

MESSAGE OF THE GITA FOR THE PRESENT DAY WORLD

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I

THE one scripture which fulfils the need of every righteous person and under any or every circumstance is possibly the *Bhagavad Gita*. Of course the Vedas and the Upanisads are the main source of all Hindu faith and therefore cannot be discounted. But the *Gita* has their essence all brought together in one place. It shows you how to live in the world without being tainted by its colour. It encourages every one to follow his traditional duties, or the avocations in which each man is placed, following which, it says, he will come to the highest.¹ This is the foundation of the *varnāshrama dharma*. It shows how every one was considered a useful member of the great family of humanity. The *Gita* has a message for every class and every section of human society. It never tells anyone to lie low and suffer humiliation. Sri Krishna, the teacher, says time and again to Arjuna, and through him to every one that is facing his battle of life, 'to stand up and fight' for the righteous cause. 'If you fall,' he says, 'you will attain heaven and if you win you shall enjoy the earth; therefore stand up firmly determined to fight.'²

It has a message for every man, to be honest, to be self-sacrificing, to acquire divine qualities. Its message to the spiritual aspirant has been dealt with, in various ways, all throughout the *Gita* ; and all along the march of time several commentaries — delineating its message to the various types of aspirants in the different denominations of the Hindu religion — have been written, expounded and enlarged upon. It has a message to the rulers, to be undaunted, to rule righteously and be firm against the foe. This message of fearlessness is there in the Upanisads. Though this code is not new to the *Gita*, in its reiteration the *Gita* is most explicit, and thoroughly purposeful. There is no mincing of matters, no dallying of words. It respects no persons in giving out what it intends to teach. Krishna severely upbraids his most beloved of friends and

¹ Gita, 18.46.

² Ibid., 2.37.

relatives, Arjuna, at the meekness and weakness displayed by the latter. He says, 'Yield not to unmanliness, O son of Prtha, it does not behove you (a man of prowess). Giving up this weakness of the heart stand up.'³ Here you have a message for the warrior, nay for all. Swami Vivekananda said that this is the message of the *Gita*, not to be weak, not to be cowed down by brute force. It is these and other words that poured forth from the lips of Sri Krishna that slowly roused the wilting heart of Arjuna, as it were by a shower of rain; the gathered clouds of infatuation were scattered and consciousness returned, until at last freed from doubt he was willing and eager to fulfil his part,⁴ in the circumstances.

There have been scoffers and there have been sceptics who have belittled or did not believe in the message of the scriptures. It is easy to run down religion, spiritual effort and scriptures, when man is in affluence and peace and happiness prevails. But when a trying time comes and he is pressed on all sides, it is these words of practical wisdom, of calm collectedness and of vigour and encouragement that support him. *Gita* is such a scripture. It has not yet lived its time. It shall last to eternity. Though it was told thousands of years ago, its message has not become obsolete nor even dull. On the other hand, every time we think about it, every time we are faced with a new problem it has a solution for even that new problem, if only we care to go through it, thus bringing to our attention its vitality and usefulness. It is, therefore, incumbent on every Hindu, for the matter of that on every person, who likes to live a life which can be properly so named, to study and imbibe the proper mode of conduct that is becoming to the position and place he occupies. For a life without a purpose, without manliness, according to the Aryan code of morals, is no life at all.

The world today is poised on the brink of a precipice and it requires enormous courage to face the crisis and decide in what manner the situation can be tackled. Here again the *Gita* comes to our rescue. Sri Krishna, by his own example, sets before us an ideal which shows how a problem, a difficult situation can be countenanced. In the midst of the warring parties, the serene and unruffled picture of Sri Krishna holding the reins of Arjuna's horses brings out in no uncertain terms the idea of how man should live in the world, unattached, like the lotus leaf in water,⁵ as he himself says. In a beautiful hymn to Sri Ramakrishna Swami Vivekananda also brings before our mind's eye the majesty and grandeur of this picture of Sri Krishna. He sings: 'He who quelled the noise, terrible like that at the time of destruction, arising from the battle (Kurukshetra), who destroyed the terrible yet natural night of ignorance (of Arjuna) and who roared out the *Gita* sweet and appeasing; That renowned soul is born now as Sri Ramakrishna.' Though the *Gita* is sweet and appeasing every word of it dings into our ears the message of courage

³ Ibid., 2.3.

⁴ Ibid., 18.73.

⁵ Ibid., 5.10.

and strength in a lion's roar. We cannot dare ignore its clarion call to arise and awake.

Further, Sri Krishna tells Arjuna: 'Giving up attachment to the fruits of one's actions, and always contented, without depending on anything, though one is engaged in action, one does not do anything.'⁶ In this small verse is contained a meaning that can last and support every man for his whole lifetime. The one point that Sri Krishna stresses here is that it is cowardice to run away from duty, from a righteous action, a noble cause. Man, as long as he lives, must perform some action or other, he cannot live idly and one day he must die. Swami Vivekananda used to say, 'Die you must, but have a great ideal to die for, and it is better to die with a great ideal in life'. This idea is contained in the above utterance of Sri Krishna. In another place he says, 'To work only have you the right and not to the fruits thereof. Let not the fruits of action be the motive behind your actions; nor be attached to inaction.'⁷ He is the hero who, amidst stresses and strains, can stand up and meet them boldly without caring for what happens to him or for the fruits of his action. But this requires enormous practice and tremendous will power. We have to cultivate it.

'The earth is for the heroes to enjoy,' says a Sanskrit proverb and in every day of our life we come to experience it. The weak and the infirm are trodden down everywhere. Stand up to your rights, that is the call of the age. That is what the *Gita* also teaches. But it also teaches us not to encroach upon another man's right. Righteousness has been the moral code of the *Gita*, of India throughout its history. Swami Vivekananda says India never went to conquer any country. It never subjected any nation, not that it was weak or infirm to do so, but it recognised man's right to live in his own way in his own country. On the other hand, over and over again India has been trodden over, conquered by various races. But it has risen anew showing the very conquerors that they were not able to crush down its infinite vitality to grow and assert its right persistently afresh. That has been possible because of the faith the Hindus had in their scriptures, of the eternality of the soul, of the necessity of spirituality in a world of mundane thinking, because of its firm conviction that Hinduism, the eternal religion, the Sanatana Dharma will live and also because India has a message, not only to its own people but to the people of the world as a whole — that in the framework of this world India has a prominent role to play as a reviver of higher values. Swami Vivekananda observes that India has more than once contributed its spirituality and its philosophy to the regeneration of the world and it has yet to play its part in the world in this capacity. So it is essential that India keeps its banner of spirituality flying high and to do so keep its culture and individuality as a nation intact and sound.

⁶ Ibid., 4.20.

⁷ Ibid., 2.47.

Tradition has it that the *Gita* was taught on the battle field to Arjuna. Some say that it is an allegory referring to the eternal struggle that goes on in man's mind between the righteous aspirations and unrighteous desires. Whatever that may be the *Gita* has a word of solace, a word of encouragement, a word regarding one's duty to everyone of us, wherever we may be placed.

What is the message of the *Gita* for the present day world — a world of science and technology, of ratiocination and logical analysis? Here we have to be clear in our minds. It will not do to shut our eyes to the unseen and unexperienced truth, in the name of these high sounding words. A large part of man's life remains hidden from him, and usually science does not take cognizance of this fact. It is satisfied with phenomenological experience and physical reactions. But man is more. Man is not a mere physical entity, he has a psychological being, a spiritual being within him. This fact has to be conceded and unless this is done we cannot adduce any meaning to life. If man was to live like any other of the animal species why was he specially endowed with the thinking faculty more than other animals? Is it to exploit all other living beings? That does not make any sense. Man has a higher purpose, higher value to cultivate, higher and nobler things to know and to assert in his own life. That is why he has been gifted with that power of discrimination, of thinking. It is possible to use this power either in the constructive or destructive way. Mere morality is not all that is meant by higher values. Morality without a spiritual basis is like a house without foundation. It cannot stand the analysis of reason: Why should we be moral? If spiritual values are not taken into consideration you cannot answer this question satisfactorily. No amount of legislation can make a man good, though he may be superficially well-behaved. There must be some principle which he struggles to achieve. There must be an ideal, a goal to attain; without that man is no man.

It is painful to see that in some quarters a wholly wrong interpretation is put as to what is meant by a secular state. They conceive it as a state consisting of people without religion. They want to believe that religion hurts people. They fear that religion, if taught to their children may upset the apple cart of their plans, their designs. In the name of education they want unrestrained freedom to behave as one pleases, as if education means a passport to licence and indulgence. Such may be the practice somewhere, in spite of all effort against it, but if India tries to adopt or imitate such behaviour the country's future would be bleak notwithstanding all the progress it may make in other directions. Restraint and sacrifice are the two essential qualities that the people of a country with a vast population like India must inculcate if it means to maintain morality and harmony in its own land. That is what Swami Vivekananda reiterated when he observed: 'The national ideals of India

are Renunciation and Service. Intensify her in those channels and the rest will take care of itself.' Outward renunciation along with inner dispassion may not be possible for all, but everyone can practise inward renunciation, control over the senses, to a smaller or greater extent. And if one cannot practise it that does not give him any right to water down the ideal or condemn it. It is no use trying to accuse religion for all that is unhealthy in society. On the other hand it is the other way about; it is the spiritual force that still sustains society.

There is enough indiscipline in the student world to require any one to plead their cause for more liberality. A disciplined life, where it is not overburdened by unnecessary dogma or harshness, should be a welcome feature in all schools and colleges and not a matter to be decried or ashamed of. If only we will remember that the students of today are to be the torch-bearers of our culture and the future leaders of India it will be obvious, to anyone with a little understanding, as to how much they should be instructed in restraint of the senses and enabled to form a temperament of sacrifice. For the lack of this spirit of sacrifice, in a sufficient measure, and the overwhelmingly predominant desire for personal gains it is that India had to suffer repeated humiliations at the hands of alien hordes in the past and even today suffers from so many maladies. Let us remember this and learn to live a disciplined life and help the younger generation to do so. Example is better than precept. That is what Sri Krishna says to Arjuna, 'In whatever way the great men act in that way the common man acts as well'.⁸ He wanted Arjuna to be an exemplar. Otherwise it would not have mattered whether Arjuna fought the battle or relinquished the kingdom and retired to the forest. Sri Krishna would have brought victory to the Pandavas even without Arjuna. But that would have been a bad example for all time. That is why he infused into Arjuna the spirit to discriminate between the right and the wrong and stand steadfast for the just cause whatever might be the outcome.

Mental poise is another quality that the *Gita* recommends and teaches how to acquire. Not to be swayed by joy or sorrow, happiness or misery, not to be deterred by calamity, but face everything that comes one's way with an unperturbed mind, and determination to do the right thing is a virtue that is always an asset, not only in spiritual life but also in all other walks of life. A man works himself into a fever for a wrong done but in his anger he may forget the very noble characteristics for which he is fighting. 'One who is not elated (at gains) nor hates, one who does not grieve (at misery or adversity) nor desires anything and gives up all good or evil and is devoted to God is dear to Him,'⁹ says Sri Krishna. As already said these virtues stand one in good stead in every situation. Depending on the Lord, to work as His tool, leaving all results of one's actions in His hands, can be done only by one who is clear in his mind as

⁸ Gita, 3.21.

⁹ Ibid., 12.17.

to the righteousness of the cause. He can then stand up against the whole world, if need be, without even a tremor of the heart. For the world is a strange place where justice and righteousness are bartered away to serve one's needs. As long as it is convenient to have you on one's side it is all right, but the moment you stand up for justice and if it cuts at your friends cloak in however insignificant a manner that friendship goes overboard. But people forget that truth alone triumphs, maybe the injured party has to suffer a great deal, but ultimately truth does triumph, even in secular pursuits.

The *Gita* has been the solace of millions of aspirants; it has also been the strength of many who though not exclusively given over to the spiritual path strive for a good cause. Let us seek its guidance in all our avocations, and be on the right track so that when our day of departure from this world comes, we can leave it without a regret and with the satisfaction of having fulfilled our task.