

Bhagvat Gita – Home Study

On the occasion of Release of Vol I of Swami Dayananda's Bhagavat Gita – Home Study Course on Monday 14th June 1999 at Narada Gana Sabha Chennai

It is with deep trepidation that I rise to release volume 1 of Swami Dayananda Saraswati's Bhashya of the Bhagavat Gita. I am not unaccustomed to task and yet I feel a measure of diffidence on this occasion. The great poet – Mahakavi – Kalidasa wrote several masterpieces of immortal Kavya and yet when he took up Raghuvamsa shuddered at the task he had undertaken. He said:

Ka Surya prabhavo Vamsah

Ka Cha alpa vishaya mathi

Trithirshur dustaram

Mohat udeuenasmi sagaram

Where is the race springing from the Sun God (Surya Vamsa) where is my limited knowledge out of my ignorance.

I wish to cross the unfathomable Ocean by a small raft.

My mind is likewise bewildered by the erudition of Swamiji and the subject matter of the book namely, Bhagavat Gita – Home Study Course.

This volume is not a series of lectures on the chapters of the Song Divine. It is not a Bhasya in the manner of Sankara Bhasya of the Gita. Swamiji runs at Annaikatti off Coimbatore a Gurukulam where vidyarthi's undergo a course lasting three and half years studying the Upanishads, Bhagavat Gita, Brahma Sutra and other important scriptures of Hinduism. The pupils have to undergo advance course in Sanskrit language and Grammar. Swamiji teaches with meticulous care bringing his command over Sanskrit, English and other national languages, a deep knowledge of the scriptures and vast information of modern sciences into full play. Swamiji's talks are spiced with elegant and clean wit and humour thereby firmly hailing his ideas in the minds of the students. As Swamiji himself says in his brief foreword (the briefest I have ever seen) "being the edited transcript of class room discussion, the material is presented to the reader as a programme of self study. If this is borne in mind, while reading, one can enjoy the same attitude of a student listening to the whole process of unfolding of the content of the words of Bhagavan".

The Upanishads contain the essence of Vedas. The Bhagavat Gita contains the essence of Upanishads. Swamiji brings this out in this volume clearly referring to the consanguinity of thoughts in the Upanishads and Gita. For instance in Page 213 of the volume dealing with chapter 2 verse 19 and 20 of Gita regarding the nature of Atma that it neither Kills nor is it killed and that it is neither born nor dies, Swamiji says

"This verse and the next two were lifted from Kathopanishad and put a little differently by Lord Krishna. He need not have quoted an Upanishad since He had the authority to propound the Vision in his own way but he respected the Upanishad because it is a means of knowledge – a Pramana Grantha". I presume that Swamiji had taken a cue from Lord Krishna himself and quotes profusely from all scriptures to explain, clarify and install in the minds of the readers the esoteric thoughts that lie embedded in the Magnum Opus of our scriptures the Bhagavat Gita.

Most of the editions of Bhagavat Gita give merely the dictionary meaning of the verses and some Common place explanations. They do not even mention Sankara's Bhasya of the Gita which itself is storehouse of wisdom. Swamiji's mastery of the Sankara Bhasya can be seen in almost every page of this volume, which serves to enhance and embellish the readers' knowledge.

In my Poorva ashrama I had to entertain the Heads of States to a banquet followed by a cultural show. On one occasion the cultural event was a Bharatanatyam performance of the episode relating to Krishna – Arjuna samvada. I was explaining to the diplomat Lord Krishna's advice to Arjuna about his duty to fight. The diplomats turned round and asked, "how come that the God asks Arjuna to fight when India professes non violence as its creed. I was nonplussed. I managed to say that righteous wars had to be waged for the preservation of Dharma (justice and fairness); I reminded him that the Soviet Union had called the second world war – "people war" – for protecting righteousness in the world.

As I was perusing the volume that is being released, I found the answer. I prefer to quote the passage rather than caricature the piece of perfect art. The Passage at Page 212 runs as follows: "Sankara says here that Krishna was not giving Arjuna an order to fight. That is not the point here. The point here was "Do not entertain the idea of withdrawing from the battle field." What is the difference between this statement and an order to flight? There is a difference Sankara says. This was not a command that one should actually fight. If it was not a command, then, was it a request? No. Arjuna was already prepared to fight. He had come with entire armory; but then found himself obstructed by sorrow and delusion – he was Soka–Moha. That is why he became silent. He could not proceed because he was completely paralyzed psychologically and emotionally for various reasons. Therefore, he was no longer interested in fighting and turned his attention to something else". "Bhagavan does not ask people to fight each other. Gita Sastra, Sanakara states, is not a Pravriti Sastra like Karma Kanda which enjoins people to perform various rituals and other activities" Krishna was only reminding Arjuna of his duty and removing his confusion. As Swamiji says, "not all of Krishnan's words are scriptural. Here they were purely words of advice and not meant as order" and only those, he taught and dealt with the ultimate concerns of life and the status scripture. Swamiji goes on to say that the expressions like Uttishta and Ujjasva in chapter 2 verses 36

Hathova propsyase sworgam

Jeethva mokshyase mahim

Thus math Uttishta Kounteya

Yuddaya krita Nischaya(36)

and (37)

Suka dukke Sami Krithva

Laba Babon jaya jayon

Thato Uddaya Ujjasva

Nainam papam avopaysi

In 37 are contextual, as the scene was the battlefield. Swamiji says: there are some points in the Gita like this one that are important to understand well because they are areas where people often misunderstand the intended meaning.

Some commentaries on “Yogaha, Karmasa, Kausalam” say that skill or dexterity in any action is yoga. They equate the Management technique of “Excellence” with Karma Yoga. A thinker or turner doing some skilled work cannot be called Karma Yogi. Can a dexterous pickpocket who has never been caught be called a Karma Yogi? Swamiji devoted a full hour in his class to explain the real meaning of the *sloka*.

Running over several pages of this volume Swamiji explains the karma Yogi performs actions not for the fruits thereof but as an offering to Iswara who is the Karmpala data.

Thasmath askthaha (chap. III Verse 19)

Satatam Karyam Karma Samachara

Asakto hi acharan Karma

Param aprot Purushah

The secular definition of karma ignoring Iswara has no basis in the sastra. Moreover, the concept of Dharma and Adharma is universal and accepted and recognized by every one. Consequently adharmic activities, however skillfully or dexterously performed cannot be regarded as yoga.

Though the Gita is divided into 18 chapters with captions, Karma Yoga, Sanyasa Yoga, Bhakti Yoga, Moksha Sanyasa Yoga, etc. they are not water tight compartments and the thoughts and ideas like diffused in the entire Gita. Therefore, the interpretation of the slokas must be holistic in the sense that the thoughts should be correlated to what has been said earlier or later in the book. One special feature of Swamiji’s classes is that such a holistic picture is presented not only with reference to ideas spread over the Gita, but to the source materials, the Sruti and Upanishads.

Dealing with Arjuna’s pertinent query in chapter 3 verse 1 that if knowledge is better than action then why should he (Arjuna) be impelled to perform gruesome action (i.e. War). Swamiji explains at Page No. 401 onwards of the volume as follows: “the two fold nishta (the committed life style) is meant only for Sreyas (moksha). Arjuna wanted Krishna to tell him which is better and Krishna replied that one can be Sanyasi or a Karma Yogi. Both are meant for the same end – Moksha, Sreyas. One can live a life of Karma Yoga and gain Moksha and one can live the life of Sanyasi and gain Moksha. The only difference is that for a Sanyasi, there is only knowledge, whereas for a Karma Yogi there is knowledge and Karma. This difference must be understood well because this is where there is a lot of Confusion”.

Swamiji draws a distinction between a person performing Karma with knowledge (Jnana) and a person performing Karma without knowledge. The former is karma yogi and the later a karmi. Thus in both the nishta the pursuit of knowledge is Common. Swamiji points out that the choice is not between Jnana and Karma but between Sanyasa and Karma Yoga.

Swamiji debunks the popular misconception that there is multi path to moksha. He adheres to Bhagavan’s answer to Arjuna in chapter 3 verses 3

Lokesmin dvidha nishta

Pura prokta maya Anagha

nana Yogena Sankhyanam

Karma Yogena Yoginam

Oh Sinless One, the two fold committed life style in this world was told by me in the beginning – (of Creation) – the pursuit of knowledge for the renunciate and the pursuit of Action for those engaged in activity.

Sankara in his introduction to the Gita Bhasya reiterates the same. He says that, “it is the two fold vedic religion of work and Renunciation that maintain order in the universe”.

Many people believe that Bhakti Marga is yet another path to moksha. The caption of chapter XII of the Gita calls it Bhakti Yoga. Besides, in verse 12 of chapter XII, Bhagavan says Jnanath Dhyanam vishisyte. Our Alwars and Nayanmars had spread the Bhakti cult over centuries.

It is illuminating to read the methodical and logical views of Swamiji on the subject. Earlier it has been explained that a Karma Yogi is one who pursues knowledge along with his obligatory duties; otherwise he is only a karmi. Swamiji asks “If there is third person called Bhakti Yogi, does he have obligatory duties or not? If he has he is Karma Yogi. Is there karma Yogi without Bhakti? Is there even a Sanyasi without Bhakti,”. Even when one meditates invoking the grace of God, one is performing manasam karma. That is why Bhagavan says

Lokesmin dvidha nishta

Tamil Saints Thayumanavar one of great exponents of Bhakti says

பண்ணேன் உனக்காக
பூஜை ஒரு வடிவிலே
பாவித் திரைஞ்சு மாங்கே
பாக்கிற மலரோடு
நீயே இருத்தி அப்பணி
மலரெடுக்க மனமும் நண்ணேன்
அலாது இருகரங்கள்
தான் குவிக்கவெனில்
நானும் என் உள்ளம்
நிறை நீ ..

When I wanted to pluck a flower for offering to you, I hesitated, because you are already in that flower.

When I wanted to clasp both my hands in prayer, I felt embarrassed as you are already embedded in my heart.

As when I offer prayer to you, only half is engaged in the process, is it proper for me to offer worship?

Here the saint describes the Brahman, which is ever present in everything. It is therefore Jnana aided Bhakti or Bhakti emanating from Jnana. Saint Arunagiri says:

நீ வேறெனாதிருக்க
நான் வேறெனாதிருக்க
நேராக வாழ்வதற்கு
அருள் கூற.

Show me that path to realize you (the God) are not apart from me and I (the devotee) am not apart from you.

It is clear that knowledge is the foundation for Bhakti. Referring to caption Bhakti Yoga in chapter XII Swamiji explains that the word Yoga in the context means “topic”. The first chapter of Gita itself is captioned Arjuna vishada Yoga. The despondency of Arjuna cannot be called Yoga. Swamiji reaches the unassailable conclusion that as stated by Bhagavan himself there are only two nishtas, the Jnana and Karma Margas.

In this rambling talk I have sought to impress that unless one studies the scriptures from a Guru mere learning from commentaries or pseudo teachers will only result in mis-education.

Not all teachers are Gurus. Sankara in Vivekachudamani(verse 33) describes the Gurulakshna. He should be srothria – well versed in Vedas, a non sinner, unsmitten by desire, a knower of Brahman, kind compassionate to sishya.. etc. It is my humble view that Swami Dayanandaji personifies the qualities envisaged for a Guru by Sankara himself.

This volume which contains the first three chapters of Gita runs into 532 pages. The other three volumes will follow making the set the most detailed exploration of Gita ever brought out. Since it is reproduction of the lesson in a classroom, there are detailed explanations, cross-reference to the Upanishads and other relevant scriptures and argument for and against any position taken or dealt with. The style is conversational and therefore very easy for even laymen to understand. The illustrative stories are enlivening and witty. I have seen the classes burst into laughter on these occasions.

The book is neatly printed and well got up. In this volume, only the number of the chapter is mentioned at the top. It will facilitate easy reference if the numbers of the verses under discussion are also mentioned.

The book is appropriately called BHAGAVAT GITA HOME – STUDY COURSE, as it will enable a person to have the benefit of a Guru's teaching in his Home.

In its concept and content this volume is unique and an invaluable contribution towards taking Gita to the Household.

Sankara in Bhaja Govindam has said, if even a little of Bhagavat Gita is studied (every day) even Yama the God of Death will not raise dispute (to your attaining moksha).

I am sure every Home will be benefited by having a copy of these volumes for self-study. I have great pleasure in releasing Vol 1 of Swami Dayananda's Bhagavat Gita – HOME – STUDY – COURSE and commending it the people not only of India but to whole Universe.