

Getting Introduced to Bhagavad Gita – Swami Sridharananda

The Setting

According to scholars and also saints belonging to various religious movements in India, the whole gamut of Indian or the Hindu scriptures can be categorized into *prasthanatrayas*—the three pillars, as it were. Of the three, first is the Upanishads and the second is the Brahma Sutras which is a compilation of the ideas that are scattered over the Vedic literature by *Maharshi* Vyasa. Finally comes the Bhagavad Gita, the third of the *prasthana-trayas*. The essence of Gita can be understood only if we know how this came into light. The fact is that the mighty third son of Pandu—Arjuna—was acclaimed and proclaimed to be the best specimen of a human being at that time of society. This measure of the personality was based on worldly acquisitions. An unparalleled warrior and a unique general, Arjuna had all that goes to make a kshatriya.

The Pandavas were greatly wronged and were denied the rightful throne. Duryodhana, the head of the Kuru family had claimed the throne of India. Prior to that, when the Pandavas were exiled in the forest (including living incognito for one year), all sorts of trickeries were laid on them by the Kauravas. Sri Krishna and Yudhishtira, the two elders of the family, were both very mature people. They tried to exhaust all avenues of a negotiated settlement, knowing full well that war does not solve any problem—which we are yet to learn in today’s world. Anyway, at that time also the same question of avoiding blood bath was paramount in the minds of Sri Krishna and Yudhishtira. When in a group, they used to discuss all that, the two brothers of the five, the second brother Bhimasena, and the third brother Arjuna used to move tangentially, used to get into a tearing raid of the two elders, to the extent they used to abuse the elder brother as coward, and not being worthy of being called a kshatriya. Arjuna felt that as a kshatriya—kshatriyas are supposed to be the maintainers of equity, justice, righteousness, and also to protect the territory of the nation—they should fight a righteous battle. This was their right and responsibility. Ultimately, it was decided to make it absolutely clear that might is right, and they are going to fight it out in a battlefield, and the winner gets all. This is the setting for the battle royal in Kurukshetra. In this great drama of Bhagavad Gita, there were two main actors—Arjuna at one end, and Sri Krishna, at the other end. They represent two aspects of life. Arjuna represents the humankind with all its plus points and minus points. Sri Krishna represents the collective wisdom of India’s spiritual heritage. This is the setting in chapter one of the Gita. Unless we understand this, we cannot grasp the inner meaning of the Bhagavad Gita.

The Beginning

Dhritarashtra was not in a position to leave his kingdom, Hastinapur. But at the same time, he wanted to be kept posted about the happenings in the war without missing any details. So Vyasa wanted to give him the divine insight whereby sitting in Hastinapur he could see what is happening. Dhritarashtra said, ‘What shall I do with this insight, dear! I’m blind from birth. Therefore, give that special capacity to my friend, my charioteer Sanjaya. Let him see and let him narrate.’ That’s how we find in

the Gita, the expression '*Sanjaya uvacha*' ('Sanjaya said'). In the battlefield, both the armies were ready. War sirens had been sounded by the blowing of conchs, as was the practice then. Krishna decided to be Arjuna's charioteer—literally and symbolically, his friend and philosopher. Charioteering was an art in itself. A charioteer has to be an exceedingly skilled horseman, so that he can tactfully manage the chariot to protect the fighter from being unnecessarily exposed to danger. When the battle was about to begin, Arjuna asked Krishna, 'Take my chariot and park it between the two armies so that I can behold my enemies who want to raise their arms against me.' It was just a simple demand: wanting to have a look at the faces of people who have assembled there with an intention to fight. But the attitude with which one expresses intent speaks volumes of how one looks at things. Arjuna spoke in a challenging, derisive tone: 'I will look at these people who have the temerity to raise their arms against me? Do they not know who am I?' His statement was full of self-confidence. This self-confidence is most welcome in every person. But none has the right to transgress the fine borderline of self-confidence entering into the domain of arrogance, vanity, and pride. This is the first catch to study the Bhagavad Gita. Arjuna's mistake was that he crossed that fine line and became self-righteous. Though

powerful, self-pity took over him and he was writhing in pain.

The Teacher par-excellence

Arjuna was fortunate because he had an excellent teacher in Sri Krishna. Though head the authority to snub Arjuna straightaway and tell him to fight for the sake of posterity and humanity at large, Sri Krishna showed us what it is to be a supremely intelligent teacher. A teacher knows how to guide the student by his nose, without wasting the time. Hence, Sri Krishna politely and honestly drives the chariot in-between the two armies and very innocently tells Arjuna, 'Look at them—whom you wanted to see, on both sides'. In the process of asking him to see and observe, Sri Krishna plays a very subtle role highlighting the blood relationships and the emotional bonds that Arjuna has had on both the sides. He starts from the most venerable grand-father of the family, Bhishma; next comes Dronacharya, the teacher of the art of warfare; then comes Kripacharya, teacher of all ethics and sciences of war, and one after the other, the most venerable elders, the most beloved related cousins, and nephews and so on. Sri Krishna, very silently and sensibly, triggered the scene for the Gita to be delivered. Arjuna starts moaning: 'O Dear! Bhishma!Dronacharya! Kripacharya! All my elders, maternal uncles and nephews.' Though Arjuna was facing his enemies, he forgot that they have to be killed in order to get back his throne. For years, Arjuna was a victim of his own anger and when reality dawned on him, what did he see? He breaks down totally saying, 'I am not prepared to fight.' What a somersault! How come this enlightened, intelligent, accomplished human being, who had made up his mind as to what around totally? What has happened to him? Arjuna could not swallow his pride. Here we can see how the funny human ego works. One should have the courage to admit plainly his inadequacy. The human ego and the influence of Maya are such that man is simply caught in the most unavoidable circumstances making him commit more mistakes. Sri Krishna was waiting for this. He did not stop Arjuna; he allowed him to come out with his vainglory. Why? Although a highly qualified human being, Arjuna did feel that he is unworthy, unable, unsuited, to face the demands and challenges. He wanted to runaway, under the noble garb of renouncing the throne and spend his life as a mendicant monk in the hills and dales of Himalayas, as if that is an answer to life's challenges. Unable to cope with the situation, and at the

same time, unable to admit our short-comings, because of our pride and ego, we create some noble mask, to cover up our weaknesses and shortcomings. That is what the concept of Maya or ajnana or avidya is. It is a fact of life. I know, my conscience does not spare me. I know I am on the wrong side. But I do not have the moral courage to admit openly, ‘Pardon me, I am mistaken. Would anybody correct me?’—we don’t have that humility because of the ego which always sticks out like a sore thumb. Arjuna keeps on creating a wonderful aura, a halo, around him, ‘Sir, I have now understood. To enjoy this throne which is bathed by the blood of the near and dear ones, is not worth it. I should not be greedy for the throne. Let them enjoy the throne and let me renounce the world and be a mendicant monk.’ It was as if, monk hood would resolve all his defeatism and escapism. And this is what most of us also think.

There are two types of knowledge—*aparavidya* [secular or mundane type] and *para vidya* [dealing with eternal issues of life]. Arjuna was excellent in *apara vidya*. But until now, no occasion had arisen in his life when he could be exposed to *para vidya*, the knowledge of the Reality behind the appearance. He might have learnt the Upanishads or recited the Vedas, but he did not know the art of translating those actions in such a demanding period of his life. Hence we find, Sri Krishna giving him this freedom to come out with his problem. After Arjuna had finished his arguments, Sri Krishna just put an innocent question, ‘Arjuna, you want to leave this battlefield and want to go away? But your intentions and your noble philosophy are known only to me, not to the whole world. When you leave this battlefield, what would others who have gathered here think? They have pawned away their life, as it were, to this war. They may die; they don’t care. They are brave people. Now, under this lofty ideology of renunciation and self-sacrifice, you want to leave the battlefield?’ Krishna reminds that if he tries to runaway from the battlefield, people will tell, ‘We now see Arjuna in his true colour. All along he was growling and howling like a tiger. Now at the crunch in his life, he runs away with the tail in-between his legs.’ ‘So, Arjuna, are you prepared to suffer this humiliation? This shame? This loss of reputation that is worse than death?’ Sri Krishna doesn’t say what to do, what not to do. He plays the same card which Arjuna had used—the ego. Arjuna thus gets a whack on his head. An intelligent teacher does not contradict the egoistic approach of a student. The art is to sow reasonable, rational doubt in his heart, which would slowly and surely erode the imposed self-confidence—the confidence did not actually arise within; it was imposed to cover up his inadequacy. Thus we find in the whole of the first chapter and part of the second chapter, Sri Krishna, actually pricking the bubble of Arjuna’s ego, as it were. Finally when Sri Krishna has neutralized the element of *ajnana*, by these probing sentences, Arjuna becomes receptive to new ideas. He says (1.7):

Karpanyadosho-apahata svabhavah pricchami tvam dharma-sammoodha cheetah; yacshreyasyat nishchitam bruhi tanme shishyas-teham shadhi-mam tvam-prapannam

‘I know what I am worth—my talents, and my faculties. But I am in such a jam; I don’t know how to use it. Therefore, please accept me as your disciple. I surrender myself totally at your command. Please help me to come out of this situation.’ We should not be carried away by the dramatics of it and instead try to understand the catch here. As humans we are liable to go wrong, and that going wrong is because of the mistaken sense of our ego, vanity and pride. Let us humble ourselves, and expose ourselves to nobler thoughts of life which will make us competent enough to cope

with the various challenges of life, of which we have no previous warning. It might happen anytime, anywhere. This life—we are in this world, and this life has been compared to a battleground where good, evil, bad, worse, best, keeps churning us all the time. Sri Krishna, in order to pull Arjuna out of dire straits says (2.1):

*kutastva-kashmalam idam vishame samupasthitamanarya-jushtam asvargyam
akirtikaram arjuna*

‘Wherefrom O Arjuna! Have you import-ed this darkness of indecisiveness? I have not seen this before. Who is this Arjuna? I don’t know. Wherefrom has he imported all this darkness of understanding, unable to take decision for himself.’

*klaibyam masma gamah partha na’etat tvai upapadyatekshudram hridayadaurbalyam
tyaktotishtha parantapa*

‘This is not pardonable and acceptable. Arise, awake, and face your life with the full dedication to your duty and learn the art of performing the duties.’ (2.3) Arjuna is back to square one again. Now Sri Krishna’s first advice is,

*ashochyan-anvashochastvam prjna-vadamscha bhashasegatasuna-gatasunscha-
nanushochanti panditah*

‘Well, Arjuna, this is something very funny. The objects about which you should not repent or lament, you are repenting and lamenting, and at the same time, you are talking tall. How do I harmonize this Arjuna? Your acts and deeds are not up to your stature. What you are trying to preach to me has nothing to do with this because you have totally, miserably failed. So, listen to me now.’ This is the Gita way of administering psycho-therapy. In order to introduce oneself to the study of the Bhagavad Gita, one should place oneself in the position of Arjuna and try to feel how many times, because of our arrogant attitude, we create problems for ourselves. And if one can develop an attitude which has the fullest support of the voice of conscience or God within us, then one will be able to sort out those self-created problems caused by one’s egoistic attitude towards situations. This is the crux of the first chapter and part of the second chapter.

Three Parts of the Gita

We read in the *Upanishad*, Shvetaketu, the young aspirant, asking the question: ‘Who am I?’ His teacher tells him:

Tat Tvam Asi (‘Thou Art That’) Here are three different words. *Tvam*—you; *Tat*—Atman or Brahman or the Absolute goal; *Asi*—the process of being and becoming the process of manifesting yourself from what we are today. The Gita exhorts us to get rid of our limitedness, extend the boundaries of our awareness, and gradually become absolutely our true Self, without any limitations. In these words—‘Thou Art That’—a human being is described. These words also describe the concept of divinity in various approaches and the processes to reach that goal. The eighteen chapters of the Gita too have been divided accordingly. The first part, (first to the sixth chapters) deals with various stages of a normal human being—from the depth of depression and non-understanding, to the end of the sixth chapter, when we are taught how to reach *nirvikalpa samadhi*, the highest experience of union with the Absolute; the *jivatman* merging into *paramatman*. In this section an elaboration of the word *Tvam*

(‘You’) from its bottommost level of awareness and suffering, to the ultimate level where one can potentially reach is done through the elucidation of the concept of

Atman, the immutable and indestructible and also such other concepts as Karma Yoga, Dhyana Yoga, Sannyasa Yoga and so on. The second part, consisting of next six chapters (seven to twelfth chapters) mentions the various concepts of the Divine ('*Tat*'). These six chapters have one purpose in view—to instill in us the understanding that God is everywhere, every moment of life, looked at from different points of view. These are not to be looked down upon as a distraction, but as a source of spiritual light. They make spiritual life more enjoyable and flavoured. Once Sri Ramakrishna wanted to listen to veena, the musical instrument quite popular in India. It is said that the purest form of sound, which borders the

Anahata dhvani [the 'unstruck sound', the primordial sound at the root of creation], can be brought out only from Veena. This is the reason that Devi Saraswati, the goddess of learning, has veena in her hands. When Sri Ramakrishna visited Benaras, he expressed his desire to listen to Mahesh Veenakar, a veena maestro, who was in Benaras then. Mathur Babu immediately made arrangements, and Mahesh Veenakar was invited and Sri Ramakrishna was present there. As soon as the first note was played in the veena, the sound was so elevating and unadulterated, that Sri Ramakrishna at once went into *nirvikalpa samadhi*. With great effort and labour he later returned to the normal plane. This is how the Divine can be enjoyed or can be experienced, in thousand and one ways, through infinite attitudes. This approach of Sri Ramakrishna is to be found in this second set of six chapters of the Bhagavad Gita. It also includes the chapter on viswa-rupa-darshan, when Sri Krishna assumed the form of *mahakala*, which destroys everything. Arjuna was scared to see that form and said, *tenaiva rupena chaturbhujena sahasra-bahu*

'O dear Lord, this is good enough for me. I know who you are. But I love to see you in that soft, sweet, pleasant manner of *chatur-bhuja narayana* (the four armed form of Lord Narayana).' The last set of six chapters—from chapter thirteen to eighteen—deal with the process of becoming one with that ultimate reality. Here Sri Krishna mentions innumerable ways, approaches, perspectives, attitudes, with which one can build up one's spiritual life, and what is the sum and substance of spiritual life? To be one with God at all times, through all avenues of our awareness. The Gita mentions various methodologies, of signs and symptoms through which one can chalk out one's path to reach the goal with a safe yardstick in one's hand. This set of chapters hence deal with *asi*, the process of realizing our true nature. The Beauty that is Bhagavad Gita. The Bhagavad Gita is an excellent masterpiece of spirituality. It helps us understand what spiritual life is and also instructs us how to live it. The Gita gives us a measuring rod, so that during our journey we do not fall into a false notion that we have reached the goal and become swollen headed. At the same time, the signs and symptoms mentioned of a realized soul, call it by any name, and help us gauge ourselves honestly. It also protects us from the charlatans who claim that they have realized God. Every chapter of the Gita is a yoga—a method of developing an uninterrupted communion with the divine. As to what types of divine attributes one wishes to meditate is left to one's choice. Here is an open invitation for us to pick up. Hence various signs (*lakshanas*) of inner perfection are given: signs of a man of wisdom (*sthitaprajna-lakshana*), signs of a perfected Karma Yogi or Jnana Yogi, man of complete renunciation and so on. When we study the Gita, we imbibe excellence in all its aspects. It instructs and educates us about what to do and what not to do, how to and when to do it and so on. Everything is precisely kept in its proper place. It is for us to learn and benefit from its study.

The Crowning Glory

The last chapter is a summary of the whole Gita. By this time Arjuna was exposed to the idea that Sri Krishna was: not his friend, not his philosopher, not his guide, not his cousin brother, but an incarnation of the Divine. Arjuna was absolutely convinced of it. Having explained in an extremely exhaustive manner, Sri Krishna concludes by saying, ‘I have told you, Arjuna, whatever I had to tell you. I have placed before you, all the options that are available to you. Through your body mind infrastructure, with all the faculties that you have, manifest the potential divinity already present in you. Do whatever you wish (*yatha icchasi tatha kuru*).’ Ah! What a freedom! God telling you; He doesn’t command you; He says, ‘Here is the table full of your choices. I have played my role. Choose whatever you want. But for heaven’s sake, choose that well.’ Finally comes the most assuring statement (18.66):

sarvadharmam parityajya mam ekam sharanam vrajaaham tvam sarvapapebhyo mokshaishyami mashuchah

Who can say that but God?! So full of love! ‘Do you want to reach the divine? Here are the choices. Has these abundant choices blinded you? Come, I will tell you what to do. Get rid of all these “isms”; get rid of all these intellectual bondages of your achievements. “Then where do I go? Do I live in vacuum? No! Then?” Answers Sri Krishna:

maam ekam sharanam vraja

‘Let your life have only one goal. And what is that goal? Follow the ideal that you have chosen.’ With no conditions!

Aham tvam sarva papebhyo mokshaishyami

‘I will see it through and through, I take you by your hand, and I will take you across the ocean of life and death and rebirth and I will take you to that promised land. It is my promise.’ Earlier too he affirmed:

kaunteya pratijanihi na me bhaktah pranashyati

‘I swear to you, my dear Kunti-putra!

Arjuna, a person who has dedicated himself or herself to me, I will see him through.’ And when this assurance came to Arjuna, after all this world of exposure, his response was:

nashto moha smritir labdha

‘my confusion to fight or not to fight has been totally removed. I have got back my wisdom, my poise, my capacity to remember what to do, what not to do.’

Tvat prasadat mayachyutah sthitosmi—

by your unending grace, O Lord, I am now rehabilitated in the concept of converting my duties of life into an endless interaction with the divine. I am now well placed in my conviction,

gata sandeha-

I am no more victim assailed by doubts and hesitation. I have established myself in my lost glory, the memory of how to convert the duties of my life into an endless interaction with you. Then he comes to the final statement:

karishye vachanam tava—‘I will follow your instructions.’ And he starts his battle of life—no more that Arjuna who with arrogance asked. ‘Let me see the soldiers with whom I have to fight (*kair maya saha yoddhavyam asmin rana samudhyame*).’ No more of that attitude but as an instrument in the hands of God. Now his attitude is ‘I know now what am I to do. I transfer all my resolutions; I just get rid of my ego and surrender it under your command. Please guide me. Use me as your instrument.’

Conclusion

The Bhagavad Gita is a treasure that the human society can ill afford to lose or forget. If we do so, it will be at our own peril and destruction. As humans we are psycho-physiological beings with such tremendous faculties that we can break open all its boundaries and limitations through proper training and guidance by the guru, and ultimately through the compassion of the Divine, we can manifest the divinity which is already within us. This is the true meaning of getting introduced to the Gita.