

Chapter 3 (Virtue in Work)

Chapter 3: Virtue in Work

Arjuna. Thou whom all mortals praise, Janardana!

If meditation be a nobler thing

Than action, wherefore, then, great Kesava!

Dost thou impel me to this dreadful fight?

Now am I by thy doubtful speech disturbed!

Tell me one thing, and tell me certainly;

By what road shall I find the better end?

Krishna. I told thee, blameless Lord! there be paths

Shown to this world; two schools of wisdom. First

The Sankhya's, which doth save in way of works

Prescribed by reason; next, the Yog, which bids

Attain by meditation, spiritually:

Yet these are one! No man shall 'scape from act

By shunning action; nay, and none shall come

By mere renouncements unto perfectness.

Nay, and no jot of time, at any time,

Rests any actionless; his nature's law

Compels him, even unwilling, into act;

[For thought is act in fancy]. He who sits

Suppressing all the instruments of flesh,

Yet in his idle heart thinking on them,

Plays the inept and guilty hypocrite:

But he who, with strong body serving mind,

Gives up his mortal powers to worthy work,

Not seeking gain, Arjuna! such an one

Is honourable. Do thine allotted task!
Work is more excellent than idleness;
The body's life proceeds not, lacking work.
There is a task of holiness to do,
Unlike world-binding toil, which bindeth not
The faithful soul; such earthly duty do
Free from desire, and thou shalt well perform
Thy heavenly purpose. Spake Prajapati —
In the beginning, when all men were made,
And, with mankind, the sacrifice — "Do this!
Work! sacrifice! Increase and multiply
With sacrifice! This shall be Kamaduk,
Your 'Cow of Plenty,' giving back her milk
Of all abundance. Worship the gods thereby;
The gods shall yield thee grace. Those meats ye
The gods will grant to Labour, when it pays
Tithes in the altar-flame. But if one eats
Fruits of the earth, rendering to kindly Heaven
No gift of toil, that thief steals from his world."
Who eat of food after their sacrifice
Are quit of fault, but they that spread a feast
All for themselves, eat sin and drink of sin.
By food the living live; food comes of rain,
And rain comes by the pious sacrifice,
And sacrifice is paid with tithes of toil;
Thus action is of Brahma, who is One,

The Only, All-pervading; at all times
Present in sacrifice. He that abstains
To help the rolling wheels of this great world,
Glutting his idle sense, lives a lost life,
Shameful and vain. Existing for himself,
Self-concentrated, serving self alone,
No part hath he in aught; nothing achieved,
Nought wrought or unwrought toucheth him; no hope
Of help for all the living things of earth
Depends from him. Therefore, thy task prescribed
With spirit unattached gladly perform,
Since in performance of plain duty man
Mounts to his highest bliss. By works alone
Janak and ancient saints reached blessedness!
Moreover, for the upholding of thy kind,
Action thou should'st embrace. What the wise choose
The unwise people take; what best men do
The multitude will follow. Look on me,
Thou Son of Pritha! in the three wide worlds
I am not bound to any toil, no height
Awaits to scale, no gift remains to gain,
Yet I act here! and, if I acted not —
Earnest and watchful — those that look to me
For guidance, sinking back to sloth again
Because I slumbered, would decline from good,
And I should break earth's order and commit
Her offspring unto ruin, Bharata!

Even as the unknowing toil, wedded to sense,
So let the enlightened toil, sense-freed, but set
To bring the world deliverance, and its bliss;
Not sowing in those simple, busy hearts
Seed of despair. Yea! let each play his part
In all he finds to do, with unyoked soul.
All things are everywhere by Nature wrought
In interaction of the qualities.
The fool, cheated by self, thinks, "This I did"
And "That I wrought;" but — ah, thou strong-armed Prince! —
A better-lessoned mind, knowing the play
Of visible things within the world of sense,
And how the qualities must qualify,
Standeth aloof even from his acts. Th' untaught
Live mixed with them, knowing not Nature's way,
Of highest aims unwitting, slow and dull.
Those make thou not to stumble, having the light;
But all thy dues discharging, for My sake,
With meditation centred inwardly,
Seeking no profit, satisfied, serene,
Heedless of issue — fight! They who shall keep
My ordinance thus, the wise and willing hearts,
Have quittance from all issue of their acts;
But those who disregard My ordinance,
Thinking they know, know nought, and fall to loss,
Confused and foolish. 'Sooth, the instructed one

Doth of his kind, following what fits him most:
And lower creatures of their kind; in vain
Contending 'gainst the law. Needs must it be
The objects of the sense will stir the sense
To like and dislike, yet th' enlightened man
Yields not to these, knowing them enemies.
Finally, this is better, that one do
His own task as he may, even though he fail,
Than take tasks not his own, though they seem good.
To die performing duty is no ill;
But who seeks other roads shall wander still.
Arjuna. Yet tell me, Teacher! by what force doth man
Go to his ill, unwilling; as if one
Pushed him that evil path?
Krishna. Kama it is!
Passion it is! born of the Darknesses,
Which pusheth him. Mighty of appetite,
Sinful, and strong is this! — man's enemy!
As smoke blots the white fire, as clinging rust
Mars the bright mirror, as the womb surrounds
The babe unborn, so is the world of things
Foiled, soiled, enclosed in this desire of flesh.
The wise fall, caught in it; the unresting foe
It is of wisdom, wearing countless forms,
Fair but deceitful, subtle as a flame.
Sense, mind, and reason — these, O Kunti's Son!
Are booty for it; in its play with these

It maddens man, beguiling, blinding him.

Therefore, thou noblest child of Bharata!

Govern thy heart! Constrain th' entangled sense!

Resist the false, soft sinfulness which saps

Knowledge and judgment! Yea, the world is strong

But what discerns it stronger, and the mind

Strongest; and high o'er all the ruling Soul.

Wherefore, perceiving Him who reigns supreme,

Put forth full force of Soul in thy own soul!

Fight! vanquish foes and doubts, dear Hero! slay

What haunts thee in fond shapes, and would betray!

HERE ENDETH CHAPTER III OF THE BHAGAVAD-GITA,

Entitled "Karma-Yog,"

Or "The Book of Virtue in Work."