Srimad Bhagavad Gita

Chapter 17 Shraddhaa Traya Vibhhaaga Yogah: Yoga of the Division of the Threefold Faith

Transliterated Sanskrit Text

Free Translation

&

Brief Explanation

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Bhagavad Gita: Chapter 17 Shraddhaa Traya Vibhhaaga Yogah: Yoga of the Division of the Threefold Faith **T.N.Sethumadhavan**

Preamble

At the end of the previous Chapter it was stated that he who discards the scriptural injunctions and acts according to the promptings of his desires cannot attain the highest knowledge. Arjuna had a doubt about the fate of those who worship with faith but who do not know the scriptures or are indifferent to their rules. For an average man it is difficult to be proficient in the knowledge of scriptural codes to guide his living although he has sufficient faith or Shraddhaa to lead a nobler way of life as enunciated in the scriptures.

Hence this Chapter deals with the questions whether it is sufficient if one lives with faith for a life of good conduct or is it necessary that he must know the scriptures in order that his faith will be subservient to the injunctions laid down in the scriptures. In short, the question raised by Arjuna is whether even without the knowledge of the Sastras, blind faith alone can take the seeker far.

Shraddhaa is that powerful force from within propelled by which all the faculties of a person act in their respective fields. It gives direction to a man's determination and endows him with character.

Instead of giving a direct clarification to Arjuna's doubts, Sri Krishna gives an analysis of the concept of `faith' as obtained in the various fields of man's endeavors viz.

- 1. his physical indulgence (*Ahara*)
- 2. his dedicated activities (Yagna)
- *3.* his self-denial (*Tapas*)
- 4. his charity (Dana)

He explains that faith is of three different types depending upon the nature of temperaments (Gunas) which an individual entertains in him. He concludes that the actions of those who are devoid of faith are as good as not done.

Since three types of faith have been expounded in this chapter it is called "Yoga of the Division of the Threefold Faith".

The Text

arjuna uvaacha ye shaastravidhimutsrijya yajante shraddhaayaanvitaah tesham nishthaa tu kaa krishna sattvamaaho rajas tamah // 17.1 //

Arjuna said

O Krishna, what is the condition of those who, neglecting the ordinances of the scriptures, perform sacrifices with faith? Is it that of Sattva, Rajas, or Tamas?

Neglecting the ordinances of the scriptures: To an ordinary man who is ever full of anxieties and confusions of daily activities, planning his life as directed in the scriptures is somewhat difficult. But a sincere seeker may have a faith in the higher way of life and devotion to ideals preached in the scriptures.

Perform sacrifice with faith: The word sacrifice includes all selfless activities undertaken by an individual for the general welfare of the society.

What Arjuna wants to know is whether these selfless activities undertaken with detachment and faith by those who do not willfully defy the rules of scriptures but are ignorant of them, come under the category of unactivity (Sattva) or of activity (Rajas) or of inactivity (Tamas).

The answer given by The Lord is an exhaustive analysis of the three types of faith involved in all human endeavors.

THREE KINDS OF FAITH

sri bhagavaan uvaacha trividhaa bhavati shraddhaaa dehinaam saa swabhaavajaa saatvikee raajasee chaiva taamasee cheti taam shrinu // 17.2 //

Sri Bhagavan said Threefold is the faith of the embodied, which is inherent in their nature - the Sattvic, the Rajasic and the Tamasic. Hear now about it.

Faith inherent in nature: The nature of man consists of his latent tendencies created by his actions, good or bad, in his previous lives. The faith of each man takes the shape, color, and quality given to it by his nature, *svabhava*, the stuff of his being, his innate substance. Man acts according to his nature; he cannot easily change it. One can transform a worldly nature into a spiritual nature only with the help of insight gained through the study of the scriptures with an indomitable determination. This faith is of three types viz., the Sattvic, the Rajasic and the Tamasic.

sattvaanuroopaa sarvasya shraddhaaa bhavati bhaarata shraddhaaamayo'yam purusho yo yacchraddhah sa eva sah // 17.3 //

The faith of every individual is in accordance with his nature, O Bharata. Man is the nature of his faith; as a man's faith is, so is he.

The Lord says that faith is of three kinds viz. Sattva - the divine, the good, Rajas - the undivine, the passionate and Tamas - the diabolic, the dull. Faith is not acceptance of a belief. It is striving after self- realization by concentrating the powers of the mind on a

given ideal. It governs our view of life which in turn conditions our desires, thoughts and actions. It is the pressure of the Spirit on humanity. It is the force that urges humanity towards what is better, not only in the order of knowledge but in the whole order of spiritual life.

The goals which religions offer prove effective according to one's faith in them. Hence an individual's physical activities, psychological behavior and intellectual maturity are controlled by the kind of faith entertained by him. If one's faith is of wrong type the expressions of his personality would also be erroneous.

The word 'shraddhaaa' usually translated as 'faith' is not a mechanical belief or acceptance of the words of a holy man or a book. It is an affirmative and reverent attitude toward supersensuous truths. Through faith a man is intuitively convinced of the existence of the Reality underlying the universe and his capacity for realizing that Reality. It is not imposed from outside, but is produced by the tendencies that are the results of his past actions. The intensity of this faith accounts for the passion he pursues an undertaking. This faith is a man's appeal to himself or to something present and compelling in him or in universal reality for his way to fullness and perfection.

So a man is made of his faith; he is that faith and that faith is he. The truth he sees is determined for him by his faith. If a man's innate tendencies are characterized by sattva, then his faith will direct him to the pursuit of knowledge and happiness. If they are characterized by rajas, then his faith will direct him to the pursuit of action ending in pain and suffering. If it is characterized by tamas, then his faith will lead him to ignorance and delusion.

yajante saatwikaa devaanyaksharakshaamsi raajasaah pretaan bhootaganaamshchaanye yajante taamasaa janaah // 17.4 //

The Sattvic or pure men worship the gods; the Rajasic or the passionate worship the Yakshas and the Rakshasas; the others (the Tamasic or the deluded) worship the ghosts and the hosts of nature-spirits.

Worship means offering one's devotion at some altar or the other and seeking a fulfillment from the benefit accrued from his invocations.

Men of Sattvic temperament, because of their serene composure and tranquil disposition seek their fulfillment at an altar of Divinity indicating their impulses.

Rajasic people who are men of action and ambition worship the demi-gods.

The Tamasic people worship the dead spirits to satisfy their lower urges.

Thus the choice of an altar depends upon the quality of urges or the kind of Shraddhaa in a devotee and this Shraddhaa is the effect of his own Guna or temperament predominating in him.

ashaastravihitam ghoram tapyante ye tapo janaah dambhaahamkaarasamyuktaah kaama raaga balaanvitaah // 17.5 //

Those men who practice terrific austerities not enjoined by the scriptures, given to hypocrisy and egoism impelled by the force of lust and attachment,

karshayantah shareerastham bhootagraamamachetasah maam chaivaantahshareerastham taanviddhyaasuranishchayaan// 17.6 //

Senseless, torturing all the elements in the body and Me also, who dwell in the body, you know these to be of demoniacal resolves.

The wrong way of worshipping at an altar is described here. No spiritual enlightenment can be expected in wasting one's energy in wrong channels in the name of religion. Sri Krishna says that physical persecution of one's own body and self-denial would not constitute an austerity following which one would expect spiritual unfoldment and inner personality development. Some people undertake severe austerities merely as a show out of egoism and hypocrisy with a view to satisfy their lustful desires and attachment to worldly objects.

Even if such people gain anything out of such austerities they will only misuse their new found strength for wrongful purposes and ultimately destroy themselves. These people belong to Asuric type. Such unintelligent practices oppress the bodily elements and also the Self or the Divine Lord within. Intelligent control is Tapas but not cruel self-torture.

THREE KINDS OF FOOD

aahaarastwapi sarvasya trividho bhavati priyah yajnastapastathaa daanam teshaam bhedamimam shrinu // 17.7 //

The food also which is dear to each is threefold, as also sacrifice, austerity and alms giving. You hear the distinction of these.

The temperamental influences which govern the mind, thought and actions of a man are enumerated here. The Lord analyses one's inward nature and consequent outward expressions when one is under the influence of any one particular Guna.

The choice of food, friends, and types of emotions entertained and the view of life in general are all indicative of the type to which the seeker belongs. In the choice of one's food, in the type of sacrifices one will make, in the kind of Tapas one will indulge and in the quality of charity one will make, any one of the three types of faith can be discernible.

aayuh sattvabalaarogya sukha preeti vivardhanaah rasyaah snigdhaah sthiraa hridyaa aahaarah saatwikapriyaah // 17.8 //

The foods which promote life, purity, strength, health, joy and cheerfulness, which are sweet, soft, nourishing and agreeable are dear to the Sattvic people.

Sattvic persons like the food which increases vitality, supplies energy, enhances strength to resist temptations from the sense objects, provides health, augments joy and inward cheerfulness.

katvamla lavanaatyushna teekshna rooksha vidaahinah aahaaraah raajasasyeshtaa duhkhashokaamayapradaah // 17.9 //

The foods that are bitter, sour, saltish, excessively hot, dry, pungent and burning producing pain, grief and disease are liked by the Rajasic.

Rajasic men to fulfill their uncontrolled passions desire food that has strong qualities like bitterness, sourness, hot, pungent etc. Although such food produces good amount of energy ultimately it leads to a life full of pain, grief and disease.

yaatayaamam gatarasam pooti paryushitam cha yat ucchishtamapi chaamedhyam bhojanam taamasapriyam // 17.10 //

That which is stale, tasteless, putrid, rotten, refuse and impure is the food liked by the Tamasic.

The kind of diet we take has its influence on our power of self control.

THREE KINDS OF SACRIFICE

aphalaakaangkhibhir yajno vidhidrishto ya ijyate yashtavyameveti manah samaadhaaya sa saatwikah // 17.11 //

That sacrifice which is offered by men without desire for reward, as enjoined by the ordinance (scriptures), with a firm faith that sacrifice is a duty, is Sattvic or pure.

"The Yajna of the Gita is not the same as the ceremonial sacrifice of the Vedas. It is sacrificial action without expectation of any reward by which man dedicates his wealth and deeds to the service of the One Life in all. People with such a sacrificial spirit will accept even death gladly, though unjustly meted out to them so that the world may grow through their sacrifice. Good people maintain the world through their suffering and sacrifice". Dr.S.Radhakrishnan.

abhisandhaaya tu phalam dambhaarthamapi chaiva yat ijyate bharatashreshtha tam yajnam viddhi raajasam // 17.12 //

The sacrifice which is offered, O Arjuna, seeking a reward and for ostentation, you know that to be a Rajasic Yajna.

In order to get some chosen result some people perform actions, while some others do so merely for show and to satisfy their vanity. These acts do not constitute Divine act nor can they bring about inward cheer or peace. Such sacrifices are termed Rajasika.

vidhiheenam asrishtaannam mantraheenam adakshinam shraddhaaavirahitam yajnam taamasam parichakshate // 17.13 //

They declare that sacrifice to be Tamasic, which is contrary to the ordinances of the scriptures, in which no food is distributed, which is devoid of Mantras and gifts and which is devoid of faith.

Disregarding all the requirements laid down in the scriptures, acting against all Vedic injunctions i.e. acts which are against all the principles of right living belong to the lowest type. These actions in which food is not distributed i.e. where no sharing of wealth with others takes place, where rituals are conducted without Mantras and without Dakshina or distribution of reward are all Tamasika.

The distribution of food and the payment of the fee are symbolic of help to others without which all work is self-centered.

THREE KINDS OF PENANCE

devadwijagurupraajna poojanam shauchamarjavam brahmacharyamahimsaa cha shaareeram tapa uchyate // 17.14 //

Worship of the Gods, the twice born, the teachers and the wise, purity, straightforwardness, celibacy and non-injury - these are called the austerities of the body.

anudwegakaram vaakyam satyam priyahitam cha yat swaadhyaayaabhyaasanam chaiva vaangmayam tapa uchyate // 17.15 //

Speech which gives no offence, which is truthful, pleasant and beneficial, the practice of the study of the Vedas is called austerity of speech.

manahprasaadah saumyatwam maunamaaatmavinigrahah bhaavasamshuddhirityetat tapo maanasamuchyate // 17.16 //

Serenity of mind, good heartedness, silence, self-control, purity of nature - this is called the mental austerity.

These three verses explain what Tapas really means and classify Tapas pursued by different types of people.

Devotion and reverence to the ideals represented in the Deva, the Deity, lived by the Twice-Born, Brahmanas and preached by the Gurus and recommended by the wise is an act of worship. Such acts of worship, external and inward purity, straightforwardness in

the dealings with others, control of the mind from sense enjoyments in order to concentrate on the Supreme Brahman and avoiding all acts of injuring others are all called austerities of the body or bodily asceticism.

Here Tapas or austerity means not merely a life of self-denial but an intelligent method of living in the right relationship with the world of objects thereby avoiding wastage of energies and utilizing such energy in creative fields of spiritual enquiry.

Speech or the spoken words which cause no disturbances in others, which are true, sincere, agreeable and beneficial to others, careful study and reflection over the scriptures are all called austerity in speech. This implies the investing of the energies of speech in the study and reflection of the teachings of the scriptures.

The five noble values of life mentioned in verse 16 constitute austerity of the mind. They are:

- Serenity of mind this is the result of one's healthy relationship with the world outside
- Kindness or good heartedness a feeling of warmth towards all
- Silence this is not only non-speaking but an inward noiseless calm wherein no passions and desires are generated
- Self control controlling of lower nature within us
- Purity of nature or honesty of motive the motivating factor for any action should be noble and divine.

These three verses depict the picture of what are true Tapas. Tapas pursued by people of different Gunas give different results. In the following verses the different kinds of Tapas based on the different Gunas of the Tapaswins are discussed.

shraddhaayaa parayaa taptam tapastattrividham naraih aphalaakaangkshibhiryuktaih saattwikam parichakshate // 17.17 //

This threefold austerity practiced by steadfast men with the utmost faith, desiring no reward, they call Sattvic.

satkaaramaanapoojaartham tapo dambhena chaiva yat kriyate tadiha proktam raajasam chalamadhruvam // 17.18 //

The austerity which is practiced with the object of gaining respect, honor and reverence and with hypocrisy is said to be Rajasic, unstable and transitory.

moodhagraahenaatmano yat peedayaa kriyate tapah parasyotsaadanaartham vaa tattaamasamudaahritam // 17.19 //

The austerity which is practiced out of a foolish notion, with self-torture or for the purpose of destroying another, is declared to be Tamasic.

These three types of austerities viz. of body, speech, and mind if practiced by men of harmonious nature with no attachment for their rewards and with utmost faith and sincerity are called Sattvic type. If these austerities are practiced with a view to gain respect, honor and reverence and with vanity and ostentation they are called Rajasic. Sri Krishna says that such a kind of Tapas is unstable and transitory which will only result in unproductive and painful self denials. Tapas undertaken with a foolish obstinacy involving self torture and not knowing its aim and indulging in destroying others is of the lowest kind. These misconceived, wrongly practiced austerities undertaken by anyone for bringing about sorrow and discomfort to others and to himself is considered as Tamasic.

THREE KINDS OF CHARITY

daatavyamiti yad daanam deeyateanupakaarine deshe kaale cha paatre cha tad daanam saatwikam smritam // 17.20 //

That gift which is given to one who does nothing in return, knowing it to be a duty to give, in a fit place and time, to a worthy person, that gift is held to be Sattvic.

yattu pratyupakaaraartham phalamuddishya vaa punah deeyate cha pariklishtam taddaanam raajasam smritam // 17.21 //

And that gift which is made with a view to receiving something in return or looking for a reward or given reluctantly is said to be Rajasic.

adeshakaale yaddaanam apaatrebhyashcha deeyate asatkritamavajnaatam tattaamasamudaahritam // 17.22 //

The gift which is given at the wrong place and time to unworthy persons, without respect or with insult, is declared to be Tamasic.

Now three kinds of charity is discussed. That gift which is given to some one out of conviction that it is an act that has to be done is the right kind of charity. Even if the recipient of the charity does no service in return, the giver of charity does not to make any discrimination among the recipients. The gift is to be made with a right faith, to the worthy person, in the right time and in the right place. Charity must come from within and out of one's heart. This is of Sattvic type.

That gift which is given with the hope of getting some benefit in return or looking forward to some reward or given with reluctance is Rajasic type.

Gifts which are made at the wrong place and time to an unworthy person with contempt and with no respect are said to be of Tamasic type.

THE MYSTICAL UTTERENCE, OM TAT SAT, PURIFIES ALL ACTIONS

om tatsaditi nirdesho brahmanas trividhah smritah braahmanaastena vedaashcha yajnaashcha vihitaah puraa // 17.23 // *`OM TAT SAT' - this is considered to be the threefold symbol of Brahman. By this were ordained of old the Brahmanas, the Vedas and the sacrifices.*

Om Tat Sat is a sentence of three words, each denoting one of the aspects of the Reality.

- `OM' represents the Transcendental and the Pure Self, Absolute and Unborn which is the substratum upon which the projections of the body, mind and intellect are maintained.
- `Tat' indicates the Eternal Goal, the Changeless and the Ever-Perfect, that from which everything has come, in which everything exists and into which everything merges back in the end.
- > `Sat' means existence, the principle functioning through all things.

Invoking this sentence purifies all our activities and motives behind them. When invoked in ritualism it removes all defects in the worship, it being the name for Brahman.

The Eternal Reality indicated in the triple nomenclature of Brahman `Om Tat Sat' is the source from which all castes, the Vedas and Sacrifices commenced. All super impositions arise from, exist on and disappear into that which is their own substratum, the Brahman.

tasmaadomityudaahritya yajnadaanatapahkriyaah pravartante vidhaanoktaah satatam brahmavaadinaam // 17.24 //

Therefore, with the utterance of OM the acts of gift, sacrifice and austerity enjoined in the scriptures are always begun by the expounders of Brahman.

tadityanabhisandhaaya phalam yajnatapah kriyaah daanakriyaashcha vividhaah kriyante mokshakaangkshibhih // 17.25 //

And with the utterance of the word `Tat' the acts of sacrifice and austerity and the various acts of giving are performed by the seekers of salvation without aiming at any reward.

sadbhaave saadhubhaave cha sadityetatprayujyate prashaste karmani tathaa sacchabdah paartha yujyate // 17.26 //

The word `Sat' is used in the sense of Reality and of goodness and so also, O Partha, it is used in the sense of an auspicious act.

The context in which the terms - Om, Tat, Sat - have to be used is explained here. Sri Krishna says that when the acts of sacrifice, gift and austerity are undertaken by the seekers the term OM is to be uttered to cherish in the mind the divine awareness of the supremacy of the Infinite. This adds purpose and meaning to all our acts of sacrifice, charity and austerity by freeing the mind from the egocentric attachments.

Liberation means liberation of our personality from its physical, emotional and intellectual attachments. Once liberated the human personality realizes the Divinity in itself. One who endeavors to liberate himself must perform all his activities in such a way that the causes that create the attachments -vasanas- are completely eliminated.

To work in the field of Yagna or Tapas or Dana by understanding the meaning of the term `Tat' i.e. the universal oneness of the spiritual truth is to work with no ego and consequent freedom from attachments. With the utterance of `Tat' alone which indicates the universal truth of oneness of all living creatures all acts of sacrifice, penance and gifts are undertaken by the seekers of liberation without expecting any reward. The word `Sat' means both reality and goodness. It is also used for all praiseworthy actions.

In our daily contact with the world of objects we more often believe that this world, as physically observed, is the reality although it is only relatively real in comparison to the unchanging substratum, the `Sat', the Absolute Reality.

yajne tapasi daane cha sthitih saditi chochyate karma chaiva tadartheeyam sadityevaabhidheeyate // 17.27 //

Steadfastness in sacrifice, austerity and gift, is also called `Sat' and so also any action for such purposes is called `Sat'.

The term `Sat' is used to indicate man's faith and devotion in sacrifice, austerity and gift. It indicates steadfastness in Yagna, Tapas and Dana. If these activities are undertaken with faith and sincerity with the chanting of OM - the Supreme, TAT - the Universal and SAT - the Real (the Infinite Brahman), the seeker's mind gives up all its selfishness, arrogance and ego. The principle behind this advice is that actions will create reactions depending upon the motive and attitude of the performer while undertaking such actions.

ashraddhaayaa hutam dattam tapastaptam kritam cha yat asadityuchyate paartha na cha tatpretya no iha // 17.28 //

Whatever offering or gift is made, whatever sacrifice is performed, whatever rite is observed, without faith, it is called `Asat' O Partha ; it is of no account here or hereafter.

Sri Krishna in this concluding verse of this Chapter emphasizes that faith is man and even if anyone performs most glorious acts without faith they are of no use either here or hereafter. Actions create effects depending on the faith behind the actions. The Lord states that whatever sacrifice is made, whatever penance is performed or whatever charity is given it is called `Asat' if they are undertaken without faith; they are mere barren actions. Such faithless actions will produce no results.

The Lord thus indicates that the spirit of faith is unavoidable and that without faith no progress or evolution can ever take place. This is true in this life and the life after death. Both in the secular activities as well as in the sacred performances of the religion, the

factor that determines the quality and quantity of the result is our faith in our own goodness and in the field of activity undertaken.

om tat sat iti srimadbhagavadgeetaasu upanishatsu brahma vidyaayaam yogashaastre sri krishnaarjuna samvaade shraddhaaa traya vibhhaaga yogo naama saptadasho'dhyaayah ||

Thus in the Upanishads of the glorious Bhagavad Gita, the science of the Eternal, the scripture of Yoga, the dialogue between Sri Krishna and Arjuna, ends the seventeenth discourse entitled The Yoga of the Division of the Threefold Faith

Concepts and Issues

Arjuna raises an interesting question whether the Shraddhaa (faith) of the people who worship the various deities, but without following the injunctions of the scriptures is Sattvic or Rajasic or Tamasic.

Sri Krishna replies that such Shraddhaa can be anyone of the three types depending upon the nature of such persons, their mental make-up. The Sattvic persons worship Gods, the Rajasic worship the demi-gods and the Tamasic worship the Bhutas and the lower Spirits.

Like faith, food also is of three types; so also sacrifice, austerity and charity. Food conducive to health, strength and purity of mind and is pleasant is Sattvic. Food that is bitter, sour or saltish, pungent and which produces disease is Rajasic. Old and stale food that has lost its taste and flavor, petrified, spoiled and impure is Tamasic.

Sacrifice done as a duty and according to the injunctions of the scriptures is Sattvic. If it is done with show and pomp and for the fruits thereof, it is Rajasic. The Tamasic one is bereft of all the prescribed rules is done without faith and lacks in Mantras and Dakshina.

Tapas or austerity is of three kinds: Sarira - pertaining to the body, Vangmaya - pertaining to the speech and Manasa - pertaining to the mind. Worship of Gods, Brahmanas and teachers as also observing purity and continence is Tapas of the body. Truthful and inoffensive speech as also study of one's branch of the Vedas is Tapas of the speech. Peace of mind, control of thoughts and speech and a pleasant demeanor is Tapas of the mind.

When this threefold Tapas is performed with faith and without desire for its rewards, it is Sattvic. If it is done in an ostentatious manner for name and fame it is Rajasic. If done without regard in one's capacity and for harming others it is Tamasic.

Dana or gifts given as a matter of duty to persons of the right type and in the right manner belong to the Sattvic kind. If given with the desire for future rewards and not very willingly, it becomes Rajasic. Gifts given in contempt to unworthy persons, violating the rules are Tamasic.

The Lord concludes that the three terms `OM TAT SAT' which form a threefold name for Brahman, act like a magic formula if uttered during Yajna, Tapas and Dana and while correcting the deficiencies therein, if any.

Live as the Gita Teaches You to Live

This Chapter tells us that there are devotees who are ignorant of the scriptural injunctions and yet endowed with shraddhaa or faith. Their faith according to its nature may be characterized as belonging to sattva, rajas or tamas. These devotees should cultivate pure sattva by avoiding food, worship, gift, and austerity that are of nature of rajas and tamas. They should be devoted to sattva alone. When their gift, worship or austerity is found to be defective, it should be purified by uttering "OM TAT SAT". This will purify the minds of the devotees and gradually enable them to realize Brahman.

Points to Ponder

- 1. What is understood by the term 'shraddhaa' or faith?
- 2. How do the three Gunas influence men in the choice of their goal in life?
- 3. Explain the terms `Om Tat Sat' and their significance while uttering them.
- 4. Write short notes on :Yajna, Dana and Tapas

Next time we shall take up Chapter 18

HARIH OM