

Bhagavad-Gita and Vedanta

Dr. M.G. Prasad, Maplewood, New Jersey (mgprasad@comcast.net)

(www.taranga.us)

Introduction:

It is well known that among the six Indian philosophical systems, Vedanta represents the culmination as it emphasizes the spiritual knowledge and deals with the ultimate source and substratum of everything as Brahman. The term Vedanta not only means the ending portion of the Vedas but also means the goal or the central meaning of the Vedas. Etymologically, Veda is derived from the verbal root 'to know' or 'to realize'. Also, the Vedanta is firmly established on the three-fold foundational literature referred as Prasthanas-Traya. The three basic sources referred together are the Upanishads, the Brahma-sutras and the Bhagavad-Gita.

Vedanta:

Among the three basic sources, Upanishads come at the ending portions of the Vedas and are the premier source for Vedanta. They essentially refer to the answers provided by the enlightened sages based on their efforts and experiences to the deepest questions on life, nature, cosmos, Brahman, etc. The nature and relationship between ontological entities namely the individual soul (Jeeva), Supreme Being (Ishvara) and Universe (Jagat) forms a major theme of the Upanishads. The conversations between guru and disciples occur directly in the close vicinity. The answers given by the sages in Upanishads are based on their direct experiences and perception. The answers are not based on their speculations as Upanishads have sustained as reference source material from time immemorial. Mere speculations do not stand the test of time. In order to understand, practice and realize the methods and experiences in the Upanishads, one needs to transcend the human level consciousness. This is because the experiences of the Brahman by the enlightened sages in Upanishads are not at the human level. Thus Upanishads based on the deep-rooted enquiries and dialectical approaches are the peaks of spiritual efforts and experiences that form the core of Vedanta. Although there are hundreds of Upanishads, the major ones are associated with the four Vedas. Among the many Upanishads, about ten of them are taken as major ones that are extensively referred in later commentaries by great acharyas.

The other two foundational literatures are the Brahma-sutras and the Bhagavad-Gita. According to the tradition the author of both is Maharishi Veda Vyasa. The Brahma-sutras are also called Vedanta-sutras. The sutra means an aphorism. There are about 555 sutras in cryptic form. The Brahma-sutras were

written not only to systematically present the Vedanta philosophy contained in Upanishads but also to firmly establish the position of Vedanta among the systems of Indian Philosophy. The Brahma-sutras essentially deals with the nature of Brahman, means of realizing it and the result of its realization.

Bhagavad-Gita:

The third foundational literature is the most well known Bhagavad-Gita. It comes in the major historical epic Mahabharata written by Maharishi Veda Vyasa. The Bhagavad-Gita consists of 700 verses. It essentially contains the decisive answers given by Lord Krishna to the profound questions by the devotee-warrior Arjuna. The situation in which this conversation occurs is very significant i.e. in the battlefield. Although Arjuna and the Pandavas were peace loving, they were forced to fight in the war as the last option for justice. Thus when an inevitable major war is about to begin, Arjuna is unexpectedly taken over by despondency that takes him away from his warrior nature and makes him mentally weak, indecisive and fickle-minded. However, Arjuna as disciple and devotee seeks knowledge and guidance from his Guru (and also Guru for the Universe) and charioteer Lord Krishna. Given this critical context and plight of his dear devotee Arjuna, Lord Krishna gives the answers that are universally and eternally relevant to all human beings of all times.

Bhagavad-Gita and Vedanta:

A well-known verse says, "Upanishads are like cows. Lord Krishna as the cowherd, milks the cows and gives the nectar-like milk namely Bhagavad-Gita, to the calf like Arjuna". However the calf here represents any devoted seeker at any time. Lord Krishna is a manifestation of Brahman. The Bhagavad-Gita is referred as the quintessence of Upanishads because the conversations in Bhagavad-Gita and the Upanishads have the purpose namely realization of Brahman. Hence it is also called as Gitopanishat. It is also called as Brahma-Vidya as it deals with methods to realize Brahman. It is also termed as yoga-shastra as it provides various approaches such as Karma, Jnana, Raja and Bhakti yoga to realize Brahman.

The ten major Upanishads contain hundreds of conversations between several sages and seers that deal with various aspects of seeking and realizing Brahman. However, Bhagavad-Gita enables the seeker to comprehend the process of gaining final spiritual knowledge starting from the initial stage of despondency and confusion. It is replete with various concepts and their modes of applications. Some of the concepts are various features of steady wisdom, types of actions and their qualities, knowledge and devotion, striving for perfection, various mental qualities, glories and attributes of Universal Self, renunciation and nature, meditation, the divine and demonic qualities, attributes of form and the formless, faith and its attributes, nature of freedom and realization. It is clearly seen that Arjuna's questions and Lord Krishna's answers

are relevant and useful to all spiritual seekers. In the words of yogi-seer Sriranga Sadguru, "The Bhagavad-Gita is not only the song of life but also is the Music of the Universe and it stands like a great Lamp".

One can see the various concepts of Upanishads coming through as answers of Lord Krishna. As an example in Ishavasyopanishat, we find that one should be engaged in good work always but should not become entangled in work. We see that the same thing in Bhagavad-Gita, in which Lord Krishna clearly advises that selfless action through Karma-yoga, is essential to spiritual advancement and one should be in this world like a lotus leaf on water. In Kathopanishat, Lord Yama clearly advises the devotee-seeker Nachiketa of the importance of choosing the spiritually beneficial path compared to the sensually pleasing path. Lord Krishna in Bhagavad-Gita clearly describes that a seeker should aspire and acquire the spiritual qualities. The essential requirement of intuitive spiritual insight is described in several Upanishads. This insight is acquired by sincere inquiry, devotion and loss of ego as for example described by Goddess Uma in Kenopanishat. Lord Krishna in Bhagavad-Gita clearly tells and gives spiritual eyes to Arjuna before showing him the Cosmic Form.

The integral relationship of Bhagavad-Gita to Vedanta through Upanishads and Brahma-sutras is evident. All the three great acharyas namely Shankara, Ramanuja and Madhva have presented correspondingly non-dualistic (Advaita), qualified non-dualistic (Vishishtadvaita) and dualistic (Dvaita) approaches in their commentaries on Bhagavad-Gita, Brahma-sutras and several Upanishads. It is important to note that the three foundational literature (Prasthanas) forms the base for all the three systems in Vedanta. The importance of moral purity, bhakti and upasana is emphasized in both Bhagavad-Gita and Vedanta.

Concluding Remarks:

The Bhagavad-Gita and Vedanta through Upanishads and Brahma-sutras are essential references for spiritual seekers. The conversations in Bhagavad-Gita show their relevance very clearly to the spiritual seekers who need to be involved in the responsibilities of the work with the selfless attitude. It also shows the way to deal with the desire and anger that are powerful enemies of spiritual development. Lord Krishna describing His manifestations in the universe and showing His Cosmic form not only helps the seeker to meditate but also is an affirmation. Upanishads are the timeless records of conversations between various seers and seekers. They clearly depict the depth and breadth of the inquiry, efforts and experiences of the sages. Brahma-sutras along with Upanishads systematically establish the Vedanta. Thus Bhagavad-Gita, Brahma-sutras and Upanishads deal with the realization of Brahman, the fulfilling goal of all spiritual seekers. Their study not only provides spiritual joy but also takes the spiritual seekers towards the goal
