

# Yoga Karmasu Kauśalam<sup>1</sup>

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Life unfolds to you choices. Every time you have to make a decision, you have to choose. We are not programmed and therefore, we have to make a decision at every level. You open your eyes because you have to wake up. Every day you have to choose the time you want to wake up. Even after getting up, you have to choose what is going to be the day's program especially, on the weekends. Many invitations are there and among them, I have to choose. Life is nowadays like a buffet. In the buffet, there is a Punjabi dish, Gujarati dish, South Indian items, and all sorts of things. One thing you should know is that you are not supposed to eat all of them. You have to choose there also. American stores like Wal-Mart etc. are confusing because for every item there are many choices. We do not have so many choices in India. In the US, you keep reading labels and you come back without buying anything. You do not know what to buy. After buying a car, you always feel that your neighbor has a better car. In this country, you can choose from a variety of disciplines of knowledge. You can study one discipline and you can change your mind to study something else.

When I am supposed to make a choice, I am not always able to make the right choice because of lack of knowledge, or because of some fear that the choice I make in a situation can lead to a problem or a conflict later. Either one wonders whether one has taken the right decision, or one is afraid to make a decision because one is not confident that one can make the right decision. Arjuna faced this problem. After having declared war, after both sides at the battlefield have blown their respective conches, Arjuna had a problem. Lord Krishna thought Arjuna was a great warrior so He became a *sārathi* for *Partha*<sup>2</sup>. Lord Krishna was happy because *dharma kārya* will be established. Lord Krishna would have thought, "I am going to do my *dharma kārya*, *avatāra kārya* and I make Arjuna my *nimitta mātra*, my instrument in doing this *kārya*." But Arjuna did not seem to understand this.

In your life, if you count the number of people who matter, you may count 10 or 20 people, not 1000 people. Only their opinions affect you. In the battlefield, Arjuna saw only a few people like Drona and Bhishma *pitāmaha*. Seeing them, he became *kṛpayāviṣṭaḥ*. If I have *krupa*, compassion, it is fine. If compassion takes over me, it is dangerous. Arjuna was overcome by compassion and said that he was not going to fight. He gave many reasons for his decision not to fight. However, Krishna did not immediately address Arjuna's concerns. He began his teaching only from verse 11 of the second chapter after Arjuna surrendered to Him as a *śiṣya*. Lord Krishna gave Arjuna knowledge so that Arjuna can make the right decision. He did not make the decision for Arjuna. He did not give advice. We do not require advices. Advices do not go very far. Whatever advice I can give you, you already know it. Everybody knows that one should wake up early in the morning; go for a walk every

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpts from a talk delivered by Swamiji in New Jersey on April 5, 2008. The talk was transcribed and edited by Dr. V. Swaminathan and Mrs. Vidya Anand.

<sup>2</sup> Another name for Arjuna

day; do dieting and so on. Our Pujya Swamiji used to say this example. A patient goes to the doctor for consultation. However, a medical student will learn from the same doctor who is an honorary professor. Will he require consultation from the doctor or knowledge from the doctor? He learns for 3 to 5 years during which the doctor is not a consultant. He is a teacher. He gives all his knowledge to the student. The student does not approach the doctor for advices. It is better to talk to people, even to your children and friends, and make them understand something instead of advising. Based on their understanding they will make the decision. Arjuna says at the end of the Gita “*naṣṭo mohaḥ smritirlabdḥā tvat prasādāt mayācyuta. Sthito'smi gatasandehaḥ kariṣye vacanam tava* - In keeping with your teaching, I know my *kartavya karma* in this war and I am ready to do that”

Therefore, making choices is very important. Postponement is also a choice. I may postpone something but not making a decision at all is dangerous, for you, and for others also. Sometimes it is too late. By the time you make a choice you lose everything. Here I have taken the topic “*yogaḥ karmasu kauśalam.*” This is a good topic and it is a choice I made! As a human being, we are endowed with a special faculty that is called will, *svatantra icchā. svatantra* is freedom given to you to exercise your will. I can do; I need not do; I can do it differently. I can be vegetarian; I need not be vegetarian; I can switch from non- vegetarian to vegetarian. I can speak truth; I can tell a lie; I can speak truth now and then. One can be alcoholic or need not be alcoholic. The third choice is very funny. Whenever somebody offers something to me for free, I take it. People tell me, “Swamiji, I don't drink. If somebody offers me a free drink, I take it. In office parties they give me free drinks.” This is called *anyathā kartum śakya*. I can take a bribe; I need not take a bribe; I appoint another person to take bribe for me. I can cook; I need not cook; I can eat from leftovers. Sometimes they call other people to come to the Sunday leftover party. I can be honest, dishonest, or now and then dishonest. A dog cannot have choices like this. There is no dishonest dog. As a human being, you have choices, over which you have no choice. If I cannot make a choice, it can become a conflict. Therefore, to remove the conflict the only way out is to make a choice.

How do I make a choice? This is one area. The second area is why do I stall making a choice? In Gita there is another very beautiful *vākya- mā te sango'stu akarmaṇi* - may you not have attachment to inaction. Why don't people want to do certain action? People have all the capabilities. A person, who has money and can definitely invest in the business, is not ready to start a business because he is afraid that he will fail. One may lose in the business or one can be successful. Nevertheless, he does not want to take a risk. There is a word called *viḡhna*, obstacle. Lord Ganeśa is called *viḡhna hartā, viḡhna nāśaka*, destroyer of obstacles. What is *viḡhna*? You have capabilities. But your capabilities are inhibited by some factor. This is called *viḡhna*. A child is very brilliant but playful. He does not study. Playfulness is *viḡhna* for the child. You have certain important things to be done but you do not have time for that. This is *viḡhna*. People do not undertake things because of fear of failure. They are inhibited by fear which is *viḡhna*. Here *bhagavān* Krishna says that when the results of my actions come, I may react. The situation that I am going to confront may not be according to my expectation. I have no control over the reaction to the situation. Frustration, anger and disappointment are all reactions. You have no control over them. You do not know how to stall your reaction. One cannot do reaction; it happens. A death of a person is a fact. I wish that it should not happen. It will give me so much sadness over which I have no control. I do not go to some

people's house because the way they behave is funny and that behavior will bring a certain reaction from me, which is very unpleasant. If I work with some people, I will make a lot of money. But I cannot handle their behavior and so I do not. Generally, I am not really afraid of the result or the outcome. I am afraid of my reactions to the result of an action over which I have no say or control. Therefore, *bhagavān* says "*mā te sango'stu akarmaṇi* - May you not have attachment to inaction."

Reaction comes because of certain non-understanding, of certain resistance. In physics, we know the word resistance. When electricity passes through a conductor, if it is a good conductor it will allow the electricity to flow. If it is a bad conductor then it does not allow the electricity to flow. Some wires resist so much that they become heating elements. Similarly, my inner resistance in not accepting a fact can turn into inner pain or agony. Can I change the fact? You cannot change the fact because a fact is a fact. This is a fact about the fact. Death of a person is a fact. *jātasya hi dhruvo mṛtyuḥ*. Any physical body is born in time. There is a manufacturing date written on this body and we all have a birth certificate. Then, there is a date of expiry. All beings that are born are mortal. Nobody is immortal. One good thing is that we do not read the expiry date but *Yamaraja* clearly reads it. That anything born in time will be gone in time is a fact. We resist this fact. The name of the body in Sanskrit is called *vyādi mandiram*, abode of diseases. Doctors tell you either those diseases that are surfacing or that may surface. 'You have marginal resistance,' means you are prone for hypertension. Looking at your blood report the doctor will say that you have Krishna disease (diabetes). There is this chant "*adharam madhuram vadanam madhuram nayanam madhuram madhurādhipeaḥ akhilam madhuram.*" If the doctor has to do a biopsy, one worries until the results come. The person will pray to *bhagavān*. When the results come and it is negative, he will come to me and I ask him if everything is fine? "Swamiji, I lost lot money." I say, "How?" "Nothing came in the report. I spent so much money unnecessarily." If something comes in the report he is worried and the other way also he is worried.

The body is nothing but diseases. Your ancestors have given you a lot of property and money and they have given you some diseases also. I see people getting deafness when they are young. The reason would be that someone in the family, father or mother, had it. They say it is genetic. The body is *vyādhi mandiram*. Can you change the body? No. If you buy a dress and do not like it, you can return it. Did you choose your parents or siblings? No, they are given. Body, birthplace, birth time are all given. They are all facts and they cannot be changed. I have resistance to certain facts. People do not like their noses and undergo plastic surgery to fix their noses. One woman had a plastic surgery done on her nose and was very happy in the beginning. After one year, she came to Pujya Swamiji and told, "Swamiji, I think that the previous nose was better." People do not like eyebrows. Pujya Swamiji tells the following story. One woman in Canada who came from India built a house and paid off the loan in 3 years. Swamiji asked, "How did you do that? What do you do?" She said, "Business."

"What business?"

"Private business."

Swamiji insisted, "What business?"

"I am a beautician."

“What do you do as a beautician?”

“Do you want to know?”

“Yes,” Swamiji said, “I want to know.”

She said, “Threading.” She has appointments made for the whole year. She was pulling the eyebrow hair. How many eyebrows she must have pulled to build a house? We worry about our age. I was told that in America one does not ask a woman her age because there is no woman above 35. Their age freeze at 35. I have never made this mistake here. Ageing is a fact and one does not accept that. Pujya Swamiji says that if somebody asks your age, you say 35 if it is 40. If it is 50, you will say 45. If it is 60, you will say 55. If it is 70, you will say 80. Why? People will say that you do not look 80. We like to hear that. When I stand before the mirror, my height, color, weight, looks - all these facts are not acceptable to me. My resistance to that fact brings inner pain.

We have two types of pain. One is a physical pain. This is in fact good. If there is no pain, you will never know which part to address and treat. In the physical system, pain acts as an alarm system and you have to do something about it. When arthritis starts giving pain then you know that it requires attention. There is also an inner emotional pain. This inner pain comes out in different forms, sometimes as anger, sometimes as frustration, sometimes as withdrawal. All uneasiness is inner pain. When there is an inner pain, I react. I react to the situation inappropriately most of the time. Anger, hatred etc. are all reactions that have a cause. If I know the cause, I can handle the effect. I have to analyze the cause for this pain, the cause for the resistance. If I do not analyze then I cannot stall this reaction. If I cannot stall and handle this reaction then I will be slowly avoiding all the activities in my life. I will be doing the minimum and not more. I do not want to meet people. I do not want to join any organization. People are burnt out. They are highly capable, highly educated, and highly sophisticated persons but they have no heart to start any activity. They avoid everything because they are not sure how they will react. They do not go to parties or marriages. No human being wants isolation. Because of the inner pain and reaction, they are isolated. By avoiding situations, neither the inner pain nor the reaction will go away. On the other hand, an angry person in time becomes angrier. Frustrated become more frustrated.

The inner pain is purely because of resistance and this resistance is because of non-understanding. The whole problem is because of one’s ignorance and non-understanding of the fact. All that is required is, therefore, a cognitive change and we need to educate ourselves. The moment I see the facts very clearly my fear and my resistance will go away. The child who sees the sun going down for the first time, says, “Mom, the sun is going down. What will happen? Will the whole world become dark?” He is afraid. Then the mother says, “My dear child, don’t worry. The sun will come back.” He sees the sunrise and the next time when he sees the sunset, he is not afraid. Similarly, the birth of a child and death of a person, both are like sunrise and sunset. One has to see the fact that any association has to culminate in dissociation *samyogaḥ viyogāntaḥ*. A fact: we are assembled here together; another fact: we will go away. In this mother earth, whoever is there now will be gone in 100 years. New people will take over, if the environment remains okay. The more I understand about these facts, less is the need to remove the resistance. The resistance dissolves away.

Therefore, I have to work on two areas the entire life. The first is surfacing the inner pain and the second is not allowing new inner pain to be born. All the inner pain is on the other side of the ego

and I have to allow it to surface or create a situation so that it surfaces. Once it surfaces, with my understanding and by certain insight, I can allow it to go. Hurt is always there from a painful experience of the past where I was victimized or I was hurt. Why was I victimized? Why did it happen to me? Whatever memories we have are locked up as pain inside. We are not able to accept those memories and the incidents that caused the pain. My resistance is still there. All the pain is there in the memory. We have to give way for the memory to surface. When they surface, it is very painful. However, if I do not allow it to surface, the pain will remain inside. With certain appreciation of *Īśvara*, one can live through the painful experiences and allow the pain to get out. Once out, the pain will never come back. You sit down, visualize the form of the Lord, and talk to the Lord. One thing about the Lord is that He will never say that He has no time. Therapists are paid only for one hour and after that hour, he will send you away politely. *Bhagavān* has 2 *lakṣaṇa* - unemployed and unemployable. He has all the time to listen. You do not require appointment with *Bhagavān*. He is available 24x7. You can mentally pray and talk to the Lord. You do not require a Sanskrit prayer. You do not require anything. You just talk to the Lord. As I talk to you, you talk to the Lord and say all that you have to say. I know that some of the saints used to write letters to *Bhagavān*. That is very nice. You can send email to Vishnu@vaikunta.com. Surface all the pain. It is not that in one day it will all surface. It takes time. However, you start this process and in due course of time, there is *mana nirmalatvam*. This *nirmalatvam* is called *prasāda*. Your mind is cheerful. Your mind is light. All learning comes later.

If I have not worked on the two areas with respect to inner pain, I will not be able to accept new facts about me. Behavior of people around me affects me and I allow it to affect me. If somebody behaves in a certain way, I am not responsible for that. I can be responsible for my behavior only. For me to feel comfortable, everybody should behave the way I like them to behave. I expect the whole world to dance to my tune. I meet everybody with an agenda, how everybody should talk to me, how they should treat me, etc. We have many demands and expect others to understand them. Some men think that their wives should exactly know what vegetable they would want them to cook. Whatever is in his mind she should cook that item. She should exactly prepare the way his mother cooks. However, she thinks that her mother was a better cook than his mother was. When I meet someone, I do not meet the person. When I go to my relative's home, I carry the memory of the previous visit. Last time when they visited me I fed them very well. Let me see how they feed me today. In India, the funny thing during a marriage is that there is a fellow who writes down what gift everybody gives. This note is kept carefully. Next time when a marriage takes place in someone else's house, I check this note and reciprocate accordingly with a suitable gift. We have so many demands on others and on ourselves. One needs to evolve to be non-demanding towards oneself and towards others also. The more I am non-demanding, the happier I will be.

Swami Dayanandaji talks about rights and duties. If I do my duties towards my wife, her rights are taken care of and vice versa. The same holds true between employer and employee, siblings and so on. Once I asked Pujya Swamiji, "Suppose I am performing my duties towards my brother, sister, children, mother father, wife, family and they don't do their duty towards me what will happen?" Swamiji smiled and said, "You will become a *sanyāsi*." The answer is so true. One will grow. When they do not do their duty, they do not grow. When I do my duty very well I grow and I do not lose anything. Therefore, a Karma yogi is one who has nothing but duties. He never even thinks about his rights. He does not demand. Even if my parents do not do their duty towards me as their son, I will do

my duty towards them. When the demand comes from any side, pain will be there immediately. People are born in a certain place, certain time, certain situation and in accordance with them, he/she has to look at his/her duty. Generally, we know our duties or we are told what they are. When you work in a corporation or any office or factory, you are told of the work you have to do which becomes your duty. In the Gita verse *yogastha kuru karmāni saṅgam tyaktvā dhananjaya siddhyasiddhyoḥ samo bhūtvā samatvam yoga ucyate*, the whole *karma yoga* is brought out in one sentence - *samatvam yoga ucyate*. *yogastha* means abiding in *karma yoga*, remaining steadfast in yoga. Whatever my duties are, I keep performing them, and I give up all my binding attachments. *saṅgam tyaktvā - saṅgam* is towards the result of an action. That this alone should be the result; this is how people should behave; this is how the situation should be; this should not happen; I should not lose the money; I should not become sick; I should never be in an accident; all these expectations are called *saṅga*. *Siddhi-asiddhyoḥ* - is success and failure; *samo bhūtvā* - giving the treatment of sameness towards them means *samatvam*, evenness of mind. This is called *yoga*.

Human beings are endowed with a special blessing and the blessing is that you have your preferences. You have your prejudices. There is nothing wrong in that. They are called *rāga* and *dveṣa*. I want a certain thing. I like certain music, food, dress, color, mannerism etc. These are called *rāga*. *Rāga* means what I want to have and retain. I want to have money because it gives me buying power. I want to retain it also. *Dveṣa* is exactly the opposite. *Dveṣa* is what I do not want. I do not want to become sick. I want to remain healthy. I do not want certain people around me. What you like or dislike may not be great. But they are your likes and dislikes based on your education, upbringing, sophistication, etc. Even Krishna had his own likes. He always wore the *pītāmbara*. He loved butter. Likes and dislikes themselves are not a problem. In fact, to have them is a blessing, an endowment. However, our likes and dislikes have to follow certain norms.

Whatever action you perform, you do not choose the results. The results are given to you. You choose your actions. If you have freedom to choose your result, you will always be successful. In math, you will always get 100 marks. Tendulkar will always hit a century. But sometimes he loses the middle stump. There are always surprises when you travel. I reach my destination but my bag does not reach. My bag reaches but I do not reach. I reach my destination with the bags, and then nobody is there to pick me up. Like these situations, you have choice over an action but have no choice over the results of an action. *karmaṇi adhikāraḥ phaleṣu na adhikāraḥ*. You have the choice to take a medicine or not. Once the medicine enters the body, each body's response to the medicine is different. Same medicine in different people brings about different responses. Similarly, same situation brings different responses in people. The recognition that I have control over my actions but not over the results is a very important shock absorber. The result is a fact. A fact is born of order and order is born of laws. The Lord is upholding the laws. Everything in this creation is constantly spinning. Mother earth is also spinning on its own axis day and night. This is born of law and order. Ageing is a fact. Death of a person is a fact. Fire is always hot and it is predictable. If the electrician puts his finger on a live wire, he also gets a shock despite his knowledge of electricity. Everything in the world is in order and the laws governing the order are universal, impartial, and predictable. You do not create the laws. They are already there. They are nothing but the Lord. Accepting the results

of your action as facts born of laws, of the Lord, is *prasāda*. I do not want inner pain to be generated by any situation and I want to get rid of it. For a *karma yogi* these two processes go hand in hand. When you sit in meditation and chant *om Īśāya namaḥ*, you allow the pain to surface and accept the situation causing the pain as a fact. *Namaḥ* is surrendering my resistance to the fact, to the law, to the Lord. All my past is a fact and that fact I accept with certain understanding and *prasāda buddhi*. Secondly, you have to understand one more thing also. Whatever I have to do, I keep doing. If there is a need to change something, I change it. If it is possible to rectify a situation by doing something about it, I do it.

Now the next question is to do with dharma. In *sāmānya dharma* you know all your duties. What you expect the other to do towards you, others expect the same thing from you. This is called *sāmānya dharma*. We all know this. There is also *viśeṣa dharma*. *Viśeṣa dharma* is what I have to do in a given situation. It is born of certain sense, discretion in me. There are situations where *dharma* appears like *adharmā* and *adharmā* appears like *dharma*. Then I have to choose. There are many current topics such as mercy killing, termination of pregnancy etc that fall under this category. There are also situations that are national, international, local and in your families. Children here come and ask me, “Swamiji, should I go for dating or not? Should I go to prom or not?” In bringing up children in this culture, these questions will come. Therefore, the important topic is how I choose. Sometimes what is right and wrong are not obvious. The discernment of right and wrong in a given situation requires *kauśalam*. Not compromising the norm and taking the right decision is called *kauśalam*.

*Sāmānya dharma* is commonly sensed *dharma*. I do not want to get hurt and you also do not want to get hurt. I do not want anybody to tell me a lie and you also don’t want anybody to lie to you. *Sāmānya dharma* is sensed by all living beings. Even animals have this sense. They also do not want to be hurt. Even an Eskimo or a tribal man in Africa knows that he does not want to get hurt. When he goes for hunting he has a cover to protect himself. *Sāmānya dharma* does not require education, because it is universal. It has its basis in *Īśvara* who has put the sense in all of us. If *sāmānya dharma* is not there, there will be problems in the world. Some people will keep stealing things and hurting others without knowing that they are not right. Hurting others orally, even by gestures is violence. Minimum violence to people around is a very becoming life. Pujya Swamiji says that the highest form of violence is to be judgmental towards one and towards others. I judge myself as useless, a failure, ugly, a *pāpi* and so on. Freeing oneself from being judgmental towards oneself and others is the highest form of ahimsa. It is a very beautiful value.

You have to interpret *viśeṣa dharma* by looking at the situation keeping in mind, the universal standard of norms without compromises. You have to interpret and that requires the grace of God. Therefore, Krishna gave another definition of *karma yoga*, *yogaḥ karmasu kauśalam*. The attitude in actions is *kauśalam*. The word *kuśala* means skillful. Most of the commentators define the word *kauśalam* as skill. If you are skillful, you are a *karma yogi*. If you are not skillful, you are not a *karma yogi*. Supposing a girl who is learning to make Gujarati flying saucers called *roti* does her first rolling. The rotis disappear because the roti will come out with the roller. The second time

she makes the rotis thick, and sometimes thin. She has to learn how to put equal pressure and make thin **roti**, which fluffs up when you put it in the fire. Since she is not skillful, she is not a karma yogi. Some skills like swimming, bicycling etc may be developed with practice. When I go to Tamilnadu I see women outside the temples making garlands measuring so many feet long. I tried doing the same thing. All the flowers fell down. These women are very skilled. Are they karma yogis? One can develop skill in action by doing it repeatedly. A person who picks pockets in Bombay is trained. If you travel in Bombay trains, the pickpockets know very easily that you are from America. They know exactly where you keep your money because every five minutes you touch your wallet to make sure. You lose the purse and you do not know who has stolen it. The pickpocket does a clean job of picking your pocket. He is very skillful. Is he a *Karma yogi*? It happened to me in Mathura station. I was carrying some cash. My mother had died and for her we needed to do some **bandara**. We did the bandara in Rishikesh and from there went to Brindavan. I was standing on the platform with my sister. A fellow threw something on my dhoti from the backside. Then he said, "Swamiji, your dhoti is dirty." My sister started cleaning the dirt. I found out later that the dirt was nothing but glucose biscuit soaked in water that looks like dirt. I left the bag on the platform and went to the edge of it for washing. When I looked back, the bag was gone. I called the police. He asked –"how much did you lose?" He was asking this because he has to get his share from the fellow. I knew this trick and so I did not answer him. I lost my ticket and everything else that was in the bag. I again became a sanyāsi. That fellow was skillful in his action. Is he a *karma yogi*?

A karma yogi maybe skillful but a person skillful in action is not a karma yogi. One can be skillful and that is good. I know one man who makes good traditional murthys of Krishna. He is very skillful but that does not mean he is a karma yogi. What is the meaning here for the word *kauśalam*? The Veda says *kuśalānnapramathitavyam*. The word *kauśalam* comes from the Veda. We discussed earlier that over the results one must have *samatvam- phaleṣu samatvam* and in karma you must have *kauśalam*. The results of an action are governed by the laws of *karma* and I can't change this fact. Appreciating this order, I take the results with *prasāda buddhi*. This is called *samatvam* towards the result of an action. Bringing my likes and dislikes under my control, managing my desires, accepting the results of my action and not allowing them to create inner pain in me, releasing the pain from all the past events with the attitude of *prasāda* is *karma yoga*. The other side of *karma yoga* is *kauśalam*, which is with reference to the action. First, you have to choose your action understanding what is right. I might like to do something if it is wrong, but I do not do that. This discriminative inquiry, *viveka*, of what is right and wrong with respect to actions, is *karmasu kauśalam*. One has to recognize the *viśeṣa dharma*. Let me illustrate this with a few examples.

In America driving on the right side of the road is right. In India driving is on the left side of the road. These are local laws important for the flow of traffic. You have to follow the rules. Suppose I am driving on the right side of a narrow 2-lane road and a big truck is coming from the opposite side on the same lane that I am driving. Perhaps the driver of the truck may have fallen asleep and did not realize that he is driving on the wrong side. A traffic cop parked on the roadside is observing the scene. If I continue to drive in the same lane, the truck will obviously hit me. The truck is obviously on the wrong side of the road. In this situation, I do not care whether he is right or wrong. I carefully move to the left side, pass the truck, and move back to my lane. The cop will give ticket to the truck

driver if he understands the whole situation. Since the truck driver is doing the wrong thing, you have to protect yourself. Even if the police officer gives you a ticket, it does not matter because you saved your life. Therefore, *dharma* and *adharma* – right and wrong are not absolute. They are situational. What is *dharma* now can appear as *adharma* in the next situation. Similarly, what appears as *adharma* in one situation can become *dharma* in another.

Let me give you a few examples from the Mahabharata for *viśeṣa dharma*. Karna and Arjuna are fighting and Arjuna with the help of Krishna destroys the chariot and horses of Karna. All his weapons are gone and Karna is standing on the land. Arjuna is about to kill him. At that time, Karna pleaded with Arjuna, “Do you know the laws of warfare? If somebody is unarmed, you can’t kill him.” Arjuna stopped because what Karna said is *dharma*. However, Krishna asked Arjuna to kill Karna. Krishna said to Arjuna, “Did Karna come unharmed to the battlefield? You have disarmed him, with all your *parākrama*. Finish him.” I have another story from Mahabharata. There was a fight going on between Yudhishtira and Karna. Karna, as you know, is a great warrior. Yudhishtira was injured and his horses were too. Karna was about to kill Yudhishtira. Salya who was Karna’s charioteer saw the gravity of the situation. Salya was for the Pandavas but due to circumstances, he had to take the side of the Kauravas. He said to Karna, “Why are you killing this Yudhishtira? What is the great thing about killing him? Arjuna is your real kill and not Yudhishtira. Do you know what is happening now? Bhima is fighting with Duryodhana and is about to finish him. Go and help Duryodhana.” Listening to this advice from Salya, Karna left the field and the charioteer of Yudhishtira brought him safely back to the camp. Arjuna came to know that Yudhishtira had been injured and came to see him. Seeing Arjuna, Yudhishtira was furious and reprimanded Arjuna for retreating from the battlefield and asked whether he was the same mighty Arjuna with the Gandiva. He further ridiculed Arjuna’s Gandiva. Arjuna could bear any personal insult but could not withstand if someone ridiculed his Gandiva. He had taken a vow earlier that he will kill the one who does *nindā* of his Gandiva. Arjuna was ready to strike his brother Yudhishtira. Of course, after killing his brother, Arjuna could not live and would commit suicide. Krishna seeing the gravity of the situation stopped Arjuna and told him of an alternative to killing his brother. Insulting his brother who is like a Guru to him is equal to killing Yudhishtira and praising himself in vain is equivalent to committing suicide. This is the advice Krishna gave Arjuna, which he followed and saved himself from killing his revered brother, Yudhishtira and committing suicide later. In those days, self-praise was not considered a virtuous thing and humility was advocated as a value. After this, Arjuna went and held the feet of Yudhishtira and profusely cried. Yudhishtira lifted Arjuna up and embraced him affectionately saying that Arjuna was like a son to him and so forth. This is called *kausālam*. Who gave Arjuna the course of action in this situation? It is Krishna, the Lord. One needs the grace of the Lord to discern what is right and wrong in a given situation.

During the Mahabharata war, Duryodhana was very angry with Bhishma *pitāmaha*. He told him, “Sir, I have brought you on my side. You have been eating my food all these years but I see that you are always taking the side of Pandavas. I think that you do not want to kill them. What for did I bring you to the battlefield?” He went on and on with his tirade. He knows how to instigate and how to hurt Bhishma. Bhishma reacted to Duryodhana’s rebuke. He took five arrows and vowed that by the next day evening he would kill all the five pandavas. Meanwhile the news about Bhishma’s vow spread the battlefield. Knowing fully that Bhishma will succeed in his vow, Krishna decided that he had to do something to avert the calamity. In those days, the ‘rules of engagement’ was that after sunset,

the fighting would stop. Both sides would retreat to their respective camps. Bhisma would do so as well and he would do his evening prayers and meditate on the Lord. In fact, Krishna was his *iṣṭa devatā*. The wives of the Kauravas would approach Bhisma and seek his blessings at the end of his meditation. With a serene mind as the result of his prayers and meditation, Bhisma would bless them. Krishna knew this practice. He went to Draupadi and asked her to come with him. Draupadi had special shoes, which everybody knew about. She can be recognized by the sound of her footwear. Krishna asked her to remove her shoes and carried them in his upper cloth. He asked Draupadi to cover her head. Both walked quietly towards the camp where Bhisma was meditating. Krishna had instructed Draupadi that when the meditation was over, she should go and touch the feet of Bhisma without making any noise. Krishna was standing outside the camp. Bhisma said *Om* and concluded his meditation. His eyes were still closed and Draupadi went and touched his feet. Bhisma put both his hands on the head of the Draupadi and said- *akhaṇḍa saubhāgyavatī bhava*. When he opened his eyes, he was surprised to see Draupadi. Draupadi paid her obeisance to Bhisma and thanked him for blessing her, *akhaṇḍa saubhāgyavatī bhava*. This blessing meant that Bhisma could not kill her husbands. Bhisma immediately knew that this must be the work of Krishna. Seeing Krishna outside the camp, he beckoned Him inside. He acknowledged what Krishna had accomplished. Then, seeing Krishna holding something in his upper garment, he asked him to show what He was carrying. Krishna opened his upper cloth and the shoes of Draupadi fell down. Bhisma was wonderstruck and said, "You are indeed *Bhagavān*. What karuna, compassion, you have towards your devotees. You are even prepared to carry their shoes. You protect them at all times; you give them the right buddhi." Krishna asked Bhisma to give Him the five arrows and went away.

Learn from these stories from Mahabharata and also from the experiences in your own life. Make a prayer to the Lord every day asking Him to give you the buddhi to make the right decision in situations which are not very clear. The Lord gives *kauśalam*. Sometimes doctors have to make a decision whether to tell a patient some things or not. One doctor told me the following story. She was a gynecologist and during a cesarean, she left inside the body of the patient an instrument. She put her hand inside but was unable to get the instrument. Time was running out. If she had left the instrument inside, it would not be a big problem. But how can she tell the patient about leaving an instrument inside her body and tell her not to worry about it. She was not sure how the patient would take it. She prayed to Lord Dakshinamurthy very intensely. She again put her hand inside and this time she located the instrument and got it out. After the operation, she asked the patient how she would have taken the news about an instrument remaining inside her body. The patient replied that she would not at all have taken it well. The decision to leave the instrument inside or not requires *kauśalam*. Every minute you have to decide. We have so many things in our lives but one thing we should have is better sense. We can be wrong at times. We have to pay very heavily for the wrong decision. Suppose Arjuna would have decided to run away from Kurukshetra, would his decision be right or wrong? It would have been a wrong decision. However, in the beginning it appeared very clear to Arjuna that fighting the war was *adharmā*. Lord Krishna knew better.

Some of the current situations like terminating pregnancy, mercy killing – all are special situations and require *kauśalam* to make the right decision. If somebody dies and the wealth comes to you, the first thing you have to find out is whether you have the right to this wealth or not. There are stipulations in the *dharma śāstra* about inheritance from ancestral property and wealth from

the estate of a deceased. If you maneuver the law and do not give the property to the deserved, then the papa will affect several generations. Somebody was selling cheap tender coconut in India. Others were selling it for 12 rupees and in this shop it was only 5 rupees. I was about to buy. Our Swamiji advised me not to buy. He told me to find out how he got the coconuts. I discovered that the coconuts were stolen from somewhere. In Bombay it is called the 'chor' market. I would like to go to flea market but not to a 'chor bazaar'. The *Īśāvāsya* Upanishad says that *mā gr̥dha kasyasvid dhanam*, don't covet someone else's wealth. I am very happy with whatever I earn and whatever belongs to me. Sometimes helping somebody may not be the right thing to do. When you go to India beggars immediately find out that you are special and they try to get something out of you. Your bag is full of big notes and you do not have small denominations. You give a big note to them. Is it right to give? There are gangsters around these beggars and they make them beg and take money out of them. In this situation, whom are you supporting?

If you look at life around you, more and more sensitive you become and the more sensitive you are, the more adverse you become towards *himsā*. When somebody comes with a problem, you listen to him or her. You allow the person to surface his issues. In marriage counseling, you have to bring people together and not separate them. Seeing the differences, you bring them together. All this is very important. Advising is dangerous. If you do not know, you can mess up. You should not give advice in areas where you do not know much. Some people advise that in the US one need not do the *pitṛ karmā*. A few days ago someone asked me, "Swamiji, my father's first anniversary is coming. What shall I do? Shall I go to India?" I said, "Go immediately. Do it. This is a must. Your son will see. Your grandson will see and the tradition will follow. This is important." This person went to India and later thanked me for giving him the right advice. We have *karmaṇi adhikārah*. We should be responsible for what we do. When you do something, be careful about special situations in which what was duty before is no more a duty. Let me ask you a question. Should you babysit your grandchildren or should you go for spiritual classes? Should you do house sitting or go for classes? The parents of the children have gone for a cruise and you have to do house sitting and babysitting. Look at your life and ask questions. What is becoming of me in this situation? There are always hundreds of questions. *yoga karmasu kauśalam* is not ordinary. Unless you have Krishna with you, you cannot be a karma yogi. Therefore, surrender to the Lord. Pray to the Lord to give you the wisdom to make the correct decision.

Once I was in Sandipini, Bombay and I used to go to a place for *satsaṅg*. This group of youngsters approached me and asked, "Swamiji, where is your ashram? Is it very quiet?" At that time, the ashram was in a jungle. They said, "We can do star gazing on the lake. Can we boys and girls come and stay overnight?" I said that I have to take permission from Swamiji. I went enthusiastically to Swamiji and asked his permission to take the youngsters with me. I explained to him that the youngsters wanted to come and they wanted to do star gazing. Swamiji replied negatively. I wanted to know why he was not allowing them. Swamiji said, "How long will they do star gazing? After some time they will gaze at each other." This never occurred to me. It did to him. You learn things the hard way. Every time the decision is not in black and white. It is not very clear. It is said in the Upanishad that if there is a wise man around you, and if you have a doubt, you approach him to help you with the decision. In every family there is an old person, *jñāna vṛiddhaḥ*. In any situation he/she knows the answers because of his/her life experiences.

I will wrap up with a nice story that Akhandanandaji Maharaj used to tell me. He told a story to show how old people have so much wisdom. A boy was getting married. The whole party was to go for the marriage and the bride's father invited only the youngsters. He did not want any old people to come to the wedding. All the youngsters went. They camped outside the village near a lake and they were dancing and joking all night. Then the news came from the father of bride that the marriage will happen the next day on the condition that the lake should be filled with milk by night. All the music stopped. Now where would one get so much milk? The father of the boy travelled with the group hiding himself in a basket so that nobody could see him. He was planning to see the marriage through the holes in the basket. The old man was sitting in the basket quietly all this time. When he did not hear the music, he came out of the basket and enquired what happened. When the youngsters told him about the stipulation of filling the lake with milk, he assured them not to worry. He asked them to send word to the father of the bride that the lake will be filled with milk only after the bride's side empty the water from the lake! When the word reached the father of the girl, he immediately said that there must be an old person on the other side. That is why in our tradition we always approach somebody who is old and wise to seek help in any situation. There will be one or two of such people in every village. *Yoga karmasu kauśalam* is not an ordinary thing. Arjuna could surrender to Krishna and so he could get all the help. Surrendering to the Lord is growth. It requires so much understanding.