

THE WISDOM OF THE BHAGAVAD GITA

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Young officers arriving for the first time at their new home among the rice fields of India during the British occupation, or in the heat and dust of a desert cantonment, would commonly be told by some well-meaning old India hand, that if they wished to grasp the essence of the eastern tradition, they should read one book, the Mahabharata, by far the world's oldest and largest epic poem, and with 100000 verses, exceeding the Bible and all Shakespeare's plays bundled together. The Mahabharata was called "*The Fifth Veda*". As a jewel within the heart, lies the *Bhagavad Gita*, in itself a chapter of this epic poem.

"*Maha-Bharata*" means something like "*the great India*"; or "*the great humanity*", because humanity (understood as the fifth race) is said to descend from original India. The composer is Vyasa, himself a character in the epic; according to tradition, he dictated the verses, and the god Ganesha wrote them down. Among the 100000 verses of the Mahabharata, over 800 verses are considered to be *Vyâsarahasya*, that is, the author's *secret* message. Vyasa used to recite such verses just gaining time to compose the next ones. It was agreed that Vyasa should dictate the stanzas continuously and without pause, or the God would stop taking dictation.

The story revolves around two sets of cousins, the Pandavas (the five sons of the king Pandu) and the Kauravas, the sons of Pandu's brother, the blind king Drrtarashtra. These two branches of the family would become bitter rivals and oppose each other in a War for the land. The Kauravas had a grotesque demonic birth, while the Pandavas were actually fathered by gods, and are assisted throughout the story by divinities and seers, including the very author of the poem, Vyasa, himself a character in the story. Each of the five brothers stands for a quality: Yudhishtira was born of righteousness and knowledge; he is the son of Dharma; Bhima, the son of the god of wind, is the strongest in the world; Arjuna, a main character in the Bhagavad Gita, son of the god Indra, is the perfect warrior; the next two are twins, Nakula and Sahadeva, the higher and the lower mind, knowledge and wisdom, the polar opposites.

Of the five brothers, Arjuna is the commander in chief of the Pandavas army, and Krishna is his charioteer. Krishna, an incarnation of the god Vishnu (the Christ or love aspect of God) is the symbol of the divine soul who imparts life-giving wisdom to the human or incarnated soul, the disciple Arjuna. The symbol of the charioteer is one that occurs in the Upanishads and in the dialogues of Plato. The Mahabharata is so full of meaning, there is always an inner significance to be found behind all the events. Symbolism is like beauty: either you see it or you do not. It is there.

The tension between both groups of cousins escalate, and end up in a monumental confrontation: the rival hosts face each other on the field of Kurukshetram. It is at this point

that the BG commences. Suddenly, Arjuna loses confidence in everything he's about to do. As soon as he was about to sound the horn to launch the battle, he falls down at Krishna's feet and says, "I cannot fight". "Krishna, my legs grow weak, my mouth is drying, my body trembles, my bow slips from my hands. Uncles, cousins, nephews, my own teacher, they are all there. I can't bring that to my own family". It is then that Krishna turns to face him, whispering to him a teaching that becomes the *Bhagavad Gita*, or "The Song of the Lord, Krishna". It is well-nigh impossible to capture the very essence of this jewel of the deepest philosophical thought in a few words. I wonder if you realize how unusual and unique this situation is, never seen in literature before: while tension builds up between two armies, Krishna in the middle of the battlefield, gives Arjuna the most sacred teachings. Krishna, seeing that Arjuna refused to take his weapons and fight, tells him that *victory and defeat are the same, he urges him to act, but not to reflect on the fruit of the action*. If you are a warrior, a Kshatriya, you must do your duty, your dharma, namely, to fight, even if it means killing others. He says "seek detachment, and fight without desire". Arjuna is confused: "you tell me to seek detachment and yet you urge me to slaughter. Your words are ambiguous". Krishna replies: "do not withdraw, you must act, but action must not dominate you". Arjuna looked perplexed: how could one put all that into practice, when the mind is so unstable, evasive, turbulent, and harder to subdue than taming the wind. Krishna thus taught the warrior an ancient art: "In the heart of action, he said, one must remain free from all attachment, and see with the same eye the mound of earth and the heap of gold, a cow and a sage, the dog and the man who eats the dog". Krishna crowned his statements with a great secret: "There is another intelligence beyond the mind". But if passion drags us away, and darkness dulls our senses, how can this higher intelligence be found? To reply to this question, Krishna taught Arjuna the ancient Yoga of wisdom, and the mysterious path of action. He revealed Arjuna's true battlefield, himself, where you need neither warriors nor weapons. For each man must fight alone. He spoke for a very long time, between the two waiting armies preparing to destroy themselves. Krishna instructs Arjuna in terms of what right action and right thought are. Dharma or right action is the main motive of the whole Mahabharata. Vyasa as a character points out that the whole poem was written so as to engrave dharma in the hearts of men. Right action or Dharma involves acting for the soul irrespective of what this world demands.

Thus on the *Kurukshetra*, the battlefield of the *Bhagavad Gita*, Arjuna sees his illusions vanish one by one; so much so, that he finally begged Krishna to show him "his *Vishvarûpa* or universal form". In other words, he wanted to see His soul face to face. In this climaxing moment of Transfiguration, Arjuna, overwhelmed with deep astonishment and awe, bowed down his head to the Shining One, and said with joined palms: "I see you. In one point I see the entire world. Through your body I see the stars. I see life and death. I see silence. Tell me who you are. I am shaken to the depths". To that, the Universal form of Vishnu replied. "I am all that you think and say. Everything hangs from me like pearls from a thread. I am the earth's scent, and the fire's heat. I am appearance and disappearance. I am the trickster's hoax, and the radiance of all that shines. I am time grown old. All beings fall into the night, and all are brought

back into daylight. I have already defeated all these warriors. /He who thinks he can kill, and he who thinks that can be killed, are both mistaken, No weapon can pierce the life that informs you. No fire can burn it, no water can drench it. No wind can make it dry. Have no fear and rise up. I myself am never without action”.

“*The radiance of all that shines*” ... beautiful description of the soul isn't it? And it is with this detachment that Arjuna can sound the horn, even with the horrors of the inevitable war. I guess you might like to know how the whole story ends. In the end, the Pandavas will conquer, but /it will be a victory that will deeply trouble them. As soon as the Bhagavad Gita is over, the battle is launched, and the Mahabharata takes the issue of violence to such an extreme, that the limits between right or wrong, good or evil become completely blurred. There is so much bloodshed, that one is tempted into the conclusion that the story has a core of historical truth, being perhaps an account of the great battle in Atlantis. In the end of all things, there is no enemy, no ally. The end of every war, isn't it? Who can be said to *really* win? Ultimately, the Pandavas embark upon a great journey towards the heights of the Himalayas. One by one they fall into the abyss and perish, including Arjuna. Yudhishtira, the son of Dharma, is left alone with a dog that has followed him faithfully all the way. At the Gates of Heaven, he is told to give up on the dog, lest the entrance into the higher realms be denied. He completely refused to leave the defenseless creature alone. This was a test: the dog is his father, who else than the god dharma. Another test awaits in heaven, where the king finds his enemies. His brothers are in hell, where Yudhishtira chooses to remain as well, with whom he considers to be “his family”. Eventually he realizes that that was the final test: the test of illusion, Maya. He understood that there is neither paradise nor hell; that there was no happiness nor punishment, no family, no enemies, only One Life. /In those realms, words and thought end, that was his last illusion. And thus ends the greatest epic poem of all time.

What is the message of the Bhagavad Gita? It is the message of *dharma*: It teaches that behind form, there is a Thinker who uses the form. If there is a core message in Krishna's words, it would perhaps be: “*Step out of illusion. Be who you essentially are, the soul*”. There are quite a few lessons we as Triangle workers could learn from the Bhagavad Gita, and perhaps we could talk about this later. The Bhagavad Gita is truly a treatise on the soul, it contains a complete picture of the soul and its unfoldment. It is one of the books every disciple should have at hand. Thus we are told.
