

THE RELEVANCE OF SOCIAL WELFARE ACTIVITY IN SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

by

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The theme of discussion suggested for the present moment is: Has social activity any relation to spiritual practice or *sadhana*? This question is similar to other questions, such as: Is the body related to the soul, or is the body not related to the soul? Is the world related to God, or is the world not related to God? Is time related to eternity, or is time not related to eternity? These are all identical questions.

We may say that the body is not the soul, as has been said everywhere by every saint, philosopher and sage. Because the body is perishable, the soul is immortal; therefore the body cannot be said to have any relevance to the soul.

The world is full of discrepancy, disparity, conflict, evil and pain, which cannot be regarded as the characteristics of God. There is a birth and death for the world also, in the sense of the evolutionary process. Evolution is the continuous activity of the structure of the universe, wherein the preceding condition dies for the birth of a succeeding condition. Transient, therefore, is this world. The Bhagavadgita describes this world - *anityam* - impermanent; *asukham* - unpleasant; *dukhalayam* - an

abode of sorrow; and *asashvatam* – not lasting even for tomorrow.

In this sense, we may say this world has no connection with God. If that is the case, life in this world has no relation to the aspiration for God. Such negative conclusions follow from visualizing the reality of life from one particular angle of vision. If the body is not the soul, and spiritual practice or *sadhana* is connected with the development of the soul in its advance towards God Almighty, then anything connected with the body also is not spiritual.

Is not social activity connected with physical existence? Is social activity a work undertaken by the soul? If we think in this manner, it will mean that any social work has no connection with spirituality. But everywhere, people are praising social welfare work. “Do good deeds; do charity; help poor people; be philanthropic,” is the conundrum, the slogan of the world, at least at the present moment.

Why go so far? Bhagavan Sri Krishna in the Bhagavadgita is emphasizing action again and again: “Do the work; do your duty.” “For the welfare and solidarity of the world, do your duty,” is the great admonition of Bhagavan Sri Krishna in the Gita. Do we not see the great contradiction here in these statements? How could perishable activity, which results in perishable fruits as a result of activity undertaken by a perishable body, do any permanent good? A perishable body can engage itself only in perishable activity, and only perishable results will follow. So, all the expectations in terms of social welfare will also perish with the perishing of the body and the perishing of the psychological intentions of a person.

If the body is not the soul, and the world cannot be identified with God, and the temporal process is not in any way related to eternity, then there would be no passage to God from this world. There would be an unbridgeable gulf between our psychophysical individual existence here, and the aspiration of our soul; a gulf between time process, in which we are all engaged, and eternity, which is the nature of

God; a gulf between this transitory world and the infinitude of God.

The problem arises on account of our inability to establish a proper relationship between what is visible and what is invisible. 'Process and Reality' is the title of a well-known book by the famous philosopher-scientist Alfred North Whitehead. How could process be reality, because process is a perishable transitory movement of one condition into another condition? As the great Buddha has told us long, long ago, there is nothing existent. Nothing is static. There is no being. Everything is becoming; everything is fluxation; everything dies. All things are a wisp of wind, momentary in every way. This made people think that Buddha had denied the existence of the soul itself. Virtually, this amounts to denying the existence of God also, which characteristic is attributed by many thinkers of Buddhism.

However, as the case may be, is it possible for us to reach God, to Infinity, we ourselves being finite? Is there no contradiction between the finite and the Infinite – utter contradiction? It is the difference between day and night. Has any connection been seen between night and day? We may say that night and day cannot be related to each other – one is brilliance and the other is darkness. But we forget night and day are the obverse and reverse of the same coin of the revolution of the earth around the sun, and when it is darkness in one part of the world, it is light somewhere else. There is perpetual light and daytime on the surface of the earth somewhere, and perpetual night, daybreak and dusk in other parts of the world. So, these are all viewpoints, and not ultimate realities.

If the body and the soul are two different things, and activities connected with the physical existence of a person cannot be regarded as having any relevance to spiritual aspiration, we have to think three times before understanding what the Bhagavadgita is saying. On one side, the Almighty represented in the personality of Krishna says, "Everything is done by me." And, at the same time, there is an

injunction upon the human individual Arjuna, “Do your work, your duty.”

Why should Arjuna, the human individual, have to do any work at all if there is One Being who does all the work? What is the compatibility between individual action and universal activity? The Bhagavadgita is a very difficult thing to understand. Even if we read a hundred commentaries, its true meaning cannot be appreciated, because everywhere we see contradiction between one verse and another verse.

Doing one's duty, engaging oneself in activity of any kind, according to the requirement of the doctrine of the Bhagavadgita, is to be set in tune with the principle that all things are done by one Being only. Though the two look different in every way, there has to be some relation between the finite and the Infinite, if it should become possible for the finite to reach the Infinite; else, the finite would be finite forever – time-bound, process-bound – and the Infinite would be unreachable. Our aspiration for God, which is what is known as spiritual practice or *sadhana*, can have relevance only if this world has relevance to God, and our actions have some connection with that actionless existence, which is supreme identity. The idea behind the gospel of the Bhagavadgita here in this context is that action is not a performance motivated or engendered by any particular individual. If the individual is the responsible agent of an action, then there would be a repercussion following as a consequence of this individualised action. It would be a nemesis of action. Every action produces a reaction. If we consider action to be that which is motivated by the ideational process of the human individual only, and if every action produces a reaction, it is good not to do any action at all because it is told to us that *karma* is binding. The binding factor in *karma* is the inviolability of a reaction following from the action performed. But the gospel of the Gita is insistent that we have to engage ourselves in such action that it should not produce any reaction. Is it possible to do such a work?

The possibility of it is the central meaning of the Bhagavadgita gospel. In this sense, we may say that all action is not a doing of something by the individual, but a participation of the individual in a universal process or requirement. There is a difference between participation and actual doing. If it is a doing from the initiative of our personal individuality, then we have to bear the brunt of it in the form of the reaction or the nemesis of action, *karmaphala* – to enjoy which, or to suffer which, we may have to take another birth.

But no one would like to do work of this kind, which is binding in its nature and which involves necessarily a very unpleasant reaction and nemesis. Inasmuch as the whole universe is moving in terms of an evolutionary process, no one involved in this process can be said to be keeping quiet. We cannot say that we are not moving while we are sitting in a moving railway train; but if we believe that we are moving, and not the train, we will be fools of the first water. We are not moving; it is the train that is moving, and our movement is a consequence of the movement of the train. In a similar manner we may say that our actions may bind us due to a foolishness involved in the very causative implication behind it, even as a foolish person may think that his being seated in the compartment of a train has some connection with the movement of the train.

The fact that no one can be inactive, but everybody has to be active doing something or the other, follows from the fact that universal evolutionary process is compulsive in its effect upon everyone organically associated with this process – myself, yourself, down to the very ant and the atom – so, automatically, every part of the evolutionary process also moves with the evolutionary process. There is activity automatically taking place in every individual part or aspect of this organism of cosmic evolution, whether one knows it or not.

That is why Bhagavan Sri Krishna says even if we decide not to work, we will do it on account of the pressure of

prakriti. The cosmic process will compel us to be engaged in a kind of activity. We cannot keep quiet unless we are outside the very process of evolutionary activity, which is an impossible thing.

So, on the one hand, it is true that action may bind us; on the other hand, it is impossible for us to keep quiet without being engaged in some process of action. This is why the Bhagavadgita gospel is so hard to understand. It is blowing hot and cold from both sides, slapping us on both our cheeks. We do not know what it is saying. We have to understand the difference between individual doing, and participation in the work of the cosmos. While it is told that work must be done, it does not mean that we have to initiate the action motivated by our own personal will. That is not the intention. The idea is that we have to consciously participate in the necessary activity of the development of the whole universe towards Self-realisation in the Absolute.

So, if in this sense we are to view the whole world of activity and the process of evolution, we will find that willy-nilly we have to engage ourselves in some work. If we will not do this work, we will do another work. If we consciously do not participate in the evolutionary process, which includes what we call social activity, we may be doing some negative activity under the impression that it is good for us. Nothing can be called good in this world which is not associated with a conscious participation in the evolutionary process of the world. Every individually motivated work is a binding process.

So, social work should not be done for our pleasure, for our name, fame, authority, and announcement of our name in the newspaper, etc. Every social worker should touch his or her heart and answer why they are doing this work. Why are they doing flood relief? Why are they doing hospital work? Why do they help people in their educational career? Why do they give charity to a beggar? Why do they do it? Suppose they do not do it; what happens? They will have a glib, very unintelligent answer: "It is good to help poor people. Is it not

good?" This is a child's answer, that it is good to help people. Who told us that it is good to help people? Where is it written?

They will be shocked if any such question is raised. "Oh, here is a man who is questioning the validity of good social welfare work." If social welfare activity means trying to do good to people in general in some way or the other, the rationality behind it should be known, first and foremost, because there would be some instinct inside the social worker, slinking surreptitiously, making it a personal, comfortable activity for maintaining one's position in society, to receive encomium, and to earn a greater name, more and more social connection with people, and incidentally, authority over people.

This subterfuge of suggestiveness which may be there, even behind the so-called altruistic activity of people, is something to be guarded against. No one can be so careful as to go so deep into one's own mind to find out what is the motivation behind doing social work at all. "It is good to do social work. It is good to help people." This is a slogan. We cannot go on with a slogan like that. We must have a reason behind our slogan. Why are we shouting this slogan that it is good to do social work? If everybody dies in the world, what do we lose? We will say, "It is horrible." Why is it horrible? We cannot answer these questions, because welfare activity is not a work undertaken by the world of sensory perception; it is something quite different altogether. The concept of total work is difficult to maintain ordinarily. I will give an example which is very intriguing.

Thousands of soldiers march in the battlefield to protect the nation. Tell me please what is meant by a 'nation'. Is it the ground of the earth? The earth need not be protected by anybody, by any soldier. Nobody can bring harm to the ground of the earth. The earth itself cannot be regarded as a nation. Mountains and rivers and trees – are they the nation? They do not require to be protected by soldiers. The sun and the moon and the stars and the sky constitute the nation. "My

sky,” we say – national sky, national space, etc. They do not require to be protected, but we have to protect our nation. What are we protecting when we say that the nation is to be protected?

There is an obvious answer to this. It is nothing but the protection of the people living in a particular locality called the geographical ground of the nation. So, when we engage ourselves in a war with someone in the interest of the welfare of our nation, it is possible that some twenty-five percent of the people may die in the war, and the nation will win victory.

Now, can we say that because twenty-five percent of the nationhood has perished in the war that the nation is only seventy-five percent alive now? Or, is it complete? Can we say twenty-five percent of the nation has perished in the war, so now the nation is only seventy-five percent? No one would say that. Seventy-five percent is not the nation; it is a hundred percent. Even if fifty percent of the people die for the national cause, the nation is remaining still complete in itself. How do we make such a statement?

It is because the nation is not people, it is not trees, it is not mountains, it is not earth, and it is not rivers. It is a concept in our mind. A totality of an integration of feeling in us, indescribable rationally, is what we consider as a nation. The nation is just a thought in our minds. It is a concept in our minds. I have been giving some other examples also, many a time, and to illustrate this point I will tell you something very humorous.

There are six hundred members in a parliament. If five hundred of them say something, it becomes an Act. You may certainly agree with me. If five hundred out of six hundred say something, it becomes an Act of the parliament; so the only condition is that five hundred members of the parliament are to say something. Now suppose five hundred of them come here to Rishikesh and sit on the bank of the Ganga and say something. Will it become an Act of parliament? No. Why? You may say that it has to be told in

that particular place only, which is called the campus of the parliament. Now, what is the parliament?

You have denied the fact that five hundred people constitute members of the parliament by saying that their saying something here in Rishikesh cannot constitute an Act. It is intriguing indeed. But you say that they should tell it in a particular place, and then only it becomes the parliament. Can you say the place is the parliament? Let all the members get out, and only the place is there. Can you say the building of the parliament house is the parliament? No. The building is not it. So, you are saying that the people are not the parliament, the building also is not the parliament; then, what else is the parliament?

You have got a concept in your mind – a peculiar descriptive notion which you cannot yourself explain. There is a nebulous feeling of what is good and what is bad, and what is right and what is wrong, etc. What I mean to say is that the activity which is known as social welfare work is also a conceptual organisation of the faculty of thinking, in the sense that it is commensurate with the supreme concept of existence Absolute. We may, in one sense, say that God also is a concept – not a concept of any particular individual, but consciousness. When we use the word 'concept', we are identifying it with the activity of the faculty of the mind or the internal organ of a particular individual. But, actually, virtually, it is identical with what we call consciousness, which becomes the essence of God-existence.

So, Thought-Absolute is God, and thought-individual is to participate in Thought-Absolute, the Universal. If this thought-individual which is at the back of every activity can be set in tune with Thought-Absolute, it becomes imperishable work producing a power that can usher we, the soul, in the direction of the achievement of the realisation of universal thought.

It is the mind that is responsible for the determination of the validity of any work – social welfare work, or whatever it is. If the mind is confused and it thinks that it is a temporal

activity that it is engaging itself in, then temporal results will follow. All our work will be a waste if we think that all our activity is our activity, because we will go one day; with that, all the things that we did also go.

But our deeds will not perish if the imperishable element in us gives the total concept of activity, universal in its nature, at the back of our motivation. Then it will come with us, even after we shed our body. When we pass away from this world, what we have done follows. But what have we done? We have built a bridge somewhere, or a dam on the river, or a hospital. If this is what is coming with us when we say that *dharma* will follow us, that right action will follow us, the result of good deeds will follow us, what do we mean by that? Will all the results of hospital-building come with us? What is it that we are thinking about? It is nothing of the kind. It is the extent and the gamut of the universality that has been implanted in our activity – call it social activity, or by any name. The element of universality – the percentage of universality that is present in our motivation, our thought, our speech, and our action – that will come with us.

It is only the Universal that can take us to the Universal. The particular cannot take us there. So, any particular activity cannot take us to the Universal Being. If we think that our activities are particularised, individualised, it is socially in the sense of a work connected with perishable human beings, then that is not going to help us in any way, because one day all people will perish. Then, all the good deeds that we have done for the sake of people also will perish. So, what is the purpose of all this activity?

Activity is the work of God, finally. It is not yours or somebody else's; and so-called social work is nothing but the element of the goodness of God present in our goodness of mind behind the activity. We should not confuse ourselves and go on with an admixture which is chaotic in its nature. Our relationship to God and reality should be known very clearly.

Everything that is done is perishable. Good deeds perish; bad deeds also perish. But the element of universality present in the action will not perish. It is up to each person to remember how much of the universal concept is present in our daily behaviour – or are we totally individualised in our behaviour? If we are a totally individualised personality, then nothing that we do will have any worth. In that sense, usually this social welfare work of the present-day concept of people has to be revamped and refurbished, and it has to be given a proper galvanising touch by the divinity that is to be present in the activities of people.

Is our work having an element of divinity in it? We must put a question to our own self. We are doing a lot of good work. Is it a divine activity, or a mere shell of activity without any substance in it? The divine element is nothing but the universal element. We have to be a little bit of a philosopher and good psychologists to understand the worth of life itself. We cannot be fools and live comfortably in this world, because one day our foolishness will bring the consequence for which we have to repent. We cannot go from this world having achieved nothing worth the while, and with nothing that will come with us when we leave this body.

You please tell me: What will come with you? You will be flabbergasted at this very question. “What for am I living here, if I leave everything here and go, like a beggar, having nothing with me, with empty hands?” No, you are not supposed to go like a beggar. You have to garner the harvest of your good deeds in this world, which is a participation of your total individuality with the total work of the Cosmic Being. This is the relationship between “I am doing everything,” as Bhagavan says, and “You also do something. You do something in the sense that you are participating with that which I am doing, so my doing and your doing are interconnected very vitally, inextricably, and organically.”

There must be an element of goodness in you in the sense of godliness also, in your personality. Unless you are godly, even in some little modicum, your actions will have no

meaning. Have you some half a percentage of godliness in you? Please think over this matter. You have come for the Sadhana Week, for this conference; you are listening to wonderful lectures on spiritual life, etc. Put a question: "Have I one percent of divinity in me, or am I bereft of it totally? Am I a skeleton, with flesh and blood, nerves and muscles? Am I nothing else?" Because if you are only an anatomical structure, a physiological movement which perishes tomorrow, who will go? Nothing will go. There will be a vacuum at the time of passing.

That which is of a permanent nature – the Universal element in us, the divine element – comes with us. That will protect us even today. Even at this very moment of our breathing here, we will be guarded by the divine element present in us. Nobody else can guard us and protect us. There is no friend in this world, really, socially construed. Every friend will desert us one day or the other, when the conditions of social friendship break. Father and mother separate; sons and daughters separate; members go here and there, helter-skelter. There is one friend who is eternally present in us, right from our birth, right from the ages through which we have passed, who will come with us wherever you go.

The great Almighty of the Gita tells us, "Know me as your real friend." Who is our real friend? That great universal Totality of Being is present in us even today – though we are not conscious of it – as a little spark of consciousness, a little intelligence that we have got, our being alive itself. If this consciousness of the principle of universality is present in some modicum, then all our activities are divine. We may do any amount of social welfare work, but it is not social welfare work – it is divine activity. If Bhagavan Sri Krishna did so much work, do we call it social welfare work? Sri Krishna did not do any social welfare work. What has he done then? He has done divine work. But when the divine work takes effect through the personalities of people, it looks like social work. So, godly activity looks like human activity. It may look like human activity; it may take the shape of social activity. It

does not matter. But really, it is divine activity. It is God moving – the God in us moving in the element of godliness present in us.

The value of our social welfare work and the good deeds that we perform will depend upon the extent of divinity implanted in our heart. To repeat, it is the universality of existence that is enshrined in our personality that endures. The universal never perishes; the particular always perishes. All particularised activity, therefore, will perish.

So, the question of whether or not social welfare work has any connection with *sadhana* is a moot question which goes deep into the very core of existence itself. It cannot be answered at once, offhand. It requires in-depth analysis of one's own personality, the structure of being, and one's relationship to the world. We must know how we are related to another person; we must know how we are related to the world outside; then also, we must know how we are related to God. If we say we have no relation, okay; then we will be in a wilderness of confusion. But if we have some relationship, what kind of relationship it is. How are we connected to another person? How are we connected to society? How are we connected to the world of nature? How are we connected to God? Tell me all these things.

You have to study the Bhagavadgita thoroughly – not with a commentary, but under a competent master. Only a God-man can tell you what the Bhagavadgita is teaching. Books and commentaries cannot tell you. You must find such a person. I would advise you to read Swami Sivanandaji Maharaj's commentary, or Jnaneshvar Maharaj's commentary. They are beautiful and will help you to some extent. But yet, as your mind is puerile and unable to grasp the subtle truths of these people, it is good to be under the guidance of a good mentor.

So, I will conclude by saying that social welfare work has a connection with spiritual activity in the sense that it is supposed to be a movement of the human personality in terms of the extent of universality present in it – minus

which, social activity has no value at all. It will perish. To the extent that the Universal Supreme Being is implanted in our hearts, to that extent our good deeds are really good deeds. They will do real good to people outside. To the extent we are minus all universal elements in us, our good deeds so-called will perish tomorrow. When we go, they will also go away afterwards. Unless we have a real trust in God, and believe that such a Being exists, and that we are breathing because of the breath of this Almighty, our existence is actually a meaningless parading of human vanity. Against this, we have to guard ourselves.

So again I repeat, social welfare work has connection with our aspiration for God, which is called *sadhana*. It will be a great blessing for us, and we will be rewarded for it in the afterlife. But it has no connection if we think that we are doing it independently. If we are personally doing it with an individualised motive, then that cannot be regarded as any good deed. It has no spiritual value. In one sense, social welfare activity has a great spiritual value. It is a *sadhana* by itself, provided that it is a universalised action with a consciousness of our being rooted in the All-pervading Being. That is why Bhagavan Sri Krishna felt a necessity to show the Vishvarupa: "See me, what I am; after that, do your work." So, the work of Arjuna became meaningful only after the vision of the Absolute, which is the Vishvarupa. Before that, he was asking hundreds of questions unnecessarily, and he never got satisfied. When that supreme vision which is cosmic, universal-inclusiveness was seen before him, he began to feel that he is included within that – his activity is its activity, and all social welfare work, good deeds, everything, is its work; and it is also our work, to the extent that we are participating in that wonderful vision.

Do you understand what I am saying? If you have not understood anything, I am sorry for it, because this subject can be carried on for days and days together, in the same way as people can go on writing commentaries endlessly on the Bhagavadgita. The whole life you can speak on this subject, and yet you will find that something is lacking. You

will never find the truth of it because you have not tried to implant universality in your life. You always have been a son, a daughter, a boss, a father, mother, sister, brother. This is what you have been. You have never been a child of God, even for a moment. That is why this question has arisen.

I request you to remember that you are a progeny of the Almighty, and you are not a progeny of a mortal father or a mortal mother. This attachment should go. A duty is different from attachment. Duty is a compulsive necessity imposed upon you by your connection with the supreme activity of the cosmos; but other activities are selfish in their nature, motivated by your false feeling that you are a body, a social individual.

This is a great subject, indeed. It is a divine discourse to be actually thinking on this subject, so I conclude that social activity has a spiritual meaning. It is a *sadhana*, provided the universal element is present. If it is not present, if the universal element is totally absent in our activity, social welfare work has no connection with spiritual life.