

Excerpts from Mahabharata (Santi Parva) – Means for Liberation

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Guruji reading Ashtavakra Gita

OM SRI GANESHAYA NAMAH

Introduction:

The Mahabharata describes one of the greatest battles of yore where many died. The victor, Yudhishtira known also as Dharmaputra begin to rule the kingdom. He was famed for his virtuous conduct and just rule.

But wherever he went, he found thousands of young ladies who had lost their husbands and fathers of their little children dying fighting in the war and old men and ladies who were bereaved of their only support in life, with no young man left to care for them.

The accusing eyes of all these people pursued him day and night. Dharmaputra could never forgive himself for his dastardly crime. He fell into a deep depression. Then Lord Krishna tried to have him consoled in various ways by telling him that he had done no more than his duty as prescribed in the scriptures for the warrior race (Kshatriyas). At last he took

Dharmaputra to Bhishma who was the grandfather of the two warring races of both Pandavas and Kauravas and who was lying in a bed of arrows struck through his body. At the request of Lord Krishna he revealed the various subtle points of the virtuous path (Dharma) prescribed separately for various stations, castes, etc. and also clarified the various doubts of Dharmaputra. These are contained in the “Shanti Parva” which is one of the parvas (parts) into which the entire Mahabharata has been divided.

Yagyavalkya’s instructions on the means of Moksha (Moksha Dharma) - i.e. Liberation

Yagyavalkya was a great sage who by intense penance pleased the Sun Lord. When the Sun Lord came before him, he only requested that he wanted to know Yajur Veda which is one of the 3 main Vedas in practice.

He just opened his mouth wide as ordered by the Sun Lord and Saraswati, the Goddess of Learning, entered into his mouth.

For a little while, there was a lot of burning sensation over his entire body which cooled down in due course by itself. Then the Sun told him, “O my dear Sage, the entire Yajurveda (known as Sukla Yajurveda) with all its allied Brahmana and Upanishad portions will come to you. On getting this knowledge, your intellect will go in quest of the path of getting liberation and you will become an expert in Sankhya Yoga and you will yourself become a yogi.” The Sun God then disappeared.

The sage went to his house and remembered Goddess Saraswati. The sage welcomed her in the traditional way and the entire Yajurveda revealed itself to him.

Thus by the grace of Sun God, he got the 15 ascensions of Yajurveda. Again, by the grace of both, the Sun God and Saraswati, the real meanings and purport of the entire Vedas became revealed to him by themselves. The sage propagated the scripture to a number of disciples.

Once, Viswavasnu, the king of Gandharvas who was himself well versed in the Veda and Vedanta (philosophy) came to Yagyavalkya for discussing about liberation. He asked the sage, “Please tell me the meaning of the following words:

- Vishwa and Avishwa
- Mitra and Varuna
- Knowledge and Knowable
- Ignorant and Knowledgeable
- Penance
- Sun
- Vidya and Avidya

- Vedya (knowable) and Avedya (which cannot be known)
- Achala (immovable) and Chala (movable)
- Akshaya and Kshaya”

The sage immediately remembered Goddess Saraswati in his mind and began to give the answers.

The sage answered thus:

“The universe which is full of all the three modes (gunas) and also the cycle of birth and death is called the primordial nature or Prakrti and that which is not the universe is called the entity bereft of all gunas. In the same way, Varuna is the Prakrti or nature and mitra is the supreme Purusha; knowledge is Prakrti and the one to be known is Purusha; the ignorant and the ignorance is Prakrti and the one who knows is Purusha; tapasya is Prakrti, avidya is Prakrti and vidya is Purusha; chala is Prakrti and achala is Purusha.

According to the different approaches of thought, people consider the Prakrti as knowable and the Purusha as unknowable. Both Prakrti and Purusha are ignorant, permanent, inexhaustible and bereft of the cycle of birth and death. They are never born and so they are called “Aja”. They can never be exhausted so they are called “Akshaya”. Prakrti is the base for the gunas like sattva guna, etc. and as the Prakrti creates the world, it is called inexhaustible. All these things can be known by understanding the purport of the scriptures and daily by reciting the Vedas after going to a Guru and doing service to him. After reading the entire Vedas, if one cannot understand the ultimate Supreme Being, then all his learning is useless. Similarly, a man who, after learning the Vedas is not able to obtain the knowledge of Prakrti and Purusha is a great fool and all his learning is infructuous. The one who comes face to face with both Purusha and Prakrti need no more be under the control of birth and death in this world. Everyday, one has to leave off those virtuous acts like the yagas and yagnas which are all transient and should see in his heart the pure form of the self or atman then only he can get the knowledge of Prakrti and come face to face with the ultimate truth called Paramatma.

It is only a man who lacks in discrimination, who considers the individual soul as different from Paramatma, the ultimate truth; while a wise man, a yogi and a person who follows the Sankhya philosophy considers the permanent Paramatma the ultimate truth and jivatma the individual soul as one.

Viswvasu then asked Yagyavalkya – “Sir, people say that jivatma or the individual soul is one which is not subject to destruction. I would like to have a complete confirmation on this point from your mouth even though I have discussed this topic with so many great mahatmas.”

Yagyavalkya answered –

“O King of Gandharvas, jivatma is capable of knowing Prakrti which is unmanifest and insentient while the reverse is not true i.e. the Prakrti cannot understand the individual soul. In the two systems of philosophy, Sankhya and Yoga, the jivatma is called as full of knowledge. So long as the jivatma considers the body as belonging to it, it cannot have a vision of Paramatman, the highest entity. When once this ego is dispelled, it gets the knowledge of the Paramatma. The Paramatma is always seeing both the jivatma and the body. A wise man will never consider the body consisting of twenty four basic principles as the Self or Atman. Just like a person gets attached to the fish by feeding it with some food stuff, in the same way, jivatma gets attached to the objects of the world, being impelled so by Paramatma. So long as the individual soul does not understand its identification with the Supreme, it identifies itself with the body to which it gets attached and thus it goes on drowning in the ocean of Samsara (phenomenal world). The moment it considers the self as non-different from the Supreme it is able to cross the ocean of Samsara. Only when the individual soul considers itself as different and distinct from the body, then it can come face to face with the Supreme Parmatma.

Both the Paramatma and jivatma are independent but the wise people have considered their form as one. When once the individual soul understands itself as different from the body and not identical with it, then it can attain liberation. Further, so long as the jivatma considers itself as the seer and the highest truth namely Paramatma as an object to be seen and also as the material cause of this world and as not identical with the form of jivatma, it cannot the vision of the highest entity. In other words, it cannot attain liberation. Thus, only when the jivatma is considered as identical with Paramatma, it is called as indestructible. The King of Gandharvas was very happy and took leave of Sage Yagyavalkya with gratitude.

So Bheeshma after recounting the story tells Dharmaputra as follows:

Liberation can only be obtained through knowledge. So one has to get this knowledge through which a man gets released from the cycle of birth and death. A person who has full faith is not subject to any fear. As people from all the castes come out of the same Brahman (the Ultimate and Supreme Entity) all persons can thus be called as Brahmins and thus are entitled for reading the scriptures (Vedas). The entire world is constituted by the Supreme Brahman. A man gets into the repeated cycle of birth and death due to ignorance and hence he has to earn the highest knowledge. The effect of knowledge remains everywhere at all times. The people who are well versed in Sankhya and Yoga Shastra consider this world as the product of both Prakrti and Purusha. The wise people declare the Supreme Brahman as liberated from likes and dislikes, as permanent and as absolutely pure. Hence, one should always live in that purity and holiness. Consider the giver, the gift which is given or any other

charity and the receiver of the charity as your own self. The self or Atman is something unique and there is nothing greater than that. At all times you think of That. As far as the persons who have no knowledge of Brahman, the Supreme, for them the best activity is to go on pilgrimages and to do fire sacrifices (yagnas). The one who gets the knowledge of the Ultimate Supreme becomes entitled for the state of liberation transcending maya or the grand illusion. One can cross the ocean of Samsara through knowledge alone but it is not possible through fire sacrifices. The wise men tell that any yagas and yagnas can never release one from the cycle of birth and death which subjects one to suffering. By doing yagas and yagnas and following some vows like fasting one may get the imaginary land of the heavens but he has to again take birth in this earth. Hence, at all times you worship the highest entity known as Parabrahman whose nature is absolute peace and who is absolutely pure with a pure heart. From this alone, you can be transformed into the form of Ultimate Paramatma.

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