

Swadharma: Fulfilling Responsibilities

The following excerpt is from Swami Sarveshananda ji's discourses on Bhagavad Gita, Chapter 3, verses 3-8.

Reactions to Responsibilities

Q: What is the purpose of fulfilling responsibilities?

A: The main purpose is to transcend our likes and dislikes. Rather than fulfilling responsibilities we assume freedom is to swing according to our likes and dislikes. Responsibilities are to be fulfilled not because of our likes and dislikes, but because it is the right thing to do. When our kids get caught in likes dislikes, we keep repeating to our kids, like super-Vedantins, "It's your responsibility"; "It's good for you"; "Do it for a period of time and you'll get the result." If we talk the talk, we don't walk the walk. We find all excuses to avoid fulfilling responsibilities.

Q: How do we view responsibilities?

A: When assigned a responsibility, instead of looking at the purposefulness of responsibility, we look through our shades of likes/dislikes. The moment a responsibility unfolds, most of us tend to inevitably react and don't want to own it. We avoid it and see it as a burden. Even before analyzing or having understood the spectrum of the responsibility, its impact and it's fulfillment, we negate it and try to ensure that someone else is also entangled in it. At that moment we think we've outsmarted the situation and found our escape route. But when the impact sets in over a period of time, looking back we tend to repent it. We carry a huge load of guilt and wish we could go back in time to fulfill those responsibilities.

Q: What are these categories of likes and dislikes??

A: Typically we interpret and categorize a responsibility as "Do I like it (or not) to fulfill it?" Most of the responsibilities fall under the range of "don't like" to "I hate it" category. The rest of them that don't fall under the category of responsibility seem to give us some amount of instant gratification. Responsibilities come as a package deal with the following characteristics:

- Responsibilities don't give us any instant gratification
- There isn't even a token of appreciation
- We don't get any recognition for fulfilling responsibilities. There is no name and fame associated for performing our responsibilities.

IF by chance we don't complete our responsibilities, there will be enough people to kick you around and remind us of the same!

Q: Why me? Why don't these responsibilities belong to somebody else?

A: Whatever stage of life we are at, we aren't living a proxy life for someone else. It is our own life. Stand in front of a mirror and ask that question – only you can answer it. When we talk of responsibilities, if "Why me?" comes up as a thought, it indicates we don't understand what we've ordered, when we've ordered it. Restaurants may make mistakes and misunderstand what we've ordered. Here there is no mistake. One who has ordered, one who has prepared, and one who has received – all happen to be Me. No one else is responsible. So the basic question itself is invalid. We are exactly where we should be because we have planned it. Nobody else is responsible for our planning. We face only those experiences that ought to be ours. Hence drop the resistance.

Q: How long do I have to do these responsibilities?

A: We may be in a bad condition, but that doesn't invoke sympathy in scriptures. Everyone thinks everything happens only to me. Finally when it aggravates to a higher level, it gets translated, as how long should I bear it? Have you ever questioned how long should I eat? Doesn't it come with the package of living? As long as you want to live, you've got to keep eating. That is the responsibility to your body. We have to fulfill responsibilities as long as it takes to reach the end that was supposed to be fulfilled by the responsibility.

Q: Do I have any escape routes?

A: When our condition aggravates to a higher level, and we question how long do we have to do our responsibilities, we find people taking the following escape routes:

1. **Quitting** is not an option. We often feel *I had a lot of patience, tolerance and compassion. Now it is thinning out, I've had enough*. If we really had all these, we'd have transcended our likes/dislikes. But this type of an attitude just shows that we've avoided facing our responsibilities in the name of *Tolerance*.
2. **Dispassion**: Second misconception is that of dispassion. We give up our responsibilities halfway and brand it as detachment. Giving up halfway isn't *sanyaasa* or renunciation. There are certain responsibilities that can't be given up in between. For example, you can't get frustrated and give up on children born unto you. You are responsible for nurturing them. Our parents had minimal resources, yet they provided for us. Compared to that we have an abundance of resources!
3. **Abandon**: If we avoid responsibilities or give up halfway through the experience in this life, it shall recontinue where you left off. Now or in distant future. People say we spend seven lives together. But that's incorrect. If within seven lives you can bounce off each other, you are free. But seven lives is a minimum amount you need to learn to live together. Choice is yours how you want to grow, or do you want to be stuck? This is true not just for this relation, but for all interactions for that matter. We have a choice – NOT of whether or not we go through the experience, but how we go through the experience. Do I go through the experience transcending my likes/dislikes, or do go on binding myself with more likes/dislikes? THAT choice we have.
4. **Inaction**: Not assuming the responsibility is not an option either. Nature of existence is to express in action. That is the truth. That inherent quality can't be deleted from the system, so at least buckle up. *Akarma krithah* – being inactive in action is not an option. When you know it is inevitable and you've carved it for yourself, should we take that responsibility without resistance?

Q: Why do responsibilities become a burden?

A: We look at responsibilities from the lenses of likes/dislikes and we start itself on a negative note. Pressure starts building on, and instant psychological reaction to any responsibility is "Not mine, I'm not going to do it." Even as kids we try to find these escape routes and avoid doing the work. As grown-ups, this behavior pattern continues and we negate our responsibilities. No matter how long you avoid them, responsibilities stare us in our face. Compelled and/or under pressures, we've lost opportunity to make it an enjoyable cherishable event.

Q: Why don't we feel like taking up responsibilities?

A: Although 95% of our life is in a repeat mode and there is no escape from those daily routines, we are burned out and feel that life is boring, mechanical and meaningless. We don't take responsibilities in the right note because we are constantly trained, groomed and nurtured into looking at responsibilities through the shades of likes/dislikes. Often we equate our freedom of choice being able to do only that which I like. When we operate with so much resistance, can our output be brilliant? Who cut out this responsibility for you in this time frame? Is there anybody in the world other than yourself that you can blame it on? You created it, and

you are facing it. You can't avoid it, and yet we rebel against it. Our output is thus pathetic. This is the story of our lives in a nutshell.

Q: At what age does one see this resistance to accepting responsibilities?

A: At any age, we always see a resistance in accepting responsibilities. There is no difference in how children and adults react to responsibilities. Kids duties are to study and live a disciplined life by participating in household chores or whatever they are engaged in. Do you know of *any* child who has whole heartedly enjoyed it or responded "Yes, I love doing this?"!!! Our behaviors as adults are not any different. We may be involved in different things, but the resistance to accept responsibilities is the same.

Q: Why does Bhagwan Shri Krishna call us hypocrites?

A: We have one set of standards for kids (or the rest of the world) and another one for ourselves. What category would we fall under? Bhagwan uses exactly one word *Mithyachar* (hypocrite) to describe us. This is the category of individuals who don't perform their responsibilities, carry forward guilt and resentment, and various other *Paschyataaps* while operating under different sets of rules for the world around. Such double standards don't work. What scars do they leave in our inner personality? We simply carry loads and loads of guilt and repentance.

Q: Why are we such hypocrites?

A: We resist our own *Swadharma* (responsibilities) because we've trained ourselves to look at each responsibility from the lenses of likes/dislikes. We've often been told by our earlier generations that if not today, eventually you'll like your responsibility, hence start doing it. We engage in the responsibility in a vague anticipation of enjoying it. We fail to understand the responsibility, and our likes/dislikes take priority. If purpose was to gain happiness, it is somehow forgotten down the lane and we continue gratifying our likes/dislikes.

Unfolding Responsibilities

Q: Why do events occur in our lives?

A: As Pujya Gurudev Swami Chinmayananda reminds us, *We have chosen our joys and sorrows long before we experience them.* We have carved out our own life, and life events unfold as per the fruits of our past actions. Each event presents us a unique role that comes with its own responsibilities. The responsibilities develop around us so that we grow out of shackles of likes and dislikes.

Q: Does life present to us only those experiences that we like?

A: In fact, all that we like in life seems to allude us, and we are constantly faced with situations that we are not comfortable with. Frustration builds on and I can't seem to get what I like and I get too many things I don't like. The frustration builds up to such a level that likes and dislikes take priority.

Q: Can we reduce the impact of the past events?

A: Definitely NOT. Hindsight vision is 20/20. We always have a perfect understanding of the moment that has just passed. You can't mend things of the past. All you can do is affect your future. Looking back at wherever I have not participated completely in fulfilling my responsibilities, it leaves a definite impact of remorse, guilt and repentance. *Paschyaat* (afterwards) *Taap* (disturbance) is the disruption created when we

didn't do something that we were supposed to do (or vice-versa). If we aim for peace, happiness and contentment and we can logically see how we've messed up in this point of time, the past cannot be repaired. But we can take charge of how we want to carve out our future. Does it take too much intelligence to assess this?

Roles and Responsibilities

Q: How do we know which responsibilities should we fulfill?

A: Major confusion comes when we are unable to identify our responsibilities. In Sanskrit, responsibilities are known as *Swa* (my own) *dharma* (responsibilities). When we encounter different situations and experiences, we should understand our responsibility provided I understand and define myself with respect to the situation. For example, in olden days there was a norm that during the war, regardless of whether you were challenging or being challenged, if you find the elderly or those worthy of paying your respects, you had to shoot an arrow in front of them from wherever you are – even in the midst of the battle field. Yudhisthira shot three arrows (for Bheeshma, Drona and Kripacharya) before the war began. Bheeshma stepped forward and asked him “Whom have you offered your salutations to? Is it to the commanding General, or to your grandfather? My blessings are depend on that and will change accordingly.” Yudhisthira replied that “Although I am challenging you as a commander-in-chief in the battlefield, the prostrations and salutations were for my grandfather and teachers.” That is when Bheeshma says, “In that case, *Vijayastu*, may victory be yours.”

Q: How should I manage the multiple roles?

A: Each encounter unfolds a unique role and responsibility for us. We contaminate the moment if we enter a new environment with the leftover earlier experience, role, repercussions and results of it dragged into the next role. You may be frustrated with somebody at home, but when you go into a new environment, you cannot bring out that anger on the people around you. Or for example, you cannot treat your office colleagues like your spouse. That role is done. You have to wrap up the earlier situation and fold it up. You can revisit your earlier role when you get back into that situation. But at this moment, what should my role be in the situation that I am in? You can give your best only when you've identified your role.

Q: What is the art of identifying with each role?

A: Learn the art of compartmentalizing various roles and responsibilities will become clear to you. Ask yourself “Who am I with respect to this role?” You may be the same person, but your role in situation A is different than your role in situation B. Even within one situation, our interaction is different with each individual. That clarity to define myself with respect to each individual within each role would easily give me an understanding as to what are my responsibilities with every single situation in life.

Q: Why do I seem to be confused with my role?

A: There is really no confusion even if you have multiple roles. It is our likes and dislikes that bring in confusion. Secondly, we should be able to prioritize various roles and understand higher dharma or lower dharma as we relate to these responsibilities. The higher dharma takes precedence over the lower. For example, in Ramayana, somebody commented on Sita devi's character. Lord Rama was disturbed and was unable to take the right course of action. Sita ji steps in and explains to Him “Lord, when you are thinking about this particular incidence, you should not think of it as a husband. You have two roles here – the King of the kingdom and second one is as my husband. You being the king is a higher priority because that is the

higher dharma than being a husband, which is a lower dharma. So whatever you decide, your role as a husband should not be applied in this case. It is the king's role that has to take priority as it is the higher dharma.”

Q: If I give up my role, can I relinquish my responsibilities?

A: We identify our responsibility with respect to every single situation and then cater to it without likes and dislikes. *Niyatam kuru karma tvam ... – Karma* (action) is always greater than *akarma* (inactivity). Existence expresses itself as activity. Death is the only experience that can't be put into an action verb and existence ceases to act. Until then, act we must. Even while sleeping, our breathing, circulatory, digestive processes continue. You cannot relinquish responsibilities at any time from womb to tomb. Stop complaining that you've been forced to live someone else's life. You feel that way because you've not identified what role you have to play in a given situation. The moment we are able to identify our role with respect to actions, the responsibilities and various skills, resources and solutions are right next to it.

Q: With what attitude should I fulfill my responsibilities?

A: Attitude can become our cause for bondage – *Karma bandhan*. It is like a quicksand situation wherein if you get agitated while trying to get out, you will get sucked in faster than usual. Our *karma* (actions) are inevitable responsibilities which have to be performed. If we don't understand the attitude with which we perform these, they can bind us. Keep in mind three things to avoid the responsibilities from draining our resources:

1. Responsibilities have to be fulfilled.
2. They are inevitable and we can't escape those responsibilities.
3. While fulfilling these responsibilities, do not look at them from the shades of likes and dislikes.

Root Cause Analysis

Q: What is the root cause of our life's disturbances and misunderstandings?

A: *Not understanding responsibilities* is the root problem. Clashes between any interactions (Him/Her, friends, relatives, or anyone else) can be traced to this root cause. Each one perceives responsibility according to their respective layers of likes/dislikes. In any relationship when there is a mismatch in these layers, instead of tossing out our likes/dislikes, we toss out responsibilities! As long as this basic infrastructural change doesn't happen from within, our expectation from the external world with respect to responsibility is something that responsibilities cannot cater. We go through responsibilities with a lot of grudge, resistance and rejection from within. Then we naturally become resentful of life.

Q: How do we know which likes/dislikes should we toss out?

A: As long as likes/dislikes are at a personal level and it doesn't bother anyone in the immediate environment around you, they are fine. However, we should toss out those likes/dislikes which interface with the world starts impacting others. Fulfilling responsibilities helps us grow out of it. If we perform responsibilities through likes/dislikes, we aren't living a justified life. Why do we carry guilt and repentances? It is because of our past mistakes of not fulfilling responsibilities in light of wisdom. If the same pattern repeats, can we not forecast how our future will be?

Q: How can we work on our likes/dislikes?

A: A slight internal adjustment has to be made. At the level of our organs of actions and perceptions, they are slaves to a pattern called habits. It loves its own certain patterns and we get addicted to those patterns. The body demands these habits (e.g. early morning jumpstarts of drinking tea/coffee; yogurt at the end of the meal, etc.) and it takes a lot of effort to get over these habits. So at a physical level certain tendencies of behaviors have formed patterns of habits and these habits have to be regulated through our mind.

Mind has layers of likes/dislikes and it is a difficult task to break these existing habits. You have to now relearn to be in a disciplined pattern. For example, you may know how to drive in one country, but have to relearn new regulations applicable to driving in another country.

1. **Discipline:** Develop a discipline to get out of our habitual mistakes.
2. **Flexibility:** Be flexible to regulate the newly acquired discipline so that not only do we get over past habits, but we don't get stuck with the newer discipline. Otherwise the inflexibility can also become an impediment.
3. **Finesse:** With the mastery of growing out of the discipline and gaining the flexibility, we can now use the likes/dislikes that were otherwise a stumbling block to our growth. You express your field of responsibilities with finesse and there is something beautiful in the way you end up doing it. Our expressions appear more refined while fulfilling responsibilities.

Q: How does this translate into the field of responsibilities?

A: When you look at responsibilities without the shades of likes/dislikes we create a discipline for fulfilling the responsibilities. We grow out of the habitual patterns at the bodily level of organs of perception and action; over likes/dislikes at the mind level; and we grow to look at responsibilities with a disciplined effort to accept them without reacting to them. Then you grow to the next level of being flexible in any mode of functionality. You remain inspired and enthusiastic because you are always trying to better your already scored best. It won't be boring because you will always get immense satisfaction as soon as you've completed your job. There are no shortcuts in breaking these existing habits to reach to the flexible level.

Q: How can we be accountable in executing responsibilities?

A: You execute your responsibilities in this world with a set core values and you see patterns of successes and failures and some indifferent patterns. You get those results back into your analyses. Go through the entire process and analysis to find out where were you successful or where did you fail, and why was it so. Reiterate and look into entire process. Refine your processes. Practice this feedback loop again and again keeping in mind that there is no shortcut to a healthy feedback system. You are comparing your efforts to better your already existing best, and not with siblings, or friends, or other competitors. When we look into our life patterns and acknowledge our responsibilities, the existing patterns of resistance are broken.

Freedom in Responsibilities

Q: How is freedom related to responsibility?

A: Responsibilities come as a package deal. We can't pick and choose to take up only what I like, and give up what I don't like. Accepting and wholeheartedly participating in whatever is presented to us will help break the barriers of likes and dislikes. Freedom is NOT from action, but in action. Freedom is from the shackles of likes and dislikes. Many of us have a misconception of *Naishkarma Siddhi* as NOT performing action, or by abstaining from action. We don't assume responsibility because it agitates us, but in fact, responsibilities are the key to get over agitations and these likes/dislikes

Q: What am I being liberated from while fulfilling responsibilities?

A: We want freedom from the attitude that causes misery, agony and pain. The same action can become either a bondage or a liberation based on the attitude with which we perform the action. Take ownership of the responsibility and become one with it. Else it will weigh us down if we carry it like a burden. Accept it and embrace responsibilities without resistance and it won't be burdensome.

Q: What is the key to liberation while fulfilling responsibilities?

A: The attitude with which we fulfill responsibilities can liberate us from the agitations and suffering we are going through. We think the main source of misery is our responsibilities. We go through loops of unnecessary logic and think that if we get rid of our situation, we can avoid our responsibilities. This is an incorrect solution. You will end up doing the same kind of work today or tomorrow. You may quit this situation but wherever you go, you will create a similar situation wherever you establish yourself. There is no escape from that.

Q: How can our responsibilities eradicate our vasanas?

A: This is a simple connection. Every expression of action that we are perform, those that are our likes/dislikes are nothing but our tendencies or vasanas. When we have refined those to such an extent and offer them to a higher altar, it is a one-side wall. We express them and there are no more loop holes connecting us back to vasanas or tendencies. Those tendencies weaken because we aren't pursuing them anymore. We pursue our responsibilities instead, and thus we get purer and purer within.

Q: How does fulfilling responsibilities impact our personality?

A: Just as electricity finds its path towards the least resistance, we can make our lives electrifying if our paths are least resistant. Stop resisting your responsibilities as though we were trying to live somebody else's life and we will find them electrifying. If we keep building higher resistance, it will only electrocute us. Get to a disciplined pattern to break the likes/dislikes that stop us from fulfilling our responsibilities. Once we get to a discipline, we have to grow out of that discipline too and develop flexibility to use different discipline systems in different situations. Likes/dislikes then lose the potency to become impediments in our path. This is the way *Karmindriya hi Karma Yogam* – Karma Yoga is performed.