

Brotherhood in action Ranks above meditation

In Krishna's eyes, brotherhood in action ranks above meditation, knowledge, and concentration — in that order.¹

*sreyo hi jnanam abhyasaj
jnanad dhyanam visisyate
dhyanat karmaphalatyagas
tyagac chantir anantaram*

Knowledge is better than constant practice,
meditation is superior to knowledge,
renunciation of the fruit of action to meditation;
final emancipation immediately results from such renunciation.

“The path of action or *karma yoga*, the path of love or *bhakti yoga*, the path of meditation or *dhyaana yoga*,² and the path of knowledge of *jnana yoga* constitute the four limbs of *buddhi-yoga* of the *Bhagavad Gita* which integrates them into an organic whole.”³ Of the many meanings of the Sanskrit word *yoga* in the *Gita*, the following sentence encapsulates its import best, and the significance of right action:

Yoga is the skill in the performance of actions.⁴

Yoga is akin to Greek *praxis*, as opposed to *sankhya* or *theoria*. “In true philosophy every physical action has its moral and everlasting effect,”⁵ says HP Blavatsky, for desire and action are metaphysically connected with perception.

¹ *Bhagavad Gita*, ch. 12, vs. 12

² “*Dan*, now become in modern Chinese phonetics *ch'an*, is the general term for the esoteric schools, and their literature. In the old books, the word *Janna* is defined as ‘to reform one's self by meditation and knowledge,’ a second *inner* birth. Hence *Dzan*, *Djan* phonetically, the ‘Book of *Dzyan*.’” [*Secret Doctrine*, I p. xx *fn.* “On the secret portions of the ‘*Dan*’ or ‘*Janna*’ (*Dhyana*) of Gautama's metaphysics.” Also *cf.* “It is the same word from which Japanese *Zen* is derived by a phonetic shift, through the Chinese *tch'an*. *Dhyana yoga* is also sometimes called *raja yoga* (royal yoga), although *raja yoga* is not any specific kind of yoga; it is yoga *per se*.” Ravindra R. *Yoga and the Teaching of Krishna*. Adyar: Theosophical Publishing House, 1998, p. 81 note 4.]

³ Ravindra R. *Yoga and the Teaching of Krishna*. Adyar: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1998; p. 81

⁴ *Bhagavad Gita*, ch. 2 vs. 50

⁵ *Key to Theosophy*, p. 47



But actualising premeditated ideas should not be confused with the aimless activities of hoi polloi and bodily functions. Says Proclus:

. . . The word *πράττειν*, to act, is asserted of those only who energize according to the dianoëtic power, but the word *ποιεῖν*, to do, is asserted of those who energize in a different manner from this. Actions therefore and makings have their proper boundaries, instruments, and times;⁶

Bhagavad Gita ch. 12, vs. 12 does not imply that meditation (dhyanam) is not important. It is. It is ranked, however, below disinterested action and serving the interests of Humanity at large; but above mere knowledge or head-learning. This paper aims to highlight the authority of “disinterested” action advocated by Krishna in the *Gita*.

It has to be admitted that very few are able to lead a focused life, let alone a life of meditation. This is precisely why *The Voice of the Silence* advises at the outset would-be disciples that:

He who would hear the voice of Nada, “the Soundless Sound,” and comprehend it, he has to learn the nature of Dharana.

As meditation is more of an aspiration than a capacity, and contemplation and reflection appear more alluring than “prolonged and effortful thinking,” for example, such words have been abused by the hyperbole of the age and the crave for effortless gain. Be that as it may, a focused mind is not only a prerequisite for success in every walk of life, it is indeed the *sine qua non* for subduing and sublimating lower propensities.

Karma-action is an integral aspect of UNIVERSAL LAW. It is by deeds, not mere thoughts, words or wishful thinking, that one can begin working along with Nature and, ultimately, break free from the uncertainties, trammels, and traps of sentient life. In the following passage from the last chapter of the *Gita*, “constant meditation” is the penultimate stage that may be reached after everything personal is totally and unconditionally surrendered to the Impersonal Principle within. Says Lord Krishna:

The highest perfection of freedom from action is attained through renunciation by him who in all works has an unfettered mind and subdued heart. [vs. 49] Learn from me, in brief, in what manner the man who has reached perfection attains to the Supreme Spirit, which is the end, the aim, and highest condition of spiritual knowledge. [vs. 50] Imbued with pure discrimination, restraining himself with resolution, having rejected the charms of sound and other objects of the senses, and casting off attachment and dislike; [vs. 51] dwelling in secluded places, eating little, with speech, body, and mind controlled, engaging in constant meditation [dyana-yoga] and unwaveringly fixed in dispassion; [vs. 52] abandoning egotism, arrogance, violence, vanity, desire, anger, pride, and possession, with calmness ever present, a man is fitted to be the Supreme Being. [vs. 53]⁷

⁶ Taylor T. & Sydenham F. (Tr. & Comm.). *The Works of Plato: Extracts from the Ms. Scholia of Proclus on the Cratylus*. Vol. V (XIII of the Thomas Taylor series); Frome: The Prometheus Trust, 1996 (1st ed.); p. 549; Teubner text, Ed. Pasquali 43

⁷ *Bhagavad Gita*, ch. 8, vs. 49-53



See how three eminent commentators have interpreted *Gita's* ch. 12, *vs.* 12. Sankaracharya first:

Should the unenlightened person engaged in works be unable to practise the disciplines enjoined earlier [ch. 12, *vs.* 3 *et seq.*] then, for him has been enjoined renunciation of the results of all works as a means to Liberation . . . “If you are unable to do even this” [*vs.* 11] since it has been hinted that it (karma yoga) is an effect of ignorance, therefore the Lord is pointing out that karma yoga is not suitable for the meditator on the Immutable, who is aware of identity (of the Self with God). The Lord is similarly pointing out the impossibility of a karma yogin’s meditation on the Immutable.⁸

Radhakrishnan quoting from the *Surya Gita* that “devotion is better than knowledge and desireless action is better than devotion,” suggests that:

Devotion [bhakti], meditation [dhyana] and concentration [dharana] are more difficult than renunciation of the fruits of action, karmaphalatyaga. This latter destroys the sources of unrest and brings about an inner calm and peace, which are the very foundations of spiritual life. The bhakti emphasis leads to the subordination of knowledge and meditation to the devout mind and consecration of all works to God.⁹

Hill’s, however, is by far the most detailed explanation:

In [the preceding *vs.*] 9-11 Krishna has graded devotional practices. He recommends to Arjuna above all other methods the *steady concentration* of his thought on Him. If Arjuna is unable to practice such concentration, then let him fix his mind on Krishna not without interruption but *again and again*. If that, too, be beyond his strength, at least let him do all his *work as a sacrifice*, as an offering, to Krishna; even so much [little?] will lead him to release. If such positive devotion be too hard, he should *give up desire for the fruit of work* and act with negative control, as taught by Krishna . . . Sankaracharya implies that “surrender of the fruit of action” is merely extolled as the best means for such unenlightened men as Arjuna . . . The message of this Reading is the praise of devotion in contrast with the colder forms of intellectual contemplation. The concentration recommended in verse 9 is concentration *on me*; the constant practice is to *win me*; work, in 10, is *for me*; and even abandonment of the fruit of work, in 11, is connected with *the control that I have taught* . . . “Abandonment of the fruit of work” in a spirit of devotion is better than mere “meditation” that would reject all loving service; and “meditation,” better than “knowledge” of the intellect, that would dispense with work and yet not know the warmth of love; while “constant practice” that lacks the steadiness of knowledge, and shares its cold indifference to devotion, is lowest

⁸ Gambhirananda S. *Bhagavadgita with the commentary of Sankaracharya*. Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1995; pp. 484-85

⁹ Radhakrishnan S. *The Bhagavadgita*. London: George Allen & Undwin Ltd, 1948; p. 296



of all methods. The exaltation of devotion is measured by the violence of the paradox.¹⁰

Please note that Narada, too, ranks Devotion above Brotherly Action:

[The Path of *Bhakti*] is far superior to Karman [Path of Action], Jnana [Path of Knowledge], and Yoga [of Patanjali¹¹ or Path of Mystical Contemplation].¹²

Narada's rationale will be shown during our comparative analysis of His sutras on Devotion with Krishna's precepts to Arjuna (*Compassion* 2009, ch. 5, pp. 160-84), but I thought it may be useful to tie up this sutra with the issues discussed in this paper as a reminder of the pre-eminence of Devotional Love.

The "Heart Doctrine" is for the elect. The "Eye," for the masses:

Which wilt thou choose, O thou of dauntless heart? The Samtan of "eye Doctrine," four-fold Dhyâna, or thread thy way through Pâramitâs, six in number, noble gates of virtue leading to Bodhi and to Prajna, seventh step of Wisdom?¹³

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Winter 2003



¹⁰ Hill W.D.P. *The Bhagavad-gita*. Madras: Oxford University Press, 1966; pp. 170-1 fn.

¹¹ [Patañjali's Yoga minus the physical practices, is akin to Raja Yoga (Royal Union) or Theurgy. See *Blavatsky Collected Writings*, (E.S. INSTRUCTION No. II) XII, p. 560. — ED. PHIL.]

¹² *Nārada Bhakti Sūtra*, vs. 25 (tr. Philaletheians)

¹³ *Voice of the Silence*, frag. III vs. 198, p. 45

