

THE CALL OF SRI KRISHNA: THE GOSPEL OF SUPER EXCELLENCE

SWAMI KRISHNANANDA

The Divine Life Society

Sivananda Ashram, Rishikesh, India

Website: www.swami-krishnananda.org

One important lesson of our scriptures which we have overlooked is their call to a life of glory. There are many passages in the Vedas in which the Rishi prays for greatness. “O Lord, make me lustrous.” “May I be the most glorious.” “May the sun and the moon and the earth and the sea, and the sky and the heaven made by Thee, be always favourable to us for achieving greatness.”

The Bhagavadgita has a whole chapter—Vibhuti Yoga—in which Sri Krishna exalts the best or most outstanding specimen in each class of beings by identifying himself with it. For example, he says: “Among immovables I am the Himalaya; among rivers, the Ganga; among trees, the holy fig; among cows, the divine cow of plenty; among sages, Vyasa; among heavenly songsters, Chitraratha; among generals, Skanda; among rulers, Yama; among celestial sages, Narada; among warriors, Rama; among men, the King. I am the glory of the glorious, the victory of the victorious, the goodness of the good-natured. I am life in all beings and austerity in ascetics.”

Sri Krishna summed up the general principle of Vibhuti Yoga in these words: “Whatsoever being is glorious, good, prosperous or powerful, understand thou that to go forth from a fragment of My Splendour.”

In this way Sri Krishna has commended the celebrities in all walks of life but not the mediocre of routine workers. This is the Gospel of super excellence—a clarion call to all aspirants to acquire greatness and glory by their golden deeds. As if to leave no room for doubt, the same previous lesson was taught by Sri Krishna, while showing his cosmic form to Arjuna: “Therefore, stand up! Win for thyself renown! Conquer thy foes! Enjoy the wealth-filled realm!”

Modern thinkers have made a strong plea for the cultivation of super excellence. Thus Emerson wrote: “If a man can write a better book, preach a better sermon, or make a better mousetrap than his neighbour, though he builds his house in the woods, the world will make a beaten path to his door.”

Similarly Swett Marden said: “There is a fitness in doing a thing superlatively well, because we seem to be made for expressing excellence.”

In his book, *Excellence*, J.W. Gardner, President of the Carnegie Foundation, writes: “Excellence implies more than competence. It implies a striving for the highest standards in every phase of life. We need individual excellence in all its forms, in every kind of creative endeavour, in political life, in education, in industry—in short, universally!”

“An effective personality,” says the noted psychologist, Dr. Links, “requires not only a variety of skills but relative superiority in a few fields and distinct superiority in one.

The chief superiority should be in a vocational field, the others in the fields of sports, hobbies and the social arts. The mere habit of developing superiority is a preparation for success in later life.”

Seva Dharma requires hard work, but mixed with brains. All work must be done efficiently. According to the Gita, efficiency in work is one of the definitions of Yoga (II/50) and the devotee who is dear to Sri Krishna is *daksha* or dexterous in whatever he does (XII/16).

Efficiency has two sides—spiritual and temporal. The essence of spiritual efficiency is selflessness or other centredness, to do the work as an offering to God or for the good of fellow beings, keeping the eye on the interests of those whom the work is intended to serve rather than one’s own. Strikes, demonstration, go-slow and work-to-rule campaigns and the clamour for more pay for less work are as anti-social and unspiritual as the practice of getting richer and richer by exploiting employees or customers.

The performance must also be satisfactory in the worldly sense. First and foremost, it must be of good quality, neat and clean, free from errors and blemishes. Secondly, speed must be added to accuracy. The work must be completed in time. Usually a good worker is also a fast worker and slowness is a sure sign of incompetence. Nothing big can be achieved without promptness.

Another important factor in efficiency is economy in labour, money and material. A capable person can work for long hours without feeling fatigued. He uses his time and energy, in fact all resources, to the best advantage. He never attempts things which his assistants can do for him. He multiplies his powers by winning the cooperation of others.

Finally, the highest ingredient of efficiency is inventiveness and originality. The really efficient man is not simply a routine worker, doing things as they were done in the past. Rather he breaks new ground, makes new, better and cheaper things, simplifies procedures and makes improvements everywhere. He leaves his organisation better than he found it.

But the Lord of Infinite Glory is not satisfied with ordinary skill; He expects superbness from His devotees.

Very noble are those who practise Karma Yoga and work efficiently for the general good. By their efforts, they maintain the world order. Even more valuable are the few who practise Vibhuti Yoga, serve as exemplars, heroes, leaders or luminaries, and make significant contributions to the knowledge, wealth or well-being of mankind.

The development of talent, which has been so much stressed in the Vedas and the Gita, is a basic principle of the doctrine of evolution. Man starts as a seed with several kinds of powers hidden in him. They must be brought out and put to good use. This is essential for the happiness and progress of the individual as well as mankind.

“Each soul is potentially divine,” said Swami Vivekananda. “The goal is to manifest this divine within by controlling nature, external and internal.”

The possibilities for the development of talent are almost unlimited. Even the most learned, if they only feel humble and sincerely try, can gain deeper insights and climb to greater heights of wisdom. Similarly, age is no bar to the growth of talent. While physical development stops in middle age, intellectual development can go on even in ripe old age. Two ways to keep the mind alert and growing

even in the evening of life are to apply it to tough problems and to continue learning something new all the time.

William James, the famous psychologist, used to say that the average person develops only one tenth of his latent mental ability. “Compared to what we ought to be,” said he, “we are only half awake. We are making use of only a small part of our physical and mental resources. Stating the thing broadly, the human individual thus lives far within his limits. He possesses powers of various sorts which he habitually fails to use.”

Alexis Carrel writes in *Reflections on Life*: “Everyone should realise the full measure of his inherited mental capacities, be these great or small. This obligation is universal. All are equally capable, if they are really determined, of releasing the hidden spiritual energy in their own depths. Though consciousness develops side by side with the body, it does not stop developing when the body has finished growing. Intellect, aesthetic activity, moral strength and religious sense continue to develop even in old age.”

The same lesson of super excellence was taught by an English poet who sang:

If you can't be a pine on the top of the hill,
Be a scrub in the valley—but be
The best little scrub by the side of the rill;
If you can't be a bush, be a bit of grass,
And some highway happier make;
If you can't be a highway, then just be a trail.
If you can't be the sun, be a star;
It isn't in size that you win or you fail;
Be the best of whatever you are.

We make use of extraordinary or supernatural powers to perform miracles that benefit rare individuals. Such feats, though spectacular, are of limited utility, as the masses can neither imitate them nor take advantage of them. In contrast, we take little notice of common powers developed to an exceptional degree which extend the frontiers of knowledge or make life easier and pleasanter for mankind. It should, however, be noted that Sri Krishna has identified himself with all celebrities, not only with the religious ones. All luminaries, whatever their nationality, period, and profession, reveal the splendour of God.

Worldly excellence is no less acceptable to God than spiritual excellence. Both are necessary for the maintenance and advancement of the world. Both are in fact one, according to the Vedanta. Elucidating this point, Sister Nivedita writes in her inspiring book *Religion and Dharma*: “We cannot be satisfied till our society has produced great minds in every branch of human activity. *Advaita* can be expressed in mechanics, in engineering, in art, in letters as well as in philosophy and meditation. But it can never be expressed in half measures. The true *Advaitin* is the master of the world. He does not know a good deal of his chosen subject; he knows all there is to be known. He does not perform his particular task fairly well: he does it as well as it is possible to do it.... The highest achievements of the mind are a Sadhana.... The man who has followed any kind of knowledge to its highest point is a rishi.”

Similarly Basil King writes in his book *The Conquest of Fear*: “All discovery of truth, whether by religion, science, philosophy or imaginative art must be discovery in God. When the Lord restores sight to a blind man, or Peter and

John cause a lame man to walk, we see manifestations of God, but we see equal manifestations of God when one man gives us the telephone, another the motor car, and another wireless telegraphy. Whatever declares His power declares Him, and whatever declares Him is a means by which we press upward to the perception of His loving almightiness.”

It should be clearly understood here that ‘superior power’ does not necessarily mean increased spirituality. The true test of spirituality is not power, natural or supernatural, but the service rendered to mankind. Demons and devils are not dear to God, though their powers are very similar, sometimes even superior to those of saints. “Man becomes great,” said Mahatma Gandhi, “exactly in the degree in which he works for the welfare of his fellow men.”

The primary condition for super excellence is a lofty aspiration of ambition, a conscious striving to know all about one’s subject, or to do one’s work as well as it can be done. This desire appears in the form of a deep interest in one’s work or the particular problem one has taken in hand. It is well known that scientists and inventors give themselves up whole-heartedly to the object of their pursuit.

A powerful interest that dominates a man’s life polarises his mind, which then acts like a magnet and continually draws out from his stored-up experiences and also from new experiences whatever is relevant and useful to the end in view. Deep interest invigorates the mind, awakens its dormant powers and is the key to super excellence, invention and discovery.

Hard work is another condition of superiority. The aspirant must master the knowledge and technique pertaining to his particular job; in fact, he must be a keen and lifelong learner, ready to pick up new ideas and new ways wherever he can find them. He must cultivate the habits of thoroughness, accuracy and reliability; he must take pains to check, revise and polish his work until it acquires as perfect a finish as possible within the limits of time available.

Inspiration only comes as a result of hard study, deep reflection and patient search for the solution. Scientific discoveries are generally preceded by a large number of different experiments, trying first one thing and then another. Edison, the wizard of inventions, made about ten thousand tests with different chemical combinations before he found the right one for his storage battery. Looking for a suitable material for the filament of his incandescent lamp, he tried more than 6,000 samples of bamboo from every corner of the earth before he found the one that made the Edison electric lamp ready for commercial use.

Similarly, good writing requires not only profound knowledge but also enormous labour in writing, painstaking revision and rewriting. Carlyle took great pains over his works and, before writing a page of his famous history books, he would consult all the well-known books on the subject. Tolstoy rewrote his *War and Peace* seven times. Adam Smith took ten years to write his *Wealth of Nations*, while Gibbon spent twenty years over his masterpiece, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*.

The story of the discovery of radium is a saga of patient toil in the midst of appalling poverty. It took the Curies

four years to isolate a very small quantity of radium from tons of ore. All day and for months they worked together in a damp, rotting shed which they called their lab. For much of this time, Mrs. Curie had to stand stirring a boiling mixture in an enormous pot with an iron rod which was as long as she was tall. The roof of the shed leaked and they did not have enough money to get it fixed. When the rains came, streams of water fell between these two workers and their work. Their labour was indeed *tapasya* of a very high order.

Super excellence means constant improvement and innovation, thinking in straight lines instead of curves, introduction of simpler procedures, time and labour-saving devices, better and cheaper goods, making two blades of grass grow where one grew before. There is nothing in the world which cannot be improved. The best is yet to be made—whether in books or automobiles, radios or nylons, medicines or men.

The ideal of all-round excellence is very difficult to attain. Only rare persons can become versatile geniuses. But everyone can acquire mastery in some little branch of knowledge or skill. Everyone can do at least some phase of his work superlatively well by developing his strong point or specialising in the part of his work in which he is most interested. And once this is done, superiority in one part of his life will stimulate superiority in other parts. Whatever a man's vocation, let him not be content to remain mediocre; let him lift himself from the commonplace to the outstanding.

In India, we are fortunate to have excellent human raw material. But the opportunities and incentives for its

development are sadly lacking. Religion has, on the whole, a blighting effect on secular professions. Even in other spheres, the strong tendency is to encourage subservience and sycophancy rather than initiative and talent. Had we paid proper attention to this matter, our country would have produced giants in every field of endeavour.

We should recapture the spirit of the Vedas and the Bhagavadgita. We should exalt work. We should discover and encourage talent wherever we can. We must produce not only great saints, philosophers and yogis, but also top class men in every walk of life. We need eminent scientists, selfless rulers, farsighted statesmen, dedicated administrators, educationists, doctors, lawyers, engineers, inventors, sportsmen, artists, explorers, writers, industrialists, managers, seers, dreamers, as well as organisers and leaders. No great man has done his duty until he has made at least ten persons worthy to take his place.

“This very moment,” exhorted Swami Vivekananda, “let every one of us make a staunch resolution: ‘I will become a prophet. I will become a messenger of light. I will become a child of God. Nay, I will become a god.’”

“Arise! Awake! Stop not till the goal is reached!”