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“Yoga Philosophy: Paths of Actions and Knowledge”

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Yoga Philosophy: Paths of Action and Knowledge

My focus in the following project is to examine and understand questions regarding how humankind should act and what we ought to strive to know through the context of the ancient Indian tradition of yoga philosophy. My ultimate goal is to understand the experience and role of the teachers who have the duty to guide the majority of us along the path of life and to examine the process of proper action and duty. I will carry out this investigation in four parts. First, I will examine the origins of spiritual and ritual thought explained in the ancient works of the Vedas and the Upanisads, and then describe the origin, language, and system of yoga philosophy. Secondly, I will focus on the divisions of thought in the tradition of Vedanta and further examine the conceptions of reality, illusion, and the human condition according to the school of Advaita, or non-dual, Vedanta. The last two sections, which include expositions of the Bhagavad Gita and Sankara's interpretation of the Bhagavad Gita, focus on the proper paths of action and knowledge and guidance toward proper examples of how we should act and what we ought to strive to know.

I. Development of Yoga

The beginnings of the Ancient Indian philosophical tradition reach back to the oral tradition of the Vedas. The Vedas were a combination of devotional praise to God and ceremonial incantation from which also the first speculative philosophical questions about the nature of the world arose. Veda can be translated as "wisdom," and it is the Vedas which were the subject and study of ancient saints and seers as far back as 1500 B.C.E. In the text, History of Mysticism, S. Abhayananda defines the synthesis and significance of the Vedas by stating the following:

The Vedas are an amalgamated collection of many songs written by priests, sages, legalists, rulers and poets of the early Aryans, and they run the gamut from lyrical devotion to ceremonial doctrine; from primitive superstition to high philosophy. They represent not only a broad extent—perhaps a thousand years of development—but also a wide divergence of intellects. It was the poets and priests contributing to the Vedas who fashioned the liturgical and legal traditions of subsequent generations, but it was some unnamed mystic or mystics who gave expression to the exalted vision of Unity which is the cornerstone of the Vedas and the foundation upon which rests the great monistic tradition of Vedanta (Abhayananda 24).

The concluding philosophical speculations of the Vedas are called the Upanisads. The Upanisads contain the ritual and ceremonial style of the Vedas, but they contain more elaborate discussions of the nature of reality and human condition as it relates to the world around us. It is estimated that the Upanisads were composed between the eight century B.C.E. and as late as the sixth century B.C.E.

Vedanta teaches that the ultimate human aspiration ought to be the realization of Brahman. Brahman is the substantial noumenon of primordial energy and reality. According to Hermann Oldenburg, “mysticism in India aspired also from ancient times to absorb in itself a higher existence and to merge with a higher existence” (Oldenburg 27). Brahman is the essence of God and Truth. The tenets of yoga philosophy expound that True Reality can only be realized through the sacrifice of the individual misconception of the egotistical self. Loss of self gains the ecstatic experience of mystical realization of Atman. Yoga is both the experience and the means whereby knowledge of reality is revealed. The word “yoga” is translated as Union. Yoga is the realization that all is One and nothing exists except the One True Self, or Brahman.

The word yoga has also come to be associated with the process or the path that leads to realization of Atman. Yoga, as defined by the saints and sages of the past, is not only the goal, but the process by which humankind can strive to know Perfection. Yoga is a discipline that emphasizes good action, proper knowledge, contemplation, devotion and Universal Love. Yoga is the path in which one fully becomes engaged in the task to know the Truth through the observance and consideration of our physical, mental and spiritual states. In the ancient text The Yoga Sutras, Patanjali states that “Yoga is the inhibition of the mental processes” (Leggett 60). The way of yoga begins with our own challenge to the way we perceive the world. The path of yoga calls for a strict and discipline lifestyle, and the challenges of life are full of obstacles and tempting desires. But the lifestyle that is aimed and directed according to union with God is the key to real notions of Unity and Truth.

The first philosopher credited with writing down the first systematic yoga philosophy was the ancient Indian sage named Patanjali. Patanjali’s exposition of yoga is entitled The Yoga Sutras, which are a collection of one-hundred and ninety-five statements in the form of brief aphorisms. Patanjali’s sutras provide a philosophical framework for dealing with the trials and struggles of being human.

The word yoga and the process of realization were not ideas unique to Patanjali's exposition. The words and processes were ancient, even in Patanjali's time frame. John and Patricia Koller regard the influence of Patanjali in the following light:

The origins of Yoga theory and practice are lost in antiquity, but its systemization dates to Patanjali, who in the second century B.C. collected and summarized the various historical teachings on the subject. The disciplinary techniques for controlling the body-mind outlined in his aphorisms have been adopted and practiced, with various modifications, by Hindus, Buddhists, and Jains from ancient times to the present (Koller 51).

Patanjali is a significant philosophical figure because it is he who is credited with framing an outline for the successful performance of good action and proper knowledge leading toward the realization of Brahman.

Since ancient times, yoga has been taught through the Tree of Life analogy. Yoga can be understood to be a living entity with roots, a trunk, branches, limbs and fruit. Brahman is the ground and the soil of Reality. The roots of Yoga provide the mystical connection of life to the primal force of the immortal Inner Controller, which is rooted below the threshold of sense perception. The trunk represents the collective unity of the things of the material world.

Furthermore, Patanjali's yoga philosophy is composed of six distinct branches. The six branches of the Tree of Life are raja, karma, bhakti, hatha, jnana, and tantra. Raja yoga is the path of meditation and concentration. Karma yoga is the path of self-transcending action. Bhakti is the yoga of devotion and compassion toward all things in creation. Hatha yoga is concerned with concentrated awareness of the physical body and mental creation. Jnana yoga focused on the pursuit and dedication to pure knowledge and tantra is the path of reverence and ritual consecration.

The limbs of yoga practice are represented by the eight-fold path referred to as *ashtanga*. *Ashtanga* is literally translated as "eight limbs." These eight limbs are basically guidelines to how to live a meaningful and proper life. The eight-fold path of yoga defines moral and ethical standards, and directs humankind on a path of self-awareness and discipline. The eight limbs are yama (ethical standard and integrity), niyama (self-discipline and spiritual observance), asana (practice of physical postures and mental awareness), pranayama (breath control), pratyahara (sensory withdrawal), dharana (concentration), dyhana (meditation or contemplation) and samadhi (ecstasy). These eight guidelines are essentially the path to a meaningful and proper life, physically, mentally and spiritually.

The limbs of yoga are to be climbed in progressive stages. The practice of yoga begins with an emphasis on personal action and responsibility, or karma yoga. The first four limbs of yama, niyama, asana, and pranayama focus on an awareness of the activities and temptations of the physical body and define morality and discipline for the masses. Once proper action and experience of the individual ego are understood, the individual can proceed to the higher levels of yoga which focus on knowledge, or jnana yoga. Jnana yoga is the effort toward wisdom and release from the suffering of the material world. Yoga, from the collective standpoints of pratyahara, dharana, dhyana, and samadhi focuses on non-attachment to the pleasures and pains of the body, and unity and bliss with the primordial power of Brahman.

The material realm is the stage on which the cycles of life are played out. The cycles of the material world are referred to as samsara. Samsara is understood as the constantly changing cycle of reincarnation that takes place in the material world. Samsara is a world of birth, death, and rebirth back into the world that we experience.

The term for the release from the cycle of samsara is moksha. The difference between rebirth and release is a result of individual actions performed in the material world. In order to break the cycle of samsara, we must discover the means whereby and actualize the path to make ourselves free. And the proper discovery is that we must act with self-discipline and resolve and become non-attached to the things of the material world and the feelings of emotions, pleasures and pains. Patanjali wrote that “Detachment is consciousness of self-mastery, of one who has no thirst for any objects either seen or heard about” (Leggett). Moksha is the fruit of the Tree of Life. “When all desires are expelled, which lurk within his heart, then a mortal becomes immortal; he attains Brahman here” (Koller 20). Rebirth or release is a matter of individual duty and effort.

II. Vedanta

At this point, it is necessary to look further into the depth and influence that the tradition of Vedanta had on the development of yoga philosophy over the ages. As mentioned before, Vedanta is the culmination of ritual, spiritual, and philosophical influence of the Vedas and the Upanisads. But as with any perspective of thought, fundamental concepts and processes of understanding are subject to interpretation. In the following section, I will explain the divisions of thought in the rich tradition of

Vedanta and examine the fundamental concepts of reality, illusion and the human struggle to understand the mysteries of the material world.

As with any religious or philosophical tradition, the oral traditions and texts that provide insight into the nature of all things are subject to interpretation. One of the main divergences among the great Vedantic sages concerned questions about the foundations of reality. The nature of what is considered real and what is considered unreal was considered from three different standpoints. The three main divisions of Vedantic philosophy are Dvaita, Advaita, and Vashishtadvaita.

Dvaita, or dual, Vedanta held the position that both the infinite power of God, or Brahman, and the dynamic realm of the material realm are equally real and subsistent. In Dvaita Vedanta, both Brahman and the material realm are distinctly real and subsistent. The sages of Advaita, or non-dual, Vedanta, propose that only Brahman is real and the activities and individual lives of the material world are unreal. Advaita Vedanta teaches us that the human perception of the existence of Earth, Universe, time and dynamic change are an unreal, yet painfully convincing illusion. The third position, named Vashishtadvaita Vedanta, holds that Reality is kind of a shady variation in between the perceptions of Dvaita and Advaita. Vashishtadvaita Vedanta views both Brahman and the material world as real, but there is no true division or multiplicity between the two realities. The following examination into the rich and fertile tradition of Vedanta will coincide with the Advaita, or non-dual, approach to the nature of reality and the human condition in the material world.

One of the greatest sages of ancient India was Sri Sankaracharya, or Sankara. Sankara was born in the latter part of the 7th century C.E. Sankara lived a short life of only thirty-two years, but his contribution to Vedantic literature and thought is immense. He wrote a variety of commentaries, including works on the *Vedanta Sutras*, the Upanisads and a numbers of independent works on Advaita Vedanta. Among his best known works are the *Vivekachumamani* ("The Crest-Jewel of Discrimination"), *Upadeshashasri* ("The Thousand Teachings"), *Atma Bodha* ("The Knowledge of The Self"), and his classic commentary on the most holy and revered text of India, *The Bhagavad Gita* ("The Song of God").

Regarding the influence that Sankara had in his time, S. Abhayananda states:

Sankara did not teach any thing new; he took his starting point from the Vedanta philosophy already established in the Upanisads. The rise and spread of Buddhism over a thousand years before had caused among the people a decline of confidence in the Upanisadic tradition; and it was for Sankara to re-establish

the essential meaning of those ancient scriptures and to reaffirm their vision of Unity (Abhayananda 188).

The words used to indicate the nature of true Reality are Brahman, Atman, and Sat. The word Brahman is associated with the notion of Divine breath. Brahman is the breath of all creation and existence. Atman is loosely translated as 'Self,' but this is the Self of Unity and interconnectedness. Oldenburg states that "while the need of the man sought name for the one that could not be named, he named it Brahman, he named it Atman" (Oldenburg 36). Sat is used to connote reality or Truth. There is no distinction between Brahman, Atman and Sat. They all indicate toward the one Being and Truth of all that Is. The reality of Sat is intrinsic to Brahman and Atman. There is no distinction between the three terms. Brahman and Atman are the reality and Unity of the One all pervading Truth. Brahman is Truth and Truth is Brahman.

Brahman is self-subsistent Being which has no beginning or end and no experience of pleasure or pain. Brahman is infinite, unfathomable, eternal, and unchanging. Atman is beyond all concepts of time and space, but it is the Atman which permeates and animates all the creations of the material realm. Atman is the inner controller of infinite possibilities. Brahman is pure Being and Ultimate Truth and cannot be understood through the concepts of subject/object relationships. In Brahman there is no action or agency. Brahman simply IS.

But, alas, how are we to communicate the Ultimate reality of Truth without the use of language. It is taught that concepts and language can only veil and abstract the Truth. Unfortunately, language is simply not adequate to the task of defining the nature of Absoluteness. To speak of Brahman in concepts cannot bring us closer to understanding Brahman, but rather, language distracts us from the nature of Atman. To ask the question "What is Brahman?" only earns the response of neti, neti, or not this, not that. The Atman, the Ultimate nature of Reality cannot be understood or even conceived by limited notions of concepts and language.

The essence of Brahman is total Unity where no subject/object relationship exists. There is nothing to be described. Atman simply cannot be understood by concepts like name and form(nama rupa), which only serve to carve up the world into a multitude of pieces and distinctions. Atman is not a subject which can be grasped by sense perception or intellectual cognition. Brahman is beyond speech and thought, therefore words cannot be expected to bridge the gap between the intellect and the Essential.

But although the true essence of our primordial existence is indescribable, we must be able to communicate the idea in some sense. It is the Atman which ought to be the goal and contemplation of all actions, therefore we must be able to elude to it in some form. In the Brhadaranyaka Upanisad, Atman is considered in the following light:

The Unseen Seer; the Unheard Hearer; the Unthought Thinker;
the Unknown Knower. There is no other Seer; there is no other
Hearer; there is no other Thinker; there is no other Knower.
This is thy Self, the immortal inner controller. Whatever is other
than this is evil (Koller 13).

It is for certain that language cannot be used to describe the nature of Unity and Reality. But language can serve our need to indicate, or point us in the direction of the Unfathomable. Our words, deeds and intellect can be used to set us off in the right direction but we could not fool ourselves into believing that language and physical or mental experience will provide the ultimate connection between the material and the Divine.

The word used to describe the activity and phenomenon of the material world is maya. Maya is translated as illusion. Basically, all of the activities and perceptions of the material realm are maya, Maya is like a magical illusion of, which seems real and convincing, but in the end turns out to be a simple act of sleight-of-hand or clever trickery. Individual agency, sensations, perceptions, mental constructions, change, time and space are all particulars in the dynamic flow of maya. From the human perspective, life as it appears through the senses is an illusion. According to Patanjali, "Illusion is false knowledge based on an untrue form" (Leggett 88). It is maya that constitutes the appearance of a world of multiplicity and agency. Maya is the illusory vision of change in Space and Time relative to the activities and perceptions of the material world.

In the material world we see a world of multiplicity. The material world is full of creatures, perceptions and sensations. The world is seemingly always moving, changing, living and dying. Life appears to be a constant cycle of life, death, happiness and despair. Nothing is static and everything is dynamic. Maya is a very busy place.

Maya thrives on the construction of subject/object relationships. The world of maya is carved up into concepts which define objects of the world with language, infusing existence with name and form. In maya, there seems to not be One, but the existence of the many. Maya is multiplicity, agency and change.

The tricky thing about maya is that, from the perspective of bodies and minds, sensations and intellects, the illusion appears to be objectively real. This seemingly real illusion gives rise to the idea of a multitude of individual agents acting independently in the world. The belief and illusory verification of maya as being real and self-subsistent lead to the individual notion that “I” am real. The false identification with the ego of the individual self causes great confusion because the illusion shows us multiplicity and agency on the one hand, yet the Reality of Brahman indicates towards oneness and Unity. The false notion of selfhood sets itself up as an obstacle to the realization of the Truth of Brahman.

The cycle of life in samsara is a result of human ignorance, or avidya. This ignorance is a result of the human tendency to become attached to the desires and appetites of material existence. Avidya is the false notion that the activities being played out in maya are real and substantial. These acts from attachment are defined by the belief in independent subjects and objects in the world. In The Yoga Sutras, Patanjali states that “illness, apathy, doubt, carelessness, laziness, failure to withdraw, misconceptions, failure to attain a state, instability (in the state)—these distractions of the mind are obstacles” (Leggett 136). The human desire to be a separate self remains attached to emotions and subject to the dynamic nature of pleasure and pain.

When we desire to be real within the context of an illusion, we condemn ourselves to rebirth back into the dynamic illusion of maya. It is the attachment to karma which keeps beings trapped in the cycle of samsara. In order to break the karmic regeneration of our own action, we must find out how to make ourselves free. The world of change is synonymous with a world of suffering. Constant change is painful because there is no lasting happiness or truth to be found. But there is a way out of this seemingly endless cycle.

III. The Bhagavad Gita

This section is focused on explaining and understanding the message of one of the most influential religious and spiritual texts of the Indian mystical tradition. Here the focus will be on briefly setting the scene in which the story takes place and moving on to the lessons which are shared in the dialogue. The Bhagavad Gita sets the stage for a proper understanding of the values of action and knowledge.

The greatest and most renowned spiritual text in India is the Bhagavad Gita. The Gita is a section of the great Indian epic entitled the Mahabharata. The Mahabharata is a collection of popular ancient

stories which is estimated to be written and compiled over period spanning two thousand years. The stories of the Mahabbarata was traditionally shared as both a means of entertainment and philosophical discussion. Initially, most of the stories were passed down as an oral tradition, but the emphasis of the story-teller was on retelling, rather than reciting, the stories. Thus, the interpretations of the stories were changed and adapted across the ages.

But the Gita is different. Although the Gita is part of the Mahabbarata, it is a separate and complete work in and of itself. And the emphasis on sharing the Gita focused on reciting the tale. Traditionally, the Gita is meant to be recited word for word and it is suspected that, even after all these years, the story, in its most pure form, remains relatively unchanged.

The story of the Bhagavad Gita begins on a battlefield in ancient India with two warring clans squared off to do battle. Here, the great warrior Arjuna stands and surveys the scene of the battlefield in front of him. But it is crucial to understand that this is not a true battle between warring factions, but rather, an allegorical battle in which Arjuna squares off against his conception of his own existence. Arjuna is accompanied by his divine chariot driver Krishna. In Indian mythology, Krishna is an avatar. An avatar is considered to be a human incarnation of Absolute Unity. Krishna is not a god, but the Truth of Brahman in human guise. Krishna is the inner controller, which is referred to in the Upanisads.

Krishna's role in the story is to guide Arjuna and answer the questions about the problems that he faces in preparing to fight this battle. Krishna is representative of the Divine Spirit of all things and the charioteer, or vital force, of all life in maya, and beyond.

As the rival clans square off to do battle, Arjuna finds himself in a troublesome situation. As he looks across the field at his foe, he sees members of his own family and friends and comrades alike. The enemy before his eyes are the people who are near and dear to him and this causes him great distress. On the one hand, he is preparing to do battle, to murder and maim those closest to his heart, but on the other, he knows it is his duty to fight. Arjuna is a warrior and he is bound by his duty to be responsible for his station in life. As Arjuna surveys the members of the rival force, he looks to Krishna and says:

They for whose sake dominion, enjoyments and pleasures are sought by us are here standing, having staked their life and wealth: teachers, father, sons as well as grandfathers; maternal uncles, fathers-in-law, grandsons, brothers-in-law as also (other) relatives.

These , O slayer of Madhu, I do not wish
 To kill, though they kill me, even for the sake of
 Dominion over three worlds; how much less,
 For the sake of the earth! (Sankara 14-15).

Arjuna is obviously in great distress. He claims he would rather die or deny rulership of the earth, then sin by destroying his own people. After speaking of his lamentation, Arjuna resigns himself to grief and sinks to the floor of the chariot.

The battle before Arjuna's eyes is not truly a war against his family and friends, but rather, Arjuna faces an allegorical conflict to understand the activities of multiplicity and change in the real world. Arjuna is struggling with the question of how he should properly know himself and the world around him. From his standpoint, the world of maya is real and consistent. Arjuna is attached to his senses and his emotions and fails to realize that the multiplicity of maya is an illusion. Arjuna fails to realize that the only reality is Atman. In reality there is only One. Arjuna's enemy, his friends and family, are representative of the senses and the orientation of individual ego in the dynamic chaos of change. For Arjuna, the senses and the power of reason is that which Arjuna is most familiar with.

Arjuna's true enemy is his faulty perception of the world of multiplicity and change. Arjuna's true struggle comes from the battle to understand the nature of the illusion and find Divinity in himself. Arjuna's concern takes on deeper meaning when we understand his worldview based on the concepts of the caste system and karma.

The performance of particular duties was prescribed by stages in ancient India. There were stations relating to the caste structure and structure defined by one's stage in life. The caste system delineated between four different castes. The four castes were the shudra (laboring class), vaishya (merchants), kshatriya (warriors), and brahmins (priests). The Brahmins duty was to study the wisdom of the Vedas and perform rituals. The kshatriyas were in charge of political administration and matters of the state. The vaishya caste was concerned with matters of commerce and trade and the shudras were the workers, servants and slaves. The ordering of the castes indicates the level of ritual purity one has attained as a result of past action

Arjuna is a warrior. Being a warrior is properly part of who he is and his station as a warrior indicates a path of proper action and vocation. This being the case, in the allegorical struggle of the Gita it

is most certainly Arjuna's duty and responsibility to fight the battle before him. In the Gita, Krishna instructs Arjuna by saying:

Killed, thou wilt reach heaven; victorious,
Thou wilt enjoy the earth. Wherefore, O son of
Kunti, arise, resolve to fight.

Then, treating alike pleasure and pain,
gain and loss, success and defeat, prepare for the
battle, and thus wilt thou not incur sin.
(Sankara 57).

Arjuna struggles with the notion of karma as he struggles to decide how he should act.. Karma is the notion of action or inaction within the realm of the illusion. The focus of karma is on the performance of actions and the cause and effect that action and inaction create. Karma is a result of the human desire to experience the fruits of our own action. Karma is not a judgmental power that is dispensed by Gods or a matter of fate or destiny. Rather, karma is the constant chain of human choices, actions and reactions.

Oldenburg examines the concept of karma in the following light:

It [karma] concerns the decision about the path man should take from one existence to another. Depending upon the merits and demerits of man's works, he attains a higher or lower, a blissful or an agonizing existence and remains in such existence till the Karman has been fully enjoyed or atoned for. It appears, we might have already alluded to this idea also or an idea similar to it. Thus it is said of the person who knows a certain rite: 'Days and nights do not drink in that world his treasures deposited there. He goes to his treasures there that have not been drunk.' What can these 'treasures' be other than the treasures of good work?

Karma is affected by choices to do good or choices to do wrong. It is important to note that the notion of karma is dependent on free will and individual responsibility.

Arjuna is in a difficult position and he looks to his charioteer for guidance. Arjuna says to Krishna:

My heart contaminated by the taint of
helplessness, my mind confounded by Dharma,
I ask Thee: Tell me what is absolutely good. I
am Thy Pupil. Instruct me, who have sought
Thy grace (Sankara 21).

Fortunately, Krishna is there to guide and direct Arjuna. It is Krishna's role to remove the veils of the illusion of maya and reveal to Arjuna the Truth of Atman. Krishna represents the immortal inner controller and it is his goal to educate Arjuna about his True Self.

Krishna assures Arjuna that there is nothing real to fear or to grieve about. In reality, all that exists is Atman.

Atman does not come to be or pass away. Atman is infinite and unchanging. Atman can never be destroyed. Therefore, Arjuna should prepare to fight the battle. Arjuna must struggle to overcome the appearance of multiplicity.

In the Gita, Krishna looks to Arjuna and says:

Do thou perform (thy) bounden duty; for action is superior to inaction. And even the maintenance of the body would not be possible for thee by inaction.

Except I the case of action for Sacrifice's sake, this world is action-bound. Action for the sake Thereof, do thou, O son of Kunti, perform, free from attachment (Sankara 97).

In order to win this struggle, Krishna guides Arjuna toward an understanding non-attached action, or action performed without the concern for the fruits of the action. Krishna encourages Arjuna to consider his dharma, which is his specific duty of what to do now and in the future. Therefore, Arjuna's actions should not be a matter of desire or personal concern, but rather, non-attached action is the action of proper duty in regard to one's stage and station in life. Sankara says that "Action is superior to inaction in point of result. By inaction you cannot attain success in life's journey (Sankara 97). Arjuna ought to be willing to sacrifice his own selfish motives for the good of action performed in the face of duty. The focus of a righteous life is a life aimed at the relentless performance of duty and honor, free from attachment or temptation.

We actualize the duty in accordance with stage and station when we act in accordance with dharma. Dharma is the experiential core of Being. Dharma is not universal, but rather a goal indicated by the particulars of a person's caste and stage in life. To live according to dharma is to live righteously. Dharma can be considered to be the specific duty of how one ought choose to act. When we choose to act in accordance with our dharma we not only become more True, but we become more Real. Righteous action brings us closer to Brahman.

The following passage is critical in understanding Krishna's emphasis on living life according to duty. Krishna says:

Having regard to thine own duty also,
thou oughtst not to waver. For, to a Kshatriya,
there is nothing more wholesome than a lawful
battle (Sankara 54).

Here, Krishna instructs Arjuna that his duty is to do the proper duty if his station in life. Duty also signifies the importance of action vs. inaction. Arjuna, who is still confused by multiplicity and desire, must first be concerned with performing the right action. To do this, Arjuna must accept his stage and station in life and act according to the dharma relevant to his stage. Krishna encourages Arjuna to have "regard to thine own duty," signifying that Arjuna must be concerned with focusing on his own actions.

Furthermore, Krishna is telling Arjuna not to "waver" before that which is Arjuna's duty. Arjuna is bound by his duty and fighting the battle against illusion is the best action Arjuna can take. And Krishna is not merely giving good advice, but he speaks to Arjuna of the categorically imperative focus on action directed by duty. Before Arjuna can hope to realize what there really is, he must first be steadfast and perform the proper duty of his stage. In order to do what is right, Arjuna must be strong in his resolve toward right action.

Arjuna is a warrior, and in this allegorical battle, Krishna is telling Arjuna to be what he is. As a warrior, it is Arjuna's duty to fight the battle. But this is not a battle for wealth or territory. Arjuna's struggle is a battle of sacred duty. Arjuna is bewildered by the weight of his task and is tempted to shy away from this duty, but Krishna, the inner controller, is there to guide Arjuna toward proper action. Arjuna's responsibility as a warrior is to fight ignorance, for if he hopes to attain moksha, he must defeat the enemies of desire and attachment.

From the individual standpoint, proper action is not defined in one set of rules and regulations. Rather, the ethics of action is determined by the proper dharma of station and stage. When Krishna tells Arjuna to look to his own duty, the message is clear. Individuals must determine what is right dependant on who they are and what they do. It is each individuals responsibility to perform right actions as those actions relate to righteous living. And proper action is not a matter of doing what is pleasant. It is about doing what is right.

Krishna is not asking Arjuna to do something that he cannot do. Rather, Krishna is asking Arjuna to do all that he can do at his current stage. Arjuna is confused by his belief in his separate self and his inclination towards desire. But right action can still be performed from a position of ignorance. A person who truly strives to be good can only do so through his or her own actions. Krishna informs Arjuna that, according to the dharma of his stage and station, it is his duty to act properly. And it is proper action which will guide Arjuna along the path of liberation. Proper action is the first step toward Brahman on the path to liberation.

IV. Paths of knowledge and action

In this last section the concern is to further investigate the notions of action and knowledge based on Sankara's own interpretation of the Bhagavad Gita. Sankara proposes that there are two distinct paths which progress toward the realization of the Unity and Truth of Brahman. These are the path of action and the path of knowledge. Sankara believed that all people start their journey toward the Beloved on the path of action. Proper action can eventually unveil Truth. But proper karma and duty must be actualized in accordance with action as defined and exposed by those already on the path of knowledge.

Sankara's commentary on the Bhagavad Gita teaches us that there are two distinct paths which lead to the realization of Brahman. Sankara suggests that there is a progression along to pathways, the path of action and the path of knowledge. The path of action is the path followed by the karma yogin and the path of knowledge is the path of the jnana yogin.

Sankara realized that not all people are ready to know the Truth. In fact, most people are attached to an illusory existence. For these people, Sankara suggests that karma yoga, or the path of action, is the way to liberation. In the Gita, Arjuna is representative of the karma yogin. He is still trapped by the confusion of the illusion and the path of action is his concern at this stage of his development. But for those who have realized the nature of the illusion and attained knowledge of the True Self, the path of jnana yoga dictates the performance of proper duty. Krishna is representative of the jnana yogin for he is responsible for teaching and guiding Arjuna towards the Truth.

The righteous path of karma yoga is meant to prepare the karma yogin for the Realization of Brahman. The karma yogin, which includes most of the people in the material realm, is attached to the

illusion. All that the karma yogin knows, sees and feels is ignorance. But the good karma yogin who strives for Oneness can willingly progress towards the Truth of Brahman.

Karma yogins are attached to desire and the illusory self. All karma yogins, to varying degrees, view the world in terms of “I” and let desire for sense pleasure rule their lives. Within karma yoga, the world is still viewed as a reality based on subject/object relationships. Multiplicity in the illusion confuses the notion of an all-pervading Oneness, and the false reality of multiplicity seems real. Karma yogins are attached to the actions and reactions within the illusion. The karma yogins perception of maya suggests that the individual self and the existence of other selves is real.

Most human beings are trapped within the illusion. And the realization of Brahman is attained by only a very few. Our reliance on the false self and desire keeps all karma yogins trapped in the cycle of reincarnation, continually being reborn because of our attachment to illusion. But the good karma yogin who strives for Oneness can break the cycle. It may take a succession of righteous to come to know the Truth, but through right action, the karma yogin can struggle to know Brahman.

Right effort for the karma yogin involves performing good karmic activities. The path of the good karma yogin is determined by devotion to good action. The karma yogin is bound to action because “action is superior to inaction in point of result. By inaction you cannot attain success in life’s journey” (Sankara 96). Performing good actions can lead to Truth, while bad actions or inaction result in inevitable rebirth into illusion. The main point is that good action is necessary for the karma yogin who sets out on the path of righteousness.

But the realization of the Truth is not just a simple result of good actions. Karma yogins must transcend attachment to false self and desire. For the karma yogin, “desire [is] a friend at the time he thirsts for objects, and it is only when suffering results from it, but not before, that he learns the truth that he has been rendered miserable by desire” (Sankara 115). The karma yogin must learn that attachment to the false self and desire is unsatisfactory, which allows the karma yogin to question the very vehicle with which he desires.

The karma yogin who, life after life, performs good actions and realized the unsatisfactory nature of desire eventually comes to question the illusory existence of the individual self. The practice of relentless pursuit of karma yoga eventually results in the discovery that the individual self is a false notion.

This realization allows the karma yogin to realize the value of non-attachment to mind and body.

“Therefore, without attachment, constantly perform the action which should be done; for performing action without attachment, man reaches the Supreme” (Sankara 104). This is the first glimpse of Knowledge. At this point, the karma yogin is prepared for jnana yoga.

Successful karma yoga is a very difficult task, but through right effort, the good karma yogin can strive for non-attachment. Non-attachment is a necessary commitment leading towards knowledge. The goal of karma yoga is to become non-attached to the temptations of the false self, desire, and the fruits of human action. Proper action along the path of karma yoga results in the preparedness for jnana yoga.

Jnana yoga is the path for those who have experienced the mystical Oneness of Atman. The jnana yogin is no longer attached to false self or worldly desire, for he realizes the ignorance of attachment to perceptions, objects and concepts. The jnana yoga exhibits complete equanimity to both pleasure and pain, excitement and disappointment. According to Sankara, the jnana yogin

is indifferent to the body, the senses, the sense-objects and their mutual connections. He is possessed of purity both internal and external. He is able to decide rightly on the spot in matters demanding prompt attention. He does not take the side of a friend and the like. He habitually renounces all actions calculated to secure objects of desire, whether of this world or the next” (Sankara 313).

The jnana yogins highest responsibility and aspiration is sublime contemplation of, and divine union with, the Beloved Atman. The following passage from Sankara’s commentary on the Gita states of discipline for the good jnana yogin.

That person to whom pleasure and pain alike,-- who neither exults in pleasure nor feels dejected in pain,-- who is a man of wisdom, whom heat and cold and other things such as those mentioned, above do not affect in virtue of his wisdom of the eternal Self,-- that man, firm in his vision of the eternal Self and bearing calmly the pairs of opposites (such as heat and cold), is able to attain immortality (moksha) (Sankara 33).

For Sankara, the progression from action to knowledge and wisdom is necessary to realize Truth. Though the strivings of volition and resolve the wise jnana yogin can realize eternal oneness with of the Beloved.

Another sacred duty of the jnana yogin is to serve as an example to, and provide guidance for the karma yogins. The jnana yogin is bound to help and guide those still trapped by the illusions of samsara, for knowledge the jnana yogins possess is necessary for those still seeking the key to release from suffering. Sankara expresses “that knowledge alone which is imparted by those who have realized the

truth—and no other knowledge—can prove effective” (Sankara 149). Jnana yogins are expected to assist those who are ignorant of the nature of the material realm, and through living a life of non-attached action, the proper focus of jnana yoga is to impart Divine wisdom to those trying to tap into the energy of the pure Self.

By living example of non-attachment, the jnana yogin can guide the karma yogin toward knowledge. “If thou art wise and knowest the truth, do thou perform action for the protection of the masses” (Sankara 127). But the jnana yogin also realizes that, in truth, there is no action, there is only Brahman. All actions and knowledge within maya are illusion. Within maya, lives maya in the act of perceiving maya. “The action by him who wishes to set an example to the world is in reality, no action, as it has been destroyed by the realization of Brahman in action” (Sankara 141).

Sankara’s provides a very clear understanding of the two paths of yoga. Proper action and knowledge ought to be the focus for those seeking to attain Truth beyond illusion and change. The jnana yogin understands and exemplifies a life aimed at a proper understanding of the Truth of Brahman. It is the jnana yogins duty to guide and council the masses of karma yogins, while, on the other hand, it is the karma yogins duty to embrace and focus on the wealth of Divine wisdom provided by the jnana yogins. The good karma yogin, who searches for the reality of Oneness, must accept and follow the guidance of those who have already realized the Truth of the all-pervading Brahman.

Following the proper path of life is not an easy journey. In this age of egotism, greed and violence, it is comforting to be able to look to the wisdom of past ages for some kind of creed and process to live by. Over the course of numerous centuries, Indian sages, seers, and mystics have struggled to understand the world before them. And their stories and interpretations of the struggles and triumphs of life have survived the ages and are available to those of us today who seek guidance on how to act and define what is ‘really’ real. By beginning on the path of proper action, as a result of True guidance and lessons from those released from the path of action, we benefit from the wisdom of ages past to help further our understanding and appreciation of the journey of life.

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