

ACTION AND WORSHIP

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Spiritual Significance : Work
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If action covers the totality of our life, it is not so for worship. Worship is consciously relegated to some moments of life that we hold sacred, whilst action happens even despite us, all the time, from the moment we are born up to the moment of death. It is much like breathing, which by the way is also an action. We cannot stop it and we are not masters of it. Breathing keeps happening and action keeps happening. It drives us and still we seem to believe and our language reflects that unquestioned premise, that there is a subject who acts, a doer of the action and very naturally, "I" am that doer. It would be difficult for us, in the course of the day, to think that "I" am not doing the action, that it is Nature that is driving me through it, for, the movement that is action, keeps unfolding through my mind and through my body, and I am led to feel that I am the owner of the action, that I am its possessor, and therefore that I must be responsible for it. And from the moment we own responsibility for action, we start thinking about its good and bad, its right and wrong, its consequences for ourselves and for others, and how to do better something that is seen by ourselves and through the other's eye as emanating from us. We do feel that the action is not limited to the time in which it emerged, it seems to have effects or reactions after it is done and has ceased to be. Action does not even seem limited to the space in which it took place, for it seems to trigger other actions at other places, sometimes far removed. Again it seems to escape us while still engaging our identity into other times and other places, sometimes outside our limited world. We sense the action as stretching into other spheres too, carrying its consequences over to other realms, those of after-death, towards some heaven or hell, and even thereafter into other lifetimes. And we also come

with a baggage that compels us to action in this birth. We seem to be in the middle of a chain of actions, of actions and reactions, causing and effecting endlessly, clouding our perception about determination, destiny and free will.

Thus action is a movement that is everywhere. It seems to pursue us even outside the time and space in which it commenced and ended. It is ours, consciously or unconsciously, and affects us at every level, engaging us with ourselves and with the world. It defines our identity, externally and internally as it questions our motives, relating itself to a moral conscience, to a sense of "I" and to the ego. How then can action be compared to worship, aside from the fact that worship is an action? How can action that is everywhere and in every form, be in any way related to the very closed and defined domain of worship? And what sort of action is worship? Can action be shaped like worship? And what would that do? Would it change the nature of the action? How would such an action affect its doer? How would it affect the relationship of the subject to the world? And would such action bring greater mastery over itself and its consequences, and all things that seem to escape the doer? These are some of the problems that action throws at us and that we would like to touch upon as we explore the act and the nature of worship in the first part and go on to understand action as worship in the second part.

Worship through its many forms has necessarily three elements in it: the worshipper, the worshipped and the action of worshipping, which forms the link between the first two terms. By becoming the worshipper, I place myself beneath the worshipped that I revere as the higher instance or Person, invoking that influence into my life. Worship is the act by which I call, I offer whatever I have and that I consider worthy to the divine Person. The traditional ritual is meant to make us remember God and offer to Him. We call Him, we invite His presence in our midst, we place a seat for Him, offer water, flowers, and fruits as a welcome. We laud Him and wave incense, light and other insignia. We declare our intentions to Him, ask for His blessings, His grace, we invoke His protection, His guidance, and in the intimacy of this relationship, pronounce our secret prayers.

Through the traditional ritual, whether done by oneself in the home or executed on our behalf by a priest in a temple, there is a raising of the consciousness in worship, we try to come nearer to the divine, and thus we are lifted out of the mundane flatness of our lives into a sacred, divine, space. In this privileged moment, the two divine instances meet, the inner divine and the transcendent God. The world of worship makes us conscious of both as the peaceful intimacy of God makes the inner divine come to the fore. So when we invite the Lord into our lives, our true being is also called upon to participate more completely in our lives. As devotion wells up in the heart and turns into adoration, we become alive and awake to the presence of the Lord around us, and to the symbols of His presence in the different things of our life, the things of beauty, harmony, peace and love. There is here an instance of remembering

and of offering. When we offer, when we give to the Lord, flowers, or any object, it is but a substitute and an aid to the real giving, that is the self-giving, and repeated self-giving in adoration is a practice of the surrender that we would like to reach. For worship and self-giving are also an exercise in the fading of the ego. It is not only through consecration of our energies, our thoughts and feelings, our very life, but also by becoming more subtle and aware of the divine within. *Shivam bhutva shivam yajet* is the effort wherein we have to become like the Lord to be able to worship Him, and become conscious that it is impelled by Him, by His desire and His grace that we are able to be in worship before Him, which means: "You are the doer, not me". And when at the end of the ritual, we take the steps of the *pradakshina*, the circumambulation around the Lord, around the sanctum in the temple, or around ourselves (as in the *grihapuja*) for the Lord seated within, we imprint our being with this truth of our life: "You are the centre, not me".

Thus in worship, by serving the Lord and waiting on Him, we learn to affirm in symbolic forms the vibrant truths of *Sadhana* that lead us to intimacy with the Divine. Remembering, offering, giving, self-giving, making the divine the centre of ourselves and of our action, reducing the predominance of ego in order to let the inner being come forward, asserting that true identity and concentrated consecration of ourselves and of our life are the highlights of this effort, as is the elevation in consciousness towards becoming like the Lord in order to worship Him, and be like Him. These are all secrets of *Sadhana* and *Tapasya* very much in tune with the teachings of the Gita. The motive, the intention, the awareness involved in the veneration lifts the consciousness out of its habitual grooves, purifies it, and prepares us to spread that attitude into other areas of our life. Slowly, gradually, by constant practice, the attitude of worship can shape all action. But how would such a thing be possible? All action is absorbing. The mind and senses are wholly involved in the act and oblivious of anything else. In worship the action is very obviously directed towards the Lord, so there is no conflict in the aim of action and the efficacy of action, as both are outstretched towards the same, the Lord. But what of daily action, what of the action that absorbs your attention only into the doing it? How can such an action be worship? And how do we include the presence of the Lord into this continuous flow of one action leading to the other? How to remember Him, how offer? How can we bridge the gap between a sacred action called worship and any action, the kind that makes up most of life?

Can all action be worship? Are there negative and positive actions? To this the Gita replies that the action has to be in tune with the *Swabhava*, the inner divine nature. Actions that go against the *Swabhava* stifle the soul, killing it. Being anti-divine, against the immanent divine, they cannot be in the form of worship to the Lord. Here it is not the action per se that is in question, but rather the action in relation to the worshipper. Action by itself has no quality; it is the attitude and the intention behind it that qualifies it. Just as in the case of worship, action that is worship needs to welcome the Lord, it should take the

worshipper Godward, that is how it can become an expression of the *Swadharmā* and be *dharmic* in nature. Only the right action is worthy of the offering, but since the three *Gunas* in interaction perform all action, the *Gita* enjoins us to cultivate the *Sattvic* tendencies that have a refining influence on human nature. The action should be uplifted to the most *Sattvic* type, thus governed by the harmonising light of *Sattva* it will keep the worshipper on the Godward path. Action has that power on the doer as it shapes him. When properly understood, all action is in the form of *Yajna*, *Tapasya*, or *Dana*, these are its motivations. If we are conscious of this, and try to lift the type of that action and motivation to the *Sattvic* level, then action and work become a great worship, a means of self-purification and self-perfection for the worshipper. Being conscious of *Yajna*, *Tapasya* and *Dana* in their *Sattvic* mode is the *Gita*'s solution to action as worship, and here the Divine is remembered and action flows towards Him. *Kartavyam karma*, is a way of saying that all work and thus action comes to us from the Divine and has to be offered to Him. It also means for the aspirant and worshipper that he does not choose the work and the action, it is the Divine who chooses and he accepts the divine bidding, accepts whatever work comes his way and does it with dedication, paving the way for a fading of the ego and of the claims of desire, in the purifying process.

Therefore action as worship cannot be dissociated from the movement of remembering the Divine and offering to the Divine. In view of this constant remembrance, a certain purification of the mind, or rather *Buddhi*, the intelligent will, is very needed, in order to foster clarity of understanding, preparing the mind to receive the spiritual truths. Once the *Buddhi* is cleared of the confusions, of the many-branching dissipative tendencies it becomes more homogeneous, calm and fixed on the aim, and once opened to the spiritual light, it can be in the remembrance of the Lord and stay with that remembrance. That purified *Buddhi* is very important, since action is totally absorbing and the will too has to be serenely fixed on the Lord. In the beginning, we need to make an effort to shift part of the focus, cultivate the inner withdrawal. The worshipper has to practice, at repeated intervals, a willed stepping back from action, a faint and delicate awareness forms that does not disturb the concentration and absorption in the action, wherein one remembers the Divine with love. Gradually it develops into a stream of consciousness that is parallel to the one absorbed in action, something indrawn and giving. This helps the worshipper to keep dedicating the flow of actions to the Lord. Sri Krishna asks us to dedicate all action to Him, so that action loses its binding edge. We can be free from the chain of causality that action keeps forming. The doer-ship will eventually be transferred to Him in this continual inner giving up. In this way action, just as worship, relies deeply on devotion and adoration. Devotion is the puissant aid in making what for a long time seems like a laborious effort. Slowly, the presence of the Lord is felt in the world, in the vibrant symbols of light, harmony, love, peace, beauty and delight. That is the movement of adoration for the Lord. When we can be in perpetual adoration, the dedication

and self-giving go with it, and ego diminishes. Love is the culminating point of this movement of devotion. Nothing resists love, not even the ego and the claiming and expecting desires; they melt in the power of love. Then self-giving is tuned towards surrender, worshipper and worshipped can both be experienced as one and the same God. Thus for the Gita, the solution is in being like the Purushottma, who is always untouched, apart, and yet deeply engaged in all manifestation. The human being can also be like the Lord; he can live absorbed in the intimacy of the Lord and still endeavour in the field of action, as an instrument of God.

The acme of the experience of action as worship is the unified consciousness that is experienced by the liberated human being. The Gita describes the experience in the imagery of a vast sacrifice. In Sri Aurobindo's words: "The universal energy into which the action is poured is the Divine; the consecrated energy of the giving is the Divine; whatever is offered is only some form of the Divine; the giver of the offering is the Divine himself in man; the action, the work, the sacrifice is itself the Divine in movement, in activity; the goal to be reached by sacrifice is the Divine", (CWSA, volume 19, page 120). There is an experienced pervasiveness of the Divine, which transforms the nature of life and action. The action has no personal sense or motivation; it is performed without attachment and done for the sake of the world. That is called Lokasangraha, the Lord is served in the world. The nature and the understanding of life are certainly very different for the liberated human being. Even reading about it thrills us. From all the above, we can see that action as worship is possible. The attitude, the faith, the devotion, the spirit in which this practice is undertaken are key to such a change, constituting the action of the mind while the body is carrying out the external action. More exactly, something in us is inactive, still, while the outer being is active. That is the skill, *kaushalam*, of doing work without forging the bondage that comes from action and *Karma*.

We started out with trying to understand the phenomenon that is action, and the fact that it is quite the opposite of the time and space, and nature of worship. It seemed like action and worship were difficult to bring together. To go deeper into the question, we first analysed worship and could see how the act of worship contains all the elements of the *Sadhana* of the Gita. Thereafter we discovered how and in what conditions, the elements of worship, specialised and sacred though they are, could be applied to all action that happens in the course of a day, or of a lifetime, because the Gita has bridged that gap between worship and ordinary action with a series of practical guidelines. Finally, just as in worship, all action can be a link between the human and the Divine, the divine in man as well as the Supreme person. This changes the nature of our actions, our relationship with the world and with Nature, and takes us closer to God. We would like to be in adoration, diminish the ego, work for the highest good, and all that is provided us by action and life when they become a means of purification and perfection. The good action is the one that takes us Godward

and the bad action is one that takes us away, or holds us back from God, slows our progress towards Him, because the real meaning of our life, its aim and its utility is the upward growth of the soul in the path of the highest good. When we can be in a state of free offering of life without a personal sense, motive, or claim, then we live more and more in the delight of Godward existence.

THE DIVINE WORKER

*I face earth's happenings with an equal soul;
In all are heard Thy steps: Thy unseen feet
Tread Destiny's pathways in my front. Life's whole
Tremendous theorem is Thou complete.*

*No danger can perturb my spirit's calm:
My acts are Thine; I do Thy works and pass;
Failure is cradled on Thy deathless arm,
Victory is Thy passage mirrored in Fortune's glass.*

*In this rude combat with the fate of man
Thy smile within my heart makes all my strength;
Thy Force in me labours at its grandiose plan,
Indifferent to the Time-snake's crawling length.*

*No power can slay my soul; it lives in Thee.
Thy presence is my immortality.*

SRI AUROBINDO, CWSA, Vol. 2, p. 612