

Gita Acharan

A Practitioner's Perspective

K. Siva Prasad

The Gita Acharan is an ongoing series to reveal various facets of the Bhagavad Gita. It is published every Sunday in the Daily World newspaper and the same can be accessed at dailyworld.in. The same is also available at gitaacharan.blogspot.com and facebook.com/GitaAcharan

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Preface

Srimad Bhagavad Gita, the song of the Lord, is a conversation between Lord Krishna and warrior Arjun in the battlefield of Kurukshetra. The original Gita is in the Sanskrit language. Though all Indian languages are based on this, not many people are familiar with Sanskrit. Mere translation won't help us as some of the teachings need interpretation in the contemporary context. This compilation is for someone who is unfamiliar with Sanskrit but still wants to take benefit of the Gita in daily life. However, to have better comprehension and understanding some simple Sanskrit words are also used along with their meaning.

The Bhagavad Gita is both eternal and comprehensive. In the constantly changing physical world, an interpretation is needed from time to time to keep these teachings in the contemporary perspective. This compilation is an effort in this direction. Being comprehensive, the Gita covers all the possible paths to attain ultimate freedom which is moksha . Some of the paths are likely to appear contradictory but depending on one's personality one should choose their path. This compilation makes an effort to cover all the paths.

All the translations and interpretations of the Bhagavad Gita carry the biases of the interpreter. If the personalities of the practitioner and interpreter are different then both of them may find it difficult to sail through. This fact needs to be taken into account carefully. Efforts are made to eliminate this bias as far as possible.

When any teaching is converted into a book, it is likely to give a theoretical look. The point to be noted is that the Bhagavad Gita is not a philosophical treatise but an experiential guide. Hence, the teachings become clearer when one experiences them in life. So, constant two way internal communication is needed till we attain ultimate freedom.

This is a collection of the weekly articles published as Gita Acharan up to the fifth chapter of the Bhagavad Gita. As there was a 300 word limit for the articles, the topics were to be wrapped up accordingly. No doubt that this word limit made each article crisp, but in the process, there was an overfill. That's why it is encouraged to read them slowly and preferably one chapter at a time. Since they came in the form of independent articles, one can pick up any to read randomly.

Acknowledgement

A casual conversation with Manish Tiwari, Editor-in-Chief of the Daily World newspaper led to this compilation. I would like to thank him for his constant encouragement, feedback and guidance. Jasvir is a dear friend and I would like to thank him for the discussions at the beginning of the series and the production of the podcast series. I would also like to thank another colleague in the civil service Sai Prasad who took out time to discuss and edit each article.

Such projects are never complete without support from the family. I always share the first draft with my wife Dr. Kamala, a dentist, who herself is on a spiritual path through her dedication to her profession. She is full of real life experiences because of her dental chair side stories. Her feedback was used to shape each article. The final draft is run through both my sons Kunal and Kautil. Their contribution gave the articles a perspective of youth and many articles were adjusted to incorporate the same.

I would also like to thank many friends who kept giving feedback for every article. Finally, I would like to thank publisher Harish Jain and his staff.

2. Contradictions in Life

Just as it is said, "All roads lead to Rome", all paths given in the Gita lead us to the Inner Self. Some of the paths appear to be in contrast with each other. However, this is like a circle where a journey on either side would take us to the same destination.

The Gita operates at various levels. Sometimes Krishna comes to the level of Arjuna and sometimes he comes as the Supersoul (*Paramatma*). This creates difficulties in comprehension at the initial stage as both these levels appear to be different.

Scientists faced similar difficulties while understanding light, at the beginning of the last century. Initially, it was proved that light is a wave and later it was realized that it also behaves like a particle. Both theories appear to be opposing each other. But light, with which we are so familiar, is a combination of apparent contradictions. Similar is life.

Once an elephant entered a village and a few blind men attempted to identify or understand

it. Depending on which part of the elephant they touched, they imagined what an elephant might be like. The one who touched trunk said that the elephant is like a long and rough creature. The one who touched the tusk said that this animal is hard as a rock. Another who touched the stomach said that it is huge and soft. And so their deductions went.

Different perceptions of one reality is the reason for all the differences we see in the world today. In reality, the elephant is none of these, but it is also all of these.

Our state of mind is no different from these individuals, with people, things and relationships being that enigmatic elephant. Partial understanding leads us to misery.

The Gita is essentially a journey from a partial understanding to a complete one.

Like in the 80-20 principle, even a few steps into this understanding can bring joy to life.

9. Identify Friend and Enemy

In the Gita, Lord Krishna says you yourself are your own friend and you yourself are your own foe. The following story of the trapped monkey illustrates it well.

Some nuts are kept in an earthen pot with a narrow mouth (*surahi*) in which the monkey's hand barely fits. The monkey inserts its hands by squeezing through the mouth of the pot and grabs a fist full of nuts. As the fist is full, its size goes up and so it can't come out of the pot. The monkey makes all sorts of efforts to get the closed fist out of the pot. It keeps thinking that someone has laid a trap for it and never realises that the trap is set by itself. No amount of explanation would convince the monkey to let go of these nuts, instead it would think that we are trying to grab its nuts.

From the outside, it looks quite simple that it has to drop a couple of nuts to loosen the fist so that its hand comes out. But realising this simple fact, when we are trapped is the challenge.

The closed fist is our foe and open fist is our friend and it's our choice to open or close, making us friend or foe to ourselves respectively.

In life, we encounter so many similar traps. Those nuts are nothing but I, My, Me and Mine; *Ahankaar* binds our hand to them. Gita repeatedly tells us, in so many ways, to let go of *Ahankaar* so that we are free of these traps, thus leading to ultimate freedom.

It is easier to get the realisation about these traps when we slow down rather than in a fast paced world with a lot of noise. The opportunity presented by COVID-19 is an ideal time to come to these realisations.

15. Equanimity

Samatva (equanimity) is a common thread that runs across the Gita. Lord Krishna highlights *Samatva-bhav*, *Samatva-drishti* and *Samatva buddhi* at various places. *Samatva* is easy to understand but difficult to internalize. The degree of *Samatva* in us is an indicator of our progress in the spiritual journey.

In the physical realm, most societies have accepted *Samatva* as equality before law for all citizens. Krishna gives many examples of *Samatva* when he says, the wise see as equal, the prey and the predators; pleasure and pain; profit and loss etc.

The difficulty with humans is that we tend to identify with one or more artificial divisions based on culture, religion, caste, nationality, race and many more. The ability to overcome these divisions and to treat two different people equally, is the first step towards *Samatva*. This is naturally much deeper than exhibited behavior.

The next level of progression in *Samatva* is an ability to see two people close to us with *Samatva*. Examples include being happy for success of our childrens' friends especially when our own kids didn't do well, treating mother and mother in law equally, treating daughter and daughter in law equally etc.

The highest level of *Samatva* is the ability to equate others to ourselves. It is the ability to maintain *Samatva* when others get what we believe belongs to us, like a promotion, fame, credit, property etc. This comes when we can see others' weaknesses in us and our strengths in others.

Krishna advises us to see ourselves in others and others in us; and finally to see Krishna in everyone and everywhere. This is nothing but *Advaita*, which says there are no two.

The obstacle in attaining this highest form of *Samatva* is our mind, which is trained to divide. Instead of allowing it to dominate, we should be able to make it subservient.

18. *Sat* (Real) and *Asat* (Unreal)

Krishna says *Sat* (reality/permanence) never ceases to be and *Asat* (unreal/impermanence) has no existence. A *Gyani* is one who can distinguish between the two (2.16).

The rope and snake analogy is often quoted in many cultures to understand the intricacies of *Sat* and *Asat*. A man reached back home at dusk and found a snake coiled at the entrance to his home. But in reality it was a rope left by children, that looked like a snake in the semi-darkness. Here the rope signifies *Sat* and the snake, *Asat*. Until he realises *Sat* i.e. the rope, he is likely to adopt many strategies to handle *Asat* i.e. imagined snake. He could attack it with a stick (fight), run away (flight) or he may try to light a torch to check out the reality. The best strategies and skills would go in vain when our perception is that of *Asat*.

Asat derives its existence from *Sat*, just as the snake doesn't exist without the rope. Since *Asat* owes its existence to *Sat*, it can influence us like a

nightmare which can make our body react as if it were sweating in sleep.

A litmus test given by Krishna to identify *Asat* is; that 'which didn't exist in the past and wouldn't be there in the future'. If we take the example of sensual pleasure, it wasn't there before and wouldn't be there after some time. The same is the case with pain and for that matter all polarities. The indication is that *Asat* exists in time whereas *Sat* is eternal.

The *Sat* is the inner self which is eternal and *Abhankaar* is *Asat* which sustains itself with the support of the inner self. The day we discover our Inner self (rope), the *Abhankaar* (snake) automatically disappears.

26. Rose Can never Become a Lotus

Krishna explains about *Swa-dharmam* (own nature) (2.31-2.37) and advises Arjun that as a Kshatriya he should not hesitate to fight(2.31) as it is his *Swa-dharmam*.

Krishna commences the Gita with ‘that’ which is eternal, unmanifested and pervades all. It is termed as *atma* for easy understanding. Then he talks about *Swa-dharmam*, which is one step before ‘that’ and subsequently comes to *Karma*.

The journey to realise the Inner self can be divided into three stages. The first stage is our present condition, the second is realizing *Swa-dharmam* and finally, reaching the Inner self. In reality, our present condition is a combination of our *Swa-dharmam*, experiences, knowledge, memories and assumptions gathered by our wavering mind. *Swa-dharmam* gets uncovered slowly when we free ourselves from our mental baggage.

Kshatriya is the combination of ‘ *Kshat* ‘ meaning ‘hurt’ and ‘ *trayate* ‘ meaning ‘to give protection’. *Kshatriya* is he who gives protection from hurt.

The best example is of a mother who shields the baby in the womb and protects the children till they are on their own. So she is the first *Kshatriya* we come across in our lives. She may be untrained and might not be experienced in childcare but it comes naturally to her. This trait is a glimpse of *Swa-dharmam*.

Once a rose was smitten by the majestic lotus flower and started nurturing the desire to be a lotus. But there is no way that a rose can become a lotus. The rose wanted to be different from what it is capable of and we have similar tendencies to try to be different from what we are, resulting in the despondency of the kind faced by Arjun. The rose can change its colour, size and shape, but will still remain a rose which is its *Swa-dharmam*.

34. Focus on *Karma* not *Karma-phal* (Fruits of Action)

In the iconic verse 2.47 of the Gita, Krishna says that we have the right to do *karma* (action) but have no right over the *karma-phal* (fruits of action). He further says that *karma-phal* shouldn't be the motivating factor for any of our actions and also that, in consequence, we should not lean towards *akarma* (inaction). This is the most quoted verse from the Gita, possibly because of the various dimensions of life that it looks at.

The easiest approach to this verse is to internalise it and start implementing it without getting deeper into its logic or attempting an analysis of its various facets. We should deepen our *shraddha* (trust) in Krishna and start practising it. Krishna indicates (7.21-7.22) that *shraddha* can do miracles and bringing the literal meaning of this verse into practice can itself take us to the pinnacle of *karma yoga*.

The next progression will be to understand that focussing on *karma-phal* of our actions will

make us lose sight of the *karma* itself and as a consequence, be denied of the *karma-phal* itself. A poorly executed *karma* (studying) by a student can never give the desired *karma-phal* (exam results). Krishna emphasises that we should only focus on doing our very best in any situation that we face.

Thirdly, *karma* happens in the present moment and *karma-phal* is always in the future, which is a combination of several possibilities. Krishna advises to always be in the present moment as we have a modicum of control only over the present but no control over the future or the past.

Whatever may be the approach or understanding, this verse has the potential to bring us *samatva* (equanimity) by helping us transcend the never ending waves of polarities.

37. *Vahi* (same) *Arjun Vahi Baan* (arrow)

Vahi Arjun Vahi Baan (Same Arjun Same Arrow), is often used to describe a situation when a successful/competent person fails to perform.

Arjun, as a warrior, never lost a war. During the latter part of his life, he lost a minor battle in which he was supposed to save some family members from a group of bandits. He explains this situation to his brother and says: “I don’t know what happened. I’m the same Arjun and these are the same arrows that had won the Kurukshetra war, but this time my arrows could neither find their target nor had power.” He explained that he had to run away and couldn’t protect the family.

Life’s experiences tell us that this can happen to any of us. Many a time, talented sportspersons just lose their form for sometime. An actor, singer simply fails. This is attributed to *Bhagya* (luck), bad time etc. and for sure nobody knows why. There is hardly any scientific explanation for the same except for conjectures and surmises.

In this context, while explaining about the relationship between *Karma* and *Karma-phal*, Krishna says (18.14) that ‘*Daivam*’ (contribution/will/blessings of Lord) is one of the factors that contributes to the fulfillment of *Karma*. *Daivam* is a kind of X factor and is unknown from a manifested (physical) world point of view. That’s the reason why Krishna says that you have right over *Karma*, but not over *Karma-phal*.

Techniques like palmistry, astrology and sun-signs are practiced, but none of them are *Daivam*. Similarly, there is no scientific theory based on which *Daivam* can be predicted.

Krishna says (11.33) we are *nimitta-maatra*, a small cog in the grand design of almighty. Failure won’t hurt us if we don’t let success bring *Ahankaar*, as both are influenced by *Daivam*.

49. *Sthith-pragna* (Stoic) is Internal Phenomenon

Krishna says (2.55), in response to Arjun's query, *sthith-pragna* (one with coherent intellect) is content with self. Interestingly, Krishna didn't respond to the second part of Arjun's query as to how a *sthith-pragna* speaks, sits and walks.

'Content with self' is purely an internal phenomenon and there is no way to measure it based on external behaviour. Maybe, in the given circumstances both an ignorant person and a *sthith-pragna* might speak the same words, might sit and walk in a similar manner. This complicates our understanding of *sthith-pragna* even more.

Krishna's life is the best example of a *sthith-pragna's* life. He was separated from his parents at birth. He was known as 'makhan thief'. His romance, dance and flute are legendary, but when he left Vrindavan he never came back seeking romance. He fought and killed when needed, but

avoided war at times and was hence known as *Ranchod-das* (who ran away from war). He showed many miracles and was a friend of friends. When it was time to marry, he married and maintained families, traced the *samantaka-mani* (valuable jewel) to ward off false accusations of theft and when it was time to give Gita *Gyan*, he gave it. He died like any ordinary person.

Firstly, there is no external pattern to his life, but the internal pattern is living moment by moment. Secondly, it's a life of joy and celebration in spite of difficult situations, which were *anitya* (transient) for him. Thirdly, as mentioned in 2.47, for him 'content with self' doesn't mean inaction, but it's *karma* (deed) sans *karta* (doer) and *karma-phal* (fruits of action).

Basically, it's living in the present moment without any burden of the past or any expectations from the future. The power is in the present moment and everything including planning and execution happen in the present.

70. Give Time a Chance

A fruit absorbs nutrients from its parent tree to grow and ripen. It then gets detached from the tree to start its own journey. The journey to freedom from the parent tree involves different actions to finally becoming a tree itself. An immature fruit, on the other hand, needs to be attached to the parent tree till it ripens.

A ripe fruit shouldn't lure the immature fruit to leave the tree, as it is not yet ready to start an independent journey. It would perish if it doesn't spend time to get the required nourishment from the parent tree. In a similar vein, Krishna advises (3.26) the wise man to not unsettle the ignorant, who is attached to actions.

This is an extension of what Krishna said (3.6) about individuals who forcefully control the organs of action, but whose mind still revolves around thoughts of sense objects. He calls them hypocrites who are deluding themselves and this would be no different to the state of an ignoramus

whose actions were forcibly stopped by a wise man.

In a class of a hundred students, each one understands the same lesson in a different manner depending on their character and state of mind. That's why, a *sanyasi* who realises the futility of motivated actions in life shouldn't encourage a *brahmachari* to desist from family life as the *brahmachari* can better learn the same futility by his own actions. There is no way other than this.

Krishna waited for the hunger to learn in Arjun to impart the Gita to him. Till then, Krishna let him keep doing worldly actions, go through pleasures and pains in life and waited for an opportune moment. Thus, learning happens when there is an inner hunger for it where each entity that we see and each life situation that we face can become a teacher.

82. We Reap what We Sow

The physical entities are governed by predictable behaviours and properties. Krishna gives insight into the relationship between the all powerful unmanifested and manifested when he says, “In whatever way people are devoted to Me, in that measure, I manifest Myself to them. All men, in every manner, pursue a path to Me.” (4.11)

This is firstly an assurance from the Lord that whatever path we pursue and however contradictory these paths may appear, all of them are paths to the unmanifested *paramatma*. Secondly, the Lord responds like a multi dimensional mirror that reflects and resonates our feelings, thoughts and actions. Thirdly, when we sow a seed, it takes time to attain its full potential of a tree and this time lag prevents us from fully understanding this principle of resonance of paramatma.

If we fill our lives with unconditional love and

shraddha (trust), love and *shraddha* are inevitably returned in due course making our lives joyful. If we sow anger, fear, hatred, cruelty or jealousy then the same will be served back making our lives miserable. There are countless examples of these and the point to be noted is that we miss the organic link between the two due to the time lag between the sowing and reaping.

This verse operates both at a subtle and gross level. While looking to realise our big dreams, we should never lose sight of small wins that help us realise the supreme consciousness at the experiential level.

Krishna further says that “Desiring success of their actions, men adore the *devatas*, as achievement accruing from an activity is readily attained” (4.12).

Devatas are nothing but glimpses of the Paramatma. We have to shed *ahankaar* to realise *Paramatma*, but it takes time. *Devatas* are the halfway point in the journey towards realising the *Paramatma* while we are still shedding *ahankaar*.

101. Emulating the Lotus Leaf

Every physical system, including life, takes different inputs and produces certain outputs. We constantly measure or judge our outputs like words and deeds. We also judge the deeds of others as well as different situations around us. In fact, in the evolutionary process, judging threats was very important for survival itself. However, the issue is in the absence of standards for judging deeds and we often depend on ignorance based perceptions and belief systems. We feel happy and satisfied whenever we encounter a deed done which conforms to our belief system.

In this connection, Krishna says, “He who is united by yoga, who has purified and conquered self, subdued his senses, who realises his Self as the self in all beings, is not tainted although acting” (5.7). This is an assurance from the Lord as to when our deeds are not tainted.

Krishna says *karmas* are not tainted when performed by someone who is purified i.e. free of

hatred and desires (5.3) and who has realised his self as the self in all beings. The point to be noted is that when one sees his self in all beings then there is no way that one performs tainted actions or crimes. On the contrary, all our actions are tainted, when performed through the lens of division of us and them.

When it comes to judging the situations around us, Krishna says that he who, dedicating his actions to *Brahman*, acts abandoning sangam (unity/attachment), is not tainted by sin as a lotus leaf by water. (5.10)

When our deeds as well as those of others are dedicated to the Lord, there is no scope for division. The situations we then face will appear to be dramas and plays, where we play our part and Krishna compares this with the lotus leaf.

107. Meditation for Bliss

The pineal gland is a pea sized, pine cone shaped organ situated at the center of the brain, directly behind the middle of two eyebrows. Physiologically it produces neurotransmitters melatonin and serotonin that are responsible for the sleep cycles as well as moods, respectively. It is also known as the third eye as it contains photoreceptors like a normal eye.

All cultures have described it in various ways as the seat of the soul; responsible for spiritual enlightenment; a sixth sense which sees beyond what the five senses can see; a symbol of spiritual awakening; a connection between the physical and spiritual world. In the Indian context, the space between the eyebrows is called *Agya Chakra* and represents the pineal gland.

This background will help us understand Krishna's method to control senses and mind when he says, "Shutting out all thoughts of external

enjoyment, with the gaze fixed on the space between the eye-brows, equalizing the flow of the incoming and outgoing breath in the nostrils, and thus controlling the senses, mind, and intellect, the sage who becomes free from desire and fear, always lives in freedom” (5.27-28). This is a method or technique given by the Lord to Arjun to help him control his senses, mind and intellect.

Vigyaan Bhairav Tantra contains 112 such methods given by Lord Shiva and one such technique says, “Concentrate without thoughts on a point between the eyebrows. The Divine Energy breaks out and rises above to the crown of the head, immediately filling one completely with her ecstasy.”

Pain is an automatic tool to bring our attention to the injured areas and this helps us in survival. Similarly, it is bringing conscious attention to the area between the eyebrows to activate the pineal gland and this activation will fill us with internal ecstasy without the help of any senses.