

The true spirit of renunciation¹

B Mahadevan²

In life we may not find ourselves in a pleasant situation always. There are occasions when the situation is rather unpleasant. It could be that we faced a big failure in our work place. At other times the spouse or the children did not give us the respect and position that we deserved in the family and took us for granted. Sometimes, we are sidelined or totally ignored by other family members or colleagues. When we face such unpleasant situations in our life, a frequently encountered feeling is that of running away from worldly matters. We suddenly become disinterested in life, withdraw our sensory organs a little bit, and become reflective. All these happen for a night. When we sleep and get up the next day morning we are almost back to normal. For many of us this is the nearest encounter to the idea of renunciation. It appears that renunciation is a great medicine to avoid difficult to handle situations in life.

Arjuna was no different during the time of the war. He was not at all ready to face the reality on the battlefield. Therefore, he felt it is better to take *samnyāsa*. In *Bhagavad Gītā*, he repeatedly asks Krishna if he must take *samnyāsa* as it seems to be a convenient way out of the predicament that he was facing. Chapters 3, 5 and 18 in *Bhagavad Gītā* begin with this question only.

Our perspectives on renunciation

Renunciation, commonly known as *samnyāsa*, means different things to us. Many of us understand it as one of the four *aśramās* prescribed in our ancient system of living. A person choosing to enter into the *samnyāsa aśrama* is expected to give up all worldly pursuits and perhaps live a detached life. He does not work for a living nor engages in building personal assets. Further he does not have a family to maintain. In some sense, a *samnyāsi* is a free bird. Perhaps the assumption is that with so much of freedom from several of the daily chores the *samnyāsi* will be able to contemplate on the ultimate truth, revel in his own self and discover inner peace and tranquility.

The other picture that comes to our mind is that a *samnyāsi* generally tonsures his head (*mundana*), wears an ochre robe and generally wanders from place to place (known as *parivrājakaḥ*), spreading the fragrance of divinity and high thinking. He lives on alms, maintains himself on bare minimum necessities in life, which the society will take care of.

Quite unwittingly, the mental model for many of us when we think of renunciation is one of escaping from the clutches of day-to-day demands of the family and society. It is a new found freedom from work which we may be lacking now. Is *samnyāsa* such a simplistic world view? Since Arjuna was also impressing Shri Krishna on the need for him to take

¹ Mahadevan, B. (2015). "The true spirit of renunciation", *Sadguru's Blessings*, Vol. 12 (11), July, 2015, pp 10 – 12.

² B Mahadevan is a Professor at the Indian Institute of Management Bangalore.

samnyāsa, Shri Krishna has provided certain clarifications on this subject. We shall look at one *śloka* from chapter 5 of *Gītā* to gain some understanding on this issue.

What does renunciation mean?

Shri Krishna first defines who is a *nitya samnyāsi*. According to him, a person who neither develops aversion (*na dveṣti*) nor attachment (*na kāṅkṣati*) is indeed a *nitya samnyāsi*. According to him, if a person is able to develop this orientation to life, then he/she will be free from the effects arising out of the world of dualities, such as success and failures (*nirdvandvaḥ*). All these would mean that such a person will be very easily and effortlessly liberated from the clutches of bondage (*sukhaṃ bandhāt-pramucyate*).

ज्ञेयः स नित्यसंन्यासि यो न द्वेष्टि न काङ्क्षति ।

निर्द्वन्द्वो हि महाबाहो सुखं बन्धात्प्रमुच्यते ॥ 5.03

*jñeyaḥ sa nityasamnyāsi yo na dveṣti na kāṅkṣati
nirdvandvo hi mahābāho sukhaṃ bandhāt-pramucyate*

There are certain aspects to this definition worth contemplating on. By the very choice of the term *nitya samnyāsi* he dispels the myth in our minds that only some type of people can be a *samnyāsi*. Anyone of us can remain in this state of *samnyāsa* forever, if we are able to adhere to the definition. The other aspect is aversion and attachment and the world of dualities are generally associated with activities, expectations and outcomes. Therefore, implicitly Shri Krishna suggests that one can be in the thick of activities and still become a *samnyāsi*. One can even conclude that Krishna has chosen to define renunciation in a reference frame of world of action.

It may be intriguing to us that Shri Krishna has taken a slightly different approach to define renunciation. In a way He is insisting that we need to engage in activities in order to truly attain renunciation. Here lies the core logic of *karma yoga* and its impact on the evolution of individuals.

Renunciation – Action – Results Connection

This definition of renunciation clarifies very important life principles for us. Renunciation is not a *physical response* of giving up all worldly activities and silently retiring in the forest or in a hermitage. One can, and indeed must be very active in this world as long as our personal preferences, individual nature and *gunas* propel us to do something or the other in the name of *pravṛtti*. On the other hand, it is renunciation of the *mental pre-occupation* over the results. In other words, it is not *karma tyāga* but *karma phala tyāga* or *karma phala icchā tyāga*. Setting on this journey requires an intense mental preparation and attitude towards the work, outcomes and entities around an individual.

The other important message is that renunciation is a gradual journey to perfection. It will be catastrophic to simply hang the boot one day just because the going is not good and take to *samnyāsa*. Many of us seem to fancy this idea in several different formats. This will be an inappropriate step in our personal journey. After renunciation, the worldly matters will

bother the individual and will come in the way of whatever that person wanted to achieve through *saṁnyāsa*. Such a person may realize very soon that the decision was a knee jerk reaction and he/she was ill equipped to face the reality of *saṁnyāsa dharma*. As the saying goes one cannot take a rod and beat a raw fruit to ripen it. It must go through the evolutionary process naturally. Shri Krishna's definition of renunciation ensures that such an eventuality is completely avoided.

The intense mental preparation that an individual goes through indeed prepares that person eventually for the full blown *saṁnyāsa* state. Once such a person reaches this stage, the person will realize how foolish the question, "Should I work or renounce?" is. It is akin to asking "Should I take a PhD degree or register for a PhD program?" There is no such thing as taking a PhD degree. It is all about investing in a process and making a journey that will eventually fetch the degree one day. Shri Krishna's prescription on renunciation is exactly of this type. By providing a process oriented definition of true renunciation, he is merely asking us to focus on the process, so that one day the result (of true renunciation) will unfold by itself.

Instead of wasting our efforts on asking a number of questions such as "Is it worthwhile to embrace *saṁnyāsa*?", or "How do *saṁnyāsis* engage themselves in the world of activities?" etc. we shall focus on evolving our mental state of mind. If we take this journey, we are all bound to reach the stage of ultimate renunciation and do a lot of good to the humanity.