

## **The Ethical System of Yoga**

Peter N. Jones

Most people look to a spiritual path for guidance as to how they should conduct themselves in daily life. These ethics are propounded by the socio-cultural or religious system of the individual. Generally speaking, our Judeo-Christian, Western system of ethics is based upon the ideal of the individual and their quest for fulfillment, but contradiction and conflict are bound to arise as long as perfection is regarded as a state unattainable by an individual. Furthermore, no philosophy is complete unless its metaphysics, psychology and ethics are woven into a harmonious system.

Yoga, however—as developed in Vedic philosophy—is a harmonious system. Its ethics and psychology logically follows from its metaphysics. The transcendence of yogic ethics does not deny the relativity of morality, but views it as a necessary stage which ultimately must be crossed by the seeker of truth.

The concept of moral truth in yogic philosophy and particularly as propounded in the Vedas is (contrary to popular opinion) different from the Chinese concept of Tao. Although Rita represents the harmony of the world and the regularity of nature, it also stands for the regular conduct of humans in their practical life. Tao represents an indifferent cosmic power, while Rita propounds the existence of an intelligent basic principle that regulates the cosmos as well as the life of us mere mortals.

Rita has great ethico-metaphysical significance. It represents the sublime, inviolable moral order. Rita is superior to gods and cosmic ethics on the one hand and individual human beings on the other. It works throughout the cosmos inevitably and justly, and is responsible for the apportionment of reward and punishment of individual's actions.

If we examine the Vedic hymns with reference to their interpretation in the Brahmana books, we may conclude that the Vedas present a monistic metaphysics from the inception of Vedic philosophy, and the Upanishads also present a monistic metaphysics. Vedic philosophy is not, as commonly understood in the West, polytheistic or henotheistic. Brahmanic literature shows that the various gods are simply the processes referred to as entities and represented by various heavenly bodies.

Man, the miniature of the universe, is regarded as an integrated whole of the four aspects viz.: 1) body, 2) mind, 3) intellect and 4) soul. Body (Sarira) corresponds to the earth element, and is known as parthiva, or earthly. Mind (Manah) represents the moon element, and is known as lunar product, or Candra. Similarly, intellect, or Buddhi, is regarded as the product of solar (sauri) energy, and hence represents the sun element. Soul (Atman) is a combination of two aspects known as Mahan Atman and Avyaya Purusa. Mahan Atman, or the great self, stands for the potentiality of all the traits corresponds to Paramesthi, the galactic centre, also designated as Visnu, the light of lights (Jyotisam Jyotih). Avyaya Purusa, or the invisible soul, is the

highest spiritual potentiality, corresponding to Svyambhu Prajapati and representing the highest reality or the supreme power.

Thus the yogic philosophy of the Vedas discusses that the aim of all the ethical and social principles is the attainment of spiritual perfection through the unification of the four aspects. Since the yogic philosophy in the Upanishads expounds the knowledge of the self, and since this knowledge is the highest knowledge (Paravidya), as contrasted with the lower knowledge (Aparavidya) of the Vedas, it is quite evident that this supreme knowledge alone is the supreme goal of life. This fact, however, does not in the least undermine the importance of the Vedic knowledge, whose sole purpose is to explain the manifestations of the unmanifested central reality. It merely points out that the central reality is capable of being realized and thoroughly understood only when a unified individual, who is the highest reality, comes to know their own inner self.

Neither the path of indulgence (Pravritti Marga) nor that of asceticism (Nivritti Marga) is desirable. Indulgence in the enjoyment of the pluralistic spatio-temporal world without insight into its spiritual basis is as harmful, antisocial, and anti-ethical as indulgence in a lower pantheism and equates good with evil without recognition of the pluralistic nature of the world. The Bhagavad-Gita follows the philosophy of Samadarsana (the unitized view of the Ultimate Reality) and Visamavarttna (differentiated behavior in the world) to the core.

The Bhagavad-Gita propounds the middle course of the Niskama Karma Yoga, which enjoins an aspirant neither to give up action, nor to be attached to it, but to perform it without any expectation of reward. Thus it advocates neither the renunciation of action, nor attachment to it, but a change of attitude, which prompts the aspirant to adopt renunciation in action.

If the path of knowledge demands that an aspirant exercise self-control, to know the distinction between the abiding Atman and the non-abiding ego, so as to give up the notion of a doer, there is likely to be doubt in the mind of a person whether this amounts to renouncing all activity. But this doubt is dispelled by the Bhagavad-Gita which advocates the path of action (Karma Yoga) as strongly as the path of knowledge. Insight into the nature of reality does not abolish the need of an active life, without which an aspirant can neither continue to live successfully nor can they adopt self-control and the worship of Spirit for attaining Moksa (liberation).

If the individual self, Atman, is ultimately identical with the universal self (Brahman), it goes without saying that the aim of life is not self-interest in the sense of seeking satisfaction of individual desires, but self-realization, which lifts the aspirant from the lower level of renunciation to the heights where they rise above all contradictions, and hence above narrow-mindedness and selfishness.

This practical philosophy is based on the metaphysical notion of central reality as Prajapati, and leads to the development of the individual and of society. This idea is inherent in the four ends of life, the four Varnas or classes of society and the four stages of life or Asramas, with the corresponding duties of the classes and of the individual. Thus, yogic philosophy presents us with an integrated scheme for living our lives.