Śaṅkara's Interpretation of the Bhagavadgītā

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I. One of the most important characteristics of the *Bhagavadgītā* is its attempt to combine three ways to salvation, i.e., *karma*, *jñāna*, and *bhakti*. This attempt was, however, not completely successful. It left a lot of inconsistencies and these inconsistencies left room for reinterpretations by later commentators.

Among many commentators on the *Bhagavadgītā*, I selected five: Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja, Madhva, Vallabha and Madhusūdhanaśaraśvatī, because they represent different phases in the history of salvation theories in the Vedāntic reinterpretations of the *Bhagavadgītā*.

Śaṅkara interpreted *bhakti* (devotion) as *jñāna* (knowledge) or means of *jñāna* and insisted that liberation could be attained only by *jñāna*. In this way Śaṅkara tried to interpret the *Bhagavadgītā* within the Upaniṣadic tradition of *jñāna*.

Rāmānuja and Madhva, on the other hand, tried to reconcile *bhakti* and Upaniṣadic tradition of *jñāna* and *upāsana* (meditation) and insisted that *bhakti* supported by *jñāna* and *karma* (action) was the means of salvation. Their *bhakti*, however, came to lose, to some extent, *bhakti*'s original emotional character as the result of the reconciliation with Upaniṣadic tradition of *jñāna* and *upāsana*.

With the spread of the *bhakti* movement both geographically and socially *bhakti* became gradually free from the Upaniṣadic tradition of *jñāna* and *upāsana* and recovered its original emotional character. This phase had two aspects. One aspect was that *bhakti* spread all over India through the Sanskrit language. The other was that *bhakti* spread even among the lower castes through local languages. Vallabha was one of the representatives of the former aspect, and Jñāneśvara was one of the representatives of the latter aspect.

Madhusūdhana's commentary is an example which shows that even in Śaṅkara's tradition the *bhakti* in emotional sense could not be neglected and was compelled to be reconciled with the Upaniṣadic tradition of *jñāna* and *upāsana*.

In this way, in medieval India, *Bhagavadgītā* was first interpreted by Śaṅkara to preach *jñāna* as the way to liberation, and then it was interpreted by most of the commentators except Bhāskara to preach *bhakti* as the way to salvation. In the modern age, however, we find the revival of the third way to salvation, i.e., *karma* not in the sense of the performance of caste ritual or duty but in the sense of social activities like the social movement for independence found in Tilak's interpretation etc.¹⁾

The purpose for my study of the commentaries on the *Bhagavadgītā* is to follow these historical changes of salvation theories found in these commentaries on the *Bhagavadgītā* including Jñāneśvara's *Jñāneśvari* and Tilak's *Gītārahasya*; and to make clear the significance of these historical changes of salvation theories. Just for this first step, I want to discuss Śaṅkara's interpretation of the *Bhagavadgītā* in this paper.

In order to find out his original interpretation of the *Bhagavadgītā*, I mostly neglect the portions where Śaṅkara makes literal interpretations of the versers of the *Bhagavadgītā* and focus my attention on the portions where he develops his arguments rather independently of the context of the *Bhagavadgītā* itself. Those rather independent portions are divided into the following four groups. (1) Introductory and concluding portions of his commentary. (2) Introductory portions of each chapter or topic. (3) The portions where he develops his arguments rather independently of the contexts of each verses. (4) The portions where he makes rather unreasonable interpretations of the verses or the portions where he makes quite original interpretations in comparison with other commentaries. Focusing my attention on these four kinds of portions, I will discuss the characteristics of Śaṅkara's interpretation of the *Bhagavadgītā* concerning three ways to liberation, i.e., *karma*, *jñāna* and *bhakti*.

II. In his introduction to the *Bhagavadgītābhāṣya*, Śaṅkara explains

how the *Bhagavadgītā* was composed by Vedavyāsa as follows ;

Viṣṇu incarnated himself as Kṛṣṇa to protect the earthly brahmins and their brahmanhood. Then, in order to save people on earth, he taught Arjuna the twofold dharma, i.e., the dharma characterized by action (*pravṛttilakṣaṇa dharma*) which directly leads to worldly prosperity (*abhyudaya*) and the dharma characterized by non-action (*nivṛttilakṣaṇa dharma*) which directly leads to the highest bliss (*niḥśreyasa = mokṣa*). Then Vedavyāsa composed the *Bhagavadgītā* inweaving these two dharmas in its seven hundred verses.²⁾

Then Śāṅkara explains the relationship between these two dharmas as follows ; "The dharma characterized by action, which is the means of attaining worldly prosperity, leads to the attainment of the region of deity etc., when it is enjoined on the several castes and religious orders. Still it conduces to the purity of the mind, when it is practiced in a spirit of complete devotion to the Lord and without regard to its result. The man whose mind is pure is fit for the attainment of the competence for the devotion to knowledge, and attains the cause of the origination of knowledge ; and thus (indirectly the dharma characterized by action) forms also the means of the highest bliss"³⁾.

In this way, Śāṅkara, first of all, establishes two kinds of fundamental the schemes : (1) the dharma characterized by non-action which directly leads to *mokṣa* (liberation) and (2) dharma characterized by action which leads to the dharma characterized by non-action through the purification of the mind, when it is practiced in a spirit of complete devotion to the Lord and without regard to its result ; and which finally leads to *mokṣa* through the attainment of knowledge. Then under these fundamental schemes Śāṅkara tries to interpret the whole *Bhagavadgītā*.

In the introductory portion of the second chapter, it is made clear that the dharma characterized by action means *karmayoga*, which depends on *yogabuddhi*, i.e. the idea of agency and multiplicity of ātman ; and the dharma characterized by non-action means *jñānayoga*, which depends on *sāṃkhyabuddhi*, i.e., the idea of non-agency and unity of ātman⁴⁾. Then

in the ntroductory portions of the second and third chapters, Śaṅkara emphasizes the opposite characteristics of these two *yogas* and criticises the so-called *jñānakarmasamuccaya* (combination of knowledge and action) theory under his first fundamental scheme. Thus here he emphasizes that *jñāna* is the only means of attaining *mokṣa* and all actions should be renounced⁵⁾. On the other hand, he often comes back to the second fundamental scheme and says in various places⁶⁾ that *karmayoga* leads to *jñānayoga* through the purification of the mind and finally it leads to *mokṣa* through *jñāna-yoga*. This process to *mokṣa* has four stages: "*Karmayoga*, which is performed in complete devotion to the Lord and dedicated to the Lord Brahman, leads to *mokṣa* in due order: the purification of mind, the attainment of knowledge, the renunciation of all actions and *mokṣa*"⁷⁾. Thus Śaṅkara shows the four stages to *mokṣa*, i.e., (1) *karmayoga* dedicated to the Lord and without regard to its result, (2) the purification of mind, (3) the attainment of knowledge, (4) the renunciation of all actions, and then *mokṣa*.

In the introductory portion of the fourth chapter, Śaṅkara summarizes the themes of the second and the third chapter and again comes back to the second fundamental scheme of twofold dharmas. In this portion, however, these two dharmas are said to be comprehended in yoga characterized by the devotion to knowledge⁸⁾, and thus two dharmas which are not yet unified in the introduction are here unified into *jñānayoga*. Then Śaṅkara emphasizes the importance of *jñānayoga* and the renunciation of all actions.

At the beginning of the fifth chapter, though the *Bhagavadgītā* itself says that *karmayoga* is superior to *sannyāsa* (renunciation of action)⁹⁾, Śaṅkara makes a rather unreasonable interpretation of it as follows;

The renunciation of actions mentioned in the *Gītā* means the renunciation of a few actions. It does not mean the renunciation of all actions. The renunciation of all actions which presupposes non-agency cannot be compared with *karmayoga* which presupposes agency. The renunciation of a few actions is, on the othen hand, more difficult to perform than

karmayoga, as it is further associated with the self-controll like *yama* and *niyama* etc. *Karmayoga* is comparatively easier to perform and is therefore spoken of as superior to *sannyāsa* (renunciation of a few actions) in the *Gītā*¹⁰⁾.

In this way Śaṅkara tries to interpret the *Bhagavadgītā* consistently under his second fundamental scheme, i.e., the stages from *karmayoga* through the purification of mind, the attainment of knowledge and the renunciation of all actions to *mokṣa*.

In the sixth chapter onward, though the topic differs in each chapter, still, as far as the stages to *mokṣa* are concerned, Śaṅkara interprets each chapter under the same second scheme beginning with *karmayoga* and ending in *mokṣa* as describe dabove. At the same time, under the first scheme (i.e., only *jñāna* directly leads to *mokṣa*), he emphasizes the importance of *jñāna* and the renunciation of all actions again and again, and criticises the *jñānakarmasamuccaya* theory repeatedly. In this sense, allmost the same arguments are developed in each chapter, as far as the means or the stages to *mokṣa* are concerned.

Finally, at the beginning of the last chapter, Śaṅkara shows his intention that he will summarize not only the purport of the whole *Bhagavadgītā* but also that of the whole Veda, and, as far as the means or the stages to *mokṣa* are concerned, he again emphasizes the importance of *jñāna* and the renunciation of all actions and again criticize the *jñānakarmasamuccaya* theory¹¹⁾.

III. Thus it was made clear that Śaṅkara tried to interpret the *Bhagavadgītā* under the scheme of twofold dharma, i.e., (1) the dharma characterized by non-action (i.e., *jñānayoga*) directly leads to *mokṣa* and (2) dharma characterized by action (i.e., *karmayoga*) indirectly leads to *mokṣa* through the purification of the mind, the attainment of knowledge and the renunciation of all actions, when it is practiced in a spirit of complete devotion to the Lord and without regard to its result.

Then where are *bhakti* and meditation (*dhyāna*, *upāsana*) situated in this scheme or the stages to *mokṣa*? Śaṅkara says that by meditation the yogins

see *ātman* by their inner organs (*antaḥkaraṇa*) refined by meditation (*dhyāna*)¹²⁾ and this *dhyānayoga* is the more proximate means to right knowledge than *karmayoga*¹³⁾. Thus meditation is situated between *karmayoga* and the purification of mind and is considered to be useful for the purification of mind.

Bhakti's position in the stages to *mokṣa* is, however, not so clear. Śaṅkara explains *bhakti* only literally as *bhājana* in some cases¹⁴⁾. On the other hand, he sometimes defines *bhakti* as *jñāna*, for example, '*bhakti* characterized by the knowledge of the highest reality' (*paramārthajñānalakṣaṇa bhakti*)¹⁵⁾ or '*bhakti* characterized by the state of knowledge' (*jñānaniṣṭhālakṣaṇa bhakti*)¹⁶⁾, and tries to comprehend originally emotional *bhakti* (devotion) into the Upaniṣadic tradition of *jñāna* (knowledge).

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- 1) J. Takasaki, "Gītā Interpretation and Hinduism", *Journal of Religious Studies*, vol. 34 (3), no. 166, 1961, pp. 48—44.
 - 2) *GBh* (Śaṅkara, *Bhagavadgītābhāṣya*, Poona Oriental Series No. 1, Poona, 1950) upodghāta, pp. 1-2.
 - 3) *GBh*, upodghāta, p. 3.
 - 4) *GBh*, II. 10, p. 11 ff.
 - 5) *GBh*, II. 10, p. 10 ff. ; III. 1, p. 42 ff.
 - 6) *GBh*, III. 4, p. 49 etc.
 - 7) *GBh*, V. 27, p. 27 ; V. 12, p. 91. Cf. Y. Sawai, "Śaṅkara's Theory of Saṁnyāsa" *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, vol. 14, no. 4, 1986, p. 376.
 - 8) *GBh*, IV. 1, p. 63
 - 9) *Gītā*, V. 2.
 - 10) *GBh*, V. 1, p. 87
 - 11) *GBh*, XVIII. 1, p. 248 ; XVIII. 10, p. 253 ff.
 - 12) *GBh*, XIII. 24, p. 207.
 - 13) *GBh*, V. 27, p. 97.
 - 14) *Gbh*, VIII. 10, p. 129 ; XIII. 10, p. 196 etc.
 - 15) *GBh*, XII. 20, p. 183.
 - 16) *GBh*, XVIII. 55, p. 277.

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