

Penance.

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There are three types of sin described in the scriptures—(1) bodily, *i. e.*, sin actually committed in deed; (2) vocal, *i. e.*, sin committed through word or speech; (3) mental, *i. e.*, sin committed in intent. In the commission of all these three forms of sin, however, contact of the mind is essential; for there can be no conscious action without the presence of the mind.

Bhagavān Manu has divided bodily sins into three classes—appropriation of unoffered wealth, slaughter without sanction and practice of adultery.* Vocal sins, according to him, are four in number—harsh speech, telling a lie, backbiting, idle and irrelevant talk.† And mental sins are—(1) thought about the ways and means of appropriating others' property, (2) thought of injuring another and (3) identification of self with the body, which expresses itself through the false idea that 'I am the body.‡

* अदत्तानामुपादानं हिंसा चैवाविधानतः ।

परदारोपसेवा च शारीरं त्रिविधं स्मृतम् ॥

(Manu XII. 7)

† पारुष्यमनृतं चैव पैशुन्यं चापि सर्वशः ।

असम्बद्धप्रलापश्च वाङ्मयं स्याच्चतुर्विधम् ॥

(Manu XII. 6)

‡ परद्रव्येष्वभिध्यानं मनसानिष्टचिन्तनम् ।

वित्तथाभिनिवेशश्च त्रिविधं कर्म मानसम् ॥

(Manu XII. 5)

For the eradication of these three forms of sin, Bhagavān Śrī Kṛṣṇa has laid down in the *Gītā* three types of penance, viz., penance of the body, penance of speech and penance of the mind. He has described these three kinds of penance as follows:—

देवद्विजगुरुप्राज्ञपूजनं शौचमार्जवम् ।

ब्रह्मचर्यमहिंसा च शारीरं तप उच्यते ॥

(XVII. 14)

“Worship of gods, the Brāhmaṇas, the preceptor and the wise, purity observed in respect of person, conduct and wealth, straightforwardness, continence and harmlessness—these are called penances of the body.”

अनुद्वेगकरं वाक्यं सत्यं प्रियहितं च यत् ।

स्वाध्यायाभ्यसनं चैव वाङ्मयं तप उच्यते ॥

(XVII. 15)

“Speech which causes no offence and is truthful, pleasant and wholesome study of the Vedas and practice of Japa of the Divine Name: these are called penances of speech.”

मनःप्रसादः सौम्यत्वं मौनमात्मविनिग्रहः ।

भावसंशुद्धिरित्येतत्तपो मानसमुच्यते ॥

(XVII. 16)

“Cheerfulness of mind, gentleness, habit of constant meditation on God, control of mind and purity of the heart: these are called penances of the mind.”

Among bodily sins that of appropriation of unoffered wealth is wiped off by the practice of purity

with reference to one's income. That income alone is pure, which is obtained by honest means. He who observes the rule of accepting money which is legitimately his due can never be guilty of the sin of appropriating unoffered wealth. Similarly, the sin of Himsā (violence) is removed by the penance of Ahimsā (non-violence). He who has taken the vow of Ahimsā (non-violence) can never commit an act of Himsā (violence). Likewise, he who has taken the vow of Brahmacharya (continence) can never be guilty of the crime of adultery.

In the same way, he who has taken the vow of uttering only unoffensive and agreeable words will never allow harsh words to escape his lips. He who has decided to speak what is wholesome will never backbite another. And he who has taken the vows of truthfulness and study of the Vedas or practice of the Divine Name will never utter any lie or indulge in useless and irrelevant talk. For he will always be on his guard lest he may utter any lie even through mistake; but one who indulges in irrelevant and idle talk runs the risk of uttering lies almost at every step. Thus economy of speech is necessary even for observance of truthfulness. He who has no control over his speech, and goes on talking indiscriminately, may be guilty of lying even unconsciously, if not consciously.

The three mental sins, viz., (1) thought of misappropriation of another's property, (2) thought of injuring another, and (3) identification

of self with the body, are destroyed by the penance known as practice of purity of the heart.

Practice of penances as stated above has been described by the Lord as the indispensable duty of every man. In the same verse it has also been pointed out that a penance performed by a man of wisdom and intelligence purifies the heart.* Tapas (the Sanskrit equivalent of penance) etymologically means heating by putting something on fire. By the practice of penance the mind, senses and the body are, as if, put on fire and heated; that is why it is called 'Tapas'. Just as the impurities of gold are burnt out when it is heated on fire and the purest ore is thus obtained, even so the impurities of man's heart and senses are destroyed by penance, and he emerges pure by its observance. The *Gītā* has made three further classifications of penance—Sattvic, Rajasic and Tamasic. The Sattvic form of penance has been described by it as follows:—

श्रद्धया परया तप्तं तपस्तत्रिविधं नरैः ।

अफलाकाङ्क्षिभिर्युक्तैः सात्त्विकं परिचक्षते ॥

(XVII. 17)

"The three forms of penance stated above performed by Yogis with perfect faith, and without desire for fruit, is called the Sattvic form of penance."

The Rājasa form of penance has been defined as below:—

सत्कारमानपूजार्थं तपो दम्भेन चैव यत् ।

क्रियते तदिह प्रोक्तं राजसं चलमध्रुवम् ॥

(XVII. 18)

* यज्ञदानतपःकर्म न त्याज्यं कार्यमेव तत् ।

यज्ञो दानं तपश्चैव पावनानि मनीषिणाम् ॥

(Gītā XVIII. 5)

“The penance which is performed with the object of securing respect, honour and homage or for show alone is uncertain and transient in its effect and is called the Rajasic form of penance.”

The Tamasic form of penance is as follows:—

मूढग्राहेणात्मनो यत्पीडया क्रियते तपः ।

परसोऽसादनार्थं वा तत्तामसमुदाहृतम् ॥

(XVII. 19)

“Penance done through perversity with torture to the mind, speech and body with the object of causing injury to another is called Tamasic penance.”

There is no doubt that the practice of penance through the body, speech and mind, performed with whatever object or motive, will save a man from the commission of new sins, so long and to the extent he is engaged in the practice. But if he is anxious to secure lasting good—in other words, if he seeks God-realization through release from the effects of all good and evil actions of the past and future, he should undertake the practice of the Sattvic form of penance as stated above. For in the matter of God-realization or release from bondage, it is not so much the quality of the action that counts as the motive by which it is actuated. The action itself may not possess a very high quality; but if the motive of the doer is high, the fruit of that action will bear a high quality. Reversely, if the action is of a high quality, but the motive behind it is base, the fruit of that action will be base. Occupations which are treated as low and ordinary such as carrying on a

trade, business and service, if pursued in a purely disinterested spirit, as a matter of duty, or with the object of attaining God-realization, Divine Love or release from bondage, may bring one the highest fruit; and highest actions such as the performance of sacrifices, practice of charity and penance, if done with a worldly motive, will bring one fruits which are quite insignificant in value. For it is the motive behind an action that determines its fruit. An action performed with a worldly motive such as the possession of a wife, children, wealth, honour, fame and social status will bring these perishable objects. Celestial happiness, though more lasting in comparison with earthly happiness, is nevertheless impermanent and perishable. For when the stock of virtue which takes one to heaven is exhausted, he is hurled down from heaven and sent back to earth (*Gītā* XI. 21). That is the reason why the Lord has described Rajasic penance performed with the object of securing respect, honour and homage, or merely for show as uncertain and transient in its effect. It has been called uncertain, because there is no certainty that it will bring respect, honour and adoration. One may get this respect and honour from those who hold the practice of penance in high estimation; but those who regard it as of no value, and wholly useless, will show him no respect at all. And it has been called transient in effect because respect, honour and adoration, etc. gained through it are all impermanent and perishable, they are connected with this world, and one gets them only so long as

his actions are worthy of honour and respect. It is, however, true that like the Tamasic type of penance, penance of the Rajasic type is not forbidden.

Therefore, those who aspire to attain the highest object should adopt only the Sattvic form of penance for practice. This penance, again, though Sattvic in form, will be truly Sattvic in character only if the motive behind it is Sattvic, that is to say, when it is undertaken not for the satisfaction of any worldly desire. If the motive or object is Rajasic in character, the fruit will correspond to it. The Lord has declared the fruits of Rajas and Tamas to be misery and ignorance (*vide Gitā* XIV. 17). Therefore, penances of the Rajasic and Tamasic types should both be rejected by spiritual aspirants.

The Tamasic form of penance is condemned by its very nature; for it is rooted in ignorance and perversity. And this ignorance and perversity, being an expression of Tamas, take one to the downward course (*Gitā* XIV. 18). And the penance which is undertaken with the motive of injuring another is palpably harmful, because *Himsā* (violence) lies at the root of it; therefore suffering in hell should be the inevitable result of that practice.

Those who practise penances of a terrible form, for which there is no sanction in the scriptures, have been described by the Lord as

ignorant and possessed of the demoniacal nature. The Lord says:—

अशास्त्रविहितं घोरं तप्यन्ते ये तपो जनाः ।

दम्भाहङ्कारसंयुक्ताः कामरागद्वलान्विताः ॥

कर्षयन्तः शरीरस्थं भूतग्राममचेतसः ।

मां चैवान्तःशरीरस्थं तान् विद्वद्यासुरनिश्चयान् ॥

(XVII. 5-6)

“Those who perform terrible austerities according to the whims of their own mind, without the sanction of the scriptures; who are full of hypocrisy, vanity, desires, attachments and consciousness of strength; who torture the elements forming the body and Me also who dwells within their hearts; know such ignorant people to be possessed of the demoniacal nature.”

Penance for which there is no sanction in the scriptures is no penance in the true sense of the word; it is penance only in the view of men who are possessed of the Tamasic quality. According to the Lord, those who wilfully take to the practice of penance ignoring the injunctions of the scriptures can neither attain worldly success (power, wealth etc.) nor joy of the Sattvic type, nor even the supreme state in the form of release from bondage or God-Realization.*

Therefore, the scriptures should be our guide in determining what penance should be adopted and what should be rejected. The Lord says:—

* यः शास्त्रविधिमुत्सृज्य व्रतैते कामकारतः ।

न स सिद्धिमवाप्नोति न सुखं न परां गतिम् ॥

(*Gitā* XVI, 28)

तस्माच्छास्त्रं प्रमाणं ते कार्याकार्यव्यवस्थितौ ।
ज्ञात्वा शास्त्रविधानोक्तं कर्म कर्तुमिहार्हसि ॥

(*Gītā* XVI. 24)

“Therefore, the scriptures should be your authority in determining what should be done and what should not be done. Knowing this, you should perform your duties according to the injunctions of the scriptures.”

This proves that penance also should be taken up when it is sanctioned by the scriptures. It is this type of penance which the Lord has recommended in the *Gītā* (XVIII. 5) as an indispensable duty. Those who undertake penance for which there is no sanction in the scriptures retard their spiritual evolution.

Through the practice of penance alone man may liberate himself from the clutches of sin and realize God: this has been declared by the Lord in the fourth chapter of the *Gītā*. This will be made clear through a joint study of verses 28 and 31 of the same chapter. In verse 28 the Lord has described penance as a form of sacrifice, and in verse 31 He has pointed out realization of Eternal Brahma as the fruit gained by those who partake of nectar in the form of the remains of sacrifice. The word ‘Yajña’ (sacrifice) in verse 31 covers all forms of spiritual practice undertaken for God-Realization, and when through the pursuit of such practices the heart of the practicant is purified, he attains spiritual delight in the form of transparency and tranquillity of mind (*Gītā* II. 64-65; XVIII 36-37); this

should be understood as the nectar in the form of the remains of sacrifice. Partaking of the nectar means to remain merged in that pure, spiritual delight, and the partaker of that nectar being liberated from sins attains Eternal Brahma. This is the purport of what the Lord has declared in the above verse.

Now, when it is established that through the practice of penance alone as a form of sacrifice man may realize God through liberation from sins, the question naturally arises whether all men are qualified to take up this sacrifice, or whether the eligibility is confined to any particular class or any particular Āśrama. The answer to this question is that men belonging to all classes and all Āśramas are qualified to take up the practice of the three forms of penance—bodily, vocal and mental—as described in the *Gītā*. Only the form of penance is altered in certain respects according to the qualification of the practicant. For instance, practice of Brahmacharya as a form of bodily penance will take one form in the case of a householder, and another form in the case of men belonging to the other three Āśramas. Association with women has been strictly forbidden for members of the Brahmacharya, Vānaprastha and Sannyāsa orders; therefore in their case Brahmacharya means renunciation of all the eight forms of sexual indulgence. But in the case of the householder, who has been enjoined to go to his wife during the period favourable to conception with a view to get a

son and thereby obtain release from the debt of the Pitṛs, it is no infringement of Brahmacharya if he indulges in sex for two nights avoiding the six prohibited and eight other nights out of the sixteen counted from the appearance of the menstrual flow. Bhagavān Manu says:—

निन्धास्वष्टासु चान्यासु स्त्रियो रात्रिषु वर्जयन् ।
ब्रह्मचार्येव भवति यत्र तत्राश्रमे वसन् ॥

(Manu III. 59)

“He who avoids the six prohibited nights and eight other nights for sexual connection is a Brahmachārī, to whatever Āśrama he may belong.”

The Law-giver Manu describes the six prohibited nights as follows:—

तासामाद्याश्चतसस्तु निन्दितैकादशी च या ।
त्रयोदशी च शेषास्तु प्रशस्ता दश रात्रयः ॥

(Manu III. 47)

“Out of the sixteen nights favourable to conception the first four and the eleventh and thirteenth nights are prohibited; the remaining ten nights are auspicious.”

Out of these ten, again, he who desires a son should avoid the four uneven nights, viz., the fifth, seventh, ninth and fifteenth; for Manu says:—

युग्मासु पुत्रा जायन्ते स्त्रियोऽयुग्मासु रात्रिषु ।
तस्माद्युग्मासु पुत्रार्थी संविशेदातिथे स्त्रियम् ॥

(III. 48)

“Connection with the wife during the sixth, eighth, tenth, twelfth, fourteenth and sixteenth nights of her menses will produce a son, and connection during uneven nights will produce a daughter. Therefore, he who desires a son

should go to his wife only during the even nights of her menses.”

Thus ten out of the sixteen nights, viz., the six prohibited and four uneven ones, are left out of consideration for those who desire a son. Out of the six remaining even nights, again, there is an injunction to avoid the Parva days, that is, the days of the four changes of the moon—‘पर्ववर्जं व्रजेच्चैनाम्’ (Manu). These Parva days are four, viz., the eighth and fourteenth day of each half month, and the days of the full and new moon. Similarly, consecrated days like the Ekādaśī (eleventh day of the lunar fortnight), Sankrānti (the sun’s passage from one zodiacal sign into another), etc. have to be avoided. Some of these days will synchronize with the ten prohibited days already mentioned. Thus in the course of the month there will remain barely two days when it is permissible for a householder to meet his wife with sexual intent. That is why Bhagavān Manu has declared one who avoids fourteen nights during the menses of the wife to be a Brahmachārī. The scriptures highly praise those who indulge in sex only once in the course of a month.

Similarly, a righteous war in which one gets involved without his seeking it is declared to be Dharma in the case of a Kṣatriya. Bhagavān Śrī Kṛṣṇa Himself says in the *Gītā*:—

स्वधर्ममपि चावेक्ष्य न विकम्पितुमर्हसि ।

धर्म्याद्धि युद्धाच्छ्रेयोऽन्यत्क्षत्रियस्य न विद्यते ॥

(II. 31)

“You should not waver considering your own duty; for there is

nothing more auspicious for a Kṣatriya than a righteous war.''

Now, in a war Himsā (violence) is inevitable. This unavoidable Himsā for a Kṣatriya in a righteous war will be treated as part of Ahimsā (non-violence), and it will cause him no sin. That is why Bhagavān Śrī Kṛṣṇa says:—

श्रेयान् स्वधर्मो विगुणः परधर्मात्स्वनुष्ठितात् ।

स्वभावनियतं कर्म कुर्वन्नाप्नोति किल्बिषम् ॥

(Gita XVIII. 47)

“One's own Dharma, though destitute of merits, is better than the well-executed Dharma of another. He who does the duty imposed on him by his own Dharma, incurs no sin.”

Not only this, the Lord even goes so far as to say that one should not abandon one's duty which falls to his lot naturally by virtue of his birth in a particular class of society; for just as fire is associated with smoke, even so every work, however high and sattvic in nature it may be, is tainted by some imperfection.* Therefore, an act of Himsā (violence) unavoidably done by a Kṣatriya engaged in a righteous war in which he finds himself involved without his seeking it is, in fact, a form of Ahimsā (non-violence).

Among penances of speech, 'Swādhyāya' in the case of a Śūdra should be interpreted to mean Japa

of the Divine Name; for there is no sanction in the scriptures for a Śūdra to study the Vedas. For the twice-born classes, it means both study of the Vedas and Japa of the Divine Name. It should not lead one to imagine that the scriptures have done an injustice to the Śūdras by denying them the right to study the Vedas. The object which is gained by the twice-born classes by the practice of both Japa of the Divine Name and study of the Vedas, may be gained by the Śūdra by practice of Japa of the Divine Name alone. With regard to God-Realization, all are considered to possess an equal right.

Penances of the mind may be practised by men belonging to all classes and all Āśramas, and they are both superior to and more difficult than penances of the body and speech. He whose mind has been brought under control and has attained purity and tranquillity through the observance of mental penance will naturally and automatically perform penances of the body and speech; for evils committed through act and word proceed from some evil intent which has its root in the mind. Therefore, it is the duty of all spiritual aspirants to practise all the three forms of penance as laid down in the *Gītā* disinterestedly, and with full faith and devotion.

* सहजं कर्म कौन्तेय सदोषमपि न त्यजेत् । सर्वारम्भा हि दोषेण धूमेनाग्निरिवावृताः ॥