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 prajñāvādāṁś ca bhāṣase, while the BhGK reads prajñavānt nābhībhāṣase. This difference is essential, since the readings bhāṣase and nābhībhāṣase convey totally opposite meanings. The word prajñāvādāṁś 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 prajñavat (“like a man with prajña”), different from the one in the BhGV. Because the BhG has suffered from the transmission of contaminated text, textual discrepancies should be carefully reconsidered. 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 (buddhimatāṁ).” 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 prajñāvādān 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 Keśavakāśmiribhaṭṭa, 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 prajñāir 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, Przemyslaw 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 BhG 12 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 "prajñāvādāṁś 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: prajñavān nābhiblyāṣayā ("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 prajñāvādāṁś 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, both of which interpret prajñavat 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. 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
have arisen, a scribe or an editor could have incorrectly construed the word prajñāvādān, and corrected it to prajñāvat. At the same time, the fact that the reading of prajñāvat 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: prajñāvan for prajñāvan.)
2) BhGsbh, 35. (Śrīmadbhagavadgītā with the Bhāṣya by Śrīmat Śaṅkarācārya, ed. Kāśinātha Śāstri Āgāse, Ānandāśrama Sanskrit Series 34 [Poona: Ānandāśrama, 1897])
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 “verstständig” (sensible/plausible), which is in line with Böhtlingk’s translation (Böhtlingk 1902, 209). Tsuij Naoshirō agrees with their interpretation. (See. n. 3 above.)
6) BhGRbh, 53. (Rāmānuja’s Bhāṣya on BhG. Vedāntaśāstra ŚrīvenkatānāthahāṛtātparyacandrikākhyātiṣamvalitāŚrīmadrāmānujaśāstrateṣvīrtabhāṣyasahitā Śrīmad Bhagavadgītā, ed. Śaṅkaraśāstri Raṅganātha, Ānandāśrama Sanskrit Series 92 [Poona: Ānandāśrama, 1923])
Interpretation of the Bhagavadgītā II.11 (KATŌ) (69)

Deśika. In BhG 11.)

8) BhGMBh, 80 (Dvaitabhāṣya of Madhva [Ānandatīrtha]. In BhG 11.); BhGKBh, 72. (Tattvapraṇāśīka of Keśavakāśmirībhāṭṭācārya. In Śrīmadbhagavadgītā including Eight Commentaries, ed. Jīvarāma Śāstri [Bombay: The Gujarati Printing Press, 1912])

9) BhGGD, 35: tvāṃ sva-yāṃ prajñā pi san prajñānām avādān prajñāir vaktum anucitān śabdāmś ca “kathāṃ bhīṣmam ahaṃ samkhya” (BhG II.4) ityādīn bhāṣase vadiṣi. (Gūḍhārthaḍipikā. In Śrīmadbhagavadgītā Śrīmadhusūḍaśarsvatīvrācitaśya Gūḍhārthaḍipikābhayā vyākhyayā sametā, ed. Kāsinātha Śāstri Āgāse, Ānadāśrama Sanskrit Series 45 [Poona: Ānadāśrama, 1901])

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


References


(70) Interpretation of the Bhagavadgītā II.11 (KATŌ)


Key words Bhagavadgītā, Kashmir Recension, prajñāvāda

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