

Satsanga with Sri Swami Veditatmananda Saraswati Arsha Vidya Gurukulam

NITYA-KARMA, OBLIGATORY DUTIES

नित्यानि - अकरणे प्रत्यवायसाधनानि सन्ध्यावन्दनादीनि ॥

nityāni - akarane pratyavāyasādhanāni sandhyāvandanādīni.

Daily rites, such as the *sandhyāvandana* the non-performance of which causes harm, are called *nitya-karma* [Vedāntasāra, 9].

Nitya-karma are daily obligatory duties described as *sandhyāvandanādīni*, such as *sandhyāvanda*. Typically, a person worships three times a day at particular times called *sandhya*. *Sandhya* means *sandhi* or the time when there is a joining or transition in the hours of the day or night. Such times are considered to be auspicious for prayers. There is a morning *sandhya* or *prāta-sandhya*, when there is a transition from night to the dawning of day. There is an evening *sandhya*, the *sāyam-sandhyā*, when there is a transition from day to night. Then there is the noon *sandhya* called *madhya-sandhya*, when the sun is at its zenith, and it is the period of transition when the first half of the day ends and the second half begins. *Prāta*, *madhyam*, and *sāyam* are thus three times of 'joining', which are considered to be auspicious times for the performance of prayers. Typically, a boy is initiated into the ritual of the *sandhyāvandanam*, which consists of making certain offerings, prayers, and chanting the *gāyatrī-mantra*.

A human being is born with three kinds of debts

The concept of *nitya-karma* comes from a sense of obligation. This concept was mentioned at the beginning of this text when it was said that even at birth we enjoy various privileges. It is said that a human being is born with three kinds of debts. These debts are *pitṛ-ṛna*, *ṛṣi-ṛna*, and *deva-ṛna* or debts towards one's parents and ancestors, towards the sages, and towards the *devatās* or gods.

We enjoy the privilege of having this body. We have been born and we have been raised, nurtured, and nourished; therefore, we are indebted to our parents and ancestors. We enjoy this wealth of knowledge, which is the result of the dedication of many teachers, sages and thinkers. They have made this storehouse of knowledge available to us from which we draw freely. For example, we enjoy the privilege of knowledge in the form of this text that is made available to us. We are able to study it easily, but imagine how much effort it must have taken to think and write this text. Thus, we are indebted to all the sages. That is called *ṛṣi-ṛnam*. Thirdly, we are enjoying all the privileges of life. In the Vedic vision, the one Lord manifests in the form of the various *devatās* or natural forces. Therefore, all these natural expressions are looked upon as gods or deities. A *devatā* is a deity; fire, water, the earth, space, the air, the sun, the moon, and all other natural phenomena are looked upon as *devatās*. It is because of them that we enjoy our privileges. The air is provided to us and, therefore, we are breathing freely. Further, food, water,

and sunlight are provided to us and the earth supports, nourishes, and nurtures us. Thus, nature is constantly taking care of us. We say that God, through nature, is constantly taking care of us. We enjoy all these privileges and are indebted to God or the various expressions of God.

Nitya-karma is meant to fulfill the three kinds of obligations

The expression of our reciprocity for this indebtedness or obligation is called *nitya-karma*, our obligatory duties. When we perform our daily and incidental duties, we fulfill our obligations. In doing so, we are not obliging anybody; we are simply repaying the debt already incurred, for the obligations we so freely accept. This is the spirit in which *nitya-karma* and *naimittika-karma* are performed. They are of the nature of worship and prayers.

We fulfill our debt to our ancestors through prayers and offerings to the departed souls, as well as through the care and service of our parents. Our debt to the sages is fulfilled in our pursuing knowledge and being instrumental in the acquisition and spread of knowledge. Thirdly, we fulfill our obligation to God through worship and prayers and by making offerings to the *devatās*.

In the Vedic times, the fire ritual was widely prevalent; different deities were invoked in the fire and offerings were made to them. When a person got married, the daily obligatory duties also involved the performance of the *agnihotra-karma* every morning and evening. It is said the fire is the carrier or vehicle for transporting the oblations to different deities and that is how those deities are nourished. The Bhagavad Gita says that when we nourish the *devatās*, they will nourish us in turn [3-11]:

देवान्भावयतानेन ते देवा भावयन्तु वः। परस्परं भावयन्तः श्रेयः परमवाप्स्यथ ॥

devānbhāvayatānena te devā bhāvayantu vah,
parasparam bhāvayantaḥ śreyaḥ paramavāpsyatha.

Propitiate the deities with this (*yajña*). May those deities propitiate you. Propitiating one another, you shall gain the highest good (*mokṣa*).

This scheme is given to us to attain prosperity in our lives. In nourishing the *devatās* with our offerings, we receive their grace and are nourished in our own lives. All of these actions of worship, study, teaching, serving and caring for parents, and offerings to departed souls fall under the category of *nitya-karma*.

Nitya-karma helps us overcome self-centeredness

When we recognize that we have been receiving help from all these sources, we become humble. Slowly, the concern for one's own individual self diminishes and we begin to have a larger view of life. We appreciate the fact that we are not isolated beings, but a part of the whole scheme of life. We are what we are because of the contribution that we have received from the

rest of the world. Therefore, we should function as a link in a whole chain, interconnected with everything else. There is a statement in Sanskrit '*vāsudaiva kutumbhakam*', which means that the whole universe is one family. When we live in an unselfish manner, we function as members of the universal family; this is the spirit engendered by the performance of duties. The larger the scope of that with which we identify, the easier it becomes to come out of our self-centeredness. This is the spirit behind *karma-yoga*, which is taught in the Bhagavad Gita and technically expressed in this text as *nitya* and *naimittika-karma*, the daily and incidental duties that are performed in the spirit of worship.

In worshipping the sun, we worship light, which stands for knowledge

The *sandhyāvandana* or worship of the sun is given as an example of *nitya karma* or daily duty. The worship of the sun and of fire was prevalent during the Vedic times because they are what we call *pratyakṣa-devatā*, evident gods. Of the five elements, *ākāśa* or space is not perceptible to the eyes, and neither is *vāyu* or air. Fire is the first perceptible element and is, therefore, said to be closest to God. The sun, the moon, and fire are all shining and perceptible forms of God and, therefore, people used to worship them the most. In worshipping them, we worship light, which symbolizes knowledge; thus, light, knowledge, and enlightenment also come into our lives. This is the spirit behind these forms of worship.

Nitya-karma helps us ward off the unpleasant effects of our past actions

Akaraṇe pratyavāyasādhanāni. It is an interesting aspect of our daily obligatory duties that their non-performance may cause harm to us. The threat that the failure to perform the obligatory duties, *akaraṇe*, can result in *pratyavāya* or harm invokes fear. Vedāntins, however, interpret the performance of these daily rituals as acts of self-purification and, therefore, if these actions are not performed, it means that the self-purification does not happen.

Nobody is free from the effects of their past actions. Even the fact of human birth is the result of a combination of evil and virtuous actions. We have performed many good and evil actions in our prior births and these past actions now manifest in the form of various situations, both pleasant and unpleasant. Our past good actions bring about pleasant situations and our past evil actions bring about unpleasant situations. *Nitya-karma* and *naimittika-karma* ward off the unpleasant effects of what we call evil actions that are in store for us. If we don't perform these duties, we are unable to ward off evil effects and will, therefore, suffer the consequences of the evil actions¹.

¹ Based on Vedāntasāra lectures. Transcribed and edited by Malini, KK Davey and Jayshree Ramakrishnan.