

Philosophy on the Battlefield: The Bhagavad Gita

VII. The Yoga of Meditation

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

The Background of Renunciation

When, on the basis of a logical analysis of the action into its physical and mental aspects, the *Bhagavad Gita* maintains that *Karma-yoga* (actions without involvement) is in fact *Karma-sanyasa* (renunciation of actions), and further recommends the adoption of the former in preference to the latter, we cannot resist the curiosity to know the reasons that raised renunciation to such a high status. For an understanding of this subject, we have to have a rough idea about the evolution of thought that led to the emergence of the Upanishads in the long range of the Vedic literature.

The Vedic Literature

The Vedic literature is the oldest literature of the world that has been preserved intact through several millennia. It reflects the physical and intellectual world of an active society at an advanced stage of civilisation with India as its seat. It is composed in a language that belongs to the Indo-European family of languages and later evolved into classical Sanskrit analysed in detail by Panini (6th c. B.C.) in his *Ashtadhyayi* which is still considered to be a perfect grammar a language can possibly have. The Vedic literature is divided in its chronological order into: (1) The basic *Samhitas* (*Rigveda*, *Atharva-veda*) consisting mostly of hymns being prayers to gods exhibiting not infrequently literary excellence and philosophical heights; (2) The Sacrificial manuals consisting of derivative *Samhitas* (*Yajur-veda*, *Sama-veda*) and commentarial treatises called *Brahmanas*; (3) The *Aaranyakas* consisting of meditative insights, paving the way for (4) The Upanishads, being treatises devoted mostly to the deliberations of philosophical issues. The Upanishads came into existence as a revolt against the sacrificial creed championed by the second stage literature, and maintained that no ritual can lead to permanent happiness, for what is produced by an action is bound to come to an end sooner or later. The permanent happiness is in the very nature of the soul and can be restored through self-discovery otherwise called liberation.

Heritage of the Upanishads

The *Bhagavad Gita* picks up the thread of thought from the Upanishads when it criticises the Vedic sacrificial creed in unequivocal terms. The *Upanishads* observe that the sacrifices are like leaking boats sure eventually to sink – *plava*

hy ete adridhaa yajna-rupah (Mundaka I.2.7). The *Bhagavad Gita* despises the ritual-addicts as miserable commuters between the earthly and the heavenly life (IX.20-21), casts aspersions on ritualistic prescriptions as flowery language (II.42-44), and compares them to a tiny pond (II.46). The Lord advises Arjuna to keep off the sacrificial part of the Veda that involves the soul in the worldly life of 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, vide *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 the renunciation thereof – *na karmna na prajaya dhanena tyagenaike 'mritatvam anashuh* (?), -- not by ritual, nor progeny, nor wealth, but only by renunciation did some attain immortality. 'Immortality' is one of the terms employed, even by the *Bhagavad Gita* (vide II.15, XIII.12, XIV.20), to convey the concept of liberation.

Contribution of the *Bhagavad Gita* to the Upanishads

The *Bhagavad Gita* does not stop at picking up the thread of thought from the *Upanishads*; it improves upon it by a thorough analysis thereof (vide *The Yoga of Action*, Oct 99). This analysis brings out the fact that it is not the physical act, but the mental involvement, that binds the performer to the consequences of the act. This involvement implies motivation on the part of the performer to benefit from the act and has its roots in his ego as the performer. If then this element of ego is eliminated, the act is deprived of its power to bind the performer even if he executes the physical act (V.7-9). If, on the contrary, he gives up the physical execution of the act while his ego is still active, he cannot dodge the bondage resulting from non-execution of an act which itself can then be viewed as an action. The *Bhagavad Gita* spells out this situation when it declares him to be wise who sees inaction in action and action in inaction (IV.18). Arjuna's refusal to fight has emerged not from an elimination of the ego but from an active ego which thinks in terms of sin and merit; and these concepts 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).

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