

The Recursive Southern Path

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Think of a game in which we are caught in a complex maze. There are two gates available for us to open and escape out of the maze. We are told that if we open “**Gate 1**” we will escape from the maze into “real freedom”. On the other hand if we open “**Gate 2**” we will step into another arena of the game consisting of two possibilities; one that is highly enticing and enjoyable and the other which is hassled, difficult to navigate etc. However suppose the game is designed in such a manner that these good or bad experiences that one goes through after entering through Gate 2 will be only temporary. Therefore, after some time we may realize that we are back at square one. The game is made challenging and engaging by not revealing the two gates explicitly. Furthermore, the irony of the game is that the player may not initially know this returning aspect of the game when gate 2 is used to escape from the maze.

It may appear to be a simple problem to solve and win this game but it is not so. After all if we opened gate 2 last time, all that we need to do is to open gate 1 this time. However, this will be possible only when two things are assured; we have the memory that last time we indeed opened gate 2 and ended up in the maze again and that the position of these two gates have not been altered between our last attempt and the current attempt. If there was a wide gap between the last attempt and the next attempt, then our memory becomes suspect. Also if we travelled through the maze in multiple directions and reached this spot again, then for all we know the direction from which we are approaching the two gates may be opposite to the last attempt that even the memory of the gate is of less use for us.

The other possibility is to open gate 2 only, but to ensure that the world that we stepped into after opening is one of comfort, happiness and enjoyment. If this is the objective behind playing the game, then we need to know all the know-how and skills needed for this. The entire effort therefore in this case will be towards acquiring these tricks, skills etc. Even after achieving this, the game organizer may have the last laugh as we will sooner or later end up back at the two gates situation with which we started.

Multiple Passes in our Game of Life

What we are talking here is not a fancy game of utopian magnitude or mere drama. It is indeed related to our game of life. Each *janma* in our life as per our *sanātana dharma* is like one pass of the game of two gates as described above. If this is true, then we would like to know *a priori* the entire knowledge about the existence of the two gates, the pros and cons of opening the two gates, the skills required to open the right gate etc. At the fundamental level, we also need to know what constitutes winning the game and bringing it to closure.

Our scriptures and vedantic texts discuss these aspects in plenty and provide vital information and clues for us to play this game of life. The equivalent of passing through

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gate 2 is the journey of a soul after death with some accumulated karmas yet to be exhausted. The soul may go through a combination of *Swarga* or *Naraka* and after exhausting what was acquired will return back for one more *janma*. We shall look at a *śloka* from the *Gītā* to understand some aspects pertaining to the gate 2.

The return path for a soul

Shri Krishna describes the path of return that most individuals travel. Those people who have departed this world go through a path characterised by one of darkness and smoke (*dhūmaḥ*), night time (*rātriḥ*), the dark phases of waning moon, known as *kṛṣṇa pakṣa* (*kṛṣṇaḥ*) and the six months (*ṣaṅmāsāḥ*) called *Dakṣiṇāyanam* (*dakṣiṇāyanam*), known in the modern parlance as the six months of the southern solstice. A person, who is pious and is making serious efforts to realize one's own true nature and God (*yogī*), will attain the illuminating and bright (*jyotiḥ*) lunar sphere (*cāndramasaḥ*). After reaching (*prāpya*) there (*tatra*) the soul will come back to the earth (*nivartate*).

धूमो रात्रिस्तथा कृष्णः षण्मासा दक्षिणायनम् ।
तत्र चान्द्रमसं ज्योतिर्योगी प्राप्य निवर्तते ॥ 8.24

dhūmo rātristathā kṛṣṇaḥ ṣaṅmāsā dakṣiṇāyanam
tatra cāndramasaḥ jyotiryogī prāpya nivartate

Two aspects need some clarification in the *śloka*. First is the issue of smoke, darkness etc. mentioned in the *śloka*. As indicated in one of the earlier writings² this *śloka* conveys a different meaning than what is indicated at a gross level. Therefore the possibilities of scheduling our own departure from this mortal world (especially in the case of someone in the ICU) to escape the darkness etc., are farfetched ideas. Darkness, as we all know is a proxy for ignorance and imperfect knowledge. Therefore this *śloka* mainly conveys the fact that as long as we are devoid of the perfect knowledge we will continue to go through the birth – death cycle, as enjoined in our scriptures following the governing principles of *sanātana dharma* and the *karma* and rebirth framework.

The other aspect that needs some clarity is the mention of the word “yogi”. This raises some doubts in our mind. If this is the path for yogis what about others? What is implied in the *śloka* clearly is that all others also will go through the birth – death cycle as we also will suffer from the deficiency of perfect knowledge as our scriptures proclaim. But there is a main difference between a yogi as mentioned in this *śloka* and others. The lunar sphere mentioned in the *śloka* pertains to the *swarga loka*, where for the good efforts invested by the yogi, the benefits will be obtained. Once the benefits are exhausted, the path of return manifests and the next birth happens in this mortal world. However, in the case of others, depending on the quality and composition of the *karma*, the soul will reach an appropriate *loka* to exhaust the benefits and will eventually return back to the mortal world for the next *janma*.

² See the write-up on “The Great Northern Path” for details.

The Darkness in One's Life

Any knowledge that is not able to liberate an individual forever cannot be perfect in itself. Such knowledge is nothing but a shade of darkness that envelops one's life. Shri Krishna is mentioning of this knowledge in this *śloka*. There are some parameters that provide the dividing line between perfect and imperfect knowledge. One is the separation of permanent (*nitya*) and impermanent (*anitya*) aspects. Material aspects such as wealth, health, joy, pleasure, power, position, pain, positive and negative aspects in things that one experiences throughout one's life are all impermanent aspects. To attach too much importance to these and let them *significantly* impact the way we lead our life is an expression of imperfect knowledge.

This does not mean we ignore these and not endeavor to attain good position and wealth etc. in our lives. It merely suggests that even when we invest hard and put our best foot forward if the results are not forthcoming we will be able to have the grace to accept these. After all these are impermanent in nature and we will constantly focus on permanent aspects of life, which will make us more spiritual and divine in character. Every such attempt by us to rediscover our path in life will only result in one layer of ignorance peeled out of our personality and throw more light into our life.

The multiple passes into the game of life through the southern path indicated in this *śloka* is merely the opportunity provided to us to understand the nuances of playing this game of life and gaining experience so that we eventually understand the winning criterion of this game. The only thing we can do while playing this game is to pray for the divine grace to befall on us that we make good sense of this and make that final escape from the maze called *samsāra*.