

Right knowledge – The means to cross our ocean of woes¹

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In life, we end up doing mistakes of many kinds. In simple terms, mistakes happen when the action performed is inappropriate for the occasion, faulty or uncalled for. For instance, it is a mistake to simply ignore a guest who visits our home or to deal with that person in a disrespectful manner. It is a technical mistake to touch a live electrical wire or to open a photo camera and simply pull out the film in a normal room. When two family members are in the peak of fight on account of some family matter, it is a mistake on the part of a stranger to repeatedly intervene despite being told that such interventions are not welcome. Also, it is a mistake to be a mute spectator to an act committed by his or her children, which is blatantly either immoral or unethical. These are simple examples and in one's life we seem to be committing a number of such mistakes on a daily basis.

The after effects of committing mistakes

There are other kinds of mistakes that we commit on larger aspects of life. Most of them happen on account of our assumptions about life, our priorities and life goals. At the outset every one of us wants to lead a happy life. While this is a natural idea, putting it into practice does not appear to be straightforward. We make certain assumptions about how this goal will be achieved and begin making life choices. For instance, many of us think that this goal of being happy will be possible only when we make enough money. In the process of achieving this new goal of making money we sometimes end up making mistakes arising out of moral and ethical deviations and dilemmas. This invariably leaves a negative impact and bad taste in us. Over a period of time, these impressions accumulate and we do not seem to have succeeded in the original goal of being happy.

Some others may think that being happy will be possible only when the people around us and the society in general respect us. Therefore we start working on this goal of ensuring that others give us the respect due to us. In this process, we get annoyed when people do not fall in line, hurt others sentiments and end up making them feel low and bad. We also feel bad in the process.

For the most part, the mistakes committed are unintentional and largely out of ignorance. However, there are after effects of the mistakes that we commit. We set on multiple paths in our life journey with a variety of assumptions only to discover for ourselves that all these are not leading us to the goal of being happy. On the contrary, it only makes us unhappy. The more we pursue our life journey and the harder we make efforts the greater is our discovery that we were unable to hit the target of being happy. Over a period of time, our personality becomes too fragile and contrived instead of becoming a full blown blossom. Once again we reach a dead end with respect to the goal of being happy.

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If we think about this more calmly, we will come to the conclusion that the basic assumptions about what makes us happy are perhaps wrong. What is the missing link? We shall see one *śloka* from chapter 4 of *Bhagavad Gītā*, where Lord Krishna points to the missing link.

The Boat to cross the ocean of woes

Shri Krishna says even for a person who is the worst (*pāpakṛttamaḥ*) among those who commit several mistakes and sins (*sarvebhyaḥ pāpebhyaḥ*), the means for overcoming all those is acquiring right knowledge. He says only by using the boat called knowledge (*jñāna-plavenaiva*) one will be able to cross over the ocean of woes and sins (*vr̥jinam sam̐tariṣyasi*). Through this *śloka* Krishna not only shows the power of right knowledge, but also motivates us to pursue right knowledge.

अपि चेदसि पापेभ्यः सर्वेभ्यः पापकृत्तमः ।
सर्वं ज्ञानप्लवेनैव वृजिनं संतरिष्यसि ॥ 4.36

api cesdasi pāpebhyaḥ sarvebhyaḥ pāpakṛttamaḥ
sarvam jñāna-plavenaiva vr̥jinam sam̐tariṣyasi

This *śloka* could be understood at two levels. In simple terms, all our problems arising out of doing worldly things could be overcome only by acquiring the right knowledge of doing things. This truth is known to most of us out of day-to-day experiences. For example, without knowing how to use a gadget such as pressure cooker we may end up damaging the cooker and expose ourselves to personal safety hazards. Similarly without knowing how to operate a machine in a factory, the worker may risk his life in the process. Similarly, a Manager in charge of the treasury operations in a business firm may run into huge risks of money laundering, theft etc. if he doesn't know the demands of the job and ways to handle the situations. In this sense, this *śloka* clarifies that right knowledge is a pre-requisite to absolve us of problems, worries and risks in life.

Right Knowledge for our life journey

What Krishna intended in this *śloka* is much deeper and profound. Without right knowledge, we are bound to mess up our life in the ways described earlier. All our attempts to seek happiness in life may be faulty, inefficient or incomplete. On the other hand, we develop a high degree of discrimination on several aspects of life from two fundamental aspects emanating out of right knowledge:

- Right knowledge will provide the much needed clarity on permanent (*nitya vastu*) vs impermanent (*anitya vastu*) aspects of life. People, relationships, money, power, position, respect in the society, health and well-being are all not permanent. As long as we have these, it is well and good. It is also fine to make reasonable efforts to preserve and protect these. However, in the absence of right knowledge, people

tend to take these too serious, real and of utmost importance that they start making a series of mistakes and get into the ocean of woes, sins and troubles.

- A natural fallout of the above is the understanding of the crucial differences between valuable (*artha*) and valueless (*anartha*) things in life. A correct understanding of this will help us develop dispassion towards *anitya vastu*. Our efforts towards various things in life will be measured. We will not be too keen to exert too much towards valueless things, nor will we be disappointed or upset when the extent to which we acquired valueless things are not up to our expectations and goals.

Endowed with the power of discrimination, we will make right choices. Several aspects of our life will become less ambiguous. We will increase our propensity to discover a sense of fulfillment and happiness which keeps evading us for one reason or the other. Our journey towards acquiring the right knowledge begins with a deep sense of faith in larger scheme of things in the world and the role of the divine order in this process. It also calls for deep bhakti towards Lord Krishna, the embodiment of Divinity.