

ARE SAMNYĀSA AND TYĀGA SYNONYMS IN THE BHAGAVADGĪTĀ ?

The Bhagavadgītā uses the words Samnyāsa and Tyāga along with their grammatical variations frequently.¹ A survey of these various uses in the Gītā² raises the question whether these words are being used to mean the same thing or to mean different things. Indeed this question is raised within the Gītā itself when Arjuna asks Kṛṣṇa for a clarification of the distinction between the two.³

This paper is only concerned with the question of the identity or otherwise of Samnyāsa and Tyāga and not with other issues the verse might raise. That this issue is indeed raised by the verse seems to be beyond reasonable question. It is clearly covered by interpretations (4) and (3). The second interpretation is difficult to sustain and as for the first, a discussion of the true nature of Samnyāsa and Tyāga must involve at least marginally if not centrally a consideration of the distinction, if any, between the two.

II

An attempt to answer Arjuna's question could be made at two levels : (1) at the level of the verbal meaning of these words and (or) (2) at the level of the essential implication of these words. Though it would probably be unwise to draw too sharp a distinction between the two levels it may be pointed out that Arjuna asks for an answer at the second level—at the level of essential implication.⁴ He wants to know the *tattvam*,⁵ the truth or essence of Samnyāsa and Tyāga as *prthak*,⁶ as distinguished.

This paper is an attempt to answer Arjuna's question at both the levels.⁷

It is worth noting that nowhere in the Gītā does Kṛṣṇa directly answer Arjuna's question by stating categorically whether Samnyāsa and Tyāga are same or different. This is not entirely surprising for even elsewhere sometimes Kṛṣṇa does not give direct answers to Arjuna's questions. Arjuna even complains about this.⁸ This paper, however, is not an attempt to answer Arjuna's question on Kṛṣṇa's behalf; rather it is an attempt to answer

Arjuna's question in the light of the remarks made by Kṛṣṇa in the Gītā on the subject of Tyāga and Saṁnyāsa. Thus Arjuna asks whether Saṁnyāsa and Tyāga are different and Kṛṣṇa never says they are the same : in this paper this open-endedness is explored.

III

In order to answer the question posed by Arjuna it is helpful to identify first the central context in which these words and their underlying concepts appear in the Gītā.

It is a tale which has been told many a time. On the eve of the great battle Arjuna is overcome with emotion at the prospect of having to kill his own kinsmen,⁹ throws down his arms¹⁰ and refuses to fight¹¹—although he is a warrior. Why ?

Arjuna argues that by killing his kinsmen he will incur sin,¹² indeed, he will incur a great sin.¹³

When Arjuna's emotion-charged arguments are filtered through the sieve of Hindu philosophy, his position can be refined into the statement that the *act of killing* will produce the *fruit of sin*. Thus if now Arjuna's position is further typologized and generalised it means that an action (killing) will produce a fruit of action (a bad one in this case, a rotten apple, sin)—which he does not like.

Kṛṣṇa then tries to meet Arjuna's objections by pointing out that there are ways in which the sinful consequence he so dreads could be avoided. The Gītā, from one point of view, is a compendium of the various possible ways in which this could be done.

From the point of view of this paper it is helpful to classify these various options under two major headings : namely, those options which relate to the realm of action (*Karma*) and those which relate to the realm of fruit of action (*Karmaphala*). That is to say, the Gītā suggests certain attitudes which could be adopted towards *karma* and certain attitudes which could be adopted towards *karmaphala* and that these attitudes have the effect of averting the sinful consequences of the course of action Arjuna is reluctant to embark upon.

Now some of these various attitudes which the Gītā recommends are brought in relation to the concepts of Saṁnyāsa and Tyāga in the Gītā,¹⁴ and this paper must now turn towards an examination of this relationship.

IV

It seems best to begin such an examination by pointing out not what the *Gītā* recommends but what it does not recommend. It does not recommend Arjuna's way of avoiding sin which is not to fight.¹⁵ Arjuna seems to closely if naively argue that to get rid of sin which is the consequence of action one might give up the action itself. It is not so simple, *Kṛṣṇa* seems to say. *Kṛṣṇa* accepts the general Hindu pre-supposition that Karma binds but the way out of the bind is not to refrain from acting because act man must¹⁶ or Arjuna must¹⁷ but to cut the bond of Karma in other ways. This bond of Karma (*karmabandha*)¹⁸ could be cut at two points—at the point of its origin, Karma itself, or at the point of its fruition or *Karmaphala*. It cannot, however, be cut by refusing to act. What other options are then available ?

Let us first discuss the options available in the realm of Karma. The general point seems to be that there are various ways of acting in which action so performed is not *karma* in the sense that it does not generate *karmaphala* even though outwardly it might appear that a person has acted. What are these situations in which action is no-action in the karmic sense ? Some of these situations visualized in the *Gītā* are presented below.

(1) When one acts only to fulfil one's prescribed duties (*niyata*)¹⁹ and not desire-motivated ones (*kāmya*).

(2) When one acts but with the realisation that it is not "he"²⁰ but the body which is acting²¹ or the *guṇas* are at work.

(3) When one acts but casts off one's actions on God or Brahman, i.e., the actions are deposited with God or transferred to God.²²

(4) When one acts without attachment to the action performed.²³

(5) When one acts but without being motivated by the fruit of action²⁴ or when one's action does not depend on the fruit of action²⁵ or is performed out of a sense of duty.²⁶

(6) When action is performed in consonance with Yoga.²⁷

Next, some of the options available in the realm of *Karmaphala* may be discussed. The main thrust here seems to be that if what one has to avoid is sin and if the *act* of killing results in the *fruit* of sin and if this link could be severed—then even if one

acted there would be no sin for the act may be there but the attitude towards its fruit would be such that its fruit will not accrue. From this point of view some of the available options in the realm of Karmaphala are :

(7) One may act but give up the *desire* or resolve for the fruit of action—then the fruit of action does not accrue.²⁸

(8) One may act but give up *attachment* to the fruit of action—then the fruit of action does not accrue.²⁹

(9) One may act but give up the fruit of action itself.³⁰

To sum up : there are myriad ways of acting which really are not acting in the sense that they do not subject one to Karmic bondage. Acting in those ways means giving up action in the sense that it is no longer Karmically consequential, as when one gives up attachment to action; gives up attachment to the fruit of action; gives up attachment *and* the fruit of action etc.

Thus Arjuna begins by wanting to give up fighting but Kṛṣṇa points out that what he must give up is not the physical act of fighting but mental engagement and one has a plethora of statements on Kṛṣṇa's version of 'giving up' as against Arjuna's. Now the two words Saṁnyāsa and Tyāga both have the general meaning of giving up.³¹ Out of the plethora of Kṛṣṇa's statements on 'giving up' is it possible to identify some senses which belong uniquely to either Saṁnyāsa or Tyāga ? The task is formidable but we should not give up !

V

If the various usages of Saṁnyāsa and Tyāga are now analysed in the context of the *realm of karma* and the *realm of karmaphala* an interesting conclusion emerges. Over most of the two realms the uses of the two words overlap. There are, however, three notable exceptions :

(1) the word Tyāga is not used in the sense of casting actions on something else such as God,³²

(2) the word Saṁnyāsa is not used in the sense of giving up the fruit of action.³³

(3) the word Saṁnyāsa is not used in the sense of giving up attachment to action.

An example will probably help clarify the implications of this conclusion. It is hoped that the example will make the problem posed in the Gītā appear less formidable and will not have the effect of trivialising it.

Let us suppose that a young American, caught up in the current fad for things Eastern, becomes exposed to Hindu philosophy and jumps to the conclusion that all action binds. Then when asked by his mother to do the dishes and in spite of the fact that the mother tries to make the undertaking attractive by offering two dollars the young lad refuses to do the dishes on the grand philosophical argument that 'action binds' !

Should now his mother be well-versed in the subtleties of the Gītā (which is unlikely) how could she, Kṛṣṇa-like, respond to the situation ? The mother could point out that according to the Hindu scripture known as the Bhagavadgītā the action of dish-washing may not bind if

(1) he regards dish-washing as his prescribed duty and so performs it;

(2) if he realises *he* is not washing the dishes, the dishes are being washed;

(3) if he mentally casts off the action of dish-washing on her;

(4) if he washes dishes without any attachment (on revulsion) to dish-washing;

(5) if he washes dishes without making his dish-washing depend on whether he gets the two dollars or not;

(6) if he washes dishes single-mindedly;

(7) if he gave up *desire* for the two dollars he will get from washing dishes (which does not mean that he may not have them);

(8) if he gave up this *attachment* to the two dollars;

(9) if he just gave up the two dollars !

If now thus edified the young lad should choose to proceed with dish-washing along any of the options except options number (3), (4) and (9), the spiritually precocious youngster could be called either a Saṁnyāsi or Tyāgi in the diction of the Gītā. If, however, he chose option number (3) he could only be said to be performing Saṁnyāsa and not Tyāga and if he chose options number (4) or (9) he could be called a Tyāgin but not a Saṁnyāsin.

It would appear, therefore, on the basis of the above analysis that though there is a tremendous area of semantic overlap between the two words *Samnyāsa* and *Tyāga* in the *Bhagavadgītā* they do not appear to be totally synonymous.³⁴

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NOTES

1. See G. A. Jacob, *A Concordance of the Upanishads and the Bhagavadgita*, Bombay : Government Central Book Depot, 1891, pp. 410–11, 968; Prahlad C. Divanji, *Critical Word-Index of the Bhagavadgita*, Bombay : New Book Co., 1946, passim etc.

2. To avoid cumbersomeness the *Bhagavadgītā* may be occasionally referred to as the *Gītā* in this paper.

3. XVIII. 1. Although this verse has been translated in at least four ways it is difficult to avoid the implication that the point at issue is the distinction between *Samnyāsa* and *Tyāga*. This becomes clear when the four ways in which the verse has been translated are examined closely. These are (1) that Arjuna wishes to know only the true nature of *Samnyāsa* and *Tyāga* severally, that is, of *Samnyāsa* on the one hand and of *Tyāga* on the other. The question of the distinction recedes in the background. This is how it seems to have been taken by Franklin Edgerton, *The Bhagavadgītā* Part I, Cambridge : Harvard University Press, 1944, p. 163; Arthur W. Ryder, *The Bhagavad-Gītā*, University of Chicago Press, 1930, p. 125; Swami Swarupananda, *Shrimad-Bhagavad-Gītā*, Calcutta : Advaita Ashram, 1967, p. 365; D. S. Sarma, *Lectures on the Bhagavad Gita*, Rajamundry : N. Subba Rau Pantulu, 1937, p. 200; J. Cockburn Thomson, *The Bhagavad-Gita*, Hartford : Stephen Austin, 1925 (?), p. 116; A. C. Bhaktivedānta Swami, *The Bhagavad Gita As It Is*, New York : Macmillan Co., 1968, p. 299; S. Radhakrishnan, *The Bhagavad-gitā*, London : George Allen and Unwin, 1948, p. 351; etc.; (2) that Arjuna wishes only to know the true nature of both together. This is how John Davies, *The Bhagavad Gītā*, London : Trübner and Co., 1882, p. 168, seems to take it. This rendering is hard to uphold—the expression *Pṛthak* hasn't been taken into account at all; (3) that Arjuna wishes to know both (a) the true

nature of Saṁnyāsa and Tyāga, and (b) the distinction between the two. It seems to have been thus taken by Srimat Yatindra Ramanujacharya, *Srimat Bhagavat Gītā* (in English translation), West Bengal : Sree Balaram Dharmasopan, 1968, p. 408; Ernest Wood, *The Bhagavad Gita Explained*, Los Angeles : New Century Foundation Press, 1954, p. 221; Charles Johnston, *Bhagavad Gita*, New York : Flushing, 1908, p. 56; Edwin Arnold, *The Song Celestial*, Boston : Roberts Brothers, 1888, p. 168; Ann Stanford, *The Bhagavad Gītā*, New York : Herder and Herder, 1970, p. 120; Eliot Deutsch, *The Bhagavad Gita*, New York : Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968, p. 130; etc. : (4) that Arjuna wishes to know the distinction between Saṁnyāsa and Tyāga above anything else. The verse is read thus by Śaṅkara (see A. Mahadeva Sastri, *The Bhagavadgita, With the Commentary of Sankaracharya*, Madras : Ramaswamy Sastrulu, 1961, p. 441) and Rāmānuja (infra) and by Jñānesvara [see H. M. Lambert, ed., *Jñānesvari* (translated by V. G. Pradhan), London : George Allen and Unwin, 1969, p. 235-236]. It has been construed similarly by Swami Nikhilananda, *The Bhagavad Gita*, New York : Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1944, p. 345; Swami Sivananda, *Srimad Bhagavad Gita*, Rishikesh : Yoga-Vedanta Forest University, 1949, p. 767; Nataraj Guru, *The Bhagavad Gītā*, Madras : Asia Publishing House, 1961, pp. 657-8 and Shri Purohit Swami, *The Geeta*, London : Faber and Faber, 1935, p. 88, etc.

4. This is clear from the verse notwithstanding the fact that the preceding verses of the previous chapter on the word *sat* almost sound like a lexicographical entry (see XVII-26, 27).

5. This word is usually translated as "truth", e.g. by R. C. Zaehner, *The Bhagavadgītā*, London : Oxford University Press, 1969, p. 385, so also by Franklin Edgerton, *op. cit.*, p. 163; Edwin Arnold, *op. cit.*, p. 83; Swami Swarupananda, *op. cit.*, p. 364; W. D. P. Hill, *The Bhagavadgita*, Oxford University Press, 1928, p. 256, etc. It has also been rendered as "true essence" (Eliot Deutsch, *op. cit.*, p. 130); as "true nature" (Swami Nikhilananda, *op. cit.*, p. 344; S. Radhakrishnan, *op. cit.*, p. 351); and as "essence or truth" (Swami Sivananda, *op. cit.*, p. 767). A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami renders it as "purpose" (*op. cit.*, p. 299).

6. The word *prthak* is most often translated as "severally", e.g. by W. D. P. Hill, *op. cit.*, p. 256; Franklin Edgerton, *op. cit.*,

p. 163; S. Radhakrishnan, *op. cit.*, p. 351, etc. It has also been rendered as "distinction" (Eliot Deutsch, *op. cit.*, p. 130).

7. In their glosses on XVIII.1 both Śāṅkara and Rāmānuja move on both the levels. They often talk of *artha* or meaning of the words as they discuss the *tattva* or essence. In other words they are functioning on both the levels—they are seeking to expound *tattvārtha*—the essential meaning.

8. III.2.

9. I.28.

10. I.47.

11. II.9.

12. I.36.

13. I.45.

14. An alternative *modus operandi* could involve seeking a connection between *Samnyāsa* and *Bhaktiyoga* and *Tyāga* and *Karmayoga*. This approach gains some credibility through verses such as III.30 which involve a transference of *Karma* on God and through verses such as XVIII.11 which link up *tyāga* with the giving up of the fruit of action, the hallmark of *Karmayogin* as a *karmayogi* cannot obviously abandon manifest action. But this approach can take one only so far—and not further. There are verses which use the word *Samnyāsa* in the sense of mere abandonment rather than deposit (e.g. XVIII.7) and the word *Tyāga* with its variants covers a very wide semantic spectrum in which giving up the fruits of action is only one element (see G. A. Jacob, *op. cit.*, *passim*). The watershed between *Samnyāsa* and *Tyāga* therefore must be explored for in a different location.

15. II.47; XI.33; etc.

16. III.5; XVIII.11.

17. XVIII.59.

18. II.39.

19. III.8; XVIII.7; etc.

20. V.8.9.10; V.13.

21. IV.21.

22. XII.6; XVIII.57.

23. II.48; V.10.11; XVIII.6-9.

24. II. 47.

25. VI. 1.

26. XVIII. 5.

27. IV. 41; V. 11; IX. 28.

28. VI. 2.4; VI. 24.

29. VI. 2; IV. 20.

30. XVIII. 9-12. The references on which this enumeration is based are scattered all over the *Gītā*—sometimes in the same verse the realms of *karma* and *karmaphala* blend (e.g. XVIII.9) and sometimes procedures at both the levels—of *karma* and *karmaphala*—are recommended in a single verse (e.g. XVIII, 6).

31. See Monier Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1964, p. 456, 1148.

32. The word *Tyāga* is used in the *Gītā* in connection with giving up *karma* (XVIII. 3), *dharma* (XVIII. 66), *saṁkalpa* (VI. 24), attachment (V. 12), etc. It is used for casting off say life, for someone (I. 9) but is not used for casting off actions on someone.

33. The word *Saṁnyāsa* is used in the *Gītā* for giving up the desire for the fruit of action or attachment to the fruit of action (VI. 2, 4) or dependence on the fruit of action (VI. 1) but not for giving up the fruit of action itself.

34. Some more general considerations seem to undergird this conclusion :

(1) The expression *Tyāgaphalam* (XVIII. 8) occurs in the *Gītā* but not the expression *Saṁnyāsaphalam*; indeed in only one verse do the words *karmaphalam* and *saṁnyāsa* seem to appear together (VI. 1). This seems to suggest a general trend in the *Gītā* to associate *Saṁnyāsa* with the realm of action and *Tyāga* with the realm of fruit of action when the two are distinguished outside the area of semantic overlap. (2) The usage of *Saṁnyāsa* to cover some senses in the realm of the *fruit of action* becomes possible when (i) the word *Saṁnyāsa* is used along with the word *Yoga* and not by itself and (ii) when the most inclusive interpretation to the word *saṁkalpa* (VI. 2, 4) is given and the word is taken to include the desire for the fruit of action. (3) The *Gītā* tends, it seems, to equate concepts whenever possible or desirable. For

instance, it identifies Sāṃkhya and Yoga (V. 5) and Saṃnyāsa and Yoga (VI. 1). This has not been done in the case of Saṃnyāsa and Tyāga even though Kṛṣṇa is explicitly questioned about it (XVIII. 1).

It is possible to argue, nevertheless, that in the *Gītā* the word Saṃnyāsa is undergoing a metamorphosis and that VI. 1-4 represents one phase in that process and IV. 20 provides the rationale for that process, wherein it is said that if one does not cling to the fruit of action no action is really performed. A similar move could be seen in a possible linkage of the two concepts through Yoga (read V.12 with XVIII. 11 and VI.2). From this it is but a step to claiming that Tyāga and Saṃnyāsa are the same. Yet the *Gītā* never quite seems to take this step. Indeed, when the opportunity arises in Chapter XVIII it is not utilised. Thus while it could be claimed that the word Saṃnyāsa is undergoing a transformation in the *Gītā* towards an equation with Tyāga or vice-versa it should be borne in mind at the same time that this transformation does not seem to have reached the point of identification between the two in the *Gītā*.