

Meaning of Life and Innovation¹

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What is the meaning of life? What are we supposed to achieve in this life and what happens if we don't? These questions blindfold us and often times we are not even sure of where to begin our search for the answers to these questions. We do not know what happens after death. This single issue puts enormous pressures on us. Sub-consciously many of us think that we have only one chance to live and therefore set forth in life with a sense of *urgency to perform* and achieve whatever we need to achieve. Even the greatest personalities in human history have had this pressure of performance. However, at some stage reality and wisdom dawns on us. For example, Alexander the Great's life mission was to conquer the world. However, if you read about his final stages of life, you will come to a conclusion that he must have felt that he missed the larger meaning of life. He apparently insisted that while he was buried, his two hands must be kept in a stretched out position, out of the coffin, so that the world knows that even the greatest emperor had to go empty handed at the time of death. There is a German saying that the last shirt that one wears does not have a pocket (meaning nobody can take anything and go while leaving this world).

These examples point to the need for every individual to make some effort to understand the larger meaning of life. In order to develop this understanding what we need first is to get a sense of life, life span, death etc. Lord Krishna kindled Arjuna's imagination by pointing to some simple things and their relevance to begin the search for these answers. Let us look at one *śloka* from *Gītā* pertaining to this theme.

Meaning of Life – A spiritual dimension

When the dress that we have been using has worn out, it is a natural behaviour on our part to discard it (*vihāya*) and in its place have new ones (*navāni*). Lord Krishna says that in a similar way when the soul comes to a conclusion that the physical body that it currently occupies has outlived its purpose, it merely discards the body and inherits another.

वासंसि जीर्णानि यथा विहाय नवानि गृह्णाति नरोऽपराणि ।
तथा शरीराणि विहाय जीर्णानि अन्यानि संयाति नवानि देहि ॥ 2.22

vāsāmsi jīrṇāni yathā vihāya navāni grhṇāti naro'parāṇi
tathā śarīrāṇi vihāya jīrṇāni anyāni saṃyāti navāni dehi

By bringing an example of this nature, Lord Krishna challenges our own mind-set as well as our understanding of the reality and the meaning of death and forces us to contemplate on

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some larger issues of life. For example, when the shirt is worn out we do not sit in a corner and mourn for having discarded it.

In order to understand this better, let us look at another example. Assume that we are travelling from Bangalore to Bombay by train. There are some co-passengers with us in the compartment. It is customary for us to socialize, discuss some issues of mutual interest to break the monotony of the journey. Suppose, the co-passengers alight at Pune station, we do not mourn their departure. We continue the journey until we reach our destination. In both the above examples, the very suggestion that should we mourn is dismissed immediately as a laughable idea. If we are willing to extend this thought much more, we may reach a point where the issue will be about our own life and the life journey that we carry on with our parents, children, spouse, relatives and well-wishers and friends. By linking the example of torn shirt to our physical body, Lord Krishna is forcing us to extend this line of argument into matters of death and life and encourages us to contemplate on some larger issues. This has profound implications for our spiritual life.

Death is not a bad event as it is made out to be in our common understanding. Such an understanding is too simplistic in its assumption. On the other hand, death could be one event or a regenerative point for the soul in its journey to “somewhere”. Viewed from this perspective, death could be an opportunity and one step for the soul to progress in its journey. Therefore, the focus quickly shifts from a single event called death to the destination and it may be a worthwhile effort to search for an answer with respect to the final destination of the soul’s journey.

Once the focus shifts to destination related issues, the pressure of achieving many things in life “now and here” comes down dramatically. For most of us, many of the pressures and tensions in life arise out of the sense of urgency to get what we want, enjoy and succeed before the end of this life. Such a paradigm will be challenged leading us to a different approach to the problem and the solution.

Innovation through creative destruction

The idea that Lord Krishna has proposed through this *śloka* has the potential to also address some of the vexing problems in business management. Today in business management the important word is innovation. Organizations are told that unless they usher in innovation they may not be able to face the onslaught of competition. Innovation is all about introducing new ideas in an organization. Only when the new ideas are successfully inherited, will the innovation be successful. A correct understanding of Lord Krishna’s message enables one to understand how to succeed in innovation initiatives. In our personal and professional life we find it difficult to make improvements because of mind-set inertia. Old habits and ways of thinking are deeply entrenched in us and we resist new ideas and changes in every possible way. This is often referred to as change management in organizations in the process of introducing new changes.

Through this *śloka*, Lord Krishna reminds us that discarding old ideas and mind-set is a very important pre-requisite for moving forward. Innovation requires inheriting new ideas and it happens only when old ideas are discarded. In modern management the word creative

destruction is used to communicate this idea. In our *purānic* tradition, we have the trinity Brahma – Vishnu – Shiva. Shiva is the Lord of Destruction. However, Shiva means *Mangala*, Shankara means one who does good things to us. A vast majority of the synonyms of Lord Shiva means “good”. How is it then that He is known as the lord of destruction? Lord Krishna, through this *śloka*, has shown how the Shiva *tatva* of destruction will help us become better both from a day-to-day living perspective as well as in our spiritual journey. Let us endeavour to inherit Shiva *tatva* in our living and be the recipient of the blessings of Shiva and Krishna.