

MORAL PRESCRIPTIONS OF THE GITA AND BUDDHISM

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Abstract

There is a comparison between the moral ideas of the Bhagavadgita and the Buddhism. In the Buddhist frame there is emphasis on getting rid of the desires (kaamanaa) to bring an end to the sufferings which is the goal of life. In the Gita there is also an emphasis on the desireless (niskaama) action to achieve the goal of the life. Some more examples are taken into account for comparison. Looking at the affinity some have raised the doubt that might be the author of the Gita "derived its ideas of controlling desires and uprooting attachment from Buddhism". Through analysis the paper has concluded that even though in both the frames giving up the attachment and desire are found as common ethical prescriptions but in the Buddhist frame the concepts of 'desire' and 'attachment' are important in the context of bondage and ignorance whereas in the Gita giving up desire and attachment has not been used for the sake of removal of ignorance. Moreover the concept of avijja of Buddhism is not the same as the ajnana of the Gita though both the terms are translated and understood as 'ignorance'. So the affinity is apparent but not final.

Keywords

Desire, non-attachment, ignorance, avijja, jnana.

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The *Bhagavad Gita* is treated as a pious text of the Hindu religion. The religious importance of the Gita is unquestionable for the Hindus. As a Hindu religious text it is supposed to be in tune with the 'Vedic orthodoxy'. By 'Vedic orthodoxy' I mean vice and virtue consideration is conditional to obedience and disobedience of the Vedic injunctions. Dasgupta mentions that "It has been pointed out that these injunctions implied a sort of categorical imperative and communicated a sense of *vidhi* as law, a command which must be obeyed."¹ It is important to note that even though the Gita is greatly understood as a significant part and parcel of the Indian classics but did not promote such Vedic orthodoxy.

The Gita receives appreciation from many non-Hindus as a valuable text for the moral philosophy it shares. The basis of such a possibility is that the message of the text can also be viewed as constituting solutions to the pertinent dilemmatic moral questions of the life. The dialogues of Srikrishna and Arjuna are based on solving knowing 'what to do and not to do'. Those provide the guidelines on the understanding of the best possible man (*Purusottama*) and the means of the achievement of the highest good. (*vada nishchitya hyena shreyo 'ham aapnuyam*, which means: tell me decisively that by which highest good can be achieved) (BG III-2) The Gita aims at that disciplined man (*yogi*) who could by resisting his desire and anger become a happy man.² That *yogi* because of his control over senses and engaging in the good of all others is fit for the attainment of the highest state, *Brahma-nirvana*.

In a nutshell it may be pointed out that the core moral prescription of the Gita seems to be the control over desires and attachments through which action without expectation of fruits can be possible. If there is any suggestion in the Gita regarding 'what type of karma should to be performed?' then undoubtedly the answer would be 'while performing the duty not to think over the fruits thereof' (II-47). Moreover, the action performed without attachment (*akarma*) is always treated as the higher order of action according to the Gita. The concept of *naiskarmya* has been understood as 'giving up the attachment or as desireless action.

Quite interestingly similar moral thoughts occupy a very significant place in the Buddhist Philosophy. Desire happens to be the sole cause of bondage and giving up desire is essential to remove the ignorance that has been treated as primary teachings of Buddha. It is also seen that there are several words used in the Buddhist literature to signify 'desire' and 'attachment'. In the book *The Ethics of Buddhism*, Tachibana has pointed out a very long list of Buddhist vices out of which it is seen that a number of words found to be used referring to 'desire' and 'attachments'. The words used to mean 'desire' are namely: *apekhaa, icchaa, ejaa, aasaa, esanaa,*

aakaankhaa, giddhi, laalasa, pihaa, aaloya, vanam, ussado, anusayo, etc. The words used to mean ‘attachment’ are namely: *aadaana-gantho, gaaho, pariggaho, kinchanam, upaadaanam, bandho, bandhanam, nivandho, upanivandho, nivesanam, sango, sanhavam, etc.* The uses of these words are found in the context of finding the sources of the vices in the Buddhist frame. Such vices are responsible for suffering and bondage. So the significant moral prescription in the Buddhist philosophy is to become free from the desires and attachments.

We have seen some close affinity between some of the ethical ideas of the Gita and the early Buddhism for which reason there is a scope of suspecting the possibility of “the Gita derived its ideas of controlling desires and uprooting attachment from Buddhism.”⁵ It is not contention to examine if any one source has borrowed the idea from the other source. It is because in my opinion if any importance has been attached to any moral idea by more than one source then one doesn’t need to follow or borrow the other. Rather my point is to see if besides affinity there is any difference in their approaches while attaching importance to ‘giving up attachments and desires’ in their frames.

So far as the Buddhist frame is concerned it may be pointed out that here ultimate goal of a being is to get rid of ignorance or *avijja* to make one free from the bondage of undergoing the birth-rebirth cycle (*janma-marana chakra*). There are twelve links to the chakra which starts with ignorance. The eighth link is *Krsna* which represents the desire for a sense of enjoyment. It gives rise to the state *apadana* or the clinging for a sense of enjoyment which is the cause of the will to be born (*bhava*). This shows that ignorance plays a key role in giving birth. They believe that only the proper knowledge of *pratitya samutpada* can remove ignorance. In the Buddhist frame the concepts that are linked with the concepts of ‘desire’ and ‘attachment’ are found as the cause of all evils or vices and the root cause is ignorance. Thus in the Buddhist frame removal of ignorance happens to be primary concern for which giving up desires and attachments is the means. So in this frame the concepts of ‘desire’ and ‘attachment’ are having important in the context of bondage and ignorance.

So far as the frame of the Gita is concerned the recommendation for giving up desires and attachments are seen in two important contexts in the following manner.

- i) Desires and attachments give rise to greed which leads to frustration and anger. Gita attaches importance to the state of *sthitaprajna* which is not possible in the presence of frustration and anger.

- ii) The concepts of desires and attachments are also found to be important in the context of Karma Yoga with respect to the performance of duty and *niskamakarma*.

Without further elaboration of the contexts it can very well be said that in the Gita giving up desire and attachment has not been used for the sake of removal of ignorance. Dasgupta has made this point clear with the words: “This need not be interpreted to mean that the Gita was opposed to the view that attachments and desires are produced from ignorance; but it seems at least to imply that the Gita was not interested to trace the origin of attachments and desires and was satisfied with to take their existence for granted and urged the necessity of their extirpation for peace and equanimity of mind.”⁶ So it cannot be thought that Gita has followed Buddhist ideas.

I would prefer to say that the Gita is more in the direction of the Upanisads where the self-knowledge occupies primary importance over the ‘sacrificial actions’. Though there are some moral prescriptions in the Upanisads but those remain unemphasized due to the overemphasis on the ontological considerations. Gita which is also considered as an Upanisad, as being certified in the colophon of the each chapter, seems to follow the moral footprints of some of the Upanisads quite remarkably. To take an example, the *Mundaka Upanisad* says that “He who entertains desire thinking of them, is born (again) here and there on account of his desires. But of him who has his desire fully satisfied, who is a perfected soul, all his desires vanish even here.”⁷ Similar view has been mentioned in the Gita as “He attains peace into whom all desires enter as the waters enter the ocean, which is full to the brim and grounded in stillness, but not the man who is the desirer of desires.” (BGII-70) Of course it may be pointed out that in the vast volumes of the Upanisads there are some moral prescriptions But in the Gita the moral prescriptions are very frequent.

In the Upanisadic frame the importance has been attached to knowledge and ignorance or *vidya* and *avidya* in the context of obtaining *aatmajnana*. (*Isopanisad*, 9 -11) The primary message is that the so-called *vidya* is as good as ignorance. For *aatmajnana* proper knowledge is necessary. Much after Sankaracarya has attached emphasis on the concept of *avidya* as the obstacle for the knowledge of Brahman. But in the Gita it does not appear that there has been emphasis on the concept of ignorance or *avidya* in any of the above senses though there has been use of the concept *ajnana* for some time. Out of the several uses of the term *jnana* besides being used to mean wrong knowledge, the most significant one is used in the sense that anything other than *jnana* is *jnana* and *jnana* stands for the unvacillating knowledge of truth and reality. However it is clear that *avijja* of Buddhism is not the

same as *ajnana* of the Gita though both the terms are translated and understood as 'ignorance'. So the affinity is apparent but not final. There is no possibility of derivation of ideas by any source.

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- The paper has been accepted for presentation in the Indian Philosophical Congress, 2023
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