

What Lord Kṛṣṇa Taught in the Bhagavadgītā

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Introduction

The Bhagavadgītā is a book conveying lessons of philosophy, religion and ethics and it is the source of inspiration to millions of Indians for at least two thousand years. In its text the quintessence of the Upaniṣads and the teachings of Vedānta, Sāṅkhya and Yoga are synthesized into one harmonious whole. As Radhakrishnan says, the Bhagavadgītā nowadays is considered as the most influential work in Indian thought¹ and it has rightly been regarded as representing not any sect of Hinduism but Hinduism as a whole.²

Traditionally, it would be said that the Bhagavadgītā is taught by the Blessed Nārāyaṇa himself to Arjuna, compiled by the ancient seer named Vyāsa, in the middle of the Mahābhārata.³ In fact, the conversation between Arjuna and Lord Kṛṣṇa is supposed to take place just before the battle which is the main theme to the great epic. Among the scholars, K.N. Upadhyaya argues that the Bhagavadgītā must be considered an original part of the Mahābhārata, because the larger epic refers to it often.⁴ But many scholars believe that some additions may be made to the original Bhagavadgītā from time to time.⁵ Therefore, they have concluded that it must have been completed sometime between the 5th - 4th century B.C. The current text of the Bhagavadgītā consists of 700 verses,⁶ and it is divided into eighteen chapters (*adhyāyas*). The Bhagavadgītā as found at present has been translated into Indian languages, into English and many other languages. In Thailand, a translation of the Bhagavadgītā from Sanskrit into Thai by Prof. Saeng Manavidura is considered as a master piece for Thai students.

In this paper, I would like to present briefly what Lord Kṛṣṇa taught in the Bhagavadgītā, especially the concepts of God (*brahman*), Self (*ātman*), Action (*karma*), Rebirth (*jāti*) and Salvation (*nirvāṇa*). I hope this would be easy for those who want to understand the Bhagavadgītā in short time.

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¹S. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, Vol.1 (Delhi : Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 519.

²S. Radhakrishnan, *The Bhagavadgītā* (Delhi : HarperCollins Publishers, 1994), p.12.

³Swami Tapasyananda, *Srīmad Bhagavadgītā; The Scripture of Mankind* (Madras : Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1994), p. xi; See also S. Radhakrishnan, *The Bhagavadgītā*, p. 10.

⁴K.N. Upadhyaya, *Early Buddhism and the Bhagavadgītā* (Delhi : Motilal Banarsidass, 1983), p. 6.

⁵M.R. Yardi, *The Bhagavadgītā as a Synthesis* (Poona : The Bhandarkar Institute Press, 1991), p. 4.

⁶This number is confirmed by Śaṅkarācārya. Cf. Swami Gambhirananda, *Bhagavadgītā with the Commentary of Śaṅkarācārya* (Calcutta : Advaita Ashrama, 1991), Introduction, p. xvii.

God (*brahman*)

In the Bhagavadgītā, Brahman manifests itself in the form of a personal God, Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa, and also in the form as Lord Kṛṣṇa.⁷ Lord Kṛṣṇa affirms that he is the origin and dissolution of the whole universe,⁸ and speaks of himself as the abode of Brahman.⁹ Brahman is also regarded as the ruler and preserver of the whole world. It dwells in all beings, though they know it not. It is the immortal Self of man as well. Besides, Brahman is said to be possessed of two natures; higher (*parā*) and lower (*aparā*),¹⁰ answering to the conscious and the unconscious aspects of the universe. Concerning the origin of the universe, the Bhagavadgītā holds the view that God (*brahman*) is the guiding principle behind the entire process of evolutions and dissolutions.

Self (*ātman*)

The Self (*ātman*) is said to be the principle of a man's life. It is what remains when everything that is not the Self is eliminated.¹¹ It is independent of the body and on the dissolution of the body the Self is not annihilated.¹² "As a person casts off the worn out clothes and takes on others new, even so the Self leaves worn out bodies and enters into new ones."¹³ The Self (*ātman*) is identical with Brahman. Brahman is the ultimate principle as realized in the universe, Ātman is the same principle as realized in a man. In other words, the former is the substance of the world and the latter is the substance of the individual, but the two are one. This identity of Brahman and Ātman is briefly expressed by the famous sayings: "That art thou,"¹⁴ and "I am Brahman"¹⁵ Therefore, the Upaniṣadic thinkers say that to know the Self is to know Brahman.¹⁶ One cannot point out what the Self is like. Positive definition of the Self is impossible. Yajñavalkya, therefore, says: "That Self is not this, not this (*neti neti*). It is incomprehensible for it cannot be comprehended."¹⁷ The Self (*ātman*) has its own essence which we cannot describe. Its essential nature is said to be being (*sat*), consciousness (*cit*) and bliss (*ānanda*). The Bhagavadgītā says that the one Ātman abides in all beings, and the man of yoga sees it as contained in all creatures.¹⁸ The Self (*ātman*) is being in itself because it does not depend on its objects for its existence; it is the ground of the phenomenal world. And it is being for itself because it is consciousness.

⁷S. Radhakrishnan, *The Bhagavadgītā*, p. 26.

⁸Bhagavadgītā, VII.6; X.8.

⁹Bhagavadgītā, XIV.27.

¹⁰Bhagavadgītā, VII.5.

¹¹S. Radhakrishnan, *The Principal Upaniṣads* (New Delhi : HarperCollins Publishers, 1994), p.73.

¹²Chāndogya Upaniṣad, VIII.12.1.

¹³Bhagavadgītā, II.22.

¹⁴tat tvam asi, Chāndogya Upaniṣad, VI.8.7.

¹⁵ahaṃ brahma asmi, Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad, I.4.10.

¹⁶P. Deussen, *The Philosophy of the Upaniṣads* (Delhi : Oriental Books, 1979), p. 39; Cf. Prayoon Mererk, *Selflessness in Sartre's Existentialism and Early Buddhism* (Bangkok : Mahachula Buddhist University, 1988), p. 95.

¹⁷Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad, IV.5.15.

¹⁸Bhagavadgītā, VI.29.

The Bhagavadgītā declares that behind human body, senses, mind and intellect which are subject to change and destruction, there is one undying principle, the Self (*ātman*). The Self is independent of the body and on the dissolution of the body, it is not annihilated.¹⁹ Thus, the Bhagavadgītā emphasizes that the Self is the inner controller of mind and body.²⁰

Action (*karma*)

Concerning the concept of action (*karma*), the Bhagavadgītā shows that all actions, whether good or bad, produce their proper consequences in the life of the individual who acts, provided they are performed with a desire for the fruits thereof. A man becomes good by performing good actions and bad by bad actions. He is liable to be born again and again until the effects of his previous actions have been exhausted and the seeds of fresh actions have ceased to be sown. The Bhagavadgītā, however, believes that the law of action (*karma*) is under the guidance and control of God (*brahman*) who creates the world in accordance with the law. It introduces God who promises to free his devotees from all sins, secure all attainment and safety to them and take even the man of most vile conduct to the highest goal.²¹

According to the Bhagavadgītā, no one can remain without action even for a moment. For all are made to action under compulsion by the qualities or modes (*guṇas*)²² born of nature (*prakṛti*).²³ When action is undertaken with a desire for a reward, it results in the accumulation of merit and demerit and leads to future births. But if a person acts without the desire for the result of action, he does nothing even when he is continuously engaged in action,²⁴ he becomes free from the bondage of rebirth and attains to the sorrowless state. This is called "*skill in actions*."²⁵

For the root cause of action (*karma*), the Bhagavadgītā regards ignorance (*avidyā*) and desire as the cause of deluded actions which are responsible for the continued chain of existence.²⁶ It divided actions (*karmas*) into two categories, namely, the actions done with the desire were called "*sakāma-karma*," and the actions done without a desire were called "*niṣkāmakarma*." Here, the Bhagavadgītā disapproved all the actions performed with a desire for the results thereof. Since one cannot remain without the performance of karma or action even for a moment,²⁷ the Bhagavadgītā instructs that one should

¹⁹Bhagavadgītā, II.18.

²⁰Bhagavadgītā, III.42.

²¹Bhagavadgītā, XVIII.66; IX.22, 30, 32.

²²The word "*guṇas*" means qualities of modes inhering in nature (*prakṛti*). The qualities or modes (*guṇas*) are three, as follows: (1) *Sattvas*, the quality of illumination, which works towards purity, goodness, and happiness (2) *Rajas*, the quality of motion, which is the source of all activity (3) *Tamas*, the quality of inertia, which produces inactivity, sloth and sleepiness.

²³Bhagavadgītā, III.5.

²⁴Bhagavadgītā, IV.20, 21.

²⁵Bhagavadgītā, II.50.

²⁶Bhagavadgītā, VII.27.

²⁷Bhagavadgītā, III.8.

control one's desires and perform actions in a disinterested manner as one's duty.²⁸ When one performs actions in a disinterested manner, thinking oneself to be a mere instrument of God, one is not defiled by sin (*pāpa*).²⁹

Rebirth (*jāti*)

The Bhagavadgītā says that beings are born again and again in different spheres of life driven by their karma-forces. As long as these karma-forces operate, the chain of rebirth continues. The physical death, therefore, does not imply a gap or break in the perpetual flux of life. According to the Bhagavadgītā the changes in the body do not mean changes in the Self (*ātman*).³⁰ The Self of man is the portion of God (*brahman*). It is neither born nor destroyed. When its body is worn out, the Self discards it and assumes a fresh body. It undergoes transmigration from one body to another. This transmigration is due to action (*karma*).³¹ The Bhagavadgītā asserts the validity of rebirth on the basis of paranormal experience and holds in common that action (*karma*) is responsible for the event of rebirth which in turn is due to ignorance and desire.

The Bhagavadgītā explains that life is full of suffering. There is life-suffering because there is birth (*jāti*). If a man were not born, he would not have been subject to the miserable state. Therefore, to stop rebirth is the basis of the cessation of suffering. In this connection, the Bhagavadgītā propounds its main thesis of desireless or disinterested action (*niṣkāmakarma*) through which right knowledge and consequent salvation are said to be attained.³² He who has obtained this release goes to the perfect state. It consists in constant and eternal dwelling in Brahman and in permanent release from the process of transmigration. Through the utter cessation of ignorance, all actions (*karmas*) and their fields are also extinguished. Such a man is free, liberated. There is no birth again for him after this.

Salvation (*nirvāṇa*)

The Bhagavadgītā brings the term "*nirvāṇa*" in metaphysical and theological elements and lays more emphasis on positive rather than on negative description such as "*the supreme peace*," "*the highest goal*," "*the eternal abode*," "*the supreme perfection*"³³ and so on. Definitely, the positive realization of the Self (*ātman*) or God (*brahman*) is the dominant note of view of salvation in the Bhagavadgītā.

Naturally, the Bhagavadgītā explains that the attainment of Nirvāṇa can be had by abandoning all desires.³⁴ However, the Bhagavadgītā repeats the exhortation for giving up desire and egoism,³⁵ and persists in clinging to the Self (*ātman*), so much so

²⁸Bhagavadgītā, III.19.

²⁹Bhagavadgītā, V.10.

³⁰S. Radhakrishnan, *The Bhagavadgītā*, p. 104.

³¹Bhagavadgītā, III. 9.

³²Bhagavadgītā, IV.38.

³³Bhagavadgītā, V.21; VI.21; XIV.27; IV.39; XVIII.62; VI.45; VIII.13; XVIII.49; XVIII.56, 62.

³⁴Bhagavadgītā, II.71.

³⁵Bhagavadgītā, III.27; XVIII.17.

that salvation (*nirvāṇa*) is regarded by it as the state of Self-absorption.³⁶ Thus, Nirvāṇa in the Bhagavadgītā is said to consist in the identification or unification with the metaphysical reality called "ātman" or "brahman".³⁷

Regarding the way to salvation (*nirvāṇa*), the Bhagavadgītā first renders that all aspirants can reach the goal of perfection and attain the saving truth or salvation in three different ways, namely, by the result of knowledge of reality (*jñāna-yoga*), by devotion (*bhakti-yoga*) and by action without concern for the fruit (*karma-yoga*).³⁸ These are distinguished on account of distribution of emphasis on the theoretical, emotional and practical aspects. But they are in essence the same, not different. Devotion (*bhakti*) and knowledge (*jñāna*) are described as only two different approaches to the same reality, conceived by turn as personal and impersonal. Likewise, the ways of knowledge (*jñāna*) and action (*karma*) also are said to be essentially one, since the same spirit of renunciation constitutes the kernel of both. The Bhagavadgītā itself seeks to establish the same doctrine of renunciation in action. The desireless or disinterested action (*niṣkāmakarma*) is made the central point in which all the paths are shown to converge. Thus, knowledge, devotion and action merge together at the end.

The idea that virtue, wisdom and salvation are inter-linked, is also well expressed in the Bhagavadgītā. The need for self-control and moral discipline is emphasized for securing the state of concentration whereby knowledge and consequent salvation (*nirvāṇa*) are said to be attained, as it is said: "The man of faith endeavoring with the control of senses (*samīyatendriyah*) attains wisdom (*labhate jñānam*) and having attained wisdom, he in no time achieves supreme peace (*nirvāṇa*)."³⁹ The word "nirvāṇa" is also clearly used as it is experienced before and after death.⁴⁰ Nirvāṇa which is experienced by the liberated saint so long as he lives, is called "*brāhmīsthiti*," meaning the state of *jīvanmukta*, i.e. released while still living, and Nirvāṇa at the end of his life span is called "*brahmanirvāṇa*," i.e. absorption in Brahman after death.⁴¹ Then, we are told that salvation (*nirvāṇa*) which is the ultimate goal of the holy life can be attained here on earth in this very life and after death or after the expiry of life.

Considering the attainment of salvation (*nirvāṇa*) as the ultimate goal of the holy life, the Bhagavadgītā holds that its ethical teachings are derived from this supreme consideration. All forms of conduct which promote the release of man from the worldly suffering and tend to attain the highest goal are righteous and their opposites are unrighteous actions respectively. The most fundamental standard of morality is also derived from the supreme consideration of the highest goal (*nirvāṇa*). It shows that attachment (*rāga*), hatred (*dveṣa*) and delusion (*moha*) are regarded as the basic roots of all unrighteous actions, by abandoning which one's actions are said to become free from all defilements, and one is said to realize the supreme serenity.⁴² The people are

³⁶Bhagavadgītā, II.55.

³⁷Bhagavadgītā, V.19, 20, 24; XI.54; XVIII.55.

³⁸S. Radhakrishnan, *The Bhagavadgītā*, p. 53.

³⁹Bhagavadgītā, IV.39.

⁴⁰Bhagavadgītā, II.72.

⁴¹Bhagavadgītā, II.72; Cf. M.R. Yardi, *The Bhagavadgītā As a Synthesis*, p. 325.

⁴²Bhagavadgītā, II.52, 64.

instructed to be absorbed in rendering good to all beings and remain free from enmity or ill-will to all.⁴³ However, the Bhagavadgītā seems to lay an almost exclusive emphasis on the control of the inner will or desire so much so that all actions (*karmas*) are said to become ethically insignificant, if one gets perfect control over one's desire.⁴⁴ It is under this plea that the Bhagavadgītā sanctions even somewhat morally defective actions (*sadosam api*),⁴⁵ and justifies them in the name of the duty for duty's sake. Likewise, the sin of a devotee to God may be condoned, if he performs his actions in dedication to God.⁴⁶

Morality is the initial requirement of the holy life which prepares the ground for the development of higher faculties by means of the true knowledge attained and the salvation (*nirvāṇa*) realized. It is not an end in itself, but only by means leading to the state of inner purification and concentration whereby the supreme end or ultimate goal of life is attained. In the Bhagavadgītā, there are two kinds of the nature of man; the divine (*daivī sampat*) and the demoniac (*asurī sampat*) or the good and the bad. The divine nature is the moral endowment which helps a man to lead the life that is in harmony with the will of God, while demoniac nature is such a fund of inherited qualities as leads man into wrong doing.⁴⁷ Wrong doing is rooted from desire or lust (*kāma*), anger (*krodha*) and greed (*lobha*); a threefold gate of hell. Therefore, a man who is released, does what is good for his soul and then reaches the highest state (*nirvāṇa*).⁴⁸

With regard to the problem of morality, if there is a question why a man who has shaken off desire or attachment in all its forms, may in face of certain exigencies perform even wrong action and yet remain uncontaminated by sin.⁴⁹ Generally, wrong actions are irrevocably associated with evil consequences and performance of wrong action is a sure sign of imperfection in holiness. But, in this matter, there is a definite exception made in the case of an absolutely unconceited and disinterested man who even kills all people, is neither called a killer nor is bound by his action.⁵⁰ Those who are disinterestedly engaged in the relentless discharge of their divinity ordained social duty (*svadharmā*), can attain perfection, despite inherent defects in their profession.⁵¹ Accordingly, everyone is required to perform his own duty relentlessly and dispassionately irrespective of the consequences, for man is to attain perfection by discharging his own duty with a detached view.⁵² To fight gallantly in the battle and not to run away from it is one of the prescribed duties of a king (*kṣatriya*). As a king, Arjuna was introduced on moral grounds that his fighting against evil-doer involves no

⁴³Bhagavadgītā, XI.55; XII.13.

⁴⁴Bhagavadgītā, IV.20.

⁴⁵Bhagavadgītā, XVIII.48.

⁴⁶Bhagavadgītā, 10; XVIII.56-58.

⁴⁷M. Rangacharya, *The Hindu Philosophy of Conduct : Lectures on the Bhagavadgītā* (Delhi : Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1990), p. 150.

⁴⁸Bhagavadgītā, XVI.22.

⁴⁹Bhagavadgītā, II.38; IV.21; V.10.

⁵⁰Bhagavadgītā, XVIII.17.

⁵¹Bhagavadgītā, XVIII.45, 47.

⁵²Bhagavadgītā, XVIII.49.

sin.⁵³ On the contrary, if he does not fight in the righteous battle, he will fall from his duty and glory and incur sin.⁵⁴ Therefore, it is no wonder that the battle or fighting against evil-doers is called by the Bhagavadgītā a righteous battle (*dharmyam saṁgrāmam*).⁵⁵

Conclusion

In the light of what has been said above, it can be concluded that the approach of the Bhagavadgītā is mainly metaphysical and it offers solutions mostly on the basis of traditional metaphysical presuppositions. The Bhagavadgītā maintains that the Self (*ātman*) which is identical with God (*brahman*) is the creator, the sustainer and the destroyer of the world. It is the highest goal of life. Concerning ignorance (*avidyā*) which is the cause of rebirth through the action committed by man, the Bhagavadgītā encourages that a man should remove ignorance through devotion (*bhakti*) to God (*brahman*). The Bhagavadgītā says that a man will receive the result of one's own action which is done with intention and attachment. However, it lays emphasis on the fact that actions performed in service of God (*brahman*) only are good actions.

Although the Bhagavadgītā always concerns with the metaphysics (*abhiprajñā*), its direct aim is to offer solution for the proper guidance of human conduct, because it tries to suggest practical ways and means to solve the pressing problems of life and to attain the state of supreme perfection.

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⁵³Bhagavadgītā, II.38; V.10.

⁵⁴Bhagavadgītā, II.33.

⁵⁵Bhagavadgītā, II.33.