

# True Meaning of Strength & Desire

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Our understanding of certain terms are not necessarily correct. The case in point are the terms such as desire and strength. This is partly because of the current paradigms that govern our life. In today's mode of living we are primarily governed by the need to make a lot of money, have all material comforts and enjoy life. This approach to life perhaps primarily comes from Semitic religions which do not believe in reincarnation. It is just one chance and we have to make the most use of it. This idea influences many things and dictates our world view and helps us decide what is important in life. Given this, strength is all about our ability to overpower, be aggressive and get the resources and endowments that we need to achieve things in this "very life". Desire has to be unlimited as that is the only way to propel our way up, be active and beget riches, albeit using right means.

The other reason is that we do not have the reference from our Ancient texts, where several issues related to living are discussed in multiple formats and multiple places. Our dharma *śāstras*, *smṛitis* and *purāṇas* have plenty of discussions on these matters as our ancestors believed that these are important. Therefore, they came with frameworks and principles that we need to apply in our lives. We do not have time to cull out these issues from these texts. The interest in these matters is also generally dwindling. Therefore, we do not seem to stand benefitted from these.

## Misunderstanding of certain life principles

There is a third reason which is the most serious of all these. We have developed a deep mental model that ancient Indian literature strongly advocates against things such as desire, materialism and wealth generation. We have come to believe that on the other hand, it celebrates simplicity in everything and a life with no desire. This cannot be true at all if we look at even the recent history. The situation before the East India Company came and began to plunder the wealth of this country and destroy the social and educational fabric was indeed telling. There are reports which pointed to dominant role of India in global trade (approximately 27% of global trade in 1700 as against 2% in 2015). How is all these possible by a culture which advised against desire and wealth creation? Clearly we have missed the essence of our living principles and landed in a mess today.

How are we to get these issues sorted out for us? Shri Krishna uses *śloka* 11 in chapter 7 to clarify some of these ideas. Perhaps this is just a tip of the iceberg and we need to explore other sources to get similar perspectives.

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## Strength and Desire: A different perspective

In his description of where we can spot divinity around us, Shri Krishna says that he is the source of strength (*balam*) behind those who are considered to be strong (*balavatām*). However, Krishna quickly clarifies who is considered to be strong. Unlike our current understanding it is not someone who has a strong physical built, able body, muscles that can put one into fear at the very sight or any other physical attribute. On the other hand, it is someone who is devoid (*vivarjitaḥ*) of desire (*kāma*) and sense of deep attachment (*rāga*) towards worldly things or entities. This definition of strength ironically has nothing to do with physical things but is an issue pertaining to the mental state of being of an individual. Krishna further states that He exists in all forms of desire (*kāmo'smi*) among the living beings (*bhūteṣu*) that are not in conflict with the basic tenets of dharma (*dharmāviruddhaḥ*). Through a peculiar definition of strength and people considered to be strong and a specific qualification of desire that Krishna has provided in the *śloka*, He has attributed these to the notion of divinity. This aspect calls for a better understanding and some thinking.

बलं बलवतां चाहं कामरागविवर्जितम् ।  
धर्माविरुद्धो भूतेषु कामोऽस्मि भरतर्षभ ॥ 7.11

*balam balavatām cāham kāma-rāga-vivarjitam,  
dharmāviruddho bhūteṣu kāmo'smi bharatarṣabha.*

### Strength is a mental issue

Why is a person who is devoid of desire and deep attachment considered as strong? It is our day to day experience that a person who is unable to overcome these aspects in life develops a weakness, no matter how strong he is physically. Let us look at some simple examples. If a person is not able to overcome his/her desires and temptations towards food then that indeed becomes the major source of weakness for that person. He can be easily overpowered and his power of discrimination momentarily blunted using these temptations. He/she can succumb to these and make a mistake or two or even get deluded. Once can say similar things with respect to one's weakness towards the opposite sex, alcohol or even money. A living example pointing to this is the method adopted to catch and tame the mighty elephant.

Therefore to become a strong person does not necessarily require one to visit the gym every day or go for a work out or jogging daily for 30 minutes. While these may provide an outward appearance of strength to someone, a person can potentially be very weak inside. On the other hand, if we are able to address the mental weaknesses and temptations and are able to outgrow these in a very natural manner, then we may have a strong personality or an inner self. Such a person may be stable, bubbling with confidence and clarity of thought and purpose in life. Sometimes such a person may appear physically weak in an outward sense by virtue of being short, lean etc.

By pointing to this aspect as the mark of divinity Krishna reminds us of two issues. How do we develop this state of mental make-up? The thought that we must develop such a

notion of strength, our serious efforts to achieve this and the relentless pursuit leading us to this goal are all possible only with the grace of the Lord. This is why it is a mark of divinity for a person.

The other aspect is the magic transformation that an individual who has outgrown the mundane aspects of low level desires and temptations will undergo. Such a person will not be affected by the plus and minus of life as he/she would have developed a high degree of mental equipoise. Events and happenings in life are not going to disturb this person easily. Such a person may not see competitors around. The sense of rivalry and tensions may all fade to the background. Perhaps these indeed are some of the signs of divinity, which Shri Krishna is reminding us through this *śloka*.

### **Some desires can be Divine**

The other interesting perspective emanating out of this *śloka* is that we need not take a single broad brush and paint all desire as bad. In fact some forms of desire can indeed be divine. What about a desire that someone has to educate all the people in the slums nearby and thereby raise their standard of living? Or how about the idea that “I will eradicate needless blindness and restore the precious gift of sight back to people” as the great social entrepreneur and founder of the world famous Arvind Eye Hospitals, Dr. G Venkataswamy proclaimed when he founded the hospital? According to Shri Krishna, in both these desires we can see divinity.

How do we recognize this from these examples? In both these examples, what is totally missing is “What is in it for me?” or “How much money can I make quickly?” If we start with an overwhelming desire to become rich, or famous or powerful, then the propensity for us to succeed and especially sustain for a long time is less. This is simply because, very soon other people who are associated with this cause may become less enthusiastic to work for somebody else to become rich. Over a period of time, it will have its own challenges and can eventually collapse.

As a general framework Shri Krishna points out that anything that is sustainable in the long run will not be in conflict with Dharma. This is simply because the very definition of dharma is that which has the propensity to support and sustain. This is a big eye opener for us. We can have any number of desires in our lives. But they all must pass the acid test of being non-conflicting with dharma. In all such situations, we will be in the thick of our activities but radiating with divinity.