

Philosophy on the Battlefield: The *Bhagavad Gita*

IV. The Yoga of Renunciation

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(Figures in brackets refer to chapters and verses in the *Bhagavad Gita* unless stated otherwise.
For an explanation of asterisked words, refer to the notes at the end of the article.)

The heritage of the *Upanishads*

We have seen in the last article how the *Upanishads* emphasise renunciation and counter the claim of the ritualists that all Vedic literature is focused on ritual. The *Bhagavad Gita* picks up this line of thought from the *Upanishads* and criticises the Vedic sacrificial creed in unequivocal terms. It despises ritual-addicts as miserable commuters between earthly and heavenly life (IX.20-21), denigrates ritualistic prescriptions as flowery language (II.42-44), and compares them to a tiny pond (II.46). Krishna advises Arjuna to avoid the sacrificial part of the Veda that involves the soul in worldly pleasure and pain and to fix his attention on the eternal goal (II.45). (For an exposition of the concept of goals of human existence, see *Context and Themes*, Sept 99.) In short, while the emphasis of the sacrificial creed is on the performance of ritual, that of the *Upanishads* is on renunciation as the means of *amritatva*, 'immortality'. This term is also employed by the *Bhagavad Gita* (see II.15, XIII.12, XIV.20) to convey the concept of liberation.

The contribution of the *Bhagavad Gita* to Upanishadic thought

The *Bhagavad Gita* develops the Upanishadic view of renunciation by subjecting it to a thorough analysis (see *The Yoga of Action*, Oct 99). This analysis brings out the fact that it is mental involvement, not the physical act, that binds the performer to the consequences of the act. This involvement implies the motivation of self-benefit on the part of the performer and has its roots in his ego*. When the element of ego is eliminated, the act is deprived of its power to bind the performer even if he acts physically (V.7-9). If, on the contrary, he desists from the physical act while his ego is still active, he cannot avoid the bondage resulting from inaction, which itself can be viewed as an action. The *Bhagavad Gita* captures the paradox of this situation when it declares one to be wise who sees inaction in action and action in inaction (IV.18).

Pseudo-renunciation versus real renunciation

Arjuna's refusal to fight has emerged not from an elimination of his ego but from an active ego which is entangled in sin and merit. The concepts of sin and merit have no relevance at the philosophical level where all action is viewed as

emerging from the ego and not from the soul (III.27-28). The *Bhagavad Gita* views as pseudo-renunciation an attempt to renounce actions while the ego is active (III.6). This results in misconceived renunciation, and a concealed desire to avoid physical exertion, styled respectively as *tamasa* and *rajasa* (XVIII.7-8). The corollary of this position is that the performance of action with the ego inactivated is, in effect, renunciation (III.7, IV.20). This is because the fire of knowledge that inactivates ego burns up all action as a powerful fire its fuel (IV.37). Hence nothing in the whole world is as sacred as knowledge (IV.38).

The above exposition clarifies the *Bhagavad Gita* view that the Upanishadic concept of renunciation is appropriate when backed by a simultaneous negation of ego. The two together constitute real or total renunciation. This view is reflected in its descriptions of a spiritually ideal man which often depict him as having renounced all actions, as noted later in this article.

Preparatory renunciation

We discussed in the last article how Yajnavalkya was an intellectual with normal human failings and not a perfected spiritual practitioner, and that his renunciation of material goods and ties was preparatory to total renunciation, whereby he could devote all his energies to spiritual development. This is perhaps the reason why the *Bhagavad Gita* does not mention Yajnavalkya although it cites King Janaka (III.20), who is inseparably associated with him in the Upanishadic episodes. This king is viewed as an ideal of *karma-yoga* and *loka-sangraha* (keeping people on the righteous path). It is possible to regard the episodes of Yajnavalkya as fictitious; yet the fact remains that the *Upanishads* do recognise a preparatory type of renunciation. In fact a ritual for such a renunciation has been in vogue in India for centuries. There is also a type of renunciation termed *atura sanyasa* for initiating a dying person into renunciation. It would be worthwhile to study the concept of renunciation in its multiple forms as found in various Indian traditions, as well as in its changed perspective particularly during recent centuries.

Types of action

Discussion of renunciation cannot be considered complete without understanding the types of action as *Bhagavad Gita* presents them. Apart from involuntary actions like breathing, the *Bhagavad Gita* visualises at least two types of conscious action: obligatory and optional. The first type consists of social duties (XVIII.41-44), variously styled as prescribed actions (*niyata karma*, XVIII.7), one's own duties (*sva-karma*, XVIII.45, 46), action binding by birth (*sahaja karma*, XVIII.48), one's own duty (*sva-dharma*), and action binding by nature (*svabhava-niyata karma*, II.31, 33, XVIII.47). According to the *Bhagavad Gita*, this first type must not be renounced (XVIII.48). The second type, styled as *kamya* (aimed at achieving certain rewards, XVIII.2), consists of rituals that bring merit and heavenly pleasures. These can be renounced 'according to one view' as Krishna

says; but in his considered opinion, they also should not be renounced as they purify the mind when performed without involvement (XVIII.5-6).

Types of renunciation

From this discussion we arrive at the following possibilities in renunciation:

- (1) Pseudo-renunciation: renunciation at the physical level accompanied by the presence of a strong ego, implying performance at the mental level;
- (2) Practical renunciation: *karma-yoga*: performance of physical acts accompanied by the negation of ego, implying renunciation at the mental level;
- (3) True or total renunciation: renunciation at both levels, physical and mental;
- (4) Preparatory renunciation: physical renunciation accompanied by the urge for ego-negation, enabling the aspirant to devote all his energies towards true renunciation.

The *Bhagavad Gita* stand on preparatory renunciation

Considering the emphasis it lays on options 2 and 3 above, can the *Bhagavad Gita* make room for preparatory renunciation as envisaged in the option 4? I think it can, though implicitly. If we read carefully the recurring references to a man who has withdrawn from worldly affairs (II.58, III.17-18, IV.21, 27, V.28, VI.10, XII.16, XIII.7-11, XIV.22-25, XVIII.51-53), we cannot but reach this conclusion. How is one to reconcile this implicit recognition with the recurring insistence in the *Bhagavad Gita* on *karma-yoga*? – By treating this as addressed to the ordinary person, represented by Arjuna, for whom the *Bhagavad Gita* is mainly intended; for Arjuna's refusal to fight is the result of a momentary emotional outburst and not of a consistent thinking process. Momentary outbursts subside as easily as they emerge and cannot provide a basis for lasting decisions. The path of *karma-yoga* advocated by the *Bhagavad Gita* provides time for deeper thought which alone can lead to a lasting decision about complete renunciation.

Men of perfection depicted in the *Bhagavad Gita*

The *Bhagavad Gita* depicts an ideal renouncer who has attained spiritual perfection at several places, with slight variations. He is described as *sthita-prajna* (whose intellect has settled, II.55-72), *brahma-vid* (a knower of the Brahman, V.17-28), *bhakta* (a devotee, XII.13-19), *gunatiita* (one who has crossed the limits of the three *gunas*, XIV.22-26), *brahma-bhuta* (one who has become Brahman, XVIII.49-54). These passages reveal that, whatever basic path spiritual practitioners may have chosen, they display identical characteristics when they reach perfection. This justifies the *Bhagavad Gita* perspective in bringing under one roof all practices aimed at spiritual development. The descriptions of the state of perfection are variously termed as *brahmi sthiti* (state in *Brahman**, II.72, V.19), *brahma-nirvana* (peace in *Brahman*, V.24), *brahma-*

bhuya (becoming *Brahman*, XIV.26, XVIII.53). The main characteristics of this state are:

- (i) Control over the mind, such that the liberated man
 - (a) is free from desires (II.55, XVIII.49) and from grief (XVIII.54),
 - (b) has the same attitude towards worldly pleasures and pains (II.56), as even pleasures in fact end in pain (V.22) and is not at all interested in objects of senses (II.59),
 - (c) is free from common reactions or emotions such as love, fear, anger (II.56, V.23, 26, XVIII.51, 53), joy and depression (V.20); is indifferent to favourable and unfavourable (II.57), pleasant and unpleasant (XIV.24) and praise and abuse (XIV.24); treats clod clay, stone and gold as equal (VI.8, XIV.24),
 - (d) behaves equally to all creatures (V.18, 25), friend and foe (XII.18), so that neither he nor others are repugnant to each other (XII.15).
- (ii) Control over the organs, which means that the liberated man
 - (a) withdraws his organs from their objects (II.61),
 - (b) is not affected by objects even if the organs sense them (II.64) and remains unaffected like the sea (II.70).
- (iii) Cessation of ego and the sense of possession (II.71, XVIII.53).
- (iv) Contentment (II.64), contentment in self (II.55, V.24), absorption in sustained meditation (XVIII.52) and total absorption in Reality (V.17).
- (v) Renunciation of all actions (XII.16, XIV.25).
- (vi) The liberated man is homeless (XII.19), has no property (XVIII.53), is isolated (XVIII.52) and is content with anything (XII.19).

This summary may incidentally give us the criteria on which to judge the spiritual status of an aspirant of liberation. The criteria for perfection in Yoga are in no way different (VI.4).

Notes

EGO, in a philosophical context, is consciousness of oneself as the promoter and beneficiary of an activity – physical, mental or intellectual.

BRAHMAN – This term stands for a principle conceived by the *Upanishads* as the universal conscious principle. It is not in its essence different from the individual, embodied soul at the level of the ultimate reality. Liberation is accordingly conceived as the restoration of the unity of the soul with the universal conscious principle. This unity is obscured by the misconception of this nature, as in a dream, leading to the experience of worldly miseries.