



**ENLIGHTENED LEADERSHIP SERIES  
LIVING THE WISDOM OF THE BHAGAVAD GITA  
Friday 5<sup>th</sup> to Sunday 7<sup>th</sup> August 2005**

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**The Bhagavad Gita & Leadership**

Probably the most famous of Indian scriptures, it is presented as a dialog between Lord Krishna and the great warrior prince, Arjuna, on the eve of the epic Mahabharata war. The Bhagavad Gita is considered to be the distilled essence of the highest knowledge of reality contained within the Upanishads, the wisdom portion of the sacred Indian scriptures.

The Bhagavad-Gita is preserved in the Mahabharata, and is arguably the jewel in the crown. While the date of the Mahabharata war is debated among scholars, tradition says it occurred five thousand years ago and that the great sage Vyasa put the Gita and the rest of the Mahabharata into written form. The main focus of the Mahabharata involves courtly intrigue, all centering on an important political family of the time. This family consisted of the Kauravas and the Pandavas, two groups of feuding cousins. King Dhritarashtra, the father of the Kauravas, was congenitally blind. Thus, the throne that would have been his was instead given to his younger brother Pandu, father of the Pandavas. Dhritarashtra resented Pandu for this and never quite got over this disappointment. After Pandu's early death, Dhritarashtra received at his court Pandu's five sons-Yudhishthira, Arjuna, Bhima, Nakula, and Sahadev and out of duty, raised them with his own children.

Even when the Kauravas and the Pandavas were young boys, rivalry grew between them. The Kauravas were devious and the Pandavas virtuous. As they grew older, the Kauravas used their military might for selfish purposes while the Pandavas were greatly loved and spiritually-minded political leaders. Still, Dhritarashtra naturally favoured his own boys, even though it was clear that the Pandavas were better equipped to rule the kingdom. Dhritarashtra's blindness signifies ignorance and inability to see right from wrong due to attachments to his own kin.

The sons of Pandu were eventually given territory of their own, where they erected a great city, Indraprastha (modern day Delhi). However, Duryodhana, the eldest son of Dhritarashtra and leader of the Kauravas, was jealous and plotted to take the territory of the Pandavas by dubious means. He "arranged" a game of dice in which the eldest son of Pandu, Yudhishthira, was sure to lose. The plot succeeded, Yudhishthira lost his kingdom, and the Pandavas were sent into exile for thirteen years.

As true Kshatriyas (noble warriors) of their day, the Pandavas honoured their (albeit rigged) defeat and entered the forest for the allotted time of their prescribed exile. Their understanding was that they would regain their kingdom when the exile came to an end. However, after the thirteen years, Duryodhana still denied them the kingdom that was rightfully theirs. They then asked for five small villages, because, as Kshatriyas, it was their inclination and duty to rule.

Duryodhana, however, was cruel. He denied them any consideration, boasting that they "would not be able to stick a pin into the amount of land that he would give them." After protracted attempts at peaceful diplomacy had failed, the two sides prepared for the ultimate

battle to the finish. The war forced everyone to take sides, and as so often happens; it pitted friend against friend, family against family, disciples against masters etc. It is important to note that although peace was preferred by the Pandavas, and the Mahabharata makes careful record of this, war was unavoidable.

Lord Krishna, known by the cousins as God incarnate, was acting as the leader of the Yadavas from Dwaraka, a magnificent city on India's western coast. He offered Himself and His entire army to the cause of the upcoming battle. But both parties would have to choose one or the other. Krishna stipulated that He would do no battle; the side that chose Him would have to be content with his moral support. He would also act as a charioteer. The opposing side would have His nearly endless group of warriors, all highly trained.

Materialistic Duryodhana quickly chose the armed battalions. The righteous Arjuna, on the other hand, asked for Krishna alone, confident that God's grace is more significant than all material inheritance. **Krishna, in letting the two sides choose Him or His army; shows that God is unbiased; if one turns to Him, to whatever degree, He reciprocates accordingly.**

Thus, with Krishna as Arjuna's charioteer, the Bhagavad-Gita begins. **It is interesting to note that even though Krishna is a divine incarnate, he happily plays the role of a mere charioteer to Arjuna indicating that no task should be considered below our dignity.**

At the outset of the battle, Arjuna instructs Krishna to position the chariot so that "he could see who has come to fight against him". Krishna, realising that Arjuna is unsure about himself, places the chariot in front of Bheeshma (the grand uncle of the two warring families) and Drona (Arjuna's guru in warfare). Krishna could have placed the chariot in front of Duryodhana, someone who Arjuna hated. Instead, by placing the chariot in front of those Arjuna considers "his own", he forces Arjuna to confront the dilemma that has no doubt been festering and growing in his mind. Caught in a web of delusion, the sight of his favourite grand uncle and teacher pushes his already confused mind into a spiral of despair and despondency, to the extent he breaks down and wants to walk away from the war.

He proceeds to provide rambling reasons to Krishna why he does not wish to fight this war – convincing him that he is a non violent person and a war that will kill thousands of kinsmen is inevitably a great sin. Krishna eloquently reminds Arjuna of his immediate social duty as a warrior, upon whom people are depending, and more importantly, his spiritual duty, to become an instrument of the divine will to fight this righteous and just war.

The relevance and universality of Krishna's teachings transcend the immediate historical setting of Arjuna's battlefield dilemma. The first chapter graphically depicts the physical state of someone who is approaching a nervous breakdown; quivering lips, eyes filled with tears, weak knees and hands etc. Krishna, unlike, modern doctors, does not take Arjuna's temperature or prescribe anti-depressants to control the physical symptoms of depression, but instead proceeds to deal with the core of Arjuna's problem; his conflict between his duty to fight the war and the attachment to his kin. He initially admonishes Arjuna for becoming weak at a moment when he should be strong, then encourages him to restore his stature of a noble prince and reminds him of his "*dharma*" to fight the righteous war.

The concept of *dharma* (literally, "duty") is fundamental to Bhagavad-Gita. The very first word in the Gita is "*dharma*", and the last one is *mam* ("my," "mine"). Consequently, tradition maintains that all that is taught in between these two words is "my duty." In other words, the Gita contains the duty of every person. It derives from the verbal root *dhr*, which means, "to hold," giving the sense of "that which holds everything together." Things are held together by their essential qualities. Dharma is consequently seen as "a given thing's essence," or "a thing's inherent nature." The dharma of water is wetness. The dharma of honey is sweetness.

Although, on the face of it, Arjuna is advocating peace and Krishna is pushing him to violence; at closer look, we realise that Arjuna is already at war – with himself. Arjuna is heart broken as he realises that those he has come to vanquish are his relatives and loved

ones. He is confused because of his attachments and not because he considers war to be unjust or unnecessary. His problem is not about killing people to attain kingdoms and justice, but rather that he has to kill who he considers to be “his people”. He forgets at that time that the war was announced only as a last resort, and after numerous attempts at diplomacy had failed. This is the crux of the conflict, and something that we can all relate to easily. **Our doubts and insecurities about decisions normally arise when we have something we consider to be “ours” to be at risk.**

Why is it that we are unaffected when strangers by the millions die each day and deeply affected when it is someone we consider to be our friend or family? Realized masters tell us that the ego fabricates an image of the “I” by aggregating all that it considers to be “mine”. So my husband, my father, my mother, my children etc are really an extrapolation of the image of “I”. When a husband dies, then the wife grieves, for a part of the wife dies with the husband. After all, the wife only came in to being on account of the husband. Similarly with other relationships, including one might argue, enemies. When an enemy is destroyed then also, a part of the “I” is destroyed. This could be one reason we tend to hold onto enmities for years to come, not allowing forgiveness to allow closure. The ego cannot accept its own destruction and therefore grieves at the thought of its mortality. So here Arjuna is grieving, for by killing “his people”, a part of him will also die.

So Krishna is aware that Arjuna’s problem is not war or violence – for he would gladly slaughter those he did not consider his own – but that of attachment. Nevertheless, throughout the first chapter, Krishna patiently listens to the lamenting Arjuna, without once interrupting him. **This is a great lesson for all of us, who rush to suggest solutions even though the person has not finished telling us about their problems.**

**The Gita also shows us how a person should behave when they realise they don’t know the answer.** Many existentialist philosophers were also seekers like Arjuna. These philosophers did not have the courage of Arjuna to be humble about their ignorance. Instead they turned their ignorance and offered it as a solution. They have stated that life is an accident, it has no meaning, and that you live, you die -that’s it. So enjoy life – you have no one to answer to. This is dangerous. Arjuna too could have provided answers but he chose to be a humble seeker, and therefore received the grace of the Divine, acting through Krishna, who illuminated him to the truths about life. **We should also be careful not to turn our ignorance into solutions. Generally, you will find we seek affirmations from friends and family on our own point of view, only because we can then convince ourselves, we are right.**

Krishna begins his masterful rendition of inspiring leadership in the second chapter. On being asked by Arjuna to guide him, instead of revealing his status as god incarnate, offering the solution, and expecting Arjuna to follow his advice, he pushes Arjuna into confronting his inner conflicts. He wants Arjuna to realise the truth for himself for only then will he be able to withstand all that life has to throw at him. **He wants Arjuna to understand that conflicts are a way of life and they present an opportunity to transcend and grow.**

*Without journeying through doubt, faith will not become stronger. Without experiencing suffering, happiness will not be appreciated. Life has to be experienced and every living moment has to be cherished. All apparent inequities and difficulties must be viewed as a means to grow and to understand that there is a core within us all; something that remains unaffected by pleasure or pain, life or death.*

Many of us wish to escape bad times, sometimes by adopting a Guru, who we feel would provide us spiritual salvation and alleviate our bad times. We seek spirituality not to understand our true nature, but to avoid hardships. Krishna is showing all of us that spirituality must be lived, day by day, moment by moment. Every conflict must be confronted, every drama must be experienced – only then will we grow. The message of Gita is to embrace life and never worry. Live life in its totality and accept whatever this life brings to us. Not only accept but rejoice in it since it is an opportunity to grow and learn.

The Gita consists of 18 chapters. The first is depicting the anguish of Arjuna. The second chapter is the executive summary of the entire Bhagavad Gita. The following fifteen chapters are an exposition of the truths revealed in the second and the eighteenth is a grand summary of the teachings again.

The second chapter itself is broken into 4 main sections. The first section is when Arjuna asks Krishna to be his spiritual guide and Guru officially. The second section is a sharing of the highest truths about life and being – called Sankhya, and why Arjuna should not grieve for the impending death of kin. The third is the teaching of Karma Yoga and the fourth, the qualities of a spiritually enlightened person.

In the Sankhya section of the Gita, Krishna reminds Arjuna that the changeless entity upon which the experiences of change take place is called the “*Atma*”, whose fundamental nature is of Pure Existence, Pure Consciousness and Pure Bliss (Sat Chit Ananda). It is only name and form that changes with time and therefore what is the point of grieving. The essence itself remains immutable, omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent, transcending space, time and causation.

Our conflicts arise from non understanding of our true nature and further by misunderstanding that we are the body mind and intellect (The “I”). As this sense of “I” is constantly changing, we feel lack and discontentment in our limited state. This discontent creates a tension that is commonly referred to as desire or “*Kama*”. To fulfil desire, we perform action or “*Karma*”. This desire which is trying to take us to a sense of fullness is instead interpreted by the individual ego as being for the purpose of avoiding pain and seeking pleasure in the world. However, there is no lasting joy in things which do not last, and we must therefore strive to recognise our inherent nature of fullness with right knowledge known as *Jnana*.

Even Arjuna, although a knowledgeable Prince, was unable to hold the subtlety of this truth. Therefore, Krishna proceeds to tell him about Karma Yoga, a science of purifying the mind and of self transformation that will prepare Arjuna (and us) to receive, hold, assimilate and understand the truth about our real Self. We must understand what karma is since it drives our experiences. We must also understand how Karma can be transformed into Karma Yoga so that the mind can be purified for higher order spiritual pursuits. This is the setting of the August retreat, where we will look at the Laws of Karma and Karma Yoga.

As we progress through the Gita, the dialogue will move through a series of questions and answers that elucidates metaphysical concepts such as the body/soul (matter/spirit) distinction, the principle of non-attached action, the virtues of discipline (yoga) and meditation, the importance of knowledge (*jnana*) and devotion (*bhakti*). Krishna will teach that perfection lies not in renunciation of the world, but, rather in disciplined action (karma-yoga), which is to be performed without attachment to results (*Karmaphala -sangha*). He will tell us about the essential drivers of human personality, the Guna’s and also tell us how to differentiate between the good and bad qualities within us, and how to work with them.

Each one of us carries an Arjuna within us, and the mind of humans at the beginning of the 21st century may not be too different from the one who fought 5000 years ago. Unlike Arjuna, our Mahabharata is often fought over a long period and our discontent and disappointments accumulate over time. Nevertheless, we must all strive to understand how to get the most out of life, our role in life, and its ultimate purpose, else we run the risk of living an aimless existence.

When should you start on this journey, a wise man was once asked? He replied, “Start the day before you know you are going to die.” Since, we do not know when we will die; the answer is “start here and now”. That’s all the time we have – the past is gone and the future is not here.”