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## What does it mean to be a sthitaprajna?

*Kushal Shah*



**E**nlightenment, Moksha, Nirvana, and Liberation are some of the commonly used terms used to define the goal of the spiritual processes. Although these terms are very well-known and often inspire people to seriously take up spiritual practices. But the usage of these terms causes many impediments towards reaching the final goal. Quite often the usage of these terms creates a negative attitude towards the material/physical world. Many serious seekers of Moksha often look down upon the physical world as impure and wish to spend most of their time in seeking the pure consciousness. These terms also create friction between the so-called spiritual seekers and the so-called materialists. The former often consider the latter to be ignorant and selfish, while the

latter consider the former to be lazy bums who do not wish to contribute to society. This divide between spiritual seekers and materialists seems to be a much later development in Indian history since epics like Ramayana and Mahabharata do not provide any evidence for the same. In both Ramayana and Mahabharata, the main protagonists, Rama and Krishna, are both spiritually enlightened and kings.

Thus, for cutting through some of these paradoxical aspects of their personality it is important to understand the original term used for describing enlightened beings. In verse 2.55 of Bhagavad Gita, Krishna provides a precise term to describe people who have struck the perfect balance between spiritualism and materialism. He strongly urges Arjuna to seek this

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state of being:

प्रजहाति यदा कामान्सर्वान्पार्थ मनोगतान् ।  
आत्मन्येवात्मा तुष्टः स्थितप्रज्ञस्तदोच्यते ॥

O Pārtha, when a man gives up all varieties of desire for sense gratification, which arise from mental modifications, and when his mind finds satisfaction in the self alone, then he is said to be of steady intellect (*Sthitaprajna*).

What does it mean to be a *Sthitaprajna* and is it different from enlightenment, moksha, or liberation? The most important difference which I believe is that a *Sthitaprajna* considers himself very much active in the worldly sense and has no desire whatsoever for becoming a recluse. A *Sthitaprajna* neither shies away from the world nor does get entangled with its ever-changing form. A *Sthitaprajna* is a perfect Karma Yogi who does his/her duty without getting attached to its results. Since as the verse above says, a *Sthitaprajna* is established in steady intellect, s/he is also a perfect *Jnani*. But then the question arises, is this state really achievable or is it a mere fantasy? Was Krishna merely fooling Arjuna by painting him imaginary fantasies, or was Krishna leading Arjuna towards a practical and achievable goal that would ultimately resolve his miseries? Interestingly, it is not just

Krishna, but Patanjali too who talks of such a state. The difference is only in terminology, while the essence remains the same. Patanjali calls this the state of Yoga, and defines it in verse I.2 of his Yoga Sutras:

योगश्चित्तवृत्तिनिरोधः ॥

The state of Yoga is achieved when there is a cessation of modifications of the mind.

What exactly are these modifications of the mind? In verse I.6 of Yoga Sutras, Patanjali states that there are five kinds of modifications of the mind and these are the right knowledge, error, imagination, sleep, and memory. The usual reaction upon hearing this that these modifications seem quite natural. Is it really possible for the human being to function without them? We may reluctantly consider giving up an error or maybe even imagination to some extent, but how can we give up on the right knowledge, sleep, and memory? Do hold on any further thoughts, the idea is not as bizarre as it may seem at first sight.

Do you remember the first time you learned to ride a bicycle? If that is too long back and your memory of that experience has faded, you could also try remembering the first time you learned to ride a two-wheeler or a car? Initially, it must have required

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a lot of effort with a lot of conscious learnings and errors. Then over time, as you repeated the process, it became an integral part of yourself and became effortless. And as time went on, you could listen to music, chat with friends, and even enjoy the scenery outside while still driving your vehicle. How did this happen? Without getting into too many details, essentially, your mind figured out many abstract laws for driving the vehicle and keeps using them to automatically do the job without you needing to put in any conscious effort. Till the mind can figure out these abstract laws, a lot of effort is required.

A similar process happens with all other things in life too. When a person first starts trading stocks or learning to write a computer program, initially it is very effortful with every small detail being paid too much conscious attention. But as the person keeps doing this, again and again, the mind figures out the abstract laws of the process and is then able to do a large chunk of the job automatically. So essentially, the role that the right knowledge, error, imagination, memory, and even sleep to some extent play is to help us in figuring out the abstract rules and laws required to do our job at hand. Areas of life where we can figure out these abstract laws become effortless,

and other areas where we are not able to figure out these abstract laws lead to stress. The state of *Sthitaprajna* is essentially one completely free of stress and completely effortless in all domains of life (not to be confused with laziness). And according to the above argument, one can achieve this state only when one has figured out all the abstract laws by which this universe operates. Makes sense? So now, of course, the next question is, how is it even possible to figure out all the abstract laws of the universe?

It is important to understand that a good driver who has figured out these abstract laws of driving is not really aware of the mathematics and concepts of mechanics which define the movement of the vehicle. These laws which have been figured out by the human mind are too complex to be understood with current scientific terms.

The process of figuring out abstract laws of any process requires practice and time. Hence, it obviously follows that figuring out all the abstract laws of the universe in all domains in our life would require infinite time simply because of infinite possibilities. And this implies that achieving the state of being a *Sthitaprajna* in a finite lifetime is clearly impossible! However, what if, at a fundamental level, there are

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only a small finite number of laws that govern the universe? Then our problem can be solved since it is surely possible to learn a finite number of laws in a finite amount of time! The good news is that the Bhagavad Gita clearly talks of such a finite set of abstract laws at the fundamental level, and if we can do the required practice, we can also achieve this state of being a *Sthitaprajna* in a finite lifetime. What are these laws?

One such fundamental law relevant to our problem is stated in verse 2.14 of the Bhagavad Gita:

मात्रास्पर्शास्तु कौन्तेय शीतोष्णसुखदुः  
खदाः ।  
आगमापायिनोऽनित्यास्तांस्तितिक्षस्व  
भारत ॥

O son of Kunti, the contact between the senses and the sense objects gives rise to perceptions of pleasure and pain. These are temporary, appearing, and disappearing, and so one must learn to tolerate them without being disturbed.

The word *Sthitaprajna* can be loosely be translated into English as equanimous. And we lose our equanimity because our mind is too easily affected by the joys of pleasure and the sorrows of pain. What Krishna says is that both these are perceptions of the mind are created when our

senses come in contact with various sensory objects. The important point is that these perceptions are temporary and last for a short time. Hence, it is important for the mind to not be disturbed by them. Pleasure will always be followed by pain, and pain by pleasure. It is not that a *Sthitaprajna* has defective sensory organs and so cannot experience these vagaries of the mind. In fact, a *Sthitaprajna* is usually a lot more sensitive and better functioning when compared to an ordinary people! As long as the *Sthitaprajna* lives in mortal flesh, s/he is surely subject to these experiences, but his/her mind is no longer disturbed by it. For example, when we are kids, we perhaps get disturbed by few marks we lose and get overjoyed by few marks we gain in the exams, but when we grow up, we realize how childish that behavior was! Similarly, life's experiences will always bring pleasure and pain at different points of time. What matters is whether we get carried away by these experiences or go through them maturely. A *Sthitaprajna* is not a boring or an insensitive person. On the contrary, a *Sthitaprajna* is the one who experiences life to its fullest extent without getting caught up in life's vagaries. Sounds attractive, right? So now, how do we reach this state? The goal is Yoga and the path is also Yoga.

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As stated by many of our Yogis since ancient times, Yoga is primarily a process of recollection of our basic nature, Sat-Chit-Ananda. There is nothing extra to add on to ourselves, but only to remove the layers of ignorance that we have gathered over many cycles of birth and death. And the way to remove these layers is just to repeatedly remind ourselves of what Krishna says in verse 2.14 stated above. All these perceptions of pleasure and pain are temporary and ephemeral, and the true Self just silently observes this

changing world of names and forms without getting attached to it. The deeper this realization seeps within our mind, the closer we will be to the goal of Yoga. As Ramana Maharshi also says, "*Pain and pleasure alternate with each other. One must suffer or enjoy them patiently without being carried away by them. Always try to hold on to the Self. He who is indifferent to pain or pleasure can alone be happy.*" ■

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### Talk 44

Mr. Ekanath Rao, an Engineer, asked Sri Bhagavan if solitude is necessary for vichara.

*M.:* There is solitude everywhere. The individual is solitary always. His business is to find it out within, and not seek it without.

*D.:* The work-a-day world is distracting.

*M.:* Do not allow yourself to be distracted. Enquire for whom there is distraction. It will not afflict you after a little practice.

*D.:* Even the attempt is impossible.

*M.:* Make it and it will be found not so difficult.

*D.:* But the answer does not come for the search inward.

*M.:* The enquirer is the answer and no other answer can come. What comes afresh cannot be true. What always is, is true.