



Vivekananda Center for Consciousness Studies and Research
School of Indian Heritage
Ramakrishna Mission Vivekananda Educational and Research Institute (RKMVERI),
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is organising an

INTERNATIONAL WEBINAR

“Four Yogas: Ancient Scriptures & Swami Vivekananda’s Modern Interpretation”

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ABSTRACTS OF TALKS

‘Karma Yoga in the Bhagavad-Gita and Swami Vivekananda’ By Swami Atmarupananda, Resident Minister, Vedanta Society of Greater Houston, USA:

The Vedas are the source of the Hindu tradition, and not just in pious imagination: it is hard to find a single idea in the vast and long historical development known as Hinduism which isn’t at least hinted at in the Vedas. And so it is with the field of karma yoga. However, it is the Bhagavad-Gita, coming near the end of the Vedic Age and after the composition of the Vedas and major Upanishads, that first treats karma yoga as a science in itself, with its own principles, methods, and goal.

When we look at the history of ideas, we see that it is the conflict of ideas that produces systematized thought – self-conscious, intentional, comparative thought – and that is true of scriptures as well. We see in the Gita evidence of a conflict between knowledge and action that existed in society at the time; and it is in this context that Sri Krishna defines karma yoga and its methods. Interestingly, this conflict has continued till modern times in the Hindu tradition.

Perhaps the most amazing single feature of the Gita is its timelessness, which translates into its modernity. Subsequent acharyas of the different schools of Vedanta commented on the Gita and, though their commentaries all show amazing genius, they all relegated karma yoga to a formulaic traditional definition, giving it secondary status, whereas Sri Krishna’s exposition on karma yoga is thoroughly “modern” because it universalizes karma yoga as a path, beyond its historical context.

In modern times it is Swami Vivekananda, more than anyone else, who has revived and expanded the karma yoga of the Gita, bringing back its universal appeal and application, and advancing its line of thought. And it is in Swami Vivekananda, as in Sri Krishna, that we see the harmony between action and knowledge, not in a way that contradicts Sankaracharya’s statement that knowledge and action cannot coexist, but in a way that – to use the Gita’s own words – finds inaction in the midst of action.

Consciousness Studies in Ancient India – Mandukya Upanishad Perspective, By Sri S.Sridharan, Trustee, senior most mentor-teacher and consultant therapist, Krishnamacharya Yoga Mandiram, Chennai:

“Each soul is potentially divine. The goal is to manifest this Divinity within by controlling nature, external and internal. Do this either by work, or worship, or mental discipline, or philosophy—by one, or more, or all of these—and be free.” – Swami Vivekananda

Rāja-yoga seeks to attain the divine by igniting the flame of knowledge of the self within. Most seekers do not have the patience and perseverance to follow this path for the sacrifices that it calls for. Raja- yoga dispels that the mind is perverted to follow the path of reason. Teaching the process of meditation and concentration, it tells you to confront the restlessness of the mind and uproot it. -Swami Vivekananda.

All beings constantly endeavour to get rid of ‘suffering’. Vyāsa in his commentary to Yoga Sūtra (1.31) defines ‘duhkha’ (suffering) as “Sorrow is that which upsets creatures who try for its removal”. In the history of mankind there is a continuous effort to find a solution for suffering and people endowed with high intellect have reflected and have left their findings for the welfare of humanity. One set of such deep enquiries is compiled and called as ‘Darśana-s’. As the very word indicates ‘they reveal’. They are like mirrors which shows the self (form) to the one who stands before and look at it. Those, whose tenets, are based on the Veda-s are called ‘Vaidika Darśana-s’. Pātañjala Yoga Darśana, brought out through the “Patañjali Yoga Sūtras” (PYS), is one among them.

In finding a permanent solution for removal of ‘human suffering’, Sage Patañjali offers a “Vyūham” – an arrangement. It starts with defining the problem, called ‘Heyam’ which means ‘to be avoided’, often called as ‘symptom’. Here, in PYS, it is ‘Duhkha’ (suffering) which is the ‘Heyam’. The next in the ‘Vyūham’ is “Hetu’ which means ‘the cause’. There are two causes identified. One is ‘Saṁyoga’ which means ‘Special Union’. Two entities are specially united; they are the Perceiver and the Perceived. The cause of this ‘Special Union’ is ‘Avidya’ which means ‘wrong understanding’. The removal of ‘Avidya’ results in removal of ‘Saṁyoga’ and thus ultimately ‘Duhkha’. There is a goal in this Vyūham and that is called “Hānam” which literally means “getting rid of/escaping”. The Sūtra calls this as “Kaivalyam” – a State of Independence of the Perceiver. The means to achieve this is called as “Upāyam” in this ‘Vyūham’, which is given as “Vivekakhyāti” which is discriminative knowledge. This is achieved through “Aṣṭāṅga Yoga” the eight limbed path of Yoga. To distinguish between various paths of Yoga which existed and continue to exist even today, this “Aṣṭāṅga Yoga” got the name ‘Rāja Yoga’. To understand the tenets of the Yoga Sūtra-s of Patañjali is very difficult. There have been numerous commentaries, sub-commentaries and notes on the Patañjali Yoga Sūtras, but the commentary by Swami Vivekānanda stands out as the most legible and appealing, yet scientific. Swamiji’s explanation for every Sūtra is unique. Swamiji ultimately calls the path as enunciated in the Patañjali Yoga Sūtras as Rāja Yoga, the ‘Royal path to Realisation.

‘Narada Bhakti Sutras and Swami Vivekananda’s Bhakti Yoga (Divine Love)’ by Swami Vireshananda, Editor, Prabudhha Bharata

Swami Vivekananda is a modern Rishi. He reinterpreted the ancient scriptures on Yoga in the light of new discoveries of science and infused a new vigour to age-old concepts and practices put forward by ancient teachers. The unique contribution of Swamiji is threefold: 1. He gave lucid explanation of highly technical details in the Yoga texts. 2. He presented intricate points of Yoga in English language in a scientific manner, which appeals to rational minds of the modern period. 3. He gave a new orientation and added many unorthodox and liberal concepts to age-old traditional teachings so as to make the practical teachings of Yoga appealing to everyone irrespective of nationality, race, and creed. In this context, it is interesting and educative to learn how Swamiji interpreted the ancient text of ‘Narada Bhakti Sutra’ an authoritative text on the Bhakti in his book ‘Bhakti Yoga’.

Swamiji’s Bhakti Yoga is not a literal translation of Narada Bhakti Sutras, nor does Swamiji touch upon all the points of the ancient work in detail. Swamiji’s approach is entirely different from that of Narada Bhakti Sutra. However, there are several points in which both the texts agree and come to same conclusions.

Narada Bhakti Sutras can be divided into five topics: 1. The nature of the superior bhakti called para bhakti, 2. The glory of devotion, 3. The discipline of bhakti, 4. The description of prema, the supreme form of love towards God, and 5. The description of a perfect devotee.

Swamiji broadly divides Bhakti Yoga into 1. Preparatory Bhakti (Vaidhi Bhakti) and 2. Supreme Bhakti (Para Bhakti). In the first part, he deals with several topics like the definitions of Bhakti, the philosophy of Ishwara, the qualifications of the aspirant and the teacher, the incarnations of God as world-teachers, the psychology of Mantra and the syllable of ‘OM’, the worship of substitutes and images, the chosen ideal, and so on. In the second part, he deals mainly with renunciation as the preparation for Para Bhakti, stating that a bhakta’s renunciation results from higher love. He also explains the naturalness of Bhakti-Yoga, how love manifests in different forms, universal love and self-surrender, how higher knowledge and higher love are one and the same, the triangle of love, and the human representation of divine love.

In both the works, the preparatory Bhakti is treated as somewhat different from Jnana or knowledge, but the culmination of Bhakti as Parabhakti is shown as equal to the highest kind of knowledge. While Narada devotes two sections to describe Parabhakti and prema, its external manifestation, Swamiji explains in detail the psychology of the highest form of love, which is but a result of lifelong practise of preparatory Bhakti and akin to spiritual realisation. Both the authors give illustration of gopis as the veritable embodiment of that highest love. While Swamiji gives the opinions of Acharya Shankara, Acharya Ramanuja, and Acharya Madhva to show the wide spectrum of views in Bhakti Yoga, Narada also gives the opinions of several teachers of yore exhibiting his catholic attitude in the doctrine of Bhakti. Both of them have dealt with bhaavas or divine moods of a devotee, which are different kinds of human representations of divine love. Bhaavas are the signs of divine love manifested in an adept devotee as well as the modes of spiritual practice adopted by a beginner so as to acquire pure devotion.

Swamiji also dwells upon several other ancillary topics like nature of Ishwara, substitutes and images, chosen ideal, psychology of Mantra and ‘OM’ etc. to make the modern readers of both east and west conversant with the fundamental concepts in Indian tradition for the proper understanding of Bhakti-Yoga. What is important is the emphasis Swamiji gives on ‘Naturalness’ of Bhakti Yoga in its highest form. It reminds one of ‘naturalness’ of Atman as one’s own svabhaava as depicted in Jnana Yoga. It leads to the definite conclusion by Swamiji that real devotion is the same as perfect

knowledge as each have the common element of 'Naturalness' in them. He deals with this all important aspect in the last few sections of his classical work.

Swamiji also removes the misapprehension among many towards the legitimacy of divine love exhibited by the gopis. He shows how this attitude manifests highest form of Bhakti as it involves supreme sacrifice, self-abnegation, and utmost purity of mind and body.

In all, it is clear that though Swamiji deals with the orthodox concepts of Bhakti-Yoga, as enumerated in Narada Bhakti Sutra, he has transformed it to a 'modern way of thinking and living where love of God predominates every walk of life' and which brings highest fulfilment and meaning to otherwise dry and insipid worldly life. In other words, love of God makes our life really sweeter and make us tools in the hands of God to reach out to others and help them too in the path towards our beloved Lord, the personification of supreme love and bliss.

Theme: The Four Yogas: Ancient Scriptures and Swami Vivekananda's Modern Interpretation: Abstract of the valedictory talk by Swami Atmapriyananda, Pro-Chancellor

Swami Vivekananda has been described by his famous French biographer Romain Rolland as a genius of synthesis and harmony:

“In the two words equilibrium and synthesis Vivekananda's constructive genius may be summed up. He embraced all the paths of the spirit: the four yogas in their entirety, renunciation and service, art and science, religion and action from the most spiritual to the most practical. Each of the ways that he taught had its own limits, but he himself had been through them all, and embraced them all. As in a quadriga, he held the reins of all the ways to Truth, and he travelled towards Unity along them all simultaneously. He was the personification of the harmony of all human energy.

Whatever Swami Vivekananda wrote and spoke were nothing but the very ideas of Sri Ramakrishna as he himself said on many an occasion. In this connection, we may quote Romain Rolland again:

“The angelic Master had instinctively resolved all the dissonances of life into a Mozartian harmony, as rich and sweet as the Music of the Spheres. And hence the work and thought of the great disciple was all carried out under the sign of Ramakrishna.” 2

Swami Vivekananda spoke of his Master, Sri Ramakrishna, as the veritable embodiment of the harmony of four yogas:

“Such a unique personality as Sri Ramakrishna, who was a remarkable combination of Jnana, Bhakti, Karma and Yoga, has scarcely appeared on the earth before.” 3 He combined in one single personality both intensity and extensity: deep as the ocean and broad as the skies and Swamiji believed that it should be possible to create a society in which such a combination of intensity and extensity is achieved, for if one individual could achieve it, why not a society, a society being, after all, 'an aggregate of individuals.' Of course, Swamiji knew that such individuals are few and far between, and cannot be created in large numbers. So he suggested a new type of harmony a 'collective harmony' by a group of individuals. In a letter to Kidi, Swamiji wrote:

“I agree with you so far that faith is a wonderful insight and that it alone can save; but there is the danger in it of breeding fanaticism barring further progress. Jnana is all right, but then there is the danger of its becoming dry intellectualism. Love is great and noble, but it may die away in

meaningless sentimentalism. A harmony of all these is the thing required. Ramakrishna was such a harmony. Such beings are few and far between, but keeping him and his teachings as the ideal we can move on. And if amongst us, each one may not individually attain to that perfection, still we may get it collectively by counteracting, equipping, adjusting, and fulfilling one another. This would be harmony by a number of persons, and a decided advance on all other forms and creeds.”⁴ The emblem of the Ramakrishna Mission is Swami Vivekananda's powerful message to humankind. Envisioned by this modern Rishi (Seer) in an exalted mood of spiritual and artistic genius, it conveys pictorially the unique message of harmony and synthesis of the four Yogas, as suited to the modern age. This is the most eloquent expression of what he really preached, what he wanted everyone to be, to realize, either in the East or in the West one's real Self, the ever-pure, ever-awakened, ever-free (nitya-shuddha-buddha-mukta) Atman, the Swan in the symbol. As Swami Vivekananda said aphoristically, “This is the whole of religion”.

References:

- (1) Romain Rolland, *The Life of Vivekananda and the Universal Gospel* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1988), p.281 [Hereafter ‘Rolland’]
- (2) *Ibid.*, p.79
- (3) *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama), 7.412
- (4) *Letters of Swami Vivekananda*, (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama. 1986), p.68