

The Bhagavadgita's Philosophy

In order to fully appreciate the *Bhagavadgita's* spiritual philosophy, the reader requires some knowledge of the Sankhya system which forms a conceptual framework upon which poem's author built. The Sankhya system was the equivalent of the scientific explanation of the cosmos in its day. Its founding is traditionally ascribed to Kapila, an ascetic about whom nothing otherwise is known. Interestingly he, or whoever thought out the system, has no place for God. Instead, he began by positing two principles, spirit and matter, termed purusha and prakriti respectively. Both purusha and prakriti are eternal and unmanifest. Prakriti contains three constituent parts, called gunas. In the beginning these three gunas were in equilibrium, and prakriti remained unmanifest. But on being disturbed by the presence of purusha disequilibrium came about and prakriti, through the gunas, manifested the universe. This resultant manifestation may be best indicated diagrammatically.

Purusha ----- Prakriti

Buddhi
(intellect, will)

Ahamkara
(individuation, ego)

Organic Inorganic
Manas (mind) Five subtle elements
Five senses of perception Five gross elements
Five organs of action

First came prakriti's will (buddhi) to manifest itself. Then, as a result of this will, came individuation (ahamkara) whereby prakriti broke up into various separate entities. These entities were divided into two worlds, organic and inorganic. The organic world consists of mind (manas), the five senses of perception (hearing, sight, touch, taste and smell), and the five organs of action (the hands, the feet, the tongue and the two organs of excretion). The inorganic world consists of the five subtle elements (sound, form, touch, savour and smell), and the five gross elements (ether, wind, fire, water and earth).

This is the Sankhya system in its cosmological form. But the system also provides a schemata which explains how human beings function in the world. Thus the senses perceive the inorganic world, then

pass those perceptions on to the mind. The mind in turn processes and organises the senses' perceptions into information which is passed through the ego to the intellect. The intellect, on the basis of this information, decides what is to be done and, by its will, that decision is relayed via the ego back to the mind which has the decision executed by the organs of action. It can be seen, therefore, that in the Sankhya system the cosmological macrocosm is reflected in the human microcosm.

The Bhagavadgita's divergence from the Sankhya system

The *Bhagavadgita* accepts all the demarcations of manifest prakriti indicated above. What it does not accept is the Sankhya system's concept of the relationship between purusha and prakriti. For the Sankhya philosopher prakriti manifests the universe and all its multiple forms, and purusha divides itself to give each particular form an individual spirit. The two principles are thus equal but separate, working harmoniously, but intrinsically independent. This is not the Bhagavadgita's view.

The *Bhagavadgita's* concept is that purusha is identical with Brahman (God), and that unmanifest prakriti is a part of Brahman, being the cosmic seed which Brahman manifests as the universe. Thus the purusha existing within each form is a particle of Brahman itself. The universe, and all the creatures in it, are therefore absolutely dependent on Brahman, being manifestations of Brahman, sustained by Brahman, and returning to Brahman when the cycle of cosmic manifestation is complete. Hence nothing exists but Brahman, which simultaneously transcends, pervades and manifests as the universe.

The purusha in each form is termed atman (self). Just as Brahman transcends the universe, so atman transcends the body it dwells within, existing before that body was born, and continuing to exist after that body dies. It is by knowing atman that human beings may know Brahman. The reason atman does not know Brahman – or itself – is that it becomes attached to and identified first with the body and then, through the body's senses, with various sense-objects existing in the universe.

Another name for the universe is maya (illusion). Maya is Brahman revealed as manifest prakriti. But maya at the same time hides Brahman in its unmanifest, transcendent aspect. This is because human beings, attached to the body and sense-objects, become lost in the vast variety of manifest maya and remain ignorant of the unmanifest within and behind that manifestation. The atman which is attached to maya, and therefore exists in a state of ignorance regarding itself, does not pass on to Brahman at the death of the body in which it dwells, but instead is reborn in another body. Thus is perpetrated the cycle of birth, death and rebirth. What keeps atman bound to this cycle is karma resulting from the activities of the three gunas.

Karma and the three gunas

The three gunas are the 'strands' of prakriti. By name they are sattva, rajas and tamas. 'Sat' means intelligence, 'raja' means king, and 'tam' is darkness. Because the cosmos is prakriti's manifestation, and the gunas are prakriti's essential substance, these three permeate everything in the universe. On the cosmological level, sattva may be seen as light, rajas as energy, and tamas as matter. On the human level, sattva is happiness and knowledge, rajas is restlessness and passion, and tamas is ignorance and sleep.

When the three gunas interact work is done. This work is karma. All karma binds atman to the body. Sattva binds through happiness and knowledge, rajas through restlessness and passion, tamas through ignorance and sleep. If atman is bound to the body by karma it is not released when that body dies, but instead is reborn into another body. This cycle of rebirth is not broken by performing any particular work, but by transcending the realm of the three gunas and karma altogether. When transcendence is achieved atman realises its nature and at death goes to Brahman, no longer subject to the cycle of rebirth.

The chief metaphysical implication arising from this is that a person who engages in 'good' deeds no more escapes the rounds of births and deaths than does someone who does only 'bad'. For both are performing actions, therefore karma is being produced. And all karma, whether good or bad, binds atman to the body.

So why should we act at all? The *Bhagavadgita's* answer to this question is that because we have a body subject to the gunas we must of necessity act. If we do not act the body is not maintained, and it dies. But all action is performed only via the three gunas, therefore whatever we do will be permeated by either sattva, raja or tamas. Spiritually sattva leads to purity, rajas to impurity, and tamas to perversity. So, as regards the seeker's spiritual development, sattvic action is to be preferred.

Yet in the final analysis even the purity, knowledge, goodness and happiness of sattva has to be transcended if the quest for release is to be fulfilled. How does one transcend sattva, rajas and tamas? The *Bhagavadgita's* answer is that the seeker does so through the practice of yoga.

The four yogas

To Westerners the word yoga conjures images of people with their bodies contorted into difficult-to-achieve positions. This is actually hathayoga, which is not mentioned in the *Bhagavadgita*. Its concept of yoga is somewhat different.

Yoga literally means ‘plus.’ In the widest sense that which takes one towards God – being plus – is yoga, and that which takes one away – and hence is minus – is contrary to yoga. Thus, depending on context, yoga is any path, any attitude, any thought, any practice which takes one towards God. There are many different forms of yoga in Vedic teachings, but the Bhagavadgita primarily emphasises two, jnanayoga and karmayoga, but it considers bhaktiyoga and dhyanayoga are also significant.

Jnanayoga is the path of knowledge, and is practised by sankhyas (not to be confused with the Sankhya system). The disquisition on the immortality of atman provided in Discourse Two forms the introduction to jnanayoga, which has as its basic premise that we are not the body. The knowledge jnanayoga seeks is direct, experiential knowledge of unmanifest atman. However, to achieve this the sankhya has to transcend the three gunas, so knowledge of the manifest world and its activities is also required. But knowledge of the manifest world is sought only insofar as it assists transcendence. Essentially, it is with the unmanifest, and how to establish and sustain consciousness of atman and Brahman while living in the body, that jnanayoga is concerned.

Karmayoga is the path of action. It is, according to the *Bhagavadgita*, the most effective method of achieving self and God-realisation. But if all action binds atman to the body, how can practising karmayoga, and therefore acting, enable atman to achieve release? The Bhagavadgita’s answer to this apparent contradiction is that all action binds save that action performed with an attitude of selfless service. To act with an attitude of selfless service one has, first, to be non-attached while acting and, second, to surrender the fruit of that action to God.

The reasoning that justifies this concept is that Brahman exists beyond the actions of the three gunas. Therefore Brahman does not act. Only the three gunas act. Further, while Brahman has manifested and sustains the cosmos, it is not attached to anything it has manifested, and therefore is neither bound nor stained by the karma which results from whatever action occurs. Similarly, within human beings atman does not act. Rather the three gunas in the body act. Hence being established in atman means the three gunas are transcended; transcending the gunas means no longer being bound or stained by the karma which necessarily arises out of any bodily action.

To become established in atman karmayoga advocates two principle practices: being non-attached while acting, and not seeking the fruit of that action. Instead, the fruit of all action should be surrendered to God. Thus the karmayogi’s actions become acts of selfless service, performed not out of selfish desires, but with a sense of service towards God and God’s manifestation. To achieve this the karmayogi allows the gunas to perform the action, while he or she abides in non-acting atman. Abiding in non-action, karma is no longer accrued. And so release from karma is attained, and the rounds of births and deaths escaped.

Bhaktiyoga is the path of devotion. Its aim is to constantly worship God. The highest form of worship is

silent, inner remembrance. God is unmanifest and therefore formless, but in order to remember and worship God most people require a form by which the formless may be visualised. For those people Discourse Eleven contains a famed passage which shows God in the form of its destructive aspect.

Underpinning all three yogas is dhyanayoga (meditation). It is principally through meditation that atman, and therefore Brahman, is known. The method of meditation leading to atman's realisation is succinctly described in Discourse Six. Obviously dhyanayoga is essential to the practice of jnanayoga, for only through it may the unmanifest be constantly lived in. But both the karmayogi and the bhakta should practise it in order that their paths may be fully realised.

As to which of the three paths is preferred, the *Bhagavadgita* comes down firmly in favour of karmayoga because it is easy to practise and direct in its result. Of course elements of each path creep into the practice of the others. For example, the karmayogi needs knowledge if he or she is to act correctly. Just as the surgeon operating without knowledge of anatomy will kill rather than cure, so action performed without knowledge is unlikely to lead to a positive result. Similarly, the sankhya practising meditation needs to apply to it the principles of karmayoga, for meditation is work, and if the aim of meditation is to be achieved it needs to be performed in a non-attached manner, not seeking rewards. And the bhakta needs jnanayoga's knowledge of the unmanifest in order to attain to the proper depth of worship, and also karmayoga's teaching on the attitude to maintain while engaged in that worship. But in the final analysis jnanayoga's approach of always holding fast to the unmanifest is difficult to sustain while living in the body, while bhaktas tend to remain attached to their chosen form of God and not perceive the formless beyond the form. Thus karmayoga, easy and direct, is the recommended path.

It is in this recommendation that the *Bhagavadgita* is of great relevance to today's spiritual seekers. For the majority of men and women the world over live as householders, marrying, raising families, and working to support those families. Thus they live in the realm of action. Karmayoga being the pre-eminent philosophy of action, it must be studied, for only by it may the seeker learn not only to act wisely, but to realise both the self and God in the midst of that action.

Sacrifice and service

But no form of yoga will lead to realisation without being complemented by yajna. In this version of the *Bhagavadgita* yajna has been rendered either as 'sacrifice' or as 'service', depending on context. Conceptually, yajna involves both.

Those who seek realisation have to serve a teaching by doing what it requires. At the lowest level this means sacrificing various bodily pleasures and desires; at the highest it means sacrificing one's sense of

self. Just as parents sacrifice much to nurture their children, serving their requirements and needs, so must the seeker sacrifice a great deal to nurture the self, serving its requirements and needs. And the more the self blossoms, the more it has to offer in service to others. Thus sacrifice and service go hand in hand.

The *Bhagavadgita* recognises that there are many forms of sacrifice, but that they all take the seeker to the same goal of realisation. In jnanayoga the seeker engages in knowledge-sacrifice, by which the ego is sacrificed in atman. In karmayoga the seeker engages in work-sacrifice, by which the fruits of all work are sacrificed to God. In bhaktiyoga the seeker engages in worship-sacrifice, by which the attachments of body, heart and mind are sacrificed in constant remembrance of God. And in dhyanayoga the seeker's sacrifice is of the manifest in the unmanifest.

However, different people have different abilities and capacities. Thus what one person has to sacrifice will not be what another has to sacrifice. And neither will all seekers serve in the same manner or to the same extent. It is in acknowledgment of these differences that The Bhagavadgita brings in its teaching on the castes.

The caste system

There are four castes: brahman, kshatriya, vaishya and sudra. Every human being is a member of one of these four. Traditionally one becomes a member of a particular caste as a result of birth, by taking on the caste of one's parents. This is not the esoteric teaching. From the esoteric viewpoint one becomes a member of a caste not through birth, but according to one's innate nature. Thus the caste system is not an indication of status, or lack of it, but of inner nature and type. The work each person is drawn towards varies according to his or her type.

The brahman engages in intellectual work, the kshatriya is leader and organiser, the vaishya is the agricultural and industrial worker, and the sudra works in the service industries which maintain all the others. To give an example: the inventor of a new device, having spent much thought during its invention, is a brahman; the kshatriyas are the businessmen and women who organise its manufacture and distribution; the vaishyas are those who build it and work in the factories; and the sudras perform those services necessary to keep all running.

Ideally, each person should fulfil his or her function out of a sense of duty, not from a desire to exploit the situation for profit or power. By doing work which accords with caste-type, not only is the society maintained, but that work, conscientiously and wisely performed, becomes the means by which karmayoga may be practised. Thus what matters ultimately is not how grandiose or humble the work one does, but whether or not it is used as a means by which to attain release. Work done in a spirit of

non-attachment, without seeking rewards, will take one towards realisation. Work done from selfish desire, to acquire wealth, status, privilege and possessions, will not. For when the body dies it is not the work one did which counts, but whether or not one is established in atman.

Realisation and the moment of death

The *Bhagavadgita* considers the moment of death to be of great importance. Its view is that whatever one's chief pre-occupation during life, whatever one's principal attachment, one's thoughts will return to at the moment of death. And only if Brahman is remembered at the moment of death will the seeker go to Brahman thereafter. But to remember Brahman at the moment of death means that remembrance of Brahman has been sustained during one's life, while to remember Brahman requires being established in atman. Thus it is through being established in atman that Brahman will be attained, and the cycle of births and deaths escaped. Further, because death may come at any moment, remembrance needs to be continuous.

The obtaining of release cannot, therefore, be likened to the Christian death-bed confession, whereby the dying person attempts a last-minute reprieve from his or her sins. If the realm of action is not transcended before death, it will not be transcended after death.

Indeed, The Bhagavadgita considers ordinary religious practices quite insufficient to obtain release. The rituals prescribed by the Vedas and, by implication, those rituals of Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and all other religions, are performed in the realm of the three gunas, and cannot take the worshipper beyond that realm. Therefore religious rituals, and even religion itself, must be abandoned and experiential knowledge of atman and Brahman sought. Only by transcending religion will the goal of knowledge and liberation be achieved.

Conclusion

After hearing all this (and much else which this brief summary has not touched on), Arjuna realises his foolishness in not acting, and declares that he will now do his duty and fight with, and against, his kinsmen. So what is the battle he is to engage in? Clearly, it is not just an historical battle that requires the death of his cousins. Rather, at heart it is the battle for the self.

The field of Kuru on which the battle takes place is life. The two opposing armies are the forces of 'good' and 'evil' – that is, the forces which take the seeker towards or away from God and the self – arrayed within the body and which are manifestations of consciousness itself. Arjuna is the questing spirit which seeks release. Krishna is the voice of the teaching which guides him. And the kinsmen who

must die are those various parts within which are limiting in their nature and must be given up that the fullness of realisation may be achieved.

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