

The trajectory to the Heaven and back to this mundane world

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Many of us may be aware of the concept of “time sharing” typically practiced in holiday resorts and tourist places. When we pay some amount upfront, we are entitled to stay in one of the several properties listed by the holiday resort company up to a certain number of days in a year, say three days in a year. Once we finish the quota we need to vacate the place and come back to our place of living and continue with our mundane life. It is common sense that if we pay more, the number of days of stay can go up. However, all of us are aware that vacating the holiday resort one day and returning back to our place is for sure. This time sharing model has an uncanny resemblance to the *sanātana dharma* way of living. One will be tempted to think that the time sharing idea must have been directly taken out of this.

The Trajectory of the Soul

The framework of karma and rebirth which is fundamental to *sanātana dharma* leaves several questions in our mind about the past editions of our lives as well as the upcoming future editions:

- What happens to the *ātman* after death, which is the culmination of one *janma*?
- If a person has been engaging in good acts while living what is in store for him/her after death?
- Where does this soul stay between one *janma* and the next?
- Are there alternative trajectories available and what are the implications of these?
- What exactly needs to be the goal of a person given this possibility?
- How the account of good and bad deeds is maintained and is there a mechanism of using the good karma gainfully?

Since this is one of the cornerstones of *sanātana dharma*, it requires clarity in the minds of the people who would like to practice this way of life. Naturally this issue has been dealt in myriad ways in the vedic corpus, *upaniṣads*, *dharma śāstras*, epics and the *purāṇas*. Shri Krishna has also in simple terms answered some of these questions. Let us look at two *ślokas* from chapter 9 of *Bhagavad Gītā* to understand this.

The two-way road to the Heaven

Shri Krishna reiterates the fact that on account of the purity of their efforts and the intensity of their prayer people obtain heaven after they depart this mortal world. This constitutes the forward journey into the heaven. By following the prescriptions provided in the three vedas (*traividya*), many perform different types of *yajñas* (*yajñairiṣtvā*) and also consume the soma drink² (*somapāḥ*). By purifying themselves (*pūta-pāpāḥ*) with various acts of *yajñās* they pray unto me (*mām*) and seek for heaven (*svargatiṃ*)

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² As per the prescribed rituals pertaining to the conduct of *soma yajñas*, the *yajamana* consumes the juice of the soma creeper as specified in the *brāhmaṇa* texts in the vedas.

prārthayante). By virtue of attaining the *puṇya* (*puṇyam-āsādyā*) they (*te*) enjoy the divine pleasures (*deva-bhogān*) in the celestial world (*divi*) of the devas and Indra (*surendra-lokam*).

त्रैविद्या मां सोमपाः पूतपापा यज्ञैरिष्ट्वा स्वर्गतिं प्रार्थयन्ते ।

ते पुण्यमासाद्य सुरेन्द्रलोकमश्नन्ति दिव्यान्दिवि देवभोगान् ॥ 9.20

traividya māṃ somapāḥ pūta-pāpā yajñairiṣṭvā svargatiṃ prārthayante
te puṇyam-āsādyā surendra-lokam-aśnanti divyān-divi deva-bhogān

After explaining the forward path for the departed soul, Shri Krishna proceeds to explain the return path back into the mortal world. Such of those who attained the heaven as explained above (*te*) after enjoying (*bhuktvā*) the celestial pleasures in the vast (*viśālam*) heaven of the Gods (*taṃ svargalokaṃ*) they exhaust all their *puṇya*. At the depletion of all their accumulated *puṇya* (*kṣiṇe puṇye*) they take the return path and enter (*viśanti*) again into this mortal world (*martyalokaṃ*). In this manner (*evam*), those with desire in materialistic objects and comforts (*kāmakāmāḥ*) by following (*anuprapannāḥ*) the scriptural prescriptions laid out in the three vedas (*trayī-dharmam*) get themselves (*labhante*) stuck into a perennial mode of going back and forth (*gatāgataṃ*) between the two worlds.

ते तं भुक्त्वा स्वर्गलोकं विशालं क्षीणे पुण्ये मर्त्यलोकं विशन्ति ।

एवं त्रयीधर्ममनुप्रपन्ना गतागतं कामकामा लभन्ते ॥ 9.21

te taṃ bhuktvā svargalokaṃ viśālam kṣiṇe puṇye martyalokaṃ viśanti
evam trayī-dharmam-anuprapannā gatāgataṃ kāmakāmā labhante

The good acts of living have not been elaborated in the above *ślokas*, simply because it is discussed elsewhere. The only reference made was to the notion of *Yajña*. By performing *Yajña* as specified in our scriptures we will ensure that all modern acts of good living such as being altruistic, sharing the wealth with poor, helping the society in times of need and all acts for the common good of the society are covered.

Good Acts of Living – A long term perspective

It is important to note in the above *ślokas* the fact that good karmas do not lead one to liberation from this cycle of birth and death. Rather they allow them to exhaust the “credits” earned through good karmas by way of some higher level enjoyment until the credit balance reaches zero. After that it simply amounts to coming back to square one. This is a very different perspective from the prescriptions of the Semitic religions. In these religions, mere acts of good living will be enough. Since the model in these religions is one *janma*, there is no need to address the issue of repeated birth and death cycle.

What then is the motivation to perform acts of good living if we subscribe to the model of *sanātana dharma*? How does one develop the escape velocity to get out of the birth – death cycle? Let us get these issues clarified. First of all there is no second opinion about doing good acts of living. In our scheme of things, the evolution of an individual leading

to the final state of liberation from birth and death cycle is conceived as a two stage process. The first stage is about purification of one's own mind, thoughts and action and the second stage is about deep introspection leading to one's own liberation. There is no method available to skip the first stage and directly graduate into the second stage in this model.

Stated differently, the purification of our mind by acts of good living not only gives us "temporary" pleasures as explained in the above *ślokas* but also takes us to higher proportions of purity of mind in successive iterations. Furthermore, the charm of temporary stay in heaven and enjoyment simply wanes and a craving for something more permanent than this begins. Simultaneously once the mind is pure and devoid of worldly distractions, tension and pressures, the entire attention turns towards the search for the ultimate truth and meaning of life. At this stage the required escape velocity will be developed for final liberation.

In the final analysis, it becomes clear that acts of good living becomes the solid foundation and the launch pad for liberation. Therefore, an immediate take away from these *ślokas* is the need to lead a *dhārmic* living "now and here". Our *dharma śāstras* therefore lay a great deal of emphasis on these principles of good living and provide a variety of suggestions for the same. These include several recommendations for the food habits, the religious observances, our approach towards our ancestors and parents, co-existing with human beings and living beings etc. It is like a comprehensive manual for living that helps us develop good *samskāras* and *vāsanās* so that the future *janmas* will eventually take us to liberation.

Let us invest for holiday timeshare in Heaven for now, but go for a different non-returnable state later in carefully premediated and orchestrated steps.