

Jnāna and Karma are Complementary

SWAMI BHUTESHANANDA

I have been asked to explain the so-called controversy between the ideal of *karma*, rather *karmayoga*, as propounded by Swami Vivekananda and the ideas of Shankarāchārya, that *karma* is contradictory to *jnāna*. At the outset, I would like to tell you that the controversy and confusion arise because of the wrong use and understanding of the terms *karma* and *jnāna*. Therefore, first of all, let us try to ascertain the proper meaning of these terms. Shankara observes in *Vivekachudāmani*:

चित्तस्य शुद्धये कर्म न तु वस्तूपलब्धये।
वस्तुसिद्धिर्विचारेण न किञ्चित्-कर्मकोटिभिः॥

Karma is only for the purification of the mind, and not for realizing the Truth. Truth is achieved only through discrimination or meditation and not by millions of actions.

Karma and Jnāna

Often we quote verses from Shankara just to prove one or the other of the contradictory views as to whether *karma* is inferior to *jnāna* and vice versa. Sometimes you find similar contradictory views in some *shlokas* in the *Gītā* also (4/33, 37, 38). Such discussions are interesting no doubt, but a close scrutiny will reveal that this kind of comparison suffers from one defect, namely the wrong use of the term. When we use these terms *karma* and *jnāna* without proper and right reference to the context, they create confusion and consequently we mix up issues. They must be understood in the proper

context in which they have been used.

Karma has been used by Shankara in the sense of *sakāma karma* ie *karma* with selfish motive. The *karmas* that have been prescribed in the scriptures are the means for attaining some kind of *abhyudaya* or prosperity in life here or hereafter. By *karma* Shankara means these *karmas* only.

It is said that unless there is a motive behind, *karma* is not possible. It is the motive that actuates us to do something. A little scrutiny will reveal that we cannot have motive unless we have some desire, and again, we cannot have desire unless we have a sense of imperfection. The sense of imperfection can be had only when there is ignorance in us about our real nature. Therefore, according to Shankara, we are ignorant about our real nature because we are imperfect beings. And while trying to remove this imperfection, we are goaded to perform *karma*.

Avidyā, kāma and karma

Avidyā, kāma, karma—these three words have been used in succession. *Avidyā* means ignorance or wrong understanding of our real nature. *Kāma* means desire, and *karma* means work or action. We have seen that desire goads us to do *karma* only to achieve some *abhyudaya* or prosperity in life here or hereafter. That is why we find in many places in the commentary of Shankara that *karma* cannot lead us to *moksha* or liberation because *moksha* is not the *phala* or result of any *karma*. It is rather a state

where all the *karma* and their *phala* culminate and where there is no sense of imperfection. It is a state of fulfilment and completeness, if it has to be expressed in modern terms. This kind of liberation comes through *jnāna* or knowledge only.

Therefore, Shankara says that *jnāna* and *karma* are like light and darkness which cannot exist together. They are diametrically opposite to each other. *Moksha* is a state which is absolutely free from all desires whereas *karma* is born of desire. Again I would like to remind you that *jnāna* and *karma* appear to be diametrically opposite only when they are used in the sense I have explained to you; otherwise not.

Unfortunately, the word *karma* has been wrongly understood by the common readers of Shankara. They wrongly think that complete cessation of *karma* is the ideal put forth by the great āchārya. You should know that he has condemned such idea in many places. The *Gītā* says that mere cessation of all activities does not mean a state of knowledge. Knowledge does not mean inertia. It is not possible to be absolutely inactive at any stage of life, unless one dies.

So long as we are alive we have to be active in some way or the other. Therefore, if a *jnāni* or, let us say a follower of the path of *jnāna*, has to be inactive, then he cannot even be a follower of *jnāna* too, because the pursuit of knowledge itself is a kind of activity; it is mental activity. Therefore it is not that kind of contradiction between the two as we ordinarily understand. Once a senior monk who is no more now, wrote to Swami Turiyanandaji Maharaj—‘Maharaj, I feel any kind of activity brings in its train egoism, *ahamkāra*. Therefore I feel I should be free from all activity.’ This meant that he would not do any work that would be allotted to him. And the reply came: ‘And you think if you just abstain from all

activity, your ego will disappear?’ That is wrong understanding of *naishkarmya* or the state of inaction.

Shankara has used the word *naishkarmya* in many places. The word *naishkarmya* or freedom from activity does not mean cessation of all kinds of activity, physical and mental: because only a dead person can be absolutely free from all kinds of activity in that sense. But Shankara or any other philosopher would not prescribe something which would not be useful and practicable for the living persons.

What is the idea then? Shankara has very beautifully put this idea. He says that *karma* means that sort of activity which is prompted by *kāma* or desire. It does not mean all kinds of activity. Therefore the conflict between *karma* and *jnāna* is in the following sense only.

When you are trying to be free from all desires, you cannot at the same time be engaged in pursuits which are prompted by desires. Remember, this is the main difference between the two. But such difference or conflict between *Jnāna* and *karma* does not necessarily continue eternally. When *karma* is not prompted by *kāma* or selfish desire, mind it, I emphasize selfish desire and not all kinds of desire, then technically it is not *karma*.

Shankara is very clear on this point. He states: suppose a person has begun a certain Vedic sacrifice, a *sakāma karma*, with a desire to get something here or hereafter. He continues that sacrifice for sometime, and before it is completed, the desire for gain disappears from his heart, but he just continues and completes the sacrifice only because he does not want to leave it halfway. But now there is no selfish desire at the back of this sacrifice. Therefore, technically speaking, it will not be *karma* and will not yield any *phala* or result for

him. So we see that action without selfish motive is not *karma*, according to Shankara.

Karma without a selfish motive

Now the next question is, suppose we are doing some *karma* without a selfish motive, will that not obstruct our *jnāna*? Will it not conflict with *jnāna*? Certainly not. It is not mentioned anywhere in our scriptures. Then what about ‘*chittasya shuddhaye karma na tu vastupalabdhye*’? We started with that. According to Shankara, *vastupalabधि* or realization of the Reality can come only through disappearance of ignorance. This is possible only when we rightly understand the real nature of the Self. The Self, according to Shankara, cannot be attained through any kind of *karma*. Of course, he excludes *nididhyāsana* and *manana* from *karma*. All other actions are not helpful for the realization of the ultimate Reality.

What is realization? According to Shankara, realization means that kind of knowledge which is not mixed up with any doubt or any kind of wrong understanding. *Asandigdha jnāna* or *aviparyasta jnāna*—the knowledge which is correct and without any trace of doubt is absolutely pure knowledge. This is what Shankara understands by realization.

We have got very mysterious and peculiar ideas about realization. By realization we often mean something coming all of a sudden by a flash, and the whole world being metamorphosed—a sort of miracle. Let me tell you, Shankara does not believe in such miracles. He is a man who deals with hard facts. If we are to have that kind of knowledge about ourselves, which is not mixed with any kind of doubt or incorrectness, it must be attained gradually. It does not come in a flash to anybody. It has to be attained through hard work. We have

to progress inch by inch towards this goal, and the goal is the extreme end of this progress.

I would like to draw your attention towards one important factor here. Attainment of the kind of knowledge, which I have discussed above is not an intellectual process, the culmination of which would be realization. It is a process which involves our whole being. In this process all the three faculties of our being—thinking, feeling and willing—are deeply involved. When all these faculties of our being are put to work towards this one end of attaining pure knowledge, and if we persevere to the last, then one day it may lead us to the attainment of such knowledge, where there will be no trace of any doubt or ignorance in our mind regarding the real nature of the Self.

Shankara thinks there is no place for *karma* or action in the process of the highest realization. In the beginning *karma* may be useful. As has been said, *chittasya shuddhaye karma—karma* is for the purification of the mind. The mind has to be purified, and with this purified mind the highest goal has to be attained.

How far, then, will *karma* be carried on for the purification of the mind—that is the question. According to Shankara, when the mind is purified, then one will attain the competence for *manana* and *nididhyāsana*, for intellectual understanding of the goal and for deep meditation. *Karma* is helpful up to this stage only. When the stage of *manana* and *nididhyāsana* is attained, *karma* has no use any more. It has done its job and it should cease as a matter of course. After this the process of *jnāna* starts. As I have already pointed out, according to Shankara, *karma* cannot go up to the last stage of realization.

According to Swami Vivekananda, *karma* can directly lead us to the highest goal as knowledge and devotion can. *Karma*

is not to be left out at any stage, because the very purpose of *karma* is purification of the mind. When mind is purified, what more remains to be done? Swamiji says, then the Reality reveals Itself simultaneously.

I would like to draw your attention towards this process. Try to understand it. What is keeping us away from the supreme realization? Impurities of the mind. That is hiding the Reality from us. One example will make it clear to you. The mind is like a glass-screen. It has now been covered with dirt and filth—the filth of desire or *vasanās*. The unselfish *karma* removes the dirt from the screen and makes it transparent. Then what happens? As soon as the glass-screen becomes transparent we come face to face with the Reality. The screen practically becomes non-existent. It does not, rather cannot, obstruct the vision of the Reality. There is no separating agency keeping us away from the highest Reality. Sri Ramakrishna said, *shuddha buddhi* and *shuddha ātman* are one and the same. Here *buddhi* means *chitta* or *antahkarana*, or mind, as we call it now in modern terms.

It is not that only Sri Ramakrishna said this. Scriptures also give support to this view that when *chitta* becomes absolutely pure, we become one with the ultimate Reality.

It is said that ignorance can be removed only through knowledge, and that knowledge means *brahmākāra vritti*, a certain state of the mind that only can remove ignorance. It is very technical and a matter of academic discussion which does not mean much for our practical purposes.

When the mind becomes absolutely pure, then it becomes non-mind—*tatra manah amanie bhavati*. What makes the mind non-mind? According to Swamiji, the process of purification itself makes the mind non-mind. There remains nothing to separate us from the ultimate Reality, and thus we

realize the Truth and become one with It. Shankara does not accept this theory in principle, because he has to direct the aspirant through the path of knowledge only. But according to Sri Ramakrishna and Swamiji, each one of these paths is fully competent to lead us to the ultimate Reality. On the other hand, according to Shankara, even devotion does not take one to the highest goal of non-duality. Because there you keep yourself distinct from Reality, say *Ishvara*, and then you become a devotee. Therefore the duality does not disappear completely.

Suppose the duality does not disappear. What harm is there? If that duality makes us low in any way, then only it should be shunned. But suppose it does not, instead of that it gives us a full view of *Ishvara* or Reality in *Ishvara*, then what is bad in it?

In the path of devotion we use the word *Ishvara* whereas in the path of knowledge they would say Brahman from which this world has come, in which it exists and into which it would merge. Is it not the same thing with *Ishvara*? There may be some technical difference between these two concepts about the Reality. Mind it, I say *technical* difference which might be useful for a pundit to show his logical skill and competence, but for all practical purposes, it does not mean anything.

According to Sri Ramakrishna, a devotee can enjoy that divine grace, that divine experience fully for ever. What harm is there? Shankara says, whenever there is duality, there is a possibility—why possibility, certainty—that it is a combination and, therefore, it must disintegrate sometime.

Not necessarily so, though it is the law with regard to the objective world we are familiar with. This world is impure. But there may be a stage where the impurity

completely disappears and, in that stage, the laws that are operative here will not be operative there. Therefore, whatever logic we are applying here will not be applicable to that stage. Shankara also has to admit that kind of state where logic is transcended. It has to be transcended even to prove Shankara's unity. When *brahmākāra vritti* comes, when one has the idea of non-duality, it is an idea, and, mind you, that idea completely removes the ignorance. Then what removes that idea? After all, it is an idea and as such it retains some distinction. How will that difference disappear? It cannot disappear by itself. Some agency must be there to remove it. What is that agency? Shankara says, 'Oh! it just disappears like, say, *nirmaliphala* or alum. It removes all the impurities from the water and itself gets dissolved into it.' That is no illustration at all. Well, that is not Shankara's ignorance. I do not mean that. He tried to explain a position and he has explained it quite correctly. That is not the point here. The point is the difference between Shankara and Swamiji. If the process of knowledge as shown by Shankara can eliminate ignorance completely and make one come to realize the Reality face to face and be one with It, then why not *karma* also be competent enough to do the same? Of course, when *karma* is performed without any selfish motive, it is *nishkāma karma*.

Shankara admits *nishkāma karma* makes the mind pure. Why *nishkāma karma* only? Even *sakāma karma* helps to some extent. That is why it has found a place in the Vedas. This is because even *sakāma karma* requires certain restraint on our animal propensities. Without restraining the animal propensities we cannot even perform the Vedic *karma*. Therefore even such *karmas* that are prescribed by the Vedas for the attainment of some objective, *abhyudaya*,

have good effect. They make the mind pure and make the man possessed of control over himself. When this process continues gradually, one becomes unselfish, and when one is *completely unselfish*, mind you, I give emphasis on that phrase, then his mind transcends itself. It becomes free from all impurities, and then it does not hide the Reality any more. This we have to understand properly. This is the idea of *nishkāma karma* of Swamiji. He has given emphasis on this and it is consistent with the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna. Sri Ramakrishna believes in that. Of course, Swamiji has given so much emphasis on this that we may sometimes think that it is not necessary. But if we look back to Swamiji's time, we find that people then were thinking that any kind of *karma* means entanglement in *māyā*. I shall give you an interesting illustration.

Once in Uttarkashi one sadhu got cholera. When the monks of the locality came to know this, they simply fled away from that place saying that this man would cause *vikshepa*, distraction, in their meditation. Wonderful meditation that must have been! Suppose they go to nurse the man, naturally, that nursing will mean some sort of distraction. They may not be able to concentrate on their meditation. They may get some attachment to that man; so it is better to be free from that attachment and get attached to the *bhikshā*, alms, that one gets elsewhere. This sort of misunderstanding comes from wrong interpretations of facts.

Aloofness from the world

Swamiji saw that in our country people were having too much of this idea of so-called aloofness from the world, so that the followers of the path of devotion were also trying to be aloof from the world in the

(Continued to page 42)