

IS KARMA YOGA AN AUTONOMOUS YOGA?

I

Informed discussions on Hinduism refer, sometimes, to four¹ but perhaps more often to three² *yogas*—those of *jñāna*, *bhakti* and *karma*. With respect to *jñānayoga* and *bhaktiyoga*, however, distinct systems have been elaborated which indicate the manner in which salvation is attained by the seeker. Thus the entire literature on Advaita Vedānta is virtually a guide to *jñānayoga*³ and in the case of *bhaktiyoga* distinct works, such as the *bhakti-sūtras* of Nārada, are to be found,⁴ not to mention the works of the devotional schools of Vedānta. Both of these systems maintain that *mokṣa* can be directly attained through them. Although the other two *yogas* may serve as a preparation for final liberation, the final act of spiritual consummation is achieved only through *jñāna* or *bhakti*. Such a definite statement can be made about *jñānayoga* and *bhaktiyoga*, that they are capable of conferring *mokṣa* by themselves without having to rely on the other (except perhaps in an ancillary way). But can such a statement be made about *karmayoga*? Is it not true that *karmayoga* leads to salvation ultimately only *via jñānayoga* according to its own tenets and not directly?⁵

II

This doubt about the non-autonomous character of *karmayoga* seems to be substantiated by the fact that there is no definite text of *karmayoga*, the way there are definite texts associated with *jñānayoga* and *bhaktiyoga*. One could, of course, argue that the Bhagavadgītā is one such text, as B. G. Tilak did;⁶ but similar claims in relation to the Gītā have been made by proponents of *jñānayoga*⁷ as well as *bhaktiyoga*.⁸ Not only that, it is perhaps more accurate to claim that all the three *yogas* are represented in the Gītā, than to insist that it upholds one of them to the exclusion of others. Verses in support of all the three *yogas* can be cited from the Gītā.⁹

Nevertheless the question may be asked : granted that the Bhagvatgita does not regard *karmayoga* as the only valid *yoga* or even the *yoga par excellence*, does it state that one attains

mokṣa directly, through it, without the attainment being mediated by *bhakti* or *jñāna*? Does the *Gītā*, in other words, while not regarding *karmayoga* as the only *yoga*, consider it an independent *yoga*?

Some parts of the *Bhagvadgītā* do seem to suggest that the *Gītā* looks upon *karmayoga* as conferring salvation directly and independently, like *jñānayoga* and *bhaktiyoga*. The most striking statement to this effect seems to be contained in the first line of 45th verse of the XVIIIth chapter: *sve sve karmaṇy abhirataḥ samsiddhiṁ labhate naraḥ* (Taking delight in his own special kind of action, A man attains perfection) .¹⁰ If, however, one continues to read on, the picture seems to change somewhat.

45. *sve-sve karmaṇy abhirataḥ samsiddhiṁ labhate naraḥ svakarmanirataḥ siddhiṁ yathā vindati taç çṛṇu*

(45) Devoted each to his own duty man attains perfection. How one, devoted to one's own duty, attains perfection, that do thou hear.

46. *yataḥ pravṛttir bhūtānaṁ yena sarvaṁ idaṁ tatam svakarmanā tam abhyarcya śiddhiṁ vindati mānavaḥ*

(46) He from whom all beings arise and by whom all this is pervaded—by worshipping Him through the performance of his own duty does man attain perfection.

Work is worship of the Supreme, man's homage to God.

The *Gītā* holds that quality and capacity are the basis of functional divisions. Accepting the theory of rebirth, it holds that a man's inborn nature is determined by his own past lives. All forms of perfection do not lie in the same direction. Each one aims at something beyond himself, at self-transcendence, whether he strives after personal perfection, or lives for art or works for one's fellows. See also XVIII, 48 and 60.

47. *sreyān svadharmo viguṇaḥ paradharmāt svanuṣṭhitāt svabhāvanīyataṁ karma kurvan nā pnoti kilbiṣam*

(47) Better is one's own law though imperfectly carried out than the law of another carried out perfectly. One does not incur sin when one does the duty ordained by one's own nature.

48. *sahajam karma kaunteya sadoṣam api na tyajet sarvārambhāhi doṣeṇa dhūmenā 'gnir ivā 'vṛtaḥ*

- (48) One should not give up the work suited to one's nature. O Son of Kunti (Arjuna), though it may be defective, for all enterprises are clouded by defects as fire by smoke.
49. asaktabuddhiḥ sarvatra jītātma vigatasprhah naiṣkarmya-siddhiṁ paramāṁ samnyāsenā 'dhigacchati
- (49) He whose understanding is unattached everywhere, who has subdued his self and from whom desire has fled—he comes through renunciation to the supreme state transcending all work.
50. siddhiṁ prāpto yathā brahma tathā 'pnoti nibodha me samāsenai 'va kaunteya niṣṭhā jñānasya yā pārā
- (50) Hear from me, in brief, O Son of Kuntī (Arjuna), how, having attained perfection, he attains to the Brahman, that supreme consummation of wisdom.¹¹

It is clear from the explanation that is offered in the subsequent verses for the initial statement: "Devoted each to his own duty man attains perfection", that *karma* is seen as leading to *mokṣa* via *jñāna*.¹² And several scholars do indeed seem to imply that *karmayoga* leads to *mokṣa* via *jñāna*.¹³ The connection which is often established between *jīvanmukti* and *karmayoga* lends further support to this view.¹⁴ Thus it may be plausibly argued that *karmayoga* confers salvation via *jñāna*.¹⁵

III

It also seems possible to argue that *karmayoga* can be seen as conferring *mokṣa* via *bhakti*. This point, that *karmayoga* leads to *mokṣa* via *bhakti*, seems to have been made less frequently than the one that it leads to salvation via *jñāna*; but it can certainly be made. Consider, for instance, Bhagavadgītā XVIII. 56-57:

56. sarvakarmāṇy api sadā kurvāno madvyaāsrayah
matprasādād avāpnoti śāśvatam padam avyayam
- (56) Doing continually all actions whatsoever, taking refuge in Me he reaches by My grace the eternal, undying abode.
57. cetasā sarvakarmāṇi mayi samnyasya matparah
buddhiyogam upāśrītya maccittaḥ satatam bhava
- (57) Surrendering in thought all actions to Me, regarding Me as the Supreme and resorting to steadfastness in understanding, do thou fix thy thought constantly on Me.¹⁶

Here it is the blending of *karmayoga* and *bhaktiyoga* which seems to achieve salvific potency. That *karmayoga* leads to *mokṣa* through *bhakti* can be argued logically thus:

It is all good to say that work should be performed without a purpose in view. Duty for duty's sake is a beautiful ideal. But is it possible? Can there be voluntary activity without some motive or other? Motive is the spring of action. Will without desire is a psychological impossibility. Therefore *karmayoga*, as taught in the Hindu Scriptures, cannot mean performance of action without any motive whatsoever. Only instead of having different motives for different actions, the *karma-yogin* has the same motive for all actions—viz., worship of God with a purified heart. The Lord of the *Gītā* declares: 'Whatsoever thou doest, whatsoever thou eatest, whatsoever thou offerest, whatsoever thou givest away and whatsoever of austerities thou dost practise—do that as an offering to me'. Work is to be regarded as worship. This implies a sublimation of the baser instincts and appetites, passions and desires. The deeds that are performed must yield their results; there is no escape. But the *yogin* does not regard these results as ends, but only as consequents. He does his work without attachment to its fruit and for the purification of his soul (*ātmaśuddhaye*); and he offers his actions and their results as offerings to the Lord. Thus the goal of moral action is the attainment of communion (*yoga*) with God, who is the internal ruler of all beings.¹⁷

IV

It can thus be maintained that *karmayoga* is not an autonomous *yoga* in the sense *jñānayoga* and *bhaktiyoga* are—it confers *mokṣa* ultimately in association with or by leading to these two other *yogas*.

What can the *karmayogin* say in response to this position? One may be tempted to argue that after all meditation is also "action", albeit mental or supramental so that *jñānayoga* has to rely on *karmayoga*. Similarly, it can be argued that not only *pūjā* but the act of self-surrender is after all action so that *bhaktiyoga* involves *karmayoga* as well. Hence if it be maintained that *karmayoga* confers *mokṣa* only by being brought in relation to *jñānayoga* and *bhaktiyoga*, then it can be maintained with equal

force that *jñānayoga* and *bhaktiyoga* are effective only on being brought in relation to *karmayoga*.

The point does possess some, perhaps even considerable, force. Why then does the impression emerge from the study of the *yogas* in Hinduism, of the dependency of *karma* on *jñāna* or *bhakti* and not vice versa as well?

The reason for this impression is perhaps to be found in the extreme formulations of *jñānayoga* and *bhaktiyoga*. For in its extreme version *jñānayoga* maintains that the *jñānin* performs *no action at all*.¹⁸ It is true that he *seems* to act externally but *really* he is not acting at all. Similarly, in the extreme version of *bhaktiyoga* it can be maintained that the *bhakta* *does not act at all*—it is God who acts and He alone.¹⁹ Now it can be maintained from the point of view of an extreme formulation of *karmayoga* that the *karmayogin* *really* does not act too as he forsakes the fruits of action. However, such a claim is harder, to make or at least more paradoxical when made for *karmayoga* than for the other *yogas*. Besides, exponents of *karmayoga* have usually emphasized action and to say that action is really inaction (and conversely inaction really action) is likely to blunt the activist thrust of the message, although the *Gītā* actually does make that statement.²⁰

V

To conclude; as generally presented *karmayoga* does seem to possess salvific potency only when in a parasitic or symbiotic relationship with other *yogas*. However, it can be argued that this prevailing impression is misleading because in their general versions *jñānayoga* and *bhaktiyoga* make use of *karmayoga* as well, while in their extreme versions all the three *yogas* can be seen as really involving "action-lessness".

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NOTES

1. See Huston Smith, *The Relations of Man* (New York : Harper and Row, 1958) p. 35; Swami Nikhilananda, *Hinduism* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1958) Chapters V-VIII; Kenneth W. Morgan, ed., *The Religion of the Hindus* (New York: The Ronald Press Company, 1953) p. 26; A. L. Herman, *An Introduction to Indian Thought* (New Jersey, Prentice-Hall Inc., 1976) pp, 158-169; etc.

2. See S. G. F. Brandon, ed., *A Dictionary of Comparative Religion* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, (1970) p. 657; Karl H. Potter, *Presuppositions of India's Philosophies* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall Inc., 1963) pp. 39-41; Ainslie T. Embree, ed., *The Hindu Tradition* (New York: Vintage Books, 1966) pp. 122-129; Beatrice Pitney Lamb, *India : a world in transition* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1968) pp. 195-6, T. M. P. Mahadevan, *Outlines of Hinduism* (Bombay: Chetana Ltd., 1971) Chapter VI: etc.
3. See Eliot Deutsch and J. A. B. van Bultenen, *A Source-Book of Advaita Vedanta* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1971) Passim.
4. See Mariasusai Dhavamony, *Love of God According to Saiva Siddhanta* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1971) Part II, Chapter V; etc.
5. I am indebted to my student Sister Mary O'Donoghue for raising this interesting question.
6. D. Mackenzie Brown, "The Philosophy of Bal Gangadhar Tilak", *The Journal of Asian Studies* Vol. XVII No. 2 (Feb. 1958).
7. See Swami Swarupananda, *Srimad-Bhagavad-Gita* (Calcutta : Advaita Ashrama, 1972) Foreword.
8. See R. C. Zaehner, *The Bhagavad-Gita* (Oxford : Clarendon Press 1969) Introduction.
9. See Ainslie T. Embree, ed., *op. cit.*, pp. 122-129. It is interesting in this context to note that while discussing the three *yogas* T. M. P. Mahadevan also quotes from the *Gītā* in each case (*op. cit.*, pp. 84-85, 90, 97). W. D. P. Hill regards *Bhagavadgītā* XVIII. 57 as containing "the three-fold doctrine of work, knowledge and devotion" (*The Bhagavadgītā* [Oxford University Press (second edition) 1969] p. 211 fn. 2); while S. Radhakrishnan remarks on XVIII. 54-56 : "In these three verses the author indicates that wisdom devotion and work go together" (*infra*, p. 372).
10. Franklin Edgerton, *The Bhagavad Gita* (New York : Harper & Row, 1944) p. 88.
11. Transliteration and translation and annotation as per S. Radhakrishnan, *The Bhagavadgita* (London : George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1958) pp. 367-368, 369.
12. This makes Śaṅkara's explanation of *sāmsiddhi* in XVIII. 45 "as the qualification of the *karmayogin* for *jñānanisthā*" (W. N. P. Hill *op. cit.*, p. 209 fn. 2) less biased than would appear at first sight.
13. See I. K. Watson, "From Karma to Moksha", *Journal of Dharma*, Vol. II No. 1 (January, 1977) pp. 7-21.
14. See S. K. Ramachandra Rao, "Prof. M. Hiriyanna and Jivanmukti", *The Mysore Orientalist* Volumes VI-VIII (1972-75) pp. 1-7.

15. Thus, for instance, W. N. P. Hill comments re V. 13 that "the emphasis in the first phrase lies on the word *manasā*—'with the mind'. Renunciation is a mental attitude, to be adopted along with action; and Kṛiṣṇa here describes the enlightened state of Self, to which *karmayoga* leads. Work must still (as always) be done, but action becomes less, and much more time is given to contemplation. In technical language, the first stage of *yoga* is called *kriyāyoga*; the second stage, to which the first will lead, is called *rājayoga*, or *dhyānayoga*" (*op. cit.*, p. 114, fn. 1).
16. S. Radhakrishnan, *op. cit.*, p. 372.
17. T. M. P. Mahadevan, *op. cit.*, pp. 86-87. The citations from the Gītā refer to IV. 26 and V. 11.
18. For an elucidation of this point through extracts not only from Śāṅkara's commentary on the Bhagavadgītā but also on the Brahmasūtra and the Upaniṣadas, see N. K. Devaraja and N. S. Hirematha, *A Source Book of Śāṅkara* (Banaras Hindu University, 1971) Chapter 6. And for Śāṅkara not regarding God as an agent see his gloss on Bhagavadgītā IV. 13 (paraphrased by R. C. Zaehner, *op. cit.*, p. 187).
19. For an elucidation of this point, that God alone is the "only real agent" see R. C. Zaehner, *op. cit.*, pp. 18-19, 38, 172, 186, 208, 243, 283, 311, 394 etc., also see John Braisted Carman, *The Theology of Rāmānuja* (Yale University Press, 1974) p. 215 etc,
20. Bhagavadgītā IV. 18.

