

Eight Significant Verses of the Bhagavad Gītā Swami Dayananda Saraswati

This is the first part of the serial article.

Chapter 3, Verse 3

श्रीभगवानुवाच |

लोकेऽस्मिन्द्विविधा निष्ठा पुरा प्रोक्ता मयानघ |

ज्ञानयोगेन साङ्ख्यानां कर्मयोगेन योगिनाम् || 3-3||

śrībhagavān uvāca

loke 'smin dvividhā niṣṭhā purā proktā mayānagha

jñānayogena sāṅkhyam karmayogena yoginām Verse 3-3

श्रीभगवान् *śrībhagavān* - the Lord; उवाच *uvāca*- said; अनघ *anagha* - Oh! Sinless One; अस्मिन् *asmin* - in this; लोके *loke* - world, द्विविधा *dvividhā* - two-fold; निष्ठा *niṣṭhā* - committed life-styles; पुरा *purā* - in the beginning; मया *mayā* - by me; प्रोक्ता *proktā* - was told; ज्ञान-योगेन *jñāna-yogena* - in the form of the pursuit of knowledge; साङ्ख्यानाम् *sāṅkhyam* - for the renunciates, कर्म-योगेन *karmayogena* - in the form of the pursuit of action; योगिनाम् *yoginām* - for those who pursue activity

Oh! Sinless One, the two fold committed lifestyle in this world, was told by Me in the beginning - the pursuit of knowledge for the renunciates and the pursuit of action for those who pursue activity.

Kṛṣṇa was not talking here as Mr. *Kṛṣṇa*, who was born on a given day at a given time, but as *Īśvara*, the Lord. Throughout the *Gītā*, *Kṛṣṇa* talked as the Lord, except in one or two places where he said to *Arjuna*, 'You are my friend.' In fact, anyone who understands the nature of *Īśvara* can talk as an *avatāra*, as *Īśvara* incarnate, just as *Vyāsa* had *Kṛṣṇa* do in the *Mahābhārata*. In the fourth chapter of the *Gītā*, *Kṛṣṇa* himself talked about what an *avatāra* is, as we shall see later.

Here, in this verse, *Kṛṣṇa* says that in the Veda, a two fold *niṣṭhā* was expounded by him. *Niṣṭhā* means a committed lifestyle. For example, a person who is committed to the practice of *japa*, chanting the Lord's name, is called *japa-niṣṭhā*, and when performing austerities, *tapas*, is the emphasis in one's life, the person is called *taponiṣṭhā*. One for whom the pursuit of *Brahman* is the *niṣṭhā* is called *brahma-niṣṭhā* and *jñāna-niṣṭhā* - one whose commitment is to knowledge.

In this verse, *Kṛṣṇa* says that one of the *niṣṭhās* or lifestyles he revealed to the world in the beginning is for the *sāṅkhya*, the *sannyāsīs*, and is in the form of *jñāna-yoga*, meaning that knowledge is the means to accomplish his end. Knowledge is the means for the *jñāna-yogi* who is a *sannyāsī* because he has no *karma* to do, other than the pursuit of knowledge, in order to gain *mokṣa*. The other *niṣṭhā*, *karma-yoga*, he revealed to the world in the beginning is for everyone else- *karma yogis*.

Kṛṣṇa then revealed the two-fold *niṣṭhā* to *Arjuna*. The word *sāṅkhya* means knowledge and is also used in the *Gītā* by Lord *Kṛṣṇa* to mean *sannyāsa*, the life of renunciation. Those who are committed to knowledge are called *sāṅkhyas* and the knowledge that is unfolded so clearly by all the *Upaniṣads*, the subject matter referred to as *Vedānta*, is called *sāṅkhya*. The only topic that *Vedānta* deals with is - ‘*ātmā* is *Brahman*.’ Therefore, *sāṅkhya* means *Brahman* and what is unfolded by the *Vedas*, by *Vedānta*, is called *sāṅkhyam Brahma*. Because the knowledge of *Brahman* is called *sāṅkhya*, and those who pursue that knowledge are also called *sāṅkhyas*, we find in the *Gītā* that the world is also used as a synonym for *sannyāsa*, the lifestyle of renunciation in which knowledge alone is pursued.

Because *Arjuna* wanted *śreyas*, *mokṣa*, *Kṛṣṇa* told him about this two-fold *niṣṭhā*. *Mokṣa* is clearly the end in view and the *niṣṭhā* is a means to this end. The *niṣṭhā* is two-fold because there are two different groups of people. One group is the *karma-yogis* or just *yogis* and includes everyone who does not live a life of renunciation. For these people there is *karma-yoga*, whereas for the *sannyāsī* there’s *jñāna-yoga*. These two styles are in accordance with the four stages of life found in the Vedic culture.

The first stage is called *brahmacarya-āśrama*, wherein the person lives a studious life with learning as the main focus. The *brahmacarya-āśrama* prepares one for the next ashram, the *gṛhastha-āśrama*, or married life. In *Chāndogyopaniṣad*, we read that, *Śvetaketu* spent twelve years in the *gurukula*, which he joined when was was twelve years old. So the first twenty four years of one’s life comprise the first stage of the *brahmacarya-āśrama*.

The second stage of life, *gṛhastha-āśrama*, where being a householder and raising a family is the primary focus, prepares one for the third stage, called *vānanprastha-āśrama*. In this stage, a person remains married, but husband and wife live as friends, rather than as a married couple. The person continues to perform the various rituals enjoined by the *Veda* for householders, but withdraws from worldly activities and lives a contented life. The *vānanprastha-āśrama*, prepares one for the fourth and final stage of life, *sannyāsa*, a life of renunciation. *Sannyāsa* is the best retirement plan there is because you do not require money for it. You simply renounce whatever you have.

Renunciation is possible at any stage. *Arjuna*, who was in the *gṛhastha-āśrama*,

wanted to renounce. He did not want to go through the intermediary stage as a *vānanprastha*. To remain as he was, meant that he would have to remain a *grhastha* for a length of time and then take permission from his wife to move on to the *vānanprastha-āśrama*, none of which would be easy. Nor was it necessary to do so for the day a person wants to get out of any of the first three *āśramas*, it can be done. When one discovers the readiness, the dispassion, in oneself, on that very day, one can take *sannyāsa*. There is a Vedic sanction for it.

The *sanyasa-āśrama* is a stage of life where one is absolved from performing all *karma*. One is freed from all duties in order to pursue knowledge. This pursuit is all that is to be done. Therefore, the person must already be a *jñānī* or want nothing but knowledge.

TYPES OF SANNYASA

There are two main types of *sannyāsa*. For a person who is already a *jñānī*, there is *vidvat-sannyāsa*, a *sannyāsa* taken because of knowledge. The person has knowledge and, therefore, there is nothing more for him or her to do in the world - no obligation whatsoever. If the knowledge has been gained in any of the other three *āśramas*- *brahmacarya-āśrama*, *grhasthya-āśrama*, or *vānaprastha-āśrama* - the person can take to the *sannyāsa-āśrama* directly, taking *vidvat-sannyāsa*, so that he or she is no longer obligated. Otherwise, for the person with knowledge, there will still be obligations because each of the first three *āśramas* implies certain duties on one's part, which cannot be left undone as long as one is in that *āśrama*. Thus, the person takes *sannyāsa* to be free of these obligations- to make it perfect, in other words.

The other main type of *sannyāsa* is called *vivdiśā-sannyāsa* and is meant for knowing. This *sannyāsa* is for those who desire to know the self, *ātmā*, as *Brahman*. The person knows exactly what is to be done. He or she has heard that this *ātmā* is *Brahman* and wants to know it. Such a person is not interested in anything else and has a certain *viveka*, discrimination, with reference to the real and the unreal. He or she also has *vairāgya*, dispassion, *mumukṣutvam*, the desire for liberation, and other qualifications in various degrees. And with these qualifications, the person takes to the life of *sannyāsa*, called *vivdiśā-sannyāsa*.

There is a third type of *sannyāsa*, called *āpat sannyāsa*. When a person thinks he or she is going to die and does not want to die a *grhastha* or a *vānanprastha*, but rather as a *sannyāsī*, he takes *āpat-sannyāsa*. *Āpat* means danger. Because the *sannyāsa-āśrama* is always praised in the *śāstra*, it is natural for a person to want the results of this *āśrama*. It is as though the person has had a blank cheque all along and now wants to encash it. For one who has already lived a *grhastha* life and has been told that death is near, there seems

to be no use in continuing in the *grhastha-āśrama*.

A man who is not about to die will usually want to remain a *grhastha* because he is fond of his wife and children. But if he knows he is going to die fairly soon, he may go for *āpat-sannyāsa*. At such a time, one does not require a *guru* but can simply declare oneself to be a *sannyāsī*. With the sun, the elements, and all the gods as witness, one can make vows, for which there is a particular *mantra*. And if one happens to survive, the vows taken can always be ratified later. This is how *Śaṅkara* became a *sannyāsī*.

HOW SANKARA BECAME A SANNYASI

Śaṅkara wanted to become a *sādhu* at a very young age, but his mother was not at all agreeable. As the story of his life goes, he had the help of a crocodile that had caught hold of his leg while he was bathing in the river. *Śaṅkara*'s mother was waiting for him on the bank and he called out to tell her what was happening. It may have been a ploy or perhaps the crocodile was symbolic of *saṃsāra*. We do not know. In any case, when his mother began crying, *Śaṅkara* told her that if he took the vows of *sannyāsa*, the crocodile would let go of him. Because there was danger to his life involved, this was *āpat-sannyāsa*. *Śaṅkara* then took the vows and, lo and behold, the crocodile released him!

When he walked out of the river, his mother said, 'Come on. Lets go home.' 'What!' *Śaṅkara* replied, 'I am a *sannyāsī* now.' When his mother told him the vows were only for the crocodile's sake, he said, 'Not at all! I have made the vows and I am going.' In this way, *Śaṅkara* became a *sannyāsī*. Later, he went to the *guru*, *Govinda-bhagavat-pāda*, who lived on the banks of *Narmadā* in the middle of India, and became his disciple. It was *Govindapāda* who ratified *Śaṅkara*'s vows of *sannyāsa*. Ratification is always possible whenever one has taken *āpat-sannyāsa* and survives.

Expecting some good end from *sannyāsa-āśrama*, people have a value for it. This expectation is based on the belief that a *sannyāsī* does not take another birth. And if there is a birth, the hope is that one will at least get a better chance in the next life. This is a belief and one has faith, *śraddhā*, in it. A person may be born into a family where he or she can start life as a *sādhu*, so that directly from the *brahmacharya* stage he or she will become a *sannyāsī* and not a *grhastha*. Thus, those who have become *sannyāsīs* this way may have been *āpat-sannyāsīs* in their previous life.

THE LAST RITUAL OF A SANNYASI

Arjuna's heart was not in *āpat-sannyāsa*. He was not dying, but he did want to know. Therefore, he wanted to take *vivdiśā sannyāsa*. In *sannyāsa* one gives up all *kar-mas*, for which there is a special ritual, the last fire ritual that a *sannyāsī* performs. You may see a *sannyāsī* doing a puja. But you will never see a *sannyāsī* sitting around a fire performing Vedic ritual. Such a person has been freed from all obligatory fire rituals, of all

karmas, in fact. A *sannyāsī*'s last fire ritual is one in which all *karmas* are given up.

In this ritual, the *sannyāsī* bids goodbye to all the ancestors, to whom there has been an obligation - father, mother, grandfather, grandmother, great grandfather, great grandmother, then *ṛṣis* and *devas*. The person taking *sannyāsa* says that self knowledge will be pursued to the exclusion of all else, asks for the blessings of the paternal and maternal ancestors and takes a vow of *abhaya*, a vow not to harm any living being, including trees and plants. The *sannyāsī* also vows to be a non-competitor in this world and all others, thereby becoming a person who does not compete for the same of the status politically, economically, or socially. Knowledge is the only interest for the *sannyāsī*.

Having taken these vows, the *sannyāsī* takes a few symbolic steps towards the north, the direction that stands for *mokṣa*. South stands for death. Thus, Lord Death, Lord *Yama*, is a southerner. This symbolism may be based on the polar attraction in the north. Death never attracts you, whereas freedom from death does. Moving towards the north in search of *mokṣa*, having discarded all clothing, the *sannyāsī* is called back by the *guru*, given a set of simple clothing, and asked to serve and continue studying with the *guru*. This, then, is the ritual of *sannyāsa*, be it either *vidvat-sannyāsa* or *vivdiśā-sannyāsa*. Both are mentioned by *Śaṅkara* in his commentary.

In *Vidvat-sannyāsa*, one may or may not take *sannyāsa* formally. The main aim is that, by knowledge, one gives up all *karmas*. The knowledge is that 'I am a non-doer. I perform no action.' This is what is called *naiṣkarmya*, the state of actionlessness. I perform no action at any time because *ātmā*, which is 'I', does not perform any action. Nor do *ātmā* cause anyone to perform action. I am not a doer in spite of all the actions I do. This knowledge is real *sannyāsa*, described as *jñāna-karma-sannyāsa*.

For the sake of this *jñāna-karma-sannyāsa*, one takes to the life style of *sannyāsa*, pursuing self-knowledge. The other *niṣṭhā*, *karma yoga*, is for all those seekers in the other *āśramas*.

THE PURPOSE OF KARMA YOGA

There is no doubt that *karma* binds, with its limited results. But, if you do *karma* for *antaḥ-karaṇa-śuddhi*, for neutralizing your *rāga-dveṣa*, for gaining the grace of *Īśvara* - if you perform your prayers, rituals, and duties for the sake of these alone, the *karma* you perform becomes a means, *yoga* for *mokṣa*.

Sannyāsa is only possible if you have lived a life of *karma yoga*. Otherwise, you become a *sannyāsī* who has *rāga-dveṣas* and you will be miserable. A *karma-yogi* has the means, world, a field, where his or her *rāga-dveṣas* can be neutralized. Such a field is not there for a *sannyāsī*. *Sannyāsa* means a life of study from morning to night. No other activity is available. A *sannyāsī* cannot even sing much because the pursuit of music, along

with everything else, has already been given up.

A *sannyāsī* is one who has to pursue knowledge for which a certain capacity to contemplate is required. If the pressure from *rāgadveṣas* is there, you cannot sit in contemplation. You will find, instead, all kinds of agitation or you will fall asleep. After a few days, the life style of a *sannyāsī*, traditionally indicated by the wearing of orange robes, will become a source of irritation. Naturally, then, *sannyāsa* is meant only for those who, to an extent at least, have taken care of their *rāgas* and *dveṣas*.

The two-fold *niṣṭhā* is meant only for *śreyas*. *Arjuna* wanted *Kṛṣṇa*, to tell him which one was better and *Kṛṣṇa* replied that one can be a *sannyāsī* or a *karma-yogi*. Both are meant for the same end- *mokṣa*, *śreyas*. One can live a life of a *karma-yoga* and gain *mokṣa* and one can live a life of *sannyāsī* and gain *mokṣa*. The only difference is the for a *sannyāsī* there is only knowledge, whereas for a *karma-yogi* there is knowledge and *karma*. This difference must be understood well because this is where there is a lot of confusion.

Arjuna was a *karma-yogi*, not a *sannyāsī*. By listening to *Kṛṣṇa*, he was pursuing knowledge. Although *grhasthas* pursue other activities, they can be qualified for knowledge. This pursuit of knowledge plus the performance of *karma*, with a certain understanding, made *Arjuna* a *karma-yogi*. If the pursuit of knowledge had not been there, if he had had no discrimination, if *mokṣa* had not been the end for him, he would not have been a *karma-yogi*. He would have been a simple doer, a *karmī*, a *karmaṭha*. When *mokṣa* is the end in view, then *karma* becomes *yoga* because it is done with a particular attitude in order to gain *antaḥ-karaṇa-śuddhi*, purification of the mind.

In this way, *karma yoga* is important in gaining knowledge. You can take *sannyāsa* and gain *sarva-karma-sannyāsa* or you can live a life of *karma yoga* and gain the same thing. *Sarva-karma-sannyāsa* is an end in itself for which the means is knowledge, gained in either of the two lifestyles - *sannyāsa* or *karma yoga* revealed by the Lord in the beginning itself, in the *Upaniṣads*.

Among the ten *Upaniṣads*, commonly studied, the first one is *Īśāvāsyopaniṣad*. The first *mantra* of this *Upaniṣad*, is meant for the *sannyāsī*, the *jñāna-yogi*. It says, 'In this moving world, everything should be looked upon by you as *Parameśvara*, the Lord - *īśāvāsyamidam sarvaṃ*. The Lord being everything, what is there that is yours? Or, not yours? Live a life of renunciation and pursue self-knowledge alone,' this *mantra* enjoins. Pursuit of this knowledge, giving up every other pursuit, is the life of *sannyāsa* or *jñāna-yoga*, says *Śaṅkara*, in his commentary.

The second *mantra* of the same *Upaniṣad* says, 'Even if you want to live one hundred years, live doing *karma* with the proper attitude. This is the best way for you. If *karma* is done in the proper way, it will not affect you at all.' This is *karma yoga*. This, we

see here the two fold *niṣṭhā* being unfolded, *sannyāsa*, wherein the pursuit of knowledge alone is allowed, and *karma yoga*, the pursuit of knowledge along with whatever *karma* is to be done. Throughout the *sāstra*, these two *niṣṭhās* are always discussed in the same way.

CHOICE OF LIFE-STYLE

In the Vedic vision, *śreyas* is *mokṣa*. *Mokṣa* is the end, the human destiny to be gained in this life. Here, itself *saṃsāra* is crossed. To have taken a human birth means that you have already made it. Because you have an intellect, *buddhi*, *viveka* is possible. It is true that experience teaches, but you do not need to get knocked around for seventy five years to get discrimination. Twenty five years are good enough! Once you develop *viveka*, *śreyas* alone looms large before you; it becomes the only real end for you.

Then you become either a *karma-yogi* or a *sannyāsī*. The *niṣṭhā* was given in a two-fold way because there are two kinds of people. But there is only one means for *mokṣa*, knowledge. Depending on the kind of person you are, you can either be a *sannyāsī* and pursue knowledge to the exclusion of all else, or a *karma-yogi* and pursue knowledge along with *karma*. In both life styles, the pursuit of knowledge is common. Knowledge is *mokṣa*. Therefore, the choice is not between *jñāna* and *karma*. It is between *sannyāsa* and *karma yoga*.

When the choice is between *karma yoga* and *sannyāsa*, it is natural to look to *sannyāsa*. Given a choice, why do *karma* at all? *Sannyāsa* seems to be the better choice since performing *karma* implies so much effort, problems, and even bloodshed, in *Arjuna*'s case. *Karma* can be such a nuisance. When two life-styles are available, why should I put up with a life of *karma*?

The choice is like asking which is the better way to catch hold of my nose in order to do breathing exercises. Shall I take my hand directly to my nose or shall I reach around from behind my head? It can be done either way, but when the first way is obviously so easy where is the question of choosing? *Sannyāsa* seems to be easier - just give up all the *karmas* and pursue knowledge. Why do both? A *karma-yogi*, living in an agricultural society, for example, has to milk the cow, graze it, wash it, and take care of the children, among other things. One child is crying, the other is on his lap, and the third one is tugging at him from behind. The mosquitos are biting and his wife is shouting. In between, he has to perform the fire ritual, called *agnihotra-karma*, with all its problems. The firewood is wet, everything is smoking, and his eyes become filled with all kinds of tears - tears born out of the smoke, tears torn out of all the nagging children, tears born out of helplessness, and so on. When will such a person have time to pursue knowledge? Whenever he picks up the *Gītā* book, all that comes is sleep!

Is it therefore not better to go for *sannyāsa*? *Arjuna* definitely thought so. However,

sannyāsa is not as easy as it appears. It looks as though you need only sit and study. But try it and you will find that it does not always work that way. Instead, you may vegetate all day because you are not able to study so intensely. This, then, is not the way. Thus *Kṛṣṇa* continued to tell *Arjuna* exactly what *sannyāsa* and *karma yoga* are. Even though a choice is there, *karma yoga* will pave the way for *sannyāsa*. It will even pave the way for the desire for knowledge and, therefore, for *vividiśā-sannyāsa*. *Kṛṣṇa* told *Arjuna* that *sannyāsa* is not at all easy in spite of how pleasant and simple it appears to be. After all, *sannyāsa* is giving up everything.

Arjuna thought that giving up everything would not present any great problem, especially since he had lived in the forest for twelve years. But, during those twelve years, he had been thinking about *Duryodhana* and the kingdom, and the injustice of it all. Twelve years of meditation upon *Duryodhana* did not make *Arjuna* a *sannyāsī*. *Arjuna* had been nursing a big hurt for a long time. Therefore, *sannyāsa* was not going to come so easily to him. One does not become a *sannyāsī* by decision alone - all of which *Kṛṣṇa* would tell him later in the *Gītā*.

To be continued...

When the knowledge that your nature is wholeness is gained, what happens? Once you are the whole, you are the whole, whether you see the creation or do not see the creation, whether you do something in the world or do not do anything. The whole does not acquire a dent by your doing something, or by your not doing something. This knowledge is called liberation, freedom – the freedom everyone loves, wants and struggles for.

- Swami Dayananda Saraswati