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A MYTHO-HISTORICAL EXPLORATION OF KARMA YOGA

The purpose of this paper is to elaborate on ideas that were presented in the panel discussions for this class on the Bhagavad Gita. Presented at that time was a brief comparison of “selfless service” (as reflected in the tradition of karma yoga) with similar notions in the western traditions of Christianity. At that time I stated:

Whenever anyone spoke of yoga to me, I have always thought of boney bodied ascetics sitting around contemplating mystical wonders. My thought was a bit judgmental in the sense that exalting asceticism was certainly a neat way of not dealing with the systemic cruelty seemingly inherent in the caste system. However, once I encountered this text I became aware that karma yoga was indeed an acceptable path to perfection. So, much like Christianity, the fault for misery, injustice, and suffering was in the application of principles, not in the principles themselves. For instance, Krishna says to Arjuna,

Strive constantly to serve the welfare of the world; by devotion to selfless work one attains the supreme goal of life. Do your work with the welfare of others always in mind. It was by such work that Janaka attained perfection; others too, have followed this path. (Easwaran, ch. 3, sec 19-20).

Furthermore, I remarked in my presentation:

What I find so interesting about this is essentially the same conflict exists within the Hindu mythic system as occurs in the Christian mythic system. Both advocate selfless service to the world—yet within both cultural milieus there exists considerable poverty and misery. The seemingly more attractive alternative is the ascetic way—jnana yoga in Hinduism and monasticism in Christianity. The fundamental difference is that the monastic way is not given scriptural support as a valid alternative to selfless service, while in Hinduism, in the Bhagavad Gita it is.

In the panel discussion for class, I made a comparison of Karma-Yoga with monastic Christianity. In this paper the intention is to focus exclusively on the relative position of selfless service (Karma-Yoga) within a Hindu mytho-historical context. The purpose of this discussion is to explore the position of selfless service (an equally effective means of spiritual perfection) within the overall context of Hindu literary expression and spiritual practice.

The principle idea we are exploring is directly from the Bhagavad Gita, when Krishna says to Arjuna: “At the beginning of time I declared two paths for the pure heart: jnana yoga, the contemplative path of spiritual wisdom, and karma yoga, the active path of selfless service.” (Easwaran, ch. 3, sec. 3).

In Hinduism today, it turns out there are more than just two forms of yoga despite the teaching in the Gita. According to various authors, including Feuerstein, Rdhakrishnan and Moore, and others, the forms of yoga include: Jnana-Yoga (the way of knowledge), Bhakti-Yoga (the way of devotion), Karma-Yoga (the way of action), as well as Raja Yoga, Hatha Yoga, Mantra Yoga, Laya Yoga and Integral Yoga. Action and Selfless Service are two ways of expressing the meaning of Karma-Yoga.

The Bhagavad Gita, where Karma-Yoga is introduced for the first time, has a privileged position in Hindu literature, as demonstrated by Sri Chinmoy in his introduction to the Gita:

I read the Gita because it is the Eye of God. I sing the Gita because it is the Life of God. I live the Gita because it is the Soul of God. The Gita is God's Vision immediate. The Gita is God's reality direct. They say that the Gita is a Hindu book, a most significant scripture. I say that it is the Light of Divinity in humanity. They say that the Gita needs an introduction. I say that God truly wants to be introduced by the Gita.(133)

One might expect a scripture of such stature to be of extremely ancient origin and to have profoundly influenced the early development of Indian culture. Even though the Bhagavad Gita is considered a part of the Mahabarata, it was composed much later than the majority of the Mahabarata texts. According to Keay the dates of interpolation into the Mahabarata is somewhere in the third to fourth centuries A.D. Within that dating schema, the composition of the Gita was fairly late in terms of philosophical expression. The Gita was written too late, in a sense, to have a dramatic impact on the unfolding events of Hindu mythic history.

According to Rdhakrishnan and Moore, the basic outline of Indian philosophy is derived of several parts, including the Vedic Period (c1100 B.C.E.), the Epic Period (c900 to 520 B.C.E.), the Heterodox Systems (600 to 400 B.C.E), the Orthodox Systems (500 to 200 B.C.E), and contemporary thought. Feuerstein suggests a completely different dating schema for the composition of these texts, particularly in view of preceding centuries of oral traditions. However one establishes the compositional dates, there are some difficulties to consider. Yoga is part of the Orthodox Systems, but the Bhagavad Gita is considered to be part of the Mahabarata, which is part of the Literature of the Epic Period. Obviously there are some confusing dating issues regarding where the concept of selfless service fits within the overall context of Indian Philosophy. Perhaps some historical orientation is in order.

Vedic Period

While there was a high order of civilization centered in Harrappa and Mohenjo Daro before the second millennium B.C.E., according to Keay and others there is no evidence that the Indus Valley Civilization influenced in any particular way the development of later Hindu thought. The Vedic Literature, which is an outgrowth of the Aryan dominance (whether by invasion or migration) began with the hymns of the Rig Veda and also include the Upanishads. One of the important social developments that occurred during this period was the development of the caste system. According to Olleville:

The subjugated non-Aryans appear to have been by and large relegated to the lower class of an emerging quadripartite social structure: (1) the elite ruling cum military class generally referred to as Ksatiriyas; (2) the hereditary priestly class of Brahmins; (3) the large group of peasants and artisans known as Vaisya, and (4) the Sudra group, which included a motley array of people, including subjugated non-Aryans, servants, and slaves. (xxvi)

The conclusion to be drawn is that the caste system was long established by the time the Bhagavad Gita was written. While the Gita may have existed in oral form prior to that time, Karma-Yoga was a historical development that occurred after the social structures had been in place.

Aside from the caste system, there are a number of philosophical ideas that predominated Indian culture for many years. A legacy from the Rig Veda that impacts on later concepts of Karma-Yoga is the concept of "Rta". Karma Yoga is about action in the world, but Rta, according to de Nicholas is a specific kind of ritual (sacrificial) action in the world that is "...also an inspired way of acting leading to the same kind of efficacy ...as a thread to be woven or a stream to be followed.(161)

Epic Period

The epic period consists primarily of the texts which were covered in the Hindu Traditions class: the Ramayana, the Bhagavad Gita and the Mahabharata. According to Raghavakrishnan and Moore we find in this period the elaboration of the orthodox social code and four aims of life. The authority of the Vedas was accepted and the new gods of Shiva, Shakti and Vishnu became prominent. They go on to say: “This period, like every period in which civilizations converge and conflict, was one of great intellectual activity, enlargement of life, and many sided developments.”(99)

Heterodox Systems

The three primary Heterodox systems of Hindu thought according to Raghavakrishnan and Moore are Carvaka, Jainism and Buddhism. While important streams of Hindu thought, they do not contribute significantly to our discussion of Selfless Service. These systems of thought just happened to develop at nearly the same time as the Orthodox Systems, roughly 600 to 400 B.C.E.

Orthodox Systems

Of the various systems of Orthodox thought, according to Raghavakrishnan and Moore there are six that have become most important: Nyaya, Vaisheshika, Smkhya, Yoga, Purva Mimamsa, and Vedanta. Of these six, the system of primary interest to this discussion is Yoga. Because things get a little complex at this point, I’m going to refer to Feuerstein to sort things out a bit.

According to Feuerstein: “The Sanskrit term yoga is most frequently interpreted as the “union of the individual self (jiva atman) with the supreme Self (parama-atman) (4).” Karma has a variety of general meanings related to action, work and effort. In the

sense of karma-yoga, according to Feuerstein, "...it denotes an inner attitude toward action, which in itself is a form of action." Furthermore, Feuerstein goes on to state:

Karma-Yoga implies a complete reversal of human nature, for it demands that every action is performed out of a disposition that is radically distinct from our everyday mood. Not only are we asked to assume responsibility for appropriate (karya) action but also to offer up our work and its fruit (phala) to the divine Person. ...Karma-Yoga thus involves considerably more than doing one's duty. It goes beyond conventional morality and involves a profound spiritual attitude. The "easy" discipline of Karma-Yoga, when adopted conscientiously, becomes a fiery practice of self-transcendence.(49)

According to Zimmer, Karma "...is understood as applying not only to the life of the individual, but to the history of society and the course of the cosmos." (13)

Mahatma Gandhi is perhaps the most well known modern example of Karma-Yoga practitioner. In the famous Chapter 3 and 4 teachings of the Bhagavad Gita, the words of Lord Krishna to Arjuna seem to apply directly to the essence of Gandhi's life. So, through the life of Gandhi and others we can see that the person of Selfless Service exemplifies that, "The goal of all work is spiritual wisdom."(4. 33)

The teaching of Selfless Service can be summed up from the following verses of the Gita:

The wise see that there is action in the midst of inaction and inaction in the midst of action. Their consciousness is unified and every act is done with complete awareness. The awakened sages call a person wise when all his undertakings are free from anxiety about results; all his selfish desires have been consumed in the fire of knowledge. The wise, ever satisfied, have abandoned all external supports. Their security is unaffected by the results of their action; even while acting, they really do nothing at all. Free from expectations and from all sense of possession, with mind and body firmly controlled by the Self, they do not incur sin by the performance of physical action. They live in freedom who have gone beyond the dualities of life. Competing with no one, they are alike in success and failure and content with whatever comes to them. They are free, without selfish attachments; their minds are fixed in knowledge. They perform all work in the spirit of service, and their karma is dissolved. (Easwaran 4.18-23)

Based upon the above testimony of the Gita, we can see that the path of Selfless Service seems to be a powerful and effective way of achieving freedom from the law of Karma. Within the context of Karma-Yoga, karma seems to be a call for assuming responsibility for one's own destiny. While some schools of thought and individuals seem to indicate that karma is a type of fatalism that cannot be escaped, the teaching of the Gita indicate that Selfless Service is an effective means of liberation from that ubiquitous law.

Feuerstein asserts that the Gita "can be understood as a massive effort to integrate the diverse strands of spiritual thought prevalent within Hinduism in the Epic Age."(188) Within that context, one cannot simply isolate Karma-Yoga from the Gita, but must allow it to exist as part of the overall practice advocated in the Gita. That is why Karma-Yoga is viewed by some to be the first stage in the practice of yoga.

How widely practiced Karma-Yoga may be is virtually anyone's guess. Perhaps the reason that Karma Yoga has not received a great deal of attention in the west is because it may not be as easy as one would think. Detaching oneself from the results of their actions is certainly different than how most people function in the world. Achieving that desired inward state may be very difficult when one is leading a normal life of action in the world.

In conclusion, based upon the above contextual overview, we can see that while given prominence in the text of the Bhagavad Gita, one of the most important Hindu scriptures, Karma Yoga is but one stream amidst a veritable river of intellectual thought. While it has important ethical/moral dimensions to it, the teaching of Selfless Service merges with many other literary currents and spiritual practices. There could be millions

of adherents to this particular form of yoga practice, but amid the teeming multitudes of the Indian sub-continent, they would be just another sub culture of Hindu thought and tradition. However, like Ghandi, from time to time a person can emerge from the multitude and offer a positive example of this particular form of religious practice. My effort has been to demonstrate that a person such as Ghandi emerged from a long standing tradition, which is ancient and powerful, but which may be unfamiliar to many people in the west.

As a western observer, I tend to equate Selfless Service with compassion. To illustrate the mytho-poetic roots of this tradition I would like to share a mythic story that sums up a Hindu understanding of this process. The story is taken from Coomaraswamy and Nivedita:

The Virtue of Compassion

Spoken by Bhishma to Yudhishthira

There lived a hunter in the city of Benares. He set forth in search of antelopes, taking a quiver full of poisoned arrows. He found a herd deep in the forest and sped an arrow toward them; but he missed his aim, and the poisoned shaft entered a great forest tree. Hurt by the deadly poison, the great tree withered and shed its leaves and fruits. But a certain saintly parrot had dwelt all its life in the hollow of its trunk, sheltered by the forest lord and though the tree was now withered, he would not leave his nest, such was his love toward it. Silent and sorrowful, motionless and without food, the grateful and virtuous parrot withered with the tree.

Indra's throne grew hot; looking down on earth, he marveled at the devotion and extraordinary resolution of the noble bird, faithful alike in happiness and sorrow.

"How," he reflected, "can this bird possess such feelings, that are not found in lower creatures? Yet, maybe it is not so strange, for every creature is kind and generous to other." Then, to test the matter further, Indra assumed the shape of a holy Brahman and approached the tree. "Good bird," he said, "why dost thou not desert this withered tree?" The parrot bowed and answered: "Welcome to the, king of the gods; by the merit of my discipline I know thee." "Well done!" exclaimed the thousand-eyed deity, marveling at the bird's wisdom. Then he inquired again: "Why dost thou cling to this leafless tree, unfit to shelter

any bird? Do thou forsake it and choose another, for there are many fair trees in the forest round about.

Then the parrot sighed: "I am thy servant. Lo, the reason of this matter: Here in this very tree I came to life; here I learnt all of wisdom that I have; here was I protected from my enemy. Why dost thou seek to turn me from my path, for I am compassionate and grateful? Do not advise me to leave the tree; while it lived it was my protector; how can I forsake it now?" Then Indra was well pleased and bestowed a boon at will upon the virtuous bird. This boon the parrot sought: "Let the tree revive." Then Indra sprinkled it with the water of life, and it was filled with sap and put forth leaves and blossoms.

Thus was the tree restored by virtue of the parrot's merit, and he, too, at the close of life, obtained a place in Indra's heaven. Thus do men obtain what they will by friendship with the virtuous and holy, even as the tree by friendship with the parrot. (367-368)

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