

11. The Yoga of Devotion

The Yoga of devotion occupies the central place in the exposition of the BG, as it recurs even in the exposition of other Yogas. It is not only *karma-yoga* that allows the performer to be absolved of the consequences of actions; a total surrender of actions to God is also a solution to the problem. Using words employed in the discussion of the *karma-yoga*, this is another way to withdraw authorship of actions, provided the performer does the actions with a sense of duty and has no personal ends to serve. While *karma-yoga* looks for support to a rational analysis of action and a philosophical view of the soul as explained earlier, the path of devotion is founded on a total faith in God. To put it in the words of the BG, God is the core force housed in all creatures' hearts and moving them in the manner of a merry-go-round. A complete surrender to Him leads the soul to supreme peace and eternal happiness, i.e. *mokṣa*, liberation. (XVIII.61)

Does this mean that devotion is a short cut to liberation that bypasses the knowledge? No. The BG does not interfere with the basic Upaniadic theory that knowledge alone leads to liberation – *tam eva viditvā 'ti mṛtyum eti, nānyaḥ panthā vidyate 'yanāya* (Śvetāśvatara III.8). In fact, it reiterates it time and again in the course of its exposition. Liberation does not come as a miracle; it has to be acquired through persistence (VII.19) and through the proper channels. What devotion does for the devotee is to place on God the responsibility of equipping the devotee with knowledge (X.10, XVIII.55). The BG recommends the path of devotion on the ground that it is easy to follow, as against the path of pure knowledge which involves harder efforts (XII.3). In devotion, God can be visualised in any form, provided the person has faith in it. Faith is the very essence of devotion (VII.21). As an illustration, reference may be made to the grand imagery in the eleventh chapter which depicts God in an unusual, universal, fierce divine form – *viśva-rūpa* (Universal form). The BG imagery in this chapter has an unmistakable resemblance to the famous *Puruṣa-sūkta* of the Ṛgveda.

Apart from this special form, the BG expounds in many places the general characteristics of God. God is viewed as the origin, sustenance and the dissolution of the world (X.20), not as an extraneous agent but the immanent, sustaining force in it (XV.17). He is housed in everybody's heart and is the ultimate source of the rise and the fall of all intelligent operations (XV.15). He is the father, the mother and the guardian of the world (IX.17). All things in the world move in Him like the wind in space (IX.6). In an invisible form, He pervades the entire world (IX.4, VIII.22). This does not mean that He is *equal* to the world; He is over and above the world. He transcends it by more of Him than permeates it (X.42). He is the essence of everything: fluidity in water, light in the sun and the moon, sound in space, the pleasant smell in earth, life in creatures, intellect in intellectuals, and so on (VII.8....., XV.12).

Once it is realised that faith is the essence of devotion, it matters little what things the devotee offers in worship. Says the Lord: 'A leaf, a flower, a fruit, plain water, -- anything that is offered with the pure sentiment of devotion, I enjoy.' (IX.26) It follows from this that social status too cannot be the basis of evaluation of worship. Whatever the caste or creed of the devotee, howsoever low in the established social structure, the philosophy of devotion which views God as equal to all does not on that count differentiate one devotee from another. (IX.32) In the same spirit the Lord assures that even the worst sinner is not prohibited from entering the portals of devotion; for the moment the sinner turns to devotion, he starts a new chapter in his life and is

sure to scale the righteous path and finally attain peace. (IX.30-31) Devotion believes that it is never too late to mend.

Though, thus, differentiation based on extraneous factors is prohibited in real devotion, the evaluation of devotees in consideration of their motivation has a place in the philosophy of devotion. The BG divides devotees into four classes: those in distress, those prompted by the curiosity to know God, those seeking material means, and those who are enlightened (VII.16). Devotees prompted by worldly motives are placed by the BG on a level lower than that of enlightened ones (VII.17-18). The BG does not denounce them; it rather speaks of them softly, saying that they are all good (VII.18), implying that it is always good to keep on the path of devotion even if it means an approach to minor deities with a worldly motive (IX.23). The BG, however, declares the enlightened devotee as the very soul of God (VII.18). He approaches God with single-minded devotion and sees Him everywhere – *vāsudevaḥ sarvam iti* (VII.19). Such a man is very rare, says the BG. Such devotees have no other object which engages their minds; they have their minds, in fact their very life, fully attuned to God. (IX.14, X.9) God considers it His duty to see that they do not lack means of sustenance while they are alive (IX.22).

Select Quotations-11

- 1 What you do, what you eat, what you offer in the fire, what penance you perform, surrender all that to me. You will thereby be absolved of their consequences. (IX.27-28) Resigning mentally all works to Me and making Me your goal, and resorting to the Yoga of discrimination, keep your mind constantly on Me. Thinking of Me, you will surmount all obstacles through My grace.... (XVIII.57-58)
- 2 To those who, ever absorbed in Yoga, worship me with love, I give Yoga of discrimination by which they come unto Me. (X.10)
- 3 I shall (now) expound the object of knowledge, knowing which one attains immortality. (XIII.12) He who thus knows the *Puruṣa* and the *Prakṛti* with its qualities, in whatever condition he may be, is not born again. (XIII.23) When he perceives the diversity of beings as rooted in the One (*Brahman*), and as spreading from that One alone, then he becomes *Brahman*. (XIII.30)
- 4 Whichever aspect a devotee seeks to worship with faith, I make that very faith of each one unshakeable. (VII.21)
- 5 If the light of a thousand suns were to blaze forth in the sky at once, it might be somewhat like the splendour of that Supreme Self. (XI.12)
- 6 I dwell in the hearts of all; from Me spring memory, knowledge and reason. I alone am the object of knowledge of all the Vedas; ... (XV.15)
- 7 Even if a person of vilest conduct worships Me, devoted to none other, he too must be reckoned good; for he is rightly resolved. He soon becomes righteous and finds everlasting peace. Be assured, O son of Kunti, that My devotee does not perish. (IX.30-31)
- 8 As for men who worship Me, thinking of Me alone and none other, who are ever absorbed in Me, I take upon Myself provision of their means of livelihood. (IX.22)