

GUIDEPOSTS FOR LIVING - THE BHAGAVAD GITA

Joy Mills

The Bhagavad Gita is one of the world's great spiritual texts to which we may look for guidance for living a meaningful or a significant existence. Through centuries it has inspired thinkers, scholars, social activists, and people from all walks of life. It has been translated into nearly as many languages as are spoken on the planet, and commentaries on it have been produced throughout time. It is a work that belongs as much to the Western world as to the Eastern, for it speaks to every individual who has ever faced a seemingly insoluble problem. The Gita speaks to each one of us confronted by the existential dilemma of choice.

The Gita is one part of the great epic of India, the Mahabharata, which contains eighteen books; the Gita, which contains eighteen chapters or discourses, is part of the sixth book. The epic itself has a historical setting, but that is not our present concern, for in addition to its context as part of a great story, the Gita has both an archetypal, or universal, aspect and an individual aspect as represented by its human protagonist, Arjuna. It is both personal and transpersonal.

Central to understanding the Gita is the concept of yoga, or what has been called the path of conscious self-realization. According to the colophons, each discourse is an exposition of yoga. Yoga is both a practical discipline and the goal of self-integration, of complete harmonization of the individual soul with the Supreme Self. It is because we are dealing with that process known as yoga that the Bhagavad Gita is truly a guidepost for living—not only living the spiritual life but living in the here and now of daily existence with all its joys and sorrows.

Professor S. Dasgupta, in his History of Indian Philosophy, has stated that the Gita is not only a “system of philosophy” but more important, “a manual of right conduct and right perspective of things in the light of a mystical approach to God in self-resignation, devotion, friendship, and humility.” It is as such a guide to our conduct and to gaining the right perspective on all that occurs that we will look together at this beautiful text.

Let us begin at the beginning. Dharmakshetra kurukshetra are the first two words of our text, a text that is truly a gita—song, a chant, the music or harmony of the Supreme embodied as Krishna, the mediator between the realm of the eternal and the world of our mundane existence. Dharmakshetra kurukshetra . . . in those two words we have the crux of our own dilemma, the central problem that every individual must eventually resolve.

Kshetra means, a field, a demarcated area or domain. It is where something takes place. It is here, now, this life, this existence, this present moment. And in this present moment, in this nowness of our existence, two voices are heard.

The first is the voice of dharma—not an easy word to define. Dharma is duty, righteousness, law, and lawfulness; it is truth, responsibility, order, religion. Dharma is the voice that calls us to fulfill our responsibility as a human being, whatever may be our occupation, our educational background, our place in life. Dharma sustains and nourishes our very existence, gives it its integrity, its meaning. Here and now, in the midst of this life, we must come awake to our dharma, to be what we are intended to be. So the first word of the Gita, dharmakshetra in Sanskrit, defines for us the place or field of our unique responsibility.

But of the place where the battle is to occur is not only the field of our dharma; but the second word of the text tells us it is the field of the Kurus. In terms of the epic of which the Gita is a part, this means, of course, the family from which both sides in the coming battle were descended. So at one level we can recognize that even as we are situated on the field of our individual duty, our dharma, we are also located on the field of all our relationships. But in Sanskrit, kuru is also one form of the verb “to do,” so kurukshetra could also mean “the field of our doings or the field of human actions,” seen in relation to the community of which we are part.

So in these opening two words, two voices call to us: the voice of our individual dharma and the voice of our responsibility as a member of a particular community. At the outset, we know we are on the field of action in the more embracing, more encompassing field of dharma. And since each individual's dharma includes all the psychological, familiar, social, and traditional laws or customs that govern each of us, as well as our duty to each of these structures, that also means that at the same time our dharma includes our responsibility to our own inner nature. So we often find ourselves in conflict among all these obligations. In fact, conflict is

inevitable. How many crossroads have you come to in your life? How many times have you asked yourself, as well as friends, relatives, elders, “What shall I do?” It may even be the question: “Shall I do what I want to do, or must I do what my parents want me to do?” And perhaps in despair we seek to abandon ourselves to no action at all, only to realize that even inaction is action.

While Annie Besant has titled discourse 1 “The Despondency of Arjuna,” many translators have called it, “The Yoga of Despair.” And indeed it may be suggested that despair, despondency, the darkness that may at times overwhelm us and obscure our vision of what is to be done, is in itself a yoga, or at least a stage on the yogic path to self-awakening. Often it is that very despair that drives us to seek understanding if not wisdom, to venture forth on the arduous road toward knowledge, freedom, truth. And it is here that we need to note a significant action taken by Arjuna, an action that I suggest is essential if we are to walk the path toward enlightenment. In many ways this is the first of the guideposts found in our text.

That action is described in verses 21 through 23 of discourse 1: Simply put, Arjuna has asked his charioteer—who is Krishna of course, representative of the Supreme—to take him to the center between the two armies who have gathered for the impending battle. In the words of verse 21: “In the midst between the two armies, stay my chariot.” When faced with any problem, it is essential to center ourselves, to come to the center where there is silence, and there to “stay my chariot,” a metaphor for the personality. In that inner quietude we may hear the voice of the Self, of Krishna, of the One who abides beyond all opposites. It has been said that Krishna never comes uninvited. We must be still to hear his voice, and only when we are centered can we ask the question, as Arjuna did.

In discourse 2 verse 54, Arjuna asks a very practical question: How does the wise person, the one who is “stable of mind,” act? How does he talk, sit, and walk? Arjuna asks this question, in one form or another throughout the dialogue. For example, in discourse 14 verse 21, after hearing about the three qualities that compose the realm of matter, Arjuna asks, “What are the marks of him who hath crossed over the three qualities . . . ? How acteth he . . . ?” Arjuna is a practical person. He has come to Krishna, as we know, with a direct question: “What shall I do?” Of course when he asks that question at the outset of the dialogue, his mind is already made up: “I will not fight,” he says and lays down his arms.

Carefully, step by step, Krishna like the true teacher he is instructs Arjuna in all that action and even inaction involve. He does not begin by talking about the individual who has achieved liberation and has transcended all relationships. Krishna does not even answer his question directly, but he pictures for Arjuna the individual who lives in the world fulfilling his responsibilities while at the same time completely detached from any desire for the fruit of action. For such an individual, actions are directed toward the welfare of the world, an emphasis that finds expression in verse 25 of discourse 3: “As the ignorant act from attachment to action, so should the wise act without attachment desiring the welfare of the world”.

Act Arjuna will; act we all will, always remembering that action is not confined to the physical realm. For there is action of thought, of emotion, of speech and mind as well as of body. Indeed, as Krishna says in verse 17 of discourse 4, “Mysterious is the path of action” and in verse 18, “He who seeth inaction in action, and action in inaction, he is wise . . . he is harmonious even while performing all action.” Yet even as we act, we must recognize, as verse 46 of discourse 18 tells us, “All undertakings indeed are clouded by defects as fire by smoke.” So it is how we act that is important, and for this Arjuna asks again and again for practical, and everyday illustrations of how the wise person talks and sits and walks and moves about in the world. And to answer this Krishna—in discourse 12—gives Arjuna and therefore us some very practical advice. Verses 13 through 20 of discourse 12 give us some extremely useful, though not always easy, guidelines for our everyday movements in the world.

Verse 13 of discourse 12 begins on what one commentator has called a “low negative key.” The verse opens with the words “He who beareth no ill-will to any being . . .” If we can pause there to examine ourselves, we will see that we like some people and dislike others; we like some beings—dogs and cats, for example—and not others—snakes and spiders, perhaps. The whole of our phenomenal life is marked by a tension between our likes and dislikes. And these are really only a manifestation of our attachments, for even our aversions are sticky attachments. So to “bear no ill-will to any being” is not quite as easy as it may first appear. Even without an active desire to do harm to another creature, we may carry a grudge against someone or feel jealousy or envy. We may feel slighted or hurt and then almost unconsciously hope that the one who has hurt us will suffer some mishap.

After that negative beginning, Krishna proceeds with the first two positive virtues, “friendly and compassionate.” We are not only to remove any feeling of ill will. We are to begin by practicing friendship. Let everyone be recognized as a friend, in unconditional friendship. In the Yoga Sutas, Patanjali puts maitri at the head of all the factors that purify the mind. Suta 33 of Section I begins with the Sanskrit words “Maitri Karuna,” and Dr. Taimni translates this suta: “The mind becomes clarified by cultivating attitudes of friendliness, compassion, gladness and indifference respectively toward happiness, misery, virtue and vice.” The essence of friendliness is sympathy, even an empathy. In friendship, there is a predisposition to listen and to understand the other. This quality of friendliness goes to the very root of right relationship.

From friendliness to compassion is a natural movement of the heart. To be a friend to all that lives means that one is compassionate, caring, one to whom all life is precious. The one who is full of friendliness and sympathy naturally feels compassion for all who suffer. There needs to be an unqualified compassion, a natural flow outward. Once total friendliness and compassion flower, we begin to lose our sense of possessiveness. So the next phrase in verse 13, “without attachment and egoism.” The last thing to dissolve and become nonexistent is the sense of a separate self, ahamkara or egoism. And this condition results in a state described in the concluding words of the verse, “balanced in pleasure and pain, and forgiving.” When we realize that pleasure and pain “come and go impermanent” as Krishna has said in discourse 2, when we are free of attachment and aversion, friendly and compassionate, no longer under the sway of egoism, then forgiveness flowers within us, which is also patience and forbearance.

Verse 14 continues the list of qualities exhibited by the “sage of stable mind,” the way in which action should be performed: “Ever content, harmonious, with the self controlled, resolute, with mind and Reason [Buddhi] dedicated to Me . . .” To be “ever content” implies a cheerfulness under all conditions, that cheerfulness spoken of as one of the points of good conduct in At the Feet of the Master. Krishna speaks of the same quality again in verse 16 of discourse 17, where it is called “serenity of mind,” a serenity that cannot be disturbed by any external or internal cause, under any conditions. The whole being is in a harmonious state, with the entire personality complex under control. When the individual has achieved this harmony, then, without effort, the mind and the intelligence or Reason (as Dr. Besant translates buddhi) come to rest in the Divine. That individual, says Krishna, “is dear to Me.” To be dear to Krishna is to be at home with one’s soul, with one’s inmost self, to be friends with that Self. Then in each of the succeeding verses, that dearness is defined, further aiding Arjuna to understand how action is to be performed.

Verse 15 declares the relationship that should exist between the wise person and the world. “He from whom the world doth not shrink away, who doth not shrink away from the world, freed from the anxieties of joy, anger, and fear . . .” Here we are reminded of the verse already cited from discourse 3, that all our actions are to be directed toward the welfare of the world. The “sage of stable mind,” as the wise individual has been called, does not live away from the world. He may be said to be in the world but not of it. Such a person feels deep concern for our common humanity. We are to be friendly and compassionate, so that the world does not shrink away from us, nor do we turn against the world. What wisdom we have is to be employed to aid the world, to aid suffering humanity, but we do so without fear and certainly without anger.

When we make ourselves available to the world, not shrinking from that contact, what is our nature like? Verse 16 describes the attitude we should have: “He who wants nothing . . . is pure, expert, passionless, untroubled . . .” To be pure is to be untainted by worldly standards. We may not feel we are “expert” in knowing how to aid the world, but when we are “pure in heart,” there is a certain knowing of what is right to do in any circumstance, which may be only to send a thought of goodwill, of peace or healing or love out into the world. So we act, as it were, without acting or, as the verse says, “renouncing every undertaking,” which means that the personal self is not involved in wanting a certain outcome, expecting a certain “fruit” of the action. We are truly “untroubled,” which is to be without fear.

Verse 17 continues the theme, describing the person free from all conditioning: “He who neither loveth nor hateht nor grieveth, nor desireth, renouncing good and evil, full of devotion . . .” What does it mean to be full of devotion? We may say that the way of the devotee is not our way, but to be full of devotion means simply that our whole being is filled with that profound love for humanity of which the Mahatma spoke when he wrote to A. P. Sinnett (The Mahatma Letters to A. P. Sinnett, Letter 33, chron.): “It is he alone who has the love of humanity at heart, who is capable of grasping thoroughly the idea of a regenerating practical Brotherhood who is entitled to the possession of our secrets . . .” And when there is such love, such devotion, there is no personal self. I am told that the Sanskrit words that Annie Besant translated as “full of devotion” are para bhakti, that imply a complete commitment of one’s being to the welfare of all.

That theme is carried forward in verse 18: “Alike to foe and friend, and also in fame and ignominy, alike in cold and heat, pleasures and pains, destitute of attachment.” Admittedly, all that is described here is not easily attained, but what is being portrayed is the self-realized individual. So we are brought face to face with the pairs of opposites that confront many of us every day and that cloud our perception of what is real, what is important, what is worth doing. Release from our clouded condition, caused by the opposites, comes only from becoming free from all attachments. That emphasis is permanent and constant throughout the entire Gita.

We must unbind ourselves from what the Buddha called “sticky attachments.” When we have ceased to be pulled back and forth between the opposites then the condition described in verse 19 is present: “Taking equally praise and reproach, silent, wholly content with what cometh, homeless, firm in mind, full of devotion,” such indeed, says Krishna to Arjuna in answer to his question, is the way in which the Self-realized, the “sage of stable mind,” the true knower of the Wisdom, acts in the world. Silent, not because such a person does not speak, though generally he may say little, but because even when he speaks there is none of the noise of desire, of chattering thought. Homeless, not because such a one has no home but because the entire world is his abode. In the beautiful words of The Voice of the Silence, he has “become a ‘Walker of the Sky’ who treads the winds above the waves, whose step touches not the waters.” Yes and “wholly content with what cometh,” filled with that inner contentment that whatever comes to us is what we have called to ourselves.

Finally, then, in verse 20, Krishna tells Arjuna, “The verily who partake of this life-giving wisdom [Amrita-Dharma, the truth that is imperishable, immortal, beautiful, and therefore life-giving] . . . endued with faith [shraddha, confidence, the faith that has been called “unlearned knowledge”], I their supreme object . . . they are surpassingly dear to Me.”

It is evident that the individual pictured in these eight verses of discourse 12 is one whose qualities and characteristics seem far beyond achieving. Yet, as all great scriptures tell us, as Masters of Wisdom—whether called Krishna or by some other name—have reiterated, “We have but one word for all aspirants—TRY!” Above all, such an individual lives in the world, to help the world, acting in the here and now, and so we must begin here and now, following the guideposts that have been so beautifully provided for our walking. As Krishna tells Arjuna in discourse 5 verse 23: “He who is able to endure here on earth, ere he be liberated from the body, the force born from desire and passion, he is harmonized, he is a happy man.”

They say that five thousand years and more have passed since the immortal teaching was given to Arjuna. If ever the world was in need of the message of the Gita, it is surely today, when spiritual values have been negated and flouted, when material craving, greed, prejudice, fear, and hatred seem to stalk the land. But Krishna promised in verse 7 of discourse 4 that whenever there is “decay of righteousness,” whenever chaos rules, he would “come forth,” born from age to age. We do not know how he will be born, how he may be recognized, in what race, or faith, or with what voice he will speak. But of this we may be certain: If we try to live in accordance with the guideposts we have been given, follow our own unique dharma, work for the welfare of all, his voice will be heard in our voices, his thoughts will be reflected in our thinking, his actions revealed in our actions, his presence known in our presence as we seek to bring light and love and peace into every human heart.

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