

# Philosophy on the Battlefield: The *Bhagavad Gita*

## VI. The Yoga of Devotion Coupled with Knowledge

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

### Devotion as an alternative to *karma-yoga*

It is not only *karma-yoga* that allows the performer to be absolved of the consequences of actions; a total surrender of actions to God is also a solution to the problem. The Lord proclaims: 'What you do, what you eat, what you offer in the fire, what penance you perform, surrender all that to me. You will thereby be absolved of their consequences.' (IX.27-28). Disinterested surrender of actions to God is sure to enable the performer to cross over any and all difficulties. (XVIII.57-58)

Using words employed in the discussion of the *karma-yoga*, this is another way to withdraw authorship of actions, provided the performer does the actions with a sense of duty and has no personal ends to serve. While *karma-yoga* looks for support to a rational analysis of action and a philosophical view of the soul as explained in the previous articles, the path of devotion is founded on a total faith in God. God is the core force housed in all creatures' hearts and moving them in the manner of the merry-go-round, to put it in the words of the *Bhagavad Gita*. A complete surrender to Him leads the soul to supreme peace and eternal happiness, i.e. *moksha*, liberation. (XVIII.61)

### Knowledge through devotion

Does this mean that devotion is a short cut to liberation that bypasses the 'protocol' position of knowledge? No. The *Bhagavad Gita* does not interfere with the basic Upanishadic theory that knowledge alone leads to liberation – *tam eva veditva 'ti mrityum eti, nanyah pantha vidyate 'yanaya* (Shvetashvatara III.8). In fact, it reiterates it time and again in the course of its exposition. (Vide IV.10, 39, VII.29, XIII.12, 18, 23, 28, 30, 34, XVIII.55) Liberation does not come as a miracle; it has to be acquired through persistence (VII.19) and through the proper channels. What devotion does for the devotee is to place on God the responsibility of equipping the devotee with knowledge (X.10, XVIII.55). The *Bhagavad Gita* recommends the path of devotion on the ground that it is easy to follow, as against the path of pure knowledge which involves harder efforts. (XII.3). The reason is that it is difficult to fix the mind on the formless as one is required to do in the latter path. In devotion, God can be visualised in any form.

### God can be visualised in any form

Since faith is the foundation of devotion, the path of devotion confers on the devotee the freedom to visualise the God in any form, provided the person has faith in it. Faith is the very essence of devotion. (VII.21) As an illustration, reference may be made to the grand imagery in the eleventh chapter which depicts God in an unusual, universal, fierce divine form – *vishva-rupa* (Universal form). It was from this wonderful description that a verse was cited by the nuclear physicist, Openheimer, to describe the unimaginably dreadful explosion the atomic bombs triggered in Japan at the end of the Second World War. It runs thus:

'If the splendour of a thousand suns were to burst out simultaneously in the firmament, it would possibly be similar to the one emanating from the great Being.' (XI.12)

The *Bhagavad Gita* imagery in this chapter has an unmistakable resemblance to the famous *Purusha-suukta* of the Rigveda\*. The chapter concludes emphatically that total devotion, free from worldly ends, is the only possible means to visualise such a form, and gives a concealed warning that it may not be possible for a devotee to bear the impact of such a visualisation for a long time.

### **The personal God in the *Bhagavad Gita***

Apart from this special form, the *Bhagavad Gita* expounds in many places the general nature of God. Styled variously as *lishvara* (Controller, XV.17), *Maheshvara* (Great Lord, XIII.22), *Paramatman* (Supreme Soul, XIII.22, 31), *Uttama Purusha/Purushottama/Para Purusha* (Supreme Being, XV.17-18, VIII.22), *A-vyakta* (Unmanifest, VIII.21), *A-kshara* (Imperishable, VIII.21, VIII.3), *Adhyaksha* (Observer, IX.10), *Brahman* (Expansive one, VIII.3, X.12, XVIII.50), God is viewed in the *Bhagavad Gita* as the origin, sustenance and the dissolution of the world (X.20), not as an extraneous agent but the immanent, sustaining force in it (XV.17). He is housed in everybody's heart and is the ultimate source of the rise and the fall of all intelligent operations (XV.15). He is the father, the mother and the guardian of the world (IX.17). All things in the world move in Him like the wind in space (IX.6). In an invisible form, He pervades the entire world (IX.4, VIII.22). This does not mean that He is *equal* to the world; He is over and above the world. He transcends it by more of Him than permeates it (X.42). He is the essence of everything: fluidity in the water, light in the sun and the moon, sound in space, the pleasant smell in the earth, life in creatures, intellect in intellectuals, and so on (VII.8..., XV.12).

### **Means and status do not matter in devotion**

Once it is realised that faith is the essence of devotion, it matters little what things the devotee offers in worship. Says the Lord: 'A leaf, a flower, a fruit, plain water, -- anything that is offered with the pure sentiment of devotion, I enjoy.' (IX.26) The evaluation of devotees based on the cost and contents of the worship has no relevance in the domain of devotion even though such distinctions are patent

with religious establishments existing today. Man has an inherent ability to turn anything into business!

It follows from this that social status too cannot be the basis of evaluation of worship. Whatever the caste or creed of the devotee, howsoever low in the established social structure, the philosophy of devotion which views God as equal to all does not on that count differentiate one devotee from another. (IX.32) In the same spirit the Lord assures that even the worst sinner is not prohibited from entering the portals of devotion; for the moment the sinner turns to devotion, he starts a new chapter in his life and is sure to scale the righteous path and finally attain peace. (IX.30-31) Devotion believes that it is never too late to mend. It is this optimistic outlook that makes a world of difference between the orthodox ethics and devotion. The former is the practical man's outlook of the rule and the rod, while the latter is the manifestation of man's magnanimity leading to the path of hope and love.

### **Classes of devotees**

Though, thus, differentiation based on extraneous factors is prohibited in real devotion, the evaluation of devotees in consideration of their motivation is a point in the philosophy of devotion. The *Bhagavad Gita* divides devotees into four classes: those in distress, those prompted by the curiosity to know God, those seeking material means, and those who are enlightened (VII.16).

Devotees prompted by worldly motives are placed by the *Bhagavad Gita* on a level lower than that of enlightened one (VII.17-18). They are denounced elsewhere in the tradition as a traders, not devotees – *yas ta ashisha ashaste na sa bhrityas sa vai vanik* (Bhagavata Purana); for trade is an exchange, and devotion is love. The *Bhagavad Gita* does not denounce them in such strong terms; it rather speaks of them softly, that they are all good (VII.18), implying that it is always good to keep on the path of devotion even if it means an approach to minor deities with a worldly motivation (IX.23).

The *Bhagavad Gita*, however, declares the enlightened devotee as the very soul of God (VII.18). He approaches God with a single-minded devotion and sees Him everywhere – *vaasudevas sarvam iti* (VII.19). Such a man is too rare, says the *Bhagavad Gita*. Such devotees have no other object which engages their minds; they have their minds, in fact their very life, fully attuned to God. (IX.14, X.9) God considers it His duty to see that they do not lack means of sustenance while they are alive (IX.22).

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### **Note**

\*This is Rigveda X.90, one of the best known and insightful of the hymns. It depicts the universal principle in an extra-ordinary human form with thousand heads, eyes, feet, (cp. *Bhagavad Gita* XVI.16, 19, 23, 46) containing the entire

universe in a 'quarter' of His total size, the remaining three 'quarters' being left free. The hymn gives further details of which specific part of the universe was created from which limb of the great Being, etc. Thus although the *Bhagavad Gita* XI depicts the destruction, and the *Purusha-sukta* the creation, of the world, the debt the *Bhagavad Gita* owes to the latter is unmistakable. One cannot fail to notice here that the *Shvetashvatara Upanishad* also views a Universal Being in which two verses from the *Purusha-sukta* (Shvet. III.14-15, RV X.90.1-2) and one-and-a-half from the *Bhagavad Gita* occur (Shvet. III.16-17, *Bhagavad Gita* XIII.13-14), word for word. It has already been observed that this *Upanishad* may be viewed as the forerunner of the *Bhagavad Gita* as far as the synthetic outlook of the two is concerned. (See the earlier article, *The Yoga of Spiritual Knowledge*.)

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