The Eternal Gospel of the Bhagavadgita

SWAMI KRISHNANANDA
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The metropolis of Bharatavarsha, today called Delhi, the headquarters of our country, was originally known as Indraprastha, the capital of King Yudhisthira of Mahabharata fame. This is the spot and the atmosphere wherein was enacted the drama of human life many centuries ago, an enactment which has been recorded for us by Sage Krishna Dvapayana Vyasa in the masterly epic known as the Mahabharata. Not very far from Delhi is Kurukshetra, the arena wherein were arrayed conflicting forces as the Pandavas and the Kauravas. Righteousness ruled the world in the form of King Yudhisthira, and divinity backed it up as Bhagavan Sri Krishna.

Dharma, which was symbolised in the life and personality of Raja Yudhisthira, was founded upon the divinity of Bhagavan Sri Krishna. Such a masterly combination of virtue and divine glory, such a blending of righteousness and divine magnificence was manifest years back in this very atmosphere hallowed by the lives of our great ancestors.
It is the fortune of the citizens of this sacred land that we have been bequeathed for posterity and eternity a gospel which we now know as the Bhagavadgita, which was spoken by the divinity of this universe through the mouthpiece Bhagavan Sri Krishna to the great warrior Arjuna, who represents human nature with all its foibles and with all its glories.

The Bhagavadgita, as the message given by the master of yoga to humanity in general, is going to be the subject of our contemplation here, in this auspicious moment. The crest jewel of the Mahabharata epic is the Bhagavadgita, wherein we are given the philosophical quintessence of the epic, which is an outer dramatic representation of the esoteric significance enshrined and embodied in the gospel of the Bhagavadgita.

The human predicament is portrayed in all its colours and patterns at the very outset, in the very commencement of this gospel, the Bhagavadgita, which is meant to be an instruction to man in all walks of life. The problem of man is the conflict of life. Every moment of time we are in a state of conflict. We are sometimes caught between the devil and the deep sea, as they say. We are caught by two horns of a dilemma, between which we cannot
easily make a choice. Sometimes we do not know whether it is better to live or to die. People who have suffered in life know what it actually means. “Is it good to live in this world, or is it better to die?” is a question which poses itself before many a mind in this very century. There are occasions when we feel that life has no meaning and no essence, like sawdust. Occasionally we also feel that life has significance and we have to live it to the best of its possibility. These two sides of life’s picture are before us, one smiling and the other frowning.

These two aspects of the panorama of existence face us every day in our life, and what we face or encounter the moment we wake up in the morning is a problem. There is a big question mark before us the moment we wake up from our bed and see the world outside: What am I to do today? Am I to lean to the right side or to the left side? Which would be better for me?

We have the question or problem of the relation of action to knowledge: our duties, our activities in their connection with our personal existence and life. This was the question before Arjuna in the battlefield of the Mahabharata, where he was faced with a system of forces called the Kaurava army. Wonderful was the mental condition of Arjuna. He,
who was known in those days as a master warrior, a soldier, went boldly and heroically into the thick of the field asking Krishna, the charioteer of that beautiful setup on the Pandavas’ side, to place him in the midst of the array so that he may have a glance at what was before him. “Let me look at these forces before I take charge upon them.”

Sri Krishna, the Lila Purushottama, God sporting the divine play of the cosmos, told Arjuna, “Look at the Kurus in front of you.” He did not say, “Look at your enemies, your opponents.” ‘Kuru’ was the word used: “Your own brethren, your own relatives, your grandfather and great-grandfather, your Guru, your brothers born of the same blood relations—look at them in front of you.”

“Oh, I see.” Arjuna opened his eyes and saw something quite different from what he expected. What did he see? He did not see the army of his enemies; he saw only his blood relations. “These are my Gurus, my Masters. This is my great-grandfather, this is my nephew, this is my brother-in-law. Am I going to face them? Am I going to destroy them in this war? Am I to kill my own blood relatives?” The idea of enmity vanished from his mind, and emotion took possession of him. Duty gave place to emotional reaction. Impersonal conduct was
brushed aside by the entry of affection born of personal connection.

This is one of the forms of conflict which we have to face in our life. We have the call of duty from one side, and the call of affection from the other side. Many a time we are unable to think through the terms of duty before us. We try to interpret every situation in terms of our personal relationships. Influence counts these days. This is a slogan which everyone is familiar with. Efficiency and the sense of duty do not seem to pay us as much as influence, personal contact and relationship. This is a fall in the sense of values. The personal relationship of Arjuna with the constituents of the army before him gained an upper hand, and the purpose for which he was there was forgotten. This happens to us, to every person. Arjuna is only a symbol of humanity, a representation of you and me and every person in the world. He spoke what each one of us speaks in our daily life. “Oh, what a pity!” cried out Arjuna, and we also say, “Oh, what a pity! I have my wife and children, I have my relatives, I have a large family to feed.”

‘I’, ‘me’, and such appellations as these which refer to our bodily existence begin to interpret every situation, and we begin to judge whether anything
in the world has any connection with us or not: “What have I to do with it, what will it pay me, and what will it bring me?” We come first always, and everything else comes afterwards. “The world is there for my sake. What does the world mean to me?” is our question. Our family has a meaning to us but somebody else’s family does not mean anything to us; therefore, we are not concerned with it. Millions of people may starve and die, but we have no concern for them because they are not our relations. But if one child of ours suffers, we cannot sleep for days because it is our child. We are not concerned with situations or circumstances as such; we are concerned only with what it means to us and how it is connected with us. This is the emotional interpretation of life and the world.

This was Arjuna’s condition. His personality was torn to shreds by the psychological conflict that arose within himself. He did not know whether it was proper to be or not to be, as Shakespeare puts it in *Hamlet*. We do not know whether it is proper to be or not to be. We do not know what to do and what not to do. *Kārpaṇyadoṣopahatasvabhāvaḥ pṛcchāmi tvāṁ dharmasammūḍhacetaḥ* (B.G. 2.7) was the query of Arjuna to Bhagavan Sri Krishna: “Lord, I do not know. I am confused. What is proper for
me in this condition? Please tell me. Am I to engage in this bloody deed called war and kill all my kith and kin in order to reign over this bloody kingdom? Or is it proper for me to retire and live a life of isolation, even of a mendicant? What is my duty at this moment, in this context?” was the question—and it is your question, it is my question, and it is everybody’s question.

What is our duty at a given moment of time? Though ‘duty’ is a general term applicable to every obligation that we owe to the world outside, it changes its colours and contours at different times and under given conditions, like a medicine that is administered to a patient. Though it is true that every disease requires medicine, different diseases require different types of medicine. In a similar manner, though duty is an obligation on everyone’s part, we owe a duty of different types. It is difficult for us to judge what peculiar shade of difference influences that particular kind of duty that we are called upon to do at any given moment of time. This requires knowledge. This knowledge which is the background of the sense of duty at any given moment of time is called sankhya in the terminology of the Bhagavadgita. Sri Krishna rebutted the arguments of Arjuna, dismissed all his cogent
statements with one sentence: “You speak words of wisdom, but you do not possess wisdom.” Aśocyān anvaśocas tvam prajñāvādāṁś ca bhāṣase (B.G. 2.11): “You are weeping for that for which you should not grieve, and yet you speak of knowledge.”

We many a time put on an air of understanding as if we are omniscient, and then under the pretext of this apparent knowledge of ours—which is another form of ignorance—we assume a sense of duty from the point of view of our own personal interpretation of it. Even a devil can quote scripture, as they say, and the error of judgment in which we mostly get rooted in life becomes the guiding factor in the judgment of values, as it happened to Arjuna and happens to every person in the world.

“Knowledge is to be the rock bottom of action; wisdom should guide the sense of duty,” is the advice of Bhagavan Sri Krishna to Arjuna. Knowledge is the guiding factor, the motive power, the determining principle behind the execution of our duty in life. We cannot know what our duty is if we do not know what our position in this world is. The knowledge of our placement in this world, in this human society, is to be the guiding light behind our performance of duty. Unless we know what we are and where we are placed, we cannot
know what to do at any given moment of our life. “Where am I, first of all?” we must know. Then only can we know what to do at that moment of time. “What is around me? Whom am I facing just now? What are the conditions prevailing here? What are the circumstances in which I am placed? What is happening outside and inside me?” These factors are the constituents of that knowledge which will tell us what steps we have to take at that particular time.

Hence, the question of the Bhagavadgita is a world question. It was not a problem of a single man called Arjuna, but a problem of mankind as a whole. It was a question of human duty in a world of various endowments and colours and sounds. The answer of Bhagavan Sri Krishna to the man in Arjuna is really the response of God to the call of man, the Eternal responding to the urges of the relative. This is the gospel of the Bhagavadgita. The great instruction of Bhagavan Sri Krishna through the Gita boils down to a simple recipe of maintaining a balance of attitude under conflicting situations. The great advice of Bhagavan Sri Krishna to Arjuna was that we should not take sides when a conflict has arisen. We should not belong to either party. We should be like an umpire in a game, judging both sides equally with a balanced vision.
What is conflict? It is the collision of two opposite forces. And what is going to be our stand in the situation of that conflict? Are we to take the Kauravas’ side or the Pandavas’ side? Arjuna was the representative of one side, Duryodhana was the representative of the other side, and Bhagavan Sri Krishna was the balancing force between the two. That is why when Duryodhana and Arjuna went to Dvarka, the abode of Sri Krishna, and requested the Lord for help, he said, “Well, I am ready to help. Equal are you both to me. Duryodhana is as much a concern of mine as Arjuna. What do you want? You can take whatever I have. I have only two things. You can choose between the two. I have a large army called the Narayani Sena. It is invincible; nobody can face it. That is one thing that I have. And I am here; that is the other thing. You can choose me, or you can choose the large army. Which do you want? But there is a condition. The army will fight vigorously and fiercely, but I will do nothing; I will keep quiet. Do you want this individual Krishna Vasudeva who will simply sit quiet doing nothing, or do you want that fierce army which will fight until death? What do you want?”

Duryodhana wanted the active, fierce army rather than Krishna who would do nothing, who would
only be a liability in the palace of Duryodhana. Why do you want a man who will do nothing? You have to feed him for nothing.

“Well,” said Krishna, “Duryodhana, you want the army? Here it is. It is yours.”

Jubilantly Duryodhana walked out with the pride of gaining victory then and there. “Arjuna is a fool,” thought Duryodhana. “I have got the butter, and he has only got the chaff out of it.”

After Duryodhana left, Krishna turned to Arjuna and asked, “What do you want now?”

Arjuna replied, “I want nothing but yourself.”

“What is the matter with you? Have you not been fooled? Duryodhana has taken away whatever is useful, and you are choosing me, who will be of no use to you.”

Sri Krishna’s reaction was very interesting. Arjuna was being tested. And this choice is before us also. Do we want Krishna, the Being that will not act, or do we want the forces of the world which will vigorously act? What do we want? We can choose between the two. But we are all Duryodhanas mostly, choosing only the active forces which will bring immediate results even if we are going to be doomed later on. This is what happens to us when we ask for the wealth of the world, when we ask for
long life, when we ask for wife and children, position and status in society, promotions and so on—all the glory of this transient earth. This was Duryodhana’s choice and it is, unfortunately, the choice of many a man in this world.

But the wise and humble Arjuna chose that Being, the *kutastha-nitya*, That which will not move but which will make everything else move. The sun does not move; the planets move. But who makes the planets move? The immovable sun exerts such a pull and pressure upon the planets that they are kept in their positions. *Bhayād asyāgnis tapati, bhayāt tapati sūryah* (K.U. 2.3.3): “The sun shines and fire burns on account of the fear of this inimitable being,” says the Upanishad. Its mere existence is a command. The very existence of the sun is an urge to action. We are alive here because of the sun shining above. The sun does not speak to us, he does not move his finger, he does not tell anything, he does not proclaim himself; he never speaks of his glory, but everything moves and acts and its life is maintained and sustained by the energy that emanates from the body of the sun. Sri Krishna’s mere presence in the chariot of Arjuna was enough to control and direct the destiny of all the forces on either side.
The knowledge of this stupendous background behind all the activities of the world is the sankhya that Bhagavan Sri Krishna refers to in the Second Chapter of the Bhagavadgita. The implementation of this knowledge in practical life is the yoga that he speaks of. Sāṅkhyayogau pṛthag bālāḥ pravadanti na paṇḍitāḥ (B.G. 5.4): “Sankhya and yoga are one and the same thing,” says the Lord. From the point of view of the Bhagavadgita, knowledge and action mean one and the same thing. Knowledge set in motion is called action, and action becoming self-conscious is called knowledge. The expression of philosophy in practical life is called religion; religion becoming self-conscious is called philosophy. Such is the quintessential teaching of Bhagavan Sri Krishna to Arjuna, to man, to every one of us. Are we going to choose knowledge, or are we going to choose the material glamour of this transitory world?

The army that Duryodhana chose was of no help to him. The very sight of Krishna was enough to paralyse their entire strength. The look that Krishna cast upon the Kaurava forces withdrew half of their strength. Such was the hypnotising glance that Krishna cast upon them because he was a magnate sitting there, weighty like the earth, immovable like a rock, knowing everything. Ishvara-tattva guiding
the destinies of man was seated in the chariot of Arjuna.

This *Ishvara-tattva* is also located in the very same chariot of our own bodies here. The Mahabharata epic is nothing but an exposition of the battle of human life. It is an answer given to every question that is raised by our minds. It is a solution to every problem that we may have to face in our lives. Arjuna and Krishna, the historical figures that strode the battlefield of the Mahabharata in Kurukshetra, are symbolically represented by the very same *Ishvara-tattva* and *jiva-tattva* in our bodies. We as individual personalities are Arjuna, and there is an invisible power within us directing our destinies. That is Ishvara. This body is the chariot. Life is itself the Mahabharata field. All that we see in front of us are the Kauravas, and the virtuous forces within us are the Pandavas. The sense of righteousness is Yudhisthira. Ability and dexterity in action is Arjuna. Strength and might and adamantine will is Bhima. And the universal guiding light, which is God, is Bhagavan Sri Krishna within us. All the weaknesses of human nature are the Kauravas within us. The *jiva* is wedded to the five senses, like Draupadi. All these symbolic representations tell us where we stand and how we can act.
We have everything with us except knowledge, even as everything was with Duryodhana except the grace of Bhagavan Sri Krishna. He represented effort without divine grace. Therefore, he failed in his attempt. Duryodhana was not wanting in effort. His army was much larger than the force of the Pandavas, and yet the quantity of Duryodhana was not able to face the quality that was the Pandavas. This quality of virtue and righteousness was receiving perpetual sustenance from the presence of Sri Krishna, God manifest in form. The Pandavas represent virtue, the Kauravas represent the opposite of it; and divine grace sheds its light only on virtue. What is virtue? What is righteousness? It is the urge within ourselves, the tendency in us to walk the path that is in consonance with the law of God. Opposed to it is vice, or evil. That which draws us towards the centre of the universe is virtue. That which urges us backward and drives us away from the centre is evil.

The senses drive us outward to objects which are supposed to bring us temporary satisfaction. *Kama, krodha* and *lobha*—lust, anger and greed—drive us outwardly to the objects of sense, like Duryodhana going for wealth, name, fame and prestige in society. But the simple Pandavas, wearing only a single
raiment on their bodies, were entirely dependent on the grace of Krishna, and turned inward rather than outward.

Sometimes we find ourselves in the wilderness in the search for divine grace, as the Pandavas found themselves in the forest for thirteen years. When we search for Truth, we will find ourselves in a no-man’s land, as it were. The world will not help us anymore because the world does not want virtue, it wants only satisfaction of the senses. For a time it appears as if evil gains an upper hand and drives us into the forest, and virtue does not succeed. Good men suffer in this world; evil men prosper. How is it? It is like the prosperity of Duryodhana for the time being and the suffering of the Pandavas in the forest. But in that forest it is that the Pandavas received help from invisible sources. Indra, Varuna, Kubera, Agni and Bhagavan Sri Krishna himself came there, asking if they could give any kind of help. The Pandavas were good children treading the path of righteousness, rather than asking for the pomp and the glory of Duryodhana who wanted only objects of sense and temporal happiness.

In the beginning, vice appears to gain an upper hand and succeed, but as Manu says in his Smriti, root and branch will be destroyed one day or the
other. Ravana also appeared to succeed in the beginning, but what happened to him? The simple Rama who walked without even any footwear, who had no chariot of his own, who had no gorgeous dress like Ravana—this single Rama was enough to foil all the attempts of the pompous Ravana because it was the quantity of material glory opposing the great quality of virtue and divinity. One Rama was sufficient to face the multitude of many a Ravana. Thousands of Rakshasas were burned to ashes by a single arrow of Rama in Janasthana, and a single act of goodness, which is the dedication of the self to God, was enough to summon the grace of invisible forces. Uncalled, unrequested, divine forces descended upon the very place where the Pandavas were suffering in the forest. The Pandavas never asked for help from any person, not even from the gods. They simply suffered and suffered and suffered. But suffering cries out in a louder tone, in a manner that the whole world will reverberate with it. The cry of a single suffering soul is enough to shake the whole earth, and Indra descended from the heavens. All the deities that guarded the quarters came down to help the Pandavas, and finally virtue succeeded because it had the backing of divinity. When God begins to help man, who can face him?
But God does not immediately come to help, as it were. He follows the system of politics called sama, dana, bheda, danda. Sri Krishna did not take up arms against Duryodhana immediately. That could have been done, but he did not do so. He first tried the method of conciliation. He made a calm and polite and very humble request, “My dear friend, why don’t you give the Pandavas their share honourably? This is not dharma, this is not duty.” It did not succeed. He tried other methods. “You take half, you give half. Or you take the major portion and give the minor portion.” That also did not work. Then he said, “I will create dissension among you”—bheda, it is called—by telling Karna whose son he was, because Karna was the strength of Duryodhana. That also did not succeed. Then the mill of God began to work powerfully, and once God begins to take action, He will pounce upon you like a lion. Duryodhana was attacked from every side until his very bones were pounded. This is what happens to vice when God begins to take action.

So the good people of the world, the virtuous and the righteous here, need not weep. Their weeping, their crying will definitely be heard, and it will be heard in a proper way, and help shall come to them. The poor and the needy, the suffering, the
downtrodden need not cry, and their cry will not be for long. It will be only for a short time, and the glory of evil shall be put down.

This epic message is philosophically presented in the Bhagavadgita as the need to take the help of the knowledge and wisdom of God for conducting ourselves properly along the path of duty and righteousness in the world. *Sankhya* and yoga are said to be the message of the Bhagavadgita, which means to say, the blending of knowledge and action, God and man working together. This symbolic message is also conveyed towards the end of the Gita in a famous verse: *yatṛ yogeśvaroḥ kṛṣṇo yatra pārtho dhanurdharaḥ, tatra śṛīr vijayo bhūtir dhruvā nītir matir mama* (B.G. 18.78). Sanjay says, “There success is sure to come, there victory is certain, where Krishna and Arjuna work together in unison seated in a single chariot.” Where the grace of God and the effort of man come together and act in unison, success is certain.

Therefore, beware of committing a mistake in your thought about personal agency. God does everything. Man is only an instrument— *nimittamātram bhava savyasācin* (B.G. 11.33). You become the fountain pen, as it were, in the hands of God, Who shall write the judgment of mankind.
Thus, the contemplation which is the Bhagavadgita gospel to us—the gospel of action, the gospel of duty, of conduct and righteous demeanour in this world—amounts to saying that our action and our sense of duty should be rooted in the consciousness of the presence of God. “Practise the presence of God and perform your duty. Trust in God and do the right.” This is the essence of the gospel of the Bhagavadgita, a vast subject which you can go on studying, thinking about and understanding throughout your life; and yet, you will not reach the depths of the Gita, because it is the word of God. As God is as deep as eternity, so is the depth of the Bhagavadgita, which is not to be understood merely by the study of the language of the Gita, but to be pondered over as a philosophical text and a spiritual message to mankind for all posterity.
It is the fortune of the citizens of this sacred land that we have been bequeathed for posterity and eternity a gospel which we now know as the Bhagavadgita, which was spoken by the divinity of this universe through the mouthpiece Bhagavan Sri Krishna to the great warrior Arjuna, who represents human nature with all its foibles and with all its glories.

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