

Philosophy on the Battlefield: The *Bhagavad Gita*

V. Jnana-yoga: The Yoga of Spiritual Knowledge

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(Figures in brackets refer to chapters and verses in the *Bhagavad Gita* unless stated otherwise.)

The metaphysical basis of *karma-yoga*

While discussing the theory of *karma-yoga*, we noted that it is ultimately founded on an understanding of the real nature of the soul as philosophy views it. The withdrawal of the authorship of actions presumed in *karma-yoga* is, therefore, not a matter of belief but a philosophical reality, – the realisation of the true nature of the soul and a criterion of wisdom (III.27-28, V.8-9, XIII.29). This is the knowledge that rids one of delusion and enables one to see all creatures in self and in God (IV.35). For a full understanding of this outlook, we have to delve into the philosophical deliberations in the *Bhagavad Gita*.

The Sankhya-Yoga-Vedanta identity in the *Upanishads*

Before going into the details, however, we have to note that the *Bhagavad Gita*, like the *Upanishads*, is a product of time when the classical philosophical systems, – particularly, Sankhya, Yoga and Vedanta, – were not differentiated. Thus we find in these texts an intermixture of terms which were later associated with specific philosophical systems. This is the reason why Shankara takes the terms Sankhya and Yoga occurring in the *Upanishads* in the general sense of theory and practice (see his commentary on the *Brahma-sutra*, II.1.1), while the term Vedanta, etymologically meaning the concluding part of the *Veda* and equivalent to the term *Upanishad*, obviously stands for a chronological stage in the evolution of Vedic literature and is thus capable of encompassing both. This situation is like the use of the term Science which, during the early decades of the twentieth century, stood jointly for a number of subjects differentiated as their study deepened in the course of time.

The treatment of the Sankhya terminology by the *Bhagavad Gita*

There is, however, room to believe that the *Bhagavad Gita* is purposely giving new meanings to Sankhya terms, although conscious of the established usage. Thus it extends the meaning of the term *Prakriti* (nature, matter) so as to include even soul – matter being the lower (*a-para*) and the soul being the upper (*paraa*) type of it (VII.4-5). The lower type is further equated with *maya*, the divine power of God (VII.14). Similarly, it extends the meaning of the term *Purusha* (conscious principle) (XV.16-17) so as to include even matter with effects being the perishable (*kshara*), and the cause being the imperishable (*a-kshara*) types of it.

It further notes the Supreme Being (*uttama purusha*) as the third type, recognised as *lishvara* in the Yoga system.

The purpose of the *Bhagavad Gita* in thus modifying the meanings of the Sankhya terms seems to be to reconcile the three systems with a view to underlining their unity as against their diversity. In fact this effort is unmistakably visible in the *Shvetashvatara Upanishad* in which most of the Sankhya terms and concepts, along with the bias of this *Upanishad* for God and emphasis on Yoga, are found. This *Upanishad*, although not considered as old as the ten well known ones, and at the same time borrowing considerably from two older ones, *Katha* and *Mundaka*, may be taken as the forerunner of the *Bhagavad Gita* in this respect. We are strengthened in this conjecture when we find the (*kshetra*, farm, and) *kshetrajna* (farmer) terminology used exclusively in this *Upanishad* (VI.16), and the *Bhagavad Gita* (XIII.1-2).

The Sankhya-Yoga scheme of evolution

More common in Sankhya terminology, *prakriti*, which also called *a-vyakta* and *pradhana*, stands for the ultimate cause of the material world. This evolves from it through the successive stages of *mahat* (cosmic intellect), *aham-kaara* (ego), and five subtle forms of the elements. From the subtle elements evolve the gross elements and the body complex consisting of ten organs (five of sense, and five of action) and the mind, the inner organ. *Prakriti* consists of three 'qualities' – *sattva* (light), *rajas* (movement) and *tamas* (delusion), which inhere in everything in the world.

Distinct from *prakriti* is the conscious principle called *purusha*, the soul. Sankhyas regard souls to be many. The recognition of *purusha* as a distinct principle and the acceptance of two ultimate principles makes the Sankhya a dualistic system, as against the monistic Vedanta theory. There is no place for God in the Sankhya system; however, the Yoga system, which is aligned to the Saankhya in its metaphysical outlook, makes room for God as a special type of *purusha*. This may be justified from a pragmatic point of view, at the sacrifice of the rational consistency in the Sankhya way of thinking. The Yoga system enlists God as an alternative to *abhyasa* (persistence) and *vairagya* (detachment) as a means of restraining the mind (II.12, 23), implying that He is not indispensable.

The *Bhagavad Gita* is Vedantic in essence

The concept of God has an important place in the *Bhagavad Gita*, too, but with a qualitative difference from the Yoga view. Unlike Yoga, the *Bhagavad Gita* treats God as equivalent to the Brahman of the *Upanishads*, essentially one with the soul; and the soul, despite its apparent multiplicity owing to that of bodies, is in reality one and undivided. There is thus only one conscious principle in the world, which is also the ultimate Reality. Matter, implying the world is an appearance superimposed on it through error (*a-vidya*).

Error, whose beginning is unknown, leads the soul to identify itself with the body complex and, through it, to the experience of worldly pleasures and pains. This error is corrected when the soul comes to realise that it is different from the body and is restored to its real nature transcending worldly pleasures and pains. This state is called liberation (*moksha*) which, once attained, is eternal. This is an outline of the Upanishadic-Vedantic outlook which the *Bhagavad Gita* essentially shares despite its occasional play with words from Sankhya terminology.

The rationale behind the concept of God

The *Bhagavad Gita* primarily has the average person in view as its intended reader, and an average person cannot think of an impersonal, formless principle (XII.3-5). It, therefore, employs terms signifying personal God, but describes Him in phrases peculiar to the impersonal principle. This is the peculiar style of the *Bhagavad Gita*. Inevitably it treats these concepts jointly under the term God, although we will try to include in this article such details as ostensibly apply to the impersonal, formless principle. It should be made clear at the outset that the concept of a personal God is the projection at the universal level of the common man's idea of a parent or a king magnified many times, basically emotional in approach and a matter of faith, while the concept of absolute Reality is a thinker's projection at the universal level of his own conscious principle and the outcome of a rational approach. The first approach develops into devotion to a personal God with a total sense of surrender; the second, into mental absorption into the formless Reality accompanied by detachment from worldly life. Whatever the relative value of the projections, these approaches expand the dimensions of thinking of the soul beyond its tiny shell of individual life and show the way to attain lasting peace and happiness.

The impersonal God

Shorn of His attributes as a personal principle, God is named Brahman and is beyond the power of language to describe. This inevitably forces the discerning thinker to present the principle as a substratum of qualities that are opposite in nature when viewed on the basis of worldly experience (XIII.12-17). It is neither existent nor non-existent, has hands, feet, eyes, heads, mouths, ears on all sides; it is devoid of organs and yet manifest through their operations; it is aloof of all and yet supports all; it is devoid, and yet the knower, of 'qualities'; it is inside creatures and outside; it moves and moves not; being subtle, it is unknowable; it is far and near; common to all and yet appearing to be several; the creator as well as the destroyer; light of lights, beyond darkness; cognition as well as its object; subsisting in the hearts of all.

God and *Prakriti*

The other aspects of the study of God are the nature and the soul. Termed variously *prakriti* (nature, IX.7, 10) / *apara prakriti* (lower nature, VII.4-5), a-

kshara purusha (imperishable being, XV.16), *maayaa* (divine power, VII.14), *yoga-maayaa* (inherent divine power, VII.25), nature is viewed as the power of God (VII.14, XVIII.61). It is constituted of and is the ultimate source of three 'qualities' (*gunas*) – *sattva* (light), *rajas* (motion) and *tamas* (delusion/inertia) -- which inhere in everything in the world (XVIII.40). It is eightfold: the five elements (termed elsewhere *kshara purusha*, perishable being, XV.16), mind, intellect and ego (VII.4). To this list are added elsewhere, under the name *kshetra* (farm, XIII.5-6), which includes *prakriti* too: the unmanifest (*prakriti*), the ten organs, the five objects of the sense organs, and the attributes and experiences belonging to the body-mind complex.

Large portions of the *Bhagavad Gita* are devoted to the classification of worldly objects and trends on the basis of the three qualities (see Ch XIV, XVII, XVIII). Of these, those founded on *sattva* are considered to promote spiritual development, although the ultimate goal is stated to go beyond the domain of the qualities (see *Gunatiita*, XIV.20...). We find in this exposition predominance of a terminology, though conveniently modified, which later came to be equated with the Sankhya system.

God and the soul

Styled variously as *jiva* (living principle, XV.7), *para prakriti* (higher nature, VII.5), *kshetrajna* (farmer, XIII.1), *sharirin / dehin* (embodied, II.18, 30), *atman* (self, XIII.32), the soul is eternal despite its association with perishable bodies in successive births (II.17, 18, 20, 25). Entangled with *prakriti*, which is the real actor (XIII.29, XIV.19), the soul considers itself to be the author of actions (III.27-28) and the recipient of experiences. Thus it gets entangled in the world of 'qualities' during births in higher and lower levels of life (XIII.21) – qualities which bind it down into the body (XIV.5). Thus the poor soul gets hanged by mistake, not knowing it is not guilty! And cunning *prakriti*, moving incognito, has been reaping rich dividends for time beyond measure!! For, as the *Bhagavad Gita* says, both *prakriti* and *purusha* are eternal (XIII.19). The soul travels from one gross body to another capsuled in its subtle body, consisting of the five organs and the mind, which it carries as the wind carries fragrance from flowers (XV.7-8).

However, in its real nature, the soul is imperishable, all-pervading, unchanging, imperceptible, and consequently beyond the grasp of the mind (II.24-25). Realisation of its true nature as distinct from the *prakriti* leads the soul to liberation (XIII.34), a state free from rebirth (XIII.24, XV.6). Distinct from *prakriti*, the soul is not different from God. This is testified by numerous *Bhagavad Gita* references to God as subsisting in all creatures (XIII.2, 22, 31, XV.17, XVIII.20).

Knowledge, its means and criteria

The higher knowledge of the Absolute Reality outlined above is frequently praised by the *Bhagavad Gita*; Nothing in the world is as sacred as this

knowledge (IV.38); this knowledge which leads to liberation is the highest and the most secret knowledge, is most sacred and verifiable by actual experience (IX.1-2); the lack of this knowledge entangles the souls into the chain of recurring births and deaths (IX.3). The *Bhagavad Gita* often talks of knowledge (*jnana*) along with experience (*vijnana*, VI.8, VII.2, IX.1), implying thereby that mere intellectual knowledge is not enough to lead one to liberation. Thus, for one who acquires this knowledge, nothing more remains in the world worth knowing (VII.2).

This praise naturally creates the curiosity about the way it can be acquired and maintained. The *Bhagavad Gita* gives a long list of spiritual qualities that are at once the means of development and criteria of knowledge (XIII.7-11). They are, broadly, freedom from the natural instincts and reactions of a mind absorbed in worldly life, the subjugation of ego, detachment even from home and family, persistent awareness of the transitory and painful nature of worldly life, and devotion to practices contributory to spiritual progress.

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