

Tyāga: Renunciation

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न कर्मणा न प्रजया धनेन त्यागेनैके अमृतत्वमानशुः ।

na karmanā na prajāyā dhanena tyāgenaike amṛtatvam-ānaśuḥ

“Neither by works nor by progeny nor by riches can immortality be attained. Some attain it by renunciation.” This scriptural statement (Mahānārāyaṇa Upaniṣad 4.12.14; Kaivalyopaniṣad 1.2.4) declares emphatically that immortality is possible by *tyāga* (renunciation; sacrifice) alone. It is not the intention of this statement, however, to belittle work, progeny, or gift of wealth. Its purpose is to stress the key importance of renunciation for the attainment of the bliss of Self realization. Furthermore, *tyāga* here means the renunciation of the fruits of action (*karmaphala tyāga*) and not the renunciation of action (*karma*) itself. Likewise, when Bhagavad Gītā 12.12 says “*tyāgāt śāntiḥ anantaram*,” meaning that peace immediately follows renunciation, the context makes it clear that it is the renunciation of the fruits of action that is being referred to.

According to Śrī Rāmakriṣṇa, the *guru* of Swāmi Vivekānanda, the central theme of Bhagavad Gītā is *tyāga*. Note that, spelled in reverse, Gītā becomes *tāgī*, meaning (in the Bengālī language) one who renounces. Much of Chapter 18 of Bhagavad Gītā is devoted to a discussion of *tyāga* and its intricacies. It is important to understand that according to Gītā, abandonment of obligatory duty is not *tyāga* but it is the renouncement of the fruits of action that is true *tyāga*. The clarion call of Gītā is to perform diligently all the obligatory duties of life with detachment and as devotional offerings to the Lord. The way to salvation is through renunciation of selfishness and working for the common good. Karmas performed by us are our offering to the Lord and *karma phalas* (results of the karmas) are the Lord’s *prasāda* to us.

Tyāga is a vital part of human life. Various religious traditions stress the importance of cultivating a sense of sacrifice with a little less attachment and a little more spirit of giving. It is in giving that you receive, as the Bible says. The very motto of the Rāmakriṣṇa order is आत्मनोमोक्षार्थं जगद्धितायच (*ātmano mokṣārtham jagad-hitāyaca*), which means “for one’s own spiritual liberation and for the welfare of the world.” Bhagavān Satya Sai Bābā’s slogan “Help ever, hurt never” emphasizes the importance of cultivating the practice of helping the needy. He further says: *Be a tyāgi and not a bhogi; the true secret of enjoyment lies in sacrifice. A bhogi* (pleasure seeker) will not think of renunciation while a *tyāgi* (renunciant) is not interested in enjoyment of selfish sensual pleasures.

The very first verse of the Īśāvāsya Upaniṣad says “*tena tyaktena bhuñjīthā*,” suggesting that one should enjoy by renunciation. The idea here is that when every action is free from egoistic doership and is free from desire and attachment, then renunciation can lead to enjoyment. Actions performed in this spirit, i.e. with a sense of detachment, transform *bhoga* into *tyāga*. Such *tyāga*, exemplified by sharing, giving, and sacrificing, comes naturally to a person who is free from *deha bhāva*, i.e. identification with the body, and is established in *ātma bhāva*, i. e. the realization that his true nature is *ātman*, which is the same *ātman* that is equally present in all other beings.

A powerful story from the Mahābhārata beautifully illustrates *tyāga* of the highest order. This story was narrated by a mongoose at the court of Emperor Yudhiṣṭhira soon after

the latter's completion of a great sacrifice. The mongoose described the story of a devout Brāhmin, who lived with his wife, son, and daughter-in-law at a time of great famine. The family used to go without a meal for days together. One day, they were able to collect with great difficulty some maize and sat down to eat a meal made from the flour. Just then came a guest who was exceedingly hungry. The Brāhmin offered him his share of the food. The man ate it all but was still hungry. Then, in turn, the Brāhmin's wife, son, and daughter-in-law gave him their shares. At last the guest was satisfied. He then said: "Blessed is your hospitality. Your most admirable and unprecedented *tyāga* has earned you a place in heaven. Behold the heavenly chariot, ascend it and go to heaven." So saying, the mysterious guest disappeared. Having narrated the story, the mongoose continued: I was nearby that day. I rolled in joy on the floor with some scattered flour and my body turned into gold wherever the flour touched me. Desirous of making my whole body gold, I have been visiting every place where *yajñas* are conducted, including this great *yajña* of Yudhiṣṭhira. Alas, even here the rest of my body failed to turn into gold. Hence, I declare that even Yudhiṣṭhira's *yajña* is not equivalent in merit to the gift of flour made by the Brāhmin family who showed the most supreme example of *tyāga*.

Our *ṛṣis* (sages) of yore exhorted humanity to develop a spirit of non-attachment and to strive more to be men of *values* rather than men of *valuables*. As Chāndogyopaniṣad 3.14.1 says, *sarvam khalvidam brahma* — everything in this universe is Brahman. By extension, all our earthly possessions (house, job, family, friends, property, and everything else) are a result of God's grace to us and nothing is really ours. Hence, all the learned *ācāryas* advise us to make a conscientious effort to set aside a portion of our earnings to help the needy and to promote activities that are helpful to society in general. Ādi Śankarācārya, in one of the verses in Bhaja Govindam, says, "*deyam dīna janāyaca vittam*," meaning that money needs to be shared with the more needy. Sharing includes not only money and materials but also knowledge, scholarship, and skills of various kinds. Knowledge gained through education gets enriched and purposeful when it is shared with others.

A voluntary restraint on one's desires, being more frugal with one's expenses, and spending the money thus saved for helping the needy would be the right thing to do whenever possible. People can think for themselves as to what and how much they really need for their needs. As Gāndhiji once remarked, there is enough in this world to satisfy everybody's need but not enough to satisfy even one man's greed. Wastage has become one of the hallmarks of affluent societies, especially in the Western world. Except man, no other creature on earth takes more from this planet than what its real needs are. It is often mentioned that the U.S. population accounts for about 6% of the world's population but consumes 45% of the world's natural resources. In general, there appears to be a direct correlation between affluence (be it in a person or a nation) and the extent of wastage. Modern man's greed and insatiable selfish desires have caused multifarious ecological problems around the world and has led to the extinction of hundreds of different species of plants, animals, and birds. Raising money and resources for those who have been deprived is a commendable goal for one and all throughout the world.

A small amount of one's time can be set aside for serving members of the family, friends, community, state, country, and humanity as a whole. Time spent less on excessive personal leisure can be better channeled to serve the people. No service task is too menial or trivial. Voluntary service makes the world a better place for all.