 12.8, 12.14, 15.20) and *buddhi* (intelligence) as a fundamental requirement (2.41, 2.44, 2.52, 2.63, 2.65, 2.66, 3.2, 3.26, 3.40, 3.42, 5.20, 5.28, 6.9, 6.21, 10.4). The Vedic religion of *Bhagavad gita* has nothing to do with the blind beliefs and obedience of abrahamic ideologies, that most atheists consider the actual and genuine (if not the only possible) model of religion.

तत्रैवं सति कर्तारमात्मानं केवलं तु यः । पश्यत्यकृतबुद्धित्वान्न स पश्यति दुर्मतिः ॥ १८-१६ ॥

tatraivaṁ sati kartāramātmānaṁ kevalam tu yaḥ | paśyatyakṛtabuddhitvāna sa paśyati durmatih || 18-16 ||

tatra: there; *evam*: thus; *sati*: being; *kartaram*: of the doer; *atmanam*: oneself; *kevalam*: only; *tu*: but; *yaḥ*: s/he; *paśyati*: sees; *akṛta buddhitvat*: due to a shortage of intelligence; *na*: does not; *sah*: s/he; *paśyati*: sees; *durmatih*: stupid.

"Therefore one who sees oneself as the only cause of actions is deluded due to lack of intelligence.

The expression *tatra evam sati* literally means "that being the case" and connects the previous verse to this one. The expression *atmanam kevalam* may apply to two levels of meaning; the ordinary level refers to "oneself only" as in the main translation of the verse, while at the higher level means "the *atman* alone". In the second case the translation is, "one who sees the *atman* as the cause of action is deluded by a lack of understanding". We have already seen that the *purusha* is never really engaged in any action, but simply feels and perceives.

We had already seen that verse 3.27 straightforwardly called "stupid" (*vimudha*) one who considers himself as the only cause and master of his actions: *prakṛiteḥ kriyamanāni gunaiḥ karmani sarvasaḥ, ahankāra vimudhatma kartāham iti manyate*, "All activities are actually performed by the qualities of nature, but a foolish person who is confused by egotism thinks 'I am doing'". So the concept of *karta* ("doer") needs to be understood properly. There is in fact a subjective principle of action called *karta* (18.14), but it is not the exclusive controller and beneficiary of the action (2.47). This is why Krishna in this verse uses the word *durmatih* ("unable to understand easily") and *akṛta* ("imperfect").

We should not foolishly claim full credit for our success, because we can only be the instrument (*nimitta matra*, 11.33) of the higher and vaster Consciousness; this of course does not mean that we should not get recognition for our work, or that someone else can take credit or recognition for the work we have done, substituting our name with their name, for example as authors of a book we have written. The factual truth should be recognized, and each person should be appreciated for their contribution: *tasmāt tvam uttistha yaso labhasva jīva satrun bhunṅsva rajyam samriddham, mayaiḥ nihatāḥ purvam eva nimitta matram bhava savya sacin*, "So, get up, o great archer, and achieve fame by your victory against the enemies, and then enjoy the prosperity of the kingdom. I have already killed all these warriors: you should become just the instrument of the victory" (11.33).

Acknowledging one's subordinate position to the supreme Consciousness as an instrument in the great plan of life is quite different from the false modesty or lack of self esteem of one who is unable to take a compliment or an encouragement or to understand the value of his own work. An instrument cannot claim the full credit for a good job, but it can and it should certainly receive the credit due to a good instrument. This is why Krishna says in 11.33, *yaso labha*, "obtain fame" and *bhunṅsva rajyam*, "enjoy the kingdom".

Vedic knowledge is not subject to copyright. We cannot say that Vyasa plagiarized the work of the many Rishis who wrote the original hymns of the *Samhitas*, and although he is known as the compiler of the *Vedas* he never claimed "intellectual property" or tried to stop others from writing further commentaries or treatises over Vedic knowledge. Yet, Vyasa is honored as the original teacher of the *Vedas* in this age. The Vedic system regularly reports, "this person said", "that person said", and quite often the individual who is speaking clearly says he is quoting someone who previously said the same things or similar things. Knowledge is eternal, and so nobody can claim to have "created" it, but it is a fact that individuals are credited with particular compositions or presentations.

Vyasa's father Parasara wrote some hymns of the *Rig Veda* (dedicated to Agni and Soma) and the *Parasara dharma samhita*. Atri Rishi (*manasa putra* of Brahma and the first of the Seven Rishis) is the author of the 5th *mandala* of the *Rig Veda*, that is also called *Atri samhita*. Agastya Rishi, another of the Seven Rishis, is the author of an original text on the *Ayur Veda* (now lost, but mentioned in later literature), the *Nadi jyotisha* (a treatise on astrology), the famous *Lalita sahasranama stuti* ("the 1000 names of Lalita", the Mother Goddess), and the famous *Aditya hridayam sukta*. Agastya's wife, princess Lopamudra of the Vidarbha kingdom, cooperated to the *Lalita sahasranama* and personally composed one hymn of the *Rig Veda*. Gautama Maharishi, another of the Seven Rishis, is the author of many *suktas* of the *Rig Veda*, the *Bhadra sukta* of *Sama Veda*, and the *Gautama Dharma sutra*, the first text among the *Dharma shastras*. Vasistha, another of the Seven Rishis, family Guru of the *avatara* Rama, is the author of the 7th *mandala* of the *Rig Veda*, and of the *Vasistha samhita*. The teachings of Vasistha are also related by Valmiki Rishi (the author of the *Ramayana*) in his famous *Yoga Vasistha*. Pulastya, one of the Seven Rishis, direct son of Brahma, received from Brahma the *Vishnu purana* and transmitted him to Parasara Rishi. Bharadvaja, another of the Seven Rishis, is famous for having written the *Vimanika shastra* (a treatise on aeronautics-astronautics, now lost).

Angira, author of most of the *Atharva Veda*, is said to be a dignitary at the court of Yama on Pitiloka, the inter-dimensional planet where the virtuous ancestors live. Atharva is author of many hymns of the *Atharva Veda*; the fact that the *Atharva Veda* was composed by these two Rishis and as such it is known by the name of *Atharvangirasa samhita*. Kausika, Vasistha, Kasyapa, Saunaka, Vamadeva, Meghatithi, Priyamegha, Nodha, Savya, Nṛimegha, Kusta, Pracheta, are the authors of other hymns of the *Atharva Veda*.

Kanva is the author of various hymns of the *Rig Veda* dedicated to Agni, Yupa, Marut, Brahmanaspati, Varuna, Mitra, Aryaman, Pusha, Rudra and Soma. Medhatithi wrote various hymns of the *Rig Veda* dedicated to Agni, Nirmathya Havaniya Agni, Idhmah Samiddha Agni, Astanunapat, Narasamsah, Ilah, Barhih, Devirdvarah, Ushasanaktha, Daivya, Hotara, Pracetasā, Sarasvatī, Ila, Bharati, Tvashta, Vanaspati, Svaha Akrutayoh Agni, Visve Deva, Indra, Maruta, Tvashta, Mitra Varuna, Dravinoda Agnih, Asvini (*ritu devatah*), Indra Varuna, Gayatri, Padani, Brahmanaspati, Soma, Dakshina, Sadaspati, Narasama, Maruta, Ribhu, Asvini, Savita, Devyah, Varuna, Anyagnayah, Dyava-prithivya, Prithivi, Vishnu, Ayu, Vayu, Marutvan, Pusha, Apah and Pura-ushnik. Praskanva Rishi wrote various hymns of the *Rig Veda* dedicated to Agni, Usha, Ashvini and Surya.

There were also several Rishikas (female Rishis) among the original authors of the *Vedas*: Ghosha (2 *suktas* in the 10th *mandala* of *Rig Veda*), Vagambhrina (*Vac sukta* of *Rig Veda*), Maitreyi, wife of Yajnavalkya (10 hymns of *Rig Veda*). Gargi, the composer of the *Gargi samhita*, is mentioned in *Yajnavalkya samhita* and *Brihad aranyaka Upanishad* on the occasion of a famous philosophical debate. Visvavara, Sikata, Nivavari, Apala and Visvavara from Atri's family, Angirasi Sarasvati from Angirasa's family, Yami Vaivasvati, Sraddha, Surya, Indrani, Urvasi, Sarama, Juhu and Paulomi Saci all wrote a number of the original Vedic *suktas*, of which all the subsequent Vedic literature constitutes commentaries.

Later in this chapter Krishna will elaborate more about intelligence according to the three *gunas*, and the effects of actions performed under the various types of understanding. Some people believe that all types of understanding or opinions should be equally respected and valued, but this is not Krishna's instruction - in fact it is just the opposite (18.32).

यस्य नाहंकृतो भावो बुद्धिर्यस्य न लिप्यते । हत्वाऽपि स इमाँल्लोकान्न हन्ति न निबध्यते ॥ १८-१७ ॥

yasya nāhaṅkṛto bhāvo buddhiryasya na lipyate | hatvā'pi sa imāṅllokāna hanti na nibadhyate || 18-17 ||

yasya: of whom; *na*: not; *aham kritah*: sense of doership; *bhavah*: nature/ feeling; *buddhih*: intelligence; *yasya*: of whom; *na*: not; *lipyate*: (is) affected; *hatva api*: even while killing; *sa*: s/he; *iman*: this; *lokan*: world; *na hanti*: does not kill; *na nibadhyate*: (and) is not bound (by the reactions).

"One who is not affected by the egotism of identification with the action remains with a clear intelligence. Even if he kills, he does not kill, and is not bound (by the reaction).

The word *ahankrita* ("I have done") is a synonym of *ahankara* ("I am the doer") mentioned several times as the delusion of material identification (2.71, 3.27, 7.4, 12.13, 13.6, 13.9, 16.18, 17.5, 18.53, 18.58, 18.59). This *ahankara* is a material element like the mind, space, air, fire, and so on; as long as we are in the material world we cannot become free from it but we need to learn how to deal with it. This is why Krishna in this verse says *na lipyate*, "is not affected". It is the same with the *gunas* - as long as we are embodied in the material world we will have to deal with the lower *gunas* of *rajas* and *tamas*, because we will come in contact with them regularly, again and again. So the best thing is to learn how to use them without being affected and controlled by them. We can use *tamas* to sleep deeply and rest our body and mind, we can use *rajas* to goad ourselves into action when we risk getting too comfortable and uninterested in investing much effort in our duties. *Sattva* is a quality of balance and tends to detachment, so in contact with *ahankara* or separate identification it could develop a rigidity that is likely turn to *tamas* because of the material obscuration of consciousness.

The solution, as we have already seen, consists in overcoming the identification with material *sattva* as well and elevating oneself to *suddha sattva*, that is the quality of goodness not tainted with material identification. But that means that one should overcome *ahankara*. How to overcome *ahankara*? It would be like trying to overcome water or fire or earth. We cannot become free from these elements, because they are present even in our own bodies. We must recognize that the action is conducted by *prakriti* through the consciousness of the *purusha*, under the direction of the *paramatma*, Purushottama.

We need to use *ahankara* just like we use water or fire or earth - carefully, with intelligence, knowledge and detachment, without being affected by it. We can direct the power of identification towards the transcendental level, in the direction of *atman* or self realization and *bhakti* or devotion to the Supreme. The key to the process is *bhava* (with a second long *a*) that means "feeling, nature", and on a higher level, "consciousness". When directly applied to action, this means we should not have any personal selfish motive, either individual or collective. Collective selfishness means acting for the exclusive benefit of one's family, ethnic group, circle of friends or gang, community, gender, race, nation or even species, without considering the benefit of all others. The concept of selfishness is based on duality, i.e. the mistaken idea that we are separated from other beings and existences, and therefore we can actually get benefit from an action that damages others. To remain free from this delusion we must always consider the benefit for all beings before engaging in any action; the activities strictly connected to our survival, as the killing of aggressors of all kinds and the reasonable and appropriate consumption of food and other resources, are not considered a selfish action because by stopping an aggressor we are actually preventing him from committing a crime, and because our personal existence has a greater value than food and other resources when we are following the instructions of the *shastra* and living for the service of the universal community (*Virata rupa*) and the well being of all creatures (*para upakara*). This is also directly confirmed in verse 5.25: *labhante brahma nirvanam risayah ksina kalmasah, chinna dvaidha yatatmanah sarva bhuta hite ratah*, "Those who see Reality attain the *brahma nirvana* because they have been purified from all faults and have cut off all dualistic illusions, engaging themselves in work for the benefit of all living beings." Verse 12.4 also uses the same words: *te prapnuvanti mam eva sarva bhuta hite ratah*, "they can attain me if they are sincerely interested in the benefit of all beings".

Verse 13.31 is particularly clear: *yada bhuta prithag bhavam eka stham anupasyati, tata eva ca vistaram brahma sampadyate tada*, "When one becomes trained to see all beings as situated in one, even when they are separated, and (how all this) is developed, s/he attains the position of Brahman." Other verses also bring up this concept, further explaining that God is present in all beings as life and consciousness: 5.29, 7.5, 7.6, 7.9, 7.10, 8.4, 8.22, 9.5, 9.8, 9.13, 9.29, 10.20, 10.22, 10.39, 11.15, 11.43, 12.13, 13.16, 13.17, 13.28, 14.3, 14.4, 15.13 and 15.14. Therefore those who act in envy and hatred against other beings are clearly defined as *asuras*: *ahankaram balam darpam kamam krodham ca samsritah, mam atma para dehesu pradvisanto 'bhasuyakah* "Taking shelter in *ahankara*, physical strength, arrogance, lust and anger, they show envy and hatred against me, as I reside in their own bodies and in the bodies of others" (16.18), and *karsyantah sarira stham bhuta gramam acetasah, mam caivantah sarira stham tan viddhy asura niscayan*, "You should know that they are certainly *asuras*, because they foolishly cause suffering and damage to all beings, and to me as well, since I reside within the body" (17.6).

The expression *hatvapi sa imal lokan na hanti na nibadhyate* echoes one of the first instructions given by Krishna: *ya enam vetti hantaram yas cainam manyate hatam, ubhau tau na vijanito nayam hanti na hanyate*, "One who knows this (*atman/ brahman*) does not consider himself to be killing or being killed; in both (positions) he knows that one does neither truly kill nor is truly killed" (2.19). A person who has overcome the illusion of duality and is attached to the benefit to all beings as the cells of one single body will take action to remove only those body parts that are damaging the body as a whole, like gangrenous tissues or cancerous growths.

In this way, he is actually working for the benefit of all other beings, therefore he is not going to suffer an adverse reaction for the "killing" of such cells. Of course forceful removal must always be the last resort: Krishna and the Pandavas amply demonstrated this point in the events of the *Mahabharata* leading to the battlefield of Kurukshetra, where Krishna and Arjuna are now talking for our benefit.

Furthermore, this does not mean that we can hide behind hierarchy and bad orders from our superiors in command, or take the pretext that one type of being is better than another so the existence of the better beings will be improved if we eliminate the "not so good" ones (that are not aggressors). There is no place for cheating or dishonesty in the work for *dharma*.

ज्ञानं ज्ञेयं परिज्ञाता त्रिविधा कर्मचोदना । करणं कर्म कर्तेति त्रिविधः कर्मसंग्रहः ॥ १८-१८ ॥

jñānam jñeyam pariñātā trividhā karmacodanā | karanam karma karteti trividhaḥ karmasaṅgrahaḥ || 18-18 ||

jnanam: knowledge; *jneyam*: the object of knowledge; *pari jnata*: one who understands; *tri vidha*: of three kinds; *karma*: of action; *codana*: the impetus/ the motivation; *karanam*: the instruments (the senses); *karma*: the action; *karta*: the doer; *iti*: thus; *tri vidhah*: three types; *karma sangrahaḥ*: the factors/ components of the action.

"There are three triggers for action: knowledge, the object of knowledge and the subject of knowledge. There are three requirements for action: the instruments for action, the action itself and the subject of action."

The expression *tri vidha* ("of three types") can also apply to the characteristics determined by the particular influence of each of the three *gunas* or modes of material nature, as Krishna has explained in previous chapters. In the next verse Krishna will clearly mention the specific symptoms of knowledge, action itself and subject of the action according to *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*, but we have seen from the previous chapters that also the objects of knowledge (the sense objects) and the instruments of knowledge (the senses of perception and action) are characterized by the specific *gunas*. The best example is the description of the three types of foods and corresponding preferences in tastes in verse 17.7.

In verse 13.3 Krishna had defined knowledge as the knowledge of the *kshetra* (object) and the *kshetra jna* (subject) as well, so in fact we could aggregate the factors of sense objects and senses under the category of the subject of action (*karta*) that Krishna will describe in the next verses. The word *codana* is very interesting. In other contexts, it has been used to indicate "encouragement" or "scriptural instruction" (*codana laksano artho dharma*, "the meaning of dharmic duty is what is indicated by the scriptures", *Purva mimamsa sutra* 1.1.2), but also "motivation", "inducement" and "impetus", "inspiration" or even "subtle manifestation" (as in the blueprint design of a technical device). We translated it as "trigger" but we could also call it "catalyst".

Some people believe that the knowledge of action and the self is not a precise or concrete science and therefore all opinions are good, but this is a very serious mistake. In Vedic civilization and in all pre-abrahamic cultures, people were able to see the strong connection between physics and metaphysics, between the *kshetra* and the *kshetra jna*.

In more recent times, western physicists have become increasingly free from the abrahamic academic prejudice and have proved that at subatomic level, reality does not actually exist until we measure it.

John Wheeler's delayed-choice thought experiment was first proposed back in 1978 using light beams bounced by mirrors, but only 40 years later the procedure was conducted with full success by using a Mach-Zehnder interferometer and ultracold metastable helium atoms, scattered by laser light in a suspended state known as Bose-Einstein condensate. The atoms were ejected until there was a single one left; this chosen atom was then dropped through a pair of laser beams, which made a pattern acting as crossroads that would scatter the path of the atom. Then they randomly added a second pattern that recombined the paths, but only after the atom had already passed the first stage. This second phase led to constructive or destructive interference, which is what would be expected if the atom had traveled both paths, like a wave would do. But when the second pattern was added no interference was observed, as if the atom had chosen only one path: this was taken to mean that the atom had not determined yet its nature before being measured for a second time. Only when the atom was measured at the end of the journey, its wave-like or particle-like behavior was brought to existence.

This confirms Bohr's view that one cannot ascribe the wave or particle behavior to a massive particle before the measurement takes place. Scientists were already surprised about the quantum physics predictions about interference (of the *kshetra jna* on the *kshetra*) when applied to light (which seems more like a wave), but the recent experiment applied the same principle to atoms, that are complicated objects that have a mass and interact with electric fields. A Vedic *rishi* would not have been surprised at all. To keep up with the progress of knowledge in the mainstream scientific research field, we need to become detached from the imperfect and often mistaken information that was peddled to us as absolute unquestionable truths during our early years in school. The same applies to archeology, paleontology and especially history, where records and theories have been manufactured with incredibly biased motivations to hide the actual truth from people.

With reference to *Bhagavad gita* and this verse, we need to understand that reality and action are much deeper than what they appear to be superficially, so we must keep an open mind to consider all the factors. Vedic knowledge is not based on blind faith, but a certain measure of confidence in the teacher is indispensable in order to become able to conduct our own verification experiments in the precise conditions that will guarantee its success. Whimsically neglecting the basic parameters (*sangraha*) that are the basis for the experiment will compromise the procedure and yield different results. Another interesting point to note is that the word *sangraha* is also related to the concept of "understanding", "enlightenment", as "to receive" (the same logical derivation of the Latin word "*data*"), and "collection" (of information or factors).

In the *bhakti* perspective, this verse has been explained as the process of engagement in devotional service, where *jnana* is *sambandha* (the relationship between *bhakta* and Isvara), *jneya* is *abhidheya* (the engagement in active service to Isvara), and *jnata* is *prayojana* (the attainment of perfect union with Isvara). In this regard, these are considered the basic factors that inspire action, while the ingredients of action are the *bhakta* (*karta*), the *bhajana* or active meditation on Isvara (as *karma* or duty according to *vaidhi* or *raganuga bhakti*), and

the *rasa* or *bhava* (sentiment) that constitutes the *siddha deha* or spiritual bodily form of the devotee (including the senses of course). This is confirmed by *Narada pancaratra*: *hrisikena hrisikesa sevnam, bhaktir ucyate*, "Bhakti is defined as using one's senses in the service of the Lord of the senses".

ज्ञानं कर्म च कर्ताच त्रिधैव गुणभेदतः । प्रोच्यते गुणसङ्ख्याने यथावच्छृणु तान्यपि ॥ १८-१९ ॥

jñānam karma ca kartāca tridhaiva guṇabhedataḥ | procyate guṇasaṅkhyāne yathāvacchṛṇu tānyapi || 18-19 ||

jnanam: knowledge; *karma*: action; *ca*: and; *karta*: the doer; *ca*: and; *tri dha*: of three types; *eva*: certainly; *guna bhedatah*: categorized according to the *gunas*; *procyate*: it is said; *guna sankhyane*: by analyzing the *gunas*; *yatha vat*: as they are; *sṛnu*: listen; *tani*: to them; *api*: also.

"Knowledge, action and the subjective factor are certainly categorized according to the three *gunas*. Listen to their enumeration according to their specific qualities.

In this verse the word *guna* is used in its fundamental meaning of "quality", "mode", "characteristic", applied specifically to the three categories of *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*. Similarly, Krishna uses here the word *sankhya* in the most elegant way as a symmetrical indication that remind us about the Sankhya philosophical system of recognizing the nature and qualities of the various components of Reality, introduced in chapter 2 as either spiritual or material (*sat* or *asat*, 2.16).

Now, we should spend a moment to wonder how chapter 2 was entitled to Sankhya, when in fact it only speaks about the *atman/ brahman* as distinct from the material manifestation, and even recommends to become detached from all the various categories of the material universe, that are merely manifestations of the three *gunas* (2.45). The seed of this understanding is contained in a deeper meaning of the subsequent verse: *yavan artha udapane sarvatah samplutodake, tavan sarvesu vedesu brahmanasya vijanatah*, "Whatever value is found in a pond is also found, for all purposes, also in a large lake, and similarly whatever is contained in all the *Vedas* can be found in a person who has realized the knowledge of Brahman" (2.46). This indicates that the analytical knowledge of the various categories of the material universe is not opposite to the science of Brahman, but rather Brahman realization contains all other categories of knowledge and existence.

By overcoming the illusion of duality (2.45, 4.22, 5.3, 5.25, 7.27, 7.28, 15.5), one penetrates the mystery of the non-difference between *purusha* and *prakriti*, as amply elaborated in chapter 13, that also started by Arjuna's questions about *kshetra* and *kshetra jna, jnana* and *jneya* (13.1). This is indeed how Krishna started his teachings in chapter 2, and the same point will continue to be central to the understanding of *Bhagavad gita*, the *Vedanta sutra* and the Vedic hymns as well (13.5). In 13.6 and subsequent verses, Krishna enumerates the categories of reality that are generally considered as the subject of Sankhya, therefore we can see the strong connection between the the two topics - *sankhya* or analytical enumeration of categories of reality, and understanding of the concept of *purusha* and *prakriti*, or *shaktiman* and *shakti*.

The connection between Sankhya and the science of the three *gunas* is illustrated in the descriptions of the creation of the universe, about which Krishna has given a reference in verses 7.6, 9.8, 10.32, 14.3, 15.4. However, to explore the subject further we will have to examine the teachings of the *Puranas*, and especially the *Bhagavata Purana*. In verse 4.11.16 we see for example this statement: *evam pravartate sargah sthiti samyama eva ca, guna vyatikarad rajan mayaya paramatmanah*, "O king, the creation, preservation and destruction (of the universe) occurs by the interaction of the *gunas* of the Paramatma's energy". The subject of primary creation is explained in *Bhagavata Purana* (3rd canto, chapters 25 to 32) by the *avatara* Kapila, the original expounder of the Sankhya system, who also elaborates there about the science of action, especially about prescribed duty and *bhakti*. We give here below a brief summary of that description.

The static combination of the three *gunas*, the three influences of nature, is the aggregate of the elements that compose nature, and is called *pradhana*. These elements are the five gross elements, the five subtle elements, the four internal senses, the five senses of perception and the five organs of action. The five gross elements are earth (energy in the solid form), water (energy in liquid form), fire (energy in the form of heat and light), air (energy in the form of gas) and space. The five corresponding subtle elements are smell, taste, color, touch and sound. The senses of perception are the nose, tongue, eyes, skin and ears, while the senses of action are those that enable us to speak, move, work, generate and evacuate. The internal subtle senses are the mind, intelligence, ego and material awareness. The 25th element is time - the external manifestation of the Godhead that starts and ends creation - while the 26th element is the presence of the soul.

In the beginning the soul is pure, clear and peaceful awareness, free from all distraction, but when it identifies with matter, the principles of creation manifest the various material elements. The false perception of the self focused in goodness manifests the mind. Material identification focused in passion manifests intelligence, with its functions such as doubt, correct understanding, incorrect understanding, memory and sleep, as well as the senses of perception and action, that depend respectively on intelligence and life energy. Material identification focused in ignorance produces the material elements, beginning with the subtle element of sound, that in turn produces space and the sense of hearing. From the existence of space the sense of touch develops, and then air. The interaction of air and the sense of touch produces the concept of the forms of the bodies, determined by the destiny of each individual. The evolution of the forms generates fire (light and heat) and the eyes acquire the ability to perceive forms and colors. The interaction of fire with the visual perception evolves the element of taste, that produces water and the sense that perceives taste (the tongue). Although taste is originally one, it develops in various categories such as astringent, sweet, bitter, pungent, acid and salty, because of its contact with different substances. The interaction of water with the perception of taste develops the subtle element of odor, that manifests earth and the sense of smell. When all these elements become differentiated, the Supreme Lord personally enters the creation together with time, action and the *gunas*, giving birth to the Cosmic Egg. Within the Cosmic Egg, Vishnu, Hari, divides it in 14 planetary systems that compose its body. The parts of the body of the Virat Purusha, the universal Lord, manifest as the various components of nature - the mouth is the power to speak and the Deva of fire, the nostrils are the sense of smell and the *prana*, and so on. At this point the *jivatmans* are introduced in the universe and take birth in accordance to their specific *gunas* and *karma*. In this way we contemplate the Godhead as present in our own body and in the universe and simultaneously distinct from them. When the living being is in this position, he is not subject to the influence of the *gunas*, of the temporary identifications and of the sense of possession, just like the sun remains detached from its own reflection in the water.

सर्वभूतेषु येनैकं भावमव्ययमीक्षते ।

अविभक्तं विभक्तेषु तज्ज्ञानं विद्धि सात्त्विकम् ॥ १८-२० ॥

sarvabhūteṣu yenaikam bhāvamavyayamīkṣate | avibhaktam vibhakteṣu tajjñānam viddhi sāttvikam || 18-20 ||

sarva bhutesu: in all beings; *yena:* by which; *ekam:* one; *bhavam:* sentiment/ nature; *avyayam:* imperishable; *iksate:* s/he sees; *a vibhaktam:* not divided; *vibhaktesu:* in (all) the separated (manifestations); *tat:* that; *jnanam:* knowledge; *viddhi:* you should know; *sattvikam:* in *sattva guna*.

"You should know that knowledge in *sattva guna* sees the one imperishable existence in all beings, undivided although manifesting in many different forms.

The first and truest form of knowledge is based on *sattva*, the quality of existence that is nearest to *sat* and *satyam* - the transcendental existence that is the supreme truth. To better understand this verse, we should remember that the word *bhuta* ("being") indicates a living entity or *jivatman*, and also a form of existence ("being") in which the living entity finds itself in this world as a result of his *guna* and *karma*. Therefore the sattvik intelligence sees all *jivatmans* as cells in the same universal body of the *paramatman* - as one and the same, and at the same time distinct and categorized according to their different functions and positions. Furthermore, such sattvik intelligence sees all conditions of life - *subha* and *asubha*, *sukha* and *duhkha*, etc - as parts of the same great plan for the evolution of the *jivatman*, just like many different classes present various subjects in a single school course for the all-round preparation of the students. Both these perspectives and meanings have been confirmed many times along the text of *Bhagavad gita*.

The word *bhava* (with a long first *a*) is used here to indicate the supreme Being, and with very good reason. We have seen in previous commentaries that this word includes the meanings of "being, state of being, situation, existence, nature", and also "feeling, sentiment, taste," and even "heart" (as in 10.11). Brahman, the Purushottama, is consciousness and existence: *raso vai sah, rasam hy evayam labdhvanandi bhavati*, "He is taste, and by attaining him, one becomes happy", (*Tattirya Upanishad*, 2.7.1).

This definition of *bhava* includes both *atman* and *brahman*, as both are *avyaya* ("imperishable", "eternal"), but this sentiment or knowledge shines brighter when it is not clouded (*na lipyate*) by the cover of separate material identification (no *ahankara* - *na aham krto*) as we have seen in verse 18.17. *Atman* and *brahman* are one, yet they are distinct as the two birds sitting on the same tree; this was confirmed from the very beginning of Krishna's instructions, in verse 2.12. This simultaneous difference and non-difference between *Isvara* and *jiva* is explained not only in terms of quantity, but also in terms of relationship, as we have seen in chapter 13. The *jivatman* is simultaneously *purusha* and *prakriti*, just like Brahman is simultaneously *purusha* and *prakriti*: this differentiation is only functional but it allows the required space for relationships or "dance", epitomized by Krishna's *rasa lila* with the *gopis* in Vrindavana. In that *lila*, the *parama purusha* is Krishna and the *parama prakriti* is Radha, while on the subordinate/ responsive level, the *prakriti* is the *gopi's bhakti*, while the *purusha* is the *gopi's bhava*, that is non-different from Krishna himself.

And in fact we found in chapter 13 a statement that is very similar to the verse we are now studying: *avibhaktam ca bhutesu vibhaktam iva ca sthitam, bhuta bhatri ca taj jneyam grasinu prabhavisnu ca*, "Although undivided, he appears as if he is divided into the many beings where he resides. He is the sustainer of all beings, and is to be known as the powerful Vishnu, who devours everything" (13.17). In turn, that verse connected to the meditation on the Virata Rupa or Kala Rupa, radiant as fire and sun and devouring the universe, that we have seen in chapter 11, especially from verses 11.10 to 11.32, that finally reveal in full splendor what had only been hinted in the previous verses 5.16, 8.10, 10.11, 10.21, and 10.36,

Here is just one example: *divi surya sahasrasya bhaved yugapad utthita, yadi bhah sadrisi sa syad bhasas tasya mahatmanah*, "If thousands of suns were rising simultaneously in the sky, that radiance would be similar to the radiance of the great Atman" (11.12). Again this will be confirmed in verse 13.8, that explains the Sankhya and the unity/ difference of *purusha* and *prakriti*: *jyotisam api taj jyotis tamasah param ucyate, jneyam jnana gamyam hridi sarvasya visthitam*, "He is described as the light in all radiant things, transcendental to darkness. He is established in the heart of everything, and he is to be known through the cultivation of knowledge" (13.18). And what is this great radiance of Brahman, the *brahmajyoti*, if not the emanation of all the *shakti*, *svamsa* and *vibhinnamsa* manifestations of the one great Reality? Therefore those who have true knowledge can see Paramatman existing in all beings: *vidya vinaya sampanne brahmane gavi hastini, suni caiva sva pake ca panditah sama darsinah*, "The wise and learned see equally the *brahmana* who is learned and gentle, the cow and the elephant, as well as the dog and to the savage" (5.18).

The next two verses will illustrate the symptoms of a mind functioning under *rajas* and *tamas*; while we can call the sattvic mode of understanding with the name of "knowledge" (*jnana*) or "intelligence" (*buddhi*), the tamasic mentality does not meet the requirements, therefore this definition will not appear in verse 23. While we study the three types of knowledge (18.20-22), action (18.23-25) and doer or subjective factor (18.26-28) we should remember that these include the position, the instruments and the effort mentioned in verse 18.18. The conclusion of this elaboration (18.30) is that only sattvic persons are able to understand the subject of *sannyasa/ tyaga* and *moksha* that is the focus of this chapter. Then again Krishna will explain about the different types of intelligence (18.31-32), determination or effort (18.33-35), and happiness (18.36-39). After establishing again the importance of the *gunas*, Krishna will describe the duties of the different types or categories of human beings in society according to their *gunas* (18.41-49). Only after that, Krishna will directly discuss about transcending material positions and identifications (*sarva dharman parityajya*, 18.66), while continuing to fulfill one's proper duties (18.56-57) as genuine, pure transcendental devotional service to the Supreme (18.55, 18.58, 18.61-62, 18.64-66). And this is the last conclusion of *Bhagavad gita*.

पृथक्त्वेन तु यज्ज्ञानं नानाभावान्पृथग्विधान् ।

वेत्ति सर्वेषु भूतेषु तज्ज्ञानं विद्धि राजसम् ॥ १८-२१ ॥

pr̥thaktvena tu yajjñānam nānābhāvānp̥rthagvidhān | vet̥ti sarveṣu bhūteṣu tajjñānam viddhi rājasam || 18-21 ||

prithaktvena: because of the distinction; *tu:* but; *yat:* which; *jnanam:* knowledge; *nana bhavan:* many natures; *prithak vidhan:* different types; *vetti:* s/he knows; *sarvesu bhutesu:* in all beings; *tat:* that; *jnanam:* knowledge; *viddhi:* you should understand; *rajasam:* in the *rajas guna*.

"Know that the knowledge influenced by *rajas* is the understanding that sees different natures in all beings as separated from each other.

We have already seen in many verses that the influence of *rajas* creates greed and attachment for the selfish exploitation and enjoyment of material nature. The very concept of selfishness and greed implies duality and separation of interests, as claiming one thing for oneself means that we are preventing someone else from having or accessing it. It is important to understand here that overcoming duality is a fundamental teaching that must be applied to the *bhutas* - the living beings and the conditions of being; one should never fall in the trap of believing that there is no difference between *sat* and *asat*, *dharma* and *adharma*, *vidya* and *avidya*, or that all opinions and "ways of life" are equally valid. It is a question of good sense: anyone can see that a particular action will bring some consequences, and the opposite action will bring the resulting consequences.

A rajasic mentality will shift the discriminating intelligence from choosing the ethically valid action and will bring it to choosing the individual or group that will obtain a separate benefit from the action. Therefore the *karma* ("action, duty") will be seen in terms of antithetical advantage rather than general advantage, based on the particular separate identity of the beneficiary of the advantages contemplated, as if different categories of beings had different natures.

In a sattvic society like the original Vedic civilization (in Satya yuga), people do not have a rigid concept of private property, and certainly they do not apply it to common basic resources such as land, water, animals, plants, or even food. When society is seen as a single harmonious unit of members who cooperate together and share together, each receiving automatically what is required for proper living, there is no crime among human beings - no thefts, no frauds, no violent aggressions.

The idea of charity is aimed at circulating and distributing wealth rather than getting some personal merit (17.20). When *rajas* increases in society, greed, selfishness and attachment develop, and the exploitation mentality creates a scarcity paradigm, the impulse to hoarding up grains and other food supplies, and the clear delimitation and segregation of one's land or territory, family and domestic animals. As a consequence, people feel empty, needy and fearful about the future, and they become worried about their self-defense, because they perceive in others the same seed of fear, the desire for exclusive appropriation, and the anticipation of loss and death.

In the cultivation of knowledge, the difference of opinions moves from complementary to competing and rival; while in Satya yuga there was only the desire to better understand and enlighten each other, in Treta yuga with the increase of *rajas* we see debates starting to develop in order to establish a winner, who thus demonstrates his superiority among other scholars. The study of philosophy and theology becomes separate from elemental sciences, and the concept of linear history appears to disrupt the constant awareness and knowledge of the entire cosmic manifestation, spiritual and material. The divisive feeling creates the different classes of occupation in human society, and a difference of roles and inclinations between men and women. Brought to excess, this rajasic influence becomes unreasonable and detrimental, based on the logic of cutting a piece of cloth from one side of a blanket to add it to the opposite side of the same blanket with the idea of making the blanket bigger, or as the famous saying goes, "robbing Peter to pay Paul".

Bodily identification becomes stronger and birth prejudice develops, creating many sufferings and damages to individuals and to society at large. People become easily confused about the nature of the *atman*, and *upadharmanas* and *nastika darshanas* develop as popular religions to cater to less intelligent and lazier people, who like to believe that the *atman* is temporary or limited to the body (to rationalize and justify their greed), or prefer to simply have a set of rules and celebrations for social interactions and affiliation (to rationalize and justify their superficiality). When *rajas* is further contaminated by *tamas* (ignorance), human society becomes asuric and hellish, as the concept of exploitation and enjoyment of resources becomes disconnected from actual work and resorts to violent aggression and destruction (vandalism, sadism).

We have seen this development described in the chapter about the difference between the *daivi* and *asuri* characteristics: *idam adya maya labdham imam prapsye manoratham, idam astidam api me bhavisyati punar dhanam, asau maya hatah satrur hanisyeh caparan api, isvaro 'ham aham bhogi siddho 'ham balavan sukhi*, "Today I have acquired all this, and I will get even more, as much as my mind desires. This wealth is mine, and it will increase more and more. I have killed that enemy of mine, and I will kill others, too. I am the Lord and master. I am the enjoyer. I am perfect, powerful and happy." (16.13-14). This mentality starts from *rajas* because of the sense of duality and separation, in which one feels that one can obtain pleasure by hurting others, and the sattvic idea of healthy enjoyment of one's legitimate share in a cooperative society is replaced by the selfish accumulation of possessions and power. This selfishness reinforces the *ahankara* (material identification with body and position) and *mamatva* (material attachment to possessions and affiliations), until *abhimana* (arrogance, pride) fills the entire horizon of the conditioned soul, and he cannot see anything else. It is the intrinsic ignorance consisting in material identification that attunes the consciousness with the lowest mode of *tamas*, in which intelligence is completely covered by darkness. This is certainly not the road to liberation.

यत्तु कृत्स्नवदेकस्मिन्कार्ये सक्तमहैतुकम् । अतत्त्वार्थवदल्पं च तत्तामसमुदाहृतम् ॥ १८-२२ ॥

yattu kṛtsnavadekasminkārye saktamahaitukam | atattvārthavadalpaṁ ca tattāmasamudāhṛtam || 18-22 ||

yat: which; *tu*: but; *kṛtsna vat*: as the completion; *ekasmin*: in one; *kārye*: in the action; *saktam*: attached; *ahaitukam*: without reason; *a tattva artha vat*: one who does not give the proper value to reality; *alpaṁ*: very little; *ca*: and; *tat*: that; *tamasam*: in *tamas guna*; *udahritam*: it is described.

"The narrow-mindedness that sees dutiful action in one method only, to which one is irrationally attached, and that does not give the proper meaning/ importance to reality, is described as controlled by *tamas*.

Abrahamic ideologies and their derivatives (such as communism, capitalism, globalism, as well as some sects of originally non-abrahamic faiths that have been contaminated later by abrahamic beliefs and concepts), are the perfect example of tamasic mentality, because each one of them (and each of their sub-sects) presents itself as the only true, genuine, possible or permissible method or way of life, and is openly determined to demonize and destroy all other beliefs or opinions, irrespective of their actual merit and the benefits they would bring to individuals and society. Sectarianism can also be present in other groups and cause friction, lack of mutual respect and even occasional

clashes, but apart from abrahamic sects (and derivatives) there is no historical evidence of any particular ideology forcing people into conversion and systematically engaging in trying to physically eliminate all other ideologies.

We need to understand this point very clearly, because in Kali yuga people are immersed in *tamas* and therefore rather stupid (*manda sumanda matayo manda bhagyah hy upadrutah*, "lazy, foolish, ill-favored by fortune and above all, misguided", *Bhagavata Purana* 1.1.10) and tend to equivocate and confuse things. Sometimes this foolishness and ignorance comes to the point of mistaking beliefs or ideological affiliations for ethnic culture or even racial character, so if we do not accept or respect the dangerously adharmic abrahamic ideologies we are accused of being racist and intolerant of cultural diversity.

Such foolish accusers are not even aware of the meaning of the words "race" and "culture", and they do not understand that a person who converts to any abrahamic sect fails to have his/ her DNA changed. His/ her skin color and face traits remain exactly the same - unless of course we introduce artificial methods such as use of bleach, dyes, cosmetic surgery etc, that can alter the external appearance but certainly not the DNA and genetic configuration and have effect on anyone with no regard to one's particular beliefs and religious practices. Also, ignorant and foolish people do not bother to verify the fact that cultural diversity and ethnic traditions rarely disappear with conversion to a particular religion, and people tend to continue in their particular traditional clothing style, food taste, language, music style, entertainment preferences, and so on - unless of course the religious or government authorities make separate efforts to ban previous ethnic customs and enforce new life styles, and in any case total uniformity (*eka asmin karya*) is extremely difficult to obtain and maintain unless *tamas* is strong and deep enough. So this really boils down to *tamas* again - on how strong it becomes in people.

There are two opposite foolish positions - one says that all opinions and beliefs are equally valid (or equally non-valid), and the other says that only one's own opinion is valid *a priori* simply because one believes in it. Both positions are influenced by *tamas* and remain unable to help the progress and happiness of the individual or society. The actual fact is that there will always be many opinions, some of which have more merit and some have less merit; all these should be individually evaluated based on their degree of intelligence, ethical sense, feasibility and beneficial effects on individuals and society in general.

The merit or demerit of a particular opinion has nothing to do with the social or historical position of the person or persons who proposed it, or even with the sheer number of the people supporting it. Vote by majority is not a guarantee of the value of what is being approved, because a majority of adharmic people, criminals or fools will support what they like best from their own perspectives; sometimes it is said that democracy is like two goats and five wolves voting together about what is for dinner, or even about what is the most righteous diet.

Claiming that a particular opinion has absolute value because "God said so" (to whom? and who will prove it?) or more realistically, because "God's priests said so", is a tamasic proposition and will only be accepted by people who are already influenced by ignorance. Rajasic people will accept an opinion because it suits them (and their personal objectives) and sattvic people will accept an opinion because it makes sense in the light of intelligence and ethical sense, while tamasic people will accept an opinion because of apathy, fear and confusion created by clever manipulative propaganda.

A tamasic mentality is naturally attracted to some particular material object or projection, and sees it at the eternal and perfect Being, the appropriate center of his/her attention, service and worship, but the real problem is that s/he becomes overly attached (*sakta*) and aggressive against all those who do not share the same belief. Such mentality is irrational, illusory, confused and irrelevant to the actual purpose of life or benefit of society. It could be some ideological belief, a religious sect, a social class, a race, or a group of any other kind - even a religious organization, a *sampradaya*, and so on. It could be a powerful person such a politician, a superstar of some kind (cinema, sports, culture, religion, etc) or a fictional character or even a *rakshasa* or evil spirit as we have seen in previous chapters (9.25, 17.4). The influence of *tamas* will compel a foolish person to worship and become very attached (*saktam*) to his/ her center of focus, to the point of supporting it against all logic and good reasons, and with all possible violence, deceit and devious means.

In this verse the words *ahaitukam* ("without reason") and *a-tattva-ārtha* ("no meaning") indicate the tamasic characteristics of no reasoning, blind faith, lack of interest in understanding or discovering reality or facts. The word *alpam* ("minimal") indicates a very narrow minded approach, obsessed with trifles and irrelevant details such as gossip about celebrities, and it can be connected to the expression *duratma* as opposed to *mahatma*. This small vision will - for example - present *yoga* as a health and fitness practice, aimed at stimulating the lower *chakras*, and present *tantra* as a pretext to get cheap sex from foolish followers, eat non vegetarian stuff and drink booze for selfish sense gratification and recreational purposes.

Similarly, the word *karye*, meaning "in what is to be done", can refer to a manufactured form or image, indicating the religious fervor of those who give more importance to the materials and the specific shape of the Deity as an idol of stone, metal or wood, rather than to the divine principle that is manifested in such *vigraha* because of the *bhakti* of the worshiper. Tamasic people who have very little intelligence (*alpa medhasa*, 7.23) will superficially worship the form without understanding it deeply, and therefore the results of such worship will be short-lived and very limited, even if the *vigraha* is one of the various Vishnu tattva forms.

नियतं सङ्गरहितमरागद्वेषतः कृतम् । अफलप्रेप्सुना कर्म यत्तत्सात्त्विकमुच्यते ॥ १८-२३ ॥

niyatam saṅgarahitamaraḡadveṣataḥ kṛtam |aphalaprepsunā karma yattatsāttvikamucyate | | 18-23 | |

niyatam: regulated; *sanga rahitam*: without association; *araga dvesatah*: without attachment or repulsion; *krtam*: done; *aphala prepsuna*: without selfish desire to enjoy the results; *karma*: work; *yat*: which; *tat*: that; *sattvikam*: in *sattva guna*; *ucyate*: it is said.

"That action that is performed in a regulated way, without identification or affiliation, without attachment or repulsion, without a selfish desire to enjoy the results, is described as belonging to *sattva*.

The word *niyatam* refers to regulated actions performed steadily and sincerely, as a matter of duty, as proper beneficial engagement or *sadhana* (*yata*, 2.60, 3.8, 4.21, 4.28, 4.30, 5.25, 5.26, 6.10, 6.12, 6.15, 6.19, 6.36, 6.43, 6.45, 7.3, 7.20, 7.29, 8.11, 9.14, 12.11, 12.14, 15.11, 18.7, 18.9, 18.46, 18.47). Such actions could be sometimes difficult and challenging, but we need to make some effort to remain regularly engaged; even if we are not successful, the amount of effort we invested in the attempt will bring good results - just like in school we must go through our exercises, tests and homework in order to learn and practice and become perfect. In Hindu-Vedic tradition, these

actions are called *nitya karma*, or *nitya karmani* (plural), and constitute the activities that according to Krishna should never be abandoned (18.3).

However, we should not think that such duties are exactly the same for everyone at all times, because the fundamental concept is to engage one's resources and abilities (*guna* and *karma*), and these can be quite different from one person to the other, or even for the same person in different circumstances or stages of individual progress. Therefore we need the wise and knowledgeable guidance of *guru*, *shastra* and *sadhu* to become able to understand what exactly is our duty (*sva dharma*) in each particular circumstance.

We have elaborated several times on the word *sanga*; here we will only repeat that it means not only "contact, association", but also "affiliation, belonging, identification" (*sa-anga*, "member with") as to a particular group rather than to the entire universal body of the Virata Rupa of which we are all parts. So our *sanga* ("association") should be liberated (from all material identifications and attachments) otherwise we should cut ourselves free from it, in order to achieve the level of *mukta sanga* - an essential step towards *moksha* or liberation.

Some commentators translate *raga* as "love" or "absorption", but that is not correct. Love is always a good sentiment and has the power to bring freedom; unfortunately the definition of "love" has been rather inflated and hijacked by using it incorrectly to refer to lust, attachment, sense of possession, attraction, infatuation, enjoyment, and so on. Also, the concept of "absorption" conveys the sense of concentration and meditation that certainly does not need to be abandoned in order to attain *moksha*.

The word *raga* actually means "attachment" and is closely connected to the type of identification (*ahankara*), based on the egotic dualistic separatist perception indicated by its counterpart *dvesha* ("repulsion, hatred"). One who identifies with the material body will be very attached to it and invest a lot of time and effort and resources in trying to keep it in the best possible shape. One who identifies with the mind will be very attached to mental activities - general readings, riddles, crossword puzzles, scholarly pursuits etc - and invest time, effort and resources accordingly. One who identifies with a particular group will be attached to that group or its ideology, and similarly invest and work for it. In all such cases, as material body, mind and group affiliation are temporary, the conditioned soul will experience fear, suffering, despair and confusion at the time of loss, due to death or other factors. The same applies for *dvesha* ("hatred, repulsion") and this is why we should do without them, as indicated by the privative prefix *a* applied to the compound word.

So the only *raga* that should be accepted is the one that has no *dvesha* because it is focused on the Supreme on the transcendental liberated stage. This means that we should become attached to our original and true spiritual identity as *atman*, part of *brahman*, and engage all our potential - time, effort and resources - in pursuing that consciousness and engagement. Since the *atman/ brahman* is eternal and unchanging, there will never be any loss, therefore automatically fear and confusion will disappear.

On that level, we are liberated from the consequences of material action because we do not identify with the action itself or its results and we are not attached to them (*aphala prepsuna*), but we simply accept whatever comes by the grace of the Supreme as *prasadam* or blessing, and use it in the best possible way as a further opportunity for universal service. That is called *visuddha sattva*.

The level of material *sattva* is a sort of preparatory training or internship towards the level of *visuddha sattva* or transcendence; in the language of *bhakti* literature we can define material *sattva* as *vaidhi bhakti* (regulated devotional service) and *visuddha sattva* as *raganuga bhakti* (spontaneous devotional service). While the first is mostly a mechanical exercise and still requires some effort, the second level is free from any friction caused by material contamination, so there is no opposing resistance to the pursuance of our activities.

Again, the platform of material *sattva* must be carefully watched and protected from any contamination, otherwise there is a serious danger of sliding into *tamas* instead of attaining the higher level of *visuddha sattva*.

This can happen due to the influence of ignorance, where *sanga rahitam* is interpreted as "without connections to others or the rest of the world" (as in self-centered egotistic callousness), *a-raga-dvesa* is interpreted as "everything is the same because I don't care" (as in neglect of the basic dharmic values), and *apahala prepsuna* is interpreted as "I don't care what the results of my actions will be" (as in selfish sense gratification, aggression and undue exploitation and misappropriation). These considerations apply both to the individuals and to the groups, including religious communities, traditions or organizations.

यत्तु कामेप्सुना कर्म साहंकारेण वा पुनः । क्रियते बहुलायासं तद्राजसमुदाहृतम् ॥ १८-२४ ॥
 yattu kamepsuna karma sahaṅkareṇa vā punah | kriyate bahulāyāsaṁ tadrājasamudāhṛtam || 18-24 ||

yat: which; *tu*: but; *kama ipsuna*: by one who desires to enjoy; *karma*: work; *sa ahankarena*: with egotism; *va*: or; *punah*: again; *kriyate*: it is done; *bahula ayasam*: with huge efforts; *tat*: that; *rajasam*: in *rajas guna*; *udahrtam*: it is said.

"However, that action that is performed in egotism, or with great efforts, by one who wants to enjoy (the results), is described as influenced by *rajas*.

We have seen that *rajas* is characterized by greed or lust rather than "passion" as generally believed. The dictionary definition of "passion" is "emotion as distinguished from reason", and "intense, driving or overmastering feeling", "ardent affection", "a strong liking or desire for, or devotion to some activity, object or concept". Therefore "passion" is a neutral factor that can be directed also towards *sattva* or even towards the transcendental spiritual level, which contradicts the usage of the definition for the materially attached, greedy and lusty influence of *rajas*. The misunderstanding is probably due to the application of "passion" to the concept of strong desire, mistakenly interpreted as always based on lust and not on love, as a corollary of the faulty interpretation and application of the definition of "love" that we have already discussed. There is a clear and important difference between love and lust, and if we are not able to understand it, we can never progress in the science of spiritual life and Transcendental Reality.

People tend to confuse the two because of ignorance and degradation, enforced through asuric cultural parameters by social convention and ideological propaganda often taking the garb of religious or moralistic teachings. Nonetheless, each human being has the innate capacity of seeing the difference between the two concepts - lust and love - because of his/ her natural ethical sense or conscience, and also in the light of intelligence and good sense. While lust is focused on selfish enjoyment, attachment and desire to possess and exploit, love is

characterized by a spirit of service and self sacrifice, and by the desire to give happiness and pleasure to the object of one's affection. Both sentiments or feelings (*bhava*) are based on emotion rather than on reason, and both can be rationalized and channeled through intelligence and logic. Both can be overwhelming and both are based on desire, but the effects are diametrically opposite, especially for our personal evolution and for the karmic consequences that will be generated. While love is liberating, lust is cause for bondage; while love brings unconditional happiness, lust brings constant suffering and fear.

Some religionists, influenced by the abrahamic ideology that demonizes nature, the body and sense pleasure, claim that there is no such thing as love in the material world, and that what we call "love" is nothing but lust. This is not a fact. Material love exists and is influenced by *sattva*, while spiritual love is influenced by *visuddha sattva*, and lust is influenced by various degrees of *rajas* and *tamas*. By denying the existence and value of sattvic material love, these ignorant religionists are repressing the natural healthy tendency for sattvic happiness and pleasure, but such tendency cannot disappear and will rather become distorted as the confused followers are led to believe that they can have some immediate joys and relationships in this world only through *rajas* and *tamas*, in a perverted selfish and even violent and degrading way. We have seen this automatic mechanism manifest again and again and destroy the lives of innumerable people: we really need to clarify this misconception to save them from serious trouble.

Actual - sattvic - love (including the material love directed to creatures and not just to the Creator) is naturally supported by *dharma* (*satya, daya, sauca, tapas*) and therefore it sublimates desire and even raises it to the level of divinity (7.11), culminating on the platform of *visuddha sattva* into the transcendental passion or ecstasy of *bhakti rasa* and *bhakti bhava* directed to the Supreme Existence, who is also made of feelings: *raso vai sah, rasam hy evayam labdhvanandi bhavati*, "He is sentiment, and by attaining him, one becomes happy", (*Tattirya Upanishad*, 2.7.1). Desire in itself is not a source of degradation, and it can actually be a powerful force for evolution if it is directed and channeled in the correct way.

However, the *kama* ("desire") mentioned in this verse (*kama ipsuna*, 18.24) is not the divine type because it is closely associated with *ahankara* (*sa-ahankarena*), that is precisely the egotistic and selfish identification and attachment that characterizes lust. It is desire and emotion channeled towards exploitation and separation, and will inevitably bring sufferings and damage.

The expression *bahula ayasa*, "with great effort", is directly connected to the concept of *sa ahankara*, "with selfish egotism". It is important to understand that spiritual engagement (*yata, nitya karma*) is supposed to be proportionate and suitable to the individual's capabilities, as confirmed in verse 9.1 *su sukham kartum* ("to be performed happily/ easily"). The concept of *sukham* ("joy") is not condemned in *Bhagavad gita*, rather it is encouraged as a natural aspiration of the living being, that we can legitimately enjoy although we should not get too attached to it (2.15, 2.66, 4.40, 5.3, 5.13, 5.21, 6.21, 6.27, 6.28, 6.32, 9.1, 10.4, 16.23). We will see more about the subject of joy or pleasure in verses 18.36 to 18.39.

It is true that in the course of our sattvic and spiritual duties in this life we must invest some effort and tolerate some difficulties and even sufferings, but we are never required to make efforts that are superior to our strengths or to go looking for suffering deliberately, because there is no intrinsic value in suffering. This idea of suffering as an inherent religious merit, called "penance" and characteristic of the abrahamic ideologies, is actually of asuric origin, as we can see clearly stated in verses 16.9, 16.10, 16.18, and especially 17.19. Therefore the proper path is in the middle - far from the callous laziness and neglect created by *tamas*, and also far from the excessive unnecessary strain and stress caused by the egotic and arrogant attempt to establish one's superiority under the impulse of *rajas*.

We do not need to show off as a big devotee, a staunch renunciate, a strict religionist, or a great personality of some other type, because all this is based on *ahankara* and *bahula ayasa*, and will not impress God or persons who have actually realized Transcendence. At most, such megalomaniac display could win the favor of ignorant and gullible fools and procure temporary followers and wealth, but it is certainly not worth it, because we will not be able to keep up with it, and soon our stamina will dwindle or snap and we will either become a cynical fraud (just keeping up a fake front for "public relations") or we will simply give up the facade and return to ordinary materialistic life as many examples have demonstrated already.

It is not difficult to understand: we can make the example of physical exercise. If we want to attain and maintain a certain level of physical fitness, we need to establish a progressive routine that is within our real possibilities, and practice regularly without straining too much. When jogging, we start with a short distance at a comfortable pace, then we increase very gradually day after day, with a careful observation of the effects on our body and mind, and if necessary we skip one or more days to recover our energies. We do not attempt a 40 km running marathon immediately, without proper preparation, just to impress our friends and neighbors, because if we do that we might end up in hospital with permanent damage, that will seriously restrict our activities in the future, and bring the typical sufferings and confusion that are the result of rajasic actions.

Our duties such as the spiritual *sadhana* and the engagement in professional activities (that can also be considered spiritual service) should be personalized under the direct guidance of an expert teacher, and adjusted according to time, place, circumstances and individual abilities. The impersonalist approach that treats everyone "transcendentally" in an artificial way, without caring to ascertain the actual *guna* and *karma* and level of personal evolution of each individual, is certainly not in *visuddha sattva* but in *tamas*, as we will see in the next verse.

अनुबन्धं क्षयं हिंसामनपेक्ष्य च पौरुषम् ।

मोहादारभ्यते कर्म यत्तत्तामसमुच्यते ॥ १८-२५ ॥

anubandham kṣayam hiṁsāmanapekṣya ca pauruṣam | mohādārabhyate karma yattattāmasamucyate || 18-25 ||

anubandham: of future bondage/ consequences; *kṣayam*: destructive; *hiṁsam*: hateful/ cruel; *anapekṣya*: careless; *ca*: and; *pauruṣam*: not sanctioned by the divine authority; *mohat*: out of illusion; *arabhyate*: is started; *karma*: work/ activity; *yat*: which; *tat*: that; *tamasam*: in *tamas guna*; *ucyate*: it is said.

"Those activities that are cause for bondage, that are destructive, hateful, careless, and fabricated without real knowledge, performed out of illusion, are said to be in *tamas*.

The expression *anu bandham* here is very interesting. The word *anu* means "following, regularly, closely, after someone, connected, related, subsequent", and *bandham* means "bondage". Accordingly, we can apply all these meanings to define the characteristic symptoms of tamasic duty or action. One is "slavery", as the action that is performed because one is forced to do so, by violence, blackmail or because there is simply no alternative. Another obvious meaning is that tamasic activities (or "duties") create negative consequences for oneself and others, as for example the professional occupation of thieves and robbers and cheaters.

Another meaning indicates an activity (or "duty") performed simply out of imitation and conformism, because "this is the tradition" or "it has always been done like this", without really understanding its purpose or significance, and therefore with a very high risk of misconceptions, mistakes and failures. Akin to this interpretation, we can add the scenario of those engaging in professional, social or religious activities because of the gregarious "gang" spirit - something that sheeple normally do when they feel they have found some trendy fashionable group or club that gives them a sense of exclusive belonging and camaraderie.

Another meaning refers to addictive (especially masochistic) or compulsive activities, such as unnecessary and excessive lifelong vows made out of egotism, that may cause unexpected complications and even serious damage in the future, and in the very least will cause guilt, fear, confusion and depression in case one becomes unable to continue the practice because of some unavoidable circumstance. Such pledges are taken without a real evaluation of one's personal strength or purpose of life, and often in a reckless and irresponsible way, but they create bondage and liabilities.

The word *ksaya* means "destruction, loss"; in the same etymological derivation, a *ksha-tra* is "one who protects from destruction". Any activity (or "duty") influenced by ignorance usually causes damages to oneself and others (16.19, 17.6); within the category of destruction we should also include the loss of faith and trust, the loss of innocence and good sentiments, the loss of karmic credit and merit, and the loss of intelligence, good sense and good will. A tamasic conditioning (also called "brainwashing" or "programming") enforced as "training" by family, school, community or organization will weaken the mind of the individual and destroy his/ her potential and chances for future success, and sometimes even the possibility of a healthy normal life with sane relationships and engagement.

A word of caution also to psychologists and psychiatrists who follow the behavioral approach in pursuance of Pavlov's experiments with dogs: a truly scientific mind will first ascertain the reality of the factors before initiating any experiment or procedure. Their methods might be useful with people who are already deeply in *tamas* and need to be treated at the bottom level of consciousness like animals, and mechanically conditioned just to behave properly because they are unable to learn in the normal way, but there are also more evolved human beings with a greater potential (even not fully developed yet, as it is the case with children) who could be harmed by the procedures.

The word *himsa* has been analyzed already in other verses. It means "violence" in the sense of hatred and aggressiveness, cruelty and malice, and desire to hurt and cause suffering. Abrahamic ideologies value corporal punishment and penance, inflicted on oneself and on others, especially after the "ideal example" of Jesus Christ who is shown in an anguished, broken and tortured state of extreme suffering called "passion". This concept develops from the intrinsic hatred towards the body and its natural origin through maternal birth, called "the original sin", from which the believer must be purified through his/ her own suffering or the suffering of a replacement scapegoat. This is crazy *tamas* in a very destructive form, and cannot possibly lead to liberation or spiritual realization. Ignorance normally brings cruelty and callousness, and when carried to the extreme, even delusional madness with all its attending perversions.

The word *anapeksa* means "indifferent, with no consideration"; it was used in a positive sense in verse 12.16, applied to indifference towards the circumstances that could distract us from our proper duty. In this verse the definition is used in a negative sense, applied to indifference towards the action itself - when it is performed sloppily, lazily, absentmindedly, by cutting corners and without sincerity, attention or devotion. It also applies to the indifference towards the sufferings and problems that one is causing to others, as well as to indifference towards the principles of ethics or *dharma*, or decency or goodness.

Another application of the term refers to carelessness in regard to the consequences of the action, its disadvantages and demerits, and its chances of success; this approach may seem similar to the sattvik attitude, but as it is not inspired by selflessness and bravery in the performance of one's duties, it remains on the level of irresponsibility and uselessness.

The word *paurusam* is also very interesting. It refers to the human level, where the material mind can manufacture so many different methods based on assumptions or fantasy, on one's own power and prowess; it is the opposite of *a-paurusam*, a definition used to indicate Vedic knowledge (*apauruseya*, "super-human"), that is realized - directly "seen" - by the *rishis* in its completeness and perfection. In this verse, *paurusam* refers to some activity or duty that has been invented or manufactured artificially, whimsically, without superior reference or scriptural evidence, but to serve some material purposes. This meaning is reinforced by the next term, *mohat*, "out of illusion", that can indicate a delusional perception of our own prowess and powers, by which we cannot really understand whether we are able to perform the action or not.

The combined meanings give an impression of the blind leading the blind, groping around in the dark and still claiming they know perfectly well where they are going - a situation that can easily be recognized in many aspects of the present society, especially in most of the academic fields of psychology, sociology, politics, and so on. The so-called ascending empirical method for acquiring knowledge is not condemned by Vedic civilization, but it is not given excessive value in itself, also because of the vast amount of information and knowledge already available for study.

We can see for example in mathematics and physics that the process of learning makes good use of the knowledge offered by previous scientists, and we happily take advantages of formulas and theorems and "laws" and other universally recognized and accepted milestones of knowledge in such fields, in spite of the fact that they may not be 100% accurate or they may even be disproved by subsequent discoveries. Still, it would be foolish to think that one had to totally rediscover (rather than verifying) personally each and every single piece of knowledge that is presently available thanks to the work of previous scientists.

The word *arabhyate* is also interesting; it literally means "it is started" and refers to the fact that the result of the activity is less important than the act of beginning it. While the conclusion of the activity results from a number of factors and is an accumulated effect of previous attempts, actually initiating an action is a big step that already creates a ripple in the world and in our own karmic territory.

मुक्तसङ्गोऽनहंवादी धृत्युत्साहसमन्वितः । सिद्धयसिद्धयोर्निर्विकारः कर्ता सात्त्विक उच्यते ॥ १८-२६ ॥
 muktaśaṅgō'naḥmāvādī dhṛtyutsāhasamanvitaḥ । siddhyasiddhyornirvikāraḥ kartā sāttvika ucyate ॥ 18-26 ॥

mukta saṅgaḥ: free from all association; *an aham vadi*: without egotism; *dhṛiti*: with determination; *utsaha*: enthusiastically; *samanvitaḥ*: endowed with; *siddhi asiddhyoh*: in success or failure; *nir vikarah*: without changing; *karta*: the doer; *sattvika*: in *sattva guna*; *ucyate*: it is said.

"A person who engages in duty without attachment to association, without egotism, but filled with equal determination and enthusiasm in front of success or failure, is said (to be situated) in *sattva guna*.

The expression *mukta saṅga* was already mentioned in the chapter on *Karma yoga*: *yajnarthat karmano 'nyatra loko 'yam karma bandhanah, tad artham karma kaunteya mukta saṅgah samacara*, "Actions must be performed as sacrifice, otherwise in this world they cause bondage and further actions. Therefore, o son of Kunti, you should perform your activities for the purpose of sacrifice, remaining free from material association" (3.9).

The concept was mentioned again in 2.47 (*sangam tyaktva*), 4.23 (*gata sangasya muktasya*), 5.10 (*sangam tyaktva*), 5.11 (*sangam tyaktvatma*), 11.55 (*sanga varjita*), 12.18 (*sanga vivarjita*), 15.5 (*jita sanga dosa*), 18.6 (*sangam tyaktva*), 18.9 (*sangam tyaktva*), 18.23 (*sanga rahitam*).

The word *sanga* is a compound of *sa+anga*, meaning respectively "with" (*sa*) and "limb" or "member" or "part" (*anga*). It carries the meanings of "union, contact, confluence, togetherness, concluded, complete, with all its parts, sticking, addiction, attachment, sexual intercourse", but also "war, conflict". A closely related word, *sangha*, carries the meanings of "association, society, organization, group, crowd, religious order, church, company, assembly, concrete cement".

It is clear that Krishna is warning us against the problem of identification and belonging with some sort of "*sanga/ sangha*" especially in the matter of actions and duty, and not only because of attachment to the results of our actions. The two things actually go together, because when we choose to maintain a sense of identification and affiliation with a particular group (falling into the illusion of duality of interests) we become attached to the results of our actions as we want to offer such result to the aggrandizement of our particular group, and not to the entirety of society and Consciousness where they should go.

Such a mentality is influenced by *rajas* (*prithak*, "separation", 18.21) and *tamas* (*anu*, "following", 18.25), not by *sattva* or *suddha sattva*, so if someone is trying to peddle such attitude to us as if it was transcendental, we know what to reply. This is particularly serious when someone is trying to enroll or exploit us for the interest of a group (organization, *matha* etc) by using the good name of God ("become a devotee of God") and then they demand that we uniform our beliefs and practices to the policies of the organization because we are "members" and our allegiance and loyalty goes to the organization first, irrespective of God's actual instructions.

Of course we can notice that *sanga/ sangha* can be under the influence of *sattva*, *rajas* or *tamas*; a *sattvik sanga/ sangha* will put the emphasis on the "togetherness" as in "team work and cooperation", rather than on the separatedness of sectarianism, so the results will be dramatically different. A strong influence of *tamas* will not only encourage sectarianism and competition with other groups, but will even cause intolerance, offensive behaviors and physical persecution of other *sanghas*. The more we rise in *sattva*, the better everything becomes; the highest level is the transcendental platform, on which we are united (*sanga*) with the entire Reality (*brahman, paramatma, bhagavan*), and therefore *sanga* becomes *yoga*.

For those who are still struggling with the *gunas*, there are other considerations too. It is said, *krite mantra prayoge va, tretayam tantra sadhane, dvapare vyuha racane, saktih sanghe hi sa kalau*, "In Satya yuga power is found in *mantras* and *yoga*, in Treta yuga power is found in *tantra* and *sadhana*, in Dvapara yuga power is found in strategy and planning, and in Kali yuga it is found in team work".

Even at the lowest level, the strength of *sanga* can be used beneficially on people who are deeply immersed in *tamas* like most of those who live in Kali yuga; by carefully and expertly using the power of *tamas* (*anu*, or conformism) and *rajas* (*prithak*, or sectarianism) under the enlightened guidance of a truly qualified *guru*, otherwise hopeless individuals can be brought to a basic level of human life and acceptable behavior, engaging them in activities that will ultimately create *punya* and increase *sattva* (3.6). But the *guru* must be truly qualified, because what is medicine for someone will be poison for another, and the impersonalist delusion that everyone (or all the individuals whimsically labeled under the same category, without proper verification) should be treated in the same way will certainly cause many casualties and great damage to the entire society.

For neophytes and weak practitioners in the journey of spiritual progress, even the power of *ahankara* and *mamatva* can be channeled in a good direction - *sattva* and *suddha sattva* - by identifying oneself as a devotee of God (especially one's *ista deva*), a *sadhaka*, a *karyakarta*, etc, and by feeling a sense of belonging and possession (association) in regard to God, *guru, shastra, sadhus*, and so on. If such association (*sanga*) is truly qualified and spiritually oriented (in *sattva* or preferably in *suddha sattva*), it will help us rather than obstructing us in our progress, through good example, inspiration, encouragement, instruction, and support. If we truly follow these parameters of *sattva* and *suddha sattva*, even association with individuals that are less evolved than us (such as our own students or subordinates/ dependents) will be beneficial for us, because it will keep good energy (emotion, or *bhava*) circulating in our own consciousness, and this will make us more open to the inspiration and direct instruction from Paramatman. Even popular wisdom says that one can still learn a lot by teaching others.

Sattva or goodness influences us to become free from *ahankara* and *mamatva*, or at least to apply them to the highest and purest level possible, using our position and our resources for selfless service to the Supreme and all beings. When we work in this selfless spirit of service, we find perseverance (*dhṛiti*) and enthusiasm (*utsaha*) in the action itself, because of the satisfaction coming from a work well done and from having found our proper place in the world, filling an adequate job description with our true *guna* and *karma*. This dutiful work is done for itself, without the need to show off or to get support from others or to be pushed. The word *dhṛiti* means "determination,

perseverance, patience", and must be supported by *utsaha*, "enthusiasm", because good results do not come by themselves and we need to keep pushing and trying and applying effort and intelligent work, and we need also to keep doing it with a smile and a proactive approach. We should see difficulties as opportunities rather than obstacles, so that we learn to utilize anything that life and destiny (*daivam*) put on our path. Remaining free from *ahankara* and *mamatva* (*an aham vadi*) is still possible even if we work with determination, enthusiasm and pride, and we get satisfaction and a good livelihood from our activities. We just have to always remember "I am just doing my job", and "I am happy to be of service".

When we are equally disposed towards success and failure (*siddhi asiddhi*), it is not because of indifference or stupidity, but because of a proactive and optimistic approach: we are able to see that each step is valuable in itself and even failure can be used for learning and building future success. This applies both to the success or failure we have already experienced, and also to those future outcomes that appear to be likely or inevitable in the course of the proper performance of our duty. *Asiddhi* means "imperfection" and is a splendid way to consider anything less than perfection, in descending order from 99% to 0%. We assess our position and then work our way upwards, with determination and enthusiasm, catching all good opportunities and shaking off negative feelings, without allowing ourselves to be distracted and misled. Cultivating determination and perseverance means that we must be regular, trying to work out a functional schedule and doing something every day, even if only a little bit, and resuming our efforts with renewed energy if for some reason we were forced to stop.

This is reinforced by the word *nirvikara*, "without change", indicating that once we have taken a decision with intelligence and wisdom, we should stick to our path without second thoughts and without being discouraged by difficulties or losses, because nothing valuable can be achieved without some measure of self sacrifice. Enthusiasm means that we find pleasure in our work (*su sukham*, 9.1) and we invest everything we have into it, without reservations, without hesitation, without holding back and without fear. *Sattva* is the key to long lasting and progressive success.

रागी कर्मफलप्रेप्सुर्लुब्धो हिंसात्मकोऽसुचिः । हर्षशोकान्वितः कर्ता राजसः परिकीर्तितः ॥ १८-२७ ॥

rāgī karmaphalaprepsurlubdho himsātmako'suciḥ | harṣaśokānvitāḥ kartā rājasah parikīrtitāḥ || 18-27 ||

ragi: very attached; *karma phala*: the results of the work; *prepsuh*: intensely desiring; *lubdhah*: greedy; *himsa atmakah*: of a cruel nature; *asucih*: impure; *harsa soka anvitah*: characterized by joys and sorrows; *karta*: the doer; *rajasah*: in *rajas guna*; *parikirtitah*: is declared.

"A person who acts out of attachment for the results of his/ her work, pushed by intense desire and greed, distracted by elation and despondence, without cleanliness or compassion, is described as acting in *rajas*.

We have seen that a *sattvik* person remains balanced and steady in front of the various situations, and can keep a cool mind and nerves of steel - s/he is the fearless leader and advisor who can steer ordinary people out of any type of trouble. Because s/he is not greedy, s/he will live happily with whatever joys, wealth and success are available without too much stress, and consequently s/he will enjoy relatively good health and peace of mind.

A *rajasic* person, on the contrary, will always be in a mental turmoil, tossed here and there by powerful emotions and desires (*prepsuh*), torn between elation and depression (*harsa soka*), victimized by envy and half blinded by the narrow and short vision typical of selfishness. So s/he will be unable to understand that the artificial means that s/he is using today to support his/ her stressful life and achieve immediate goals will ultimately take their toll on physical and mental health, relationships, and even on the opportunities to enjoy the accumulated wealth, properties, positions etc. A *rajasic* person (man or woman) is selfish and this does not make him very popular in spite of all efforts to win a good social position, and certainly he will never be able to have a real satisfactory relationship based on love or affection. When he is asking, "what's in for me?" before even bothering to hear other people speak, he is ruthlessly nipping any good sentiment in the bud, and cutting himself out of any real evolutionary progress because his interest remains nailed to grossly material profit in the form of sense gratification, possession and domination.

The word *ragi* ("attached") indicates lust, that is very different from love, even when it is applied to personal relationships. What to speak of material objects and wealth, a *rajasic* person remains miserable and suffering because no relationships can really satisfy his hunger. He is eating more and more and more, and then vomiting so that he will be able to eat some more - this applies to relationships as well, as we can see in the cases of people who become addicted to superficial sex, flirting and meaningless social life. A miser (*kripāna*) is greedy and avid (*lubdhah*) and envious of the property and success of others, but he is never really enjoying his own property and success, because he is always focused on the next goal and above all, he is afraid of losing what he already possesses. So in the end he suffers more than a true pauper, because at least a person who does not own anything has no fear of losing what he does not have. This is connected also to the expression *himsa atmaka*, that can be interpreted on different levels.

On one level, *himsa atmaka* means "one whose nature is violent and cruel", but we see that usually violent people are also addicted to harming themselves, in some way or another. In a very direct interpretation, we can see that *rajasic* people tend to commit suicide more easily, due to the terribly desperate depression they feel when they lose the object of their attachment - wealth, good name, career, family, a romantic or sexual relationship, the success they aspired to or dreamed of. However, this self-inflicted damage could also be brought about through the abuse of drugs, or by mere stress and excessive mental pressure, the thrill of fear, or by some weird death wish as in the case of those nuts who think it is fun to go swimming with the sharks, climb dangerous cliffs, go bungee jumping or paragliding, drive at full speed at night without headlights or on the wrong side of the road, and so on. Such activities are performed without any benefit whatsoever to society or individuals, but simply to get one's adrenaline pumping and feel "high". Of course the problem is that "getting high" has a descending curve, called "being down"; all forms of intoxication produce side effects called hangover, withdrawal, rejection, de-sensitization or over-sensitization (reverse tolerance), compulsive reactions and dependency. After the pleasurable effect has passed, the addict feels worse than before and in the long run he will need to consume a dangerous quantity of the substance just to feel "normal", and to get the "high" feeling he will usually risk overdosing. The addict will also have very unpleasant hallucinations, desperate depression, anger and violent fits, anxiety, paranoia, schizophrenic tendencies and many other mental disorders; he will feel pains all over the body,

nausea, and a lot of other physical problems mostly due to brain damage and liver damage. This can be observed in different degrees in those who consume addictive substances such as psychotropic or stimulant herbs (from the mild and sometimes beneficial theobromine, caffeine, cannabis, light alcoholic drinks and nicotine, to the stronger and more dangerous datura, psilocibine etc), and even more in an increasingly serious scale with liquors, heroin, morphine and other opium derivatives, cocaine and other traditional drugs normally used for centuries in various cultures, and to more recent synthetic chemical cocktails such as LSD, amphetamines, meth and similar stuff, as well as legal prescription medications, commercial solvents (sniffed by some destitute street children) etc. Interestingly, the same stimulation and similar damage can be caused by some natural substances produced by one's own body - especially the pituitary and other glands - under particular stress or excitement conditions such as danger, fatigue, physical strain etc. These are the neuropeptide endorphins, the hormone adrenaline (also known as epinephrine), and the various dopamine neurotransmitters produced by a particularly rajasic approach to sex, gambling, video gaming, physical exercise, risk/ danger taking, social rewarding, personal attention, psychotropic substance abuse, and even some kind of music.

It is interesting to note that in order to get the dopamine production effect, one does not really need to assume the substance or perform the action - it is sufficient for the mind to anticipate or even remember the consumption or the activity through the internal senses (*antah karana*). Addictions and drug abuse are typical of people who are strongly influenced by *rajas* and *tamas*; the rajasic type uses these substances for stimulation, while the tamasic type uses the same substances to dull down or block unpleasant feelings and emotions or thoughts. In the end, however, both elation and despondency, as well as the obnubilation of all feelings, are cause for suffering and degradation, sooner or later. Of course, there is an even darker category of asuric people who do worse than that, specifically becoming addicted to causing pain and suffering and death to others "just for fun"; the numbers of these unfortunate souls are increasing under the pressure of what goes under the name of "culture" and "entertainment", and the accumulated karmic results will be disastrous.

A person who gives so much importance to sense gratification, acquisition of possession and position, as if they were permanent and could define one's purpose in life through identification and attachment, will certainly be looking at people in an impure way (*asuci*), always thinking about how to get some profit or benefit from them, and will eagerly associate with bad or dirty company if that seems to offer some opportunity for material benefits - which is often the case. This also applies to the contact with material objects and acquisitions, as a rajasic person will not care if his earning is pure or impure - as the famous Roman emperor said, "*pecunia non olet*" ("money does not stink").

अयुक्तः प्राकृतः स्तब्धः शठो नैष्कृतिकोऽलसः । विषादी दीर्घसूत्री च कर्ता तामस उच्यते ॥ १८-२८ ॥

ayuktaḥ prākṛtaḥ stabdhaḥ śaṭho naiṣkṛtiko'lasaḥ | viśādī dīrghasūtrī ca kartā tāmasa ucyaṭe | | 18-28 | |

ayuktaḥ: not engaged/ without connection (to *yoga* or the scriptures); *prakritah*: materialistic; *stabdhah*: stubborn; *sathah*: deceitful; *naiskritikah*: destructive/ harmful; *alasaḥ*: lazy; *visadi*: morose; *dirgha sutri*: procrastinating; *ca*: and; *karta*: the doer; *tamasa*: in *tamas guna*; *ucyate*: it is said.

"A person acting in *tamas guna* is not engaged (in useful activities), he is materialistic, stubborn, deceitful, destructive, lazy, morose, and procrastinating.

The word *a-yukta* is the exactly opposite of *yukta* (2.39, 2.50, 2.51, 2.61, 3.26, 4.18, 5.6, 5.7, 5.8, 5.12, 5.21, 5.23, 6.8, 6.14, 6.17, 6.18, 6.29, 6.47, 7.17, 7.18, 7.22, 7.30, 8.8, 8.10, 8.14, 8.27, 9.14, 9.22, 9.28, 9.34, 10.10, 12.1, 12.2, 17.17), a word that Krishna uses as a synonym of *yogi* (3.3, 4.25, 5.11, 5.12, 5.24, 6.1, 6.2, 6.8, 6.10, 6.15, 6.19, 6.27, 6.28, 6.31, 6.32, 6.42, 6.45, 6.46, 6.47, 8.14, 8.23, 8.25, 8.27, 8.28, 10.17, 12.14, 15.11). By re-reading these verses we will be able to understand the meaning of this definition more deeply.

Yukti, or *yoga*, includes the meanings of "engagement, connection, service, conscious action, purposeful action, relation" and could be considered the opposite of the separatist mentality that comes from the illusion of duality. Among the various meanings of *ayukta* we find "unemployed, unsteady, erratic, disconnected, devoid of basis or foundations, without reference to *shastra* or method, irresponsible, lazy, incomplete". This is confirmed by the verses that directly speak about those who are *ayukta*: *nasti buddhir ayuktasya na cayuktasya bhavana, na cabhavayataḥ santir asantasya kutah sukham*, "A person who is not connected/ engaged (in *yoga*) cannot have the proper understanding. A person who is not engaged (in *yoga*) cannot get any good results, or be able to attain peace. And how can there be happiness without peace?" (2.66), and *yuktah karma phalam tyaktva santim apnoti naisthikim, ayuktah kama karena phale sakti nibadhyate*, "A *yogi* gives up the attachment to the results of activity and therefore attains permanent peace. One who is not a *yogi* becomes tied by the results of the action that s/he desired to obtain through work" (5.12).

The word *prakrita* is directly derived from the word *prakriti* ("nature") as applied to material nature, therefore it indicates a person who sees life as a mere manifestation of material nature, not unlike the animals see it. By itself, this definition is not insulting or negative, but it restricts the intelligence and the activities of the individual to the material level. The word thus contains the meanings of "materialistic, spontaneous, naive, simplistic, sentimentalist, passive, uneducated, illiterate, unrefined". On a deeper level, it can indicate a person who is slave to the nature of the body, i.e. the mind and senses, and focuses his consciousness on their demands only, without caring for the consequences; these two interpretations reflect the qualities of *rajas* and *tamas*. On the other hand, the word *stabdha* is certainly negative. It means "stubborn, rigid, obstinate, arrogant, impudent", and it was used in verse 16.17 to describe the asuric nature. The word *sathat* is even worse, as it means "cunning, deceitful, clever, hiding, cheating, secret, hypocritical".

The word *naiskritika* literally means "undoing", and it indicates a destructive behavior, insulting and torturing others, trying to destroy their livelihood and create problems. It also conveys the meanings of "miserly, mean, passive aggressive, blackmailing". The word *alasa* means "indolent, languid, lazy", while *visadi* means "depressed, morose, negative" - as in Arjuna's feelings in the first chapter of *Bhagavad gita*. The expression *dirgha sutri* means "procrastinating, postponing, goofing out, spacing out", as when one takes a month to to one day's work, or "kills time" with some foolish games. We find further elaboration in *Bhagavata Purana* (1.16.9): *mandasya manda prajnasya, vayo mandayusas ca vai, nidraya hriyate naktam, diva ca vyartha karmabhih*, "Lazy and ignorant/ foolish people, who live only a short life, spend their nights by sleeping and their days by wasting the hours in useless activities".

बुद्धेर्भेदं धृतेश्चैव गुणतस्त्रिविधं शृणु ।

प्रोच्यमानमशेषेण पृथक्त्वेन धनञ्जय ॥ १८-२९ ॥

buddherbhedam dhṛteścaiva guṇatastrividham śṛṇu | procyamānamaśeṣeṇa pṛthaktvena dhananjaya || 18-29 ||

buddheh: of intelligence; *bhedam:* the difference; *dhriteh:* of determination; *ca:* and; *eva:* certainly; *gunatah:* according to the *gunas*; *tri vidham:* three types; *sru:* listen; *pra ucyamanam:* as they are described; *asesena:* in many ways; *prithaktvena:* differently; *dhananjaya:* o Dhananjaya.

"O Dhananjaya, there are also three types of intelligence and determination, according to the *gunas*. Listen, I will describe them.

The word *buddhi* ("intelligence, understanding") has been used prominently in *Bhagavad gita* as a major factor in self realization and progress in knowledge and wisdom towards liberation. Krishna already introduced this concept in verse 2.39: *esa te 'bhihita sankhye buddhir yoge tv imam sru, buddhya yukto yaya partha karma bandham prahasyasi*, "I have explained *Sankhya Yoga* - now listen to *Buddhi Yoga*. O Arjuna, through this application of intelligence and correct understanding you will be released from the bondage of *karma*".

Next he continued to elaborate on *Buddhi Yoga* from verse 2.49 to 2.53, and speaking about the importance of intelligence and understanding, culminating in 2.63: *krodhad bhavati sammohah sammohat smṛiti vibhramah, smṛiti bhṛamsad buddhi naso buddhi nasat pranasayati*, "Anger becomes confusion, and confusion becomes failing memory. Because of the loss of memory, intelligence is lost, and when intelligence is lost, one falls to destruction."

Again Krishna will highlight the importance of using one's intelligence, especially in verses 5.20, 6.9, 6.21, 6.43, 8.7, 10.10, 12.8, 12.14, 15.20. It is interesting that *buddhi* and *dhṛiti* ("determination") are mentioned together in this verse, because intelligence without determination will not be sufficient to carry out the actions to their proper completion, and determination without intelligence is mere stubbornness that will cause us to stick to wrong and detrimental choices.

The word *bheda* means "classification", but also "division, differentiation, separation", and in this sense it can be connected with *viveka*, the discriminating function of intelligence that makes us understand the difference between *sat* and *asat*, between *dharma* and *adharma*, between *vidya* and *avidya*. So on a primary level, *bheda* in this verse refers to the distinction between the three different categories of intelligence and determination according to the three *gunas*, but on a deeper level we see that *bheda* as *viveka* also becomes a factor together with *buddhi* and *dhṛiti*, for the preliminary stage of action when one makes the choice of performing it (*arambha*, 3.4, 4.19, 12.16, 14.12, 14.25, 18.48).

The expression *pra ucyamanam* means "as it is being stated", and refers to the elaboration that Krishna will offer in the next verses and that is presented as particularly accurate by the words *asesena* ("completely") and *prithaktvena* ("distinctly"). It is also interesting to note that the primary meaning of *asesena* is "endlessly", which in this context refers to the innumerable sub-divisions (*prithak*) of the characteristics of the three *gunas* when they couple up and weave into each other.

So besides the basic three modes known as *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas* (that are rarely found in their pure state as they keep interacting with each other), we can have *sattva-sattva*, *sattva-rajas*, *sattva-tamas*, *rajas-rajas*, *rajas-sattva* and *rajas-tamas*, *tamas-tamas*, *tamas-rajas* and *tamas-sattva*. Furthermore, in individual persons (and in material objects and situations) we can also find *sattva-rajas-tamas*, *sattva-tamas-rajas*, *rajas-sattva-tamas*, *rajas-tamas-sattva*, and so so with many (endless, actually, because they also change with time and action) different combinations, where the definition shows the preeminence of one *guna* on the others by the relative position in the compound word. Thus, for example, *sattva-rajas* is a combination in which a person likes to work hard for the good of society, and although he enjoys the dynamism of his engagement and a variety of stimuli for his intelligence, and has a taste for the benefits and pleasures that his work and social position bring, when he has to choose between honesty and success, he will immediately choose honesty and will use his wealth and position selflessly. Conversely, a *rajas-sattva* person will tend to be more self-righteous and take advantage of his position to get some special attention and honors, although he will externally and superficially remain a very refined gentleman and even a philanthropist. A *sattva-rajas-tamas* person will be honestly working for the benefit of society, moderately enjoying the benefits and pleasures connected to such work, but he will be jealous of his privacy and attached to family, clan, ethnic group etc; furthermore, if the occasion arises, he may choose to use his position to give special benefits to those he considers "his own people" even if they are not qualified or deserving. A *sattva-tamas-rajas* person will be a well mannered individual, a good honest worker, but if he has to choose, he will put his own interest before the interest of society, and defend his position fiercely.

Krishna elegantly hints at this mixture of influences inherent in the roles of human society by calling Arjuna with the name of Dhananjaya ("who wins wealth"), referred to the service Arjuna rendered to his brother Yudhisthira especially on the occasion of the Rajasuya yajna, when Arjuna played the role of supreme army commander and followed the roaming horse to the various kingdoms to collect tributes and donations from their rulers as a mark of respect and cooperation to Yudhisthira. This does not mean that Arjuna himself is confused by the influence of the *gunas*; it means that his role in society is inevitably based on a mixture of characteristics that originate from the *gunas*, and therefore he has to deal with them: *na tad asti prithivyam va divi devesu va punah, sattvam prakṛiti jair muktam yad ebhih syat tribhir gunaih*, "There is not even one single person, either in this world or in the world of the Devas, who is free from the influence of the three *gunas* created by the *prakṛiti*" (18.40).

प्रवृत्तिं च निवृत्तिं च कार्याकार्ये भयाभये ।

बन्धं मोक्षं च या वेत्ति बुद्धिः सा पार्थ सात्त्विकी ॥ १८-३० ॥

pravṛttim ca nivṛttim ca kāryākārye bhayābhaye | bandham mokṣam ca yā veti buddhiḥ sā pārtha sāttvikī || 18-30 ||

pravṛttim: engagement; *ca:* and; *nivṛttim:* renunciation; *ca:* and; *karya akarye:* what should be done and what should not be done; *bhaya abhaye:* what should be feared and what should not be feared; *bandham:* bondage; *moksam:* liberation; *ca:* and; *yah:* that; *vetti:* who knows; *buddhih:* intelligence; *sah:* that; *partha:* o son of Pritha; *sattviki:* in *sattva guna*.

"O son of Pritha, sattvik intelligence is when one knows what should be accepted and what should be rejected, what actions should be performed and what actions should not be performed, what is to be feared and what is not to be feared, what brings liberation and what brings bondage.

This verse reminds us, for contrast, of verse 16.7: *pravrittim ca nivrittim ca jana na vidur asurah, na saucam napi cacaro na satyam tesu vidyate*, "Asuras do not have correct knowledge about engagement and renunciation. They have no purity, or proper behavior, or truthfulness." Thus we understand that *asuras* are actually stupid (*alpa buddhayah*, 16.9) and they tend to keep making the wrong choices that will bind them more and more and bring them down to the lowest levels of existence (16.19-20). In this process, *paramatman* is merely allowing them to act through the volition of consciousness (*tan aham kshipami, mam aprapya*): it would be wrong to say that God is responsible for such degradation, or that such hellish existence (*naraka*, 1.42, 1.44, 16.16, 16.21) experienced by the *asuras* is a sort of punishment ordered by God as claimed by abrahamic ideologies. It is all a question of what we do with our free will; as a loving parent, God will simply assist and support us in our educational experiences while we try to get happiness even in the wrong way and against the good advice of *shastra* and *sadhu*.

Also, neither paradise (*svarga*) nor hell (*naraka*) are eternal - no material condition of pleasure or pain is ever eternal, as all joys and sufferings have a beginning and an end, and are caused by the contact of the senses with the sense objects (however subtle and refined): *matra sparsas tu kaunteya sitosna sukha dukkha dah, agamapayino 'nityas tams titiksasva bhārata*, "O Arjuna, the contact of the senses with the sense objects causes joy and distress just like cold in winter and heat in summer. Such feelings are temporary: they come and go, and you should just try to tolerate them." (2.14). Here we can also connect this concept with the statement about what is to be feared and what is not to be feared (*bhaya abhaye*): we should only fear to make the wrong choice, that is *adharma* over *dharma*, because all our bad actions will bring a proportionate consequence in the future, sooner or later, causing further bondage in the cycle of births and deaths. On the other hand, we should not fear death or loss in themselves, because with the proper consciousness we can utilize them for our progress towards liberation. We should never be afraid of God, either, as God is not our enemy. God does not care for the merits or demerits of individuals or groups: *nadatte kasyacit papam na caiva sukritam vibhuh, ajananavritam jnanam tena muhyanti jantavah*, "The all powerful Lord does not consider the good or bad merits of anyone. Whatever happens is only done by the living entities themselves, that are confused because their knowledge is covered by ignorance" (5.15). This means that at any time we can choose to change the course of our life and gradually establish ourselves on a better path. God does not care if someone does not give him allegiance or loyalty or obedience: *samo 'ham sarva bhutesu na me dvesyo 'sti na priyah, ye bhajanti tu mam bhaktya mayi te tesu capy aham*, "I am equally disposed towards all living beings. I do not hate anyone, and I do not favor anyone. Yet, when someone offers me a sincere service in devotion, I also serve them with love and devotion" (9.29). In this perspective, it makes sense to say that God is good and loving.

The words *pravritti* ("doing, following, engaging") and *nivritti* ("renouncing, abandoning") are quite important because they constitute the focus of the balance between the two opposite poles of *sat-asat*, *dharma-adharma*, *vidya-avidya*, and so on. The choice is not between two perspectives or *darshanas* of Reality, or between one belief or another, but between two courses of action that will automatically and naturally bring opposite consequences as fear or fearlessness (*bhaya abhaya*), freedom and bondage (*moksam bandham*), and therefore they should be performed or rejected (*karya akarya*). The laws of the universe do not care about what we believe or do not believe: if we throw a rock against the sky, the rock will come back down with a "vengeance" that is totally neutral and hit a believer just like a non-believer.

Other commentators have defined the two as *vihita* ("proper, established, arranged, ordained, dutiful, determined, destined, ordered, prescribed by *shastra*") and *pratisiddhe* ("improper, omitted, denied, rejected, forbidden by *shastra*"). However, we should not interpret this scriptural endorsement as some kind of sectarian commandments, because that is not the Vedic mentality. The emphasis on the scriptural support is expressed to counteract the tendency of people to rely on social conformism or *laukika sraddha*, that is an opinion held by some or many people but not substantiated by any fact or reliable source - in other words, a popular superstition.

यया धर्ममधर्मं च कार्यं चाकार्यमेव च ।

अयथावत्प्रजानाति बुद्धिः सा पार्थ राजसी ॥ १८-३१ ॥

yayā dharmam adharmam ca kāryam cākāryameva ca | ayathāvatprajānāti buddhiḥ sā pārtha rājasī || 18-31 ||

yaya: by which; *dharmam adharmam ca*: *dharma* and *adharmam*; *karyam ca akaryam*: what should be done and what should not be done; *eva*: certainly; *ca*: and; *ayatha vat*: not clearly; *prajanati*: who understands; *buddhih*: intelligence; *sah*: that; *partha*: o son of Pritha; *rajasi*: in *rajas guna*.

"O son of Pritha, the type of intelligence that does not understand clearly what is the difference between *dharma* and *adharmam*, or what should be done and what should not be done, is controlled by *rajas*.

The primary meaning of this verse is that *rajasic* people do not care about *dharma*, but only about their own material advantage, so they choose to label conclusions and behaviors as *dharmic* or *adharmic* according to their personal interests and beliefs. Similarly, they legitimize their actions, engagements or rejections, on the degree of material benefit they can obtain through them (*kama ipsuna*, 18.24) or the attractiveness of the activity itself (*akusalam kusale*, 10, *istam anistam*, 12) and personal likes and dislikes (*raga, dvesa, lobha, bhaya*).

In our previous commentary we have mentioned the difference between the *shastra buddhi* ("understanding through the scriptures") and the *laukika sraddha* ("popular belief"); the proper understanding of the eternal principles of knowledge as directly seen by the *rishis* ("realized souls") is illuminated by *sattva*, while the influence of *rajas* leads people (*loka*) to develop particular beliefs (*sraddha*) according to their selfish interest. Greed does not apply only to sexual lust or acquisition of money and other material possessions - it also includes subtler forms of sense gratification such as fame, name, adoration, social position, recognitions, honors, etc. It also expands in collective selfishness, greed and aggrandizement as we can see in intolerant sectarian movements or ideologies. This can easily be applied to the distinction between *pravritti* and *nivritti* on several levels of meanings, but in any case the central concept here is *ayathavat*, that means "wrong, not true, not thoroughly understood, incorrect, imperfectly understood". Krishna is giving us the measuring instrument to verify the value of all possible conclusions and behaviors.

One of the important *darshanas* in Vedic tradition is Nyaya, that literally means "logic". So all conclusions and behaviors should be carefully sieved through the mesh of logical arguments, direct verification and examples from genuine scriptures compiled by genuinely realized persons.

We have seen many times Krishna emphatically and explicitly saying that we should overcome the illusion of duality (*dvandva*, 2.45, 4.22, 5.3, 5.25, 7.27, 7.28, 15.5) and he has also repeated the same concept of equal attitude to opposite situations in 2.14, 2.15, 2.38, 2.48, 2.50, 2.56, 2.57, 2.64, 3.30, 3.34, 5.19, 5.20, 6.7, 6.8, 6.9, 6.29, 6.31, 6.32, 12.13, 12.15, 12.16, 12.17, 12.18, 12.19, 13.10, 13.28, 13.29, 14.24, 14.25, 18.50, 18.51.

Unfortunately, people who are influenced by *rajas* and *tamas* remain unable to understand this point correctly, and imagine that the only way to overcome duality is to deny the value of *viveka*, discriminating intelligence. This problem is also created by the fundamental dualistic attitude, by which the individual is expected to become officially affiliated to a particular ideology and pay exclusive allegiance to it, in a form of expanded selfishness also influenced by *rajas*, and therefore gives up the proper use of discriminating intelligence, delegating it to "the leaders" or "the authorities" that are seen as "the guardians of the tradition". We see this problem for example in the dichotomy between the "followers of *dvaita* schools" and "the followers of *advaita*", as if *dvaita* was a totally different reality in opposition of *advaita* and not just a different perspective of the same Reality. These two groups are often mistakenly presented as *pravritti marga* and *nivritti marga*.

In the typically abrahamic approach, the opposite camp is considered not simply mistaken (or "incompletely understood"), but dangerously vicious (i.e. satanic), because allegiance to a particular ideological affiliation is based on the fear of committing the sin of "infidelity" manifested in appreciating the good value of some statement given by the opposite camp. This idea is totally alien to the original Vedic system, where all the various *darshanas* are respected as different perspectives, as long as they agree on the basic - universal and eternal - principles of *dharma* (*sanatana dharma*), that have nothing to do with beliefs or perspectives or the choice of one's *ista devata*. This is the reason why Hinduism is so broad minded: it is not afraid of "heretics" or "infidels" and listens with an open mind to all good ideas: *a no bhadra kritavo yantu visvatah*, "may good things come to us from everywhere" (*Rig Veda*, 1.89.1)

अधर्मं धर्ममिति या मन्यते तमसावृता । सर्वार्थान्विपरीतांश्च बुद्धिः सा पार्थ तामसी ॥ १८-३२ ॥

adharmam dharmamiti ya manyate tamasāvṛtā | sarvārthānviparītāmśca buddhiḥ sā pārtha tāmasī || 18-32 ||

adharmam dharmam: *adharma* (as) *dharmam*; *iti*: thus; *yah*: which; *manyate*: one considers; *tamasa avrita*: covered by ignorance; *sarva arthan*: in all pursuits/ values; *viparitan*: in the wrong direction; *ca*: and; *buddhih*: intelligence; *sah*: that; *partha*: o son of Pritha; *tamasi*: in *tamas guna*.

"O son of Pritha, the type of intelligence influenced by *tamas* believes *adharma* to be *dharma*, and because it is covered by darkness it always chooses the wrong direction in all pursuits.

While rajasic people opportunistically decide what is *dharma* according to their particular selfish material interest, tamasic people consistently mistake *adharma* for *dharma*, and *dharma* for *adharma*. They do not say, "I do not know what *dharma* is", or "there is no *dharma*", but they are actually very strongly opinionated and usually very vocal about what they believe *dharma* is - and therefore they cause the greatest damage to individuals and society, because they keep trying to enforce *adharma* as *dharma* on all others. Just as a passing note, we should remember that the fundamental principles of *dharma* are truthfulness, compassion, honesty, self-control, etc; any "religious teaching" that violates such principles is clearly dictated by *tamas*.

The word *avrita* means "covered", and refers to the darkness of ignorance and stupidity that is almost palpable, like a thick fog on which the tamasic individual or group will project their own blind beliefs. Another application of the word *avrita* refers to a stratification of various layers of dirt, wrong concepts, unfounded or misplaced beliefs, incorrect cultural superimpositions, and contrasting random ideas accumulated during one's various experiences. The point is that such concepts remain separated and opposite, without any attempt at reconciling them in a meaningful harmonious picture; they are simply superimposed without proper discrimination even if they show a veritable monster - like a stack of photo slides or transparencies of an object seen from different positions and perspectives.

The expression *yah manyate* ("he thinks") summarizes the entire problem of ordinary unfounded and unverified opinions, either one's own or someone else's, presented as actual facts or truth. Usually such opinions are created from a superficial observation devoid of actual knowledge, as when a simple-minded person sees a machine functioning or a vehicle moving, and thinks that the object is acting independently, without an operator.

The expression *sarva arthan* literally means "all meanings, all purposes, all values" and applies both to theory and practice. The word *viparitam* ("wrong direction") is also very interesting; it expresses the idea of "totally opposite, upside down", where perception is exactly the opposite of reality. Now, making some mistakes on the path is not a very serious problem, because we can learn and correct ourselves and become even stronger and wiser than before, but going in the wrong direction is a big problem that should be addressed as quickly as possible, to avoid wasting a lot of time and energies. We should not be afraid of abandoning a wrong path, if after sufficient correct experimentation along a reasonable length of time, we actually see it is leading us in the opposite direction.

The sectarian blind ideological allegiance by which which one only accepts good ideas from a particular line is certainly different from the determination of honestly and seriously following a method by applying all the genuine requirements. Once a student has chosen a *guru*, s/he should stick to the method faithfully and apply it without cutting corners, but questioning should always be encouraged (*pariprasnena*, 4.34). An intelligent student does not close his/ her eyes "out of loyalty" in front of apparent contradictions or mistakes or inconsistencies in the teachings or behaviors of the *guru*; a student has not only the right but also the duty to ask relevant questions (respectfully but clearly) to verify whether s/he has misunderstood something. A genuine *guru* should happily welcome such questioning as a good opportunity to help the student to understand how theory and practice should be applied to the various circumstances of time, place and recipient, and if any mistake had really been made out of distraction or other reasons, the genuine *guru* will be eager to correct the mistake. Otherwise, the student should understand that the *guru* is not genuine, and that there is no fault or offense in abandoning a false *guru*.

The preposterous misconception of blind ideological allegiance, that is nothing else but intolerant sectarianism and blind faith, has been compounded by mainstream academia that was founded and directed for many centuries as a propaganda tool for abrahamic expansion and society control; in the first schools and universities of the present era, all students had to take clerical vows in the Christian church (hence the words "clerk" and "clerical work" applied to scribes) as all others were forbidden to learn to read and write.

The church would then pick the most clever and faithful by indoctrinating them and verifying their beliefs through exams before giving them further knowledge with which to control society for the benefit of the church - mostly as priests and other echelons of the church itself, but also as school/ university teachers, intellectuals, writers and translators, medical doctors, lawyers and notaries, magistrates and judges, diplomats and advisors to kings.

It is high time to liberate Hinduism from such disastrous influence and restore it to its pristine and genuine glory; this must be done by separating (*viveka*) what is actually Vedic knowledge and instructions from what is merely a stratification of dirt - not unlike the process of washing a baby and throwing out the dirty bath water. In this light, the repeated instructions by Krishna about removing oneself from *sanga* (as a corollary of *ahankara* and *mamatva*) are particularly valuable (2.47, 4.23, 5.10, 5.11, 11.55, 12.18, 15.5, 18.6, 18.9, 18.23, 18.26). We must liberate ourselves from the fear of not being "loyal enough" to one party or another, one group or another, one school or another, one lineage or another, one organization or another, one tradition or another, because this fear is an obstacle to real progress and evolution. It stops us from recognizing good things as good and bad things as bad, irrespective of who said or did them, and certainly this approach does not lead to liberation.

धृत्या यया धारयते मनःप्राणेन्द्रियक्रियाः । योगेनाव्यभिचारिण्या धृतिः सा पार्थ सात्त्विकी ॥ १८-३३ ॥

dhṛtyā yayā dhārayate manahprāṇendriyakriyāḥ | yogenāvyaabhicāriṅyā dhṛtiḥ sā pārtha sāttvikī || 18-33 ||

dhṛitya: determination; *yaya*: by which; *dharayate*: that sustains; *manah prana indriya kriyah*: the activities of the mind, the *prana*, and the senses; *yogena*: through the practice of *yoga*; *avyabharinya*: without interruption; *dhṛitiḥ*: determination; *sah*: that; *partha*: o son of Pritha; *sattviki*: in *sattva guna*.

"O son of Pritha, the sattvik determination is that which sustains the dutiful activities of the mind, the *prana* and the senses through the practice of *yoga* without interruption.

We can see from this verse that Krishna applies the definition of *yoga* to all the dutiful activities that a human being performs with mind, *prana* and senses. The practice of *astanga yoga* ("eight-limbed engagement") consists of eight parts: *yama*, *niyama*, *asana*, *pranayama*, *pratyahara*, *dharana*, *dhyana* and *samadhi*, and all these can be applied equally to all methods such as *hatha*, *kriya*, *raja*, *karma*, *jnana* and *bhakti*. Actually these are all perspectives of the same approach of "union" with the Supreme, as all definitions of *yoga* are merely attendant practices to the central and fundamental meaning of *yoga*. *Buddhi* or *vidya* includes *jnana*, *vijnana*, *sankhya*, *sannyasa* and *moksha*, explains the truth about *prakṛiti* and *purusha*, shows the *visva rupa* and warns us about the effects of the *gunas* and the symptoms of *daivi* and *asuri* natures. It also possesses the attributes of *taraka* and *vibhuti*, and leads us to the realization of Purushottama through *bhakti* in proper dutiful action or *karma*. It is therefore very important to apply *sattvik viveka* to our understanding of *yoga*, otherwise *sattvik* determination will be applied to *rajasic* or *tamasic* understanding, and the results will not be so good. For example, many unqualified teachers of *yoga* merrily skip over the fundamental requirements of *yama* and *niyama*, and carefully avoid to tell their students what *dhyana* and *samadhi* are supposed to be, while Patanjali himself starts his *Yoga sutras* by dedicating the entire first chapter to discussion about *samadhi* and *atman/ brahman* realization as the sole purpose of *yoga*.

There is not one single verse in Patanjali's *Yoga sutras* that states that the purpose of *yoga* is to lose weight or relieve stress or treat the various physical diseases through *asanas* and *pranayama*, or to see pretty lights and colors in one's mind. Various technical exercises in meditation and purification of *nadis* and *chakras* have been added to the tradition of *yoga* by a number of teachers on the basis of their own experience, but under no circumstances such literature or teachings can be considered on a par with the original *shastra* of *yoga*, and certainly they should not be presented under the label of "the best/ true *yoga*" as methods to achieve mere physical fitness or relieve stress so that one can carry on with a materialistic life where no *yama* or *niyama* are applied.

Reference to sufferings is there (*Yoga sutras*, 2.11-2.16) but simply to state that it must be addressed in the mind only, by detaching oneself from it. *Bhagavad gita* is more specific about practically addressing physical problems, but it only recommends attention and moderation in working, eating and sleeping: *yuktahara viharasya yukta cestasva karmasu, yukta svapnavabodhasya yogo bhavati duhkha ha*, "For one who consciously controls his food intake, who is controlled in moving around, makes controlled efforts in performing one's duties, and is regulated in sleeping and keeping vigil, *yoga* becomes the destroyer of sufferings" (6.17).

Rather, the fundamental definition of *yoga* is to control and eliminate the modifications of consciousness (*yogas citta vritti nirodhah*, *Yoga sutras*, 1.2) in order to focus it on the pure *atman/ brahman* (*tada drastuh sva rupe avasthanam*, *Yoga sutras*, 1.3) by dropping all other identifications (*vritti sarupyam iti ratra*, *Yoga sutras*, 1.4) and overcoming mistaken perceptions (*vrittayah pancatayah klista aklistah - pramana, viparyaya, vikalpa, nidra, smritayah*, *Yoga sutras*, 1.5, 1.6) including all the fantasies and projections of the mind based on false knowledge (*viparyayo mithya jnana a tad rupa pratistham*, *Yoga sutras*, 1.8). All imaginative visualizations are therefore excluded very explicitly by Patanjali: *sabda jnana anupati vastu sunyo vikalpah*, "Descriptions or knowledge of things that are devoid of actual reality are called fantasies (and as such, they should be abandoned)" (*Yoga sutras*, 1.9).

The only two genuine methods to achieve the purpose of *yoga* are emotional detachment and constant practice of meditation on the *atman* (*abhyasa vairagyabhyam tan nirodhah*, *Yoga sutras*, 1.12) together with the direct meditation on Isvara (*tat param purusa khyater guna vairisnyam*, *Yoga sutras*, 1.16) or simply devotion to Isvara (*isvara pranidhanad va*, *Yoga sutras*, 1.23). One should be very wary of any *yoga* teacher who is trying to make things more complicated than this, especially in Kali yuga when human beings need to simplify processes and make them more practical and useful for the limited possibilities of the people of this era.

The word *dharayate* in this verse obviously refers to *dharana* ("to hold"), that is the constant practice of focusing the consciousness on the desired object of meditation. Some preliminary exercises for neophytes include contemplation of a lamp light or a *mandala* or *yantra*, but

in any case one should avoid using imagined forms such as random geometrical shapes, ordinary material objects or similar distracting forms, either gross or subtle. This *dharana* can be performed successfully only if the previous limbs of *astanga yoga* have been fully mastered, from *yama* and *niyama* (abstentions and practices) to *pratyahara* (withdrawing the senses from sense objects).

We will briefly summarize them here: *yama* consists of *ahimsa* (non violence, including strict vegetarianism), *satya* (truthfulness and honesty), *asteya* (abstention from misappropriation and excessive consumption of resources), *brahma acharya* (behaving like *brahman*), *aparigraha* (not accepting gifts or payments), while *niyama* consists of *saucha* (cleanliness and purity, including ritual purification and *samskaras*), *santosha* (renouncing the search for sense gratification and possessions), *tapas* (tolerating difficulties in the performance of one's duties) and *svadhyaya* (study of the scriptures about *atma vidya* and *brahma vidya*). Without being firmly established in these practices, the "mastery of *asanas* and *pranayama*" has no meaning, because it will only apply to the body and will have no effect on the mind, and in some cases it can even have adverse effects, such increase of blood pressure, physical pain etc, apart from the lamentable increase in egotism (*ahankara*) and arrogance (*abhimana*).

Many people misinterpret the purpose of *asana* and *pranayama* (and the various *kriyas*) as some sort of entertainment exercise or party trick, in which we show people our stomach dancing in its cavity or we produce thin cotton cloth streaming into our mouth and out from our nose, or we exhibit our body twisted up into a pretzel, or precariously balanced in awkward and exotically strange positions. But the meaning of the word *asana* is "sitting place", and the purpose of the *asana* is to sit in meditation; the variety of the positions and movements has the only purpose to train the body to remain still and quiet, so that it will not disturb or distract one from meditation - the focusing of consciousness on the *atman/ brahman*. This is confirmed by other commentators to this verse with the expression *nirbheda brahma anusandhana*, "becoming united with *brahman* without any difference/ disruption". The sensationalist physical demonstrations offered by some *yogis* are merely meant to impress and attract the simple minded and foolish people, and to inspire a measure of awe and reverence for the ability to do extraordinary things; a serious student of *yoga* is not distracted by these gimmicks. Similarly, the word *pranayama* means "control of the *prana*", and it is done *through* the control of breathing - it is not the mere control of breathing itself. Just like the balanced stillness of the body is conducive to the steadiness in focusing the mind, *prana* circulation and breathing must be reduced and ultimately stopped in order to facilitate the cessation of all the modifications of the mind (*yogas citta vritti nirodhah*, *Yoga sutras*, 1.2). Exactly the same must be done with the senses through *pratyahara* (literally "directing the consumption by removing"), which includes not only the practice of restricting the amount of food consumed by the mouth and stomach, but also all the other "food for senses" that is hearing, seeing, touching, smelling and remembering and desiring (through one's *antah karana* or internal senses).

This does not mean total abstention but rather control and detachment (5.8, 5.9) and is confirmed by verses 6.16 and 6.17 and especially by this verse with the expression *manah prana indriya kriyah*, "the activity of mind, *prana* and senses". This control should be constant, unbroken, stable, free from deviations as expressed by the word *avyabhicari*, meaning "firmness, no change, no adulteration". In the approach called *isvara pranidhana* by Patanjali, this *avyabhicarini bhakti* means *samadhi* as *suddha bhakti*, or devotion that is not touched by any other consideration except love and service for the Supreme.

यया तु धर्मकामार्थान्धृत्या धारयतेऽर्जुन । प्रसङ्गेन फलाकाङ्क्षी धृतिः सा पार्थ राजसी ॥ १८-३४ ॥

yayā tu dharmakāmārthāndhṛtyā dhārayate'ṛjuna | prasaṅgena phalākāṅkṣī dhṛtiḥ sā pārtha rājasī || 18-34 ||

yaya: by which; *tu*: but; *dharma kama arthan*: *dharma*, *kama* and *artha*; *dhṛitya*: the determination; *dharayate*: that sustains; *arjuna*: o Arjuna; *pra sangena*: because of attachment; *phala akanksi*: one who desires the results (of the actions); *dhṛitiḥ*: determination; *sah*: that; *partha*: o son of Pritha; *rajasī*: in *rajas guna*.

"O son of Pritha, that determination that sustains *dharma*, *kama* and *artha* because of the desire for their benefits is (produced) by *rajas guna*.

It surely takes a lot of determination to engage sincerely and regularly in the hard work required to achieve success in *dharma*, *artha* and *kama*. Vedic civilization does not condemn such pursuits but rather describes them as *purusha arthas*, "purposes of life", as the *purusha* is the living consciousness that inhabits the body. For such work to be really successful in this life and in the next, one has to start with *dharma*, otherwise the results will be ultimately disastrous, even though superficially it may seem that benefits are reaped more quickly and easily without concerns for *dharma* (18.31).

In transcendental *suddha sattva*, every action is a sacred offering in the union with the Supreme: *yat karosi yad asnasi yaj juhosi dadasi yat, yat tapasyasi kaunteya tat kuruva mad arpanam*, "O Arjuna, whatever you do, whatever you eat, whatever you sacrifice, whatever you give, whatever you endure in the performance of your duties - do it for me" (9.27). On the material platform, the difference between *sattva* (14.6, 14.16, 17.11, 17.17, 17.20, 18.9-10, 18.20, 18.23, 18.26, 18.30) and *rajas* (14.7, 14.17, 17.12, 17.18, 17.21, 18.21, 18.24, 18.27, 18.31) is that in *sattva* one works selflessly for the benefit of all beings, in full knowledge and consciousness, without being distracted by joys or sorrows, while in *rajas* one works to acquire wealth, sense gratification, position, power, for oneself or one's own group, and remains attached and identified with the results of actions. Religious activities performed under the influence of *rajas* also remain material and create bondage.

The expression *pra sangena* again highlights the *sanga* ("contact, association, affiliation, belonging") as the main factor of the action prompted by *rajas*. It is the selfish separation of interests (*prithaktvena*, 18.21) by which one separates himself and his group from the rest of the universe, and therefore from the body of the Virata rupa and the supreme absolute consciousness of the Brahman. It is interesting to note that in this verse Krishna lists first *dharma* and then immediately *kama* before *artha*; this indicates that under the influence of *rajas* the acquisition of valuable pursuits is merely directed to personal sense gratification and desires. In *sattva*, the acquisition of valuable things is directed to the benefit of the entire society and community of beings, and therefore *kama* is created and obtained automatically for all, without any separate effort, as it actually should be. This is the key to genuine success: *karmanah sukritasyahuh sattvikam nirmalam phalam, rajasas tu phalam dukkham ajnanam tamasah phalam*, "They say that *sattva* gives immaculate results as properly performed duties, while *rajas* produces distress, and *tamas* produces ignorance" (14.16).

यया स्वप्नं भयं शोकं विषादं मदमेव च ।

न विमुञ्चति दुर्मेधा धृतिः सा पार्थ तामसी ॥ १८-३५ ॥

yaḥ svapnaṁ bhayaṁ śokam viṣādaṁ madameva ca । na vimuñcati durmedhā dhṛtiḥ sā pārtha tāmasī ॥ 18-35 ॥

yaya: by which; *svapnam*: dreaming; *bhayaṁ*: fear; *sokam*: complaining; *visadam*: negativity; *madam*: delusion/ madness; *eva*: certainly; *ca*: and; *na*: not; *vimuncati*: one gives up; *durmedha*: stupid; *dhritih*: determination; *sa*: that; *partha*: o son of Pritha; *tamasi*: in *tamas guna*.

"O son of Pritha, the determination that is in *tamas guna* is characterized by stupidity and cannot go beyond dreaming, fearfulness, lamentation, moroseness and illusion.

This is certainly the type of determination that we can observe most commonly among the people of our times. Even people who consider themselves as staunch dharmic activists will rarely go beyond mere lip service or idle theorizing and protesting. When some actual practical proposal is offered, they shy away and disappear. In Kali yuga people are immersed in *tamas* and therefore rather stupid (*manda sumanda matayo manda bhagyah hy upadrutah*, "lazy, foolish, ill-favored by fortune and above all, misguided" (*Bhagavata Purana* 1.1.10), and *mandasya manda prajnyasya vayo mandayusasya ca vai, nidraya hriyate naktam diva ca vyartha karmabhih*, "These lazy, foolish and ignorant people are weakened by bad health; they spend their nights sleeping and their day engaging in pointless activities" (*Bhagavata Purana* 1.16.9).

Rakshasas and human *asuras* are very eager to take advantage of the situation, because stupid people can be controlled more easily, like sheep that passively remain in queue at the slaughterhouse munching on some fodder although they can see their companions dragged away and killed. This is because they are offered *svapna* or dreams and fables (such as the description of the pleasures of paradise, surrogate happiness through consumers' goods and services, fictional heroes and adventures in movies, etc) and *bhaya* or fear (the imaginary torture of hell and the very real torture and persecution in this very lifetime), *soka* by creating one crisis after another to distract people and make their lives more miserable (so that they do not have time or energy for anything more than mere survival) and by offering scapegoats to blame and hate (so that they do not try to find out the real cause for their unhappiness) by and *mada*, encouraging intoxication and addictions through a subtly manipulative balance of prohibition, shame and guilt. As Orwell put it: convincing people that ignorance is strength, freedom is slavery, war is peace, oppression is love, victims are the offenders, and truth is whatever you are told to believe from time to time.

Tamasic ideologies have always treated the mass of people like sheep (hence the neologism "sheeple"), even shamelessly calling their own leaders as "shepherds", and time and again they have sacrificed many innocent creatures (human and non-human) in their blood holocausts for the sadistic pleasure of the evil beings they worship. The main instrument they have used in these last 3000 years to keep the people in *tamas* is the imposition of collective stupidity and ignorance, especially through the physical destruction of books, libraries, teachers, schools, universities, and the prohibition to cultivate any knowledge that is not strictly under their control; this principle has been applied more or less thoroughly in different periods and regions proportionately to the social, financial and military power acquired by such ideologies. In their scriptures we find many openly anti-intellectual statements condemning not only wisdom, intelligence and knowledge but even the direct experience of "one's ears and eyes" that dare to oppose the complete and blind obedience to the official ideology.

In Europe, even the teaching of basic reading and writing was prohibited for many centuries, from the 300s to the 1600s, reserving this privilege to priests and monks, who were the only people allowed to keep libraries. Ordinary people (*laymen*, or "non-clerics") were forbidden to read even the Bible independently; translations in vulgar (popular) languages were strictly prohibited and translators were burnt at the stake for their disobedience to the law. Intellectuals and even kings tried to oppose this tyranny, but only in the 1400s with the Italian and French Renaissance the situation started to improve thanks to the patronage of wealthy aristocrats, who through corruption were able to put some of their own people on the papal throne. However, the recovery has been very gradual, long and difficult and still today it is incomplete, as the abrahamic ideology has been inculcated so deeply in the collective subconscious, that even those who try to remove its influence from culture and society continue to subconsciously carry its fundamental concepts as if they were objective truths, or the only possible truths. For example, we see many atheists (by definition "people who do not believe in the existence of God") that merrily engage in insulting God (a God they externally claim does not exist) and surmise *a priori* that all religions are contrary to the natural ethics and conscience, and have the purpose of dumbing, brainwashing, oppressing, enslaving and exploiting people in this life with a false promise of future happiness in paradise. At present, it is very clear that only a solid, deep, vast, consistent, practical, scientific and ethical ideological system such as the original Vedic civilization and knowledge has the intrinsic power to solve the problem and save human society from complete disaster.

All tamasic ideologies stupidly try to solve problems by applying the same faulty mechanics that created the problems in the first place (18.32). For example: to cope with the problem of unwanted teen pregnancies and sexual abuse of children, schools introduce compulsory sexual education - but instead of trying to prevent the exploitation of children by warning them about the dangers, the program rather actively engages pre-teens in learning how to have sex in all possible ways. This, coupled with the obsession about sexual prowess and attractiveness ("sexiness") as general status symbols advertised by media and society, creates a pressure on children to demonstrate that they are "cool" by having more sex even if their hormonal development has not created any sexual desire yet.

Similarly, to address the problem of widespread criminality, the government privatizes the prison system with contracts with commercial companies that demand a guarantee of 90 to 100% "occupancies" in their establishments, so that police and magistrates are pressurized into convicting larger numbers of people, including children, even for very mild misconduct cases. In these jails, convicts are exposed to a very harsh life and association in which they learn to become actual criminals, and subsequently after their release they are rejected by the job market because of their criminal records - and have no other option but applying their newly mastered skills to make a living. The "war against drugs" is conducted by deliberately pumping people from early childhood with all sorts of toxic substances - from fluoride in the water and toothpaste to chemical additives in fast food, to heavy metals in vaccines and strong medications (such as Ritalin) for the so-called attention deficit disorder - and giving a high position as valuable commercial and cultural goods/ services to addictive substances and behaviors such as alcoholic beverages, caffeine, nicotine, engagement in gambling, obsessive sex, video gaming, and so on.

This is reinforced by the application of emotional manipulation techniques and by proposing unrealistic standards of social acceptability and life objectives. Wasting resources, "killing time" and avoiding any real useful work are considered symptoms of high-class position in society, and nothing seems too stupid when it comes to spending money and "having fun".

The dumbing down trend of TV programs, music lyrics and styles, literature, media news, comedy, popular jokes, feature films and general entertainment is considered normal. From early childhood, people are made to believe that it is "cool" to dedicate time and attention to watching professional sports games and soap operas and serials, following the gossip and private lives of celebrities, or getting obsessed with cars and motorcycles, physical fitness, fancy diets, fashion and trends, commercialization of relationships (especially through "celebration of special days" by purchasing and gifting consumer's goods), commercialization of personal value (through status symbols such as career position, academic titles, attractiveness of one's wife, personal physical fitness and attractiveness, down to the model of one's car and the cost of one's shoes and clothing), so-called reality shows, game shows, street magicians shows, systematic media disinformation, and a superficial use of social media and electronic gadgetry. However, the disastrous performance of students in schools and adult illiteracy are blamed on the introduction of the teaching of Darwin's theory of evolution, that is contrary to the tenets of abrahamic ideologies and therefore "immoral".

To cater for the basest taste of the public and the adrenaline junks, cinema producers favor the glorification of actual criminality, especially by creating terrifying cult characters and multiple sequels about psychologically diseased individuals who horribly torture and slaughter innocent people, more graphically disturbing with every new movie, so that they consider a symptom of success if the spectators end up feeling sick to their stomachs. But if anyone is putting up some kind of protest, they are not objecting to Jason or Freddy - they are objecting to Harry Potter.

Other typical tamasic approaches are the "one way only" method (18.22) with an hypertrophy of legislation and law enforcement and bureaucracy, by which everything that is not compulsory becomes forbidden and illegal, also creating an overgrowth of unproductive and pointless professional positions dedicated to complicating simple things and harassing good people. To give themselves some importance and confuse the gullible, these useless administrators often come up with preposterous and whimsically invented methods (18.25) in the hope they will somehow work, and applying more of the same if it becomes clear that they are not working. And over and above all, there is the general blame game in which everyone is whining, cursing and complaining about others without really knowing who or what is actually responsible for a particular problem - and without ever engaging in practical proactive work.

The dreaming (*svapna*) mentioned in this verse is not simply the excessive importance given to ordinary sleeping dreams and daydreaming (that in moderate amounts are generally good for one's health), but it can also be applied to fake "meditation" practices invented by people who are not qualified by proper knowledge and realization.

The overpowering presence of *svapna* in tamasic societies is also observed in the hypertrophy and excessive importance given to commercial advertisement, fictional stories with no practically useful contents, all forms of virtual reality, cosplay, internet gaming, internet *avatars*, computer generated special effects, and so on, while *mada* indicates not only the intoxication of wine and liquor, but also all kinds of addictions and delusions, including plain madness.

सुखं त्विदानीं त्रिविधं शृणु मे भरतर्षभ ।

अभ्यासाद्रमते यत्र दुःखान्तं च निगच्छति ॥ १८-३६ ॥

sukham tvidānīm trividham śṛṇu me bharatarṣabha | abhyāsādramate yatra duḥkhāntam ca nigacchati || 18-36 ||

sukham: happiness; *tu*: but; *idanim*: now; *tri vidham*: three types of; *srnu me*: listen to me; *bharata rshabha*: o best among the descendants of Bharata; *abhyasat*: by practice; *ramate*: one enjoys; *yatra*: where; *duhkha antam*: the end of sufferings; *ca*: and; *nigacchati*: one attains.

"O best among the descendants of Bharata, there are three different types of happiness. Now hear from me how by practice one can obtain pleasure and put an end to sufferings.

Everyone seeks happiness: this is the nature of the soul, that is also called *anandamaya*, "made of happiness". Although the *atman* is pure *sat*, *cit*, *ananda*, the conditioned *jivatman* keeps running around in the attempt of finding pleasure in the external world. However, in this verse Krishna does not use the word *ananda*, but the word *sukha*, that is usually accompanied by its polar opposite *duhkha*, "suffering". Therefore we are dealing here with that type of happiness that one obtains through action in the world of the *gunas*. The expression *abhyasat* means "constantly, acquired by practice", and indicates that the pursuit of all types of happiness is not an instant fix but requires a certain amount of effort and work.

What is this material happiness? The acquisition of pleasure and the cessation of suffering. At the most basic level, happiness is just the absence of suffering, especially physical pain, that can be really overpowering and erase everything else from one's consciousness. However, even physical suffering can be experienced in a different way according to our individual level of evolution and training; the human body has the power to deliberately cut off the painful feelings in order to continue to work for a higher purpose, and conversely one's mental attitude towards pain can also make it much more unbearable through emotional reinforcement and identification.

In this last section of *Bhagavad gita*, Krishna is still talking about the all-encompassing power of the *gunas* in this world, because as long as we have a body and a mind, we need to deal with them and use them properly. This is a very important field of knowledge: *ya evam veti purusam prakrtim ca gunaih saha, sarvatha vartamano 'pi na sa bhuyo 'bhijayate*, "One who knows the *purusha* and the *prakriti*, as well as the various ways of the *gunas*, will not take another birth, irrespective of his/ her situation" (13.24). After explaining the three types of happiness, Krishna will comment: *na tad asti prithivya va divi deve su va punah, sattvam prakriti jair muktam yad ebhish syat tribhir gunaih*, "There is not even one single person, either in this world or in the world of the Devas, who is free from the influence of the three *gunas* created by the *prakriti*" (18.40).

We can also remember a very similar statement in chapter 7: *daivi hy esa guna mayi mama maya duratyaya, mam eva ye prapadyante mayam etam taranti te*, "This divine energy of mine manifesting as the three *gunas* is very difficult to overcome, but those who take shelter in me can cross over this illusion" (7.14). Here is the redeeming path: while we continue to negotiate the *gunas* in this world, in our bodies and minds, we must keep our consciousness, desires, identifications and attachments on the transcendental level, that is the supreme

Reality of *atman/ brahman*: *ye caiva sattvika bhava rajasa tamasa ca ye, matta eveti tan viddhi na tv aham tesu te mayi*, "You should know that certainly all those forms of existence created by *sattva*, *rajas* and even *tamas* come from me alone, but I am not in them: rather, they are in me" (7.12). Verse 7.12 was accompanied by another wonderful statement, that shows us the proper way to tread: *balam balavatam caham kama raga vivarjitam, dharmaviruddho bhutesu kamo 'smi bharatarsabha*, "O Arjuna, I am the strength of the strong who is free from selfishness and attachment. In all beings, I am the desire that is not contrary to *dharma*" (7.11). This divine dharmic desire is the pursuit of happiness in the true and correct direction, and is based on love rather than selfish lust; the highest object of love is certainly the Supreme Personality of Godhead, and we can start developing this love first of all by hearing or reading about his activities for the support of *dharma*. This was already clearly stated in chapter 4: *yada yada hi dharmasya glanir bhavati bharata, abhyutthanam adharmasya tad atmanam srijamy aham, paritranaaya sadhunam vinasaya ca duskritam, dharma samsthapanarthaya sambhavami yuge yuge, janma karma ca me divyam evam yo vetti tattvatah, tyaktva deham punar janma naiti mam eti so 'rjuna*, "O Arjuna, whenever *dharma* declines and *adharm* rises, at that time I manifest myself. I personally descend *yuga* after *yuga* to protect the good people, destroy the evil doers and re-establish *dharma*. 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." (4.7, 4.8, 4.9). This is the truest method to attain happiness and the cessation of sufferings: *mam upetya punar janma duhkhalayam asasvatam, napnuvanti mahatmanah samsiddhim paramam gatah*, "Having attained me, they do not have to take another birth in this world, that is the cause of sufferings and impermanence. Such great souls have already reached the highest level of perfection" (8.15).

यत्तदग्रे विषमिव परिणामेऽमृतोपमम् । तत्सुखं सात्त्विकं प्रोक्तमात्मबुद्धिप्रसादजम् ॥ १८-३७ ॥

yattadagre viṣamiva pariṇāme'ṁṛtopamam | tatsukhaṁ sāttvikam proktamātmabuddhiprasādam || 18-37 ||

yat: which; *tat*: that; *agre*: in the beginning; *viṣam iva*: like poison; *pariname*: at the end; *amrita*: nectar; *upamam*: similar to; *tat*: that; *sukham*: happiness; *sattvikam*: in *sattva guna*; *proktam*: it is described; *atma buddhi*: the understanding of the self; *prasada jam*: derived from the satisfaction.

"That happiness that seems like poison in the beginning but is nectar at the end is described as sattvik in nature and is born from the understanding of the self and the satisfaction of the mind.

The most direct meaning of this verse refers to *sadhana*, the deliberate engagement of body, mind and senses in the practice of spiritual consciousness and action, dropping all other concerns at least for the time regularly scheduled for meditation: *sankalpa prabhavan kamams tyaktva sarvan asesatah, manasa ivendriya gramam viniyama samantatah, yato yato niscalati manas cancelam ashiram, tatas tato niyama itad atmany eva vasam nayet*, "Completely abandoning all the desires and plans arisen from the mental processes, one should control the mind and all the senses by regulating them from every side. The mind is unsteady and impatient to wander around. Every time and wherever it runs off, one should bring it back under control and regulate it so that it remains controlled in the *atman*." (6.24, 6.26).

This is also exactly how Patanjali defines *yoga*: *yogas citta vritti nirodhah*, (*Yoga sutras*, 1.2) *tada drastuh sva rupe avasthanam*, in order to focus it on the pure *atman/ brahman* (*Yoga sutras*, 1.3) *vritti sarupyam iti ratra*, by dropping all other identifications (*Yoga sutras*, 1.4) and overcoming mistaken perceptions i.e. *vrittayah pancatayah klista aklisah - pramana, viparyaya, vikalpa, nidra, smritayah* (*Yoga sutras*, 1.5, 1.6).

It is important to understand that one does not need to abandon the dutiful activities, which include some amount of planning and desiring in order to become successful - just like Arjuna needed to focus on strategy while engaging in the battle at Kurukshetra. Many times Krishna has explained that one should renounce not the action itself, but the selfish attachment to the results of the actions (2.47, 2.64, 3.3, 3.4, 3.5, 3.7, 3.8, 3.9, 3.25, 3.26, 3.28, 3.30, 3.31, 3.33, 4.14, 4.15, 4.20, 4.21, 4.23, 4.24, 4.37, 4.41, 5.2, 5.10, 5.12, 5.13, 5.14, 6.1, 7.29, 7.30, 9.28, 12.11, 12.12, 12.14, 13.21, 18.2, 18.6, 18.7, 18.8, 18.9, 18.17, 18.23, 18.30). Thus we understand that the practice of *sadhana* allows in learning how to control the mind and focus it (*dharana, dhyana, samadhi*) on the precise subject we want to examine, without assisting it to run off in other directions: *vyavasayatika buddhir ekeha kuru nandana, bahu sakha hy anantas ca buddhayo 'vyavasayinam*, "O Arjuna, the intelligence that is constantly focused is the only true one in this world. Those who do not concentrate disperse their intelligence in innumerable minor ramifications" (2.41).

When we have a strong and sincere consciousness of dutiful activities performed as a service to the Supreme, every small action becomes transcendental and worthy of our full concentration: *yat karosi yad asnasi yaj juhosi dadasi yat, yat tapasyasi kaunteya tat kurusva mad arpanam*, "O Arjuna, whatever you do, whatever you eat, whatever you sacrifice, whatever you give, whatever you endure in the performance of your duties - do it for me" (9.27). And again: *gata sangasya muktasya jnanavasthita cetasa, yajnayacaratah karma samagram praviliyate*, "One who has finished with all associations and whose consciousness is firmly established in knowledge, worships Yajna (Vishnu) as all his actions become devotional service. The entirety of his *karma* is thus destroyed." (4.23)

To practice *yoga* one does not need to remove himself from family and society and abandon his duties. In the beginning, one must make some extra effort to find a place and time alone (6.10, 13.11) to learn to concentrate without distractions, but the purpose is to attain the direct realization: *naiva kincit karomiti yukto manyeta tattva vit, pasyan srinvan sprisan jighrann asnan gacchan svapan svasan, pralapan visrijan grihmann unmisan nimisann api, indriyanindriyarthesu vartanta iti dharayan*, "One who is a *yogi* thinks, 'I am not the doer of anything'. One who knows the truth engages in the activities of seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, eating, going, dreaming, breathing, talking, leaving, accepting, opening and closing one's eyes, but s/he sees that the senses should naturally be engaged in the sense objects and s/he does not identify with them." (5.8, 5.9). This is the way to engage the *gunas* in the *gunas*: *tattva vit tu maha baho guna karma vibhagayoh, guna gunesu vartanta iti matva na sajjate*, "O Arjuna, one who knows things as they really are is able to understand the various qualities and activities, and therefore he engages the *gunas* in the interaction with the appropriate *gunas*: this awareness keeps him free from attachment" (3.28).

The word *prasada* found at the end of this verse (*prasada ja*) was already explained at the beginning of Krishna's instructions: *raga dvesa vimuktas tu visayan indriyais caran, atma vasyair vidheyatma prasadam, prasade sarva duhkhanam hanir asyopajayate, prasanna cetaso*

hy asu buddhiih paryavatisthate adhigacchati, "A person who has become free from the attraction and repulsion for the objects of the senses, maintains the control of himself in his actions and regulates himself (in body, mind and senses) obtains satisfaction. This *prasadam* (blessing) brings about the destruction of all sufferings, gives peacefulness to the mind, and quickly establishes the proper understanding." (2.64, 2.65).

विषयेन्द्रियसंयोगाद्यत्तदग्रेऽमृतोपमम् । परिणामे विषमिव तत्सुखं राजसं स्मृतम् ॥ १८-३८ ॥
visayendriyasamyogadyattadagre'mṛtopamam | pariṇāme viṣamiva tatsukhaṁ rājasam smṛtam || 18-38 ||

visaya: the objects of the senses; *indriya*: (and) the senses; *samyogat*: from the union; *yat*: which; *tat*: that; *agre*: in the beginning; *amrita upamam*: comparable to nectar; *pariname*: at the end; *visam iva*: like poison; *tat*: that; *sukham*: happiness; *rajasam*: in *rajas guna*; *smrtam*: it is remembered.

"That happiness that comes from the contact of the senses with the sense objects is like nectar in the beginning and like poison in the end, and is described as due to *rajas guna*.

Learning how to be satisfied with what comes naturally and to peacefully enjoy the healthy dharmic pleasures can be difficult in the beginning because it takes some training. A small child tends to be selfish because his survival requires constant cares and attention from adults; he feels pleasure and laughs when his needs are met, and feels pain and cries when his needs are not attended to.

In such a helpless situation there is not sufficient space for other considerations in his consciousness, except for the constant feeling of insecurity and fear. According to the Vedic system of civilization, a child is pampered until 2 or 3 years of age, when s/he becomes able to understand the connection between actions and their consequences. At that point his/ her family members generally start to educate the child by precept and not only by example as they had already been doing from before his/ her birth. Still, the child is usually not punished for his/ her mistakes and his/ her security or self image is never threatened. After the completion of 5 years from birth, children were sent to live in the home of the *guru* for their education; the *guru* and his wife became their foster parents and the other students became their siblings for a variable number of years according to their individual possibilities.

Because of the new environment and the many interesting opportunities for engagement, children could easily forget any previous bad habits and the excessive familiarity they had developed with their lenient family members. Still, in the house of the *guru* the student was treated with much affection and care, and never mistreated or punished severely; discipline never used any corporal punishments or other methods that could harm the healthy self-respect of the child. Particular emphasis was given to developing the actual potential of the child with positive reinforcements and recognitions, and especially with peer pressure and healthy competition among students, who were encouraged to associate closely in small groups based on age and talents or inclinations.

Apart from the academic learning, students were gradually trained in engaging in tedious menial services such as house chores, and to observe strict discipline in regards to meals and leisure occupations. For example, they were taught they could take food only by sitting together and after taking permission from the *guru*, and consume only the foods permitted by the *guru*. All the students proudly wore the same austere clothes and attire of the *brahmachari*, and roamed around in groups to collect forest products (wood, fruits, herbs etc) and alms from the village people (grains, etc) to present to the *guru* for communal use in the *ashrama*; in this way through peer pressure they learned how to behave responsibly, properly, politely and selflessly in all circumstances.

For those who did not have the good fortune of being educated in a genuine *gurukula* (which today means practically the entirety of the global population, except a very small number of people), this training in sense control will have to be self-taught at a later age. Still the principle is the same, and we can find the proper instructions in *Bhagavad gita*. This verse warns us about attachment to sense gratification, that is pleasurable in the beginning but ends in frustration. The word *samyoga* means "engagement, service, meditation, contemplation" and indicates the deliberate choice of focusing one's attention on sense gratification rather than on one's duty and on the consciousness of one's true identity (which is the meaning of *brahma achara*). This is quite different from the healthy and appreciative enjoyment of the good things that naturally come to us in the correct performance of our duties.

We can make a very good example with couple relationships: marriage should be based on love and duty, and not on sense gratification and lust, otherwise after a short infatuation period there will be nothing left when physical attraction dwindles. Then the troubles start, because pregnancy is the natural consequence of sexual union, and if a relationship was simply based on sense gratification, the husband will feel he has been somewhat replaced by the child in his wife's attentions, and the physical and mental changes of motherhood may make the wife less sexually attractive. The daily life routine and duties will become tiresome and boring and the couple will start blaming each other to the point of resentment and spite, and often the man will make himself scarce, sometimes seeking sexual gratification from other women.

We can see the root problem through the word *visa* ("poison") used in this verse together with its derivate *visaya* ("sense objects"). A poison may not be instantly recognizable when we drink it and actually it could taste sweet, but soon it will affect our health, destroying our strength and intelligence, making us lose consciousness and finally killing us. This applies to all types of sense gratification, that can be healthy only if consumed sparingly and carefully and in the correct way; a poison often can also act like a medicine, but it must be taken in the proper dosage and in the specific circumstances, otherwise it will have the opposite effect. A great example is salty, sour or spicy food, that was mentioned in verse 17.9 as characteristically loved by rajasic people; in small quantities and in the appropriate bodily conditions and environment (season etc), these ingredients can be extremely beneficial to our health, but if we consume them in excess they become addictive and gradually destroy our health.

The same applies with the sensations of heat and cold that were also brought as an example of sense gratification early in chapter 2: *matra sparsas tu kaunteya sitosna sukha duhkha dah, agamapayino 'nityas tams titiksasva bhārata*, "O Arjuna, the contact of the senses with the sense objects causes joy and distress just like cold in winter and heat in summer. Such feelings are temporary: they come and go, and you should just try to tolerate them without being confused and distracted from your duty" (2.14). We certainly enjoy cold things in summer

such as ice cream, chilled drinks and dips in cool water, and warm things in winter, such as warm fire, warm bed, contact with warm bodies, hot soup and food etc. But we do not like cold things in winter and hot things in summer; in fact the same items that gave us so much pleasure in one season will make us suffer in the opposite season. Therefore an intelligent person will simply journey through these ups and downs without being attached to either, but accepting them in moderation when they are favorable to his/ her service in the performance of his/ her proper duties.

यदग्रे चानुबन्धे च सुखं मोहनमात्मनः । निद्रालस्यप्रमादोत्थं तत्तामसमुदाहृतम् ॥ १८-३९ ॥

yadagre cānubandhe ca sukham mohanamātmanah | nidrālasya pramādottham tattāmasamudāhṛtam || 18-39 ||

yat: which; agre: in the beginning; ca: and; anubandhe: and in future consequences; ca: and; sukham: the happiness; mohanam: delusional; atmanah: about the self; nidra: sleep; alasya: laziness; pramada: madness; uttham: arisen from; tat: that; tamasam: in tamas guna; udahritam: it is said.

"That happiness that is based on illusory identifications from the beginning to the end, and is born from sleep, laziness and madness, is said to originate from tamas guna.

This verse clearly states that the happiness offered by *tamas* is merely oblivion and loss of consciousness about oneself - not only about the real self or spiritual *atman*, but even one's material identification. Some people say, "ignorance is bliss", and in fact we can see that on the level of *tamas*, total illusion and madness can give a sort of happiness to the confused soul, that is unable to perceive his actual position and degradation. For a drug addict or a drunk in the gutter their stupor gives a temporary cessation of suffering and a delusional feeling of happiness, and only someone else can usually see their real plight. Even when the anesthetic effect of their intoxication vanishes and they suffer horribly both in mind and body, their consciousness remains covered by delusional identifications and attachments, and they are unable to improve their condition. As *gunas* and *prakriti* are always in movement, there will be some brief flash of self-awareness even in the most degraded human being, but that moment will be exactly the opposite of happiness, and the only way out from that terrible predicament will be a new birth in an animal body, where the conditioned soul will be able to stop harming himself and to start "detoxifying".

For a pig, happiness is all about rolling around in smelly mud and finding some tasty excrements to eat; this perfectly agrees with the set of senses and the type of mind and body he has naturally acquired, and his activities will not be self-destructive and self-inflicted as in the case of the junkie. If an animal suffers, it is trouble coming from outside, that will consume his past *karma* and not create more bad *karma* for the future; the duration of this experience depends on the specific individual's karmic baggage and if we try to engage a pig on a more sattvik level of life, he will feel alienated and possibly even get angry at us.

There is no point in trying to change his nature; although we should not mistreat him, we should not waste time and energy to educate him either. This is why Krishna tells us not to confuse the minds of people who are immersed in *tamas*: *na buddhi bhedam janayed ajnanam karma sanginam, josayet sarva karmani vidvan yuktaḥ samācāran*, "A person who has knowledge should not confuse the understanding of the ignorant who are attached to their actions, but should rather help them to engage in all activities in a spirit of cooperation, giving a good example personally" (3.26).

Of course there is a huge difference between a pig and a human being, as *manusya jati* (human birth) already contains the potential for education and evolutionary progress to a level that lower animals can never attain; however such evolution must be a personal choice and cannot be imposed from the outside. All external help should come in the form of assistance in positive and proactive engagement, that will counteract the tamasic tendency to laziness and favor an increasing influence of *rajas* or greed. In very rare and exceptional cases, the power of transcendental contact can raise a conditioned soul out of tamasic stupor, but even in that case the purification and progress must be performed through active engagement in practical useful service so that s/he will sweat off all traces of *tamas*. Otherwise, a relapse is inevitable.

In this verse, the word *anubandha* refers to future binding consequences, and can be translated "in the end" like in the two previous verses we have seen the word *parinama*, that literally means "transformation" (as in *parinama vada*, "the doctrine of transformation"). This indicates that both *sattva* and *rajas* imply a change or transformation - one for the better, the other for the worse - while *tamas* is an immobilizing factor, like the ropes or shackles that bind a prisoner (*anubandha*).

As we have seen, intoxication or *pra mada* ("what makes one crazy") is a major cause/ effect for *tamas* to obliterate self-awareness; this can be applied to all types of addictions and behaviors that remove our consciousness from the perception of reality, including the adrenaline highs that drown other feelings and numb the brain. However, the same effect is easily obtained by obsessive identification and attachments as in *moha* ("illusion"), inertial inaction, callousness and irresponsibility to the point of catatonic condition as in *alasya* ("laziness"), and simply a self-reinforcing habit of excessive sleep as in *nidra* ("sleep"). In all these conditions, the deluded soul seeks permanent happiness and not merely a temporary relief from fatigue, and therefore he "hates Mondays" and dreams of a lifelong vacation in which he will not do anything but all his needs and pleasures will be provided by someone else's work.

We find very similar statements in Krishna's instructions to Uddhava: *sattvikam sukham atmottham, visayottham tu rajasam, tamasam moha dainyottham, nirgunam mad apasrayam*, "Happiness in *sattva* is found in the self, happiness in *rajas* is found in sense objects, and happiness in *tamas* is found in illusion and degradation. However, transcendental happiness is found in me" (*Bhagavata Purana* 11.25.29). We should remember here that by "me" Krishna means the supreme Consciousness and Reality known by the names of Brahman, Paramatma, Bhagavan.

In this regard, we can observe the distinction between the *atman* mentioned for *sattva* and the *paramatman* mentioned for *visuddha sattva*: the perception of *atman* ("self") can vary according to the degree of *sattva* or goodness, and is indicated by the legitimate etymological use of the definition *atman* to refer to the spiritual consciousness and *purusha*, the *jiva*, the mind and even the body. So we are to understand that all types of happiness that we can find in ourselves without looking for external sources are sattvik and good for us.

However, as the *gunas* constantly revolve in the wheel of *samsara*, even sattvik happiness is not permanent and if we want a permanent solution and position we need to rise above all *gunas*: *traigunya visaya veda nistraigunyo bhavarjuna, nirdvandvo nitya sattva stho niryoga ksema atmavan*, "The knowledge of the three *gunas* is based on the sense objects only. O Arjuna, you should become detached from all these three *gunas*, and situate yourself in that pure goodness that is not subject to change. One who knows the *atman* becomes free from all dualities and finds protection in detachment." (2.45).

न तदस्ति पृथिव्यां वा दिवि देवेषु वा पुनः । सत्त्वं प्रकृतिजैर्मुक्तं यदेभिः स्यात्त्रिभिर्गुणैः ॥ १८-४० ॥

na tadasti pṛthivyām vā divi deveṣu vā punaḥ । sattvaṁ prakṛtijairmuktam yadebhiḥ syāttribhirguṇaiḥ ॥ 18-40 ॥

na: not; *tat*: that; *asti*: there is; *pṛthivyām*: on the earth; *vā*: or; *divi*: in the sky; *deveṣu*: among the *devas*; *vā*: or; *punaḥ*: again; *sattvam*: existence; *prakṛti jaih*: born from nature; *muktam*: free; *yat*: which; *ebhiḥ*: from these; *syat*: there will be; *tribhir gunaih*: three *gunas*.

"Neither on this earth nor in the heavens among the Devas, one's existence can be free from the influence of these three *gunas*, that are generated by nature.

In this verse, the expression *divi deveṣu* is quite interesting. The word *diva* literally means "sky", "luminous", "glittering", and is used to refer to the higher planetary systems, where everything is radiant - bodies, land, buildings etc - as the material elements are illuminated by *sattva*, with a small influence of *rajas* and almost complete absence of *tamas*. The expression *tat sattvam*, divided at the beginning of each of the two lines, means "that existence" or "that mind", indicating that Svargaloka is a higher dimension of life but it is still within the material realm under the rule of the mind.

Materialistic people often confuse heaven with the spiritual dimension, but these are not exactly the same. The concept of paradise, especially in abrahamic ideologies that consider it the highest possible attainment and an eternal position, is still loaded with materialistic ideas of sense gratification, and a subconscious cultural superimposition often confuses Hindus into believing that the spiritual world or Vaikuntha is a sort of paradise where the devotees of Vishnu or Krishna go after death to enjoy an eternal life of celestial pleasures. *Bhagavata Purana* (3.15.13-23, 4.12.35) gives a short description of the Vaikuntha planet within this universe, called Svetadvipa or Dhruvaloka, where Brahma and the other Devas travel when they want to approach Karanodakasayi Vishnu and where a certain semblance of time and space is created in order to facilitate the understanding and the communication with embodied souls.

However, even in this watered-down projection of the transcendental Consciousness we clearly see that everything there is meant for the service and pleasure of Bhagavan, and not as a display of sense gratification opportunities to reward the faithful deceased. Without the limitations imposed by material dualistic perception, such as time and space, the spiritual world or *param dhama* (8.21, 10.11, 11.38, 15.6) is a non-manifested/ non-changing (*avyakta*) eternal complete present everywhere in perfect union with the Supreme, therefore it cannot be described (*adhokṣaja*). It is the Supreme itself/ himself, beyond duality and non-duality.

There is no contradiction between this verse and the verses in which Krishna has instructed us to become free from the *gunas* (2.45, 7.14, 14.20, 14.23, 14.25, 14.26), as this verse and the others referring to the great power of the *gunas* (3.5, 3.27, 3.29, 4.13, 7.13, 7.14, 13.15, 13.20, 13.22, 13.24, 14.5, 14.18, 14.19, 15.10, 18.19, 18.29) speak of the influence of *gunas* on one's existence - mind, senses, body, surrounding objects, circumstances of life - and never on the real self or *atman*. Because of its inherent transcendental nature, the *atman* can never be touched or changed by the *gunas*, just like a diamond is never really touched or changed by the layers of dirt that accumulate around it. The consciousness of the self can only be temporarily covered or obscured, but genuine detachment based on realized knowledge is sufficient to liberate it from such identifications: this is called *moksha*. The subject of the *gunas* and the process to transcend the *gunas* is also explained extensively by Krishna to Uddhava in the famous *Uddhava gita*, contained in *Bhagavata Purana* (canto 11, chapters 7 to 29); we are planning to produce a separate publication on this subject.

It is important to understand that liberation comes from the genuine and permanent detachment born from realized knowledge, and not from the mere absence of a physical connection with a material body. Liberation from material conditionings does not come automatically at the time of death; although it is a fact that death liberates us from the sufferings of a seriously damaged body, if we still have material identifications and attachments we will have to take a new birth in another material body: *jatasya hi dhruvo mṛityur dhruvam janma mṛitasya ca, tasmad apariharye 'rthe na tvam socitum arhasi*, "Because one who has taken birth must necessarily die, and one who has died will again be reborn. There is no point in worrying over something that is inevitable." (2.27). Our purpose then is not merely to "be liberated from the body", but to become liberated from all the delusional desires, attachments and identifications that will cause the development of one body after another. This applies not only to the earthly level (*pṛthivi*) but also at the celestial level (*divi deveṣu*) within the material universe: *a brahma bhuvanā lokah punar avartino 'rjuna, mam upetya tu kaunteya punar janma na vidyate, mam upetya punar janma dukkhalayam asasvatam, napnuvanti mahatmanah samsiddhim paramam gatah*, "O Arjuna, all these worlds, from the planet of Brahma downwards, are places from which one returns, but for one who has attained me there is no more rebirth. Having attained me, they do not have to take another birth in this world, that is the cause of sufferings and impermanence. Such great souls have already reached the highest level of perfection." (8.16, 8.15). This means that we need to attain the *atman/ brahman* realization well before leaving this body: *saknotihaiva yah sodhum prak sarira vimoksanat, kama krodhodbhavam vegam sa yuktah sa sukhi narah*, "One who in this life, before leaving the body, is capable of withstanding the onslaughts of lust and anger, is a *yogi* and a happy human being." (5.23)

Liberation can and must be attained already in this lifetime: *gata sangasya muktasya jnanavasthita cetasaḥ, yajñayacarataḥ karma samagṛam pravilyate*, "One who has finished with all associations and whose consciousness is firmly established in knowledge, worships Yajna (Vishnu) through his actions. The entirety of his *karma* is thus destroyed." (4.23) This is required because living in a body necessitates constant actions and therefore puts us in contact with the *gunas*: *na hi kascit ksanam api jatu tisthaty akarma krit, karyate hy avasah karma sarvah prakṛti jair gunaih*, "Never, at any time, can a person remain without acting even for one moment, because he is forced to into action by all the *gunas* born from *prakṛti*." (3.5).

To attain liberation, one simply needs to firmly maintain one's consciousness (*samadhi*) on the transcendental identity of *atman/ brahman*, that is neutral and detached in regard to the *gunas*, even while continuing to work with them: *prakṛiteḥ kriyamanani gunaih karmani sarvasah, ahankara vimudhatma kartaham iti manyate, tattva vit tu maha baho guna karma vibhagayoh, guna gunesu vartanta iti matva*

na sajjate, "All activities are actually performed by the *gunas*, but a foolish person who is confused by egotism thinks 'I am doing'. One who knows things as they really are is able to understand the various *guna* and *karma*, and therefore he engages the *gunas* in the interaction with the appropriate *gunas*: this awareness keeps him free from attachment" (3.27, 3.28).

In the next group of verses, Krishna will expand this concept into a brief description of the *guna* and *karma* of the four *varnas* or occupational categories of human society. that constitute the guidelines for a sattvik and progressive life, gradually leading to liberation (*dharma, artha, kama, moksha*). After that, Krishna will clearly explain that even while performing one's occupational duties, it is possible to become established on the level of liberation by keeping one's consciousness focused on the transcendental Reality, in the subsequent realizations of Brahman, Paramatma, Bhagavan. This is the *nirguna* level, where all the differences in material duties become meaningless, and one is ready to selflessly perform any service to the Supreme (18.66). This will be the conclusion of *Bhagavad gita*.

ब्राह्मणक्षत्रियविशां शूद्राणां च परन्तप । कर्माणि प्रविभक्तानि स्वभावप्रभवैर्गुणैः ॥ १८-४१ ॥

brāhmaṇakṣatriyaviśāṃ śūdrāṇāṃ ca parantapa । karmāṇi pravibhaktāni svabhāvaprabhavaigūṇaiḥ ।। 18-41 ।।

brahmana: of the *brahmanas*; *ksatriya*: of the *kshatriyas*; *visam*: and the *vaisyas*; *sudranam*: of the *sudras*; *ca*: and; *parantapa*: o Parantapa; *karmani*: the activities; *pra vibhaktani*: are categorized; *sva bhava*: out of their individual nature; *pra bhavaih*: produced by; *gunaih*: the *gunas*.

"The duties of the *brahmanas*, *kshatriyas*, *vaisyas* and *sudras* are categorized according to their specific natures, produced by the *gunas*.

The expression *karmani pravibhaktani* indicates that the duties of the four *varnas* are different, and this difference is determined by the particular nature (*sva bhava*) of each category, produced by the influence of the *gunas*. Some commentators have translated the word *pra bhava* as "by birth", and interpreting this as a confirmation of the casteist prejudice by which one can belong to a particular *varna* only if he was born into it.

This interpretation is profoundly incorrect and it has caused immense damage to Hindu society and to the human society in general, because it somehow created the idea that people who were born as in a high *varna* - especially *brahmanas* - did not need to qualify themselves, while people who were not born in that position could never become qualified and should never be allowed to try. The casteist prejudice is heavily influenced by *tamas* and Kali yuga, and is the reason for the gradual social, political, economical weakening and collapse of India society, especially as clever invaders and colonizers took full advantage of this weakness and reinforced it for their own purposes.

Unfortunately there is still a number of people, especially among unqualified birth brahmins, that continue to defend the birth prejudice, claiming that the different castes have a totally different DNA, like a cow is different from an elephant or a dog. However, this half-baked genetic argument does not explain why the DNA of a member of a high caste does not show any change in case the individual "loses his caste" due to the ostracization from the community or conversion to a non-Hindu faith. The fact is that there is not one single verse, in *Bhagavad gita* or in the entire expanse of the *shastra* (*sruti* and *smriti*) that states that the categorization and duties of the four *varnas* are determined by birth, but on the contrary there is ample documentation on the *suddhi*, *prayascitta* and remedial *diksha* procedure that has been used regularly and for large numbers of people who were welcomed in the *varna* system as *vratyas*, up to the highest position of *brahmanas*. The system was discontinued only in the last 200 years as the British introduced the caste based census, rigidly codifying the hereditary positions as different race groups.

Verse 4.13 had already stated: *catur varnyam maya sristam guna karma vibhagasah, tasya kartaram api mam viddhy akartaram avyayam*, "The four *varnas* have been created by me on the basis of different *gunas* and *karmas*, but although I am their maker, know that I am unchangeable and detached from action." The position of each individual within the civilized system of human society described in Vedic tradition is solely determined by the particular tendencies or *gunas* and activities or *karma*; in the original Vedic system one's duty or *sva dharma* is determined automatically by one's *karma*, so much that the two words are normally interchangeable, except in the case of *vikarma* or "bad actions" that are not prescribed for anybody. The concept of *karma* as duty is therefore strictly connected to the concepts of *sva dharma* and *sva bhava*; the difference between *dharma* and *bhava* is similar to the difference between *dharma* and *karma*, as there can be an *asuri bhava* (7.15, 9.12, 16.4, 16.5, 16.19, 16.20) that is opposed to *dharma*.

In other words, there can never be a "criminal *dharma*" as some casteist fools would have us believe, because that is an oxymoron or a contradiction in terms. If one was born in a family or community of criminals, it is certainly not his duty to remain in such situation and carry on the "cultural legacy and family beliefs"; on the contrary, it is the express duty of all civilized people and especially of the *brahmanas* to help those who want to reform and purify themselves and find an appropriate place within the civilized human society called the *varnashrama dharma*: *krinvanto visva aryam*, "Let us make everybody an *arya*" (*Rig Veda* 9.63.5).

In this verse the first three occupational classes are united in a single compound word (*brahmana-kshatriya-visam*) while the *sudras* are mentioned separately, because *brahmanas*, *kshatriyas* and *vaisyas* are *dvi-ja* ("twice born") and therefore they have the duty to perform the activities of their specific professional responsibilities as well as the traditional Vedic rituals called *nitya karmani* ("regular duties"). By definition, *sudras* do not have the suitable *gunas* for such duties, and therefore they are not required to perform them; if they wish, they can engage in various types of religious activities or get training for a higher *varna*, under the expert guidance of a qualified *brahmana*, and if they develop the appropriate *gunas*, they can be awarded the recognition and engagement that is most suitable to them.

Contrarily to the abrahamic ideology, where one's particular type of birth is mysteriously and unquestionably decreed and sanctioned by God and therefore it cannot be changed for one's life (and then it's over as there is no reincarnation), Vedic civilization teaches that one obtains a particular body in particular circumstances due to his previous activities and desires, and therefore his situation can be changed at any time by a suitable modification of his activities and desires. Not only this concept is explained theoretically, but it is also demonstrated through the practical examples of many famous personalities whose stories are narrated in traditional Vedic literature.

Jabali (Satyakama Jabala), Valmiki, Gautama, Janasruti, Citraratha are often quoted as individuals who were born totally outside the *varna* system (one could say "outcaste") and yet became acknowledged as great *brahmanas* and Rishis. The story of Satyakama Jabala, son of a prostitute who did not even know who his father was, is particularly well known because it is narrated in *Chandogya Upanishad* (4.4.1-5). The great Vasistha was the son of the *apsara* Urvasi, born from a casual encounter. Veda Vyasa was born from the casual sexual encounter of a woman belonging to the fishermen community; he had a highly qualified *brahmana* son (Sukadeva), two *kshatriya* sons (Pandu and Dhritarastra) and a son who was situated on a level of consciousness completely transcendental to the *varna* system (Vidura).

Parasara himself was born from Adrisyati Chandaluni. Aitareya Rishi, author of the *Aitareya Upanishad*, was born of a *sudra* mother. In *Aitareya Brahmana* (2.19) we find the story of Ailusha Rishi, who was the son of a prostitute and himself a gambler of low character; however he became sincerely interested in Vedic knowledge and in time he was recognized as a Rishi and an Acharya. On the other hand, the famous *rakshasa* Ravana (and his brothers) were the grandchildren of Pulastya Rishi.

Visvamitra the son of Maharaja Gadi was a *kshatriya* not only by birth but by *guna* and *karma* as well, but he was determined to become a *brahmana* and he achieved his goal after a long and hard training. He is mentioned together with Maharaja Vitahavya in *Mahabharata* respectively in Adi Parva chapter 174 and Anusasana Parva, chapter 30, because they both moved up from a *kshatriya* birth to the position of famous *brahmanas*. The *Hari vamsa* (29.7-8) also says that among the descendants of Gritsamada the son of Vitahavya there were many *brahmanas*, as well as *kshatriyas*, *vaisyas* and *sudras*.

The position of *brahmana* was attained by Suceta, Prakasa, Pramiti (famous experts in *Vedas* and *Vedangas*), and also by Sunaka, who was born as a *sudra* and became the father of the famous Saunaka Rishi (who narrated the *Bhagavata purana* to the Rishis assembled in Naimisharanya). Conversely among the descendants of the great *brahmana* Rishi Bharadvaja we find king Vitaka, a great *kshatriya*, who had two sons (Nara and Garga); Nara continued the dynasty with a *kshatriya* offspring, while Garga became a *brahmana*.

Another *kshatriya* who became a *brahmana* and generated an offspring of *brahmanas* was Maharaja Dhrista, mentioned in *Bhagavata purana* (9.2.16-17). Again the *Bhagavata Purana* (9.2.22) mentions for the same reason Maharaja Agnivesya (later known as Jatukarma Rishi), son of Devadatta, whose *brahmana* descendants became famous as the Agnivesyayanas.

Jahnu Muni was born as the son of king Hotra, descendant of the saintly king Aila of the Chandra vamsa (*Bhagavata Purana* 9.15.1-4), Kanva Rishi was born in the dynasty of Maharaja Puru and his son Medhatithi was the ancestor of the *brahmana* Praskanna (*Bhagavata Purana* 9.20.1-7). Similarly the position of *brahmana* was attained by Gargya the son of King Sini, by the three sons of king Duritakshaya called Trayyaruni, Kavi and Puskararuni (*Bhagavata Purana* 9.21.19), by the *vaisyas* Nabhaga and Dista (*Bhagavata Purana* 8.18.3), by Ajamidha and his son Priyamedha (that belonged to the dynasty of king Bharyasva) and his descendants such as the great Rishi Mudgala, Satananda and Kripacharya (*Bhagavata Purana* 9.21.21, 9.21.31). The *Hari vamsa* (31.33-35) states that Maharaja Bali had 5 *kshatriya* sons but also other sons who became *brahmanas* and generated *brahmana* lineages. The *Bhagavata Purana* also informs us that among the 100 sons of king Rishabhadeva, 81 became *brahmanas* (*Bhagavata Purana* 5.4.13).

शमो दमस्तपः शौचं क्षान्तिरार्जवमेव च । ज्ञानं विज्ञानमास्तिक्यं ब्रह्मकर्म स्वभावजम् ॥ १८-४२ ॥

śamo damastapaḥ śaucam kṣāntirārvameva ca | jñānam vijñānamāstikyam brahmakarma svabhāvajam || 18-42 ||

samah: control of the mind; *damah*: control of the senses; *tapah*: control of the body; *saucam*: cleanliness; *ksantih*: tolerance; *arjavam*: simplicity; *eva*: certainly; *ca*: and; *jnanam*: theoretical knowledge; *vijnanam*: applied knowledge; *astikyam*: faith in Vedic authority; *brahma karma*: the activities/ duties of the *brahmana*; *svabhava jam*: born from his specific nature.

"The activities/ duties of the *brahmana*, determined by his particular nature, are control of his own mind, senses and body, cleanliness, tolerance, simplicity, theoretical and practical knowledge, and living in accordance to Vedic teachings.

The word *astikyam* ("faith in *Vedas*") is closely connected with the word *astika* ("one who believes in the authority of Vedic knowledge") used in the traditional categorization of *darshanas*; we may remember that among the dharmic *darshanas* there are three that are described as *na-astika* ("not recognizing the authority of Vedic knowledge"): Buddhism, Jainism and Charvaka's agnostic materialism. These ideologies are still considered compatible with *sanatana dharma* because they recognize the validity of the eternal and universal principles of ethics (*dharma*), but they are not up to the mark of the civilized (*arya*) system of *varnas* and *ashramas*, and they are therefore called *upa-dharmas*.

In this verse Krishna clearly establishes that there can be no such thing as an agnostic *brahmana*, because that would be an oxymoron, like saying "dry water" or "cold heat". *Astikya* is a defining characteristic by which one can recognize a *brahmana*, so if this quality is not present, the individual can at most be a *brahma bandhu*, or "relative of a *brahmana*". It is important to understand that such faith is in the genuine and original Vedic knowledge. It does not refer to a particular belief in a personal God, because Vedic knowledge accommodates the perspective of impersonalism (*akshara*, 12.3, non-manifested, 7.24), although Krishna says that it is an unnecessarily difficult form of meditation (12.5). Therefore the word *nastika* cannot be translated as "atheist" in the abrahamic sense.

The preceding couple of attributes, *jnana-vijnana*, refers to *astika*, therefore it indicates a solid verifiable source, and not some second hand opinion or popular belief (*laukika sraddha*) as sometimes Hinduism is considered. This also means that one can certainly study and respect the teachings of Vedic commentators or *gurus*, but such writings must never be considered on the same level of the original *sruti*, because their presentation was necessarily adapted to their particular *desa*, *kala*, *patra* and therefore do not require an implicit faith from a *brahmana*. Blind allegiance to a *sampradaya* against the teachings of the original *Vedas* thus disqualifies a person from the category of *brahmanas*. This also means that paid teachers depending on academic institutions cannot be considered *brahmanas*, because *brahmanas* only teach under their own responsibility and value truth and knowledge above all else. On the other side, academia forces people to conform to what is taught, even against truth and ethics, and against the benefit of the students.

The next *karma* (characteristic activity, duty, qualification, occupation) of the *brahmana* is *arjavam*, a definition that conveys the meanings of "simplicity, honesty, truthfulness, straight-forwardness". Unfortunately some people confuse simplicity with foolishness or ignorance. The same applies to *kshanti*, that means "tolerance, forgiveness", often mistaken for callousness or indifference, neglect or

absenteeism, or even irresponsibility. The other qualities are *sama* and *dama* (control of one's internal and external senses, especially *manasa*, *jihva*, *udara* and *upasta* - mind, tongue, belly and genitals), *tapah* (austerity consisting in bravely facing difficulties) and *sauca* (cleanliness and purity). These have been discussed in many previous verses, especially from 13.8 to 13.12 where Krishna described the real meaning of *jnana*; that list should also be considered contained in the expression *jnana vijñana* of this verse. One who does not show the qualities/ activities listed in this verse cannot really be considered a *brahmana*.

In the *Bhagavata Purana* (7.11.21) Narada Muni states: *samo damas tapah saucam santosah ksantir arjavam, jnanam, ayacyutatmatvam satyam ca brahma-laksanam*, "The qualities that characterize a *brahmana* are the control of one's mind and senses, austerity and tolerance in the face of difficulties, cleanliness, contentment, tendency to forgive, simplicity, knowledge, compassion, truthfulness, and complete surrender to the Supreme Personality of Godhead."

In the *Mahabharata* (Vana Parva chapter 180), Maharaja Yudhishthira states: *dharmas ca satyam ca damas tapas ca amatsaryam hris titiksanasya, yajnas ca danam ca dhrtih srutam ca vratani vai dvadasa brahmanasya*, "A *brahmana* must always behave in accordance to *dharma* (ethical principles). First of all he must be truthful and able to control his own senses. He must be austere, detached, humble and tolerant. He must not envy anyone. He must be expert in the performance of sacrifices and distribute his possessions in charity. He must be determined in the study of Vedic scriptures and in religious activities: these are the 12 fundamental qualities of a *brahmana*." And again, *sudre tu yad bhavel laksana dvije tac ca na vidyate, na vai sudro bhavec chudro brahmano na ca brahmanah*, "If these qualities (listed as the characteristics of the *brahmanas*) are found in a *sudra* (i.e. a person born in a *sudra* family), such person must never be called a *sudra*, just like a *brahmana* (i.e. a person born in a *brahmana* family) is not a *brahmana* if he lacks these qualities."

We find descriptions of the character of the genuine *brahmanas* also in the original *samhitas* such as *Rig* (2.22.2, 5.34.6, 6.63.5, 7.103.1), *Atharva* (5.17.9), *Yajur* (26.2); here is one example: *brahmana saha saumino vacamkrat brahma krinvantah parivatsarinam adhvaryayo gharminah sisvidhana avirbhavanti guhya na kecit*, "A *brahmana* is always gentle and soft spoken, always engaged in spiritual activities on the highest level of consciousness, offers revelations on knowledge, recognizes merit in others and does not hide anything" (*Rig Veda* 7.103.8). Again the *Mahabharata* gives further clarifications in this regard (Anusasana Parva 163.8, 26, 46), where Shiva tells Parvati: *sthitoh brahmana-dharmena brahmanyam upajivati, ksatriyo vatha vaisyo va brahma-bhuyah sa gacchati, ebhis tu karmabhir devy subhair acaritais tatha, sudro brahmanatam yati vaisyah ksatriyatam vrajet, etaih karma-phalair devy suddhatma vijitendriyah, sudro'pi dvija-vat sevy ity brahmabravat svayam, sarvo'yam brahmano loke vrttena tu vidhiyate, vrtte sthitah tu sudro'pi brahmanatvam niyacchati*.

Here is the translation: "If *kshatriyas* or *vaisyas* behave like *brahmanas* and engage in the occupations of *brahmanas*, such persons attain the position of *brahmana*. In the same way, a *sudra* can become a *brahmana* and a *vaisya* can become a *kshatriya*. O Devi, thanks to the performance of these activities and by following the instructions of the *Agamas* (Vedic scriptures that contain the instructions for the rituals) a person born in a family of *sudras* devoid of qualifications can become a *brahmana*. In this world, a person is born in a *brahmana* family as a result of his tendencies, therefore a *sudra* that manifests the tendencies of a *brahmana* and acts as a *brahmana* automatically becomes a *brahmana*." The *Bhagavata Purana* (7.11.35) confirms: *yasya yal laksanam proktam pumso varnabhivyanyakam, yad anyatrapi drsyeta tat tenaiva vinirdiset*, "One who shows the characteristics of a *brahmana*, *kshatriya*, *vaisya* or *sudra* as described above, should be classified in the corresponding social category."

Abandoning the study and practice of Vedic scriptures (*svadhyaya tyaga*) still remains the most serious cause for degradation for a son of *brahmana* parents. *Manu samhita* (2.157, 2.172) states, *yatha katha-mayo hasti yatha carma-mayo mrgah yas ca vipro'nadhiyanas trayas te nama bibhrati*, "A *brahmana* who does not study the *Vedas* is comparable to an elephant or deer made of leather, that are called elephant or deer but cannot function as such. We must know that as long as a *brahmana* is not qualified in the Vedic knowledge, he remains on the same level of a *sudra*." The *Manu samhita* (4.245) states, *uttamanuttaman gacchan hinam hinams ca varjayan, brahmanah sresthatam eti pratyavayena sudratam*, "According to the good or bad company he keeps, a *brahmana* can either become extraordinarily elevated or fall to the position of a *sudra*."

The *Mahabharata* (Santi parva, 189.7) declares, *himsanrta-priya lubdhah sarva-karmopijivinah krsna saucaparibhrasthas te dvijah sudratam gatah sarva-bhaksyaratirn ityam sarva-karmakaro 'sucih tyakta-vedastvanaca rah sa vai sudra iti smrtah*, "A *brahmana* who commits violent acts (as for example in the consumption of non-vegetarian foods), who lies and cheats, who is greedy, impure, or engages in any activity in order to earn a livelihood, is degraded to the position of *sudra*. Precisely because he eats and drinks anything without discrimination and is attached to the material things and to the idea of making money, he has abandoned Vedic *dharma* and ethical behavior, and is called a *sudra*."

Traditionally, a *brahmana* is considered fallen from his social position if he commits violations to cleanliness/ purity (*saucam*), for example because of the consumption of non-vegetarian foods, alcoholic drinks, or even of vegetarian foods that have been cooked by *sudras* (*sudranna pustam*), as confirmed by the *Kurma purana*: *nadyac chudrasya vipro'nnam mohad va yadi kamatah sa sudra-yonim vrajati yas tu bhunkte hy-anapadi*. This is the reason why a *brahmana* never goes to a restaurant for eating, and is extremely careful about what he purchases on the market.

शौर्यं तेजो धृतिर्दाक्ष्यं युद्धे चाप्यपलायनम् ।

दानमीश्वरभावश्च क्षात्रं कर्म स्वभावजम् ॥ १८-४३ ॥

śauryam tejo dhṛtirdākṣyam yuddhe cāpyapalāyanam | dānamīśvarabhāvaśca kṣātram karma svabhāvajam | 18-43 |

sauryam: heroism; *tejah*: charisma; *dhritih*: determination; *daksyam*: resourcefulness; *yuddhe*: in battle; *ca*: and; *api*: also; *apalayanam*: steadiness; *danam*: charity; *isvara bhavah*: sense of leadership; *ca*: and; *ksatram*: of the *kshatriya*; *karma*: activities/ duties; *svabhava jam*: born from his specific nature.

"The activities/ duties of the *kshatriya*, determined by his particular nature, are heroism, charisma, determination, resourcefulness, steadiness in battle, charity, sense of leadership.

The *Bhagavata Purana* confirms: *sauryam viryam dhritis tejas, tyagas catmajayah ksama, brahmanyata prasadas ca, satyam ca ksatra laksanam*, "The characteristics of the *kshatriya* are heroism and chivalry, determination, charisma, detachment from possessions, self-

control, obedience to *brahmanas*, satisfaction, and truthfulness" (*Bhagavata Purana* 7.11.22) and *tejo balam dhritih sauryam, titiksaudaryam udyamah, sthairyam brahmanyam aisvaryam, ksatra prakritayas tv imah*, "Charisma, bodily strength, determination, heroism, tolerance, generosity, great endurance, steadiness, devotion to the *brahmanas* and sense of leadership are the natural qualities of the *kshatriyas*" (*Bhagavata Purana*, 11.17.17). A person who does not show these qualities in practice is not a *kshatriya* but an impostor and usurper, or the impotent descendant of illustrious forefathers.

Just like *arjavam* (simplicity) and *kshanti* (tolerance) should not be confused with foolishness and apathy, the characteristics of a *kshatriya* need to be understood correctly. The expression *isvara bhava* ("controlling nature") could also be translated as "lordly attitude" because *isvara* means "Lord"; a tendency to be bossy is not a bad thing, as it does not mean bullying people around to impose one's will over others whimsically. If the bossy individual is qualified and properly trained, and capable to lead, direct and manage others, society should appreciate this quality and use it to its benefit instead of resenting it on the basis of a delusional belief in the complete equality of all human beings. The only equality that should exist in society is equal access to opportunities to qualify oneself; according to the particular nature (talents and tendencies, or *guna* and *karma*) of each individual, some people will become more qualified for some particular duties, and some will be more suitable for other duties, and some others will always need to be told what to do and depend on others for their protection and maintenance. Of course respect and obedience are to be commanded, not demanded. A true leader shines for his own value and charisma (*tejas, saurya*) and naturally inspires faith and loyalty in good people.

A true *kshatriya* is always on the front line, before anybody else, in the thick of the battle, and is the best example to follow. He works harder and longer hours than anyone else, and is ever ready (24 hours a day, 7 days a week) to sacrifice his own sense gratification, comforts, possessions, position and personal life (by living and by dying) for the sake of the kingdom and the *prajas* - whether the kingdom is a large country or a village, a neighborhood or any group of people who look up to him for guidance.

A true *kshatriya* takes responsibility not only for his own failures but also for collective defeats, inspires and encourages others and helps them to rise and progress to become qualified leaders in turn. He demonstrates concern, care and affection for the *prajas* just like a good father behaves with his children, engages them happily and appropriately, and always watches over their well-being, over and above his own immediate family and relatives. If a *kshatriya* expects to be obeyed in his orders to people about what they should do, it is because he knows what he is doing; he is *daksha*, "expert", as his training has taught him the sciences of war strategy, social management and resource administration.

The word *dakshyam* also indicates resourcefulness, that is the ability to face new unforeseen situations and to adapt one's approach smoothly. Generosity and charitable disposition (*dana*) are his natural qualities, therefore people are not afraid they will be exploited or mistreated in any way; rather, because he is never afraid to stand for justice and protection of the subjects (*yuddhe apalayanam*), people feel safe in his presence and seek his help and protection. The qualities called *sauryam* and *tejas* are similar to each other. The word *sauryam* is closely related to *sura* (divine beings such as the Devas) and *surya*, referring to the Sun, and indicates the radiance of majesty, the chivalry and personal power, and invincibility that we associate with the Sun itself. *Tejas* also means "radiance, power", and even "heat", and its meanings overlap with *tapah*; in fact *tejas* is created by *tapah*. These two attributes warn us that it is dangerous to step too near to the royal *kshatriya*, because in spite of his benevolence and spirit of self-sacrifice, his energy is very powerful and could scorch a weak personality, causing negative effects such as envy or fear (which in turn will give rise to hatred). Normally and ideally, *sauryam* and *tejas* should be engaged with determination and careful skills in the protection of the *prajas*, and therefore the two qualities are mentioned in the first part of the verse together with *dhriti* (determination, patience, endurance, perseverance), *dakshyam* (skillfulness, resourcefulness, expertise, ability, dexterity) and *yuddhe apalayanam* (steadfastness and courage in battle).

The word *dhriti*, especially in this context, could also be translated as "grit, resolve". It indicates the strong determination of the warrior, who firmly faces any difficult situation or loss and even death, and when he is wounded and unable to stand, he continues to fight even on his knees. However, this determination should not be confused with the stupid stubbornness of tamasic people that are attached to some particular action or belief or underestimate dangers; the *kshatriya* has a clear vision of the situation but he chooses to sacrifice himself for the protection of the *prajas* if this is required, because that is his duty.

He is never depressed or dogged down, as this is considered a contamination (*kasmalam*, 2.2), a sign of impotence (*klaibyam*, 2.3) and a "weakness of the heart" (*hridaya daurbalyam*, 2.3) that is unworthy of a civilized person (*anarya justam*, 2.1), a cause of infamy (*akirti karam*, 2.1) and an obstacle to one's elevation (*asvargyam*, 2.1). Of course these qualities cannot be expected from everyone, and even in a person who has the genuine talents and inclinations for the role of *kshatriya*, these must be developed through appropriate training and experience, so aspiring *kshatriyas* should not feel discouraged at their shortcomings.

Similar to *dhriti* is *apalayanam*, "not fleeing", referring to the steadiness in battle and heroism in spite of adversities; this quality or characteristic is not demonstrated only on the battlefield but in all aspects of daily life, in the small and the big things. Also, there are many weapons with which one can fight; swords, bows and arrows (of many types) are more chivalrous than guns and modern weapons (that are more suited to cowards), and there are subtler weapons too, consisting in words and ideas. *Kshatriyas* are educated and trained in strategy and diplomacy in dealing with the enemy - the first attempt is *sama*, treating the opponent like a friend and allowing sufficient space for his livelihood and prosperity, the second is *dana*, trying to win them with peace offerings and gifts, the third attempt is *bheda*, trying to break up hostile alliances and facing one enemy at the time, and only as a last chance one should resort to *danda*, punishment as in taking physical action against the offender.

This brings us to another very important clarification. The main job of a *kshatriya* is fighting to protect the *prajas*, because that is his natural inclination and the best use of his qualities, as Krishna has stated specifically: *sva dharmam api caveksya na vikampitum arhasi, dharmyad hi yuddhac chreyo 'nyat ksatriyasya na vidyate, yadricchaya copannam svarga dvaram apavritam, sukhinah ksatriyah partha labhante yuddham idrisam*, "Considering your own dharmic duty you should not hesitate, because for a *kshatriya* there is nothing better than fighting a dharmic battle. O Arjuna, happy are the *kshatriyas* to whom such opportunity comes unsought. For a warrior, engaging in such a battle is like having the doors of heaven open in front of him." (2.31, 2.32). This will also be confirmed again in verse 18.59. However, the warrior spirit of a *kshatriya* is not the war mongering, blood lust, and cruelty of the *asuras*; he is not a brawling bully and he avoids confrontation and conflict if there is any other option still possible, as the Pandavas demonstrated in practice in their dealings with

the aggressive Duryodhana and his brothers. Besides, there is a specific code of conduct for *kshatriyas*; non-combatants should never be attacked or harmed, and property that is not directly connected to the fighting should not be destroyed; for example, the encampments where the warriors retire for the night are not to be touched. Even on the battlefield a warring enemy should not be attacked if he is unprepared, unarmed, distracted, distraught, or if he admits defeat..

Sometimes unqualified persons pose as *kshatriyas*, but they should be exposed and neutralized by genuine *kshatriyas* or *brahmanas*; they are described as *nripa linga dharam* ("merely showing the appearance/ insignia of kings"). Prominent examples can be found in *Bhagavata Purana* (1.3.25, 1.14.17, 4.14.28, 4.14.31, 4.14.34, 1.16.4, 1.17.1, 1.17.5, 1.17.10-11, 1.17.14, 1.17.32, 4.14.4, 4.16.6, 4.16.14-16, 12.1.39-41, 12.2.8, 12.2.20).

Here is a description of the unqualified kings of Kali yuga: *stri bala go dvija ghnas ca, para dara dhanadritah, uditasta mita praya, alpa sattvalpakayusah, asamskritah kriya hina, rajasa tamasavritah, prajas te bhaksayisyanti, mleccha rajanya rupinah*, "These *mlecchas* in the form of kings will be killing/ injuring women, children, cows/ the planet and the twice born, and going after the wives and wealth of others. They will be mentally and emotionally unstable, rather weak mentally and physically and short lived. Covered by *rajas* and *tamas*, they will not perform any proper duty or auspicious ritual, but they will devour the *prajas*." (*Bhagavata Purana* 12.2.39-40).

A brief note about the meaning of *mleccha*: as in the case of the *varnas*, the categorization of *mleccha* depends on *guna* and *karma*, demonstrated by a criminal nature (*mleccha bhavata durjanah, Bhagavata Purana* 9.16.33), as in the case of the sons of Visvamitra who did not accept Sunahsepha as their eldest brother. Ancestry, ethnic group, language, nationality, family of birth and other similar considerations are irrelevant to the point - only adharmic behavior is the criterion.

कृषिगौरक्ष्यवाणिज्यं वैश्यकर्म स्वभावजम् । परिचर्यात्मकं कर्म शूद्रस्यापि स्वभावजम् ॥ १८-४४ ॥

kṛṣigaurakṣyavāṇijyam vaiśyakarma svabhāvajam | paricaryātmakam karma śūdrasyāpi svabhāvajam || 18-44 ||

krisi: agriculture; *go raksya*: protection of the cows/ del pianeta; *vanijyam*: commerce; *vaisyas karma*: the activities/ duties of the *vasya*; *svabhava-jam*: born from his specific nature; *paricarya*: service/ assistance; *atmakam*: consisting of; *karma*: activities/ duties; *sudrasya*: of the *sudra*; *api*: also; *svabhava-jam*: born from his specific nature.

"The activities/ duties of the *vaisyas*, determined by his particular nature, are agriculture, protection of the cows/ planet, and commerce. The activities/ duties of the *sudra*, determined by his particular nature, are the service / assistance (to others).

Vaisyas and *sudras* are grouped up in one single verse because they are less evolved than *brahmanas* and *kshatriyas* and therefore they have less duties; the *sudras* considerably less than the *vaisyas*. These professional and social positions are easier to maintain even without making particular efforts to qualify oneself or make lots of personal sacrifices.

Therefore it is said that in the age of Kali everyone is born a *sudra*, because without a strenuous effort and a proper training it is almost impossible to become genuine *brahmanas* or *kshatriyas*. Yet, *sudras* and especially *vaisyas* should not be underestimated, because their work is essential for the proper functioning of the social body. Only stupid people would neglect their own stomach or feet, considering them less lovable than their arms and head, because all parts of the body are strictly connected and the sufferings of one part affects the entire body.

The word *krishi* is the most important item in the verse; in verse 17.7 we elaborated on the fundamental importance of food, both materially and spiritually, and how the production of abundant food is the core of the entire service to the social body. Even the *brahmanas* and the *kshatriyas* depend on the food produced by agriculture, just like the basic function of the head and the arms is to work to procure food and convey the resources to the stomach so that the nutrients can be re-distributed all over the body, so that all the other types of work can be performed properly - including the higher functions of intellect and consciousness.

Without sufficient and appropriate food there can be no material or spiritual progress (1.42, 17.13), as confirmed also by the *shruti* (*Chandogya Upanishad* 6.6, 7.1-3, *Taittiriya Upanishad* Brighu valli, 3.1.1, 3.7.2, 3.8.1, 3.9.1, 3.10.1, *Taittiriya Upanishad* Brahmananda valli, 2.2.1, *Sama Veda samhita* 3.10.6, *Prasna Upanishad* 1.4, 1.14, *Brihad aranyaka Upanishad* 1.4.7).

After establishing the importance of agriculture, Krishna immediately gives the necessary ethical guidelines with the expression *go rakshya*; *rakshya* means "protection" and *go* can refer both to cows and to Mother Earth as the personification of the land. This means that a *vaisyas* is responsible for the health and well being of the land; he must make sure that the soil is not depleted or contaminated or polluted in any way, because the food production would suffer. Within the definition of land (*go, bhumi*), one needs to include the water reservoirs (surface and underground), the forests, the wild animals etc.

Protection of the cows obviously does not mean ruthless exploitation and cruel treatment as we can observe in the "animal husbandry" methods developed following the abrahamic exploitative values and centralized industrialization. It may be difficult to believe for those who are used to the present asuric society (and may consider it the "norm"), but it is possible for human beings to live with cows and other animals in a mutually beneficial relationship, based on friendship, love and trust. When obtained ethically, the products of cows are extremely valuable for the health and progress of human society.

The word *vanijyam* means "commerce, trade", and refers to a further stage in the transformation and distribution of resources, by which wealth is created through commercial enterprises. This does not include unnecessary parasitic professional positions that simply make money without actually producing anything of real value, but it rather consists in all those activities that contribute to create useful goods and distribute them to a larger number of people. For example, mining and forging metals into weapons, pots and plates, containers, instruments for agriculture and specialized tools of many kinds, and of course the personal ornaments that are suitable for the different types of individuals according to the recommendations of the *brahmanas*. *Vaisyas* also used precious metals (gold, silver, copper) in the form of minted coins and gems (pearls, diamonds etc) to support their trade in other regions where they traveled by river or sea or by utilizing the roads protected by the imperial garrisons, transporting commodities characteristically produced in different places, such as salt, spices, medicinal herbs and extracts, textile materials, oils, rare foods and seeds, cosmetics and so on.

Indian tradition gives equal primary importance to army personnel and farmers (*jawan-kissan*) that are the foundations for the survival and prosperity of the people and the kingdom (*rastra*), even in the absence of properly qualified *brahmanas* and *kshatriyas*, like we see in non-aryan tribal civilizations. In fact, the present plight of farmers and society in general could be easily solved by removing the asuric tendencies and obstructions (internal and external) and allowing people sufficient freedom to provide for themselves in the matter of food and other agricultural/ forestry products, energy, housing, and protection. Any society can prosper with an agriculture based first of all on local subsistence and self sufficiency, with diversified production based on organic cultivation and permaculture, added value processing in local cottage industry preservation and transformation of produce, and small scale local market selling directly to consumers on an open venue. This was the prevalent system everywhere in ancient times, and it worked very well.

The Vedic system, however, rises human society to a higher level. It is more scientific and focuses on education and training, so that the full potential of each individual can be developed, stage after stage, after attaining perfection in one's individual occupation. A *sudra* is encouraged to become responsible for himself through the development of self-sufficient handicrafts and/or kitchen gardening; once he has become able to manage his own production independently and provide sustenance for himself and his family, he is already in the process to become a *vaisya*. The decisive step consists in taking an apprentice and becoming responsible for his work and maintenance - at this point, he is already an entrepreneur, albeit a small one, and he can get advice and further training from qualified *vaisyas* and then from *brahmanas*.

A successful *vaisya* has become able to manage many workers and gradually develops a stronger tendency to protect his subordinates - both animals and people - and the lands he is taking care of. By a closer cooperation with qualified *kshatriyas* and the proper instructions from *brahmanas*, he can develop the qualities to become fully responsible for his own small "kingdom" and by delegating the easier tasks to apprentices, he can personally qualify as *kshatriya*.

Similarly, a *kshatriya* who has expanded his mind from the charge of a small kingdom to the greater society of all beings in the universe can become able to protect the *prajas* on a deeper and vaster level, that is beyond the temporary identification with the material body and social position. Since all the twice-born (*brahmanas*, *kshatriyas* and *vaisyas*) regularly study Vedic knowledge and engage in religious activities and pursuits, this evolution is only natural.

In his elaboration on the *varna* system, Narada Rishi explained to king Yudhisthira: *deva guru acyute bhaktis, tri varga pariposanam, astikyam udyamo nityam, naipunyam vaisya laksanam*, "The characteristics of the *vaisya* are devotion towards the Devas, the *guru* and God, feeding the three (the 3 *varnas*, as well as the 3 purposes of *dharma-artha-kama*), faith in Vedic system, skillfulness and determination in working" (7.11.23). Krishna also gave similar instructions to Uddhava: *astikyam dana nistha ca, adambho brahma sevnam, atustir arthopacayair, vaisya prakritayas tv imah*, "Faith in Vedic civilization, dedication to charity, freedom from hypocrisy, service to the *brahmanas* and constant work to create wealth are the natural qualities of the *vaisyas*." (*Bhagavata Purana*, 11.17.18).

The duty of the *sudra* is very simple and only requires sincerity and loyalty to one's employer. It is important to understand that a *sudra* is not a slave, an outcaste or an untouchable (*dalit* or *paria*); *sudras* normally lived in the home of their employers as family members, but they were free to leave if they were not satisfied with their treatment, and sometimes they could be sent away if they did not behave properly. Although the Vedic system encourages individual evolution, sometimes people choose to indulge in lower and degrading tendencies and picking up bad habits, for example neglecting cleanliness or becoming greedy to the point of stealing, or cruel and insensitive towards people or animals. At this point the *sudra* falls to the level of *anarya*, and is dismissed from service and expelled from Vedic social life; he becomes a *chandala* or *mleccha*, that is outside the *varna* system, and therefore has no duties whatsoever.

The word *paricarya* means "working for others" and refers to employment or dependent work, including State/ Government servants of all levels; anyone who receives a *salary* for his work is a *sudra*. A *kshatriya* is an independent protector and does not take orders or salary from anyone because this would compromise his freedom in supporting *dharma*; he can accept gifts or tributes (taxes) from the people he protects and cares for, but only in a reasonable amount.

A *kshatriya* can employ *sudra* soldiers in the army under his orders and take care for their maintenance, but their responsibilities and duties are different; they are not permanently on service but they simply respond the *kshatriya's* call in case of a major attack from the outside. They are *private* citizens who understand that the king needs help in defending their homes and families, and participate to the manoeuvres as best as they can, according to their abilities; these voluntary temporary fighters can come from all sections of society because every limb of the body is eager to help when the entire body is in danger, therefore *sudras*, *vaisyas* and even *brahmanas* can bear weapons and fight on the battlefield in case of emergency. But that does not make them *kshatriyas*, and they are not permanently organized as military forces like in modern societies, where army personnel get bored and restless when there is no war, or become lazy on the salaries paid by the government.

स्वे स्वे कर्मण्यभिरतः संसिद्धिं लभते नरः । स्वकर्मानिरतः सिद्धिं यथा विन्दति तच्छृणु ॥ १८-४५ ॥

sve sve karman्यabhirataḥ sansiddhiṁ labhate naraḥ | svakarmanirataḥ siddhiṁ yathā vindati tacchṛṇu || 18-45 |

sve sve: each according to his own nature; *karmani*: activities; *abhi rataḥ*: following; *sam siddhim*: complete perfection; *labhate*: obtains; *narah*: a human being; *sva karma*: in one's specific duty; *nirataḥ*: engaged; *siddhim*: perfection; *yatha*: as; *vindati*: attains; *tat*: that; *srnu*: listen.

"By engaging in the duties pertaining to his specific nature, a human being gradually attains perfection. Now listen how one can attain perfection through engagement in his specific duties.

The expression *sve sve karmani* indicates that each limb of the social body has very specific functions and should stick to the engagement in his particular duties according to the position that was assigned individually by the *guru*. The influence of *rajas* and *tamas* can push people to desire a different occupation because it seems to offer more advantages and less problems than the position they occupy, but that is simply illusion. An upgrade of *varna* is always possible, but it cannot be done whimsically; it requires a genuine gradual qualification and training in accordance to the established rules. A downgrade in the *varna* system is much easier, but it is not helping the personal

evolution of the individual or the good functions of society; however it is preferable to step down to a less responsible position than to try to artificially occupy a professional place without fulfilling one's proper duties. Especially in the genuine Vedic system, the higher position one occupies, the more duties and the more difficult and hard is the work, and the more sacrifices one is expected to make for the sake of society. *Sudras* may think that their *vaisya* employer is having an easy life just giving orders while the farm hands are doing all the work, but they do not know anything about planning, coordinating, marketing, and managing. Left to their own devices, *sudras* would work as little as possible and enjoy and consume as much as possible, and would soon slide into bankruptcy and destitution, if not starvation. Of course the definition of *sudra* applies to the *guna* and *karma* of the individual, not to the birth or belonging to a *sudra* community, because it is certainly possible that *sudra* parents can give birth to a more talented child, who will rise to a higher social position by his own effort, even against all hardships. The socialist/ communist experiments in the last 300 years have demonstrated that inevitably more talented (and often more ruthless) individuals rise to fill the posts of command anyway, and in the absence of an ethical and scientific social system of evaluation of their qualifications, their personal power cannot be controlled by the rules and duties supporting a progressive evolution. So they become tyrants in their own way, and the people working under them are oppressed and exploited, often worse than in capitalistic systems, and nobody really makes much progress, because nobody is encouraged to take personal responsibility and become more qualified.

The word *abhiratah* means "sticking to, following", and indicates a type of attachment to one's duty that is actually selfless, a loyalty towards society, and a love and pride in one's work for its own sake. This approach brings a deep satisfaction and a feeling of happiness for a work well done, for the clean conscience of having properly contributed one's part for the common good. Since the prescribed duties for the professional categories are strongly based on ethical and progressive considerations, they constitute a valuable fail-safe protection against degradation and should always be respected in the best possible way. Of course this does not mean that there are no provisions for flexibility in the system. This brings us to the very important concept of *apat (apad) dharma*, or "duties/ ethics in case of emergency". It is similar to the word *anapadi*, that indicates a social emergency or upheaval in which there is no qualified person to occupy a particular position, and the next best person must step up and take the place. The Vedic system is based on the fundamental ethical principles called conscience, and therefore it easily admits that in some circumstances it is better to follow the spirit than the letter of the law; *dharma* is not a rigid set of commandments and taboos but a system of principles that support society, so it should be applied with intelligence according to the circumstances.

Chandogya Upanishad (1.10-12) offers the example of Ushasti son of Chakra, who was a *purohita*, a chief priest in sacrifices performed for kings and other twice born. Once traveling through a wild region during a serious shortage of food, he was able to find no food except a few cooked beans from the house of a *chandala* (outcaste) and he shared them with his wife because they were extremely hungry, however he refused the water that the *chandala* wanted to give him, because he could find purer water elsewhere. After simply taking a bath, he proceeded to his destination where he normally resumed his place as instructor and supervisor of the *ritvika brahmanas* engaged in the religious rituals to which he had been invited. Nobody objected saying that he had "lost his caste" and therefore he was not qualified any more to direct the *yajna*.

The *brahmanas* still have the responsibility of ascertaining the level of emergency and directing or endorsing the necessary actions; it is said: *jaghanyo nottamam vrittim anapadi bhajen narah, rite rajanyam apatsu sarvesam api sarvasah*, "A person with lower qualifications should not usurp a higher position for the sake of his own livelihood, but when there is no genuine king in charge, in the emergency created anyone can perform any other tasks - except for the *kshatriya*" (*Bhagavata Purana*, 7.11.17). The exception of the *kshatriya* in this verse means that in times of emergency or social upheaval, the work of the *kshatriya* is the most important and urgent in order to preserve and protect the *prajas* and the resources of the kingdom, so a *kshatriya* who abandons his duties in such circumstances to take up some other professional activity is a traitor to the kingdom. A *kshatriya* can also find himself in a situation of personal emergency - for example being exiled by some conspiracy, or being defeated in battle and left seriously injured on the battlefield while his opponent ascends the throne. In such cases he is allowed to take up the occupations of *brahmanas* (if he is qualified to teach something) or *vaisyas* (agriculture and cow protection) until such time when he can resume his normal duties again; only he cannot become a *sudra*, otherwise he will be lost (*Bhagavata Purana*, 11.17.48). Similarly, a *brahmana* can temporarily work as a *kshatriya* or a *vaisya*, but never become a *sudra*, a position that is considered the livelihood of a dog (*sva vrittya*, 11.17.47) as a house dog totally depends on the owner and is fully loyal to him, no ethical questions asked. A *vaisya* may take up some handicraft venture or get temporary employment as a *sudra* (11.17.49), until he gets the opportunity to return to his normal duties. The duties of each particular *varna* are engineered to challenge his abilities and progress in learning and realization, therefore it is possible that due to some difficulty or depression one can be tempted to take another position - a lower one for which he is overqualified and therefore does not require much effort, or a higher one for which he is even unable to understand what qualifications are required. This is why verse 18.47 will warn us that it is better to fail or die while engaging in our duties than to attain success in performing someone else's duties.

The word *samsiddhi* is a compound of *sam* + *siddhi*, indicating complete perfection, much like the word *sanskrita* (indicating Sanskrit language) is a compound of *sam* + *krita*, indicating a complete system of expression. The complete perfection one can attain through the loyal and sincere performance of one's professional and social duties - i.e. proper work - increases one's learning (knowledge), character (*sila*, or behavior), intelligence, strength, wealth, position and religious merits (*punya*), so that one will get a better birth in the next life or even *moksha* (liberation). The word *vindati* ("increases") indicates the gradual attainment of perfection through a regular and continued effort.

यतः प्रवृत्तिर्भूतानां येन सर्वमिदं ततम् ।

स्वकर्मणा तमभ्यर्च्य सिद्धिं विन्दति मानवः ॥ १८-४६ ॥

yataḥ pravṛttirbhūtānāṃ yena sarvamidaṃ tatam | svakarmanā tamabhyarcya siddhiṃ vindati mānavah || 18-46 ||

yatah: from which; *pravrittih*: the creation/ engagement; *bhutanam*: of the beings; *yena*: by which; *sarvam idam*: all this (universe); *tatam*: is pervaded; *sva karmana*: by his own activities; *tam*: that/ him; *abhyarcya*: by worshiping; *siddhim*: perfection; *vindati*: attains; *manavah*: a human being.

"By properly performing one's duties one is worshipping the Supreme from which all beings/ situations are created and engaged, and that pervades all this universe. This is how a human being can attain perfection.

The glory of the Vedic system is that it raises the human being to the level of bodily part of the Supreme Personality of Godhead, to become directly engaged as co-creator and co-controller, co-preserver and co-protector of the universe. This concept is unique to the Vedic tradition, as other dharmic and natural systems consider the human being simply as a part of creation, with the same rights of all other creatures but not more duties, while the adharmic systems consider the human being as the lord and owner of creation, with more rights (and no duties) compared to other creatures.

This is the reason why in Vedic tradition, and especially in the *varna* and *ashrama* system, the word *dharma* is normally translated as "duty". This is also the reason why the *dvi-ja* (twice born) who are more responsible than the generic ordinary population of *sudras* are required to engage daily in religious rituals to associate with the Devas who have even higher responsibilities towards all creatures. So when a *brahmana*, *kshatriya* or *vaisya* is engaged in performing a *homa* (fire sacrifice) calling the Devas to partake of the *ahutis* (oblations of clarified butter), he is actually engaged in a breakfast business meeting with his superiors - bonding with them and absorbing their qualities, and at the end of this human life he may move to their level and work directly with them.

The Devas, too, are limbs of the universal body (Virata Rupa), and occupy their positions precisely because of their absolute loyalty to their own duties; the fire never fails to burn, the wind never fails to blow, the sun never fails to rise, and death never fails to take his toll on a mortal body. All levels of consciousness, however, are coordinated by the supreme Consciousness, that includes all other individual consciousnesses and yet is greater than them all - just like the owner of the body includes the functions and consciousness of all the body cells and organs, yet he is more than the body. This was explicitly confirmed in verse 15.7: *mamaivamsa jiva loke jiva bhutah sanatanah*, "The living being in this world is certainly a limb of my (body), and as such he is eternal."

At the universal level, this supreme Consciousness or Reality is called *tattva*, or more specifically, *vishnu tattva*, because it is the foundation and source of all power (*vishnu* means "powerful"). Here we must not be distracted by sectarian prejudice, because we would lose a golden opportunity to really understand life; Vishnu is not a separate Deity that can be opposed to Shiva, Durga, Brahma, or other Personalities of Godhead, although we see that in their *avatara lila*, the various Personalities interact in amazing ways.

Actually, all such Personalities are one Reality, one supreme Consciousness, that is called Brahman, Paramatma, Bhagavan: *vadanti tat tattva vidas, tattvam yaj jnanam advayam, brahmeti paramatmeti, bhagavan iti sabdyate*, "Those who know the *tattva* declare that *tattva* is undivided Knowledge, variously called Brahman, Paramatma, and Bhagavan" (*Bhagavata Purana* 1.2.11). The Godhead is described as knowledge (*jnana*) and reality (*tattva*), as well as undivided (*advayam*); God is therefore the sum total of all being and knowledge/ consciousness, and although it remains undivided, it manifests innumerable forms and names to express all the immense variety of qualities and functions. It is already impossible to comprehend all these aspects of God that are manifested in this single universe (Virata Rupa), so we can understand how foolish must be the arrogance of someone who claims they fully know the Supreme Reality in the spiritual world, that is non-manifested and therefore impossible to even imagine for minds that function within time-space parameters.

After clarifying this point, we can safely state that all the members of the *varna* system should actually perform their professional duties sincerely and devotedly, considering them as the most fundamental act of worship to Vishnu, the sum total of all Consciousness: *atah pumbhir dvija srestha varnasrama vibhagasah, svanusthitasya dharmasya samsiddhir hari tosanam*, "The categories of *varnas* and *ashramas* and their specific prescribed duties constitute perfection (of human life) because they please Vishnu" (*Bhagavata Purana*, 1.2.13), *varnasramacara vata purusena parah puman, visnur aradhyate pantha nanyat tat tosa karanam*, "A human being who performs the duties of the *varna-ashrama* system is worshipping the supreme Personality of Godhead, Vishnu. There is no other way for satisfaction" (*Vishnu Purana* 3.8.9). The satisfaction mentioned in this verse of *Vishnu Purana* refers both to pleasing the Supreme and to pleasing the *atman*, as the two are closely connected.

The word *yatah* at the beginning of the verse is a declination of the pronoun *yah*, "that", indicating the Supreme. The word *pravritti* contains the meanings of "creation, emanation, engagement, work, development", and connected to the word *bhutanam* ("of all beings") obviously refers to the supreme continuum of reality that is the source of the manifestation and the activities of all beings. We can continue the microcosmic comparison with the body cells, by remembering that it is the *atman*, the original unchangeable being living in the body, that creates all the body cells by developing tissues and organs gradually, beginning from conception, and sustains all the cells for the entire duration of the body, and then destroys the body by leaving it in accordance to his evolutionary journey. Since the *atman* is consciousness, he is present everywhere in the body (*yena sarvam idam tatam*, 2.17), and service to him is the purpose of all the cells and organs. Similarly in a larger macrocosmic scale, God as the sum total of Consciousness is all pervading, the origin of all creatures and the purpose of their engagement: *janmady asya yato 'nvayad itaratas carthesv abhijnah svarat, tene brahma hrda ya adi kavaye muhyanti yat surayah, tejo vari mrdam yatha vinimayo yatra tri sargo 'mrsa, dhamna svena sada nirasta kuhakam satyam param dhimahi*, "I offer my respect to Bhagavan Vasudeva, from whom the creation/ birth etc of this (universe, body, manifestation) proceeds. He is fully independent, fully conscious of purpose, directly and indirectly. He inspired the supreme Consciousness of Brahman in the heart of the first poet (Brahma). His nature/ existence/ energy of illusion overpowers even the *suras* (*devas* and *rishis*), (just like) with the optical illusions created by heat, water and earth. In this way by action and reaction he always manifests himself as the 'almost reality' of the three creations and all their objects/ places of existence. I meditate on (him), the supreme truth, always self-sufficient, of whom illusion is just the absence of perception." (*Bhagavata Purana* 1.1.1).

The word *pravritti* ("engagement") is also connected to *abhyarcya* ("worshipping"), as the worship itself consists in dutifully engaging in the activities that are suitable to one's nature. This is the origin of the famous saying, "work is worship", also characteristic of the Hindu tradition. The fact that God is all-pervading (*yena sarvam idam tatam*) means that everyone can remember and worship God at any time and in any place, and in any activity: *yat karosi yad asnasi yaj juhosi dadasi yat, yat tapasyasi kaunteya tat kuruva mad arpanam*, "O Arjuna, whatever you do, whatever you eat, whatever you sacrifice, whatever you give, whatever you endure in the performance of your duties - do it for me" (9.27).

This attitude will align our consciousness perfectly with the supreme Consciousness, so that there is no more difference in purpose: *yajnarthat karmano 'nyatra loko 'yam karma bandhanah, tad artham karma kaunteya mukta sangah samacara*, "Actions must be

performed as sacrifice, otherwise in this world they cause bondage. Therefore you should perform your activities for that (purpose of sacrifice), remaining free from (material) association." (3.9).

Because there is no difference in purpose, there will be no negative effects: *brahmany adhaya karmani sangam tyaktva karoti yah, lipyate na sa papena padma patram ivambhasa*, "Dedicating all activities to the Brahman, giving up all material identification and association, one is never affected by the negative consequences of bad action, just like a lotus leaf is never affected by water." (5.10). This will be confirmed at the conclusion of this chapter (18.65). This is the traditional ancient system, by which the great personalities of the past attained perfection: *karmanaiva hi samsiddhim asthita janakadayah*, "Janaka and others like him became situated in perfection through the performance of their duties." (3.20)

श्रेयान्स्वधर्मो विगुणः परधर्मात्स्वनुष्ठितात् । स्वभावनियतं कर्म कुर्वन्नाप्नोति किल्बिषम् ॥ १८-४७ ॥

śreyānsvadharmo viguṇaḥ paradharmātsvanuṣṭhitāt | svabhāvaniyataṁ karma kurvannāpnoti kilbiṣam || 18-47 ||

sreyan: better; *sva dharmah*: one's specific duty; *viguṇah*: not perfect; *para dharmat*: than the duty of someone else; *su anuṣṭhitat*: followed perfectly; *sva bhava niyatam*: prescribed according to one's specific nature; *karma*: activities; *kurvan*: performing; *na apnoti*: does not achieve; *kilbisam*: fault.

"It is better to engage in one's specific duty, even imperfectly, than following the duties of others in a perfect way. One's duties are prescribed according to one's specific nature, and engaging in them is the right thing to do.

We have seen an almost identical verse in the chapter on *Karma yoga*: *sreyan sva dharmo viguṇah para dharmat sv anuṣṭhitat, sva dharme nidhanam sreyah para dharmo bhayavahah*, "It is better to perform one's own duty even with some imperfections or mistakes, or even if this means meeting with death or destruction, rather than successfully engaging in the duties of others - which is a dangerous choice" (3.35). This idea can be (and has been) misinterpreted by foolish and ignorant people who remain unable to understand the particular nature of each individual, and confuse it with the circumstances of his birth. So this verse has been desecrated by fake brahmins to mistreat and insult innumerable genuine Satyakamas and to prevent them from pursuing the proper education and engagement in dharmic duties that they desired so strongly, while the duty of the *brahmana* should have been to purify, elevate and train sincere souls who wanted to progress, even from the lowest level (*Rig Veda* 2.22.2). It is difficult to calculate the amount of negative reactions to such gross dereliction of duty, arrogance and cruelty, but we can see the results all around us.

Krishna has already explained very clearly that each particular position and its duties are assigned specifically according to the individual's *guna* and *karma*, and are not automatically hereditary. We have elaborated on this point several times already in previous commentaries, but one should see that Krishna's statement is clear enough on its own when he speaks of a specific individual nature. As the popular saying goes, if it walks like a duck and quacks like a duck, it cannot be something else, even if it was found in a place very different from a duck nest. This is called *vrsicka tanduli nyaya*, "the logic of the scorpion and the rice"; it is said that sometimes scorpions lay their eggs inside a mound of rice to take advantage of the warmth of the grains that are drying up, so when the eggs hatch, it appears that the little animals were born from rice grains, while in fact the rice was simply the host.

Of course when degradation spreads and *brahmanas* become corrupted by *tamas* and *rajas*, those endorsed by them as *brahmanas* will be even less qualified generation after generation, until *adharma* becomes normally presented as *dharma* (18.31, 18.32). This is the true root cause of the degradation of Hindu civilization, where many misguided people present the gross identification with the material body (casteism, racism, sexism, etc) as the highest form of *dharma* and religious duty, that overrides all considerations of ethics and intelligence and even the direct observation of the actual *guna* and *karma* and realizations of the individual.

A very clear example is the life of Salabega, a very famous pure devotee who loved Jagannatha very much and was very dear to the Lord, and whose songs are universally recognized as the highest standard of *bhakti* and sung by one and all in Puri and Orissa. Yet, simply because of his birth Salabega was always treated like an outcaste, insulted, beaten and barred from ever entering the temple for public *darshana*, his house was torched and he was denied access to the crematorium for the funeral of his mother - a disgraceful persecution that is still considered with pride by the brahmins in Puri as a demonstration of "purity" in the temple standards. We could make thousands of similar examples from the history of the last 500 years and also from contemporary news especially in Orissa, Bihar, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh in India, although casteism is becoming increasingly obsolete especially in big cities where the westernization of society and culture has moved the focus of social prejudice and injustice to financial considerations and political positions rather than religious privilege.

Some people resent what they call "brahmin bashing", claiming that the higher castes (which are actually artificial and irrelevant ethnic subdivisions of the general brahmin caste) have been and are still grievously mistreated and unjustly discriminated. However, they are not taking any proactive measure to improve the situation, thus demonstrating that they are deeply immersed in *tamas* (18.35, 18.32, 18.39, 18.28, 18.25, 18.22, 14.13, 14.8, 14.17) and therefore unqualified for the elevated position of *brahmana* they want to occupy and the attending rights they are demanding. Instead of blaming others, recriminating, complaining, whining and dreaming, they should start really performing their duties and work actively and fearlessly to purify themselves and the entire society from *avidya* and *adharma*. For example, many of these fake brahmins are very attached to non vegetarian foods (the ordinary type, purchased on the market) and to silence their own guilty subconscious, they regularly attack and insult those who propagate the knowledge of the benefits of vegetarianism. Also, fake brahmins are generally characterized by hatred and spite for women, and many of them are ferociously "anti-feminists", a persuasion that goes from justifying rape ("boys will be boys"), to beating and torturing their own wives and other female family members or congregation members, encouraging the mistreatment, suppression and elimination of girl children, and enjoying and circulating offensive jokes and vignettes that portray women in humiliating and degrading ways.

For a brahmin who wants to become a *brahmana*, a good first step consists in actually studying, understanding and applying the instructions of the *shastra* in one's own life, developing his qualities as described in scriptures and especially in *Bhagavad gita* (2.46, 17.23, 18.42, etc), verifying his own realizations and improving the general culture of society by engaging in public debates in support of

dharma and *vidya*, and sincerely (without cutting corners for materialistic selfish purposes) performing the traditional *karmas* (dutiful activities, ritual ceremonies) starting from *suddhi*, *prayascitta* and *vrata* for themselves and for those who wish to engage in the Vedic way of life. Then he should continue by sincerely understanding and observing all the *samskaras* and elevating his own consciousness and the consciousness of others through example and precept, observing and teaching the practices of *yama* and *niyama* and properly training the other members of society (according to the individual *guna* and *karma*) for the positions of *kshatriyas* and *vaisyas*. If he chooses not to do that, he does not deserve any respect, even if externally he may present himself as a great religionist. The *Vishnu dharma shastra* (93.7) states, *na vary api prayacchet tu vaidala-vratike dvije na baka-vratike vipre naveda vidi dharma-vit*, "Those who know *dharma* should never give even a drop of water to the hypocritical son of a *brahmana* who has not studied Vedic knowledge but follows the vow of the duck or the vow of the cat". The *baka vrata* ("the vow of the duck") is that of one who always looks down in order to make a show of humility and does *sadhana* for the purpose of earning money, but is cruel, arrogant and usually tells lies. The *vaidala vrata* ("vow of the cat") is shown by one who is externally proud of his religious position (*dharma dhvaji*) but is in fact a hypocrite, a greedy, envious, hateful, violent person, indulging in slandering innocent people.

When social and professional roles are assigned by a qualified *guru*, a person's leaving his prescribed duty for another position, without any real emergency, can be explained as a whimsical movement of the restless mind, that can only create problems to the individual and to society: *indriyasya indriyasya arthe raga dvesau vyavasthitau, tayor na vasam agacchet tau hy asya paripanthinau*, "Attraction and aversion are ordained to result from the interaction of the senses with the objects of the senses; one should not fall under the control of either of them, because they are both to be considered as obstacles on the path of the performance of duty" (3.34).

The word *vigunah* means "incomplete, with bad qualities, without much value, not interesting", and refers exactly to the negative emotions of a person who is facing depression and a fall in self esteem due to some temporary difficulty. When a person is not educated and trained properly, he will become more vulnerable to anxiety and insecurity, because he has no clear vision of the situation. At the opposite side, we have the expression *su anusthita*, meaning "very well done, more attractive", which shifts the focus from the social importance of the activity to the narcissistic complacency for the action itself or the social position it seems to offer.

The *guru* is supposed to help the disciple developing this clear vision (*darshana*), starting from the real identity of the self (*atman*), the meaning of *dharma*, *artha*, *kama* and *moksha*, and the appropriate method to apply them in one's life through *yoga* as explained by Krishna in *Bhagavad gita*.

The word *kilbisam* means "stain, offense, contamination, bad reaction", as in verses 3.13, 4.21, 6.45; this indicates that in the sincere performance of one's duties there could still be some imperfections and failures, but one should not take them too seriously.

On a deeper spiritual level, the word *viguna* has been interpreted as *nirguna*, signifying that one should continue to perform the assigned duties even after having transcended the material qualities of nature (3.18, 3.22, 3.23, 3.24, 3.25, 4.14, 4.20, 4.21, 4.23, 4.24, 9.9, 17.26) because in this world everyone must continue to work until the end of the body (3.4, 3.8, 5.2, 18.9). Similarly, the expressions *sva dharma* and *para dharma* are applied respectively to the *atman* and the *non-atman*, that is the material composing the mind, the senses and the body. In this respect, we would like to highlight the fact that there is a difference between *para* (no long *a*) and *para* (long final *a*); the first means "other" and the second means "superior" as in *para prakriti* (long *a*).

सहजं कर्म कौन्तेय सदोषमपि न त्यजेत् । सर्वारम्भा हि दोषेण धूमेनाग्निरिवावृताः ॥ १८-४८ ॥

sahajam karma kaunteya sadosamapi na tyajet | sarvarambha hi dosena dhūmenāgnirivavṛtaḥ || 18-48 ||

saha jam: born at the same time; *karma*: activities; *kaunteya*: o son of Kunti; *sa dosam*: together with some fault; *api*: although; *na tyajet*: one should not abandon; *sarva arambha*: all enterprises; *hi*: indeed; *dosena*: with some fault; *dhumena*: by smoke; *agnih*: fire; *iva*: similarly; *avritah*: covered.

"O son of Kunti, one should not abandon the duties pertaining to one's own congenital nature, even if they seem to be imperfect, because all activities are bound to have some defect, just like fire is covered by smoke."

The expression *saha jam* ("born at the same time") refers to the *guna* and *karma* carried by the individual at the time of his birth, and that can be ascertained by a good astrologer by examining the exact time and place of birth; for this reason astrology (*Jyotisha Veda*) is considered a direct and important part of Vedic literature. In ancient times every newborn had his or her horoscope immediately cast by a trusted astrologer, so that the parents could adjust the early stages of education.

In genuinely qualified *brahmana* families, all the members always maintain a high standard of spiritual consciousness, mental purity, good behavior and clear knowledge of *dharma* and *vidya*, and thus they create a specially favorable environment; with the *garbhadaṇa samskara* the womb of the mother is purified through spiritual and religious impressions, so at the time of conception the high level of consciousness of the parents will likely attract an evolved soul. Any negative influence can bring disastrous results, as exemplified by the inauspicious circumstances of the pregnancy of Diti, the wife of Kasyapa Rishi and mother of the great *asuras* Hiranyaksha and Hiranyakasipu.

Again, here we must remember that birth is something that applies to the person who is born, not to his parents or family; the one who takes birth is the subject of the action. It is easy to verify this point by comparing specific qualities - intellectual capacity or the strength of one's ethical sense but especially professional talents or abilities - between siblings or even between child and parents, where irregularity or discordance are the actual norm and not the exception: how many mathematical geniuses, for example, come from families where everybody shares the same trait? Therefore the duties one acquires by birth are those activities that are related to one's own congenital characteristics, that may be quite different from those of one's parents or family members, especially if the parents have neglected to control their level of consciousness during intercourse - in which case any type of person can take birth, as the sexual act in itself is exactly the same for all *varnas* and indeed for all human beings. In any case, during the pregnancy and at birth several more *samskaras* are performed to raise and purify the level of consciousness of the fetus, that is still very impressionable and submissive to learning. After the astrological evaluation of the *guna* and *karma* of the child, the family can remedy a bad situation with extra rituals and spiritual/ religious

activities and so on, besides the customary *samskaras* that continue up to the age of 5, when the child is sent to the *gurukula*. One of the main rituals is the *annaprasana*, marking the start of the weaning process at the completion of 6 months of age and consisting in feeding the child with his first cooked grains; during this ceremony the child is shown various articles symbolizing different tendencies (*guna* and *karma*) such as books, working tools, money, an image of a Deity, weapons, and so on. The child will normally be attracted by one article more than by the others, and this is taken as a broad indication for his education.

However, a child below 2 years of age (*sisu*) does not undergo any specific training or moral teaching and is free to do whatever s/he wants; there is never any punishment for "bad actions" because such a small child cannot really understand it. After the second or third birthday the child (*bala*) is gradually taught whatever possible by his/ her family members, and at the age of 5 he is usually sent to the residential school; there, too, he is considered just a child and allowed lots of freedom and leniency until the age of 12. A boy older than 12 years is called *kumara* and becomes subjected to an increasingly strict discipline by the *guru*, stage by stage: he is called *kisora* until his 15th birthday and *taruna* until his 19th birthday, after which he is known as *yauvana*. These definitions are used to establish their specific duties.

Not all the students in the *gurukula* will be able to endure the increasing pressure, so usually *sudras* are dismissed at the age of 12 after learning the fundamentals of *dharma* and *achara*, *vaisyas* graduate at the age of 15, *kshatriyas* at the age of 19 and *brahmanas* can be trained up to the age of 25, after which they need to marry and begin their work in society. During this training period, the individual can rise much higher than the original position at birth, but the purpose of the training is not to move the student to a higher *varna* than what was indicated by his birth chart, but rather to help him develop his potential in accordance to *dharma* and *vidya*, and learn how to perform all the duties prescribed for his particular nature, and which will be comfortable for him. After attaining perfection in those duties one can start training in stricter duties for further evolution. It is important to understand that the higher *varnas* have proportionately more stringent duties and less opportunities for enjoyment - up to the *brahmanas*, whose sustenance should be obtained by collecting discarded grains in the fields after the harvest or from the bags of merchants in the market (*yayavara silonchanam vipra vritih, Bhagavata Purana 7.11.16*) and should always live in simplicity and austerity, without indulging in sense gratification.

The expression *saha jam* ("born with") is elegantly balanced with the symmetrical expression *sa dosam* ("with defects"), indicating that in the beginning any enterprise or work appears difficult and imperfect, but one should not be discouraged by a poor performance or even by failure. This is why we need to practice our duties regularly (*sadhana*) to improve ourselves. No job is perfect or easy or completely pleasant, as there will be tedious and even unpleasant, dangerous and painful moments, yet one should never give up: this is the only way we can attain perfection (*samsiddhi*).

The example of the fire covered by smoke (*dhumena agnih avritah*) is amazingly beautiful. When we start a fire (especially by friction, as it was done in ancient times) the smoke is the first thing we see, then a small flame pops out, and when properly fed with the suitable fuel, a nice crackling fire appears; then we can put some bigger load of wood and finally everything is consumed to embers and ashes.

So in the beginning of one's training there will be mostly difficulties and discomfort (*yat tad agre visam iva pariname 'mritopamam*, "happiness that seems like poison in the beginning but becomes nectar in the end", 18.37) especially if we did not make any practice in previous lifetimes (6.41-6.45). Before making good progress, we need to burn away a good amount of impurities that cloud our vision and encrust our good will, and that makes a lot of stinking smoke.

Then one fine day we suddenly get some amazing realization, like a small flame popping out apparently from nowhere, and we start to see the light; from that time, our desire to improve and progress gets warmer and brighter and the fire is burning. All the good things (study, austerity, charity, rituals, etc) we offer in the fire make it brighter, until our light can be seen from far and wide, and nothing can stop the fire of our realization and consciousness. Finally, when the process is completed, all the fuel has been digested and absorbed into a glowing and stable awareness that can remain hot for a very long time without any further feeding, and that can instantly kindle other consciousness fires just by contact. Applied to the evolution of the individual from one level of duties to another, the embers of stable consciousness are then fed with a different and purer quality of fuel - such as *ghi* or camphor, for example, exemplifying pure transcendental consciousness - that gives the fire different functions, shifting gradually from heat to light, until only light remains.

We have already clarified the difference between *dharma* and *adharmas*, one described as *sat* or *daivi* and the other as *asat* or *asuri*; therefore when we speak of *sva dharma* that is following one's *sva bhava*, that never applies to *asurim bhava*, because there can be no such thing as criminal *dharma*. Therefore a person who was born in a disadvantaged situation, in a degraded family or community, should be helped in all possible ways if he wants to purify and elevate himself. True, he was born in that situation because of his past *karma*, but bad *karma* is not absolute and eternal and can be changed at any moment simply by engaging in positive *karma* or actions, or even simply by accepting transcendental knowledge (2.39, 2.50, 2.51, 3.9, 3.31, 4.14, 4.19, 4.20, 4.23, 4.37, 4.41, 9.28).

Similarly, we need to remain conscious about *dharma* and *vidya* in all social and professional positions; a *sudra* can refuse to carry out the orders of a bad adharmic master, and in fact he should abandon him to find better employment. Anyone can and should observe whether the *vaisyas* and especially the *kshatriyas* (and even the *brahmanas*) are engaged in adharmic actions; for the protection of the entire society the genuine *brahmanas* should admonish, reform or if necessary even remove such unqualified leaders. Returning to the example of the smoke covering the fire in the early stages: smoke does not make the fire impure but it can kill you if you are in a closed environment and you keep breathing it - that is, if you remain attached to your bad habits and qualities, or if you continue to perform toxic activities either by your own deliberation or by someone else's orders.

We have also explained that the importance of remaining loyal to one's prescribed duties is based on the fact that such duties are specifically and scientifically engineered for the evolution of the individual, and not for his material profit, comfort and success. People are very eager to discuss about their own rights (or what they perceive to be their rights, sometimes incorrectly) and not so eager to discuss about their duties; if you try to bring the issue to the table they get offended and do their worst to take revenge overtly or covertly, again demonstrating their utter lack of qualifications. Krishna has stated many times that one should perform one's duties sincerely and at the best of one's abilities, but without being attached to the success and failure in any specific action (2.38, 2.48, 3.35, 4.22, 16.15, 18.26), therefore it should be clear that the purpose of engagement is learning, not merely obtaining a material result. Learning and evolving have an eternal value as we carry them from one lifetime to the next, while the material attainments in this world are always very temporary and

therefore have little meaning in themselves; they rarely make us better persons, and without a higher evolution of consciousness in the members of society, all the technological achievements will fail to procure happiness because they are likely to be misused and cause more problems than solutions.

असक्तबुद्धिः सर्वत्र जितात्मा विगतस्पृहः । नैष्कर्म्यसिद्धिं परमां संन्यासेनाधिगच्छति ॥ १८-४९ ॥

asaktabuddhiḥ sarvatra jitatmā vigatasprīhaḥ । naiṣkarmyasiddhiṁ paramāṁ sannyāsenādhigacchati ॥ 18-49 ॥

asakta buddhiḥ: with detached intelligence; *sarvatra*: in all circumstances; *jita atma*: with self control; *vigata sprīhaḥ*: having abandoned the attachment to contact; *naiṣkarmya siddhiḥ*: the perfection of *naiṣkarma*; *paramam*: supreme; *sannyasena*: by renunciation; *adhigacchati*: one attains.

"One attains the supreme perfection of *naiṣkarma* through *sannyasa*, that is detached intelligence applied to all circumstances, (and also) establishing self control and giving up all association.

Krishna has already discussed the meaning of *sannyasa* in several verses (3.4, 3.30, 4.41, 5.3, 5.6, 5.13, 6.1, 6.2, 6.3, 6.4, 6.38, 8.11, 9.28, 12.6) and then again on the request of Arjuna in chapter 18 he elaborates on the difference between *sannyasa* and *tyaga* (18.1 to 18.12). Also, chapter 5 was completely dedicated to *Sannyasa yoga*. From all these instructions we can understand that the act of renunciation in itself, as in the *sannyasa ashrama*, has different value and results depending on the consciousness and motivations.

A superficial external renunciation devoid of real realization will not bring good results (3.4) but only sufferings (5.6) because nobody can ever stop acting (3.5) as long as the body continues to live. So the real *sannyasi* is one who performs his prescribed duties in society without being bound by *ahankara* and *mamatva* (5.3, 5.13, 12.6, 18.5, 18.6, 18.7, 18.9, 18.10, 18.11), not the one who does not kindle the fire and remains officially without a job and a family (6.1).

Therefore we must carefully distinguish when the word *sannyasa* is used in the superficial sense or in the true sense. The key to understand the true meaning of *sannyasa* as the path to *moksha* is found at the beginning of this verse in the expression *asakta buddhiḥ sarvatra*, that can be translated as "using intelligence to remain detached in all circumstances" as we have seen in so many previous verses. In fact, the central focus of *Bhagavad gita* is *Buddhi yoga* (although there is no specific chapter entitled to it), the awakened consciousness that enables us to remain connected and united through detachment. It sounds like a contradiction, but we can consider the example of a father who has many children: he can remain connected to all of them only if he is detached from their differences, mistakes, characteristics or appearances but maintains an equal approach. The moment he becomes attached to one of them, he will lose focus on the others, and ultimately he will also lose the object of his attachment, because attachment is not love.

The expression *jita atma* is also very interesting; it means "having conquered oneself". Just like the word *sannyasa* can be used at different levels, the word *atma* can refer to the soul (*atman*, *jivatman*) or to one's mind, senses or even to the body. All the different meanings remain valid because people who are situated on different levels of personal evolution need to relate to the self and renunciation according to their particular capabilities. So at the beginning of the path of *yoga*, one needs to start controlling his own body and senses (*yama*, *niyama*, *asana*, *pranayama*) and then he becomes able to control the mind (*dharana*, *dhyana*, *samadhi*). On the level of *samadhi*, the *atman* is conquered in the sense that the *yogi* has won the greatest prize: the direct perception and realization of his transcendental identity. And then he can engage in purely spiritual work (18.54).

Similarly, on the neophyte level one needs to take the external motions of accepting the order of *sannyasa* and following the strict rules and regulations, that are like crutches for the development of one's consciousness - a journey that usually takes many lifetimes (7.19). The regulated practice of renunciation will create a positive habit (18.37) and shape the mind into *sattva* and finally *visuddha sattva*; on that level one can engage in any *varna* or *ashrama* and perform the attending duties without being touched by any contamination, as Krishna will clearly state at the conclusion of the chapter (18.66).

This brings us to the next interesting expression of the verse - *vigata sprīha*. Some commentators translate "without hankering/ without aspirations", but the literal meaning is "contacting/ touching completely gone". We have seen it in verses 2.56 (*vigata sprīha*), 2.71 (*nihsprīhah*), 4.14 (*na me sprīha*), 6.18 (*nihsprīhah*), and in a negative sense in 14.12. The word *sprīha* is closely related to *sparsa* ("contact"), as we have seen in previous verses: *matra sparsas tu kaunteya sitosna sukha dukkha dah*, "the contact of the senses (with the sense objects) causes joy and distress just like cold and heat" (2.14); *ye hi samsparas ja bhoga dukkha yonaya eva te*, "Those pleasures that derive from contact (with the sense objects) are the cause for future sorrow" (5.22); *sparsan kritva bahir*, "keeping the objects of contact outside" (5.27); *sukhena brahma samsparasam*, "s/he easily remains in contact with Brahman" (6.28).

Several previous verses mentioned *siddhi* or *samsiddhi* (18.45, 18.46, but also 3.20, 8.15, 12.10, 14.1); specifically, verse 3.4 stated: *na karmanam anarambhan naiṣkarmyam puruso 'snute, na ca sannyasanad eva siddhiṁ samadhigacchati*, "A person cannot achieve freedom from *karma* by abstaining from action, just like perfection cannot be achieved simply through *sannyasa*." How can we reconcile verse 3.4 with the present verse claiming that one attains the supreme perfection of *naiṣkarma* through *sannyasa* (*naiṣkarmya-siddhiṁ paramam sannyasena adhigacchati*)? Simply by remembering that the word *sannyasa* can have a lower or neophyte level, and a higher or transcendental level, as we were discussing on the meaning of the expression *jita atma*.

Here Krishna clearly establishes that the meaning of the word in the particular verse is verified by the presence of detached intelligence in all circumstances (*asakta buddhi sarvatra*), genuine mastery of the self (*jita atma*) and true detachment from all identifications and associations (*vigata sprīha*).

As long as a *sannyasi* does not have these symptoms, he will not attain the supreme perfection of *niskarma*. For a person who has attained that perfection, there is no more duty to perform: *yas tv atma ratir eva syad atma triptas ca manavah, atmany eva ca santustas tasya karyam na vidyate*, "A human being who loves the Self certainly becomes satisfied in the Self and peaceful within the Self: for such a person there is no need to perform any action" (3.17).

सिद्धिं प्राप्तो यथा ब्रह्म तथाप्नोति निबोध मे । समासेनैव कौन्तेय निष्ठा ज्ञानस्य या परा ॥ १८-५० ॥

siddhim prāpto yathā brahma tathāpnōti nibodha me | samāsenaiḥ kaunteya niṣṭhā jñānasya yā parā | | 18-50 |

siddhim: perfection; *praptah*: achieved; *yatha*: similarly; *brahma*: Brahman; *tatha*: also; *apnoti*: achieves; *nibodha*: you should understand; *me*: from me; *samasena*: in brief; *eva*: certainly; *kaunteya*: o son of Kunti; *nistha*: established position; *jnanasya*: of the knowledge; *ya*: which; *para*: supreme/ transcendental.

"O son of Kunti, you should understand from me that once (this) perfection is obtained, one attains Brahman. In brief, certainly this realization is the supreme knowledge.

The perfection to which this verse refers consists in performing the activities of one's duties with complete dedication in service to the Supreme, and without any selfish motivation, attachment or identification (see the previous verse, 18.49). When one is firmly situated in this consciousness (*nistha*), all positions in the universe are instantly transformed into pure devotional service, because Brahman is everywhere and in everything (*sarvatra*). At this level the separation between matter and spirit loses importance because everything is ultimately spirit (Brahman). This is an advanced understanding of Reality - just like in elementary arithmetics we are taught that you cannot subtract a larger number from a smaller number, but in advanced algebra we learn that the opposite is true, too. This is the reason why we need the direct and personal guidance of a realized *guru*, who is established on a higher level (*nistha*) from which s/he can see how the two apparent opposites can easily be reconciled, and how the teaching method should proceed gradually according to the understanding of the student.

The Vedic system offers a variety of approaches to the same fundamental path of Yoga, where the word Yoga defines the essence of spirituality and religion as explained abundantly in the many chapters of *Bhagavad gita*. In this sense, Yoga is not simply one of the *darshanas* of Vedic tradition, but it is Vedic tradition itself - its essence, meaning, root, source and foundation. The *karma kanda* (*Purva mimamsa*) is *Karma yoga*, the *jnana kanda* (*Uttara mimamsa*) is *Jnana yoga*, the Sankhya system is *Sankhya yoga*, Nyaya is *Buddhi yoga* and *Vijnana yoga*, Vaishesika philosophy is *Vibhuti yoga* and *Visvarupa darshana yoga*, and there are even more *darshanas* in *Bhagavad gita* - such as the *Taraka brahma yoga*, *Sannyasa yoga* and *Moksha yoga*, that go even beyond the scriptures and seek realization from the direct contemplation of the *atman/ brahman*.

This is the real, immense, liberating contribution of *Bhagavad gita*, offered from age to age (4.1) to the human kind as an essential integration to all methods of study. *Bhagavad gita* is not meant to affirm the sectarian superiority of the formal worship or sentimentalist devotion of one particular God - Krishna - as opposed to "the demigods", or to preach an exclusive path of formal renunciation and absenteeism from the "illusory things of the world".

Through *Bhagavad gita*, Krishna teaches us that we are all, directly and indirectly, limbs of the Supreme Purusha (Purushottama, chapter 15, who is the source of Brahman, 14.27) and as such we have duties in this universe by which we can contribute to the happiness and progress of the entire body. This devotional service is the key to our individual evolution and to the establishment of a perfect society where each individual is supported, protected, engaged and cared for, each and everyone comfortably enough for their particular *guna* and *karma* but with just the sufficient pressure to make efforts to improve, and where the human potential can bloom in its full splendor and glory. This is true Yoga.

The first part of the verse is focused on the symmetry of *yatha-tatha*, that means "at the same time, in the same way", and connects perfection (*siddhi*) with Brahman, the supreme Consciousness that encompasses all Reality. This is the final stage (*nistha*) of renunciation (*sannyasa*) and liberation (*moksha*), the subject of this chapter. We have already elaborated on the fact that Brahman (Paramatma, Bhagavan) is the reality of consciousness or knowledge (*tattvam yaj jnanam advayam, Bhagavata Purana*, 1.2.11) and that the *jivatmans* are his parts or limbs (*amsa*, 15.7).

Everything wonderful and beautiful in this world is manifested by a part of the radiance of this Brahman (*tejo amsa sambhavam*, 10.41), as the *Bhagavata Purana* further explains: *etan nanavataranm nidhanam bijam avyayam, yasyamsena sriyante deva tiryak naradayah*, "From these many *avatars* (Karanodakasayi Vishnu, Garbhodakasayi Vishnu, Kshirodakasayi Vishnu) come the indestructible seed (the *anu atman, aham bija pradam*, 14.4) that manifests all existences such the *devas*, the animals, the human beings and all other creatures" (1.3.5). These three subsequent forms of Vishnu are called *purusha avatars* ("manifestations of the personal principle of consciousness in this world"); the first is also called Narayana ("the shelter of human beings") that is sleeping (*sayi*) immersed in *yoga nidra* or *maha maya* in the Karana ("causes") *udaka* ("ocean") also called the *mahat tattva brahman*, and at each one of his breath cycles all the innumerable universes are created and destroyed. Then a *svamsa* ("complete/ united part") enters each of these universes and rests (*sayi*) on the Garbha ("embryo") *udaka* ("ocean"), giving birth through his navel to Hiranyagarbha ("the golden embryo" or "the golden egg") that is Brahma, the first creature and creator of each universe.

Simultaneously, Narayana also manifests in a localized form in *prapanchika vaikuntha*, a duplicate Vaikuntha planet (or dimension) within this universe - a sort of embassy of Vaikuntha in the material world - and therefore he is called Kshira ("milk") *udaka* ("ocean") *sayi* ("reclining"). This Vishnu abode in the ocean of milk is the island Trikuta ("three mountains") also called Svetadvipa ("the white island") and Dhruvaloka or the polar star, around which all the other stars and planet circle; here Brahma and the Devas can approach Vishnu for help in the protection of the universe. Since the number of universes is unlimited, there are certainly many of these *svamsa avatars* in the material manifestation; from these emanate all the *jivatmans* or *anu atmans*, that are the seeds of life and consciousness, beginning as small atoms that incarnate in the world in order to evolve.

बुद्ध्या विशुद्धया युक्तो धृत्यात्मानं नियम्य च । शब्दादीन्विषयांस्त्यक्त्वा रागद्वेषौ व्युदस्य च ॥ १८-५१ ॥

buddhyā viśuddhayā yukto dhṛtyātmānaṁ niyama ya ca | śabdādīnviṣayāṁstyaktvā rāgadveṣau vyudasya ca || 18-51 ||

buddhya: with intelligence; *visuddhaya*: completely purified; *yuktah*: engaged; *dhṛitya*: with determination; *atmanam*: the self; *niyama*: regulating; *ca*: and; *śabda adin*: beginning from sound; *viṣayan*: the sense objects; *tyaktva*: giving up; *raga dvesau*: both attraction and repulsion; *vyudasya*: putting aside; *ca*: and.

"By engaging the self with determination and a completely purified intelligence, and by following the prescribed method, and also by letting go all the sense objects, beginning with the sounds, as well as attraction and repulsion,

Intelligence (*buddhi*) is the key and the instrument to attain true success both on the material level (in *dharma, artha, kama, moksha*, brought about by *sattva*, 14.16) and on the spiritual level as well; however, in order to remain on the spiritual level (*nistha*) one's intelligence must be completely purified, and therefore rise above material *sattva*. The word *visuddha* ("completely purified") is also used to refer to that level of *sattva* ("goodness") that is not contaminated by any material consideration, therefore the *visuddha buddhi* is beyond material intelligence and constitutes the highest possible position from which we can realize the absolute Truth - Brahman, Paramatma, Bhagavan Purushottama. Of course the expression can also mean "purified by intelligence", as when intelligence is pure, the consciousness is not covered by contamination. .

Other commentators have explained that *visuddha buddhi* means *anatmani atma buddhi nivrittan*, "the termination of thinking as self what is not the self", or in other words, abandoning the root delusion of material identification (*ahankara* and *mamatva*). The process of purification requires determination (*dhṛiti*) because one needs to sincerely follow the proper method and its rules (*niyama*) and abandon all the attachment, attraction and repulsion towards the sense objects. This is not a one-time choice, but a daily repeated process, because as long as we have a material body, our material senses and material mind will be subject to the power of the *gunas* (18.40) and to the waves and movements of their interactions.

The purpose of Yoga is to become detached from such waves and movements, raising our consciousness above the ocean of material existence, so that our mind is not disturbed any more by these *vrittis*. This is only possible when the mind is strongly focused on the transcendental contemplation of *atman/ brahman*.

Some people try to meditate "on the void", foolishly thinking that the purpose of Yoga is to become "liberated from the mind", but that is delusion; if they seem to succeed, it is because they have immersed their consciousness in *tamas*, so nothing moves there but only because of inertia and forgetfulness, just like in the minds of a lobotomized human being or a less evolved creature such as a plant or a rock. We need to follow the proper method (*niyama*) in meditation, because mere fantasy and speculation will not have the same effect as a sincere and dedicated application of the genuine scientific system. The word *yukta* is from the very same root of the word *yoga*, and indicates "union, connection, engagement, relationship, control, regulation"; we can better understand the meaning of Yoga by applying all these particular meanings to our *sadhana*.

The expression *śabda adin*, meaning "all those (things) beginning with sound" is very interesting. On the simpler level, it indicates the various sense objects or functions of the senses such as sound, form and color, touch, taste, smell. On a deeper level, it refers to the fact that all material creations begin from the sound - first subtle, then gross - and develop subsequently into form and then into physical contact. We can easily verify this scientific fact by experimentally concentrating our attention on a mental sound, preferably a word, and then we will be able to observe how the mind follows the senses by recalling a form that corresponds to that word or sound, and then how the senses of action will send the impulse of movement to go and touch the sense object. There is the famous exercise on the name "lemon"; by focusing on the name/ sound/ idea "lemon", our internal senses will immediately present the image of a lemon and even the sour taste of the lemon, recovering it from our previous memories.

Therefore the purification of the mind starts with sounds, more specifically with the *pranava omkara* and the *maha mantras* composed by the names of God, the descriptions of the teachings, activities, qualities and forms of God, and with other auspicious sounds such as conch shells blowing, bells ringing, etc. By regularly surrounding ourselves with these spiritual sounds, the memory of the inauspicious sounds will be pushed out, and gradually the mind will abandon it completely because it has found a better taste (2.59).

The perfection of this meditation is called *sakalpa* or *samprajnata samadhi*, or constant absorption of the mind on auspicious transcendental sense objects or ideas, such as *mantras, stutis, vighras, lilas*, etc. Only after attaining this level one can aim at transcending it and attain the *nirvikalpa* or *asamprajnata samadhi*, the original state of the *atman/ brahman*, where there is no *sankalpa* ("desire, purpose") or *jnata* ("object of knowledge"), because there is no more duality, no more space and time, and the *atman* is completely united into *brahman*, yet it remains distinct in service and relationship. One who has not experienced transcendence will not be able to understand how this is possible, because it is not a concept that can be explained by words or perceived by the senses or by the mind. Yet, it is very much real, in fact more real than material objects and consciousness; in *asamprajnata samadhi* everything is contained in a *bindu* ("point/drop") much like Arjuna experienced the entire expanse of the universe in one single point when he contemplated the Virata Rupa. Such an experience has nothing to do with *sunyata* ("void").

The word *vyudasya* ("putting aside") is a very practical instruction for meditation, both for beginners and advanced students. The mind is restless and always eager to find something new and interesting, so it keeps running everywhere and bringing back stuff to show us, like an enthusiastic little child who has found wonderful and strange objects in his exploration of the world - a pebble with a particular shape, a feather fallen from a bird, a piece of broken glass, a flower, and so on (sometimes even nasty things). Krishna has already recommended that we should make friends (6.5, 6.6) with our own mind and treat it affectionately but firmly like we would deal with a restless child to be engaged in some important learning task: *sanaih sanair upamed buddhya dhṛiti grihitaya, atma samstham manah kritva na kincid api cintayet, yato yato niscalati manas cancalam asthiram, tatas tato niyamyaitad atmany eva vasam nayet, cancalam hi manah krisna pramathi balavad dridham, tasyaham nigraham manye vayo iva su duskaram, asamsayam maha baho mano durnigraham calam, abhyasena tu kaunteya vairagyena ca grihyate*, "Gradually withdrawing from attachments and distractions by the use of intelligence, with

a determined effort, one should fix the mind in the Self/ *atman* and stop worrying/ thinking about everything else. The mind is unsteady and impatient to wander around. Every time/ wherever it runs off, one should bring it back under control, and regulate it so that it remains controlled in/ by the Self/ *atman*. The mind is indeed restless, turbulent, powerful and stubborn; controlling it is more difficult than controlling the wind. However, although the mind is restless and very difficult to manage, it can be controlled by practice and detachment." (6.25, 6.26, 6.34, 6.35).

We should therefore sit in meditation, in a comfortable position (*asana*) so that our body will not distract us, then calm and purify the mind through proper breathing (*prayanama*) and learn how to stop listening to external messages (*pratyahara*) so that we can fix our mind (*dharana*) on a transcendental sound (*mantra*) and form (*vigraha, yantra*). Every time our mind becomes distracted by external or internal objects, every time it comes up with some other idea or memory, we should say, "thank you, but now I am busy" and go back to the proper contemplation. Sometimes it helps to take a quick note (pen and paper) if we have the impression that the mind's idea is particularly useful in our daily life, so that the mind feels satisfied that we have given it some attention.

However, we need to remain neutral towards all the impressions, emotions, memories etc, because both attraction and repulsion will reinforce the interest of the mind and create an attachment, and repression is even worse because it gives the problem too much power. Just acknowledge and let go. Gradually the mind will learn to appreciate the transcendental objects and will become calmer and more focused, undisturbed by the waves of the *gunas* (2.70).

विविक्तसेवी लघ्वाशी यतवाक्कायमानसः । ध्यानयोगपरो नित्यं वैराग्यं समुपाश्रितः ॥ १८-५२ ॥

viviktasevī laghvāśī yatavākkāyamānasah | dhyānayogaparo nityam vairāgyam samupāśritah || 18-52 ||

vivikta sevi: living alone and in a quiet place; *laghu asi*: eating moderately and light food; *yata*: having controlled; *vak*: speech; *kaya*: body; *manasah*: (and) mind; *dhyana yoga*: in *dhyana yoga*; *parah*: dedicated to; *nityam*: constantly; *vairagyam*: renunciation; *samupasritah*: having taken shelter of.

"living alone/ in an isolate place, eating moderately, controlling the speech, the body and the mind, taking shelter in renunciation, and constantly immersed in meditation,

Krishna is summarizing here the essentials for *yoga* and *sannyasa*, that lead to *moksha*. The previous verse (18.51) clearly stated that one should first of all be determined to purify one's intelligence from *ahankara* and *mamatva*, follow the rules of *yama* and *niyama*, and becoming completely detached from both attraction and repulsion, letting go all the sense objects, starting from sound - noise pollution, useless and meaningless socialization, the constant chattering of the mind, and so on.

In this verse Krishna recognizes that it is extremely difficult to do this unless one lives alone, in a quiet and solitary place, so that one does not have to deal with the constant chattering of the mind of someone else (besides one's own mind's chattering), and with the silly and superficial socialization and the loud noises created by stupid people. And today the situation is even worse than the condition of society in Krishna's times.

Sometimes religiously inclined people who are influenced by *tamas* believe that if something is good, more of that same thing must be better, so they distort and abuse the idea of spreading auspicious sounds for the benefit of all. Vedic civilization did not use loudspeakers and certainly does not prescribe putting the mega boom boxes at maximum volume to get their *kirtanas* or *bhajanas* heard at 10 km distance, creating hearing problems, mental confusion and physical pain to all those who live at a closer range (within 1 km, for example) and damaging the eardrums, brain and nervous system of those who stand or sit even nearer (within 10 meters, for example). We have seen how *tamas* creates addiction to an excessively high volume of music, because the aggression of sound to the brain and nervous system is mistaken by the conditioned body and mind as a pleasurable stimulation.

However, normal people, especially small children, and even animals are simply disturbed and aggravated by this noise pollution, that can cause miscarriages in women and cows as described in the *shastra* with reference to very powerful sounds like the war conch shells of *asuras*. Actually, sattvic sounds as described in *shastra* with references to *ashramas* are very soft and sweet, on the same decibel level of scattered birds singing.

So, *vivikta sevi* ("living alone") is a precise instruction by Krishna. It was already recommended in previous instructions: *yogi yunjita satatam atmanam rahasi sthitah, ekaki yata cittatma nirasir aparigraha*, "A *yogi* should constantly practice meditation on the *atman* by living alone in a secluded place, carefully keeping the mind and the consciousness under control, free from expectations and from attachments to material acquisitions/ from depending on others" (6.10). Because our world is now overpopulated and society and government are not conducive to the actual practice of *yoga*, it may be difficult to find a proper place to live and practice meditation in a congested city or even in the vicinity of some loud temple or "*yoga ashrama*", so we need to adjust as best as we can. For example, it is always advisable to have a room of one's own (no other people using the same room) and let people know that we are practicing *mauna* (silence), so that we can avoid their gossiping and chattering and superficial socializing. The telephone is another major source of distraction and frustration, so it is better to switch it off or keep a voice mail recording instead, and let people know that they should send you messages and you will call them back when free.

The next extremely important factor in one's spiritual life and practice is the choice of food (*asi*, "eating, consuming, absorbing"). It was also mentioned in verse 6.17 (*yukta ahara*, "controlled eating"), and confirmed in many verses of *Bhagavata Purana* (*mita bhuk*, 3.27.8, 7.12.6, 11.11.30, *mita vanya bhuk*, 4.8.56, *mita adanam vivikta ksema sevanam*, 3.28.3, *nihsanga aparigraha ekah vivikta saranah mita asanah*, 7.15.30). This of course applies both to the mind's food and to the body's food. By living alone in a quiet place, we can better choose the food we want to make available to the mind, without external disturbances and interruptions, and similarly a *yogi* who lives in the forest or keeps a small permaculture or forest garden and orchard in or near his *bhajana kutir* or *ashrama* can obtain nice light food that is suitable for *sadhana*.

It is a very well known fact that a *yogi's* diet is based on fresh fruits and vegetables, especially herbs and leaves (*patram puspam phalam toyam*, 9.26), edible roots (*Bhagavata Purana* 4.23.5, 10.20.28, 11.18.2, *vanya bhuk*, 11.29.42, 12.2.9), nuts, and milk produced by the

ashrama or household cows, who return home in the evening after grazing in the forest or non-cultivated lands around the isolated place where the *yogi* lives. Occasionally the *yogi* (*brahmana*, *sadhu*, *brahmachari*, *vanaprastha* or *sannyasi*) can go to some village and collect alms in the form of grains (rice, wheat, barley, sesame, beans, etc) and keep a small store in the kitchen especially to cook small quantities of nice *bhoga* offerings for the Deity on festive occasions. With a sufficient supply of pure fresh water and occasional forest products such as honey and medicinal substances, the health and peace of mind of the *yogi* are guaranteed.

We understand that such a sattvik, idyllic, easy and comfortable way of life is not available to many people at present, therefore we will adjust by observing strict vegetarianism and choosing only sattvic ingredients, and especially preparing and consuming them in a "light" manner (*laghu*). So we should avoid the excessive use of spices and especially hot spices, the excessive use of sugar and especially refined white sugar, the excessive use of fats and especially fried fats or heavy oils such as the irritant mustard oil or the saturated fats of palm oil, coconut oil, "*vanaspati*" vegetable oil mixes etc. Even excessive use of clarified butter (*ghi*) and milk products is detrimental to good health and the lightness of body and mind required by the practice of *yoga* and *sannyasa*, so when we use relatively heavy (albeit pure vegetarian) ingredients, it should be only in the form of *prasadam*, that consists in very small quantities of preparations offered to the Deity and shared with others.

Controlling one's speech and mind is something we need to work on even when we are living and practicing in perfect solitude, and it is best done by engaging our power of speech (*vak shakti*) in reciting the *shastra* and singing devotional songs, and especially by vibrating the completely transcendental sounds of *pranava omkara* and *maha mantras*, that are composed exclusively by Divine names. The mind can also be nourished by the constant study of the scriptures (*svadhyaya*) and by devotional activities and thoughts (*isvara pranidhana*), and especially on the dynamic meditation (*dhyana*) on the Divine reality and its service, including the close association with the *antaryami paramatma*, whose voice becomes easier for us to hear clearly when there is no other noise around, internally or externally.

The word *yata* means "controlled, engaged", and gives us a better understanding of the word *yati*, that is a synonym of *sannyasi* (4.28, 5.26) as also confirmed even more clearly in *Bhagavata Purana* 7.12.16, 11.8.16, 11.18.17, but also 2.2.15, 3.1.31, 4.23.12, 5.26.39, 11.8.17, 11.16.43). Here is one example: *mauna aniha anila-yama, danda vag deha cetasam, na hy ete yasya santy anga venubhir na bhaved yatih*, "One who is not controlling his power of speech, has not given up selfish activities, does not control his *prana*, and does not keep a strict discipline on his own voice, body and mind, can never be a true *sannyasi*, even if he carries many bamboo rods (the insignia of an ordained *sannyasi*)" (*Bhagavata Purana*, 11.18.17).

The *tridandi sannyasis* of some later *dvaita* lineages carry a bamboo rod (*danda*) with three (*tri*) points, to distinguish themselves from the original *ekadandi* ("one rod") *sannyasis*; they claim that such three points symbolize their vow of controlling speech, body and mind (*vak, kaya, manasa*) as instructed in this verse. This is all very nice, but too often these three points of the *danda* are seen not just to represent such control, but to replace it altogether, as the *sannyasis* are found to be shamelessly engaged in such activities of sense gratification and material power that ordinary people end up trying to achieve a more enjoyable standard of living and better facilities by officially entering the order of *sannyasa* in such lineages.

Such fake *sannyasis* will claim that they are accepting these facilities only for the sake of devotional service, but that does not explain very expensive and unnecessarily prestigious status symbols such as the rolexes, the executive class seats on frequent air flights, the multi-star hotel rooms, the lavish birthday parties, the super-luxury vehicles, the dedicated personal servants including cooks preparing an elaborate feast with sophisticated items three times every day, the silver plates cups and *katoris*, the silken bedsheets and garments, the *pashmina* sweaters and shawls, the high quality marble and golden fauceted bathrooms at one's own private apartments, and the state of the art electronics and digital devices that are only used for very elementary purposes (sending/ receiving email messages and writing notes for a lecture). At these objections, the fake *sannyasi* will reply that he is humbly accepting these loving offerings from his disciples to avoid hurting their feelings, but if he is their *guru* he is supposed to teach them what is an appropriate living standard for a *sannyasi*, and encourage them to invest their wealth and efforts in the service of God and the cause of *dharma* and *vidya* instead. And if the *sannyasi* receives gifts from outside people, he should distribute them to deserving others according to the principle of utility in such higher service, if possible instructing them to sell the expensive articles and use the money for better purposes. Of course we need to adjust the externals of *sannyasa* to the present *desa, kala, patra*, but the principle of renunciation must remain the same, otherwise there will be a rajasic/ tamasic meaning in the definition itself (18.31, 18.32).

The verse from *Bhagavata Purana* (11.18.17) we quoted earlier is extremely interesting, because it further illustrates the meaning of the verses we are studying (18.51, 18.52, 18.53). *Mauna* means "silence" as we have seen in 18.51 and 18.52 (this verse), and we will see in 18.53 (next verse) represented by *santa* ("peaceful, quiet"). The word *aniha* means "without greed, without hankerings, without selfishness", and it corresponds to dropping all sense objects (*visayam tyaktva*) and abandoning the duality of attraction-repulsion (*raga dvesau vyuda*) as in verse 18.51, and to controlling speech, body and mind (*yata vak kaya manasa*) in the present verse (18.52), as it is also explicitly mentioned in the *Bhagavata Purana* (*danda vag deha cetasam*). The *Bhagavata* verse adds *pranayama* (*anila yama*) as an important practice to control speech, body, mind and *prana* or life energy, connecting *prana* with *cetasa* ("consciousness") as an alternate definition of "mind" (*manasa*, 18.51).

The expression *dhyana yoga parah* clearly indicates that a *yogi* should give priority or supreme position (*parah*) to meditation; this applies to multiple terms of comparison. The most immediate meaning is that a *yogi* should focus his/ her entire life on meditation as the main purpose of his/ her existence; *yoga* is not a hobby or an ancillary health practice used to enjoy some physical exercise and relaxation for one hour twice a week.

It is not even a "second job" to make some extra bucks or get some other similar benefits. Also, within the practice of *yoga, dhyana* is much more important than *dharana, pranayama, pratyahara* and *asana*, and even more than *yama* and *niyama*, because all these *yoga angas* ("limbs") are meant to support *dhyana* or meditation, and they constitute only preliminary and subordinate practices. When the *yogi* becomes perfect in *dhyana* (the actual purpose of *yoga*), meditation itself becomes *nitya dhyana*, technically called *samadhi*, or *sama dhi*, or *sama dhyana* ("constant equal meditation"). Another meaning of the expression interprets the word *para* as "Supreme" as in *brahman, paramatma, bhagavan*; meditation should only focus on *atman / brahman*, not on material objects. All these meanings are also confirmed by the expression *samupa asritah* ("fully possessed, taking full shelter").

अहंकारं बलं दर्पं कामं क्रोधं परिग्रहम् ।

विमुच्य निर्ममः शान्तो ब्रह्मभूयाय कल्पते ॥ १८-५३ ॥

ahāṅkāraṁ balaṁ darpaṁ kāmaṁ krodhaṁ parigrahaṁ | vimucya nirmamaḥ śānto brahmabhūyāya kalpate | | 18-53 | |

aham karam: I am the doer; *balam*: strength; *darpaṁ*: pride; *kamam*: lust; *krodham*: rage; *parigraham*: seeking gifts/ favors; *vimucya*: completely free; *nir mamah*: without a sense of proprietorship or belonging; *santah*: peaceful; *brahma bhuyaya*: the level of *Brahman*; *kalpate*: wishes.

"completely free from *ahankara*, pride for one's strength, lust, anger and expectation of honors, free from *mamatva*, and peaceful: (this person's) desires are on the level of *Brahman*.

An alternate (and more literary) translation of this verse is: "One who has become completely free from *ahankara* and *mamatva*, from the sense of material strength, pride, lust, anger and greed, and is peaceful, focuses his/ her desires towards *Brahman*." Other commentators have translated *brahma bhuyaya kalpate* as "can aspire to attaining the level of *Brahman*", but a person who is qualified in the manner described in these verses is already on the level of *Brahman*. The same meaning was expressed in verse 14.26 (*sa gunan samatityaitan brahma bhuyaya kalpate*, "develops desires on the *Brahman* level, transcending all these *gunas*").

The first line of this verse starts with *ahankara* ("I am the doer"), that is the single most detrimental obstacle to spiritual realization; the other bad qualities and habits listed in the first line are merely consequences created by *ahankara*. Material identification with the body and mind, that constitutes the *ahankara*, creates and thrives on the pride for one's own strength (*balam darpaṁ*) as well as on physical strength and fitness as a value in itself (*balam*) and on pride and arrogance as a value in itself (*darpaṁ*). So one who "practices *yoga*" because s/he is (or wants to be) proud of his/ her own body fitness or strength is automatically a failure and cannot progress.

The addition of *kama* next to *bala* and *darpa* is also illuminating, because generally those who pride themselves in their own bodies (fitness, sexyness etc) are eager to engage in subtle or gross sex and sense gratification; already the simple fact of being proudly conscious of one's body and identifying with it (*ahankara*) is a sort of narcissistic sexual activity. It does not matter if people cover their bodies up completely when they go out in public: lust and sense gratification and sexual urges remain undiminished even under a *burqa* and they are not dissolved even by artificial repression or mere abstention (3.6, 3.33). The only real solution is to drop the identification with the material body altogether, and move one's focus to our true identity as *atman/ brahman*. A real *yogi* does not wish to make the body strong and fit (2.70), even if this means that s/he is going against the opinion of the public (2.69) and is subjected to a barrage of impressions in that direction (2.70); his/ her wishes are on the level of *Brahman* (*brahma bhuyaya kalpate*).

The word *balam* means "force, material power, violence, strength", as well as "impact, clout, leverage, influence, affluence, position, fame, attachment" as these are elements of such material power. Together with arrogance (*darpa*), lust (*kama*), anger (*krodha*) and the exploitation mentality (*parigraha*), this material power is nothing less than asuric: *dambho darpo 'bhimanas ca krodhah parusyam eva ca, ajnanam cabhijatasya partha sampadam asurim, asa pasa satair baddhah kama krodha parayanah, ihante kama bhogartham anyayenartha sancayan, ahankaram balam darpaṁ kamam krodham ca samsritah, mam atma para dehesu pradvisanto 'bhyasuyakah*, "The characteristics of those born of asuric nature are hypocrisy, impudence, conceit, rage, rudeness, and of course ignorance. Bound by hundreds of ropes in the form of desires, always immersed in lust and anger, they desire to increase their desires and for that purpose they adopt any means to accumulate wealth. Taking shelter in *ahankara*, physical strength, arrogance, lust and anger, they show envy and hatred against me, as I reside in their own bodies and in the bodies of others." (16.4, 16.12, 16.18).

Specifically, it is the mixture of lust, greed and anger that obstructs the evolution of the soul: *kama esa krodha esa rajo guna samudbhavah, mahasano maha papma viddhy enam iha vairinam, tri vidham narakasyedam dvaram nasanam atmanah, kamah krodhas tatha lobhas tasmad etat trayam tyajet, kama krodha vimuktanam yatinam yata cetasam, abhito brahma nirvanam vartate viditatmanam*, "This (negative power) is (the mixture of) desire and anger, and it is born from *rajas guna*. Know that it is all-devouring, the cause of great sins, and the (true) enemy in this world. The threefold gate to hellish life and to self-destruction consists of this mixture of lust, greed and anger, therefore one should abandon them. The saintly persons who are completely free from lust and anger and have their consciousness steadily fixed (in *atman/ brahman*), who have realized the Self: (for them) there is *brahma nirvana* very soon." (3.37, 16.21, 5.26).

The mixture of *kama-lobha-krodha* is born from the influence of *rajas* on *ahankara* (material identification) and *mamatva* (material attachment), therefore by dropping *ahankara* and *mamatva*, and taking shelter in the Supreme through *sattva* and *visuddha sattva*, we automatically become free from this great enemy of progress. *Ahankara* and *mamatva* are also the source of *parigraha*, the tendency to accumulating and keeping superfluous things, acquiring wealth and property, expecting gifts and favors and service from others, exploiting or depending on others for one's own maintenance, and so on. This also applies to the religious field, of course, as we have seen that *asuras* also love to present themselves as religionists (16.10, 16.15, 16.17), and ordinary religious activities can also be performed with the wrong motivations and with bad effects (17.5, 17.6, 17.12, 17.13, 17.18, 17.19, 17.21, 17.22, 18.31, 18.32), and with the wrong attitude and understanding (18.7, 18.8, 18.21, 18.22, 18.24, 18.25, 18.27, 18.28). Only a sincere *sadhaka*, who is free from *ahankara* and *mamatva* and has overcome all the bad qualities born from *rajas* and *tamas*, can attain peace and rise to the level of *Brahman*, the *brahma bhuyaya* or *brahma nirvana* (5.26). And only from that level, true *bhakti* or devotion to *Isvara Bhagavan* can start, as the next verse will clearly state.

ब्रह्मभूतः प्रसन्नात्मा न शोचति न काङ्क्षति ।

समः सर्वेषु भूतेषु मद्भक्तिं लभते पराम् ॥ १८-५४ ॥

brahmabhūtaḥ prasannātmā na śocati na kāṅkṣati | samaḥ sarveṣu bhūteṣu madbhaktiṁ labhate parām | | 18-54 | |

brahma bhutah: the state of *Brahman*; *prasanna atma*: satisfied in the self; *na socati*: does not lament; *na kanksati*: does not hanker; *samah sarvesu bhutesu*: equally disposed towards all beings/ towards all existences; *mad bhaktim*: *bhakti* to me; *labhate*: obtains; *param*: spiritual/ transcendental.

"One who is established in the state of *Brahman* is satisfied in the self; he does not lament of hanker (after anything), is equally disposed towards all beings and achieves transcendental devotion to me.

Brahma bhuya or *brahma bhuta* is the existence of Brahman, or "being" Brahman, the level of *paramahansa* that constitutes the perfection of the evolution in human beings - *samsiddhi*, or *moksha*, liberation from the ignorance and illusion of material identification and attachment. Without attaining this level, devotion can only be impure, contaminated by material ignorance and motivations that we project on God; before the *atman/ brahman* realization, religious devotion can only be a shadow or glimpse of true *bhakti*. Such sentimental devotion should not be condemned, because it is a step in the proper direction (10.10), but it should not be presented as the genuine article, either, because people would be confused and misled into believing they have already attained the goal when they are actually just dreaming and fantasizing, so they will stop making efforts to attain the true realization and they will miss the main point and the special opportunity of human life.

What is the existence of Brahman? The word *bhuta* ("being") refers both to the condition of existence and to the individual consciousness who lives in that particular existence; the word is a derivative from the verb "becoming" (*bhavati*), therefore it indicates a process of development, such as birth, evolution or realization. The individual soul starts as *anu atman* ("atomic self"), a non-developed spark of consciousness that is meant to evolve and grow into a fully fledged *siddha svarupa*, or transcendental/ spiritual body, made of pure consciousness (*sat cit ananda*) just like the body of God. So the *anu atman* enrolls in the school of the material world and becomes a *jiva atman* or *jiva buta* ("living being"); in the beginning there is some confusion about the body-identity thing, so the tiny *atman* incorrectly identifies with the material body he has developed. Through a series of experiences and with the proper education and teachings, the *jivatman* will finally attain the full understanding (realization) of its true identity and the meaning of "transcendental body". This is the *brahma bhuta* level.

One might ask why God, who is so good and omnipotent, puts the *jivatmans* through such a long and painful process. Can't he create fully perfect emanations, already developed, already in the adult *siddha deha* form, and spare us all this trouble? The answer is that true love must be based on free choice, on real appreciation that comes through a contrast with some other term of comparison. This is the purpose of duality, this is the purpose of the entire material manifestation. As *jivatmans*, we get the opportunity to participate in the *lila* of creation, preservation and destruction of the world, and we can always choose the role we want to play. God does not get angry at us if we do not make the right choices, but the game has some in-built rules that the *jivatman* cannot break, because they are stronger than him (7.14, 3.5, 3.33, 13.30, 18.40). Foolish and ignorant people throw insults at their Mother Mahamaya, calling her "witch", or "evil stepmother", just like stupid children get angry with mother because of their own failures and limitations, or with the teacher because they are asked to study more effectively. If they really want to overcome their problems, they should rather seek the blessings of Mother and make a sincere effort to understand what she wants from them: she just wants us to grow up.

How can we grow up? By developing the same level of consciousness of Isvara (*mam eva ye prapadyante*, 7.14), that is benevolent neutrality and detachment towards all beings and circumstances, due to the fact that we find perfect happiness and satisfaction in the self (*prasanna atma*). What is the different between a child and an adult? The adult can take care of himself and does not need or depend on others, either materially or emotionally, irrespective of the age of the body in years. An adult makes the best use of what he gets, without complaining or obsessing about what he has and doesn't have (*na socati na kanksati*) and remains balanced in joys and sorrows (*samah sarvesu bhutesu*). At that level, we can really engage in real devotional service and not simply in a childish imitation of devotion.

We should carefully dispel the various misconceptions on the points offered in this verse, starting with the widespread but mistaken idea that Brahman realization is "impersonal" as opposed to "personal". This is particularly foolish because by definition in the Absolute (*advaita*) there is no duality and therefore there can be no contradiction between personal and impersonal. All the genuine *shastra* keep repeating that Transcendence, by definition, is what transcends the limited comprehension of the material mind and speech based on the experience of duality, time and space that we can have with the material body. The subtler (and therefore sharper and more penetrating) our consciousness becomes, the more we can realize that duality, time and space are not what they seem to be (as the illusory projection of *maya*). The fact is that individuality is eternal and constitutional, therefore it cannot be annihilated when entering or merging into the Brahman consciousness; what is annihilated is the *ahankara*, the material identification of a separate interest and action that is not in complete harmony with the Supreme.

A limb or cell in the body can never really function properly unless its consciousness is completely aligned with the consciousness of the entire body; when the DNA code in the cell is different from the DNA code of the rest of the body, or when the cell acts in a way that is not the purpose pursued by the body, we have a problem. To materially identified and conditioned people, this may appear to belittle the role of a human being in the universe, or to diminish the importance of free will, presenting God as a sort of intolerant dictator. This happens because in this world we have the experience of foolish and ignorant conditioned beings trying to play God without being God, and without even understanding what God really is. One of the best definitions is offered by the *Bhagavata Purana* (1.2.11): *vadanti tattva vidas, tattvam yaj jnanam advayam, brahmeti paramatmeti, bhagavan iti sabyate*, "Those who know the *tattva* declare that *tattva* is undivided Knowledge, variously called Brahman, Paramatma, and Bhagavan".

God is existence, knowledge and consciousness - the sum total of all existence, knowledge and consciousness that is, has been and can ever be - and the source of everything as well. In other words, Krishna Consciousness is not "being conscious about Krishna" but it *is* Krishna himself as Consciousness. When we "dovetail" our consciousness with God as Consciousness, we are not losing or missing anything, because everything is there and nothing exists without it or outside it - if "without" and "outside" actually could have a meaning when we speak of all-pervading omnipresence).

Realizing Brahman is like a drop of water entering the ocean, like some computer data entering the supreme software that creates the entire hologram - every molecule of water still retains its atomic identity, every bit of information still retains its script, and similarly every *atman* or bit of consciousness retains the consciousness of everything (otherwise, it would not be consciousness). Not easy to explain in words or to grasp with one's material intellect, but there is no surprise there, as Transcendence by definition transcends both words and material intellect.

Again, we need to clarify a possible misunderstanding here; when we say that Transcendence cannot be defined materially, it does not mean that it is a "mystery of the faith" and that it should not be discussed. It means that it has to be realized individually, with a paradigm shift called enlightenment (*prakasa*) or realization, a flash of actual comprehension that consists in directly *seeing* the meaning (*darshana*),

after having heard and read so much about it. Human intelligence is not sufficient to understand Transcendence, but it holds the key to open its door, so we need to cultivate and purify it with regular practice as explained in *Bhagavad gita*. When we have attained this realization we can see the Big Picture, so there is no cause for complaining or running after things; we can certainly continue to make plans and strategies and to work, and we can see the difference between joys and sorrows, but we are not bound to them any more because we know that everything is perfectly organized and balanced as One Consciousness, as clearly stated by *Svetasvatara Upanishad* (3.9): *tenedam purnam purusena sarvam*, "by his arrangement the universe is made complete and perfect" and by *Isa Upanishad* (8): *yathatathyati 'rthan vyadadhat*, "he fulfills the requirements of all". So we happily perform our functions and we finally achieve that transcendental identification, possession and belonging that is the true reality, of which any material identification, possession and belonging is just a shadow. The material universe is a world of shadows, covered by the cloud of *ahankara*, and the illusion (*maya*) consists in the fact that a shadow looks very similar to the real thing but has no substance. This is where Krishna had started his teachings in *Bhagavad gita*: *nasato vidyate bhavo nabhavo vidyate satah, ubhayor api drishto 'ntas tv anayos tattva darsibhih*, "Those who see the truth know that what is illusory/ temporary will not continue to be, while what is real/ eternal will never be destroyed. They have carefully observed both categories and reached this conclusion." (2.16).

A *yogi* who has attained the Brahman realization can still continue to live in a material body in this world as *jivan mukta* (4.21, 5.11, 5.13, 5.14, 5.19, 5.23, 10.3, 13.33, 14.20, 15.10, 15.11) and he is aware that he automatically receives what he needs (9.22), although the package may also contain some bitter medicines. There is no need to leave or destroy the body or even the mind in order to achieve liberation; a conditioned soul's trying to achieve *moksha* by merely leaving his body will simply lead to a new reincarnation, and trying to get rid of the mind will simply lead to a deep tamasic state - exactly the opposite of what we are seeking. In fact, a realized soul can continue to live a long and full life, because serving God in the material world is just as good as (or even better than) serving God in Vaikuntha (*jijivisech chatam samah, Isa Upanishad*, 2).

The word *labhate* ("obtains, attains"), applied to actual *bhakti*, indicates that genuine devotion to Bhagavan is something that we find through the process of realization, a diamond that is hidden under layers of dirt and becomes visible when impurities are burned or washed off. It does not depend solely on *sadhana*, and certainly it does not correspond to *sadhana*, or Krishna would have said, "*kurute*" ("s/he does, performs"); *bhakti* therefore is not a particular type of activity such as religious rituals or practices, or a sentimental or cultural attachment to a projected form of God. These things are just the vessels or opportunities for developing *bhakti*.

भक्त्या मामभिजानाति यावान्यश्चास्मि तत्त्वतः । ततो मां तत्त्वतो ज्ञात्वा विशते तदनन्तरम् ॥ १८-५५ ॥

bhaktiā māmabhijānāti yāvānyaścāsmi tattvataḥ | tato mām tattvato jñātvā viśate tadanantaram || 18-55 ||

bhaktiā: through *bhakti*; *mām*: me; *abhijanati*: one can understand; *yavan*: as much as; *yah ca asmi*: as I am; *tattvatah*: in truth; *tatah*: then; *mām*: me; *tattvatah*: in truth; *jnatva*: knowing; *visate*: enters; *tat*: that; *anantaram*: eternally/ without end/ constantly.

"Through *bhakti* one can understand me as I really am. By knowing this *tattva*, one finally enters (in me).

We found a very similar verse already in the chapter describing the Virata Rupa: *bhaktiā tv anyanya sakya aham evam vidho 'rjuna, jnatum drastum ca tattvena pravestum ca parantapa*, "O Arjuna, only through *bhakti* it is possible to know and to see me truly, and to enter into me" (11.54). The word *visate* was also found in verse 8.11 (*yad aksaram veda vido vadanti visanti*), that mentions the *akshara brahman*, the unchangeable eternal existence of consciousness, saying that those who "know that knowledge" enter there.

This verse (18.55) is also quite difficult to understand properly, because superficially it appears to be contradictory; the word *visate* ("enters") is a synonym of *pravisate* ("enters", infinitive form *pravestum*) and seems to indicate a loss of individuality or a physical movement in space from one place to another. Neither of these are actually correct. We need to remember that this *tattva* (Brahman, Paramatma, Bhagavan) is Knowledge and Consciousness and is not limited by a material body, therefore attaining Bhagavan realization means entering the existence of Knowledge and Consciousness, or according to the *bhakti* dictionary, "entering his *lila*". Because this Consciousness transcends the limits of material intellect and not just the limits of material form, it is not sufficient for us to speculate about it, but we must fine tune our pure consciousness, just like we do when we develop a strong loving relationship with someone. Some call it telepathy, some call it "the language of the heart", but it is actually our most fundamental nature - loving harmonious consciousness.

The *Bhagavata Purana* (11.14.21) confirms in the teachings given by Krishna to Uddhava: *bhaktiāham ekaya grahyah sraddhayatma priyah satam, bhaktih punati man nistha sva pakan api sambhavat*, "I can be attained through pure *bhakti* by a faithful devotee. I am the *atman*, dear to the good people (*sat jana*), and such *bhakti* in full dedication purifies anyone, even the savage dog eaters". This pure *bhakti* is gradually developed through *jnana* or cultivation of sattvic knowledge and *karma* or proper performance of one's duties (*Bhagavata Purana* 11.20.6), as Krishna has been explaining all along the text of *Bhagavad gita*.

Bhakti (devotion) is the supreme expression of *yoga* (6.47), but one cannot attain true *bhakti* without evolving to the level of *brahma bhuta*, and for this we need to cultivate *jnana* (knowledge) and *vairagya* (renunciation) while fulfilling our prescribed duties (*karma*). In the chapter on *vijnana yoga*, Krishna has clearly stated: *bahunam janmanam ante jnanavan mam prapadyate, vasudevah sarvam iti sa mahatma su durlabhah*, "After many lifetimes, one who has knowledge attains me, realizing that God is everything. Such a great soul is very rare." (7.19). We should not take *bhakti* cheaply, because in that case we would just get a cheap imitation of the genuine article. Sometimes superficial and ignorant people equivocate on the idea of pure *bhakti* as free from *jnana* and *karma* (*jnana karmady anavritam*), imagining that a neophyte sentimentalist devotee can instantly attain the stage of genuine pure *bhakti* (*mad bhaktim param*) by artificially abandoning the cultivation of knowledge and the prescribed duties towards family and society.

Especially we should be wary about those who say that in order to attain pure devotion to Krishna we need to stop listening to intelligence, good sense and conscience (that are the voice of the *antaryami paramatma*) and even to neglect the instructions of genuine *shastra* such as the teachings of Krishna in *Bhagavad gita*.

Many *prakrita sahajyas* ("materialistic simpletons") prefer to indulge in pinkish saccharin fantasies about the *rasa lila* and the childhood adventures of Krishna in Vrindavana rather than studying and understanding and following the instructions of *Bhagavad gita*, but contrary

to their delusions of grandeur, their position is not as sublime as they think. They want to use Krishna for their own pleasure and entertainment rather than rendering a favorable service to the Supreme Good, so their devotion has very little value, and in fact according to one of the most famous authors of medieval *bhakti* literature it is even detrimental to society: *sruti smriti puranadi pancharatra-vidhim vina, aikaintiki harer bhaktir utpatayaiva kalpate*, "So-called exclusive *bhakti* to Hari (Vishnu or Krishna) 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*).

What trouble could that be? "Let one thousand flowers bloom", will say superficial religionists, "after all, these people are just doing their best to worship God, and Vishnu/ Krishna actually is the supreme Personality of Godhead (11.45, 11.46, 11.50)". Certainly we should never physically persecute anyone for their incorrect beliefs, but we have the duty to expose unfounded and dangerous arguments because we must protect the good and innocent people from confusion (4.8).

The problem we need to highlight consists in the idea of "exclusivity" (*aikantika*), a typically abrahamic concept that infiltrated India through the islamic invasions and was already widespread at the time when the *Bhakti rasamrita sindhu* was written. This "monotheistic" approach denies the value of the proper use of intelligence and conscience, and emphasizes absolute obedience to the "religious authorities" that claim to represent "the only true God", while all other forms and personalities of Godhead are considered inferior if not false or despicable - and their devotees are unjustly insulted, attacked and persecuted. This is a very serious deviation from the Vedic vision, the real intolerance that we should not tolerate, and it creates havoc in society because it prevents people from following the proper path and causes offenses to the *shastra* and to the *Devas* as well as to many good people and genuine *acharyas* (such as Adi Shankara). Besides, it deludes people into thinking they have already gone beyond the prescribed social duties and even *dharma* and *vidya*, when in fact they are living as noxious parasites of society and giving a bad example to others, against the precise instructions of Krishna (3.21, 3.22, 3.23, 3.24, 3.25, 3.26).

The path of devotion (*bhakti*) starts from the sincere cultivation of knowledge by approaching a genuine *guru: tad viddhi pranipatena pariprasenena sevaya, upadeksyanti te jnanam jnaninas tattva darsinah*, "You should learn this knowledge by approaching those who directly contemplate the Truth, asking them all possible questions and offering them service. Those who have the knowledge will initiate you into this science." (4.34). The stage of *vaidhi bhakti* or *sadhana bhakti* is simply the sincere practice of *yoga* as described by *Bhagavad gita* and by Patanjali's famous *Yoga sutras*; one needs to start with *yama* and *niyama*, which consist in purifying one's existence from the gross attachments to bad qualities and behaviors. Then one should engage one's body (*asana*) in the service of *atman/ brahman* by performing the activities of one's prescribed duties in a spirit of devotional dedication of one's life energy to the Supreme (*pranayama*), and by learning to control the senses of perception and action (*pratyahara*). This will gradually help the *sadhaka* to control his/ her mind (*dharana*) and engage it in an increasingly efficient way (*dhyana and samadhi*). The *Narada pancaratra* confirms, speaking of five subsequent divisions of knowledge: 1. *jnana*, 2. *yoga*, 3. *vairagya*, 4. *tapah* and 5. *bhakti*, presented as a special function of *vidya* or transcendental knowledge.

The search for the knowledge of Brahman (*brahma jnana*) does not need to be pursued on the level of supreme *bhakti* because it has already been attained (2.52). Knowledge or realization must be sought as long as one does not have it, just like one goes to school to learn, but upon graduation he does not need to attend classes any more, because he is directly contemplating and applying the realized knowledge that now has become a part of his own nature. After attaining direct realization, it is not possible to return to ignorance, so when we say that we leave *jnana* behind, it does not mean that we really abandon knowledge.

In this verse, the word *yavan* ("as much as") indicates that the supreme Reality can be understood not completely but truly, without misconceptions and confusion, as opposed to the imaginative projections of the fantasy of ignorant and foolish people. Of course this knowledge or understanding (*abhi jnana*, "specific knowledge") includes the Personality of Godhead, as Krishna clearly mentions the personal pronoun three times in the verse (*mam*, "me", *asmi*, "I am", *mam*, "me"). Adi Shankara himself declared at the beginning of his commentary on *Bhagavad gita* that Narayana is beyond the *avyakta* or non manifested Brahman (*narayanah parah avyaktat*). A famous passage of *Katha Upanishad* (3.10-3.11) confirms: *indriyebhyah para hy artha arthebhyas ca param namah, manasas tu para buddhir buddher atma mahan parah, mahatah param avyaktamavyaktat purusah parah, purushan na param kinchit sa katha sa param gatih*, "Beyond the sense organs are the objects of the senses. Beyond them is the mind. Beyond that, there is *buddhi* (intelligence). Beyond that, is the *paramatman*. Beyond the *paramatman* is the non-manifest Brahman. Beyond that is the Purusha. There is nothing beyond the Purusha: that is the goal, that is the supreme."

Interestingly, the *Katha Upanishad* continues to declare in the subsequent verses: "This Purusha is hidden in all beings, so he is not visible to material eyes, but he can be seen by those wise *yogis* who strive to focus their meditation. A *yogi* who has knowledge and a sharp intelligence should engage/ unite the words in the mind, the mind in the intellect, the intellect in the *paramatman*, and the *paramatman* in the supreme divine Reality. Arise! Awake! Seek that pure knowledge by following intelligent teachers who practice what they preach. The expert sages explain that the path is a risky one, as sharp as the edge of a knife, and it is not easy to walk or cross over. When one knows what is beyond the perception of sound, touch, sight, taste and smell, that eternal unchangeable Reality that has no beginning nor end, greater than the greatest, permanent and consistent, one becomes free from the hungry claws of death" (*Katha Upanishad*, 3.12, 3.13, 3.14, 3.15).

The last word in the verse, *anantaram*, is also very interesting. It conveys the meanings of "eternally, constantly, without end, without limits", while some commentators have translated it as "thereafter, instantly", which can easily confuse superficial and foolish people into falling for the *prakrita sahajya* delusion. The actual meaning of the word is better explained by Jada Bharata to king Rahugana: *jnanam visuddham paramartham ekam, anantaram tv abahir brahma satyam, pratyak prasantam bhagavac chabda samjam, yad vasudevam kavayo vadanti*, "The experts explain that Vasudeva is that perfectly pure knowledge, the only supreme value, eternal and omnipresent (that has no outside), Brahman, Truth, that is directly realized, the perfect peace, also known by the name of Bhagavan" (*Bhagavata Purana* 5.12.11).

सर्वकर्मण्यपि सदा कुर्वाणो मद्यपाश्रयः । मत्प्रसादादवाप्नोति शाश्वतं पदमव्ययम् ॥ १८-५६ ॥

sarvakarmāṇyapi sadā kurvāṇo madvyapāśrayaḥ | matprasādādavāpnōti śāśvataṁ padamavyayam | | 18-56 | |

sarva karmani: all activities; *api*: although; *sada*: always; *kurvanah*: performing; *mad vyapasrayah*: under my protection; *mat prasadat*: by my blessing; *avapnoti*: one achieves; *sasvatam*: eternal; *padam*: the position; *avyayam*: imperishable.

"While still performing all the activities of his/ her own prescribed duties, one achieves the eternal and imperishable position by my blessing and under my protection.

If by reading the previous verse someone had developed the idea that by engaging in some superficial sentimentalist acts of devotion one can consider himself over and above the prescribed duties of a sattvic society, here Krishna immediately disenchant him.

Several times Krishna has clarified this point along the *Bhagavad gita*, and if some foolish ignorant people have used the pretext of renunciation and devotional life to subtract themselves from their actual responsibilities, it is not fair to blame Krishna. From the very beginning, when rebuking Arjuna for his idea of abandoning the battle to become a *sannyasi*, to the conclusion in this chapter, Krishna has unequivocally declared that a devotee and a self realized soul should continue to engage in his duties to support society and earn his own livelihood honestly by his hard work - in the very least, to give a good example to the general mass of people.

Specifically, here Krishna says, *sarva karmani* ("all the prescribed activities") and *sada* ("always"), so there is no provision for cherry-picking the duties one whimsically likes to perform and the ones that seem to be unpleasant. Ascertaining one's *sva dharma* as per *guna* and *karma* (18.41) is necessary, but then one needs to sincerely engage in all the prescribed duties, without cutting corners or jumping back and forth from one position to the other to enjoy rights and dodging duties on the pretext of being a transcendental follower of "*daivi varnashama*". Actually all *varnas* and *ashramas* are divine (*daivi*), as they were established directly by Krishna (*catur varnyam maya sristam guna karma vibhagasah*, 4.13), and blatant disregard and disobedience to scriptural injunctions and Krishna's orders - all in the name of transcendence - can only add insult to the injury and bring the disastrous results we have seen practically happening again and again to so many people.

There is no need to speculate about inventing "new methods" to solve the problems of ignorant people. Neglecting the instructions of the genuine scriptures is certainly a disaster in the making (16.23, 16.24, 17.5). So rather than saying that they are "above the *varnas* and *ashramas*", these fallen pretenders should recognize the simple fact that they have no qualifications and they are striving along as much as they can; there is no need to present oneself as a great *sannyasi* or *brahmana* in order to develop genuine *bhakti* and inspire others.

It is better to remain humble than to become frauds and violate the last principle of *dharma* (truthfulness); "fake it till you make it" is a sure recipe for disaster, and the people preaching it should be exposed for what they are.

Of course *sarva karmanam* does not include prohibited actions or *vikarma*, that the *yogi* and devotee should have abandoned already from the very beginning of *sadhana* (7.28) by strictly observing the rules of *yama* and *niyama*. Yet, it is all too common to see people feigning devotion who precisely choose to continue in *vikarma* or prohibited activities, while neglecting the *nitya karmani* or prescribed activities on the pretext that they have "transcended ordinary duties", and how revealing is the fact that such issue is usually avoided in the discussions and publications of some religious organizations, while there should be an abundance of quotes by their founder *acharyas*, who were very vocal about this problem.

The expression *sasvata pada avyaya* ("the eternal and unchangeable position") can be elaborated in a number of meanings. Once one has attained the *brahma bhuta* (18.54) there is no chance to fall back (5.17, 8.21, 15.4, 15.6) because that evolution of consciousness permanently changes one's vision. People with a materialistic vision remain unable to understand the difference between Svarga (the heavenly planets) and Vaikuntha, therefore they imagine that Vaikuntha is a sort of heaven where one can sit with Vishnu rather than with the "demigods" who reside in the higher planetary systems, just like they imagine that Vishnu is another separate God that is simply more powerful than the other "gods".

It is no surprise then that such confused and ignorant people speculate that the *jivatmans* were once engaged in fully transcendental *lila* and service to Vishnu or Krishna in Goloka Vrindavana, and then due to the influence of ignorance and time they fell down into the material world as a punishment for their disobedience (this is the fundamental idea of the Garden of Eden narrated in the Bible). The surprise will rather be theirs when they find themselves not in Vaikuntha but taking birth in Bila Svarga, the lower planetary systems where the *asuras* live, and that correspond more precisely to the visualizations and projections they have cultivated so fondly in their "devotional meditations". The scriptures clearly say that in Bila Svarga, too, there is no need for the light of the sun or the moon (15.6) because of the radiance of the jewels decorating the inhabitants' heads (that could be mistaken for *cinta mani* spiritual stones), and the wonderful opulence of the place - gardens, palaces, agricultural villages, dairy farms etc - surpasses even the beauty of the higher Svarga planets.

The best course of action is to sincerely take full shelter in God (*mat vyapasrayah*) and only depend on what he sends (*mat prasadat*), making serious efforts to understand the science of *Bhagavad gita* and dropping all material identification and attachments and desires for selfish gratification, individual or collective.

चेतसा सर्वकर्मणि मयि संन्यस्य मत्परः । बुद्धियोगमुपाश्रित्य मच्चित्तः सततं भव ॥ १८-५७ ॥

cetasā sarvakarmāṇi mayi sannasya matparaḥ | buddhiyogamupāśritya maccittaḥ satataṁ bhava | | 18-57 | |

cetas: by awareness; *sarva karmani*: all the activities; *mayi*: to me; *sannyasya*: renouncing; *mat parah*: dedicated to me; *buddhi yogam*: in *buddhi yoga*; *upasritya*: taking shelter; *mat cittah*: in my consciousness; *satatam*: always; *bhava*: become.

"Renouncing all activities in your consciousness, dedicate yourself fully to me, taking shelter in *buddhi yoga*, and you will permanently become my consciousness.

No, it is not a translation mistake. The sentence "permanently become my consciousness" may not make sense to a person who has not attained the realization of Brahman and still believes s/he is a body and a mind. Yet, this is what Krishna is saying here: "*become my consciousness*". The word *citta* specifically means "consciousness", while the adjective form of the term is *cetana* ("conscious") also used as a noun meaning "mind" or "conscious being". In other passages to indicate a conscious being Krishna has used the expressions *prajna*, *jnani*, *vit*, *darshi*, that are also synonyms for "conscious person" or "one who knows".

The idea of "becoming divine consciousness" appears easier to understand when we realize that as individuals we already *are* consciousness (*atman*). When our true identity is clouded by material identification, we develop a material body, and when this cloud is dissipated by the warm light of knowledge, our original and true identity as consciousness shines brightly again. At a deeper devotional or *rasika* level, it makes perfect sense too: we will remember here that the word *bhava* also means "consciousness" as "ecstatic feeling in the relationship with Krishna", and that it is one's *sthayi bhava* ("permanent feeling") that constitutes the *siddha deha* or *siddha svarupa* of the fully realized devotee.

So at the level of Brahman, at the level of Paramatma and even at the most intimate level of Bhagavan, everything is pure consciousness - knowledge, feeling, perception. Without attaining this level, one cannot come in direct contact with Bhagavan because the material body is a thick and clumsy covering that greatly limits our potential and activities as *atman*; however we can outgrow it by developing our consciousness/ identity as a special *siddha deha*.

The *siddha deha* is very real, in fact it is more real than the gross bodies that we can touch and see and smell with our material senses, but it is not restricted by time, space and duality, therefore it is not normally seen by material senses. It is important to understand that such *siddha deha* or *siddha svarupa* is not "another body" that one takes after leaving the present material body - it is the inherent nature of the *atman* and is fully developed through the proper method, and it can already act perfectly while one still lives in the material body (*jivan mukta*). In some cases, the *siddha deha* can bypass the perception of material senses and connect directly with the perception of the *atman* in others (11.8, 11.48, 11.52, 11.53, 11.54), but such manifestation is not done without a valid purpose, and remains impossible to actually understand for unevolved people (9.11, 10.3, 15.10); yet it is the only form in which we can truly come in direct contact with Bhagavan and spiritual reality in general.

We can understand and realize these things through *buddhi yoga*, or the engagement of the higher functions of intelligence or intellect. The material mind and senses are not subtle enough, because they are encrusted by *ahankara* and *mamatva*, while intelligence is made purely of *sattva* and therefore constitutes the bridge between the subtle dimension and the spiritual dimension, much like the *prana* constitutes the bridge between the gross physical body and the subtle body made of energy and mind. True, *buddhi* is listed among the eight elemental principles of the material world (7.4), but by definition it is consciousness and knowledge, and as such it can never be bogged down by *tamas* or ignorance, or distracted by *rajas* or greed. In fact, actual intelligence is the sharp sword that can cut through illusion (4.41, 5.25, 15.3). This is also confirmed by the first word in the verse, *cetasa* ("consciously, with awareness") that is closely related to the expression *mat citta* in the second line of the verse. The reference to *buddhi* and *cetasa* automatically excludes *adharna* and *vikarma* from the vast range of activities (*sarva karmani*) that one can offer to God in pure devotional service (*mat parah*, "dedicated to me"), even with the idea of personally renouncing the enjoyment of their results (*sannyasya*, "renouncing while performing"). For example, Krishna simply asks for pure offerings such as a leaf, a flower, a fruit, and water, and the *smriti* also confirms that one can present the Deity with a vast range of pure vegetarian ingredients and preparations. There is not one single passage in the scriptures where God requires the offering of non-vegetarian or impure items; when such offerings are allowed, they are meant to facilitate the development of devotion in neophyte persons influenced by the lower *gunas*, and when performed in that way, they are supported by intelligence and consciousness as they can wean the individual away from ordinary butchery meat.

Renunciation to all activities must be done in one's consciousness (*cetasa*) by offering the fruits to the Supreme as the center of one's life (*mat parah*) and acting selflessly; on this level of renounced (detached) consciousness one can and actually should continue to perform all activities for the service of the Supreme. Of course this is a gradual process. In the beginning the *sadhaka* starts to worship God with a sentiment of devotion that is mixed with some personal desires (*sa-kama*) and is still clouded by material concepts (*prakrita*), therefore the position of such devotee is called *kanistha* ("immature"). In the intermediate stage (*madhyama*) the devotee purifies his/ her intelligence (*buddhi*) and cultivates knowledge (*jnana*) and detachment (*vairagya*), that bring the realization of the supreme Consciousness in an increasingly clear vision. Finally, at the highest level (*uttama*) the devotee takes full shelter (*upasritya*) in this supreme Consciousness and is not distracted by any separate interest (*ananya*) and fully concentrates on the supreme Consciousness only (*aikantika*). Again, these stages are present in all the forms of *yoga*, starting from the deliberate effort to engage in the search for the Supreme Consciousness and ending in *samadhi* or complete and constant immersion in that Supreme Consciousness (*satatam*).

मच्चित्तः सर्वदुर्गाणि मत्प्रसादात्तरिष्यसि । अथ चेत्त्वमहंकारान्न श्रोष्यसि विनङ्क्ष्यसि ॥ १८-५८ ॥

maccittah sarvadurgāṇi matprasādāttariṣyasi | atha cettvamahaṅkāraṇna śroṣyasi vinanṅksyasi || 18-58 ||

mat cittaḥ: in my consciousness; *sarva durgani*: all difficulties; *mat prasadat*: by my grace; *tariṣyasi*: you will overcome; *atha*: but; *cet*: if; *tvam*: you; *ahankaran*: because of egotism; *na sroṣyasi*: you will not listen; *vinanṅksyasi*: you will be lost.

"In my consciousness you will overcome all difficulties by my grace. However, if you choose not to listen, because of egotism, you will be lost.

It is important to understand that this verse is not the threat of a punishment for a disobedience or lack of faith. It is a simple statement of a scientific truth about the natural laws of the universe: the more we develop our intelligence and consciousness, the better we will be able to overcome all difficulties, while by choosing ignorance because of foolish personal ego and pride against our conscience and the harmony of the universe we only become lost and suffer unnecessarily.

There is a supreme order in the universe (*rita*) by which the planets move in their proper orbits, the elements regularly fulfill their functions, and all beings work for the support and the progress of the entire universal community. Except for human beings, all creatures

evolve in a predetermined way, according to the stringent laws of nature that dictate their reactions and behaviors; human beings too are carried around in the machinery of the cosmos (*yantrarudhani mayaya*, 18.61) but due to their particular intermediate position they can choose the direction of their movement and actions by leaning on one side rather than the other. These two sides are the *daivi prakriti* and the *asuri prakriti* (see chapter 16), that will pull the individual higher or lower respectively; these are also called *para* ("supreme") and *apara* ("not supreme"), or in an approximate English translation, "spiritual" and "material".

The definitions of spiritual versus material can be misleading for those who suffer from cultural prejudice, because abrahamic ideologies openly demonize material nature (this world, the bodies, etc) and therefore one could be tempted to condemn material nature and try to fight against it. This would be a spectacular mistake, inevitably doomed to failure, because material nature is the divine Shakti (*daivi hy esa gunamayi mama maya*, 7.14), and the individual *jivatmans* are utterly impotent against her. In fact, without the blessings of Mother Mahamaya, one will never be able to make any progress either materially or spiritually. When the *jivatman* chooses to take shelter in the *daivi prakriti*, he is not approaching a different personality that is opposed or rival to *asuri prakriti*: he is simply appealing to the divine "side" of the same supreme Goddess, and showing that he is ready to evolve and cooperate for the common good. On the other hand, those who want to be "tough" and show asuric qualities and characteristics will be met with the Goddess' fierce and terrifying side.

It is important to understand here that the *asuras* are not the people who worship the fierce aspect (*asaumya* or *ugra rupa*) of the Goddess, but those who oppose the laws of the universe to enforce their own ego, and therefore become subject to the punishment given by the Goddess. Those who find this point difficult to understand because they are attracted by the "peaceful" Vishnu should remember that Vishnu too has his own *ugra* forms (Narasimha, for example), and *asuras* certainly do not worship such forms but enter in contact with them in a rather different way.

The name Durga literally means "fort, prison" (and by extension, "restriction, limitation, difficulty" as in this verse) and indeed Mother Durga is fully in charge of the fortress of this world and providing suitable holding cells for all those crazy, violent and dangerous criminals who refuse to listen, understand and cooperate with the rest of society. Chapter 16 has given a very detailed portrait of such people (16.4 to 16.24), comparing them to the people who have chosen to take shelter in the divine qualities and behaviors (16.1, 16.2, 16.3) that are based on mutual support and cooperation with the universal community. Because of the particular position of human birth, at any time one can decide to change direction and qualify for liberation; there is no prejudice or injustice in this system, just like there is no favoritism in the law of gravity. What may seem to be different standards of treatment are actually due to the fact that the favored individual has a better knowledge or consciousness of the general laws and principles, and uses intelligence to navigate difficulties: this is what is clearly expressed in this verse.

Krishna had already stated very clearly that he is not interested in the merits and demerits of the individual souls and does not want anything for himself (3.22, 5.15), but he gladly reciprocates (4.11, 4.14, 9.9, 9.29) with those who want to learn, evolve and unite with him. Krishna never gives orders to anyone, but simply asks us to listen (2.39, 7.1, 10.1, 13.4, 16.6, 17.2, 17.7, 18.4, 18.19, 18.29, 18.45) to his good advice; he explain facts and things with logic and reason, and then lets us decide what we want to do (18.63, 18.64).

God Consciousness (*mat cittah*) is not consciousness "about" God, but rather the conscious perception of the entire Reality as microcosm and macrocosm, inside us and outside us, and of the eternal and universal mechanisms that move it - the three material *gunas* (*sattva*, *rajas*, *tamas*) in the material dimension and the three spiritual *gunas* (*sat*, *cit*, *ananda*) in the spiritual dimension. Therefore this Consciousness is the position (*pada*) or abode (*dhama*) both in this material universe and in the spiritual dimension.

To develop and maintain this focus on the supreme Consciousness, we need to hear (or read) about it from the genuine scriptures and from those devotees who have already attained the level of direct realization: *nasta prayesv abhadresu nityam bhagavata sevaya, bhagavaty uttama sloke bhaktir bhavati naisthiki*, "All inauspicious things are destroyed by constantly serving the discourses on Bhagavan; in this way one becomes firmly situated in the dedication to Bhagavan, who is described by wonderful verses" (*Bhagavata Purana*, 1.2.18). The simple act of hearing or listening (*sravana*) is already considered a valid service and a meritorious action, and the engine of progress and evolution. It is important to understand here that service (*seva*) indicates regular association or practice in a favorable sentiment, just like we have seen in verse 6.20 of *Bhagavad gita* with reference to dedication to *yoga* (*yoga sevaya*).

It is interesting to notice that Krishna is saying "you will overcome all difficulties", not "you will not find any difficulties" or "all difficulties will disappear". Many unevolved people believe that religion is about praying God to give us free food and an easy life, without temptations or difficulties, and that all the consequences of our past deeds, our debts and trespasses, should be magically and repeatedly deleted any time we ask God to do so. This idea is delusional: we should all earn our food by honest work, face the difficulties meant to test us and stimulate our evolution, take our stand in support of *dharma* and the universal family, and bravely and honestly be ready to pay our debts and dues at the right time, and even take some responsibility for the other less mature siblings.

It is only small children who ask Father to solve all problems for them, in exchange for some praise and flattering. Grown up sons and daughters are competent to help Father and do some good useful work, and they are ready and willing to face the inevitable difficulties in the discharge of their duties. As Krishna has already stated (3.20, 3.21, 3.22, 3.23, 3.24) even perfectly liberated souls and even divine *avatars* give a good practical example in this matter, so that nobody can say they are above the need to face difficulties and hard work.

चदहंकारमाश्रित्य न योत्स्य इति मन्यसे । मिथ्यैष व्यवसायस्ते प्रकृतिस्त्वां नियोक्ष्यति ॥ १८-५९ ॥

yadahaṅkāramāśritya na yotsya iti manyase | mithyaiṣa vyavasāyaste prakṛtiṣtvāṁ niyoṣyati || 18-59 |

yat: if; ahankaram: in egotism; asritya: taking shelter; na yotsya: you will not fight; iti manyase: thinking like this; mithya esah: all this is false; vyavasayah: with determination; te: your; prakritih: nature; tvam: you; niyoṣyati: will compel to engage.

"If because of egotism you think, 'I will not fight', this will be a false decision, because your own nature will force you to become engaged.

The previous verse clearly mentioned *ahankara* (egotism as material identification with body, position and attachments) as the cause for delusion and dereliction of one's duty. This was also explained in verses from 18.5 to 18.9: one should never give up the dutiful activities

of sacrifice (*yajna*), charity (*dana*) and austerity (*tapah*), but certainly one should give up the illusion of *ahankara* (*kartavyan*, 18.6). A person who is influenced by ignorance tends to do exactly the opposite of what should be done (16.7, 18.30, 18.31, 18.32), therefore instead of renouncing *ahankara* and sticking to their duties, foolish and ignorant people will renounce their duties and stick to *ahankara*.

Apart from the obvious bad results on the general functioning of the universe, for which they will have to pay the consequences, these fools have taken their stand on very unstable ground, because their understanding is clouded by illusion (*mohat*, 18.7). If they refuse to perform their prescribed duties, greed and ignorance will engage them in more degrading activities, source of much greater future sufferings. Krishna has stated many times that the delusional incorrect vision of oneself is a product of ignorance (9.12, 14.17, 16.10, 16.16, 18.7, 18.9, 18.25, 18.35) and cannot bring good results, but we can directly verify the truth of such statement by observing the lives of people around us.

The tamasic and rajasic tendencies of the present degraded society are geared to indoctrinate people in the asuric direction, presenting the idea that hard work and study are for foolish nerds and social losers, while cool successful people do not do any real work but simply have fun all day spending money on unnecessary luxuries and industrial food products. Similarly, those who are sincerely interested in spiritual life and personal evolution in the ethical principles are presented as gullible, unreasonable, superstitious and fundamentalist fanatics, while cynical exploitation and selfishness, the unlimited endless pursuit of possessions and positions, and the ostentation of status symbols and arrogance are the road to happiness and success.

The naked reality is that such approach to life only brings sufferings and anxiety from beginning to end. People are forced to work very hard and long hours in jobs they hate to get the money to pay for things they don't need, to impress people they don't care for them. It's sharks eating sharks, and the baddest of all become bigger and bigger and take over the government to legalize their thieveries and criminal aggressions against the general people, and in the end everyone is expected to blindly worship real or imaginary characters that are nothing but *asuras*.

The bad but expensive food makes them sick, their medicines are engineered to increase their dependencies on pharmaceuticals and medical business, their nice vacations are ordeals from which they need to recover when they come back, their fancy shoes and clothing are very uncomfortable and their relationships are a disaster. All this because they did not want to accept the little healthy difficulties in the journey of personal evolution, the sincere dedication to their natural duty, and refuse to work in harmony with the rest of the universe and develop relationships based on care and true love.

Everybody is compelled to act in one way or another: *na hi kascit ksanam api jatu tisthaty akarma krit, karyate hy avasah karma sarvah prakriti jair gunaih*, "Never, at any time, can a person remain without acting even for one moment, because he is forced to into action by all the *gunas* born from *prakriti*" (3.5). In fact, the activity itself is carried out by nature only: *prakriteh kriyamanani gunaih karmani sarvasah, ahankara vimudhatma kartaham iti manyate*, "All activities are actually performed by the qualities of nature, but a foolish person who is confused by egotism thinks 'I am doing'." (3.27).

We need here to clarify that *ahankara* is not necessarily an excess of pride and arrogance due to overestimation of oneself. The delusional material identification called *ahankara* is also the cause for low self esteem or excessive humility. Therefore a self realized soul will never say "I am not able to do this", when life puts something difficult in front of him. Most of the times, it is just fear speaking these words, not intelligence or good sense, and if we actually engage in the action with full attention, a positive attitude and some detachment, we will find it was not so difficult after all, even when it was something we never dreamed of being capable of doing. When we sincerely and bravely perform our duty, we have nothing to lose. As Krishna told Arjuna in the beginning of his discourse (2.37), if we succeed we will be able to use the results of our success, and if we fail we will equally obtain blessings albeit in a different form - experience, realizations, purification.

The support of the universe is not one man's job, so even if we do our part properly, it is possible that externally our efforts will not appear to be successful, but we have been paving the way for the work of others who will build on our sacrifice and bring the entire enterprise to the final success. Our merit will not be lost.

The word *mithya* is particularly interesting. People confused by ignorance tend to mistake *sat* for *asat*, and vice versa, so at times we find some artificial *sannyasi* who preaches that this world is false, our duties are false, society is false, individuality is false, and everything is false, while only the particular path he is offering is the real truth. We should be very careful, because this is precisely what has been described in verse 18.22 as a position characteristic of *tamas* and in verse 16.8 as characteristic of the asuric mentality - whether it is proposed by *advaitins*, *dvaitas*, *vaishnavas* or anybody else - and is in violation of the instructions of the *shastra*, including the teachings of *Bhagavad gita*. So we should remain determined (*vyavasayah*) and focused (*vyavasayatmika buddhi*, 2.41) in our service to *dharma* and *vidya*, following in the footsteps of so many great teachers, *acharyas* and even *avatars* who have invested time, energy and efforts in this work. When we take shelter in the *daivi prakriti* (9.13), we will certainly be fully engaged, and such engagement will give full satisfaction to the *atman*.

The *Bhagavata Purana* (1.2.6) confirms: *sa vai pumsam paro dharmo yato bhaktir adhoksaje ahaituki apratihata yayatma suprasidati*, "The supreme *dharma* for all human beings is loving dedication to the inconceivable Lord, and this *bhakti* can completely satisfy the soul when it is selfless and constant."

स्वभावजेन कौन्तेय निबद्धः स्वेन कर्मणा । कर्तुं नेच्छसि यन्मोहात्करिष्यस्यवशोपि तत् ॥ १८-६० ॥

svabhāvajena kaunteya nibaddhaḥ svena karmaṇā | kartuṃ necchasi yanmohātkariṣyasyaśopi tat || 18-60 ||

sva bhava jena: by that (activity) born from (your) specific nature; *kaunteya*: o son of Kunti; *nibaddhah*: bound; *svena*: by your particular; *karmana*: duties; *kartum*: to perform; *na icchasi*: you do not wish to; *yat*: that which; *mohat*: because of illusion; *karisyasi*: you will perform; *avasah*: involuntarily; *api*: even; *tat*: that.

"O son of Kunti, you are bound by those particular activities that are created by your own nature. Even if you do not wish to perform such duty because of illusion, you will find yourself acting in that way instinctively.

As long as we are incarnated in this world, the elements of the body and mind will be functioning according to the laws of material nature - *guna, karma*, etc - and this is a strong bondage, like the shackles of a prisoner. The word *nibaddha* means "shackles, bondage, ties" but can also be used in a positive sense, as in family relationships or social ties, that determine our particular duties towards family and society according to our congenital qualities. This is confirmed by Brahma while talking to Priyavrata: *yad vaci tanyam guna karma damabhih, sudustarair vatsa vayam suyojitah, sarve vahamo balim isvaraya prota nasiva dvi pade catus padah*, "The words of Brahman (the *shastra* and the natural laws of the universe) bind us like a long rope consisting of *guna* and *karma*. This rope is extremely strong, and we are all bound by it to Isvara, just like a man drives cattle by pulling at the rope tied to their noses." (*Bhagavata Purana* 5.1.14).

Such a rope can be very dangerous when our attachment ties us to people who have chosen to neglect the true purpose of human life: *na te vidum svartha gatim hi visnum, durasaya ye bahir artha maninah, andha yathandhair upaniyamanas te 'pisa tantryam uru damni baddhah*, "Those who focus only on acquiring difficult goals in the external world are oblivious to their real purpose of life - the realization of Vishnu. They are like blind people following other blind people, and they are all bound by very strong ropes." (*Bhagavata Purana* 7.5.31).

As it normally happens when we are tightly bound by ropes and shackles, we develop skin irritation and an itchy feeling. Prahlada explains: *yan maithunadi grihamedhi sukham hi tuccham, kanduyanena karayor iva dukkha dukkham, tripyanti neha kripana bahu dukkha bhajah, kandutivam manasijam visaheta dhirah*, "That (life that is based on) couple relationship and everything that is connected to it, all types of family and society pleasures, are insignificant like the rubbing of hands to relieve an itching. One can never find satisfaction in this material world full of sufferings, but the *kripana* willingly follows all these sorrows as if they were the purpose of life. One who is able to tolerate this itching created by the mind is a sober person." (*Bhagavata Purana* 7.9.45).

If we learn how to use these ropes and shackles to our advantage rather than being hampered by them, we can attain a greater success; we can make the example of the famous martial art called *capoeira*, that was developed in the 16th century by the black slaves imported from west Africa to Brazil by the Portuguese invaders, to be employed in the sugar cane plantations there. The slave workers were shackled with chains at all times, so that they would not be able to walk around too freely, but they were allowed to do some singing and dancing in the night, also for the entertainment of their masters. So with the pretext of acrobatic dance movements on the rhythmic music they practiced many fighting moves, such as kicking and spinning, even utilizing the weight of the chains to their advantage, and in this way several of them were able to escape and take shelter in the jungle.

It is said that the word *capoeira* comes from the Tupi words *ka'a* ("jungle") and *puer* ("it was"), referring to these hiding places, where a new culture was created together with the local native tribes in revolutionary settlements called *quilombos*, attracting more fugitive slaves and teaching *capoeira* as a combat technique by which they successfully opposed the colonial regime and their military expeditions trying to eliminate the rebellion. We, too, can use the shackles of the material *gunas* with intelligence, deliberation and purpose, and ultimately earn our liberation from bondage. This is opposed to the helpless blundering of one who has no control on his movements (*avasa*, meaning "without deliberate choice, helplessly, without control"), and is completely confused (*mohat*, "out of illusion").

The present situation in which we were born, with the attending *guna* and *karma*, was created by *samskaras* or previous impressions due to our actions and choices in our previous lifetimes, and it can be modified considerably by applying the same medicine of good *samskaras*. Narada tells Vyasa: *amayo yas ca bhutanam jayate yena svvrata, tad eva hy amayam dravyam na punati cikitsitam*, "The diseases of the living beings can be cured by the (proper) application of the very same thing that caused the disease in the first place" (*Bhagavata Purana* 1.5.33). We can understand from this statement that *samskaras*, *gunas* and *karma* can be used both ways, either for our progress and purification, for our degradation and bondage; the choice is ours (6.5, 6.6).

ईश्वरः सर्वभूतानां हृद्देशेऽर्जुन तिष्ठति । भ्रामयन्सर्वभूतानि यन्त्रारूढानि मायया ॥ १८-६१ ॥

īśvaraḥ sarvabhūtānāṃ hṛdḍeśe'ṛjuna tiṣṭhati | bhrāmayansarvabhūtāni yantrārūḍhāni māyayā || 18-61 ||

isvarah: the Lord; *sarva bhutanam*: of all beings; *hrd dese*: in the place of the heart; *arjuna*: o Arjuna; *tisthati*: resides; *bhramayan*: going around; *sarva bhutani*: all beings; *yantra*: on a machine; *arudhani*: placed; *mayaya*: under the power of illusion.

"O Arjuna, the Lord of all beings resides in the heart (of all beings), and all beings move around each in its own high position as parts of a machinery under the power of Maya.

The word *yantra* in this verse indicates the one single great mechanism that is the macrocosm, the Virata Rupa of the supreme Atman, as well as the body of the various living entities within the universe, in which the supreme Atman resides as well. All such forms are powered by Maya through the various elements listed by the Sankhya philosophy.

In previous chapters, Krishna has already stated: *sarvasya caham hridi sannivisto mattah smritir jnanam apohanam ca, vedais ca sarvair aham eva vedyo vedanta krid veda vid eva caham*, "I am situated in the heart of all/ everything, and from me come memory, knowledge and forgetfulness. I am the scope of the study of all the *Vedas*. I certainly am the creator of *Vedanta*, and the one who knows the *Vedas*." (15.15), *tesam evanukampartham aham ajnana jam tamah, nasayamy atma bhava stho jnana dipena bhasvata*, "Out of my kindness for them, I destroy the darkness of ignorance from within their hearts, by shining forth with the radiant lamp of knowledge" (10.11), and *iyotisam api taj jyotisah param ucyate, jneyam jnana gamyam hridi sarvasya vishitam*, "He is described as the light in all radiant things, transcendental to darkness. He is established in the heart of everything, and he is to be known through the cultivation of knowledge." (13.18).

The same point was presented also in 13.28 and 13.29, and in verse 8.9, that declared that Isvara is also present within each atom (*anor aniyam*), echoing a similar verse in *Katha Upanishad* (1.2.20): *anor aniyam mahato mahiyam atmasya jantor nihito guhayam, tam akrotah pasyati vita soko dhatuh prasadan mahimanam atmanah*, "Smaller than the atom and bigger than the entire cosmic manifestation (*mahat*), situated in the innermost heart of all living being, he is the witness that does not act, and by his blessing one becomes free from all worries: such are the glories of the Atman". And also in *Svetasvatara Upanishad* (6.11): *eko deva sarva bhutesu gudhah, sarva vyapi sarva bhutantaratma karmadhyaksah sarva bhutadhyasah saksi ceta kevalo nirgunas ca*, "God is one, but he is in the heart of each living being.

He is all-pervading, yet he is localized in the innermost being of all beings as the Atman. He is the witness of all actions, but above all actions, he is beyond duality and beyond the *gunas*".

The word *isvara* applies to Brahman, Paramatma and Bhagavan, and in fact even to the Atman: *sariram yad avapnoti yac capy utkramati isvarah grihitvaitani samyati vayur gandhan ivasayat*, "The Lord who has entered a body and accepted all these (the mind and senses), then he goes out again, like air carries scents" (15.8). Remembering this verse is important because it protects us from the mistake of considering the living entities as mere puppets devoid of any free will. The Lord of all beings and all existences is not a distant tyrant with a pathological need to control his creatures as presented by some other ideologies; God is Consciousness itself, so the individual *atman* also directly participates of the identity of God. This supreme realization is also clearly affirmed in the *maha vakyas* ("great statements") considered the essence of the *Upanishads*: *sarvam khalv idam brahma*, "all this is Brahman" (*Chandogya Upanishad*, 7.25.2, *Nrisimha uttara tapani Upanishad*, 7), *prajnanam brahma*, "Brahman is full consciousness/ knowledge" (*Aitareya Upanishad*, 3.3), as well as *aham brahmasmi*, "I am Brahman" (*Brihad Aranyaka Upanishad* 1.4.10), *ayam atma brahma*, "this Atman is Brahman" (*Mandukya Upanishad* 2), *tat tvam asi*, "you are that (Brahman)" (*Chandogya Upanishad*, 6.8.7) and so 'ham, "I am that (Brahman)" (*Narada parivrajaka Upanishad*, 6.4). This sublime knowledge is found in Vedic tradition (Hinduism) only, and constitutes the highest level of the realization of *yoga* (*yoga arudha*, 6.3, 6.4), while the *aruruksa* ("one who desires to attain the high level") is a beginner in the practice of *yoga* (6.3). We find this same definition (*arudha*) in this verse, connected to the word *yantra*, that literally means "machine, mechanism, device, vehicle". In the science of Tantra, a *yantra* is a geometric symbolic representation of the Deity, that works as a "vehicle" for the Deity's personal presence during the rituals, much like the elaborate *vigrahas* we normally see in public worship, but more suitable for private personal worship.

As we have seen in the chapters on *Vibhuti yoga* and *Visva rupa darshana yoga*, this entire cosmic manifestation is a *yantra*, and so are the bodies of all living entities - they are vehicles and temples at the same time, as both the *atman* and the *param atman* reside in them and can be worshiped through proper service or *sva dharma*. Both types of vehicles are made of *maya* (*mahamaya/ yogamaya*), and therefore we can actually say that all activities are performed by Prakriti, just like the driver of a vehicle simply gives the directions and the vehicle itself does the work and travels around (*bhramayan*).

The use of the word *arudhani* in connection with the position of Isvara in all the beings (*sarva bhutani*) shows a natural superiority of *atman/ brahman* over the vehicle itself, and of the *param atman* on the *jiva atman*, as it is a "high" position. However, this superiority should not be cause for envy, because on the transcendental level there is no duality, as the natural, happy and healthy position of the cells in the body is to attune to the superior consciousness of the entire body and participate to it through favorable service.

तमेव शरणं गच्छ सर्वभावेन भारत । तत्प्रसादात्परां शान्तिं स्थानं प्राप्स्यसि शाश्वतम् ॥ १८-६२ ॥

tameva śaraṇaṁ gaccha sarvabhāvena bhārata । tatprasādātparāṁ śāntiṁ sthānaṁ prāpsyasi śāśvatam ॥ 18-62 ॥

tam: to him; *eva*: certainly; *saranam gaccha*: go and take shelter; *sarva bhavena*: in all the *bhavas*; *bharata*: o descendant of Bharata; *tat prasadat*: by his grace; *param santim*: the supreme peace; *sthanam*: position; *prapsyasi*: you will attain; *sasvatam*: eternal.

"O descendant of Bharata, you should approach and take shelter of him in all circumstances. By his grace you will attain the imperishable position of supreme peace.

Although one, Consciousness manifests in many individual *amsas*, or parts, that are called *svamsas* ("direct parts" as the Devas) and *vibhinnamsas* ("separate parts") as the *jiva atmans* (13.17, 15.6). Krishna teaches us that *atman* and *brahman* are simultaneously and inconceivably identical and different, and that the supreme purpose of human life consists in uniting (*yoga*) the *atman* into the *brahman*, thus realizing their transcendental oneness. We should not be confused by this, because if the idea is inconceivable through the material logic of mind and senses, it can be directly perceived (*prakasa, darshana*) through spiritual intelligence (*visuddha buddhi*) and the eyes of the scriptures (11.8, 13.35, 15.10). This is the reason why it is not possible to attain any realization without a careful preliminary study of the *shastra* (13.26, 15.20, 16.23, 17.24), and why only *bhakti* can open the last door to perfect realization (4.3, 7.17, 8.22, 9.14, 9.29, 9.34, 11.54, 11.55, 12.14, 12.20, 13.11, 13.19, 14.26, 18.54, 18.55, 18.65). This is also hinted in this verse by the expression *sarva bhavena* ("with all *bhavas*", "in all *bhavas*"), where *bhava* means "existence, being, nature, body, birth, circumstance of life", and also "emotion, sentiment, loving relationship". The supreme union (*yoga*) between the *atman* and the *brahman* is therefore compared to the mystical moment of merging of the existence of two lovers, the thrill of ecstasy where the ego dissolves and is forgotten. It is the *spandakarika*, the sacred tremor, the throbbing of formless and all pervading happiness, existence and consciousness that is at the very nucleus of creation and dissolution, symbolized by the loving orgasmic union between Shiva and Shakti, between Krishna and Radha. In this ecstasy, all differences lose their meaning, and the two become one. This liberating experience, that radically changes the perception of existence, is deeply feared and hated by the *asuras*, who therefore strive to eliminate and prohibit true love and selflessness from their own lives and from the lives of the people under their dominion, and replace it with the ultimate and greatest manifestation of egotism - the cruel lust of possession and domination that we call rape.

To facilitate the evolutionary journey of the *anu atmans*, culminating in the ecstatic experience of *atman/ brahman* realization, the supreme Consciousness creates a distinction between the One and the Parts, emanating innumerable "separate parts" (*vibhinnamsas*) and manifesting the cosmos to accommodate them, and even entering into this universe and within each body and each atom to enjoy the pleasure of the company of its parts. As we see exemplified in Arjuna's words about his own relationship with Krishna, this supreme Consciousness is always with us, walking with us, lying down, sitting, eating, joking and having fun, when we are alone or in the presence of others (11.41, 11.42). The *Bhagavata Purana* (11.11.6) says: *suparnav etau sadrisau sakhayau yadricchayaitau krita-nidau ca vrikse, ekas tayoh khadati pippalannam anyo niranno 'pi balena bhuyan*, "Two birds of similar nature and related by friendship have made a nest in a tree by their own choice; one is eating the food from the banyan tree, the other is not eating but he is more powerful." The same image is found in *Mundaka Upanishad* (3.1.1): *dva suparna sayuja sakhaya samanam vriksam parisavajate, tayor anyah pippalam svadv atty anasnann anyo 'bhicakasiti*, "Two birds are sitting on the same tree as friends; one bird is eating the fruits of the tree, and the other is simply observing, without eating."

This exact verse is repeated in *Svetasvatara Upanishad* (4.6), and another verse is added (4.7): *samane vrikse puruso nimagno 'nisaya socati muhyamanah, justam yada pasyaty anyam isam asya mahimanam iti vita-sokah*, "Although the two *purushas* are in the same tree, one is experiencing deep anxiety and confusion, but if he turns towards the Lord and becomes aware of his glories, immediately he becomes free from all worries."

It is not difficult to approach the Lord of all beings (*isvara sarva bhutanam*) and take shelter in him, as he also resides in the same body (8.4, 13.23, 13.32, 15.8, 16.18, 17.6) because of his friendship and love for the individual soul. This *param atman* ("supreme soul" and also "soul of the soul") is always ready to communicate with the individual soul and in fact his voice is known popularly as the "voice of conscience". The relationship of the individual soul with this supreme soul can be understood as similar to the relationship of the consciousness of a body cell compared to the consciousness of the owner of the entire body; at all times the body cell is supported by the entire body and the consciousness that sustains and directs it, through the DNA interface as well as through the constant exchange of nutrition. The nucleus of the cell is identical with the nucleus of the entire body, because it consists of genetic information - consciousness or knowledge.

We have seen that the *Bhagavata Purana* very clearly defines the Supreme as knowledge (*tattvam yaj jnanam advayam, brahmeti paramatmeti bhagavan iti sabdyate*, 1.2.11), and this is also confirmed in the other seminal Vedic texts; for example *Taittiriya Upanishad* (2.1.1), elaborating on the origin of *jivatmans*, clearly says, *satyam jnanam anantam brahma*, "Brahman is the absolute Truth, the unlimited Knowledge".

Already in verse 13.23 Krishna had stated that this *paramatman* is present in the body as the consciousness that witnesses the *jivatman* and its actions; he gives advice and permission (*anumanta*), supports the *jivatman* and oversees and enjoys its activities (*upadrastanumanta ca bharta bhokta mahesvarah, paramatmeti capy ukto dehe 'smin purusah parah*). Thus the limited consciousness depends on the unlimited consciousness for its activities and existence, and they are distinct and different in scope and level in the course of conditioned life. This is also confirmed in *Vedanta sutras: sariras cobhaye api hi bhedena enam adhiyate*, "Both (the *jivatman* and the *paramatman*) are present within the body, as distinct from each other" (*Vedanta sutra 1.2.20*) and *guhnam pravistav atmanam hi tad darsanat*, "Both (*jivatman* and *paramatman*) have entered the cave (of the body), but the *atman* is distinct from that (supreme)" (*Vedanta sutra 1.2.113*).

We have already mentioned that the *jivatman* is an emanation of the Supreme, generated directly by God (*mama eva amsa jiva loke, jiva bhuta sanatanah*, 15.7). This is abundantly confirmed in the *Upanishads: sad eva saumyedam agra asid ekam evadvitiam tad aikсата bahu syam prajayeya*, "In the beginning was the Supreme, who was one without a second. He thought: 'Let me become many. Let me become the progenitor of many'." (*Chandogya Upanishad 6.2.1*), *so 'kamayata bahu syam prajayeya sa tapo 'tapyata tapas taptva idam sarvam asrijat. yad idam kincana tat sristva tad evanupravisat. tad anupravisya sac ca tyac cabhavat*, "He desired: 'I will become many, I will father a numerous progeny'. From his *tapah*, he created everything. Then he entered within the world he had created, and he became all that is manifest and all that is non manifest" (*Taittiriya Upanishad 2.6.1*), *sa aikshata lokan nu srija*, "He thought: 'Now I shall create the people/ the worlds'." (*Aitareya Upanishad 1.1.2*), *yato va imani bhutani jayante*, "From the Supreme these beings were born." (*Taittiriya Upanishad 2.1.1*), *tad atmanam svayam akuruta*, "He created (everything) from his own *atman*" (*Taittiriya Upanishad 2.7.1*), *tasmad va etasmad atmana akasah sambhutat*, "From the *Atman* the *akasha* (space, first of the material elements) was manifested" (*Taittiriya Upanishad 2.1.1*).

We should not project our material limitations on God. We have seen that *Isvara Bhagavan* is the Father (9.17, 11.43, 14.5), but s/he is also the Mother (9.17, 14.3). This is clearly confirmed in the *Upanishads: yad bhuta yonim paripasyanti dhirah*, "The wise see that Brahman is the womb from which everything was born" (*Mundaka Upanishad 1.1.6*), *kartaram isam purusam brahma yonim*, "The Supreme Personality of Godhead is the original creator, the womb from which everything was born" (*Mundaka Upanishad 3.1.6*).

This is the key to true self realization: *ya eko 'varno bahudha sakti-yogad, varnan anekan nihitartho dadhati, vi caiti cante visvam adau sa devah, sa no buddhya subhaya samyunaktau*, "May the one, unrivaled Supreme Personality of Godhead, who for his own purpose created the many varieties of living entities by the agency of his potencies, who created everything in the beginning and into whom everything enters at the end, grant pure intelligence to us." (*Svetasvatara Upanishad 4.1*)

इति ते ज्ञानमाख्यातं गुह्याद्गुह्यतरं मया । विमृश्यैतदशेषेण यथेच्छसि तथा कुरु ॥ १८-६३ ॥

iti te jñānamākhyātaṁ guhyādgūhyataraṁ mayā | vimṛśyāitadaśeṣeṇa yatheccchasi tathā kuru || 18-63 ||

iti: thus; *te*: to you; *jnanam*: the knowledge; *akhyatam*: described; *guhayat*: more than secret; *guhayataram*: the most secret; *maya*: by me; *vimrsya*: deliberating; *etat*: this; *asesena*: completely; *yatha icchasi*: as you like; *tatha*: that; *kuru*: perform.

"In this way I have described to you the supreme among all the great secrets. Now think carefully about this, and then do as you wish.

Everybody has a conscience, and if we listen carefully we can hear its clear voice and deep down, under all the layers of ego and mental accumulations, we *know* that our conscience is giving us excellent advice and that we should follow it for our own good. However, our conscience does not give orders or force us to do anything; we are always free to choose to disregard and neglect its voice and even forget its existence for any length of time: it is up to us.

God does not interfere and does not get offended if we do not follow his instructions, and whenever we are ready to listen, he will be there to guide us with the same unchanged affection and wisdom. Forced compliance has no real value because when a child is forced to obey, he cannot really learn and evolve; as soon as the prohibition is somehow slackened or can be escaped, he will inevitably try to engage in that very same activity that was once forbidden - and with a stronger and more violent desire, because repression can only aggravate the problem and make it more dangerous and perverted.

The foolish parents and guardians who follow the abrahamic approach of "not sparing the rod to teach a child for his own good" are creating repressed monsters that will some day vent their own festered frustrations on other innocent creatures, becoming fully fledged

asuras like their elders before them, and losing all sense of intelligence and conscience under a toxic mountain of subconscious guilt and self-loathing, fear, conformism, hatred, anxiety, greed, obsessions and psychological diseases.

In the last centuries the same approach has been imposed for the relationship of the governments with the citizens, and we need to understand that it is directly derived from the example of the God of the Bible, that whimsically and unexpectedly strikes even his faithful worshipers when he is irritated by some small mistake or even some involuntary accident or just because he wants to do so - and don't ask questions or you will be treated as an offender.

On the other hand, we see that in non-abrahamic cultures and religions people are free to think, speak and live in the way they choose, although aggression is naturally considered a crime; the famous slogan of the Wiccan Rede (presented as "witch-craft" by the dominant abrahamic-based culture) is, "An' it harm none, do what you will" ("as long as it does no harm to anyone, do what you want to do") and it nicely summarizes the point.

The expression *yatha icchasi tatha kuru* ("then do whatever you wish to do") clearly shows the liberality of Krishna's advice and his patience and detachment as well, and it demonstrates the abyss of difference between original Hinduism and the abrahamic faiths.

However, it is important to notice that Krishna does not say, "do as you please", because he wants to make sure that the *jiva atman* makes a responsible and sober choice, that is not simply based on the superficial and childish attraction of likes and dislikes, because growing up means becoming able to understand that what may seem unpleasant in the beginning could be nectar in the end, and the other way around (18.36, 18.37, 18.38, 18.39, 5.22, 16.23). The conditioned *atman* naturally seeks happiness, but he does not have clear ideas on how to find it, therefore Krishna wants to make sure that he properly understands the indications on how to reach true happiness.

It is true that all paths ultimately lead to God (*mama vartmanuvartante manusyah partha sarvasah*, 3.23) because each individual can develop gradually in his/ her own time and sweet will, going through the different experiences in a personalized order, but it is also true that some courses will lead us more directly to the destination, while by choosing other courses it may take much longer (16.20). However, the entire journey is supposed to be an evolutionary experience tailored according to our individual tastes and preferences, so God does not interfere, and leaves the travel arrangements to the agency of Nature in pursuance of the choices of the individual *atman*. Paramatma is the witness, and advisor and the facilitator only (*upadrasta anumanta ca*, 13.23); like a good parent and teacher, he gives instructions and not orders, as he prefers educating rather than dominating.

We have already mentioned several times that God never demands blind obedience or faith; those who believe and teach that religion consists in submitting to commandments, dogma and fatwas out of fear for God, are actually speaking in the name of something that is not God. While abrahamic ideologies and their derivatives (such as communism etc) demand that their members renounce the use of intelligence, common sense and ethical conscience in the name of faith, obedience and allegiance to the established authorities of the system they follow, *Bhagavad gita* and Vedic tradition encourage people to develop their God-given intelligence and purify it through the understanding of the eternal and universal ethical principles of *dharma*. This is particularly indicated by the words *vimsrija* ("pondering over, meditating") and *asesena* ("on the whole and specifically"). One should not act whimsically and irresponsibly, because each action will create consequences; ignorance of the laws of nature is no excuse. The lessons offered us by life and Mother Nature are not pointless - on the contrary, they are very carefully and lovingly engineered to help us learn and grow in the best possible way.

We have all experienced the fact that at fist the teacher offers hints without speaking, to see if we are intelligent enough to understand the point by ourselves, then he speaks in a soft voice giving a short explanation, and then if we still do not understand the explanation becomes longer and harsher and the tone of voice becomes louder to express a sense of urgency and importance. We should not think that our lack of comprehension is hurting the teacher, or that the teacher hates us because he is showing anger when we do not care about our studies; a good teacher is worried about our good or bad results in the upcoming tests and is trying to spare us greater sufferings in the future. We should appreciate that, and remember it when we cry out and wonder why we failed at the exams, and blame God for our shortcomings.

Transcendental knowledge of liberation is called the supreme secret among secrets (*guhyad guhyataram*) but not because it is some incomprehensible mystery that we should accept unquestionably. The entire *Bhagavad gita* consists in a series of questions posed by Arjuna to clarify the doubts that anyone could have in the study of Vedic science, and in Krishna's elaborate answers from all possible angles; the word *akhyatam*, "I have explained", indicates the care and dedication that Krishna has invested in presenting the transcendental knowledge of *Bhagavad gita*, not just in these last verses or on this occasion on the battlefield of Kurukshetra, but many other times as he has already mentioned (4.1, 4.8). On a deeper level, we should consider this verse meaning remembering that the word *jnana* includes all the modes of *yoga* presented in *Bhagavad gita* - *Arjuna visada yoga*, *Sankhya yoga*, *Karma yoga*, *Jnana yoga*, *Sannyasa yoga*, *Dhyana yoga*, *Vijnana yoga*, *taraka brahma yoga*, *Raja guhya yoga*, *Vibhuti yoga*, *Visva rupa darsana yoga*, *Bhakti yoga*, *Prakriti-purusha-viveka yoga*, *Guna traya vibhaga yoga*, *Purushottama yoga*, *Daivasura sampada vibhaga yoga*, *Sraddha traya vibhaga yoga*, and *Moksha yoga*. The word *jnana* also indicated Bhagavan himself, as we have already mentioned several times.

Therefore we should not be superficial and childish like those fools who dismiss *jnana* as a mere "impurity" in the practice of *bhakti* (*jnana misra bhakti*); this is also indicated by Krishna's instruction here: *vimrisyaitad asesena*. This is confirmed in the *Upanishads* and also in *Bhagavata Purana*: *vadanti tat tattva vidas, tattvam yaj jnanam advayam, brahmeti paramatmeti, bhagavan iti sabdyate*, "Those who know the *tattva* declare that *tattva* is undivided Knowledge, variously called Brahman, Paramatma, and Bhagavan" (*Bhagavata Purana* 1.2.11), and *satyam jnanam anantam brahma*, "Brahman is the absolute Truth, the unlimited Knowledge" (*Taittiriya Upanishad* 2.1.1).

सर्वगुह्यतमं भूयः शृणु मे परमं वचः ।

इष्टोऽसि मे दृढमिति ततो वक्ष्यामि ते हितम् ॥ १८-६४ ॥

sarvaguhyatamam bhūyaḥ śṛṇu me paramam vacaḥ | iṣṭo'si me dṛḍhamiti tato vakṣyāmi te hitam || 18-64 |

sarva guhya tamam: the most secret of all (knowledge); *bhuyah*: again; *srnu*: listen; *me*: from me; *paramam vacah*: the supreme instruction; *istah asi*: you are dear; *me*: to me; *dridham*: extremely; *iti*: thus; *tatah*: therefore; *vakasyami*: I am telling; *te hitam*: for your benefit.

"Again hear from me the greatest secret of all, the supreme instruction. You are very dear to me, and this is why I am speaking for your benefit.

In this verse, the word *iti* indicates that the instructions of Krishna in *Bhagavad gita* are drawing to the final conclusion. This means that the process of teaching regularly needs some test to verify what the student has been able to understand and learn; after explaining the subject from all possible angles, the teacher will sit back and let the student talk and make his choices (*iyatha icchasi tatha kuru*).

Krishna is talking with Arjuna in a very confidential manner, because Arjuna is his friend and devotee (4.3, 10.1) and has surrendered to him as a disciple to the *guru* (2.7, 6.39). Bhagavan reciprocates the feelings and service of those who love him (*tams tathaiva bhajamy aham*, 4.11, *ye bhajanti tu mam bhaktya mayi te tesu capy aham*, 9.29). He will personally protect those who take shelter in him (9.31, 11.55), and he has a special affection for those who strive to qualify themselves by developing the divine characteristics and behaviors (12.14, 12.15, 12.16, 12.17, 12.19, 12.20). However, he still is the loving friend of all beings (*suhridam sarva bhutanam*, 5.29).

Bhagavan never tires and never abandons us, even when our disastrous choices drag us into the lowest levels of degradation and stupidity, and even when our ignorance and arrogance force us to obstruct the progress of others. From time to time, the supreme Consciousness descends as *avatara* (4.1, 4.5, 4.8, 2.12) to re-establish the correct understanding of *dharma* and *vidya*, because human beings often misuse their free will and tend to make a mess of things. Bhagavan does not hate anyone (9.29), and even when he is confronting the *asuras* and the *duskritas* ("the evil doers") to stop their destructive activities, he is still moved by affection and benevolence for them. The great Daksha recognized this truth after being shaken from his arrogant complacency: *daksha uvaca, bhuyan anugraha aho bhavat krito me, dandas tvaya mayi bhrito yad api pralabdham*, "O Lord, you have done me a great favor by punishing me and thus destroying (my arrogance)" (*Bhagavata Purana* 4.7.13).

We should not think that because Bhagavan does not give orders and does not become offended when we neglect his instructions, we will not be punished when we make a bad mess of things. Already the laws of material nature normally take care of the proper retribution in the form of what we call "karmic reactions" or more correctly, "reactions to *vikarma*" or "reactions to *ugra karma*". The effect of the law of *karma* is the same on everyone, irrespective of their beliefs and allegiances; it is true that Bhagavan in the form of *jnana* (knowledge) immediately destroys the accumulated reactions of *karma* in his devotees, but the process is not a "free ticket out of jail" as some foolish people like to think.

In abrahamic ideologies, everyone is considered a sinner because of the simple fact of having taken birth (since birth is a demonic contamination for them, the "original sin"), and the only hope for purification and forgiveness is conversion, that is giving total and blind allegiance to God and his official representatives. This simple act of allegiance is believed to destroy all sins not only at the initial moment of conversion, but also along the entire life of the "faithful", every time he is blessed by the official representatives of God.

The most characteristic example is the "sacrament of confession" in the Catholic church, in which one confesses his/ her sins to a priest and is absolved of all responsibilities and faults, without having to pay any debts to the people s/he harmed. The main prayer of the Christians says, "forgive our sins" (Luke 11.2-4), as if by simply pledging allegiance to God and praying to him could liberate us from the karmic debts we incurred towards our fellow creatures: this is the perfect recipe for disaster, because it destroys all sense of responsibility and justice, and encourages evil doers to continue in their bad activities counting on God's repeated and regular blanket absolution and pardon by the blessing of the priests.

It is the most effective way to strengthen one's resolve to disregard the voice of one's conscience - "I made my peace with God, everything is OK now, and I can do it again in the same way any number of times".

Some ignorant and foolish people could be tempted to apply this approach to verse 18.66 that we are going to study soon: *sarva dharman parityajya mam ekam saranam vraja, aham tvam sarva papebhyo moksayishyami ma sucah*, "Leaving behind all differences in duties, take shelter in me alone. Do not worry, I will liberate you from all faults." Misunderstanding the meaning of "taking shelter" (2.7, 2.49, 4.10, 7.1, 7.14, 7.29, 9.13, 9.18, 9.32, 11.38, 14.2, 15.4, 18.57, 18.62, 18.66) and "surrendering" (3.30, 4.11, 5.10, 12.6), they conclude that simply by pledging allegiance to the sectarian worship of Krishna and by keeping in good terms with the "established religious authorities" they can afford to commit any crime or evil deed without the fear of being punished, and they will attain paradise at the end of this lifetime. Vedic knowledge does not encourage this foolish delusion, because it does not limit God to a material personality affected by duality as we see in abrahamic ideologies.

One should take shelter of God and surrender to God in the form of his instructions and consciousness, that are based on equal vision towards all beings, development of a divine personality and purification from all bad qualities and bad activities, beginning with the root of all evils, that is material identification and selfish attachment. Thus God liberates us from all faults because the more we become conscious of God, the more we abandon asuric qualities and develop divine qualities, to the point that we completely overcome the connection with the gross material body - not by demonizing it, but by outgrowing it.

True knowledge (*jnana*) destroys the accumulation of karmic reactions by burning them (4.19), therefore there must be a fire that consumes them, by reducing to ashes the very root of ignorance that is the *ahankara-mamatva* identification. Bodies will never survive this fire and in fact they are not meant to (2.11-13, 2.16, 2.18, 2.22, 2.23, 2.27, 2.28, 11.27-30), and only the *atman* is not touched by this destruction (2.23, 2.24), so the destruction of the body of an evil doer is not a loss under any circumstance - not even for him.

In the Vedic system, evil doers (*atayinah*, "aggressors") must be immediately met with lethal force while they are engaged in the act of aggression itself. There is no place for reasonable discussion or negotiation, no place for lawyers' tricks to escape justice or to elicit sentimentalist compassion or demands to "respect the human rights" of the criminals, or space for bribing or sneaking one's way out without paying the price for evil deeds. At the very moment when a criminal engages in attacking a good innocent creature, he is forfeiting all his human rights because he is denying the same rights to his victim; the same thing applies for the so-called "religious freedom" by which we are asked to be tolerant towards the intolerant and recognize them the right to deny the same rights to others (including us). This utter idiocy has been created by the abrahamic ideologies only, because they claim for themselves all rights and no duties towards others. *Karma* is never a one-way street, and those who believe it is are going to pay dearly for that delusion. After clarifying this, we can elaborate on the ethical principles of *dharma* that teach that a surrendered enemy should not be punished. The aggressor can and should be

punished while he is still engaged in committing the crime, but if before being defeated he surrenders, we should abstain from killing him; removing his weapons and rendering him harmless will be sufficient for the protection of the *prajas*. If he tries again to attack innocent people or creatures, the criminal should be considered unrepentant and exiled out of the kingdom. This is exactly what the laws of nature do through the dynamics of *karma*, when it assigns a lower birth to a repeated offender, by denying him the opportunity of a human form of life (*manusya janma*).

There is a big difference between one's circumstantial position (created by the combined reactions of our previous actions and choices) and the ability to make new and hopefully better choices for our future. Such difference is called *jati* (birth), but contrarily to what ignorant and stupid casteists believe (on the basis of the racist prejudices reinforced by abrahamic influences), *jati* refers to the species of the body one has acquired and not to the particular family of birth. Vedic scriptures describe three kinds of *jati*: *manusya jati* ("birth as a human being") as opposed to *pakshi jati* ("birth as a bird") and *mriga jati* ("birth as a mammal animal"). In this sense, *jati* is a genetic heritage that gives specific fundamental physical characteristics and abilities. But there are no such genetic differences among human beings in regard to religious duties and social occupations, and Vedic scriptures knew this very well.

मन्मना भव मद्भक्तो मद्याजी मां नमस्कुरु ।

मामेवैष्यसि सत्यं ते प्रतिजाने प्रियोऽसि मे ॥ १८-६५ ॥

manmanā bhava madbhakto madyājī māṁ namaskuru । māmevaiṣyasi satyaṁ te pratijāne priyo'si me ॥ 18-65 ॥

mat manah: think of me; *bhava*: become; *mat bhaktah*: my devotee; *mat yaji*: my worshiper; *mam namaskuru*: offer your respect to me; *mam*: to me; *eva*: certainly; *esyasi*: you will come; *satyam*: in truth; *te*: to you; *pratijane*: as a promise; *priyah*: beloved; *asi me*: you are to me.

"Focus your mind on me, become my devotee, worship me and offer me respects, and you will certainly come to me. I am truly promising this to you, because you are very dear to me.

Krishna had already given the same instruction in the chapter of the *Raja gya yoga* ("the supreme secret"): *man mana bhava mad bhakto mad yaji mam namaskuru, mam evaisyasi yuktaivam atmanam mat parayanah*, "Always think of me, become my devotee and my worshiper. Offer me your respect and dedicate yourself to me. You will attain me because of this connection." (9.34). Also, we found a similar instruction in the chapter on *Bhakti yoga*: *mayy avesya mano ye mam nitya yukta upasate, sraddhaya parayopetas te me yuktatama matah*, "Those who are always keeping their mind in me and worship me with faith, always united with me, have attained the supreme level and I consider them as the most intimately united." (12.2). We need to understand this concept very clearly, because an artificial superimposition of alien abrahamic concepts will contaminate the intelligence of those who have a poor fund of knowledge and confuse their understanding, with potentially disastrous consequences.

As we have already explained, abrahamic ideologies (and their derivatives) present blind faith and allegiance (often mistaken for spiritual devotion) as the only required action for those who want to be considered religious people. This creates the delusional idea that "lip service" (i.e. prayer) is sufficient to qualify one for a higher position in religious and spiritual realization; when applied to the process of *bhakti*, this misunderstanding is compounded by the notion that *sravana kirtana* ("hearing and talking") are independent forms of devotional service in themselves and not simply initial stages of a larger process and limbs (*anga*) of a scientific method. Thus superficial people conclude that one just needs to make a show of religiosity in theory without substantiating it with one's actual beliefs and behaviors, but this idea is not confirmed by *Bhagavad gita* or any other genuine Vedic text or *acharya*. So for example we see people who consider themselves perfectly situated on the highest platform if they mechanically sit through periodical religious readings, and they expect that such exercise will be sufficient to automatically guarantee them everything they desire and ultimately liberation, too. Technically, this is compared to watering the good plant without bothering to clean out the weeds, and the result is often disappointing because the bad weeds end up consuming all the water and the good plants wither away and do not fructify at all.

It is true that the external modalities of one's worship (*mad yaji mam namaskuru*) can be adjusted according to the individual circumstances and possibilities (*desa, kala, patra*) and that we can even engage in many devotional activities also within our own mind, as *manasa puja* (mental meditation), when it is too difficult to perform them externally (17.19, 18.24, 6.37, 2.40). But we should be honest in our efforts (3.43, 4.12, 6.5, 6.17, 6.25, 6.36, 6.43, 12.11, 15.11); we should strive to engage all our senses in the service of the Supreme, as instructed by the great teachers of *bhakti* such as Narada Rishi: *hrisiksha hrisikena sevnam bhaktir ucyate, "bhakti is defined as engaging one's senses in the service of the Lord of the senses"* (*Narada Pancaratra*, quoted in *Bhakti rasamrita sindhu*, 1.1.12). Just engaging the sense of hearing is not enough; it is a crucial beginning step, but we need to use all our senses in God's service, and avoid engaging in activities that are unfavorable to such service.

Bhagavan is very liberal and accepts even very small offerings (9.26, 27) also in the simplest and most ordinary daily activities; he suggests a variety of approaches to the method (12.8, 12.9, 12.10, 12.11) to facilitate the choice of those who have attained different levels of realization. The practice of spiritual/ religious *sadhana* should be comfortable enough to be sustained over long periods of time (*su sukham kartum avyayam*, 9.2), therefore Krishna is not recommending that we should over-exert ourselves with excessive austerities based on egotism, especially when these are not prescribed by the *shastra* or by the *guru* (*asastra vihita ghoram tapyante ye tapo janah, dambhahankara samyuktah kama raga balanvitah*, 17.5).

On the contrary, one should make controlled efforts in performing one's duties (*yukta cestasva karmasu*, 6.17) and abandon the egotistic desire for over-performance (*sarvarambha parityagi*, 12.16, *lobhah pravrittir arambhah karmanam asamah spriha*, 14.12, *sarvarambha parityagi gunatitah sa ucyate*, 14.25). Still one must make an effort to qualify oneself by developing the divine characteristics and behaviors (12.14, 12.15, 12.16, 12.17, 12.19, 12.20), by understanding the science of God (13.9, *mad bhakta etad vijñaya mad bhavayopapadyate*), and by working for the benefit of all beings.

Krishna has described the characteristics of a true devotee in many verses; we can quote here one that summarizes them nicely: *mat karma krin ma paramo mad bhaktah sanga varjitah, nirvairah sarva bhutesu yah sa mam eti pandava*, "My devotee is engaged in working for me and sees me as the supreme Reality. S/he has abandoned all association/ affiliation/ identification, and has no enmity towards any being. In this way, my devotee comes to me" (11.55). He has also given practical instructions (9.27): *yat karosi yad asnasi yaj juhosi dadasi yat, yat*

tapasyasi kaunteya tat kurusva mad arpanam, "O Arjuna, whatever you do, whatever you eat, whatever you sacrifice, whatever you give, whatever you endure in the performance of your duties - do it for me."

We can get a more complete idea of the meaning of *bhakti* from the descriptions of the *Bhagavata Purana*, specifically in Prahlada's teachings about the nine limbs of devotional service: *sravanam kirtanam visnoh smaranam pada sevnam, arcanam vandanam dasyam sakhyam atma nivedanam, iti pumsarpita visnau bhaktis cen nava laksana, kriyeta bhagavaty addha tan manye 'dhitam uttamam*, "Listening, speaking, remembering Vishnu, following his instructions, offering worship and respect, engaging in practical service, developing a personal relationship with God and dedicating oneself fully: thus a person who offers a devotional service to Vishnu according the ninefold method should engage in all of them. I believe this to be the highest instruction." (*Bhagavata Purana* 7.5.23-24).

सर्वधर्मान्परित्यज्य मामेकं शरणं ब्रज । अहं त्वां सर्वपापेभ्यो मोक्षयिष्यामि मा शुचः ॥ १८-६६ ॥

sarvadharmānparityajya māmekaṁ śaraṇaṁ vraja | ahaṁ tvāṁ sarvapāpebhyo mokṣayisyāmi mā śucaḥ || 18-66 ||

sarva dharman: all duties; *parityajya*: leaving behind; *mam ekam*: only to me; *saranam vraja*: come for shelter; *aham*: I; *tvam*: you; *sarva papebhyah*: from all faults; *moksayisyami*: I will liberate; *ma sucah*: do not worry.

"Leaving behind all the differences in duties, take shelter in me only. I will liberate you from all faults, do not worry."

The expression *sarva dharman* is extremely interesting in this verse; as the word *dharma* is expressed in the plural form, it indicates a dualistic fragmentation of the universal and eternal principle that sustains the universe and the progress of all beings. *Dharma* is always one, although its principles (or "legs") can be listed as truthfulness, compassion, cleanliness, self-control, tolerance, personal progress, cooperation, and so on. This fundamental root that supports existence is identified with Krishna's teachings (2.40, 9.2, 9.3, 9.31, 11.18, 12.20, 18.70) and even with Bhagavan himself (14.2, 14.27) as confirmed also in *Bhagavata Purana* (2.4.19, 7.11.7, 11.15.18) and in the introductory verses of *Vishnu sahasra nama* (*Mahabharata*, Anusasana parva, chapter 149) as follows: *brahmanyam sarva dharmajnam... esa me sarva dharmanam dharmadhikatamo* (sloka 14). Also, Krishna's specifically declared mission is to re-establish *dharma* whenever it is weakened (4.7, 4.8), therefore it is not possible that Krishna is instructing us here to abandon *dharma* as a fundamental value of life. Such a foolish and dangerous conclusion could be presented only by the hypocrite *asuras* who have not bothered to study (what to speak of practicing) the teachings of genuine *shastra* (16.17, 16.23, 17.6, 17.13) to understand the principles of *dharma*.

The "various *dharmas*" to which Krishna is referring here (*sarva dharman*) are the temporary and limited definitions of duty that are attached to the material *gunas* as described in the activities and qualities of the different *varnas* (*brahmanas, kshatriyas, vaisyas, sudras*), and that include the externals of the different religious practices of the various *ashramas* (*brahmacharya, grihastha, vanaprastha, sannayasa*).

We had already seen this concept in verse 9.21, where Krishna mentioned the "three *dharmas*" (*trayi dharman*) as the ritual ceremonies prescribed for those who wish to attain the higher planetary systems (*svarga lokan*). And certainly we can apply the definition *sarva dharman* to the various sectarian approaches that oppose for example a *vaishnava dharma* to a *shaiva dharma* etc.

We should be careful not to make the equivalence *papa* = sin, because the abrahamic concept of sin is nothing but a disobedience to the order of God and his priests, something that is totally irrelevant in the Vedic system. We will try here to better define the terminology used in Vedic tradition for negative actions: *papa* is an act that directly or indirectly causes sufferings to others, while *duskrita* is a bad action in general, *agha* is a truly criminal action but *agas* is simply an irresponsible action. *Droha* is a malicious action against the principle of gratefulness, *pataka* is a degrading action that causes a downfall from the position we were supposed to hold in society, and *dosha* is a character fault or a bad quality (defect). *Aparadha* is a formal act of disrespect, *drugdha* is an action meant to cause harm, *vipatti* is the failure to fulfill some duty, and *anrita* is a lie.

It is important to notice that Krishna is not saying "I will relieve you from all the reactions/ results of your negative activities", but he says, "I will relieve you from all your negative activities", meaning that Krishna will guide his sincere devotee to give up all bad activities and become purified from all adharmic contamination - exactly as we had seen in verses 9.30-31. So those cunning rascals who were planning to dump their responsibilities cheaply and escape the reactions of their bad actions by making some protestation of having taken shelter in Krishna will have to check their maths again, because that is not going to happen.

This verse is indeed the most confidential instruction by Krishna, and the passage in *Bhagavad gita* that can be most easily misinterpreted by someone who has not carefully and properly understood all the other instructions given by Krishna in the previous chapters.

The *prakrita sahajyas* are the materialistic simpletons who convince themselves (or let themselves be convinced by others) that it is sufficient to accept the external appearances of devotion and immediately they should be considered established on the highest transcendental level of *bhakti*. Therefore they become sentimentally attached to their own projection of God according to their material preferences, just like the admirers or fans of famous actors, singers or musicians, professional sports celebrities, and so on. Becoming a "fan" of Krishna is certainly better than choosing to worship some of those personalities, and even better than developing a strong material attachment for one's children or grand-children as we see sometimes in persons who consider family life as the highest possible value in life.

Krishna quickly became a very popular figure in these last 5000 years because he appears like a handsome, artistic and fun-loving young man, a charming, affectionate, clever and adventurous boy and a very sweet and vivacious cute baby. His idyllic pastimes with the little *gopas* and amorous dalliances with the beautiful *gopis*, his love and respect for his parents and elders, his protective care for the cows and calves all contribute to the aura of tenderness and innocence that attracts all minds. In fact, the very name *krishna* has been explained as meaning "all attractive", from the root *karsati* ("to attract").

Loving Krishna is therefore extremely easy, even on a sentimentalist level, and even *asuras* are generally not intimidated by his character. In fact, we see that many unscrupulous people have tried to take advantage of him in several ways, sometimes imitating him and pretending to be his reincarnation to attract gullible followers, or claiming to be his great *sevakas* and representatives, collecting wealth

and prestige in his name for their own self aggrandizement. To impress the general public they often make a great show of emotional ecstasy or excitement, grand gestures and dramatic performances of devotional sentiments.

Simple-minded people who have little familiarity with the teachings of the *shastra* are usually unable to see the difference between a genuine *avadhuta* and a clever fraudster who is a skilled pretender, or even an ordinary person who suffers from mental imbalances, therefore they can easily be cheated and misled, thus wasting the valuable opportunity of human life. To save the poor unfortunate souls from the damage of ignorance and foolishness, Bhagavan manifests personally (*svamsa avatara*) or empowers realized souls (*sakty avesha avataras*) to spread the correct knowledge and understanding of *dharma* and *vidya*, and to offer shelter to sincere people. We can ascertain the real value of such preachers by measuring their precepts and example with those of *guru*, *shastra* and *sadhus*, and especially with the recommendations of *antaryami paramatman*.

Because the *param atman* is present in the heart of everybody and speaks with the voice of the conscience even to those who are totally illiterate, the lack of formal education is not a decisive obstacle in spiritual progress. The real problem is when a person has ulterior motives and the fraudulent presentation seems to offer better selfish advantages to the followers; the cheaters and the cheated are attracted to each other because they have a similar view of life.

So, please make sure that when you are "taking shelter in Krishna only", you are not connected to the wrong phone number. You have been warned.

इदं ते नातपस्काय नाभक्ताय कदाचन । न चाशुश्रूषवे वाच्यं न च मां योऽभ्यसूयति ॥ १८-६७ ॥

idaṁ te nātapaskāya nabhaktāya kadācana | na caśuśrūṣave vācyaṁ na ca māṁ yo'bhyasūyati || 18-67 ||

idam: this; *te*: you; *na*: not; *atapaskaya*: to a person who is not austere; *na*: not; *abhaktaya*: to a person who is not a devotee; *kadacana*: never; *na*: not; *ca*: and; *susrusave*: to someone who is not willing to listen; *vacyam*: to be instructed; *na ca*: and also not; *mam*: of me; *yah*: one who; *abhyasuyati*: is envious.

"This (secret) should never be disclosed to a person who has no devotion or austerity. It should not be spoken to a person who is not willing to listen or who is hostile against me.

The key words in this verse are *bhakta*, *tapaska*, *susrusava*, indicating a person who has devotion to Bhagavan, is dedicated to austerity and is honestly willing to listen and understand: these are the fundamental qualifications to become a genuine student of *Bhagavad gita*. In this verse each of these words is preceded by the privative "a", a prefix that expresses negation and that has been inherited from Sanskrit by other languages such as ancient Greek and Latin.

The last word in the verse is *abhyasuyati*, "one who envies", "one who is actively hostile", and that automatically includes all those who approach the study of Hinduism to disprove it in favor of their own ideology - something that has regularly happened in the last several centuries in the academic establishments founded and directed by abrahamic ideologues.

Unfortunately this does not apply only to the foreigners, as some Indians like to believe, but it has been happening regularly in India because the current educational system (as well as the political, legal and bureaucratic systems) is still based on the same ideological lines introduced in colonial times by establishment agents such as Macaulay and Max Muller, who was hailed as the "go tirtha" ("Ox-ford") *mulla* (Muller) *acharya* (teacher of Vedic knowledge)" by the political leaders of "orthodox Hinduism", and whose disgracefully racist theory of the "purity of the Aryan race" is still supported directly or indirectly by the very same casteist fools that claim to represent Vedic tradition today.

The word *abhyasuya* is the opposite of *anasuya*; to this effect we can remember verse 9.1: *idam tu te guhyatamam pravaksyamy anasuyave, jnanam vijnana sahita, yaj jnatva moksyase 'subhat*, "I will explain you this supreme secret, because you are not envious. By knowing this theoretical and applied knowledge, you will be free from all inauspiciousness." Other commentators have explained the word *abhyasuyati* as "caviling, trying to find faults", but such interpretation can be dangerous because it is usually taken to be a one-way street only, to avoid uncomfortable questions about faulty translations and ideological applications.

Krishna has clearly shown in his dialog with Arjuna that he is not offended by objections (2.5, 2.6, 3.1, 4.4, 5.1, 6.33), and as a perfect teacher he has always supplied sufficient explanations and clarifications, to make sure that the subject was properly understood. We should be very wary of those who get easily offended when questioned and accuse others of being "envious" of the high position they have attained as *gurus* or *acharyas*, because most likely they are unable to give the proper answers and are trying to divert the attention of the questioners by changing the subject.

We have already found the word *abhyasuya* in the chapter describing the characteristics of the *asuras*: *ahankaram balam darpam kamam krodham ca samsritah, mam atma para dehesu pradvisanto 'bhyasuyakah*, "Taking shelter in *ahankara*, physical strength, arrogance, lust and anger, they show envy and hatred against me, as I reside in their own bodies and in the bodies of others" (16.18). In the light of this verse we understand that the secret of *Bhagavad gita* will not be disclosed to anyone who is hostile and envious towards the Atman - who lives both in his body and in the bodies of others - especially *because* of their bodies, and on the basis of material bodily identification (*ahankara*, *balam*). A person who is hostile and envious towards the Atman and the Paramatman can never be a devotee (*bhakta*) or dedicated to austerity (*tapaska*), or sincerely interested to learn the actual meaning of Krishna's instructions (*susrusava*); why then would someone like that try to study *Bhagavad gita* or other Vedic literature? Their motives must be wrong.

Krishna clearly states here that the "objective" or "secular" academic study of the intimate texts of *Bhagavad gita* should not be accepted as valid; for this purpose it is better to utilize summary studies prepared and taught by genuinely qualified people - those who are truly devoted and austere. This prohibition does not have anything to do with the casteist and racist prejudices of some ignorant fools who claim to be traditional orthodox religious authorities on Hinduism, and believe that "foreigners" and "low caste people" should not even be allowed to study Sanskrit and in any case they would never be able to understand Vedic knowledge because they lack some special DNA structure.

The problem is rather in the blind faith that most people have towards the mainstream academic system, from which they crave recognition and endorsement directly or indirectly. It is rare to find "traditional Hindus" who do not want to know what are your "academic qualifications" according to the mainstream establishment, so that they can judge your competence in discussing about *shastra*, while no importance is given to your actual realizations and practices in life. At the same time, even those who talk about Vedic literature on the basis of their "birth qualification" or "religious lineage" continue to rely on hostile colonial translations and dictionaries, and especially to use appallingly demeaning abrahamic definitions to describe their own tradition - for example, they say "idol" to refer to Deities or *vigrahas*, "mythology" to refer to the sacred stories or *itihāsas* and *puranas*, "seer" to refer to realized souls or *rishis*, "caste" to refer to the genuine system of *varnas*, and so on.

We can easily verify the seriousness of the problem if we consult a good dictionary to verify the actual meaning of these definitions. For example, "idol" means "false god, pretender, impostor, a form of appearance visible but lacking substance, a fallacy, a false conception", while "myth" means "an unfounded or false notion, a person or thing having only an imaginary or unverifiable existence". The word "cult" means "a religion regarded as unorthodox or spurious", while "orthodox" means "conforming to established doctrine especially in religion", which in the case of Vedic knowledge should refer to what is actually written in the *shastra*, and not to a mentality characterized by narrow-mindedness, backward mentality, and blind fanaticism based on gross material bodily identification and the falsely moralistic values absorbed from the toxic abrahamic influence. The arrogance of those who claim they have the right to use their own "special Indian meaning" of such English words clearly shows that they do not possess either *bhakti* or *tapah*, and therefore they should never be considered qualified even to discuss about *Bhagavad gita*, what to speak about teaching about it, or even claiming exclusive monopoly rights on its teaching.

Padma Purana recommends, *asraddhadhane vimukhe 'py asrinvati yas copadesah, siva namaparadhah*, "one who gives instructions to a person who has no faith and is hostile and unwilling to listen, will cause him to commit *aparadha*"; this does not apply only to the teaching of the secret of *Bhagavad gita* but also to all kinds of instructions. Before taking up responsibility for the material and spiritual progress of an individual, we should make sure that our advice and instructions will be received favorably, otherwise it is better to simply make general statements presenting an elementary level of knowledge that cannot be misinterpreted easily.

च इदं परमं गुह्यं मद्भक्तेष्वभिधास्यति । भक्तिं मयि परां कृत्वा मामेवैष्यत्यसंशयः ॥ १८-६८ ॥

ya idam paramam guhyam madbhakteshvabhidhāsyati | bhaktim mayi param kṛtvā māmevaiṣyatyasamśayah || 18-68 ||

yah: one who; *idam*: this; *paramam guhyam*: supreme secret; *mat bhaktesu*: to my devotees; *abhidhāsyati*: explains; *bhaktim*: devotion; *mayi*: to me; *param*: supreme; *kṛtvā*: doing; *mam*: me; *eva*: certainly; *esyati*: comes; *asamsayah*: without any doubt.

"One who explains this supreme secret to my devotees is performing the supreme devotional service and will certainly attain me. There is no doubt.

We find a very similar instruction in Kapila's conversation with his mother Devahuti: *naitat khalayopadisen navinitaya karhicit, na stabdhaya na bhinnaya naiva dharma dhvajaya ca, na lolupayopadisen na griharudha cetase nabhaktaya ca me jatu, na mad bhakta divisam api, sraddhadhanaya bhaktaya vinitaya anasuyave, bhutesu krita maitraya susrusabhirataya ca*, "This knowledge should not be offered to those who are envious, to the agnostic, to those who are proud of their position, to those who make a big show of religiosity, and to those who do not practice what they preach. It should not be taught to those who are greedy, too attached to the identification with family life, devoid of devotion, or hateful against my devotees. But it should be offered to those loving devotees who have faith and are sincerely desiring to understand, free from envy, friendly to all beings, and eager to render service." (*Bhagavata Purana*, 3.32.39-41).

Also Krishna offers the same advice to Uddhava at the end of their conversation: *naitat tvaya dambhikaya nastikaya sathaya ca, asurusor abhaktaya durvinitaya diyatam, etair dosair vihinaya brahmanyaya priyaya ca, sadhave sucaye bruyad bhakti syac chudra yositam*, "You should not speak of these things with those who make a great show of religiosity, to those who do not accept the authority of Vedic knowledge, to pretenders or hypocrites, to those who are not interested in listening, to those who have no devotion or sincere desire to learn. One can speak of these things only to someone who has become free from bad qualities, is dedicated to spiritual realization (of Brahman), is gentle and well behaved, has a pure heart and a devotional attitude, and that also includes *sudras* and ordinary women" (*Bhagavata Purana* 11.29.30-31).

Someone trying to teach the supreme secret to the wrong people described in the previous verse (*abhakta, atapaska, asurusava, abhyasuyaka*) is obviously acting for some selfish materialistic purpose, to get money or prestige, or with even more sinister intentions. We know that Max Mueller translated many Vedic texts and wrote a 50 volume encyclopedia about *The Sacred Books of the East*, but his intentions were openly hostile: "This edition of mine and the translation of the Veda will hereafter tell to a great extent... the fate of India, and on the growth of millions of souls in that country... the only way of uprooting all that has sprung from it during the last 3000 years... and that is of a more degraded and savage character than the worship of Jupiter, Apollo or Minerva... It may have but served to prepare the way of Christ... India is much riper for Christianity than Rome or Greece were at the time of Saint Paul." Max Muller was particularly angry at those scholars who, instead of devoting themselves to this "evangelic mission", committed the mortal sin to sincerely appreciate Vedic knowledge: one who did that "should know that he can expect no money; nay, he should himself wish for no mercy, but invite the heaviest artillery... to condone Brahminical idolatry and to discountenance Christianity is to commit high treason against humanity and civilization." Mainstream academic indologists still follow the same orientation today, not only in the West but in India too, and have contaminated with the same mentality many religious institutions and organizations even within the Hindu fold. On the other hand, one who engages in sincere and constructive discussions with genuine *bhaktas* is inspired by the spiritual happiness that is created (*bodhayantah parasparam kathayantas ca mam nityam tusyanti ca ramanti ca*, "they find great pleasure and satisfaction by always discussing about me, to help each other to better understand me", 10.9). There can be no higher pleasure or satisfaction than this, because this happiness is permanent and does not depend on external circumstances (4.38, 5.13, 5.21, 5.23, 5.24, 6.21, 6.27, 6.28, 9.2, 14.27).

The word *abhidhāsyati* ("who teaches") is particularly interesting here. It does not refer to the formal relationship between *guru* and *sisya*, but rather to an open discussion on the various meanings of Krishna's words. A closely related word, *abhidhana*, means "conversation", but

also "explanations, definitions", and even "lexicography, dictionary"; it is connected to the words *vritti* and *anuvritti*, as we can see in this verse spoken by Suta at Naimisaranya: *aho vayam janma bhrilo 'dya hasma, vriddhanuvrittityapi viloma jatah, dauskulyam adhim vidhunoti sighram, mahattamanam abhidhana yogah*, "How wonderful that we have been raised today to such a position due to our service to great personalities, even though we were born in a lowly family without being blessed by the proper *samskaras*. The conversations that unite us with those who are great souls will very quickly remove all faults from our life." (*Bhagavata Purana*, 1.18.18).

The word *vritti* includes the meanings of "interpretation, alliteration, activity, process, occupation, function, mode of being, condition, respectful behavior, profession", while *anuvritti* means "commentary, repetition, remembrance, act of continuance, following, obedient spirit, propensity, tendency". This is how we can attain and practice genuine transcendental *bhakti* (*bhaktim mayi param kritva*).

न च तस्मान्मनुष्येषु कश्चिन्मे प्रियकृत्तमः । भविता न च मे तस्मादन्यः प्रियतरो भुवि ॥ १८-६९ ॥

na ca tasmānmanuṣyēṣu kaścīnme priyakṛttamaḥ । bhavitā na ca me tasmādanyaḥ priyataro bhuvi ॥ 18-69 ॥

na: not; *ca*: and; *tasmat*: than him/ her; *manuṣyēṣu*: among all human beings; *kascit*: anyone; *me*: to me; *priya krt tamah*: dearer; *bhavita*: will become; *na*: not; *ca*: and; *me*: to me; *tasmat*: than him/ her; *anyah*: other; *priya tarah*: dearer; *bhuvi*: in this world.

"Nobody among all human beings is dearer to me, and nobody else will ever be dearer to me in this world."

The previous verse (68) clearly stated that explaining the supreme transcendental secret of Yoga to sincere spiritually inclined people is the greatest devotional service. In fact it is such a sacred mission that Bhagavan himself directly descends in this world from time to time to perform the same function: *paritrānaya sadhunam vinasaya ca duskritam, dharma samsthapanarthaya sambhavami yuge yuge*, "I manifest myself *yuga* after *yuga*, to protect the good people, destroy the evil doers and to establish the knowledge of *dharma*" (4.8).

This is also confirmed in *Bhagavata Purana* (4.22.16): *vyaktam atmatvam atma bhagavan atma bhavanah, svanam anugrahayemam siddha rupi caraty ajah*, "In this way Bhagavan, the unborn, walks around in the form of a perfectly realized soul to enlighten those who are determined to attain spiritual realization".

The transmission of spiritual knowledge is the greatest gift and the most valuable proof of love and affection: *sa evayam maya te 'dya yogah proktaḥ puratanah, bhakto 'si me sakha ceti rahasyam hy etad uttamam*, "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" (4.3).

We have seen that Krishna has said that one should be equally impervious to insult and glorification, joys and sorrows (*tulya priyapriyo dhiras tulya nindatma samstutih*, 14.24), impartial and detached from both friends and enemies, honor and neglect (*samah satrau ca mitre ca tatha manapamanayoh*, 12.18, *mana apamanayas tulyas tulyo mitrari paksayoh*, 14.25), and should see equally everyone, including benefactors, friends, enemies, neutral persons, mediators, envious persons or relatives (*suhriṇ mitrariy udasina madhyastha dvesya bandhusu*, 6.9) and be friendly with all and not hostile towards anybody (*advesta sarva bhutanam maitrah karuna eva ca*, 12.13).

God also behaves according to these same parameters: *nadatte kasyacit papam na caiva sukritam vibhuh, ajnanena avritam jnanam tena muhyanti jantavah*, "The all powerful Lord does not consider the good or bad merits of anyone. Any difference is only due to the living entities themselves, who are confused as their knowledge is covered by ignorance." (5.15). Another verse added a slightly different angle: *samo 'ham sarva bhutesu na me dvesyo 'sti na priyah, ye bhajanti tu mam bhaktya mayi te tesu capy aham*, "I am equally disposed towards all living beings. I do not hate anyone, and I do not favor anyone. Yet, when someone offers me a sincere service in devotion, I also serve them with love and devotion." (9.29).

We also know that God regularly takes the side of the Devas against the Asuras whenever the proper management of the universe is threatened and they ask for his help. One could then wonder how this is possible, and whether it is not a contradiction; after all most people believe that religion can only be a sort of sectarian pact of covenant between God and his "chosen people", where such people obey orders and offer worship, and God protects them from bad things and answers their prayers granting them all good things. But this is not exactly a fact.

Sukadeva explained this to Parikshit: *sa esa rajan api kala isita sattvam suranikam ivaidhayaty atah, tat pratyanikan asuran sura priyo rajas tamaskan praminoty urusravah*, "God as Time nourishes the many *suras* through *sattva*, therefore those who are hostile to the *suras* - the *asuras* - are destroyed" (7.1.12). How this happens, it is inconceivable for the living beings: *na yasya sakhyam puruso 'vaiti sakhyuh sakha vasan samvasatah pure 'smin, guno yatha gunino vyakta dristes tasmai mahesaya namaskaromi*, "The living being cannot understand the friendship of the friend who lives with him in the same body, just like qualities cannot understand those who possess such qualities or the sense objects cannot understand the senses that perceive them. I offer my respect to Isvara." (6.4.24). We know that the *jiva atmans* are simply projections of the *param atman*, his *amsas* and *shaktis*, so God remains largely inconceivable to us (*adhokshaja*).

Bhagavan is always the best friend of all creatures (4.11, 5.29, 9.18, 9.29), but human beings have a special position in his affection because they are mature enough to take up their share of responsibilities in the work of supporting the universe, but they are also small enough to remain sober and humble in such service. The key expression in this verse is *manuṣyēṣu*, "among human beings". As we have commented already in previous passages, the only real qualification to engage in spiritual life and *yoga* is *manusa jati* - having acquired a human form of life (*athato brahma jijnasa, Vedanta sutra* 1.1.1).

Paramatman resides in the hearts of all creatures and even within the hearts of atoms, but only human beings have the faculty to make the free choices to elevate themselves and attain liberation (*moksha*, 13.35, 16.5, 18.66, *brahma bhuta*, 6.27, 18.54). Those human beings who take a new birth on the higher planetary systems thanks to their religious merits also have the opportunity to elevate themselves to liberation, but in that position of sattvic happiness they can become too complacent (14.9) and this will strengthen their bondage to material identification, so they will have to return to the level of human life when their merits have been consumed (9.20, 9.21).

Especially in Kali *yuga*, taking birth as a human being is a great blessing, as confirmed for example in *Bhagavata Purana* (*kalav icchanti sambhavam kalau khalu bhavisyanti*, 11.5.38), because under the pressure of unfavorable circumstances people can more easily wake up

from the delusional hope to find happiness in the sense gratification of the material world, that is actually only a burden (*indriya artha maya sukhaya bharam udvahatah*, 7.9.43). We should therefore appreciate this wonderful and rare opportunity of a human birth (*durlabham manusam janma, Bhagavata Purana 7.6.1*) and not waste it foolishly in the hope of getting a better birth in a next lifetime. Any level of human birth qualifies us to strive for perfection (9.32), so we should not even wait one minute longer: *ayur harati vai pumsam, udyann astam ca yann asau, tasyarte yat ksano nita, uttama sloka vartaya*, "Every sunrise and sunset take away a piece of the duration of life for a human being, which is lost without gain except for those who use time to understand God", (*Bhagavata Purana 2.3.17*).

अध्येष्यते च य इमं धर्म्यं संवादमावयोः । ज्ञानयज्ञेन तेनाहमिष्टः स्यामिति मे मतिः ॥ १८-७० ॥

adhyesyate ca ya imam dharmyam sanvadamāvayoḥ | jñānayajñena tenāhamiṣṭaḥ syāmiti me matiḥ || 18-70 ||

adhyesyate: will study; *ca*: and; *yah*: one who; *imam*: this; *dharmyam*: on *dharma*; *samvadam*: conversation; *avayoh*: our; *jnana yajnena*: by the sacrifice of knowledge; *tena*: by him/ her; *aham*: I am; *istah*: worshiped; *syam*: shall be; *iti*: thus; *me*: my; *matiḥ*: opinion.

"One who studies this conversation of ours about *dharma* will be worshiping me through the celebration of knowledge. This is my opinion.

The equation *dharma = yoga = jnana* is very clear, so when Krishna says that he descends from time to time to re-establish *dharma* (*dharma samsthapanartha*, 4.8) when this is somehow lost (*yogah nasta*, 4.2), we should understand that he comes to explain the ancient science of *yoga* (*yogah proktaḥ puratanah*, 4.3). Without understanding this point, it is very difficult to make any progress.

Mainstream academics, still bogged into the abrahamic-based colonial indology, still believe that Hinduism "evolved in time" from a so-called Rigvedic period of primitive fire worship of war gods, when there was no concept of reincarnation, ethical vegetarianism, *moksha*, *yoga* etc. We can understand that they need to do so in order to get official recognition from the establishment mafia, but such position is a disgrace for those who claim to be Hindus and to have faith in Vedic knowledge and tradition.

The entirety of Vedic knowledge has always existed in its perfect and complete form, since the very beginning of creation - of *each* creation - because it is transmitted by the *paramatman* to the Rishis in their hearts (10.11, 15.15) as well as through the formal external teaching from *guru* to *sisya*. At the beginning of the chapter on *Jnana yoga*, Krishna clearly stated: *imam vivasvate yogam proktavan aham avyayam, vivasvan manave praha manur iksvakave 'bravit*, "I explained this eternal science of Yoga to Vivasvan, and Vivasvan taught it to Manu, and Manu told it to Ikshvaku" (4.1). This is confirmed by both *sruti* and *smriti*, as we can see for example in the opening verse of the *Bhagavata Purana*: *yato 'nvayad itaratas carthesv abhijnah svarat tene brahma hrda ya adi kavaye*, "by whom Brahman knowledge was revealed in the heart of the first scholar, directly and indirectly and in full consciousness" (*Bhagavata Purana*, 1.1.1).

The genuine Vedic tradition teaches that at the beginning of this Kali yuga, Vyasa compiled a new edition of all Vedic scriptures, as clearly explained in the *Bhagavata*: *catur hotram karma suddham prajanam viksyā vaidikam vyadadhah yajna santatyaī vedam ekam catur vidham; rig yajuh samartharvakhya, vedas catvara uddhritah, itihasa puranam ca, pancamo veda ucyaṭe; tatrarg veda dharah pailah samago jaiminih kavih, vaisampayana evaiko nishato yajusam uta; atharvangirasam asit sumantur daruno munih itihasa purananam pita ma romaharsanah; ta eta risayo vedam svam svam vyasyann anekadhā, sisyaith prasisyais tac chisyair, vedas te sakhino 'bhavan*; "(Vyasa) divided the one Knowledge of the Vedic rituals in four compilations including the science of the four sacrificial fires and the purifying duties for the people in general. These four compilations are known as *Rig Veda*, *Yajur Veda*, *Sama Veda* and *Atharva Veda*, plus the *Itihasas* and *Puranas*, that are called the fifth *Veda*. Then he entrusted Paila Rishi to elaborate on the *Rig Veda*, Jaimini with the *Sama Veda*, and Vaisampayana with the *Yajur Veda*, Angirasa (Sumantu Muni) with the *Atharva Veda*, and Romaharsana (father of Suta) with the *Itihasas* and *Puranas*. All these Rishis transmitted their respective scriptures to their disciples and those to their own disciples, and in this way the Vedic literature has expanded." (*Bhagavata Purana* 1.4.19, 1.4.20, 1.4.21, 1.4.22, 1.4.23).

This is the proper method for studying Vedic knowledge (*sva-adhyaya*): we receive the original text and the compilation of commentaries by the previous *acharyas*, and then we transmit the original text with our own presentation in the best possible way according to *desa*, *kala*, *patra* and according to our personal realizations. Suta says: *aham hi prsto 'ryamano bhavadbhir acaksa atmavagamo 'tra yavan, nabhah patanty atma samam patattrinas tatha samam visnu gatim vipascitah*, "Having been requested by great *aryas* such as you, I will speak as far as my understanding can reach; just like (different) birds fly in the sky, knowledgeable people will speak about the supreme Personality of Godhead" (*Bhagavata Purana*, 1.18.23).

We remember that a few verses earlier, Suta had said: *aho yayam janma bhrito 'dya hasma, vridhdhanuvrittyapi viloma jatah, dauskulyam adhim vidhunoti sighram, mahattamanam abhidhana yogah*, "How wonderful that we have been raised today to such a position due to our service to great personalities, even though we were born in a lowly family without being blessed by the proper *samskaras*. The conversations that unite us with those who are great souls very quickly remove all faults from our life." (*Bhagavata Purana*, 1.18.18).

श्रद्धावाननसूयश्च शृणुयादपि यो नरः । सोऽपि मुक्तः शुभल्लोकान्प्राप्नुयात्पुण्यकर्मणाम् ॥ १८-७१ ॥

śraddhāvānanaśūyaśca śṛṇuyādapi yo naraḥ | so'pi muktaḥ śubhāṁlōkānprāpnuyātpuṇyakarmaṇām || 18-71 ||

śraddha van: one who has faith; *anasuyah*: one who is not envious; *ca*: and; *śrinuyat*: will hear; *api*: certainly; *yah*: who; *narah*: a human being; *sah*: s/he; *api*: also; *muktaḥ*: a liberated being; *subhan lokan*: the auspicious planets; *prapnuyat*: s/he attains; *punya karmanam*: of those who have performed virtuous deeds.

"Any human being who will listen (to this discussion) with faith, free from envy and hostility, will become liberated and attain the auspicious planets of those who have performed virtuous deeds.

In this verse the word *mukta* ("liberated") is particularly interesting. One who has attained liberation is free from material conditionings, from the need to take another birth in this world, and from the identification with the body and mind s/he is still wearing (*jivan mukta*).

This means that he is also free to remain in the world, or to descend again in this world - not as a prisoner but as a social worker, to assist Bhagavan's mission. These are the Devas who reside on the higher planets (*subhan lokan prapnyat punya karmanam*) and the Mahajanas ("great personalities") and Ciranjivas ("long-lived") like Dhruva, Prahlada, Janaka, Bali, Sukadeva, Hanuman, Vyasa, Narada, the Kumaras, etc

In the previous verse Krishna clearly stated that the *jnana yajna*, the sacred act of cultivating knowledge through the sincere study (*adhyesya*) of *Bhagavad gita*, is a genuine method of worship that really pleases God (*ista syam*). In fact, it is the best form of worship, as Krishna has said a few verses earlier (18.68). We should ask ourselves whether we really understood the meaning and purpose of worship, because people influenced by *tamas* and *rajas* can easily become confused on the subject, and even project their own mentality and motivations on God, surmising that God must think and act in the same way and logic like they do.

Tamasic and rajasic people only do something good for others when their ego is pampered enough by flattery and praise, when they see some selfish advantage for themselves (generally in exchange for the favor they give), or simply because they are forced to do so by some other force (magic spell etc). Krishna has already explained that sattvic consciousness is not touched by praise or insult, and performs the required good work without expecting anything in return. God is the supreme *sattva* (*hareh sattva nidher, Bhagavata Purana* 1.3.26), therefore we should understand that such qualities apply to Bhagavan even to a greater extent.

When we present various worship articles (*upachara*) to the Deity in the *puja* rituals, we are simply expressing our respect and affection and gratitude for God, because God does not need any material offering. There is nothing in all the three worlds that God needs or wants to obtain (*lokesu kincana nanavapam avaptavyam* 3.22) and in fact he is the provider of everything for everyone (*yoga ksemam vahamy aham*, 9.22) as also confirmed in the *Upanishads* (*eko bahunam yo vidadhathi kaman, Katha Upanishad* 2.2.13).

Bhagavan only accepts our offerings when, and because, they are presented with love (*tad aham bhakty upahritam asnami prayatatmanah*, 9.26), therefore we can understand that the best form of worship mentioned here by Krishna is characterized by the deepest love.

Love can only come from actually knowing the object of our love, deeply and intimately; people use the word "love" improperly to indicate a lustful physical attraction, an infatuation, or a perceived affinity of pleasure connected to the presence or contact with a sense object. The fact is that we cannot really love someone we do not know - this realization inevitably comes after some time, when the initial infatuation has weakened and we actually see the object of our sentimental interest for what s/he really is.

Genuine love is built on a deep understanding of the object of our affection, and this is the reason why studying *Bhagavad gita* is the best expression of *bhakti*, as it gradually increases our knowledge, understanding and appreciation for Bhagavan, and leads us through the realization of Brahman, Paramatma and Bhagavan to the solid level of transcendental existence (*brahma bhuta*, 18.54).

By regular association or contact with Bhagavan's teachings we can attain the highest destination, the same level of Bhagavan (8.21, 10.12, 11.38, 14.2, 18.56), what to speak of mere liberation or the higher planets of this universe where good people live (*muktah subhal lokan prapnyat punya-karmanam*).

The required qualifications for studying *Bhagavad gita* have already been listed in verses 18.67 and 18.68 as well as in previous verses, so here they are simply summarized as *anasuya* and *sraddhavan*, respectively "one who is not hostile" and "one who has faith"; any human being (*narah*) who shows these qualities is therefore entitled to study and practice the most secret science of *yoga* and *dharma*.

Again, we can clearly see that there are no restrictions of caste, race, nationality, gender, occupation etc, therefore it is clear that anyone who tries to stop or obstruct others from accessing this sublime study on some birth pretext is openly violating Krishna's instructions, and should be exposed and condemned. The worst situation for the planet and for human society is when demoniac people take up the positions of *brahmanas* and *kshatriyas* and control society for their own materialistic and demoniac purposes.

In the last few centuries, due to the degradation of Kali yuga (*Bhagavata Purana* 12.2.1) Vedic knowledge has become oppressed because of being imprisoned by the unqualified and evil descendents of *brahmana* families (*vacam devam brahma kule ku-karmani, Bhagavata Purana* 1.6.21). This weakness has been compounded by the toxic adharmic influences of invaders, who have found it very convenient for their exploitation and suppression plans, also unwittingly supplying an easy pretext for such unqualified brahmins to blame others (i.e. "foreign" invaders) for the rampant degradation and defilement of knowledge into what some people today call "orthodox Hinduism". What an irony, for an ideological system that is so deeply and fundamentally opposite to the actual version of the Vedic *shastra*.

कच्चिदेतच्छ्रुतं पार्थ त्वयैकाग्रेण चेतसा । कच्चिदज्ञानसम्मोहः प्रनष्टस्ते धनञ्जय ॥ १८-७२ ॥

kaccidetacchrutam pārtha tvayaikāgreṇa cetasā | kaccidajñānasammohaḥ pranaṣṭaste dhananjaya || 18-72 ||

kaccit: if; *etat*: this; *srutam*: (that you have) heard; *partha*: o son of Pritha; *tvaya*: by you; *eka agrena*: with full concentration; *cetasa*: of awareness; *kaccit*: if; *ajnana*: ignorance; *sammohah*: confusion; *pranastah*: destroyed; *te*: of you; *dhananjaya*: o Dhananjaya.

"O Partha, have you listened to all this with full concentration of consciousness? O Dhananjaya, has your confusion of ignorance been destroyed?"

Krishna has kindly presented the teachings of *Bhagavad gita* under all possible angles and answered all the questions and doubts raised by Arjuna. By now the body language expressed by Arjuna must have changed considerably and he must have been showing a deep confidence in such teachings, demonstrating that his initial sadness and confusion had disappeared. But we should not rely only on intuition and subtle communication. Clear and explicit discussion between teacher and student is always essential, because it ensures that all possible blind spots or gray areas are clarified and the possibility of mistakes is radically reduced.

Some confused people, out of foolishness and ignorance, imagine and believe that *guru* and *sisya* do not need to communicate so much, and say that the disciple should just listen and read collectively with all the others and follow whatever order is given directly or indirectly through the "chain of command" of the institution. Questioning is streamlined and restricted, if not openly discouraged or prohibited.

There are even some "disciples" who have never directly spoken with their "*guru*", and of whom the "*guru*" barely remembers the name (what to speak of other essential things). Such "*gurus*" (from various denominations and groups) only make themselves available to collect

money (fees, donations, *guru dakshinas* etc) and worship (*guru puja*, *vyasa puja*, public/ impersonal preaching programs, festival and public events appearances etc). They rarely or never reply to letters or e-mails, what to speak of answering the phone. This means they do not want any personal responsibility for the progress of their disciples.

This is utter impersonalism, based on the incorrect assumption that everyone is the same, has the same qualifications (or lack thereof) and problems, potential and history, realizations and misconceptions, so everyone should simply "follow the system" - read the books of the "big *acharya*" (or those "authorized by the church/ organization") and blindly do whatever they are told. Even when students are tested for their comprehension, it is a standardized exam with pre-determined answers chosen by political and doctrinal considerations, because the examiners themselves lack sufficient personal realization.

Sometimes they even openly say so, stating they do not need to be personally qualified and realized because they are not acting on their own responsibility, but "in the name of the organization". Foolish people mistake this candid admission as a proof of "great humility", and short-circuit the logical process by concluding that *because* the teacher is claiming that he is in fact *not* qualified, he must be humble and sincere, which automatically means he is *actually* qualified - by the fact he is claiming not to be qualified and therefore unable to take any responsibility.

Somewhere in this contortionist reasoning, simple minded people get lost and confused, but then they are told that they are contemplating the "great mystical mystery", and therefore they should be even more awed and intimidated by the sublime qualities of their teachers.

Where does this system come from? You guessed it. It comes from the abrahamic mentality, for which everyone is born a sinner (due to the famous "original sin" consisting in incarnation itself), and because there was no previous individual history (lifetimes before this), everyone (except those who have already been sufficiently indoctrinated in the "only true faith") is considered equally ignorant as all knowledge and realizations "other than the only true path" are considered non-valid or even heretical or blasphemous, and they must be destroyed without even looking at them - just like all books that are not "endorsed by the only true religion" must be burned without even reading them. Differences in conditions of birth (gender, race, social position etc) and the ensuing categorization are then ascribed to the unquestionable will of God; for example it is believed that women and people from other races have a lesser soul and were created for a subordinate position; since this bodily identification cannot be changed, all individuals in this category are considered unable to qualify on a higher level and therefore they are forbidden even to try to do so (and if they do try, they are insulted, punished, persecuted and ridiculed).

We can easily see how such ideas are heavily influenced by *tamas*, and how the only true solution is the dissemination of genuine knowledge and understanding, explained so beautifully by Krishna in *Bhagavad gita*. *Ajnana* ("ignorance" and *sammoha* ("confusion") always walk together, because the absence of knowledge creates confusing ideas, and pervasive confusion prevent us from acquiring proper knowledge and understanding.

The process of listening (*srutva*) is the solution. It must be attentive (*ekagrena cetasa*) and not simply mechanical, therefore we need to invest sufficient intelligence and good will. It must be done in the association of people who have already realized this knowledge (*tattva darsis*, 2.16, 4.34, 5.19) and not simply as an exchange of fabricated and uninformed opinions considered as equally valid. However, this listening should be active, characterized by questions and answers (*pariprasnena*, 4.34), and mutually explanatory (*bodhayantah parasparam kathayantas*, 10.9). It should be repeated under all possible angles until all doubts and misunderstandings are dispelled: as Krishna is showing here, the teacher should personally ask each student, and if something is still not perfectly clear, the teacher is ready to explain everything again.

This is what Krishna is asking Arjuna here. We can rest assured that if Arjuna had expressed more questions or doubts, Krishna would have immediately continued the discussion, presenting the same teachings under yet another perspective and repeating the core concepts as he has done all along these past chapters.

Incidentally, we should also note that this continuing process of studying *Bhagavad gita* and Vedic scriptures in general is meant to be repeated at least 3 times, because these verses are filled with several layers of meanings, and each time we read them we can find new inspiration and insights.

अर्जुन उवाच ।

arjuna uvāca ।

नष्टो मोहः स्मृतिर्लब्धा त्वत्प्रसादान्मयाच्युत । स्थितोऽस्मि गतसन्देहः करिष्ये वचनं तव ॥ १८-७३ ॥

naṣṭo mohah smṛtir_labdhā tvatprasādānmayācyuta । sthito'smi gatasandehah kariṣye vacanam tava ॥ 18-73 ॥

arjunah uvaca: Arjuna said; *nastah*: destroyed; *mohah*: confusion; *smrtih*: memory; *labdha*: regained; *tvat prasadat*: by your grace; *maya*: my; *acyuta*: o Acyuta; *sthitah*: firmly established; *asmi*: I am; *gata*: gone; *sandehah*: doubts; *kariṣye*: I will do; *vacanam*: instructions; *tava*: your.

Arjuna said: "O Acyuta, by your blessing my confusion has been destroyed and I have regained my memory. I am firmly established and the doubts have gone. I will follow your instructions."

The study of *vidya* and *dharma* is not an artificial imposition on the mind, but rather it is the process of washing off misconceptions, confusion, illusions and ignorance (all under the category of *tamas*) so that the original memory and consciousness of the soul can shine brightly. This is why the study of the scriptures is called *svadhyaya* - it is actually the cultivation of the knowledge of the self, as the self is *atman/ brahman*, pure consciousness that includes all existence. However, we should not conclude that we can regain this awareness of the universal knowledge without the study of the *shastra* and without the careful guidance of the *guru*, because the conditioned soul is covered by several layers of material contamination, and these materials project very deep shadows, that can be mistakenly considered real.

The meditation prescribed by the method of *yoga* is a very scientific process, meant to train our awareness to contemplate the true nature of *atman/ brahman* and not the whimsical projections of the mind. The technique called "the witness meditation" consists in becoming

detached from all the various thoughts, impressions, memories, sensory stimulations and desires that are normally cluttering the mind and flow through the consciousness. Ultimately, by neglecting them, all these movements will lose power and gradually dissolve, leaving only the pure consciousness of the *atman*.

Confused and misguided people could imagine that when these movements of the mind (*citta vrittis*) are extinguished, the result is some kind of void, and/ or that "meditation on the self" means that we should become aware of our material personality, its qualities and defects etc. But these are all mere projections of the mind, temporary and illusory identifications that do not need to be cultivated and pursued.

At a superficial level we can and should be aware of the qualities of our character, just like we are aware of other external and relative circumstances, such as the time and place, the character and qualities of the people around us, the movements of objects and bodies, and so on. But all these things are only circumstantial, and must be considered on a relative level, not mistaken as actual realities of our true self.

From the very beginning of *Bhagavad gita*, we have learned that the *atman/ brahman* is eternally unchangeable (*avikara*, 2.25), therefore the true meditation on the self must be firm (*sthita prajna*) and undisturbed like the flame of a lamp where there is no wind (*nirvata*).

This would be impossible if we were focusing on material qualities and activities, that by their own very nature must have a beginning and an end. Genuine *svadhyaya* or "contemplation on the self" must therefore apply only to the *atman/ brahman* and eventually to the development of the *siddha deha* or *siddha svarupa*, just like Patanjali explains in the very beginning of his *Yoga sutras* (1.2-4): *yogas citta vritti nirodhah, tada drastuh sva rupa avasthanam, vritti sarupyam itiratra*, "Yoga is the dissolution of the waves of the mind, by which one's true form is revealed, because the waves of the mind are attributed identifications".

The confusion (*moha*) mentioned by this verse is the root of all ignorance, consisting in the identification with the material body and mind, creating a mistaken sense of doership and attachments (*ahankara* and *mamatva*). When this confusion is dispelled, the perception of one's real self comes clearly as a memory reflected by the *param atman*: *sarvasya caham hridi sannivisto mattah smritir jnanam apohanam ca, vedais ca sarvair aham eva vedyo vedanta krid veda vid eva caham*, "I am situated in the heart of all/ everything, and from me come memory, knowledge and forgetfulness. I am the scope of the study of all the *Vedas*. I certainly am the creator of *Vedanta*, and the one who knows the *Vedas*." (5.15).

In that verse, Krishna clearly stated that in order to know him (*atman/ brahman*), one needs to study all the *Vedas* and the *Vedanta*. In these genuine original scriptures, the realizations of the great Rishis and *tattva darshis* are presented with great attention and care, with examples and discussions that are specifically meant to help us understand the subject and avoid misunderstandings and misconceptions that create doubts because of dissonance with the voice of the *param atman*.

After attaining the genuine level of self realization (*atman/ brahman*), one becomes truly able to engage in devotional service to the Supreme, as we had already seen in verse 18.54: *brahma bhutah prasannatma na socati na kanksati, samah sarvesu bhutesu mad bhaktim labhate param*, "One who is established on the state of Brahman is satisfied in the self, he does not lament of hanker after anything, is equally disposed towards all beings and attains transcendental devotion to me."

सञ्जय उवाच ।

sañjaya uvāca ।

इत्यहं वासुदेवस्य पार्थस्य च महात्मनः । संवादमिममश्रौषमद्भुतं रोमहर्षणम् ॥ १८-७४ ॥

ityaham vāsudevasya pāthasya ca mahātmanah । samvādamimamaśrauṣamadbhutaṁ romaharṣaṇam ।। 18-74 ।।

sanjayah uvaca: Sanjaya said; *iti*: thus; *aham*: I; *vasudevasya*: of the son of Vasudeva; *parthasya*: of the son of Pritha; *ca*: and; *mahatmanah*: the great soul; *samvadam*: the conversation; *imam*: this; *asrausam*: that I have heard; *adbhutam*: wonderful; *romaharsanam*: making my hair stand on end.

Sanjaya said: "Thus I have heard this conversation between Vasudeva and Arjuna, the great soul. It is so wonderful that my hair are standing on end.

The text of *Bhagavad gita* began with the old Dhritarastra, regent to the throne, asking his assistant Sanjaya about the events unfolding at Kurukshetra: *dhritarastra uvaca, dharma ksetre kuru ksetre samaveta yuyutsavah, mamakah pandavas caiva kim akurvata sanjaya*, Dhritarastra said: "O Sanjaya, what did my sons and Pandu's sons do, after they assembled in the sacred place of Dharma, the battlefield of Kurukshetra, ready to fight?" (1.1). Sanjaya had continued to describe the introductory events (1.24, 1.47, 2.1, 2.9) and also witnessed the manifestation of the Virata Rupa and the Vishnu form (11.9, 11.35, 11.50). Now that the central conversation between Krishna and Arjuna is closed, we find Sanjaya rejoicing with the wonderful revelations that he heard, and expressing his gratitude to his spiritual guide, Veda Vyasa, by whose kindness he had obtained such a blessing, as he will say in the next verse.

We find here several interesting words, the first of which is *vasudeva*, that contains two different and complementary meanings. On the ordinary level, Vasudeva (with a long first "a") is a patronymic name of Krishna, as "son of Vasudeva" (with a short first "a"). In this regard, we may remember that Krishna's father, Vasudeva, was the brother of Kunti, the mother of Arjuna and the other Pandavas, and that Pritha is another name of Kunti. Therefore by using the two names Vasudeva and Partha, Sanjaya is highlighting the strong family connection between Krishna and Arjuna, who are cousins in the first degree, as well as intimate friends.

On a deeper symbolic level, the name Vasudeva is a name of Vishnu meaning "the omnipresent", and refers to the all-pervading quality of the Brahman-Paramatma-Bhagavan consciousness. In relation to this meaning, the name Pritha or Prithivi (meaning "the vast") can be interpreted as referring to Mother Earth, and therefore Arjuna comes to represent all the *narah*, the human beings who live on this planet, as "children of Mother Earth". Based on this particular interpretation, it is very interesting to notice the attribute of *mahatmanah* (*maha atmanah*, "the great *atman*") that is referred to Arjuna, indicating that Arjuna - while being a child of the Supreme Mother - is not merely a *jiva atman* but is actually *shiva tattva*, the manifestation of the *param atman* in this material universe as the *param guru* for all living beings.

The *Bhagavata Purana* (4.1.59, 10.69.16, 10.89.59) clearly states that Krishna and Arjuna are Nara and Narayana Rishis, the two great spiritual teachers to whom homage is paid before starting to study the scriptures (1.2.4, 5.19.11, 8.16.34, 10.86.35, 11.5.29-30, and the entire chapter 8 of canto 12). They appeared as the twin sons of Dharmā and Murti, daughter of Dakṣha (1.3.9, 11.4.6) and according to *Bhagavata Purana* (12.4.41) they taught all the *Puranas* to Narada, who in turn transmitted them to Vyasa.

Indirectly, Sanjaya is warning Dhritarastra that Krishna and Arjuna are no ordinary persons, because their conversation is so extraordinary that a sincere soul will be thrilled to hear and remember it again and again. Therefore, Dhritarastra should understand that his evil son Duryodhana is grossly underestimating the Pandavas and Krishna, and he is making a big mistake in waging such an unjust war against them - he will certainly be defeated, because wherever Krishna and Arjuna are, there will always be victory.

The description of hair standing on end was also found in the first chapter (1.29) describing Arjuna's deep anguish in seeing all those who had come to the battle ready to give up their lives: *sidanti mama gatrani mukham ca parisusyati, vepathus ca sarire me roma harsas ca jayate*, "I feel my limbs losing their strength and my mouth drying up. My body is trembling and my hair is standing on end". This symptom, also called hair-rising or horripilation (or goose pimples in case the skin has less hairs), is due to a strong emotion that moves the *pranas* in the body and is accompanied by irregular breathing (temporarily suspended, slowed down, or fastened considerably).

Many positive or negative emotions can have such an effect, both on the material and spiritual level, and in fact this is known as one of the main symptoms of spiritual ecstasy. Others are loss of external consciousness (fainting), tears, tremors, faltering of the voice, contraction of the muscles, widening of eyes and mouth and nostrils, hot or cold perspiration, reddening of the skin, and so on.

व्यासप्रसादाच्छ्रुतवानेतद्गुह्यमहं परम् । योगं योगेश्वरात्कृष्णात्साक्षात्कथयतः स्वयम् ॥ १८-७५ ॥

vyāsaprasādācchrutavānetadguhyamaham param | yogam yogēśvarātkṛṣṇātsākṣātkathayataḥ svayam || 18-75 ||

vyasa prasadat: by the grace of Vyasa; *srutavan*: a listener; *etat*: this; *guhyam*: secret; *aham*: I; *param*: the supreme/ transcendental; *yogam*: yoga; *yoga isvarat*: from the Lord of yoga; *kṛṣnat*: from Krishna; *saksat*: directly; *kathayatah*: speaking; *svayam*: personally.

"By the grace of Vyasa I could hear this supreme transcendental secret of yoga directly from the very words spoken by Krishna, the Lord of yoga.

Sanjaya is certainly a sincere soul, because Veda Vyasa has given him the power to hear the teachings of Krishna; we know from other passages of the *Mahabharata* that he tried several times to encourage Dhritarastra to rethink his position and correct his son. The wise Vidura had done the same thing until the day he was openly insulted by his nephew Duryodhana.

It is not said plainly, but we can easily imagine that Vyasa, who was the father of Vidura (and Pandu and Dhritarastra) and a great spiritual personality with a very clear vision of *dharmā*, must have had deep and meaningful conversations with Sanjaya on the occasion of his visits to Hastinapura, and had instructed him to keep a watchful eye on the family. In such case, he had certainly given him the instruments to be able to perform this task, too.

In our commentaries to chapter 1 we elaborated on Sanjaya's position as a combination of secretary, advisor, charioteer and messenger; in the Vedic system of government a *mantri* (a word used today with the meaning of "minister") is the trusted supporter, close associate and personal assistant of a *kshatriya* of the royal order. The position of *mantri* could be filled either by a *brahmana* or a *sudra*, with specific functions based on the *guna* and *karma* of the individual. A *brahmana mantri* would be mostly an advisor, and carry messages of great importance when the receiver could also use some good advice materially or spiritually, or further explanations of the meaning of the message itself. A *sudra mantri* would deliver ordinary messages or simple orders and take care of the personal needs of the king, driving his chariot, guarding his weapons etc. In both cases, it was a position of great importance for a man the king could fully trust with his own life, therefore it required a very good intelligence and complete loyalty.

In this verse and the previous verse the teachings of Krishna to Arjuna are described as *etat guhyam* and *imam samvadam*; *etat* and *imam* are respectively the feminine and the masculine form of the same pronoun meaning "this", and some commentators have highlighted this fact to show how Krishna's teachings are perfectly balanced and inclusive.

Other commentators have seen Sanjaya's expression of gratitude towards Vyasa as an indication of the supreme importance of the officially recognized lineage in the transmission of knowledge or *guru parampara*, but this is not the original Vedic system. Here Sanjaya only remembers Vyasa, and not an entire lineage of *gurus* from which Vyasa is supposed to have received his authority. We should understand that Vyasa is the original *guru* - a point well expressed by the traditional celebration of Vyasa puja in which Veda Vyasa is honored as the supreme *guru* of all *gurus*, and not as a mere representative or a link in a chain of disciplic succession. Of course, when this tradition is distorted and exploited, the Vyasa puja concept dumps Vyasa entirely and only keeps a *vyasa asana*, "the seat/ position of Vyasa", worshiping anyone who is occupying it, legitimately or illegitimately, and calling him "the supreme universal *guru*". Even the day of the celebration is moved to accommodate the date of birth of such individual, so that the entire exercise becomes a sort of glorified birthday party, with a big cake and presents and no spiritual enlightenment at all.

As we see in this verse and in all other passages of the genuine *shastra*, each disciple is fully entitled to have a direct personal relationship with his/ her own *guru*, whether this *guru* is present in a material body or not - a relationship on which nobody else has any right to interfere. The relationship between *guru* and *sisya* is the most deeply personal relationship that can ever exist, and under no circumstance it should be transformed into a collective institutional allegiance or a tradeable property or commodity. Unfortunately, some people have come to believe that the transmission of spiritual realization can be done by proxy or inheritance by some sort of official authority solely based on the merits and qualifications of one's predecessor(s).

This delusional concept exaggerates the importance of the "spiritual lineage" to a point that was never meant in the Vedic system, and is rather typical of the abrahamic ideologies, where the priests do not need to be particularly qualified personally, but must be obeyed and worshiped absolutely because they present themselves as the sole representatives of God through the historical founder of their particular sect. Such trickery is called "bait and switch" because it attracts followers by presenting a deified figure of the founder (messiah, prophet,

acharya etc) as the perfect teacher that everyone should follow, inflating the personal charisma of his figure with stories, quotes and information that cannot be verified because this founder has now disappeared and cannot be contacted in the ordinary way.

Then, when the gullible follower is converted (and cannot leave, under pain of persecution or even death), the priests hang away the founder's portrait and take his position, to give orders and accept worship in his name, and if anyone objects to their nonsense, he is accused of blaspheming the saintly founder and his entire family/ lineage and God himself.

For the same reason and with the same motivations, some commentators have mistranslated several passages of the *shastra*, for example verse 4.34 of *Bhagavad gita* (presented by them as the most important verse of the entire text), where they used the singular instead of the actual plural form, to give the impression that a sincere spiritual seeker must restrict his/ her choice to only one specific *guru* that is presented as the "authorized" exclusive or sole representative of Krishna. The actual facts are quite different. In that verse, Krishna speaks of "those who directly contemplate the truth" (*tattva darsinah*), and the *diksha* they offer (*upadekshanti*) is knowledge (*jnana*), not a social recognition of indictment and allegiance to a particular sect that presents itself as the unquestionable carrier of the absolute truth. Basically, the genuine reading of that verse destroys the pretense of those people who (albeit admittedly not qualified themselves as *tattva darshis*) claim to be the officially authorized guardians of a particular lineage where the founder *acharya* was a *tattva darshi*, so that anyone who wants to be admitted into the "chosen people" can only receive initiation through them.

This is the evidence of how in Kali yuga people have a strong tendency to take or retain only the worst from all groups and reject whatever good things were found anywhere. In this way, someone who is dissatisfied with an old system approaches a new system and absorbs from it those concepts, beliefs, attitudes and practices that seem attractive or compatible with his previous mentality; without understanding what was wrong in the old system and what may be wrong in the new one, a foolish ignorant person merely collects garbage and spoils everything.

The idea of a non-qualified person giving *diksha* to the new generations in the name of his own material descent from some qualified ancestor in ancient times was typically found in the deluded casteist brahmins plagued by a strong prejudice of bodily identification. Because this serious misconception had greatly weakened the effectiveness of the Hindu tradition, some great religious reformers detached themselves from the label of Hinduism, and re-packaged *Bhagavad gita* to be more appealing for westerners (especially the Anglo-Saxon Protestant Christians in USA, in those times considered the leading model of civilization and development).

There were advantages in the strategy: elimination of the birth prejudice and privilege, development of unity and community spirit, emphasis on sincere work and service, direct study of the scriptures, and so on. However, because of a lack of genuine realization in the followers, the original idea became lost and the externals gained importance to the point of duplicating the churchist mentality and all its defects. Now that the Christian influence has been broken by a widespread evolution of consciousness in knowledge, and people are genuinely interested in the original Vedic system, the foolish inheritors of the great Hindu reformers remain attached to the package and have lost the actual valuable contents it was supposed to carry and preserve.

राजन्संस्मृत्य संस्मृत्य संवादमिममद्भुतम् । केशवार्जुनयोः पुण्यं हृष्यामि च मुहुर्मुहुः ॥ १८-७६ ॥

rājansamsmṛtya samsmṛtya samvādamimamadbhutam | keśavārjunayoh puṇyam hr̥ṣyāmi ca muhurmuḥḥ | | 18-76 | |

rajan: o king; *samsmṛtya samsmṛitya*: by remembering again and again; *samvadam*: the conversation; *imam*: this; *adbhutam*: wonderful; *kesava arjunayoh*: of Kesava and Arjuna; *puṇyam*: meritorious; *hr̥ṣyāmi*: I feel a great happiness; *ca*: and; *muhur muḥḥ*: again and again.

"O king, every time I think of this extraordinary and sacred conversation between Kesava and Arjuna, I feel a great happiness.

Dhritarastra is not really the legitimate king, because he was born blind and therefore he would not be able to keep a careful watch over the kingdom and engage in battle for its protection. This was the reason why his younger brother Pandu was enthroned, and his sons the Pandavas were the legitimate heirs; Dhritarastra was only supposed to take care of the administration with the help of Bhishma and Vidura until the Pandavas became of age and could take up the job.

However, Sanjaya has sincere affection for the old regent and he calls him "king" to give him pleasure and a sense of self worth. It is important to notice that Sanjaya's respect and affect for the old man did not impair his proper understanding of the actual facts or give way to adulation and compassionate lies, because he is clearly telling Dhritarastra that Krishna and Arjuna are extraordinary personalities and they are going to win the battle against Dhritarastra's son, Duryodhana.

Sentimentalist people believe that if you love and respect someone, especially elderly people, you should not displease them with hard truths, because that can be seen as a sign of disloyalty. Such a delusional idea is extremely dangerous and can be compared to the foolish choice of a sentimentalist physician who reassures the patient about his good health when in fact the patient is dying. What is the benefit? The purpose of human life is to overcome ignorance and attain liberation from material conditionings and identifications.

If we fail in this task, our human life has been wasted and has no more value than the life of any animal; this awareness is naturally part of our original and inherent consciousness, therefore denying it or preventing someone from attaining it is certainly not a proof of love. If your elderly relatives need some encouragement to wake up to the reality of life and engage in spiritual progress, you should also be ready to give them some good instructions, albeit very respectfully and kindly. In Vedic tradition, the definition of *vridha* ("elder") does not refer to the age of the body but to the accumulation of knowledge and wisdom (*jnana vridha*); if someone correctly follows the Vedic system, the years will be dedicated to acquiring more knowledge and wisdom, but some people only become senile by age.

Some commentators have translated *samvada* as "message" or even "gospel" (since the Greek word *evangelos* means "good news" or "good message"), but this can confuse the minds of people. The word *samvada* is a combination of *sam* ("with", "together") and *vada* ("speech"), therefore it means "conversation", and can only be stretched to mean "news" when one person is giving information to another and they discuss about it.

The expression *muhur muḥḥ* ("again and again") indicates that the teachings of Krishna should be remembered at every moment, constantly, or at least they should be studied several times. The standard method to study Vedic scriptures requires at least 3 readings of

each text, from the beginning to the end; the verses should be studied both singularly and in context, separately and together, until the clear meaning of the entire discussion becomes manifest. It is also a good practice to memorize important verses, by repeating each line 10 times and then repeating the entire verse 10 times.

The word *punya* refers to the merit gained by performing a good action, and indicates that by studying Krishna's teachings one already acquires virtuous merits, such as the good effects one obtains from performing *yajnas*, *tapah* and *dana*. Krishna has already said that he considers the sincere study of *Bhagavad gita* as fully fledged worship offered to him, and this verse confirms that it constitutes a genuine religious practice in itself. The accumulation of such *punya*, or virtuous merits, creates a positive movement in our life and rises us to a better next birth, to the heavenly planets, and to liberation from material conditioning: all this is due to the power of knowledge, that burns all ignorance and bad *karma* (4.19, 4.37).

The word *hrishyami* ("I rejoice") indicates that transcendental knowledge and realization are the real source of happiness. Intelligent people do not seek happiness in material pleasures, that depend on the contact of the senses with the material objects and therefore are temporary (5.22); such an unstable situation produces a constant movement (*rajas*) and the movement causes emotions, especially greed, fear and anxiety; only when these emotions are calmed down there can be peace, and without peace there can be no happiness (2.66, 4.40). We should not think that spiritual life and transcendental consciousness are devoid of pleasure and happiness - in fact, the *atman/ brahman* is the actual source of pure happiness, that is free from all conditionings and therefore is perfect and eternal, as confirmed by the *Bhagavata Purana* (*ahaituki apratihata yayatma suprasidati*, 1.2.6). Krishna had already stated that *yoga* is a happy path (9.2) and true happiness is found in freedom from conditionings and in the supreme consciousness of *atman/ brahman* (4.38, 5.13, 5.21, 5.23, 5.24, 6.21, 6.27, 6.28, 14.27). The transcendental existence is defined as *sat* ("existence"), *cit* ("consciousness") and *ananda* ("happiness"). Here Sanjaya confirms that by listening sincerely to the conversation between Krishna and Arjuna, one can easily attain this transcendental existence of eternity and consciousness, that is the ultimate purpose of human life.

तच्च संस्मृत्य संस्मृत्य रूपमत्यद्भुतं हरेः । विस्मयो मे महान् राजन्हृष्यामि च पुनः पुनः ॥ १८-७७ ॥

tacca saṁsmṛtya saṁsmṛtya rūpamatyadbhutaṁ hareḥ | vismayo me mahān rājanhr̥ṣyāmi ca punaḥ punaḥ || 18-77 ||

tat: that; *ca*: and; *samsmṛtya samsmṛtya*: remembering again and again; *rupam*: the form; *ati adbhutam*: very wonderful; *hareh*: of Hari; *vismayah*: amazement; *me*: my; *mahan*: great; *rajan*: king; *hrisyami*: I am filled with joy; *ca*: and; *punah punah*: again and again.

"O great king, constantly thinking of the wonderful form of Hari, I am feeling waves of joy and amazement, again and again.

The previous verse said, *samsmṛtya samsmṛtya* ("remembering again and again") and *hrishyami ca muhur muhuh* ("I rejoice again and again"), and this verse repeats, *samsmṛtya samsmṛtya* and *hrishyami ca punah punah*. Such repetition is not a literary defect, but it expresses the great importance and wonder of Krishna's teachings; the previous verse mentioned *adbhutam* ("amazing") and this verse echoes *ati adbhutam* ("very amazing"). This overwhelming emotion is the ecstasy of wonder (*vismaya*) that rises from transcendental consciousness and realization.

We mentioned the *spandakarika* as the throbbing of orgasmic happiness in the union between the *atman* and the *brahman*, between *shakti* and *shaktiman*, but here the ecstasy rises from the realization of the intrinsic and inherent unity of *atman* and *brahman*. There can be only union, because they are one and the same, although they dance with each other in the *rasa lila* that consists in tasting the feelings (*rasas*) of the supreme awareness: *raso vai sah, rasam hi evayam labdhva anandi bhavati*, "He is taste, and one who attains this taste becomes happy", (*Taittiriya Upanishad*, 2.7.1).

This eternal dance is the form of Hari (*rupam hareh*), because form is *prakriti* and *shakti*; it is Mother who gives the body and everything that is related to the body, both on the spiritual and on the material level (4.9, 7.25, 9.10, 13.20, 13.22, 13.27, 14.4, 18.61). It is only through the agency of the Mother, that the *atman* takes birth from the *brahman* and again unites with *brahman*; devotion is Bhakti Devi, spiritual pleasure is Hladini Shakti, and knowledge is Sri Vidya. In her aspect as Mahamaya, the Mother acts in the material world and manifests the material bodies, while in her aspect of Yogamaya she acts in the spiritual world and manifests the spiritual bodies. The transcendental *gunas* (qualities, powers, energies) of *sat* (existence of the relationship of the Supreme with his parts), *cit* (knowledge and awareness) and *ananda* (happiness and spiritual pleasure) are respectively *bhakti*, *vidya* and *hladini shakti*.

Yogamaya is the "magic of union" that manifests all the spiritual forms, activities, attributes, and so on. Without Yogamaya, Vishnu would have no form, as Yogamaya is form itself as Bhumarupa ("she whose form is all existing things") and Linga Bhairavi ("the formless form of Time"). Yogamaya manifests both the material forms and the spiritual forms, as confirmed in the *Devi mahatmya* of the *Markandeya Purana*: *sarva svarupe sarvese sarva sakti samanvite*, "you exist as the form of all, ruler of all, possessing all powers" (11.24) and *visnuh sarira grahanam aham isana eva ca karita aste*, "you have caused all of us to take a form - including Vishnu, Shiva and me (Brahma)" (1.84).

Another significant correspondence in these two last verses connects the form of Hari with both Kesava and Arjuna. We know that Hari is worshiped mainly as the Vishnu aspect of the composite form of Hari-Hara, also represented in the previous verse by Krishna and Arjuna, who are Narayana and Nara, Vishnu and Shiva. Together with the Adi Shakti, Yogamaya, they constitute the Triad also known as Jagannatha Purushottama, the Supreme Personality of Godhead, that protects the entire universe.

यत्र योगेश्वरः कृष्णो यत्र पार्थो धनुर्धरः । तत्र श्रीर्विजयो भूतिर्ध्रुवा नीतिर्मतिर्मम ॥ १८-७८ ॥

yatra yogeśvaraḥ kṛṣṇo yatra pārtho dhanurdharaḥ | tatra śrīrvijayo bhūtidhruvā nītimatirmama || 18-78 ||

yatra: where; *yoga isvarah*: the Lord of yoga; *krsnah*: Krishna; *yatra*: where; *parthah*: the son of Pritha; *dhanur dharah*: who carries the bow; *tatra*: there; *srih*: prosperity; *vijayah*: victory; *bhutih*: glory; *dhruva*: certain/ permanent; *nitih*: morality; *matih*: opinion; *mama*: my.

"Wherever is Krishna, the Lord of *yoga*, and Arjuna the great archer, there will be prosperity, victory, glory, determination, and morality. This is my opinion.

This closing verse in the text of *Bhagavad gita* is a blessing and a *phala sruti*, a declaration of the merits of association with Krishna and Arjuna through the reading and the remembering of their conversation.

This was already mentioned in verse 18.71: *sraddhavan anasuyas ca srinuyad api yo narah, so 'pi muktah subhal lokan prapnuyat punya karmanam*, "Any human being who will listen to this discussion with faith, free from envy and hostility, will become liberated and attain the auspicious planets of those who have performed virtuous deeds."

According to Vedic tradition, sacred texts are accompanied by some verses stating that their study and recitation will bring virtuous merits, and all material and spiritual success. One should not take this as some kind of magic spell that we can use to obtain the selfish benefits we desire, but rather as the purificatory effect of transcendental knowledge that will raise us from the lower *gunas* to *sattva* and then to *visuddha sattva*. So, the more we invest our sincere attention and intelligence in the study of *Bhagavad gita*, the more we will receive its beneficial effects.

A mechanical recitation will only bring limited results, while true engagement in the path of *yoga* described by Krishna will give the greatest benefits: *vedesu yajnesu tapahsu caiva danesu yat punya phalam pradistam, atyeti tat sarvam idam viditva yogi param sthanam upaiti cadyam*, "A *yogi* obtains greater benefits than those acquired by the prescribed virtuous acts (*punya*) such as reciting the *Vedas*, performing *yajnas*, engaging in austerities and distributing charity. Knowing all this, a *yogi* attains the supreme and original position." (8.28).

The name *yogesvara* indicating Krishna here has also appeared in the chapter of the universal form, mentioned both by Arjuna and Sanjaya: *manyase yadi tac chakyam maya drastum iti prabho, yogesvara tato me tvam darsayatmanam avyayam*, "O Lord, supreme master of *yoga*, if you think that I am capable of seeing it, then please let me have the direct vision of your imperishable self" (11.4) and *sanjaya uvaca, evam ukta tato rajan maha yogesvaro harih, darsayam asa parhaya paramam rupam aisvaram*, Sanjaya said, "O king, saying these words Hari, the great Lord of *yoga*, showed the supreme majestic form to Arjuna" (11.9).

We can therefore understand that the deepest meaning of *yoga* is the *acintya bheda abheda tattva* of the simultaneous oneness and distinction of the Purusha and the Prakriti, of the Para and the Aparā, by which the *yogis* become able to see Purushottama in everything (4.35, 5.7, 5.18, 5.19, 6.29, 6.30, 6.31, 6.32, 7.7, 7.10, 7.19, 8.22, 9.4, 9.5, 9.6, 10.3, 10.15, 10.16, 10.20, 10.39, 11.7, 11.11, 11.13, 11.15, 11.16, 11.20, 11.23, 11.40, 13.14, 13.15, 13.16, 13.17, 13.18, 13.28, 13.29, 13.31, 13.34, 15.13, 15.15, 15.19, 18.20, 18.46, 18.61, 18.62). These are the Rishis, "those who see", whose consciousness is always united in the supreme Consciousness, that is the entirety of Existence (*advaya vastu*).

It is very interesting to note that next to Krishna who is *yogesvara*, Arjuna is mentioned with the names of *partha* ("son of Pritha") and *dhanur dhara* ("the carrier of the bow"), to remind us that the entire *Bhagavad gita* was spoken with the purpose of encouraging Arjuna to engage in the *dharma yuddha* ("ethical battle") to protect the Earth. Contrarily to what many people think, Krishna's teachings are not meant to convince us to leave the world and our duties to the universal community in the name of some vague renunciation and spirituality. This is clearly demonstrated by the fact that at the end of the conversation, Arjuna says that he is now ready to engage in the battle, and he is certainly grasping his famous bow Gandiva, that he had dropped in the beginning of the text (1.30). We are also called to do the same. In this sacred duty, we should remember the Supreme to whom we are offering our sacrifice, as well as the Shakti that engages us in this service. This is why wherever there is the *bhoktri* (the object of love) and the *bhakta* (the one who loves), there must be *bhakti* (love).

This supreme Goddess, the Adi Para Shakti, is also known as Mahalakshmi; her names are many and all auspicious. Sri means "opulence, beauty, prosperity, blessing", and in this form the Mother Goddess accompanies the names of all good people, male or female, as we can see from the Indian tradition, and especially in the title of *sri yukta* ("joined with Sri") that is referred to married men, who have integrated their life and energy with the feminine power and are therefore qualified (*adhikari*) to perform the sacred rituals. The name Vijaya ("victory") is also characteristically associated to Lakshmi, especially in the form of the Mother Goddess worshiped by kings and protectors of the land and her *prajas*.

The word *bhuti* literally means "power", especially in the sense of "expanding, prosperity, growth, development, evolution"; it is closely related to the word *vibhuti*, to which chapter 10 was entitled. We remember that when Arjuna asked Krishna for specific instructions on meditation (10.17), Krishna told him to meditate on his *vibhuti* (10.19), described in chapters 10 and 11. This instruction is also directed to us, and we should follow it. If we sincerely follow this instruction in a determined and constant way (*dhruva*), we will always be situated on the highest level of morality (*niti*) because our behavior towards all beings will be the service full of love and devotion that we render to the Supreme. This consciousness includes all the other forms of *dharma*: *yavan artha udapane sarvatah samplutodake, tavan sarvesu vedesu brahmanasya vijanatah*, "Whatever value is found in a pond is also found, for all purposes, also in a large lake, and similarly whatever is contained in all the *Vedas* can be found in a person who has realized the knowledge of Brahman" (2.46). The fact that *niti* is united with *dhruva* indicates that such morality is not merely a matter of social etiquette or a temporary or relative position, but it is eternal.

This is the opinion of Sanjaya, and also the opinion of the great Rishis and Acharyas.