Interpretation of the *Bhagavadgītā* II.11

KATŌ Takahiro

1. Introduction

A recently published article by the author (Katō 2014) focused on certain differences between the so-called Kashmir recension of the *Bhagavadgītā* (BhGK) and the vulgate of the *Bhagavadgītā* (BhGV). Among these differences, the most characteristic is the reading of the *Bhagavadgītā* (BhG) II.11b, where the latter version above, the BhGV, reads *prajñāvādāṃś ca bhāṣase*, while the BhGK reads *prājñāvan nābhibhāṣase*. This difference is essential, since the readings *bhāṣase* and *nābhibhāṣase* convey totally opposite meanings. The word *prajñāvādāṃś* is problematic, as well. Traditional commentators have provided various interpretations of this word, especially with regard to their analysis of the compound word. Modern scholars also translate this passage in various ways.

Previous studies, both traditional and more contemporary, have focused on the reading preserved in the BhGV. There exists another difficulty, however, that makes matters even more complicated. The BhGK provides a unique reading of *prājñāvat* (“like a man with *prajñā*”), different from the one in the BhGV. Because the BhG has suffered from the transmission of contaminated text, textual discrepancies should be carefully reconsidered.¹⁾ This paper, therefore, examines the passage in question by comparing the exegeses of various commentators, including those from the Kashmirian tradition, and adds some observations on the issue.

2. Śaṅkara’s Influence on Later Commentators and Translators

Among many extant commentaries on the BhG, the most popular and the oldest is that of Śaṅkara. In his commentary, Śaṅkara paraphrases the term *prajñāvādān* as “words (*vacanāni*) of wise men (*buddhimatām*).”²⁾ Śaṅkara’s interpretation might be very influential, because one sees many western translations that follow Śaṅkara,

interpreting the phrase as “words of wisdom,” “those of wise men,” or the like.³⁾ Jacobus Samuel Speyer was not satisfied with the predominant interpretation of *prajñāvādān* as *prajñāvatām vādān* on the ground that the word *prajñā* could not mean a person. Therefore, he reads *prajāvādān* for *prajñāvādān* (words of ordinary men).⁴⁾ Otto Böhtlingk opposed to Speyer’s emendation and proposed the translation “Worte der Vernunft” (words of reason),⁵⁾ but he did not clear up Speyer’s doubt.

3. Traditional Interpretation

3.1. Interpretation of the Compound *Prajñāvādān*

Many traditional commentators shared Speyer’s doubt, also wrestling with difficulty in interpreting the word *prajñāvādān*, and each proposing various interpretations. Rāmānuja, for example, paraphrases *prajñāvādān* as “words based on *prajñā*” (*prajñā-nimittavādān*).⁶⁾ According to him, the word *prajñā* means “the knowledge of the nature of the body and the Self” (*dehātmasvabhāvaprajñā*). Rāmānuja’s interpretation was accepted by some later commentators, such as Vallabha, Hanumat, and others.⁷⁾ These scholars understand that it is the knowledge of the nature of the body and the Self that gives rise to these words.

Some later commentators give a different interpretation. Ānandatīrtha (Madhva) and Keśavakāśmīribhaṭṭa, for example, diluted the meaning of the word *prajñā*. They took the word *prajñā* in a somewhat negative sense, interpreting it as “being brought about by his own idea” or “manifesting his own cleverness.”⁸⁾ As an example, Arjuna, though being possessed of *prajñā*, grieves for those who should not be grieved for. This attitude is contradictory, according to the later commentators, who suggest that his words are therefore based not on the true *prajñā*, but on his own thought.

Another interpretation is that of Madhusūdana, who analyzes the compound *prajñāvāda* in a unique manner. Madhusūdana interprets the word as *prajñānām avādān*, and paraphrases it as *prajñair vaktum anucitān śabdān* (words that are not suitable for wise men).⁹⁾ Madhusūdana must have noticed the contradictory content between *pāda* a and *pāda* b, and tried to resolve the contradiction by introducing an unusual interpretation of the compound. Even in this case, however, there remains doubt that the word *prajñā* could mean “a wise man.”

In the aforementioned interpretations, commentators commonly supplied a few

explanatory words in between in a variety of ways, which gives the impression that these commentators also had difficulty in interpreting the present passage, and these different ways of glossing are merely a later invention and do not necessarily express the original meaning of the compound word.

3.2. Interpretation of the Word *Vāda*

Despite these differences with respect to the interpretation of the word *prajñā* in the compound *prajñāvāda*, most of the commentaries agree that the word *vāda* could be paraphrased as *vacana* or *śabda*. It is important that some commentators identified the source of *prajñāvāda* with the passages in the BhG. According to Bhāskara, for example, the word *prajñāvāda*, which is shown in the plural form, does not mean a general concept, such as “words of wise men,” but refers to the actual statements of Arjuna, such as found in the BhG I.35, I.44, and II.5.¹⁰⁾

3.3. *Prajñā* in the Polemics with Buddhism

It has been often discussed that the BhG adopted some Buddhist ideas,¹¹⁾ one of which is the concept *prajñā*. Recently, Lindtner (1995, 209) argued that “the term *prajñāvāda* surely means ‘the school, or the doctrine of *prajñā*,’ i.e., Mahāyāna Buddhism.” In response to Lindtner’s suggestion, Przemysław Szczurek clarified the link between the concept of *prajñā* and *paññā* in Pāli Buddhism, and tried to understand the term *prajñā* in an assumed context of the BhG’s polemics with Buddhism. These arguments are well fortified and worth consideration. The term and concept of *prajñā* found in early parts of the BhG¹²⁾ might be borrowed from Buddhist idea of *prajñā* (or *paññā*) *pāramitā*, yet it is uncertain whether *prajñā* could be used in that sense. As Szczurek also recognized, there are no traditional commentators who glossed that the term *prajñā* in the second chapter of the BhG refers to the Buddhist idea of *prajñā*. In addition, there is difficulty in understanding the plural word *vādān* in the sense of “the school or the doctrine.” Szczurek (2008, 222) gave examples of compound words that have the word *vāda* as their latter half. These words are actually employed in singular. According to Böhtlingk’s reference (1902, 209) to some instances in his PW,¹³⁾ the plural form of *vāda* as a latter half of a compound word is employed in the sense of “words.” Most traditional commentators also paraphrase it as *vacanāni* or *śabdān* (words, statements, etc.), and have paid no special attention to this problem. It seems that the word *prajñā* does not have a special meaning here, as Szczurek (2008, 217) himself noticed, but

rather, simply denotes “intellect” in a very general sense, or knowledge of the Self (*ātman*). In any case, this point is worth noting, though there is no better solution for the moment.

4. Interpretation of Kashmirian Authors

To this point, this paper has discussed problems regarding the readings and interpretations of the verse containing the phrase “*prajñāvādāṃś ca bhāṣase*.” This reading, as a matter of fact, is of the BhGV, and the so-called Kashmir recension of the *Bhagavadgītā* has different reading: *prājñāvan nābhibhāṣase* (“you do not talk like wise men”). This reading was first reported by Schrader (1930, 13–14) who also recognized an issue with the reading found in the BhGV. Schrader drew the conclusion that “the reading of K (BhGK) is that of original Gītā,” on the ground that there is no persuasive reason to support the phrase *prajñāvādāṃś ca bhāṣase* in the BhGV, and also because “the reading of K is quite natural and unobjectionable.” On the BhGK, there are commentaries by Ānandavardhana and Rājānaka Rāmakaṇṭha,¹⁴⁾ both of which interpret *prājñāvat* as *buddhimān iva*. According to Rājānaka, Arjuna does not talk like wise men, because he is not possessed of the knowledge that discriminates the body from its possessor, i.e., *ātman*.¹⁵⁾ In other words, his *buddhi* (= *prajñā*) is not complete. This idea has a connection to the *sthitaprajña* discussion in the last part of the BhG II. The commentators understand that Arjuna’s unwise behavior described in *pāda* a stems from his incomplete *buddhi*. If one follows the reading of the BhGK and these interpretations of the commentators, one is not troubled with the difficulty that the contents of *pāda* a and *pāda* b contradict each other, which is a problem in the interpretation of the BhGV.

5. Concluding Remarks

In sum, there is no definitive answer regarding which of the two recensions was the original, or closer to the original, reading. What has become clear is that the reading of the BhGK seems to be more natural than that of the BhGV. Commentators of the BhGV such as Śaṅkara had tried to interpret the text in a more persuasive manner, which is in part successful, but not completely satisfactory.

As a possible scenario of how such complicated situation in the subject passage could

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have arisen, a scribe or an editor could have incorrectly construed the word *prājñāvādān*, and corrected it to *prājñavat*. At the same time, the fact that the reading of *prājñavat* in the BhGK is easier to understand would teach the possibility of later improvement of the readings to resolve the contradictory remarks found between *pāda* a and *pāda* b. In this case, however, the explanation of why the corrector employed the relatively rare word *abhibhāṣase* for *bhāṣase* is missing.

As far as the present passage is concerned, there is, unfortunately, not a definite solution. There are still many other instances in the BhG where the texts cited by commentators have variations and the meaning of the sentence is not very clear. It is necessary to pay more attention to the variants of the BhG, especially in comparison with those of the Kashmir recension, and deal with them more carefully.

Notes

1) See Katō 2014 for the variant readings in BhG II.11. (Katō 2014, 82. Corrigendum to 82.5–6: *prājñāvan* for *prājñāvan*.)

2) BhGŚbh, 35. (*Śrīmadbhagavadgītā with the Bhāṣya* by Śrīmat Śaṅkarācārya, ed. Kāśīnātha Śāstri Āgāse, Ānandāśrama Sanskrit Series 34 [Poona: Ānandāśrama, 1897])

3) Here, one can note some examples. Wilkins (1785, 35): Thou grievest for those who are unworthy to be lamented, whilst thy sentiments are those of the wise men. Telang (1882, 43–44): You have grieved for those who deserve no grief, and you talk words of wisdom. Garbe (1905, 73): Du klagtest um die, welche nicht beklagen sind, und redest [doch] verständige Worte. Deussen (1906, 39): Du beklagst solche, welche nicht zu beklagen sind, wenn auch deine Reden verständig sein mögen. Tsuji (1950, 48): 汝は嘆くに足らざる者のために嘆けり。しかして汝は智慧の言葉（一見聡明な言葉）を語る。 Zaehner (1969, 49): You sorrow for men who do not need your sorrow and [yet] speak words that [in part] are wise. Buitenen (1981, 75): You sorrow over men you should not be sorry for, and yet you speak to sage issues.

4) Speyer 1902, 125: Du trauertest um die, welche nicht zu betrauern sind, und du sprichst wie die Leute reden. (You grieve for those who are not to be grieved for and you speak as people do.)

5) Richard Garbe and Paul Deussen interpreted the word as “verständig” (sensible/plausible), which is in line with Böhtlingk’s translation (Böhtlingk 1902, 209). Tsuji Naoshirō agrees with their interpretation. (See. n. 3 above.)

6) BhGRbh, 53. (Rāmānuja’s *Bhāṣya* on BhG. *Vedāntācārya Śrīveṅkatanāthakṛtatātparyacandrikākhyatīkāsaṃvalitaśrīmadrāmānujācāryaviracitabhāṣyasahitā Śrīmad Bhagavadgītā*, ed. Śaṅkaraśāstri Rāṅganātha, Ānandāśrama Sanskrit Series 92 [Poona: Ānandāśrama, 1923])

7) BhGVbh, 82. (*Tattvadīpikā* of Vallabhācārya. In BhG11, *The Bhagavadgītā with Eleven Commentaries*, ed. Śāstri Gajanata Śambhu Sadhale [Bombay: The Gujarati Printing Press, 1935]) BhGPbh, 81. (*Paiśācabhāṣya* of Hanumat. In BhG11.) BhGVBh, 80. (*Tātparyacandrikā* of Vedānta

Deśika. In BhG 11.)

8) BhGMbh, 80 (*Dvaitabhāṣya* of Madhva [Ānandatīrtha]. In BhG 11.); BhGKbh, 72. (*Tattvaparakāśikā* of Keśavakāśmīribhaṭṭācārya. In *Śrīmadbhagavadgītā including Eight Commentaries*, ed. Jīvarāma Śāstri [Bombay: The Gujarati Printing Press, 1912])

9) BhGGD, 35: *tvam svayaṃ prajño 'pi san prajñānām avādān prajñair vaktum anucitān śabdāṃś ca "katham bhīṣmam aham saṃkhyā"* (BhG II.4) *ityādīn bhāṣase vadasi.* (*Gūḍhārthadīpikā*. In *Śrīmadbhagavadgītā Śrīmadhusūdanasarasvatīviracitayā Gūḍhārthadīpikākhyayā vyākhyayā sametā*, ed. Kāśīnātha Śāstri Āgāṣe, Ānandāśrama Sanskrit Series 45 [Poona: Ānandāśrama, 1901])

10) BhGBbh, 42. (*Bhagavadāśayānusaraṇa of Bhāskara*, ed. Subhadra Jha [Varanasi: Parijata Press, 1965]); BhGRbh, 53; BhGGD, 35; BhGNbh, 82–83. (*Bhāratabhāvadīpa of Nīlakaṇṭha*. In BhG 11.)

11) Tsuji 1950, 31–32, Zaehner 1969, 10–11.

12) Szczurek's discussion is based on the argument of Ježić (1979, 1986) who, in the course of study, examined the textual layers of the BhG.

13) PW: *Sanskrit-Wörterbuch*, von Otto Böhtlingk und Rudolph Roth, 7 vols. (St. Petersburg: Kaiserlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1855–1875).

14) BhG(KAv), 29. (*Śrīmadbhagavadgītā with the Jñānakarmasamuccaya Commentary of Ānanda [vardhana]*, ed. Shripad Krishna Belvalkar [Poona: Bilvakunja Publishing House, 1941]); BhG(KR), 28. (*Śrīmadbhagavadgītā with Sarvatobhadra of Rājānaka Rāmakaṇṭha*, ed. T. R. Chintamani [Madras: University of Madras, 1941]).

15) BhG(KR), 28.

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(Assistant Professor, The University of Tokyo, Dr. Phil.)