

A TEACHING FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

Devotion; the Bhagavad Gita

On the lecture list for a course on the Bhagavad Gita by Ed Bryan at Rutgers University, the last period is designated as follows:

Debate. Does the Gita primarily emphasize *bhakti*, *karma* or *jnana*? The class will be divided into 3 groups to defend a position.

It will be remembered that the Bhagavad Gita describes the dilemma of the warrior Arjuna, faced imminently with fighting a battle in which he has close relatives on both sides. He faints away at the horror of it. Krishna pours courage back into his veins by describing the inevitability of things and the way to find liberation through the various yogas.

HH described the three-fold division of the Bhagavad Gita in the following way:

In the Bhagavad-Gita the first six chapters speak about the path of Action. Practically everything is related to that in those six chapters – how this path is built up and how one has to act. The next six chapters deal with the path of Devotion – Love. In this part all attributes of the Lord, His compassion for people, His association, His love and how He comes to rescue them in case of need – all these things are described. And in the third part – from the 13th to the 18th chapter – the path of Knowledge is described, which deals with abstract ideas about the Absolute and His relation to creation. After describing all these Lord Krishna asked Arjuna, “Now since everything has been described to you, has it removed your attachment? Have your doubts been discarded? Are you ready for your duties?” And then Arjuna says, “Yes, my doubts are removed, and my attachments are no more with me, and I am ready to do my duty – to take the law (Dharma) in hand. Whatever is needed will be done.” [Record 28.10.65]

HH sometimes indicated that the path of Action (*karma yoga*) is the right path for the householder, but on other occasions he said that Devotion (*bhakti yoga*) is the easiest – most people are devotional by nature. Perhaps he meant that for the 'good life' the path of Action is adequate, but for anyone who wants to take things further, who wants inner realisation, the path of *bhakti* beckons.

We have a pretty good idea about what the path of Action is: for anyone who meditates, the Maharishi's metaphor of visiting the Treasury and spending the proceeds in the Marketplace is a succinct metaphor. But what did HH mean by devotion? Is it the same as in the Bhagavad Gita and other classics? To appreciate the purely devotional approach one could do worse than turn to Ramanuja.

In the same way that Shankara is regarded as the great proponent of *jnana* and the founder of Advaita, Ramanuja is regarded as the proponent of *bhakti* and the founder of the rival philosophy of Visishadvaita. Whereas in the 8th century Shankara had argued against the devotional movements of the day, three centuries later Ramanuja returned the compliment. To Ramanuja, Brahman is one manifestation of Krishna; it is Krishna who is the Supreme Lord. So Ramanuja writes in the introduction to his commentary on the Bhagavad Gita:

The Supreme Lord Krishna naturally delights all the worlds who are fortunate enough to learn about Him with His transcendental beauty, His eternal, spiritual form and His extraordinary phenomenal pastimes which are overflowing with the nectar of compassion and love. . .

By delineating *karma* yoga and *jnana* yoga which both when becoming mature blossom into *bhakti* yoga, which is the science of the individual consciousness attaining communion with the Ultimate Consciousness by loving devotional service unto the Supreme Lord or through any of His incarnations revealed in the Vedic scriptures.

The Supreme Lord Krishna fully described the science of *bhakti* yoga in the middle six chapters of Srimad Bhagavad-Gita and these six chapters reveal the goal of all Vedantic teachings and by which He is irrefutably indicated as the Ultimate Reality, the best object of love for the highest good of all living entities and that loved, He Himself becomes the means to rescue a living entity from all illusory and conditioned existences.

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Towards the end of the Bhagavad Gita Krishna gives to Arjuna his 'Word Supreme, the most secret of all':

Fix thy thought on Me, be devoted to Me, worship Me, do homage to Me. Thou shall reach Myself.

But devotion is not something that can be put on like a coat: 'one develops *bhakti* by the mercy of great souls or by a small drop of the Lord's mercy' (*Narada Sutras*). HH puts it like this:

As Param-Atman is all-powerful and limitless, it is obvious that no bondage could tie Him. But it is strange, again, that strings of love and *bhakti* can do so. We know that only acquaintance can create love. Param-Atman is so beautiful that the more we get acquainted with Him, the more we get filled with joy - this creates *bhakti* automatically and necessarily. Then, acts of worship become redundant. They, however, constitute a preliminary necessity.

It should be understood here that that so-called 'devotion' (which we can attempt before acquaintance), is a forced phenomenon and unreal, while that which sets in inevitably after acquaintance is real. Then our body, mind and all the possessions become dedicated to Param-Atman, and this dedication itself becomes the worship of Param-Atman. Then we eat, drink, act, etc. for the sake of Param-Atman and do nothing for ourselves. Everywhere and in everything we see nothing but Param-Atman. This is a stage of absolute intimacy with Param-Atman, and *bhakti* is just another word for this stage. [Record 16.10.73]

All these Yogas . . . are all leading towards only one aspect, that the individual who wants to go by any of these ways has to decide once and for all that whatever he does, he does it for the Absolute, and then he will find this union.

If you try to do anything, however gloriously you may function, but just to fulfil your worldly commitments, then you will find that the union which is already there will not be

experienced, so the thing to decide is that one is doing everything - even digging the earth or anything else one likes to do - for the Param-Atman.

In the Gita it says that People should take to this through their own vocation, whatever they are destined to do (or whatever they find themselves doing is good enough) and that is the way, that is the Yoga for unity with the Absolute; but the only thing is that everything must be done for the Absolute, and nothing should be done to acquire any particular thing except union with the Absolute, and one should just surrender oneself and the feeling of surrender itself is the gate of liberation, and a *Bhakta* is always liberated because he is not bothered about anything except the Absolute; and when there is only this one idea reigning in the mind, the Absolute, then that is liberation. A *Bhakta* does not necessarily go under discipline but he simply lives a liberated life. [Record 26.9.75]

Exercise

To get the general drift of the Bhagavad Gita read it right the way through as quickly as possible (in about an hour), or in three sessions: Chapters 1-6, 7-12, 13-18.

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