

Philosophical Elegance of Yakṣa Praśna

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Abstract: Dharma is the very core of Indian philosophy which highlights a way of life and view of life. Yakṣapraśna is famous anecdote from the great epic Mahābhārata with great philosophical, intellectual, and ethical explications which is in par with the time period. It is in the form of dialogue between Yamadharma and Dharmarāja Yudhiṣṭhīra and this conversation provide great lesson for leading an ethically enriched and socially enlightened fruitful life. That means the stories and lessons are relevant for the wellbeing of humanity. In some instance it is not easy to understand the meanings of the questions and the answers of Yakṣa praśna and hence more trustworthy interpretations and explanations are necessary for getting the real sense of such questions. The Yakṣa praśna expounds profound moral truths and ethical ideals that are worthy of study, reflection and observance in action. The Yakṣa praśna lays down that Dharma should be performed for the sake of Dharma only and not for the sake of enjoyments and desires. Everybody who is desirous of leading a worthy and fruitful life should study the purport of the questions and answers in the Yakṣa praśna.

Keywords: Brahman, Ātmā, Dharma, Mokṣa, Yakṣa, Yuddhiṣṭhīra

Introduction

The Mahābhārata is the greatest Epic that comprises one lakh ślōkās arranged in 18 books called Parvās. Among the 18 Parvās, Vana Parva (also known as Āranyaka parva: Book of the Forest) contains very interesting anecdotes. One of them is Yakṣa praśna (also known as the Dharma Baka Upākhyānam: Story of the Righteous Crane) and this section is considered as one of the five gem in Mahābhārata. The other four being Bagavat Gītā, Viṣṇu Sahasranāma, Vidura nīti and Sanath Sujāthīyam. Even though, it is a small portion of Mahābhārata, the same is pregnant with great philosophical, intellectual, and ethical explications which is in par with the time period. Dharma is the very core of Indian philosophy which highlights a way of life and view of life. Yakṣa praśna provides great emphasis on Dharma. It is in the form of dialogue between Yamadharma and Dharmarāja Yudhiṣṭhīra. Yudhiṣṭhīra is the person who never gave up Dharma even in the most critical situations of life, which get reflected throughout the conversation. Yakṣa who was Yamarāja himself put forth 124 difficult Questions seem to be simple with deeper reflection. The answers provided by Yuddhiṣṭhīra is astonishing and are the essence of our Vedas and other scriptures.

Background

Mahābhārata introduces this Yakṣa praśna by creating a dramatic context. The story is pictured as it happened during the end of 12 years of exile of Pāṇḍavās in the forest to live incognito (Ajñātavāsa). At that time, once, the Pāṇḍavās were travelling in the forest called Dwaitavana, were a Brāhmaṇa accompanied them. For doing the daily ritual the Brāhmaṇa have to light the fire. For lighting the fire, Brāhmaṇa was in need of Aranīs (the sticks which is used to lighten the fire for

daily rituals). One day a deer around them, got taken the Araṇīs and ran away. The Brāhmaṇa told the Pāṇḍavās about the mischief and they promised to help him out of this problem. Therefore the Pāṇḍavās followed the deer with the hope of getting back the Araṇī stick to the Brāhmaṇa. But the deer keeps running and somehow they lost their way while following that deer. So in order to find the deer, they go on and on for a long time and eventually they find themselves totally lusted in the forest. By eagerly following the deer, they felt so tired and thirsty. So they looked for water but they could not find. At that point, the youngest of Pāṇḍavās, who named Nakula climbed on a tree to find some source of water around and he founded a lake in some distance. Therefore Nakula went for taking water and then he came across a very beautiful lake. In this lake there were a lot of beautiful flowers and trees around it and the water looked very clear and fresh. By seeing the clear water Nakula himself felt very thirsty and he moved to drink the water but when he enters into that lake, he happened to hear a strange voice that warns him not to take water from that lake. It also claims that the lake belongs to him, so Nakula can only take the water after answering his questions. But Nakula did not give much importance to the strange words, he moved ahead and tried to drink the water. As soon as he did that, he fell down in the lakeshore. Seeing that their younger brother is not returning Sahadeva went to the lake in search of his brother. Sahadeva also found the same lake and when he moved to take water, he was also warned by the crane. But Sahadeva also ignored the crane and falls down after drinking the crystal clear water. In the same manner, both valiant Arjuna, and powerful Bhīma met the same fate. Since none of his brothers returned with water, Yuddhiṣṭira embarked in search of them. Upon following the same path, Yuddhiṣṭira came across the lake and found his brothers lying unconsciously in the lake shore, but when the crane warned him, Yuddhiṣṭira realized that the crane held the answer to the turn of this events. Yuddhiṣṭira could please Yaksha because he had the patience and was not arrogant like his brothers. The virtuous Yuddhiṣṭira proceeded to answer the questions put forth by the crane.

Philosophical Elegance

Each of the questions raised by Yakṣa and the corresponding answers by Yuddhiṣṭira in the Yakṣa praśna are of great importance. The question arised were not direct with just one meaning nor was the answer. In order to understand it great Sraddha is necessary. The whole conversation revolves around various concept of philosophy, the problem of being righteous and the maintenance of social condition. Vyāsa reveals the authenticity of the Vedās, while answering the very first questions. The first four questions belongs to a single set, even though they reflect on the sun has a deep Vedic meaning which the Rṣīs and Ācāryās systematically decoded, presented and a great scholarship in necessary for understanding the essence.

The first question put forth by Yakṣa was “What is that makes the sun rise up”¹. “Kīṁsvidādityamudeti” (Mahābhārata, 3, 296, 26). Yuddhiṣṭira answered it as “Brahmam rises the sun”². “Brahmādityamunnayati” (Mahābhārata, 3, 296, 27) The meaning conveyed in the context is that Brahman denotes Vedās and Ādityā (sun) here represents the Jīvātmā (Individual soul). It has been said in the Upaniṣads that he who knows the Ātman crosses over sorrow and that is the benefits one attains by the knowledge of the Ātmā³.

The fundamental concept of Dharma is that, the association of Ātmā with the body is called as the birth and the dissociation of the Ātmā from the body is called

as death. So the vital comprehension is that, you are not the body but the soul. All the Epic, Purāṇas, Vedās and Upaniṣad keep on firmly establishing this aspect. Ātmā or the soul has knowledge and it is immortal and never dies. It is the body which is mortal and dies. The immortal Ātmā keep associating with the mortal body based on its karma till Ātmā attain the mokṣa or salvation. Vedās supposedly uplift the Jīvatmā. Jīvatmā can be considered as the soul or the life line that exist every living creature. With the help of Vedās or Brahman the Jīvatmā or the soul can uplift itself to Paramātmā or the eternal one. Upaniṣad will also help us understand this.

The next question in the first set, “Who are his surrounding attendants”⁴? “Ke ca tasya abhitaścarāḥ” (Mahābhārata, 3,296, 26). Which means who come along with sun? The answer is “the Devās are his attendants”⁵. “Devāstasya abhitaścarāḥ” (Mahābhārata, 3, 296, 27)

Here also the sun means the Jīvatmā or the individual soul and the Devās are associated with the body are the senses. Our body is constituted by five gross elements, which are earth, water, fire, air and space known as “Pancabūṭha”. This is why our body is often referred as “Bhūthaśārīra”. The process of the formation of the gross elements from the subtle part of the elements is known as the “Pancīkarāṇa” in Advaita Vedānta. It consist in a compounding of the elements in which one half of each rudimentary elements is mixed with the eight parts of each other rudimentary elements.

Upon death when the body gets burn, it split itself and goes back earnestly to the earth, water, fire, air, and space. Here the word Deva denotes the five gross elements. And these five gross elements are associated with the five senses in our body. With these five sense organs we can hear, feel, see, taste and smell and this association increase one by one as the move up from one elements to other. So these five gross elements are the basic of body and senses.

In fact each of the senses are associated with the finger as well. Space with the middle finger, air with index finger, fire with thumb, water with little finger and earth with the ring finger. Yoga mudra deals exciting these fingers to control the balance between the five gross elements in the body for the effective functioning of our physiology. So that is how these five senses are associated with Pa-mahābhūthās or the body itself which is get associated with the Ātmā or the Āditya based on the Ātmā’s past Karmās and this concept is well explained by Yuddhiṣṭira through this second question in Yakṣa praśna in Mahābhārata. The matter or the body is dull, non eternal and not blissful while the soul is conscious eternal and full of bliss. The soul dose not undergo change but the body undergoes changes. Body is subject to death while soul is indestructible. Soul moves from one body to another like changing garments while body is only as a vehicle for the soul. Bhagavad Gītā says,

“The soul is invisible, inconceivable and immutable. Knowing this, you (Arjuna) should not grieve for the body”⁶

The other question in the set was “In which is he firmly placed?”⁷, “Kasminsca pratitiṣṭati” (Mahābhārata, 3, 296, 26). Which means where is the sun established? Sun translates to Āditya and Āditya is equated to Ātmā. The question here is where the Ātmā gets established or where does the Ātmā permanent placed? The answer told by Yuddhiṣṭira was, “He is firmly grounded in truth”⁸, “Satye ca pratitiṣṭati” ((Mahābhārata, 3, 296, 26)

Which means the Ātmā is established Satyam (truth). The Satyam can be con-

sidered as Brahman. We can often see the usage of Brahman in our scriptures. Brahman is everything that which is incomprehensible, that which we cannot understand fully. Satyam is equated to Brahman.

Taittirīya Upaniṣad says “Satyam Jñānam Ānandam Brahma”⁹. It says try understanding Brahman with these three (Satyam Jñānam Ānandam Brahma) tendencies. Ānandam that which is infinite without beginning or end. Another question put in Yakṣa praśna, was “What is said to be knowledge”, ¹⁰ “Kim jñānam procyate” ((Mahābhārata, 3, 296, 70). Yuddhiṣṭira replied it as “Knowledge is the perception of the Truth”¹¹, “Jñānam tatvārthasambando” ((Mahābhārata, 3, 296, 71)

Knowledge is understanding the real meaning of life and which is the perception of the truth why we are here. If we come to know the truth behind life that is real knowledge. Since Brahman owns its quality it can be called as Ānandam. Brahman is the repository of all knowledge of the Universe. The knowledge of gender balance in the world, the knowledge of laws of physics, the knowledge of birth, ageing and death, all the knowledge that human beings can and cannot understand. So the Brahman can be called as the Jñānam itself. Brahman can be called as the Satyam because the truth is something which cannot change. Brahman is not changing and eternal. There is no transformation. The Paramātmā or Brahman does not change at all, it can be called as the Truth (Satyam).

Then what changes? The Ātmā changes. It transforms. Whenever we simply say Ātmā, it is Jīvātmā the Individual soul or the soul presents in the living being in the planet. That Ātmā is “sobhāvavikāram”. Its tendency changes based on the body it takes. So the Ātmā which has the property to change, finally, merge it with the supreme which does not change at all. So the answer can be rewritten as “the Ātmā get established in the supreme or the Paramātmā. Countless Ātmā upon Mokṣa get established themselves in the single Supreme Paramātmā. This what Yuddhiṣṭira explained about Ātmā in Yakṣa praśna. It form deep and central root for Hindu philosophies and concept.

Brahman is the Ultimate reality behind the apparent plurality of the world. The unreality of the world does not mean, as it often misunderstood, that the world is a mere shadow without substance, a pure illusion or avoid. It has the pragmatic entity. From the immutable Brahman, the source of creation which when desirous of creation become inflated because of its possession, through omniscience of the power and knowledge of creation, preservation and dissolution originates the unmanifest, which is in the state of imminent manifestation from it originates Prāna that is Hiranyagarbha who is common to all being in the universe. From that, originates mind, comprising conception, deliberation, doubt, determination etc. there originates on theses (worlds) Karma, castes and stage of life.

Significance of Dharma

The word Brahma means Veda. Here it revealed that Vedās are the basic principle of our Dharma. Among the first set of question asked by Yakṣa, the third one is “who makes the sun set”¹², “Kaścainamastam nayati” ((Mahābhārata, 3, 296, 26). The answer provided there is “Dharma makes the sun set”¹³, “Darmaścāstam nayati” (Mahābhārata, 3, 296, 27).

Coming to Puruṣārthas; Dharma, Artha, Kāma and Mokṣa. Artha and Kāma are the two types of pursuits. We pursue different kind of securities in our life such as financial security, social security, health security and so on. So we are driven to do things in our life in order to pursue these goals. Kāmas are pleasures and wish-

es, we also pursue to do things in our life for varieties of pleasure. So all these things we can do in a right way or a wrong way. We have that choice whether to take the right or wrong path to attain Artha and Kāma pursuits in our life. The point there is also Dharma in account in with the picture. Which means if we pursue the goals of life for Artha and Kāma, by living the life in accordance with the Dharma, then that will aids us to the final Puruṣārthās, which is Mokṣa or life of fulfillment. That is the ultimate goal of life. But if we pursue the goal of life for Artha and Kāma, by living the life in way that is not in conductive or righteous, then that is not conducive for the fourth pursuit.

Here Yakṣa's question was, "Dharma, Artha and Kāma are opposed to each other, how these eternal antagonists co-exist in one place." Some people find the way that is not conductive and righteous to attain Artha Kāma pursuit. They believe this wrong as much more easily compared to righteous way. But in order to accomplish Mokṣa, one has to live a life with Artha Kāma pursuits by following Dharma. The Dharma, Artha and Kāma has to reconcile. The Yakṣa praśna teaches us how the Artha Kāma pursuits and Dharma can mutually support each other. Here Yuddhiṣṭira told that "when a wife and virtue agree with each other and are in control, each of the other, then there is co-existence of the three, namely Dharma, Artha and Kāma"¹⁴. Which means when a wife and virtue agree with each other, then all the three thou hast mentioned may exist together. If a wife heartily support and assist her husband in the pursuit of the three objectives of life, namely, the observance of Dharma, acquiring wealth and the fulfilment of one's legitimate desires, these three are contradictions may co-exist. If wife understands well and if she is supportive well, then they will come together.

Here comes the idea and the whole purpose of a marriage is supposed to be supportive each other and contusive to growth to spiritual goal. And it will also bring these Dharma, Artha and Kāma together, so they can pursue the ultimate goal Mokṣa. Marriage is something that is conducive to mutual growth. As a person we need support and secure feel to grow. Only when we feel secure and motivated as a person then we are able to look at ourselves and grow and achieve whatever we need. Otherwise it makes us difficult. He who ever intent on Dharma attains the goal of everlasting bliss. Nothing comes to his aid in his life after death as the Dharma he has pursued.¹⁵ Manu says "Dharma rakṣati rakṣitaha"¹⁶

After answering the whole question the Yakṣa became more satisfied because all the answers Yuddhiṣṭira told was very much true and Yakṣa was also impressed by the patience of Yuddhiṣṭira. So Yakṣa said he would like to give a boon that Yuddhiṣṭira can restore the life of one of his brother. Yuddhiṣṭira chosen Nakula. Here we can see how perfect is Yuddhiṣṭira in his righteous way. Even at this point of time, he could have very well taken Bhīma and Arjuna. Because we can see in the whole Mahabharata, Bhīma and Arjuna are people with exceptional qualities.

None could over power of Bhīma in strength and Arjuna in archery. But Yuddhiṣṭira was ready to loss both of them and pickup one child of mother Mādri. So this is how Yuddhiṣṭira is the perfect person. He always follows the righteousness. He is not unjust at all. Pleased with Yuddhiṣṭirā's choice, Yakṣa brought all his brothers back.

Conclusion

The Mahābhārata epic which is a reservoir of great wisdom, always provide great lesson for leading an ethically enriched and socially enlightened fruitful life. That is why it is called Sanātana. That means the stories and lessons are relevant

for the wellbeing of humanity. When Yuddhiṣṭira was in real trouble, the questions asked by Yakṣa reflect the spiritualistic explications of serious world troubles and they were answered with brevity. In some instance it is not easy to understand the meanings of the questions and the answers and hence more trustworthy interpretations and explanations are necessary for getting the real sense of such questions. The Yakṣa praśna expounds profound moral truths and ethical ideals that are worthy of study, reflection and observance in action. The narrowminded people pursue Dharma for the sake of wealth but broad-minded ones pursue Dharma for the sake purification of the mind. The Mahābhārata lays down that dharma should be performed for the sake of Dharma only and not for the sake of enjoyments and desires. The only satisfaction is that one has done one's duty. Virtue is its own reward of one's own relentless actions. Everybody who is desirous of leading a worthy and fruitful life should study the purport of the questions and answers in the Yakṣa praśna.

Endnotes

1. K. Bōlasubramania Iyer, Yakṣa Praśna, page no; 3
2. Ibid, page no; 3
3. Ibid, page no; 4
4. Ibid, page no; 4
5. Ibid, page no; 4
6. Bagavad Gīta ; page no 2.25
7. K. Bōlasubramania Iyear, Yakṣa Praśna, page no; 3
8. Ibid page no; 4
9. Taittirīya Upaniṣad, page no; 2.1.1
10. K. Bōlasubramania Iyer, Yakṣa Praśna, page no; 60
11. Ibid page no; 60
12. Ibid page no; 3
13. Ibid page no; 4
14. Ibid page no; 68
15. Ibid page no;74
16. Manusmrithi, page no; 8.15

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