

## Introduction to Yoga Philosophy 8: *Bhagavad Gita* and Yoga (1)

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The *Bhagavad Gita* in eighteen chapters is a part of the great Sanskrit epic *Mahabharata*. Although it is conceived as a dialogue<sup>i</sup> between Krishna and Arjuna on the background of the battlefield, it deals with a perennial problem of life, the problem of the conflict of values, and seeks its solution in following the conventional setup of duties in a way that would absolve the performer of the evil effects thereof – the path of action without involvement, or *Karma* Yoga. This way of action maintains the social setup, essential to make the society go, and, at the same time, raises the performer's status in developing spiritual abilities. This is what the work offers to a man of the world possessing a sense of duty and spiritual urge.

The *Bhagavad Gita* would have ended here, had it aimed at a solution of such conflicts and had *Bhagavad Gita* been an integral part of the epic drama. But it aspires to give full guidance to a man in his journey from a life of action towards the total freedom from the mundane life. The *Bhagavad Gita* is thus a complete guide to sublimation of man's being. From this point of view, it harnesses all aids that are of value on the path of spiritual development. Designating them by the common name Yoga, it proceeds to explain in a lucid manner how each of them can contribute to spiritual upliftment. Thus, to *Bhagavad Gita*, Yoga<sup>ii</sup> is a means (the most basic sense of the word), direct or distant, not to a mundane goal but to the highest goal of human existence (sense in which the *Bhagavad Gita* restricts the word), viz. liberation from the worldly existence, the *moksha*. This *Bhagavad Gita* concept of Yoga covers also the Yoga of meditation which is the most popular sense of the term and to which *Bhagavad Gita* devotes a whole chapter (ch 6) besides occasional references elsewhere.

This comprehensive view of Yoga makes *Bhagavad Gita* a *Yoga Shastra*, 'the science of Yoga', an epithet employed in the colophon of each of its chapters. Thus, *jnana* (knowledge of the reality), *bhakti* (devotion), *karma* (action, duty), *sanyasa* (renunciation) and *dhyana* (meditation) – are all Yogas provided they are not harnessed to worldly ends. To illustrate, to worship God for obtaining son, property, wealth, land, victory over enemies etc. is plain *bhakti*; to worship God for his grace to endow one with spiritual knowledge is *Bhakti* Yoga. *Karma* becomes *Karma* Yoga when performed for the purification of mind and without expectation of worldly gains. There is a long chain of means and ends in which every preceding link is a means to the following one which is its end. Every chapter of the *Bhagavad Gita* is therefore designated as a Yoga prefixed by the topic of the chapter<sup>iii</sup>.

Besides being called *Yoga Shastra*, *Bhagavad Gita* is also given the status of the *Upanishads*<sup>iv</sup>. And each one of its chapters is called an *Upanishad*, so that the *Bhagavad Gita* stands as a collection of eighteen *Upanishads*. This traditional designation not only raises the status of the *Bhagavad Gita*, an acceptably man-made work, to that of the *Upanishads* which are believed to be God-given (*apaurusheya*), but also gives a clue to its relation with the oldest Sanskrit philosophical treatises. The *Bhagavad Gita* not only epitomises the metaphysics of the *Upanishads* but freely borrows terminology, concepts and even verses and lines from them. On this score, *Bhagavad Gita* is most indebted to the *Katha Upanishad*. There is a noticeable attempt in the *Bhagavad Gita* to reconcile views of different philosophical systems such as *Sankhya*, *Yoga* and *Vedanta* make room for simple spiritual aids like devotion in a broader scheme of spiritual development.

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<sup>i</sup> Dialogue is the most popular literary form prevailing in ancient times across cultures and countries. All *puranas*, the *Mahabharata*, the *Yogavasishttha*, many Buddhist *suttas*, the *Milindapanha*, many *Jaina* texts, etc are presented in dialogue form. Even outside India, Plato's dialogues are too well known. It would be interesting to make a study of the dialogue form as a natural literary form all over the world.

<sup>ii</sup> The word comes from the root *yuj* to unite with a suffix 'a' meaning a means. Four goals of human existence (*purusharths*) are conceived: *dharma* (religion), *artha* (all that contributes to the smooth conduct of this-worldly life such as politics, commerce, and agriculture), *kama* (pleasures of life including sex), and *moksha* (liberation from transmigratory existence).

<sup>iii</sup> To illustrate the names of chapters of the *Bhagavad Gita*: Ch 2 is *Sankhya Yoga*, Ch 3 is *Karma Yoga* and so on. The word *Yoga* is not suffixed to the name of the first chapter which provides only a background for the teaching of the *Bhagavad Gita*.

<sup>iv</sup> *Upanishads* are part of the *Vedic* literature, chronologically the last to be added to it and devoted to philosophical issues. The oldest *Upanishads* by common consent are ten, though later works posing to be old continued to be added taking the number to more than two hundred.