

The Ideal Person

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In the Bhagavad Gītā, detailed descriptions of the ideal person are given by Śrī Kṛṣṇa in chapters 2, 6, 12, 13, and 14, and there are brief passages in other chapters as well. The reason for this plurality of presentation is that there are different types of people, with different tastes and capacities; the hope is that, one way or another, the message will get through. The different passages use different terms for this ideal person, but they all have the value of providing us a path to follow, a way to keep track of where we are on the path, and also, for those rare ones who have attained perfection, a confirmation of their own Being. In chapter 2, verses 55-72, the term used is *Sthita Prajñā*—a person of steadfast wisdom, one who has attained the highest. A few of these verses formed part of the daily prayers of Mahātma Gāndhi because, as he said, he wanted to keep before him a model of that perfect person. Chapter 6, verses 1-10, describe the *Yogi*—a person of steady mind. Chapter 12, verses 13-19, describe the *Bhakta*, the ideal devotee. Chapter 13, verses 7-11, describe the attributes of a *Jñānī*, a person with true knowledge. Chapter 14, verses 22-26, describe the *Triguṇātīta*, one who has gone beyond the three qualities of *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*. Some other relevant verses are 16.1-3 and 18.51-53.

In this article, our focus is on the 12th chapter. To fully appreciate the teachings of this chapter, we must first consider what happens in the preceding chapter, the 11th. There Śrī Kṛṣṇa shows Arjuna His universal form; He gives Arjuna a special eye to see Him. The point is that we human beings, with our limited ability, are really bankrupt; and unless we declare our bankruptcy, understanding of divinity in its fullness is not possible. But once we declare bankruptcy (start chapter 11 proceedings!) and submit to a greater power (the justice system), we are taken care of and our condition gets stabilized. Then we can go back to business as usual, but now guided by the new understanding we have acquired. In the 12th chapter, Śrī Kṛṣṇa describes to Arjuna how one has to rise up and express one's behavior and attitudes in everyday life in conformity with that complete Reality that Arjuna has been shown in the 11th chapter.

Verses 13-19 of the 12th chapter spell out 35 characteristics of a *bhakta*. The Lord says that those who possess these qualities are exceedingly dear to Him.

Verse 13: One who does not hate any being, who is friendly and compassionate, free from (the notion of) "I" and "my", even-minded in pain and pleasure, forgiving;

Verse 14: this yogi, who is ever content, steady in meditation, self-controlled, possessed of firm conviction, with mind and intellect dedicated to me – such a devotee is dear to me.

Verse 15: The one by whom the world is not agitated, and who is not agitated by the world; who is free from joy, envy, fear, and anxiety, is dear to me.

Verse 16: One who is free from desires; who is pure, alert, unconcerned, untroubled; who has renounced (the doership in) all undertakings – he, my devotee, is dear to me.

Verse 17: One who neither rejoices nor hates nor grieves nor desires, who has renounced both the good and the evil, and who is full of devotion – he is dear to me.

Verse 18: The one who remains the same towards friend or foe, in honor or disgrace, in heat or cold, in pleasure or pain; who is free from attachment; and

Verse 19: who is indifferent to censure or praise, who is silent, content with anything, unattached to a place (country or house), with a steady mind, and full of devotion – that person is dear to me.

The traits listed above address the values, attitudes, and behaviors one should develop in the many dimensions of life—social, psychological, and moral. Upon examination, we will see that all the traits derive from a correct understanding of the nature of one’s being. For example, take the first trait listed: a person of the highest devotion has no hatred or aversion to any being. How can that be? How can a person rise to a level where he never gets angry, never feels “this is good, while that is bad”? He achieves that level by locating his identity in a domain or a principle that has nothing to do with the input-output transactions of daily life. Then only he will be able to accept and bear with the ills of this world. As another example, take the first trait listed in verse 14, contentment (*santuṣṭah*). What is the source of this contentment? It cannot come from the variable transactions of life but must be rooted in the Reality of the spirit—the thought that one is that spirit or that one is in communion with that spirit. Some people enjoy being, others enjoy belonging. The first type prefer to define their being in an absolute way, without reference to another. The second type prefer to think that they belong to another being who is full of all good and great qualities—they themselves are not that great being, but they like to express the qualities of that great being in a smaller way and be in the service of that great being. Both types derive their contentment from the constancy of their sense of being or belonging.

To absorb the teachings of these verses, we must put in the effort to free ourselves of the limited perceptions and partial vision that bind us and partition our understanding. Alternatively, we need to accept everything as part of Reality—even the things we dislike or hate. We must accept and cope with the existence of evil, of sorrow, of deprivation as manifestations of that same Reality that in some of its other manifestations we enjoy. Being able to do this has been one of the difficulties in humanity’s spiritual quest. But there are people who have lived such a life of acceptance of everything, and they become inspirations for the rest of us.

Thus we see that, in these verses, Śrī Kṛṣṇa has lovingly given us guidelines to help us minimize, and ultimately remove, the distance that keeps us from Him—in other words, guidelines to practice spirituality. We minimize the distance by psychological preparedness and self-transformation. Everyone has the potential to develop the qualities listed. As Swāmi Vivekānanda repeatedly said, every being is potentially divine and all our effort should be to realize that divinity. We may differ in the degree to which we succeed, but all of us can and must pursue the qualities listed. Devotion in a person is measured by the extent of development of these 35 traits, and not by the extent of emotional attachment to a particular deity. The real measure of devotion is annihilation of ego, self-effacement, surrender. Surrender does not mean resignation, passivity, or indolence. Let us perform our obligatory duties with selfless dedication. Whatever be the outcome of our honest endeavors in life—agreeable or disagreeable—let us accept it as *prasāda* (gift) from the Lord. That is, let us try to recognize and feel the Reality above our individuality.