

Importance of Sraddha in crossing the ocean of Samsara

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Quite often we hear this word *śraddhā* from many people. If we do not do a job properly, sometime our parents and elders admonish us saying you have no *śraddhā*. Although it is hard to find an exact equivalent to this word in English, the closest possibility is “faith”. *Śraddhā* viewed in this manner is an approach to do things without questioning anything. We need to merely follow without knowing or asking “why” because perhaps somebody told us to do so, or somebody felt it is good to do it this way etc. In other words *śraddhā* is built on the edifice of a deep belief system. This is perhaps why some others prefer to even use the phrase “blind faith” to define *śraddhā*, to make their point even clearer.

Modern educated people (almost all of us come into this category!) simply resist this idea as it appears counter-intuitive to them and is against the training that they have received. We have been trained to ask “why”, search for reasoning etc. before we accept anything. Therefore anyone trying to talk of *śraddhā* is stereotyped as old fashioned, irrational or not progressive. However, the entire scriptural repository available in this country talks very high of the virtue called *śraddhā*. How can they get this totally wrong?

Is śraddhā such a bad idea?

We need to dig deep into our own mental model to objectively evaluate our own position in the matter of *śraddhā*. A closer examination reveals that without *śraddhā* it is impossible to lead even the material life. A few simple examples will clarify this for us:

- Our exact date and time of birth is simply a matter of faith as we could not have known this at the time of birth. After we grew up our parents showed us a piece of paper issued by some government office and we believe that it ought to be true. We never set out to find out the truth for ourselves before accepting it. We merely took it for granted on our own judgment and because several others also did the same thing.
- If we had a chest pain and went to a specialist who gave a piece of advice (that we need to tear open the chest and get it repaired) we accept this purely on the basis of faith. We neither know anything about chest pain nor make sense of the reports. At best we may ask one more specialist to make ourselves comfortable with the process of “blindly believing” what is being told to us. The entire domain of healthcare decisions that we make is on the basis of the blind faith we have on the specialists.
- Suppose we went to a village and were about to jump into a lake for a swim. The local villager advised us not to because there were crocodiles in the lake. We do not apply the yardstick I will find this out myself before accepting this. In a very practical sense, we blindly accept this, failing which we may prove our point posthumously.

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One can go on with a number of examples, but the moot point is accepting many things without “questioning” or knowing for ourselves is a practical and a sensible way to lead a life. More than this, faith becomes a beautiful tool in our hands to give us courage and strength to tread the unknown path. Otherwise our life will just revolve around known things. Also in the world of difficult to know or rather unknown piece of knowledge available to our normal senses, faith is the only mechanism to make progress. Perhaps that is why one can argue that the most vital tool for a Nobel laureate to spend long years of work in his/her laboratory is faith. All other things come second only to this.

Nāstikas say that they are only willing to believe in what they can directly perceive. Since there is no immediate perception of God, they do not believe in God. However, we believe in many things in the world without direct perception of them. A judge delivers judgment in a case pertaining to an event that took place many years in the past. If the judge adopted the *Nāstika* philosophy then the entire legal system would fail. In all these examples, the faith was reposed through a process. This may for example mean believing some specialists, people who the community respect or some knowledge repository that is considered credible and respected by a large section of the society.

Given this perspective of *śraddhā* let us see what Shri Krishna has to say about the role of *śraddhā* in our spiritual progress by looking at one *śloka* from chapter 9 of the *Gītā*.

Importance of faith in scriptural teachings

Shri Krishna says that *śraddhā* is very important to every individual, otherwise we may not be able to escape from the endless cycle of birth and death called *saṃsāra*. He says, Hey Parantapa (*parantapa*), those people (*puruṣāḥ*) without faith (*aśraddhadhānḥ*) in the matters of *sanātana dharma* (*dharmasyāsyā*) without reaching (*aprāpya*) unto Me (*mām*), get back (*nivartante*) into this path (*varṭmani*) characterized by birth in this world, engagement in worldly things and eventually death (*mṛtu-saṃsāra*).

अश्रद्धधानाः पुरुषा धर्मस्यास्य परन्तप ।
अप्राप्य मां निवर्तन्ते मृत्युसंसारवर्त्मनि ॥ 9.03

*aśraddhadhānḥ puruṣā dharmasyāsyā parantapa
aprāpya mām nivartante mṛtu-saṃsāra-varṭmani*

The *śloka* does not explicitly mention about the subject matter of faith. However, it is implied that by *sanātana dharma* it implies the wholesome teachings of our vedic scriptures which lay the governing principles of our life. The prescriptions in the vedas provide us guidance to know the goal of our life, the means to achieve the goal and the way we need to make various choices and priorities in our life to achieve this goal. It may be of interest to us to know why faith in this is important to cross the ocean of *samsāra*.

Self-evolution – A solo journey in an uncharted path

Spiritual growth and self-evolution are subject matters that are beyond physical, material or biological sciences. First of all it is a solo journey each individual has to take. There is no scope for group work and spiritual enlightenment on a bulk basis. Furthermore, it is not possible to undergo some surgical procedure and come out of the operation theatre as a finely evolved individual. Alternatively, we cannot mutate our DNA and become a highly evolved individual. There are no hereditary issues in this journey, otherwise Gautama Buddha's father ought to have been as evolved as Buddha was. In fact the subject matter is beyond the realm of our sensory perceptions and intellectual analysis. Therefore the training that we have received to question everything, know what it is and then consider acceptance will not help in this journey. Given this fundamental nature of the subject, *śraddhā* becomes a very valuable and an important tool for reasons already mentioned.

On the other hand, if we are not willing to utilize the tool called *śraddhā*, then we become a doubting personality. Every sentence in the scripture will be a challenger. The notion of other world, life after death, existence of fourteen worlds, to name a few are all simply dismissed using the yardstick of verifiability. Our life will be one of a "frog in the well" that is too familiar. We need to be satisfied with what we can achieve within the domain of our sensory perceptions. Generally people argue that this is not such a limitation as the world of sensory perceptions is so vast and versatile.

This view of life can be quite deceptive. Despite several opportunities to innovate, learn new things and develop new ideas about life, we will still be operating within one level of our self-evolution. There will be no scope for crossing from one efficiency frontier into the next higher one. This is akin to the frog that is simply unable to appreciate that the world is much more than the well simply because the frog has enough scope to lead a comfortable life in the apparently large well. It takes several *janmas* to realize that there is more than the sensory world that we live in.

By using the tool of *śraddhā* we can simply accelerate our journey on the highway of self-realization and evolution. This is perhaps what Shri Krishna urges us to think about in this *śloka*.