

Shloka 2-31

**Svadharmam api cha avekshya, na vikampitum aharsi,
Dharmayat hi yudhat shreya anyat, kshatriyasya na
vidyate**

svadharmam	own dharma
api	even
cha	and
avekshya	looking at, from the perspective of
na	(is) not
vikampitum	waver, be indecisive, irresolute
aharsi	appropriate, apt, fitting
Dharmayat	according to dharma, righteous
hi	because
yudhat	compared to war
shreya	virtuous, auspicious
anyat	no (any) other
kshatriyasya	for a kshatriya
na	(does) not
vidyate	exists

Meaning: Even looking at it from the perspective of one's own dharma, (your) wavering is not appropriate (for a kshatriya), because there does not exist any other (more) virtuous deed for a kshatriya than fighting a righteous war.

Explanation

This shloka is very dear to me because this is the first shloka in the Bhagwad Gita in which Bhagwan Krishna starts preaching the philosophy of Karma Yoga to Arjuna. Prior to this shloka, Bhagwan Krishna has instructed Arjuna about the Sankhya philosophy which is also beautiful, but starting from this shloka to the 18th chapter, the Bhagwad Gita focuses on its main message which is the philosophy of Karma Yoga.

The philosophy of Karma Yoga is intricately tied to one's dharma. The word "dharma" has been defined in many ways but a simple meaning can be "social and work related obligations or duties". The word "sva" means mine. "Svadharmā" is a special Gita word which means "my dharma".

In later shlokas, the Bhagwad Gita makes it very clear that different people have different dharmas (see Shlokas 18-42 to 18-44). For example, the dharma of a brahmin is to impart knowledge, whereas the dharma of a kshatriya (soldier) is to fight, if fighting is necessary for the right reasons (for example, to protect the innocent or defenseless). In fact, the Bhagwad Gita states quite clearly in this shloka that there is nothing more auspicious or better for a kshatriya than to fight a righteous war.

This shloka highlights a key principle of the philosophy of Karma Yoga which is that one must do one's "svadharmā" at all times and never waver from it. Of course, we have learnt before (in Shloka 8-7) that Bhagwan Krishna not only instructed Arjuna to fight but to fight as the highest Karma Yogi would fight, i.e., with his mind and intellect dedicated to Ishwara and constantly thinking of Him.

The moral of this shloka is this: There is nothing better than being able to find an opportunity to conduct one's svadharmā.

Questions

1. What is a key principle of the philosophy of Karma Yoga?
2. What is the meaning of the Sanskrit word "Sva"?
3. What is dharma?
4. What is the "svadharmā" of a student?
5. What is the "svadharmā" of a parent?
6. Who is a kshatriya?
7. Who is a brahmin?
8. What is the name of the main philosophy described in the Bhagwad Gita?
9. What is the other philosophy described in the Gita (besides the philosophy of Karma Yoga)?

The Caste System

In the old days, those who studied the [Vedas](#) became known as Brahmins, those who practiced trade became known as [Vaishya](#), those who labored became known as [Sudra](#) and those who took up martial arts became known as Kshatriyas.

The Kshatriyas were assigned to be protectors of [Dharma](#) (duty/justice), the people and livestock (modern day police force and army). The word “raja” means king. Arjuna’s eldest brother, Yudhishtira was known as Dharma Raja since he was a noble king. The noblest king was Shri Ramchandra (yes, he too was a kshatriya). Bhagwan Krishna himself was a kshatriya and states quite clearly in the Bhagwad Gita that He takes birth again and again to ensure that “Dharma” is not uprooted from this world (Shloka 2-7).

Gautam Buddha was born in a Kshatriya family but was a Brahmin in reality. Similarly, Prahlad was born in an Asura Kshatriya family but was a Brahmin by nature.