

Chapter 9

The Bhagavadgita

The setting of the *Bhagavadgītā* is symbolic of the battlefield of life but perhaps more importantly, it is symbolic of the battlefield within all of us. Our life is a constant turmoil between our positive impulses and negative impulses, between the pleasant and the better, between our likes and dislikes, and stated more metaphorically, between the good and the bad. As such, the Gita addresses questions that arise in the heart of every human being. Thus, even though the Gita is the record of a dialogue that occurred ages ago, it is relevant to the modern age (or any age), as it addresses fundamental questions and tries to provide answers to them. Through the vista of epic literature, we are able to hear and see the sacred dialogue between Arjuna and Krishna. Arjuna's despondency is our own despondency. Arjuna's questions are our own questions. As we read the Gita, it is as if we are in direct communion with the great sage embodied in the personality of Krishna.

In our last lecture, we saw Krishna's immediate response to the dejection and despondency of Arjuna on the battlefield. He began by telling him to snap out of it. "This is not the behaviour of a great warrior," he told him. Normally, if the depression is mild, such words of encouragement do have an effect. In this case, however, the problem is deeper. So Krishna immediately resorts to the highest teaching he can give, namely the essence of the Upanishads teaching us of the immortality of the Supreme Self. "Life and death are part of the cosmic process. But the Self is indestructible and immortal. It is not slain when the body is slain."

We must remember here that a battle is just about to begin. All avenues of diplomacy have already been tried. War has reared its ugly face and it is now to be slain. The work to be done is clearly before Arjuna, yet at the eleventh hour, he has become doubtful of his role. Thus Krishna teaches Arjuna about the

ātman and instructs him that he should keep this awareness while engaged in battle. But even this highest teaching cannot lift Arjuna out of his depression. Then, Krishna comes down and makes a plea from a worldly perspective. “If you abandon your work, people will forever recount your abandonment, and living such a life is worse than death. Therefore, stand up and fight!”

This exhortation still does not energize Arjuna to go into battle. So Krishna begins his brilliant discourse on the theory of work, known as *karma yoga*. This is one of three original contributions to Indian philosophy that we find in the Gita, the other two to be described later in this lecture.

It is good to begin with Vivekananda’s explanation of the meaning of *karma yoga*. He says, “The word *karma* is derived from the Sanskrit *kri*, [meaning] ‘to do’; all action is *karma*. Technically, this word also means the effects of actions. In connection with metaphysics, it sometimes means the effects, of which our past actions were the causes. But in *karma yoga* we have simply to do with the word *karma* as meaning work. ... Thus we are all doing *karma* all the time. I am talking to you: that is *karma*. You are listening, that is *karma*. We breathe, that is *karma*. ... Everything we do, physical or mental, is *karma*, and it leaves its marks on us. ... We are responsible for what we are; and whatever we wish ourselves to be, we have the power to make ourselves. If what we are now has been the result of our own past actions, it certainly follows that whatever we wish to be in future can be produced by our present actions; so we have to know how to act. ... But there is such a thing as frittering away our energies. With regard to *karma yoga*, the Gita says that it is doing work with cleverness and as a science, by knowing how to work, one can obtain the greatest results.”¹

“In the path of *karma yoga*,” Krishna begins, “no effort is ever lost and no obstacle prevails. Even a little practice of this yoga saves one from great fear. The resolute understanding is single. Thoughts of the irresolute are many-branched and endless. Firmly fix the thought on the Supreme Self, and relinquish all selfish desire. To action alone, you have the right, but not to the fruits of action. Don’t let the fruits of action be your motive. Neither should you be attached to inaction. Fixed in this yoga, do your work, abandoning attachment and being of even mind in both success and failure. Evenness of mind is called *yoga*. *Yoga samatvam ucyate*.”

The first thing in *karma yoga* is to fix the thought on the realisation of the Supreme Self. Thus the teaching of the Upanishads is made the foundation on which the yoga is built. The next step is to act but not with a selfish motive. This is a difficult message to comprehend. If we examine our life, we find it is full of self-interest. How can we work if we are not motivated by self-interest?

¹S. Vivekananda, Complete Works, Vol. 1, pp. 27-31.

Does this mean we should abandon work? Krishna emphatically says no. You should not resort to inaction either. The ideal is to work with an evenness of mind in both success and failure. Is this possible?

Vivekananda gives us a personal view on this matter. “I have been asked many times how we can work if we do not have the passion which we generally feel for work. I also thought in that way years ago, but as I am growing older, getting more experience, I find it is not true. The less passion there is, the better we work. The calmer we are, the better for us, and the more the amount of work we can do. When we let loose our feelings, we waste so much energy, shatter our nerves, disturb our minds, and accomplish very little work. The energy which ought to have gone out as work is spent as mere feeling, which counts for nothing. It is only when the mind is very calm and collected that the whole of its energy is spent in doing good work. ... The man who gives way to anger, or hatred, or any other passion, cannot work; he only breaks himself to pieces, and does nothing practical. It is the calm, forgiving, equable, well-balanced mind that does the greatest amount of work.”²

Krishna continues. “Action should be guided by intelligence, not by self-interest. One who has joined himself to *buddhi*, or illumined reason, and works, is said to be skillful in action. Yoga is said to be this skill in action. *Yogah karmasu kausalam.*”

In these verses, Krishna outlines his theory of work and gives two definitions of *yoga*. One is that it is evenness of mind, and the other that it is skill in action. Both of these have to be combined to gain a proper understanding of this philosophy of work. In all our actions, we must work with full attention, with a calm mind and be skillful in action. At the same time, we must not be attached to the fruits of our work.

At this point, Arjuna asks for a description of such a perfect sage. His question is indicative that slowly Arjuna is coming out of his despondency and depression. Krishna answers, “When all the desires of the mind are put away and the spirit is content in itself, the sage is said to be of settled intelligence (*sthitaprajna*). He is untroubled in the midst of sorrow and is free from eager desire amid pleasures. He from whom passion, fear and rage have passed away is called one of settled intelligence. He who draws away the senses from the objects of sense just as a tortoise draws in its limbs into the shell, his intelligence is said to be firmly set.”

Now begins Krishna’s masterly analysis of how attachment comes about. “The objects of sense turn away when one abstains from feeding on them. The

²S. Vivekananda, Complete Works, Vol. 2, p. 293.

taste for them, however, remains, and only disappears when the *ātman* is realised. The senses are impetuous and can carry the mind away by force, if one is not careful. By thinking about sense objects, attachment to them is formed. From attachment, arises a desire to possess them. When this is not gratified, anger comes. From anger comes confusion. From confusion, loss of memory. From loss of memory, the destruction of intelligence. From the destruction of intelligence, one perishes. ”

Modern psychoanalysis has revealed that anger is a manifestation of repressed or suppressed desire. Modern medicine has also established the damage to internal physiology caused by excessive anger. In all forms of conflict, when we analyse them carefully, we find these principles at work. How often is it the case, that in moments of anger, we are confused and issues that have no bearing on the circumstance are brought in only to add further confusion. From such confusion, we forget many things, the purpose of our life, our roles, our goals, and most importantly, that we must co-exist peacefully with others, and that they too have feelings that must be respected.

The process by which the mind falls into error and how, if this error is not corrected, it falls into destruction is what is described in this important verse. Literature is replete with examples of this one psychological phenomenon: how selfish desire can possess the mind and lead it to annihilation. This is the fundamental theme in the drama of human life, the question of “moral choice” in all issues and circumstance. But that “moral choice” must be guided by intelligence. It is often found that morality for its own sake is too weak to stand on its own. One must have a larger perspective with which to view things and this perspective is provided by intelligence, or illumined reason (*buddhi*).

Krishna continues, “But one who is of disciplined mind, who moves among objects of sense with the senses under control, free from attachment or aversion, such a one attains purity of spirit. For the uncontrolled, however, there is no intelligence, nor is there the power of concentration. Without concentration of mind, there is no peace. For the unpeaceful, how can there be happiness? When the mind runs after the roving senses, it carries away all understanding just as the wind carries away a ship on the waters. What is night for all beings is the time of wakefulness for the sage. What is the time of wakefulness for all beings is night for the sage.”

The meaning of the last part is an indication of priorities. When the world is dazzled by the glitter of sense objects, the sage is focussed on understanding reality and touching the very substance of the phenomenon of life. Thus the mind of the sage is asleep to what the world is awake to. Conversely, the world is asleep to what the sage is awake to. This clearly needs no further elaboration.

In a masterly stroke of psychoanalytic insight, Krishna indicates that “the sage does not hug desires when they arise. Nor does he agitate the mind to create them. He is indifferent to them. As waters enter the sea, though ever being filled, is ever motionless, so is the mind of the sage with respect to desires.” From his spiritual vantage point, Krishna sees desires as part of a psycho-biological process. Arjuna intervenes and asks, “If you think the path of understanding (*jnāna yoga*) is better than the path of action (*karma yoga*), then why do you urge me to fight? I think you have only confused me by this teaching. Tell me for certain which path I should follow.”

Here begins Krishna’s outline of the theory of work. To many contemporary thinkers, such as Mahatma Gandhi, this is considered to be the major contribution of the Bhagavadgita to philosophic thought. In response to Arjuna’s question, Krishna replies, “One may lead a life of contemplation, or a life of action. Both properly done lead one to illumination. But one must understand that freedom from work is not gained by abstaining from work. By mere renunciation of work, you do not attain perfection. It is impossible to maintain even one’s life without doing some work. One who restrains the organs of action but continues to brood over sense objects is said to be a hypocrite and only brings about misery and delusion on oneself. But he who controls the senses by the mind and engages the organs of action in the path of work is superior.” Here is the beginning of Krishna’s brilliant fusion of both *jnana yoga* and *karma yoga*.

In order to refrain from falling into error, one is tempted to refrain from action altogether. But this is definitely not the way. Vivekananda describes this error in a humorous way. “The cow never tells a lie, and the stone never steals, but nevertheless, the cow remains a cow and the stone a stone. Man steals and man tells lies, and again, it is man that becomes a god.”³

“Do thou thy allotted work,” the Teacher instructs, “for action is better than inaction. Even to maintain physical health, one must work. But learn to work free from attachment. This world is an interdependent world. All creatures support each other through mutual co-operation. Join your mind to a higher cause that enables the welfare of all. It is in this way that the great ones of the past have attained perfection through work alone. Whatever a great person does, others follow. Whatever standard is set by such a one, the world rises to that standard. Look at me Arjuna. There is not for me any personal gain from the work I do, yet, I continue to work. If I did not engage in work unwearied, people would follow my example and the world will fall into ruin. Just as the ignorant act from attachment to work, so should the learned act, but without any attachment and with a desire for the welfare of the world. The enlightened person acts in a spirit of yoga and thus sets others to act as well.”

³S. Vivekananda, Complete Works, Vol. 5, p. 451.

Here is the main message of the Gita. Often we are tempted to take up a life of exclusive meditation, but this is not an option to be followed according to Krishna. Few have the capacity for sustained concentration and so most of the time is spent in idleness. The classic adage, “An idle mind is the devil’s workshop,” more or less summarises the dangers of such an option. The ideal is to join the mind to a wider vision, a worthy cause that enjoins the welfare of all, and then to engage the mind and body in work.

This does not mean that we must abandon our present work and take up something that has been certified as social service by the world at large. “Do thou thy allotted work,” enjoins Krishna. “Repressing or suppressing desires is not desirable for then, these energies only become subconscious to manifest later in all their fury. The energies and passions must be given a higher direction as I have indicated. Better is thought and action consonant with one’s own abilities and aptitudes than that which is not. Even though this may not be done perfectly, it is better because acting contrary to one’s psychological disposition often leads to great fear.” Thus, we see that we must take our own abilities and give them a higher direction. For this, we need not go anywhere. It is our own view that must be adjusted and enlarged.

“What is action, what is inaction and what is non-action? Even the wise are confused on these points,” says Krishna. He who sees action in inaction and inaction in action, he is the yogi. For one whose actions are free from selfish desire, every work culminates in wisdom. Such an individual holds his life as an offering, a sacrifice, to a higher ideal. Knowledge as a sacrifice is greater than any material sacrifice since all works without exception culminate in wisdom. Learn that by humble reverence, by inquiry, by concentration and by service.”

Mere physical action is not action according to Krishna. Real action is the process by which we refine wisdom from the crude ore of experience. One may be silent, reflective and outwardly, performing no action but inwardly, through introspection, one is gaining insight and wisdom and thus performing action. All experiences, good and bad, can be used to distill wisdom. The last line indicates a fusion of humble reverence, inquiry, concentration and service. This brings us to the second major contribution of the Gita, namely, the union of the path of devotion, or *bhakti yoga* and the path of concentration *rāja yoga*. Krishna now indicates that we must infuse feeling into whatever we do, but that must be one of humble reverence. At the same time, we must practice concentration of mind.

The mind must learn to concentrate and for this it must be trained to do so by engaging the will. What exactly is will? It is love converted into power. Thus, the same mechanism outlined before that leads one to a downfall can be

used to rise to a higher awareness. The mind should be fixed on the desire to realise *Brahman*. “As a lamp in a windless place does not flicker,” Krishna says, “so also is the mind fixed on the Supreme Self that is not disturbed by selfish desire. Let him gain little by little, tranquility by means of reason controlled by steadiness, and having fixed the mind on the Self, let him not think of anything else. Whenever the mind wanders, let him restrain and bring the mind to the focus of concentration.” Arjuna intervenes and says, “This control of mind that you describe is very hard indeed. It is as difficult as trying to control the wind.” “Yes,” agrees Krishna, “but it can be done with steady practice. Wonderful things can be accomplished through steady practice. It becomes easier if we constantly remind ourselves of the goal to be attained. Thinking of That, directing one’s whole conscious being to That, making That their whole aim, with That as the sole object of their devotion, they reach that supreme state. Even here on earth, the world of duality is transcended by one whose mind is established in equality.”

As the discourse continues, one can see Krishna’s mind ascending in awareness. His speech begins to reveal that he is now teaching from the universal awareness as taught by the Upanishads. “I am the taste in the waters. I am the light in the moon and sun. I am the syllable Om. I am the fragrance in the earth and brightness in the fire. I am the life in all existence. I am the origin of all. From Me⁴ the whole creation proceeds. Knowing this, the wise worship Me, with their thoughts fixed on Me.” As Krishna’s mind ascends to a higher level of awareness, Arjuna asks if he too can have such an awareness. “If you think It can be seen, then please reveal It to me.”

Then Krishna says, “It cannot be seen by the human eye. I will give you the divine eye by which you can see.” In the eleventh chapter of the Gita is described this cosmic form, *visva rūpa*, of Krishna. Arjuna is, at first, frightened. “If a thousand suns were to rise simultaneously in the morning sky, that might resemble the splendour of that vision,” says the poet. “I behold Thee,” says Arjuna, “infinite in form on all sides. I do not see Thy end, Thy middle or Thy beginning. I see many things. The entire space is pervaded by Thee alone. I see sons of Dhritarāshtra rushing towards destruction. As moths rush swiftly into a blazing fire to perish there, so do these men rush into their own destruction. ... I have seen what was never seen before and my heart is shaken with fear. Please show me your compassionate form.”

Then Krishna said, “This universal form is very hard to see and you have seen It. Others too can, through unswerving devotion to the Supreme, attain to the same state of awareness. In the practice of devotion, it is difficult for the mind to focus on the abstract, That which is beyond manifestation, beyond thought, which is changeless, immobile and constant. This is quite difficult

⁴The word ‘Me’ in the translation of the verse refers to the Universal Self.

for embodied beings. But those who worship Me, meditating on Me, with unswerving devotion, also attain to a higher level of awareness. The essential thing is to give up selfish desire and be dedicated to the welfare of all beings. Real devotion is to not have any ill-will towards any being, to be free from egotism, to be even-minded in pain and pleasure. This is the yoga of devotion (*bhakti yoga*).”

This can be said to be the second major contribution of the Gita to the world’s philosophic thought. In these verses, Krishna assimilates in a masterly way all dualistic views into the non-dualistic framework. As long as one thinks of oneself as an embodied being, a dualistic view will intervene no matter how hard we try to avoid it. One need not lament about that. The essential thing is “to have no ill-will towards anyone, to be free from egotism, to be even-minded in pain and pleasure.” That is the essence of devotion.

From duality, Krishna moves to plurality. In the thirteenth chapter of the Gita, Krishna gives us a detailed view of the Sāmkhya philosophy. As mentioned earlier, this philosophy is based on two uncreate principles, *purusha* and *prakriti*, or simply, Pure Awareness and Creative Energy or as Krishna defines it, the Knower of the Field (*ksetrajna*) and the Field (*ksetra*). After elaborating on the twenty-four cosmic principles of the Sāmkhya, Krishna gives us his insight into the manifestation of the *gunas*, or modes of energy. “As the one sun illumines the world, so does the *ksetrajna* illumine the entire field of *ksetra*. Those who perceive thus through the eye of wisdom attain to the Supreme. The three modes or *gunas* are the cause of bondage. Dullness (*tamoguna*), born of ignorance, deludes all embodied beings and gives rise to attachment for negligence, indolence and sleep. Passion (*rajoguna*) springing from craving gives rise to attachment for selfish action. But goodness (*sattvaguna*) being pure, causes illumination, health and causes attachment for knowledge. When the light of knowledge streams forth in all the gates of the body, *sattva* is said to increase. When greed, restlessness and selfish activity prevail, *rajas* is said to increase. When delusion, negligence and inertia prevail, *tamoguna* is said to increase. From goodness arises knowledge, from passion, greed and from dullness, ignorance. When one rises above these three modes, one attains the state of *Brahman*. Everything in this manifested universe exhibits this three-fold nature.”

“For example,” Krishna explains, “there are three kinds of work. That work which should be done, performed without attachment to fruits, is said to be of the nature of goodness, or *sattva*. That work which is done in great strain to gratify one’s selfish desires is said to be of the nature of passion, or *rajas*. That work which is done through ignorance, without regard to consequences, or to loss and injury, without regard to one’s human capacity, is said to be of the nature of dullness, or *tamas*.”

Then Krishna makes a final appeal, echoing his earlier message of verses 30 and 31 of the third chapter:

*mayi sarvāni karmāni samnyasyā 'dhyātmacetasā
nirāsir nirmamo bhūtvā yudhyasva vigatajvarah
ye me matam idam nityam anutisthanti mānavāh
sraddhāvanto 'nasūyanto mucyante te'pi karmabhih*

Resigning all your works to Me, with your consciousness fixed in the Self, being free from desire and egotism, fight, free from any mental fever. This is my philosophy of life and whoever follows this teaching will also be released from the bondage of work.

These two verses contain the essence of the Gita.⁵ The human mind has four faculties, thinking, feeling, willing and restraining. Just as thinking can be taken to a higher state as illumined reason, so also feeling, willing, restraining can be taken to higher levels. The method for raising each faculty to a higher state is called *yoga* and the four yogas, *jnāna*, *bhakti*, *karma* and *rāja* correspond to the four faculties of thinking, feeling, willing and restraining. When Krishna refers to 'his philosophy', he means the four-fold combination of all these yogas. This is his masterly stroke. This is his magnificent synthesis of all philosophic thought. The human brain should not be developed in a one-sided fashion but must be exercised in this four-fold way giving a higher expression to each of its four faculties.

So Krishna says, "Resigning all your works to Me (*bhakti*), with your consciousness fixed in the Self (*jnāna*), being free from desire and egoism, fight (*karma*), delivered from mental fever (*rāja*)." The Teacher continues, "This wisdom more secret than all secrets, has been given to you by Me. Please reflect upon it and do as you choose."

Here again is the fundamental principle of choice in life. We are given the highest wisdom and now must choose. No one can be coerced into goodness. "Have you listened carefully Arjuna?" Krishna asks. "Would you like me to repeat anything?"

Here again, the Teacher is the embodiment of patience. After receiving the message from Krishna, Arjuna rises, "Gone is my delusion. Through your grace, my doubts have been dispelled. I shall carry out your word."

⁵This was first pointed out to me by Swami Sarvagatananda of the Vedanta Society of Boston. Krishna's use of the term *me matam*, is especially important since it means 'my philosophy'. A more forceful translation can be 'my religion.'

Thus ends the Bhagavadgīta. So profound and valuable is its teaching that it has acquired the status of an Upanishad, and it is referred to as the Bhagavadgīta Upanishad. However, it can be said to include all the other Upanishads in it as well as much more, encompassing all religious, moral and philosophical traditions in a universal synthesis.

To re-iterate, the Gita's contribution to philosophy is its introduction of *karma yoga*, or the yoga of work, *bhakti yoga*, the yoga of devotion, and its assimilation of all philosophies ranging from the plurality of Sāṃkhya to the non-dualism of the Upanishads. As such, it absorbs into it the yoga of reason (*jñāna yoga*) and the yoga of restraining (*rāja yoga*).

What is impressive about the whole piece is the personality of Krishna. He is, as it were, the very embodiment of the universal teaching he is giving. The message is delivered on the battlefield, not in the solitude of a forest hermitage or a secluded mountain cave. Stand in the middle of the battle of life and be calm, think clearly and act from the higher standpoint. That is his message and if one looks at Sri Krishna's life, he is the superb example of the teaching put into practice.

Concerning the personality of Krishna, Vivekananda writes, "He is the most rounded man I know of, wonderfully developed equally in brain and heart and hand. Every moment of his is alive with activity, either as a gentleman, warrior, minister or something else. Great as a gentleman, as a scholar, as a poet. This all-rounded and wonderful activity and combination of brain and heart you see in the Gita. ... Most wonderful heart, exquisite language, ... This tremendous activity of the man - the impression is still there. Five thousand years have passed and he has influenced millions and millions. ... My regard for him is for his perfect sanity. No cobwebs in that brain, no superstition. He knows the use of everything, and when it is necessary to assign a place to each, he is there. ... Then that heart! ... That wonderful mind! That tremendously active life! ... Krishna preached in the midst of the battlefield. 'He who in the midst of intense activity finds himself in the greatest calmness, and in the greatest peace finds intense activity, that is the greatest Yogi as well as the wisest man.'⁶ It means nothing to this man - the flying of missiles about him. Calm and sedate he goes on discussing the problems of life and death."⁷

How does the message of the Gita relate to our daily life? For each individual, life is a series of choices they have made, partly based on circumstance, environment, outlook and aptitude. We can all testify that life is not always smooth sailing, but often a stormy journey. The storm is partly within and

⁶Gita, Chapter 4, Verse 18.

⁷S. Vivekananda, Complete Works, Vol. 1, p. 457-458.

partly without. During such episodes, there is a psychological tendency in each one of us, to abandon whatever it is we are doing and take up something else, simply because difficulties have arisen. It is precisely such moments through which enlightenment can be gained, says the Gita, if one works through it, with a calm mind, giving up egoism, with firm determination. Thus, the message of the Gita is a perennial message and millions have been inspired by its teaching. Mahatma Gandhi spoke of it as 'his mother,' and wrote "When disappointment stares me in the face and all alone I see not one ray of light, I go back to the *Bhagavadgīta*. I find a verse here and a verse there and I immediately begin to smile in the midst of overwhelming tragedies - and my life has been full of external tragedies - and if they have left no visible, no indelible scar on me, I owe it all to the teachings of the *Bhagavadgīta*."⁸ The Gita has survived countless centuries and it is sure to survive for many more centuries as it addresses the fundamental questions of the human heart.

⁸M.K. Gandhi, *Young India*, 1925, pp. 1078-1079.

