

Prasnottara Ratna Malika

The Precious Necklace
of Questions and Answers

by Shankara Bhagavatpada

Translations and commentaries compiled

by Parama Karuna Devi

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Verse 1

कः खलुः नालंक्रियते दृष्ट-अदृष्ट-अर्थ-साधन पटीयान्
अमुया कण्ठस्थितया प्रश्न -उत्तर-रत्नमालिकया ।

*kaḥ khalu nālaṅkriyate dṛṣṭa-adṛṣṭa-artha sādhana paṭiyān
amuyā kaṅṭha sthitayā praśna uttara ratna-mālikayā*

Who will not adorn himself with this precious necklace of questions and answers, by memorizing it for constant remembrance, since it is the best means to obtain all visible and invisible successes in life!

The poetic image of the precious necklace of gems (*ratna-mala*) is meant to illustrate the wonderful qualities of this collection of questions and answers. These teachings are compared to valuable gems for their richness and value, brilliance and inalterability, and also for the beneficial influence on the life of those who will honor them by keeping the constantly close to their hearts.

In fact, gems possess beneficial qualities which will neutralize the bad influences of planets and bring well-being, beauty and splendor, health and happiness to those who wear them. Similarly, the questions and answers in this collection are a great source of benefits (*artha*), valuable and useful things, both visible and invisible (*dṛiṣṭa-adṛiṣṭa*). The visible benefits are immediate and material and refer to the better quality of life in this world, while those which are described as invisible are the future and spiritual blessings which derive from personal growth and gradual realization of the reality of life.

Knowledge can be obtained in two ways — by ascending method and by descending method — but undoubtedly the best way consists in listening from a realized soul and asking sincere questions, and then carefully meditating on the answers. In Vedic culture a great emphasis is given to the transmission of knowledge through aural reception, as this implies a direct relationship with the teacher and therefore a greater effectiveness in the learning process because of the immediate verification of the proper understanding in the student. Also *Bhagavad-gīta*, the most important and accessible text on the philosophy of *sanātana-dharma*, recommends to search the truth by asking many comprehensive questions (*pariṣrasnena*) from those who have a clear vision of reality (*tattva-darsināḥ*).

Another important word in this opening verse is *sadhana*, which indicates a regular practice, meant to develop spiritual life. Spiritual knowledge is never only theoretical or academic, because without a sincere and dedicated spiritual practice it is not possible to understand it. Therefore *Bhagavad gīta* (4.34) also recommends a sincere attitude of service to the teacher, and the process of initiation into spiritual

practice: *tad viddhi pranipatena pariprasnena sevaya, upadekshyanti te jñanam jñaninas tattva-darsinah*, “You must study this knowledge by approaching a master through submissive inquiries and rendering service to him. Those who see the Truth will initiate you into Knowledge.”

Regular study, if possible by memorization, is a very important practice to assimilate teachings, because it makes the teachings an important part of our life as we dedicate a lot of our time and energy to them.

Verse 2

भगवन्! किम् उपादेयम्?

bhagavan! kiṁ upādeyam?

O Lord! What should we accept?

गुरुवचनम्!

guru-vācanam

The words of the Preceptor.

The word *bhagavan* indicates a person who possesses perfection (*bhaga*) and is generally used for a divine or great personality. According to Parasara Muni, this perfection is manifested in six forms: wisdom or knowledge, beauty or splendor, richness or opulence, fame, power and renunciation. The sincere student must respect and serve the genuine Guru as the direct representative of God. *Bhagavata Purana* (11.17.27) says, *acaryam mam vijaniyan navamanyeta karhicit, na artya-buddhyasuyeta sarva-deva-mayo gurub*, “One should understand that the *acharya* is not different from Bhagavan as he represents him; one should never disrespect the genuine spiritual master at any time by considering him an ordinary human being. One should never be envious or inimical towards a genuine spiritual master, because he is the representative of all the Devas.”

In Vedic culture, the relationship with the genuine teacher (*guru*) is extremely important. In order to progress in theoretical and practical knowledge, it is essential to be blessed by the enlightened guidance of an expert and able person, who can guide and support us along the slippery path of life. The word *guru* literally means “heavy”, “solid”, and gives the picture of a person who possesses great knowledge and experience, which give great weight and solidity to his words and teachings.

Vacham refers to the word: teachings and orders. One who does not give the due respect to the teacher’s words consisting in following his orders will never be able to learn anything. Another meaning of *vacham* refers to the *mantras*, the meditation formulas transmitted by the master to the disciple at the moment of initiation,

which are an essential part of the spiritual practice of all followers of *Vedas*. *Mantras* should be properly received from a realized teacher, otherwise they will not have the same effect — therefore it is very important to listen carefully to the master when he speaks *mantras* and instructions.

हेयमपि किम् ?

heyam api kim?

What should we give up?

अकार्यम् ।

akāryam

Actions which should not be done.

The word *akaryam* specifically indicates “that which must not be done” and refers to all the things which are not recommended by the *guru* or by the scriptures. There are many negative activities which bring bad results: among them, consumption of non-vegetarian foods, consumption of intoxicants, immoral behavior and all acts that are contrary to the principles of *dharmā* (ethical religion). All this must be given up, otherwise our attempts in spiritual progress and knowledge will be futile.

को गुरुः ?

ko guruḥ?

Who is a Preceptor?

अधिगततत्त्वः । शिष्यहिताय उद्यतः सततम् ।

adhigata tattvaḥ, śiṣya hitāya udyataḥ satatam

One who has personally realized the truth and who is always acting for the benefit of the disciple.

There are many misconceptions and prejudices on the idea of the preceptor, master or teacher (*guru*), often created by cultural and social expectations. Actually, a *guru* is not qualified by academic titles, by the caste or family in which he was born, by a specific gender or race, by the dress he wears or by his belonging to a specific social order or even by a hierarchical position in a religious institution. The real definition of *guru* is given in this verse by Shankara Acharya himself: someone who has directly and deeply realized the truth he teaches (*tattva*) and acts always in a selfless way, simply for the benefit of the disciple (*śiṣya hitāya*), is a real *guru*, not others.

The word *adhigata* is very similar to a word used in Buddhist philosophy to define an enlightened soul, *tathagata* (“one who has reached the destination”).

Verse 3

त्वरितं किं कर्तव्यं विदुषाम्?

tvaritaṁ kiṁ kartavyaṁ viduṣaṁ?

What should the wise hasten to do?

संसार -सन्ततिच्छेदः

samsāra-santati cchedaḥ

To end the cycle of birth and death.

Vidusha or *vidvan* is “someone who knows”, that is a person who has obtained knowledge and has been able to reach wisdom through it. A person who possesses knowledge has a supreme duty to perform: cutting the cycle of repeated births and deaths created by material conditionings, and fighting against ignorance, attachment and illusion.

The word *samsara* is very important because it illustrates the vicious circle of births and deaths: all those who are born will have to die, and those who die without having reached full freedom from conditionings will be forced to take another birth. Many people think that birth is a happy event and death is a tragedy, but in the light of knowledge we can see that birth in a material body entails several years of sufferings and difficulties, while death is often a liberation from pain. But as long as we continue to desire what exists on the material platform, we will have to take birth again and again innumerable times, going through endless sufferings, like a prisoner who is moved from one cell to another without ever being able to get out of jail. How to get released from this prison?

किं मोक्षतरोः बीजम्?

kiṁ mokṣa-taroḥ bījam?

What is the seed of the tree of liberation?

सम्यग्ज्ञानं क्रियासिद्धम् ।

samyag jñānām kriyā siddham

Proper knowledge, applied through action.

Liberation (*moksha*) is compared here to a tree, a solid and living plant that grows from a seed, sprouts and takes roots, growing and becoming stronger and stronger

until it gives fruits. One who wants to obtain liberation must therefore search for knowledge with a sincere heart, applying it always through personal experience and practice (*kr̥ya*, “what must be done”).

Another meaning of this verse implies that knowledge is acquired through direct experience, by performing those actions that are right and necessary, by completing and overcoming them just as different courses of academic studies must be attended practically and then completed through examinations, tests and discussion of a doctorate thesis. The same principle applies in life and in the acquisition of the knowledge that takes us to freedom from material conditionings and illusion; only in this way we shall be able to attain a solid and genuine detachment.

Verse 4

कः पथ्यतरः ?

kaḥ pathyatarah?

What is the most beneficial thing?

धर्मः ।

dharmah

Dharma

The word *dharmā* has a very deep meaning, and cannot be translated with a simple English word. It derives from the root *dhṛ*, that means "sustaining", with reference to those actions that sustain or support the universal community and the individual in his/ her evolution. In simple language, *dharmā* can be defined as "doing the right thing".

The *Upanishads* state: *dharmasya tattva nihita gubaya*, “the essence and significance of *dharmā* is subtle and hidden.” Often *dharmā* is translated with “religion” or “duty”, sometimes with “righteousness”, “virtue”, or “justice”, because it contains all these meanings. Actually, *dharmā* refers to the inherent quality of the subject, through which perfection is attained, and perfection itself as complete harmony with all others aspects of existence in the material and spiritual universes. In this sense, *dharmā* is also *tattva* and *satya*, Reality itself, at the same time the means and the end.

Now, just like the word *atma* (“self”) can be interpreted in various ways according to the level of identification of the subject (it can therefore be applied to the body, to the mind or to the soul, who is the real self), the word *dharmā* can also be applied at different levels.

If we consider the social position of a person, *dharmā* indicates the social obligation of performing one's specific professional duties, that are “religious” in regard to the social position for various groups of people: intellectuals and teachers,

administrators and soldiers, entrepreneurs and merchants, laborers and servants, in the system of *varnas*. If we consider the family position and lifestyle (*asbrama*), there is a different definition of *dharmā* for a married man, for a woman, for those who are in the orders of *brahmacarya* or *sannyasa* and so on. At the cultural level, *dharmā* refers to the different religious traditions followed by one's group and community.

All this still remains on a social level, which is temporary, subject to change just like one's position, from one life to another and even in this same lifetime. However, there is an *eternal dharmā*, a *sanatana dharmā*, that never changes in different time or circumstances, and which consists in living the essence of religion — something we can call also “virtue”, “religiousness” or “dedication to the Supreme”.

This is always the right thing to do for anyone, the most beneficial thing. In any social, religious, familiar or cultural position we find ourselves, the foundations of *dharmā* are always the same, and allow the universal community (honored as the Body of the Godhead, the *virat rūpa*) to function in harmony and progress towards a general progress generating benefits to the entire universe (*visva kalyana*). Anything which is contrary to these principles is defined as *adharmā* (contrary to *dharmā*).

The *Manu-smṛiti* explains that *dharmā* is manifested in 10 forms: *satyam* (truthfulness), *dhṛiti* (courage), *kṣama* (tolerance and patience), *dama* (self-control), *asteya* (avoidance of stealing and cheating), *indriya-nigraha* (control of the senses), *dhī* (intelligence or meditation), *vidyā* (knowledge acquired through study), *akrodha* (freedom from anger), *saucam* (internal and external cleanliness). Other Vedic scriptures summarize *dharmā* in four basic principles: *satyam* (truthfulness), *daya* (compassion), *saucam* (cleanliness) and *tapas* (austerity).

कः शुचिः इह ?

kaḥ śuciḥ iha?

Who is clean and pure in this world?

यस्य मानसं शुद्धम् ।

yasya mānasam śuddham

One who has a clean and pure mind.

Cleanliness or purity is one of the fundamental pillars of personal progress and religious practice. A person who is contaminated or dirty will tend to contaminate others, therefore the *Vedas* recommend to avoid contact with such people, especially if we want to progress on the path of spiritual realization.

Asat-sanga is one of the worst diseases, that comes from lack of spiritual hygiene, because dirtiness and contamination cover our faculty of proper perception and perpetuate our illusory beliefs, obstructing our true vision. For this reasons the *Vedas* recommend that contaminated things or people should not be allowed to come in contact with objects, places or persons closely connected with religion,

rituals and meditation. Those who have no faith in religious life or live in a way which is contrary to its principles should not be admitted in the most sacred areas of religion, otherwise they will contaminate the general atmosphere by creating difficulties to those who try to elevate themselves spiritually.

The problem is, however, how to determine who is pure and who is not. Many people think that purity can be judged from a particular type of physical body, from the social or familiar position (*varna* or *asbrama*), from the caste of birth or past experiences or similar considerations, but Shankara Acharya reveals here that this is not the real point: the purity of a person can be judged only from the purity of mind, from intentions, desires and mental habits. Only by knowing this can we judge the purity of a person, otherwise we will lack in correct discrimination.

कः पण्डितः ?

kaḥ paṇḍitaḥ?

Who is wise and learned?

विवेकी

vivekī

An intelligent person with power of discrimination.

The word *pandita* or *panda* is widely used in Indian culture to define a “wise man”, a learned and respectable person who knows the scriptures and therefore can teach and guide people on the path of spiritual progress and ritual ceremonies. In this sense, a *pandita* is the guide and teacher of society.

Due to illusion, conditioned living beings see themselves and others according to material terms pertaining to the body, categorizing people according to birth in a specific family (*jati*). According to *Bhagavad gita* the actual position of each person should be evaluated according to the level of individual awareness and consciousness, externally determined by qualities and activities demonstrated in practice (*chatur varnyam maya sristam guna karma vibhagasah*, *Bhagavad gita*, 4.13). The *Vedas* explain that there are four major natural categories in society: *brahmanas* (teachers and priests), *kshatriyas* (government and administration people), *vaiśyas* (entrepreneurs of all kinds), and *sudras* (laborers who only have manual abilities). According to the *Vedas*, a religious teacher is also called *pandita* (wise), *vipra* (learned), *dvija* (twice born, a person who has received the spiritual birth of initiation), and *brahmana* (*brahma-jana*, a person who knows Brahman, spirit, and lives according to spiritual awareness).

These qualities are confirmed in *Bhagavad gita* (5.18) in their practical application: *vidya-vinaya-sampanne brahmane gavi hastini, sumi caiva sva-pake ca panditah sama-darsinah*, “the wise who possess real knowledge see with equal vision a *brahmana*, a cow, an elephant, a dog and a *chandala* (dog-eater).”

The “discriminating intelligence” described in this verse of *Prasnottara Ratna Malika* does not contradict the “equal vision” described by *Bhagavad gita*; rather it further defines it in a specific way, allowing the sage to relate with different living beings with compassion and respect but at the same time with intelligence, by engaging each and every one according to their natural qualities and activities (*guna* and *karma*) on the material platform (temporary *dharmā*) and to their eternal position (*sanatana-dharma*).

किं विषम् ?

kiṁ viṣam ?

What is poison?

अवधीरणा गुरुषु ।

avadhīraṇā guruṣu ।

Disrespecting the Preceptors.

Even on the level of common activities, a student who disrespects his teachers, does not listen to them carefully and does not follow their instructions, or transgresses their orders, has very little chances to progress and obtain real knowledge. The *guru* always acts for the benefit of the disciple, but no scripture orders him to insist in giving instructions and teachings to those who demonstrate no interest in listening respectfully and sincerely: for this reason, a lack of respect for the teacher will automatically bring about the loss of opportunity for progress.

Bhagavad gita recommends to approach the Preceptor in a very respectful manner, to serve him humbly and sincerely (*tad viddhi pranīpatena parīprasna sevayā*) to increase one's chances to obtain his blessings and knowledge. The *guru* should even be worshiped as the personification of knowledge and the representative of Godhead (*gurur brahma gurur viṣṇur guru devo mahesvarah, guru sakṣat parabrahma tasmai sri gurave namah*) and considered as our real friend, parent and master.

It is also said: *dhyana mulam guror murtib, puja mulam guroh pada, mantra mulam guror vakya, moksha mulam guroh kripa*, “the image of the Preceptor is the root of meditation, the lotus feet of the Preceptor are the root of ritual worship, the word of the Preceptor is the root of the *mantra*, and the kindness and compassion of the Preceptor are the root of liberation”.

Verse 5

किं संसारे सारम् ?

kiṁ saṁsāre saram ?

What is the essence of material life?

बहुशोऽपि चिन्त्यमानं इदमेव ।

bahuśo 'pi cintayamānaṁ idam eva

This is something on which we must meditate many times.

The word *samsara* is not easy to understand, because it constitutes the very foundation of the doctrine of spiritual liberation. When we speak of liberation, the first question is: “liberation from what?” Every living being aspires for happiness, knowledge and eternity, and on the material platform we are constantly baffled in this search by various kinds of sufferings, ignorance and impermanence of our own body and of everything else around us. Naturally this contrast causes a deep frustration, similar to the feelings of a prisoner who would like to do many things and to find happiness, but is constantly restrained.

The *Vedas* teach that the root of such frustration is the illusion of duality, the mistaken identification with the material body and objects. As long as we remain in material illusion, our own identification and the objects of our attachments will continue to generate suffering, ignorance and impermanence. Unfortunately, due to his attachment to what is temporary, a conditioned soul is constantly running after the mirage of material happiness, and at the end of the time allotted to this material body, he is forced to take a new birth to continue his mad race.

This cycle of births and deaths is called *samsara*, the wheel of material life, and can be compared to the shackles that keep a prisoner bound even when he is dragged from cell to cell. How to break free from the cycle of repeated births and deaths?

If we do not understand deeply and clearly the essence or cause of our imprisonment, it is impossible to attain liberation: the key to open our shackles must be earned through knowledge — and this requires constant and repeated meditation.

By meditating again and again we will constantly remember the goal of our work towards liberation and at the same time we will be able to understand better and better the meaning of spiritual knowledge. In fact, knowledge grows on the foundations (or roots) of previous knowledge, becoming wider and higher, and in this process we become able to see and understand different explanations of the same issue, explanations which will be more complex and complete.

किं मनुजेषु इष्टतमम् ?

kiṁ manuḷeṣu iṣṭatamaṁ ?

What is most desirable for human beings?

स्व-पर-हिताय उद्यतं जन्म ।

sva-para-hitāya udyataṁ janma

A life dedicated to the benefit of oneself and others.

This verse expands the explanation of the meaning of liberation by applying it to the free choice of accepting a birth or life (*janma*) to work for the benefit of oneself and others. *Manushya janma* is a real blessing and not a sentence for forced labor, and it becomes a great opportunity for liberation if we dedicate our work to the real benefit of all beings, including ourselves.

Many people think that in consecrating one's life to the benefit of others we should neglect ourselves, or that it is much more desirable and profitable to work for one's own benefit instead of caring for others, but this verse clearly states that the welfare of others should be kept on the same level as our own personal welfare or benefit. This vision frees us from duality and is founded on a deep understanding of the spiritual nature of all beings: the spiritual welfare of one is the spiritual welfare of all, because there is no conflict of interests on the level of Brahman (the supreme and absolute Spirit). Active and caring work for the spiritual benefit of oneself and others is a valuable opportunity offered by life in a human body, and we should not underestimate or waste it away in the name of detachment and renunciation.

Often people think that in order to become free from illusion and attachment it is necessary and sufficient to retire from the world, from relationships and professional work, but this is not a fact: a person who spends his days in idleness and indifference for the sufferings of others, in the name of religion and renunciation, is actually wasting a valuable opportunity and disrespecting the teachings of the great Preceptors.

Verse 6

मदिरेव मोहजनकः कः ?

madireva moha-janakah kah?

What generates delusion, like liquor?

स्नेहः ।

snehah

Attachment.

After recommending active and caring work for the benefit of oneself and others, we must clarify the nature of the needed work and the ways in which it must be executed. The word *madira* indicates an intoxicating substance, like liquor or opium, that creates confusion and madness, covering intelligence and vision and preventing the inebriated person from understanding things, working properly and keeping the right direction.

One who calculates his own benefit and the benefit of others on the basis of material attachment to the sense objects (money, property, social position, control over others, prestige and other material benefits) is confused like a drunkard, who does not even know who he is, where he stands and what he is doing, therefore he

cannot execute a good work or get benefit from the opportunities that are in front of him.

It is important here to distinguish attachment from affection and love, sometimes also defined with the same term, *sneha*. While love is a sincere desire to work for the benefit of one's object of affection (*sva-para-bitaya*, as the previous verse recommends), attachment entails trying to use others for one's own pleasure and material personal advantage, seeing them as sense objects and personal properties we can use and exploit. Love that is free from attachment produces liberation, happiness and real benefit for everyone, while attachment in the name of love creates illusion and suffering for everyone.

के च दस्यवः ?

ke ca dasyavaḥ?

Who are the thieves?

विषयाः ।

viṣayāḥ

The sense objects.

A thief is one who takes something from the lawful owner without giving anything in exchange. When our energies, our time, our intelligence and our opportunities are absorbed by our sense objects, we do not get any lasting benefit; thus we should rather dedicate all our resources to work for the true spiritual benefit of ourselves and others. Another definition of “thief” includes cheaters, those who make promises and will never keep them. Thus sense objects are also cheaters because in spite of all their nice promises of pleasure and satisfaction they cannot give more than flimsy feelings which bring about joy and sorrow at the same time.

Vedic scriptures list the sense objects as *rūpa* (form), *śabda* (sound), *rasa* (taste), *gandha* (smell), *sparsa* (touch). We should not mistake the sense objects with the objects in themselves, that have no responsibility in the creation of our problems: nice-looking things or bodies, music, good food, sweet smelling flowers and soft and smooth things exist on a separate level from our perception and desire, and must be respected and even utilized for a higher purpose, without attachment to our personal pleasure.

का भवल्ली ?

kā bhava-vallī?

What is the plant of birth?

तृष्णा ।

tṛṣṇā

Thirst for pleasure.

A *valli* is a creeper, a plant that grows by leaning on a tree or some other solid support. Birth and rebirth, or the ties with the cycle of material life, grow by leaning on real existence, which is eternal. Due to illusion and thirst for material pleasure, the conditioned living being is constantly searching material contact with sense objects, something that requires a material body — hence the automatic result of repeated births.

This vine of birth is watered and nurtured by habits: in this sense the word *trishna* is particularly meaningful, as physiologically speaking any needs, like thirst, hunger and addictions dramatically grow when we indulge in their pleasure without control. For example, if we develop the habit of drinking a lot, we will gradually need more and more drinks; if we eat salty foods for their taste, our craving for salt will become excessive, forcing us to consume too much salt. Our body actually needs much less, and our health is also damaged by excessive consumption of salt. The same applies to allopathic medicines such as painkillers and other similar drugs that easily give addiction. By cutting or uprooting this craving, which is inexhaustible and always growing from itself, it is possible to eliminate the need for a new birth, with all its entailed sufferings.

को वैरी ?

ko vairī?

Who is the enemy?

यस्तु अनुद्योगः ।

yastu anudyogaḥ

The only enemy is idleness.

Anudyoga literally means “not being engaged”. To better clarify the concept of renunciation to cravings and thirst of pleasure, that could bring any people to indifference and idleness, we need to explain how dangerously destructive is the idea of simply abstaining from action. For a materialistic person who will work only to get a personal selfish benefit, the idea of giving up the craving for pleasure and material acquisitions will naturally mean giving up all activities and living without responsibilities and engagements, in a sort of perennial vacation, thus becoming a parasite for society.

Real renunciation, however, is quite different, and consists in sincerely engaging in action while remaining detached from the desire of enjoying its fruits. Those who have not reached this level yet will progress by working for the benefit of themselves and others, but those who simply indulge in laziness will not get anything, thus wasting the precious opportunity offered by a human birth.

In ordinary life for a human being there are no enemies — persons, events, ignorance or bad qualities — that cannot be neutralized by one's careful and sincere work, but idleness is the only real enemy who constantly plunders and destroys our life, our happiness, our assets and our progress.

Verse 7

कस्मात् भयम् इह ?

kasmāt bhayaṁ iha?

What is the origin of fear in this world?

मरणात्

maraṇāt

Death.

The fear of death is present in all living beings, who instinctively react by fighting for survival at any cost. For a human being, death is the final test of life, that will decide his next destination. For those who do not believe in the permanence of the soul, death takes even a more sinister meaning, as it implies the dissolution of being, a sort of non-existence, the loss of everything we believe we possess, including our own identity. In order to conquer the fear of death it is not sufficient to avoid thinking about our own mortality as materialistic people often do; we should rather try to understand the nature of real existence (*sat*), which is eternity, knowledge and happiness. *Bhagavad gita* (2.17) explains that the spirit pervading the body is imperishable and indestructible (*avinasi tu tad viddhi yena sarvam idam tatam, vinasa anyasyasya na kascit kartum arhati*). What is eternal and real (*brahma satya*) can never cease to exist.

Those who identify with the body are overwhelmed by panic at the idea of losing it, while one who has deeply understood his own spiritual nature (*aham brahmasmi*) is not bound by material laws and has no need to fear death. *Bhagavad gita* (2.13) teaches: *dehino 'smin yatha debe kaumaram yauvanam jara, tatha debantara-praptir dhiras tatra na muhyati*, “A wise man is not confused at the moment of death, because he knows that death is not different from the natural passage from childhood to youth to old age”.

While passing through childhood to youth to old age we must undergo a change of body, although much more gradual, and if we apply this knowledge at the moment of death we will be free from fear. *Bhagavad gita* (2.22) offers another easy example: giving up old and torn clothes to wear new ones, *vasamsi jirnani yatha vibhaya navani grihṇati naro 'parani, tatha sarirani vibhaya jirnany anyani samyati navani debi*. In itself, the death of the physical body does not even imply a cessation of personality, which, still tied to the material platform, brings back the living entity to take a new birth by developing another body to continue his travel on the reincarnation cycle.

अन्यात् इह को विशिष्यते ?

andhāt iha ko viśiṣyate?

Who is afflicted by another form of blindness?

रागी

rāgī

Someone who is attached.

Spiritual blindness is much worse than material blindness, that did not prevent great sages and saints of different ages to attain full realization. One who is led by attachment and sense of possession cannot see anything else, is not aware of his benefit or others' benefit, and is not able to act in a proper way.

कः शूरः ?

kaḥ śūraḥ?

Who is heroic?

यः ललना-लोलन-बाणैः न च व्यथितः ।

yaḥ lalanā-lolana-bāṇaiḥ na ca vyadhitaḥ

One who does not fall ill because of the arrow-like glances of lusty women.

The word *śura* means “hero”, and indicates a man of great strength and determination. Facing external enemies is much easier than facing internal enemies like lust, that easily ignites when coming in touch with similar qualities in the environment around us. According to the physical principle of resonance, when an object vibrates at a certain frequency (like a diapason) it causes similar vibrations in other surrounding objects that have its same nature.

Thus a person who is afflicted by carnal desires creates waves of lust that strike those who are nearby like arrows, awakening similar vibrations. In particular, glances can transmit feelings and thoughts very well and can reveal a person's inner states of mind, inspiring similar desires and emotions. A man who is not shaken by such an attack and remains steady in his duty without falling down or “becoming ill” with debilitating hankerings is certainly a strong and brave hero, and deserves glory and victory.

Due to the biology of body and mind, normally a man is attracted by the female form, just like a woman is attracted by the male form; therefore it is necessary to regulate contacts between men and women according to superior principles that can help everyone to progress in spiritual life. Relationships and contacts that are not based on sincere work for the benefit of oneself and others (*sva-para hitaya*) are as dangerous as a battlefield where sharp and pointed arrows are shot, but the spiritual warrior sticks to his principles and struggles to upkeep *dharma* in society, in spite of all kinds of attacks coming from materialistic people.

Verse 8

पातुं कर्णाञ्जलिभिः किम् अमृतम् इह युज्यते ?

pātūṁ karṇāñjalibhiḥ kiṁ amṛtam iha yujyate?

What should be listened to like nectar?

सदुपदेशः

sad-upadeśaḥ

Good teachings.

The beautiful poetic image of this verse prompts us to receive the teachings of good and saintly people with respect and care. *Karna* means “ears” and *añjali* means “with folded hands”. One who comes forward to receive something with folded hands shows respect and attention, and a desire to receive as much as possible. We should therefore use our hearing power (our ears) with an attitude of prayer and attention to absorb the nectar of good teachings.

The word *amritam* literally means “nectar of immortality”, the elixir which prevents all diseases and gives eternal life. As long as we drink this nectar we do not need to fear death or decay: in the same way, as long as we listen respectfully and eagerly to the teachings of good and saintly people, we do not need to fear death and degradation. *Sat* indicates that teachings should be of spiritual nature or at least good nature, truthful and beneficial for everyone.

किं गुरुतायां मूलम् ?

kiṁ gurutāyāṁ mūlam?

What is the root of greatness?

यत् एतत् अप्रार्थनं नाम् ।

yat etat aprārthanam nāma

What is defined as not asking for personal favors.

The second verse of *Prasnottara Ratna Malika* said: *ko gurub? sisya hitaya udyatah satata*, “Who is *guru*? One who always acts for the benefit of the disciple.”

This verse stresses the same concept, by explaining that *gurutayam*, the greatness of a realized person, a *guru*, consists in acting in a selfless way, free from all personal motivations. For a great and powerful personality it would be very easy to take advantage of one’s elevated position to get personal benefits, but those who are swept away from the right path by the winds of personal profit are certainly not *guru*, “heavy, solid”, but rather *laghu*, “light, superficial”: they have no roots and they are easily destroyed.

A genuine spiritual preceptor never asks for personal favors, otherwise his personal motivations will denounce his lack of real qualifications. The only business in the life of a spiritual preceptor should be constantly, carefully and expertly acting for the benefit of his disciples and of society at large. A disciple can offer anything and everything to his teacher if prompted to do so by his own affection and gratitude, but a teacher who materially depends on his followers or disciples, expecting to receive material benefits from them, has failed in his mission.

Verse 9

किं गहनम् ?

kin gahanam?

What is difficult to understand?

स्त्रीचरितम् ।

strī-caritam

The activities of women.

The word *gahana* means “deep, difficult to understand”. The activities of women are particularly difficult to understand for the male mentality because they are often based on the emotional component of human personality more than on rationality. Conventionally one who has a female body will tend to develop the creative and emotional hemisphere of the brain, while one who has a male body will tend to develop rationality and mechanistic and philosophical thought. The human brain is composed by two hemispheres, presiding one over rational activities (as mathematics, philosophy etc.) and the other over emotional activities (as creativity, beauty and so on); this is confirmed also by the science of *yoga* that speaks about two parallel energy currents, the female and the male, which must be harmonized to reach the “mystical marriage” of *yoga*.

कः चतुरः ?

kaḥ caturah?

Who is intelligent?

यो न खण्डितः तेन ।

yo na khaṇḍitaḥ tena

One who is not confused by them.

Usually women are not inclined to discipline and austerity, therefore they are not required to take up a renounced life. Those persons who are born in a female body

but have a strong inclination to austerity and renunciation, spiritual knowledge and religious life are not considered “women” by Vedic civilization, but rather *yoginis* and *sadhvis* and are respected as such.

Women who live in family, only taking care of the house, husband, children and relatives, tend to develop a mentality centered on bodily identification under the social pressure and expectations of materialistic people, but this is contrary to spiritual progress — both for these women and for their family members. The allurements of bodily relationships, the idea of being lord and master of one’s house and family, and the pleasures of conjugal life stimulate the male’s ego, attracting it towards an illusory whirlpool of false identifications and expectations, and throwing him into the “dark well of family life”.

Therefore the Vedic scriptures recommend that husband and wife should enter the *vanaprastha ashrama* as soon as they reach the age of 50 (*panchasa urdhvam vanam vrajet*), when their children are grown up and capable of continuing the religious and social traditions of the family. Prahlada teaches in *Bhagavata Purana* (7.5.5): *bitvatmapatam griham andha-kupa vanam gato yad dharim asrayeta*. “One should go to the forest and take shelter of Hari, leaving the dark well of *asat-grahat*, the temporary identification where he has fallen due to the illusory nature of material family life.”

An intelligent person will not allow him/ herself to be confused by material games and remains well aware of his/ her own nature and of the nature of everything around him/ her, keeping his/ her concentration on his/ her prescribed duty without losing him/ herself in what is temporary and simply based on emotions.

किं दुःखम्?

kim duḥkham?

What is unhappiness?

असंतोषः

asantoṣaḥ

Inability to get satisfaction.

The word *dubkha* means “lack of happiness” or “suffering”, while *asantosa* means “being unable to get satisfaction”. *Tusti*, satisfaction, should be searched in the self, because there is no limit to the mind’s material desires: the more we have, the more we want, until we become crazy for the megalomaniac craving of possessing or dominating the entire world.

A materialist will never be able to attain satisfaction, because the pleasures offered by sense objects are temporary and illusory, and very expensive. Joy and sorrow are both relative and temporary, therefore we must learn to tolerate both by happily accepting whatever destiny sends us and using it in the best possible way. A person who learns to become satisfied with a simple life, striving to raise his consciousness

level, attains peace and happiness even in this life, otherwise there is no hope of permanent happiness.

किं लाघवम् ?

kiṁ lāghavam?

What is cause for dishonor?

अधमतो याच्ना ।

adhamato yācñā

Asking for favors from low class people.

When we ask for a favor from a degraded person we risk getting manipulated and blackmailed in the future. Searching for help from bad people could seem easy and comfortable, because such people are always keen to show their own greatness and power and obtain fame and popularity (as well as personal profit), but there is always a hidden price, because we will get caught in their game thereby losing our freedom and honor. And on top of that, we are very likely to become exploited and trapped in a degrading situation. Real dishonor does not amount to being poor or being persecuted and slandered by envious and wicked people, but to choosing to depend on those who have a petty, mean and wicked mind.

Verse 10

किं जीवितम् ?

kiṁ jīvitam?

What is life?

अनवद्यम् ।

anavadyam

That which is immaculate.

Life in itself is a great gift and constitutes the pure existence we can utilize in a perfect way by dedicating our time and energies to good activities. Problems and sufferings are created by our own conception of life: when we purify our vision, we become able to see the spotless splendor of existence in itself, which is nothing less than the eternal manifestation of the Supreme Brahman.

किं जाड्यम् ?

kiṁ jāḍyam?

What is dullness?

पठतोऽपि अनभ्यासः ।

pāṭhato pi anabhyāsaḥ

Not repeating or practicing what we have learned.

When we invest time and efforts to learn something, it would be normal to apply such knowledge to our practical life. Knowledge given to a fool is like a seed sown in a barren field, which will give no fruit, but we should not blame the seed, rather we should know that it is the dull and rocky field that is not able to receive it properly. *Jada* also means “stone”, and “dull matter”.

Mere theoretical knowledge is not going to help us. For example, if we have learned *aham brahmasmi* and *tat tvam asi*, but we continue to maintain a gross bodily identification for ourselves and for others and to behave on the materialistic platform, our learning is useless and superficial.

को जागर्ति ?

ko jāgarti?

Who is awakened?

विवेकी ।

vivekī

One who is able to discriminate.

A proper understanding of the meaning of intelligence and lack of intelligence is a crucial point to progress on the path of knowledge and liberation; therefore it is important to further clarify this concept. Lack of intelligence is like deep sleep, where a person is lost and does not remember who he is, where he is or what he should do. Intelligence should help us to be well awake and attentive to life and things, to be able to discriminate what is good from what is bad, what should be done from what should not be done. One who thinks he is intelligent but cannot distinguish between such things is actually dreaming in deep slumber.

का निद्रा ?

kā nidrā?

What is sleep?

मूढता जन्तोः ।

mūḍhatā jantōḥ

The stupidity of people.

If lack of intelligence and discrimination can be equated with slumber, we can say that sleep is contagious and easily spreads in society when there are no attentive persons that work to wake people up. Just like someone who is asleep cannot

understand what is going on around him and often replies in irrational and inconsistent ways to those who try to wake him up, the mass of people in general is not very evolved and prefers to follow their own dreams or even nightmares rather than listening to wake up calls. Besides, it is a very well known fact that sleeping people do not like to be awakened and may react unpleasantly when someone tries to wake them up, so usually giving good teachings and advice to fools can be a very dangerous task.

Mudha is one who blindly trudges on a path that does not lead anywhere, panting and sweating under a useless burden, and has no time to listen about the real purpose of life. This definition also applies to those who carry a heavy burden of scholarship without applying it in life: they are not different from a donkey that carries a load of books.

Verse 11

नलिनी-दल-गत-जलवत् तरलं किम् ?

nalini-dala-gata-jalavat taralam kim?

What is temporary like water on a lotus leaf?

यौवनं धनं च आयुः

yauvanam, dhanam ca ayuh

Youth, wealth, health and life.

This poetic image of a water droplet on the leaf of a lotus flower depicts the flimsiness of our position in this world — at any moment it can roll and slide away with the movements of the wind and with the ripples of the water surface. A mere frog leaping nearby, and there!, our water droplet is gone. Therefore we should not wait for our old age to start studying and practicing spiritual knowledge: we do not know if we will actually attain old age, and if such retirement years will be free from the serious impediments created by bad health and financial insecurity.

In particular, the meaning of *ayuh* includes life (in the sense of duration of life) as well as well-being and health, according to the philosophical concepts of medicine taught in *Ayur Veda*, where health is something more than lack of disease: it is vital force, long duration of life and well-being.

कथय पुनः के शशिनः किरणसमाः ?

kathaya punah, ke śaśināḥ kirāṇa-samāḥ?

Tell me again, what is similar to the moon rays?

सज्जना एव ।

sajjanā eva

Only good people.

Here is another poetic image inspired by the observation of nature: after a long and exhausting summer day, the pleasing and refreshing moon rays soothe the mind and brighten the night without hurting our eyes. Good people (*sat jana*) who have a spiritual consciousness and are faithful to the principles of religion (*dharmā*) irradiate peace and freshness because they are not out to exploit others for their own personal profit; they are satisfied in themselves and always want to work for the benefit of everyone. Their company is a real pleasure and brings blessings and tranquility to the souls wounded and fatigued by the struggle for survival.

Verse 12

को नरकः ?

ko narakaḥ?

What is hell?

परवशता

para-vaśatā

Being under someone else's control.

The concept of hell (*naraka*) as a place of punishment for criminals is found in Vedic scriptures as opposed to paradise or heaven (*svarga*) as a place of pleasure for good and pious people. However, both these places are not eternal, and simply constitute a stage in our general journey of life.

Just like heaven essentially means enjoying great power and freedom, the sufferings of hell consist mainly in being subjected to others' control, and having to suffer all kinds of miseries and pains without being able to fight back or escape. Being under someone else's control means having to put up with blackmailing, to be forced to betray truth, to lose oneself and to humiliate and annihilate one's self even to complete degradation. It is important to make a distinction between a free, healthy and mature relationship with other people and a relationship based on dependence and control, born from attachment and fear. While the former brings benefit and happiness for all, the second is only a source of suffering and degradation.

किं सौख्यम् ?

kiṁ saukhyam?

What is well-being?

सर्वसंग-विरतिः या ।

sarva-saṅga-viratiḥ yā

Detachment from all kinds of contacts.

Sukha means “happiness” and *saukhyā* “well-being”. As stated in the previous verse, depending on others causes suffering and anxiety, because we are not free to follow the right path for our personal progress. On the contrary, being detached from any relationship brings peace and well-being, because we are free to engage in the real work of life. *Rati* means “attachment” and *virati* is its contrary, i.e. detachment. *Saṅga* (*sa ṅga*) is “contact”, “relationship”, “being near”, and also “being member of”, “being part of”.

When we are spontaneously free from attachment towards material relationships we finally attain peace and tranquility in solitude, where we can work without disturbances for our benefit and the benefit of others. *Bhagavad gīta* (6.10, 13.11) also recommends that one should live alone (*vivikta dese, ekaki*) in order to avoid the disturbances created by people who are not interested in the cultivation of *yoga* and spiritual life.

किं साध्यम् ?

kiṁ sādhyam?

What should be done?

भूतहितम् ।

bhūta-hitam

The work for the benefit of creatures.

To further clarify the meaning of the two previous verses, that encourage us to break free from material ties and from attachment to worldly relationships, this verse stresses that renouncing attachments does not mean indifference or lack of love for others. Rather, detachment from a limited circle of material relationships constitutes the best opportunity to act in a positive way for the benefit of all. A *sannyasi* has the greatest family of all: the family of Jagannatha, Vasudeva’s *kutumbakam*!

Bhuta indicates all those who exist, and this means that a realized person sees equally all living entities as parts of his own universal family. All the living entities, in whatever bodily form, are part of the Supreme and therefore are worthy of our affection and consideration. To show indifference or even cruelty towards some living entity is contrary to the principles of saintly behavior (*sadacara*) and renunciation.

प्रियं च किम् प्राणिनाम् ?

priyam ca kim prāṇinām?

What is dear to all creatures?

असवः ।

asavaḥ

Life.

Prani indicates a living being in general, a definition that includes animals and plants. A wise person who has renounced all forms of attachment must work actively for the benefit of all creatures, and the most precious and dear asset for all living beings is naturally life itself.

This verse implies that we should never kill any living being unnecessarily, and directly sustains the importance of vegetarianism and non-violence in the spiritual and cultural life of human beings.

Verse 13

को अनर्थफलः ?

ko anartha-phalaḥ?

What brings evil fruits?

मानः

mānaḥ

Pride.

Anartha means “something which should not be pursued”, “a negative thing”, or “something unwanted”. Pride and arrogance, born from a material position (social, economic, academic and so on), cause innumerable unnecessary problems and serious damage to ourselves and others, because a proud person takes a position he is not actually fit for, and mistreats others with the idea of being superior to them. Living apart from others and dedicating oneself to religious or spiritual pursuits rather than ordinary occupations is a good thing, but it should not be done out of pride and conceit.

In the Vedic social system the excellence of great persons is manifested in their humility in front of the Supreme, of the spiritualists and other good people, and not in defying the religious principles. On the other hand, in the jungle of material relationships the biggest and most ruthless and ferocious animal becomes the leader.

Unfortunately an animal leader is continuously challenged by others who are similar to him, and his life is short and full of problems and anxieties. One who climbs higher than the others becomes the favorite target for an angry mob, and when he falls down, his sufferings are terrible. On the contrary, in a society where spiritualists and teachers, elders and superiors are naturally respected and each person behaves in a decent and respectful way, arrogance becomes less prominent. However, we should always remain careful: when people show respect to us, we should not start thinking we are really great, because the we could gradually lose contact with reality. This would bring about several problems and defects for our personal life and degradation in society.

का सुखदा ?

kā sukha-dā?

What brings happiness?

साधुजन-मैत्री ।

sādhu-jana maitrī

Friendship with good and saintly people.

Although renunciation, detachment, and a peaceful life in solitude are a source of well-being, freedom, progress and joy, we must not neglect the importance of positive relationships with good and saintly people, the *sādhus*, those who are situated on the path of spiritual progress and whose friendship constantly encourages us to carry on in spite of the inevitable difficulties. Of course, the meaning of *sādhu* is not defined by a dress or religious affiliation, but by genuine qualities and activities. Those who believe that relationships must always come with material attachment have a limited intelligence. Real friendship and love should actually be free from material attachment and pursued for the ultimate benefit of everyone — for ourselves and for others. In relationships, we must avoid the two extremes of searching only for the benefit of others and searching only for one's own benefit — both are detrimental and dangerous, ultimately creating suffering for all the people involved. Balanced and progressive relationships are actually a blessing, because friends help and support each other, are a source of inspiration and often of reciprocal verification for personal realizations and defects. Being free and detached is extremely important, but being unable to keep good relationships with good people may be a problem.

सर्वव्यसन-विनाशे को दक्षः ?

sarva-vyasana-vināśe ko dakṣaḥ?

Who is expert in destroying all sorrow?

सर्वदा त्यागी ।

sarvadā tyāgī

One who is always renounced.

Tyaga, renunciation and detachment, is again recommended in this verse as the antidote to all sufferings. One who accepts everything with an open and detached mind, giving up expectations and illusions, will never be disappointed and unhappy, because he will positively appreciate whatever Providence sends him. Everything is temporary in this world, so we should always be ready to let go both of good things and bad things when they naturally disappear in the course of time.

In his famous song *Bhaja Govinda*, Adi Shankara reminds us: *yavad vittoparjana-sakta stavad nija-parivaro raktah, pascat jivati jarjaradebe, vartam ko 'pi na pricchati gebe*, “When a man is wealthy and able to support his family, everyone shows him affection and care, but when life’s sunset arrives, not even his nearest kin will approach him to ask about his well-being.”

And, *arthanamanartham bhavaya nityam, nasti tatab sukhalesah satyam, putradapi dhanabhajam bhitih sarvatraisha vibita ritih*, “Remember, material possessions and achievements are illusory and bring suffering: they do not give any real happiness. A rich man even fears his own son: this is happening everywhere.”

However, we should not confuse genuine renunciation with false renunciation. As *Bhagavad gita* (6.1) explains, *anasritah karma-phalam karyam karma karoti yab, sa sannyasi ca yogi ca, na niragnir na cakriyah*, “The real *sannyasi*, the real *yogi*, is one who selflessly fulfills all his duties in society and performs the proper actions where required, without any attachment to enjoying the fruits of his activities — not one who escapes from action in the name of some rules of renunciation.

It is also important to clarify the difference between a neutral detachment, recommended by this verse, and negative detachment, which is nothing but rejection — merely another form of attachment: that is, attachment to the contrary of what we reject, or to being free from what we reject.

Verse 14

किं मरणम् ?

kin maranam?

What is death?

मूर्खत्वम् ।

murkhatvam

Foolishness.

In verse 10 the dullness of blockheads was compared to slumber, while this verse even compares it to death. Sleep is a kind of minor death, which makes us inert and insensitive and prevents us from taking proper action. One who is a fool beyond

any hope of awakening is actually not better than a dead man — we cannot expect anything good from him.

किं च अनर्घम् ।

kiṁ ca anarḡham?

What is priceless?

यदवसरे दत्तम् ।

yad avasare dattam

That which is given at the proper time.

Among all the precious things in the world, the one that has most value is something we actually need at any given time. If we were lost in the desert, hungry and thirsty, all the gold in the world would have no value compared to water and simple food. The real value of a thing is not in its market quotations, but in its real utility for us at the moment when we really need it: what is the value of amassing material possessions we are not really using? Something that was purchased at a high price but has no real use is only good for the garbage bin, while finding a useful piece of old string or a simple stick on the street in an emergency situation will make us rejoice as if we had found a priceless treasure.

आमरणात् किं शाल्यम् ?

āmarañāt kiṁ śālyam?

What pricks us until death?

प्रच्छन्नं यत् कृतं पापम् ।

pracchannam yat kṛtam pāpam

A bad action committed in secrecy.

An action committed with full awareness of its negativity and kept secret gets stuck in our conscience like a thorn and constantly scratches our thoughts and our hearts, even if no one else is blaming us. Actually we are the most severe judges we will ever have and the staunchest executioners to punish our crimes, because we know perfectly well what we have done and why. We are the first to pronounce the verdict and execute the sentence, in this life and the next, until we feel we have paid for our crimes and are liberated from the ignorance that generated them.

This also applies to those who seem to be impervious to guilt and keep committing horrible actions without any hesitation: sooner or later they will realize the enormity of their wrongdoings and be willing to atone for them, usually after having been beaten into reason by the karmic reactions of their crimes.

Verse 15

कुत्र विधेयो यत्नः ?

kutra vidheyo yatnaḥ?

Where should we direct our efforts?

विधाभ्यासे, सदौषधे दाने ।

vidyābhyāse, sad-auśadhe, dāne

In the acquisition of knowledge, in proper medicines and in charity.

When we speak of active work for the benefit of oneself and others (*sva-para-hitaya udyatam janma*, verse 5), it is important to understand properly what this work is about. It is very important that dharmic people direct their efforts to the protection and assistance of more vulnerable people for their own welfare, too, because we all live in society, including those who officially adopt the order of renunciation. Neglecting the weaker sections of society is never a good policy, because others will take advantage of our weakness and exploit these most vulnerable people for their adharmic purposes.

To effectively work for the benefit and progress of society, we must concentrate our efforts on precise objectives:

1. Literacy campaigns and diffusion of culture; this will bring greater sensitivity and intelligence in the mass of people, a greater freedom of choice and more chances of cultivating the most elevated qualities and improve the quality of life. Culture and education will also help developing the principles of religion, hygiene and cleanliness, and encourage respect among individuals, thus creating peace, cooperation and prosperity in society. Within this crucial assistance work we must include the spreading of spiritual culture, publications that raise the awareness level of people and general knowledge, public discussions to improve the individual and social understanding of the reality of life and the teachings of the scriptures.

2. Proper medical assistance is another fundamental factor in social work; however, it is important to qualify this medical assistance as *sat*, that means “good” - specifically proper, non-offensive, non-toxic and possibly preventive. Bad medicines that have bad side effects or are given without discrimination or respect for the patient do not really help those who suffer and therefore should be substituted with good medicines that actually solve the health issues without creating more and more serious problems in future.

3. Charitable assistance in emergencies constitutes a form of help to those members of the human family who are in difficulty, not simply referring to money (which is often badly managed by corrupt people or badly utilized by ignorant but needy people), but to true loving assistance and care which wins people’s hearts

and elevates their feelings. The word *charity* comes from the Latin word *charitas*, meaning “fraternal love”; it is not enough to give charity to the needy without respect and affection (see verse 25).

अवधीरणा क्व कार्या ?

avadhiraṇā kva kārya?

Where should we show lack of interest?

खलु, परयोषित्सु परधनेषु ।

khalu, para-yoṣitsu, para-dhaneṣu

Towards bad people, the wife of another, and the property of another.

The word *avadbūta* defines a person who does not want anything, and is not concerned by social conventions or attracted by material benefits. The lack of interest recommended in this verse refers to lack of attraction. It means that we are not interested in obtaining something.

The tendency to see everything around us as a possible source of personal pleasure should be curbed very carefully: we should not turn to bad people to ask for favors, we should not think fondly about the wife of another or the things that belong to others.

Verse 16

को अहर्निशम् अनुचिन्त्यः ?

ko ahar-niśam anucintayah?

What should we think about, day and night?

संसार-असारता , न तु प्रमदा ।

samsāra-asāratā, na tu pramadā

About the futility of material life, and certainly not about what is intoxicating for our senses and mind.

This verse and the next one explain very nicely the meaning of the previous verse. A person who often thinks about bad people who have hurt or wronged him, or about other people’s wives and others’ properties gets lost in unhealthy fantasies of revenge, jealousy, envy and lust, which can do no good to anyone and cause him to lose contact with reality and hence to slide into madness. *Pramada* means in fact “madness” or “intoxication”.

On the contrary, by meditating on the futility and impermanence of material life we get cured from the inebriation of material desire and become able to live in a real and healthy way. The wicked people who are now prospering and bullying others are doomed to fall sooner or later, and they will pay for their sins even without our intervention. The wives of others will soon become old and lose their attraction even if today they may look beautiful and desirable, and if one carries them away from their legitimate husband, out of infatuation or lust, there will be only troubles.

The properties of other people are also temporary and limited: wealth and property come and go very quickly, and at the time of death we should leave them behind anyway — no one can take property or money beyond the threshold of death.

का प्रेयसी विधेया ?

kā preyasī vidheyā?

What should we cultivate with love?

करुणा दीनेषु । सज्जने मैत्री ।

karuṇā dīneṣu, sajjane maitrī

Compassion and kindness to those who suffer or have been neglected,
and friendship with good and saintly people.

The lack of interest (*avadhirana*) recommended in the previous verse certainly does not contradict the need for compassion and kindness to those who are suffering (*dina*). Taking care of people out of pure selflessness and compassion (even of formerly wicked people or the wives of others who are suffering or find themselves in emergency) is a charitable act free from selfish material motivations, and therefore it should not be condemned. Rather, compassion for those who suffer and friendship for good people should actually be very dear things to us (*preyasi*). Even compassion and kindness for the neglected or suffering properties of others is a commendable act, provided it is free from personal attachment of all kinds from our part.

Good people (*sat-jana*) have sufficient understanding, wisdom and compassion to help us to see when we should care and for what, therefore if we keep friendship with them we will always benefit from their good advice and guidance, without falling on either side of excess and mistake. The positive concept of relationships already mentioned in verse 13 is here repeated to help us understand its importance, further clarifying the need of selflessness and detachment from material gains.

A true *sannyasi* is not one who mistreats and neglects others, or teaches such kind of behaviors. Rather, he is a friend for all good people and a compassionate benefactor for those who suffer.

Verse 17

कण्ठगतैरपि असुभिः कस्य हि आत्मा न शक्यते जेतुम् ?

kaṅṭhagatair api asubhiḥ kasya hi ātmā na śakyate jetum?

Who can never be reformed, even at the cost of life?

मूर्खस्य शङ्कितस्य च विषादिनो वा कृतघ्नस्य ।

mūrkhasya śaṅkitasya ca viṣādino vā kṛtaghnasya

A fool, a doubter, a morose person and the ungrateful.

A teacher or reformer must know how to channel his efforts in spreading knowledge, and concentrate mostly where his work is most useful and effective. Just as it is not easy to find a good teacher, it is also very rare to find a good student or disciple - one who is intelligent, sincere and ready to listen and apply teachings into his life without reservations. If the student does not accept the teachings properly, all our efforts will be fruitless, even if we were ready to die in the attempt of giving the knowledge or if the student himself was about to die.

One who has no intelligence may listen carefully and try to put teachings in practice, but the results will be disastrous. More likely, a fool will not even be able to realize the importance of the teachings and therefore he will have no interest for learning. In this case, insisting in trying to reform such a fool is a mere loss of energy and could even be dangerous.

A cynical person will constantly argue about everything without ever accepting anything, he is full of doubts and hesitations and never decides to try and put teachings into practice. His position is really miserable. Indeed, the world is full of cheating and cheaters, but one who doubts everything and everyone will never have any chance to discover truth and therefore he has already lost all opportunities of finding something of value, engaging in a good path and find happiness.

Bhagavad gita (4.40) says, *ajñas casraddadhanas ca samsayatma vinasyati, nayam loko 'sti na paro, na sukham samsayatmanah*, "Fools who have no knowledge or faith in scriptures and always doubt of everything will meet with destruction; in this world or in the next, a cynic never finds happiness."

Trying to reform a cynic is like pouring water in a broken vessel: nothing remains, in spite of all our efforts. One who is always morose and depressed has no interest in life or in progress. Some difficult and depressing periods may happen to anyone, but those who build their lifestyle on depression and self-defeat are very bad candidates for progressive knowledge.

For these people ignorance and self-destructive patterns are a solid reference point in the universe, which gives the a false sense of security and steadiness, therefore it

is not possible to raise them from that position through good teachings and advice. A masochist, one who enjoys sufferings (real or imaginary), can not and will not listen to anyone.

The fourth class of hopeless cases consists of ungrateful people, those who do not appreciate good teachings and the path of spiritual progress, and rather suffer from a deeper cynical nature and a lack of ethical values than those who declare themselves as agnostics or atheists, because they do not even believe in good people or good things. Actually ungrateful people are not interested in learning anything; rather their motivation is merely in materially exploiting the teacher in some way or another: when such a thinking pattern has become a habit, it is very difficult to change it or learn something really useful.

Thus, a teacher should become detached from these types of people and not waste time on them, when there are any sincere and eager souls who may be instructed instead.

Verse 18

कः साधुः ?

kaḥ sādhuḥ?

Who is a good and saintly person?

सदघत्तः

sad-ghatta

One who does good.

The word *sadhu* is widely used in Vedic culture, and in contemporary Indian society it often defines celibate and renounced "monks" who loiter here and there without a fixed residence or live in some temple by begging. Sometimes, however, they are just false renunciates, people who do not have any culture or practical ability, who choose the life of a beggar as a livelihood and find it materially convenient to clad themselves in saffron clothes in order to increase their income by exploiting the religious feelings in the mass of people. Such people can easily be recognized by the fact that they do not care for the benefit of others. Rather, they behave selfishly and shamelessly, always ready to use their alms or received benefits for their own personal sense gratification — often even trying to fight for a higher position of power and prestige by bullying or creating problems for those who are more humble and modest.

The bad example of these people causes the society to disrespect real renunciates who tirelessly work for the benefit of all, so false *sadhus* should be exposed for the benefit of the entire society. Actually a genuine *sadhu* is a good and saintly person, who works according to the religious principles and always strives for the benefit of

everyone (*visva-kahyana*). In this sense *sadhu* is a synonym of *sat-jana* (a good, spiritual person). Verses 13 and 16 recommend friendship with saintly people (*sadhus*) as a source of happiness and a valuable asset, because by associating with people we learn their ways and develop their same qualities.

What is good? An act done for individual and collective spiritual progress, as verse 5 teaches. Verse 15 also explains that good activities are centered on acquisition and spreading of knowledge, on developing and distributing good medicine and assisting those in need. Verse 12 explains that we should always dedicate our efforts to the benefit of all creatures, starting from protecting them from unnecessary violence. Sadly, there is sometimes a necessary violence or force, which however must be applied with knowledge and detachment, without hostility or hatred for anyone, as *ahimsa* actually means lack of hatred or hostility, not abstention from the application of force. When a dangerous living being (a tiger or a criminal, for example) is seriously threatening the life of innocent people, the force applied to prevent and stop such danger is not considered real violence, because it is necessary to protect the innocent. It is actually to be considered real *ahimsa*, non-violence.

कम् अधमम् आचक्षते ?

kam̐ adhamam̐ ācakṣate?

Who is a low-class person?

तु असद्वृत्तम् ।

tu asad-ghattam

Certainly someone who commits evil actions.

Here is the completion of the previous answer: if a good and saintly person is someone who does good, certainly one who commits evil actions is exactly the opposite of a good person — in other words, a low-class person. Many people think that social position (wealth, station etc) is the proper measuring rod to evaluate the class of a person, his elevation or degradation, but actually an intelligent and knowledgeable person has a much better way to evaluate people.

One who acts in a bad and wicked way is a degraded low-class person, even if he is at the top of the social ladder, or in a very prestigious place in politics, institutionalized religion or academic culture. In fact, these degraded people who occupy a high social position are a real disease for the whole social body, because from their prestigious material positions they give a bad example to the masses and become directly responsible for the collective disasters in society. *Bhagavad gita* (3.21) explains, *yad yad acarati sresthas tat tad evetarō janah, sa yat pramanam kurute lokas tad anuvartate*, “The general public imitate the behavior of the prominent figures of society by considering them as role models. Whatever these prominent people do is automatically considered good by society and worthy to be imitated.”

केन जितं जगदेतत् ?
kena jitaṁ jagad etat?
Who will conquer this world?

सत्य-तितिक्षावता पुंसा ।
satya-tītikṣāvataṁ puṁsā

A man who has truthfulness and tolerance.

In order to establish the principles of religion in society and overcome the opposition of irreligion, it is necessary to possess truthfulness and tolerance at the same time. In fact, nothing really solid and valuable can be built without truthfulness, because sooner or later lies and untruth will become apparent, creating great embarrassment for everyone and destroying the work we thought we had done. Even if such lies were foolishly intended to attract ignorant people to a good path or “improving the public image”, nonetheless their effect will be negative, because whatever is built on falsity is like a house built on sand — at any moment it can collapse and slide away.

Defending truthfulness and maintaining the principles of religion requires a great deal of tolerance. First of all, because in the world there are many liars and cheaters and many cynics: one who proclaims the truth will often be neglected, disrespected and even persecuted, and therefore he needs to be very tolerant. Furthermore, not everyone likes to hear the truth: many people prefer to go on sleeping, deeply immersed in ignorance or untruth.

Secondly, truth requires constant work in order to be protected against bad influences, and must constantly be deepened and widened, because it has many facets according to the perspectives of different people and is all-encompassing. For example, the true vision of the horizon is different while we progress in climbing a mountain: can we say that the vision of those who are still at the foothills is not true?

What is true and right for a person may not be applicable to another: an elephant has a different “truth” from an ant’s, and sees and understands the world differently. If we want to establish truthfulness in the world we must consider the qualities and tendencies of every single group or individual and offer each a path which is suitable for them, for the benefit of all.

Right and proper activities for a soldier are true for him, while they would be wrong and false for a farmer, a priest or a child. Not everyone is able to understand truth in the most complete and vast sense, therefore we must apply tolerance by widening our own mental vision, embracing the vision of others, appreciating their personal sincerity and truthfulness and encouraging them in the most useful way.

Verse 19

कस्मै नमांसि देवाः कुर्वन्ति ?

kasmai namāṁsi devāḥ kurvanti?

To whom the Devas offer their homage?

दया-प्रदानाय ।

dayā-pradānāya

To a compassionate person.

The Devas mentioned in this verse are secondary forms of the the Supreme Lord, Isvara, manifested for managing the universe. Even those that belong to the category of *jīvas* should never be disrespected or neglected, because they are our superiors. They are the partial manifestations of Isvara himself, powerful and saintly divine beings who live at a much higher level than humans. Nevertheless, they appreciate human beings who try to perform good deeds and help others who are in difficulty. *Daya* means “mercy”, “compassion”, “charity” and defines affectionate feelings for those who need help — a feeling which must also translate into beneficial, practical and sincere action.

कस्मात् उद्वेगः स्यात् ?

tasmāt udvegaḥ syāt?

What should make us shudder?

संसार-अरण्यतः सुधियः ।

samsāra-aranyataḥ sudhiyaḥ

One who has a noble mind shudders in front of the jungle of material life.

To expand the teaching of the previous answer, this verse reveals material life (*samsara*) as a jungle (*aranya*) full of dangers and predators, where compassion (*daya*) is very rare indeed (and therefore worthy of admiration even from the Devas). Birth, death, disease and suffering are the basic pillars of life in the material world, and this is certainly a horrible condition. The law of the jungle favors the strongest, cleverest and most ruthless, who survive and prey on weaker victims, and establishes that every living being must feed on other beings. When we live in the middle of animals, humility and meekness will be mistaken for weakness, and we are quickly shown that the weak are mistreated and picked at by everyone. A jungle is a home for tigers, lions and wolves but also for jackals, vultures, hyenas, snakes, monkeys and frogs.

There are not only dangerous carnivorous predators, but mean and wretched animals too, who are always ready to prey on the disgraces and sufferings of others, venomous and sneaky beings who bite and poison those who have benefited them,

shameless and foolish beings who insult, harass and challenge others as a habit and a way of life, and noisy creatures always croaking around with no idea or understanding of what they are saying. A noble-minded person, with sufficient intelligence, will shudder at the sight of such a way of living, because he feels compassion and affection for all living entities.

Therefore, if we live in the jungle of the material world, we should at least try to keep contact with civilized and good people (verses 11, 13, 16, etc.) whose company will relieve and soothe our inevitable sufferings born from the contact with the animalistic and degraded people who inhabit the jungle of material life.

Verse 20

कस्य वशे प्राणिगणः ?

kasya vaśe prāṇi-gaṇaḥ?

Who can control all creatures?

सत्य-प्रियभाषिणो विनीतस्य ।

satya-priyabhāṣiṇo vinītasya

**One who is devoid of pride and tells the truth
in a kind and pleasing manner.**

Someone who must live in the jungle of the material world can establish some measure of good relationships with animals by learning how to deal with them. An intelligent person does not need to be aggressive: truth can also be told with kindness, by choosing the best way to present things — although this verse does not recommend flattering others by saying false things or giving up the principles of religion to propitiate animalistic creatures. If one is kind and affectionate, avoids falsity, is free from self-conceit, and does not try to impose his presence or control, he can obtain much from others, even from materialistic people.

In fact, often animals react out of fear, even when they attack. The life of a jungle animal is steeped in fear, suffering and anxiety, while all living entities naturally need affection, compassion and kindness — so if someone is able to give affection, compassion and kindness, he becomes able to control others through love. However, to control others we must have a positive motivation, worthy of the principles of religion, otherwise we will lose the right path.

क्व स्थातव्यम् ?

kva sthātavyam?

To what should we stick?

न्याय्ये पथि दृष्ट-अदृष्ट-लाभादये ।

nyāyye pathi dr̥ṣṭa-adṛṣṭa-lābhādaye

To the right path, where we can obtain many
visible and invisible advantages.

Patha is the path that leads us through the forest of material life, by supplying us at the same time with guidance, nourishment and shelter. The visible and invisible advantages mentioned in this verse are exactly those described in the introductory verse of the *Prasnottara Ratna Malika* (1).

This verse suggests that we should not only be interested in visible advantages (*pravṛtti*), but also to the invisible ones (*nivṛtti*). A gross materialist is unable to see those benefits that go beyond the immediate selfish advantage and self-aggrandizement, while a dharmic person is able to see also what is usually “invisible” to the ordinary and attached persons.

A person who possesses the real vision (*drashtu*) can see the future consequences of karmic actions, the glorious Paramatma residing in the hearts of all living entities and in every atom, and the eternal Truth of Dharma.

The poetic image of the path also brings us to meditate on personal progress and evolution, as the path of progress, the right path, should take us upwards, towards light (*asato ma sad gamaya, tamaso ma jyotir gamaya, mrityor ma amritam gamaya*). As we proceed on this path our vision gets better and better, wider and more complete, so we become “seers” rather than blind blunderers.

Verse 21

को अन्धः ?

ko andhaḥ?

Who is blind?

यो अकार्यरतः ।

yo akārya-rataḥ

One who is attached to performing bad deeds.

While walking on a path in the middle of a forest, it is necessary to have sufficient power of sight, hearing and expression, otherwise we will find ourselves in difficult and dangerous situations. Real blindness, described in this verse, is the spiritual blindness of those who enjoy bad deeds and are attached to adharmic activities. *Akarya* means “what should not be done”, as explained in verse 2, and the negative

results of material attachment are described in verses 6, 7, 12, 13. One who has attachment for bad deeds in themselves is especially blind, because he cannot see where he is going and will surely fall in some ditch as a result of bad *karma*. Many know that bad habits — like smoking, drinking liquors etc. — are harmful, but giving them up is a totally different thing; we must have a proper vision to be able to see their future results, the waste of energy, money, time and the sufferings caused to ourselves and others. Therefore, it is very important to make the decisive step from theory to practice, especially in spiritual life.

को बधिरः ?

ko badhiraḥ?

Who is deaf?

यो हितानि न शृणोति ।

yo hitāni na śṛṇoti

One who does not listen to good advice given for his benefit.

Good advice is given for the benefit of the concerned person and for the benefit of the entire society too, because everyone is connected to all others in this world, and each action of each person has a reaction that affects the entire community. Advice is always a difficult merchandise to sell and buy, even when it is given with good intentions.

Many people are too proud to accept advice, but this is not a good policy. Chanakya, in his *Hitopadesa* (15), teaches: *visbad apy amritam grahyam amedhyad api kancana, nicad apy uttamam jñanam stri ratnam dushkulad api*, “One should be able to skim nectar even from a pot of poison, accept gold even when coming from a contaminated place, consider good advice even when coming from an unqualified person, and marry a good woman even if she comes from a bad family.”

On the other side, we need to use discrimination in accepting the advice of others, as not all “advice” is “good advice”: one who gives advice may not know all the factors of the problem and therefore he may not have a complete vision of the situation of those who are supposed to follow the advice. Furthermore, giving theoretical advice may be very easy, while following it practically in a difficult situation could be another story altogether. In any case, an intelligent person should listen to all the suggestions he gets, because in each and every one (even in apparently foolish ideas) he may find some valuable truth.

One who does not listen to good people’s advice is really deaf, because he has no way of becoming aware of the dangers in the forest. Physical defects such as loss of sight and hearing power are not as dangerous and real as the spiritual defects of those who willingly indulge in nefarious activities and do not heed the warnings of good people.

को मूकः ?
ko mūkah?
Who is dumb?

यः काले प्रियाणि वक्तुं न जानाति ।
yaḥ kāle priyāni vaktuṁ na jānāti

One who does not know how to say the proper kind words at the right time.

Certainly one who has no speaking power will have much difficulty in expressing himself and helping others with affectionate and kind words, but if this is only due to a physical defect, one can express himself by writing, bodily language or in other ways, without the need of speaking. However, someone who does not know what to say or does not have anything to say when the proper opportunity arises is wasting his God-given power of speech that should be used for saying beneficial and useful things when required.

Many people talk and some people talk too much, but if they are devoid of compassion and affection for others, all their talking will remain useless, because the words of those who do not act for the benefit of the creatures do not have real power or relevance.

Verse 22

किं दानम् ।
kiṁ dānam?
What is charity?

अनाकांक्षम् ।
anākāṅkṣam

Not expecting anything in return for what we give or do.

Real charity is not about giving or doing something in order to obtain a material benefit: this would amount to a commercial transaction, a business investment. “Electoral” charity that is done only for a show is not real charity.

Rather it can become a sinister form of exploitation where the expenditures incurred are certainly smaller than the material benefits one can obtain by alluring ignorant and gullible people, who are usually forgotten by the “benefactor” when he has obtained his purpose from them.

One who gives in charity to acquire glory, respect from society, gratitude or worship, fame, advertisement or profit of any kind is already receiving his retribution, while one who gives without expecting anything in return — out of affection and compassion, for sense of justice or faith in a good cause — is really praiseworthy and is working for the real benefit of himself and others.

किं मित्रम् ?

kiṁ mitram?

Who is a friend?

यो निवारयति पापात् ।

yo nivārayati pāpāt

One who saves us from bad actions.

Friendship with good people (*sadhu* or *sat-jana*) saves us from sin because it keeps our mind and our activities engaged in a positive way and helps us in the difficult times when we might be tempted to give up the proper path. Sinful and wrong activities (*papa*) stain the consciousness of the performer and create bad consequences. Sometimes fools get angry with those who try to dissuade them from committing sins; we should rather thank such friends and love them dearly.

को अलंकारः ?

ko alaṅkārah?

What is an ornament?

शीलम् ।

śīlam

Good character.

Character and good behavior are much more valuable than riches and jewels; we cannot judge the value of a person from the money he owns or from his social position instead of considering his or her real personal qualities. All good qualities are based on knowledge, as Chanakya suggests: *nakshatra bhushanam chandro, narinam bhushanam patib, prithivi bhushanam raja, vidya sarvasya bhushanam*, “The moon is the ornament of the constellations, a good husband is the best ornament for a woman, a good king is the best ornament for the earth, and knowledge is the supreme ornament of everything and everyone.” (*Hitopadesa*, 18)

किं वाचां मण्डनम् ?

kiṁ vācāṁ maṇḍanam?

What is the ornament of speech?

सत्यम् ।

satyam

Truth.

In Vedic culture, ornaments are considered a mark of auspiciousness. Many speakers love the act of speaking for itself, for the fame and profit it gives, or talk with the aim to impress others with their learning and brilliance, but if their speeches are not centered on truth all decorations and ornaments, metaphors and rhetorical figures will be valueless. Even worse, if such speeches are specifically engineered to cover a lack of knowledge or distort truth, they become extremely inauspicious.

Word jugglery and an empty show of scholarship are not really going to help us when we come to face the supreme test of life: *bhaja govinda bhaja govinda, bhaja govinda mudha-mate, samprapte sannibhite kale, nabi nabi rakeshati dukriñ karane*, “Worship Govinda, serve Govinda, glorify Govinda, you fools! Grammatical erudition and academic scholarship will not be able to protect you once the hour of death comes”, (*Bhaja Govindam*)

Verse 23

विद्युद्विलसित-चपलं किम् ?

vidyud vilasita-capalam kim?

What disappears as quickly as lightning?

दुर्जनसङ्गतिः युवतयश्च ।

durjana-saṅgatiḥ yuvatayaś ca

Bad company and young people.

Young and immature people are generally not very trustworthy; they can easily change their minds because they are still searching for a personal sense of identity. During adolescence we go through a serious crisis as we need to create an independent image of ourselves but we still do not know what we should do in life and we need to learn patience and perseverance in order to succeed in life. Generally, youthful enthusiasm is essentially attracted to new things, and disappears when the object of interest becomes “old”.

In particular, the sentimental interest of youngsters — especially of young men (and women) who have ample choices of marital partners — is easily attracted and distracted. In a twinkling, a young materialist can jilt and dump a girl (or a boy) to run after new ideas and discoveries, new people and relationships, new things to do and to experience.

In this regard we must explain, however, that according to Vedic culture the concept of “young” and “old” does not simply refer to physical age, but it should be rather considered as referring to the intellectual, cultural and emotional age, as we will see in verse 43. A person who is very young in physical age may be an “elder” in wisdom and determination, while a person who has attained physical old age may still be an immature and ignorant child in his understanding and behavior. So we must always be careful not to identify people with their physical bodies and appearance.

As far as bad company is concerned, it is a very well known fact that false friends disappear as quickly as lightning as soon as they see some difficulties or feel that advantages for them are becoming less attractive. When you really need help and support in difficult times, you will never be able to find these false friends, because they regularly disappear with some pretext or even without bothering to give a pretext. After exploiting you and even getting you into troubles, they dump you without a second thought, because such people are simply interested to get some personal benefit and have no intention to cultivate a sincere and honest relationship.

कुलशील-निष्प्रकम्पाः के कलिकाले अपि ?

kula-śīla-niṣprakampāḥ ke kali-kāle api?

**Who is not shaken from his noble family traditions and
from proper behavior, even in Kali-yuga?**

सज्जनाः एव ।

saj-janāḥ eva

Only good and saintly people.

According to the *Vedas*, the world constantly goes through a cycle of four ages - Satya, Treta, Dvapara and Kali - and in this cycle the principles of religion and opulence gradually become weaker. It is important to clarify here that the name of Kali yuga (*kali* means "black") has no connection with the black form of the Mother Goddess who is called Kali. This will be apparent in the Sanskrit orthography as they are two different words - one masculine (referred to the Kali purusha) and the other feminine.

Kali yuga is the age of ignorance, quarrel and hypocrisy in which Vedic culture becomes degraded to the point of being unrecognizable. In fact in Kali-yuga (that is said to have started about 5000 years ago) the duration of life decreases, intelligence dwindles as well as good fortune, wealth and health. Life becomes more and more difficult and maintaining the lofty Vedic principles becomes a great effort, so much that the vast majority of the noble families who used to have high principles become degraded and forget or pervert religious and spiritual traditions, choosing to engage rather in unbound sense gratification, social prestige, and hoarding of material wealth.

In such a degraded society, where teachers and heads of the society are ignorant and do not follow the precepts of scriptures or even distort them for petty material gains, it is not at all easy to remain faithful to the family traditions of nobility, culture, purity, spiritual awareness and kindness taught and practiced by one's ancestors.

Family traditions that follow Vedic culture should be protected with loyalty and determination by the new generations, because moral values learned through direct example from the people who always loved and cared for us are extremely valuable. However, such family traditions must be noble. Low-class family traditions and the bad example of degraded or ignorant parents or forefathers do not need to be preserved and followed; such an attachment is foolish and self-destructive and contrary to the progress of society.

If our ancestors were not particularly noble, rather than following their bad example it is better to personally start a family tradition that is more civilized, learning about the principles of ethical religion from a qualified Guru and becoming part of his/ her tradition. This path has been chosen honorably by great personalities in the past - such as Valmiki and others - and it is approved by the Vedic tradition.

Unfortunately, in Kali-yuga it is very difficult to find families with noble principles who follow Vedic injunctions, therefore we should trust only those people who are actually good and sincere in their spiritual practices (*sat-jana* or *sadhu*) as they are the only ones who can maintain the principles of religion. In case our family had become degraded in the course of generations, its present descendants have the duty to reestablish the noble principles of their ancestors, no matter how distant.

Following and preserving the family tradition in character and behavior (*keula-sila*) as explained in this verse also applies to the spiritual tradition (*parampara*) of a genuine disciplic succession (*guru-keula*). Chanakya also says, *putrams ca sishyams ca*, "there is no difference between a son and a disciple".

Verse 24

cintamanir eva durlabham iba ki?

What is rare like touchstone?

kathayami tat, catur bhadram

I will tell you: it is good fortune in its four forms.

In the alchemical language, a touchstone (*cintamani*) is a substance capable of transforming base metal into pure gold: such a gem (*mani*) is made of pure spiritual energy or consciousness (*citta*). Indeed, it is difficult even to imagine the nature and existence of such a treasure... what to speak of finding it and possessing it!

Especially in Kali-yuga, when all good qualities of human beings seem to be lost, it is very rare to find people with auspicious characteristics (*bhadram*). The word *bhadra* means “good fortune”, “auspiciousness”, “good thing”. The explanation of these four forms of fortune is given in the next verse.

चिंतामणिरिव दुर्लभम् इह किम् ?

ciñtāmaṇir eva durlabhaṁ iha kim?

**What is constantly recommended by those who have vanquished
the darkness of ignorance?**

Those who have overcome the darkness of ignorance have a clear vision of what is good and important in life, and want to alleviate the sufferings of this confused and misled humanity. For this reason they continue to speak (*vadanti*) presenting genuine knowledge from many different perspectives (*viśeṣaṇa*), hoping that their words will fall on a fertile soil and give fruit.

Verse 25

दानं प्रियवाक्सहितं , ज्ञानम् अगर्वं , क्षमान्वितं ।
शौर्यम्, वित्तं त्यागसमेतं दुर्लभेतत् चतुर्भद्रम् ॥

*dānaṁ priya-vāk sahitaṁ, jñānaṁ agarvaṁ, kṣamānvitaṁ
śauryam, vittaṁ tyāga sametaṁ durlabhetat catur bhadram*

**Charity united with sweet words, knowledge united to lack of conceit,
courage united with patience, wealth united with renunciation.**

These four fortunes are difficult to achieve.

Usually rich people behave very arrogantly with others and think they are great men who do not need to show kindness to anyone, so one who offers charity or gifts is thinking, more or less consciously, that he is on a superior platform and he does not need to show any affection for those who receive the gift. On the other hand, proper charity accompanied by sweet words means that the gift is given to a worthy recipient, by account of qualities or need.

Knowledge and academic education can also make people proud and arrogant, and sometimes lead them to elaborate artificial theories with the hope of becoming famous and respected. Lack of conceit, united with knowledge, allows us to continue learning and utilize our knowledge in the best way for the benefit of ourselves and others. In this case, however, lack of conceit and humility does not mean fear, cowardice, low self-esteem, false modesty, sense of unworthiness or lack of ethnic values as in the betrayal of truth for selfish motivation.

Courage and patience are also two qualities that rarely go together; one who has courage is often impulsive and rash in behavior, while one who has patience rarely has the guts needed to take action at the proper time. Courage and patience, united together, can give glorious results.

Wealth and renunciation even appear as contradictory ideas for most people. Usually one who “renounces” gives up everything and chooses — more or less voluntarily — to live in poverty, while a rich man is very attached to his wealth. Calling “renounced” one who lives honorably by earning his livelihood without depending on others for his own maintenance may seem absurd to some, but this verse clearly states that real renunciation does not consist in throwing away money and properties, but rather in using them without attachment, for the ultimate good of oneself and others, while living in a simple and virtuous way.

Verse 26

किं शोच्यम् ।

kin śocyam?

What should we grieve about?

कार्पण्यम्

kāraṇyam

Narrow-mindedness.

Kripana, or *duratma*, is the precise contrary of *brahmana* or *mahatma*. *Kripana* is one who has a narrow, mean and avaricious mind, no matter how much wealth he possesses. The rich miser who does not use his money properly and does not have a wide vision of life is no different from the beggar who is attached to his old broken bowl and torn clothes, and is not able to see anything else. This kind of mentality should be avoided as a veritable disease and disgrace, for which we should grieve.

सति विभवे किं प्रशस्तम् ?

sati vibhave kin praśastam?

What is praiseworthy in affluent people?

औदार्यम् ।

audāryam

Generosity.

The type of generosity indicated by the word *andaryam* is based on compassion and consideration for others. It is the most praiseworthy quality of affluent people, as it indicates a noble soul, who is not tainted by pride and conceit. This quality is always accompanied by respect for others, by which one is ready to give whatever is needed without making any difference between oneself and the person in distress.

कः पूज्यः विद्वभिः ?

kaḥ pūjyaḥ vidvabhiḥ?

Who should be honored by learned people?

स्वभावतः सर्वदा विनीतो यः ।

sva-bhāvataḥ sarvadā vinīto yaḥ

One who is always humble by nature.

Vidvan or *vidusba* is “one who knows”, a person who possesses culture, knowledge and wisdom. A person who is always humble by nature (i.e. free from conceit) is blessed and honored by intelligent people who are able to see qualities without any need for advertisement.

Verse 27

कः कुलकमलदिनेशः ?

kaḥ kula-kamala dineśaḥ?

Who is the sun who makes his family blossom like a lotus flower?

सति गुणविभवेऽपि यो नम्रः

sati guṇa-vibhave 'pi yo namraḥ

One who is not conceited, in spite of possessing great qualities.

The poetic image of a lotus flower in connection with the family shows beauty, splendor, purity, fragrance coming from a good lineage, which become manifest in a worthy descendant. A lotus flower grows in muddy waters but blossoms above the water level and is never tainted by dirt; for this reason it is considered a symbol of sanctity.

In India, lotus flowers grow in great numbers at the end of the rainy season, when at last the sun again appears warm and bright in the sky. Ancient noble traditions can also remain hidden in murky waters during stormy times, but when the sun appears — a descendant who possesses great qualities and is free from arrogance — they blossom again, manifesting their pristine beauty and fragrance. This verse expands the explanation of previous verses.

कस्य वशे जगदेतत् ?

kasya vaśe jagad etat?

Who can control this world?

प्रियहितवचनस्य धर्मनिरतस्य ।

priya hita vacanasya dharma-niratasya

**One who speaks kindly and for a good purpose,
and who is faithful to Dharma.**

This verse continues to explain the meaning of verse 20, by substituting the word *satya* (“truth”) with *dharma* (“justice”, “religious principles”). Actually *satya* and *dharma* are synonyms, as a real and true thing is naturally just and good. *Satya* is the main principle of religion, that can still be practiced easily in Kali yuga when all other principles become more difficult to follow.

All problems in our personal life and in society arise only from our behavior against truth and *dharma*. If we are able to present *satya* and *dharma* in a pleasing and acceptable way, we will achieve success as there are many sincere people in the world who are searching for truth.

Verse 28

विद्वन्मनोहरा का ?

vidvan manoharā kā?

What enchants the heart of the learned?

सत्कविता बोधवनिता च ।

sat-kavitā bodhavanitā ca

Poetry that inspires noble feelings, and the Lady called Knowledge.

Here again we find the word *vidvan*, “one who has knowledge and wisdom”. A learned and wise person is attracted by knowledge (defined as understanding things and enlightenment) and by poetic works that inspire noble sentiments, like Vedic scriptures, the descriptions of the *lila* (play or adventures) of the Lord in his different incarnations, the narration of *Mahabharata* or *Ramayana*, or the adventures of heroes who struggle to establish the principles of religion, to protect good and innocent people and destroy evil doers. Literature that deals with spiritual topics, knowledge, personal growth and progress is always attractive and pleasing to good people.

Knowledge is described here as a beautiful and noble lady, sweet and powerful, who can give all blessings: Sri Vidya, Cit Shakti, the Mother of the Universe, also called Sarasvati or Lakshmi.

कं न स्पृशति विपत्ति ?

kam̐ na spr̥śati vipatti?

Who is not touched by disaster?

प्रवृद्धवचनानुवर्तिनं दान्तम् ।

pravṛddha vacanānurvartitaṁ dāntam

One who follows his superiors' advice and has controlled his own senses.

Even in the midst of disaster we can still save ourselves by maintaining control over our senses and mind (considered by Vedic culture as “the sixth sense”) and by carefully following the advice of the most expert and wisest persons. Panic is extremely dangerous in critical situations and should be avoided at all costs. Learning how to control one’s senses is a long and gradual work but gives excellent results all along one’s life, in all circumstances.

In Vedic culture children are given education in sense control, starting from the age of five, under the guidance of the Preceptor, thus becoming mature and responsible adults, whose work is very valuable for the society.

Verse 29

कस्मै स्पृहयति कमला ?

kasmai spr̥hayati kamalā?

Who is blessed by the Goddess of Wealth?

अनलसचित्ताय नीतिवृत्ताय ।

tu analasacittāya nīti-vṛttāya

**One who is industrious and never lazy, but behaves
with honesty and justice.**

त्यजति च कं सहसा ?

tyajati ca kam̐ sahasā

Who is immediately abandoned by the Goddess of Fortune?

द्विज-गुरु-सुर-निन्दाकारं च सालस्यम् ।

dvija-guru-sura-nindākarāṅ ca sālasyam

**One who is lazy and offends the *brahmanas*,
the Preceptors, the Devas and good people.**

Kamala is the Goddess of fortune and wealth, also called Lakshmi or Sri; she appears on a lotus flower and holds in her hand a lotus flower, symbol of blessing. Everyone wants to be blessed by the Goddess of fortune, but in order to obtain such favor we must earn it, by working with intelligence and zeal, avoiding idleness as well as physical and mental laziness. The same idea is expressed in any other verses (6, 10, etc.)

One who does not like to work and expects to become rich and happy by hook or by crook, by cheating or stealing, and furthermore offends those who try to correct him, is doomed to be abandoned by fortune, very soon. In this regard we can say that such people behave like the demon Ravana, who wanted to snatch away by deception and forcibly keep Sita, the Goddess of Fortune, in his hands, but was soon destroyed together with his family and kingdom.

Dvi-ja literally means “twice-born” and indicates a person who has received initiation in the study of spiritual science; it is therefore a synonym for *brahmana* (“one who knows Brahman”). However, also *kshatriyas* and *vaisyas* who have studied the *shastra* and perform their religious duties are in this category.

Guru is the teacher or preceptor, while *sura* means “good” or “pious” and indicates both the Devas and noble and generous people who always work for the benefit of all. *Sura* is the contrary of *a-sura*, which indicates demoniac beings and wicked persons.

Ninda means “offense” and can be of three types: mental, verbal or physical - naturally each type is more serious than the previous. By offending those who work selflessly for the benefit of all, one commits a serious crime and immediately loses the blessings of fortune.

Verse 30

कुत्र विधेयो वासः ?

kutra vidheyo vāsaḥ ?

Where should one live?

सज्जन-निकटे अथवा काश्याम् ।

saj-jana nikaṭe athavā kāśyām

Near good and saintly people, or in Kasi.

In several other verses before this, it was recommended to always keep company with good and saintly people (*sat jana* or *sadbhus*); without their company and support it is very difficult to progress on the right path, even for someone who is sincere, qualified and intelligent.

Living in a holy place is a great asset for spiritual progress as we are constantly surrounded by memories of the Lord and by people who want to progress and purify their existence. The influence of environment can greatly speed up or hamper our progress by offering a kind of resonance where vibrations become much stronger. However, if we live in a holy city without taking advantage of good and saintly people, we are wasting a valuable opportunity.

Those who visit holy places only to take bath, travel or see new places like ordinary tourists or because “it is tradition to do so” can not obtain the full benefit of a pilgrimage because they are afflicted with a very strong material identification that prevents them from recognizing the true purpose of a holy pilgrimage.

Bhagavata Purana (10.84.13) affirms, *yasyatma-buddhib kunape tri-dhatuke sva-dhib kalatradishu bhauma ijya-dhib, yat tirtha buddhib salile na karbicij janeshu abhijñeshu sa eva go-kharah*, “Those who identify themselves with the gross material body, believe they are the lords and masters of their wives and families, and consider their own native places or countries as intrinsically worthy of worship, also visit the holy places only to take a bath in the water there. These are foolish people, and the benefit they get is not greater than the benefit that cows and donkeys could get from such journey.”

This verse from the *Bhagavatam* shows a strong connection between gross bodily identification, material attachment to the enjoyment of family life, the inability of obtaining the real advantages of holy places, and a mistaken approach in considering the place where one should live. A materially identified person who was born in a particular place or country will have a strong attachment for his native place and will strongly identify with his nationality or ethnic group. However, this is a big mistake and seriously obstructs one’s spiritual progress. The entire Earth is worthy of worship, and if we want to consider a particular place as more worshipable, we should choose a holy place where spiritual progress is facilitated by the congenial atmosphere and the good company of *sadbhus*. An intelligent person will not hesitate to leave one’s native place or country and establish his residence in such a sacred place, even if this choice involves some difficulties.

The real purpose of pilgrimage, as well as the real purpose of choosing a place of residence, is coming in contact with saintly people, making friends with them and listening to good teachings about spiritual life, asking to be engaged in the service of the Lord — which certainly purifies the mind, as verse 34 recommends. On the other hand, any place becomes sacred and auspicious due to the presence of good and saintly people, as this verse clearly states.

The city of Kasi, also called Varanasi or Benares, is particularly indicated because it is the residence of Lord Siva, the greatest among good and saintly personalities (*sat-*

jana). However, the name of Kasi can be applied to all the residences of Lord Siva, such as Uttara Kasi, Dakshina Kasi, Ekamra (Bhubaneswar) and other places. Of course, all the holy places are Siva's residence, as Siva is *ksbetra-pala*.

Some people believe that one should remain in his native place for his entire life, but this is not confirmed by Vedic scriptures or by genuine spiritual authorities. The real purpose of life is about pursuing spiritual realization and dharmic life, therefore each and every human being has the right and duty to choose to live in the place that is most conducive for such progressive life.

कः परिहार्यो देशः ?

kaḥ parihāryāṁ deśaḥ?

Which place should we avoid?

पिशुनयुतो लुब्धभूपश्च ।

piśunayuto lubdha-bhūpaś ca

**The place where many bad people live, and where
the governor (or landlord) is greedy.**

In Kali-yuga — the age of ignorance, hypocrisy and quarrel — places like the one described in this verse abound everywhere. For a peace-loving person who simply wants to engage in some honest occupation for a living and dedicate all possible time and energy to a progressive spiritual life, it is not easy to find a suitable place to live. Greedy government officers, kings, prime ministers, ministers, vice-ministers, bureaucrats, legislators or politicians of all sorts make life very problematic for everyone because they are always intent on manufacturing new systems, new artificial laws, new taxes and new difficulties in order to extract as much money as possible from people.

Taxes and the cost of life artificially grow larger and heavier, because the lords of the land do not really care for the benefit of the people; rather, they just want to amass as much as possible in their own secret accounts, in their name or in the name of some family members, before losing their positions. Besides taxes proper, greedy officers manufacture a series of artificial and bureaucratic difficulties to complicate and hamper the normal dealings of everyday life, in order to squeeze as much as possible from those who are forced to pay bribes to obtain something which would be a normal right.

Furthermore, greedy politicians encourage with their laws an artificial and disastrous lifestyle based on non-renewable energy sources like petrol, unnecessary consumerism and waste, excessive militarization and the production and utilization of toxic substances, as all these supply the juicy shares in the profits of large companies and government agencies and even bribes, while in the process innocent people are exploited and harmed, the environment is polluted and culture is destroyed.

A greedy and degraded government head constitutes a disastrous example for the mass of people, who learn to behave in a similar way because, as it is stated in *Bhagavad gita* (3.21), great people on the public scene become a role model for the public: *yad yad acarati sresthas tat tad evetaro janah, sa yat pramana kurute lokas tad anuvartate.*

Seeing that the “best people” in the nation shamelessly cheat and exploit yet continue to be respected and acclaimed, ignorant people learn that greed and cheating, prevarication and arrogance are desirable qualities that enable one to reach a respected and elevated position — in this way a hellish society is created, where a noble-minded person finds life almost impossible, in spite of all his tolerance and good will.

Bad people in general are very unpleasant neighbors. Those who have no good sentiments, culture, respect and noble values, compassion for suffering and innocent people and animals create a hellish environment, where physical and mental pollution contaminates the whole area. In such a situation a pacific and honest person is constantly disturbed and distracted from spiritual progress and good work and forced to fight for mere survival, just like in a jungle full of ferocious and uncivilized animals.

Verse 31

केन अशोच्यः पुरुषः ?

kena aśocyah puruṣah?

In which way can a man remain free from grief?

प्रणतकलत्रेण धीरविभवेन ।

praṇata-kalatreṇa dhīra-vibhavana

**One who enjoys his wife’s respect and a steady financial situation
has nothing to worry about.**

One who is able to create and maintain intimate relationships based on respect and affection will never have reason to worry or grieve. Verse 38 explains that a good wife must be carefully protected and verse 49 states that a married man’s best and true friend is his wife. In Vedic culture marriage is based on mutual cooperation, where the husband has the duty to protect the family and provide money for the maintenance of all its members, while the wife has the duty to manage the house and take care of the practical needs of all family members. In other words, the man provides and brings home, and the woman utilizes.

Within such a practical co-operation friendship, respect and loyalty are extremely important. Besides the basic considerations of respectful and loyal cooperation in

the practical work to maintain the family, we also need to respect and consider the emotional needs of each person in the family.

Within the relationship between husband and wife, a woman has the natural tendency to depend emotionally on her husband and a man has the natural tendency to protect his wife. When a man acts in such a way as to inspire admiration and respect in his wife, the balance in the relationship is perfect, but if a man's behavior destroys such respect there will be reasons for worries in the future. A stupid, wicked, mean, cowardly, weak or unworthy man can keep a respectable mask in front of the public, but he will not be able to hide his true nature from his wife, who constantly lives with him and watches him every minute. A wife who cannot respect her husband will naturally feel frustrated, anxious, irritable and unhappy, and such a situation creates sufferings for the whole family.

Respect cannot be demanded, it must be commanded or inspired. A bad person trying to artificially obtain respect from others will only create sufferings for himself and for everyone else. In the ancient Vedic civilization marriage was considered a very important event: the girl's father made sure that the boy would be of good nature and temper, and of good compatible qualities so that the girl could like and respect him. Furthermore, the father gave a dowry to the girl so that she could always have some personal money or valuable objects she could sell in case of personal need; in this way she would not be forced to depend on her husband's family. This tradition was considered very valuable and auspicious, giving the greatest religious merit to a father.

Unfortunately, in modern India the whole system has been corrupted and degraded and in most cases arranged marriages have become a real social disease, where the girl becomes "an accessory" to the dowry and often a bride is tortured and pushed to suicide, burnt alive with kerosene or sold as a sex slave in some distant place (i.e. going "missing") so that the boy's family can arrange another marriage and lay hands on another dowry. To avoid paying the enormous sums required by future greedy in-laws, many people kill their baby girls at birth or even before they are born (99% of abortions are female children). In this regard it is particularly useful to remember an important teaching contained in verse 63: the cause of degradation in the family is that which nauseates and horrifies good and saintly people. Certainly the murder and mistreatment of innocent children and women qualify for this description.

The problem of financial stability is a constant cause of worry for all and a very real situation to be addressed. Verse 36 teaches that greed destroys all good qualities, while verse 41 says that debts are the most serious contamination — and that the greatest cause of worry and fear is money (its lack, the best way to preserve and invest it, how to earn it etc.). The two ideas are not contradicting each other. We need to find a proper balance where we can live peacefully in order to progress in spiritual life. A person who is able to keep a steady financial situation by working with energy and intelligence and without squandering money unnecessarily is really intelligent and deserves all good fortune.

इह भुवने को शोच्यः ?

iha bhuvane ko śocyah?

For who should we grieve in this world?

सत्यपि विभवे न यो दाता ।

satyapi vibhave na yo dātā

For one who does not give anything,
in spite of being really rich and powerful.

A rich and powerful person who does not give or do anything for others or for the progress of society is actually consuming his past merits and is not depositing anything in the “karmic bank”. For this reason, even if ignorant people may consider him clever or lucky, a man who uses all his properties only for his own personal pleasure is building a sad future for himself, and therefore he should inspire pity and sorrow in wise and intelligent people.

Greed and lack of money are two extremes we need to avoid, but also narrow-mindedness and isolation in our own small world is to be avoided. *Vibhu* actually means “powerful”, which indicates that the amount of wealth and power may also be modest and simply related to “having the power” to help others. Even a person who does not possess much wealth or power may be in a position to help others, and if he does not do so, he is to be grieved for.

Verse 32

किं लघुताया मूलम् ?

kiṁ laghutāyā mulam?

What is the cause of disgrace?

प्राकृतपुरुषेषु याच्ना ।

prākṛta puruṣeṣu yacñā

Running after materialists to get favors from them.

Verse 9 explained that asking help and favors (*yacñā*) from degraded people is a source of dishonor and suffering. Here the point is further stressed in connection with the previous verse (one who is rich and powerful, but does not give anything, should be pitied) because anyone could find himself in an emergency situation, forced to ask for help and cooperation.

Even a religious person who wants to execute some welfare work must sometimes ask for the cooperation of those who have sufficient funds. However, it is advisable

to cultivate relationships and solicit support only from good people who are inclined to spiritual life and have a spirit of selfless service. One should always avoid insisting for favors or help from materialistic people, because they do not give anything for free, and any favor they give comes at a high price.

ramad api kab surah?

Who is even more heroic than Lord Rama?

smara-sara-nibato na yab calati

One who does not waver even under the blows of Kandarpa's arrows.

Lord Rama, whose adventures are narrated in the famous *Ramayana*, is considered the perfect model of hero, a powerful and brave warrior who always faced all difficulties with a steady and noble mind. The only occasion when Ramacandra showed pain and confusion was the kidnapping of his beloved Sita, the faithful and devoted wife who had followed him in the forest exile. Of course, this apparent pain and confusion is only a *lila*, a transcendental pastime enacted for the purpose of educating the mass of people: therefore we should take advantage of this practical demonstration through the example of Rama described in *Ramayana*.

This verse repeats the same words of verse 7: *surah*, “hero”, *sara* which is an exact synonym for *bana* (“arrows”), and *chalati* which is the exact equal of *vyadhitah*, “wavering”. In Vedic culture, Kandarpa is known as Smara, as he obsesses his victims with the memories of material attachment, and Ananga (“bereft of body”), relating to the incident when Kandarpa's body was burnt to ashes by the wrathful glance of Siva. Many equate Kandarpa with “Cupid” as in Western culture there was also a little “god of love” who went around with a bow shooting arrows at people to make them fall in love. Cupid's arrows are generally identified as women's passionate glances but we should understand that desires may suddenly prick the heart of a man even if the woman has done nothing to stimulate them (and sometimes would actually prefer not to be the object of the attentions of that particular man. Who is to blame in this case? This is why it is said that a person who falls in love unexpectedly “has been hit by Cupid's arrows.”

Verse 33

किम् अहर्निशं अनुचिन्त्यम् ?

kim ahar-nisam anucintyam?

What should we contemplate day and night?

भगवच्चरणम्, न संसारः ।

bhagavac caraṇam, na saṁsāraḥ

The Lord's lotus feet, and not this world's material life.

Kandarpa's arrows nail the unfortunate victim to the wheel of material life (*samsara*), forcing him to suffer the repetition of material pains and illusions. How to become free from such a situation? Constant meditation on material life is not the best way to get out of it (even if verse 5 recommends to regularly meditate on its causes) because we risk to increase our attachment.

Bhagavad gita (2.62-63) teaches that by contemplating the sense objects we end up developing attachment, then desire to possess them, until we lose consciousness of our situation (*dhyayato vishayan pumsab sangas teshubajayate, sangat sañjayate kamah kamat krodho bhijayate, krodhad bhavati sammohah sammohat smriti-vibramah, smriti-bhrasat buddhi-naso buddhi-nasat pranasyati*). Now, when we contemplate something in our mind, we are in a very close contact with the object of our meditation.

To meditate constantly, day and night, on the lotus feet of the Lord (*bhagavan*) keeps us in touch with the divine platform and quickly purifies our heart. Such meditation should be done both on the transcendental form of the Lord (*vapu*) and on his instructions (*vani*): *bhagavad gita kimcidadhita ganga-jala lava kanika pita, sakridapi yena murari-samarca kriyate tena yamena na carca*, "Simply by reading something from *Bhagavad gita*, drinking a little Ganges water, and sincerely worshipping Sri Murari even once, one will never have to fear Yamaraja any more" (*Bhaja Govindam*). By meditating on the divine instructions of Krishna in *Bhagavad gita* one contemplates the lotus feet of the Lord in the form of his instructions. By drinking the pure water of Mother Ganga, that washed the lotus feet of the Lord in his Vamana-lila, one contemplates the feet of the Lord in humility and service. Serving Mother Ganga is not different from serving the Lord.

The sincere worship of the beautiful form of Sri Murari, who destroys all ignorance and obstacles to the path of self-realization, is performed in the correct way by one who humbly serves his lotus feet first as a mark of respect and submission. The practice of *archana*, the ritual worship of the *archa-vigraha*, always includes the offering of Tulasi leaves and Ganga water to the feet of the Lord. This verse balances the previous statement that presented Lord Rama's apparent defect in being afflicted by love's pangs in the separation of his wife. We should never make the mistake of judging the activities of divine incarnations according to the standards of material life.

Bhagavad gita (9.11, *avajananti mam mudha manusim tanu asritam, param bhavam ajananto mama bhuta-mahesvaram*) reveals that fools attribute material qualities and behaviors to the divine manifestations and their activities, and recommends a proper understanding of the divine appearances and activities in order to attain liberation from the cycle of births and deaths (4.9, *janma karma ca me divyam evam yo vetti tattvatah, tyaktva deham punarjanma naiti mam eti so 'rjuna*).

चक्षुष्मन्तोऽपि अन्धाः के स्युः ?

cakṣuṣmanto 'pi andhāḥ ke syuḥ?

Who is blind, in spite of having good eyes?

ये नास्तिकाः मनुजाः ।

ye nāstikaḥ manujāḥ

One who has no faith.

One who does not believe in anything and does not trust anyone is actually refusing to look at the truth, therefore he will never be able to see. In spite of a brilliant result at the oculist's exam, he will remain blind in front of life's reality.

There is a difference between real faith and blind faith. Blind faith does not care to verify through personal experience and does not ask questions because one does not want to find out that his beliefs may be wrong, so there is not much progress. It is exactly like the case of a cynic who does not care to verify through personal experience because he does not want to believe.

Real faith, on the other hand, is for intelligent persons who can discriminate between a trustworthy source and a source that has no authority, and who are willing to personally experiment and verify. Vedic knowledge is different from the so-called "revealed religions" of the "exclusive type" because it can be verified directly.

Bhagavad gita (9.2) declares, *raja-vidya raja-guhyam pavitram idam uttamam, pratyakshavagamam dharmyam su-sukham kartum avyayam*: "Sanatana Dharma is the imperishable King of all knowledge and secrets; it is perfectly pure and transcendental to all material considerations, it is directly verifiable through direct experience and its practice brings great happiness."

The words *pavitram* and *guhyam* are particularly important in this regard, as they define the necessity of initiation, that purifies the candidate and connects him/ her intimately with Truth and Dharma, giving a new birth (*dvi-ja*) that transcends all previous material identifications and beliefs.

By studying the *Vedas* under the tutelage of a qualified preceptor, a sincere person will easily develop intelligent faith by verifying the truth of their knowledge. However, nothing can be learned by one who maintains a challenging attitude from the start. In any school, whenever we want to learn something, we need to start by accepting what the teacher says as truth, and our questions must be presented in a submissive spirit, with the sincere desire to understand the subject.

For example, a first grade student who is beginning to learn arithmetic cannot challenge the teacher to "prove" that 2 plus 2 equals 4, or refuse to "believe" such a statement, otherwise he will not be able to learn anything.

Bhagavad gita explains: *tad viddhi pranipatena pariprasnena sevaya, upadekshyanti te jñanam jñāninas tattva-darsinah*, "You should endeavor to learn this science by respectfully approaching a qualified teacher, rendering service, and submissively ask questions. Those who have directly experienced Truth will initiate you into Knowledge."

Here the main qualification for a teacher of the transcendental science is clearly explained: he must be a *tattva-darsi*, a person who “sees” the truth, having its direct experience. Studying with theoretical academicians who have never practiced what they teach, or with armchair philosophers who consider knowledge as an intellectual exercise only, will not help a sincere student to actually realize Truth.

The particular term *astika* refers to those schools of philosophy that recognize the authority of Vedic scriptures, such as Uttara mimamsa, Karma mimamsa, Yoga, Sankhya, Nyaya and Vaiseshika. In opposition to these, the *nastika* schools are the Bauddha, Jaina and the other groups that do not recognize the authority of the *Vedas*. Some people believe that Buddhists and Jains are more eligible to be included in the definition of “Hindu” than sincere people who have developed a deep faith in Vedic knowledge through initiation and *sadhana*. This verse proves them wrong.

Verse 34

कः पङ्गुः इह प्रथितः ?

kaḥ paṅghuḥ iha prathitaḥ?

Who must be considered lame in this world?

व्रजति च यो वार्द्धके तीर्थम्

vrajati ca yo vārdhake tīrtham

One who waits for old age to start going to pilgrimage places.

Many people think that religion and spirituality are things we should pursue when we have no more chances to get satisfaction in other ways; according to this idea, old people have nothing else to do, therefore they can “kill time” with pilgrimages and similar stuff, such as watching religious channels on TV and attending spiritual gatherings and discourses. It is true that towards the end of our life we begin making some “budget assessment” of what we have done in our allotted time, and we feel the urgency of understanding the futility and impermanence of things in this world. But it is also true that, at that time, it is too late to change one’s past or to start doing something really meaningful for our spiritual progress.

Bhagavad gīta (8.6) explains that the level of consciousness at death is the sum total of all the acts of consciousness we have cultivated during the entire course of our lifetime and will automatically determine our next birth: *yam yam vapi smaran bhavam tyajaty ante kalevaram, tam tam evaiti kaunteya sada tad-bhava-bhavitah.*

It is not at all easy to keep our consciousness on the spiritual level in old age or at the time of death, if we have been cultivating a material consciousness for the greatest part of our lives, and we shaped our existence and *karma* with unwise

choices. It is better to cultivate our spiritual self while we are young and able to perform good activities, otherwise we will waste our life.

A lame man is not able to walk; he cannot go to important places and do what is beneficial for him: if our legs are used only to move from home to office to cinema theaters or shopping malls, they are not really working properly for our benefit.

In his instructions to his school friends (*Bhagavata Purana* 7.6.1) Prahlada says, *kaumara acaret prajño dharman bhagavatan iba, durlabbam manusam janma tad apy adbruvam arthadam*, “An intelligent person should learn and practice Bhagavata Dharma already from childhood, taking full advantage of this human birth that is very rarely achieved, extremely valuable and very temporary.”

Again, Prahlada says (7.6.5), *tato yateta kusalah ksbemaya bhavam asritah, sariram paurnisham yavan, na vipadyeta pushkalam*, “An intelligent person should strive to obtain the real benefit of life while his human body is still stout and strong and not embarrassed and weakened by old age.”

किं तीर्थमपि च मुख्यम् ?

kiñ tīrtham api ca mukhyam?

Which is the most important pilgrimage place?

चित्तमलं यन्निवर्तयति ?

citta-malañ, yan nivartayati

The one that washes away the mind's impurities.

As we have seen in previous verses, a pilgrimage must purify our consciousness in contact with the divine level of existence and good saintly people. If we don't attain this goal, our pilgrimage has not been very effective. A fresh and clean mind, enriched by knowledge and understanding about the purpose of life, is an invaluable asset in anyone's life, irrespective of age. A society composed by such people is certainly happy and prosperous in all senses.

Those who live in holy pilgrimage places have the duty and responsibility to maintain such sacred places in cleanliness and purity, both materially and spiritually, so that pilgrims will actually obtain the benefit of pilgrimage.

Unfortunately we see that today in India the *tirthas* are seriously neglected and even polluted, and instead of serving the holy places with devotion and respect, many local residents actually exploit the holy places for their selfish material profit, without even caring for the proper maintenance of temples, sacred rivers and tanks etc. Holy rivers like Ganga and Yamuna are insulted by gross materialists who misuse them to produce electricity through artificial dams or to carry away their sewage. The sacred waters of the Yamuna, that were still sweet and pure in the

1980s are now so polluted that they are considered unfit even for agricultural purposes. The ocean is also polluted by petrol spills, toxic waste disposal, and sewage discharge. Sacred lakes and ponds, where people are supposed to take a purificatory bath, are suffocated by garbage of all kinds. In such a situation, the minds of those who visit the pilgrimage places become polluted rather than purified, and the *dhama-vasis* are particularly responsible for this disaster.

Verse 35

किं स्मर्तव्यं पुरुषैः ?

kiṁ smartavyam puruṣaiḥ?

What should people remember?

हरिनाम सदा, न यावनी भाषा ।

harināma sadā, na yāvanī bhāṣā

**Always the name of Hari, and not the useless chattering
of materialistic people.**

Verse 33 recommended to constantly meditate on the Lord (*bhagavan*) and this verse helps in broadening the concept. How to meditate on the Lord? The first step consists in remembering his name. In order to remember the name of Hari (Narayana), the best course of action consists in hearing and reciting it often: from hearing and repeating we will naturally remember. *Brihan-naradiya Purana* recommends: *harer nama, harer nama, harer nama eva kevalam, kalau nasti eva, nasti eva, nasti eva gatiḥ anyatha*, in the age of Kali the only means of liberation and progress consists in hearing, chanting and remembering the name of Hari.

को हि न वाच्यः सुधिया ?

ko hi na vācyaḥ sudhiyāḥ?

What should not be uttered by an intelligent person?

परदोषश्च, अनृतं तद्वत् ।

para-doṣaś ca, anṛtam tadvat

**A wise person should abstain from talking about other
people's defects and from uttering lies.**

The words *na vacyaḥ* mean “what should not be said”. If truthfulness is a fundamental quality for a noble soul, we should not forget that the purpose of truth is giving benefit to all living entities. For this reason verse 47 explains that in extraordinary cases, even a lie (*anṛita*) can be innocent and commendable: this happens only when the untruth is uttered in order to protect the religious principles

- compassion, austerity, tolerance. For example, a person having a noble mind does not commit any sin toward truth when he tells a lie to save innocent creatures.

Another meaning of the word *anrita*, “untruth”, relates to mental speculations - imagining or manufacturing artificial meanings of things. This is another very dangerous habit, which must be avoided because it contaminates truth with our personal or collective illusions. Truth must be realized and confirmed through the voice of our conscience (*antaryami*), the teachings of scriptures, the explanations of the Preceptor and of good and saintly people. Whatever does not align with these parameters will not be beneficial for us and for the society.

As far as other people’s defects or mistakes are concerned, it is always advisable to mind one’s own defects and mistakes, and not other people’s. The tendency to criticize others is very negative and does not benefit anyone. If we want to explain the bad effects of a wrong way of acting, it is always better to avoid mentioning the name of the concerned person. Broadcasting news on defects or bad behavior of other people also hampers that person’s efforts to correct and reform himself, as bad reputation is a serious obstacle.

Verse 36

किं संपाद्यं मनुजैः ?

kiṁ saṁpādyam manujaiḥ?

What is opulence in human beings?

विद्या, वित्तं , बलं, यशः, पुण्यम् ।

vidyā, vittam, balam, yaśaḥ, puṇyam

Knowledge, wealth, strength, fame and spiritual merits.

Sampada means “opulence”, “glory”, and it is compared to *bhaga*, although *bhaga* has a more auspicious meaning. A person’s true opulence is judged not only by wealth, fame or power, but by spiritual merits as well. All these things are valuable and should not be rejected when they come spontaneously.

कः सर्वगुणविनाशी ?

kaḥ sarva-guṇa-vināśi?

What destroys all good qualities?

लोभः ।

lobhaḥ

Greed.

शत्रुश्च कः ?

śatruś ca kaḥ?

Who is the real enemy?

कामः ।

kāmaḥ

Lust.

Greed and lust (*lobha* and *kama*) are the desire to possess for one's own personal pleasure, which brings to anger and prevarication. *Bhagavad gita* (3.37, 39) confirms that this strong desire to possess things and people is the greatest enemy for the living entity and covers his intelligence, consuming him like an insatiable fire: *kama esha krodha esha rajo-guna-samudbhavah, mahasano maha-paṇma viddhy enam iba vairinam, avritam jñanam etena jñanino nitya-vairina, kama-rupena kaunteya dushpurena analena ca.*

Just like a raging fire destroys anything and kills very easily, lust destroys all fortune and opulence: knowledge, wealth, strength, fame and spiritual merits - as described in the previous answer. The uncontrolled desire to possess and enjoy something destroys knowledge and intelligence, because one loses the power to understand what is right or wrong. It destroys wealth, because in order to gratify our senses we are ready to spend any amount of money. It destroys strength, because our senses and energies are exhausted in the unending and illusory race after pleasure. It destroys fame because a greedy and lusty person loses the respect of good people. Finally, it destroys spiritual merits because an insatiable thirst for pleasure consumes our good karmic results, even pushing us to do stupid and bad things that create big karmic debts.

We should not think, however, that lust and greed only apply to sex pleasure and acquisition of money and material possessions. As explained in the previous verse, opulence does not just mean wealth — although this is certainly one of the most popular and evident meanings — as greed and lust can be also directed to other opulences as well. Therefore even strength, fame, knowledge and religious merits can come to be considered as mere commodities to be possessed and exploited, and thus they become objects of lust and greed, for the aggrandizement of one's ego and selfish gratification. *Bhagavad gita* (3.40) confirms that lust does not dwell only in the senses, but also in the mind and intelligence (*indriyani mano buddhir asyadbishthanam ucyate, etair vimohayaty esha jñanam avriya dehinam*) and covers all conditioned living entities, in different degrees.

Lust manifests as the attachment to material influence and power (for oneself personally or for one's group or clan), especially when people seek one's intervention to pressurize others or bend the rules for some partisan advantage. It contaminates fame when one aspires to obtain honors and worship that will raise him above the crowds and give him lasting glory.

It even contaminates knowledge when one studies and writes books out of pride and desire to be considered superior to others, to see one's name on a book's cover, to be acclaimed as a great scholar and expert in this or that field. It manifests by contaminating religious merits when one tries to become a big man in society or religion and thus obtain prestige, large donations, followers, and sense gratification of various types. In brief, lust also appears in the form of desire for worship to oneself - for name, fame and profit.

Another important point expressed in this verse is the fact that actually there are no external enemies but only internal enemies, such as lust, greed and anger. One who divides the world in friends and enemies has a false and illusory vision; of course we must be able to recognize the differences in motivations and behaviors when people come forward to help or to attack us, but we should not be blinded by external projections and depend on others.

Verse 37

का चा सभा परिहार्या ?

kā ca sabhā parihāryā?

Which assembly should be avoided?

हीना या वृद्धसचिवेन ।

hīnā yā vṛddha-sacivena

The one devoid of senior counselors.

This verse offers practical advice in social life. Participation in community life is certainly important, but we should be careful about the kind of activities that are discussed and decided in such assemblies. The meetings where there are no wise and expert people who know the principles of religion and are determined to defend them are actually dangerous situations, because decisions taken in immature ways are always a source of suffering for everyone. In the best case, they are simply a waste of time and energy.

Our presence in a particular assembly or situation constitutes a form of endorsement, support and approval for the decisions and activities that are taken by the group, therefore even if we do not vote favorably we will be partially responsible for the actions decided in the assembly.

If in a particular assembly or meeting Dharma is offended, we have the duty to speak up and take action to protect Dharma and dharmic people; if this is not possible, or we are not listened to, we should immediately leave the place otherwise we will also become accomplices for the wrongful conclusions or actions decided in the assembly.

Verse 43 clearly explains who are the *vridha*, “the elderly” or “senior members of society”: they are the wise people who know truth and duty, and not simply old people. This specific idea of seniority is common to many cultures, where “senators” are not necessarily old in age.

We should not mistake physical age with intellectual or cultural age, because especially in societies where the use of alcoholic drinks, non-vegetarian foods and other bad habits damage the vital energy and intelligence in people, the typical decay of old age starts from the brain and can bring about a real senile mental deficiency, all the more in people who never cultivated love for knowledge and virtue.

On the other hand, physically young people, like Sukadeva Gosvami or even Shankaracarya himself, were immediately recognized as great expert and wise persons (*vridha*) by all educated and intelligent people of their times, who listened to their teachings with extreme respect.

इह कुत्र अवहितः स्यात् मनुजः ?

iha kutra avahitaḥ syāt manujaḥ?

What should a person be very careful about?

किल, राजसेवायाम् ।

kila, rāja-sevāyām

Indeed, in the service to the king.

Service to a king is always a risk, because when we depend on powerful people or politicians we always have to face daily compromises of all kinds.

Another great risk consists in coming to know about dangerous state secrets and getting involved in gossiping, slandering and in various kinds of plotting and schemes that always mushroom around powerful people. Even the smallest mistake or distraction in this field can bring about disaster. Furthermore, kings and government officers at all levels can be quite irritable due to their heavy responsibilities and duties in solving the problems of the entire kingdom, and being near them is often difficult and dangerous.

Verse 38

प्राणादपि को रम्यः ?

praṇad api ko ramyaḥ?

What gives more joy than life itself?

कुलधर्मः साधुसङ्गश्च ।

kula-dharmaḥ sādhu-saṅgaś ca

**One's duty, executed according to family traditions,
and the company of good and saintly people.**

Verse 23 explained the importance of preserving and serving one's noble family traditions. For one who was born in a family having high spiritual principles it is very easy to follow the because all his upbringing, from birth itself, is geared to help his development in that direction.

If we do not take advantage of such an opportunity and fail our responsibility, we commit a serious mistake. The need of friendship and company with good people, *sadhu* or *sat-jana*, has already been explained in many verses (11, 13, 16, 30): this verse again stresses its importance.

There is no joy greater than a good job well done, approved, appreciated and glorified by good people and by our seniors, but the joy coming from the company of true spiritualists is even higher and more precious than life itself, because it is eternal and generates benefits of all kinds.

का सुरक्ष्या ?

kā su-rakṣyā ?

What should be protected with all efforts?

कीर्तिः पतिव्रता नैजबुद्धिश्च ।

kīrtiḥ pati-vratā naija-buddhiś ca

Good reputation, a faithful wife and intelligent discrimination.

Good reputation is considered extremely important in Vedic culture because it enables us to live a quiet and progressive life and properly execute our duties in society and family. *Bhagavad gīta* (2.34) confirms it: *akīrtim capi bhūtāni kathayishyanti te 'nyayam, sambhavitasya cakīrtiḥ maranat atiricyate*, a respectable person suffers immensely when his or her good reputation is questioned or slandered. However, we should not mistake good reputation with the false pride connected with material fame - which on the contrary is a problem and a defect.

A faithful wife who is not interested in men other than her husband should be protected with all care and given plenty of love and affection, because often men with a degraded mentality are especially attracted by the idea of contaminating what is pure. A husband who neglects such a good and faithful wife creates suffering and unhappiness for himself and his entire family, and he will have to suffer its consequences.

The power of discrimination, i.e. intelligence united with knowledge, is a very valuable asset that allows us to progress on the material and spiritual path; if we endanger it by not giving sufficient attention and protection, we will have to face disastrous consequences. It is very interesting to note here that a good and wise person will naturally take care to protect his own treasures, but will also try to help his friends to protect theirs, especially in emergency situations.

Verse 39

का कल्पलता लोके ?

kā kalpa-latā loke?

In this world, what is the plant that satisfies all desires?

सच्छिष्याय अर्पिता विद्या ।

sac-chiṣyāya arpitā vidyā

Knowledge given to a good and sincere student.

The desire tree, also called Kalpa-vriksha or Kalpa-lata, is a very special plant capable of granting any boon or desire; in Vedic culture it is mentioned very often, but this concept is found regularly in other cultures as well. The contemporary spiritual and cultural movement growing in Western countries and called “New Age movement” has produced a number of popular techniques of visualization, positive thinking, creative meditation, personal growth, efficiency techniques, psycho-dynamics, but all this knowledge has been borrowed from the original Vedic knowledge of Yoga.

Besides, it is a recognized fact that Vedic civilization and knowledge once existed all over the planet in various forms and the relics of such knowledge still remain. For example, the famous Christmas tree has absolutely nothing to do with Jesus Christ, Christianity or any of the Churches: the tradition of decorating an evergreen tree with lights, sweets and other nice items, and to surround it with gifts for family members and friends, is obviously derived from the concept of the Kalpa-vriksha.

Knowledge given to a good and sincere student (*sat*, “sincerely interested in spiritual life”) is a blessing both for the student and for the teacher, and supplies all kinds of auspicious fruits, both spiritual and material.

को अक्षयवटवृक्षस्स्यात् ?

ko akṣayavaṭa vṛkṣas syāta?

What is the eternal banyan tree?

विधिवत् सत्पात्रदत्त-दानं यत् ।

vidhivat sat-pātra-datta dānam yat

**A gift offered to a worthy person, from one who has
knowledge and understanding.**

The banyan tree, or *asvattha* or *akshaya vata*, is another auspicious symbol in Vedic culture. It is particularly honored because it has the property of constantly reproducing itself by transforming its branches into roots and vice versa. In this way one single banyan tree can become enormously large and continue living even for thousands of years, because when one part of the tree becomes too old and dies away, the new branches are self-sufficient and get their nourishment directly from the soil through their own roots. In the same way, charity (*dana*) offered to a worthy person (*sat-patra*) by someone who has sufficient knowledge, has an eternal and living value, because it forms a reciprocation of affection and help that continues to exist even from one lifetime to the other. A worthy person who has received a gift will be ready to reciprocate whenever need or opportunity arises.

Already the previous verses had stated the great importance of charity and liberality, but this verse explains very well what real charity is about, in order to reform those who give charity to the wrong persons and with the wrong attitude.

Bhagavad gita (17.20, 21, 22) also instructs about the proper way to give charity: *datayam iti yad danam diyate 'nupakarine, dese kale ca patre ca tad danam sattvikam smritam; yat tu praty upakarartham phalam uddisyā va punab, diyate ca pariklishtam tad danam rajasam smritam; adesa-kale yad danam apatrebhyas ca diyate, asat-kritam avajñatam tat tamasa udabritam.*

“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 goodness, while charity performed in expectation of some return, or given unwillingly, is in the mode of passion and charity given without considering time, place and recipient, without respect and affection, is under the mode of ignorance.”

The results of actions performed in goodness, passion and ignorance are described in *Bhagavad gita*: actions in goodness will bring happiness and purification, actions performed in passion will bring suffering and anxiety, and actions performed in ignorance will bring degradation, illusion and madness.

When we give something it is important to know to whom we are giving, and how our gift will be used; one who gives carelessly is making a bad use of something which really does not belong to him. *Isa Upanishad* (1) states: *isavasyam idam sarvam yat kiñca jagatyam jagat, tena tyaktena bhujitha ma gridhah kasya svid dhanam*, “All this universe (including the living entities) actually belongs to the Lord, and each one of us must simply use the part allotted to him or her for one’s own necessities, without encroaching on what is allotted to others, because we should always remember that everything and everyone belongs to God only.”

If we renounce one part of our wealth to help another member of God's family who may be in difficulty, we must make sure that our action is actually useful and wise, otherwise we will share the responsibility of any bad use to which our gift will be put. Mindless charity can do more damage than good.

Verse 40

किं शस्त्रं सर्वेषाम् ?

kiṁ sastram sarveṣām?

What is the supreme weapon?

युक्तिः ।

yuktiḥ

Reasoning.

The ability to reason, to "put together" ideas and thoughts, constitutes the most powerful and flexible weapon, "the Mother of all weapons", as without it no weapon can be properly utilized. Without reasoning and intelligence we won't be able to do anything but destroy and hurt ourselves and others: a clear example is the use of modern nuclear, chemical and bacteriological weapons, which can easily escape from the control of those who invented them, and create immense disasters for everyone.

A bacteriological weapon, for example a new virus, especially studied to be incurable and lethal (like AIDS), can have unforeseen developments and remain incubated for years in laboratory research subjects who had been inoculated, even without showing any symptoms. If these animal or human carriers (apparently in normal health) later come in touch with other individuals outside the controlled environment of the research, there might be terrifying uncontrollable epidemics that endanger the life of millions of people. Intelligence is the only weapon that cannot be used against ourselves, and that can defeat opponents by earning their appreciation and sometimes even their friendship.

माता च का ?

mātā ca ka?

Who is the mother of all?

धेनुः ।

dhenuḥ

The cow.

According to Vedic scriptures, a mother is one who feeds and cares for us. There are different types of mothers: the one who gives birth, the one who feeds us with her milk, the cow, earth, the king's wife, the preceptor's wife and the *brahmana's* wife. All these mothers must be respected because their kindness allows us to get the nourishment needed for life. The cow is a particularly good and generous mother, and she deserves affection, respect and consideration. In atheistic and violent civilizations the cow's kindness and tolerance are mistaken for weakness, and these sweet and intelligent animals are mistreated and killed without any remorse to satisfy the false need for non-vegetarian dishes.

In Vedic culture killing a cow is considered a particularly heinous crime exactly because of the great kindness of these animals, who are always ready to accept us as their own children and supply us with the milk from their body.

किं नु बलम् ?

kim nu balam?

What is real strength?

यद्धैर्यम् ।

yad dhairyam

Courage.

Courage and determination enable us to execute incredible things that generally require a lot of strength. On the other hand, one who just has physical strength but has no courage is not able to bring anything to completion or to execute heroic acts, because every important deed is always faced with all kind of difficulties and opposition, especially in Kali yuga.

को मृत्युः ?

ko mṛtyuḥ?

What is death?

यत् अवदानरहितत्वम् ।

yat avadānara hitatvam

Lack of care.

One who lives in a miserable and neglected condition, like many old people and homeless bums who are devoid of relatives and friends and who forget to take care of themselves, is as good as being dead, and such existence is pitiful and miserable. It is a life that has no meaning - simply a waiting room for death.

Verse 41

कुत्र विषम्?

kutra viṣam?

Where is poison?

दुष्टजने ।

duṣṭa-jane

In bad people.

Among all poisonous animals, evil human beings are certainly the worst because they often attack without the least provocation or need, while animals generally react out of fear or hunger.

Bad people poison others by their biting or by the contact of their tongue and even with their simple presence, therefore it is extremely important to carefully avoid their company and anything connected with them.

किमिह आशौचं भवेत्?

kim iha aśaucam bhavet?

What is contamination?

ऋणं नृणाम् ।

ṛṇam nṛṇām

Debts contracted by people.

When we make debts, our life becomes true hell, because at every moment we must keep them in mind and appease our creditors so that they will patiently wait for the refund. Furthermore, usually debts have the tendency to grow constantly due to interest rates and create a bad reputation, which in turn makes earning money and repaying debts even more difficult.

The entire modern system of so-called “developed economy” is based on debts and loans, and under the garb of helping people to build their dream homes, purchase a vehicle, start a business or complete their education, it enslaves them and often ends by depriving them of their possessions, which are required to be offered as mortgages. Credit cards have also become the cause of immense problems in “developed countries” as people spend money without being aware of how much they are actually spending and how much money they actually have in their bank account, and land themselves in heavy debts, in turn creating serious restrictions in their personal lives. Countries that borrow money from other countries also face the same problems, only on a much larger scale.

Debts lower our consciousness level, create anxiety and devour our life and energy like a fire or a disease, continuously feeding on themselves and becoming stronger and more arrogant every day.

The same applies to non-financial debts that we incur when we receive help or benefits from others. Every person is automatically indebted towards God, the Devas, the great Rishis, other living entities etc, so by performing one's duties and repaying such debts, we become purified and eligible for liberation.

किम् अभयम् इह ?

kim abhayam iha?

What is fearlessness?

वैराग्यम् ।

vairāgyam

Detachment.

In order to avoid the contamination of debts, we just need a little detachment in regard to possession and enjoyment. Detachment is the only way to conquer fear. In fact, what do we usually fear? We fear suffering — that is, getting what we do not want and not getting what we want. Joy and pain are relative concepts (what is heaven for someone could be hell for another, according to our tastes and preferences or even the particular circumstances) and temporary, too, because they have a beginning and an end.

Bhagavad gita (5.22) says, *ye hi samsparśa-ja bhoga dukkha-ya eva te, ady-antavantaḥ kaunteya, na tesu ramate budhab,* “The enjoyment derived from the contact of the senses with the sense object is ultimately a source of suffering because it has a beginning and an end, and intelligent persons do not search for happiness there.”

Bhagavad gita (2.14) recommends that we bravely face all dualities in life, all the ups and downs, without getting upset because they are temporary like summer and winter: *matra-sparśas tu kaunteya, sitoshna sukha-dukkha-dah, agamapayino 'nityas, tams titikshasva bharata.*

However, it is important to understand that detachment does not mean denial or refusal. Some people believe that by systematically rejecting happiness and pleasure, accepting only suffering and pain they become somehow meritorious, but this is not a fact.

Tapasya, or voluntary acceptance of difficulties for the sake of spiritual progress, must always be directed to a good cause and performed with detachment, which is the only way to overcome the illusion of duality. Verse 13 recommended to keep always a detached attitude to destroy all unhappiness; *tyaga* and *vairagya* have the same meaning.

भयमपि किम् ?

bhayam api kim?

What is fear?

वित्तमेव सर्वेषाम् ।

vittam eva sarveṣām

For everyone, it is money.

Verse 7 said that the cause of fear is death — the loss of something to which we are very much attached (our body and bodily relationships). This verse expands the point including the loss of something which, for many people, is even more important than life itself: wealth. Many people risk their lives every day in order to get money, and some would rather die than being robbed of what they have painfully earned.

However, money is cause of fear both for those who have it and for those who don't have it, because everyone needs money to survive - and if money is not properly protected or invested, it disappears very quickly. How to become free from this fear? The detachment stressed in the previous verse does not mean throwing money away so that we don't have to worry about it anymore, but rather it means accepting losses and gains with a balanced mind, as unavoidable circumstances of life, being satisfied with what is necessary to our needs, working honestly and sincerely, and sometimes - if necessary - accepting some restrictions without losing one's peace of mind.

Verse 42

का दुर्लभा नराणाम् ?

kā durlabhā narāṇām?

What is rarely obtained by human beings?

हरिभक्तिः ।

hari-bhaktiḥ

Love and devotion for Lord Hari.

For a long time there has been a form of material rivalry among some who call themselves devotees of Siva and some who call themselves devotees of Vishnu (Hari, or Narayana). Actually such a dualistic vision, that often caused offensive or even violent behavior, is a great disgrace for both camps and denounces a complete lack of spiritual understanding in those who support and foster it. In verses 55-56 the transcendental relationship between Siva and Mukunda is explained, while verse 65 reveals that Shankara and Narayana are two aspects of the same Reality.

Regarding the question of *bhakti*, some partisans of the path of knowledge (*jñāna-yoga*) tend to denigrate the path of devotion (*bhakti-yoga*) and vice versa. This is also a dualistic and limited vision and it denounces a lack of intelligence in those who support it, because *jñāna* and *bhakti* are made to support each other and are actually non-different from each other. *Bhakti* devoid of *jñāna* (devotion without knowledge) is nothing but emotional sentimentalism devoid of real substance and constitutes a terrible danger for those who sincerely try to progress on spiritual life, while *jñāna* without *bhakti* is dry and causes pride, distortion of reality for one's personal advantage, insensitivity towards the sufferings of others, and many other evils.

Real knowledge must necessarily bring us to devotion to the Supreme, as we learn from *Bhagavad gīta* (7.19, 7.3): *babunam jananam ante jñānavan mam prapadyate, vasudevah sarvam iti sa mahatma su-durlabhab; manusyanam sabasresbu kascid yatati siddhaye yatatam api siddhanam kascin mam veti tattvatah*. "After many rebirths, a person who has attained real knowledge surrenders to me and attains me; such a rare great soul can actually see Vasudeva in everything that exists", "Among thousands and thousands of people, one may endeavor for perfection, and among those who have actually attained perfection one may come to know me in truth."

Knowledge and detachment (*jñāna* and *vairagya*) constitute the two preliminary steps of real *bhakti*, that according to this verse is a rare and precious asset, very difficult to obtain. The cheap merchandise one can find on the market of materialistic religion, and that is falsely labeled as "devotion" (*bhakti*) is actually a surrogate only, a poor imitation to cheat and engage foolish and superficial people.

पातकं च किम् ?

pātakam ca kim?

What is heinous?

हिंसा ।

himsā

Cruelty.

The specific meaning of *ahimsa* is not simply "non violence", as it is usually translated, but rather "absence of cruelty and hostility", which constitutes a much deeper and significant meaning, based on the realization of the universal brotherhood of all living entities, who are all children of the Lord and parts of him. *Bhagavad gīta* (15.7) explains: *mamaivamso jīva-loke jīva-bhūtaḥ sanatanah*. All the living entities are eternally "limbs" of the body of the Supreme, and should be treated as such.

The Lord cares about all his children and loves them dearly, so one who is cruel to any living entity (by actions, words or thoughts) commits a heinous crime in the

eyes of God. In this sense, even abstention from positive action (i.e. being callous or even enjoying the sufferings of others) is a form of cruelty and violence. It is not sufficient to abstain from committing violent acts: even an apparently “innocent” onlooker can be very guilty of a cruel behavior, depending on his consciousness.

Not being cruel does not mean that we should become weak and cowardly and avoid all confrontation or strong action in defense of *dharmā* or innocent and good souls. Such strong action performed to prevent a crime is actually free from cruelty because it is ultimately meant for the benefit of all, including the restrained or punished criminal, who would otherwise have to incur a much stronger punishment at the hands of Yamaraja. Thus, a strong action taken to prevent a crime is actually *ahimsa*.

को हि भगवत्प्रियः स्यात् ?

ko hi bhagavat priyaḥ syāt

Who is dear to the Lord?

योऽन्यं न उद्वेजयेत् अनुद्धिग्नः ।

yo 'nyaiṁ na udvejayet anuddhignaḥ

One who does not cause pain to others and does not get lost in worries.

This verse repeats the crucial point of kindness and respectful compassion towards all living entities, already expressed in verses 5, 12, 15, 16, 18, 19, 21, 25, 26. It connects with the previous verse as well (42) as lack of cruelty means to avoid causing pain to others.

The Lord is very pleased with those who are good to all creatures, as God is the eternal Father of all living beings, as confirmed in *Bhagavad gita* (14.4): *sarva-yonishu kaunteya murtayah sabhavanti yah, tasam braha mahad yonir abam bija-pradah pita*. No father will be happy to see his children hurt each other, and especially to see some children who regularly behave cruelly with others.

As far as getting lost in worries is concerned, the Lord takes care of all his children, but is especially affectionate to those who completely surrender to him, with devotion and faith: *ye yatha mam prapadyante tams tathaiva bhajay abam* (*Bhagavad gita*, 4.11). One who loses himself in worries is only preoccupied with his small problems, is wasting the valuable opportunity of human life and shows very little faith in the Lord.

Another form of worry is the intense suffering caused by sympathy with the sufferings of other living entities: we should not allow us to be overwhelmed by compassion to the point of becoming unable to take the appropriate actions. This weakness is compared to the hesitation of a surgeon who faints at the sight of blood during his work, and is therefore unable to actually help his patients.

Verse 43

कस्मात् सिद्धिः ?

kasmāt siddhiḥ?

From where perfection comes?

तपसः ।

tapasaḥ

From austerity.

Siddhi usually refers to the divine power that is the goal of mystic *yoga* practice. There are eight main *siddhis* and many other less important ones, but ultimately they are different manifestations of the same power to control matter. In order to obtain any goal, any material or spiritual perfection, it is necessary to practice austerity: to undergo a precise discipline and face some difficulties, that could even be painful especially in the beginning. Without austerity it is not possible to achieve perfection: we will only remain on the theoretical level.

Bhagavad gita (18.37, 38) explains, *yat tad agre visha iva pariname 'mritopamam, tat sukham sattvikam proktam atma-buddhi prasada-jam; vishayendriya-samyogad yat ta agre 'amritopamam, pariname visham iva tat sukham rajasam smritam*, “Happiness in goodness awakens one to self-realization; it may seem like poison in the beginning but at the end it is like nectar, while happiness in passion, derived from the contact of the senses with the sense objects, seems like nectar at the beginning but in the end it is just like poison.”

Bhagavad gita (17.14,15,16) lists the different forms of austerity for body, mind and speech, that help our progress on the path of perfection: *deva-dvija-guru-prajña-pujanam saucam arjavam, brahmacaryam ahimsa ca sariram tapa ucyate; anudvega-karam vakyam satyam priya-bitam ca yat, svadhyaya abhyasanam caiva van-mayam tapa ucyate; manah-prasadah samnyatvam mauna atma-vinigrabah, bhava-samsuddhir ity etat tapo manasam ucyate*.

The austerities of the body are the worship of the Supreme, the genuine *brahmanas*, the spiritual master and superiors, as well as cleanliness, simplicity, continence and non-violence. Austerity of the speech consists in speaking true, pleasing, beneficial and soothing words, and regular recitation of scriptures and *mantras*. The austerity of the mind consists in remaining always satisfied, kind, sincere, self-controlled, and working at purifying one's life. On the other hand, 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 turned against the Paramatma residing within one's body: *asastra-vibitam ghoram tapyante ye tapo janah, dambhabankara-samyuktah, kama-raga-balanvitah; karshyantah sarira-stham bhuta-grabah acetasah ham caivantah sarira-stham tan viddhy asura-niscayan* (*Bhagavad gita* 17.5-6).

बुद्धिः क्व नु?

buddhiḥ kva nu?

Where is intelligence found?

भूसुरे ।

bhū-sure

In *brahmanas*.

Intelligence is the characteristic quality of *brahmanas*: a foolish or ignorant *brahmana* is a contradiction in terms, an oxymoron, like saying “dry water” or “cold fire”. If someone wants to pass off as a *brahmana* on the basis of birthright or belonging to a particular community, but lacks intelligence and discrimination, he should be considered part of that group described in the *Vedas* as *brahma-bandhu*, “a relative or friend of *brahmanas*”, but he can never be called *brahmana*.

A true *brahmana* is considered a *bhu-sura*, “a Deva on Earth”, because among all the beings who live on this planet, an intelligent spiritualist who knows Brahman (and who is therefore *brahma-jana*), is the highest authority and the most divine personality. *Sura* means “good or divine personality”, while *asuras* are demoniac and materialistic personalities. Therefore, a so-called *brahmana* who exhibits demoniac and materialistic qualities and activities must be rejected as a dangerous impostor.

कुतो बुद्धिः ?

kuto buddhiḥ?

Where does intelligence come from?

वृद्धोपसेवया ।

vrddhopasevayā

From constantly serving the elders.

Someone could think that a *brahmana*'s intelligence is innate from birth, and it needs no work to develop. This verse contradicts such a theory by stating that intelligence and understanding (i.e. enlightenment, *buddhi*) are qualities that we develop by executing the proper activities, especially by regularly serving our superiors.

One who was born in a family that follows noble principles is naturally facilitated in this task, because since early childhood he is surrounded by people who regularly practice service to *brahmanas*, to preceptors, to the great *acharyas* and to Isvara, who is the Eldest of all.

के वृद्धाः ?

ke vrddhah?

Who are the elders?

ये धर्मतत्त्वज्ञाः ।

ye dharma-tattva-jñāḥ

Those who know *dharma*.

This verse clarifies beyond all possible doubt which are the proper parameters to evaluate people. The elders described in Vedic tradition as object of respectful service in order to achieve real intelligence are not aged and senile ignorant people devoid of moral principles, who did nothing in their lives but acting against true religion and spirituality. Such “elders” cannot be counted in the category of superiors, but rather in the group of poor suffering and neglected creatures (*dina*) who verse 16 recommends to treat with kindness (*karuna*).

This, however, does not mean that aged people should not be considered our superiors because of some inevitable physical problem connected with old age, if they fit this verse’s description: if they know *dharma* (duty and ethical religion) they are always worthy of all our respect and constant service. By staying regularly in contact with these people — by constantly serving them — we will be able to absorb their moral principles and therefore to develop real intelligence.

In fact, one who knows *dharma* constantly works for one’s own progress and for the progress of the entire world; therefore those who engage constantly in their service are automatically engaged in such auspicious activities, which will help them to develop a deeper understanding of reality.

Verse 44

संभावितस्य मरणात् अधिकं किम् ?

sambhāvitasya maraṇāt adhiḥkāṁ kim?

What is more painful than death, for a respectable person?

दुर्यशो भवति ।

duryaśo bhavati

Getting a bad reputation.

As explained in verse 38, good reputation should be protected with all care because a bad fame makes it impossible to properly execute one's social duty.

It is very easy to become the target of slandering, but one who behaves properly and uses intelligence in relationships with others can maintain a respectable reputation when living among good people. Some other very good advice contained in *Bhagavad gita* (6.10) is that one should not hanker after social life and rather one should prefer to live peacefully in a solitary place in order to practice *yoga*. As far as the fact of living in the middle of venomous or ignorant people, verse 30 recommends to carefully avoid the places where many bad people live.

लोके सुखी भवेत् कः ?

loke sukhī bhavet kaḥ?

Who will find happiness in this world?

धनवान् ।

dhanavān

One who is wealthy.

Verse 41 defined money and wealth as the source of fear for everyone, while verse 11 said it is one of the most impermanent things in life; in many other verses renunciation is recommended as the only way to achieve peace and happiness in all circumstances. However, a slightly different concept is gradually introduced: the great spiritual value of wealth used properly, as in verse 25, which praises wealth united with renunciation.

Once this connection is established, other verses (29, 31, 36,) will present wealth as a blessing, because it allows us to do beneficial deeds for others (*para-upakara*).

In this verse and in the following ones, the real meaning of wealth is more clearly established: wealth consists in being always satisfied and renounced at the same time. Someone who possesses great amounts of money and material assets is not wealthy, if his mind is always strained on a strong urge to accumulate more and more money and properties: one who always thinks about how to make money is really poor, because he sees himself as such.

धनमपि च किम् ?

dhanam api ca kim?

What is this wealth?

यतश्चेष्टम् ।

yataś ceṣṭam

That which meets our needs.

Actually being wealthy means to be satisfied with what we have, even with whatever meets our simple and basic necessities. It is important to clarify the fact that each living entity may have specific needs, different from others': an elephant, for example, needs much more food than an ant.

A person's needs can be measured on someone else's only in a very rough and approximate way; it is true that everyone needs a proper quantity and quality of food, clothes, shelter for sleeping and enjoying privacy, a certain amount of social and cultural life and recreation, but according to different cultures, specific places and climates, the individual health conditions, age, physical constitution and activities, such needs may differ greatly.

While it is always important to stress the value of a simple life and wealth as consisting in becoming easily satisfied with what we obtain without too much trouble, it is advisable to carefully consider the differences among individuals and in the different phases in the life of a same individual.

One should renounce the insatiable thirst for material possessions and enjoyment, train his mind to use intelligence and be satisfied with what comes through his own good and honest work and as a result of one's past *karma*: *mudha jahibi dhanagama-trishna, kuru sad-buddhim manasi vitrishna, yad labhase nija-karopattam, vittam tena vinodaya cittam* (*Bhaja Govindam*).

Verse 45

सर्वसुखानां बीजं किम् ?

sarva-sukhānaṁ bījaṁ kim?

What is the source of all pleasure?

पुण्यम् ।

puṇyam

Spiritual merit.

दुःखमपि कुतः ?

duḥkham api kutah?

And where does suffering come from?

पापात् ।

pāpāt

From bad actions.

This verse proposes a very special explanation of pleasure and happiness and attainment of wealth and other opulences, strictly connected with the concepts of *karma* and reincarnation. The Sanskrit word *karma* is commonly used to mean “action”, but also “reaction” and “connection between action and reaction”.

These three are actually very strictly connected: according to the laws of the universe, each action is followed by an equal and contrary reaction. This applies to the movements of gross physical bodies in the environment but also to the subtler facts and their consequences that may be observed after a very long time, or under different forms. For example, if we consciously and unnecessarily kill someone, sooner or later we will have to die a violent death to “pay” for our karmic “debt”, the action we initiated and which must attain completion before dissolution. It is not a punishment but a compensation, a re-balancing of the cosmic energies that were disturbed by our non-harmonic actions.

Maybe the killer will be killed by the victim’s relatives or executed after a trial, but he can also “get away with it” and then become a victim of an “accident” in this lifetime or in the next. The purpose of the mechanism is teaching us how to live in a proper way, because in order to deeply understand the meaning of a violent death we have to go through exactly the same experience, and the Supreme Witness who constantly resides within us guides us to our appointment with “destiny” (usually, without out conscious knowledge) where we will learn that particular lesson.

Now, just like in the “bank account” of *karma* there are debts to pay, we also have credits to cash. Spiritual merits (*punya*) earned by executing good deeds, charity and religious activities, are so many deposits on our account and will mature in due time, even if we do not remember them. For this reason pleasures and sufferings, compared here to the credits and debts we daily find in our account, have roots in good (*punya*) or evil (*papa*) activities we performed in the past.

Actually there is no injustice, nothing happens “by chance”: life and destiny follow a scientific law of perfect justice which, once we understand it, will help us get free from all ties and even to close the account once and for all.

How to close the *karma* account? First of all, we need to soberly accept all the joys and sufferings that always come every day, without trying to solve our problems by resorting to evil activities. We can certainly work to solve problems but we should always remain within the boundaries of Dharma. When we are in deep and troubled waters, the greatest danger is panicking and floundering about without a clear vision of reality: this may prompt us to commit actions that are actually against Dharma, thereby creating more negative reactions for the future.

Secondly, we must act in a detached way, out of duty, always doing what is good and beneficial for ourselves and for others; in this way we will accumulate merits that allow us to meet our daily karmic “expenditures” until the moment we leave this body. Actually, as long as we have a material body we need to “spend”, i.e. to enjoy or consume a minimum amount of pleasure and benefits that are necessary for our bodily and mental health. After the “rental period” of this body is over, we

can close our “karmic account” and be freed from its responsibilities by simply renouncing our remaining accrued merits and offering them for the benefit of others.

Karmic credits allow us to get wealth, beauty, intelligence, fortune, fame, strength, health, self-control and so on. It is very important to note that the karmic credits we build today can also be cashed in this very life, as *karma* is simply “action” and not necessarily “action from a previous birth”. By sincere work, determination and intelligent efforts, and by avoiding making “new debts” we can improve the situation of our “karmic account” even in a very short time.

कस्य ऐश्वर्यम् ?

kasya aiśvaryam?

Who is glorious and powerful?

यः किल शंकरं आराधयेत् भक्त्या ।

yaḥ kila śaṅkaraṁ ārādhayet bhaktyā

Verily, one who worships Siva with devotion.

Devotion for the Lord, practically demonstrated through different but genuine forms of worship, constitutes the distinctive symptom of someone who has intelligence, inner strength and a broad mind. By worshipping Siva with devotion one can obtain all material and spiritual blessings needed to progress in life and attain visible and invisible glory and power, as Shankara Mahadeva is *asutosha*, very affectionate and benevolent in nature, easily pleased by a sincere attitude.

Aradhana means “worship” and includes performing ritual ceremonies, chanting of *mantras*, glorifying, hearing the descriptions of Bhagavan (including names, qualities, *lila*, etc), meditating, offering one’s submission and prayers, and accepting the leftovers of the things offered to God as *prasada*.

Verse 46

को वर्धते ?

ko vardhate?

Who is growing?

विनीतः ।

vinītaḥ

One who is humble.

को वा हीयते ?

ko vā hīyate?

Who is becoming diminished?

यो दृप्तः ।

yo dṛptaḥ

One who is arrogant.

We should be sad to see a person squandering his money without doing anything good to rebuild his credits and we should be glad to see one who carefully manages his money and works with sincerity and intelligence. Similarly, one who has the proper vision can understand that a person who behaves arrogantly, cruelly and foolishly, often bullying others, is quickly burning up his karmic credits, while one who is humble, kind, friendly with all living creatures is actually accumulating merits, thereby building a bright future for himself.

According to the law of gravity, going down is much easier than going up, but the results will be different. Arrogance brings to degradation even those who may have attained elevated positions, while humility allows anyone to improve his own position.

को न प्रत्येतव्यः ?

ko na pratyetyavyaḥ?

Who should not be trusted?

ब्रूते यश्च अनृतं शश्वत् ।

brūte yaś ca anṛtaṁ śaśvat

Someone who is accustomed to telling lies.

One who is accustomed to telling lies develops a kind of second nature, that automatically brings him to distort truth for his own personal interests. How can such a person be trusted? Some people and organizations build their entire structures on lies, so even honest and sincere people who become associated with them are contaminated by this impurity and thus should never be trusted. The practice of truthfulness is therefore extremely important in dharmic life and spiritual progress.

Verse 47

कुत्र अनृतेऽपि अपापम् ?

kutra anṛte 'pi apāpam?

In which case a lie is considered sinless?

यच्चोक्तं धर्मरक्षार्थम् ।

yac coktaṁ dharma-rakṣārtham

When it is uttered to protect Dharma.

Although truthfulness (*satya*) is considered one of the most fundamental principles of Dharma, it is necessary to deeply understand its nature and constantly meditate on it. Truth is much greater than what we are normally able to see, and has ample space for all beings, as all are his children. First and foremost, Truth must be served in this positive attitude of service to Dharma which is ethical principles, justice, the eternal and constitutional nature of Reality.

For example, it is perfectly ok to tell a lie out of compassion, to save innocent creatures or even to protect one's life and property. It is also ok to tell a lie to protect our cleanliness or self-discipline, for example when we are offered inappropriate foods or objects we can say we are not hungry.

This verse expands the meaning of verses 20 and 22, and on the legal platform it recalls the distinction between the letter and the spirit of the law: sometimes by trying to respect the letter of the law we may deeply betray its spirit — so we need to be careful and give up foolish narrow-mindedness.

को धर्मः ?

ko dharma?

What is Dharma?

अभिमतो यः शिष्टानां निजकुलीनानाम् ।

abhimato yaḥ śiṣṭānāṁ nija-kulīnānām

What has been practiced by the noble elders of the family.

This verse expands the explanation of verses 23, 27, 28, 38, by offering a practical example of how Dharma was applied in different situations by the noble elders who came before us. In fact, it is much easier to understand the spirit of the law by observing its applications in different circumstances, instead of just enunciating its rules without connecting them with life itself. This is why Vedic knowledge has been compiled also in the form of stories as in the *Puranas* and *Itihasas*, and the *lila* of divine manifestations are rich in various situations and display a great range of choices.

Abhimata means “respected”, in the sense that good and noble-principled people act by practicing the teachings of spiritual path while respecting the spirit of divine law. In order to really understand what Dharma is, we must observe the minimum common denominator in a great number of actions apparently different from each other, sometimes even appearing as opposite.

Sishya indicates that the good actions of those who came before us constitute their real legacy and heritage and their perennial contribution to civilization and to the noble traditions of the human family. Indeed, if we consider the Supreme as the Father of all living entities, the whole universe is our family and the greatest and noblest persons in all human kind are our ancestors, the noble and good elders of our family who we must respect and honor by defending and applying their principles.

Verse 48

साधुबलं किम् ?

sādhu-balaṁ kim?

What is the strength of a good and saintly person?

दैवम् ।

devam

God

कः साधुः ?

kaḥ sādhu?

Who is a good and saintly person?

सर्वदा तुष्टः ।

sarvadā tuṣṭaḥ

One who is always satisfied.

A *sadhu*, a good and saintly person, who exemplifies by his life the application of Dharma, finds his strength in God at the divine level, without giving much importance to what is temporary and fallible — physical strength, economical strength, the power of intellect, the strength of family and society, the power of fame and reputation. A *sadhu* is not characterized by a specific dress, title, or religious affiliation. All these are just externals that sometimes can help and sometimes even obstruct spiritual progress.

We should be very careful to understand the meaning of the word *deva* in Sanskrit language and in the Vedic sense: the concept of “Godhead” is much more than the limited concept of Abrahamic religions. *Bhagavata Purana* (1.2.11) explains: *vadanti tat tattva-vidas tattvam yaj jñanam advayam, brahmeti paramatmeti bhagavan iti sadyate*, “Those who know the Truth have described Reality as a non-dualistic knowledge and substance, defined as Brahman, Paramatma and Bhagavan.”

The personal aspect of God is also present in Vedic knowledge, but it is not limited by sectarian views or by material restrictions. Without understanding and realizing Brahman and Paramatma, our understanding of Bhagavan is bound to be very defective and distorted. Particularly, so-called exclusive devotion to one particular form of Bhagavan, Paramatma or Brahman, is defined as a “useless disturbance to human society” as it creates hostility and ignorance in the name of religion and spirituality.

One who always depends on God is always satisfied and has nothing to worry about, because he knows that everything happens for a higher purpose and has already found satisfaction in the self (*atmarama*). *Bhagavad gita* (18.66) teaches: *sarva-dharman parityajya mam ekam saranam vraja, abam tvam sarva-papebhyo mokshayishyami ma sucah*, “Do not worry about the temporary and limited *dharmas* of the material level, but surrender unto me only and do not fear anything, because I will protect you.”

One who reached the level of spiritual realization, the Brahman level, has nothing to worry or to hanker about, but is always benevolent towards all beings and worships the Supreme with devotion: *brahma-bhutaḥ prasannaṭma na socati na kankshati, samah sarveshu bhuteshu mad-bhaktim labhate param* (*Bhagavad gita* 18.54).

दैवम् किम् ?

devam kim?

What is Godhead?

यत्सुकृतम् ।

kaḥ sukṛtam

Good action.

कः सुकृती ?

kaḥ sukṛtī?

Who is the performer of good actions?

श्लाध्यते च यः सद्भिः ।

ślādhyate ca yaḥ sadbhiḥ

One who is praised by good people.

Contact with Godhead is attained through good and auspicious actions. It is not sufficient to profess belonging to a certain faith and then act in a cruel or ignorant way: good and auspicious action is crucial to attain the divine platform (*brahma-bhuta*). In fact, someone who claims a high religious or spiritual position and actually performs evil actions is the greatest cheater and rascal.

Such cheaters and rascals are praised by bad and ignorant people, and so they like to surround themselves with this kind of persons, while they cannot accept being questioned about their evil actions. They cannot even tolerate to see that others are obtaining success through dharmic means.

Bhagavad gita (16.15) explains that deluded demoniac people actually perform sacrifices and give charity in order to advertise themselves and to feel great and powerful above all others: *adhyo 'bbijanavan asmi ko 'nyo 'sti sadriso maya, yakshye dasyami modishya, ity ajñāna-vimohitah*, “The fool, deluded by ignorance, thinks: There is none as powerful as me. I am supported by important people like nobody else. I will celebrate sacrifices and give charity for my own pleasure and profit.”

So the difference between the “good actions” or even “religious actions” performed by demoniac people and those performed by people of divine qualities is the motivation — a good motivation is praised by good people. A person who has a good motivation in performing good actions is not disturbed by seeing that others also perform good actions and obtain the praise of good people, and is actually happy to see the success of others.

What are the good and auspicious actions on the divine platform? The best way to understand the spirit of the law is to observe its practical application by good and saintly people and listen to their explanations; this can be done by keeping their company and acting under their guidance.

Verse 49

गृहमेधिनश्च मित्रं किम् ?

gṛha-medhinaś ca mitraṁ kim?

Who is the real friend of a family man?

भार्या ।

bharyā

His wife.

Already in previous verses we had seen the importance of good human relationships on the path of progress, and this verse explains very well what the intimate relationship between husband and wife should be. The entire society is built on this spirit, as family is the building block of the whole social fabric, fundamentally the same all over the world.

A *gṛha-medhi* is “one who uses his intelligence for the benefit of home and family”, or in other words, a married man who must provide for the maintenance and protection of other people in his care.

Without the friendship, affection and cooperation of his wife, a man cannot live happily at home and fulfill all his material and spiritual duties. The concept of friendship implies an equal level relationship, based on mutual respect and confidence, where each of the two partners can fully rely on the other.

The tendency to keep one's wife in submission and domination, deny her what is necessary for her overall health and happiness (physically, mentally and spiritually), mistreat her and get pleasure by humiliating her is a demoniac tendency that brings about great social evils besides serious personal problems in this life and in the next.

को गृही च ?

ko gr̥hī ca?

Who is a family man?

यो यजते ।

yo yajate

One who engages in sacrifices.

One who lives at home (*grihi*) is considered a family man, different from *sannyasis* who have no home and *brahmacharis* who live in the home of their Preceptor to serve him and learn from him. In the Vedic system there are four stages (*ashramas*) in the life of each civilized and progressive man:

1. *brahmacharya*, a period of study and discipline at the house of the Preceptor, where the boy learns how to control his senses and behave in a selfless, responsible and serious way,
2. *grihastha*, a period of family and society life when the young man gives his contribution to society and fulfills his own desires and personal development,
3. *vanaprastha*, a period when a mature man becomes able to completely dedicate to spiritual life by retiring in some holy and quiet place (such as a forest or pilgrimage place) to perform austerities and elevate his consciousness as much as possible in preparation to death, because his children are fully grown and capable to take charge of home and business,
4. *sannyasa*, where the old man has finally overcome all attachments and material needs and renounces all comforts, pleasures and safety in order to operate within society without depending on it. In the position of a *sannyasi* a traveling spiritual Preceptor can affirm moral and spiritual truth without any fear, as he cannot be blackmailed by materialists.

Considering the remarkable austerities and strict discipline of the other three *ashramas*, many people think that family life is exclusively meant for sense pleasures, cultivation of pride and possessions, social prestige and entertainment based on material identification. This verse, however, clarifies that such an idea is totally wrong. A family man has the duty to perform sacrifices for the benefit of the entire

society, otherwise he is no better than an animal. Even dogs have families and society, but their lives are centered merely on personal welfare and on the welfare of family and restricted clan or social group. In a canine society there are continuous fights and quarrels, often cruel and merciless, to establish the supremacy of the clan, community or nation over other groups. The clan members who do not accept to submit to the strongest individual or pack leader are cruelly punished and ostracized, while those who are “different” are persecuted by all. When a new dog enters the clan’s territory, the local clan members rally against him. In a canine society, dog eats dog.

In a civilized human society, however, the life style should be different, based on material and spiritual progress, on cooperation among different groups, just like the different parts of the cosmic body (Virata Rupa) described in the *Vedas*, that naturally cooperate with each other. Just like each social group takes care of a specific function and must be respected for the important work it performs for the benefit of everyone, similarly the members of the various *ashramas* have different duties for the benefit of the entire social body. If a family man did not perform sacrifices for the benefit of the entire society, the other three *ashramas* would not be able to concentrate on spiritual progress, which is essential in a civilized society. What is a sacrifice? The word sacrifice means “an act which makes something sacred”. The next question and answer will clarify this concept.

को यज्ञः ?

ko yajña?

What is a sacrifice?

यः श्रुत्या विहितः श्रेयस्करो नृणाम् ।

yaḥ śrutyā vihitaḥ śreyas karo nṛṇām

What is prescribed by Scriptures and brings real benefit to people.

Prescribed activities constitute a duty, and therefore a “sacrifice” that “makes sacred” the life of the family man, who is engaged in the maintenance of his family. A married man should however have a broader vision of the concept of family, which should include all the members of the human race (*nṛinam*), who are members of the same family as children of God. *Nara* indicates all human beings.

Bhagavata Purana (1.2.13) explains, *ataḥ pumbbir dvija-sreshtha varnasrama-vibhagasah, sv-anushthitasya dharmasya samsiddhir hari-toshanam*, “The highest perfection that one can achieve by performing one’s duties according to social position and order of life is to please Hari”, and *Vishnu Purana* (3.8.8) adds: *varnasramacara-vata purushena parah puman, vishnur aradhyate pantha nanyat tat-tosha-karanam*, “The proper performance of one’s duties within the system of *varnas* and *ashramas* is meant for the service and satisfaction of Vishnu.”

Thus, if one neglects or disrespects the instructions of Vishnu and his representative, the genuine Guru, and/ or neglects to bring real benefit to the living entities, who are the children of Vishnu, one's sacrifices are worse than useless. By executing activities that bring benefit to the people in general, a married man justifies and sanctifies his own life and work, and gives a crucial contribution to society. We must make sure that such sacred and beneficial activities are confirmed by the genuine scriptures (*śruti*), because frequently even well-meaning actions for the benefit of people may bring about disastrous results when they are performed in ignorance or passion.

Actually, authoritative scriptures always recommend what is beneficial for all and pleases the Supreme (also called Yajña, "the Lord of Sacrifice") who is the father and the friend of everyone. *Bhagavad gīta* (5.29) connects the practice of *yajña* with the attainment of peace: *bboktaram yajña-tapasam sarva-loka mahesvaram, subridam sarva-bbutanam jñatva mam santim ricchati*, "Peace is attained by one who knows God as the beneficiary of all sacrifices and austerities, the owner of all worlds and the most intimate friend of all living entities."

Verse 50

कस्य क्रिया सफला ?

kasya kriyā saphalā?

Whose actions give fruit?

यः पुनः आचारवान् शिष्टः ।

yaḥ punaḥ ācāravān śiṣṭaḥ

The actions of someone who always behaves properly.

By expanding the meaning of the actions suggested in the previous verse, this verse stresses the importance of wise and conscious action, based on moral and religious principles, on knowledge and desire to benefit all creatures, which is the foundation of Vedic teachings (*viśva kalyāna*). Those who want to make good use of their resources and energies by acting in a proper and fruitful way must always behave with justice and virtue, always examining their own projects in the light of proper knowledge.

कः शिष्टः ?

kaḥ śiṣṭaḥ?

Who is learned?

यो वेदप्रमाणवान् ।

yo veda pramāṇavan

One who respects the *Vedas* and accepts their authority.

The word *Veda* exactly means “knowledge”. Vedic scriptures were revealed to humans to help them in performing their duties, and they contain all necessary knowledge to properly activate society and guarantee spiritual progress to all individuals.

The authority of the *Vedas* (*shastra-pramana*) is on a superior level than temporary authority because it derives from a source that is not subject to the limitations of conditioned souls (*apaurusheya*); those who accept it are in a better position because they can avail a greater body of knowledge and wisdom, that would be otherwise impossible to attain.

Regarding the duties within society, Vedic knowledge is summarized in *Bhagavad gita* (4.13): *catur-varnyam maya sristam guna-karma vibhagasah*, “The four categories of human society were created directly by me according to the inherent qualities and tendencies of the individuals.”

Each particular position in society has specific duties connected with the natural qualities and tendencies of the person who occupies that position. In degraded societies people tend to avoid duties and occupy positions that seem to offer more rights than duties, even changing their social position when they see some better opportunity for personal profit.

को हतः ?

ko hataḥ?

Who is killed?

क्रियाभ्रष्टः ।

kriyā bhraṣṭaḥ

One who is fallen from the practice of his duties.

It is impossible to overestimate the importance of the execution of one’s duty in the light of knowledge and benefit for human society: the purpose of life consists in acting for one’s own and others’ benefit, therefore those who give up the practice of their duties are living uselessly and should already be considered as good as dead. A life which is simply dedicated to one’s own sense gratification, selfishness, laziness and vanity is no better than death.

The importance of duties in one’s social position is here stressed to the extreme: failing to execute one’s duties equals to death.

Brahmanas have the duty to remain detached from material power and possessions, to patiently teach Dharma to all people, to celebrate rituals for all the other members of society, and to lead an exemplary life based on the qualities and activities that characterize their position.

Bhagavad gita (18.42) lists them: *samo damas tapah saucam kshantir arjavam eva ca, jñanam vijñanam astikyam brahma-karma-svabhava-jam*, “A *brahmana* naturally exhibits the qualities of peacefulness, self-control, austerity, purity, tolerance, honesty, knowledge and wisdom based on Vedic authority.”

People who do not engage in such duties and do not possess such qualities are simply fallen and do not deserve the respect due to a *brahmana*.

Kshatriyas have different natural qualities and tendencies, and therefore different duties, mostly pertaining to the protection of the *prajas*: *sauryam tejo dbritir dakshyam yuddhe capy apalayanam, danam isvara-bhavas ca kshatram karma-svabhava-jam*, “The natural qualities of a *kshatriya* are heroism, a powerful personality, determination, resourcefulness, courage in battle, generosity, and leadership” (*Bhagavad gita* 18.43).

A person who does not show these qualities in practice is not a *kshatriya* but an impostor and usurper, or the impotent descendant of illustrious forefathers.

Vaisyas and *sudras* have less duties (*Bhagavad gita* 18.44): *krishi-go-rakshya-vanijyam vaisya-karma svabhava-jam, paricayatmakam karma sudrasyapi svabhava-jam*, “The natural qualities and duties of a *vaisya* are the cultivation of the land, the protection of the cattle, and trade. The natural qualities and duties of a *sudra* are simply about assisting the others.” These social positions are thus easier to maintain even without making particular efforts to qualify oneself or make personal sacrifices. Therefore it is said that in the age of Kali everyone is born a *sudra*, because without a strenuous effort and a proper training it is almost impossible to become genuine *brahmanas*, *kshatriyas* or even *vaisyas*.

Verse 51

को धन्यः ?

ko dhanyah?

Who is wealthy?

सन्न्यासी ।

sannyāsī

One who is renounced.

This answer clarifies the real significance of wealth. After discussing about money and wealth in many verses, now *Prasnottara Ratna Malika* clearly states a truth which could see absurd at first sight: how can a renunciate be wealthy?

In Kali-yuga we see many so-called *sannyasis* who accumulate personal money and live in luxury and material power, but this is not the meaning of our verse. The real significance of this verse is that one who is detached from sense gratification and

material power, who is content with the basic necessities of life, is always happy and does not need anything, because he already has everything he wants.

One of the most important topics of *Bhagavad gita* is precisely the clarification of the difficult concept of *sannyasa*, that can be easily misunderstood by misinformed people. Krishna explains, *kamyānam karmanam nīyasam sannyasam kavayo viduḥ, sarva-karma-phala-tyāgam prabhuḥ tyāgam vicakṣaṇaḥ*, “Actual renunciation or *sannyasa* consists in giving up the desire for selfish activities. In fact, one should renounce the fruits of all activities: this is defined as renunciation.” (18.2).

However, those actions that are prescribed in the scriptures and performed for the real benefit of the people (*yajña*, or sacrifice), the distribution of necessities for life to deserving people (*dana*), and the hard work in the service of God (*tapas*) should never be given up (*Bhagavad gita* 18.5): *yajña-dana-tapah karma na tyajyam karyam eva tat, yajño danam tapas caiva pavanani manishinam*.

Prescribed duties should never be renounced. If, because of illusion, one gives up his prescribed duties, such renunciation is said to be in the mode of ignorance. Similarly, anyone who gives up prescribed duties because they are troublesome, or out of fear, is said to be in the mode of passion and such renunciation will not give permanent fruits (*Bhagavad gita* 18.7-8: *nīyatasya tu sannyasah karmano nopapadyate mohat tasya parityagas tamasah parikirtitah; dukkham ity eva yat karma kaya-klesa-bhayat tyajet, sa kṛitva rajasam tyagam naiva tyaga-phalam labhēt*).

Some men take the position of *sannyasa* in order to live as a parasite of the society without actually working, to automatically get respect, service and special material facilities from the general mass of people, to escape from family responsibilities or to acquire power in some religious institution: such renunciation never brings the real fruits of *sannyasa*. On the contrary, it only causes sufferings to everyone and will certainly end in a disastrous downfall in the future - sooner or later.

को मान्यः ?

ko mānyaḥ?

Who should be honored?

पण्डितः साधुः ।

paṇḍitaḥ sādhuḥ

One who is learned, wise and good.

कस्सेव्यः ?

kas sevyah?

Who should be served and worshiped?

यो दाता ।

yo dātā

One who gives liberally.

A learned, wise and good person is honored by civilized human beings: teaching this principle to people is essential in order to maintain social order and individual and collective progress. Even more than generic respect (*mana*), society should worship and serve (*seva*) those well-wishers who do not simply behave properly and honestly in their own lives, but actively work for the benefit and progress of others.

को दाता ?

ko dātā?

Who gives liberally?

यो अर्थितृप्तिं आतनुते ।

yo arthi-tṛptiṁ ātanute

One who satisfies the needy.

In order to give real satisfaction to the needy we must follow some basic points:

1. choosing people who are in real need and worthy of receiving charity,
2. giving with a respectful attitude and kind words,
3. offering the gift without expecting or desiring anything in return.

One who follows these principles, already explained very clearly in previous verses, is able to satisfy the recipient of his charity, otherwise there will be negative and dangerous feelings and results.

Among all forms of charity, the gift of knowledge is certainly the greatest, because a person who gets real knowledge becomes able to find satisfaction in the self and act for the benefit of oneself and others, which gives the maximum possible satisfaction.

Verse 52

किं भाग्यं देहवताम् ?

kiṁ bhagyaṁ deha-vatām?

What is fortune for one who has a body?

आरोग्यम् ।

ārogyam

Freedom from disease.

For all those who live in a material body (*deha*) freedom from disease (*roga*) is the greatest asset, because a diseased person is not able to properly perform his duties, to enjoy normal pleasures in life or to progress in spiritual life, because he is always distracted by his own sufferings. Therefore the greatest charity on the material platform consists in helping people to maintain their health and to be cured from diseases — with proper medicines, proper diet and good life habits. This all comes from knowledge, as knowledge empowers people to take care of themselves properly.

कः फली ?

kaḥ phalī?

Who obtains the result of his efforts?

कृषिकृत् ।

kr̥ṣi-kr̥t

One who tills the land.

When we cultivate the land, we easily obtain the result of our efforts because Earth is a generous and benevolent Mother. Agriculture has a primary importance in the maintenance of society, because all living entities must subsist on the produce of the land: any other product of human labor is an extra asset, which can improve the quality of life but cannot sustain it in the most basic needs. From the cultivation of soil — paddy fields, forests, etc. — we can obtain whatever is necessary in human society: foods of all kinds, good medicines, building materials, fuel, detergents, cloth fibers, paper for books and innumerable other valuable things for all aspects of life.

This answer also has another, more profound meaning: whatever we want to obtain, we must carefully cultivate and tend it just like a good farmer takes care of his crops. The soil of any enterprise (material or spiritual) must be tilled with our hard labor, cleaned from stones and weeds, fertilized and protected. Good seeds must be planted and watered regularly, then the growing crop must be protected from disease, pests and other problems. In this way, with constant work, patience and enthusiasm, faith and determination, any work will give fruits.

कस्य न पापम् ?

kasya na pāpam?

Who is free from sin?

जपतः ।

japataḥ

One who chants the sacred syllables

Japa literally means “chanting” a *maha-mantra*, consisting of divine Names. The practice of *japa* constitutes the easiest and most powerful form of meditation and worship, especially in the age of Kali, in which we presently live. *Bhagavad gita* (10.25) clearly states that among sacrifices, the chanting of *japa* is the best: *yajñanam japa-yajño ‘smi*.

This is because it can be performed in any place at any time, by anyone, and it has immediate and sure effects. The sacred syllables, the holy Names to be chanted on *japa-mala*, are spiritual sounds, *abda-brahman*, not comparable to common sounds. There are many *maha-mantras* recommended for *japa* chanting by different spiritual schools, but all must be confirmed by the scriptures in order to have an effective value.

The power of the holy Names is so great that it destroys all sins and defects. *Bhagavata Purana* (3.337) teaches: *aho bata sva-paco ‘to gariyan yaj-jihvagre vartate nama tubhyam, tepus tapas te jubuhub sasnur arya brahmanucur nama grinanti ye te*, “O Lord, those who chant your holy Names are the real *brahmanas* and *aryas*, even if they were born in families of dog-eaters. The simple fact that they are able to keep the holy Name on their tongues demonstrates that they have already practiced all austerities prescribed in Vedic scriptures, performed the prescribed sacrifices and took bath in the holy *tirthas*.” It is a fact that a non-purified person is unable to actually chant the holy Names of the Lord and he is quite averse to their pronunciation.

कः पूर्णः ?

kaḥ pūrṇaḥ?

Who is a complete person?

यः प्रजावान् स्यात् ।

yaḥ prajāvān syāt

One who has a progeny.

Human life goes through the four stages of *ashramas* because psychologically and biologically a human being is meant to fulfill his basic material duties. From the viewpoint of family tradition, one who was born in a family automatically contracts a debt with his own parents and ancestors, who expect from him an active life of work for the continuation and protection of the family’s traditions of progress and noble principles.

When one has a child, he can pass on to the new member of the family the responsibility to continue such a tradition, and when the child is grown up and able to perform his duties, the father can retire without any worry from social and family life and totally dedicate himself to spiritual progress and detachment from material ties.

From the psychological viewpoint, a man who has not gone through the family stage of life may have learnt the discipline of sense control as a *brahmachari*, but he usually lacks the experience of responsibility and duty, that are best practiced when one is in charge of a family. For this reason, a man who has a progeny and properly takes care of them is able to develop his inner growth in a way which is generally impossible for lifelong celibates.

However, it is possible for some extraordinary persons, having special character and qualities, to develop such qualities of responsibility, compassion, affection and care for other living beings without going through the family experience: such *naishtika brahmacharis* are already on a higher level and they are able to perfectly serve the entire society — that constitutes their real family — by renouncing sense gratification and by utilizing all their energies for spiritual progress for themselves and others. The next verse will clearly explain this concept.

The word *praja* also refers to the subjects of a King and include animals and all the living entities who were born on the land protected by the King.

Verse 53

किं दुष्करं नराणाम् ?

kiṁ duṣkaraṁ narāṇam ?

What is difficult for human beings?

यन्मनसो निग्रहः सततम् ।

yan manaso nigrahaḥ satatam

Constant control of their minds.

To attain constant control of the mind is very difficult, as stated in *Bhagavad gita: cañcalam hi manah kṛishna pramathi balavad dridham, tasyaham nigrabham manye vayor iva suduṣkaram* (6.34). However, it is not impossible, if we sincerely try with constant practice and detachment: *asamsayam mahabaho mano durnigrabham calam, abhyasena tu kaunteya vairagyena ca grihyate* (6.35).

The practice of *yoga* is aimed at controlling the mind through constant practice and detachment, to make it work in a beneficial and positive way for the benefit of oneself and others. Thus our mind can become our greatest friend instead of our greatest enemy and dictator.

There are eight stages of *yoga*, eight steps on which the practitioner must stand to gradually attain the final goal: *yama* (control of senses and activities), *niyama* (abstaining from negative activities and reforming bad qualities), *asana* (controlling one's body by sitting postures), *pranayama* (controlling emotional and energetic

levels through breathing), *pratyahara* (detaching one's senses from the sense objects), *dharana* (meditation exercises to keep the concentration of thought), *dhyana* (active meditation and conscious thought connections) and *samadhi* (constant control of mind through meditation).

There are different kinds of *yoga*, all arranged on the same mechanism: *batha-yoga*, *kr̥ya-yoga*, *jñāna-yoga*, *buddhi-yoga*, *karma-yoga*, *bhakti-yoga* and so on. In all of them, the preliminary stages must be followed in order to develop awareness, and all stages lead the practitioner to the constant, enlightened awareness, where mind control happens naturally and spontaneously.

को ब्रह्मचर्यवान् स्यात् ?

ko brahmacaryavān syāt?

Who is a *brahmachari*?

यश्च अस्खलित ऊध्वरेतस्कः ।

yaś ca askhalita ūdhvaretaskḥ

One who has sublimated his own life energy instead of wasting it.

To expand the meaning of the previous verses on family duties and the position of a married man, this verse illustrates the definition of a *brahmachari*, one who chooses to abstain from family life and from any sexual relationship in order to dedicate all his energies to work for the pursuit of spiritual knowledge.

The words *brahma achari* mean “one who acts for/as Brahman, on the spiritual level”, and indicate a person who lives on the level of *brahma-bhuta*, where there are no dualities like male and female, young and old, fat and thin, tall or short, beautiful or ugly, and so on — where all living entities are seen equally as spirit, distinct from the material forms they wear in a specific moment in time. One who has such a vision is naturally free from sexual needs, because he is a liberated soul (*jivan-mukta*) who lives at a higher level.

It is extremely important to distinguish between real *brahmacharis* (those who are at a higher level of spiritual awareness) and those who have simply remained unmarried bachelors for various reasons — social pressure, inability to maintain a family, lack of favorable occasions and so on.

When they externally abstain from sex relationships due to circumstances, but they are not maturely detached from material identifications and desires, these men tend to become like pressure cookers without a safety valve and constantly suffer from various mental and physical problems. Even when sperm is not released it keeps being produced by the body and accumulating; the accumulated sperm produces a pressure not only on the genitals, but on the other vital organs as well — stomach, heart and brain. When such pressure is not properly channeled by *yoga*, it can cause damage and even madness.

The word *urdhvareta* is particularly significant in this respect, and in order to understand it properly it is necessary to explain some basic concepts of *yoga*. Sperm is just a physical manifestation of life energy.

Energy contained in the body (also called *prana*) constantly flows allowing us to execute various activities in daily life and gives us health and stamina. Through the practice of *yoga*, the *sadhaka* uses this life energy to raise the *kundalini* upwards through the various *chakras* of the subtle body and thus elevates his consciousness.

Without energy we cannot do anything, not even maintaining life in our body, but the energy current flows in different ways in various people according to the development of their awareness and the opening of the *chakras*.

When *chakras* are closed or blocked by material contamination and ignorance, the life energy circulates especially in the lower parts of the body and mainly manifests as sexual energy. As we have already mentioned, if it is not “discharged”, such energy presses against the various organs, without giving benefits. When raised with higher consciousness through higher *chakras*, however, this same energy opens and purifies them manifesting other higher activities, that are more beneficial for the body and the mind.

The opening of *chakras* is not a cheap business, rather it is comparable to a delicate surgical operation by the concentrated energy of the *kundalini*, that works like a laser. In the hands of an incompetent and foolish person, a laser scalpel can cause enormous damage, so will energy directed or managed in the wrong way because of ignorance or mistaken ideas.

Verse 54

का च परदेवता उक्ता ?

kā ca para-devatā uktā?

Who is known as the supreme Goddess?

चिच्छक्तिः ।

cic chaktiḥ

The power of consciousness.

Kundalini is another name for the Mother Goddess, also called Shakti.

Among all the Devas who rule the universe and can grant blessings, the Mother Goddess of consciousness or awareness is the greatest and most wonderful power. Without the power of the Cit sakti, no one among the Devas, the human beings, the demoniac beings, the animals and the plants would be able to prosper or even

just to survive, therefore Awareness is the Mother of all beings. Shakti is the inseparable nature of God. This divine awareness and consciousness is so powerful that she can elevate any being to her own level and engage them in purely spiritual activities. This Cit sakti manifests in various forms, according to the numerous characteristics she possesses, but she is always spiritual and transcendental, causing creation, maintenance and destruction of the material world, and the eternal existence of the spiritual world as well.

को जगद्भर्ता ?

ko jagad-bhartā?

Who is the maintainer of the universe?

सूर्यः ।

suryaḥ

The sun.

The sun, visible and powerful manifestation of the Supreme, is the support of the entire universe because from its power and splendor all the planets and life forms are created. Each and every type of energy in the universe is simply a transformation of the solar energy, which makes animals, plants and minerals grow and store energy through chemical and biological processes.

The famous Vedic *mantra* Gayatri is a meditation on the sun's power as a manifestation of the Godhead, and by regularly reciting it, we can purify our awareness and acquire a great spiritual potency. Gayatri is also another name or form of the Mother Goddess.

सर्वेषां को जीवनहेतुः ?

sarveṣāṃ ko jivana-hetuḥ?

What is the source of support for all living entities?

स पर्जन्यः ।

sa parjanyaḥ

Rain.

The sun evaporates water from the sea and other reservoirs and collects it in clouds, then with proper changes of temperature it makes it fall as rain. Without rain the land remains dry and cannot produce food for the living entities — that food which is the maintenance and life for all.

This verse establishes the importance of nature and environmental balance and health for the true progress of society. Where water is polluted and rain is turned to acid by industrial fumes, its touching the land causes death and destruction instead of bringing life and prosperity.

The proper quantity of rain is also a blessing from the Devas, as confirmed in *Bhagavad gīta* (*annad bhavanti bhutani parjanyaḥ anna-sabbhavah, yajñād bhavati parjanyaḥ yajñāḥ karma-samudbhavah*, 3.14), and is favored by the performance of auspicious activities, beneficial for all beings.

The responsibility for the proper performance of auspicious activities and hence of a proper rainfall lies with the *brahmanas* and *śhatrīyas*. When the land suffers from drought or scarcity of water, *brahmanas* and *śhatrīyas* need to examine their standards in the performance of their duties, correct their mistakes and faults, and atone for their failure in protecting society. Similarly, impious and destructive activities performed by demonic beings bring suffering and chaos even in climate and rain distribution, because they alter the natural order of things.

Bhagavad gīta (16.8-9) explains: *asatyam apratiṣṭham te jagad abur anisvaram, aparaspara-sambhutam kim anyat kama-haitukam; etam drishtiṃ avashtabhyā nashtatmano 'lpa-buddhayah, prabhavanti ugra-karmanah śhatrīyaya jagato 'bitah*, “demonic people claim that the world has no other purpose or sense besides mere pleasure and lust, therefore they are confused about the real purpose of their existence, and because of ignorance of reality they constantly engage in terrible and destructive work.”

Those who use the world as a garbage dump or a quarry without caring for the benefit of all creatures create untold damages like the destruction of forests and environmental balance. These imbalances include global warming and climate changes on the whole planet, causing cyclones, floods and drought, the melting of glaciers and ice caps at the poles and the consequent rising of the levels of the oceans.

The worst situation for the planet and for human society is when demonic people take up the positions of *brahmanas* and *śhatrīyas* and control society for their own materialistic and demonic purposes.

Verse 55

को शूरः

ko śūrah?

Who is a real hero?

यो भीतत्राता ।

yo bhīta-trātā

He who protects those who are afraid.

Previously the same question was already asked twice, in verses 7 and 32; the answer was “one who is not confused by lust and remains steady in the execution of his duties.” Here the explanation is considerably expanded by introducing a clarification on what is expected from a hero: the protection of those who are afraid. One who has fallen victim to lust and greed gives no consideration to the fear and sufferings of others and is only interested in satisfying himself. Such a person deserves nothing else but pity for his weakness and cowardice.

A real hero is not a daredevil dedicated to destruction and massacres or to some imperialistic world conquest, but one who fights only to protect the good people, the weak and the innocent, to destroy the evil-doers and to uphold the principles of *dharmā*. Thus, a real *ksatriya* King is a direct representative of God for his subjects. However, one should not confuse this idea with the theocratic model of government that imposes a particular sectarian view of religion through material enforcement and persecute good people who worship God in a different way within the purview of the genuine universal principles of Dharma.

A *ksatriya* King cannot enforce sectarian ideologies or a particular “religion” — rather he protects the universal principles of religion that are valid for all groups of religionists and spiritualists: truthfulness, compassion, cleanliness and self-discipline. Religious discipline can never be enforced by a government, because that is the job of *brahmanas*, who have no material power in society other than the power of freely offering knowledge. The only way in which *brahmanas* can fight defective philosophical and theological conclusion is through a public philosophical debate and the propagation of literature. Besides, *brahmanas* can never instruct *ksatriyas* to enforce philosophical or theological conclusions through laws and persecution of dissidents.

In Vedic civilization there is no such thing as aggressive wars of conquest based on imperialistic principles, religious conversion or economic domination, or even persecution of dissident intellectuals and philosophers or “heretics”. The best protection of society is based on a program that enables people to protect themselves by developing reason and intelligence, already defined as the real strength in verse 42, and divine consciousness defined as “strength of good people” in verse 48. Such a program is defined in the next verse.

The association of this verse with the previous verse indicates a strong responsibility of the King in the protection of the *prajas* also in relationship with the proper amount and timing of rains and the other climatic conditions. When Dharma is properly protected and cultivated in a kingdom, the *prajas* do not suffer from natural calamities.

त्राता च कः ?

trāta ca kaḥ?

Who can give real protection?

स गुरुः ।

sa guruh

The Preceptor

The King has the duty to protect the *prajas*, but the Preceptor has a greater duty because knowledge can actually enable people to protect themselves and the entire society. By properly teaching Dharma and its applications and by inspiring people with his personal life example, a genuine Guru can actually save society both materially and spiritually: in fact we should always remember that all material circumstances have their roots at the spiritual level.

A spiritual Preceptor is the only person who can really protect us because he helps us to break free from the shackles of death and rebirth, that are the prime cause of all our sufferings beyond the temporary circumstances of a particular birth.

In this material world everyone is automatically subject to three forms of suffering: *adhyatmika klesa*, *adhibhautika klesa* and *adbidainika klesa*, that is sufferings caused by one's own physical and mental nature, sufferings caused by other living entities of various kinds, and sufferings caused by natural agents under the control of Devas. No one can really protect us in a complete way from birth, disease, old age and death, which are inevitable in one form or another, for all who have accepted a material body.

The supreme protection consists in liberation from all conditionings and from the need of taking another birth in a material body, as the greatest danger and suffering is the repetition of births and deaths: *punarapi jananam punarapi maranam, punarapi janani-jathare sayanam, iba samsare bahu dustare kripaya pare pabi murare; gurun-caranambuja-nirbhara bhaktah samsaradaciradbhava muktab, sendriya-manasa niyamadevam, drakshyasi nija-bridaya-stham deva* (Bhaja Govindam).

The only way to escape from the horrible and frightening cycle of birth and death, to be saved from having to lie again in a mother's womb, is to cherish the lotus feet of the Guru, thereby freeing oneself from the enslavement of illusion and controlling one's senses and mind, by learning to contemplate Isvara within one's heart.

को हि जगद्गुरुः ?

ko hi jagad-gurur uktaḥ?

Indeed, who is known as the universal Preceptor?

शंभुः ।

śambhuḥ

Lord Siva, Sambhu.

ज्ञानं कुतः ?

jñānam kutah?

Where is knowledge coming from?

शिवादेव ।

śivādeva

From Lord Siva.

The concept of *guru*, already mentioned in verse 2, is extremely complex and requires various levels of explanations. The Supreme is the original spiritual master, from who all knowledge emanates. *Jagat-guru* means “universal preceptor”, a person who is able to teach anyone and liberate everyone from ignorance and contamination.

We offer our humble obeisances, again and again, to the Supreme Guru, who revives the natural knowledge of the soul from within one’s heart.

Verse 56

मुक्तिं लभेत कस्मात् ?

muktiṁ labheta kasmāt?

How is liberation attained?

मुकुन्दभक्तेः ।

mukunda bhakteḥ

Through devotion to Mukunda (Vishnu, Krishna).

मुकुन्दः कः ?

mukundaḥ kaḥ?

Who is Mukunda?

यस्तारयेत् अविद्याम् ।

yas tārayet avidyām

He who takes us beyond ignorance.

The *sat-guru*, the real spiritual master, is interested in liberating his disciples from ignorance, not in performing some magic or confusing people with impressive

theatrics or word jugglery. Liberation comes only through the development of true spiritual knowledge and therefore by devotion to the Supreme Lord, which purifies the soul from all envy and lust and material desires. Siva is also known as Mukunda-priya, “dear to Mukunda”, because he constantly takes care of conditioned souls to bring them to liberation.

का च अविद्या ?

kā ca avidyā?

And what is ignorance?

यत् आत्मनो अस्फूर्तिः ।

yat ātmano asphūrtiliḥ

That which covers our true spiritual nature.

The contrary of knowledge, i.e. ignorance (*avidya*) is simply that which covers our true spiritual nature by hiding and clouding it, preventing us from seeing it in all its glory. Liberation actually means finding the awareness of our true spiritual nature and behaving accordingly. For one who knows he is spirit, all the sufferings and joys of matter fade away, all fears vanish, all actions and reactions take on a special significance beyond the temporary circumstances.

Atma literally means “self”, and is interpreted in various ways according to the level of awareness; our true self is spiritual and eternal and is never changed by material contamination, but rather covered and hidden by several layers of dirt. These different forms of dirt are called *avidya*, ignorance, and when they are removed, the perfect diamond of our self can again shine in all its original beauty.

Verse 57

कस्य न शोकः ?

kasya na śokaḥ?

For whom we should not worry?

यः स्यात् अक्रोधः ।

yaḥ syāt akrodhaḥ

For one who is free from anger.

किं सुखम् ?

kiṁ sukham?

What is happiness?

तुष्टिः ।

tuṣṭih

Being satisfied.

One who is free from anger and always satisfied in all circumstances will never have serious problems, because nothing can disturb him in his inner awareness. He does not need anything and is not easily offended, because he is detached from all material contacts.

No matter what may happen, even the most terrible things, his peace and inner strength are unlimited. Summer and winter come and go, rain comes and goes, and we must learn how to tolerate these extremes without getting angry or dissatisfied. When rain falls, it is stupid to try to stop it or to get angry at the rain or to fight against it. The best thing to do is to accept the good side of the rain and to tolerate its bad sides, especially those that cannot be mitigated by our positive work (such as building a shelter or using an umbrella).

को राजा ?

ko rājā?

Who is a king?

रंजनकृत् ।

rañjana-kṛt

One who makes others happy.

कश्च श्वा ?

kaś ca śvā?

Who is a dog?

नीचसेवको यः स्यात् ।

nīca-sevako yaḥ syāt

One who serves degraded masters.

The difference between a king and a dog is not in the dress or in the amount of wealth or material power, or the social honor one receives from the public. A king is a generous person who dedicates his life to protect his subjects and make them happy by working selflessly and without false pride for their benefit, while a dog is simply interested in his own immediate material benefits, which are easier and quicker to obtain when one serves degraded materialistic people, by learning to behave like them, without considering the future karmic consequences.

However this game does not last long, because at the end of this life the canine qualities and tendencies one has developed by living in such a way will force the evil-doer to take a new birth in a body that is more suitable to the kind of desires and activities he likes to cultivate.

Real freedom consists in constantly and sincerely serving good and saintly people who only desire the benefit of others, and by learning from them how to live in ethical and wise ways. This will bring us to develop the qualities of responsibility and moral strength, which will elevate us to a royal level.

Verse 58

को मायी ?

ko māyī?

Who controls *Maya* (the mystical energy)?

परमेशः ।

parameśaḥ

The Supreme Lord.

कः इन्द्रजालायते ?

kaḥ indra-jālāyate?

What is divine magic?

प्रपञ्चोऽयम् ।

prapañca 'yam

The manifestation of this world.

Maya means “illusion” or “magic”, and defines this material world, where everything appears real but is in fact constituted by energy rather than substance. What appears as matter is actually energy in constant vibration that continuously transforms in a kaleidoscope of situations, forms, colors, sounds and images. This is also the conclusion of the modern nuclear and particle physics.

Behind all magic there is however a magician, just like behind all artwork there must be an artist and behind all inventions there is a scientist. To think that creation has produced itself, “by chance”, denounces a mentality which is not at all scientific. Actually a real scientist should know that nothing happens by chance, that every effect has a cause, and each complex creation requires a plan - intelligence, deliberation and energy.

The Supreme Lord (*parama isa*) is this supreme scientist who creates, maintains and dissolves the whole material manifestation for the benefit of the conditioned souls

who want to have fun here and experience joys and sorrows — like an immense merry-go-round or amusement park with films and projections, horror tunnels and love tunnels, roller coasters, bumpy rides and all other illusory games that enthuse and thrill us (and make us sick, too).

कः स्वप्ननिभः ?

kaḥ svapnanibhaḥ?

What is dreaming?

जाग्रत् व्यवहारः ।

jāgrat vyavahāraḥ

The activities we perform in the waking state.

सत्यमपि च किम् ?

satyam api ca kim?

And what is real?

ब्रह्म ।

brahma

Brahman

Within this great amusement park that is the material manifestation, we pass through life like dreamy children lost in the most interesting and realistic projection shows, and sleepwalk around without knowing where we are and where we are going or what is the purpose of life.

The science of Yoga teaches that there are different degrees of consciousness: the ordinary waking state, the dreaming state, deep sleep and the “fourth level of consciousness”, called *turiya*, or “super-consciousness”.

Those who do not know the science of Yoga believe that the ordinary waking state is the real world and identify themselves with the conscious mind and material body, but this perception of reality is false and illusory — in fact, it is *maya*.

Even when we are “awake” our normal activities are devoid of real awareness, just as in day dreaming we project ideas and situations, and in dreams we project false awakenings so that we can keep sleeping.

In this wonderful magic illusion the most insubstantial things may look like the most concrete ones, whereas reality actually appears abstract and vague. How many materialists mock spiritualists by saying spiritualists are after mirages and abstract ideas, while they engage in “concrete” and tangible things?

One of the favorite “magical” tricks of illusion is making a solid floor appear like water, and a pool of water appear like a solid floor. Thus the foolish materialist keeps on trying to walk on water and quench his thirst from a dry floor, deriding those who do exactly the opposite of what he does — and he cannot understand why he cannot catch hold of permanent happiness in material things.

When we finally wake up — for a brief awareness glimpse or for longer periods into the *turiya* state, the actual consciousness of the *atman* — we realize that all this phantasmagoria was illusory and devoid of real importance: reality is much more solid and constant, something we vaguely aspire to even while struggling in our worst nightmares or our most vivid dreams.

The *Vedanta-sutras* begin with the verse *athato brahma-jijñāsa*: now, in this human form of life, we have the opportunity and the duty to search for the absolute and transcendental spirit, Brahman, that is the true eternal reality from which material existence borrows some ideas by distorting them, just like dreams vaguely reflect reality by giving us a nonsensical and confused picture.

Beyond all these dreams there is an eternal and transcendental existence, made of knowledge and happiness, a kind of bliss we will never be able to experience even in our best dreams — which still remain dreams, with their vague and confused feelings.

Verse 59

किं मिथ्या ?

kiṁ mithyā?

What is false and illusory?

यद्विद्यानाशयम् ।

yad vidyā-naśyam

That which is destroyed by knowledge.

तुच्छं तु ?

tuccham tu?

What should be considered as non-existent?

शशविषणादि ।

śaśa-viṣānādi

Absurd projects and illusory ideas.

Just like darkness is dispelled at dawn when the sun begins to appear, illusory dreams are destroyed by our awakening to the knowledge of true reality. Evil is

nothing but lack of good, as darkness is nothing but lack of light. Dreams are therefore simply a lack of awareness of our real nature and position — when our mind needs to create some illusory image in order to project its activities.

Bhagavad gita (18.35) explains that the determination that cannot go beyond dreaming, fearfulness, lamentation, moroseness and illusion is controlled by ignorance and does not bring any good result. Mirages and nonsensical projects that are unrealistic and serve no practical purposes are all in the category of dreams and can be easily destroyed by awakening to knowledge, i.e. by distinguishing reality from the magician's tricks. As soon as we are shown the mechanisms of the projectors or other magical tricks, illusion vanishes and we awaken to reality, laughing at our own foolishness.

का च अनिर्वचनीया ?

kā ca anirvacanīya?

What cannot be ascertained as real or unreal?

माया ।

māyā

Maya.

किं कल्पितम् ?

kiṃ kalpitam?

What is imaginary superimposition?

द्वैतम् ।

dvāitam

Duality.

To understand the nature of *maya*, the illusion of the supreme magician, is not at all easy. In one sense it is unreal because it is a false image that does not correspond to true reality and keeps transforming and changing, but in another sense it is very real. A feature film is unreal because the story is fictional, the actors play roles that do not correspond to their real identities, and the special effects are a make-believe, but at the same time it is all real because the actors really exist somewhere and were engaged in the film making. There are also a projector, a film and a screen in the cinema theater, and a public that watches the story.

We can say that a cloud is unreal because it can vanish at any time, but the rain discharged on land can bring inundation, floods, landslides and many other disasters, which remain very real even after the cloud has disappeared. Similarly, the rain water nourishes the seeds and the plants, which blossom and bear fruit and feed many living entities.

Therefore we can say that *maya*, the material manifestation, is at the same time real and unreal, as it constitutes an imaginary superimposition of concepts which have deep roots in reality. The projections we see do not exist, but *maya* — which is the projector, the screen and the film in the show — actually exists and will always exist. If we want to get free from illusion we don't need to destroy the projector and the screen (we wouldn't be able to do it anyway because they are actually eternal in themselves) but we need to realize the true nature of the projection and the screen and detach ourselves from the drama of the story.

The actual illusion is the duality, the fiction of the characters, because everything is part of the Absolute Reality. In a theater drama the actors seem to be fighting, but actually they are playing their parts in perfect accord and synchrony to create the impression of battle and confusion. Each picture is carefully planned to give us the illusion of separation and duality, so that we can think we are independent and different from the rest— that we are bigger or smaller, and so on.

Verse 60

किं पारमार्थिकं स्यात् ।

kiṁ pāramārthikaṁ syāt?

What is real, after all?

अद्वैतम् ।

advaitam

Non-duality.

च अज्ञता कुतः ?

ca ajñatā kutaḥ?

Where is this lack of knowledge coming from?

अनादिः ।

anādiḥ

It is beginning-less.

The word *paramartha* describes the Reality, something that is really valuable.

Vedic scriptures present us the four *arthas*, or “valuable pursuits” of human life: *dharmā*, *artha*, *kama* and *moksha*. However, the “most valuable pursuit” is the realization of the non-dual (i.e. transcendental) Reality that supports all these *arthas* and gives them their real value.

It is very difficult to understand the meaning of “Transcendence” or “Non-Duality” because everything we see in this world is based on dualities - heat and cold, day and night, male and female, light and heavy, big and small. So people tend

to understand *dharmā*, *artha*, *kāma* and *mokṣha* in a dualistic sense, creating a lack of cooperation among the limbs of the social body or among the different spiritual traditions, a sense of private ownership, exploitation of the sense objects, and a concept of spiritual salvation that is very similar to an escape from action.

For one who is used to think in dualistic terms, *Maya* cannot exist and not exist at the same time, but there is always a greater perspective from which we can reconcile all apparent contradictions. This perspective is called “Transcendence” because it is situated beyond duality. A wise and realized person, who has true knowledge, is able to see beyond material duality by clearly perceiving the fundamental oneness of all beings in this spirit. Among the many aphorisms regarding this point we can quote *aham brahmasmi, tat tvam asi, sarvam khalv idam brahma*, etc.

Bhagavad gita (7.28) also teaches that we must reach the platform of non-duality, where we can actually see things as they really are: *yesham tv anta-gatam paṇam jananam puṇya-karmanam, te dvanda-moha nirmukta bhajante mam dṛidha-vrataḥ*. Only those who have reached this level are free from all bad behaviors and act in a beneficial way for all, therefore they are able to worship the Lord, the Supreme Brahman. Those who have this transcendental vision are indeed on the platform of Brahman: *brahma-bhūtaḥ prasannaṭma na soḥati na kaṅkṣati, samah sarveṣu bhūteṣu mad-bhaktim labhate param; vidya-vinaya-sampanne brahmane gavi hastini, suni caiva sva-pake ca paṇḍitāḥ sama-darsināḥ* (*Bhagavad gita* 18.54, 5.18).

A really enlightened sage, situated on the level of Brahman, is always benevolent towards all living entities and because he knows their true spiritual nature, he does not consider them according to their different bodies, that are just illusory and temporary creations of *maya*. If true reality is non-duality, i.e. the Supreme Brahman, eternal, unchanging and transcendental spirit, how could this illusion be generated?

The answer is that the show has always been going on, as there have always been conditioned living entities who aspired to be immersed in it. Actually, duality is due to *Ishvara*’s kindness and generosity, as the supreme magician who controls illusion is ready to help his children to satisfy their material desires: because the living entities are eternal and God is eternal, also duality and material illusion are eternal and beginningless.

वपुषश्च पोषकं किम् ?

vapuṣaś ca poṣakaṁ kim?

What is feeding the body and maintaining it in life?

प्रारब्धम् ।

prārabdham

Past deeds which have begun to give results.

च अन्नदायि किम् ?

ca annadāyi kim?

What supplies food?

च आयुः ।

ca āyuh

Duration of life.

The results of past deeds supply the nourishment for the body and maintain the duration of life; this means that when karmic reactions which caused that particular body are finished, also life in that body terminates, in some way or another.

Without *karma*, the body has no more reason to exist. The results of past deeds are joy and misery, that are needed to complete our karmic mission, learn the different lessons and finally attain liberation.

The science of reincarnation is precise and complex, and constitutes the most interesting and important among all sciences known to man, because it directly deals with the purpose of our life and with the basic laws which govern it. No other science can be more relevant in the cultivation of human knowledge.

Verse 61

को ब्राह्मणैः उपास्यः ?

ko brāhmaṇaiḥ upāsyah?

Who should be worshipped by *brahmanas*?

गायत्री-अर्क-अग्नि-गोचरः शंभुः ।

gāyatri-arka-agni-gocarah śambhuḥ

Sambhu, Siva, who is perceived by senses through Gayatri, sun and fire.

गायत्र्यां आदित्ये च अग्नौ शंभौ च किं नु ?

gāyatrām āditye ca agnau śambhau ca kiṁ nu?

What is there in Siva, in Gayatri, in sun and fire?

तत् तत्त्वम् ।

tat tattvam

Reality.

Reality (*tattva*) is what eternally exists, beyond the magic illusion of the material word: this is the supreme spirit (Brahman). In this world, Isvara manifests in the form of Sambhu, Siva, the Father of the material creation.

The science of *siva tattva* is extremely vast and deep, and one who actually comes to realize it becomes able to enter into Divine Existence.

Siva is described by *Brahma-sambhita* (5.45) as non different from Vishnu, in fact as Vishnu himself when coming in contact with the material energy (*maya*): *kshiram yatha dadhi vikara-visesha-yogat sanjayate na hi tatah prithag asti betoh, yah sambhutam api tatha samupaiti karyat.*

The material and spiritual teachers of society (*brahmanas*) should give the example to the general population by worshiping Brahman in the visible forms described in this verse. Some people criticize the worship of the sun and the fire, considering them “primitive”, but such people have no real understanding of the power of such symbols and manifestations of the Godhead.

It is also very interesting to note that Gayatri, the Mother of all *Vedas*, is represented in a female form that unifies the most popular aspects of the Mother Goddess. The nature of Brahman is pure energy, as it is also confirmed by modern science, which has come to study concepts which appear of mystical meaning, related to the nature of matter in its most elementary and ultimate forms: quanta, microcosm, energy vibrations, and so on. The recent discoveries in sub-nuclear physics have brought researchers to conclusions that remarkably correspond to those contained in ancient Vedic literature.

Brahman is manifested in this world in different pure and powerful forms that we can observe and understand even in our present position, and from different levels of awareness, such as the Sun, Fire, and spiritual Sound. These manifestations are universal and people from all cultures are attracted by them and appreciate their power, although only a few Traditions have preserved their knowledge.

Fire (*agni*) is a fundamental principle of creation and dissolution and is present everywhere in the form of heat (including the heat in the bodies of living entities), fermentation and acid reactions, as well as electricity and light. Lamps and incense are activated by fire, and the sacrificial fire is directly considered the tongue of Deva — Vishnu as Yajña and all his limbs constituted by the various Devas.

The ancient Tradition of alchemy, also derived from the Vedic knowledge of Yoga, considered Fire as the purifying principle at a subtle level. Native traditions also give a great importance to fire in their sacred rituals and symbolic language, identifying it with the connection between the members of the family and community, including those who are dead, between this life and the next.

The Sun (Arka, Aditya or Surya) is described as the brilliance of the Lord, and is the greatest visible manifestation of energy in this universe, the giver of life and death, and the purifier. All religious traditions honor the Sun as the center of life; even

Christianity had to adopt winter solstice as the birth day of Jesus and the mystic concept of resurrection (characteristic of the ancient worship of the Sun) in the theological process of deification.

It is important to note that the present compilation of Vedic scriptures, attributed to Vyasa about 5,000 years ago at the beginning of the Kali yuga, often refers to a more ancient version of Vedic knowledge, containing a deeper and vaster knowledge of the universe, both material and spiritual, that Vyasa feared could become lost due to the inevitable degradation of people in this unfortunate age.

Verse 62

प्रत्यक्षदेवता का ?

pratyakṣa devatā kā?

Who is the Godhead manifested on the visible level?

माता ।

mātā

The mother.

पूज्यो गुरुश्च कः ?

pūjyo guruś ca kaḥ?

And who is the Preceptor we must honor?

तातः ।

tātaḥ

Our father.

This verse stresses the importance of family in Vedic culture, and at the same time teaches us that the relationship with the Godhead and the spiritual Preceptor should be based on love, gratefulness, constant communication and nurturing exchanges. And, most important, that all Dharmic relationships are sacred.

As the worship offered to Siva, to Gayatri, Sun and Fire may become distorted, trivialized and made mechanical by lack of awareness and knowledge, *Prasnottara Ratna Malika* gives us an easy and visible reference in this verse. One who is unable to respect and serve one's good parents will not be able to really respect and serve the Godhead. The valuable and extraordinary opportunity offered by human birth is a wonderful blessing, for which we should be eternally grateful.

Our mother is the one who constantly takes care of us, feeds us, consoles and educates us from our very first days of life; actually maternal care begins from the

first moment of our conception, even before we can realize it. Giving birth and nurturing a child is the most sacred act in life, and the proper relationship between mother and child is the foundation of all civilized cultures.

The present adharmic society disrespects motherhood in all possible ways: becoming a mother is called “breeding” and considered as a mere act of material “production of offspring”, “husbandry” is applied to the commercial exploitation of animals, childbirth is called “delivery” and controlled by medical doctors who have no respect for the sacredness of giving birth.

Women are forced to unnatural positions and procedures during childbirth, babies are forcibly taken from them at birth and kept separate, and breast-feeding of infants is considered indecent so that it should not be done in public. Abortion, especially of female fetuses, is also widespread. Girls are disrespected and often mistreated, kept uneducated and malnourished, segregated as “inferiors” and taught complete submission to any adharmic behavior of their family members and community. Eve-teasing is often benevolently considered a “normal youthful sport” and the victims of rape are shamed, treated as criminals and ostracized by family and society, while their rapists are excused or even admired for their "exuberance" and "uncommon sexual power".

This problem is also reflected in the ways that the other sacred symbols of motherhood are treated: mother cow, Mother Earth, and the Mother Goddess.

In India, cows are formally worshiped once a year: painted, decorated with colorful clothes, ornaments and garlands, shown lamps and incense, and given some sweets, then they are callously mistreated for the rest of the year. “Unproductive” cows are often sent to scavenge for food in garbage dumps, while “productive” cows are subject to artificial insemination and other unnatural practices, and kept constantly segregated and immobilized, often tied to a very short rope. Although cows are very sensitive, playful and loving animals, they are denied a natural and healthy family and social life. In many places even in India, cows and their children are slaughtered for meat and leather, or sold to others who will slaughter them (which is actually not very different). Sometimes, calf meat is sold on the market as “goat meat”.

Mother Earth is also disrespected, poisoned with dangerous artificial chemicals and pollutants of all kinds, and kept in exclusive property by people who do not care for the land. She is cultivated with artificial monocultures and “cash crops” and genetically modified seeds, over-exploited for the extraction of petrol and minerals, shaken with underground nuclear tests, devastated with all kinds of weapons, and burdened with enormous numbers of adharmic people who inflict unnecessary sufferings on her innocent children.

The Mother Goddess is still worshiped in India, but due to disrespect for women such worship becomes careless and shallow and it is even considered as an opportunity for the organizers to misappropriate the money collected by exploiting the religious sentiments of the general people and use it for irreligious purposes.

When the proper respect and love for Mother is forgotten, one cannot understand the proper position of Father as archetype model. This, in turn, creates generations of ignorant and bad mothers and fathers in society, who do not take their responsibility seriously or even desecrate their position with adharmic behaviors, mistreating and abusing their children or giving them to others who do so.

This cultural degradation is compounded by TV soap operas and films with a low ethical value that present a bad image of women and bad role models in family and society with endless examples of bickering, hatred, envy, vendettas, back-stabbing, violence and abuse, blind lust, greed over material possessions and shallowness. Such films and serials very rarely present good examples of men and women who successfully cooperate together, help each other, correctly teach Dharma to their children by precept and example, and help their children to develop their potential fully on all levels.

Mother and father should take care of our material and spiritual education, protection, maintenance and happiness, by giving affection and fulfilling all our desires because they have a deep love for us. Boys and girls should be properly prepared for their future duties of motherhood and fatherhood by their own parents and elders, so that the spiritually progressive tradition of Dharma can be preserved. *Bhagavata Purana* (5.518) teaches: *gurur na sa syat sva-jano na sa syat, pita na sa syaj janani na sa syat, daivam na tat syan na patis ca sa syan na mocayed yab samupeta-mrityum*, “Those who cannot deliver their dependents from the path of repeated birth and death should never become a Guru, a family elder (such as father and mother in law), a father or a mother, a worshipable superior or a husband.”

In order to deliver one’s dependents from the *samsara* of repeated births and deaths, it is necessary to personally attain such position through the proper training under the tutelage of a genuine Guru; therefore the *varnasrama* system prescribes a period of *brahmacharya* (studentship under the direct and personal care of a genuine and qualified Guru in order to attain the realization of Brahman) before entering the stage of *grihastha* or family life.

This is the proper dharmic method for the happy and progressive development of family and society.

कः सर्वदेवतात्मा ?

kaḥ sarva-devatātmā?

Who is the incarnation of all Devas?

विद्या-कर्मान्वितो विप्रः ।

vidyā-karmānvito vipraḥ

The *brahmana* who possesses knowledge and proper conduct.

Even more important than our own parents — as loving and benevolent as they may be — is the wise spiritualist who has a deeper knowledge of reality and behaves consistently, always working for the benefit of all entities. In this sense a

brahmana is at the same time the father and mother of everyone, because he constantly and tirelessly acts to protect them, nurture them with material and spiritual knowledge, and train them on the path of progress.

A mother and father who love their children will naturally direct them to learn Dharma and spiritual knowledge from a qualified *brahmana* who possesses knowledge and proper conduct. Nowhere in Vedic scriptures or in the teachings of the great *acharyas* we find that the concept of *jati*, or birth-right position, is the crucial factor in choosing a *brahmana* as preceptor, spiritual guide or priest in religious rituals. Without knowledge and proper conduct, birth in a traditional family of priests or *brahmanas* has no value and actually becomes a disturbance in society.

Verse 63

कश्च कुलक्षयहेतुः ?

kaś ca kula-kṣaya-hetuḥ?

What is the cause of the degradation of the family?

संतापः सज्जनेषु यो अकारि ।

santāpaḥ sajjaneṣu yo akāri

That which aggrieves the heart of good and saintly people.

We have seen in the previous verse how important it is to protect and preserve the moral and religious principles of the family, because from this basic nucleus of society the entire humankind grows and progresses. Impressions absorbed during our first years of life constitute an enduring memory and the life example of parents and ancestors shapes our character and our tendencies. In this sense we could say that *guna* and *karma* can be powerfully influenced by *jati*.

However, *jati* in itself has no value, especially if the family where one has taken birth had already lost the genuine knowledge and practice of Dharma and only keeps the name and title without substantiating it with suitable *guna* and *karma*.

If the descendants of families originally guided by noble principles continue to follow the example of their parents and ancestors as recommended in verses 47, 38, 27, society will be able to prosper. However, we have seen in verse 23 that in Kali-yuga ignorance and duality gradually become stronger and widespread, and only good and saintly people (*sat jana* or *sadhu*) are actually able to resist degradation.

Sometimes this degradation creeps in slowly, gradually and silently, so that the families are affected without even realizing it. In order to always maintain a careful control of the family's moral values, it is mandatory for all family members to keep contact with good and saintly people who will help us to understand which actions or situations can cause the suffering and therefore constitute a danger.

Basically, actions contrary to the principles of religion are committed out of cruelty, insensitivity, lack of compassion, lack of interest for knowledge and progress, arrogance, pride, craving for possessions and sense gratification, lust, foolishness, ignorance, bad training, superficiality, lack of respect for spiritualists, for the authoritative scriptures and for the Godhead. All the above considerations also apply to the disciplic succession system, as the “Guru-kula” is considered the actual family of the Guru. In particular, the degraded and unworthy descendants of a good disciplic family or Kula can contaminate and destroy their family and disciplic succession by committing atrocities, injustice, offenses and other horrible acts that cause suffering to good and saintly people.

Such offenders must be removed from the family or disciplic succession without delay, otherwise the entire Kula will be lost. It is said that a bad and foolish son is like a diseased and blind eye, as he is unable to perform his duty and gives constant pain and disturbances instead, so if there is no hope of improvement he should be removed from the family before he destroys it.

केषां अमोघवचनम् ?

keṣāṃ amogha-vacanam?

Whose words never fail?

ये च पुनः सत्य-मौन-शम-शीलाः ।

ye ca puṇaḥ satya-mauna-śama-śīlāḥ

**Certainly those who observe good behavior, truthfulness,
speech discipline and mind control.**

When we say something, we should only speak about what we know, with respect for truth and for religious principles, and controlling our mind and senses. One who observes these vows acquires a great spiritual power and when he speaks, his words carry a greater weight and do not fail.

The speech discipline or vow of silence (*mauna*) is a very important practice because it helps the mind to be silent and become able to listen to the conscience’s voice. When we are not able to tolerate silence, it means that we are not able to tolerate ourselves or the voice of our conscience. Controlling the faculty of speech is the first and foremost requisite for progress in spiritual life, because if we cannot keep silence when required we will never be able to listen properly, and without listening, no knowledge can be acquired.

Verse 64

The (**किं जन्म ?**) objects.
kiṃ janma?

विषयसंगः ।
viṣaya-saṅgaḥ

What is the best next birth of a person?

पुत्रः स्यात् ।

putrah syāt

His own child.

Without attachment for sense objects there is no more need for a new birth. After death the soul travels in the subtle body in search of a destination that is favorable for the fulfillment of his desires and attachments, particularly through the contact of the senses with the sense objects. In the Bardo, the “between-lives” situation, a materialistically oriented person is unable to satisfy his thirst for sense enjoyment because the subtle body has no senses that can enjoy gross material objects. This pushes the conditioned soul back to take another gross body.

The wish to perpetuate the family traditions and attachments to sense objects forces a soul to take a new birth, often in the same family, to carry on the activities he used to perform. In order to avoid the sufferings of repeated births and deaths, we can detach ourselves from material interests by transferring them to a qualified and intelligent child who will be able to carry them on with detachment and efficiency. This is a natural tendency as loving parents wish to offer all the best to their children in terms of material opulence and sense enjoyment. In one sense, children are an expansion of our own personality and traditions, and this is why parents always try to shape the spirit of their children according to their own tastes and preferences.

However, parents should not be attached to the idea of shaping their children into an exact replica or projection of themselves, because each individual person is different and has specific qualities and tendencies that need to be developed properly. Parents who are able to recognize their children’s individual personalities and to help their progressive development can also become detached and progressive in their own personal development.

If as parents we give a good example to our children, by honoring and following the genuine tradition of Dharma and the authoritative teachings of scriptures and *acharyas*, our children will spontaneously develop in the best possible way. After properly executing our duties as parents, it will be easier for us to get free from attachments and from the sense of duty to our ancestors by repaying our debt to them, and thus becoming free from the wheel of material existence.

Pu-tra means “one who frees from hell” and indicates a qualified and well-trained son who saves his parents from the degradation of giving up their prescribed duties (even for physical impossibility or other good reasons) by his own sense of responsibility and loyalty in performing such duties personally. In fact, a son is naturally entitled to represent his parents and act on their behalf especially in regard to religious duties.

को अपरिहार्यः ?

ko aparihāryah?

What is inevitable?

मृत्युः ।

mṛtyuḥ

Death.

Among all the things that may happen in this world, the most inevitable is surely death. *Bhagavad gita* (2.27) states, *jatasya hi dbruvo mṛtyur dbರುವam janma mritasya ca, tasmad aparibarye 'rthe na tvam socitum arhasi*, “One who has taken birth will certainly have to die, and similarly those who die will get a new opportunity for rebirth; therefore lamenting for the unavoidable loss of the material body is useless.”

The death of the body is not different from the constant smaller changes of body that happen in the course of one lifetime, from childhood to youth to old age (2.13): *dehino 'smin yatha debe kaumaram yauvanam jara, tatha debantara-prāptir dbiras tatra na muhyati*. In fact, the fear of death is simply due to the illusion of material identification with this temporary body and its relationships. Once we overcome this illusion born from ignorance, we find out there is nothing to lament about (2.11): *asocyān amasocas tvam prajāna-vadams ca bhāshase, gatasun agatasums ca namusocanti pānditāb*.

Becoming able to remember one's past lifetimes is a special blessing because one can directly understand the impermanence of material identification, and the continuity of life in different situations.

Our material body is composed of elements which constantly transform and change, and whose capacity of aggregation is constantly decaying with time. We may prolong life in a more or less effective way, we can avoid getting sick (even if this is extremely difficult, especially in Kali-yuga), and we may happen to die before having the chance of getting old. Death, however, is awaiting everyone, and nothing can be done to escape it when the time has come.

कुत्र पदं विन्यसेच्च ?

kutra padaṁ vinyasec ca?

Where should we put our foot?

In a place we consider clean.

दृक्पूते ।

dr̥k pūte

This verse tells us to avoid getting ourselves in muddy and complicated situations

where we can slip and end up in the slime. When we see and consider the place and the situation sufficiently clean, we can step in to proceed in our walking, otherwise we will incur great dangers.

Verse 65

पात्रं किं अन्नदाने ?

pātraṁ kiṁ annadāne?

Who is the proper recipient of a gift of food?

क्षुधितम् ।

kṣudhitam

One who is hungry.

The best qualification for receiving food is the most natural one: being hungry. When we offer food as a token of respect, affection or social tribute, we should make sure that the person receiving our gift is in a position to appreciate it: if food is offered to someone who is not hungry or is not able to digest the food, in spite of our best intentions we are actually creating embarrassment and suffering to the recipient of our offering, and this makes our gift absurd and negative both for us and for the person we want to honor.

Offering a gift of food to a beggar who claims to be hungry is always the best action for someone who is noble, charitable and wise, as by giving food one does not risk of contributing money to the degradation of an unqualified person who would spend it in a wrong and sinful way. If the beggar refuses the clean and good food we offer, we can then understand that he is a liar and does not deserve our charity.

If we want our charity to be as beneficial as possible, we should also remember the teaching of *Bhagavad gīta* (9.27): *yat karoshi yad asnasi yaj juboshi dadasi yat, yat tapasyasi kaunteya tat kurushva mad-arpanam*, and offer to God whatever action or sacrifice we do, whatever food we eat or distribute in charity. In this way we will not simply distribute food, we will distribute *prasada*, transcendental spiritual food offered to God, that is nourishing the soul as well as the body.

को अर्च्यो हि ?

ko arcyoḥi hi?

Indeed, who is worthy of being worshiped?

भगवदवतारः ।

bhagavad-avatāraḥ

An incarnation of Godhead.

Bhagavan regularly manifests by descending in this world when the religious principles are forgotten, irreligion advances and wicked and cruel people are persecuting the good and saintly: *yada yada hi dharmasya glanir bhavati bharata, abhyutthanam adharmasya tadanam srijamy abam; paritranaaya sadhunam vinasaya ca dushkritam, dharma-samsthapanarthaya sambhavami yuge yuge* (Bhagavad gita 4.7, 8).

The word *avatara* literally means “one who descends” and defines the different manifestations of the Godhead who descend in this material world to manifest divine plays (*lila*) and establish a perfect example, broadcast genuine teachings on *dharma*, protect the good people against the evil-doers and purify the world by establishing sacred pilgrimage places.

According to the purpose and the potency manifested by each *avatara* we can categorize the different manifestations of God as *svamsa* (direct and complete manifestations of the Personality of Godhead), *vibhinnaamsa* (indirect emanations of the Personality of Godhead) and *saktyavesa* (“acquired” or “empowered” manifestations, i.e. living entities who receive from God a special power to execute a specific mission).

Any type of true *avatara* is a divine manifestation free from the defects of conditioned souls, therefore all *avatars* are worthy of worship, especially as they represent the incarnation of divine mercy who spontaneously and freely descends among the sufferings and illusion of this world in order to spread the blessings of knowledge and liberation.

It is not easy for ordinary people to recognize an *avatara*. The *Puranas* narrate many stories where the *avatars* were not recognized immediately. Krishna says in *Bhagavad gita* (9.11), *avajananti mam mudha manushim tanum asritam, param bhavam ajananto mama bhuta-mabesvaram*, “Foolish people deride me when I manifest myself as an *avatara* in a human form. They are unable to understand my divine nature and my control over the material energy.”

However, it is said that in Kali yuga Bhagavan manifests only as “hidden” or *channa avatara*, to avoid encouraging degraded people to claim Godship in order to get cheap material benefits. When Bhagavan descends in Kali yuga as *avatara*, he presents himself as a devotee of God and spiritual teacher, accomplishing the mission of establishing the principles of religion, protecting the good people and annihilating the evil-doers, through his teachings on Dharma.

Bhagavata Purana (6.3.19) explains: *dharmam tu sakshad bhagavat-pranitam*, “Only a divine manifestation actually has the power to establish the principles of religion”, therefore as *Bhagavad gita* teaches (4.7), *yada yada hi dharmasya glanir bhavati bharata, abhyutthanam adharmasya tad atmanam srijamy abam*, “I manifest myself whenever and wherever there is a decline in the principles of ethical religion and *adharm*a becomes prominent.”

कश्च भगवान् ?

kaś ca bhagavān?

Who is Bhagavan?

महेशः शंकरनारायणात्मकः ।

maheśaḥ śaṅkara-nārāyaṇātmakaḥ

The Supreme Lord, who is at the same time Narayana and Shankara.

The meaning of the word *atma* is very complex, and it can be explained in different ways, but basically we can translate it as “self”. Just like the “self” is the essence, the soul, or the personality of an individual, we can say that the “self” of the different forms or personalities of Godhead is considered their basic essence or existence. The Godhead is unlimited and manifested in innumerable forms, defined as *svamsa*, *vibhinnaśa* and *vaibhava*. Every primary manifestation of the Godhead emanates secondary manifestations in terms of plenary expansions, partial expansions and energies. The science of Godhead is extremely fascinating and includes the topmost realizations of all sciences, like philosophy, theology, and even psychology, physics, and medicine. In the ancient Vedic tradition such elevated science is expounded in many texts that contain a very complex knowledge and cannot be comprehensively explained in a few lines. However, we may say that the Godhead is unlimited and is manifested in innumerable forms, all coming from the same supreme source or essence.

As we have already seen in previous verses (42, 45) there is no contradiction or duality between Narayana (also called Vishnu, Mukunda, Hari) and Siva (also called Sambhu, Shankara or Mahadeva). Bhagavan is not limited by a material body, therefore he manifests in various forms that constitute the demonstration of his many qualities and activities. Just like each one of us possesses different qualities and activities (and in a sense different forms or dresses) in a greater way the Supreme Lord, who possesses unlimited qualities and is able to do everything, must have the power to manifest innumerable forms. For the Lord there is no difference between dress and body, between body and mind, between mind and spirit, because everything about him is purely spiritual and non-dual.

Bhagavan is omnipotent, complete and perfect in himself, and remains the supreme Complete even when innumerable complete entities emanate from him, as confirmed in *Isa Upanishad*: *om purnam adah purnam idam purnat purnam udacyate, purnasya purnam adaya purnam evavashisyate*. The Supreme moves and does not move at the same time; extremely far, he is also very near. Present in every being and every thing, he is also outside all that exists: *tad ejati tan najati tad dure tad v antike, tad antarasya sarvasya tad u sarvasyasya bahyatah* (*Isa Upanishad*, 5).

Bhagavad gita (7.7) confirms that Bhagavan is the very essence of reality: *mattah parataram nanyat kiñcid asti dhananjaya, mayi sarvam idam proktam sutre mani-gana iva*. We must understand Bhagavan as the one without equals, the unborn, who has no

other cause beyond himself, infallible, the omniscient philosopher, the omnipotent, self-sufficient, who fulfills all desires of all living entities from the beginning of the universe. No veins irrigate his body, nothing stains his perfect purity: *sa paryagac chukram akayam avranam asnaviram suddham apapa-viddham, kavir manishi paribhub svayambhur yathatathyato rthan vyasadbac chasvati bhyah samabhyah* (Isa Upanishad, 8).

Bhagavan, the support of all existence, veils his transcendental form with the dazzling light of the Brahman (*brahmajyoti*). A prayer in *Isa Upanishad* (15) asks the Lord to allow his devotee to contemplate his lotus feet and obtain the direct vision of his form and abode: *hiranmayena patrena satyasyapibitam mukham, tat tvam pushann aparinu satya-dharmaya drishtaye*. Only the devotees, who surrender themselves to the Supreme, can be blessed by this vision: *naham prakasah sarvasya yoga-maya-samavritah, mudho 'yam nabhijanati loko mam ajam avyayam* (*Bhagavad gita*, 7.25).

Verse 66

फलमपि च भगवद्भक्तेः किम् ?

phalam api ca bhagavad-bhakteḥ kim?

What is the result of devotion to Bhagavan?

तल्लोक-स्वरूप-साक्षात्त्वम् ।

tal loka-sva-rupa-sākṣātvam

Direct realization of his abode and his form.

We can attain the supreme blessing, the realization of the form and the abode of the Lord by cultivating love and devotion to the Supreme according to the nine prescribed ways: *sravana* (listening), *kirtana* (chanting or singing), *sarana* (remembering), *vandana* (offering prayers), *pada-sevana* (faithfully following his instructions), *dasya* (offering service), *puja* (offering homage and ritual worship), *sakhyā* (developing a relationship where we see God as our best friend), *atma-nivedana* (completely surrendering to God). Without a genuine relationship of love and devotion for the Godhead, developed from knowledge and appreciation, it is impossible to actually understand the Supreme. Theoretical scholarship does not help much.

Bhagavad gita explains how to obtain this supreme blessing and recommends to always meditate on God, consider oneself his devotee, offer him homage, worship him and offer him all our activities in sacrifice, completely dedicating oneself to him: *man-mana bhava mad-bhaktō mad-yajī mam namaskuru, mam evaishyasi yuktvaiva atmana mat-parayanah* (*Bhagavad gita*, 9.34). Only devotional service allows one to really understand God and enter his abode or consciousness: *bhaktya mam abhijanati yavan yas casmi tattvatah, tato mam tattvato jñatva visate tad-anantaram* (*Bhagavad gita*, 18.55).

Verse 33 recommends searching the perfection of existence by constantly contemplating the lotus feet of the Lord, i.e. by meditating on the form of the Lord

and his instructions, while verse 42 declares that devotion to God is the rarest and most valuable blessing that can be obtained, defined in verse 45 as “the greatest glory and power”. It is certainly rare to find a human being who has attained the realization of the personal form of God, as confirmed in *Bhagavad gita: manushyanam sahasresbu kascid yatai siddhaye, yatatam api siddhanam kascid mam veti tattvatah* (7.3)

Therefore, we should never underestimate the value of real devotion to the Supreme by mistaking it for cheap and sentimental bigotry. One who really knows God and understands the transcendental nature of his form and activities can remember him at the moment of death and attains his abode or existence: *janma karma ca me divyam evam yo veti-tattvatah, tyaktna deham punar janma naiti mam eti so 'rjuna* (*Bhagavad gita*, 4.9). Among all the *yogis* and spiritualists, the greatest is one who worships God with pure devotion: *yoginam api sarvesham mad-gatenantar-atmana, sraddhavan bhajate yo mam sa me yuktatamo matah* (*Bhagavad gita*, 6.47). Only those who have purified their own existence and overcome the illusion of duality are able to worship God with real devotion: *yesham tv anta-gatam papam jananam punya-karmanam, te dvandva-moha nirmukta bhajante mam driha-vratah* (*Bhagavad gita*, 6.45).

मोक्षश्च कः ?

mokṣaś ca kaḥ?

What is liberation?

हि अविद्या अस्तमयः ।

hi avidyā astamayāḥ

Real liberation means becoming free from ignorance.

We cannot judge if a person is liberated or not just by observing his body or material position: the only method consists in ascertaining the level of ignorance or freedom from ignorance and illusion. When we overcome the different levels of the abyss through knowledge and finally come to see the sunlight, by freely going out in it, all ignorance is automatically destroyed.

कः सर्ववेदभूः ?

kaḥ sarva-veda-bhūḥ?

What is the origin of all the Vedas?

अथ च ओम् ।

atha ca aum

The sacred syllable Aum.

The *Vedas*, the original source of all knowledge, emanate from the very breath of

God and are transmitted by realized souls in order to dissipate the ignorance in this material world. The primordial sound vibration, the sacred syllable *a-u-m*, is also called *pranava* in Vedic scriptures and constitutes the primeval sound that permeates the various levels of creation and connects the subtle dimension with the gross dimension. The entire universe is created through sound, the Word, the vibration of energy which, condensed, transforms into all the material elements: this knowledge is apparently incredible and difficult to understand, but has been recently confirmed by the most advanced scientific research in the field of subatomic physics.

The sound *om* constitutes a form of the Supreme, as confirmed in *Bhagavad gita* (7.8): *raso 'ham apsu kaunteya prabhasmi sasi-suryayoh, pranavah sarva-vedesbu sabdah ke paurusham nrishu*. God 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, 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.

Bhagavad gita (17.23) confirms that from ancient times the three words were used to indicate the Supreme Absolute Truth in chanting the Vedic *mantras* and during the performance of sacrifices: *om tat sad iti nirdeso brahmanas tri-vidhab smritab brahmanas tena vedas ca yajñās ca vibitab pura*. 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 67

इत्येषा कण्ठस्था प्रश्नेत्तर-रत्नमालिका येषाम् ।
ते मुक्ताभरणा इव विमलाश्चभान्ति सत्समाजेषु ॥

*ityeṣā kaṇṭhasthā praśnottara-ratna-mālikā yeṣām
te muktābharaṇā iva vimalāś cā bhānti satyamājeṣu*

Those who recite by heart this Gem Necklace of questions and answers
shine by their purity among the noble people, like a pearl necklace.