

BHAGAVAD GITA

The Global Dharma for the Third Millennium

Chapter 17

Translations and commentaries
by Parama Karuna Devi

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phone: +91 94373 00906

E-mail: paramakaruna@aol.in

Website: www.jagannathavallabha.com

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Correspondence address:

PAVAN House

Siddha Mahavira patana,

Puri 752002 Orissa

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 (*sraddha*) 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 rahu 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.

VERSE 1

अर्जुन उवाच ।

arjuna uvāca ।

ये शास्त्रविधिमुत्सृज्य यजन्ते श्रद्धयान्विताः ।

ye śāstravidhimutsṛjya yajante śraddhayānvitāḥ ।

तेषां निष्ठा तु का कृष्ण सत्त्वमाहो रजस्तमः ॥ १७-१ ॥

teṣāṃ niṣṭhā tu kā kṛṣṇa sattvamāho rajastamaḥ ॥ 17-1 ॥

arjunah: Arjuna; *uvaca:* said; *ye:* those who; *sastra vidhim:* the knowledge of the scriptures; *utsrijya:* abandoning; *yajante:* worship/ perform sacrifices; *sraddhaya:* with sincere faith; *anvitah:* taking shelter; *tesam:* of them; *nistha:* the faith; *tu:* but; *ka:* what (is); *krsna:* 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 utsrija*) mirrors the point presented in the last verses of the previous chapter: *yah sastra vidhim utsrija 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 cetasa, yajnyacaratah karma samagram*

praviliyate, 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 *sraddha* or *nistha*, where *sraddha* 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 (*asatyam*, 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.

VERSE 2

श्रीभगवानुवाच ।

śribhagavānuvāca ।

त्रिविधा भवति श्रद्धा देहिनां सा स्वभावजा ।

trividhā bhavati śraddhā dehinām sā svabhāvajā ।

सात्त्विकी राजसी चैव तामसी चेति तां शृणु ॥ १७-२ ॥

sāttvikī rājasī caiva tāmasī ceti tām śṛṇu ॥ 17-2 ॥

sri bhagavan: the wonderful Lord; *uvaca*: said; *tri vidha*: of three types; *bhavati*: becomes; *sraddha*: faith; *dehinam*: of the embodied beings; *sa*: that; *sva bhava ja*: born from one's own nature; *sattviki*: *sattvika*; *rajasī*: *rajasika*; *ca*: and; *eva*: certainly; *tamasī*: *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 deve su 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.

VERSE 3

सत्त्वानुरूपा सर्वस्य श्रद्धा भवति भारत ।

sattvānurūpā sarvasya śraddhā bhavati bhārata ।

श्रद्धामयोऽयं पुरुषो यो यच्छ्रद्धः स एव सः ॥ १७-३ ॥

śraddhāmayo'yaṁ puruṣo yo yacchraddhaḥ 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; *sah*: s/he; *eva*: certainly; *sah*: 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 (*vritti*) 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").

VERSE 4

यजन्ते सात्त्विका देवान्यक्षरक्षांसि राजसाः ।

yajante sāttvikā devānyakṣarakṣāmsi rājasāḥ ।

प्रेतान्भूतगणांश्चान्ये यजन्ते तामसा जनाः ॥ १७-४ ॥

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 worshipping *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 *aghorī sadhanas* go bad and people become crazy and die, thus becoming ghosts in turn.

VERSE 5

अशास्त्रविहितं घोरं तप्यन्ते ये तपो जनाः ।

aśāstravihitam ghoram tapyante ye tapo janāḥ ।

दम्भाहंकारसंयुक्ताः कामरागबलान्विताः ॥ १७-५ ॥

dambhāhankārasamyuktāḥ kāmārāgabalanvitāḥ ॥ 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").

VERSE 6

कर्षयन्तः शरीरस्थं भूतग्राममचेतसः ।

karṣayantaḥ śarīrasthaṁ bhūtagrāmamacetasah ।

मां चैवान्तःशरीरस्थं तान्विद्ध्यासुरनिश्चयान् ॥ १७-६ ॥

mām caivāntaḥśarīrasthaṁ tānviddhyāsuraniścayān ।। 17-6।।

karsayantah: causing suffering and damage; *sarira stham*: situated in the body; *bhuta gramam*: all beings/ all the material elements; *acetasah*: 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 *dharm*a 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 *adharma*. 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.

VERSE 7

आहारस्त्वपि सर्वस्य त्रिविधो भवति प्रियः ।

āhārastvapi sarvasya trividho bhavati priyaḥ ।

यज्ञस्तपस्तथा दानं तेषां भेदमिमं शृणु ॥ १७-७ ॥

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 annasyasyamanasya 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 upasasada, 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 navadhitamastu 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).

VERSE 8

आयुःसत्त्वबलारोग्यसुखप्रीतिविवर्धनाः ।

āyuhṣattvabalārogyasukhaprītivivardhanāḥ ।

रस्याः स्निग्धाः स्थिरा हृद्या आहाराः सात्त्विकप्रियाः ॥ १७-८ ॥

rasyāḥ snigdhaḥ sthīrā hṛdyā āhārāḥ 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; *snigdhaḥ*: 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 savoury 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.

VERSE 9

कट्वम्ललवणात्युष्णतीक्ष्णरूक्षविदाहिनः ।

kaṭvamlalavaṇātyuṣṇatīkṣṇarūkṣavidāhinaḥ ।

आहारा राजसस्येष्टा दुःखशोकामयप्रदाः ॥ १७-९ ॥

āhārā rājasasyeṣṭā duḥkhaśokāmayapradāḥ ॥ 17-9 ॥

katu: bitter; *amla*: sour; *lavana*: salty; *ati usna*: very hot; *tiksna*: pungent; *ruksa*: dry; *vidahinah*: burning/ spicy; *aharah*: food; *rajasasya*: of one who is in *rajas*; *ista*: desired; *duhkha*: 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, *pakoras*, 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, pramadasya 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).

VERSE 10

यातयामं गतरसं पूति पर्युषितं च यत् ।

yātayāmaṁ gatarasaṁ pūti paryuṣitaṁ ca yat ।

उच्छिष्टमपि चामेध्यं भोजनं तामसप्रियम् ॥ १७-१० ॥

ucchiṣṭamapi cāmedhyaṁ bhojanaṁ tāmasapriyam ॥ 17-10 ॥

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; *tamasa 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.

VERSE 11

अफलाङ्क्षभिर्यज्ञो विधिदृष्टो य इज्यते ।

aphalāṅkṣibhiryajño vidhidṛṣṭo ya ijyate ।

यष्टव्यमेवेति मनः समाधाय स सात्त्विकः ॥ १७-११ ॥

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 (*dharma*); in the smallest scale these duties refer to our body, our family, our professional community and our society, and they are called *sva dharma*. 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 dharma*. 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.

VERSE 12

अभिसन्धाय तु फलं दम्भार्थमपि चैव यत् ।

abhisandhāya tu phalam dambhārthamapi caiva yat ।

इज्यते भरतश्रेष्ठ तं यज्ञं विद्धि राजसम् ॥ १७-१२ ॥

ijyate bharataśreṣṭha taṁ yajñaṁ vidधि 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 descendents of Bharata; *tam*: that; *yajnam*: sacrifice; *vidधि*: 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 worshipping 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 descendents 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 yajnais 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).

VERSE 13

विधिहीनमसृष्टान्नं मन्त्रहीनमदक्षिणम् ।

vidhihīnamasṛṣṭānnaṁ mantrahīnamadakṣiṇam ।

श्रद्धाविरहितं यज्ञं तामसं परिचक्षते ॥ १७-१३ ॥

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; *sraddha 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, ajnanad 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."

VERSE 14

देवद्विजगुरुप्राज्ञपूजनं शौचमार्जवम् ।

devadvijaguruprājñapūjanam śaucamārvavam ।

ब्रह्मचर्यमहिंसा च शरीरं तप उच्यते ॥ १७-१४ ॥

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; *pūjanam:* 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 imprintings) 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 abstention 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 *brahmacarya* 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.

VERSE 15

अनुद्वेगकरं वाक्यं सत्यं प्रियहितं च यत् ।

anudvegakaram vākyaṁ satyaṁ priyahitaṁ ca yat ।

स्वाध्यायाभ्यसनं चैव वाङ्मयं तप उच्यते ॥ १७-१५ ॥

svādhyāyābhyasanaṁ 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 evil-doer 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 skillfull 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.

VERSE 16

मनः प्रसादः सौम्यत्वं मौनमात्मविनिग्रहः ।

manah prasādaḥ saumyatvaṁ maunamātmavinigrahaḥ ।

भावसंशुद्धिरित्येतत्तपो मानसमुच्यते ॥ १७-१६ ॥

bhāvaśuddhirityetattapo mānasamucyate ॥ 17-16 ॥

manah prasadah: mental satisfaction; *saumyatvam*: kindness; *maunam*: being able to remain in silence; *atma vinigrahaḥ*: self

control; *bhava samsuddhih*: 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 *dhyana*. 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 samyama*) 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, *cancalam 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.

VERSE 17

श्रद्धया परया तप्तं तपस्तत्रिविधं नरैः ।

śraddhayā parayā taptam tapastatrividham naraiḥ ।

अफलाकाङ्क्षभिर्युक्तैः सात्त्विकं परिचक्षते ॥ १७-१७ ॥

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*; *paricaksate*: 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 *sraddha 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.

VERSE 18

सत्कारमानपूजार्थं तपो दम्भेन चैव यत् ।

satkāramānapūjārtham tapo dambhena caiva yat ।

क्रियते तदिह प्रोक्तं राजसं चलमध्रुवम् ॥ १७-१८ ॥

kriyate tadiha proktaṁ rājasam calamadhruvam ॥ 17-18 ॥

sat kara: for admiration; *mana:* for prestige; *puja:* 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, iyyate 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 adhruvam*), 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 subhasubham, prasannatmatmani sthitva sukham aksayam asnute*, "The happiness found in the contentment of the consciousness destroys all the consequences of actions".

VERSE 19

मूढग्राहेणात्मनो यत्पीडया क्रियते तपः ।

mūḍhagrāheṇātmano yatpīḍayā kriyate tapaḥ ।

परस्योत्सादनार्थं वा तत्तामसमुदाहृतम् ॥ १७-१९ ॥

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; *utsadana 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 demoniac 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 utsadana 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.

VERSE 20

दातव्यमिति यद्दानं दीयतेऽनुपकारिणे ।

dātavyamiti yaddānaṁ dīyate'nupakāriṇe ।

देशे काले च पात्रे च तद्दानं सात्त्विकं स्मृतम् ॥ १७-२० ॥

deśe kāle ca pātre ca taddānaṁ sāttvikam smṛtam ॥ 17-20 ॥

datavyam: that must be given, out of duty; *iti*: thus; *yat*: which; *danam*: charity; *dīyate*: 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 (*purnima*), 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.

VERSE 21

यत्तु प्रत्युपकारार्थं फलमुद्दिश्य वा पुनः ।

yattu pratyupakārārthaṁ phalamuddiśya vā punaḥ ।

दीयते च परिक्लिष्टं तद्दानं राजसं स्मृतम् ॥ १७-२१ ॥

dīyate ca parikliṣṭaṁ taddānaṁ rājasam smṛtam ॥ 17-21 ॥

yat: which; *prati upakara:* to get something in return; *artham:* for the sake of; *phalam:* result; *uddisya:* desiring; *va:* or; *punah:*

again; *diyate*: 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*.

VERSE 22

अदेशकाले यद्दानमपात्रेभ्यश्च दीयते ।

adeśakāle yaddānamapātrebhyaśca dīyate ।

असत्कृतमवज्ञातं तत्तामसमुदाहृतम् ॥ १७-२२ ॥

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*; *udahritam*: 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.

VERSE 23

ॐ तत्सदिति निर्देशो ब्रह्मणस्त्रिविधः स्मृतः ।

omtatsaditi nirdeśo brahmaṇastrividhaḥ smṛtaḥ ।

ब्राह्मणास्तेन वेदाश्च यज्ञाश्च विहिताः पुरा ॥ १७-२३ ॥

brāhmaṇāstena vedāśca yajñāśca vihitāḥ 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 smṛti; brahmanah: those who know Brahman; tena: by that; vedah: the Vedas; ca: and; yajnah: sacrifice; ca: and; vihitah: 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 'nadrta yusmad anghrayah*, "O lotus-eyed Lord, those who consider themselves as liberated but have not elevated their intelligence to the level of *visuddha sattva* 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, visvakkena 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 *tattvas* (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.

VERSE 24

तस्मादोमित्युदाहृत्य यज्ञदानतपःक्रियाः ।

tasmādomityudāhṛtya yajñadānatapaḥkriyāḥ ।

प्रवर्तन्ते विधानोक्ताः सततं ब्रह्मवादिनाम् ॥ १७-२४ ॥

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 temporary 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, sukhena 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.

VERSE 25

तदित्यनभिसन्धाय फलं यज्ञतपःक्रियाः ।

tadityanabhisandhāya phalam yajñatapaḥkriyāḥ ।

दानक्रियाश्च विविधाः क्रियन्ते मोक्षकाङ्क्षिभिः ॥ १७-२५ ॥

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 dhiih, 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).

VERSE 26

सद्भावे साधुभावे च सदित्येतत्प्रयुज्यते ।

sadbhāve sādhubhāve ca sadityetatprayujyate ।

प्रशस्ते कर्माणि तथा सच्छब्दः पार्थ युज्यते ॥ १७-२६ ॥

praśaste karmaṇi tathā sacchabdaḥ pārtha yujyate ।। 17-26 ।।

sat bhave: in spiritual consciousness; *sadhu bhave*: 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 *prayuyjate*, 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 *yuyjate* 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 *yuyjate* 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*).

VERSE 27

यज्ञे तपसि दाने च स्थितिः सदिति चोच्यते ।

yajñe tapasi dāne ca sthitiḥ saditi cocyate ।

कर्म चैव तदर्थीयं सदित्येवाभिधीयते ॥ १७-२७ ॥

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; *abhidhiyate*: is indicated.

"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 *tat*, or Brahman (*om*). The expression *tat 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 *pravasa* (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).

VERSE 28

अश्रद्धया हुतं दत्तं तपस्तप्तं कृतं च यत् ।

asraddhayā hutam dattam tapastaptam kṛtam ca yat ।

असदित्युच्यते पार्थ न च तत्प्रेष्य नो इह ॥ १७-२८ ॥

asadityucyate pārtha 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 *dharma*, *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.