

The Great Northern Path

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In the modern parlance we use idiomatic expressions such as “going south” and “going north” to indicate how things are proceeding. North is typically associated with the situation when everything is going well. On the other hand, when the going is not good, we tend to use the word “south”. For example we often hear, “the stock market headed south again” indicating that the price of the stocks are falling. Whenever directions are represented on a plain paper or a map, we indicate the north by pointing up. Upward direction is related to positive things, expression of happenings in the right direction etc. Conversely, south points to downward movement, happenings in the wrong direction etc. Therefore the genesis of this usage in modern parlance is apparently related to this.

References to northern path (*Uttarāyanam*) and southern path (*Dakṣiṇāyanam*) can be found in the Indian astronomical system. This refers to the trajectory of the Sun. Sunshine brings energy and enthusiasm for all living beings. Therefore for those living in the Northern Hemisphere in some sense, the northern path is one of energy, enthusiasm and prosperity. However, the expression of “northern path” and “southern path” are abundant in our philosophical texts as well. They have profound ideas related to *sanātana dharma*. They provide a sound framework for a true seeker to understand the evolutionary path he/she is undergoing.

The path of liberation?

Followers of *sanātana dharma* believe in the theory of karma and rebirth. As an individual soul, known as *Jīva*, progresses through one *janma* to another, it accumulates some good and bad karma at the end of one *janma*. As a consequence of this it gets into the next *janma* by selecting an appropriate role to exhaust the karma it brought forth. This process goes on and is apparently an endless cycle viewed from a near term. However, the scriptures again and again mention of the possibility of escaping from this endless cycle. Even great spiritual and religious masters often pray to the Lord through *stotras* and other philosophical works to redeem one from this ocean of *samsara*.

The question naturally is, “What is the path that leads us to this liberation once and for all?” In order to provide some ideas to a true seeker, Shri Krishna has devoted a few *ślokas* in chapter 8 of the *Gītā*. We shall see one *śloka* in this write-up.

The Path of “no return”

Shri Krishna describes the path of liberation that every individual is striving for either knowingly or unknowingly thus. Those people (*janāḥ*) who have departed this world (*prayātāḥ*) and have indeed realized Brahman (*brahmavidāḥ*) go there (*tatra gaccanti*) unto Brahman (*brahma*), through a path characterised by one of brightness and light (*agniḥ*), illumination (*jyotiḥ*), day time (*ahaḥ*), the bright phases of waxing moon, known

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as *śukla pakṣa* (*śuklah*) and the six months (*ṣaṇmāsāḥ*) called *Uttarāyaṇam* (*uttarāyaṇam*), known in the modern parlance as the six months of the northern solstice.

अग्निर्ज्योतिरहः शुक्लः षण्मासा उत्तरायणम् ।
तत्र प्रयाता गच्छन्ति ब्रह्म ब्रह्मविदो जनाः ॥ 8.24

agnir-jyotirahaḥ śuklah ṣaṇmāsā uttarāyaṇam
tatra prayātā gaccanti brahma brahmavido janāḥ

A first and a casual reading of the *śloka* and its meaning as provided above suggests that by departing during the times indicated in the *śloka* we can indeed escape from the birth – death cycle. This is a very tempting proposition if true. If somebody is in the ICU of a hospital, we can schedule pulling of the plug coinciding with these time descriptions and get a straight ticket to escape the birth – death cycle. How is it possible to die during *uttarāyaṇam* or *śukla pakṣa* and get out of the endless cycles of birth and death?

The cardinal principle of *sanātana dharma* is to strive through several *janmās* to escape from the clutches of the birth – death cycle. Therefore if what is stated in this *śloka* is indeed true, then all that the true seekers need to do is to schedule (?) to depart from this world during such times and solve this complex problem as indicated above. This conclusion is farfetched, because commonsense and logic would tell us that what is intended is not conveyed by the mere gross meaning. Therefore we need a careful interpretation of the *śloka*.

Light – Symbolises Knowledge

The *śloka* mentions five aspects, the fire, illumination or light, the bright part of the day, bright fortnight of the moon, and the six months of the northern solstice. What is common to all, of them is the brightness or light. It is well known that light symbolizes, among other things, knowledge. We use phrases such as “I was illuminated or enlightened with this new idea” to indicate that we found a new knowledge. Also a person who experienced a new learning will sport a bright face and will be radiating confidence. Even a one year old child which, learnt to get up on its own and take a few steps for the first time in its life has indeed acquired a new knowledge. You must watch its face when this happens. It will be radiating with brightness. Therefore, what is intended in this *śloka* is that a person who indeed obtained “knowledge” is the one who will escape the clutches of birth – death cycle.

This understanding will shift our focus from gross issues such as day time, *śukla pakṣa* etc. to one of obtaining the right knowledge. A study of our scriptures and spiritual texts such as *upaniṣads* informs us that the knowledge to be sought after is known as either *brahma vidyā* or *ātma vidyā*. It is about the knowledge of oneself, a knowledge that is not to be mastered merely in an intellectual sense. In other words, this knowledge is not obtained in the same manner as that of getting to know calculus or organic chemistry. This knowledge is borne out of constant experimentation, internalization and accumulation of experiences over a long period of time.

The guidance of a Guru, the availability of a *satsang* to nurture this process and the grace of the Lord are the enablers for an individual to obtain this knowledge. On the part of the seeker there is a need for a constant effort driven by an unflinching attitude arising out of *śraddhā*. Through this process one's own ideas of life, its purpose, the relationship between oneself, the universe and the God will all go through constant change. The ignorance that covered oneself slowly gets peeled layer after layer. This typically happens over several *janmas*. Eventually the knowledge must be realized "with in" through deep contemplation. Such a person will indeed eventually become a realized soul and will be free from the clutches of birth – death cycle.

In the history of mankind, such realized persons come and go all the time giving us an opportunity to learn from their life and practices. In the recent past we have had such examples in the well-known personalities of Bhagavan Ramana Maharishi and Ramakrishna Paramahansa. A deep study of the life and teachings of such personalities may give us some clues to discover the northern path in our own ways with the grace of the Lord.