

Bhagavad Gita online Class 71 on 11 Jan 2020 by Swami Dayatmanada (Lecture delivered online from Bangalore, India)

Shanti Patha:

ॐ वसुदेवसुतं देवं कंसचाणूरमर्दनम्
देवकीपरमानन्दं कृष्णं वन्दे जगद्गुरुम् ॥ १ ॥

Vasudeva sutham devam, Kamsa Chanura mardanam,
Devaki paramanandam, Krishnam vande jagat gurum

I worship Lord Krishna, Who is the spiritual master of the universe, who is the son of Vasudeva, who is the Lord, who killed Kamsa and Chanura, and who is the bliss of Devaki.

सर्वोपनिषदो गावो, दोग्धा गोपाल नन्दनः।
पार्थो वत्सः सुधीर्भोक्ता, दुग्धं गीतामृतं महत् ॥
Sarovopanishado gaavo, dogdha gopala nandanaha|
parthovatsa: sudheerbhoktaa, dugdham gitamrutam mahat |

All the Upanishads are likened to the cows. The milker is Krishna, the son of Gopala. Partha is likened to the calf, while the drinkers are the wise ones. The nectar of Gita is the milk.

मूकं करोति वाचालं पङ्गुं लङ्घयते गिरिं ।
यत्कृपा तमहं वन्दे परमानन्द माधवम् ॥
Mookam karoti vachalam pangum langhayate girim |
Yat-krupa tamaham vande paramananda madhavam ॥

The Five Debts Of Every Person:

According to our Vedic view, the whole of human life, is a continuous sacrifice, in order to get rid of the five debts that we incur by being born as human beings. Most of us know those five debts:

- To our seers (rishis), called *rishi-yajna*,
- To our ancestors, known as *pithru-yajna*,
- To various gods and goddesses, called *deva-yajna*,
- To every human being on this earth (directly or indirectly, called *nru-yajna*,
- To all other things (both living and non-living) including rivers, mountains, forests, birds, plants and animals, known as *bhuta-yajna*

This beautiful idea means that everything in this universe is inter-connected.

How Does Science View This?

Scientists have not only accepted this idea, but are now actively promoting it, and one who lacks this vision of totality is simply ignorant. This approach, that the world is not only connected, but very intimately related, is known as holistic vision.

This means that any harm done to anything would affect one's own self, which proves yet again that

- I am Brahman, and
- Brahman is the entire universe

Therefore, I am the entire universe. Thus, if I do good, I am simply doing good to myself. Equally, any harm done is really only to myself.

The Laws of Rta, Dharma, and Karma Explained

This beautiful concept of holistic vision was one of the greatest discoveries of our ancient rishis. They called it the law of *rta* (ऋत, order, rule, truth). If that law is right, then it follows that we must live, think, speak and act in a way that would help us realize the truth that everything is me, and I am everything.

Such a life (i.e., one led with this holistic vision) has a beautiful name in Sanskrit – *dharma*. The concept of *rta* has converted itself into the concept of *dharma*, which is explained through the law of *karma*. If we do something evil, it is always done to others, never oneself. If one does something good, it will come back to him a million-fold (though it should never be our goal).

Ultimately, this means that every good or evil deed done by us comes back to us only because everything in this universe is me.

This is beautifully explained in the third mantra of the Isavasya Upanishad:

असुर्य नाम ते लोका अन्धेन तमसावृताः ।
तांस्ते प्रेत्याभिगच्छन्ति ये के चात्महनो जनाः ॥

asurya nāma te lokā andhena tamasāvṛtāḥ |
tāmste pretyābhigacchanti ye ke cātmahano janāḥ ||

Those who kill themselves (i.e., being ignorant of their true nature and behaving in an ungodly, harmful manner) suffers a great deal after (or even during the tenure of) this very birth.

The Concept of Morality

Again, this is the concept of morality. What is morality in modern terminology? That one should not do to others what one would not wish others to do to oneself. Likewise, one should do unto others what one would like others to do to oneself.

So if others make me happy, I am happy. Equally, if others harm me, I suffer. Therefore I should never harm others.

If one truly understands the truth that whatever I do ultimately affects none other than me, than that person has progressed far ahead of others, in spiritual life.

The Purpose of Bhagawad Gita

The purpose of Bhagawad Gita is to take each soul (from wherever it is) to the awareness of its true nature, dualistically called God Realization, and realistically called self-realization. The way to do that is to convert one's whole life into a spiritual practice.

Another translation for the term *yajna* (sacrifice) is convert everything that happens in the mind, speech and actions. If these three things are directed only towards God, then ultimately they take us

to God. A cognitive change takes place within us. Whereas earlier we thought of ourselves as individuals, now we know we are the whole universe. Because the whole universe is God, I, too, am none other than God. I come from God, I live in God, and I go back to God. The three conditions of janma (creation), stithi (sustenance), and laya (dissolution) all happen in God, from God, and to God.

Awareness of this truth is called sacrifice.

No one – however ignorant or foolish – wishes harm/unhappiness to himself or herself.

How to convert one's whole life into a yajna? The Lord has detailed many methods, together with some examples. As mentioned in the last class, these are only a few ways of converting our life into a great spiritual yajna or *tapasya*.

Carrying on verse 28 from last class:

द्रव्ययज्ञास्तपोयज्ञा योगयज्ञास्तथापरे ।
स्वाध्यायज्ञानयज्ञाश्च यतयः संशितव्रताः ॥ २८॥

*dravya-yajñās tapo-yajñā yoga-yajñās tathāpare
swādhyāya-jñāna-yajñāśh cha yatayaḥ saṁśhita-vratāḥ*

Some, likewise, offer as oblations their wealth, austerity and yoga; while the ascetics, of self-restraint and rigid vows, offer their scriptural study and knowledge.

The last thing is offering wealth (offering *dravya*, or material wealth). All our possessions, including our bodies and minds, and the actions done through them, must be converted into a spiritual sacrifice.

How is this to be accomplished?

- If we have wealth, expend it in charity. Sri Ramakrishna used to say that rich people should spend their wealth in the service of God, in worship and the service of temples, as well in the service of the poor people, going so far as to state *Shivagnane jeevasewa*. This means that everything should be looked upon as permeated by the Divine, and we should attempt to realize that the whole universe is a manifestation of Brahman (with name, form and purpose). So all wealth should be offered to God. Examples:
 - If we have a large house, we could use it in the service of learned/holy people.
 - If there is plentiful food, it could be offered to the hungry and the needy.
 - Boats could save lives when the area is flooded (e.g., during the recent floods in Kerala, many people sacrificed their time and energy, and provided great and loving service by using their boats to rescue the stranded people). Though this was necessitated by a natural calamity, we should try to incorporate it in our daily life.
 - The most revered Holy Mother has expressed this idea in Bengali as follows: *jar aache, maapu (those who have, let them donate it freely)*. If they do not have, *japo (do japam for them)*.
 - In the West, some people are dedicated to serving the blind by reading books to them; or they go the deaf people and render them suitable service; or they go to hospices and provide company to people who are on their death beds, and talk lovingly, sweetly with them and taking away their loneliness. Many elderly people, deprived of such love, care and comfort from their children, greatly appreciate such

unstinting service from volunteers. This is a way of converting one's wealth into sacrifice.

- There are people with natural skills as mediators, and such people can mediate between quarrelling parties and establish peace and harmony between them.
- Professional teachers could undertake to teach poor children without reward.
- Good singers could render service, and inspire others, through devotional music.
- People knowledgeable in scriptures could expound them to others.
- Those who are blessed with a good voice and reading skills could read out the scriptures (and their meaning) to those who are unable to read (or like to have it read and explained to them).
- All the above (faculties) form of physical and mental wealth, or *dravya yajna*.
- Tapo-yajna indicates various austerities, performed by devoted for the welfare of other people. For example, Christian missionaries and nuns in convents do this on a daily basis, by reading the newspapers every morning, and whenever they find news of natural disasters such as earthquakes and floods, they dedicate their prayer that day to the welfare of the affected people. That is their way of performing tapo-yajna.
- Others undergo hardship for the welfare of the others. For instance, the Holy Mother fasted for other people, and also constantly did japam while immersed in various household duties, even sacrificing her sleep during the night. This is evident from an incident in her life. Once, very late at night, one of her attendants softly called out to her, and she instantly responded. Astonished, the attendant asked her why she wasn't sleeping. Holy Mother replied that she no opportunity to sleep, as many people addressed her as *Mother* and obtained initiation from her. However, they failed to do any japam afterwards, and she – having accepted the responsibility for their spiritual welfare – had to do it all for them.
- Swamiji, in his hymn on Sri Ramakrishna, says, *pranarpana jagata tarana* – from birth to passing away, Sri Ramakrishna's life was a continuous sacrifice for the welfare of humanity, and the whole universe, as it were. We are all deriving – and will continue to derive in the future – great spiritual benefit from his sacrifice. This is what is described as tapo-yajna (the word tapas means undertaking, entirely voluntarily, the hardship of spiritual practices).
- Imagine two shelter-less people in the street – one is a beggar without any possessions (so his suffering is unavoidable), and the other a prince who has voluntarily sacrificed his possessions (and thus reached penury). At the moment, both are suffering the pangs of hunger, cold etc., but the prince is joyfully undergoing these hardships for spiritual progress.
- We need to bear in mind that a spiritual aspirant, progressing rapidly, is doing a great deal of good to everyone else, too – by becoming selfless, and constantly repeating the name of God, and increasingly identifying himself with God. When such a person thinks about God constantly (with the idea that his essential nature is divine), he produces a wonderful spiritual vibrations around himself. That is why, in the Narada Bhakti Sutras, it is said, *tirthi-kurvanti-tirthani* (when a person performs great spiritual austerities, the surrounding area is filled with spiritual vibrations, and becomes a *tirtha*, or a holy place). Not only does that place help him, but it also helps millions of other aspirants in the future, inspiring them and helping their progress towards God – which is why they are called as holy places. Thus the spiritual aspirants convert these places into *tirthas*.
- Hindus believe that Varanasi is among the holiest of holy places in the world. Since times immemorial, millions of pilgrims and intense spiritual aspirants have visited Varanasi and spent long periods – in many cases their whole lives – practicing austerities. Many have attained perfection there. Therefore, the place has become extremely holy. In fact, it is

believed that any person, just by the fact that he dies there, will attain liberation. How wonderful, how intensely holy must that place be!

- There are numerous such *tirthas*, of course – Vrindavan, Rameshwar, Kanyakumari, Mathura, Madurai, Haridwar, Rishikesh, Kedarnath, Badrinath, Baidyanath, and many others, but Varanasi is the very best among them. These places have become holy because of the spiritual practices of millions of *sadhakas* (spiritual aspirants) over many centuries.
- Thus some people can convert any type of hardship into yajna, on the condition that:
 - it is voluntary,
 - it is bereft of any selfish motive, and
 - it is done solely for pleasing God
- When a person chooses to practice such voluntary austerities, he or she is converting his entire life into a divine sacrifice

Yoga-yajna:

The term yoga (also called *ashtanga-yoga*, *raja-yoga*, or *Patanjali-yoga*) consists of eight steps:

- *yama*,
- *niyama*,
- *asana*,
- *pranayama*,
- *pratyahara*,
- *dharana*,
- *dhyana*,
- *samadhi*

Of these, *yama* and *niyama* are spiritual qualities that we have to develop. In order to practice *ahimsa* (not injuring through action, speech, or – in its highest expression, even thought – anyone), one has to constantly pray for their welfare. The only way to accomplish this is by identifying oneself with them, and declaring that they are no different from one's own self, i.e., *Aham Brahmasmi* (अहम् ब्रह्मास्मि, or *I am the Absolute*).

Examples of People Who Practiced Truthfulness

We all know the brilliant example of Mahatma Gandhi, who practiced *ahimsa*, and *satya* (truthfulness), who famously stated that he did not consider God as the Truth, but the Truth as God. Other famous examples are that of Kshudhiram, and Sri Ramakrishna himself, who couldn't – even unconsciously – observe untruth (the Divine Mother would immediately correct him)

Millions of other people have done the same. What is the acid test to prove this? Anybody who attains God is necessarily a truthful person. An untruthful person fails to attain, not only God, but also happiness in this life.

Sri Rama was the very embodiment of truth and *dharma* (righteous conduct). In the Hindu puranas, we come across the famous story of the king Satya Harishchandra, who sacrificed his all for the truth. That is why it is said, *Satyameva Jayate* (*Truth alone triumphs*).

In order to understand this comprehensively, we have to consider the popular saying: *Know the Truth, and the Truth will make you free*. When does a person know the truth? When he becomes truthful. Truthfulness in speech leads to truth-seeking. A person who seeks the Truth, and practices the Truth, ultimately becomes the Truth, which is God, or Brahman.

In the Taittiriya Upanishad, Brahman (2.1.1) is described as *satyam jnanam anantam brahma* (*Brahman is the Truth, True Knowledge, and Infinity*). So He is the Truth, He is the true Knowledge, and He is Infinite-Eternal.

Ahimsa-Brahmacharya

To continuously think of God, to speak of God, to meditate upon god, to read about God, constantly turning every activity, both physical and mental, Godward, is called *brahmacharya*.

Astheya

Not stealing anyone else's possessions is known as *astheya*. The Isavasya Upanishad exclaims: *Whose wealth are you going to steal, really? O fool, the whole world is none other than God!*

The whole world, and everything in it, belongs to God. So if one covets anything other than God, one becomes a thief and a liar. Since God is everything, one is stealing from none other than oneself, which is most undesirable. So it is said, *ma grithaha kasyasvit dhanam*. Sri Shankaracharya, commenting beautifully on this verse, says: *Whose wealth can you steal? Because the whole world is God, everything belongs to Him. Do not covet anything except God, because by attaining God, everything is achieved. If God is not attained, nothing is obtained.*

Sri Ramakrishna had expressed this truth in another, beautiful way: Numerically, any number of zeroes (worldly things) have no value by themselves. But if they are preceded by the number 1 (God), they acquire great value. The whole universe belongs to you, so where is the need to steal?

Aparigraha

Aparigraha means non-acceptance of gifts. However, it is impossible for anyone to live in the world even for a few minutes without accepting anything at all. For instance, *Bhumata* (Mother Earth) is constantly supplying us with food. Mother Annapurna (the Divine Mother in the form of food) constantly sacrifices herself for our sake. Similarly, the air we are breathing is a gift from God in the form of Vayu (wind). We are borrowing heat from the sun, moon, fire and other objects in this world. We move on Mother Earth, and in *Akasha* (space). Also, we are borrowing water from the Divine mother in the form Jala-Devata (water-god).

So in truth, aparigraha in the literal sense is simply impossible. However, a more general interpretation would be to not accept anything more than what is really required. Even when keep what we accept from anyone to the barest minimum needed, it should be returned to them in any manner possible (for example, as *dravya-yajna* or the giving of material wealth). However, if that is not possible, then we must pray for them to repay our debt.

Performing the Five Great Sacrifices to Get Rid of Our Debts

We should exercise great caution not to fall into debt in any form. From a Vedantic point of view, in our life, we are already heavily indebted, and to discharge this debt, we have to perform the *pancha maha-yajnas* (five great sacrifices) everyday, as discussed in the earlier classes. In this context, the following points should be noted:

- By helping others to obtain knowledge (either through donation, or by teaching them, or by getting them books or any other means), we can discharge the debt owed to *rishis* (seers)
- Since we get everything from the gods or *pancha-bhutas* (पञ्चभूत, or the five elements), by worshipping them, we get rid of our debt to them

- By showing our gratitude through prayers etc., we can be rid of our debt to our ancestors. If our parents, grandparents, or great-grandparents are alive, we should serve them to the best of our ability to discharge the debt owed to them. If they have passed away, pray for them constantly. This act, as we know, is what is known as *Śrāddha* (श्राद्ध, a ceremony involving prayers, offering of food etc., performed in honour of a dead ancestor in Hinduism; a *Śrāddha* ceremony is performed in the days immediately following the death; thereafter, a yearly ceremony is performed. There is also a monthly ceremony prescribed). This activity has a wonderful spiritual benefit.
- When a person perform the funeral rites called *antyeṣṭi* (अन्त्येष्टि, literally meaning last rites of a person just passed away), he or she is made aware of his transitory nature, i.e., given the knowledge that this would be his condition sooner or later. No one wants to remember as a wicked or evil person; by performing this *pitru yajna*, we get rid of our debts to our ancestors.
- Everyone in this world is dependent upon everyone else in this world. Therefore, as far as possible, we have to serve everyone in this world. Sri Ramakrishna advises us not to look upon others as mere human beings, but as God himself, not merely because this is a helpful or useful attitude to have, but because it is indeed the ultimate truth. Indeed, it is the only thing that can help us, ultimately.

Why Should We Look Upon the Whole World as God?

When a person learns to look upon others as God, he would be forced to look upon himself, too, as God. Whether we know or appreciate this or not, the whole world is a huge web, as it were, with every part being connected with, and dependent upon, every other part. Therefore, one must look upon the whole universe as God, and help others as best as one can, so that the debts owed to others can be gotten rid of.

Not only are we indebted to other human beings, but also to all animate and inanimate beings such as animals, plants, birds, insects, mountains, rivers, and forests. Nowadays, awareness is growing worldwide that we are poisoning ourselves by creating various types of pollutions, and through activities like deforestation, wholesale destruction of rivers, mountains, animal and insect species. But our ancestors had realized this thousands of years ago, and had enjoined us not to harm even a blade of grass unless it was unavoidable.

However, this injunction should be accepted with a bit of common-sense. It is simply impossible to live in this world without killing. Because life depends on life to survive, we have to necessarily kill plants, or sometimes insects, to survive ourselves. Since this is an arrangement that we all have to accept in this world, we do so with the understanding that only the barest minimum harm will be done to other living beings. If we can steadfastly stick to this, it would be a great worship of the Divine – something that would enable us to become Divine ourselves.

The Excellent Qualities That A Spiritual Aspirant Should Possess

These are:

- *Shaucha*, or cleanliness outside, and purity inside
- *Santosha*, or contentment. We have to thank God for everything given to us, including grief and suffering etc. Holy Mother declared: *Misery is the gift of God*. If we reflect on our misery, we can see that:
 - It is the result of our own actions, or *karma*
 - If there is anything that can awaken us to our higher nature, it is misery

- Worldly happiness has never, and will never, turn a person's mind towards higher or spiritual ideas
- Only grief or suffering comes, a person, not finding any refuge or remedy in the world, turns to God as the last resort
- If a person is content with whatever one has (i.e., whatever one has been given by God), he is the happiest person in the world
- *Tapah*, or austerities and hardship. We all have to go through some form of suffering, or hardship, in our lives. For instance, a student or a scientist, who, in the pursuit of his goals, sacrifices a great deal of rest and comfort (an excellent example would be that of Madame Curie and her husband, Pierre Curie, both of whom not only worked extremely hard, but also had to suffer a fatal disease, cancer, from their close contact with radium; thus they had to sacrifice their lives for the cause of scientific advances, whose benefit we are all enjoying now). Many other scientists also underwent hardship, sacrificing their whole lives, suffered lack of recognition, and in extreme cases, were criticized, condemned, and even persecuted (strangled, burnt at the stake, kept in house-arrest for life etc.) by the so-called holy people. Today, our society, and the comforts it provides us, is based on their great discoveries and inventions. This is *tapasya*, or hard austerity, that we all have to perform; if we do it voluntarily, we will make rapid progress. Everything must be offered to the Divine Lord; in order to accomplish this, we must have faith in Him. But that is not so easy, because we have never experienced God, only coming to know about Him through the scriptures. Therefore a regular study of the scriptures is essential (to build and strengthen this faith). This is known as *swadhyaya*, as described below.
- *Swadhyaya*, or the study of one's own mind (etc.). We also need to practice periodic self-examination to see if we are really carrying out these practices properly or not.
- *Ishwara-Pranidhana*, or the acceptance that everything is possible by the grace of God.
- *Asana*, or how to be seated in a posture that is comfortable (enabling us to contemplate God better)
- *Pranayama*, or the control of breath. This will be dealt with later.
- *Dharana*, or concentration upon the desired subject (God).
- *Pratyahara*, or the capacity to withdraw the mind from unwanted or undesirable thoughts and turn it towards desirable ones.

If we practice the above qualities, in that order, then, sooner or later, our meditation would become much deeper, which is *dhyana*, culminating in *samadhi*, or mental union with the Divine.

What is Samadhi?

It is to know that one is Brahman, Brahman is the world. Therefore I, the world, and Brahman are the same reality.

Some people take one particular virtue (*swadhyaya*, *yama*, *aparigraha* etc.) and make it the target of lifelong practice. Ultimately, this enables them to progress towards God.

All Qualities, Good and Bad, Come in Groups

It is seen in nature that both good and evil qualities always come in groups. Therefore, the practice of one quality can't be done in isolation, without the other qualities being present. For instance, to practice truth, one must be fearless. To be fearless, a tremendous faith in God is necessary (i.e., to have the feeling that God is always there to protect). To acquire that faith in God, a regular study of

scriptures is a must, and so is the cultivation of holy company. Thus to practice one virtue to the fullest extent is possible only with the practice of every other virtue, leaving out nothing.

Similarly, a person can't degrade through one evil quality only. Each bad quality brings numerous others in its wake, leading to a total degeneration.

What is Swadhyaya?

The Lord says that swadhyaya, or the study of scriptures, must involve the following:

- It must be done regularly
- It must be done with *nishta*, (निष्ठा, complete adherence, dedication and steadfastness),
- It must be done with total faith
- It must be done with the greatest devotion
- It must be done with total submission to the Lord, and
- It must be done with a prayer admitting one's ignorance, and a request for the right knowledge

This is one interpretation of swadhyaya. The other interpretation is, making one's own mind an object of, or the target of, an intense analysis. There must be a constant introspection, and an impartial examination of whether one is doing right or wrong.

Swami Yatiswaranadaji Maharaj used to advise all his disciples and devotees to be constantly aware of what is going on in their own mind. Swami Brahmanandaji Maharaj prescribed contemplating at the end of the day (just before going to bed), spending five or ten minutes thinking about how well the day was spent (i.e., whether the mind was mostly on God or other, useless subjects, and if so, how to correct oneself next time).

The Meaning of Gnana-Yajna

Lastly, the Lord speaks of *gnana-yajna*. *Gnana* means knowledge, and everything culminates in *gnana*. All our austerities and sacrifices culminate in that knowledge. With practice, our faith gradually deepens into a conviction, with strengths gradually, culminating in a direct realization of fact. Another interpretation of *gnana-yajna* is that if a holy person begins to expound a scripture (for example, the Bhagawad Gita), it is *gnana-yajna*. If the teacher is expecting reward (e.g., in the form of honour, praise or monetary benefits), and the students are, likewise, studying for some worldly benefits (rather than for transforming their lives), it can turn into a selfish activity, and is not really a yajna.

But if it is done with *shraddha* (dedication), *bhakti* (devotion), and for the sole purpose of progressing in spiritual life, for realizing the Self or God, then both the teacher and the taught are blessed, and for both, the activity is a *gnana-yajna*.

Nor is it limited to just talk. When a book is being read, for instance, it must be done with the feeling that it is a *gnana-yajna*. Even an ordinary conversation can be transformed into a *gnana-yajna*, thus benefiting both parties.

All these sacrifices follow a particular hierarchy. The lowest of these are the material sacrifices. Higher than those are the austerity sacrifices. Even higher are the yogic sacrifices. One of the highest is the study of scriptures (with the sole purpose of attaining God) and speaking and conveying that knowledge to others, looking upon them as manifestations of God. At the very peak lies *gnana-yajna*, in which the whole mind is concentrated on the idea that there is nothing else but God. That

awareness is at the root of devotion, knowledge, karma-yoga, concentration, and other spiritual qualities. This is how some people manage to transform their lives.

What is Pranayama?

In the 29th verse:

अपाने जुह्वति प्राणं प्राणेऽपानं तथापरे ।
प्राणापानगती रुद्ध्वा प्राणायामपरायणाः ॥ 29॥

*apāne juhvati prāṇam prāṇe 'pānam tathāpare
prāṇāpāna-gatī ruddhvā prāṇāyāma-parāyaṇāḥ*

Others offer a sacrifice of the outgoing breath in the incoming, and the incoming in the outgoing. Restraining the courses of the outgoing and incoming breaths, solely absorbed in that restraint.

In this verse, an excellent breath-control (*pranayama*) technique is being described. Most of us identify *pranayama* with regulated breathing. That, however, has nothing to do with real *yajna*. Shankaracharya ridicules such people, saying: *Blacksmiths (when melting metal) use bellows to blow air. The bellows go up and down, drawing and discharging air. When people just practice breathing in and out (i.e., without any divine purpose) they are merely moving their lungs like bellows.*

The only result of such practices is that the lungs become strong and powerful, the voice becomes strong and thunderous!

If pranayama is done without spiritual sacrifice, it is called *hatha-yoga*, which has some physical benefits like improved health, digestion, with perhaps some improvement in concentration (due to a fitter body). But that is not real *pranayama*.

Ajapa-Japa

The ancient *rishis* (sages) understood that every living being (including animals, birds, insects etc.) are doing real *pranayama*, called as *ajapa-japa*, or unconsciously repeating who they are (*soham*). When a person breathes in, the sound that emerges sounds like “so”. On the other hand, when he breathes out, it sounds like “ham”. Together, they sound like *Soham* (*I am the Divine, I am Brahman*). This goes on naturally from birth to death, from life to life. But if we can do it with awareness (i.e., remembering our own nature when breathing in and out), then it becomes a *yajna*. That thought (called *Soham-bhavna*, meaning the thought of *Soham*) leads us to the highest goal, which is self-knowledge. That is real *pranayama*.

In the 30th verse:

अपरे नियताहाराः प्राणान्प्राणेषु जुह्वति ।
सर्वेऽप्येते यज्ञविदो यज्ञक्षपितकल्मषाः ॥ 30॥

*apare niyatāhārāḥ prāṇān prāṇeṣhu juhvati
sarve 'pyete yajña-vido yajña-kṣhapita-kalmaṣhāḥ*

Others, with well-regulated diet, offer vital airs in the vital air. All these are knowers of sacrifice, whose sins are destroyed by sacrifice.

What Constitutes Ahara (Food)?

Niyata-ahara means those who regulate their food. In his *Brahma-Sutras*, discussing the seven qualities necessary to become a devotee, Ramanuja interprets the word *viveka* (discrimination) as the discrimination between pure food and impure food. According to Shankaracharya, however, *viveka* is the discrimination between the real and the unreal.

We can take either interpretation, which is what Swami Vivekananda had done in his talks on Bhakti Yoga. One must acquire the seven qualities, the first of which is the control of food, or *ahara*. Whatever is taken into our body is called *ahara*. So Shankaracharya means that there are five doorways through which we are taking food inside. These are the five organs of sense-knowledge (sight, hearing, smelling, tasting and touching).

So the food (protein, carbohydrates etc.) should be pure, and free from three defects:

- Some foods are defective by nature
- Some foods become impure by the admixture of dust, hair etc.
- Some foods become very impure by their being handled by impure people

For spiritually-minded people, the last is most important, therefore eating outside the house (in restaurants etc.) or having it ordered in is most undesirable (unless unavoidable).

Converting Every Experience Into Something Divine

Shankaracharya implies the following: *let us see, hear, smell, taste and touch only what is pure*. This is not really possible in real life, but it is possible to convert everything taken in into something pure. According to the Vedic prayer:

ॐ भद्रं कर्णेभिः शृणुयाम देवाः ।
भद्रं पश्येमाक्षभिर्यजत्राः ।
स्थिरैरङ्गैस्तुष्टुवाग्ँसस्तनूभिः ।
व्यशेम देवहितं यदायूः ।

*Om Bhadram Karnnebhih Shrnnuyaama Devaah /
Bhadram Pashyema-Akssabhir-Yajatraah /
Sthirair-Anggais-Tussttuvaamsas-Tanuubhih /
Vyashema Devahitam Yad-Aayuh /*

*Om! O gods, may we hear auspicious words with the ears;
While engaged in yajnas,
May we see auspicious things with the eyes;
While praising the gods with steady limbs,
May we enjoy a life that is beneficial to the gods.*

This does not mean that it is always possible to hear, see etc. only what is good. However, we can practically convert whatever we hear, see etc. into a spiritual context.

Examples from Sri Ramakrishna's Life

- Sri Ramakrishna once saw the union of a dog with a bitch. While that can provoke impure thoughts in the minds of ordinary people, what Sri Ramakrishna saw was only the union of Shiva and Shakti.
- On another occasion, when he saw a public woman waiting for customers, he perceived her only as Mother Sita waiting for Lord Rama.
- When he heard the word *karana* (wine), he only thought of the intoxication produced by the thoughts of the Divine Mother, which used to leave him in a state of divine intoxication while singing songs of the Divine Mother. In fact, just hearing or thinking about God used to make him divinely intoxicated.

This is what we call converting every sight into a divine sight.

Stories Illustrating this Conversion:

The following story, possibly apocryphal, illustrates this point beautifully:

A Christian monk, living in a monastery, once found that he was being disturbed by local sounds in his prayers. So he decided to go to a solitary place where he could practice continuous prayer undisturbed. He went to such a place, but to his great astonishment and annoyance, he was continuously being disturbed by natural sounds such as the sounds of innumerable frogs abounding that area. Being a sincere man, he prayed intensely to God for relief from that disturbance.

Eventually, God bestowed His grace upon him by making him understand that the frogs were also His devotees, and they were praying in their own tongue. When that realization dawned upon him, he joyfully joined his prayers with those of the frogs, thus converting what was formerly an unspiritual disturbance and distraction, into a powerful aid for spiritual progress!

In the same manner, we can convert all that we see into something spiritual, by *Brahma-drishti*. A beautiful saying goes: *Asukthehe Amrutehe Kaalam Na Yeth Brahma Chintayaa* (until we fall asleep every day, until this body drops off at the time of death, let us spend our time only in thinking about God).

However, this is not possible if we continue to interpret things in the normal way. It may be said in jest that even divine sounds can be disturbing or distractions if we do not have a spiritual attitude! For instance, when one is trying to sleep early in the morning, loud public playing of Lord Venkateshwara's Suprabhatam prevent one from sleeping!

In summary, even divine songs and sounds can be distractions, and disturbances converted into divine sounds! So we need to change our attitude towards them.

Real-Life Example of This Conversion

During Sri Ramakrishna's time, a Brahmo lady devotee was greatly devoted to Krishna, but had the duty of taking care of her nephew. This was proving to be a distraction, as she felt that the thought of her nephew was preventing her from thinking of Krishna. When she came to Sri Ramakrishna and explained her problem, he advised her to think of her nephew as Krishna alone, so that whenever she was doing anything (bathing, feeding, playing with, putting to bed etc.) for her nephew, she was only serving Krishna. Merely by changing her attitude, within a few months, she obtained the vision of the Divine Lord.

In other words, we have to convert every action into a divine activity. This is what is meant by saying: Some people control their food (whatever they take in), and ensure that whatever is inside or goes in from outside is according to their capacity, and are both pure, and is taken in after being

offered to God. This is how some people manage to convert their whole lives into one of sacrifice, and all of them become pure in the end. As indicated to us in the second half of the verse,

सर्वेऽप्येते यज्ञविदो यज्ञक्षपितकल्मषाः ॥ ३०॥

All of these people (who are practicing various sacrifices) are the true knowers of yajnas, and all their sins, all their impurities, all their worldliness is totally destroyed by the performances of these sacrifices. All of them verily attain to Brahman.

Shanti Patha:

ॐ वसुदेवसुतं देवं कंसचाणूरमर्दनम्
देवकीपरमानन्दं कृष्णं वंदे जगद्गुरुम् ॥ १ ॥

Vasudeva sutham devam, Kamsa Chanura mardanam,
Devaki paramanandam, Krishnam vande jagat gurum

I worship Lord Krishna, Who is the spiritual master of the universe, who is the son of Vasudeva, who is the Lord, who killed Kamsa and Chanura, and who is the bliss of Devaki.

May Sri Ramakrishna, Holy Mother, and Swami Vivekananda bless us all with devotion and knowledge.