

Chapter I

Whom the Gita is for; the objective “remember dharma, practice dharma”; introduction to Arjuna and Krishna; Arjuna’s despondency; the path of surrender.

To understand the meaning of the *Gita*, a reverential approach is necessary. You must take up its study in an attitude of submission and expectancy. For the *Gita* is the “milk” of the *Upanishads*, drawn by the cowherd Krishna with the help of Arjuna, “the calf”, for all the “dull-witted” to drink and draw sustenance from. Some argue that the *Gita* as a sacred poem was created later than the *Mahabharatha*, of which it is a part; but whatever may be said of the composition of the *Gita*, there is no doubt that the principles and teachings of the *Gita* are ancient, nay, dateless. In the first three verses of the fourth chapter, reference is made to the Lord instructing the *Gita* first to Surya (Sun God) and later to Manu (first law-giver), and also to the fact that from Manu it reached King Ikshvaku and thence to others in succession! So, the *Gita* is beyond the category of time and cannot be assigned to a particular point of time, past or present.

The *Gita* is a text for spiritual practitioners, for it emphasizes spiritual discipline and spiritual attitudes more than anything else. Every chapter lays down means and methods of reaching the goal of peace and harmony. Now, spiritual discipline is the product of keen and steady yearning for progress. The aspirant must aspire, not despair. He must persevere, not clamour for quick success. The *Gita* is a boat, which takes people across from the self-imposed state of bondage to the freedom that is their nature. People are taken from darkness to light, from lusterlessness to splendour. The *Gita* ordains disciplines and duties that are free from the taints of tendencies and impulses that tie people to the relentless wheel of birth and death.

Really speaking, people have come into this field of activity (*karma-kshetra*) only to engage themselves in activity, not to earn the fruit of such activity. That is the teaching of the *Gita*, its fundamental lesson. The *Gita* is the quintessence of the meaning of all the *Vedas*. Rituals and sacrifices, the outward-directed activities, are mentioned in the preliminary portions of the *Vedas*. Activities of the mind, like worship of the Lord, which are directed inward, are mentioned later. And the *yoga* of spiritual wisdom (*jnana*) is also expounded to minds thus clarified and purified.

Any individual, however scholarly, cannot escape delusion and therefore is subjected to grief, which acts as a brake upon activity. Arjuna, the great hero, capable of great renunciation and of great wisdom, is deluded by the awful needs of war, and his grief handicaps his activity too. He confuses the body with the self; he starts identifying the two. He imposes on the *Atma* (the never-changing divine Self or Spirit) the unreal and ephemeral nature of the world and takes this delusion as true. He believes that his worldly activities, according to that false identification, are his *Atmic* nature (*Atma-dharma*)! This is the tragedy not only of Arjuna but of all humanity! Therefore, the *Gita* is of universal and eternal value.

To study the *Gita* is to learn the art of swimming across the sea of delusion. The *Gita* is the very voice of Lord Krishna. The fact that it has provided consolation and liberation to millions of people is evidence of its divine origin. A lesser person could not have given it that authenticity.

The way it begins and ends gives a clue to the subject that it expounds. The very first verse starts with the words “in the *dharma*-field, in the battle-field (*dharma-kshethre, kuru-kshethre*)”, with *dharma* (righteous action) being the leading word. The last verse of the final eighteenth chapter speaks of “wherever the Master of *Yoga*,

Krishna (*yathra yogeswarah Krishnah*), and the phrase “Master of *yoga*” sums up the *dharma* that is taught. Thus, it is clear that the objective of the teaching in the *Gita* is just this:

Remember *dharma*; practice *dharma*.

How significant this is! All scriptures (*sastras*) are engaged in demarcating and defining the nature and subtle characteristics of *dharma*. The *Gita* incorporates this study and this analysis. It is a textbook of *dharma*, in all its aspects. It discusses all the principles underlying *dharma*.

Arjuna is the individual (*jivi*). The body is the chariot and the teacher in the chariot is Krishna, the Lord. The charioteer is the Lord, the inspirer of the intelligence, the *Brahman* that prompts the intelligence, in answer to the prayer contained in the *Gayatri Mantra*: “Awaken my discrimination, oh Lord, and guide me”. The Kauravas represent the demonic nature; the Pandavas, the divine. Those are evil; these are good. And there has always been a struggle between the two. In this conflict between opposing forces, Krishna (the divine Self, the *Atma*) is always on the side of *dharma* —the reality that sustains, not the delusion that undermines. If you seek to have the Lord on your side as your guide, equip yourself with divine nature, the qualities of *dharma*. For the Lord is where *dharma* is.

Of course, this does not mean that the Lord is not omnipresent! Butter is omnipresent in milk, although it can be made manifest in one location, in the milk, only by the processes of curdling and churning. So too, the Lord can be made manifest in a specific location by the process of righteous spiritual discipline.

“Where there is *dharma*, victory is achieved (*yatho dharma-sthatho jayah*).” Arjuna was engrossed with the physical aspect, so it was necessary to bless him with the knowledge of the real, the *Atmic* aspect. The entire complex of spiritual discipline is directed to the clarification of the awareness of *Atma* and the fixing of attention on That. The teaching of Krishna is just this; in fact, this is the sum and substance of the search for truth.

Krishna answered many doubts that had entangled Arjuna but that he failed to express. “Oh Arjuna! You are grieving because these kings and princes who are related to you are about to meet death at your hands. You talk glibly of *dharma*. But remember, the wise mourn neither for the living nor for the dead. Shall I tell you why? Well, you are feeling grief over the body, which alone decays on death. Did you grieve when the body underwent many changes hitherto? The child disappeared in the boy, the boy disappeared in the youth, the youth became lost in the middle-aged man, the middle-aged man was lost in the old man, and the old man is lost in death. You never wept for the changes that affected the body so far, so why weep for this one change? Today, do you have the body you had when you were a boy? Where is that frame you had when you tied up Dhrishtadyumna? You still remember that boyish exploit, but the body that achieved it is gone! So too, whatever changes your body suffers, the *Atma*, the splendour of the true wisdom, remains immortal. Being established unshakeably in this knowledge is the sign of the truly wise.” Thus spoke Krishna.

“You may ask whether one would not feel sad when the bodies with which one moved and lived for years go out of sight. But for how many have you to lament, in case it is proper so to grieve? Have you thought of that? Joy and grief are as day and night. They have to be put up with, gone through. If you refuse, they won’t stop happening; if you desire, they won’t start happening! Both are related to the physical, material, the body; they do not affect the spirit, the soul. The moment you escape from these two you have liberation (*moksha*).”

The first discourse, which teaches these truths, is named “the Despondency of Arjuna (*Arjuna Vishada Yoga*)”. It is the very foundation of the edifice that is the *Bhagavad Gita*. When the foundation is strong, the edi-

vice too is lasting. The *Gita*, built on that foundation 5,000 years ago, is unshaken and unshakable. From this, you can infer how strong its foundation is and how wise the person is who laid it.

You refer to it as “despondency”! But that “despondency” was very beneficial; it was no ordinary “want of courage”. For it tested Arjuna’s sincerity and steadfastness; it induced him to take unquestioning refuge in the Lord. That is why it is dignified by the name *yoga*. The *Gita* begins with the *yoga* of despondency (*vishada*) and ends with the *yoga* of renunciation or detachment (*sanyasa*). Despondency is the foundation; renunciation, the superstructure. Despondency is the seed; renunciation, the fruit.

The question may be raised: how could Arjuna be credited with a pure nature, which alone is said to deserve the wisdom that is imparted in the *Gita*? The word Arjuna means pure, unsullied, white. He is very appropriately named, and he lived up to that name. That is how he secured the immediate presence of Lord Krishna; that is how he became the instrument for the gift of the *Gita* to the world.

Krishna uses the word *yoga* many times in the *Gita*; the state of the individual (*jivi*) during *yoga* is also described. Yet, a doubt may arise in the minds of those who have read the *Gita* that there is no agreement between the word as used ordinarily and as used by Krishna. Krishna has extolled detachment (*vairagya*) in some places. In other places, He has declared that the highest freedom can be earned by worship. He also elaborates on various methods of attaining the supreme state of spiritual bliss. In the eighth discourse, there is an account of the royal *yoga* (*raja-yoga*), but it is not right to say that the *Gita* is a text that teaches the royal *yoga*.

Complete surrender to Lord Krishna, freedom from the threefold shackles that bind one with the external world of objects, and observance of good deeds and virtuous disciplines —these are the principal truths underlined in the *Gita*. The Lord holds these forth as the best forms of training and the deepest secrets of inner progress.

The real meaning of the *Gita* is not grasped by all. Reputed scholars and writers, although gifted with rare intelligence, have failed to unravel the mystery of its message. Commentators speak of the principle of perfect balance amidst all change, or of the achievement of freedom as more important than anything else. On the other side, others compare the *Gita* with the philosophical texts of the West with which they are familiar and start teaching young minds in that strain! Of course, full renunciation is highly desirable, but only a very small number can practise it. If a certain spiritual teaching has to gain universal acceptance, it must have disciplines that can be practised and experienced by everyone in daily life and its activities.

The highest *dharma* is for each one to follow their own *dharma* boldly. Regarding this problem, there is a conflict between religion and morals. “It is difficult, fraught with danger (*Gahana karmanogathih*)”, says the Lord, speaking of moral discipline. Which act is legitimate, which is not? Which act is sanctioned by morals, which is not? People have struggled and are struggling to decide these. However, in the following verses, Krishna mentioned the type of acts that are worthy:

Fix thy thought on Me; be devoted to Me; worship Me; do homage to Me.

And thou shalt reach Me. The Truth do I declare to thee; for thou art dear to Me. This is My teaching, My grace.

This is the path to come to Me. Give up all *dharmas*; surrender to Me.

Do not grieve; I shall liberate you from the consequences of all your acts.

Manmanaa bhava madbhaktho madyaajee maam namaskuru.

Maam evaishyasi sathyam the prathijaanee priyo si me.

*Sarva dharmaan parithyajya maamekam sharanam vraja.
Aham thvam sarva paapebhyo mokshayishyaami maa suchah.*

Ah! Note the meaning and significance of these stanzas. Isn't this act of surrender enough to save you and to liberate you from the round of coming into, staying in, and leaving the world? Here is what the Lord seeks from you: Seeing Him in every being, being aware of Him every moment of existence, and being immersed in the bliss (*ananda*) of this awareness. Also, being merged in the relation caused by profound devotion and love to Him. And, dedicating all acts, big and small, to Him, Krishna. Wish, will, attitude, activity, fruit, consequence —dedicating everything from beginning to end. Finally, renunciation of all attachment to the self and performance of all acts in a spirit of worshipful non-attachment. This is what the Lord seeks from you.

Of course, it is hard to effect this full surrender. But if you make but the slightest effort toward it, the Lord Himself will confer the courage to pursue it to the end. He will walk with you and help you as a friend; He will lead you as a guide; He will guard you from evil and temptation; He will be your staff and support. He has said,

This course of action, if followed even to a small extent, will save you from terrifying fear.

Swalpamapyasya dharmasya thrayathe mahatho bhayath.

To follow *dharma* is itself a source of joy; it is the path least beset with hurdles. That is the teaching of the Lord.

“You will come near Me; you will approach Me (*Maamevaishyasi*)”. That is to say, you will understand My mystery, you will enter into Me, you will achieve My nature. In these terms, acquiring divine nature, existence in God, and unity in God are indicated. When one has attained the state of realizing the divinity in every being, when every instrument of knowledge brings the experience of that divinity, when It alone is seen, heard, tasted, smelled, and touched, then one becomes undoubtedly a part of the body of God and lives in Him and with Him. When this duty to your own progress is taken up, you will get new strength at the very first step; you will thrill to a new and purer joy; you will taste the fullness of bliss; and you will be refreshed by a new holiness.

This *dharma* is not laid down or recommended only for the extraordinary among people. It is within the reach of all, for all have the hunger for God, all have the discrimination to discover that there is something basic behind all this change. Even the most heinous sinner can quickly cleanse their heart and become pure by surrendering to the Lord in anguished repentance.

Therefore, the Lord's command is that each person should pursue the special *dharma* laid down for them; each should plan their life according to the spiritual foundations of their culture; each should give up the “objective” vision and listen to the voice of God.

Those born in India (Bharath) should deserve the privilege by listening to the voice of the leader of India, Gopala (Krishna), and manifest the divinity latent in them —in every word they utter, every letter they write, every wish they entertain, every thought they frame, and every act they do for the winning of gross things, such as food or shelter or health. Only then can this Indian nation demonstrate to the world the excellence of the Ancient Religion (*Sanathana Dharma*), which is its special gift to humanity, and ensure peace for all mankind. Acts in line with that *dharma* alone can confer the strength of spirit that can encounter all crises and achieve victory. The sacred *Gita* grants that boon, by indicating the way clearly.