

THE DIALECTICAL SYNTHESIS OF ACTION, KNOWLEDGE, AND DEVOTION (THE *BHAGAVAT GITĀ* PERSPECTIVE)

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I

Introduction

Dialectical synthesis can be interpreted as the synthesis of pairs of opposites which is never possible in the domain of logic and mathematics. Dialectical synthesis is also not possible by a scientific methodology that is based on the facts of experience. The dialectic of 'A and Not A' in logic is never synthesized without committing contradiction. Similarly, in the factual experience, it is impossible to synthesize the fact that two things can remain present physically at the same time. Science is possible on the phenomenological status of space and time. Science can never transcend space and time, and logic cannot overcome the deductive formal rules. But the dialectical synthesis is possible in the domain of psychological discipline and moral consciousness. The objective of this article is to highlight the possibility of attaining the highest transformation of human life by the synthesis of *Jñāna*, *Karma*, and *Bhakti*. This is well-discussed and explained in the *Bhagavat Gitā*. Man easily gets distracted by temporary emotions and feelings, which create an attachment to the things or the persons around him. Everyone has the empowerment to make anything possible but they are ignorant of their own inner power. They can manifest what they want. Our subconscious mind has the power of doing anything or making everything real, which is thought by us. We just need to train it in a proper way through meditation. We need to have control over our emotions and attachments by keeping our minds at peace. When *Arjuna* was reluctant to fight against his own brothers, Lord *Krishna* taught him the path of righteousness pertaining to the disciplines of *Jñāna*, *Karma* and *Bhakti*. This lesson not only inspired *Arjuna*, but also the whole of mankind. My objective in this paper is to submit how the

ethical consciousness and ethical disciplines guide us to walk on the path of righteousness in our life and become a foundational source of inspiration for man-making and the attainment of freedom.

II

Action–Knowledge Interface

Action and knowledge both are human possibilities and both are generally treated as independent ways of attaining liberation. But in our practical experience, we experience that action and knowledge are closely related to each other and each complements the other. The *Bhagavat Gitā* enumerates the ethical discipline necessary for the highest knowledge. The discipline consists in controlling the senses. If the senses are not restrained, they run after the pleasurable, and obsession with the pleasurable results in the malfunctioning of understanding. When the faculty of intellect (*buddhi*) is impaired one fails to distinguish between the desirable and the undesirable, the pleasurable and the preferable, and the relative and the absolute. Then ultimately one is ruined by delusion. It is said in the *Bhagavat Gitā*, “From anger comes delusion; from delusion loss of memory; from loss of memory to the destruction of discrimination; from the destruction of discrimination, he perishes.”¹

Arjuna's grief was because of his memory, which was stored with experiences and habits. Every time, man confronts his own memory and stumbles on the path of action and knowledge. Personal memory demands the continuity of events, and out of this demand for continuity, habit is formed. Habit is the greatest defence mechanism that man and nature establish. It keeps out the incoming new impulses and influences from life. Habit insists on the continuity of experience, even if it is full of ignorance and indulgence. Thus, habit is a closed circle in which life moves, covering the same ground again and again. Man needs psychological security and survival and for this, he seeks a base of continuity and finally becomes entrenched in a defence mechanism. He clings to it as firmly as possible, leaving no trace of flexibility. Such a person cannot confront a new and challenging situation that is out of his box of habits and, at that moment, he

becomes completely unpredictable. He clings tenaciously to his pattern of habit because, in the firm holding on to habit, he finds the only way to security and survival. The strongest and the most powerful psychological defence is processed through our reactions. It is a reaction that prevents fresh life impulses and cannot confront a new situation.

Because of our ignorance of the spiritual experience we entertain in our intellect's unending desires. As the desires in us, so are our thoughts. As our thoughts, so are our actions. At every moment, the texture and quality of our thoughts are directly conditioned and controlled by our desires. Actions are nothing other than our thoughts projected and expressed in the world. Thus, in the chain of ignorance, constituted of desires, thoughts, and actions, each one of us is caught and bound. *Karma Yoga* facilitates us to transcend the karmic nexus through experience beyond ignorance. *Karma Yoga* does not mean the renunciation of action or running away from life. *Karma Yoga* teaches the skill of doing all actions (*Yogaḥ Karmasukauśalam*)². Man is ever agitated under the influence of the triple tendencies of *Sattva*, *Rajas*, and *Tamas* inherent in him. Even for a single moment, he cannot remain inactive. So long as we are under the influence of these mental tendencies (*Gunas*), we are helplessly prompted to act. Complete inaction is impossible. Similarly, to act in life without any expectation of results is also impossible. So, one must have an appropriate orientation of the results. The stanza "*Karmaṇyevādhikāraṣṭemāphaleṣu kadācana*"³ should not be misinterpreted as that one must not expect any consequences of one's duties. Rather, it is to understand that one should renounce mental slavery for the consequences. One should have a proper orientation about the consequences, but one should not be disturbed by the wrong imaginations of the consequences.

Action is performed with the *dharma*-paradigm. But it is not as rigorous as a categorical imperative. Action should be performed according to both the paradigms of *Dharma* and *Svadharmā*. But this karma may be the cause of bondage even if it is done according to both the paradigms of *Dharma* and *Svadharmā* because the agent may have a sense of agency (*kartṛbhāva*). The agent of the action is necessary for doing an action

but the sense of agency (ego) in doing that action leads to bondage and suffering. Similarly, the consequences inevitably accrued to an action but the unnecessary nagging after and hanging over the consequences lead to bondage and suffering. So *Dharma-karma* or *Svadharmakarma* is not *Niskāmakarma* or *Akarma*. The *Dharma-karma* or the *Svadharmakarma* should be performed without the sense of agency and without the expectation of the consequences. This is called *Akarma* or inaction. *Akarma* or inaction is a state of mind or wisdom that motivates one to do *Niskāmakarma*. In the *Bhagavat Gītā* it is said that the wise person is he who sees inaction in action and action in inaction.⁴ The *Bhagavat Gītā* has given all scope for human freedom through *Svadharmakarma*. At the same time, the *Bhagavat Gītā* has sanctioned ultimate freedom from all bondage through *Niskāmakarma*. The dynamics of karma such as *Dharma-karma*, *Svadharmakarma*, and *Niskāmakarma* are well explained in the *Bhagavat Gītā* without any logical oddity and absurdity. When one is established in the state of *Niskāmakarma*, it ultimately takes one to the state of *Niskarmya*.⁵ *Niskāmakarma* is cognized as a qualified *karma* installed with five fundamental attributes. Firstly, *karma* should be free from the sense of agency (*kartrbhāva*). Secondly, *karma* should be free from attachment to the results or consequences, favourable or unfavourable. Thirdly, *karma* should be inclined toward collective well-being (*lokasaṅgraha*). Fourthly, *karma* should be executed by free will or rational will. And finally, *karma* should be guided by the principle of righteousness (*dharma*).

III

Knowledge – Devotion Interface

As a dialectical synthesis of knowledge and action is attained through *Niskāmakarmain Karma Yoga* so the dialectical synthesis between knowledge and devotion is attained by the state of *Sthitaprajña* in *Jñāna Yoga*. Dialectical synthesis does not reject the dialectical opposites; rather, it culminates the higher scope in which the pairs of opposites are merged together. *Niskāmakarma* is not only a state of disinterested action, but also a higher state of wisdom. Similarly, *Sthitaprajña* is the culmination of both knowledge and devotion. The *BhagavatGītā* has defined

Sthitaprajña as "the steady wisdom which is attained by the 'evenness of mind' and subsequently the tranquillity of mental composure in facing all pairs of opposites is defined as Yoga"⁶ [*Samatvam yoga ucyate*]. Not only it is sufficient that a true worker should act in the world being established in equipoise and equanimity, but also he should uphold this poise through renunciation of his attachment to the immediate fruits of his action. This is attainable by *Buddhi Yoga* which makes a sharp distinction between the function of mind and intellect. When the thought flow is in a state of flux and agitation, it is called the 'mind' when it is single-pointed, calm, and serene in its own determination, it is called the intellect. Thus, *Buddhi Yoga* means 'to be established in devotion to the intellect'. In *Buddhi Yoga*, we pursue our duties without ever losing our ultimate goal in life. We may interpret *Buddhi Yoga* as an individual's attempt to live and act from the zone of the intellect, which freely controls the function of the mind with the complete surrender of his ego. Self-realization is possible when the intellect is absorbed in the Self.⁷ The *Bhagavat Gitā* states that "when a man completely casts off all the desires of the mind and is satisfied in the Self, then he is said to be the one of steady wisdom (*Sthitaprajña*)"⁸. In ignorance, when one conceives oneself as the ego, one has a burning desire for sense-objects, a binding attachment with emotions, and a jealous preference for one's preoccupied fond ideas. But when the ego is transcended, it melts away to become one with the Infinite. In the Self, the man of steady wisdom (*Sthitaparajña*) can no more entertain any desire, or have any appetite for the objects of the body, of the mind, or the intellect and he becomes the very source of all bliss. The *Bhagavat Gitā* describes the attribute of a *Sthitaparjña* having explained that "he whose mind is not shaken up by adversity, and who in prosperity does not hanker after pleasures, who is free from attachment, fear, and anger is called a Sage of Steady-wisdom".⁹

The real action is one which is permeated with devotion. An ideal action culminates in devotion (*bhakti*). Devotion is a state where all the cognitive, conative, and affective pursuits of the individual are directed to one end. It is in the state of *Bhakti* that the impersonal is made personal, and the individual finds everything as the manifestation of the Lord. Everything becomes sacred for him and his love for the

ultimate expresses itself in form of love for the whole creation. The sense of 'mine' and 'thine' disappears as a result of complete identification with the Lord and his manifold manifestations. For a devotee, every action becomes a sacrifice (*yajña*) and all actions become directed towards the upliftment of the whole (*lokasangraha*). A *bhakta* becomes a true *Niskāmakarmi* and it is he who knows the Self to be the essence of everything. *Bhakti* leads one to the state of unconditional surrender (*prapatti*). In the state of *Prapatti* one has the feeling of unworthiness (*akiñcanatva*) which makes one realize one's limitations and accept God as the ultimate agent of all actions. Devotion is not to be confused with sentimentalism. A true devotee is he who hates no single being, who is friendly and compassionate to all, who is free from attachment and egoism, to whom pain and pleasure are equal, who is enduring, ever content and balanced in mind, self-controlled, and possessed of firm conviction, whose thought and reason are directed to the Lord.

The Bhagavad-Gita observes:

"Of one who is devoid of attachment, who is liberated, whose mind is established in knowledge, who acts for the sake of sacrifice, all his actions are dissolved"¹⁰

"He who has renounced actions by Yoga, whose doubts are rent asunder by Knowledge, who is self-possessed, actions do not bind him, O, *Dhananjaya*"¹¹

"He who is devoted to the Path-of-action, whose mind is quite pure, who has conquered the self, who has subdued his senses, who realizes his Self as the Self in all beings, though acting is not tainted"¹²

The mind cannot contemplate on any theme that cannot be conditioned by the senses. The mind of a devotee cannot wander to any place where he is not reminded of the smile of the Lord. Every one of us, at any given moment, is the sum total of what we think and what we feel. If our minds are resting on the Lord and our intellects have dived into the very depths of the Infinite, our individualities end and we merge to become one with the infinite. The seeker has to fix his mind totally at the feet of the Lord and bring his intellect to play upon and rip open the significance of the Form-Divine. This double

act needs an extremely subtle intellect and single-pointedness of the mind. For this, the only practical method would be to pursue the *Yoga* of constant practice (*Abhyāsa Yoga*). The *Yogeswar (Krishna)* is only advising us not to get enticed away by the mind from our divine pursuit. One who has realised that the Spirit everywhere is the same, and that the Spirit in All alone is his own Self, cannot afford to hate anyone because, from his vision of understanding, there is no one who is other than the Self. The attitude of a true devotee to all living creatures will be friendly, and he is ever compassionate to all beings. Being ever content he discovers a flawless infinite joy in himself whether he obtains even the means of his bodily sustenance or not.

IV

Conclusion

The Synthesis:

Human consciousness is expressed through the act of knowing (cognition), willing (conation), and feeling (affection). The personality of an individual is determined by the preponderance of cognitive, conative or affective faculty. When cognitive ability is preponderant, one becomes prone to pursue the path of knowledge. For him, acquisition of knowledge remains the prime concern of life. Those in whom the conative aspect is predominant turn out to be men of action. For them, pursuing the 'path of truth' is more consequential than 'knowledge of truth'. An ounce of practice weighs more than a pound of wisdom. Similarly, when the affective faculty is preponderant one tends to follow the dictate of the heart than mind. One becomes empathetic, sensitive, and ready to share the weal and woe of others. When the promptings of the heart are directed unto the divine it takes the form of *bhakti*. Though everyone possesses the tendency and ability to pursue the path of knowledge (*jñāna*), action (*karma*), and devotion (*bhakti*) individuals stand distinct depending upon the dominance of one faculty to others. *Jñāna yoga*, *karma yoga*, and *bhakti yoga* have been prescribed as independent ways by which one can attain the state of unification of *jīvātmā* (unit consciousness) with *paramātmā* (cosmic consciousness). Of these three paths, *bhakti* is mooted as the easiest way to

Godhood. *Bhakti* does not demand suppression of the natural impulses but sublimation of them. The path of knowledge is arduous for it is as good as walking on the razor's edge. Cultivation of knowledge calls for exercising restraint over instinctive promptings and baser propensities which otherwise take one for a ride and stand in the way of knowledge of the highest truth. The disciple must be worthy himself and may stand in the way of knowledge of the highest truth. Scriptures are vocal about the limitations of the empirical mode of knowing because the dichotomy of the knower (*jñātā*) and the known (*jñeya*) cannot be done away with.

Knowledge finds its culmination in the state of devotion. *Jñānavādins* claim that *bhakti* is necessary so far as it facilitates the attainment of the highest knowledge. The path of *jñāna* is meant for a select few in whom the cognitive faculty is developed and one needs to have reasonable restraint and firm determination to walk on the path till the goal is reached. The path of *jñāna* is relatively difficult to be pursued, as it calls for unflinching resolve on the part of *jñānī* not to succumb to the temptations of the lower self. The path of *karma* is also fraught with difficulty. Action binds. Action also liberates. What is consequential for a moral agent is not that one acts but how one acts and the ideation [intention] behind the action. Action performed under the sway of ignorance binds the doer to the consequences of the action. As is the action so are the consequences. One cannot abstain from doing the action because the exigencies of life demand that one must act. Act one must and every action binds. Then liberation appears to be unattainable. *Nishkāmakarma* unfolds the secret of doing action without being bound to the consequences of the action. It is the sense of agency which makes the doer enter into the karmic nexus. The same action which brings bondage to the doer proves to be liberating when one gives up the sense of agency (*kartṛbhāva*). While suspending the sense of agency, one has to act by thinking that one is nothing but an instrument (*nimitta*). The Supreme subject (*paramapurūṣa*) is the agent of all actions. It is on account of ignorance that one wrongly appropriates the 'agency' to oneself. Action is crowned with success only when it aligns with the cosmic will. Thus, goes the cosmic decree that those who are wedded to the path of truth come out victorious in the long

run. The more one acts, the more one comes to realize that the results of action are dispensed by a plethora of extra human factors over which one has hardly any control. One comes to understand that man proposes God disposes. Thus, a man of action (*karmī*) transforms into a devotee (*bhakta*) par excellence. For a *nishkāmakarmī* every action (*karma*) becomes an instance of sacrifice (*yajna*) because it is undertaken to fulfil the will of the cosmic and consequences of action (*karmaphala*) are offered at the altar of the divine. Viewed from this perspective, *bhakta* is not a path along with *jñāna* and *karma* but is the very end. In other words, *jñāna* and *karma* find their consummation in *bhakti*.

The aim of *Karma Yoga* is *Karma Sanyāsa*. *Karma Yoga* explains the art of doing *Niškāmakarma* and *Karma Saṁnyāsa* teaches the art of renunciation of all attachments. Mind can be purified only by the process of treating it with the right action. One who is well established in the path of selfless activities soon develops the qualities of poise and single-mindedness. *Karma* fulfils itself in making the *Yogi* fit for continuous and fruitful meditation. The agent has to surrender all his sense of agency (*karṭṛbhāva*) in his actions to God and he has to remember this concept of Truth as often as he remembers his limited ego. Once our real nature is realized, the actions of the body, mind, and intellect can no more leave any impression on the Self. *Yogis*, having abandoned attachment, perform actions merely by the body, mind, intellect, and senses, for the purification of the self (ego). This is the secret of *Karma Yoga*. *Yogis*, who is able to withstand the impulse born out of desires is really a happy man. He who is happy within, who rejoices within, who is illuminated within, that *Yogi* attains Absolute Freedom or *Mokṣa*. To sum up, when an individual acts with a sense of instrumentality, with no desire for consequences, and surrenders all consequences to God, it becomes an instance of *Niškāmakarma* and for him everything is Brahman. Cultivation of devotion does not deny the role of free-will. It does not negate rational thinking. Rather, devotion is said to be the result of the righteous use of reason and will. Some observe how true knowledge leads to the right action, and the right action becomes an instance of devotion. Lord *Krishna* does not impose His will and His ways on *Arjuna* and, having explained everything, asked him

to decide by himself.¹³ Knowledge gives direction to devotion because without knowledge, devotion may take the form of dogma. It is an action that gives content to devotion. Devotional sentiment must be expressed in and through action. The highest devotee is said to be a *Sthitaprajña*. The attainment of this state of equanimity is workable by the synthesis of knowledge, action, and devotion (*Jñāna, karma, bhakti samuccaya*).

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