

5. What are the basic concepts of Indian philosophy?

As pointed out earlier, the BG presents its teaching on the background of the philosophical heritage of the Upaniṣads. It would, therefore, be helpful to have a broad idea of the basic concepts of Upaniṣadic philosophy. Borrowing an analogy from Vyāsa's commentary on Patañjali, these concepts may be explained as parallel to the fourfold plan of medical science: worldly bondage (cp. disease), erroneous knowledge (cause of disease), liberation (release from disease), right knowledge (means of release).

For an ordinary man, life may be an admixture of pleasure and pain. The philosopher, however, views it as full of suffering because even pleasure is followed by sadness as it terminates. The experience of pleasure leaves the mind yearning for it, and the sense of yearning is definitely not a pleasure. Man develops attachment to objects of pleasure, and hatred for those that cause pain. This constant process finally results in the loss of peace, which is no doubt suffering. Religious belief shows a way to attaining more lasting pleasures -- e.g. by attaining heaven -- through acquiring merit by practising religious and philanthropic deeds; but souls in heaven have to quit heaven when their merit is exhausted. The impermanence of pleasure causes worry even during the span of pleasure; and worry is certainly not a pleasurable experience. The shadow of death pursues a creature from the moment it is born; and death is the most hated thing in the world. Nor is death a full stop; for it is followed, as much as preceded, by rebirth in any form of life determined by the actions of the soul. All these considerations lead the philosopher to view worldly life as a chain of suffering.

To find a way to get rid of this suffering, the most logical step is to find out the cause of suffering. The philosopher finds suffering rooted in the erroneous knowledge of the soul about its identity. The soul identifies itself with the complex of the body, the mind and the organs. This leads it to assign to itself the experiences of this complex and, as a result of this, to suffer. This situation is best explained by the universal experience of a dream. No one would treat a dream experience as real, but no one can deny its effect on the dreamer during the spell of the dream.

The dreamer is blissfully unaware of the sufferings in the waking as well as the dreaming states when he passes on to the state of deep sleep. This is when the soul manifests its original nature of pure consciousness free from all worldly bonds and identities. This experience, although short, gives a glimpse into the supreme state the philosopher calls 'liberation'. As it is the original, natural state of the soul, it is permanent in the sense that, once attained, it is never lost. One can subsist without external attributes, but can never subsist without oneself. In brief, liberation is not an acquisition, but a restoration of the natural state of the soul.

If the cause of suffering is erroneous knowledge, it logically follows that being rid of this knowledge will lead to an end of suffering. As darkness is dispelled by light, erroneous knowledge is dispelled by the right knowledge of the nature of the soul that it is not Tom, Dick or Harry, but pure consciousness, free from worldly identities of individual, group, nation, colour, race, sex and so on. It is too obvious a fact to any intelligent individual, even outside philosophical thinking, that these identities are at the root of all conflicts in the world. It is a matter of going still deeper into the search of the self that would bring one nearer the philosopher's perspective of worldly life and his urge to find a permanent solution to it.

Bhagavad-gītā: Quotations-5

1 The medical science has a fourfold plan: the disease, cause of the disease, release from the disease, medicine. Similarly, this science also has a fourfold plan: the transmigratory (worldly) life, its cause, liberation, the means (of liberation). To explain: worldly life full of suffering is to be rid of; the union of the matter/mind and the soul is the cause of suffering; liberation is the eternal disunion of the two; right knowledge is the means of the disunion. (Vyāsa on Yogasūtra II.16)

2 It is not possible to satiate sense organs by persistence in pleasures. How? Attachment and deftness of the organs in pleasures grow with persistence in pleasures. Therefore, persistence in pleasures is certainly not the means to lasting happiness. The man who indulges in the objects of pleasure in the hope of achieving happiness ultimately sinks in the quagmire of suffering, as is one scared of a scorpion when bitten by a snake. (Vyāsa on Yogasūtra II.15)

3 (Those who perform sacrifices attain heaven and enjoy heavenly pleasures.) Having enjoyed the extensive heavenly world, they return to the mortal world at the expiration of their merit. Thus, the seekers of pleasure follow the path of rituals and commute between two worlds. (BG IX.21)

4 (The tree of worldly life:) Its branches, nourished by the three elements (*sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*) and sprouting as sense objects spread upwards (heavenwards) and downwards (earth and thereunder). Its roots, woven into actions, have penetrated deep down in the world of mortals. No form of this tree is perceived, no end, no beginning, nor middle. ... (BG XV.2-3)

5 Arjuna asks: Now tell me, O Lord, what prompts this soul to indulge in sins, even against its will, as if it is forced into them?

The Lord replies: It is desire, it is anger -- a glutton, the worst sinner -- springing from the element of *rajas*, (that prompts it into sins). Know that it (desire-anger) is an adversary on the path of liberation. As fire is engulfed by smoke, a mirror by dirt, a foetus by sac, so is knowledge engulfed by this its avowed enemy disguised as desire, insatiable and ever hungry. Sense organs, mind and intellect are said to be its seats. Through these, it (desire-anger) deludes the soul by covering knowledge. (BG III.36-40)

6 On reaching me, great souls attain the supreme, perfect state, and are not exposed to rebirth which is the home of suffering and is impermanent. (BG VIII.15)

7 He who thus knows as distinct the soul and the matter consisting of elements (*sattva*, *rajas*, *tamas*) is not reborn, whatever the way he lives. (BG XIII.23)

8 Those who thus know the distinction between the farm (matter) and the farmer (soul), and also the release of the soul from the root cause of the material world, attain the supreme state. (BG XIII.34)