

*A Guide to*  
**Bhagavad Gita**  
**K. Aravinda Rao**

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# **A Guide to Bhagavad Gita**

K. Aravinda Rao

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# **Dedication**

to

**My Mother**

**Annapurnamma**

whose love and blessings

have been my strength

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## Transliteration key

The International Alphabet for Sanskrit Transliteration (IAST) has been used to denote the Sanskrit words written in Devanagari script. IAST is the most widely used key, which is also explained on the web. A brief table is given. However, it is advised to learn the exact sounds from a teacher.

अ	a	as in sun	क	k	cut/kite	ट	ṭa	touch
आ	ā	bald	ख	kha	Book-house, 'k' combined with aspiration 'h'	ठ	ṭha	anthill
इ	i	bit	ग	ga	gun	ड	ḍa	Dull
ई	ī	beat	घ	gha	Pig-head, the sound 'g' in 'gun' with aspiration 'h'.	ढ	ḍha	Godhead, aspiration as above
उ	u	put	ङ	ṅa	Lung	ण	ṇa	under (retroflex)
ऊ	ū	tool	च	ca	chunk	त	ta	Path
ऋ	ṛ	rhythm	छ	cha	catch-hold	थ	tha	The sound 'th' in 'thumb' combined with aspiration 'h'
ए	e	date	ज	ja	Jug	द	da	Then
ऐ	ai	might	झ	jha	Hedgehog, 'j' with aspiration	ध	dha	The sound 'th' in 'thus' plus aspiration
ओ	o	Oat	ञ	ña	bunch	न	na	number
औ	au	out						

प	pa	<i>pot</i>	य	ya	<i>yet</i>	ष	ṣa	<i>shun</i>
फ	pha	<i>Soup-hunt,</i> aspiration as above	र	ra	<i>run</i>	स	sa	<i>Sun</i>
ब	ba	<i>but</i>	ल	la	<i>love</i>	ह	ha	<i>Hall</i>
भ	bha	<i>Abhor,</i> aspiration as above	व	va	<i>voice</i>	क्ष	kṣa, combines the 'k' in 'king' with the sound 'sh' in <i>Shaw</i>	<i>rikshaw</i>
म	ma	<i>much</i>	श	śa	<i>sat</i>	ज्ञ	jña	

## Foreword

The *Bhagavad Gita* is the most important religious text for Hindus. We call it 'the most important text' because we have several texts of almost equal importance. This is because Hinduism was not originated by a single prophet or a sage at any one point of time as in the case of the western religions. It evolved over a few centuries. Several sages had composed several texts during that period and all those are taken as important texts. We, however, study this text as it is a concise summary of the entire Hindu philosophy.

There are several books in English that explain the message of the present text, the *Gita*, but most of them fall into three types:

Elaborate texts that give the Sanskrit commentaries with English translations, which are only for a determined reader,

Books written by eminent Swamijis and writers which give the essence of *Gita*, from the ethical and moral point of view, avoiding the philosophical discussions in the text, and

Self-improvement books, that dwell on the management principles and personality development, intended for a 'modern' reader, who is presumed to have a delicate intellectual appetite.

Books of the first type are primary works which convey the doctrine, particularly the commentaries in original. Those of the second type are by Sanskrit scholars who belong to the mainstream but who have chosen not to get into serious

discussions. Books of the third type are by those modern professionals who may or may not be acquainted with the original texts, but who have an inter-disciplinary approach and who address the modern reader.

There seem to be very few books which tell about the philosophical discussions in *Gita*, such as the nature of human being, nature of the divine, questions on creation and such others to the inquisitive reader in simple terms. There are several keen students who wish to know their philosophical tradition but who do not find books within their comprehension. I had made several attempts to study the text with commentaries, but kept it aside in reverence, hoping to read it at a later date. The commentaries require guidance of a teacher, because the *Gita* is not an introductory text on Vedanta. The subject is a *śāstra*, a science, with its own terminology and definitions. A study of this is essential to answer any questions which even the children may ask. I have tried to explain these in simple terms (though I have avoided serious philosophical debates). Hence, I feel, this book has some justification.

This book is intended for a student who may have no acquaintance with Vedanta. It will be of immediate help to one who has earlier attempted to study the *Gita* and has found it somewhat abstruse and remote. A preliminary knowledge of Sanskrit will, however, help him, though I have explained all the concepts. The glossary of frequently used terms in the text will be of use to the reader.

I am grateful to my teachers Mahamahopadhyaya, Padmasri Prof. Sri Pullala Sriramachandrudu, Swami Sri Tattvavidananda Saraswati and to late Sri Mudigonda Venkatarama Sastry for their teachings and lectures which have helped me in understanding the text.

\* \* \*

# Introduction

## 1. The Place of the *Gita* among the Sacred Texts

Though the *Bhagavad Gita* is the most *important* text, the *Vedas* are the most *primary* texts for the Hindus. The *Vedas* were a vast mass of hymns, rituals and discussions about the nature of the Supreme Reality, or God as we call It. They were all said to be revelations to several sages during their meditations on the nature of reality. Rig Veda is the oldest record of mankind. Sage Vyasa is said to have organized the whole mass of Vedic literature into four texts.

We normally call the human being a rational animal, a political animal and so on, but he is also a religious animal. Most people seek some divine help in times of distress or try to see some divine hand in the magnificent harmony of the universe. Most people seek rituals and some form of worship, while some others are contemplative by nature and try to speculate on more subtle issues about reality.

The *Vedas* take into account all these aspects of human nature. The initial portions of the *Vedas* describe prayers and rituals. Later they move on to describe the meditative practices for self-discipline and at the end they speculate on the nature of the Supreme. The end portions of the *Vedas* are called the *Upanishads*. These constitute the core philosophy of Hinduism.

Most of the religious texts are in Sanskrit but many portions of the *Vedas* are in the older form of Sanskrit, known as the Vedic Sanskrit. These texts make a tough reading even for a scholar in Sanskrit. Thanks to later commentators that we are able to know these texts.

It was therefore necessary to communicate the philosophy of *Upanishads* to the common man through a more understandable medium. Sage Vyasa took this responsibility on himself. He composed the huge epic the *Mahabharata* with hundred thousand verses and another huge epic *Srimad Bhagavatam* with eighteen thousand verses. *Mahabharata* is the largest epic of mankind and it is encyclopedic in range. It contains hundreds of sub-plots, stories, discussions on political and ethical issues and extensive philosophical passages.

The present text, the *Bhagavad Gita*, is one such philosophical passage. Thus it is not an independent book but a tiny portion of the great epic. It has seven hundred verses, covering about forty printed pages. It is in the form of dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna. Krishna is god in human form (about which I will explain later) and Arjuna is a warrior in the battle field, facing a dilemma about his duty. Krishna gives a comprehensive picture of the human situation, the nature of Supreme Reality and the right attitude to one's socially assigned duty.

The *Gita* is a mere passage but we find voluminous commentaries. The reason can be understood thus. Imagine a conversation between two experts in any field of knowledge, involving use of terminology unique to their field. A common man, however intelligent he may be, would require an introduction to the subject and concepts, besides some explanation of the terms. The case of the *Gita* is same. We may note the following points:

Both Krishna and Arjuna were educated in the *Vedas* and other scriptures as part of their *kṣatriya* (ruling class) educational regimen. (A *kṣatriya*'s field of study included four subjects – logic (which gives analytical ability), the *Vedas* (which gives spiritual discipline), economics, and jurisprudence. All these are needed for a ruler). It was only

that Arjuna was temporarily confounded by his attachment and sentimentalism and Krishna had to reorient him.

The conversation took place about five thousand years ago and the discussion is on the concept of dharma with reference to the social institutions of the time.

The conversation uses terminology relating to the metaphysical thought of the times. It has allusions to contemporary schools of philosophy – the *sāṅkhya*, yoga, *mīmāṃsā* and other schools (which will be explained in the text).

Arjuna was in a moral dilemma, which needed an exhaustive discussion on the issues of dharma, the nature of man and the nature of the Ultimate.

The whole conversation took place for about two and a half hours; that is the time taken to cover the dialogue in 600 verses, (excluding about hundred verses which are descriptive in nature). It is not as though Krishna and Arjuna were engaged in conversation for several days.

Hence it was necessary to write elaborate annotative notes to help the readers of the later day. Besides, scholars of different schools – the dualists (like Sri Madhwacharya), the non-dualists (like Sri Shankaracharya), the advocates of qualified non-dualism (like Sri Ramanujacharya) – wanted to validate their own doctrines by commenting on the *Gita*, like they did in the case of the *Brahma Sūtra-s*. That is how we find numerous commentaries on the *Gita*.

Of all the available commentaries, Sri Shankara's is the oldest, though he has himself mentioned that there were several commentaries prior to him and quoted their arguments. Later, Sri Ramanuja, Sri Madhwa and many other followers of those schools wrote commentaries on the book. The present book follows the commentaries of the non-dualist school – primarily that of Sri Shankara.

## 2. The Context of the *Gita*

At the battlefield Arjuna stands in a moral dilemma. His question is whether to fight or not. His kith and kin stand in front of him, poised for war, as it is a war between the fraternity. He had come prepared for war, having mobilized armies from all his friends. He had personally requested Krishna to be his charioteer. His *dharma* as a ruler is to wage war against injustice, but he is not sure whether it is moral to do so. Now he says that it is better to live on alms like a mendicant, which is the *dharma* (duty) for a Brahmin (a person of priestly class).

It was Krishna's duty to remind Arjuna of his *dharma*. As Arjuna too was schooled in *dharma*, Krishna had to give a comprehensive picture of it in a larger context, explaining to him the nature of human being, the nature of Ultimate Reality (called Brahman in Vedanta), and the relation between the human being and the Brahman. In a way he was giving a larger picture of *dharma* to Arjuna. He was not instigating Arjuna for war. Krishna was merely surprised that the warrior who had come prepared for a just war had suddenly felt confused and it was his duty to remind him of his *dharma*.

## 3. About the Text

The word '*Gita*' literally means 'that which has been sung', but it does not mean that Krishna sang it in the battlefield. A noteworthy and venerable message about the nature of Supreme Reality (Brahman) was called *Gita* in the Vedic tradition. These may or may not be independent texts. There are several *Gitas* in the Indian tradition – Anu *Gita* (in *Mahabharata* itself), Uddhava *Gita* and Shruti *Gita* (in *Srimad Bhagavatam*), Ashtavakra *Gita* (an independent work) and so on. The present text is called *Bhagavad Gita*, which in Sanskrit can mean a message by the Lord, message about the Lord, or a venerable message.

The *Gīta* is in eighteen chapters, each of the size of one to two pages. At the end of each chapter the closing line (a refrain) mentions the attributes of the text. The *Gīta* is lauded as i) *upaniṣad*, ii) *brahmavidyā*, iii) *yogaśāstra* and iv) *saṃvāda*. I shall explain what these words mean.

An *upaniṣad* is a text which is at the concluding part of a Veda, which deals with the knowledge of the Absolute. Literally it means a study in the close proximity of a guru, under the close guidance of a realized person. The *Gīta* is called an *upaniṣad* as it is said to contain the message and essence of all *upaniṣad*-s. A well-known verse compares Krishna to a milk-man while all the *upaniṣad*-s are compared to cows. The milk of those cows is the nectar called *Gīta*. Arjuna is the calf for whom the milk is immediately meant, but it is also taken by all others (readers). This is the nectar of self-knowledge.

The other appellation is *brahma-vidyā*, which means the knowledge of Brahman. Brahman is the name for the Supreme Reality. The *Upanishads* say that this Reality is of the nature of pure consciousness existing infinitely. It is not a personal god but an infinite entity. We have to mention it by some name and hence the name given is Brahman. (Brahman is different from Lord Brahma, the name given to the function of creation). It is designated in neuter gender as 'It', because It is of the nature of pure consciousness. This is the reality at the absolute level. However, religion visualizes a god at the functional level. This functional/empirical god is a manifestation in pure consciousness, as we shall see in great detail. The well known gods we find in the *purāṇa*-s – Vishnu, Brahma and Rudra – are mere manifestations in this absolute consciousness. The *Gīta* is about knowing such Absolute Reality and hence called *brahma-vidyā*.

It is also called *yoga-śāstra*, the science of yoga. Yoga does not refer to the exercises we do. It does not even refer

to the philosophical system of Sage Patanjali, though some of the spiritual disciplines of that school are similar here. Etymologically, the word yoga is from the Sanskrit root 'yuj', which is cognate with the word 'yoke'. It refers to a means or strategy to attain something which we do not have already. The ultimate message of the *Gita* is to tell about the unity of the individual consciousness called *jīva* and the Supreme Consciousness called Brahman. This is the yoga, 'yoking', intended in the text. However, each chapter is also titled yoga, depending on the theme of the chapter; like it is called *bhakti-yoga* when the strategy used is *bhakti*, devotion; it is called *karma-yoga* when the strategy used is action and similarly in other cases.

It is also called *saṁvāda*, a scholarly dialogue between a teacher and a disciple. Krishna is the guru and Arjuna is the disciple. It is said by the commentators that taking Arjuna as a pretext, Krishna has told the divine message of the *upaniṣad*-s to the whole of humanity. Krishna is hence called *jagad-guru*, the universal teacher.

#### 4. Philosophy and Religion – The *Gita* is a Philosophical and Religious Text

Religious texts normally make an easy reading. They describe the creation of the world by God, a long lineage of kings and people and stories of how God guides them and intervenes to help the righteous. The books also describe heaven and hell and present an ethical code to followers. There is no philosophical enquiry in them.

Unlike other religious texts, Vedanta (the non-dualist thought which we find in the *Upanishads* and in the *Gita*) is more of philosophical thought and hence poses a challenge to our intellect. (This is true of Eastern religions in general. The Buddhist and Jain texts are both philosophical and religious texts). Vedanta takes into account some beliefs of religion such

as *karma*, rebirth and heaven and puts them in a plausible framework. It talks about the Absolute Reality in terms of pure consciousness which shines on all things, sentient and insentient and which is the source of all intelligence. Thus it goes beyond religion. Vedanta talks of the unity of consciousness of the individual and the Absolute. It talks of the emotions of love and hatred which are universal, and explains the constitution of the human mind, how it is illumined, and how the three constituents of nature - *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas* – make the human personality. It does not consider heaven as ultimate, but talks of *mokṣa*, or liberation (which will be discussed in due course). The followers of different religious sects accepted the pre-eminence of the *Gita*, as it permitted diverse religious beliefs. All those who accepted the *Vedas* have also accepted the *Gita*. Hence we find commentaries by different schools.

The titles of different chapters – *bhakti yoga*, *sāṅkhya yoga*, *karma yoga* – may give an impression that they are different paths to self enquiry. It is not so. There are only two paths – the path of action (*karma yoga*) and the path of knowledge (*sāṅkhya yoga*). All others fall under these two categories. Devotion, renunciation and others are consciously done as spiritual practices and hence fall under the category of action. These are intended for purification of mind. Contemplation starts after the cleansing of mind. Liberation is only through knowledge of Self. It is not attained by action. The results of *karma* are ephemeral, time-bound, but liberation is eternal.

The *Upanishads* prescribe that a seeker has to approach an enlightened guru if he seeks enlightenment. It is only such a guru who knows the pitfalls on the path. Realization of Self is not a mere intellection, but a transformation of the inner self, equating the individual self with the Absolute Self.

## 5. The Three Primary Texts for Hindus

Here it is useful to know about the three texts which are the primary source of Hindu philosophical thought. These are – the *Upanishads* (collectively taken), the *Brahma sūtra*-s and the *Gita*. These are collectively called the the three-fold path (*prasthānatraya*). The paths are different but the goal is self-realization. The *Upanishads* are as a result of the visions of various sages who did *tapas* (meditation) and ‘saw’ the texts. These are numerous. Traditionally 108 *Upanishads* are accepted though ten of them are more prominent. A superficial reading would show some apparent contradictions in these and hence the *Brahma sūtra*-s were composed by sage Badarayana, to establish the unity of thought in different texts.

## 6. Arjuna, the Universal Man

Lord Krishna, the narrator of the *Gita* as we know, is a householder and a king himself. The listener Arjuna is also the same. The place of teaching is the battle field. It need not necessarily be taken as a place of physical conflict, but as a metaphor for a psychological conflict. It is also clear that the message is not for mendicants or *saṃnyāsī*-s who have renounced the world but for all of us who are actively in the worldly life. Krishna teaches several strategies for self-realization, besides advising us about our attitude to *karma* (work) in case we choose to remain in the path of action (worldly life).

We noted that the *Gita* is a tiny portion of a larger book, *Mahabharata*. It is the pattern in the Vedic scheme of dissemination of knowledge that the *dharma* which is told in the *Vedas* has to be elaborated in the ancillary texts like *Mahabharata* and the *purāṇa*-s (the mythological texts). If we can broadly compare the *Vedas* to a textbook of law, the ancillary texts are like the case law, where live illustrations are

given for elucidating the nuances of dharma. It is also a process of humanization of Vedic knowledge.

## 7. How to Study the *Gita*?

This guide is meant to take the student to the main text of the *Gita*. The *Gita* is not a text for intellectual curiosity but a manual for self-improvement and self-knowledge. It is a manual of physical and mental disciplines to be practised. A beginner may study this guide slowly in order to understand and appreciate the concepts. He may simultaneously start following the original text. We have an ancient tradition called *parayanam* (*pārāyaṇam*) in which holy books are read on a daily routine. *Parayanam* means the 'supreme way' (*param* = supreme, and *ayanam* = way) to be followed. Even today texts like the *Gita*, the *Ramayana*, or the *Bhagavatam* are read every day by the devout. For the lay devotee this practice promises some merit or good fortune. The learned, of course, do it for enlightenment.

In the entire text of the *Gita* when Krishna refers to himself as 'I', the meaning of 'I' is different in different contexts. Sometimes he refers to himself as the Supreme Reality, sometimes as the creator of the universe, and rarely as a personality of his times. There are more than a hundred references to himself – like 'I', 'mine', 'by me' – in the *Gita* and we have to see from which standpoint Krishna is speaking. In most places, scholars have interpreted the reference to first person as referring to the Supreme Reality, the Brahman. That is why Sage Vyasa says '*bhagavān uvāca*', - 'the Lord told' – instead of saying – 'Krishna told'.

Similarly, Krishna, at times, talks about a realized person, at times about a devotee or a practitioner of self-restraint and at times talks with reference to Arjuna, telling him what is suitable for him. Introductory notes on the verses by the commentators are highly useful here.

The book is intended for all of us who are in the place of Arjuna, encountering several dilemmas. At a practical level it gives us an insight into human nature and develops dispassion and enables us to face conflict situations. At a higher level, the message is intended to prepare a seeker for self-realization and take him on par with the Absolute. It is a book which expects an internal transformation and a progressive negation of the individual self in order to equate the realized person with the universal Self.

\* \* \*

# 1

## The Yoga of Arjuna's Anguish (*Arjuna-viṣāda-yogaḥ*)

### 1.1. The Context

This chapter is named as the yoga of Arjuna's anguish. Here Arjuna, the protagonist and the star warrior in the battle to ensue, is seen deeply anguished. He is in a state of extreme distress. He collapses in helplessness, unable to bear it.

In the introduction we have seen why every chapter is called *yoga*. The names of chapters indicate the theme or predominant argument in the chapter, and here it is Arjuna's sorrow. This chapter has 47 verses. The whole chapter is a part of the story line and hence narrative in nature.

The cause of Arjuna's sorrow is known to a reader acquainted with the story of *Mahabharata*. To recapitulate, the Kauravas, the cousins of the Pandavas had tried to kill Pandavas several times, usurped their share of the kingdom by guile, dishonoured their wife, sent them to forests for thirteen years and broke the condition of returning the kingdom after their forest tenure was over. Krishna also tried to mediate but in vain. Both groups prepared for a showdown and hence mobilized mighty armies for war. The two rivals Arjuna and Duryodhana, the Kaurava chief, went to Krishna also for help. Krishna posited his entire army on one side and himself on another as a non-combatant advisor. Arjuna wisely chose Krishna while Duryodhana gladly took the army.

A battle ground named *kurukṣetra* was chosen and the deadly battle started. After ten days of war, Bhishma, the revered veteran among the Kauravas, fell on a bed of arrows. This news was carried to Dhritarashtra (*dhṛtarāṣṭra*), the blind and aged king of the Kauravas, by Sanjaya, his courtier and trusted counselor. On a detailed enquiry by Dhritarashtra, Sanjaya started narrating the proceedings of the war, which he could closely see and listen because of a special gift of Sage Vyasa. Thus starts the *Gita*.

The first line is a question of Dhritarashtra about what ‘my men’ and Pandavas did in the *kurukṣetra*, which he terms as *dharmakshetra* (*dharmakṣetra*), the field of dharma. Ironically the elderly king suggests that *dharma* would win. (Dharmaraja is name of the chief of Pandavas, who is also renowned for his sense of justice and fairness). *Kurukṣetra* means the field of Kuru, the forefather of the *kaurava* lineage, who had performed several pious and noble deeds at that place and hence it was known by his name. By some premonition Dhritarashtra is suggesting the victory to his rival group.

*Kṣetra* is an important term which we come across later in the *Gita*. Literally, the word means a cultivable field. The human body is the field where good and bad deeds are done and their results are experienced, like the harvest we reap from our fields. The word ‘*kuru*’ is itself from a Sanskrit root which means ‘to work’, or ‘to do’. In the human body which is the field, it is the individual self (called *jīva*) who is the doer.

## 1.2. Two Human Paths – Worldly Action and Renunciation

Humanity has two types of people – the majority who seek prosperity and pleasures in life and the very few who are inward looking and contemplative in nature. The quest for prosperity and pleasures should be within ethical framework. Scriptures use the word *dharma* to denote this ethical structure. Thus

it is *dharma* to pursue prosperity and pleasures and it is also *dharma* to pursue the path of contemplation and renunciation.

Both these are needed in a balanced society. The latter guides the former. Together, they sustain and uphold the social structure. Dharma is an important concept in Indian tradition. The word is from a Sanskrit root which means ‘to hold’, ‘to bear’, or ‘to sustain’. It is called dharma because it holds the society from breaking down or disintegrating. Apparently, it is a combination of religion, metaphysics, social philosophy, and ethics. The word ‘dharma’ is thus difficult to translate, and it is good to see that it has entered the English lexicon.

In the introduction too, we noted that the *Gita* is more of philosophy than a set of religious beliefs. Dharma is another component in the text, as both religion and philosophy have an underpinning of dharma in them.

The commentator Sri Shankara, in his introductory note, gives a good introduction to dharma, which is the subject matter of the text. The key lines tell the following:

*Vedas* mention two types of *dharma* – *dharma* for action and *dharma* for renunciation, which in Sanskrit are called *pravṛttilakṣaṇa* and *nivṛttilakṣaṇa*. These are the foundation for the world to exist or hold together.

The Lord has chosen Arjuna for this message because Arjuna is an esteemed person and whatever is followed by eminent men in society is followed by others.

The primary objective of the science of the *Gita* (*gītāśāstra*) is to enlighten the seeker for total withdrawal from the world, which is the result of ignorance (*avidyā*). This is possible by total renunciation of action and by Self-enquiry.

The secondary objective is to propose desire-free action (*niṣkāma karma*), done or performed as dedication to the

divine (*īśvarārpanabuddhi*), which bestows good in this world and hereafter, besides purifying the mind of the performer. This pure mind enables him to pursue the path of knowledge if he so desires later.

The above terms need some preliminary explanation, though the text elaborates them later.

All of us who are not seekers (we may be part time seekers, not leaving our worldly pursuits) are very much men of the world, and we need some guidelines for action which benefits mankind. This is the *dharma* for a man of action.

Those who are serious seekers do renounce the world, and disconnect themselves from all worldly bonds, (though the ‘big brother’ society will not allow a person to throw away his social security card, Vedanta envisages this), and engage themselves in self-enquiry. This is the *dharma* of renunciation (*nivṛttilakṣaṇa*).

The term ‘ignorance’ in Vedanta is not ignorance of sciences or arts or such other studies, but it refers to the fault of seeing the non-real as real. A person may be an expert in some field of study, but with regard to knowledge of Brahman he is ignorant, in the sense that he sees the unreal as the real and does not see himself as Brahman. (There is nothing to be ashamed of this ‘ignorance’, because all except the enlightened person are considered ignorant. The seeker is one who wants to get rid of his ignorance and realize his self).

Desire-free action is a misunderstood concept. The *Gita* does not ask a person to work in a company and go home without the pay slip. It refers to the religious actions (known as karma) described in the scriptures. Rituals to be performed as a dedication to the divine is suggested for someone who desires to achieve the purity of mind, which is a pre-requisite for graduating to the path of knowledge. Action as dedication

to the divine is a state of humility and an acknowledgement of the interdependence of all things in the world. Submission to this cosmic plan is otherwise called offering to the divine. This will be elaborated in chapter four which deals with *yajña* in a comprehensive way.

### 1.3. Lord, the Charioteer

Lord Krishna is the charioteer for Arjuna. The chariot symbol is significant in the *Upanishads*. *Kathopanishad* (*kaṭhōpaniṣad*) has the following mantra (3-3):

आत्मानं रथिनं विद्धि शरीरं रथमेव तु ।  
बुद्धिं तु सारथिं विद्धि मनः प्रग्रहमेव च ॥

*ātmānaṃ rathinaṃ viddhi śarīraṃ rathameva tu ।*  
*buddhiṃ tu sārathiṃ viddhi manaḥ pragrahameva ca ॥*

“Know that the self is the master of the chariot for the body which is the chariot. Know that the discerning intellect is the charioteer and that the mind is the bridle.”

The human body is the chariot, dragged in different directions by the wayward senses which get attracted to every beautiful or pleasant sensory object. The mind is the bridle while the *buddhi*, the intellect, is the charioteer. The master of the chariot is the individual self. A wise intellect will lead him to the right goal and an unwise one can lead him to disaster. The *Kathopanishad* continues to say that a wise charioteer will lead the self to the Supreme Reality.

Here Krishna is the charioteer for Arjuna who is leading Arjuna to enlightened action. Krishna is the teacher, the *jagad-guru* – universal teacher – as we noted above. His role as the charioteer is to explain that the battle was a part of the divine scheme and that Arjuna and others are merely instruments.

#### 1.4. Descent of God - *Avatāra*

Where does the Lord come from? This is one of the fundamental postulations in the Indian system. The Supreme Reality (through the empirical ruler of the universe) is believed to ‘come down’ to earth whenever there is a collapse of *dharma* and is said to restore *dharma*. This is called *avatāra*, which literally means ‘coming down’. Brahman, the Supreme Reality, is of the nature of consciousness and existence. It is *nirākāra* (having no appearance) and *nirguṇa* (without functions or attributes, not even that of ruling the world). The ruler at the empirical level (see para 4 of part 3 of the introduction) takes a name and form whenever there is a need. Bhagavatam (the well-known *purāṇa* by sage Vyasa) describes several *avatāra*-s of Lord Vishnu, who is treated as the Supreme Reality in that text.

The Indian tradition postulates such appearances of the lord of the universe. Brahman has Its manifestations through *māyā*, a power, so to say, which is eternally associated with Brahman, but not a ‘quality’ of Brahman. This *māyā* has a power to project itself in various forms. The whole universe is said to be such manifestation. Various deities like Vishnu, Shiva, Shakti and others and their realms are mere appearances within this *māyā*. Writers of the *purāṇa*-s (it is generally believed that Vyasa wrote all the eighteen of them) have described various realms and their attainment mainly to keep the human being on the path of righteousness. Ardent followers of these sects proclaim their own deity as the highest, or their realm as supreme, but such followers are very few. The common Hindu is seen accepting all of them as manifestations of one and the same Brahman. It is enough if we understand that whenever there is upsurge of evil, the divine force has a way of manifesting and setting things right.

## 1.5. Arjuna's Plight

Let us return to the text. We saw the question of Dhritarashtra to Sanjaya. Sanjaya started narrating thus.

While the two armies stood marshaled against each other, Duryodhana, the *kaurava* chief, approached Drona (the martial arts guru for both *kauravas* and *pandavas*), the commander of his army and started reviewing the army. He started evaluating the chieftains of both armies. 'See how your able pupil Dhrishtadyumna, has fielded the army against us', he told Drona with an undisguised tone of sarcasm.

As the conches blew and as the warlike shouts were made by the warriors, Arjuna became inquisitive and requested Krishna to position the chariot in between the two armies. He was curious to see as to who were all with whom he was going to fight. A brief review of the armies and persons who had come prepared to lay down their lives in war brought a sudden distress in him. He saw the *kauravas*, who were none else than his cousins, uncles, sons, grandfathers (such as Bhishma) and all those whom he once dearly loved. They were the persons with whom he would gladly share the kingdom and whom he would loathe to kill. The thought of killing elders like Bhishma and gurus like Drona was repulsive, and he collapsed in despair, leaving his bow and arrows.

Here Arjuna's reasoning was affected by the overwhelming compassion he felt for his kinsmen. The sentiments are called *rāga*, *śoka* and *moha*. An extreme sense of attachment and inability to live without someone is *rāga*. This is caused by *moha* or delusion or inability to see things right. This leads to *śoka*, sorrow or despair which is manifest in Arjuna now. He feels that Bhishma, Drona and several others are essential for his happiness. Inability to see things right, or to see dharma as *adharmā* is *moha*.

How is it a delusion? Forgetting one's duty and trying to adopt the role of someone else is delusion. It was the duty of a *kṣatriya* to put down the wrong doer and establish dharma. Much discussion had taken place before war about the legitimacy of the war and Krishna himself tried to mediate and avert war. Duryodhana stood firm and declared that he would not part even with a tiny speck of land that would stand on a needle-head. Hence the war was in accordance with dharma and Arjuna's sudden change in stand about its legitimacy is due to his delusion.

Here the commentators have illustrated from the texts on dharma to show that those who indulge in arson, who administer poison, those who outrage the modesty of women or those who grab the property of others are all outlaws - *ātatāyinaḥ* who deserved to be killed at sight. The *Kauravas* had done all these to *Pandavas* and it was a righteous action of *Pandavas* to go to war. Arjuna acknowledges that *Kauravas* are outlaws by the above definition but still shirks from his duty.

The point for discussion is despair, or anguish which has disoriented Arjuna. Krishna's task is to analyze it and remind him of his duty as a *kṣatriya*. Arjuna's dereliction can be termed 'the sin of omission', similar to that of a judge who becomes sentimental while awarding a sentence against a wrongdoer.

\* \* \*

## 2

# The Yoga of Knowledge (*sāṅkhya-yoga*)

### 2.1. An Overview

This is a long chapter compared to others, having 72 verses. It gives a bird's eye view of the Vedantic doctrine which is the subject matter of the *Gita*. The word *sāṅkhya* means self-knowledge. (This is different from the *sāṅkhya* philosophy which is one of the six systems of Indian philosophy, propounded by Sage Kapila). The chapter may make a tough reading for a beginner because Krishna starts his teaching with the most important question in Vedanta.

The expression 'self-knowledge' is unique to Vedanta. We normally know ourselves to be having a certain name, a certain occupation, social standing and belonging to certain religion or race. We define ourselves with all these identities. Vedanta does not take into account these identities. It does not even consider whether you are a male or a female. It merely considers the fact that you are a conscious entity and that this is your identity which is in common with all living beings starting from the tiny virus to a dinosaur. All are categorized as beings endowed with intelligence, which can otherwise be called consciousness. We are going to see a great deal of discussion on what is self and what is not self throughout the *Gita*. This 'self' is called *ātmā* (usually written as *atman* in English) in Vedanta.

This chapter can be viewed in four parts. Arjuna's surrender to Krishna is told in the first eleven verses. The second part (verses 12-30) describes the path of knowledge, (*jñāna-yoga*),

while indicating to Arjuna that it is not for him (verses 31-38). The third part is the path of desire-free worldly action (*karma-yoga*). The qualities of an enlightened person (*sthitaprajña*), the efforts to attain that stage and the pitfalls to be avoided are described in the end (verses 54-72).

## 2.2. Arjuna's Surrender

Arjuna's tone is quite definitive toward the end of the first chapter. He is sure that his argument is correct. He starts in the same tone in this chapter also. "It is better to live by begging for alms", he says. But begging was allowed only for a Brahmin in those days and hence what Arjuna says implies switching over to someone else's duty (*dharma*), leaving his prescribed duty. As per the social order of the times, renunciation (*saṁnyāsa*) and begging were only allowed for a Brahmin and not for others. (The Indian society was divided into four categories – priestly class, warriors, traders and workmen, as in other cultures. The persons of priestly class were known as Brahmins. The hero Arjuna in the present case belonged to the warrior class).

Having started on a confident note, Arjuna seems to realize that he could be wrong and so he requests Krishna: "My nature is demented by the flaw of sentimental anguish and my sense of judgment is confounded. I come to you as a pupil, having surrendered to you; dictate what is best for me" (2:7). It is a state of inability to judge what is right and what is wrong, what is *dharma* and what is *adharmā*.

There are two terms in Vedānta – *śreyas* and *preyas*. These are the two pursuits told by Yama, the teacher in the *Kathopanishad*, while testing his student Nachiketa. *Śreyas* is what is good for a person, in the sense that it helps him in his spiritual development. *Preyas* is that which gives pleasures of the world. Self-enquiry leading to realization is *śreyas*. In the text Arjuna asks Krishna to tell as to which option is *śreyas* for him and also requests Krishna to command him as a disciple.

The word ‘surrender’, *prappatti*, is also significant. It refers to an important quality of a devotee or seeker waiting for self-knowledge. It is a general principle that the knowledge of Brahman has to be imparted only to a person who is really sincere. The above verse is considered as *śaraṇāgati* verse, the verse of surrender. It is the duty of a master to impart knowledge to such a student.

### 2.3. The Universal Teaching

Till now Arjuna has been the master but now the roles have been reversed. Arjuna and Krishna are talking in a different tone. Arjuna has been the master and Krishna his charioteer. Now he is a charioteer in a different sense, the one who guides him philosophically. The flaw as admitted by Arjuna is anguish which is clouding his judgment, and such anguish is due to faulty perception. The commentator Sri Shankara points out that sorrow and delusion are the cause for the eternal cycle of birth and death. Self-knowledge is the only remedy which breaks a person free from this cycle. Hence Krishna becomes a teacher, and as Shankara points out, he takes Arjuna as a pretext and delivers his message to the world.

The teaching is universal and hence we bow to Krishna saying - *Kṛṣṇam vande jagad-gurum* – which means ‘I bow to Krishna, the universal teacher’. In fact we see this appellation *jagad-guru* referring to some traditional teachers. Etymologically, *jagat* is that which is moving, that which is always in a flux, that which changes. A guru, for that reason is one who knows the change and directs the society. Sage Vyasa was also a teacher of that order and hence it is said that his work *Mahabharata* is at once a book on *dharma*, philosophy, political science, social science and also a great poetic work. A sample of it is seen in the *Gita* here.

## 2.4. Self (Atman) and Brahman

Here, we may try to have a preliminary idea of self (atman), which is a recurring subject in the text, and which the text explains at several places later. Vedanta says that atman is the same as Brahman, the Ultimate Reality. What is this Ultimate?

When we consider any object, we see how it is produced, from which substance it is produced, and by whom and how it is produced. In other words, we see the cause-effect relationship. If we take the simple example of a tea cup, we know that it is made of clay. Clay is called the *material cause*, the raw material from which it is made. The person who made it is the *efficient cause*. The next question is 'what is the cause for clay' (what is the cause of earth). A long lineage for this is given in the Taittirīya Upanishad (2:1) which says:

'from the eternal Atman space (*ākāśa*) manifested,  
from that space air emerged,  
from air emerged fire,  
from that fire the waters,  
from waters earth came forth,  
and from earth all the plants, which became the food,  
all living beings (human and animal) are but modification of food'.

These and similar lines in other *Upanishads* are likely to be taken by the ordinary reader as explaining the process of creation. (This narrative is close to the nebular hypothesis of present day physics and also to the theory of evolution). However, Vedanta interprets these lines as conveying the meaning that the whole universe is a manifestation in consciousness, otherwise called Brahman. The intention of these lines is not to describe the process of creation but to show that there cannot be anything other than Brahman.

In the above example of tea cup, if we analyze and move up from one cause to another, we go up to Brahman, the cause of all causes. There is no further cause for Brahman.

We may leave the tea cup and take a live example, ‘my own self’. ‘Who am I’ is the most important question in Vedanta. It applies to all humans, in any corner of the world. Listen to any teacher and he would start with this question. All Vedantic texts are about self-knowledge. When I ask: “who am I?”, the first thing which appears is the gross body with flesh and blood, occupying certain space, weighing a few kilos, and having a particular size and height. There is a body mind complex which gives the assurance that ‘I’ exist. This ‘I’ is a combination of the five elements which we noted above – the space, the air, the fire, the water and the earth. In addition there is also the mind, which makes me feel happy or sad as the case may be.

What, out of all these is Atman? There are several theories. Briefly, we may know that the materialists (of *Cārvāka* or *Lokāyata* school) consider the body-mind-complex as the Atman (source of intelligence) and admit nothing further. (The word ‘*Cārvāka*’ means one who speaks sweetly, and ‘*Lokāyata*’ means something which is popular. The above argument appeals to lay persons and hence the names). A little bit of examination shows that the sense of self (the notion of ‘I’) is absent when a person is deeply asleep. The body exists but the mind is dissolved into its cause.

The logicians (*tārīkika*-s) hold that a person is no more than the mind. Intelligence is the property of the mind, they say. This perhaps is the position of science today. According to this group, the inner self (atman) interacts with the mind, the mind with the objects, and as a result of this interaction we perceive the world of objects. There are several such theories about intelligence, which we may not get into.

Vedanta distinguishes four levels of mental activity. When a person is awake there are different levels at which the mind functions. Firstly, the level of receiving impressions through the five senses. This registering faculty is called *manas*. It is a mere cognition that ‘something’ is there. The second level is identifying the impressions as A or B. this level is called the discriminating faculty or *buddhi*. Thereafter a notion emerges – ‘I know it’. This notion of ‘I’ is called *ahankāra* or ego. (This should not be mistaken for ‘egoism’ or megalomania. It is merely a recognition that ‘I know’). The next level is the faculty of recalling and analyzing things, which is called *cittam*. All these are collectively called *antaḥkaraṇam*, which literally means ‘the internal organ’. In English we include the above four functions in what we generally call ‘mind’.

This mind receives impressions through the five senses. Vedanta tells that we are nothing other than Consciousness and hence when we say we see an object, it is the consciousness associated with the object which is getting in a way ‘merged’ with the consciousness associated with the *antaḥkaraṇam* and that means ‘seeing’ the object. The senses which cognize the sense objects do function one at a time, that is, the impressions are received one after the other, though their rapidity make us feel that we are receiving several impressions at the same time. The fact that these are processed shows that there is an *antaḥkaraṇam*, the four-fold complex noted above. This complex itself is not the consciousness. *It is inert according to Vedanta. It is a medium in which consciousness is captured or reflected most.* Atman is the consciousness-continuum. Our mind is a sort of reflected glory; it does not produce intelligence but merely reflects the Brahman consciousness.

When we keep analyzing and rejecting what is non-Self, we will be left with the consciousness or Atman, which is permeating in all things and illumining all minds. This is a process of negation, which is the methodology of the

*Upanishads*. As the Brahman cannot be described as ‘this’, it is described in terms of what it is not. The Upanishad says ‘*neti*’, ‘*neti*’, which means - ‘not this’, ‘not this’. Whatever remains when everything is negated, is Brahman. Also, all analysis on cause and effect of all things, sentient and insentient, stops with the Supreme Consciousness, Brahman.

If we compare the individual consciousness to the space in a jar, or to the reflection of sun on a small water surface (two common examples given in Vedanta), the Absolute is like the space itself or like the sun himself. When the jar breaks what remains is only pure space or when the water body is removed, what remains is sunshine only. Even when the jar existed, it was no different from space, but space appeared as though it was delimited to the confines of the jar, or the sun looked delimited by the confines of the water body. Similarly consciousness looks delimited by the body-mind-complex but with the removal of the delimiting factor, what remains is pure Consciousness. Knowing that ‘I am that Ultimate’ is Self-knowledge. Vedanta says that we cannot ‘know’ Brahman like we know an object, but realize that we are the Brahman and thus ‘become’ the Brahman.

## 2.5. *Sāṅkhya*, the Path of Knowledge

The above discussion is what is called *sāṅkhya* or knowledge (the title of the chapter), giving a detailed picture of the individual self. *Why is all this needed when the war was about to start?* We may note that an ordinary soldier, if unwilling to fight (like avoiding draft), could be compelled to fight, but not so the leader himself. We noted earlier that Arjuna himself is as educated as Krishna in the intricacies of ethics (*dharma śāstra*), but suddenly got overwhelmed by compassion and anguish. Sri Shankara, in his commentary (2:11), hazards a guess that Krishna decided to give a big picture of what Arjuna was in the whole scheme of dharmic action. He had to be enlightened

about the nature of self, and the nature of Universal Self, the nature of *dharma* and his duty in the context of *dharma* in order to convince him about the judicious nature of the war on *adhharma*.

Secondly, it was also the scheme of the author of an epic to take such an opportunity to convey a metaphysical message to the reader. The content of the *Gita* is not new. It is the basic message of the *Upanishads* on *karma* and renunciation. All ancient writers used such occasions to elaborate on *dharma*, on statecraft and such subjects, as the scope of an epic was encyclopedic in nature.

Reverting to the text, we see Krishna saying: “You are grieving those for whom you should not grieve. You are advancing pedantic arguments too. The wise do not grieve either for those alive or those departed” (2:11). Bhishma, Drona and others would be dying only from a relative point of view; they are of the nature of pure consciousness. Their death is like a temporary disappearance, surely leading to reappearance in another body, in another life in the cycle of life and death.

Krishna explains: “You and I always existed and will exist for ever in future. So is the case with all these kings in front of us (2:12). Just as an embodied self has several stages like infancy, boyhood, youth, old age and final decay for the body, so does it have another body. The wise person does not get deluded” (2:13). He adds: “Dualities like pleasure and pain are ephemeral, caused by contact of senses with sense-objects. Endure them with equanimity” (2:14).

Pleasure and pain, love and hate, like and dislike etc. are called dualities. They are in pairs. The senses have so evolved that we either like or dislike the sense objects, depending on whether they are pleasant to senses or otherwise. Our reactions depend on this feeling of love or hate, and our consequent action results in *punyam* (merit of good action, giving good

result in future) and *pāpam* (negative result of bad action, giving bad result in future). These two bind us in a cycle of birth and death. Arjuna is advised to get over them.

Krishna gives a reason. The unreal can never come into being. The real can never be non-existent (2:16). What we see as the individual self is ever existent. Arjuna's understanding that Bhishma and other warriors were going to die is incorrect, as Krishna says.

Sri Shankara explains further. All dualities noted above are fleeting in nature. They come and go and hence are unreal. In the above example of cause and effect, we noted that clay, the material cause is one whereas the products may be many. If one pot (effect or *kārya*) gets destroyed, it reverts into clay but the cause, the clay, remains. A product may get destroyed, but the material cause remains. All effects are unreal (*asat*), lacking in existence before they are formed or produced. Similarly they are 'asat' or 'unreal' after their destruction or dissolution. The idea of being 'real' remains in the cause, the clay.

If this example is applied to *māyā*, the foundation of the universe, or rather the base on which the entire universe manifests, it follows that a particular individual self may be negated at any point of time but the idea of 'real' is always existent in some other individual. All individual selves are manifestations on the above *māyā*, according to Vedanta. This *māyā* itself is an appearance in Brahman and is inseparable from Brahman. Appearances like birth, adulthood, and death are all transformations within this Brahman. As all products are indistinguishable from their causes, so are the selves, which are indistinguishable from their cause, Brahman. Hence they are ever-existent.

Identifying oneself with the four levels of the mind is a limited view of the self. Realizing that the mind, the internal instrument, is only a reflecting medium for the Supreme

Consciousness and that our real nature is Consciousness, is the right view. Observing the mind, being a witness to the mind, is a spiritual practice done in Vedanta. While the mind observes all external objects, the seeker has to start observing the mind as another object. He trains himself to be the seer (*dṛk* in Vedantic terms).

Krishna continues: “That which is real (*‘sat’*) is *avināśi*, indestructible. It is also *avyayam*, immutable and unchangeable” (2:17). The reality of Brahman pervades all beings and hence the embodied self, *jīva*, is always real.

अन्तवन्त इमे देहा नित्यस्योक्ताश्शरीरिणः ।  
अनाशिनोऽप्रमेयस्य तस्माद् युद्ध्यस्व भारत ॥ (2-18)

*antavanta ime dehā nityasyoktāśśarīriṇaḥ*  
*anāśīno’prameyasya tasmād yuddhyasva bhārata*॥

“For the eternal, indestructible, unknowable embodied Atman (the individual self), these bodies come and go. Therefore, oh Bharata, you fight”.

The following points are made in the above verse.

A body is only an *upādhi*<sup>1</sup>, an encasement, a limiting factor for the eternal, indestructible Atman. Such bodies come and go.

Consciousness, which is called ‘embodied’ (*śarīrī*) here, is one and eternal, but the small encasements called bodies are impermanent and several.

The word *antavanta* means ‘those having an end’. The bodies no doubt have an end. This is the normal sense. *But*

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1 *Upādhi* is something which is proximate to another and imparts its qualities on the other. A red rose near a crystal makes the crystal look red. It is said to be an *upādhi* for the crystal. Similarly, the human body, which shows characteristics like birth, ageing, death etc. is an *upādhi* for the eternal atman, by making it appear as having such qualities.

*what the text really says is that the sense of identification with the body (which we all have) ends when ignorance is dispelled. The impression of a snake on a rope disappears when the rope is seen. Likewise, the idea of body disappears once the Brahman is realized.*

*Aprameya* is another word used. *Pramā* is valid knowledge. There are certain means of valid knowledge. What we directly perceive with our senses is one such means. It is called perception. Inferring the presence of fire on seeing smoke is another type. It is called inference. Such means of valid knowledge are called *pramāṇa*-s. Philosophers have told up to six such *pramāṇa*-s. What can be known by a *pramāṇa* is *prameya*. It is something which the senses and the mind can know'. What cannot be known by *pramāṇa*-s is *aprimeya*, which is what the present verse says. The Supreme Consciousness is what illumines the mind, makes it know things. That itself cannot be known by the senses.

Another word, which has to be contextually understood but which is sometimes misinterpreted, is '*yuddhyasva*'. This is a direction to Arjuna to fight. Has Krishna instigated Arjuna to fight, when Arjuna himself was a peace monger? Sri Shankara has also foreseen this question. He says –

*“What Krishna is doing is not to prescribe war as a duty, but merely to remind Arjuna of the duty which he, as a warrior, has himself started and left midway because of a moral dilemma. Krishna does this by removing the cobwebs of the mind which clouded the judgment of Arjuna”* (2-18).

Krishna continues to tell about the indestructible nature of the individual self. It is neither the slayer nor the slain. One would be wrong to say so (2:19). Here is another popular verse:

वासंसि जीर्णानि यथा विहाय नवानि गृह्णाति नरोऽपराणि ।  
तथा शरीराणि विहाय जीर्णान्यन्यानि संयाति नवानि देही ॥22 ॥

*vāsāmsi jīrṇāni yathā vihāya navāni grhṇāti naro'parāṇi |  
tathā śarīrāṇi vihāya jīrṇānyanyāni saṃyāti navāni dehī ||*

“Just as we cast off worn out clothes and wear new clothes, so do we cast off the worn out bodies and take over new bodies”(2:22).

This is a cyclical process which goes on and on till the individual attains self-realization. It is only after self-realization that the cycle ceases and the individual self (*jīva*) becomes Brahman Itself. Self-realization is the result of a study and contemplation on the sayings of the *Upanishads* (This will be explained in the text later). This brings an end to the transmigrating existence of the individual self.

Krishna tells some more characteristics of this *jīva*. All things which have a body do surely undergo a change. Here *jīva* is not the body; he is the illumining force for the body-mind complex. It has no limbs like an organism. It is pure consciousness. In Vedanta it is called limbless (*niravayava*) (2:20). Because it is limbless, it cannot be killed or hurt in any sense. The hurt is only to the body.

For this reason, *jīva* is not affected by the vagaries of the five elements – earth, water, fire, air and space. Verses 24 and 25 say that it cannot be burnt, cannot be parched, can not be soaked and so on. It is *nitya*, which means eternal; *sarvagata*, which means omnipresent; *avyakta*, meaning not perceivable by the senses; and finally *avikārya*, meaning changeless.

*Vikāra*, a change, is only for a perishable thing. There are six such changes for all living beings – conception, birth, growing, maturing, decaying and finally perishing. *Jīva* is not subject to any of these changes. All changes are for the body, which has the status of a worn out shirt.

Man needs a lot of maturity and courage to perceive this. That is why Krishna says – “People look at it as a wonder; hear

about it as a wonder and tell each other as a wonder. Rarely does someone understand; many cannot understand even after listening” (2:29). This is because we identify ourselves with the body and not with the inner consciousness. When everyone is so deluded, why blame you, Krishna seems to tell Arjuna.

## 2.6. The Three Bodies

When we talk of transmigration, we think that the individual ‘self’ travels from body to body. The word ‘soul’ is not generally used for ‘self’ because it has different connotations for readers exposed to western religions. What transmigrates is not even the individual ‘self’, which is otherwise called *jīva*. What moves from body to body is *sūkṣma śarīra*, also called *liṅga śarīra*, the subtle body.

What is this subtle body<sup>2</sup>? Vedanta talks of three bodies – the gross body (*sthūla śarīra*), the subtle body and the causal body (*kāraṇa śarīra*). The gross body is the composite of flesh, blood, bones and all the physiological systems. It is made of the five elements – earth, water, fire, air and space. It grows with food, undergoes change and perishes. The five elements are also responsible for the five senses we have. These and the mind are subtler than the body. There are five organs of knowledge and five organs of work. This combination of ten organs, the five airs in the body and the four-fold *antaḥkaraṇa*, is called the subtle body. This body continues till a person attains knowledge of Brahman. When such knowledge is attained, the person lives as a *jīvanmukta*, liberated while being alive. After his death the subtle body does not transmigrate but resolves into the five elements. The third body is known as the causal body; it is the indefinable *māyā* which is the source of all bodies of all beings.

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2 Here the student is advised to refer to any basic text in Vedanta such as ‘Tattva Bodha’ of Shankara which explains all the basic concepts. A very brief note is given here.

When Krishna speaks of discarding bodies like clothes and taking up new clothes, he is not talking of the subtle body, but he is talking of the *jīva*, which is the consciousness aspect itself, which does not die. This chapter is intended to tell about the indestructible nature of *jīva*, which is nothing else than the Brahman.

## 2.7. Karma Yoga

In verses 39 to 53, Krishna tells about the right attitude a spiritual seeker should have towards work. What is the ultimate goal? He says that we shall get over the binding nature of *karma* if we adopt this attitude (2:39).

What is *karma* and how is it binding? *Karma* literally means ‘action’. In Vedanta, *karma* does not refer to the routine work of sipping coffee or going to office, but to the ritualistic duties assigned by scriptures to a person in the society. In the ancient society when the world was not globalised, society had some specified duties for persons who were divided in different strata. (This stratification will be explained later in chapters 4 and 18). These activities were of four types:

*Nitya karma* – those which are compulsory, like the daily prayers which have to be done three times a day. Giving food to guests and animals is another duty. Study of scriptures is also mandated. One attains *pāpam*, (normally translated as ‘sin’) by not performing these actions.

*Naimittika karma* – those which are prescribed for specific occasions like child birth, marriage, etc. These too are rituals which are compulsory.

*kāmya karma* – those which are motivated by some desire (*kāma*). The desire may be for wealth, for a child, for victory, for gaining heavenly worlds or any such desire in accordance with *dharma*.

*prāyaścitta karma* – those which are in the nature of penance for a wrong action done in the past.

The *Vedas* (known as *śruti*, those which are handed down by oral tradition) and *smṛti*, (the ancillary writings like Ramayana, *Mahabharata*, based on the *Vedas*) prescribe the above *karma*-s. One may gain heaven<sup>3</sup> but has to return to earth after the expiry of the merit of good deeds.

*Karma*-s are different for persons of different categories (*varṇa*) (noted above) and stage of life (*āśrama*)<sup>4</sup>. These will be explained in Chapter 18. For example, a Brahmin is ordained to study *Vedas* and live as a mendicant for the welfare of society. A *kṣatriya*'s duty is to protect the social order. A *vysya* is expected to build up wealth and a *śūdra* is expected to engage in different services.

There is a law of inevitability of result for *karma*. One has to experience the result. Hence, *karma* is said to be binding in nature. A good *karma* may lead to heaven, but it is also binding in the sense that there is rebirth. Accumulated *karma*-s give rise to several lives and so the chain of birth and death continues till one attains self-realization.

Vedanta accepts the principle of *karma* for the following reasons:

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3 The concept of heaven in Vedanta is different from the western idea of heaven. In Vedanta, heaven is not the ultimate. Good actions take a person to one of the seven heavenly worlds and bad actions take him to one of the seven nether-worlds, but the person takes birth again after the expiry of such karma. One gets released from this cycle of birth and death only by the knowledge of Brahman, i.e. the knowledge that his own Self is not different from Brahman.

4 *Āśrama* is a stage in life. There are four stages: brahmacharya (vedic studies), gṛhastha (house-holder), vānaprastha (retirement to forests for meditation) and saṃnyāsa (renunciation). Each stage has its own prescribed duties.

- In order to explain the diversity in creation. One is born rich, another is born poor; one may be healthy and the other may be lame. This should be explained as due to some cause.
- If *karma* is not accepted we would be accusing the creator of favoring someone and punishing someone else by making him poor. Someone is rewarded for no good deed done and someone is punished for no fault of his. God would appear as favouring someone.
- It holds a person responsible for his actions and their consequences.
- It is a useful postulation to ensure that people do good deeds and thus follow social order.

Krishna now tells how one can do *karma* and yet be untouched by the result of *karma*. This is *karma-yoga*, which means doing *karma* in some other fashion. Krishna is praising this: “In this way you will be released from the bondage of *karma*” (2:39). He also says – “even a little of this strategy will save you from fear” (2:40). What is this fear? It is the fear of perpetual transmigration.

Desire-free (*niṣkāma*) *karma* is *Karma Yoga*

Krishna describes what he calls desire-free *karma*. If one wants to avoid the fruit of *karma* one should not desire the fruit of such action. No doubt, he performs some action, but he does it as a duty cast on him by the scriptures, or as an order from the Lord. If one is merely obeying the cosmic law, the result will not affect him. You do *karma* as a duty ordained by Lord or as an instrument of Lord. That will take you away from the operation of its result.

How can it release from the cycle of birth and death? That is possible only through knowledge (*jñāna*) but not by *karma*, as per all Vedantic texts. Sri Shankara explains this

by saying – “Oh Arjuna! By following this you will gradually attain *jñāna* by the grace of Iswara and thus get over the cycle of transmigration” (2:39).

It has to be noted that desire-free *karma* alone does not lead to liberation, but it cleanses the mind of all weaknesses like attachment (*rāga*) and hatred (*dveṣa*). Such elimination of impurities enables the mind to think on the Upanishadic sayings and thus becomes a useful tool for attaining self-knowledge. Knowledge of Brahman will dawn only on a pure mind just as the reflection of sunlight is possible only on a clean mirror. A pure mind always does desire-free *karma* and so will attain self realization. Desire-free action, thus becomes an important phase in the spiritual journey.

## 2.8. When the *Vedas* Become Irrelevant

Krishna sums up the message of scriptures :

त्रैगुण्यविषया वेदा निस्त्रैगुण्यो भवार्जुन ।  
निर्द्वन्द्वो नित्यसत्त्वस्थो निर्योगक्षेम आत्मवान् ॥

*traiguṇyaviṣayā vedā nistraiguṇyo bhavārjuna*  
*nirdvandvo nityasattvastho niryogakṣema ātmavān* ॥ 2-45

“*Vedas* deal with wish-fulfillment, which is the matrix of three *guṇa*-s. Rise above this matrix. Rise above the dualities and abide in *sattva*”, Krishna tells Arjuna. All human emotions such as love, hate, ambition and greed are determined by the three *guṇa*-s, and rising above them means consciously cultivating detachment. Rise above the dualities of *dharma* and *adharma* – *nirdvandva*, as the above verse says. Always stay in a pure and serene frame of mind (*sattva*). Also become – *niryoga-kṣema*, one who has no interest in *yoga* (acquiring something which we do not have) and *kṣema* (protecting what we acquire).

What is the use of *Vedas* for a *jñānī* then? They are of not much use for one who has controlled his desires. If he is a realized

person it is like taking water from a small well when you have water all around. (It is like carrying coal to the coal mine, to use a modern expression). Self-knowledge is all encompassing, and so the little knowledge of actions and results which the *Vedas* provide is of not much use to a *jñānī* (2:46).

If what all has been said is about a *jñānī*, what is our interest? We are in the midst of desires and we cannot give them up. If a *jñānī* alone is eligible for emancipation we will all be deprived of it forever. We will be moving in the wheel of *saṃsāra*.

## 2.9. Action is Obligatory - but No Claim on Result

Krishna visualizes such worldly person and says:

कर्मण्येवाधिकारस्ते मा फलेषु कदाचन ।

मा कर्मफलहेतुर्भूर्मा ते सङ्गोऽस्त्वकर्मणि ॥47 ॥

*karmaṇyevādhikāraṣte mā phaleṣu kadācana ।*

*mā karmaphalāheturbhūrmā te saṅgo'stvakarmani ॥*

“Your responsibility is merely for action and not for its result. May you not become the cause for the fruit of your action. May you not take recourse to inaction” (2:47).

*This is a much misunderstood and challenged verse. How can Krishna ask us to do work and tell us not to expect any result?*

Krishna is not referring to worldly actions giving worldly results. He is referring to ritualistic actions like charity, austerity, and *yajña* which promise a spiritual merit which will fructify at a later date in the form of a better life or some heavenly world and thus bind a person. So long as a person performs such works he will continue to get the results and will continue to rotate in the cycle of transmigration. A wise person has to get out of this transmigration. The only way is to perform actions as an instrument of the cosmic scheme, as we noted above.

In the previous verse (2:46) Krishna was talking of a *jñānī* for whom the *Vedas* cease to have relevance. Thereafter he is turning to Arjuna and telling him that the *jñāna* path does not immediately apply to him. However, Arjuna should not be totally excluded from knowledge even at a later date. Hence he is suggesting a path which will enable him to be a man of action, a path which is also in consonance with his spiritual pursuit.

(I may repeat that Krishna is not telling this in the context of an ordinary achiever in a multinational company, aiming at better business targets or about a person working in an office and receiving a hefty pay slip. His advice is in the context of ethical actions which would entail positive merit or sin and thus cause transmigration. However, what he says can give us the right attitude to work that will help an achiever in managing his work with equanimity).

This verse is oriented to Arjuna, for whom it is not proper to renounce and take up the role of a Brahmin. It is an advice to all those who are men of action and are engaged in *karma* while seeking liberation (*mokṣa*) eventually. If you seek *mokṣa* you should be untainted by the fruit of *karma*. This is possible only through desire-free *karma*. The above verse says – do not become the cause of the *karma-phala*, the fruit of your action. This is possible only when you do your work as an instrument of the Lord.

At the same time, the verse says, it is incorrect to give up all actions, expecting to be untainted. In such case you will have a notion – ‘I have given up *karma*’. When there is the notion of ‘I’, the result of inaction will accrue. This is like the sin of omission. It finally means that a seeker has to do the karma ordained on him, but do with dispassion.

The purport of Vedanta is to give us right knowledge and free us from the cycle of transmigration. This is possible when we are untainted by the fruit of action. Inaction is of no use,

as we noted. So, we have to do karma in a different mode, as a duty in the cosmic scheme. We have to realize finally that it is the three *guṇa*-s which are the doer. This awareness is enlightenment.

The difference between action and the *yoga* of action is this:

<i>Karma</i>	<i>Karma-Yoga</i>
Desiring the fruit of action	Not desiring the fruit of action
No intention of liberation ( <i>mokṣa</i> )	Desire for <i>mokṣa</i> by cleansing the mind through desire-free action, oriented for welfare of society
Action for individual benefit	Action as a means for <i>mokṣa</i>

## 2.10. The Concept of *Karma* is not Fatalism

We hear of two concepts in western philosophy – free will and determinism. Those who accept free will say that man has a conscious choice of his actions and that he is not destined to think in a particular way or choose in a particular way. Determinism, on the other hand, says that man is conditioned and hard-wired by his past *karma* to think and choose in a pre-determined manner. Vedanta accepts free will in the choice of action, though a person's past *karma* determines his birth in a rich or poor family. It is not helpless fatalism that Vedanta advocates, as it is sometimes misunderstood. A person is the master of his own destiny, and so can create a fruit of action as he desires. Even in this there is a choice; he can get the fruit of action, or if he so desires, he can disconnect from the karma or fruit of action through desire-free action (*niṣkāma karma*) performed as an offering to Lord.

In an overall analysis we see persons of three types:

- 1) Those who renounce all actions and are in the path or knowledge,
- 2) Those who are in *karma-yoga* (desire-free action) and
- 3) Those who have no desire for knowledge but who are merely interested in rituals giving material benefits.

A person who is seemingly in *karma yoga* is of two types:

1) One who is still in pursuit of self-realization and performs action for purifications of the mind, and

2) One who attains self-realization but yet performs action as part of his *dharma* and to serve as a role model for others. Strictly speaking, this is not *karma-yoga* but it is called *jñāni karma*, which is seemingly a *karma*. The famous example for this is King Janaka, Lord Rama and other kings referred to in the *Upanishads*. There are several passages in the *Upanishads* dealing with Janaka's discussions with several sages.

Krishna is prescribing *karma-yoga* to Arjuna, which is appropriate for his nature. He continues – “perform action while staying firm in *yoga*. Have equanimity in achievement and non-achievement. Equanimity is *yoga*” (2:48). Such equanimity keeps a person away from the positive or negative results of action. The real dexterity in action is to keep doing action, while being untainted by the fruit of action. *Karma* binds a person to the cycle of birth and death. Dexterity is to turn this binding force into a releasing force, making it a tool for liberation (2:50).

What happens when one keeps acting like this? One gets released from the bondage of birth and attains the supreme state which is free from all sufferings (2:51).

The initial portions of *Vedas* tell about several desirable and pleasant goals and pleasures and also the ways to achieve them. All these are too alluring and distracting to the mind. The

*Gita* calls such persons *śruti vipratipannāḥ*, those confounded by multiple goals mentioned in the scriptures (2:53). A seeker would shun these and keep his mind steady in himself in order to attain *viveka*, ability to discriminate between the real and unreal.

## 2.11. *Swarga* and *Mokṣa* – Heaven and Liberation

Here we should know the difference between heaven (*swarga*) and liberation (*mokṣa*). Religions usually talk of heaven as the ultimate attainment. The *Upanishads*, on the other hand, do not consider heaven as the ultimate. The ultimate attainment is self-realization, which is also called liberation. Heaven is a happy state of mind attained by doing meritorious deeds like *yajña*, *dānam* or *tapas* (meditation). It is a plane of enjoyment, where there may be heavenly damsels, delicious drinks and food. There are different heavens depending on the god-form we worship. There is the *loka* (place) of Shiva, a *loka* of Vishnu and so on. All these heavenly abodes are impermanent. They depend on the quantum of ritualistic merit we have gained in this world. Once this merit is exhausted, a person returns to earth (takes birth) in some form, human or otherwise.

Hell (*narakam*) operates on the same principle. There is a return to earth once the demerit (*pāpam*) gets exhausted.

Liberation (*mokṣa*) is a state of unqualified happiness, happiness not dependent on external objects, but on self-realization. There are no divine damsels and no sensual pleasures. In fact it is a desireless state. It is untainted by the fruit of good deeds (*puṇyam*) or bad deeds (*pāpam*). It is directly attained through knowledge of self. *Karma yoga* is a preparatory stage for knowledge.

Krishna has already disapproved of those fixated on the *Vedas* (2:42). He said that they are persons obsessed with the Vedic rituals (*vedavādaratāḥ*), and personifications of desires

(*kāmātmānaḥ*). They consider heaven as supreme (*svarga parāḥ*). They can neither come to *karma yoga* or to the *yoga* of knowledge.

One has to get over the confounding allure of the ends and means described in the *Vedas* and stay firm in *karma yoga*, which will gradually lead to liberation, by cleansing the mind and making it suitable for knowledge.

## 2.12. *Sthita-prajña*, the Person of Stable Intellect

Krishna is seen repeatedly asking Arjuna to get over the allure presented in the *Vedas* and asking him to stay firm in the knowledge of Brahman. Arjuna wants to know how such a balanced person looks like and how he behaves. There is a famous verse here:

स्थितप्रज्ञस्य का भाषा समाधिस्थस्य केशव ।

स्थितधीः किं प्रभाषेत किमासीत ब्रजेत किम् ॥

*sthitaprajñasya kā bhāṣā samādhisthasya keśava*।

*sthitadhīḥ kiṃ prabhāṣeta kimāsīta vrajeta kim*॥ 54

*Sthita* means stable and *prajña* means intellect. The word refers to one whose *prajña*, the intellect is firm in Self-knowledge. His mind is firm in the view 'I am the Supreme Brahman'. This word *sthitaprajña* is synonymous with *jñānī*. Two types of persons attain this stage: 1) one who has renounced and is in the *jñāna* path, and 2) the person who is in *karma-yoga* for a long time for purification of his mind and who takes the path of devotion and the knowledge of Brahman. Arjuna desires to know the characteristics of such person.

Interestingly, Krishna starts telling about the practices one has to do to become a *sthitaprajña*, instead of telling his characteristics.

*A general principle in Vedanta is mentioned here by Sri Shankara: whatever are the characteristics of a realized person, the same are the means to be sedulously cultivated by a seeker.*

One who has attained the knowledge of Brahman has no further goal to be attained. This stage is reached by various means of self-discipline. These means have been so ingrained in the *sthita-prajña* that they become his nature. These qualities have to be consciously cultivated by a seeker, till the mind is also brought under control. In modern terms, we may say that conscious habits have an influence on the unconscious mind.

What are these qualities which a *jñānī* has and which a seeker cultivates?

- Abdicating all desires, and staying happily in one's self (2:55).
- Seeing pleasure and pain with equanimity, just like an uninvolved witness, without attachment or anger or fear (2:56).
- Like a tortoise withdraws its limbs into the shell, the *jñānī* withdraws his five senses into himself, that is, withdraws his senses from sense objects (2:58). This is called *pratyāhāra* in Patanjali's yoga.
- Once this is achieved, one's innate lurking desire also disappears, as it loses taste in the sense objects and dries up like a seed without water (2:59). The psychology of withdrawal is shown here.
- Senses are powerful; they draw a person towards sense objects. One who controls his mind from all such temptations is a *sthita-prajña* (2:61).
- The very thought of sense objects is enough to generate a longing for that, and such longing turns into strong desire, and desire (when obstructed) turns into anger (2:62). Such

anger leads to a clouded judgment and wrong perception of things. Such wrong perception leads a person to his fall (2:63).

- Here Krishna talks of an important quality called *prasāda*, serenity of mind. It is not possible to stop interacting with the world and worldly objects. You have to refine your senses, he says. Senses should not go to sense objects with their usual attitude of like or dislike. When the senses are under the mind's control, the seeker can interact with the world with a sense of serenity (2:64).
- Such serenity of mind will lead to firmness of mind (2:66). If the mind cannot control the senses but instead runs after them, it will be drawn away, just as a sail is swept away by a gale (2:67).
- Krishna makes an oxymoronic statement. What is night for others is day for a *jñānī*, and that in which all people are awake, is night for him. Self-knowledge is not easy for all. Krishna will say later that one in several thousand do attempt for such knowledge. Such knowledge, which is clear as daylight to a *jñānī* is darkness to others. The material world to which all are awake is like darkness to a *jñānī* and hence it is his night (2:69).
- Just as the ocean remains unperturbed when thousands of rivers flow into it, so is a *jñānī* undisturbed by the flood of sense impressions he receives. All get subsumed. He is already a *pūrṇa*, a complete person, his happiness is not dependent on external things, but on his own Self (2:70).
- There are two things to be avoided – *aham* and *mama* – 'I' and 'mine'. The first notion is called *ahaṁkāra*, the ego and the second is *mamakāra*, sense of ownership. One who gets over these two will stay in peace. (2:71).

All the above qualities make a person a *sthita-prajña*. His state is the state of Brahman. It does not allow delusion or wrong perception. One who stays in this will certainly attain *brahma-nirvāṇam*, the state of stillness in Brahman. *Vāṇam* is movement of air or breeze and *nirvāṇam* is its absence, stillness. This is the state of a liberated person where his mind does not waver.

Thus the chapter gives an overview of the path of knowledge (*jñāna yoga*) and the path of action (*karma-yoga*), the two paths Krishna is going to elucidate in the subsequent chapters.

\* \* \*

## 3

# The Yoga of Action (*Karma Yoga*)

### 3.1. An Overview

We learnt that *karma yoga* is not the abdication of action but performing action in consonance with the cosmic scheme, as an offering to that scheme, which we call God. It involves a sedulous practice of reduction of ego and giving up desire for the fruit of *karma*. This idea is further explained in the present chapter.

This chapter has 43 verses, which can be broadly seen in three parts:

- Elaboration of *karma yoga* in the first 20 verses,
- Verses 21-35 deal with the conduct of a wise person,
- Verses 36-43 deal with desire and anger, the driving forces for action.

### 3.2. The Two Paths

Having heard of the two paths for mankind – the path of renunciation and the path of action, and having heard Krishna extolling the former, Arjuna desires to know why Krishna is prescribing the latter path to him. Krishna tells him:

लोकेऽस्मिन् द्विविधा निष्ठा पुरा प्रोक्ता मयानघ ।  
ज्ञानयोगेन साङ्ख्यानां कर्मयोगेन योगिनाम् ॥३॥

*loke'smin dvividhā niṣṭhā purā proktā mayānagha|  
jñānayogena sāṅkhyānāṃ karmayogena yoginām||*

“I had told two distinct paths earlier. The path of knowledge is for those who renounce. They are called *sāṅkhyāh*. The path of action is for yogis” (3:3).

(In the *Gita* we should not mix up this word ‘yogi’ with the Patanjai’s yoga of self-discipline unless it is specifically referred to, as in the sixth chapter. Krishna uses this word elsewhere in the *Gita* to refer to *karma yogi*).

Teachers of Vedanta have explained that the above two paths are in fact two stages in the same path, one being the stage of *sādhana*, practice, and the other is the stage of *sādhya*, the stage of attainment. It is comparable to a person doing his bachelors’ degree before he goes for masters’.

Sri Shankara explains thus: “*karma yoga* is commended not as an end in itself but as an instrument for liberation”. We have seen earlier that there are four human goals – *dharma* (righteousness), *artha* (wealth), *kāma* (desire) and *mokṣa* (liberation). *Karma yoga* is useful as an indirect means to attain that objective, but not as an independent and direct means, like the path of knowledge.

The reason is thus. An impure mirror with a lot of dust settled on its surface will not be able to reflect light. The surface has to be cleaned. *Karma yoga* is compared to such cleaning of the mind. Purity of mind (known as *citta śuddhi*) is the first step needed before the student seeks the knowledge of self.

Rituals like *yajña*-s mentioned in the *Vedas* involve socially helpful actions like liberal donations to the deserving poor, distribution of food and such. These actions when performed as an offering to the Lord will lead to the purification of mind. It is like the removal of dirt settled on the mirror.

Mere removal of dirt is not enough. There should be a beam of light falling on its surface, in order to generate a reflection or image. The lines of Vedanta are this light. Contemplation on vedantic lines under the tutelage of a competent teacher leads to Self-knowledge.

Here Krishna reiterates what he told in verse 2:47. It is not the intention of the *Gita* to advocate renunciation for all. There is no doubt that liberation is the highest goal and renunciation is the best path, but everyone in society is not ready for that. “Actionless state (*naiṣkarmyam*) cannot be achieved by abdicating action. One who abdicates so, will not get the fruit of karma yoga” (3:4), says Krishna. Such a person will take pride under the conceited notion – ‘Oh, I have given up action’. But the notion of ‘I’ has not left him. So long as he thinks that *he* has given up action, he has consciously done an action. Hence, abdication is also an action. It is in fact an omission of prescribed duty.

Krishna makes a statement on human nature: “None can sit idle even for a minute” (3:5). Human nature, which is a combination of the three *guṇa*-s, does not allow a person to remain so. “Even if he consciously restrains his sense organs from running towards the objects, the inner organ, mind, does not remain restrained. It keeps going after the objects. A person who forcibly keeps the senses under control but allows the mind to wander is a hypocrite” (3:6).

“Restrain the mind first and do the above said *karma yoga* with dispassion”, says Krishna (3:7). Some action is ordained on every individual depending on his role and position in society. One has to play the role. A soldier has to fight; a thinker has to advise and so on. It is his *niyata karma* – assigned duty.

### 3.3. *Karma* for *yajña*, Universal Good

Krishna is explaining *karma yoga* in different words. It is *karma* for the sake of *yajña*, he says. In other words, it is performing *karma* as a sacred duty like *yajña*. The discussion is on the result-giving and binding nature of *karma*. When does it become binding and when does it become neutral (though not liberating)?

यज्ञार्थात् कर्मणोऽन्यत्र लोकोऽयं कर्मबन्धनः ।  
तदर्थं कर्म कौन्तेय मुक्त-सङ्गः समाचर ॥ (3:9)

*yajñārthāt karmaṇo'nyatra loko'yaṃ karmabandhanaḥ*  
*tadārthaṃ karma kaunteya mukta-saṅgaḥ samācara*॥

“*Karma* done with the spirit of *yajña* is not binding. In all other cases it is binding. Hence perform *karma* with a sense of dispassion”.

What is *yajña*? Conventionally, it is an elaborate ritual which the organizer, called *yajamānī*, with a desire in his mind, performs a ritual with the help of a team of Vedic scholars amidst chanting of *mantra*-s, offering ghee and such other oblations in the huge fire place specially prepared for that. What has it to do with *karma yoga*? Krishna uses the term in a special sense, explains Sri Shankara. The scripture says - ‘*yajño vai viṣṇuḥ*’, the word *yajña* refers to Vishnu, the all-pervading deity, the preserver of the universe. Action for *yajña* means action for such purpose, without a desire in mind and for the welfare of the world. Thus it becomes a worship of Vishnu. This is what is called performing action as an offering to Lord. One becomes an instrument of God, to assist God in the universal scheme. Krishna further asks Arjuna to be *mukta-saṅga* – one without attachment.

### 3.4. The Wheel of Nature

Not all can have this attitude straight away. They have to follow the prescribed ritual of *yajña*. This gradually purifies the mind and prepares one for *karma yoga*. Hence in the next few verses (10-16) Krishna refers to the conventional sense of the word *yajña*.

There is a principle of interdependence (*upakārya-upakārahāva*) that governs everything we see. The conventional *yajña*-s like *vājapeyam*, *jyotiṣtomam* etc, are intended to please the deities, who, in turn, would cause good rain which is essential for crops. ‘Please the deities, they please you’ (3:11). It is the Vedic belief that the offerings given through fire in a *yajña* would be carried to the deities by the god Agni (fire) thus strengthening the gods. In other words, the divine forces would strengthen when all people do their assigned duties on earth. ‘The creator has created *yajña* simultaneous with creation of man’ – says Krishna (3:10). The deities mentioned here refer to different manifestations in nature which affect human life. In such a case, what Krishna means is that we have to take from nature and give back to (protect) nature. *Yajña* also involves offerings to sages and to poor. This sustains the society. A person who fulfils such obligation is said to be freed from all past sins and those who do not fulfil it are eating sin-stained food (3:13).

Krishna briefly mentions the cycle of *yajña*. “All beings originate from food; food is originated by rain; rain is due to performance of *yajña* and *yajña* is human action. This action is ordained by Veda, the universal law. Therefore, know you that this universal law is established in human action” (3:14-15).

A selfish exploiter of society and nature is an accursed person. He is called *aghāyuh*, one who leads a sinful life, one who revels in sensual pleasures, leading a wasteful and dissolute

life (3:16). A human being has the choice of action and hence he is advised not to break the cycle of nature for his selfish ends.

### 3.5. Action by a *jñānī*

Is the above cycle to be followed by the *jñānī* too? *Karma* is for purification of mind, we saw. Hence for one who is established in the knowledge of Self, there is no need for any action (3:17). But for one like Arjuna, who has not attained that stage, *karma* is needed as a preparatory step. Krishna gives the example of illustrious kings:

कर्मणैव हि संसिद्धिमास्थिता जनकादयः ।

लोकसङ्ग्रहमेवापि संपश्यन् कर्तुमर्हसि ॥ 20

*karmaṇaiva hi saṁsiddhimāsthitā janakādayaḥ*

*lokasaṅgrahamevāpi saṁpaśyan kartumarhasi*

“Persons like King Janaka attained liberation by *karma* only. Even from the point of ensuring social order, you should perform *karma*” (3:20).

*Lokasaṅgraha* is action conducive to maintaining social order. Sri Shankara explains it as ‘action to prevent people from taking a wrong path’. This is done by being a role model for others. King Janaka makes a frequent appearance in the Vedic literature as a king and a *jñānī*. He is one such role model.

Krishna’s words present two alternatives – 1) performing *karma* while being a *jñānī*, for the sake of social order, and 2) performing desire-free action (*niṣkāma karma*) for purification of mind. If Janaka were to be a *jñānī* he was doing it merely for upholding social order. His *karma* was merely a semblance of *karma* (*karmābhāsa*) because it would not produce result as in the case of an unrealized person and hence it was not binding in nature. If he were not a *jñānī*, he was performing *karma* as a seeker, for the gradual purification of mind, as a preparatory step for Self-realization.

For Arjuna, however, the prescription is the latter course, as his *dharma* is not to be a man of contemplation. Krishna categorically prescribes the path of action and says:

यद्यदाचरति श्रेष्ठः तत्तदेवेतरो जनः ।

स यत् प्रमाणं कुरुते लोकस्तदनुवर्तते ॥ 21

*yadyadācarati śreṣṭhaḥ tattadevetaro janaḥ*

*sa yat pramāṇam kurute lokastadanuvartate* ॥

This is a verse quoted quite often. It says: “Whatever the noble person does, the common man follows; and whatever standards of ethics the noble one sets forth, the lay person follows” (3:21). An example of it is Krishna himself. “Observe me”, he tells Arjuna, “I have nothing to achieve, nothing which has not been gained or which has to be gained, but I always engage in action” (3:22). If the wise do not live an exemplary life, they would contribute to making of a normless society (3:24). The path therefore is:

सक्ताः कर्मण्यविद्वांसो यथा कुर्वन्ति भारत ।

कुर्याद् विद्वांस्तथाऽसक्तः चिकीर्षुर्लोकसङ्ग्रहम् ॥ 25

*saktāḥ karmanyavidvāṃso yathā kurvanti bhārata*

*kuryād vidvāṃstathā'saktaḥ cikīrṣurlokasaṅgraham* ॥

This is a verse for meditation. It tells about a wise person’s attitude to work. Krishna says: “Oh Arjuna! In contrast to an unwise person who engages in work clinging to the fruit of action, the wise should engage in work for the sake of social order, unattached to the fruit of action”. Whether you are wise like me (Krishna) or whether you are a seeker, you have to engage in karma for the sake of society. An unwise person does work for himself. The wise, should work with the same vigor for the sake of others. This is the formula for action.

There is yet another formula which dictates tolerance. “One should merely encourage every good action even when

it is done ignorantly. The wise person should not find fault or berate *karma*. The wise should perform *karma* with right understanding” (3:26). If the wise person condemns *karma*, the unrealized person would also stop *karma* by imitating him. This would lead to confusion.

### 3.6. Is Human Being the Doer? The Concept of *Guṇa-s*

We all consider that we do perform several actions everyday. It never really occurs to us to question what our real identity is. Vedanta says that we are essentially Brahman, the consciousness, existing everywhere. The actor in us is what Vedanta calls the *guṇa-s*. It is as follows.

All creation is from Brahman, the Supreme Reality, we noted earlier. Let us recapitulate the cause-effect relationship. In the case of a pot, a clod of earth is the material cause (*upādāna kāraṇa*). The person who conceives it in his mind, the potter, is the efficient cause (*nimitta kāraṇa*). When we say that Brahman has created the universe, it would normally imply that he (more correctly ‘It’) took some material (outside Itself) and made it. Such an explanation would be enough for a school boy. Vedanta cannot say this. If some material external to Brahman were to be accepted, we cannot say that Brahman is all-pervading. He would be as limited as a potter, though a lot more powerful. Such limitation cannot exist in Brahman.

We are all delimited in three ways – a) limited by space, (one who is in place X cannot be in place Y), b) limited by time, (one who lived in the 10<sup>th</sup> century cannot be present now) and c) limited by being (one who is X cannot be Y, or that which is a pen cannot be a chair).

Brahman, that we usually call God, cannot be such delimited entity. Brahman is boundless Existence and Consciousness. Therefore, the material should be something to do with Itself.

It may then mean that Brahman has taken out a part of Himself (Itself) and created the universe. If this were so, Brahman would become a *sāvayava* entity, one having limbs and thus a shape, like all of us. This is also not correct. It is mere Consciousness, referred to in the neuter gender.

Vedanta explains creation through an interface called *māyā*, which is a ‘power’ or ‘energy’ that is indefinable, beginningless and coeval with Brahman. It is a power which manifests in Brahman and makes Brahman appear as the universe. In the second chapter (2.4) we noted that from the Brahman’s (the pure Consciousness) power of *māyā*, the space, air, fire, water and earth, originated in that order.

If the universe is from this *māyā*, it cannot be different from that. It should either be a modification of *māyā* or a mere appearance because of the power of *māyā*. It is not a modification of Brahman, because Brahman is an unchanging principle. *Māyā* can thus be called the material cause (like clay) and the efficient cause (like the potter) simultaneously, and so in vedantic diction it is called *the simultaneous material-efficient cause* for the universe.

The universe (creation) is neither real (present in all times) nor unreal (totally illusory thing.), says Vedanta, because *māyā* itself is neither real nor unreal. But *māyā* has some constituents which go into the manifestation of the universe. These are the three *guṇa-s* – *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*. The word *guṇa* can be translated as disposition or tendency in a person’s character. The presence of these *guṇa-s* in different proportions and predominance of one over others make different personality types. (Chapter 14 deals exclusively with these *guṇa-s*). *Sattva* manifests in human beings as contemplative nature, brightness, serenity, contentment and quietness in nature. *Rajas* manifests as assertiveness, ambition, spirit of achievement and aggressiveness. *Tamas* manifests as dullness, sloth, laziness

and indulgence in sensual pleasures. These characteristics determine the *varṇa* of a person, about which we shall see in detail in chapter 4 and 18. All things in the universe, animate or inanimate, are constituted by the above *guṇa*-s in different proportions.

The Sanskrit word *guṇa* has two meanings. It means a trait in character, or a tendency as we saw above. It also means ‘a rope’, that which is used for binding. However much a person may try to be a *jñānī* the *guṇa*-s pull him back into action, and depending on which *guṇa* is predominant, the person is pulled into action corresponding to it. The *jñānī*’s constant tug of war is with these *guṇa*-s. The *guṇa*-s produce the predispositions which we call the nature of a person, and pull even a strong-willed person. The Lord uses the word ‘*prakṛti*’ which includes the actions of previous births which also play a role in building the nature of a person (3:33). This is called *saṃskāra*. This exerts influence on a person’s behavior.

*saṃskāra* is a commonly used word in Vedānta. What we call as the character of a person arises due to the cumulative effect of the impressions of this birth and the impressions of previous births. We now refer to them as heredity and environment. Both are jointly called *prakṛti* or nature by Krishna. Mighty self-restraint is called for to check this *prakṛti*.

These *guṇa*-s are, in fact, what we call the ‘doer’ in any living being.

Krishna says:

प्रकृतेः क्रियमाणानि गुणैः कर्माणि सर्वशः ।

अहङ्कारविमूढात्मा कर्ताहमिति मन्यते ॥

*prakṛteḥ kriyamāṇāni guṇaiḥ karmāṇi sarvaśaḥ |*  
*ahaṅkāravimūḍhātmā kartāhamiti manyate || 27*

“It is the *guṇa*-s, the latent tendencies, which propel us to action, but a person deluded by the notion of ego thinks that he is the doer” (3:27). (This should not lead us to conclude that it is fatalism; as we will later see Krishna mention the choice in action). Delusion means attributing the properties of the *guṇa*-s on one’s self. The wise person knows that the attributes of these tendencies are not his real nature, that he is of the nature of pure consciousness and that the *guṇa*-s are acting as per their potential. He thus tries to come out of their clutches, so to say, and does not have attachment for the fruit of action (3:28). The unwise continue in their attachment to action and cling to the fruit of action but the wise person does not get disturbed by them (3:28). A wise person would not interfere and censure others who cling to the fruit of action, for fear of confusing them (3:29).

#### Distinction between *karma yogi* and a realized person

<i>Karma Yogi</i>	Realized Person
Performs <i>karma</i> with an intention to avoid the fruit of it.	<i>Karma</i> is not compulsory. He might have renounced <i>karma</i> . Even if he performs <i>karma</i> its fruit will not accrue as in the case of king Janaka.
He is still a seeker, making efforts for the purification of mind.	Attained realization of self as Brahman.
<i>Karma</i> is done with the notion of being the doer.	<i>Karma</i> if done is done without the notion of being the doer.
Performs <i>karma</i> as an instrument of the divine scheme	He has achieved the state of actionlessness.

Krishna relates to Arjuna again. He says: “those who perform the duties enjoined on them by *dharma* without seeking their fruit will not attract the bondage of such actions. On the other hand, those who desire the fruit of their actions are indeed foolish” (3:30-31).

The sense organs are designed to like or dislike the sense objects. One who falls a prey to them is hindered from the path of *dharma* (3:34). It is because of this that Arjuna wanted to relinquish his prescribed *dharma*, the duty of removing evil, enjoined on him as a *kṣatriya* king.

Here the Lord Krishna gives an advice. As a *kṣatriya* king, it is the duty of Arjuna to engage in a righteous war and not try to adopt the Brahminical duty of mendicancy (3:35). Mendicancy is prescribed only for a Brahmin and not to others. It is better for Arjuna to do his own duty even imperfectly instead of stepping into another’s role.

In the modern context, this advice is likely to be misinterpreted to mean that Krishna is advocating stratification as we see now. Hence it has to be read along with the verse 4:13 where Krishna clarifies that the four-fold categorization of *varṇa* is based on the *guṇa*-s and not on the accidental nature of birth in what we see in the present day as caste. We shall see the discussion on *varṇa* in 4.4 and 18.4.

The discussion on prescribed *dharma* recurs in chapter 18 also, where Krishna tells Arjuna that even if he tried to avoid *karma* in a fit of sentimentality, his nature would not allow him to do so – ‘your nature would impel you’ (18:43). Arjuna’s nature is valour, boldness, steadiness and such other royal qualities which are the characteristics of *rajas*, and they would surely put him in his duty willy-nilly.

What then, is the course of action? Krishna says: ‘renounce all actions in me, and with a clear mind do your enjoined duty

as an offering to me’ (3:30). ‘Me’ does not refer to the individual Krishna but to the cosmic being. A human being is expected to do whatever is the socially assigned duty as an offering to god, the cosmic scheme. This verse shows that the word ‘renounce’ is used in a different sense. Renunciation means the spirit of selfless and dispassionate performance of duty. The individual has to become the instrument of god in furthering the cosmic scheme of harmonious existence.

### 3.7. Desire and Anger

Arjuna has a query here. ‘How is a person, though wise and unwilling, impelled into sinful action (3:36)?’ Krishna answers: “It is the voracious nature of desire (*kāma*), which is the same as anger, arising out of the *rajo- guṇa* (the second *guṇa* we saw above) which propels a person into action” (3:37). He calls it *mahāśana* – voracious or gluttonous in nature. It has an insatiable appetite; the more we feed the hungrier it makes us. We may also note that desire is equated with anger. Desire, when unfulfilled, or hindered by something, turns into anger. Anger is the alter-ego of desire and so they are spoken of as one and the same. This anger is the enemy for a seeker, as it ensnares him and shrouds his intellect. “Just as smoke covers up the fire, and as dust covers the surface of a mirror, and as the womb covers the foetus, even so a person’s nature is shrouded by this desire” (3:38).

Desire is the eternal enemy, says Krishna. It appears in several devious forms. It is an unquenchable and eternal fire (3:39). It is called ‘*analam*’, that which never says ‘enough’. Like the fire which swallows what all is offered into it, this desire swallows and grows in size.

What is the locus for this enemy called desire? Is it the innate nature of the self, which we have seen as pure consciousness? Or, is there any other locus?

The body-mind-complex (BMC) is the seat for this desire, says Krishna. The locus is within. It is the sense organs, the mind and intellect which are its locus. It is by these that a person gets deluded and his knowledge gets clouded (3:40).

Delusion is the inability to see what is real and what is unreal. It is the lack of *viveka*, discrimination. Because the sense organs are outward bound, they have a built-in sense of like or dislike towards the sense objects. These are presented to the mind. The mind and intellect also have the tendency to accept and analyze them and develop love or hatred to them. The only weapon to encounter the senses is the mind itself. Krishna advises Arjuna to do so (3:41).

It is the all-pervading consciousness, otherwise called Brahman that illumines the senses, the mind and the intellect. Brahman is immanent and transcendent with respect to them. Hence, though the senses appear to be powerful, they can be certainly reined in by the intellect. One has to realize this innate ability in oneself and conquer the enemy called desire. The real enemy before Arjuna is not the army of the enemy, but desire. This is what Krishna says: ‘oh mighty one! Conquer the wily enemy called desire’ (3:43).

The mind has to be conquered by mind; it has to be made pure and tough to move toward the goal. Purity is attained by overcoming desire; steadiness by self-discipline and practices of yoga mentioned by Patanjali and others. The mind is the cause for bondage and mind is the cause for liberation. The mind can ensnare and the mind can tear itself out of the snare. Turning it towards objects is bondage and turning it inwards is the route for liberation and self-knowledge. One who is not yet ripe for this stage has to perform action as assigned to him as a member of the society, with a sense of enthusiasm, dedication and dispassion and as an offering to the Lord.

\* \* \*

## 4

# The Yoga of Wisdom and Renunciation of Action (*jñāna-karma-saṁnyāsa-yogaḥ*)

### 4.1. An Overview

The entire message of the *Gita* has indeed been covered in the second and third chapters. So assuming, Krishna starts narrating the genealogy of this yoga, as per convention. However, Arjuna's further queries prompt him to elaborate on the issues raised by him and hence the forthcoming text.

We see four major topics in this chapter containing 42 verses. The first 11 verses give a picture of what an *avatāra* (God's incarnation) is. This is in answer to Arjuna's query. The next 12 verses tell more about karma yoga which we saw in the third chapter. There is an incidental reference to Varna system existing in Indian society. Verses 23 to 32 elaborate the concept of *yajña*. The last 10 verses are devoted to the description of a realized person, a *jñānī*. As the last topic in the chapter is *jñāna*, it is named as the 'Yoga of Wisdom and Renunciation of Action'.

### 4.2. The Genealogy of the *Gita* and the Philosopher-Kings

The history of the divine message *Gita* is quite long. "I had told this eternal wisdom to the Sun God. He transmitted the same to Manu, the progenitor. Manu further transmitted it to Ikshwaku", says Krishna (4:1). From then it got transmitted to the long lineage of the *rājarṣi-s*, the philosopher kings (4:2).

The word *rājarṣi* means a *jñānī* and a king rolled into one. In those days the royalty were taught the *Vedas* in addition to systems of logic, trade and commerce and jurisprudence. The purpose of the *Gita* is to impart the knowledge of the Self which is an important aspect of royal studies. The commentator Sri Shankara explains this in one very significant line – ‘to invigorate the spiritual strength of the rulers of the world’. With the help of this Yoga they can protect *dharma*. He adds further – ‘if the Vedic knowledge and royal duties go together, they would be strong enough to govern the whole world’. Here one has to note that the king is not the head of religious issues in the ancient Indian state; he is merely trained in the Vedic *dharma* and thus performs his duties with the spirit of *karma-yoga* or as a realized person, as we saw earlier.

This combination of the knowledge of self with the royal power is discussed in the text and also by Sri Shankara on two occasions. King Janaka is the example in the text. The commentators have named several other *jñānī* kings. The question was whether King Janaka was already a *jñānī* or whether he was performing Karma yoga in order to attain *jñāna*. There are two alternatives here. If he was already a *jñānī*, he was merely going through the motions of statecraft as a result of his past *karma* which has given effect to this birth. If he was not a *jñānī*, he was performing it for the purification of his mind, as a preparatory step for self-knowledge. In either case, there was combination of royal power with the pursuit of knowledge of the Supreme Self.

#### 4.3. *Avatāra* or Divine Incarnation

Arjuna has a query. He asks – “How could you, living at this point of time, tell the Sun God and initiate the lineage of this yoga” (4:4)? Krishna gives an explanation. He tells Arjuna that he is a manifestation of the Supreme Brahman, but not a historical character present before Arjuna.

*Avatāra* is a concept that we see in the Vedic literature. There are three prominent cosmic functions – creation, sustenance and resolution (resolving back into the creator). Symbolically they are named the creator Brahma (not Supreme Brahman), the sustainer Vishnu and the resolver Shiva. The universe is sustained by the observance of righteous conduct by a majority of people. But sometimes wickedness thrives and subjugates the virtuous. If the wicked are too strong, there is a need for some grand intervention. This is a historic situation when Vishnu, the preserver, takes birth in some form to restore order. This is called *avatāra*, which literally means coming down.

Brahman (pure consciousness) is unborn and imperishable. However, It assumes a self-created nature and manifests through Its own creative power *māyā* (4:6). What we call cosmic being is the consciousness associated with *māyā*.

Whenever there is a crisis that threatens the divine scheme of things and whenever there is an upsurge of wicked and unrighteous the cosmic scheme, which we call a functional God, restores the balance by appearing in a human form. Two well-known verses describe this.

यदा यदा हि धर्मस्य ग्लानिर्भवति भारत ।

अभ्युत्थानमधर्मस्य तदाऽऽत्मानं सृजाम्यहम् ॥7 ॥

*yadā yadā hi dharmasya glānirbhavati bhārata*

*abhyutthānamadharmasya tadā'atmānaṃ sṛjāmyaham* ॥

परित्राणाय साधूनां विनाशाय च दुष्कृताम् ।

धर्मसंस्थापनार्थाय संभवामि युगे युगे ॥8 ॥

*paritrāṇāya sādūnāṃ vināśāya ca duṣkṛtām*

*dharmasamsthāpanārthāya sambhavāmi yuge yuge* ॥

“Whenever virtue is in peril and when there is upsurge of the wicked I create my self in this world (4:7). I take birth

in every age in order to protect the virtuous, to destroy the wicked and to establish *dharmā*” (4:8).

This is the idea of an *avatāra*. It is in the universal scheme of things that there is a divine intervention, whenever there is an upsurge of wickedness and severe threat to *dharmā*. This intervention happens in every age whenever there is a crisis. There is no physical descent as such from any heavenly world, but it is a figurative way of describing the restoration of universal order. Some great character appears when there is a historic need and restores righteousness. Such a person is the *avatāra* we are talking of. The mythological tales about Lord Vishnu leaving his abode Vykuntha and coming down to earth along with his consort Lakshmi are stories which comforted people for millennia.

There is a difference between our taking birth and the Creator appearing as a human being. Our births are as a result of the fruit of previous actions, whereas the assumption of body by the Creator is for restoration of Dharma and not a result of the fruit of any action.

#### 4.4. The Four *Varṇa*-s

During the course of conversation, there is a reference to the diversity of human nature. In this context, there is a familiar and contentious issue stated here:

चातुर्वर्ण्यं मया सृष्टं गुण-कर्म-विभागशः । 13

*cāturvarṇyam mayā sṛṣṭam guṇa-karma-vibhāgaśaḥ* | 13

“The structure of four *varṇa*-s is created by me according to the innate dispositions of people and duties have been assigned”.

It is important to read this line closely. *Cāturvarṇyam* refers to the four *varṇa*-s – Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vysya and Sudra – which are the four categories based on human nature.

Krishna says that the division is according to the *guṇa*-s, the innate dispositions and tendencies. It is by these that the *karma*, duties, have been assigned. Though the Lord himself is a non-actor, and immutable, this division of *varṇa*-s is as per His scheme.

Human nature is broadly noticed to be of three types. Persons of the first type are peace loving, austere, saintly, learned, contented, and righteous persons. The persons of second type are those who are brave, valorous, aggressive, violent and ever eager to acquire more and dominate others. The third type refers to those who tend to be lazy, indulge in sensual pleasures and also tend to be violent. The *Gīta* makes a similar analysis of personality types.

The *Gīta* had told (3.7) that *māyā*, otherwise called *prakṛti*, is the fountain source for the three *guṇa*-s corresponding to the above three types. *Sattva* refers to qualities like truthfulness, compassion, contentment, rectitude and such. *Rajas* refers to qualities like ambition, domineering and acquisitive nature, while *tamas* refers to qualities like sloth, dullness and sleep. All beings, human and non-human, sentient and insentient have a combination of all these qualities in different proportions.

Thus comes the classification of persons into different *varṇa*-s. The Indian society has come under heavy criticism because of this differentiation which has undergone several mutations over a period of time and which now remains fossilized in the form of caste system. *Vedas* say that in the beginning there was only one *varṇa*, Brahmana. As the society grew, the division was necessitated because of the divergent societal functions. Tasks were assigned to people depending on their aptitude. This is seen by the predominance of one or two of the above *guṇa*-s in a person. A general explanation is given by Sri Shankara as follows:

Brahmana	predominance of <i>sattva</i> followed by <i>rajas</i> and <i>tamas</i>	Study of and teaching scriptures, performing rituals, leading a simple life
Kshatriya	predominance of <i>rajas</i> followed by <i>sattva</i> and <i>tamas</i>	Ruler of society, protecting the weak against aggression by the wicked.
Vysya	predominance of <i>rajas</i> followed by <i>tamas</i> and <i>sattva</i>	Creation of wealth in all fields – agriculture, animal wealth and trade
Sudra	predominance of <i>tamas</i> followed by <i>rajas</i> and <i>sattva</i>	Rendering physical help to the above three types

In the later text, the *Gita* would say that there is no being sentient or insentient in the whole universe which is not a product of the combination of the above three *guṇa*-s. We shall see a more detailed discussion in the verse 18:4.

Ancient Indian *dharma* evolved duties corresponding to the *guṇa* of a person and identified him as such. Long passages in Mahabharatha discuss the issue of *varṇa* and decide that it is nature of a person which determines the *varṇa* and not mere birth. A person born as a Brahmin may really be a Vysya or a Sudra because of his nature and he has to be identified as such.

It is for Indian religious leaders to decide whether we have to stick on to the medieval interpretation and suffer a fractured society or move back to the more egalitarian Vedic interpretation.

The above discussion has come in the context of saying that the Supreme Brahman is beyond the three *guṇa*-s. In the verse 14, Krishna says – “know me as the one whom *guṇa*-s and

activities of *guṇa*-s do not affect. I am not affected by the fruit of any action. One who knows me so, gets liberated from all attachments with *karma*.” He goes on to say – “All the ancient rulers knew my nature and performed their *karma* and attained liberation” (4:15).

#### 4.5. Action, Non-action and Wrong action (*karma*, *akarma* and *vikarma*)

This chapter started with the mention of the philosopher-kings. They are mentioned as role models for Arjuna. They knew the intricacies of *karma* and performed *karma* while being *jñānī*-s. In this connection, Krishna explains three terms – action, non-action and wrong action.

He says – “You should know what action is, what non-action is and what wrong action is. The path of action is difficult to comprehend. One should do the right action but not resign oneself to inaction” (4:17). He further says:

कर्मण्यकर्म यः पश्येदकर्मणि च कर्म यः ।

स बुद्धिमान् मनुष्येषु स युक्तः कृत्स्नकर्मकृत् ॥

*karmanyakarma yaḥ paśyedakarmaṇi ca karma yaḥ*

*sa buddhimān manuṣyeṣu sa yuktaḥ kṛtsnakarmakṛt* ॥

It is an enigmatic statement. “One who sees non-action in action and action in non-action is the wise one. He is the knower and doer of all actions” (4:18).

A *jñānī*, a realized person, performs action as actively or rather more actively than any unwise person, but he is aware that all action pertains to the body-mind complex. He is of the nature of pure consciousness and hence not the *kartā* or the doer. Knowing oneself as the non-doer is what is meant by “seeing inaction in action”. In other words, he does not have the notion of doer-ship – the notion that “I am the doer”. People perceive him to be the doer but he has risen above that level. It

is non-action from his point of view. This is what Krishna calls non-action in action.

One who does *Karma yoga* has this notion of ‘I’ initially. But this desire-free karma results in purification of mind which is a prerequisite for moving on to the *jñāna* path. If he succeeds, his notion of doer-ship drops off and whatever action he does is only seemingly an action but it does not accrue any result on him. It is a mere appearance or semblance of action.

A person might stop doing an action and may be under the impression that he has given up action. Even that giving up is an action by itself because the notion of ‘I’ has not disappeared. Hence it is construed as action only. This is what Krishna means by “seeing action in non-action”.

*Karma* relates to the body but not to Atman. A person who realizes that he is the Atman can distance himself from whatever action he may be doing and be capable of looking at it as a spectator. The commentators have given a good comparison here. A person moving on a boat in a river would, after some time, think himself to be stationary and the trees on the bank to be moving. It is the same in the case of the knower of Atman. There is no action in Atman, but it appears to be there. Realizing that there is no action in the Atman is the right vision. A person having such vision is called a wise person (4:18).

Knowledge of Atman is compared to fire. Action is like a seed which has the potential to sprout. Unless it is properly roasted it will not lose its potential. Knowledge is like the fire which destroys the sprouting potential of karma. Karma fails to give its inevitable result. Just as fire burns the seed, *jñāna* burns all *karma-s*. In other words it nullifies all the results of karma. A wise person who knows that he is not the doer, is the one endowed with the fire of wisdom which burns all actions.

Krishna explains this further. One who is still at the level of Karma yoga but wants to move on to the path of *jñāna* will have to perform actions as an offering to the divine scheme of things (as we saw in the third chapter). By doing so he does not attract the fruit of his actions (4:20).

Verse 20 further clarifies this by saying that a *karma yogi* who has given up the desire for fruit of action, is a non-actor. He will not be affected by the fruit of action, rebirth. (The expression ‘fruit of action’ does not refer to the material benefit which a person gets after doing an action, but it refers to rebirth in order to reap the fruit of good or bad deeds done now).

#### 4.6. What is Yajña?

Krishna goes on to give a very wide meaning for the word *yajña*:

गतसङ्गस्य मुक्तस्य ज्ञानावस्थितचेतसः ।  
यज्ञायाचरतः कर्म समग्रं प्रविलीयते ॥23 ॥

*gatasāṅgasya muktasya jñānāvasthitacetasaḥ*।  
*yajñāyācarataḥ karma samagraṃ praviliyate*॥

“All actions get dissolved in the case of a person who is dispassionate, free from all bondages, stays in the path of knowledge and performs action for the sake of *yajña*” (4:23). The third chapter has shown that the performance of action for the well-being and harmony in society (*loka saṅgraha*) is *yajña*.

The seekers are of different types and grades in the path of *jñāna*. Verses 23 and 24 talk of an already an enlightened person who sees Brahman in all things.

ब्रह्मार्पणं ब्रह्म हविः ब्रह्माग्नौ ब्रह्मणा हुतम् ।  
ब्रह्मैव तेन गन्तव्यं ब्रह्मकर्म समाधिना ॥ 24

*brahmārpaṇaṃ brahma haviḥ brahmāgnau brahmaṇā hutam*।  
*brahmaiva tena gantavyaṃ brahmakarma samādhinā*॥ 24

“For the person who is in Brahman awareness Brahman is the ladle; Brahman is the fire; Brahman does offering in the fire of Brahman; the goal is Brahman” (4:24).

We are familiar with the statement – ‘the snake is rope’. Someone sees a rope as snake in the semi-dark state, whereas his friend points out to him that ‘the snake is rope’. What he has been thinking as snake is indeed rope. The snake gets negated and rope remains.

This is what is meant in this verse. What is viewed as the implement for offering is Brahman; the offering is Brahman; the fire is Brahman and the person making the offering is also Brahman. These things get negated and it is the Brahman which remains. The subject, predicate and object are all viewed as Brahman by the enlightened person.

The commentators point out that this verse is meant to show that *jñānam* is *yajña*. It is the idea of Krishna to describe different types of *yajña*-s and finally point out that *jñāna yajña* is supreme among them all.

The daily spiritual practice of *sandhyā-vandanam* deserves mention here. The objective stated for the above ritual is *Brahma-karma samārabhe* – ‘I am commencing the meditation on Brahman’. This is a daily ritual of practicing *Brahma bhāvanā*, visualizing Brahman in one self and in everything. This is a practice which is in accordance with the *jñāna* path and hence, it is made a compulsory ritual for every human being. Rituals in general aim to attain some material benefit whereas the above exercise is for the purification of mind.

#### 4.7. Different types of *yajña*:

Krishna describes different types of seekers.

- Some worship different deities and do good deeds in order to please them. (4:25)
- Some offer themselves in the fire of Brahman. This expression is figurative. Seeing oneself as not different from Brahman, is figuratively called '*yajña*' and by this *yajña* they are offering themselves in the fire of Brahman. The commentators say that 'knowing oneself as Brahman is what is intended here' (4:25).
- Some offer their senses in the fire of self-restraint. The senses are like wild horses pulling a person in all directions. Hence controlling them is like offering them in the fire of self-restraint (4:26).
- Some offer the sense objects in the fire of the senses. It means that the mind and senses have attained a level of purification whereby they accept only what is desirable and discard things which are not approved by the scriptures (4:26).
- Some others make an offering of all the sense activities in the fire of self restraint. The five sense organs, the five motor organs and the five vital airs, the mind and intellect are collectively called the subtle body. All actions of this subtle body are referred to here. All these activities are purified by the fire of the knowledge of Brahman (4:27).
- Some perform *yajña* at the material level, offering donations in all holy places or to deserving persons with a spirit of (*yajña buddhi*) social well-being. Digging of wells, construction of water tanks, food distribution and such actions come under this category (4:28).

- Some do *tapo yajña*, tough, physical austerities (4:28). A popular example is the *cāndrāyana vratam*. It follows the lunar cycle in which one has to start eating only one morsel of food and slowly increase one morsel per day for the first fifteen days and then reduce in the same order and come back to one morsel at the end of the month.
- Some do *yoga yajña*. They follow the eight-fold discipline described in the Patanjali yoga path (4:28).
- Some others do *svādhyāya yajña*, mastering and propagating that branch of the scripture which they are traditionally bound to uphold. Some others do *jñāna yajña*, study of scriptures and understand the meaning. They are persons with very austere way of life (4:28).
- Some others are dedicated to *prāṇayāma* (breath control) and experiment with different types of *pūraka*, *kumbhaka* and *recaka* (inhalation, retention and exhalation of air) while trying to control the activities of mind (4:29). Keeping one's gaze on the tip of the nose or watching the breath are the easy ways to stop the flow of thoughts in the mind.
- Some take recourse to food restrictions, taking very limited food and combine it with *prāṇāyāma* (4:30). Here, the commentator Nilakantha takes the word '*prāṇa*' to mean the senses. He says that the senses are to be controlled by the mind and the mind by the ego and finally the ego has also to be discarded (4:30).

All persons following the above paths are called knowers of the right path. Krishna does not qualify them as knowers of Brahman as they are still at the level of doing several exercises for the purification of mind. All this is prelude to the level of *jñāna*. Those who conduct themselves in the above manner are figuratively said to be eating food purified by *yajña*. They attain

Brahman gradually by continuing in the right path. One who does not follow any of the above paths is doomed both in this world and in the other world (4:31).

All activities intended for *loka saṅgraha*, for social coherence or welfare of society, are to be called ‘*yajña*’. The *dravya yajña-s* which are performed with a variety of goods and accessories are possible only for the rich. Those who cannot perform this, do the other types like *tapo yajña*, *yoga yajña*, described above. All these attain Brahman in a gradual manner after attaining purification of mind.

#### 4.8. The Supremacy of *jñāna*

Here, Krishna clarifies that all these are at the level of *karma*. The *jñāna* path is superior to all the above. It is the only path which can annihilate the fruit of *karma*, transmigration. Those who intend to break the cycle have to follow the path of knowledge.

सर्व कर्माखिलं पार्थ ज्ञाने परिसमाप्यते । 33

*sarvaṃ karmākhilaṃ pārtha jñāne parisamāpyate*

“Oh Arjuna! The culmination of all *karma* is in *jñāna*” (4:33).

This is a categorical statement from Krishna and it is the sum and substance of the *Upanishads*. The final aim of all *karmas* is to get rid of the cycle of *karma* and this is possible through knowledge.

Krishna suggests three stages in this – submission (*praṇipāta*) before an enlightened guru, active intellectual interaction (*paripraśna*) and devoted service to the teacher (*seva*) (4:34).

What is the vision of a *jñānī*?

He is not deluded any longer. He sees all beings in himself as much as he sees all of them in the Brahman (4:35). This is called ‘*sarvātma bhāva*’ – the rejection of the delimited ego of an individual and realization of his self as not different from Brahman Itself. The confines of the body mind complex are negated and the definition of ‘I’ equates with that of Brahman. By having this vision, the *jñānī* sees all beings in himself.

Knowledge of Brahman is compared to a boat which helps the seeker in crossing the ocean of the transmigratory existence. He goes beyond good and evil (4:36).

Knowledge is also compared to fire. Fire is not only a burning agent but a purifying agent. The fire of *jñāna* burns all the good or bad deeds and turns them to ashes so that the result of such actions never again sprouts (4:37).

Krishna emphasizes – *nahi jñānena sadṛśaṃ pavitram-ihā vidyate* – “There is nothing more purifying than knowledge of Brahman”. This knowledge is achieved through the graduating process of *karma yoga* (4:38). Dedication and self-restraint are the prerequisites for this. When these two are achieved, the process of *jñāna* becomes fast (4:39).

The ignorant and insincere one who doubts the efficacy of *karma yoga* is bound to be doomed. He is happy neither here nor in the other world. He gets entangled and ensnared in *karma* and lingers on. It is only with the sword of knowledge that one becomes free of all doubts and will be able to cut all the tangles and snares (4:41). It is needless to say that Krishna finally exhorts Arjuna to use this sword of knowledge and free himself from the bonds of *karma* and discharge his royal duties.

\* \* \*

## 5

# The Yoga of Renunciation

(*Karma-saṁnyāsa-yoga*)

### 5.1. An Overview

From all the above discussion, it appeared to Arjuna that Krishna was at times commending the renunciation of all actions and at times commending *karma yoga*. Having heard this, Arjuna raises a doubt – “You are commending renunciation on one hand and *yoga* on the other by turns. Please tell me decisively as to which is the commended path for me” (5:1) – he asks Krishna. Hence, in this chapter, Krishna answers that question and moves on to give more details by defining what is true renunciation (*saṁnyāsa*) and comparing it with *karma-yoga*.

The title of this chapter is ‘*Karma-saṁnyāsa Yoga*’, the yoga of renunciation of action. There are 29 verses in this chapter. The first 9 verses expand on what has been told in chapters 2 and 3 about knowledge and action, making a comparative study of both. Verses 9 to 22 give further details of the different levels of the two paths of *karma* and *jñāna*. Verses 23 to 29 describe the means and practices to attain *jñāna*.

Was Krishna really speaking in a mixed-up manner or did Arjuna not understand him correctly? Krishna had certainly commended the path of knowledge and renunciation as a better path but advised Arjuna to be on the *karma* path. In this chapter, while answering Arjuna’s question, Krishna says that *karma yoga* is superior to *saṁnyāsa*. This is a prescription with particular reference to Arjuna in the battle field.

There are different levels or stages in the path of renunciation. We have to see as to what type of renunciation (*saṁnyāsa*) Krishna is referring to.

## 5.2. Two Types of Renunciation

Two types of *saṁnyāsa* are mentioned in Vedānta: Renunciation of action before attainment of *jñāna* (*Vividiṣā saṁnyāsa*) and renunciation of action after knowledge of Brahman (*Vidvat saṁnyāsa*). The first type is adopted as a preparatory stage to *jñāna*, where the practitioner renounces the duties of a householder, puts on ochre robes and formally takes up *saṁnyāsa*. He then undergoes the three level spiritual training – *śravaṇam*, *mananam*, and *nididhyāsanam* (study, deliberation and assimilation). This in deed is the real study of the *Upanishads*. *Karma yoga* is a mere preparatory stage for this. In this path there is likelihood of attaining *jñāna* in due course *but there is also a danger of fall, like getting tempted to sensual pleasures again.*

The second type is renunciation of actions after self-realization. This can be of two types. (1) Having followed the path of *karma*, one attains purification of mind and thereafter undergoes the three level spiritual training of study, deliberation and assimilation. This leads to self-realization and thereafter, he renounces actions. There is no fall or relapse from this stage. (2) Some are born *jñānī*-s because of the fructification of contemplation done in previous births. We get some rare examples such as Suka, Vamadeva, Sanaka, Sanandana and others in scriptures.

A *jñānī* may not necessarily renounce but continue to perform actions because of certain socially ordained and unavoidable duties enjoined by dharma. Examples of this are the philosopher kings like Janaka, described in Chapter 4. As a king, he is not permitted to renounce and take up the life of a

mendicant and hence, he has to discharge his royal duties with dispassion. This is called '*jñāni karma*'.

In contrast to the above, *karma yoga* is the performance of actions by one who has not attained realization. The *karma yogi* performs actions as an offering to God, and as his contribution to the society. This leads to purification of mind and makes it ripe for further steps.

Among the *karma yogi-s*, there are seekers who wish to attain the knowledge of self but they may be in different intellectual levels. Some may be quick learners and some may be slow. By virtue of fructification of spiritual exercises of previous births, one may attain purification of mind faster and complete the three tier learning faster. He is called a student of top grade. The student of a middle grade may be a householder (one who is in *grhastha dharma*), who has the responsibility of sustaining not only his family but also the *brahmacāri-s* and the *sannyāsi-s* as enjoined on him by dharma. He may continue to be a householder and become a *jñāni* by sincerely performing *karma yoga* and doing the three tier spiritual training. The third type of student is more mediocre in nature and is content with the performance of elaborate rituals and holds on to them with passion. He is not even in the grade of *karma yoga*.

What Krishna says can be quite confusing if these different types of action, renunciation and intellectual competence noted above are not clearly understood.

Returning to the question posed by Arjuna, we see Krishna's reply: "Both renunciation and *karma yoga* are reliable paths for realization. But yet, the path of action is better than the path of renunciation" (5:2).

What type of renunciation is better than what type of action? Krishna's meaning is that, the *karma yoga* (performance of *karma* as a duty to humanity) done by a non-realized person,

is better than renunciation of action by a non-realized person. Both are conducive to realization in course of time but still, the path of action is commended because it is useful for society. This is because mere renunciation cannot guarantee self-knowledge, unless followed by sincere study and contemplation of scriptures, and self-discipline by following the eight-limbed yoga described in yoga tradition. It is also Krishna's opinion that, *karma* path is what suits Arjuna. "To tell the truth, the *karma yogi* who does not hate anything nor desire anything can be commended as a *nitya-saṁnyāsi*. (It is more difficult to be a man of action and have self-control in all situations than merely renouncing actions). One who is above the dualities (of love, hate and such) gets released from the bonds of *karma* even if he performs action" (5:3) Krishna says. To be constantly in this state of understanding is *nitya-saṁnyāsa*, which is like treading on a razor's edge.

"People normally think that the path of action and that of renunciation are two different types. But the learned do not think so because by following either of the paths, one can attain liberation. The person who knows this knows correctly" (5:4-5). This expression by Krishna is intended to praise the path of action, which is the path commended to Arjuna at the commencement of the battle. It is also a fact that without this preparatory stage of action, one cannot move on to the next stage of renunciation (5:6).

### 5.3. Action (*karma*) by a realized person

The introductory verses told that *karma yoga* was a path helpful for realization. The person in this path has to consciously practice treating all beings as not different from himself. This is a '*sādhana*', a conscious practice which will bring about an internal transformation. We had seen earlier that the characteristics of a *jñānī* are also the means to be consciously

cultivated by a spiritual seeker. This is a general principle in the spiritual journey.

Krishna compares the conduct of a man of action (in *karma yoga*) with the conduct of a *jñānī*. A *jñānī*'s conduct is like this:

नैव किञ्चित् करोमीति युक्तो मन्येत तत्त्ववित् ।

पश्यन् शृण्वन् स्पृशन् जिघ्रन् अश्नन् गच्छन् स्वपन् श्वसन् ॥ 8

*naiva kiñcit karomīti yukto manyeta tattvavit ।*

*paśyan śṛṇvan sprśan jighran aśnan gacchan svapan śvasan ॥ 8*

“In all actions such as seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, eating, walking, lying down and breathing, the realized person thinks – certainly I am not doing anything (I am not the actor)” (5:8).

This verse summarizes the approach of a *jñānī* who, like the philosopher kings, performs action that is unavoidably enjoined on him. In all his activities, such as seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, eating, moving and so on, the *jñānī* constantly reminds himself: “it is the senses which are experiencing the sense objects whereas ‘I’, the witness self, am untouched by any of these activities and I am not the actor”. In other words, he watches all his sensory and mental activities as a witness.

Existence and awareness are the characteristics of Atman and all action is the characteristic of *prakṛti*, which is the body-mind complex.

*The above verse is highly useful for contemplation for an over-stressed person in the modern world.*

Krishna again describes the *karma yogi* as one who engages himself in action without clinging to the fruit of action. He performs his duty as an offering to the almighty, as an offering to the aggregate. He performs action for purification of his mind and remains untouched just as a lotus petal is not touched by water drops in the lake (5:10-11).

In contrast, a realized person mentally renounces all activities and remains happy in his own nine-gated city, the body-mind complex, like an unattached witness. All of us are of course, staying in the body. The difference, however, is that an unwise man thinks that he is a part of that city. He has the notion of 'I'. But a *jñānī* realizes that he merely goes through the motions of the body but the self has no ownership of the body. He neither sees himself as an actor or director of actions. They are not the characteristics of the Atman (5:13).

#### 5.4. Does Brahman take away our sins?

Krishna makes a statement which may appear startling to a lay devotee. He says that the Supreme Reality is not the one which has created the *karma* and its cycle. As we noted above, the Supreme is of the nature of Existence and Consciousness. It is the *māyā* with its three *guṇa*-s which has created the *karma*, *kartā* (doer) and the result of *karma* and thus made all beings engage in different actions (5:14).

In the same tone, Krishna says: “The Omnipresent Lord does not take away either the good or bad deeds of a person. People are deluded because their knowledge is clouded by ignorance (5:15)”.

What is the connection between the system of merit-demerit (*puṇyam - pāpam*) and Brahman? The above verse says that there is no connection whatsoever. The Supreme Brahman has no doer-ship whatsoever as It is of the nature of pure consciousness. Hence, Brahman does not take away the sins or the good deeds of anybody. Men deluded by *māyā* believe that Brahman is responsible for all the good or bad deeds done by them (5:15).

These statements appear rather shocking to us. We believe in the ‘Moving Finger’ which writes our fates, makes us do good and bad deeds, gives good and bad results and takes away our

sins in case we pray to That. Man derives a lot of consolation from the idea that we can keep on doing some human errors and it is God's grace to pardon them. Vedanta says that Brahman is an entity which transcends such arrangement.

Vedanta accepts a functional level god in the plane of *māyā*. This god is called the creator of the universe. All functional gods (either with form or without form) that humans worship are visualized in this plane. It is *māyā* which appears as creation and the three *guṇa*-s are responsible for all human activity and for giving the sweet or bitter fruits for such actions. *Humans have the free will* to do whatever action they want and get the desired results from the functional level god. The system of good and bad deeds and propitiation of deities to pardon our sins are in the framework of *māyā*. All this will disappear when a person realizes the Self (5:15-16).

#### 5.5. The Conduct of a *jñānī*

Krishna continues to describe the experience of a *jñānī*. This continues till the end of this chapter.

The knowledge of Brahman brings about an internal transformation in the seeker (5:17). Brahman awareness is not a mere understanding of the Upanishadic statements at an intellectual level. It is merely the first stage. The seeker has to experience it and continuously dwell in that (5:19). Brahman awareness blows away all the impurities, the results of actions of past lives.

An oft quoted verse appears here:

विद्या-विनय-सम्पन्ने ब्राह्मणे गवि हस्तिनि ।

शुनि चैव श्वपाके च पण्डिता समदर्शिनः ॥18

*vidyā-vinaya-sampanne brāhmaṇe gavi hastini*

*śuni caiva śvapāke ca paṇḍitā samadarśinaḥ* ॥18

“The wise perceive the *sama* (same, meaning Brahman) in all things such as a Brahmin endowed with knowledge and humility, in a cow, in an elephant, in a dog or in a dog eater” (5:18). All are equal in the eyes of the wise one who sees the same Brahman consciousness in all beings. In all these divergent things, the wise person sees Brahman untouched by the tendencies born out of the three *guṇa*-s (5:18). Extreme examples are given here to demonstrate that the *jñānī* sees Brahman in all things.

The question should not arise here whether the learned man should be treated on par with a dog or whether the king and his servant have to be treated equally. Such social ranking or order of precedence may be applicable in a social context (transactional level) but not at the absolute level. A *jñānī* rises above the limitations of *varṇa*, *āśrama* and all such delimiting features. The difference among *varṇa*-s is merely due to difference in *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas* but a *jñānī* is one who has risen above the *guṇa*-s.

Such even-sighted person is a *jīvanmukta*, one who has attained liberation even while being alive. He has overcome the cycle of birth and death because his mind is stationed in equanimity. Krishna says that such *sama-buddhi* or equanimity is Brahman. All the impurities such as being a dog-eater and such are the characteristics of the body mind complex (5:19).

A *jñānī* neither rejoices when a pleasant thing befalls nor bemoans when an unpleasant thing happens (5:20). Vedanta talks of two types of happiness – happiness arising from external objects which give happiness to senses and happiness arising out of knowledge of self. Abiding in the knowledge of self is *Brahma yoga*, Krishna says. “A person in such a state of bliss in the contemplation of Brahman is untouched by any external attractions” (5:21). The happiness arising out of sensory objects

is the cause of grief, because it is ephemeral, having a beginning and an end.

We had learnt earlier that the very characteristics of a *jñānī* are the means to be consciously cultivated by a seeker. This is somewhat similar to our modern observation that conscious habits influence the unconscious mind. Some of these means mentioned by Krishna are as follows.

One has to restrain the ferocity of desire and anger. Desire creates anger and together, they overwhelm a person, sway him and make him rage with anger. One has to consciously restrain their momentum (5:23). The antidote is to look inwards and find the inner light. Krishna calls this “*antarjyoti*”. Shankaracharya describes this in his famous ‘*ekaśloki*’, a single quartet summarizing the nature of self. This is the inner light which remains when the body-mind-complex is negated. All the desires, frustration, anger are in the realm of the body-mind-complex.

“The yogi who is happy within, sports within, derives light from within, such a one, by being Brahman, will attain the transcendence of Brahman” (5:24).

## 5.6. Measuring Happiness

Can we measure happiness of a human being and compare it with the bliss of Brahman? Is there any yardstick for it?

The *Upanishads* have several passages to describe this inner light and bliss. The Taittiriya Upanishad devotes a long passage which is an enquiry into the nature of bliss. Imagine a person in the prime of youth, enjoying good health, full of *joie de vivre*, with all desirable things of the world at his command. His happiness is taken as the yardstick for highest happiness at human level. A hundred-fold of such human happiness is the happiness of Gandharvas, the celestial beings. This happiness is equal to the happiness of a *jñānī* who has vanquished all his

desires and stable in the knowledge of Brahman. Similarly, there are other celestial beings whose happiness gets multiplied exponentially as above but all these are ultimately less than the happiness of the *jñānī*. The wise person has no wants in him, as he does not feel any sense of incompleteness or inadequacy in him. He identifies himself with the infinite Brahman Itself and hence, nothing else can equal him. Such a person is referred to in the above verse (5:24) as ‘*antaḥ sukhi*’, one who is happy in himself. He is also called ‘*antar- āramah*’, one who rejoices within himself. He is also called ‘*antar-jyoti*’, one who has found the inner light. His happiness does not depend on external things.

It is natural for such person to see Brahman in all things and realize that his own self is not different from that Brahman. It is human nature to love oneself and hence for the *jñānī* who sees his self in others, love for all beings becomes his nature. He has transcended the dualities.

All the above are characteristics of a *jñānī*, but from the point of view of the seeker, the same are exercises to be consciously practiced. Shankaracharya explains that *jīvanmukti* is attained by the *jñānī-s* who renounce action. The path of *karma yogi-s* is a gradual path, initially leading to *citta-śuddhi* (purification of mind), enabling it to attain knowledge. Thus it is the preparatory step for knowledge.

However, *karma yoga* (*karma* performed as an offering to the Lord, or cosmic design) will not stay with the *jñānī* after attainment of knowledge. It will be dropped off. Hence it is called an external means for *jñāna*. The next chapter will tell about self-restraint and meditation (*dhyāna*). These will continue to stay even after attainment of knowledge and be an integral part of a *jñānī*. These are called the internal or co-existing means for *jñāna*.

## 5.7. Self-Restraint and Meditation

The last three verses of the chapter introduce this concept of *dhyāna yoga*, which is going to be dealt with in detail in the next chapter. The basic feature of *dhyāna yoga* is the control of the wild nature of the body mind complex by constant practice of yoga. Meditation on a functional god (either with form or formless, known as *saguṇa brahma*) along with the techniques of physical restraint through control of breath (practices described in Patanjali's yoga) are the strategy. A hint of such physical exercise and breath control is given here (5:27). The sense objects have to be consciously kept away from the mind and desires, fear, anger which are the tendencies of mind have to be gradually weakened.

Devotion to *saguṇa Brahma* (The Creator Brahman as distinguished from the Supreme Brahman) is mentioned in the last verse of this chapter. This empirical entity which we call 'God' is what is intended by the *karma yogi* when he discharges his functions as an offering to the Lord. It is the same god who is the purveyor of all actions, recipient of all the oblations offered in the *yajña*-s and he is the subject matter for all the meditations. Such surrender will enable the seeker to realize the god indwelling and illumining all beings. Such a practitioner, in course of time, attains bliss which is nothing other than the cessation of the cycle of transmigration (5:29).

\* \* \*

## 6

# The Yoga of Meditation

(*Dhyāna-yoga*)

### 6.1. An Overview

This chapter is variously named as *dhyāna yoga* (the yoga of meditation), *abhyāsa yoga* (the yoga of practice) and also as *ātma-samyama yoga* (the yoga of self restraint) in different traditions. Our sense organs are outward looking; they seek sense objects and bind us with those objects. The self is full of such sense objects and it has to be unburdened. For this, the senses have to be controlled and turned inwards. This is not an easy task but requires constant attention and practice. This practice or *abhyāsa* is the main theme of Patanjali in his aphorisms on yoga. The practices of self-restraint are common to different systems of Indian thought like Vedanta, Patanjali yoga, *sāṅkhya*, Buddhism and Jainism. All these are not mere philosophical systems but ethical and religious systems too.

This chapter has 47 verses. It starts with defining the inter-relationship of *karma*, renunciation and meditation. Verses 4 to 17 talk about conscious control of the body and certain practices which are meant to bring the mind and sense organs under control. Verses 18 to 32 describe the internal transformation and purification achieved by the seeker in the path of Brahman. Verses 33 to 47 talk of the obstacles in the path of meditation, the consequences and how such obstacles have to be overcome.

In this chapter, the word ‘*yoga*’ is generally used by Krishna to refer to *dhyāna yoga*, meditation associated with restraint of senses. This is a supplement to the *karma yoga* and *yoga* of renunciation which we saw in the earlier chapters.

The five sense organs – sight, smell, touch, taste and hearing – can be controlled by conscious effort, but the internal organ, the mind, is difficult to be restrained. It is a generally observed principle that conscious restraint of the external organs will gradually lead to control on the mind. This is what is shown here by Krishna.

*Karma yoga*, by itself, gives the limited result of attaining purification of actions (because of the right attitude to *karma*) as we have seen. But there is still a possibility of the dualities of likes and dislikes storming the mind. Hence, *karma yoga* has to be combined with meditation for better results. This again has to be followed by the three level learning of *śravaṇam*, *mananam* and *nididhyāsanam* (study, reflection and actualization).

Similarly, renunciation of actions (*saṁnyāsa*) by itself will not give the final result. This too has to be associated with *dhyāna*, self-restraint, followed by study, reflection and realization. We shall see this association of the three *yoga-s* in the paragraphs to follow.

## 6.2. Ascending the Orbit of Meditation

Krishna’s instruction in the *Gita* is meant to guide the whole humanity whose predominant nature is *pravṛtti*, action-orientation. The immediate listener too is Arjuna, a man of action. Keeping this in mind, Krishna starts complementing a *karma yogi*. He says that a *karma yogi* is no less than a monk who has achieved perfection in meditation (6:1).

Krishna says that *karma yoga* is a means (or a preparatory step) for *dhyāna yoga*. There are two words used here by Lord Krishna – one who wants to ascend the orbit of *dhyāna yoga*

(*ārurukṣu*) and the other who has ascended that level (*ārūḍha*). For the person who is still in the process of ascent, *karma yoga* becomes the means. It is a necessary prerequisite. But having attained this stage, the *karma yoga* will have to be dropped off if he has to continue in the path of self-realization. The next step will be total renunciation of actions (6:3). Renunciation of action is the spiritual wealth which is needed to traverse the path of knowledge. Thus, on one hand, Krishna encourages Arjuna on the path of action and on the other hand, indicates its limitations too.

Krishna then moves on to tell about meditation itself and the preparation for it. He advises not only withdrawal of senses from the sense objects but even avoidance of thinking or attaching any value (*saṅkalpa*) to them. We love and pursue objects because we attach value to them or because they are glorified by others. Renunciation of such glorification of objects is the first step in *dhyāna yoga*. The word ‘*saṅkalpa*’ is significant; it means attachment of value to a sense object, which is otherwise ephemeral and impermanent (6:4).

Krishna gives an important advice:

उद्धरेदात्मनाऽत्मानम् नात्मानमवसादयेत् ।

आत्मैव ह्यात्मनो बन्धुरात्मैव रिपुरात्मनः ॥6 ॥

*uddharet ātmanā’tmānam nātmanamavasadayet*

*ātmaivahyātmano bandhuḥ ātmaiva ripurātmanaḥ*

“One has to elevate one’s own self by the self and never destroy the self. The self is the friend and it is also the enemy of the self” (6:6).

The uplift of a person depends on himself and he should not allow it to fall. The word ‘*ātman*’ here refers to one’s self and also to the body-mind-complex alternately. The body-mind-complex is the only tool either for the uplift or downfall of the self. It is one’s own friend when it is well controlled

and when it discards bondages but becomes one's foe when it accumulates bondages. Self is a friend if you overcome the pulls and pressures of the senses and self is a foe if they are not overcome.

A person who controls the senses will have equanimity in all situations of duality. Krishna uses his two terms – *jñāna* and *vijñāna* to refer to knowledge at an intellectual level and the level of realization of Brahman. A seeker has to achieve both levels. Such a yogi is neutral to pleasure and pain, honor and dishonor. He values gold and a lump of earth equally. He is neutral to a friend, foe, relative, a saint or a sinner (6:8-9).

### 6.3. Practices for the Body-Mind-Complex

The ancient seers of all schools of philosophy had given a lot of importance to self-purification and for this they had realized the need to consciously control the body in order to achieve control on mind. This is seen in the *Upanishads*, Buddhism, Jainism and it is extensively discussed by Patanjali in the *Yoga-Sutra-s*. What we find in the *Gita* can also be seen in Patanjali and in other schools.

Krishna elaborates the practices to be followed.

- Loving to stay in an isolated place and alone (6:10)
- Having control on one's mind and senses (6:10)
- Abandoning all desires and following the principle of '*aparigraha*' (non-acceptance of any offering from anyone) (6:10)
- Having a proper posture for meditation, on a seat cushioned by grass, deer skin and cloth. (6:11)
- Concentration of mind for self-purification (6:12)
- Fixing one's gaze on the tip of the nose (6:13). The idea is not to concentrate on the nose but to ensure that the eyes

do not hover around. This practice, in course of time, will control the wandering mind too.

- Having tranquility of mind, not entertaining ideas of duality (6:14).
- Being fearless (6:14). This is possible for one who practices Brahman consciousness, which is the ability to look at all beings as Brahman. This is achieved through constant meditation on the Upanishadic statements. Such a person cannot see an enemy and hence, he is fearless.
- To follow the regimen of a *brahmacāri* (6:14). This does not mean mere sexual restraint as it is normally taken, but it refers to the seeker's unwavering orientation towards Brahman.
- Fixing one's attention on Brahman (6:14). Here Krishna uses two words – *mat-citta* (mind on me), and *mat-para* (considering me as Supreme). This holds at two levels – the level of a seeker worshipping God with name and form and a seeker contemplating on the Supreme Brahman.
- Avoiding either excess or abstinence in food, sleep and activities (6:16).
- Undertaking only such activities which are complementary to meditation (6:17)

*Srimad Bhagavatam* gives an appropriate metaphor for the mind. Mind is compared to a wheel (*nemi*) which is in constant motion. The place where the mind-wheel comes to a halt is known as *naimiśam* in the above *purāṇa*. It symbolizes a mind which has achieved tranquility. In that epic the forest in which all the sages dwell is named *naimiśam*, which symbolizes the state of tranquility of the sages. (Incidentally this is a pilgrim centre too).

Concentration is like passing a beam of light through a convex lens so that it converges at a focal point. It is a one-pointed attention on a single thought. Conscious physical effort helps much in achieving this and hence it is called *haṭha-yoga*, that which is wrought by effort. Modern students are familiar with this word.

Meditation is slightly different. While meditation requires concentration, it is not focused on a single thought but on a stream of similar thoughts, undisturbed by dissimilar thoughts. For instance, the idea of ‘that you are’ has to be followed up by all the logical analysis which we find in the Upanishadic texts. Hence it is called *rāja-yoga*, the king of yoga-s, which we will see in the ninth chapter of the *Gita*.

Krishna promises that the person who practices in the above manner will attain everlasting peace and will also abide in the Brahman Itself (6:15).

#### 6.4. The Tranquil Mind

The person who attains such a stage of tranquility can be said to be established in yoga (6:18). His state of mind is described like this:

- Just as a lamp does not flicker in a breezeless place, so is his mind unwavering and devoid of any disturbance (6:19). This is tranquility of mind (*niścalatvam*).
- He does not have any external thoughts disturbing his meditation. All the thoughts have been controlled and he revels in his Self (6:20). This is purity of mind (*nirmalatvam*). Both tranquility and purity are needed in the path of *jñāna*.
- The bliss which he enjoys is something beyond the senses. It is only known to the mind (6:21).

- The seeker who attains this state will not consider anything else greater than this and he will remain unmoved in any adversity (6:22).
- Krishna calls this stage the stage of dissociation from association with sorrow (6:23). The sense organs which are the causes for contact with sensory objects are non-functional here.

What has the practitioner to do at this stage? He has to gradually practice the exercise of *uparati*, withdrawal of sense organs from sense objects. The mind has to be focused on Self and not anything else (6:25). As and when the fickle mind tries to move out it has to be slowly brought back and brought under control (6:26). It is not by force that one has to do this, but by proper realization of the futility and impermanence of objects. A person who achieves such state of subdued mind, is indeed *jīvanmukta*, one who is liberated while being alive (6:27).

He is also praised as the one who has got rid of all the impurities (*kalmaṣa*). Impurity not only means the actions of demerit (*pāpam*) but includes actions of merit too (*puṇyam*), because both these cause rebirth in order to reap the fruit of such action. Hence, both merit and demerit (good and bad deeds) are impurities which stand in the way of a *jñāni* and hence he avoids both (6:28).

The greatest aim of a human being is to get the highest type of happiness. The aim of Vedanta is to enable the seeker to achieve the same. This is possible for someone who is unaffected by desires (*akāmahata*), we noted above. Total freedom from any type of sorrow is possible only for him who is in that Brahman consciousness, as the next verse says:

सर्वभूतस्थमात्मानम् सर्वभूतनिचात्मनि ।  
ईक्षते योगयुक्तात्मा सर्वत्र समदर्शनः ॥

*sarva-bhūtasthamātmānaṃ sarva-bhūtāni cātmani*  
*īkṣate yogayuktātmā sarvatra sama-darśanaḥ* || (6:29)

“The person who has attained perfection in meditation sees himself in all beings and also sees all beings in himself. He has achieved the stage of seeing Brahman all around”.

Brahman is designated as *sama* (sameness), the underlying principle in everything. The successful yogi sees Brahman which is present in all beings starting from a blade of grass to the creator of the universe. (Vedanta, we know, treats the creator of universe as only a manifestation in the Supreme Consciousness, Brahman).

The existence aspect of Brahman (*sat*) is inherent in all things which appear in the universe. That is also inseparable from consciousness. When a person says – ‘I am’, the fact of his existence is inseparable from his knowledge. Existence is like the thread in a garland pervading in all things. All appearances are mere *upādhi-s* or delimiting factors for the same existence-intelligence (*sat* and *chit*) and all are impermanent. In all these impermanent objects the realized person sees the unchanging Brahman, devoid of all the delimiting factors (6:30-31). Brahman is always present to him as in the case of Prahlada who saw Brahman in everything, including in a pillar.

Lord Krishna extols the *dhyāna yogi* who has attained the ability to see Brahman in every being and also to see It as non-different from himself. “Such a yogi dwells in Me”, says Krishna (6:31).

Inability to see Brahman in everything and perception of duality is due to one’s own idea of finiteness and identification with the body-mind-complex. One who can see Brahman as not different from oneself, is said to be dwelling in Brahman Itself. He may be engaged in *karma* or may have renounced *karma*. This sort of unity with Brahman is possible by what

Vedanta calls *manonāśa* – the annihilation of mind. It means the gradual thinning down of the notion of ‘I’ in the limited self and expanding the ‘I’ to the level of Brahman. It is the stage when the seeker realizes that he is of the nature of pure consciousness and not the mind. Such a person has a different perception of his surroundings.

### 6.5. Empathy is the Result of Realization

The quality of empathy is called *ātmaupamyam* (6:32), where the seeker puts himself in the place of others and perceives the other man’s grief as his own grief. Such a person cannot do any harm to others, just as he cannot do any harm to himself. He is the supreme yogi (6:32), says Krishna.

There are three prerequisites which would facilitate the seeker to reach this level of awareness. These are – 1) knowledge of Brahman at an intellectual and theoretical level, 2) ‘annihilation’ of mind, and 3) annihilation of *vāsanā-s*, predispositions. Knowledge at theoretical level is possible by going to a guru and studying the Upanishadic statements, and logically validating the conclusions derived in the *Upanishads*. However we saw that this is not enough. Vedanta has to be experienced. This is possible only when the mind is made totally neutral. Hence ‘annihilation’ of mind is suggested. Mind is a bundle of feelings such as desire, determination, anger, frustration, fear and many such thought processes called *chitta vṛtti-s* or modifications of mind. Rejection of mind is possible only by negating it consciously and meditating that one’s real nature is pure awareness and not a delimited awareness reflected in an insentient object called mind.

The third requirement is the eradication of *vāsanā-s*. *Vāsanā-s* are certain predispositions formed in the mind because of previous actions (*karma*) either in the present life or in the previous life. These are like indelible impressions etched on the mind. These impressions create unpremeditated

responses in the form of likes and dislikes towards objects. These predispositions can be either good or bad. Even good dispositions can be an obstacle in the path of knowledge. For instance, obsession with scholastic achievements is an obstacle. It is like missing the wood for the trees. Obsession with one's own image in the public and obsession with perfection in personal conduct are obstacles too. These too have to be consciously removed from the mind by continuous practice of meditation.

## 6.6. Arjuna's Doubt

Having heard all this, Arjuna has a doubt. Krishna himself is saying that the mind is too wayward. How can one control it? (6:34). "Yes, it is true. But it can be controlled by *abhyāsa*, constant practice and *vairāgya*, spirit of renunciation" (6:35), says Krishna. Patanjali's yoga sutra talks of these two as important disciplines to be practiced by a seeker. *Abhyāsa* means the retention and repetition of a stream of similar thoughts undisturbed by any dissimilar thoughts. This is a process which involves discrimination (*viveka*) of what is eternal and what is non-eternal, what is Self and what is non-Self, the nature and futility of desires and so on. This stream of thought gradually influences the mind and brings it under control. Dispassion, (*vairāgya*) is possible only by a proper analysis but not by impulsive, emotional or forcible withdrawal.

Arjuna has another doubt. Suppose a person who has come to the stage of *dhyāna yoga* has given up *karma yoga* and has started the discipline of meditation. The question is as to what will happen if the latter does not fructify. Will he fall between the two stools, as we commonly say? (6:37-38).

This does not happen, assures Krishna. A person who, for no fault of his, fails to attain self-realization or dies before attaining realization, will not be a lost person. Any devoted effort in the spiritual path will never go waste. Such person

has two possibilities. He will enjoy long number of years in good *loka-s* (after-world) and will take birth in pious and rich households. He will then continue his spiritual discipline (*sādhana*) from where he had left earlier. Another possibility is that he will be born in the very households of *yogi-s* where there is a greater helpful atmosphere for spiritual progress. This is a more desirable option, says Krishna (6:42). The seeker's mind will be dragged in the direction of self-realization and he will attain realization without fail. Krishna extols this status of *yogi* and exhorts Arjuna to become a *yogi*.

### 6.7. A Comment on the Structure of the *Gita*

The structure of the *Gita* is analyzed by traditional commentators. They point out that the three words of the Upanishadic line – ‘That you are’ – are examined in the eighteen chapters of the *Gita*. Each word is said to have been examined in a group of six chapters.

In the Upanishadic line, the word ‘That’ refers to Brahman and ‘you’ refers to *jīva*. It is said that the nature of *jīva* has been examined in the first six chapters. The nature of ‘That’ (Supreme Reality) is discussed in the next six chapters and the equation of *jīva* with Brahman is shown in the last six chapters.

The teaching of Krishna in the first six chapters shows this. The nature of *jīva*, the embodied being, is fully analyzed. Vedānta analyzes three aspects – the *jīva*, the created universe and the Brahman. The universe falls under the category of insentient, while the *jīva* is the sentient entity. We have seen the human frailties, desires, conflicts and dilemmas in Arjuna's mind. Arjuna is Everyman. His feelings are our feelings. These chapters analyzed the whole gamut of human activity and suggested the right attitude to *karma* (*karma yoga*). Krishna has given a large picture of dharma and told about the nature of Self in the second chapter. He said that *jīva* is the same as Brahman. The eternal Self is unaffected by the vagaries of five

elements and what we call death is only for the body. Krishna has also referred to Arjuna's duty as a king from the point of view of transactional reality. There is an elaboration of *karma yoga* in the whole of chapter three. There is a reference to the three *guṇa-s* – *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*, which are the real actors in the body-mind-complex.

The broad perspective about the concept of *yajñā*, as envisioned in the *Vedas* is presented in the fourth chapter. *Yajñā* is not a mere ritual but an activity for social harmony and well being. There are several types of *yajñā-s* described in the whole of chapter four. Renunciation of action was told in chapter five and the techniques of meditation have been told in chapter six.

All these constitute the whole range of human endeavor in the process of self-realization. Thus it has been rightly said that the first six chapters analyze the nature of *jīva*. We may now see the second group of six chapters which would describe the nature of Brahman.

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# The Yoga of Knowledge and Realization

## (*Jñāna-vijñāna-yogaḥ*)

### 7.1. An Overview

Continuing from where he left, Lord Krishna, on his own, starts telling about the nature of Supreme Reality.

This chapter has thirty verses. The nature of Supreme Brahman is told from verse 2 to 12. The nature of *māyā*, the seed for the whole universe, is told in two verses; the supremacy of a *jñāni* is told in verses 17 to 19 and the two types of devotion – devotion on Brahman without attributes and devotion on a God-form are told in the subsequent verses.

### 7.2. Knowledge (*jñānam*) and Realization (*vijñānam*)

Krishna promises to tell about knowledge (*jñānam*) and realization of knowledge (*vijñānam*). He also asserts that there is nothing else to be known if one realizes the knowledge of self.

In this context, by the word ‘knowledge’, Krishna is referring to the theoretical knowledge of scriptures. For instance, the *Upanishads* say that Brahman is existence, consciousness and infinitude and also that the individual (*jīva*) is Brahman. Mere knowledge of this statement cannot be taken as realization unless the seeker mulls over the logic presented in the *Upanishads* and dwells on it as part of meditation. Realization involves self-purification. This is achieved by the *karma-yoga* and the practices of self-discipline (which were noted in the previous chapter). A good teacher is also needed

to guide him in the process. This can enable the seeker to experience Brahman as Krishna is going to describe.

There is a familiar example which the teachers of Vedanta give. It seems ten young men were crossing a river while going from one village to another. They had to wade through the river in neck deep waters and hence after getting on to the bank, one among them started counting whether all had safely crossed the river. He counted all except himself. Another person counted too, but committed the same mistake. Likewise, all felt that one was missing and started lamenting loudly. A passerby enquired about the matter and after learning about their problem, he told the young man – ‘you are the tenth one’. The young man realized that he was really the tenth one. This is called ‘*aṅkarokṣa jñāna*’, immediate knowledge. The *Upanishads* proclaim – ‘That you are’, meaning that the *jīva* is none else than Brahman. This has to be experienced by the seeker and only then it becomes immediate knowledge. Thus in this chapter Krishna is promising that the nature of Brahman will be told not only theoretically but also to make Arjuna realize Its nature.

### 7.3. The Higher and Lower Manifestations of Brahman

Vedanta holds that Brahman alone exists and whatever we see as universe is only an appearance on Brahman because of the power called *māyā*. It is a power which is origin-less and which is a manifestation in Brahman. This has three constituents or qualities named *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*. These three *guṇa*-s cause the five elements – space, air, fire, water and earth – which initially originate in an elemental, unseen form. These five elements in their elemental form interact among one another, acquire an appearance and appear as gross elements as we see them, with all their variegated forms. Thus consciousness is the higher reality and what appears as universe is the lower reality.

Krishna refers to the above as two types of Brahman’s nature. He calls one as *parā*, the higher or superior and the other

as ‘*aparā*’, the lower or inferior. They have been distinguished like this.

The lower ( <i>aparā</i> )	The higher ( <i>parā</i> )
There are eight components – Earth, water, fire, air, space, mind, intellect and ego	<i>jīva</i> , the intelligent being, the embodied self
Finite, delimited	Infinite.
<i>jaḍa</i> , insentient	<i>cetana</i> , Sentient
All this is called <i>kṣetram</i> , the field, which is the observed	This is the observer, <i>kṣetrajñā</i>
It is also called ‘ <i>saṃsāra</i> ’, which is of binding nature	Pure consciousness has no bondage, but feels bound by identifying with the body-mind-complex

In the above table, the word ‘mind’ refers to the notion of ‘I’ at cosmic level. Intellect refers to the cosmic self or the cosmic mind called ‘*hiranya-garbha*’ and ego refers to the unmanifested *prakṛti*. This eight-fold nature is called inferior because by nature it is insentient and it has to be cognized by an observer, and the observer is *jīva*, the embodied consciousness. The term ‘*jīva*’ refers not merely to a human being but to all beings, from a tiny insect to the Cosmic Being called ‘*hiranya garbha*’ in Vedanta. (It is in this Cosmic Being that different God forms are visualized).

In Indian tradition the discussion on the relationship between mind and matter is as old as the *Upanishads*.

In the above table, mind is categorized as insentient. We have to see how it can be called so.

Unlike the logicians (nyāya system of Indian philosophy) who hold that the world is made of atoms and that intelligence is produced in the atoms, the *Upanishads* hold that the mind itself is insentient and that it is only a reflecting medium for the consciousness principle, that we call Brahman. We have seen that *māyā* is a power which manifests in Brahman and that there are three constituents, *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas* in it. The emergence or appearance of the five elements – space, air, fire, water and earth – from the same *māyā* was explained in an earlier chapter. These five elements too have the three basic constituents, *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas* in them. Each sense organ corresponds to one element. We know that the ear can only hear sound, skin can only feel touch, eye can only see the light, tongue can only taste and the nose can only smell. These five qualities correspond to five elements. Vedanta says that these five sense organs are indeed evolved from the *sattva* component of the five elements and hence they are able to perceive those elements. The mind is able to receive data from all the five sense organs, collate the data and understand it. Mind is said to be the cumulative product of the *sattva* component of the five elements. Thus it also categorized as insentient. However it is said to be of very fine material which is capable of receiving the reflection of Consciousness of Brahman and in turn illuminating the five sense organs which reach out to the external world and perceive external objects.

As we have seen earlier, Vedanta holds that there cannot be any other external material apart from Brahman. If there were to be some material apart from Brahman, in such case Brahman would not be infinite. Hence Vedanta holds that whatever appears as cosmos is an appearance in Brahman. This is what Lord Krishna says – “origin, sustenance and resolution of the universe is within me” (7:6). He asserts the same – “Arjuna! There is nothing apart from Me” (7:7).

When Krishna says “I pervade the whole universe”, he is referring to the Supreme Reality by the word ‘I’. “Everything in the universe is strung in me, the Brahman, just as several precious stones are strung in a garland”. When Krishna says, “all these things are in me”, it is not as though the whole universe is physically located in Brahman like a bunch of fruits in a basket. It merely means that all things exist in the existence-consciousness called Brahman. Brahman is the material and also the instrumental cause for the universe through the medium of *māyā*. It is a general rule that an effect (*kārya*) has the same properties as that of the cause (*kāraṇa*), just as all ornaments are nothing but modifications of gold and just as all earthen vessels are but modifications of clay. All things in the universe are but modifications of the *māyā* which is characterized by three *guṇa*-s. The essence of all things in the universe is Brahman. This is further explained from verses 8 to 12.

An interesting verse is seen here. Indians are usually accused of being content with the ‘Hindu growth rate’ and as people not concerned with worldly achievement. Krishna tells the contrary.

बलं बलवतां चाहं कामराग-विवर्जितम् ।  
धर्माविरुद्धो भूतेषु कामोऽस्मि भरतर्षभ ॥ 11

*balam balavatām cāham kāmarāga-vivarjitam*  
*dharmāviruddho bhūteṣu kāmo’smi bharatarṣabha* ॥ 11

Strength and desire in a human being are also manifestations of divinity. Vedanta does not scoff at people fulfilling desires so long as they are in accordance with dharma. Strength, likewise, should be used with dispassion in accordance with *dharmā* in order to vanquish evil. Similarly, all worldly achievement has to be in accordance with *dharmā*.

Here Krishna explains the concept of *māyā* further. Good and evil, the products of *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*, are all manifested in Brahman. “They are in me, but I am not in them”, says Krishna. It means that their existence and intelligence are from Brahman only. Everything in the universe is a combination of the three *guṇa*-s. People get deluded by these *guṇa*-s and treat them as their own character but fail to see the Supreme Being (*paramātmā*) beneath them.

“My *māyā*, constituted by the three *guṇa*-s is difficult to surmount. Only those who contemplate on Me can cross this over” (7:14).

*Māyā* is a manifestation in Brahman and it is difficult to cross over unless the seeker particularly tries to know the Brahman by proper discrimination and single-minded devotion. Mere enquiry is not enough, says Krishna. The mind should also be pure; it should be rid of all impurities like *rāga*, *dveṣa*. People with impure minds cannot attain Brahman as their knowledge is whisked away by *māyā* (7:15).

#### 7.4. Four Types of Seekers

Four types of people seek God, the Lord of creation. They are – a distressed person, a seeker of truth, a seeker of wealth and also a realized person. All the four are commendable, since they have chosen to seek God. However Krishna says that the last type, the realized person, is dearest to him, as the realized person is not different from Brahman Itself. Persons of the first type are those who are in distress; may be due to threat from enemies, disease or some other danger. After exhausting various options, they come to god. The character of Gajendra in *Bhagavatham*, Kunti and Draupadi in *Mahabharata* are examples of this. Most people usually come to think of god only when in distress. That is why Kunti prays to Krishna “let me always have difficulties so that I can always remember you (*Bhagavatam*)’.

Examples of the second type are people like Uddhava in *Bhagavatam*. He is called a *jijñāsu*, an inquisitive person and a seeker, who wants to know the Supreme Reality. He does not have any desire to be fulfilled.

The third type of person is the one who wants prosperity. He is already in a comfortable situation but wants more. Examples are Sugriva and Vibhishana in *Ramayana*, and Dhruva in *Bhagavatam*. People want celestial worlds like heaven or some such attainment.

The last type of person is a *jñānī*, a realized person. He has already seen the end of *māyā* and he has no desires what so ever. The devotion of a *jñāni* is like a person's love for himself. He approaches god with the same love with which he approaches himself. In other words, he does not see Brahman as different from himself. In his famous aphorisms on devotion (*bhakti*), Narada says – “devotion is of the nature of intense love”. *Bhakti* is the highest form of love, he says. Prahlada in *Bhagavatam* is an example of this.

All the four types are said to be fortunate people because they are all on the right path. Even the person in distress and the person who wants prosperity will finally graduate to the level of *jñānam* because of purification of mind through the process of *bhakti* (verses 7:17-18).

Krishna says that the human life is an instrument and an opportunity for self- purification. The human body is an *āśraya*, a vehicle, a tool, an infrastructure to do *tapas*, (self-less) *niṣkāma karma* and contemplation on the Vedantic postulations and build up positive impressions (*saṃskāra-s*) over a period of several births. All these *saṃskāra-s* have a cumulative effect. They fructify at a later point of time, leading to self-realization. The life in which such fructification takes place is called the final life and such person is called *jīvan-mukta*, liberated while being alive (7-19).

## 7.5. Why do we worship several deities?

Here, the *Gita* makes an analysis of how people relate to the divine nature. We noticed above that a person's character is the result of the combination of the three *guṇa*-s in different proportions. There may be predominance of *sattva* in one, predominance of *rajas* in another and predominance of *tamas* in some other person. Our desires and ambitions are determined by the predominance of *guṇa*-s in us. These create desires and desires distract the wisdom of a person. While choosing a god too, we choose a god according to our nature. There are two verses here which make a doctrinal assertion in this regard. We shall see them closely.

यो यो यां यां तनुं भक्तः श्रद्धयाऽर्चितुमिच्छति ।  
तस्य तस्याचलां श्रद्धां तामेव विदधाम्यहम् ॥ 21

स तया श्रद्धया युक्तस्तस्याराधनमीहते ।  
लभते च ततः कामान् मयैव विहितान् हितान् ॥ 22

*yo yo yāṃ yāṃ tanuṃ bhaktaḥ śraddhayā'rcitumicchati |*  
*tasya tasyācalāṃ śraddhāṃ tāmeva vidadhāmyaham || 21*

*sa tayā śraddhayā yuktastasyārādhanamīhate |*  
*labhate ca tataḥ kāmān mayaiiva vihitaṅ hitān || 22*

Krishna says: “whoever worships a deity in whatever divine form I confirm devotion (*śraddhā*) in the same form to that person” (7:21). “He worships a deity in some form and also gets result from the same form. But, in reality, the result or the fruit of that worship is dispensed by Me” (7:22). A study of the above two verses will show us the following:

1. The nature of god is not dictated by religion in the Indian tradition; it has been discussed in the Vedānta, which is philosophy. Religion is doctrinal in nature and says - ‘this is the real god’. Vedānta does not do so. It tries to analyze the nature of the self and the nature of the Supreme Self.

It says that any name or form can be taken as a support, a crutch, in order to worship and attain the desired objects.

2. The Lord of the universe is one in spite of the diverse forms in which we may worship.
3. A person can worship god in any form or name or without a form too. This depends on the devotee's nature.
4. Man's desires depend on his nature. He chooses a deity accordingly and worships it. All the deities are merely forms which we have visualized in the Supreme Brahman which is on the nature of Consciousness and Existence. Those who are predominantly *sāttvika* in nature, choose deities who are also *sāttvika* in nature and try to do good deeds helpful to mankind. Those who are predominantly *tāmasa* in nature, choose some inferior forms and desire harmful objects.
5. People get the result (*phalam*) according to their desire.
6. This fruit of worship is dispensed by the Lord of the universe, who is a manifestation in the Supreme Brahman only. This dispensation is according to the cosmic principles of *prakṛti*.
7. Krishna has neither commended nor condemned such worship of different deities. Worship is also an action dependent on a person's nature and refinement (*saṃskāra*) and hence the person gets result accordingly. Sometimes the (*karma-phalam*) fruit of such worship can be harmful to the person himself, as in the case of the demons who get boons and finally perish by the same boons.
8. A seeker may choose different forms or symbols in order to attain concentration of mind and to meditate. Such meditation, called *saguṇa-upāsana*, gives him the required concentration of mind.

9. Worship of several deities in so many forms is merely due to the multiple nature of desires and because the intellect is hijacked by such desires.

The above practice of visualizing and worshipping several forms of one Cosmic Being is philosophically sanctioned in the Indian system but it is mistaken as polytheism by others. Hindus are labeled as polytheists and idol worshippers. Other religions make a high virtue of monotheism little knowing that monotheism is in the same ontological level as the *saguṇa* Brahma (god with attributes), because the God in western religions is very much a person, discharging duties of protecting his followers, punishing the non-believers and so on.

The philosophy of the *Gita* goes beyond monotheism and talks about the non-dual Brahman at the absolute level. It is only at the transactional or empirical level that such worship of different deities is recognized in the *Upanishads* and in the *Gita*, that too as an aid for *sādhana*, spiritual pursuit. It is seen that the *sanātana dharma* has accepted the human nature and permitted a God with attributes but recommended a higher level of truth, that is, the *nirguṇa*, non-dual Brahman. It did not bulldoze or destroy the existing practices in society, as it happened elsewhere in the world when new religions came up.

We also see that an ordinary Hindu worships different gods on different occasions. We worship Ganesh on the Ganesha Chaturdhi day, Vishnu on another day and Shiva on some other occasion. All these forms are deities which are *sāttvika* in nature. They are merely a support or *ālambana* for meditation. These worships are intelligently structured appealing to the ignorant and the informed person as well. On different occasions, while we worship different forms, the *mantra-s* say that all these forms are of the Supreme Brahman only. For Instance, while worshipping Ganesha the *mantra-s* say that he is the all-pervading Supreme Brahman. When we perform the

popular *Satyanarayana-vratam* we praise Lord Satyanarayana as the Supreme Brahman. While giving gift to the Brahmin at the end of the *vrata* we recite a sloka ... ‘*Gaṇeso pratigrhṇāti Gaṇeso vai dadāti ca*’, which means the giver himself is Ganesha and taker too is Ganesha, which means that both are forms of the Supreme Brahman only.

Krishna says that mere desire driven worship gives results which are finite in nature (7:23). After the fruit of it is enjoyed, the person gets back into the cycle of birth and death. All these god forms are delimited, finite forms visualized in the infinite Brahman as per the level of maturity of the seeker. Krishna distinguishes these from the Supreme Brahman by saying that those who dwell on the nature of Supreme Brahman attain *mokṣa*, liberation, which is infinite in nature. Liberation is achieved only by *jñāna*, Knowledge. Unfortunately people are content with the *sagūṇa* level of worship (7:24).

Supreme Brahman is devoid of any limitation, but unfortunately people enveloped in ignorance consider the Brahman as one with limitation (7:24). We know that the Brahman can be realized in two forms – one with a delimited form and the other in infinite form. Forms like Vishnu, Shakti, Shiva etc., are limited forms. There are other types called *avatāra-s*, manifestations, such as Rama and Krishna who take birth for the sake of establishment of *dharma*, the social order. Brahman without limitations is pure consciousness, and it is called the Absolute Reality.

Visualization of a form in the formless Brahman is to facilitate meditation, it has been told in all Hindu scriptures. For instance the Ramatapaniya Upanishad says:

चिन्मयस्याद्वितीयस्य निष्कलस्याशरीरिणः ।  
उपासकानां कार्यार्थं ब्रह्मणो रूपकल्पना ॥

*cinmayasyādvitīyasya niṣkalasyāśarīriṇaḥ|  
upāsakānāṃ kāryārthaṃ brahmaṇo rūpakalpanā||*

A form is visualized in the Brahman which is of the nature of intelligence, non-dual, infinite and formless. The non-dual consciousness does not have any parts in it. A form is visualized in such a non-dual Brahman in order to help the *upāsaka*-s, the persons who meditate either to fulfill a desire or to know the Supreme Reality. But such finite form should not be taken as the ultimate reality. An idol or a form is only a strategy or means to go ahead.

### 7.6. Obstacles in Knowing Brahman

Why can't everyone realize the Supreme? Delusion (*moha*) is the obstacle, says Krishna. Delusion is perceiving something as something else. The Lord has been telling about it from the beginning. Desire and hatred are the dualities which create this delusion (7:27). A human being is born with such delusion because of these dualities (7:27).

Who can see the reality? One should have attained some spiritual merit called *punya* because of the good deeds. The accumulated bad deeds done over a period of time must have been neutralized by a good amount of righteous deeds (7:28). Vedanta does not talk much of *punya* but the texts on ethics say that the good deeds would neutralize the effect of evil deeds. This probably is to induce a person to do good deeds and be a useful member of the society. Performance of good deeds has a purifying influence on the mind. Such people with pure minds, whose bad deeds have been neutralized, will be able to overcome the delusion caused by the dualities and will be able to follow the path of devotion.

\* \* \*

## The Yoga of Imperishable Brahman (*Akṣarabrahma-yogaḥ*)

### 8.1. An Overview

Indian Tradition presents Brahman, the Supreme Reality, at two levels for two levels of seekers. The seekers of first level are those who approach a guru, undertake study of scriptures, contemplate on the nature of Reality, attain internal purification and realize the Supreme. For them the Supreme Brahman is spoken in terms of *satyam*, *jñānam*, *anantam* – truth, consciousness and infinitude. But most of us are not capable of studying the scriptures, or contemplate on the nature of that reality. We are also not ready for self-purification. Hence for all the common seekers, the scriptures suggest another form of Brahman called an empirical god discharging cosmic functions. He is called *saguṇa Brahma* – God with functions. Devotion on this functional god will help as a sort of crutch or support in order to gradually attain the higher level. If the supreme Brahman were to be visualized as an ocean of consciousness, the god form at the empirical level can be visualized as a huge wave of consciousness. The seeker, who is himself a small bubble of consciousness, riding on that wave and realizing that he is the ocean, the Supreme Brahman.

In the last two verses of seventh chapter Krishna mentioned seven principles to be known – *Brahma*, *adhyātman*, *karma*, *adhibhūtam*, *adhidaivam*, *adhiyajñam* and the final frame of mind at the time of leaving the body. All these are different manifestations of the same Brahman. A seeker can meditate

on any of these and try to attain the higher level. This is done with a notion of duality, that is, the seeker as different from the god. This chapter talks mostly of this type of meditation, called *saguṇopāsana* practiced by the lower level seeker we talked about.

This chapter is variously named in various traditions. It is called *akṣara-brahma yoga*, viewed from the point of the meditation on Aum. It is called *tāraka-brahma yoga*, viewed from the point of view that meditation on a god form will gradually deliver the seeker. It is also called *dhāraṇā yoga* as it talks about the meditation on a god form.

This chapter has 28 verses. Verses 1-13 are questions by Arjuna and replies of Lord Krishna. These verses explain the terms which were used in the last two verses of the seventh chapter. Verses 14-22 talk about the Brahman at the absolute level and Brahma at the *saguṇa* (with attributes) level for purpose of worship. They also talk about the type of *loka-s*, the experiential states attained by the seekers and the limitations of such *loka-s*. These also explain the concepts of creation and dissolution (*śṛṣṭi* and *pralaya*). The next verses 23-26 talk about the two paths taken by the seekers. The seekers who contemplate on a personal god and perform their actions with the spirit of *karma-yoga* (without seeking the fruit of action) take a brighter path which will lead to a *loka* from where there is no return (rebirth). On the other hand those who are merely engaged in the Vedic rituals like *yajña-s* etc., with a desire for heaven or worldly prosperity, take a darker path. They do attain some *loka-s*, some happy experiential states which are very temporary in nature and they do return to earth, which means that they have a re-birth in some form. In the last two verses of the chapter Krishna exhorts Arjuna to be associated with *dhyāna-yoga*, to contemplate on a divine form so has to attain a result higher than that which is obtained in *karma-yoga*.

## 8.2. The Seven Principles to be Known

Krishna starts explaining the words used by him in the earlier chapter.

- 1) *Brahma*- It is the Supreme, imperishable Brahman without name and form, which is not manifested in the form of *māyā*.
- 2) *Adhyātman* - This refers to consciousness which is illumining the minds of all beings. The same Supreme Brahman manifests in all the beings in the form of consciousness. Hence it is called *pratyagātma*, the indwelling self.
- 3) *Karma* - These are rituals prescribed by the *Vedas*, performed with an intention to propitiate different deities (different cosmic functions visualized as gods), for attaining some heavenly worlds or for worldly prosperity. These actions are responsible for the diversity we see in nature. One is born rich another is born poor and so on. The creator has no like or dislike towards any being.
- 4) *Adhibhūtam* - *bhūtam* refers to the five elements – earth, water, fire, air and space. This is perishing in nature. All the beings are physically constituted by these five elements only. Hence anything that comes into being is a product of these five elements (8-4).
- 5) *Adhidaivam*- This is called the cosmic mind, Hiranyagarbha. This is the regulating mechanism for the whole visible universe in the form of the five elements. If the universe were to be visualized as a body, this *adhidaivam* is the mind of that body, regulating all its functions.
- 6) *Adhiyajña* - Krishna says that *Adhiyajña* is himself. It is that aspect of cosmic function which is the bestower of the result of human actions. It is in the body of all beings and

is responsible for all the actions. All the righteous actions performed by a person are referred to by this word.

- 7) The final thought (*antya-vāsanā*) - This is the decisive factor for a seeker who wishes to attain the celestial worlds. Lord Krishna says that the future of a departing person will depend on the final thought or mental function. If the final thought is on the deity which has been worshipped by him (*saguṇa Brahma* or god form), the person would attain that particular *loka*, the experiential state. If it is not so, he will get back to earth in some form. This departing thought will depend on the cumulative effect of the efforts like *yoga*, meditation and such process of refinement in him over a period of time. All good deeds create some lasting, purifying impressions on our mind and these purifying impressions are called *saṃskāra-s* or *vāsanā-s*. The final thought in the mind of a person will depend on the effect of these impressions. If a person has been doing evil deeds all through the life, he cannot have good *saṃskāra-s* and he cannot fortuitously think of god in the final moment.

### 8.3. The Final Thought – Importance of Good *Saṃskāra-s*

All human interactions produce certain impressions on the mind. Good interactions leave good impressions. A continuous performance of good deeds creates strong impressions on the mind. Such impressions influence further behavior of a person. Such impressions are called *saṃskāra-s* or *vāsanā-s*.

Here Lord Krishna tells of the powerful influence of the final thought (which is a result of a person's *saṃskāra-s*) of a person at the time of death.

यं यं वापि स्मरन् भावं त्यजत्यन्ते कलेवरम् ।

तं तमेवैति कौन्तेय सदा तद्भाव-भावितः ॥6 ॥

*yaṃ yaṃ vāpi smaran bhāvaṃ tyajatyante kalevaram |*  
*taṃ tamevaiti kaunteya sadā tadbhāva-bhāvitaḥ ||*

“With whatever thought a person leaves this body, he attains a corresponding state, which is actualized by his own thought” (8:6). In other words the strength of human *saṃskāra*-s over a period of time will decide his next birth or release from the cycle of birth and death. The final thought cannot fortuitously happen without a constant practice of meditation done earlier. Hence Krishna advises Arjuna to keep his mind always on Brahman.

These words have influenced the lives of people over the ages. This is an idea which is ingrained in the mind of every Hindu. A lifelong meditation on a god form and gradual withdrawal from worldly life are contemplated in the Indian way of life. A *vānaprastha* (one who has retreated to forest) is an example of this. This is the stage in human life where a person hands over the responsibility of family to his children and departs to quieter life in order to meditate on Brahman and on the nature of his own self. This, over a period of time develops strong *saṃskāra*-s, lasting impressions on the mind, which will enable him to have the right frame of mind at the time of leaving the body.

The story of king Jadabharatha, related in the fifth book of Bhagavatam is a good example here. Jadabharatha is a king who becomes a *jñānī*, relinquishes his kingdom, becomes a recluse and goes to forest to do *tapas*. Once he comes across a tiger chasing a deer. The deer while jumping over a rivulet gives birth to a baby and runs away. The baby falls there while the tiger goes chasing the deer. The king takes pity on the baby deer, brings it home and raises it. Gradually he develops attachment with that deer and it so happens that even at the time of death he worries about the safety of the deer. With that final disposition (*vāsanā*) in his mind he takes birth as a deer. However, he remembers his previous birth and at the end of deer’s life, takes birth as a human being, teaches the knowledge of Brahman to a king and later attains liberation.

#### 8.4. Meditation on a Personal God

The *Gita* goes on to describe the method of *upāsana*. This is in relation to a god with functions (*saguṇa*). Such a deity may have a form such as Shiva or Vishnu or may not have a form. The *nirguṇa Brahma*, the attribute-less Brahman has to be known or realized whereas the Brahman with attributes has to be worshipped (*upāsana*). *Upāsana* means a focused flow of similar thoughts about a deity, undisturbed by any dissimilar thoughts. The commentators describe it as a continuous stream of similar thoughts, like the unbroken thin string of oil poured out of a beaker, uninterrupted by dissimilar thoughts. This is what the *Gita* calls intense practice (*abhyāsa Yoga*) (8:8). It is not mere *upāsana* that is told here but *upāsana* associated with *Karma-Yoga*. *Karma-Yoga* is for purity of mind and *upāsana* is to attain the desired god form.

Krishna says that the *upāsaka*, the worshipper, attains the level of cosmic mind (8:9). This cosmic mind is the one which gives the fruit for various good and bad actions of the people, one which is the controller of the Universe, one whose nature is consciousness and the one which is beyond *ajñāna* ignorance. The entity mentioned here is known as Hiranyagarbha, the cosmic intellect. The pure Brahman is free from any doer-ship. All creation, sustenance and dissolution (*sriṣṭi, sthiti, laya*) happens in the realm of *māyā* in which the Hiranyagarbha principle operates.

Plexues (*cakra-s*) in the Body and Knots (*granthi-s*) in the Mind

A modern student of *yoga* may have heard words such as *cakra-s* and *granthi-s*. *Yoga*, when associated with devotion to god, will give greater results.

The *yogi-s* too can attain the cosmic being Hiranyagarbha, says the *Gita* (8:10). *Yoga* is the physical and psychical process which is used to develop concentration and for purification

of mind. Different levels are described in yoga and these are called *cakra-s* or plexuses in the body. Rising from one plexus to another metaphorically means moving from the grosser to a more subtle level. It is an emotional or spiritual progress to move from baser instincts like reproductive activity (symbolically called *Brahma-granthi*, as Brahma is associated with creation) in the first stage, and then rise from the comforts and pleasures of the world (symbolically called *Vishnu-granthi*, as Vishnu is associated with sustenance) and finally overcome the ego (symbolically called the *Rudra-granthi*, as Rudra is associated with ego). This, in yogic parlance, is called breaking the knots (*granthi-s*) and moving up. This is a tough and slow process of bringing the mind and its emotions under control by a sedulous practice of the eight-fold path of yoga (which is accepted in Vedanta as a useful tool). It is a gradual process of rejecting the lower self and realizing a higher self. Such yogis will be able to control the vital airs of the body, bring them up through what is known as *sūṣumnā* nerve, bring up to the middle of the brows and depart from the world by leaving those vital airs. This is said to be known to and experienced only by *yogi-s* of high order.

#### 8.5. Meditation on AUM

Apart from Yoga, Krishna suggests yet another path in the eleventh verse. ‘This is the *upāsana* on AUM, the imperishable goal which the knowers of *Vedas* say, which the saints who have renounced the world attain and for which the seekers of Brahman aspire’ (8:11).

In the Vedic tradition, *upāsana* is a practice in which the nature of divinity is contemplated upon. Such contemplation is done with the help of a symbol or a mantra. *Omkara*, the sound AUM, is a unique symbol which has been visualized by the Vedic sages by a valid reasoning but not arbitrarily prescribed. This symbol is used to denote both the unconditioned Brahman, which is the supreme consciousness and the conditioned

Brahman, the empirical god who is the creator and lord of the universe. The *Kathopanishad* also discusses this symbol and says that the seeker can attain either the Brahman at lower level or Brahman at higher level, whatever he chooses to attain (Katha.U. 1:2:16). Krishna suggests that this meditation on AUM can be done along with the discipline of Yoga. ‘All the doors of perception, the sense organs, have to be restrained and the mind should be turned in words. This should be combined with *prāṇāyāma*, the regulation of breath’. (8:12).

*Upāsana* involves visualization of a mighty concept in a small symbol, like we visualize Lord Vishnu in a small stone called *sālagrāma* or visualize Shiva in a small crystalline, oval shaped object called *līnga*. AUM is such symbol which represents the whole world of names and forms and also the three experiential states – waking, dreaming and deep sleep – as is explained in the Vedanta texts. We may recall that we do this *upāsana* in our daily prayer called Sandhyavandhan. We visualize the creator’s splendor and recite that Aum is all the three worlds and all experiences. All the elements like earth, water and fire are Aum.

Krishna here suggests that all the *loka-s* up to that of the creator Hiranyagarbha, which the men of worship attain, are within the ambit of the transmigrating existence (8:16). This needs explanation.

## 8.6. The Heavenly Worlds

Here we have to understand this word *loka*. Those who are acquainted with *Purana-s* may have seen description of different heavenly worlds like Vishnu *loka*, Shiva *loka* (Kailasam), Brahma *loka*, *Go-loka* and so on which are attained by good deeds and the nether worlds like *pātāla*, which are destined for persons who do bad deeds. For a man of ritual and religion the heavenly *loka-s* are some three dimensional places somewhere in the space where unlimited pleasures are provided. A student

of Vedanta has a different understanding of these *loka-s*. Sri Shankaracharya in his commentaries has noted several times that all these *loka-s* are certain experiential states and not some three dimensional space stations. The meaning of the word *loka* is – *lokyate iti lokah*, that which is experienced is *loka*. In his commentary on the *Isavasya Upanishad* he says that the word *loka* refers to a particular birth attained by a person as a result of his previous deeds. The hierarchical structure and graphic description mentioned in the *purana-s* is for the lay man and not for a student of a Vedanta.

Vedanta holds that the Supreme Existence-Consciousness has no change or mutation in it and that the creation as we see is a manifestation at the level of *māyā*, a power which gets expressed in the supreme consciousness. This power of manifestation is called the creator Brahman or Hiranyagarbha. All the concepts of personal God which are visualized by worshippers of all traditions fall in this plane called Ishwara consciousness. The followers of Vishnu may call it Vaikuntham, followers of Shiva may call it Kailasa, worshipers of Krishna may call it *Go-loka*, or in any other manner. All these are mere *upādhi-s* (limiting factors) where the Supreme Brahman manifests. If the *antahkaraṇa* of the *jīva* is a tiny *upādhi*, that of the Hiranyagarbha, the cosmic mind, is an *upādhi* at the cosmic level. Even if it is a cosmic mind it is only a manifestation in the Supreme, infinite consciousness and hence any worship of this delimited entity will also give a limited result. That is what Krishna points out when he says that the *upāsana* of all these lower levels of manifestations will give limited results whereas understanding the supreme reality (this is not called *upāsana*, but understanding) will result in breaking away from the cycle of birth and death. The cycle of birth and death is inescapable in all other *upāsana-s*.

Among these *upāsana-s*, the *upāsana* of the cosmic mind, the Hiranyagarbha is said to enable the seeker to attain what

is known as Brahma *loka*, an experiential state in which the seeker progressively attains realization in the highest sense. This method of gradually attaining liberation is called *krama-mukthi* or liberation in a phased way. *Upāsana* of deities other than this cosmic consciousness will lead to smaller *loka-s* from where there is a return in the form of a rebirth in some former the other.

### 8.7. Liberation While Being Alive

There is yet another concept here called *sadyo-mukti* – immediate liberation. Krishna mentions this in verses 14 and 15 where he says that those who realize and dwell on the Supreme as not different from one self (*ananya-cetah*) would attain liberation even while being alive. This is called *sadyo-mukti*, otherwise called *jīvanmukti* (*mukti* = liberation, *jīvan* = while being alive).

The difference between a *jīvanmukta* and the one who has done *upāsana* is that the *jīvanmukta* has imbibed Vedanta having gone through the three fold steps called *śravaṇam*, *mananam*, and *nididhyāsanam*. The ordinary worshipper has not gone through those steps. *Jīvanmukta* is called *jñānī* and all his actions are merely apparently actions but he is not tainted by the fruit of such actions. He is forever liberated, *nitya-mukta*, and he does not have rebirth.

We have now seen three stages

- 1) Liberation while being alive,
- 2) A phased liberation, which means attaining Brahma *loka* initially and from there attaining liberation
- 3) Return to this earth. All the *loka-s* other than the Brahma *loka* are delimited in nature and are subject to the three phases – creation, existence, and resolution. This is told by Krishna from verse seventeen till the end of the chapter.

## 8.8. Cycles of Creation

Certain details of the duration of Brahma *loka* are given in the *Gita*, which may arouse our academic interest. A cosmic cycle involves three steps - creation, existence (sustenance) and resolution. A thousand such cycles are said to constitute one day for the cosmic mind Hiranyagarbha (8:17). The life span of Hiranyagarbha has to be calculated at this scale. When we count in this scale, we arrive at billions of years.

What is day for the creator is the time for creation and what is night for the creator is the time of resolution, the period in which all the beings get resolved into Brahman. The same beings are born again and again – *bhūtvā bhūtvā pralīyate* (8:19). All their births depend on their previous actions on earth.

This creator Brahman we are talking about is also called *avyakta* – the unmanifested. The Supreme Brahman is above this unmanifested. Lord Krishna is addressing from that level of unmanifested state which is above the level of this creator of the universe. There is no concept of time in this pure consciousness there is no creation, sustenance or resolution. Concepts like space and time are conceived only at the level of creator Brahman and not at the level of the Supreme Reality. This state is called *akṣaram*, the imperishable state and *paramāgati*, the supreme attainment (8:21).

How is one to attain this supreme level? This is told next verse (8:22). This is attainable by the non-dual devotion – *ananya bhakti*. Any contemplation or meditation in the mode of duality – a notion that the seeker is different from the divine - entails in limited results. *Ananya bhakti* is the notion that the worshiper is not different from the non-dual Brahman. It is a state of realization that what all we see is merely a manifestation in that Supreme Brahman.

## 8.9. The Two Paths – The Path of Gods and The Path of Forefathers

Here the *Gita* talks about the after-life of those who practice meditations on personal Gods and those who merely perform desire-driven rituals. Krishna introduces two more concepts, *devayāna*, the path of the gods and *pitryāna*, the path of ritual traversed by our forefathers. These are from verses 23 to 27. *Devayāna* is a path in which the seeker attains the phased liberation whereas in *pitryāna* the individual rotates in a perpetual cycle of birth and death.

We have seen that the structure of *Vedas* is broadly in three stages: the first stage called *karma-kāṇḍa*, dealing with different types of rituals and *yajña*-s, the second stage is *upāsana kāṇḍa*, dealing with ritual combined with meditations (*upāsana*-s) and the final stage where pure enquiry into the nature of reality is seen (Vedanta). In the first phase known as the stage of *karma*, the person is not a seeker but he is merely performing certain acts sanctioned by the *Vedas*. He performs such actions for his own benefit either in this world or in the after world. After death, such a person is said to travel in the path of the forefathers, goes to certain intermediate *loka*-s and returns to earth again and again.

The second phase of *Vedas* wherein there is a combination of *karma* and also *upāsana* is a stage of transition from the phase of pure action to the stage of contemplation. Here there is an element of *karma*, the ritual, associated with understanding of the nature of divinity. Here such *upāsaka*, the meditator, is said to attain some higher result than the person performing pure ritual for personal benefit.

The two paths described above can be summarized as below.

<i>Deva-yāna</i> (the path of gods)	<i>Pitr-yāna</i> (the path of forefathers)
- It is also called the northern path – associated with brightness and intelligence	- It is also known as the southern path – associated with darkness and ignorance
- It is the result of worship of a god with attributes	- It is the result of performance of <i>yajña</i> and such other rituals
- Also called <i>śukla</i> , bright path – the performers attain liberation in a phased manner – called <i>krama mukti</i>	- It is called Krishna, dark path – they keep rotating in the wheel of <i>saṃsāra</i>

‘The *yogi* who realizes the above two paths does not get deluded, be always firmly settled in yoga’, Krishna says (verse27).

In summary, we notice the following points in the eighth chapter.

- One who is a performer of desire-driven actions (*kāmya karma*) cannot attain any higher results. He is destined to follow path of forefathers (*pitryāna*).
- One who performs actions without desire for the fruit of action attains purity of mind but his karma of previous births remains. Hence he too has to take birth to exhaust the *karma*.

- One who performs desire-free karma and also meditation on a deity becomes eligible for the northern path, which leads him to liberation in a phased manner.
- The person performing desire-free *karma* and meditation can also combine it with the deliberation on Brahman (*śravaṇam* etc), and can attain the knowledge of Brahman and thus attain liberation. This is called *sadyo-mukti*, liberation immediately following knowledge of Brahman. This is also called *jīvan-mukti*, liberation while being alive.

At times Krishna praises the path of action and at some other times, the path of devotion, keeping in mind the eligibility of the person. A student in a primary class is told that what he is studying is important. A student in higher class is also told the same. The paths suggested in the *Gita* (except the path of knowledge) are similar to such steps and we have to keep in mind that they are not ultimate attainments.

\* \* \*

# The Yoga of Royal Knowledge and Royal Secret

(*Rājavidyā-rājaguhya-yogaḥ*)

## 9.1. An Overview

‘I shall tell you knowledge (*jñānam*) along with realization (*vijñānam*)’ – told Krishna to Arjuna at the beginning of seventh chapter (7:2). These two, which are the direct means for liberation, are being elaborated by Krishna in this chapter. In between, Krishna has told about the worship of an Iswara with functions and attributes (*saguṇa* or *sopādhika brahma*) in the eighth chapter. This Iswara with attributes (with form or without) is for meditation whereas what is being told in the present chapter is the attributeless Brahman which has to be realized. In other words, what was told in the earlier chapter was phased liberation and what will be told in the present chapter is immediate liberation, leading to a state called *jīvan-mukti*, liberation while being alive.

This chapter is named *rāja-vidya- rāja-guhya-yoga* – the king among learnings and the king among secrets. The knowledge of Brahman is the king among all types of knowledge. It is the subtlest, demanding keen enquiry and highly deserving preservation and protection (*guhya*). It is not a secret in the sense that it should not be told to anyone, but it is a secret in the sense that even if it is told, it does not reveal itself to most people. Like a lover, it chooses the most ardent

follower, says the *Kathopanishad*. Hence it remains a secret and thus called the king among secrets (*rāja-guhya*).

The title of the chapter should not be mistaken as proposing a new type of *yoga*. What was told as *sāṅkhya* in the second chapter and what was told as knowledge and realization in the seventh chapter is being elaborated here.

This chapter has thirty four verses. The first three verses laud the knowledge being told. Verses 4 to 10 talk about the attribute-less (*nirguṇa*) Brahman and Its relation with the universe. Verses 11 to 34 talk of seekers of different levels of maturity. The divine, the human and the demonic natures are described in a few verses and thereafter the nature of supreme reality is described in verses 16 to 19. The importance of *yajña* and devotion are mentioned in verses 20 to 25 and results of such devotion are mentioned in the later verses till the end of the chapter. The last verse exhorts Arjuna to combine righteous action with devotion.

## 9.2. Praise of the Royal Knowledge

“This knowledge is directly realizable, it is abiding in *dharma*, easy to attain and it is imperishable”, says Krishna (9:2), praising the royal knowledge. This knowledge of the Supreme Brahman is not a thing to be known merely at the intellectual level but it is bliss to be experienced. This in fact, is the status of *jīvan-mukta* – the one who has attained liberation while being alive. This is said to be easily attainable. On one hand Krishna says that the knowledge is very subtle, and in the same breath he says it is easily attained. It means that there is no physical effort involved in this as in the case of different rituals. It is a thing to be known by contemplation. One need not doubt that such a thing which is easily obtained may also be lost easily. Krishna assures that it is also *avyayam* – not something which will be lost. Those negligent persons, not

caring for this knowledge, will perpetually move in the wheel of transmigration (birth and death).

### The Nature of Brahman and The Nature of Creation

Two key verses 4 and 5 tell the nature of Brahman and Its relation to the universe.

मया ततमिदं सर्वं जगदव्यक्त-मूर्तिना ।  
मत्स्थानि सर्वभूतानि न चाहं तेष्ववस्थितः ॥4 ॥

*mayā tatamidaṃ sarvaṃ jagadavyakta-mūrtinā*  
*matsthāni sarvabhūtāni na cāhaṃ teṣvavasthitaḥ*॥

“The whole universe is pervaded by me in my unmanifest form. All the beings exist in Me, I do not exist in them” (9:4).

When Krishna says ‘they are in Me, I am not in them’, it is not like objects in a box. It is a layman’s assumption that consciousness is ‘in’ the body. Krishna says that all objects are in consciousness. Consciousness is like space, encompassing the whole universe.

Brahman is both the efficient and material cause for the universe. This was discussed in an earlier chapter (2.4 and 2.5). The word ‘*tatam*’ means ‘pervaded’, just like gold pervades all ornaments or as sugar pervades all sweets. Brahman pervades the universe in the form of existence and consciousness. The word ‘*avyakta*’ refers to the unmanifest form. The Supreme Brahman is of the nature of existence, consciousness, infinitude and It does not directly create the universe. However, the above three principles form the base, the substratum, for the universe. The power of *māyā* which manifests in Brahman is the unmanifest in the sense that it is unknowable by senses and the mind.

Who, then, is the creator? The creation evolves from that unmanifest, as described in the Taittiriya Upanishad (discussed in 2.4 above). All the cosmic functions – creation (Brahma),

sustenance (Vishnu) and dissolution (Rudra) are different names in that unmanifest. All the beings are manifest in that consciousness. Shankaracharya points out that it is only from the point of an ignorant person that consciousness appears to be ‘in’ the objects. Krishna clarifies – ‘I do not dwell in them’ – meaning that consciousness is not connected with anything like a material object with limbs.

The very next verse says the opposite:

न च मत्स्थानि भूतानि पश्य मे योगमैश्वरम् ।  
 भूतभृन्न च भूतस्थो ममात्मा भूत-भावनः ॥5 ॥

*na ca matsthāni bhūtāni paśya me yogamaiśvaram ।  
 bhūtabhṛnna ca bhūtastho mamātmā bhūta-bhāvanaḥ ॥*

“Nor do created things dwell in Me. See the power of My *yoga*. I support the beings while not being in them, but My Self is what brings all things into existence” (9:5).

This appears as a total contradiction to the earlier verse. The earlier verse said, ‘all the beings in Me’. The present verse says, ‘the beings are not in Me’. *We have to realize that the earlier verse is at a lower level of understanding. The present verse is from the stand point of the absolute reality.*

Vedanta says that the material cause for the universe is *māyā*, the power which manifests in Brahman. Brahman does not have doer-ship (*kartrtva*). It is merely of the nature of consciousness. *Māyā* on the other hand, has three *guṇa*-s in it as seen earlier and the evolution of universe is because of these three *guṇa*-s. All the gods we visualize are different cosmic functions within this *māyā*. At a lower level of understanding one can say that consciousness is *in* all things but in reality consciousness has no connection or relation with anything.

Commentator Nilakantha explains this by the citing the familiar example of a rope-snake. A non-existent snake is

visualized on the rope. The snake depends on the rope for its existence, but the rope does not exist in the snake in what so ever manner. The final doctrine of Vedanta is that the visible world is similar to the rope snake. Consciousness manifests as the material universe.

In summary, Brahman is the cause for the universe only in a figurative way, in the sense that It is the support, just as the rope is the substratum for the snake. Once a person has the knowledge of the rope, the idea of snake instantly disappears. Vedanta says that once Brahman is known, the idea of the world disappears. The world will not disappear, but it will be seen as Brahman only.

The example of space and air is given to explain the above (9:6). The universe exists in Brahman just as the air is present in the space. The space doesn't move but it is the air which moves. The space is no connection with any object.

### 9.3. Cycles of Creation:

Earlier, in 8.8 we learnt about the cycles of creation. The inexplicable and unseen link between Brahman (consciousness) and the manifest world is further clarified in the next four verses (7 to 10). The creation as we see emanates from *māyā*, the power which manifests in Brahman. *māyā* is otherwise known as *prakṛti*. This *prakṛti* is insentient but illumined (brought in to action) by Brahman. Krishna says:

सर्वभूतानि कौन्तेय प्रकृतिं यान्ति मामिकाम् ।  
कल्पक्षये पुनस्तानि कल्पदौ विसृजाम्यहम् ॥ 7 ॥

*sarvabhūtāni kaunteya prakṛtiṃ yānti māmikām .*  
*kalpakṣaye punastāni kalpadau visṛjāmyaham ..*

“All the beings resolve into the *prakṛti*, which is my manifestation, at the time of resolution. At the beginning of the cycle of creation (*kalpa*), I create them again” (9:7).

It is not the Supreme Brahman which is the creator, but it is the consciousness associated with *māyā* which is called the creator. This consciousness associated with *māyā* is variously called Iswara, Hiranyagarbha, Virat from different points of view. When it is viewed as the overlord, dispensing the fruit of *karma* to all the beings, it is called Iswara. When it is viewed as a cosmic subtle body, it is called Hiranyagarbha and it is called Virat when viewed as the cosmic gross body. For every cycle of creation there is a creator and all these creations keep recurring.

Krishna however clarifies that the Supreme reality, Brahman, has no connection with creation. He says that the *māyā* is a power which is manifest in the Supreme Brahman and that it is the material cause for the cycles of creation (9:8). The Supreme Reality is merely *udāsīna*, transcendental and *adhyakṣa*, the witness from above, forming the support or substratum for the universe (9:9). But yet ignorant persons do not realize the Supreme Reality (9:11).

Pure consciousness is merely illuminating in nature just like the sun which illuminates the whole universe. It is like a lamp in dark room which enables one to see the objects in the room, but the lamp itself has no doer-ship. It is unattached, unaffected by the human action, it is non-dual and beyond good and evil. An important principle of non-dual philosophy about the relationship between Brahman and the universe is revealed by Krishna in the above verses.

#### 9.4. Divine nature versus Demonic nature

We come across people who foolhardily pursue sensual pleasures or pursue rituals with desires for pleasures. The rituals they perform are naturally in accordance with their demonic nature. The results they attain are also demonic. They are deluded by the pleasures. All their rituals are intended for

violent achievements. The sixteenth chapter tells about this further.

The divine nature is in contrast to the above behavior. Those who follow such nature are called *ananya manasaḥ*, those whose minds do not deviate from the Lord (9:13). They are *sāttvika* in nature and their entire attention is on the Supreme Reality. Some of these are persons who follow the path of devotion. Some others follow the path of knowledge (9:15). Knowledge is the ability to see Brahman in all things. Some others meditate on different cosmic forms such as Sun, Moon, or on the mind itself as Brahman.

All these are accepted by Iswara, the Lord of the universe. It is the Supreme which dwells in all actions, in all rituals, in all offerings, in all *mantras* and in the sacrificial fire into which offerings are made. All are subjects fit for *upāsana* because they are all founded on Brahman only (9:16). Hence, people do follow various forms of worship.

#### 9.5. The *saguṇa* and *nirguṇa* paths

Worshiping the Supreme by visualizing a deity with attributes (either with form or without) is called *saguṇa*. The word *saguṇa* means ‘having attributes’. Attributes refer to the functions such as punishing the evil and rewarding the good, protecting the virtuous and such. People are comfortable with such god but not with some attribute-less Brahman. Realizing this, our ancients have devised the forms of prayer in a manner that they cover both the ordinary devotee and a serious seeker. For instance, while worshiping goddess Lalita, we recite *mīthyā jagadadhiṣṭhānā* – ‘oh you, who is the substratum for the unreal world’. While worshiping Vishnu we recite a mantra which says – “he is Brahma, he is Shiva, he is Hari, he is Indra”. In all worships the functional level deity and the Brahman the absolute level are both mentioned. A person may start as an ordinary devotee with a notion of duality between him and the

deity. But while pursuing the path of devotion he could realize that the reality is something beyond. Thus turn his attention towards attribute-less, non-dual Brahman.

What happens to die-hard ritualists? These are the persons who merely recite *Vedas*, cling on to the *yajña*-s and seek the benefits of heaven. They may attain all these but they keep returning to earth. A well known verse follows:

ते तं भुक्त्वा स्वर्गलोकं विशालं क्षीणे पुण्ये मर्त्यलोकं विशन्ति ।  
एवं त्रयीधर्ममनुप्रपन्ना गतागतं कामकामा लभन्ते ॥ 21

*te taṁ bhuktvā svargalokaṁ viśālaṁ kṣīṇe puṇye  
martyalokaṁ viśanti .*

*evaṁ trayīdharmamanuprapannā gatāgataṁ kāmakāmā  
labhante ..*

“They do enjoy the pleasures of the boundless heaven, but after the expiry of the fruit of their good deeds, they do return to earth again and again. Such is the fate of *kāmakāmāḥ* – the desirers of desires” (9:21). They earn a pleasure trip and come back to work at the end of it.

Those who perform desire-free action (*niṣkāma karma*) and dwell constantly on the Lord get higher results. Another well known verse is below.

अनन्याश्चिन्तयन्तो मां ये जनाः पर्युपासते ।  
तेषां नित्याभियुक्तानां योगक्षेमं वहाम्यहम् ॥ 22 ॥

*ananyāścintayanto māṁ ye janāḥ paryupāsate .*

*teṣāṁ nityābhiyuktānāṁ yogakṣemaṁ vahāmyaham ..*

“Those who do not see anything other than the Lord and are devoted to him are rewarded by the Lord. He looks after their *yoga* and *kṣema*” (9:22). These are two familiar words that are normally used in a mundane sense of welfare. Here however they are used in a special sense. *Yoga* refers to attainment of

higher state in the path of enquiry and *kṣema* refers to stability in that path.

### 9.6. Worship of Other Gods

The Supreme Reality is pure consciousness, having no connection with creation of universe, but there is a need for a tentative acceptance of an empirical, functional god. This is what we noted as the *saguna* god in an earlier paragraph. These *saguna* types can be several. What is the result which the devotees of diverse deities attain? Krishna says:

येऽप्यन्यदेवताभक्ता यजन्ते श्रद्धयान्विताः ।  
तेऽपि मामेव कौन्तेय यजन्त्यविधिपूर्वकम् ॥23 ॥

*ye.pyanyadevatābhaktā yajante śraddhayānvitāḥ .*  
*te'pi māmēva kaunteya yajantyaavidhipūrvakam ..*

“Those who worship any other deities with devotion do worship me only (the Supreme Brahman), though in an unconventional manner” (9:23).

When the Supreme Reality is of the nature of consciousness , it matters little as to what form or function is visualized for a personal god. All god-forms are visualized in the cosmic intellect, Hiranyagarbha. All these are visualized at the level of religion by the devotees and can be called man-made. “All this world, including god has been visualized by me”, says Sri Shankara in the *Manisha Panchakam* (verse 2). When we say Indra, it refers to consciousness associated with that cosmic function. When we say Varuna it again refers to consciousness associated with that cosmic function. Brahman is the essence of all *yajña*-s and the essence of all deities. All these are in the realm of non-realization. A realized person sees Brahman in all these. This is almost a policy statement of the *Upanishads*. It is an example of universalism of *Upanishads*. This is similar

to verse 7:21 which we discussed above. This accounts for the worship of multiple gods in Hinduism.

The result attained by devotees is as per their seeking. Those who worship the gods attain those gods; those who worship demi-gods for frivolous results attain such results only (9:25).

#### 9.7. Simplicity in Devotion – Loved by God

- Nothing is lowly in God's scheme of things. All value attribution is by the humans only. Devotion is the only legal tender in the realm of God. There is no need for ostentation in devotion. A devotee can offer a leaf, a flower, a fruit, water or any paltry thing with love and the God will receive it (9:26).
- All activities ordained by scriptures or needed for livelihood have to be performed with a sense of offering to the Lord (9:27-28).
- Such practice, over a period of time will free a person from the result of his actions. *Karma-yoga* is emphasized here (9:28).
- God does not either love someone or hate someone, he is equal to all, just as the sun equally shines and gives warmth to all beings. The good or bad result we get depends on the purity of our actions.
- A stickler to rituals, without devotion to God does not get the desired result. Simple and pure devotion devoid of adherence to ritualistic prescriptions, by any person of any nature, will ennoble such person (9:30).

#### 9.8. *Karma- Bhūmi* – Realm of Action is The Human Existence – Not Geographical India

One notable point is highlighted in this context by the commentators (9:33). The scope of all human action – good, bad, noble, ignoble – is in the human life only. Other *loka*-s, such as the realm of gods, realm of demons, realm of animals and plants are all lives where a person enjoys or suffers the fruit of his actions. The only level at which a person can do either good or bad deeds, modify and elevate himself is while he is in the human body. Hence the human life is called the realm of action, *karma-bhūmi*, in Vedanta. *Bhūmi* does not mean earth; it means a level, a state of being. It is only a concept found in *purāṇa*-s that the land mass of Bharat is the *karma-bhūmi*, where alone a person gets the result for the rituals prescribed. Referring to a land mass as *karma-bhūmi* is a mere laudatory statement, not accepted in Vedanta, as we may clearly see from the commentary of Sri Nilakantha in this context. (One may recall that in olden days *Bharata-varsha* extended up to the present day Afghanistan in west and Myanmar in the east).

The final verse exhorts Arjuna to focus on devotion. Krishna says – “meditate on my nature, be my devotee, perform your activities as ordained with a sense offering to me and follow my path as the Supreme one. You will thus attain me” (9:34). This forms the key to the next chapter as we shall see.

\* \* \*

## 10

# The Yoga of Divine Manifestations

(*Vibhūti-yogaḥ*)

### 10.1. An Overview

We are now familiar with the terms *saguna* and *nirguna* Brahman. We have been seeing these in the seventh, eighth and ninth chapters. The seventh talked about the higher and lower natures. *Jiva*, the sentient, belongs to the higher nature. The universe which is cognized by the *jīva* is insentient and hence called the lower nature. Chapter 7 also spoke of manifestations in verses 7 and 8 where Krishna said – “I am the essence of water, earth, sun, moon, and all things in the universe” (7:8).

Similarly, the eighth chapter told about the *saguna* level of Brahman for purpose of *upāsana*. It also talked about the frame of mind (*vāsanā*) at the time of leaving the body and it is also talked about the two levels of journey – the path of gods and the path of forefathers.

Chapter nine focused on the Supreme Brahman and hence it was called *rāja-vidyā* – the brilliant and shining knowledge, the king among all types of knowledge. Here too there were indications of the *saguna* level in verses 16 to 19 where Krishna was saying *ahaṁ kraturahaṁ yajñaḥ* - I am the *yajña*, I am the *mantra*, I am the fire, I am the offering and so on. The same principle is being elaborated in the present chapter.

The present chapter is named Vibhūti Yoga. The word *vibhūti* means manifestation in different forms by the power of *māyā*. All these are mentioned for the purpose of *upāsana*.

All these are mere manifestations in one and the only Supreme Consciousness which we know as Brahman.

This chapter has 42 verses. Verses 1 to 11 are the words of Krishna about his true nature and power of manifestation. Verses 12 to 18 are the words of Arjuna where he shows his keenness to know all the important manifestations of Brahman. Verses 19 to 38 are the words of Krishna which narrate seventy five such manifestations. The concluding three verses declare the general principle that all magnificent manifestations are the sparkles of God's glory. All of us have some manifestation of Brahman in us in varying degree – some have a higher manifestation and some lower. All the great men can be considered as the *vibhūti*, a powerful manifestation of Brahman.

## 10.2. The Nature of Evil

The nature of Brahman is told in the introductory verses. Consciousness, associated with *māyā* is both the material cause and the efficient cause of the universe. It is the consciousness which is beginningless and beyond time (10:3). All characteristics of the three *guṇa-s* – *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas* – are from Brahman only, as Krishna told in 7:12. Good and bad are both from Brahman. We may note that in Vedantic literature there is no concept of devil, found in other religions as the arch-rival of God. (If there were to be an arch-rival to God, it would mean that God is a limited entity however powerful and mighty he might be. Devil would be something apart from God and hence God cannot be called all pervading.) Evil is a product of *rajas* and *tamas* and whenever there is upsurge of evil, the divine scheme takes care of it in the form of an *avatāra* as we saw in chapter four. The divine scheme takes care of restoration of *sattva*.

Consciousness associated with *māyā*, is known as Iswara. The same principle, in the context of creation is known as Hiranyagarbha. The seven ancient sages, the progenitors and

others manifested by the mere will of Hiranyagarbha. “One who knows such ability of Brahman to manifest and the oneness in all such manifestations is the real knower. He is steadfast in his knowledge”, says Krishna (10:7). The wise men worship these forms with a clear understanding that the underlying principle is Brahman and none else. They engage their whole attention on the Brahman and see Brahman in all things (10:8- 9).

What does god bestow on them?

तेषां सततयुक्तानां भजतां प्रीतिपूर्वकम् ।  
ददामि बुद्धियोगं तं येन मामुपयान्ति ते ॥ 10 ॥

*teṣāṃ satatayuktānāṃ bhajatāṃ prītipūrvakam ।  
dadāmi buddhiyogaṃ taṃ yena māmupayānti te ॥ 10 ॥*

“To those who always fix their mind on me and worship me with great love, I give *buddhi yoga*, by which they reach me” (10:10).

Devotion leads to purity and strength of mind which is the prerequisite for the dawn of knowledge. A pure mind can discriminate between what is *atman* and what is *non-atman* and between what is eternal and what is ephemeral. Such discrimination is also by the grace of god who dwells in such devotees as the internal light and destroys their ignorance with the brilliantly shining lamp of knowledge (10:11).

Arjuna becomes inquisitive. For the first time he addresses Krishna as *parambrahma*, *paraṃdhāma* which mean ‘Supreme Brahman’ and ‘Supreme Goal’ (10:12). He is now convinced that Krishna is none other than the *saguṇa* embodiment of the Supreme Brahman. “I have heard much about you from sages like Narada, Vyasa and others. Your real nature cannot be gauged by gods or any other beings. Please narrate in what all forms you have pervaded the universe and in what all forms I can worship you” (10:12-18).

### 10.3. Multitude of Manifestations

In the present context Krishna does not narrate all the forms in which he had pervaded, but he tells a few of them. All these *vibhūti-s* are meant for meditation. We may recapitulate that the *saguṇa* concept becomes an aid for meditation. The idea of a personal god is like a crutch or a support to lean on and go to higher levels. This path is meant for the middle level seekers who are not capable of contemplation on Brahman by mere *śravaṇam*, *mananam* and *nididhyāsanam*. Meditation on a name and form or on a *mantra* is the initial stage. Worship of idols appears to have evolved in the same manner. Initially the Vedic *mantra* was the body for the deity but in later days the meaning of the *mantra* got translated into a pictorial depiction called *yantra* or a figurative depiction called idol. The Sanskrit word for idol is *vighraha - viśeṣeṇa grhyate ātmatattvaṃ anena iti vighrahaḥ* - it is a symbol which is highly helpful to 'capture' the nature of the self.

The description of various deities in our devotional literature illustrates how this symbolism works. For example, we can take a name like - *manorūpeḥṣu kodandā pañcatanmātra sāyakā* among the thousand names of Lalita. It means that the bow held by the goddess in her hand is but the human mind and the five arrows which she has are but the five senses. Several names or verses describing the gods and goddess reveal such symbolism and help a discerning seeker to meditate on such form to reach higher levels of understanding. If we stop at the level of *vibhūti* we are stuck with a dualist understanding. If we appreciate the *vibhūti* at the symbolic level we attain the non-dual understanding.

That is the reason why Krishna calls these names and forms as divine manifestations, *divyā vibhūtayaḥ* (10:19). There is no end to my pervasiveness (10-19). The primary realization is as below.

अहमात्मा गुडाकेश सर्वभूताशयस्थितः ।

अहमादिश्च मध्यं च भूतानामन्त एव च ॥ 20 ॥

*ahamātmā guḍākeśa sarvabhūtāśayasthitah ।*

*ahamādiśca madhyaṃ ca bhūtānāmanta eva ca ॥ 20 ॥*

Krishna addresses Arjuna as *Guḍākeśa*, which means one who has conquered sleep, the sleep called ignorance. Krishna says – “I am the cause in which all beings manifest and dissolve into. I am the beginning, the middle, the end and inner Self of all” (10:20).

The subsequent verses (21 to 38) describe seventy-five forms, human and animal, abstract concepts such as victory and symbols such as Aum. Any best manifestation in a particular class is a *vibhūti*, says Krishna. A few samples are as below.

He is Vishnu among the Aditya-s. There are eleven Aditya-s as per our *purāṇa*-s. These are different cosmic functions described as deities.

He is the Sun among all blazing and brilliant things. He is the Sama Veda among the four *Vedas*. Among gods he is Indra and among the senses he is the mind. He is Shankara among the Rudra-s (another level of gods), Kubera among the Yaksha-s, Bhṛigu among the sages, the exalted peak Meru among the mountainous peaks and the ocean among the water bodies. He is the sound Aum among all sounds, meditation among all the *yajña*-s and the Himalayas among mountains. He is the weapon *vajra* among all weapons, the divine cow *kāmadhenu* among cows, the mighty Ananta among the snakes and Garuda among birds. He is Prahlada among the demons and Rama among the archers. He is the knowledge of Self among all types of knowledge and he is the god of death among all ravishers. He is the pipal (*aśvattha*) tree among the trees. The meaning of *aśvattha* is significant. It means ‘that which will not stay till tomorrow’ – refers to the world which will disappear from the

point of view of the seeker once he realizes Brahman. Time, the devourer of all, is another manifestation.

He is Narada among the divine sages; he is Arjuna among the Pandava-s and sage Vyasa among all sages. He is the law of jurisprudence among all controllers. He is *vāda*, deliberation among all types of dialectics. *Vāda* is a term in logic which can be compared to the modern word brain-storming. It is a discussion with the objective of arriving at truth.

Such a variety of manifestations take us on a tour through several *purāṇa-s*. A complete account of these manifestations can be found in those books. For instance when Lord says he is the *vajra* among all weapons, we refer to the stories of sage Dadhichi, who gives away his vertebral column to Indra as a weapon in order to vanquish the demon Vritra. This too is symbolic. The vertebral column symbolizes *kundalini*, well-known in yoga. Vritra means one who envelopes, symbolizing ignorance. The stories of Bhrigu, Garuda, Prahlada and several others mentioned in this passage have guided Indian society over ages by their moral teachings. A quick verification with the *purāṇa-s* would brilliantly explain the significance and symbolism in these references.

Lord Krishna concludes the narration by saying that the principle of existence-consciousness in all beings is that of Brahman only. It is the Brahman associated with *māyā* (called Iswara) in which all beings manifest, exist and resolve into the same (10:39). There is also no end to the brilliant manifestations of Iswara. Only a few have been narrated by me, says Krishna (10:40). What characterizes a *vibhūti*? Krishna explains –

यद्यद्विभूतिमत् सत्त्वं श्रीमदूर्जितमेव वा ।  
तत्तदेवावगच्छ त्वं मम तेजोऽशसम्भवम् ॥ (41)

*yadyadvibhūtimat sattvaṃ śrīmadūrjitameva vā ।*  
*tattadevāvagaccha tvam mama tejoṃśasambhavam ॥ (41)*

“Whatever is glorious, powerful, well endowed and energetic is a *vibhūti*, know that to be a sparkle of my glory” (10:41).

Indian tradition sees trees, rivers, mountains and animals as divine manifestations, deserving respectful coexistence. Krishna’s narration in this chapter covers all these and this is the reason a Hindu respects them all, including cows and trees. Even when one has to use them, he seeks their forgiveness. For instance, when a person digs the ground to build a house for himself, he seeks forgiveness of the earth, which is considered to be the mother. A ceremonial mantra reads – *mṛttike hana me pāpam* – “oh ground, forgive my intrusion on you”. When one takes a dip in a holy river, he seeks forgiveness for washing his bodily dirt in it – *yanmayā dūṣitaṃ toyam śārīramalasaṃyutam* – “the water indeed has been offended by my bodily dirt”. When a person gets up from bed in the morning and puts his feet on the ground he says – *pādasparśam kṣamasva me* – “forgive me for placing my feet on you”. All these may appear ridiculous beliefs of nature worshipers. Such an understanding is simplistic. Vedanta is a serious deliberation into the nature of truth and our respect for all beings, sentient or insentient, springs from that. The message of this chapter is to view the world of names and forms as but a manifestation of Brahman.

\* \* \*

# The Yoga of Revelation of Cosmic Form

(*Viśvarūpa-darśana-yogaḥ*)

## 11.1. An Overview

Students who know the general outline of the story of *Mahabharata* know that Krishna had shown his *viśvarūpa*, the cosmic form, on two earlier occasions, once when he was challenged in the court of the blind king Dhritarashtra and again when he was challenged by the arrogant king Sisupala during the *yajña* performed by the Pandavas. On both occasions there was no teaching involved. In the present chapter the *viśvarūpa* shown by the Lord is in continuation of teaching to Arjuna.

The earlier chapter gave several examples of divine manifestations. Arjuna has realized that the whole universe is a manifestation in Brahman. It is his desire to see that form. The intention of the present chapter is to reveal a more comprehensive manifestation. The divine forms shown earlier were for *upāsanā* by the middle level seekers. Visualizing the whole universe in Brahman, as shown in this chapter, is for a higher level *upāsanā*. What we see here, as the name indicates, is a *rūpa*, a form but not the reality.

The Supreme Brahman has no form. In such a case what is the form which Krishna is showing? The power of manifestation, called *māyā* appears in the Supreme Brahman and such consciousness conditioned or limited by *māyā* is known as Iswara (not to be confused with Lord Shiva of the Shiva tradition). Brahman is devoid of any activity like

creation, sustenance etc., and it is at the level of Iswara that we talk of the omniscient and omnipotent nature. All the god forms are conceived in this consciousness called Iswara. The present chapter reveals that the whole cosmos is permeated by this consciousness.

This chapter contains 55 verses. Arjuna's request and inquisitiveness to show the cosmic form and Lord Krishna agreeing to that is in the first nine verses. The narrator Sanjaya (who is narrating the whole battle scene to king Dhritarashtra) describes the grandeur of the cosmic form in the next five verses. The spellbound Arjuna describes the form from verses 15 to 31 and later from 36 to 46. The words of Lord Krishna are in the final verses.

## 11.2. Divine vision

Having heard about the excellent manifestations of Iswara, Arjuna becomes inquisitive and requests Krishna to show the cosmic form. Krishna agrees to do so and gives *divya-cakṣu*, divine eye, to Arjuna. The Sanskrit root '*div*' is used in the context of illuminating or enlightening. Figuratively, it refers to intelligence or consciousness. Divine eye is thus different from the normal appreciation of an ignorant person. God's universal form, the conditioned Brahman, can only be envisioned by a highly refined mind. It is a special insight given by Krishna to him. It has to be understood as a form of mature vision of a seeker who is initiated into the study of scriptures and who can see the ephemeral nature of human life in the stream of things in the universe. It is the ability to see past, present and future, all at a time on a grand, cosmic canvas.

Krishna promises to show the countless forms, sentient and insentient, of the whole universe at one place in his own body. Sanjaya narrates this to Dhritarashtra and says that splendor of that form is comparable to the brilliance of a

thousand suns which have simultaneously risen in the sky. This is what Vedanta calls the Virat, appearing in infinite forms. All names and forms in the world are part of the Virat. It is this form of Virat that worshipers pray in the Purusha Sukta of the RigVeda. The description here is similar to the opening lines of that Sukta. Sanjaya says that it is *aneka-vaktra-nayanam*, countless heads and eyes, countless hands with raised weapons. It is also *viśvato-mukham*, all the heads of all beings are seen in that (11:11). It is the source of all sense organs and organs of action of all beings in the universe.

### 11.3. The Cosmic Form

Arjuna stands in amazement with folded hands, his hair bristled. He describes the form he sees (11:14).

- The trinity – Brahma, Vishnu and Rudra – symbolizing the cosmic functions of creation, sustenance and resolution are seen in that form (11:15).
- The demi-gods like Yaksha-s, Gandharva-s and all such are also seen (11:15).
- There is no beginning or end to that form (11:16).
- All the beings are seen this form (11:16).
- This form is seen all around like a blazing sun with several divine weapons (11:17) (The divine weapons are not physical weapons but symbolize different aspects of the god.)
- I realize that you are the imperishable Brahman, the basis for all and the goal for all (11:18) (Here Arjuna has started realizing the nature of the divine. Initially he started with mere amazement but gradually he has started realizing the cosmic vision. He is able to see the substratum behind all the visible things).

- You are the Supreme principle to be realized (through knowledge) (11:18).
- You are the protector of the universal harmony and order (*śāśvata-dharma-goptā*) and you are the eternal Purusha, the enlivening principle in all (11:18).
- The sun, the moon and what all is seen in the inter-stellar space is seen as part of you (11:19-20).
- Gods and sages are singing praises of this form (11:21).
- Several devouring mouths are seen in this form and the sons of Dhritarashtra along with Bhishma, Drona, Karna and others are entering these mouths are getting crushed under the teeth of that cosmic form (11:27).
- Some are entering those mouths and some look half crushed (11:27).
- All these are entering the fierce mouths of this cosmic form just as all waters of rivers enter the sea (11:28).
- All the beings of the world are speedily entering these mouths like insects jumping into the fire (11:29).
- It is as though you are licking off the whole universe with your blazing mouths and the whole universe looks scorched with your fierce fire (11:30).

#### 11.4. What did Arjuna see?

Arjuna puts the same question to Krishna. He wants to understand what he has seen. Krishna says

कालोऽस्मि लोकक्षयकृत् प्रवृद्धो लोकान् समाहर्तुमिह प्रवृत्तः ।  
 ऋतेऽपि त्वां न भविष्यन्ति सर्वे येऽवस्थिताः प्रत्यनीकेषु योधाः ॥32 ॥

*Kālo'smi lokakṣayakṛt pravṛddho lokān samāhartumiha  
 pravṛttaḥ .*

*rte'pi tvām na bhaviṣyanti sarve ye'vasthitāḥ pratyānīkeṣu  
yodhāḥ ..*

“I am the *Kāla* (Time), the destroyer of all, engaged here in the act of resolution. Even without you, all these warriors assembled in battle formations will not stay alive” (11:32). Krishna makes it very clear that Arjuna need not have any false sense of importance that he is the key warrior who is expected to vanquish his enemies. Krishna says that all of them are already as good as dead. He further says – “get up and perform your dharma as a person of royal clan. All these warriors have been destroyed by me already; be merely a pretext” (11:33).

Out of the three cosmic functions creation, sustenance and dissolution, the function of *laya*, dissolution of the universe, is exclusively shown here in a figurative manner. Krishna himself explains this saying that he is appearing in the form of the all-devouring Time, lest a lay reader should wrongly understand that it is a fierce form chewing up all people. The commentator Anandagiri explains this by saying that *Kāla* is Iswara's *kriyā-śakti*. It is this power which is worshipped as *Kāli*, in a feminine form by the worshippers. It is also the cosmic dance of Shiva. It is a terrible form for the ignorant person but it is a revelation of the divine scheme to the realized person. Arjuna is tentatively able to appreciate this form.

Even after the consoling words of Krishna, Arjuna has not regained his self. He speaks in a trembling, faltering voice – “you are indeed the Supreme Brahman, all the worlds dwell in you and you are the knower, you are the known and you are the one pervading the whole universe” (11:38).

We have seen the two levels in appreciating Brahman – the Brahman which has to be worshipped and the Brahman which has to be known. The former is the conditioned, limited Brahman and the latter is the unconditioned, infinite level. In his appreciation of the cosmic form (the limited form), Arjuna

is shifting between the conditioned and unconditioned levels. He is addressing Krishna as the Supreme principle beyond all appearances (11:37). He then seeks forgiveness of Krishna for all acts of indulgence done by him in ignorance. He had earlier treated Krishna as a close friend, as a person of Yadava clan and had commented lightly about him. He also requests Krishna to withdraw the cosmic form and come to his normal self (11:45-46).

Krishna himself interprets the cosmic form which he has shown. It is a form which no one had seen earlier. It is not possible to have such vision by performance of *yajña*-s, acts of charity and austerity. Such form can be seen only by a single minded devotion to the Lord, *ananya-bhakti*, a state of unwavering attention to the Lord and a state in which nothing other than the Lord is cognized by the senses and the mind (11:54). This single minded devotion is a step subsequent to the yoga of action (*karma yoga*) and the yoga of meditation. These two yoga-s may be good strategies, wherein one gives purity of mind and the other gives concentration of mind, but they are incomplete without devotion.

The last verse refers to devotion

मत्कर्मकृत् मत्परमो मद्भक्तः सङ्गवर्जितः ।  
निर्वैरः सर्वभूतेषु यःस मामेति पाण्डव ॥55 ॥

*matkarmakṛt matparamo madbhaktaḥ saṅgavarjitaḥ .  
nirvairah sarvabhūteṣu yaḥsa māmēti pāṇḍava .*

“A person who does *karma* for my sake (*karma yoga*), who holds me as the supreme goal, who is my devotee, who has eschewed attachment and has no enmity for any being, attains Me” (11:55).

Shankaracharya calls this verse as the most significant verse in the whole text of the *Gita*. It is because it can be implemented by all. The path of knowledge is too difficult, the path of

*karma* has its limitations and so is the path of meditation. But in this verse Krishna wants that the *karma yoga* and the yoga of meditation have to be combined with devotion. Devotion elevates the seeker to a higher level of purity of character, wherein the seeker renounces all bonds and loves all beings. Bhakti purifies a person more easily than the yoga of action or meditation. It provides a strong support enabling the seeker to travel further.

\* \* \*

# 12

## The Yoga of Devotion

(*Bhakti-yogaḥ*)

### 12.1. An Overview

At several places in the earlier text Krishna had told about Supreme Brahman as distinguished from functional gods, those who are envisaged in this sphere of *māyā*. When we say Vishnu or Shiva or Shakti or any other god envisaged by a religion, we are referring to this level called *māyā* which is a delimited level of the Supreme Consciousness.

What we saw in the eleventh chapter was the manifestation of the cosmic form, which is none other than the delimited form of consciousness. *Māyā* is the limiting factor (*upādhi*) here. This is the cosmic form which was shown in the earlier chapter.

Practices such as the yoga of knowledge (chapter 2), *karma yoga* (chapter 3), the yoga of self restraint and meditation (chapter 6) are for different levels of students. Devotion to a personal god is the strategy which is being described in the present chapter. An overview of the psychology of devotion has been presented.

It is a tiny chapter with only twenty verses but yet it is of great significance. The first twelve verses discuss the comparative merits of devotion to personal god versus pursuit of the Supreme Brahman devoid of any attributes. Verses 13 to 20 discuss the characteristics of a devotee who is also a realized person.

## 12.2. Devotion to a Personal God

Earlier too, Krishna had told that devotion to personal god is an important means to attain higher levels. A well known verse (quoted by Madhusudana Saraswati in his commentary on the *Gita*) reads like this.

निर्विशेषं परंब्रह्म साक्षात्कर्तुमनीश्वराः ।

ये मन्दास्तेऽनुकम्प्यन्ते सविशेषनिरूपणैः ॥

*nirviśeṣaṃ paraṃbrahma sākṣāt kartumanīśvarāḥ .*

*ye maṃdāste ’nukampyaṃte saviśeṣanirūpaṇaiḥ ..*

“For the benefit of those not capable of comprehending the Supreme level, the scriptures, out of compassion, have presented a personal god in order to worship the same and attain the ultimate”.

How does devotion work?

- The person following *karma yoga* relies mostly on his own effort and strength. He may or may not be a devotee. He is the one who has given up the desire for the fruit of his actions. The person following the yoga of self restraint is also relying on his own strength of dispassion. Unlike this, the devotee has the advantage of the divine grace, the greatest support from the Lord.
- Devotion is like anchoring on to a higher self. It is an activity which purifies the heart more easily than the *karma-yoga* or the Patanjali-yoga.
- It does not need any elaborate material as in the case of the *yajña*. An offering of a flower, a fruit or mere water is enough to please the Lord (9:26).
- Devotion does not need any pre-requisites like self restraint and other levels mentioned in yoga.

Devotion can be done even by a sinner and devotion helps for purification of his heart.

- Devotion leads to virtues like self-restraint, dispassion in a gradual manner.
- There are several stipulations in the performance of *karma-s* (meticulous procedures mentioned for *yajñas*) and several physical steps like postures (*āsana*), breathing (*prāṇāyāma*) in yoga. Devotion does not have any such stipulations.

The student may look up *Narada Bhakti Sutra* and *Sandilya Bhakti Sutra*, wherein Sages Narada and Sandilya have given the whole philosophy of *bhakti* in the form of aphorisms. Both say that devotion is a supreme form of love to god. A devotee is like a lover trying to cross the river. Followers of other paths have to cross the river on their own whereas the God, like a lover, comes to pick up the devotee half way through.

Lord Krishna tells the same in the very beginning of the chapter. The devotees are dearest to me he says (12:2). The devotion mentioned here is for the cosmic form described in the earlier chapter.

Contrasting the persons on the *jñāna* path with the devotees, Krishna says – ‘they attain me’ (12:4). Here the word ‘Me’ refers to Supreme Brahman. It indicates that the seekers in the *jñāna* path attain the Supreme Brahman on their own. The devotees, on the other hand, have to be uplifted by the Lord (12:7). Teachers of Vedanta give an interesting analogy. Those on the *jñāna* path are like the young ones of the monkey, which hold on to the mother’s belly while the mother keeps jumping from branch to branch and thus grow up. Those on the path of devotion are like the kittens which have to be carried by the cat carefully with its mouth. What Krishna says can be seen as follows.

Devotion to personal god	Those on <i>jñāna</i> path
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Easy to follow, a willing submission and trust are needed</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Strenuous path, one has to restrain the mind, study the scriptures under a teacher, meditate and deliberate on that and also give up the notion of identity with the body-mind-complex.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- They need to be uplifted by the god (12:7). Divine grace gradually brings him to the path of knowledge</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- They attain the Supreme on their own (12:4)</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- There is no study of scriptures and deliberation on Brahman</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Study of scriptures and deliberation on Brahman</li> </ul>

### 12.3. Options for Seekers of Different Levels

Vedanta has to take care of seekers of all levels and take everyone along. Krishna suggests different alternatives for different levels of people.

- The person on the *jñāna* path is no doubt at the top level.
- The next highest level suggested by Krishna is devotion to the cosmic form (*viśvarūpa-upāsanā*) (12:8).
- If the above is found difficult, one has to select a simpler or conventional god form (such as Ganesa, Vishnu etc.,) as an object for meditation (*ālambanam*) and practice meditation on that (12:9).

- If such practice is also found difficult, one has to take up devotional activities, which ultimately lead him to perfection. Here the commentators have described the devotional activities such as listening to the glorious deeds of the Lord, singing praise of the Lord, doing worship or doing any type of service (12:10).
- If one is not capable of that, one has to take up *karma-yoga* and stop desiring the fruit of actions (12:11).

Krishna extols *karma yoga* by saying that it is superior even to the *upāsana* on the cosmic form and that it would finally lead to liberation (12:12). The statement is merely by way of praise, in order to motivate Arjuna for *karma yoga*.

#### 12.4. The Vision of a *jñāni*

All the levels told above are for worshipers of a conditioned Brahman (*sopādhika-brahma*), in other words a *saguṇa brahma*. Those on the *jñāna* path attain Brahman by their own effort. But yet they too are devotees, not in the mode of duality like the ignorant devotee but their devotion is pure love towards god. The person who has realized that his self is not different from Brahman, has an altogether different perspective towards the world. The seeming world is part of his consciousness and hence he does not see any duality in it and hence does not either desire or hate anything.

The characteristics of such *jñāni* are told from verses 13 to 19.

- He has enmity to none, as he does not see anything apart from himself (12:13).
- He is friendly and compassionate to all beings (12:13).
- He has no notions of 'I' and 'mine' (*aham, mama*) (12:13).
- He has equanimity of mind in pleasure and pain and has tolerance (12:13).

- He is always happy, self-restrained and firm in his knowledge. His mind always dwells in the Lord and he is loved by the Lord (12:14).
- He does not agitate or trouble others. He too, is not emotionally agitated or troubled by others. He is beyond all emotions such as happiness, anger, fear or exuberance (12:15). Such a conduct is possible only for a *jñāni* and not for an ignorant person. A *jñāni* distances himself from all these emotions and looks at them as a witness.
- He has no expectations (*anapekṣaḥ*) or wants because of his sense of completeness (12:16). Only an ignorant person derives happiness from an external object.
- He has purity of mind, speech and actions and he is capable of handling anything dexterously (*dakṣaḥ*) when confronted by a developing situation. He is dispassionate and untroubled (12:16).
- He has renounced all actions. It means that he has no sense of compulsion in any action as he has no desire for enjoyments in this world or in heavenly worlds (12:16).
- He neither rejoices when something pleasant happens nor hates when something painful occurs. He does not either grieve or desire anything (12:17).
- He is equal to a friend and foe, as he sees neither a friend nor foe in any one. Similarly he does not either see honor or dishonor done to him (12:18).
- He has equanimity in all dualities like heat and cold (affecting the body) or pleasure and pain (affecting the mind). This is possible because he has no attachment to objects (12:18).

- Insult and praise do not affect him and he is always contemplative. He is content with whatever befalls him (12:19).
- He does not choose to have any dwelling place but wanders about. His realization of self is unshaken and his devotion is unshaken (12:19).

All these qualities, described for a *jñāni*, are natural to him because of his awareness of Brahman. All these, such as compassion, equanimity, absence of wants etc., are not traits which are consciously practiced by him but they accrue to him as a natural consequence of the knowledge of Brahman. He has gone beyond his limited self and identified with the Supreme consciousness.

In this chapter Krishna has repeatedly used the word ‘devotee’ while referring to the *jñāni* (the realized person). The fact of *jñāni* being a devotee may appear like a contradiction because we have seen earlier that a realized person is one who sees his self as Brahman. It is also our experience that devotees look at god as something different from themselves and worship the god in a duality mode. Though it is true that devotion is usually in a duality mode, the great *jñāni*-s are also great devotees, loving God not with a notion of duality but with full awareness that the Lord is not different from oneself. One of the greatest non-dualist philosophers, Sri Madhusudana Saraswati, who has written monumental works on Advaita, says - *kṛṣṇāt paraṃ kimapi tattvamahaṃ na jāne* – “I do not know any greater truth than Krishna”. He has also authored a book *Bhakti Rasayanam* and established that *bhakti* (devotion) is an important way to attain the Supreme.

The realized person is in a *upādhi*, the body-mind complex and hence has to follow the dharma of the *upādhi*. Hence he practices devotion as a matter of pure love. This he does in order to be a role model for the society and for *loka-saṅgraha*,

as Krishna told in the third chapter. What he does is merely a semblance of activity.

Vedantins give an example for this. A potter makes a pot by rotating a wheel and takes out the pot when it is properly shaped. The wheel, however, continues to rotate as long as the momentum exists. The activities of a *jñāni* are compared to such rotation of the potter's wheel before it comes to a stop. His earlier acts of austerity and devotion continue till the mortal life comes to an end. His devotion is not for seeking any boon but as an expression of love to god. Such devotion is called *nirguṇa-bhakti*.

In the final verse, Krishna calls this devotion as *dharmyāmṛtam* – the nectar which abides in *dharma*. It is supposed to be the dearest to god. Though a normal devotee is also dear to god, a *jñāni* devotee is the dearest. All the refined qualities and virtues which accrue to him become the characteristic features of a *jñāni*. A seeker however, has to consciously practice all these qualities as a means to achieve perfection of mind and attain realization.

Thus we see Krishna demonstrating the merits of devotion to the conditioned Brahman as the primary level leading to realization and devotion to the unconditioned Supreme Reality.

\* \* \*

## The Yoga of Field and Field-Knower

(*kṣetra-kṣetrajñā-yogaḥ*)

### 13.1. An Overview

Krishna has been talking about the knowledge of Brahman as a spiritual journey wherein the seeker has to undergo an internal transformation, change his perspective about himself and try to transform his lower self to the Supreme Self. A comprehensive picture of the nature of *jīva* was told in the first six chapters and the nature of Brahman were told in the next six chapters. Krishna also told that *jīva* and Brahman are one and the same. The seeker has to see how it works out. He has to practice (*sādhanā*) certain spiritual discipline for this. The following six chapters of the *Gita* elaborate this practice and enable *jīva* to elevate his self to the Brahman status.

This chapter is named the ‘Yoga of Field and Field-knower’. The Sanskrit word for field is *kṣetram*. It is derived in three different ways – 1) it protects a person from an injury or harm, 2) it gets weak and infirm and 3) like an agricultural field, it yields harvest depending on whatever is sown. The person who understands the nature of this field is the field-knower. We are sure, of course, that these two are different.

The two words ‘field’ and the ‘field-knower’ are used for the first time by Krishna but they are merely new words for concepts seen earlier. The commentators have drawn attention to the words he used in earlier chapters. Chapter seven uses the words *parā* and *aparā*, the higher and lower aspects of Brahman.

The words *prakṛti* and *puruṣa* were also learnt earlier. We will have clarity about the words if we see them in the following equation.

*kṣetram = prakṛti = aparā = viṣaya = dṛśyam = anātmā = jaḍa*

(field = creation = lower = object = seen = non-self = insentient)

*kṣetrajña = puruṣa = parā = viṣayi = drk = ātmā = cetana*

(field-knower = the intelligent principle = the higher = the objectifier = the seer = self = sentient).

This chapter has 34 verses though in some traditions an extra opening verse in the form of question by Arjuna is seen. The first six verses explain the meaning of the terms field and field-knower. Verses 7 to 11 describe the nature of Supreme knowledge. Verses 12 to 18 tell about the Supreme entity to be known (*jñeya*). Verses 19 to 23 talk about the same field and field-knower in different terms, by using the words *prakṛti* and *puruṣa*. The verses starting from 22 till the end talk about the spiritual discipline which a seeker has to undergo. We see the similarity between the characteristics of *sthita-prajña* told in the second chapter and the characteristics told here.

### 13.2. The Field and the Field-Knower

The opening verse makes this statement:

इदं शरीरं कौन्तेय क्षेत्रमित्यभिधीयते ।

एतद्यो वेत्ति तं प्राहुः क्षेत्रज्ञ इति तद्विदुः ॥ 1 ॥

*idaṃ śarīraṃ kaunteya kṣetramityabhidhīyate .*

*etadyo vetti taṃ prāhuḥ kṣetrajña iti tadviduḥ .*

“This body, oh Arjuna, is called the field. The one who knows this is called the field-knower, say the wise” (13:1).

The literal meaning is quite simple, but Krishna has used two important terms of Vedanta here.

When we take any object like a book, a pen or a chair, we designate them by the term 'it'. The meaning of '*idam*' in the above verse is 'it'. 'It' is something which is known by us as something apart from us. I am different from a chair or a book, or a pen. Whatever is known is different from me. All objects in the universe are known by us and are found to be different from us. Similarly, when we apply this to our body we can say my hand, my leg and so on as something apart from what we consider as our own self. All the sense organs are also apart from 'I', as 'I' can exist without these. Hence the above verse calls the human body (bodies of all beings) as the field, as something that is seen.

The second word in the above verse is *śarīraṃ*, which etymologically means a thing which becomes infirm and drops off. When this is called the field, it implies that the body is a facility in the divine scheme wherein the *jīva* enjoys happiness, misery, health, ill-health and such, which is the fruit of his *karma* (action). It is the instrument for enjoyment and also for liberation.

When the above verse says 'this body', it implies that the body is not you. A person is normally very firm in his notion that he is the body-mind complex. Vedanta says that it is not so and that the body is as much a thing that can be objectified as any other object.

One who objectifies the body-mind complex is called *kṣetrajña*, the field-knower. This is possible by a discrimination of what is self and what is non-self. What is 'seen' is insentient, an object and it is inferior to the 'seer' and is non-self. The 'seer' is of the nature of awareness or consciousness.

The second verse reads as follows

क्षेत्रज्ञं चापि मां विद्धि सर्वक्षेत्रेषु भारत ।

क्षेत्रक्षेत्रज्ञयोर्ज्ञानं यत्तद् ज्ञानं मतं मम ॥ २ ॥

*kṣetrajñāṃ cāpi māṃ viddhi sarvakṣetreṣu bhārata .*

*kṣetrakṣetrajñāyorjñānaṃ yattad jñānaṃ mataṃ mama .*

“Also learn, oh Arjuna! that the field-knower in all the fields is none other than me. The knowledge of the field and the field-knower is the (Supreme) knowledge, according to me” (13:2). The field-knower is *jīva* himself (the consciousness identifying with the body-mind-complex) so long as we are referring to the empirical stage, the stage of ignorance (non-realization). When *jīva* gets over his ignorance and realizes that he is not different from Brahman, the ‘field-knower’ refers to Brahman.

The first line in the above verse says – “it is only me who is the field-knower in all fields”. Fields are several but the knower is one. This is a statement which is establishing the oneness of *jīva* and Brahman. It is the same as the Upanishadic statement ‘That you are’. It is the consciousness which looks divided in several delimiting bodies in the universe just as the sun appears divided in several reflecting surfaces or as the space which appears delimited in several enclosures. When such limitations are negated, what remains is mere consciousness.

When Krishna says – “know me as the field-knower too”, it is like the Lord saying I am already ‘X’, I am the ‘Y’ too. It means that what we called field is also an appearance in the same consciousness. He is both field and field-knower.

Here when Krishna uses the word ‘I’, he is referring to the status as Iswara. Iswara is one and the fields are many. It means that all these fields are like different limiting adjuncts (*upādhi*-s) for the one and only Iswara. When Krishna says he is the knower dwelling in all fields, it means that the real nature of field-knower is only Iswara. We identify with our body-mind complex and entertain the notion of different individual

egos and do not know our real nature to be the same as Iswara. The inability to know our real nature is what Vedanta calls 'ignorance' (*avidyā*).

### 13.3. What does the field consist of?

It is not merely the body that is the field. All that which can be objectified, all that can be seen apart from 'I' can be termed as field. Thus the whole creation (*prakṛti*), including the five elements, ego, intellect and the unmanifest (*māyā*) falls into this category. The five sense organs, the five organs of action, the mind and the external objects which are known by the senses and the mind are all termed 'field' (5). And also, all modifications of mind such as desire, love, hatred, happiness, misery and all such moods are all 'field' (6). All these fall under the category of 'seen' (*dṛśyam*).

The field knower is pure consciousness. There is no act of knowing or overseeing what the field does. Consciousness is called knower merely in a figurative sense. It is the consciousness which illumines or enlivens or enables the field to transact its activities. The consciousness associated with the mind and identifying itself with the body-mind-complex (BMC) and its dispositions and moods is known as *jīva*. It is this *jīva* whom we call the transmigrating being. When this *jīva* consciousness realizes that it is something distinct from the BMC then it is said to be free from the cycle of transmigration. This is what we call *mukti*, liberation.

When a human being identifies himself as 'I', he is referring to this *jīva* which has associated with the BMC and which has acquired a social identity called man, woman, husband, doctor, businessman and so on. But his real nature is pure consciousness.

In order to claim his real status and say – 'I am not the BMC, the characteristics of BMC are not mine', a lot of unlearning

is needed. As soon as a person is born a social identity is automatically created labeling him as belonging to a particular group, society or nation. All these have to be consciously negated by the seeker who is in the path of realization. Scriptures say that the only way is *viveka*, faculty of discrimination and reasoning and a continuous practice to negate the ego. One has to consciously acquire certain characteristics.

#### 13.4. Knowledge

The means to attain the knowledge of self (in other words, the knowledge of Brahman) are told from verses 7 to 11. As these are the means for knowledge, Krishna calls them knowledge itself. These are:

- Absence of pride (13:7)
- Absence of hypocrisy and unpretentious nature (13:7)
- Non-violence – not causing harm to any being (13:7)
- Tolerance even when someone causes harm and ability to pardon (13:7)
- Uprightness in conduct (13:7)
- Approaching the competent teacher and learning scriptures (13:7)
- Purity of mind thought and deed (13:7)
- Control of senses and mind (13:7)
- Dispassion towards objects of attraction (13:8)
- Absence of ego (13:8)
- Evaluating birth, death, old age and such facets of life and know their intrinsic nature as the cause for misery (13:8)
- Non-attachment to things (13:9)

- Lack of intense attachment even towards closest ones like wife and children (13:9)
- Equanimity in happiness and unhappiness (13:9)
- Unswerving devotion to the Supreme God (13:10)
- Resorting to solitude, choosing a place congenial for deliberation on self (13:10)
- Distaste for crowded places of sensual pleasure and distraction (13:10)
- Constant deliberation on the nature of self (13:11)
- Realization that the knowledge of self is the only way for liberation (13:11)

Vedanta holds that habits which are consciously acquired will help in purifying the mind. All the above characteristics are conducive to knowledge and hence Krishna rightly calls them knowledge itself.

### 13.5. The Highest That is to be known

What is the real nature of the ultimate thing to be known (*jñeyam*)? The following verse mentions it.

ज्ञेयं यत्तत् प्रवक्ष्यामि यद् ज्ञात्वाऽमृतमश्नुते ।  
अनादिमत्परं ब्रह्म न सत्तन्नासदुच्यते ॥ 12 ॥

*jñeyam yattat pravakṣyāmi yad jñātvāmṛtamaśnute .  
anādimatparam brahma na sattannāsaducyate .. 12 ..*

“I shall tell that which has to be known, that beginningless Supreme Brahman, knowing which a person attains immortality. It is called neither being nor non-being” (13:12).

Here the Supreme Brahman is indicated by the use of words in neuter gender. The seeker attains immortality by knowing this Brahman, says Krishna. Vedanta says that ignorance is

death and knowledge is deathlessness. Knowledge is the nectar which leads a person to immortality.

The expression *anādimat* in the second line of the verse means ‘that which has no beginning’. Consciousness has no beginning. If there were to be a beginning it would need another conscious entity to know its beginning. It is also distinct from what is manifest (*sat*) and what is unmanifest (*asat*). Manifest refers to all things in the universe which are cognized by our senses. Unmanifest is the state prior to this manifestation, which is otherwise called *māyā*. Brahman is distinct from all appearances and from *māyā* which is the source of all appearances.

Brahman is said to be distinct from manifest because It does not have any of the characteristics we see in manifest things. All manifest things have at least one of the characteristics – belonging to a class, associated with action, having some quality or having a relationship. A horse belongs to a class. Sitting, standing and such others are actions. Good, bad, red or blue are qualities. A strong person, a weak one, husband or wife are relationships. Brahman cannot have any of these attributes.

Similarly, Brahman is said to be distinct from unmanifest (*māyā*). This should not lead us to conclude that Brahman does not exist at all. Consciousness exists in all states of our experience. During the waking and sleeping states we are clearly aware of the presence of consciousness. In deep sleep however, we are not directly aware at the time of sleep but we realize that we slept happily. It means that consciousness was present even in that state.

The discussion here is similar to that in Kenopanishad (Sri Shankara cites the same). The Upanishad says that Brahman is distinct from the known and from the unknown (Kena 1:3). In other words, it is distinct from manifest and unmanifest. If something is not knowable as an object and yet exists, it

is the knower itself; because the only thing remaining apart from known and unknown is the knower himself. The text is indirectly saying that the person who realizes is himself the Brahman.

### 13.6. Super-Imposition and Negation

This is a method adopted by Vedanta in order to explain the nature of Brahman. If a child asks us to explain as to what is the sky, we say that it is up above us like an inverted bowl, blue in appearance. When the child gets a general idea about the sky, it is slowly explained that sky is indeed colorless and that it is not an inverted bowl. What we had told earlier is negated by us. Similarly, if it is said that Brahman has no attribute in it or that Brahman has no connection with creation, sustenance and dissolution of the universe, it would be inconceivable for a lay person. Hence Vedanta chooses to say that Brahman is that which is all pervading, and later negates that it is totally distinct from all this. Let us listen to Krishna attributing some properties to Brahman:

सर्वतःपाणिपादं तत् सर्वतोऽक्षिशिरोमुखम् ।

सर्वतःश्रुतिमल्लोके सर्वमावृत्य तिष्ठति ॥ 13 ॥

*sarvataḥpāṇipādaṃ tat sarvatokṣīśiromukham .*

*sarvataḥśrutimalloke sarvamāvṛtya tiṣṭhati .. 13 ..*

“It has its hands and feet all around, Its eyes and heads all around, Its ears all around and It pervades everything” (13:13), says Krishna. It means that all the limbs of all living beings and all the senses of all beings belong to or enlivened by Brahman consciousness. All these limbs and senses are like reflecting media for the consciousness.

Brahman is of the nature of existence, consciousness which is infinitely pervading. It cannot be cognized or objectified by us like we cognize any other object. Brahman can be known

through its effects just as the electricity is known through the functioning of several gadgets. All the limbs and senses of all living beings are merely gadgets which indicate the presence of Brahman. These senses are called *upādhi-s* which reflect the consciousness just as several water bodies reflect the image of the sun. We have seen earlier that the mind is merely a reflecting medium for the consciousness. All the minds of all beings are merely the limiting factors (*upādhi-s*) for the one and only one consciousness.

In the very next verse (13:14) Krishna negates what he told above. He tells us that Brahman is devoid of any limbs or sense organs. The *Gita* is thus adopting the strategy of superimposition and negation. The previous verse superimposed attributes like senses and limbs on Brahman which is devoid of any such attribute. The present verse is clarifying it. Brahman is unattached (*asaktam*) but yet it is said to be the sustainer of all (*sarvabhṛt*). It means that the whole universe is manifest in that Supreme Consciousness.

Brahman is devoid of attributes but at the same time the creation is attributed to it. We have learnt the concept of *māyā* which explains this. The universe is a product of this *māyā* whose nature is inexplicable. Its existence can neither be affirmed nor negated. If the world were to be really untrue, it would not manifest and if it were to be really true it would not disappear after realization of Brahman. A realized person sees the whole universe as Brahman. The world is negated from his point of view. Vedanta uses a term called *mithyā*, that whose existence cannot be either affirmed or negated. This is the reason why Krishna describes Brahman in oxymoronic expressions.

Krishna continues to tell about *prakṛti* and *puruṣa* in verses 19 to 23. These are not new words. We had earlier learnt that *prakṛti* is the same as the field (*kṣetram*), the manifest universe, which is otherwise called the lower nature (*aparā*) of Brahman.

*Puruṣa* is the same as the field knower (*kṣetrajñā*), otherwise known as the higher nature (*parā*) of Brahman, which is consciousness itself.

These two are said to be beginningless, Krishna says. “May you know that *prakṛti* and *puruṣa* are both beginningless” (13:19). This appears to be contradicting the view that god created the world. The commentators explained this elaborately. According to Vedānta *māyā* is coeval with Brahman. It is a manifestation which is always there. It is always having the nature of manifesting as the universe. If we say that god created the world at a particular point of time it would imply that prior to such creation god was sitting alone, unemployed and “he cannot even be called Lord, as there was nothing to lord over” (*īśitavyābhāvāt īśvarasya anīśvaratva prasāṅgāt*), says Sri Shankara. And also if creation were to be merely arbitrary it would also mean that god had created this unequal world with someone as rich and someone as miserable. Vedānta prefers to accept that Brahman is not directly the creator but we are merely attributing creatorship to Brahman.

Krishna also says that the body-mind-complex (BMC) is the product of *prakṛti*, which, with its three constituents, *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*, goes to the making of the gross body and the subtle body (the mind and senses) (13:20). *Puruṣa*, on the other hand is the consciousness principle reflected in the mind. The consciousness is so closely mixed up with the BMC that the *puruṣa* (otherwise known as *jīva*) identifies himself with the BMC. The reason for such identification is called *avidyā*, ignorance. It is due to this ignorance that the *jīva* assumes his self to be joyous or miserable. This is attribution of the qualities of BMC on consciousness, which in reality is unconnected with such joy or misery. It is because of this attribution and indulgence in good or bad deeds that a person takes up a series of births in good or bad wombs (13:21).

The Supreme Consciousness, though unconnected with anything, appears to be playing different roles in the BMC. It is called 1) witness illumining the activities, 2) as the one watching all actions, 3) as the one supporting all actions and 4) as experiencer (enjoyer) of all experiences (13:22). In this context Sri Shankara in his commentary dwells on what is known in theology as eschatology. Vedanta does not contemplate resurrection of the dead on the day of judgement but tells about a series of births and deaths based on the good or bad deeds of a person. The one who realizes the real nature of the *puruṣa* will get out of the cycle of transmigration.

### 13.7. Means for realization:

Verses 24 and 25 tell about such means. Krishna recapitulates the means told earlier. Those who have achieved perfection in *śravaṇam* and *mananam* go to the third level *nididhyāsanam* and abide in that till they stay firm in Brahman awareness in whatever they see. Those in the second level have not reached this stage but they are capable of intelligent analysis. They would start *śravaṇam* and *mananam*. This is called the path of enquiry. After attaining perfection in this they go to the third level. Those in the first level perform *karma-yoga* and attain purity of mind which is the pre-requisite for the path of enquiry (13:24).

Those who are not in any of the above categories may also attain liberation by devoutly following the instructions of realized masters. Scriptures have to guide seekers of all levels including those who cannot know the intricacies of scriptures. Vedanta holds that every human being is eligible for liberation. Krishna says that *śraddhā*, devotion to master's words, would surely lead the seeker to liberation (13:25).

Krishna says that whatever being comes into existence is due to the combination of the field and field knower. He uses the word *saṃyoga* to tell about this combination (13:26).

Any object to combine with another object should have parts or limbs. A question arises that if the field knower is of the nature of consciousness he cannot combine with an object having limbs. The field (like the BMC) has parts in it. Hence it is impossible to think of any combination between the field and field knower. The commentators explain this by saying that the nature of combination is attribution of one's qualities on the other. This is called *adhyāsa*, super-imposition. The mind which is insentient is mistaken to be sentient and the field knower, on the other hand, though sentient, is identified with the BMC. This sort of identification is similar to the perception of a snake on a rope, says Sri Shankara.

If a person continues to see the plurality of the world he would continue to transmigrate in the cycle of birth and death. He can only be redeemed by a proper understanding of the field and field-knower. The field is the BMC which is an evolute of *prakṛti*. The multitude of fields – starting from a blade of grass to the cosmic mind Hiranyagarbha – is all evolved from this *prakṛti* only. The field-knower is the consciousness itself. The fields perish but the field-knower does not. Consciousness stays equally in all the fields (BMCs) in the creation. A realized person distinguishes this unchanging consciousness from the changing and decaying BMCs. This vision, called *samyak jñānam* is the right vision (13:27-28).

An example would be that of sunlight passing through the sky and falling on divergent objects on the ground and getting reflected. The sunlight by itself is colorless, but when it falls on different reflecting surfaces, the qualities of such surfaces appear to taint or impart their color to the sunlight. *The pure sunlight can be compared to Iswara, the reflected light to the field-knower and the reflecting object itself to the field (BMC)*. Just as we cannot see sunlight unless reflected from a surface, we cannot notice consciousness unless it is reflected in the BMC. The BMC is the place where atman can be realized.

When a person can distinguish in the above manner he will notice that all the activities of the BMC are the works of the *prakṛti* itself but not of the consciousness. Atman, the self, is a non-doer (13:29). Such an understanding will also enable him to see the unity of self in all beings. He realizes that consciousness – being origin-less and attribute-less – is not either a doer or experiencer of the fruit of actions (13:31).

The realized person sees the difference between the field and field-knower with the eye of wisdom (*jñāna-cakṣuṣā*), says Krishna. He is the one for whom the *prakṛti* and its evolutes cease to exist (13:34).

Thus ends the discussion on field and field-knower.

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## The Yoga of Three-Fold Guna-s (*guṇa-traya-vibhāga-yogaḥ*)

### 14.1. An Overview

The previous chapter told us that everything that is born in this universe is due to the *interaction* of the field and the field-knower (13:26). It also told that attachment with the three-fold *guṇa-s* is the cause for the unending sequence of births and deaths in various forms – divine, human or inferior forms such as animals and trees. The present chapter explains the nature of that *interaction* and the nature of contact with the three-fold *guṇa-s*. In his essential nature the human being is not different from the Supreme Consciousness but he forgets this due to his attachment with the three *guṇa-s*. It follows that he can free himself from these three *guṇa-s*. and realize his original self, Brahman Itself. The present chapter is about this process of the human being freeing himself from the bondage of *guṇa-s*.

This chapter has 27 verses. Verses 1 and 2 extol the knowledge of the three *guṇa-s*, which is the means for liberation from them. Verses 3 to 5 tell about the evolution of the universe from the perspective of the *guṇa-s*. Verses 6 to 18 define as to what are these *guṇa-s*, how they manifest in beings and drive them. Verses 19 to 26 describe the characteristics of a person who transcends the three *guṇa-s* and how he conducts himself. Verse 26 advocates devotion as the prime means for such liberation. The concluding verse reiterates the essential unity of the being and the Supreme.

We learnt that the last six chapters of the *Gita* are meant for *sādhana*, spiritual progress. The knowledge of three *guṇa-s* is like the diagnosis of a disease, a knowledge which enables him to get rid of the disease. Lord Krishna attempts the same in the present chapter.

#### 14.2. The Nature of Creation

Verse 3 describes this interaction:

मम योनिर्महद्-ब्रह्म तस्मिन् गर्भं दधाम्यहम् ।  
संभवः सर्वभूतानां ततो भवति भारत ॥३ ॥

*mama yonirmahad-brahma tasmin garbhaṃ dadhāmyaham .  
saṁbhavaḥ sarvabhūtānāṃ tato bhavati bhārata .. 3*

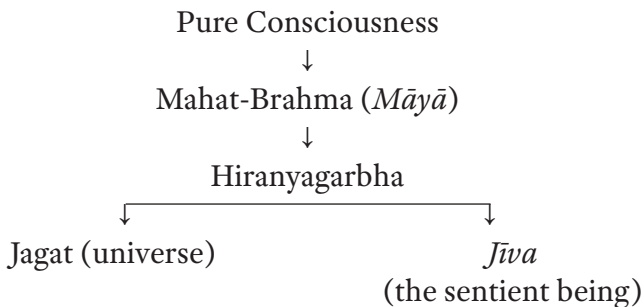
“Oh Arjuna! *Māyā* is the medium in which I plant my seed for the origin of the first being Hiranyagarbha. Evolution of all beings and things follows from that” (14:3).

Krishna tells about the nature of creation from the perspective of *guṇa-s*. Brahman is pure consciousness but the material world is perceived to be physical. Vedanta holds that consciousness is primary and that matter is an appearance in it. In the above verse the term *mahad-brahma* refers to *māyā*, which is figuratively called the mother of the universe while the Supreme Brahman is like the father (14:4). We see this image of parents throughout Indian tradition. It may be called Shiva and Shakti in one tradition or Vishnu and Lakshmi in another.

This *māyā*, the mother of the universe, has three constituents, called *guṇa-s*. These are not physical constituents like different chemicals in a compound but they are qualitative in nature. Just as *māyā* is beyond the cognition of senses, the *guṇa-s* too are beyond sensory perception. *Māyā* is a sort of interface between consciousness and the universe which is insentient. This is an important postulation of Vedanta. All the evolved things such as the five elements, the intellect, the gross

universe and the diversity of beings in the universe are all due to the combination of the three *guṇa-s* in varying degrees.

We can depict the above three verses as follows.



### 14.3. The Nature of the Three *guṇa-s*

A modern student is aware of the personality types. Someone may be an intellectual type, content with his studies and moderate means. Someone else is domineering and ambitious in nature and someone else is slothful, lazy and lacking in initiative. We see a description of such types in verses 6 to 18. A broad picture can be seen as follows.

<i>Sattva</i>	<i>Rajas</i>	<i>Tamas</i>
Purity of mind, capacity for knowledge	Characterized by desires, ambitions and pursuit of actions	Laziness, inattentiveness, proneness to mistakes
Desires to be happy, contented	Dissatisfied with what one has – constant anxiety	Inaction, sleep
Intellectual pursuits, seeking happiness in such pursuits	Always going after new endeavours or enterprises	Characterized by ignorance and wrong understanding ( <i>moha</i> )

The three *guṇa-s* impact on one another and tend to subdue one another. At times, the *sattva* predominates by subduing *rajas* and *tamas* this can be known by the conduct of a person. He will display the personality traits noted in the above table. He is a happy, contented person with peaceful and intellectual pursuits. When *rajas* predominates by subduing *sattva* and *tamas*, its manifestation can be seen in a person who is dominating, acquisitive and constantly in anxiety. When *tamas* predominates by subduing *sattva* and *rajas*, its manifestation is seen in a person who is lazy, lacking in initiative and deluded (verses 11 to 13).

In chapter 8 we learnt that the after-life of a person depends on the actions in this life. Following that, Krishna tells about the after-life of the persons characterized by the three *guṇa-s*. A person with a *sattva* frame of mind attains *loka-s* (states of existence) which are attained by people who do good deeds (14:14). These are the divine *loka-s*. A person with a *rajas* frame of mind attains a life which is again a repetition of the earlier life, with the same incessant quest for things and anxieties (14:15). The one with the *tamas* frame of mind predictably attains lower lives such as animals or plants (14:15).

#### 14.4. Freedom from *guṇa-s*

The ideal for a human being is to transcend the three *guṇa-s*. The whole creation is a manifestation of these. From the beginning, the Lord has been advising Arjuna to rise beyond the three *guṇa-s* (2:45). The only way to rise above the *guṇa-s* is to be their spectator. The seeker has to become a witness to all the activities caused in the BMC by the interplay of the three *guṇa-s*. He has to realize that all activities of the BMC are due to them and he should also be aware of the Supreme which is above these three (14:19). By this vision a person goes beyond the miseries of birth, old age and death and attains immortality (14:20).

What are the indications of the person who transcends the *guṇa*-s, Arjuna is curious to know. What would be his conduct and how does he rise above them, he asks (14:21).

Krishna describes the signs by which a realized person can be identified. We may notice that this description is not different from what he told about a *sthita-prajña* in chapter 2, about a devotee in chapter 12, and about a *jñāni* in chapter 13. Here the description is from the perspective of the *guṇa*-s.

We may recall the two concepts the seer and seen which recur in Vedanta. The seer (*dṛk*) is the person who is in the state of pure awareness, not distinguishable from the Brahman Consciousness. All the activities of the BMC and the whole universe itself become the 'seen' (*dṛśyam*) for him. All his intellectual achievements, all the praises heaped on him by society for his good deeds are not his own self. These are manifestations of *sattva*. It is difficult to rise above them because the society around him praises him for those qualities and a person sees no reason why they are undesirable. However, a realized person does not fall in the trap of the manifestations of *sattva*. He looks at them as a witness. Similarly, other manifestations of *rajas* and *tamas* would also become irrelevant to him. He neither loves whatever good has befallen nor hate whatever bad he had encountered (14:22). He stays firm in his real nature, consciousness (14:23). He is called a *udāsīna*, a disinterested spectator, sitting above all the happenings of the universe.

Sage Vidyanaraya, in his well-known work *Panchadasi*, speculates on the life of such a person (*Panchadasi* 6:260-275). Would he sit merely like an enlightened log of wood, without interacting at all with the outside world? We know that Lord Krishna, sage Vyasa, Shankaracharya and others were no doubt realized persons but they did not merely sit in splendid isolation but did actively move around to establish

*dharma* and gave the *Vedānta śāstra* in the present condition to us. Hence Vidyaranya says that the suffix ‘*vat*’ is significant in the expression *udāsīnavat*, which means, ‘like a disinterested person’. A realized person may be engaged in actions but his attitude is totally disinterested, devoid of the notion of ‘I’ness. All the dualities such as – happiness and misery, praise and blame, respect and disrespect, a friend and foe – all become equal to him (14:24-25).

Here Krishna comes up with a more direct means for realization – single minded devotion to the Supreme (14:26). In this context, devotion refers to the devotion of a realized person who understands the nature of the Supreme and pays single minded attention to that. Devotion to the conditioned Brahman at the level of *māyā* would lead to the realization of the unconditioned Brahman. The last verse shows this:

ब्रह्मणो हि प्रतिष्ठाहम् अमृतस्याव्ययस्य च ।  
शाश्वतस्य च धर्मस्य सुखस्यैकान्तिकस्य च ॥ (27)

*brahmaṇo hi pratiṣṭhāham amṛtasyāvvyayasya ca ।*  
*śāśvatasya ca dharmasya sukhasyaikāntikasya ca ॥(27)*

“I am the manifesting medium, *pratiṣṭhā* for Brahman, the immortal and immutable. (I am also the *pratiṣṭhā*) for the eternal *dharma* and for Supreme Bliss (14:27).

The conditioned Brahman, the Hiranyagarbha, which manifests in all beings in the form of the inner self is indeed the *pratiṣṭhā*, the manifesting medium for the Supreme Brahman. The inner self is a limiting adjunct for the Supreme. The real nature of Brahman is not affected because of the fact of manifesting in a *upādhi*, a limiting adjunct called body-mind-complex. The verse also says that the Supreme Brahman is also the substratum or the base for the conditioned Brahman.

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## The Yoga of Attaining the Supreme Being (*puruṣottama-prāpti yogah*)

### 15.1. An Overview

We may recall that the last six chapters of the *Gita* are meant for the spiritual practice of a seeker in the process of realizing the individual self as Brahman. The objective of the seeker is to practice and reach a state of unbroken stream of Brahman awareness. Hence Krishna repeats some of the points in a new perspective. In this chapter he is presenting the world with the metaphor of a tree.

This is the smallest chapter in the *Gita*, containing 20 verses. Verses 1 to 3 describe creation with the metaphor of tree. Verses 4 and 5 exhort the seeker to destroy that tree with the sword of knowledge. Verses 6 to 20 give a description of the Supreme Being. Verse 16 introduces two new words *kṣara* and *akṣara* to denote what we already know as the individual self (*jīva*) and the cosmic self *īśvara*. Verse 17 talks of the Supreme Being as the *puruṣottama*, referring to Supreme Brahman. This explains the title of the chapter. The last 3 verses tell about the reward for the person who realizes Brahman.

### 15.2. The Ephemeral - Eternal Tree of Existence – *Saṃsāra*

Vedanta uses several metaphors to describe the transmigrating world (*saṃsāra*). It is sometimes compared to an ocean because of the difficulties in crossing over it. It is sometimes called a river to show the ever changing nature and a relative notion of eternity. It is sometimes called a dense

jungle because of the difficulties in passing through that. In this chapter the metaphor is that of a tree. This metaphor is borrowed from the *Kathopanishad*, where the description of *saṃsāra* is in almost the same words. Presently, Lord Krishna says:

ऊर्ध्वमूलमधःशाखम् अश्वत्थं प्राहुरव्ययम् ।  
छन्दांसि यस्य पर्णानि यस्तं वेद स वेदवित् ॥1 ॥

*ūrdhvamūlamadhaḥśākham aśvatthaṃ prāhuravyayam ।  
chandāṃsi yasya paṇṇāni yastaṃ veda sa vedavit ॥*

“They call the transmigrating life, *saṃsāra*, to be the ephemeral (*aśvattha*), eternal tree with its roots upwards and branches downwards, with all *Vedas* as its leaves. One who knows it, knows the message of *Vedas*” (15:1).

The symbolism is as follows:

**Roots upwards:-** Unlike all trees which have their roots below and branches upwards, this tree has its roots upwards and branches downwards. We do not see the roots which are under the ground. Similarly we do not see the roots of this tree too. This root is called *avyakta*, or *māyā*.

**Branches downwards:-** The branches, sub-branches, leaves, flowers and fruits are all flowing downwards. All these are seen and experienced.

***aśvatthaḥ*:-** This is the name of the Indian peepul tree, considered holy. The etymology is interesting – *na śvaḥ tiṣṭhati iti aśvatthaḥ* - “that which does not stay till tomorrow”. It shows the ephemeral nature of the phenomenal world. The world looks permanent for an ignorant person but it disappears at the very moment when Brahman is realized. It does not physically disappear, but the wise person sees it as Brahman and not as the world. Hence it is called *aśvatthaḥ* - ‘that which does not stay till tomorrow’.

**Eternal (*avyaya*):**- This word usually refers to Brahman which is unchanging in nature. In this context the transitory world is called unchanging in a relative sense. The world has been going on and on through several cycles of creations running over billions of years. In that sense it is relatively eternal. But once Brahman is known, the transitory nature of the world is realized. The paradoxical words, ephemeral and eternal are to be understood thus.

*Vedas*, which tell about the *dharma* and *adharma*, are an elaborate edifice of ethical teaching. In addition to philosophical passages known as *Upanishads*, the initial portions of the *Vedas* talk about the prescribed and prohibited conduct for social well-being. This edifice is like the branches, canopy and leaves of the inverted tree. Just as the leaves protect the tree the *Vedas* guide a person and protect him from sinful behavior.

The branches of the above tree are said to have spread out in all directions, some downwards and some upwards. These branches are nourished and strengthened by the three *guṇa-s*. Human activities are based on the predominance of the *guṇa-s*, as we have seen above. The goal of these activities is to attain worlds of happiness or misery. The happy worlds are described as branches going upwards and the miserable worlds are shown as branches going downwards. Similarly, the human activity in the world is compared to a huge matrix of aerial roots. These produce certain predispositions and impressions called *vāsanā-s* which bind the human being in further actions. Thus it becomes an unending cycle of transmigration for each being starting from an ant to a dinosaur (15:2).

This verse also refers to the world of humans as the field of action. It is here that a person can do righteous deeds and attain higher worlds or attain liberation through knowledge. That is why the human world is called *karma-bhūmi*, as we saw in an earlier chapter.

### 15.3. Smashing the Tree with the Sword of Knowledge

This tree appears formidable and strong-rooted for an unrealized person but it becomes fragile and feeble for the realized one. He can destroy the tree with the sword of dispassion (*vairāgya*) (15:3). Thereafter he has to stay firm in the state of awareness of self as Brahman. By doing so, he will not revert to the world of transmigration (15:4). This is a state of understanding not easily attained by all. It is attained only by those whose ego and pride have vanished, who have developed dispassion, who have transcended the dualities and who do not have deluded understanding (15:5). All these characteristics are that of a *sthita-prajña* whom we saw in second chapter, a devotee in the twelfth chapter, a *jñānī* shown in the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter and a *gunātīta* shown in the previous chapter.

Such supreme state of awareness is described in verse 6. It is a state not illumined by sun or moon or by fire. It is an abode from where there is no return (15:6). Here the words sun, moon and fire do not refer to their physical bodies. Sun is the presiding deity for the eye and thus represents the eye, the sense organ. The moon represents the mind and fire represents the sense of speech. This is a general notation we find in the scriptures. The verse therefore means that the Brahman awareness is something not known to the eye (and all other sense organs), or the mind or to speech.

In the same verse when the Lord says – ‘that is my abode’, he is not referring to a physical abode but to the state of Supreme Consciousness. It is this light which is illumining all other divine entities like sun, moon or fire and also all the beings in the universe (15:6).

The individual being is comparable to a miniscule part of that consciousness, much similar to the space an empty pot compared to the huge space pervading the universe. Alternatively, it is like the reflection of a sun in a tiny water

body. The clarity of reflection depends on the stillness and purity of water in the water body. If it is still and pure the picture is clear; but if the water is moving and is also impure, the reflection may be bad. Similarly, the individual being is like a tiny speck of consciousness reflected in the BMC. When this tiny speck of consciousness assumes the notion of self, it draws upon the *prakṛti* and collects the five sense organs and mind from the *prakṛti* (15:7). It moves on from one body to another carrying the baggage of the mind and sense organs. Through these instruments, the being tastes good and bad experiences from sense objects (15:8-9).

In all these activities – such as assuming the BMC, experiencing sense objects in different ways – the unwise person is unaware of the atman which is illumining all the beings. Only the wise person can distinguish the BMC from the illumining consciousness and places himself in the position of a detached witness to all the activities in the BMC (15:10). Such vision is possible for someone accomplished in the yoga of worship (which was qualified as *dhyāna-yoga*, devotion associated with knowledge, in twelfth chapter). Others who have not attained purification of mind by the four-fold practices (*sādhana catuṣṭaya*) will never be able to know the atman in spite of being highly knowledgeable in scriptures (15:11).

#### 15.4. The Indwelling Brahman

The four verses (15:12-15) briefly recapitulate the glories of God. The Supreme Brahman is what illumines the sun, the moon, the fire and the universe. It is Brahman which holds the universe together and provides nourishment in the form of *Soma*, the moon (15:16). A well known verse follows:

अहं वैश्वानरो भूत्वा प्राणिनां देहमाश्रितः ।

प्राणापानसमायुक्तः पचाम्यन्नं चतुर्विधम् ॥ 14 ॥

*ahaṃ vaiśvānaro bhūtvā prāṇināṃ dehamāśritaḥ ।*

*prāṇāpānasamāyuktaḥ pacāmyannaṃ caturvidham* ॥

“Dwelling in the bodies of all the beings in the form of fire and equipped by the vital airs *prāṇa* and *apāna* I consume the four types of food” (15:14).

This is a verse recited before a person starts his lunch or dinner.

In the Vedic tradition the whole universe is broadly viewed in two parts, that which eats and that which is eaten. The fire is the eater and food is the eaten. This fire dwells in the whole universe (*viśva*) in all beings and hence called *Vaiśvānara*. The priests perform a ritual called *agniṣṭoma* (combination of the words Agni and Soma) wherein the food items are given as offering into the fire. In daily life, when a person eats he is expected to have this notion in mind and eat his food as an offering to the Lord dwelling in him in the form of fire. This helps in not being a glutton but eat one’s meal with a notion that it is a requirement for the BMC.

### 15.5. Purushottama

This is the title of the present chapter. The *Gita* is employing this term in the concluding verses of this chapter. They tell about two types of *puruṣa*, namely, *kṣara* and *akṣara*. This is not a new concept though the words used are new. We have seen in Vedānta that the *jīva* is consciousness associated with the individual mind and Iswara is consciousness associated with the cosmic mind. Mind itself is *prakṛti* which is insentient and not like *puruṣa*, the sentient entity. Whether it is individual mind or cosmic mind both are *prakṛti* and hence they are two limiting adjuncts for the Supreme Consciousness. Here Krishna is distinguishing the Supreme Consciousness as *Puruṣottama*.

The term *akṣara* has to be carefully noted here. In some other contexts it refers to the Supreme Consciousness Itself. In the present context it refers to the consciousness delimited by

the cosmic mind. *Puruṣottama*, as distinguished from *akṣara* is the consciousness without any delimiting adjuncts (15:16-18). This consciousness is beyond the tree of *saṃsāra*, though it is the inspiring force behind the tree.

A seeker is said to attain perfection in knowledge only when he realizes himself as not different from this Supreme Consciousness, unbound by any limitations. He is the one who has achieved equality with Brahman by discarding the limitations and by discarding all the dualities of the mind. Such a person is called the all-knowing one, because apart from Brahman there is nothing else to be known. He is also said to have attained completeness in his actions (*kṛtakṛtya*). All rituals and prayers subsume in such completeness. He has no further activity to do (15:19-20). Such knowledge breaks the tree of transmigration and the person remains as Brahman.

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## The Yoga of Divine and Demonic Attributes

(*daivāsura-sampadvibhāga-yogaḥ*)

### 16.1. An Overview

This chapter analyzes human nature from the point of view of the divine and demonic attributes with which a person is endowed. A brief reference was made to these in the ninth chapter (9:12-13). Chapter 7 and 14 also told that the three *guṇa-s* are manifestations of the Brahman only. We do not have the concept of Devil, as we noted in para 10.2. Gods and demons are none else than projections of human beings on a symbolic plane. There are episodes in the *Upanishads* which talk about the battle between gods and demons. The commentator Sri Shankara has elaborately explained (in his commentaries on *Upanishads*) that the clash between gods and demons is an allegorical picture of the internal clash between the divine and the demonic qualities in a human being. In the mythological story of churning the ocean of milk the ocean is but the human mind, the Gods and demons are our own good and bad attributes. A successful churning yields the nectar of wisdom.

The title explains the subject. *Daiva* is divine, *āsura* is demonic. *Sampat* is the character with which a person is endowed and *vibhāga* is their differentiation.

There are no questions from Arjuna in this chapter. The whole narration is by Krishna. The chapter has 24 verses. The first three describe the divine attributes and all the verses from 7 to 18 describe the demonic attributes. The *Upanishads* say that the divine are few in number and the demonic are numerous. Hence a longer cataloguing of such attributes. The last four verses (21 to 24) are instructions to Arjuna to overcome desire, anger and greed – which are the three doors leading to hell – and to follow the guidance of the scripture.

The intention of this chapter in enumerating the demonic qualities is to warn the seekers to carefully avoid such qualities. Enumeration of divine qualities is to present the attributes of a realized person and to advise the seeker to emulate them.

## 16.2. Divine Endowment

The first three verses, as noted above, list out twenty-six qualities considered to be divine. They are:

- **Fearlessness:** This is an important outcome of proper understanding. A realized person achieves oneness with the Supreme and thus he has no sense of duality. Vedanta says that fear is due to the perception of duality. Realized person has overcome this perception and hence he is in a state of fearlessness. There is also no threat from him to any being.
- **Purity of mind:** This refers to absence of hypocrisy and deceitful nature. A person's conduct is characterized by purity of thinking and action.
- **Steadiness in knowledge:** It is the knowledge of Brahman which is referred to here. A realized person is one who stays in that awareness in a steady manner.

- Charity: Scriptures have given several examples of right and wrong situations in charity. This has to be associated with humility and awareness of the *atman* indwelling all.
- Restraint of organs of action: This is a preliminary step for a seeker whose mind is not yet restrained. He should consciously restrain his physical behavior though the mind can be erratic at times.
- *Yajña*: This is a word with several layers of meaning which were described in the fourth chapter. In the most general sense it is a ritual performed for religious merit (*punya*). It also refers to the duties of a house-holder towards guests, gods, living beings and so on. Study of scriptures and austerities were also categorized as *yajña*.
- Learning of scriptures: This refers to a regular study and following instructions of the scripture handed down in the family lineage. Traditionally each person is expected to study at least one of the four *Vedas*.
- Austerities: This is termed as '*tapas*'. The word has two meanings. It refers to the mental activity of contemplation on the nature of absolute. It also refers to physical austerities like fasting.
- Uprightness in conduct: Absence of crookedness.
- Non-violence: Not causing hurt to any being. Hurt can be either physical or mental. A realized person does not hurt any being in any manner.
- Truthfulness: Abjuring lies and unpleasant words.
- Abjuring of anger: Absence of anger even in provocative situations.
- Renunciation: This can refer to total renunciation of actions as in the case of a mendicant and also to renunciation of

*fruit of action (karma-yoga)* though a person is engaged in action.

- Inner tranquility: This word is most commonly translated as ‘peace’ but it conveys only part of the meaning. Etymologically it refers to the restraint of mind as a result of discrimination of the right and wrong. Actions will be pure when the mind itself restrained.
- Not talking ill of others in their absence.
- Compassion for all beings.
- Overcoming temptation even when objects of pleasure are available.
- Gentleness and behavior.
- Sense of shame which inhibits a person from wrong doing.
- Absence of fickleness of mind and of bodily movements.
- Confidence in bearing.
- Forgiveness.
- Steadfastness and will power.
- Purity of mind and body.
- No vengeful nature.
- Absence of self-glorification.

These are the attributes of a person born under divine nature (16:1-3). They are also the qualities of the realized person.

The divine attributes are due to the *sattva*, which has the potential to lead a person on the path of knowledge and elevate him to the level of Brahman. The demonic attributes on the other hand bind a person in the wheel of transmigration (16:5). Krishna assures that Arjuna is endowed with the divine

attributes. It implies that Arjuna was having the *sattva* frame of mind when he was engaged in the battle.

### 16.3. The Demonic Endowment

Krishna goes on to elaborate the demonic nature. This nature is predominant in the world and hence Krishna devotes twelve verses (16:7-18) to describe this. *Upanishads* have sometimes divided human nature in two categories – divine and demonic – and at some other places divided the same in three categories – divine, human and demonic. It is the humans who display the predominance of *sattva* are called divine; those who display predominance of *tamas* are called demonic. A mix of all the three *guna-s* in varying degrees makes all of us who are humans. In the present context, the demonic nature is shown in verses 7 to 18:

- They lack the sense of good and evil.
- Lack of internal and external purity.
- Lack of tradition and lack of truthfulness.
- Advocacy of atheism – saying that the universe is quite accidental and that there is no guiding principle called *dharma*.
- The whole creation is due to the union of male and female beings prompted by lust.
- Indulgence in cruel actions, dangerous to society.
- Insatiable desire for things.
- Ostentatious display of virtuousness.
- High sense of self-esteem.
- Pursuing wrong and anti-social objectives.
- Endless worries all through the life.

- Ensnared in hundreds of desires, motivated by desire and anger.
- Unhesitating indulgence in immoral and illegal actions.
- Vaulting ambition to dominate and over-power people.
- Pompous display of religious behavior with a sense of arrogance and performing *yajña-s* which are only name sake.
- Indulgence in self-glorification.
- Drunk in their self-assumed glory.

Just as a text book in medicine deals more with illness and not with health, so does the *Gita* dwell with the demonic attributes in greater detail in order to demonstrate the qualities to be avoided. The seeker can achieve purity of mind only when he can overcome the above obstacles in the path of knowledge.

Krishna says that such persons with demonic nature will get hurled into demonic wombs (16:19) by virtue of their *karma* and that such people would fail to attain liberation.

The demonic nature is summarized in one verse.

त्रिविधं नरकस्येदं द्वारं नाशनमात्मनः ।

कामः क्रोधस्तथा लोभस्तस्मात् एतत्त्रयं त्यजेत् ॥21॥

*trividhaṃ narakasyedaṃ dvāraṃ nāśanamātmanaḥ ।*

*kāmaḥ krodhastathā lobhastsamāt etattrayaṃ tyajet ॥21॥*

“There are three doors to hell which lead to the tragic destruction of *atman*. They are desire, anger and avarice. These have to be eschewed” (16:21). All other demonic attributes noted above are derivatives of these three. Krishna exhorts that a person who overcomes these three would be on the right path and would attain the highest goal (16:22).

#### 16.4. The Authority of Scripture (*śāstra*)

In view of the complexity of issues described above Krishna prescribes a safe rule – follow the scripture. He says – “a person who abandons the instructions of the scriptures and behaves as per his desires will never be able to attain purity of mind. He is neither happy here nor in the other world. Hence follow the scriptures in all matters of duty” (16:23-24). The *Vedas*, including *Upanishads* are referred to as scripture in this context. Scripture is not an arbitrary or capricious assemblage of ‘do’s and don’ts but it is the collective wisdom of a large number of sages to whom *Vedas* were revealed over a period of time. There is a minute analysis of the nature of human being, the nature of the divine, the nature of universe and the eternal law (*dharma*) upholding the world order. The aim of *śāstra* is to demonstrate the equation of individual (*jīva*) with the Absolute (Brahman). It also provides the strategy for the human being to elevate himself to the divine level.

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## The Yoga of Three-fold Dedication

(*śraddhā-traya-vibhāga-yogaḥ*)

### 17.1. An Overview

The last two verses of the previous chapter talked about the authority of the scripture. This causes a doubt in Arjuna's mind. There may be many who are not proficient in the scriptures but have the sense of *śraddhā*, dedication. What happens to them? Should we categorize their dedication as *sattva* or *rajas* or *tamas*?

Dedication can itself be characterized by *sattva*, *rajas* or *tamas*, explains Krishna. His detailed reply constitutes this chapter.

This is a small chapter with 28 verses. Human activities such as the choice of food, the type of *yajña*, the type of charity (*dāna*) and the type of *tapas* are described here all through, in verses 2 to 22. The measure for all these is *śraddhā*. Verse 23 to 28 describe the three notations of Brahman – *aum*, *tat* and *sat*. Krishna explains as to how these are employed in order to enhance the sanctity of the actions performed.

### 17.2. What is *śraddhā*?

*Śraddhā* is something more than mere faith or trust. It is a conscious and willing choice to follow the time-tested path of wisdom. It is an attitude of mind which is the result of the accumulated impressions/dispositions (*vāsanā-s* or *saṃskāra-s*) of the previous birth, carried over to this birth. The

present life too, generates such dispositions. Such disposition is the starting point for a person but the scriptures are there to guide him and shape the right type of dispositions which will constitute the wealth of dedication.

*Śraddhā* is an important component in the process of knowledge. We have seen that the endeavor of the *Gita* is to enable the seeker to transform himself from his lower self to the higher self of Brahman. The *Gita* shows the path but the traveler has to be equipped with all necessary goods for travel. *Śraddhā* is like the travel expenses in the spiritual path. It is called *śraddhā-vitta*, the wealth of dedication.

Krishna rightly feels that the above generalized doubt of Arjuna requires some analysis. He says, “*śraddhā*, which is the result of previous dispositions, is of three types – depending on *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*. Every human being is a product of this *śraddhā*. His personality is defined by it and it is built around it. A person is what his *śraddhā* is” (17:2-3).

### 17.3. Types of Worship

Just as we can tell about a person by knowing about his friends, we can similarly tell about a person by knowing the type of gods he worships and the manner in which he worships. People of *sāttvika* nature worship the Vedic deities such as Vishnu, Indra, Rudra and others. This is ordained in the scriptures. People of *rājasa* nature worship lower gods like *yakṣa-s* for mediocre results and those with *tāmasa* nature worship the spirits of departed persons for evil ends (17: 3-4). Their *tapas* is ostentatious and egoistic. They do emaciate and punish their bodies beyond limits without caring for the spirit of scriptural instructions (17: 5-6).

### 17.4. Food Indicates Our Nature

Krishna tells how the choice of food indicates the *guṇa*. We have earlier seen that everything in the universe is composed of

the three *guṇa*-s. It means that all our food is also composed of these and hence produces results in accordance with their nature. They are chosen by people of same temperament. The *sāttvika* people choose *sāttvika* foods which enhance longevity, enthusiasm, strength and happiness. They choose foods which are juicy, oily and help in body building.

Those of *rājasa* nature choose *rājasa* foods which are excessively bitter, sour, salty, hot, pungent, dry and burning in nature. They do cause hurt to the body and lead to disease in the long run. Those of *tāmāsa* nature choose *tāmāsa* foods which are not cooked in the proper manner, foods which are foul, putrid and kept over a long period. They do not mind eating food that is left over and which is unfit for offering in rituals.

#### 17.5. Attitude to *yajña*

Performance of *yajña* is analyzed in a similar way. Chapter 4 had given a comprehensive description of *yajña*. We saw that *yajña* can be a means either for bondage or for purity of mind, leading to liberation. Here Krishna is again referring to *yajña* performed in the spirit of *karma-yoga* – performing it as a matter of duty and not desiring the fruit of that *yajña*. A person performing such *yajña* is a *karma-yogi*, one who has surrendered his will to the will of god. We may say that he is the one who puts himself in the shoes of god and performs his actions. God would not perform actions with any selfish intention but would do them for the welfare of mankind. A *karma-yogi* does the same. His *yajña* is *sāttvika* in nature (17:11).

The persons of *rājasa* nature perform rituals seeking the fruit of such actions or for ostentatious display. Such action does not contribute to purity of mind. Those of *tāmāsa* nature are much worse. They do not bother for perfection in the performance of rituals, lack dedication and do not even pay for the services of those helping them in the rituals (17:12-13).

## 17.6. Three Types of *tapas*

While *yajña-s* are more in the nature of a group activity, *tapas*, on the other hand, is more individual in nature. It involves our thoughts, words and deeds. Hence Krishna analyzes the idea of *tapas* from the point of view of thoughts, words and deeds. Outward action of respecting elders, integrity in behavior, devotion to scriptural studies and non-violence is the *tapas* at the body level. Use of kind, gentle, truthful, non-insinuating words and study of scripture is the *tapas* at the level of speech. Equanimity of mind, gentleness, meditative temperament, self-control and purity of thought are the *tapas* at the level of mind.

After such analysis, Krishna goes on to examine *tapas* in the framework of the three *guṇa-s*.

Here too, *karma-yoga* is the touch stone. Any austerity performed with a sense of dedication and without desiring the fruit of it is called *sāttvika* in nature. Krishna also uses a word ‘*yukta*’ which means an enlightened spirit of dedication (17:17). On the other hand, there are people who undertake austerities with the purpose of being noticed by others. They desire fame, respect and also worship by others. Such austerity done with ostentation is *rājasa* in nature and its result is fleeting and very little.

The persons of *tāmasa* nature hit upon a fool-hardy and dangerous decision and stick to it in an obstinate manner. They may even torture and push their bodies to physical extremes. Their intentions would be evil, desiring destruction of others.

## 17.7. Charity (*dānam*)

Charity too is a topic relevant at all times. This is also of three types – depending on the *guṇa* motivating it. Charity motivated by *sattva* is explained in different contexts in the *Upanishads*. Krishna encapsulates those instructions. He says, “Any charitable act becomes *sāttvika* when it is done as a matter

of duty without keeping the spiritual merit (*puṇya*) in mind and done to someone who has not done any favor earlier or who is not capable of doing any favor. Similarly, an act of charity has to be done at the right place, at the right time and to the right person” (17:20). This is to ensure that the recipient would also use it righteously without disturbing social harmony.

A *rājasa* charity is different from the above. Here charity is done with an intention that it would be repayed in some form at a later date. This is also done keeping the spiritual merit (*puṇya*) in mind and also not with willingness and happy frame of mind. The *tāmasa* type of charity is an act which is done irresponsibly. The general guideline of place, time and deserving person is thrown to the winds. (We come across examples of persons helping violent activities. There are also states financing terrorist outfits). The giver not only does not show proper courtesy to the recipient but on the other hand, shows discourtesy. This is not in the interest of social harmony.

All the above analysis of worship, food, *yajña* and others are to tell the seeker that he has to consciously cultivate the *sāttvika* style in those actions.

### 17.8. Brahman awareness

It may so happen that even when the above activities are done with a *sāttvika* frame of mind, there may be some lapses taking place unknowingly. In order to redeem from such lapses Krishna suggests that the utterance of three words which denote Brahman would nullify the defects and sanctify all actions. These three words are *Aum*, *tat* and *sat*. Krishna told about the significance of *Aum* in chapter 8 earlier. It is a symbol to denote the infinitude, which is Brahman. Similarly, *tat* and *sat* are established notations to denote the absolute Brahman. Krishna says that the whole structure of priesthood, the *Vedas* and the *yajña*-s has been created on the basis of these three notations (17:23).

The wise persons recite the word ‘*Aum*’ both while beginning and while concluding any ritual like *yajña*, charity or austerity. This would sanctify all such acts. Those seekers who wish to attain purity of mind and who do not desire the fruit of their actions would recite the word ‘*tat*’ both at the beginning and at the end of such acts.

People recite the word ‘*sat*’ when some good act has been performed by someone or when an act is done in a praiseworthy manner. In events like marriages and such other auspicious occasions the elders recite the word ‘*sat*’ in approval of the same. Any act done in the spirit of karma-yoga is also called ‘*sat*’.

‘*Sat*’ is the existence principle of Brahman and hence acts done with devotion are approved by that word. All actions done without devotion are called ‘*asat*’, the opposite of the above. It means that such acts are as good as useless and false. Such acts would not yield any worldly result or heavenly result.

In the farm-land called human mind we sow the seeds such as *yajña*, charity or austerity and irrigate the field with the water called dedication (*śraddha*). Dedication is also compared to the wealth that is required to travel the path of self realization. Scripture is so kind to humans that it shows a remedy to those who are not acquainted with the nuances or complexities of rituals and procedure. The chapter began saying that the spirit of dedication would be enough. Envisaging some lapses even for this, the scripture has now suggested the three words denoting Brahman which would redeem human actions from all lapses.

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## The Yoga of Liberation and Renunciation

(*mokṣa-saṁnyāsa-yogaḥ*)

### 18.1. An Overview

Krishna started elaborating on the path of self-discipline from the chapter 13 onwards. We saw that the last six chapters of the *Gita* deal with *sādhanā*, the quest for the knowledge of the Supreme. So far, they gave a picture of *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*, the three constituents of the universe. Every being, sentient or insentient is a combination of these three. Krishna analyzed the whole range of human nature, its types and characteristics. Various virtues which are pre-requisites for self-knowledge were analyzed in the framework of the above three constituents. A few more are remaining. Krishna analyzes these in the present chapter, besides concluding his teaching.

The name of the chapter is the ‘Yoga of Liberation and Renunciation’. It is the largest chapter in the *Gita*, having 78 verses. Verses 1 to 11 explain renunciation of actions versus renunciation of the fruit of actions. Verses 12 to 17 talk of the realized person. Verses 18 to 40 examine knowledge, actions and the actor (doer) in the framework of the three constituents. Verses 41 to 44 tell about categorization of persons into four *varṇa-s* based on the innate qualities with which they are endowed. Verses 49 to 56 review the means for knowledge of Brahman and tell the characteristics of the realized person. Krishna makes concluding observations to Arjuna from verses 57 onwards till end.

The chapter starts with a question by Arjuna. He wishes to have the final opinion of Krishna on the relative merits of renunciation of actions altogether and renunciation of the fruit (result) of actions. These two were discussed earlier by Krishna. However, he gives an overview again.

## 18.2. Renunciation of actions

Total renunciation of actions (*saṁnyāsa*) arises in two situations. A realized person can renounce all actions (except in cases such as king Janaka where he may perform actions). A person can also renounce actions by formally taking up the *saṁnyāsa* stage of life. This is a sort of preparatory step for knowledge. Such a person has to go through the three-tier system of *śravaṇa-manana-nididhyāsana*. Arjuna's question about renunciation of actions does not apply to these two persons.

Thus, Arjuna's question about renunciation of actions arises in the case of a house-holder (*grhastha*). But scriptures say that a house-holder should not normally renounce actions. He has to perform his obligations to society. We saw that the obligatory actions include hosting of guests, giving food to mendicants and students, performing *yajña-s* and such. He is the main pillar for the society. He cannot abdicate actions.

The second option is renouncing the fruit of action. We have seen that actions are of two types – desire-driven actions and desire-free actions. Actions of the first type produce result in the form of heavenly worlds but do not lead to purification of mind. Actions of second type, on the other hand, do not produce result but lead to purification of mind.

We also learnt that the intelligent way is to give up desire-driven actions and do obligatory actions without expecting the result. This is called the renunciation of fruit of actions. The social obligations are performed and the individual attains

purity of mind as well, which is the basic step in the path of knowledge.

Krishna concludes in the same way:

यज्ञदानतपःकर्म न त्याज्यं कार्यमेव तत् ।

यज्ञो दानं तपश्चैव पावनानि मनीषिणाम् ॥5 ॥

*yajñadānatapaḥkarma na tyājyaṃ kāryameva tat ।*

*yajño dānaṃ tapaścaiva pāvanāni manīṣiṇām ॥*

Krishna categorically says that socially useful actions like *yajña*, charity and austerity are obligatory actions and hence they have to be necessarily done. They are for self-purification (18:5). Besides, a person would be setting a role model for others. This is a hint to the modern day seekers who do not care for the obligatory routine such as daily prayers but merely consider themselves ‘spiritual’. Such persons would be setting a bad model for others, including their own children.

Krishna continues to say that even though actions are binding in nature, they have to be performed as a dedication to the Lord, as a dedication to the universal will (18:6). Such action would not accrue result to the person. This is the course recommended for a seeker. One who is not a seeker may continue his desire-driven actions and continue in the cycle of transmigration. Alternatively, he may give up actions and accrue sin as a consequence of inaction (18:8).

### 18.3. Knowledge, Action and Actor

Krishna starts analyzing the above three in the framework of the three constituents – *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*. The word ‘knowledge’ here refers to the vision of life of a person. This depends on a person’s *guṇa*-s. Krishna says that the person endowed with *sattva guṇa* tries to see unity and common factors in the diversity of beings. People may look divided on various sociological, communal or religious grounds but the

wise person tries to see unity among them all. Such knowledge or vision is the *sāttvika* vision. Such knowledge arises from the purity of mind. It is the preparatory ground for the knowledge of Brahman (18:20).

The *rājasa* vision, on the other hand, sees diversity, tries to probe into differences and is always conscious of such division (18:21). This is the vision of those academics who foster enmity among people. The *tāmasa* vision is the worst of all. It holds preference to one single object or person or idea as if it were the be all and end all. This preference and attachment is based on irrational thinking. It is far from reality and is also paltry and petty in nature (18:22). This is comparable to the dogmatic and fundamentalist views today.

Krishna now examines *karma*, the ritualistic action which gives spiritual merit or demerit, which would entail good or bad future lives.

The person endowed with *sattva* prefers to avoid the desire-oriented actions. He performs the obligatory works without desiring the fruit of such works and without the sense of like or dislike. This is part of the spiritual discipline, which enables further progress (18:23). The *rājasa* person desires the fruit of actions and also performs the desire-oriented actions. He does it with a great sense of ego and with ostentation and labour (18:24). The *tāmasa* person does not look into the consequences of his actions, does not see the impending damage, one's own ability or violence involved but undertakes activities with a deluded thinking (18:25).

The doer (*kartā*) is also of three types. All of us perform rituals and hence it is our attitude which is discussed here.

The *sāttvika* doer performs actions without desiring the fruit and without any sense of ostentation or ego. Yet he performs actions with fortitude of mind and enthusiasm. He

is undeterred by success or failure but performs actions as ordained by the scripture (18:26). In contrast, the *rājasa* doer has strong desire for the fruit of actions and does not mind violence and cruelty. He is exuberant when he achieves and depressed when he fails (18:27). The *tāmāsa* doer is indecisive, unrefined, stubborn, cunning, cruel and lazy. He is usually pensive and depressed. He procrastinates actions (18:28).

In the same vein, Krishna analyzes ‘intellect’ and ‘will’ in the framework of the *guṇa-s*. ‘Intellect’ is the ability to analyze things and it is to be distinguished from ‘knowledge’ mentioned above. Knowledge is the end product of intellect.

The *sāttvika* intellect knows and evaluates the path of worldly actions (*pravṛtti*) and the path of renunciation (*nivṛtti*). It analyzes the good and bad activities. It knows what has to be shunned and what has to be owned. It also knows actions which cause bondage and actions leading to liberation (18:30). The *rājasa* intellect gives a distorted picture of what is right and wrong and what is to be done or not done. This is due to the intervention of ego and intense desire for the fruit of action. ‘Fair is foul and foul is fair’ for the *tāmāsa* intellect. It is shrouded by ignorance and perceives things contrary to truth (18:32).

Firm will or resolve is also of three types. The *sāttvika* will is firmly focused in self-discipline. It upholds and restrains all the activities of mind and body and does not allow the mind and senses to deviate from the path of righteousness (18:33). The *rājasa* will is strongly focused on whatever goal a person chooses – *dharma*, *artha* (wealth) and *kāma* (desire) (18:34). This person has a strong will but it is oriented towards the fruit of action. The *tāmāsa* will is almost the absence of any resolve. It merely drifts. It is due to faulty and crooked understanding. The person does not get over his fears, anxieties, depressions or pride as the case may be. People take pride in their own ignorant

perceptions or justify their foolishness. They also take pride in their sensual indulgence. Such is the *tāmasa* will (18:35).

Krishna analyzes happiness too. A person gets accustomed and feels happy with whatever type of happiness is natural to him. The *sāttvika* happiness starts from self-discipline and quest for knowledge. It may be tough to start with. A person has to control his vagrant behavior and practice several acts of austerity and studies. But as he grows in maturity he starts deriving happiness from that knowledge. This happiness is nectar-like, says Krishna. This happiness is not due to external pleasures but is due to right understanding and calmness of mind (18:37).

The *rājasa* happiness is due to enjoyment of objects of sensual pleasure. To start with this appears nectar-like but later turns out to be poison (18:38). Such pleasure saps a person's strength, vigor, intelligence, wealth and enthusiasm and enfeebles him. The *tāmasa* happiness is indeed no happiness at all, either in the beginning or towards the end but it is due to a delusive understanding of things. It is due to sleep, laziness and inattentiveness (18:39).

Krishna makes an important statement: “*There is nothing in the whole universe, in the human or divine worlds, which is not constituted by these three guṇa-s*” (18:40). All human actions and results which emanate are in the realm of ignorance as we have seen in the metaphorical portrayal of the world as the inverted tree (15:2). This tree can be destroyed by the sword of knowledge. One can get into the path of realization only by destroying this tree, Krishna had said.

#### 18.4. The Four *Varṇa-s*

The whole discussion in the *Gita* started when Arjuna wanted to give up the duty enjoined on him as a warrior and desired to live as a mendicant, which is the *dharma* of a

Brahmin. Krishna gave a comprehensive picture of the human being in the cosmic scheme. He has to say the final word on this now. He recapitulates the four-fold structure to which he had made a passing reference in chapter four. That was regarding the four *varṇa-s* – the Brahmin, the ruler-warrior, the trader and the workman.

As Krishna said above (18:40), all beings are as a result of combination of the three *guṇa-s* in innumerable ways. However, the predominance of one *guṇa* over the others creates four types of personalities. We have seen the characteristics of *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*, starting from chapter 14 onwards. Krishna says that scriptures have not arbitrarily prescribed duties to these four categories but have done based on the characteristics manifesting in a person by birth (18:41). These characteristics may be due to the *saṁskāra-s* (latent pre-dispositions) of the earlier birth or it may be due to predominance of either *sattva* or *rajas* or *tamas* in a person. This is a universal principle, not confined to Indian society alone. Personality traits like equanimity, tranquility, aggressiveness or lazy nature are universal.

The predominance of *sattva*, with *rajas* in the second place produces the type of personality which we can call Brahmin in any society. Such a person has predominantly *sāttvika* qualities. The duties assigned to him are – control on mind, control on body, austerities, purity of heart and body, forbearance, integrity of character, pursuit of knowledge and adherence to Vedic discipline (18:42). Scriptures have assigned to him duties which are compatible with his naturally endowed dispositions and talents.

The next in line is the ruler-warrior. He is known as a *kṣatriya*, one who protects the weak from the villainous persons. He has *rajas* as predominant and *sattva* as the secondary *guṇa*. Krishna says that this person is valorous. He is fearless and

confident in his approach. He has strong will and does not get demoralized or demotivated in times of adversity. He has the ability to handle any developing situation. He does not run away from battle. He is also charitable to all needy. Above all, he has leadership qualities. All these are attributes with which he is naturally endowed (18:43).

The other two categories form the support structure in a society. The third type has predominance of *rajas*, while *tamas* is secondary. Krishna says that activities like agriculture, animal farming and trade of all types are the characteristics of *vaiśya* (18:44). This word literally means a citizen. Thus almost all citizens in society were covered in this category.

The fourth type has predominance of *tamas* while *rajas* is secondary. Krishna says that such a person, not given to refined thinking and lacking in initiative is best suited to help others in all activities. He is the workman. He is called *śūdra*, which etymologically means one who is afraid of things.

A question arises whether all noble qualities described for the Brahmin *varṇa* are invariably present in any Brahmin we see. This is a question as old as *Mahabharata*. There are several passages in *Mahabharata* in which this question has been raised and answered. In the episode of snake-king Nahusha, it is said that whoever has the above qualities has to be categorized as a Brahmin. It is also said that if someone born in a Brahmin clan does not possess these qualities he should not be considered a Brahmin (Vana parva of *Mahabharata*).

Srimad Bhagavatam, another epic (also called *purāṇa*) by sage Vyasa describes in the same vein. Certain characteristics are told to define each *varṇa*. If such characteristics are found in a person of other category he should be recognized in accordance with those characteristics (Bhagavatam 7-11-35). This epic also gives examples of how the sons of a king Rishabhadeva take up to austerities and become Brahmins (ibid 5-4-13).

Later law texts known as *smṛti-s* have prescribed duties to the four categories of persons in consonance with what Krishna has told here. However, they have not gone into the sensitive question whether a person has to be treated as a Brahmin based on his qualities or whether he can be disqualified from that status.

### The Meaning of *dwija* – The Twice-born

Persons in the first three categories, including farmers, traders and cowherds were all entitled to study the *Vedas* and perform all the Vedic rituals. Krishna, belonging to the cowherd clan, is himself an example. All the three types were called *dwija*, the twice-born. The first birth is from the parents and the second birth is by the ritual in which he starts wearing a sacred thread. An additional duty given to a Brahmin was to teach *Vedas*. It is surprising to see that most of the persons in the *vaiśya* category have given up Vedic studies over a period of time and have started considering themselves as *śūdra*. This may be due to the upheavals in Indian society due to successive invasions and distortions.

“Performing *svadharmā*, one’s assigned work, is worship. A person attains purity of mind by such performance. He then becomes eligible for the higher learning – the knowledge of Brahman” says Krishna. “It is better to do one’s own assigned work though it is defective in some way. It is not proper to take up the *dharma* of another category. One does not attain sin by doing *svadharmā*.” (18:47).

*Svadharmā* is based on the naturally manifest qualities, as Krishna told above (18:41). His present task is to remind Arjuna that he cannot leave his warrior *dharma* and take up the *dharma* of a Brahmin.

### 18.5. Getting Unbound from Actions

In an earlier chapter (5.2) we were told about two types of renunciation – one by a realized person and the other by an unrealized one. Krishna is recapitulating the qualities of a realized person who has gone beyond the mundane level of worldly actions. He uses the word ‘actionlessness’ (*naiṣkarmyam*). This is not achieved by merely relinquishing actions but it is achieved by the knowledge of the oneness of self and Brahman (18:49).

Brahman is not known by the mind like any other object. Whatever is known by the mind is inferior to the mind and hence cannot be Brahman. Brahman is the consciousness which is illumining the BMC. In other words, it is enabling the mind to cognize things.

The mind is said to be a mere receptacle or reflecting medium for consciousness. It is compared to a mirror. All human thought processes like desire, love, hate, determination, firmness, coyness, fear and all such are merely factors of the mind. These constitute the human personality and our predispositions. If the mind has to reflect on Brahman it has to be pure from all the above factors. This is possible by continuous practice of reminding oneself to be a mere witness to what all emotions go on in the mind. The sense organs have to be consciously controlled by the mind from becoming wayward and the mind itself has to be controlled by proper discrimination about what is real and what is un-real.

Vedanta says that all this involves a dedicated practice for a long time. The notion of self has to be taken away from the BMC and the seeker should realize himself as of the nature of mere consciousness. Krishna tells thus in 18:51-53:

- One should have a guileless mind endowed with *sāttvika* qualities
- One should control the BMC with firm determination

- Getting rid of the dualities of love and hatred
- Lifestyle has to match with his view of life – hence he has to seek solitude
- He should not be gluttonous in his food
- He should have control on mind, body and speech
- He should spent time in contemplation
- One should have dispassion
- One has to get over the mental states such as pride, arrogance, desire, anger, greed and ownership on things

Such a person is fit to become Brahman, says Krishna (18:53). It means that all the above are the integral qualities of a realized person.

The whole discussion of the present text had started because of a sudden feeble-mindedness of Arjuna. He wished to relinquish his duty of a king and wished to adopt the lifestyle of a mendicant Brahmin. Krishna keeps this in mind and reverts to Arjuna. He says – “Even as a person performs all activities, he would attain me by my grace if he seeks shelter in me” (18:56). Krishna is referring to *karma-yoga*, performance of action as a part of the divine scheme.

Krishna gives a mild warning too – “Your action is bound by your nature. You are endowed with the quality of *rajas* and you will inevitably come on to the path of action in spite of yourself” (18:60). “Follow the divine order and you will find peace and also attain the supreme goal” (18:62).

Concluding his teaching, Krishna says

सर्वधर्मान् परित्यज्य मामेकं शरणं व्रज ।  
अहं त्वा सर्वपापेभ्यो मोक्षयिष्यामि मा शुचः ॥66 ॥

*sarvadharmān parityajya māmekaṃ śaraṇaṃ vraja ।*

*ahaṃ tvā sarvāpāpēbhyo mokṣayiṣyāmi mā śucaḥ* ||66||

“Seek shelter in me, relinquishing all actions (*dharma-s*). I will deliver you from all types of activities”. These words are to be taken not as an assurance from the individual called Krishna to Arjuna. Here when Krishna refers to himself he is speaking from the point of view of Supreme Brahman. Relinquishing all *dharma-s* refers to going beyond the activities prescribed by the scriptures. When Krishna says that he will deliver Arjuna from all sinful activities it does not mean that he will nullify or pardon whatever sins are committed. It means that he would give wisdom to Arjuna which would enable him to transcend both righteous and unrighteous deeds (Ch-10.2). Krishna had indeed told him earlier that the Supreme Brahman does not take away either the righteous or sinful deeds of people (5:15).

All this philosophical discussion was meant to give a comprehensive picture of righteous action. Arjuna’s mind is now free from all delusion. He says – “My delusion has disappeared by your grace and I have regained my own self without any sense of doubt. I will act as per your advice” (18:73).

## 18.6. Conclusion

The discussion has thus concluded. The core of the message revolves around two types of *dharma* as told by Krishna in the beginning of chapter 3. He called them the path of action and the path of knowledge. Practices such as *karma yoga*, devotion, self-restraint and meditation are all activities consciously performed by a person and hence all those come under the category of action. A person in *karma-yoga* is aware that he is performing his prescribed duty as an order from the Lord. A devotee is aware that he is worshiping a particular deity either for fulfillment of desire or for self-purification. Self-restraint and meditation too are conscious efforts. Their results can be summarized thus:

- *Karma yoga* leads to purity of mind, but that by itself is not the ultimate. It is a means to the path of knowledge.
- Self-restraint leads to purity of mind which is essential for further activity such as study of scriptures and contemplation. This too is a means for knowledge.
- Meditation results in concentration of mind, which is another pre-requisite.
- Devotion is an important means because there is also the divine grace in addition to human effort.

The path of knowledge involves three stages – a proper study of scriptures, contemplation and abiding in such awareness. Realization of self means realizing that one’s own self is not different from Brahman. It is a realization that self is a non-doer and that it is of the nature of pure consciousness.

Realization is not exclusive to a person who has renounced action. Renunciation may help realization but there can be instances where a realized person is also performing action, but without the notion of self in such actions. Krishna had given the examples of the philosopher kings such as Janaka.

The final question is whether Arjuna has become a realized person like the philosopher kings of old or whether he is a *karma-yogi* or whether he is merely obeying Krishna’s advice. The whole text began because of Arjuna’s grief, caused by *moha*, deluded perception. Krishna thought that there was no remedy for delusion other than the knowledge of self. Hence he started talking about the self as being unborn, undecaying, non-actor.

At the end of the entire discussion Arjuna says – “My delusion has been dispelled by your grace and I have realized my real self. I now stand clear of all doubts and I will act as per your advice” (18:73). Arjuna’s reply that he has realized his real nature has been explained by the commentators as due to his realization in the absolute sense, the result of which is release

from the transmigrating existence. Eradication of sorrow and delusion is indeed the intended goal of Vedanta. The whole teaching was a *jñāna yajña*, the highest form of *yajña* (a name which Krishna himself suggests in 18:70) which would burn away all notions of limited self and the consequent desire, greed, sorrow and delusion. Freed from sorrow, a person can undertake action and be untouched by the fruit of such action. Arjuna is poised and ready for that. He has evolved into being a philosopher-king, like Janaka and others who were commended by Krishna.

The whole discussion between Krishna and Arjuna was narrated to the blind king Dhritarashtra by his minister Sanjaya, we may recall. After this narration Sanjaya gives his own assessment – “I do firmly hold that all glory, victory, prosperity and *dharma* abide in the place where Krishna, the Lord of all *yoga-s* and Arjuna the mighty archer, are together” (18:78). Knowledge directs action, which becomes actionlessness in a realized person.

\* \* \*

## Glossary

[Terms which occur frequently in *Gīta* and in other texts of Vedānta are given below in English alphabetical order, following the IAST transliteration key. Words used in a specific context are explained in the text itself.]

*abhyāsa*: literally means practice, but in Vedānta it refers to conscious practice of self-restraint.

*adhibhūta*: relating to the five elements; perishing in nature.

*adhidaivam*: relating to the divine; Hiranyagarbha in the context of (8:4).

*adhyātma*: concerning self; the indwelling self in all beings (8:3).

*adhyāsa*: attributing properties of one on the other due to ignorance.

*āgāmi karma*: the *karma* which has not yet given its result and is bound to give result at some time in future.

*ahaṅkāra*: the notion of 'I' in a person.

*ajñānam*: absence of knowledge of self.

*akṣara*: that which does not perish; generally refers to Brahman, but in 15:16 it is used to refer to *māyā*.

*antaḥkaraṇam*: literally means *inner organ*. It refers to the four levels of functioning of mind – *manas*, *buddhi*, *ahaṅkāra* and *cittam*.

*aṅgarā*: means that which is not *parā* or supreme; secondary or inferior in nature.

*āśrama*: one of the four stages of human life – *brahmacarya* (stage of study),

*gṛhastha* (stage of house-holder), *vānaprastha* (stage of retreat and meditation), *saṁnyāsa* (stage of renunciation).

*āsura*: demonic nature.

*ātma-saṁnyama*: conscious disciplining of sense organs and mind.

*avidyā*: see *ajñānam*.

*avyakta*: unmanifest, refers to *māyā*.

*bhagavān*: refers to the Lord of universe, possessing divine glories.

*brahma*: Supreme Brahman – known as existence, consciousness and infinitude.

*brahmā*: the Lord of the universe.

*buddhi*: the discriminating function of the mind.

*cit*: consciousness.

*cittam*: the recalling and analyzing function of the mind

*citta-śuddhi*: purity of mind, achieved by practice of *karma yoga* and such methods.

*citta-vṛtti*: a frame of thought in the mind when an impression is registered on it or when a thing is recalled in the mind.

*daiva*: divine

*dama*: control of external sense organs.

*devayāna*: the path of the gods which a person takes after death (8:24).

*dhāraṇā*: concentration.

*dharma*: literally, that which holds the society from falling apart; that which sustains. It refers to two types of human activity – one for progress in worldly life and the other type relating to progress in the knowledge of Brahman.

*dhṛti*:- determination.

*dhyānam*: meditation.

*dṛk*: the seer; intelligence.

*dṛśya*: the ‘seen’, the object of cognition.

*gṛhastha*: a house-holder, married person. This is the second stage in human life.

*guṇa*: literally, a quality or property of an object. In the context of Vedānta and Sāṅkhya it refers to the three constituents

of *prakṛti*, which are – *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*. *Sattva* manifests as contemplative nature, brightness, serenity, composure and quietness in nature. *Rajas* manifests as assertiveness, spirit of achievement and aggressiveness. *Tamas* manifests as dullness, sloth, laziness and indulgence in sensual pleasures.

*hiranyagarbha*: the cosmic mind, also known as the first *jīva*, which manifests in Iswara (which is consciousness associated with *māyā*).

*indriya*: sense organ – the organ of hearing, the organ of seeing etc. Contextually it also refers to the organs of action such as hands, feet etc.

*īśvara*: consciousness (Brahman) associated with *māyā*, in which the cosmic mind and all the worlds manifest.

*japa*: repetition of a *mantra* several times with a desire to achieve a benefit.

*jīva*: consciousness associated with *antaḥkaraṇa* (see above), any entity endowed with intelligence.

*jīvan-mukta*: a person who is liberated while being alive, having realized the knowledge of unity of self and Brahman.

*jīvan-mukti*: the state of liberation while being alive.

*jñānam*: literally, it refers to any knowledge. In the context of Vedanta it refers to the knowledge of Brahman or the knowledge of self, both of which are said to be one.

*jñāna-niṣṭhā*: steadiness in the awareness of self/Brahman.

*jñānī* : a realized person.

*kāmya-karma*: any ritualistic action prescribed by scriptures which is designed to fulfill a desire (*kāma*).

*karma*: literally, it refers to any action. 1) In the context of Vedanta it refers to ritualistic action mandated by the scripture, endorsed by the scripture or prohibited by the scripture. 2) In certain contexts it may also refer to the fruit of action.

*karma yoga*: an important means advocated by Krishna in the *Gita*. It is an attitude to action. It refers to performance of action without desiring the fruit of such action and as an individual's contribution to the society or with a notion that it is an order from Lord. Such action leads to purification of mind.

*krama-mukti*: attainment of liberation in a gradual manner by achieving purification of actions by *karma yoga*, making the mind focused by *dhyāna yoga*, making it more perfect by the yoga of self-restraint and by associating devotion (*bhakti*) to the above strategies.

*kṣamā*: forgiveness.

*kṣānti*: forbearance.

*kṣara*: that which is ephemeral and perishing in nature.

*kṣetra*: literally, it means a field such as an agricultural field. In Vedanta it refers to anything which the knower can distinguish from himself or objectify.

*kṣetrajñā*: it refers to the knower of *kṣetra*. It is the *jīva* at the transactional level and it is Brahman at the absolute level.

*kūṭastha*: immutable or unchanging. It refers to Brahman.

*laya*: an effect (*kārya*) getting merged or resolving into its cause (*kāraṇa*).

*loka*: a state of existence achieved by virtue of doing an action (*karma*); it refers to the human, divine or demonic levels of existence which a person achieves.

*loka-saṅgraha*: ensuring social harmony and order, performing exemplary actions which motivate others to do similar acts for social harmony. A *karma yogi* is expected to perform actions with this frame of mind.

*mananam*: rumination and logical validation of what has been learnt from the scriptures. This is essential for a seeker in order to strengthen proper understanding.

*manas*: generally, it refers to mind. Vedanta observes mind at four levels – the stage of sensory impression on the mind

(which is called *manas*), the stage of determination (which is called *buddhi*), the stage or faculty of recalling what has been known earlier (which is called *cittam*) and the faculty of realizing as 'I know this'. See also *antaḥkaraṇa*.

*māyā*: the Supreme Brahman which is of the nature of consciousness and existence has no doer-ship in It. In order to explain creation from such an entity, Vedanta postulates *māyā*, a power in Brahman which manifests as creation.

*moha*: deluded perception or understanding.

*mokṣa*: literally, means liberation. It is the state of a person who has a realized Brahman, in which he is free from all worldly bondages.

*mūḍha*: a person who has deluded understanding.

*mumukṣu*: a seeker of liberation.

*naimittika karma*: a ritualistic action which is mandated on certain occasions such as – child birth, occasion of putting on the sacred thread, marriage etc.

*naiṣkarmyam*: the state of actionlessness achieved by realized person. His actions do not accrue any positive or negative result though seemingly they appear as actions.

*nididhyāsanam*: the third level in the three-tier process of study and understanding (*śravaṇam*), logical deliberation and validation (*mananam*) and actualization (*nididhyāsanam*). Steadiness in this stage leads to realization.

*nirguṇa*: attribute-less Brahman, defined as pure existence, consciousness and infinitude. Also known as *nirupādhika brahman*

*niṣkāma-karma*: desire-free action, also known as *karma yoga*. See *karma yoga*.

*niṣṭhā*: steadiness in any strategy or means adopted by the seeker.

*nitya-karma*: action which is mandated by the scripture. It refers

to the daily rituals and the five-fold activity known as five *yajña-s* – propitiating gods (by prayers), propitiating the departed (by prayers), propitiating guests by offering food, propitiating animals by giving food and daily study of scriptures.

*parā*: the higher level of manifestation, *jīva* (7:5).

*pravṛtti*: getting engaged in action intended for advancement either in this life or after life.

*phalam*: the fruit of an action, also called *karma-phalam* or simply, *karma*.

*pitṛyāna*: literally, it means the path of the forefathers. It is the inferior path for the dead who had merely performed ritualistic actions during their life time with the intention of having the fruit of such actions.

*prakṛti*: another name for *māyā*, see above.

*pramāṇa*: any means of valid knowledge – perception, inference etc.

*prasāda*: tranquility of mind attained by right understanding of the self.

*puruṣa*: the indwelling self, the *jīva*.

*puruṣārtha*: refers to the four human goals – *dharma*, prosperity (*artha*), desire (*kāma*) and liberation (*mokṣa*).

*puruṣottama*: it refers to the Supreme Brahman in the context of *Gita*.

*sādhana-catustaya*: the four-fold practices which are a prerequisite for the seeker of Supreme Reality. The four practices are 1) discrimination between what is ephemeral and what is eternal, 2) dispassion for all worldly or other-worldly pleasures, 3) discipline of mind and senses and 4) deep desire for realization.

*saguṇa*: literally, that which has attributes. *Saguṇa Brahma* refers to a functional god with attributes such as creation, sustenance and resolution as opposed to the attributeless Brahman. Also known as *sopādhika*.

*sākṣī*: literally, means witness. In Vedānta it refers to the

consciousness which is distinct from the body-mind-complex and which merely enables the BMC to transact its activities, while the *sākṣī* itself is uninvolved.

*śama*: control of the mind by proper understanding of what is ephemeral and what is eternal.

*samādhāna*: steadiness of mind, a pre-requisite for a seeker.

*samādhi*: steadiness of mind achieved by meditation on any god with attributes or by meditation involving exclusion of all thought frames (*citta vṛtti*) as in Patanjali yoga.

*saṁnyāsa/sannyāsa*: renunciation of all actions. Chapter 6 tells of two levels in this – renunciation as a preparatory step for self-knowledge and renunciation after self-knowledge.

*sampat*: literally, means wealth. In the context of the divine *sampat* and demonic *sampat*, the word refers to the endowment or attributes of divine or demonic nature.

*saṁsāra*: the transmigrating nature of *jīva* from one birth to another. This cycle is broken only by self-knowledge.

*saṁskāra*: any experience or action leaves an impression on the mind. Such impressions are called *saṁskāra-s*. These in turn influence further actions of a human being. Good *saṁskāra-s* cause good actions.

*sañcita-karma*: the law of *karma* is that its result has to be experienced by the doer. All *karma-s* do not get exhausted in one life and hence some get accumulated and passed on to the next birth. Such pending baggage of actions, accumulated over several previous births, is called *sañcita-karma*. All this gets cleared only by experiencing or alternatively all of them get destroyed by the self-knowledge.

*sāṅkhya*: the path of knowledge by which the self is realized (shown in chapter 2). In the general context of Indian philosophy it refers to the *sāṅkhya* system of Philosophy propounded by sage Kapila.

*sannyāsa*: see *saṁnyāsa*

*śāstra*: scriptures at two levels – the *Vedas* (including *Upanishads*) which are the primary texts and the *smṛti-s* which are the secondary texts meant for conveying the message of *Vedas* to the common man.

*sattva*: one of the three *guṇa-s*

*satyam*: that whose existence cannot be negated at any time, that which is beyond time. It describes Brahman.

*siddhi*: attainment of the desired result.

*smṛti*: the secondary texts, known as *Itihasa* and *Purana*.

*sopādhika*: see *sagūṇa*.

*śraddhā*: an attitude of mind characterized by dedication, faith, trust and willingness to follow a code or principle. This depends on the predominant *guṇa* in a person.

*śravaṇam*: proper understanding of the Vedantic doctrine, having heard it from a competent teacher.

*śruti*: the primary texts, i.e. the *Vedas* and *Upanishads*.

*sthita-prajñā*: literally means a person of stable intellect. *Gīta* uses the term to refer to a person who has realized Brahman and who firmly dwells in such awareness

*svabhāva*: literally, means one's nature. In the context of 8:3 it refers to manifestation of Brahman in all bodies.

*swarga*: a heavenly world, achieved by good deeds done in human life.

*tamas*: one of the three *guṇa-s*. (see above)

*tāmasa*: the adjectival form of *tamas*.

*tapas*: literally, means austerity. A special connotation is given in chapter 17.

*tattvam*: the reality of a thing.

*upādhi*: it is an object which is proximate to another, imparting its qualities on the other. A red rose near a crystal makes the crystal look red. It is said to be an *upādhi* for the crystal. Similarly, the human body, which shows characteristics like birth, ageing, death etc., is an *upādhi* for the eternal

atman, by making it appear as having such qualities.

*upāsanā*: meditation on a personal god.

*vairāgya*: dispassion.

*vaiśvānara*: the fire within a living being which digests the food which is eaten.

*varṇa*: one of the four categories of persons in society; categorized on the basis of the predominant characteristic/tendency/*guṇa* in a person. Division of work in a society depended on the predominant characteristic traits in a person.

*vāsanā*: the lasting impressions on the mind which are created by all interactions; also called *saṃskāra* (see above).

*vibhūti*: a magnificent manifestation of the creator of the universe, either for restoration of *dharma* or for *upāsanā* by devotees.

*vicāra*: intellectual deliberation.

*vidhi*: injunction, duty mentioned in the scriptures.

*vikāra*: change, modification.

*viveka*: discrimination.

*vṛtti*: see *citta-vṛtti*

*yajña*: a Vedic ritual which promises a desired result; incidentally involving virtuous actions such as charity. Chapter 4 gives an extended meaning for this word to cover any socially useful activity.

*yama*: self-restraint; the first stage in the eight-limbed yoga doctrine propounded by Patanjali.

*yoga*: derives from the Sanskrit root ‘*yuj*’, which means ‘to combine’; it is cognate with the word ‘yoke’.

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