

Being alert in life¹

B Mahadevan²

The amount of effort we put to get things done properly need not have a direct relationship to the success of the work. In fact, many a times we come across a situation where despite putting a lot of efforts, we tend to lose out on the whole. For instance, a student does considerable preparation for the examination but does not score commensurate to the efforts. A sub-ordinate puts long hours of work and prepares a report for his boss, only to be reprimanded by the boss for an inadequate job. We conduct a family function or a public social function and earnestly put efforts to make everyone happy. However, at the end of the function there are complaints and dissatisfaction on the part of the guests. In all these cases one common reason could be that they did not develop a correct understanding of what is required to accomplish the task on hand.

Nobody likes to put enormous efforts in doing things and end up with a sense of dissatisfaction. Therefore, it is important for us to address this issue at a fundamental level. Moreover, all these will leave a trail of unhappiness and frustration in our mind. If this repeats we may develop a negative attitude towards people, lose interest in engaging in such activities and begin to blame others for the mistakes. In some extreme cases we find fault with ourselves and withdraw from many worldly activities. Such an approach to life is not very good.

There could be several reasons for this state of affairs. We may not have the skill and knowhow of doing things. If that is the situation, then we need to equip ourselves with the required skills and expertise. On the other hand if we have the required skills and expertise and still end up in such a situation it is a much serious issue to be addressed. One of the reasons for this could be that we haven't developed an eye for details. Once we develop an eye for details, it raises our level of alertness in discharging various activities in life.

Developing an eye for details

What exactly one means by saying "developing an eye for details"? The phrase "developing an eye for details" at the outset suggests to us that we need to use the faculty of seeing with great care and thoroughness. Whenever we see something, we need to be a keen observer so that we do not miss any details. We also need to observe it a few times so that we comprehend things fully and properly. However, if we stretch this idea a little bit, we will realize that developing an eye for details requires developing a similar level of sharpness with respect to other sense organs. For example, we need to employ a similar approach with respect to what we "hear", "touch", "taste" or "feel". If this is the case, then a person with sharpened senses will be able develop a high degree of eye for details.

While this may be a necessary condition, it may not be sufficient. One needs to also develop a high degree of alertness so that one can avoid committing needless efforts on things that

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

may not be worthwhile or desirable. By alertness we mean our ability to exercise our choice as to when to use the sensory organs and when not. Let us see what Lord Krishna has to advise us on this aspect.

Muni: A person with a great sense of alertness

Lord Krishna characterizes a Muni using a paradoxical comparison with other living beings. According to him, that which is night for other living beings (*ya niśa sarvabhūtanām*) is the time for being awake (*tasyām jāgarti*) for a muni. Similarly, that which is the day time for other living beings (*yasyām jāgrati bhūtāni*) is the night time for the muni (*sā niśa paśyato muneḥ*). The term Muni generally denotes a man of silence. It is not silence of speech. The mind of such a person is under great discipline, the thinking is very disciplined and therefore he is profoundly thoughtful in his ways of doing things. Therefore, in a nutshell Lord Krishna says that to be alert in life is the same as being a muni.

या निशा सर्वभूतानां तस्यां जागर्ति संयमी ।
यस्यां जाग्रति भूतानि सा निशा पश्यतो मुनेः ॥ 2.69

ya niśa sarvabhūtanām tasyām jāgarti samyamī
yasyām jāgrati bhūtāni sā niśa paśyato muneḥ

There is a subtle meaning to this *śloka*. By night and day Lord Krishna does not literally mean the time of the day. During night time, our sensory organs are not active; they are dull, dead and non-responsive. Also we lose of our power of discrimination as we are immersed in deep sleep. On the other hand, during day time the sensory organs are active, constantly processing information and responding to emerging situations. Moreover, we will be able to use our power of discrimination very well. Given this understanding of day and night, we can infer something deeper from this *śloka*.

Lord Krishna advises us that developing a sense of alertness is all about knowing when to do what. Ordinary living beings are alert about things that are superficial, transitory and imperfect. Such things do not interest a muni at all. Therefore he will switch off his sensory and discriminatory faculties (similar to our experience in night time). In contrast a muni is alert about things that ordinary living beings do not seem to focus much attention on.

Developing a sense of alertness

The implications of the *śloka* can be understood at two levels. In a day-to-day living sense, what this suggests is that when we are able to see what others are normally not able to see, clearly it means that we have a much better eye for details. The ongoing discussion also points to the route to develop alertness in life. It simply boils down to being very thoughtful. A thoughtful person's understanding of various outcomes and events in life will be deeper and the response more measured. Such a person will not be judging every event and people around him/her. He/she will quickly understand that such an approach will only agitate the mind more and make his/her life more stressful. On the other hand, he/she will seek

meaning to outcomes and events that unfold around him/her. In a much evolved state, such a person will gracefully take these events and outcomes and *bhagavat prasāda* and save him/her of strenuous rationalization of the events in life.

At another level, this *śloka* provides a deep philosophical meaning to our life. What Lord Krishna seems to suggest is that there are many transitory things in life which appeal to our sensory organs directly. The notion of happiness, fulfillment and contentment that one tries to achieve through these are at a superficial level. Therefore, it may not be worthwhile in spending too much of our efforts on them. On the other hand, everlasting happiness, bliss and sense of fulfillment are deep rooted, more involved and subtle. They require efforts much more than what appeals to the sensory organs directly. Therefore, a wise person will focus on these while the rest may not even take notice of such a possibility.

This is the fundamental building block for developing an eye for detail and alertness in life. Through this *śloka*, Lord Krishna pointed to us the need to understand this both at the day to day level and well as at the philosophical level. We need to constantly endeavor to achieve this on both the levels.