

Avoid being a victim of situations¹

B Mahadevan²

Every one of us often face a common problem in our lives on a day-to-day basis. This relates to our inability to handle a difficult situation that we face either in our office or in our home. The boss is unhappy with the work that we have done and therefore gives a piece of his mind to us. We end up with a heated argument with our colleagues in a meeting in which we cross the limits of decency and start yelling at each other. At home we may sometimes engage in an argument on an apparently simple issue with our better half or our parents. In the course of this argument we exceed our limits and end up with a bad relationship and a mood. At other times, the child bears the brunt of everything that happens at our office. We pick up an unimportant issue and use that opportunity to vent all our frustrations in the form of abusing the child. Many of us exhibit this behavior from time to time. Invariably we feel bad about the entire episode after a while. After some time when we calm down and reflect on these events we repent for our bad behavior.

Is there a way we can handle this weakness of ours? In *Bhagavad Gitā* Lord Krishna provides several ideas and advises on this important issue which is worthwhile for our scrutiny. We shall look at one advice from *Gitā* in this write-up. In chapter 2 of *Bhagavad Gitā* Arjuna requests Lord Krishna to explain to him the notion of *sthita prajñā*. Arjuna specifically asks Lord Krishna to educate him how a person with *sthita prajñā* attitude will behave. In the last 18 *ślokas* of the chapter Lord Krishna provides a detailed explanation of this concept.

Sthita Prajna: The Practical Relevance

We all engage in the society in many different ways. Some of us occupy high positions in an organization while others play the role of translating the vision of the top management into reality by participating in the thick of action. Many others contribute in a silent, yet an important, way to prepare the background for successful execution of activities that others do. This applies to any kind of organization including a multinational corporation, a public sector company, a government department, a not-for-profit organization or a religious entity. Irrespective of the position that we occupy and the nature of work that we do the success and satisfaction of work depends on our ability to stay focused. This, in essence, is the quality of a *sthita prajñā*.

Why is focused attention important? A focused attention is a good way of calming the mind. Otherwise, the mind gets too much distracted with several signals coming from outside and begins to respond to them. For example, assume that we are to fulfill some target in our office. The best way to get this done is to stay focused on the job and do everything required to meet the target. Imagine our plight when we start listening to all others around us. Our peers and friends may have several things to say about potential problems and failures that we are likely to face. This will agitate our mind and reduce our effectiveness of doing the work. The mind will activate all the five senses and they will begin to work

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² B Mahadevan is a Professor at the Indian Institute of Management Bangalore.

overtime to collect more and more ideas for the mind to process. Soon we will develop fear and mental tension because the chance of failure will appear as a real possibility. Eventually we will end up showing our frustrations by shouting out at fellow colleagues at office and family members back at home. A student with a distracted mind will go through a similar problem that will result in poor performance in his/her studies. Lord Krishna equates such a distracted mind to a boat (*navamiva*) in the middle of the sea (*ambhasi*) being driven by strong winds (*vāyuh*). Naturally, the boat is directionless and tossed between one and another depending upon the force of the wind.

इन्द्रियाणां हि चरतां यन्मनोऽनुविधीयते ।
तदस्य हरति प्रज्ञां वायुर्नावमिवाम्भसि ॥ 2.67

indriyāṇāṃ hi caratām yanmano'nuvidhīyate
tadasya harati prajñām vāyur-nāvamivāmbhasi

On the other hand, a *sthita prajña* will have a calm mind. The calming of the mind enables the person to respond to the outside situations in a controlled fashion. It also helps to turn the attention inward. In this process this person will become more and more thoughtful, silent and composed in life. Such a person will not lose control of his/her senses and eventually become a victim of situations.

Learn from the Tortoise

While this idea appears very convincing why are we not able to practice it? Is there a technique that we can follow to avoid getting into this trap? Lord Krishna provides a simple method by which we can avoid such situations in our life. He points to the example of a tortoise. A tortoise (*kūrma*) is endowed with a capability to withdraw all of its body into the shell the moment it senses some danger. Since it is covered with the hard shell outside it is protected from any physical damage that could happen to it. After some time it slowly withdraws its four limbs outside. Lord Krishna advises us to take a similar approach in life.

यदा संहरते चायं कूर्मोऽङ्गानीव सर्वशः ।
इन्द्रियणीन्द्रियार्थेऽभ्यः तस्य प्रज्ञा प्रतिष्ठिता ॥ 2.58

yadā saṃharate cāyam kūrmo'ṅgānīva sarvaśaḥ
indriyāṇi-indriya'rthe'bhyaḥ tasya prajña pratiṣṭhitā

We become the victim of situation simply because of our inability to control our senses. Therefore, Lord Krishna suggests that the moment we sense situation getting out of control we need to immediately withdraw our senses as a tortoise does. A *sthita prajña* trains his mind to behave exactly the way Lord Krishna has advised. The idea here is not to instantaneously react to the situation. If only we can delay our response during an unpleasant situation (such as fiery conversation or a fight) by a few moments more than 80% of our problems will be solved. We will not regret for our action later. We would have

avoided an unpleasant situation of compromising the honor and respect of people involved in the situation. We could have also avoided unnecessary mental stress and loss of credibility.

A practical way to implement this is to create a little gap between the stimulus and response. This is what modern-day psychologists also advise. Typically, they advise us to mentally count 10 before giving a response to a situation. A better way is to remember Lord Krishna and the tortoise example. That not only saves us from the situation but also showers on us the divine Grace of Lord Krishna. We would have also laid the first important step in building a happy family and a more contented self.