

INSTITUTE BOOKLETS : 24

AN INTRODUCTION  
TO  
THE STUDY OF THE GITA

By  
SWAMI RANGANATHANANDA



THE RAMAKRISHNA MISSION  
INSTITUTE OF CULTURE

CALCUTTA



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Swami Ranganathananda is a senior monk of the Ramakrishna Order and till recently Secretary of the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Calcutta. *An Introduction to the Study of the Gītā* consists of three lectures delivered by the Swami in February-March 1946 under the auspices of the now defunct Ramakrishna Society, Hyderabad, Sind, Pakistan. The lectures appeared subsequently in the May-June 1946 and February 1947 issues of *The Vedanta Kesari*, a monthly journal of the Ramakrishna Order published from Sri Ramakrishna Math, Mylapore, Madras. It was later brought out in book form by the Ramakrishna Mission, Shillong, in 1950 for limited circulation. It is now being published in the Institute Booklets series.



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# AN INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY OF THE GĪTĀ

THE BHAGAVAD-GĪTĀ: A UNIVERSAL  
GOSPEL

THE *Gītā* is not an original work in the sense in which we usually understand the term, though it is a supremely original statement of what Aldous Huxley calls 'The Perennial Philosophy'. It is a continuation of the ancient philosophy that you find in the Upaniṣads. The *Gītā* summarizes the essential teachings of Vedānta and presents them in a popular manner. That is why it has become the scripture of the vast masses in this country. When we study the *Gītā*, we are not merely studying the Upaniṣadic philosophy, but also the ethical implications of that philosophy. We want ethical guidance, and the *Gītā* provides it. A metaphysics which speaks of the highest Reality without reference to everyday life will not be of much use to us. Therefore, the sublime ethical implications of the Vedānta are elaborated in the *Gītā*.

Apart from the ethics of conduct there is another element in the *Gītā* which is

*bhakti*, devotion to God. The *bhakti* of the *Gītā* is the expression of the religious mood at its highest and best. It is love of God out of the fullness of one's heart and not out of its emptiness as it is in its early states. It is this that makes the devotee of the *Gītā* an embodiment at once of fearlessness and gentleness. The twelfth chapter is a mighty saga in praise of the perfection of character through this path of spiritual discipline.

From all these considerations the *Gītā* has assumed an importance in our life, and that importance is increasing day by day. In his preface to the English edition of the *Gītā* by Charles Wilkins, Warren Hastings, the first British Governor-General of India, declared that 'the writers of the Indian philosophies will survive, when the British dominion in India shall have long ceased to exist and the sources which it yielded of wealth and power are lost to remembrance'. Since these lines were written, the *Gītā* has been establishing an ever-widening empire in the hearts of men and women both in the East and the West. Its appeal to the thinking minds of the

modern world, as its appeal to the thinking minds of India in the past, is in sharp contrast to the indifference and often hostility displayed by the modern mind to the scriptures and prophets of the world. The source of this power lies in the two important features of its message—its rationality and its universality.

Before going into the *Gītā* proper, it is necessary to say a few words by way of introduction. Most of you must be knowing something of the *Gītā* and its place among the scriptures of the Hindus. When I use the word Hindu, while studying the Vedānta, I use it for want of a better word. Because most of these scriptures and philosophies were elaborated long before there were any other religions in the world—Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, or Muslim. These distinctions did not exist then. The great sages elaborated their concepts of religion with no such distinctions. It is necessary to keep this point in view. Today when we use the word Hindu, it is to demarcate some class of people from some other classes. But when I use this word with reference to the *Gītā*, this demarca-

tion does not exist ; only because the sages gave their sublime thoughts not to any particular class of people, Hindus as opposed to all other people, but to all the people who wanted guidance—without reference to any community or race. Keeping this point in view, we have to approach these ancient books and their teachings. It is the religion of man that is taught there and not of this community or that. Ethics, morality, and metaphysics are propagated for the welfare of humanity and not of any sections thereof. This universality of outlook is thoroughly emphasized in all our ancient works ; so much so, the great law-giver Manu develops his Code keeping in view the true welfare not of Hindus only, but of humanity in general. It is the *Mānava Dharma Śāstra*—the Ethical Code of Manu for the guidance of his progeny, Man. It is for man in general, any part of the world he may be inhabiting and to any race he may belong. If man wants to attain happiness and welfare, he has to follow certain ideals and certain methods, and these ideals and methods are universal and these are prom-

ulgated in this book. Similarly in the Vedas and the Upaniṣads, and later in the *Gītā*; their teachings are not sectional or parochial in their import and appeal. Sects and creeds may use them with profit, but cannot exhaust them; for they deal with human nature; their theme is man's aspirations and struggles after Self-realization. The division of humanity into various religions and sects is only a later story.

So, when we read through the *Gītā*, we clearly find that its teachings are addressed to all humanity—to All men and women who are struggling to realize the higher expressions of their soul. This is what is given by this philosophy and religion. This ideal is also emphasized in the nature of the dialogue which is characteristic of the *Gītā*. This dialogue is between Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna. In our ancient scriptures, Arjuna is considered as the incarnation of Nara, the man, and Kṛṣṇa of Nārāyaṇa—the supreme Lord. It is not that Kṛṣṇa is imparting his teaching here to any particular sect, but to man, through his disciple Arjuna. In the *Gītā*, therefore,

God is face to face with Man— Nārāyaṇa with Nara—and this is what constitutes its solemn and sublime setting.

In our country, for several centuries, the Hindu mind has been directed to narrower and narrower circles of thought ; even the universal thought of the *Gītā* has been sought to be limited in these narrow grooves. Even Śrī Kṛṣṇa has been sought to be imprisoned in a creed, be it Vaiṣṇavism or something else. Śrī Kṛṣṇa was a universal teacher. He made no distinction between Vaiṣṇavism or Śaivism or any other ism. Today we require this rhythm of universality which transcends all creeds and classes and embraces one and all and gives the same kind of inspiration to one and all. Therefore, the *Gītā* is to be viewed in its own setting—as a commentary on the Vedānta given by one who was a universal Being, that is Śrī Kṛṣṇa himself. Universal teachings cannot be given by anybody but a universal man, and they cannot be understood as well by anybody but a universal pupil. If one who is limited by creeds studies the *Gītā*, he will find there only a narrow teaching—an echo of

himself—and his conception of Śrī Kṛṣṇa will be conditioned by his limited mind. This has been done in the past ; but what we now require is an open mind, a universal attitude to life ; then alone will the *Gītā* open out its best to us—its spirit of universality and practicality. This accounts for the wide influence that the *Gītā* exercises on the people of this country and outside. The people in this country and outside find in the *Gītā* something which will strengthen their faith and their spiritual endeavour *in their own way*. Whether they be Christians or Muslims or Hindus of various denominations, the *Gītā* intensifies their *śraddhā* in their own faith. Its universality is of a special type. It is not an imposition, but an invitation. The *Gītā* belongs to everyone in his or her own way. Such a universal message we require to mediate between the various religions that prevail at present.

Śrī Śaṅkarācārya, in the introduction to his commentary on the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, gives us his views as to the nature of the *Gītā* dialogue. There are various views as to how the *Gītā* came to be taught. The

very orthodox section holds that all these verses are as they were spoken between Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna. They stick to the letter ; but, as the Bible says, 'The letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life'. It is most unreasonable to expect that in a battlefield questions and answers should go on for such a long time and that, too, in verses. Rational people do not accept this view. The great Śaṅkarācārya, who is considered to be the fountain-head of the present orthodoxy, has not accepted this view. He says in his commentary that when Arjuna was confused with difficulties, Śrī Kṛṣṇa gave him some effective advice and this advice was put by Vyāsa into 700 ślokaś. This is the view of Śaṅkarācārya, and this seems to be quite reasonable.

We find that a great teaching or a great ideology always takes its birth under the stress of circumstances and environments. This is true with regard to the birth of any vital idea in any part of the world. The birth of the great Marxist ideology in the nineteenth century—one that is now moving men and women in all parts of the world—is an instance in point. The

ideology took birth at a time when society was waiting for it. It is a development out of the accumulated previous conditions. It took shape in the middle decades of the last century. The idea of 'Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity', which was the war-cry of the French Revolution, took its birth during the stress of the mid-eighteenth century in France. Similarly, when we study the *Gītā* and the conditions that obtained at the time of the *Mahābhārata* and also the circumstances that made for the appearance of the teaching of the *Gītā*, we find there were strong reasons for the promulgation of the ideas of the *Gītā*. In the early days we have the Vedic literature and the ritualistic religion associated with it. So also we have the Upaniṣads and the philosophic religion taught therein. Both these come to us with antagonism. The Vedas promise happiness in this world and in the heaven after death. So much so, a person who wants the good things of this life and wants a place elsewhere after death tries to attain it by sacrifices to various gods as understood at that time. Later, there was a protest against this

heaven-philosophy by the Upaniṣads. When we study the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* we find that by the first boon Naciketas wants to gain something relating to this world. By the second boon he wants to know how to attain to heaven. But he is not satisfied with these. The protest in the Upaniṣads takes us to a higher purpose and function and that is why the third boon of Naciketas relates to life's problems as viewed by a lofty philosophy and ethics. It is only by an inquiry into the Reality behind life that this problem can be solved. This is the special function of the Upaniṣads. Thus, for the first time, this question is brought to the forefront in the Upaniṣads. At the same time this disparity between this-worldly life and the other-worldly life grew, and there was a great need for a synthesis ; and this synthesis the *Bhagavad-Gītā* attempts in its teachings. The Vedas teach us *karma*, sacrifices, etc., to secure a fine place in heaven after death. Coming to the Upaniṣads, there is a reaction, and it has nothing to do with *karma*, sacrifices, etc. The ideal is to realize the Reality by meditation ; there is no place for action.

But in the *Gītā*, we find Śrī Kṛṣṇa's own reconciliation of the demand for action and the demand for thought. No life can be perfect without reconciling these two opposing forces. The man who says 'I shall act without reference to thinking' will not succeed, and the man who merely indulges in thinking without reference to action will not also be perfect. Therefore, the times demanded a synthetic philosophy, and that is what Śrī Kṛṣṇa gave in the *Bhagavad-Gītā*. In every chapter of the *Gītā* we come across the terms and concepts which were familiar in the pre-*Gītā* age. Śrī Kṛṣṇa takes them up, but gives them his own meaning and interpretation and presents a constructive philosophy which reconciles the claims of action and thought. This we find specially in his interpretation of action and inaction in the eighteenth chapter.

Secondly, the Upaniṣads speak of a Reality which is the fruit of a sustained metaphysical inquiry, and Śrī Kṛṣṇa wanted to bring out the ethical implications of this philosophy. Man wants a good deal of guidance. If philosophy does not give it,

he looks for it elsewhere. We want the guidance of philosophy so that life may be lifted up to a higher level. The aim of the *Gītā* is to lift up life from the ordinary to a high level of ethical and moral values. It placed life under the guidance of a sublime metaphysics.

The second chapter gives us the whole scheme of the philosophy of life as conceived by the *Bhagavad-Gītā*. This is how the Upaniṣadic thought developed and evolved till it found a new and original formulation by Śrī Kṛṣṇa in the *Gītā*. As a friend, philosopher, and guide of humanity, Śrī Kṛṣṇa gave his message of a lofty metaphysics and practical ethics which has sustained and will continue to sustain humanity through the ages.

The Upaniṣads contain the highest and the most sublime statement of Indian thought. Max Müller refers to the boldness of the thinkers of ancient India who built up a mighty edifice of philosophic thought led on by their love of truth and reason and undeterred by any fear of blame or lure of fame. When we are in the Upaniṣads, we are face to face with a

vast ocean of thought, and the *Gītā* is the attempt made for the first time to put this thought into a systematic form.

The *Gītā* belongs to the *Mahābhārata*, which records events that happened in India about the fourteenth century B.C. This is the conclusion that modern scholars have arrived at. So far as the book itself is concerned, they put it at about 900 B.C. Whatever the precise date, there is no doubt that it is very ancient. The chronology of ancient Indian history is uncertain, and it is only from the period of Buddha that some sort of chronology is available ; previous to that, everything comes under ancient Indian history. The formulation of the *Gītā* can be considered to be a few centuries before Buddha. There are great ideas in the *Gītā* ; but these were not properly understood by the people, and Buddha came and gave the thought a new form to make people understand the real spirit of the ancient teachings.

The formulation of every great idea has created an epoch in this country, and there has been a mighty personality behind each such epoch. Every national epoch

has been the result of the working out of a mighty idea preceded by a mighty personality who gave it to the race. We had Buddha in the sixth century B.C., and later Śaṅkara in the eighth century A.D., and we are still living in the light of these great masters. Coming to modern times, in the nineteenth century, we have had great luminaries amongst us, and we are today guided by them and their ideas. Anybody who studies Indian history is struck with this unique fact that every epoch has been preceded by the formulation of a mighty ideal of thought and life, behind which there has been a great personality as the focal centre of inspiration. There is something unique in this historic phenomenon which has been responsible for the continuity and vitality of our culture. This phenomenon you find nowhere else except in China. 5,000 years of history is behind us ; we are the same ancient race, and the same ancient ideals are moving us today. What is it that makes for the permanence of this culture on the world's stage ? So many civilizations came on the world's stage and vanished like ripples on water,

and in the midst of all these vanishing civilisations there are only two—India and China—which are permanent. This should make us think deeply as to what constitutes the source or sources of our cultural vitality. There was a time when Greece and Rome played with pomp and vigour on the world's stage ; much earlier there were Babylonia and Egypt ; and today, there is England, already down the road, and there are Russia and America. Those who once played mighty roles have vanished ; the countries and their physical features are there, but the continuity of culture is lost, the heritage is broken. Facing ancient Greece and Rome was India, and India is there to greet the new comers on the world's stage without herself changing, and she will be there to greet others that are to come in future. This is a fact of history, and as students of Indian history it is our duty to inquire into this fact and learn of the lessons that it holds for us. This leads us to an inquiry into the origin and sources of our culture. The thoughts proceeding from the Vedas and the Upaniṣads, reinforced

by the ideas of Śrī Kṛṣṇa, Buddha, and Śaṅkara and others have provided the basic inspiration to our cultural values, loyalty to which has been responsible for the continued vitality of our race and our culture. As a race, we had our ups and downs—no progress is continuous—everywhere there have been ups and downs. But the peculiar fact about India is that whereas others fall and never rise again, we fall and rise again ; whereas others live and die and never rise again, India only seems to die and rises again rejuvenated, more glorious than before. The Christian missionaries who came to India in the nineteenth century thought that India was dying, never to rise again. They made this statement on the analogy of the Red Indians, the Mexicans, and the Incas, who had once built up great civilizations in America, but had perished at the touch of the white man. Even we seemed disposed to accept this judgement of the missionaries. But today we and they feel differently. Not merely are we not apologetic about our civilization and culture, but we are facing the world in an aggressive way,

aggressive used in the ideal sense. Any culture is said to be living when it overflows. Expansion is life and contraction is death. For the last thousand years we were greeting death; we were building narrow walls around ourselves. But, then, for the last hundred years we have broken through these narrow walls and are facing the world and spreading our ideas in distant parts of the world. It is the same ancient race and the same ancient culture, but rejuvenated and strengthened. This is significant. Whereas other countries make noise and die away, we but go to sleep and rise again to face the world with renewed vigour.

Take our history; what do we find there? We find a great man rising about every thousand years. Each one comes to renew the vigour of the same ancient ideals, maybe with a little different emphasis according to the needs of the time. That is why there is an unbroken continuity of our culture. India has survived many a vicissitude. This must make us humble. Let it be constantly kept in view that our culture is preserved because of

these great personalities, whom we consider as incarnations of God. Whatever the attitude we take with regard to these great men, whether as *avatāras* or otherwise, they come when the racial life is at its lowest ebb and their touch breathes a new life into the almost dead bones and muscles of the race. God alone can give life ; call them God or men, they breathe life into the dead bones and muscles of the people. One such great man is Śrī Kṛṣṇa. In the whole history of India I do not find another such great personality so supremely dynamic as Śrī Kṛṣṇa. Those who have read the *Mahābhārata* will bear this out. Śrī Kṛṣṇa is loved by one and all. When Kṛṣṇa comes to Indraprastha, you find thousands of people gathering to greet him. Even as we find our people welcoming their great leaders today, you find people crowding on the parapet walls and, looking through the windows, showering flowers on him as he passes through the roads of the city. Everyone, from the sage to the ordinary peasant, is full of respect for him. He is the greatest of Kṣatriyas, and yet is humble. He goes to make his

obeisance to the righteous before undertaking any major task. He is the friend of the lowly and the lost. When he comes to Indraprastha he stays with the poor Vidura, forsaking the splendour of the imperial court of Duryodhana. He is mighty and kings bow down to him, and yet he does not want any kingdom for himself. He is the *gopāla* loved by the cowherds. He is loved by the young and old, men and women, the learned and the ignorant. In the India of his time, everywhere you find the influence of Kṛṣṇa. His presence was felt by every section of the population.

Śrī Kṛṣṇa was a dynamic personality and his teachings also are dynamic; they are a mass of strength-giving ideas. We have to understand this Kṛṣṇa. Uptil now, we have had only the Kṛṣṇa who evoked our tears and our softer sides. But the Kṛṣṇa of the *Gītā* comes to lift up a people and make them dynamic. There is a Bengali song which invokes the Kṛṣṇa with the *sudarśanacakra* to come to the succour of fallen India:

*Avanata bhārata cāhe tomāre  
Eśo sudarśanadhāri murāri.*

He is a person who has impressed himself upon the culture of this country in every aspect. Take away Kṛṣṇa, and everything of value in our culture vanishes. His impress is there on our art, literature, music, painting, sculpture, folk dance, etc. Many a foreigner is jealous of the rich cultural heritage of India. This culture took its rise as a little stream in the dim antiquity of the Vedas; during its unimpeded course through thousands of years of history, it has received accessions of strength and richness from many a tributary. And today, it is a vast swelling ocean of virtue, purity, and power. Every Hindu can be justly proud of being a participant of this rich cultural heritage. Kṛṣṇa is one such who strengthened and enriched this culture. Long before the separation of humanity into the Hindu, Mussalman, and Christian was dreamt of, he was there. Therefore, Kṛṣṇa belongs to every child of this country, be he Hindu, Mussalman, or anybody else. A time will

come when everyone in this country, irrespective of caste, creed, or colour, will recognize Śrī Kṛṣṇa, Buddha, and Śaṅkara as the architects of the nation's mind who handed down a rich cultural heritage to the people of India without any distinction. This culture is the common property of all communities. Just a few days back, Dr. Soekarno of Indonesia, in an article contributed by him to *The Hindu* of Madras, had said that in the blood of every Indonesian the culture of India is there. So, it is not difficult to imagine a time in India when everyone will claim and look to the same ancient culture for inspiration and guidance.

When we realize our true condition, we realize the part played by Śrī Kṛṣṇa in the culture of this country. Śrī Kṛṣṇa of the *Mahābhārata* is a mighty philosopher as well as a mighty man of action. Yet he was absolutely detached. He was respected by everybody—the mighty of the land, the sages, the women, the children, and the peasants.

The *Gītā* is the teaching of such a mighty and dynamic personality; and he

has infused his mightiness and dynamism into his teaching. Such a dynamic teaching can be properly understood only by those who have a little of that mightiness in themselves. When little people take to a great idea they bring it down to their own level, as they cannot rise to its level. For the last thousand years we have produced nothing but soft literature. Swami Vivekananda says that the country preferred softening ideas, with the result that most of the literature of the last thousand years, if squeezed, produces only tears. In the hands of such people the *Gītā* also lost its mightiness. But Śrī Kṛṣṇa had no place in his teaching for any sort of weakness or sentimentalism. The very opening verse that he utters to Arjuna is *Kutastvā kaśmālam idaṁ viṣame samupasthitam*—‘Whence has this weakness crept into you at this critical juncture?’ The Upaniṣads and the *Gītā* speak only of strength. Swami Vivekananda says: ‘Strength, strength, is what the Upaniṣads speak to me from every page.’ Weak minds can never understand or grasp mighty ideas. In their attempt, they but dilute such ideas

with their own littleness. But when we shall develop a little strength and vigour, we shall find in the *Gītā* something that will stand us in every situation of life. For those who want merely a little soothing of nerves and are afraid to face the hard trials of life, a lot of material will be found in the *Purāṇas*. But those who want stimulation for a higher life through hard struggle will find it in the *Gītā* in ample measure. Only the mighty can understand the value of the *Gītā*. As Swami Vivekananda says, 'Only the elephant knows the strength of the lion and not the mosquito'. The *Gītā* is not meant to soothe us and put us to sleep, but to wake us up from our slumber and lethargy and goad us on to the highest self-realization and self-expression. The *Gītā ślokas* have a power to invigorate us and to make us think in fresh terms; they will not let us move in the old ruts.

## ARJUNA'S FIRST LESSONS IN DISCIPLESHIP

LAST time we discussed some of the aspects of the *Gītā* in relation to the context in which it was delivered, as also its place among the scriptures of the Hindus. In that connexion, I referred to the special quality of the *Gītā* teaching and the personality of its teacher, Śrī Kṛṣṇa. That was by way of introduction to the study of the *Gītā*. Today we shall enter into the subject itself, but before doing so we shall tarry for some time in the first chapter.

In the first chapter we get the environment in which the *Gītā* was taught. It is a dramatic setting that we get there. In that great battle of Kurukṣetra, famous in ancient Indian history, between the Kauravas and the Pāṇḍavas, the greatest hero Arjuna, with Śrī Kṛṣṇa as his charioteer, stands between the two arrayed armies and views the warriors on both sides. Suddenly a piquant situation develops: Seeing his own kith and kin facing

him, Arjuna is overcome with grief. His nerves fail him. He lays down his mighty bow, *gāṇḍīva*, with the resolve not to fight against his own people. A sort of revulsion comes to him, and he determines that he will not fight; he thinks that it is better and more ethical to give up the attempt to fight and conquer his enemies, better it is to be defeated and slain by the enemy than to go forward in this line of resistance and war. It is a moving scene that is thus depicted in a telling manner in the first chapter of the *Gītā*. It is a conflict of emotions and ideals, love and duty, all in an environment of conflict and war: war within and war all round.

Whenever such a situation obtains, it becomes fraught with momentous possibilities. A crisis is the precursor of a creation; greater the crisis, better the creation, if the persons involved are of stern stuff. It sees the birth of a creative affirmation or a dynamic idea. This explains the perennial dynamism of the *Gītā* thought.

It is very rare that common people get occasions to experience such intense conflict of emotions. We hardly get an occasion

to be violently pulled in opposite directions—'to do or not to do'. But in the case of those who are born to achieve true greatness, there are several occasions when they are placed in such circumstances, when there arises a conflict of loyalties ; and it is a hard thing for them to decide as to what is to be accepted and what rejected. This kind of conflict of duty comes with varying intensity to every sincere aspirant of the ethical life. On such occasions, the human mind needs and demands some sort of effective guidance ; it is such guidance that Śrī Kṛṣṇa offers us, from the second chapter onwards in the *Gītā*.

When we take the first chapter, it is such a historic presentation of the ethical problem—the question of the nature of duty and the problem of the conflict of duties. This problem and its discussion is there in our ancient thought, and it is there in every type of ethical thought in the world. The *Gītā* discusses this subject in the second chapter in the light of a lofty metaphysics ; and it comes in for a more varied treatment in subsequent chapters when it

deals with such topics as action and inaction, renunciation and action, *sannyāsa* and *karma-yoga*. The presentation of the subject of duty in the very first chapter of the *Gītā* provides a basis for the building up of a mighty edifice of metaphysics and ethics in the subsequent chapters. We have in the first chapter a dramatic element that furnishes so much of beauty and sublimity to the *Gītā* teaching. It adds an air of reality to the message of the *Gītā*; it imparts a touch of earnestness to the discussion. The discussion is not simply academic, in which case it would have become ineffectual and unrelated to practice. But, being born out of the fire of conflict and struggle, it issued forth in a message of permanent value to man. Here is a sincere seeker in a crisis, face to face with a great teacher. The seeker asks for practical guidance. Naturally, such a situation does not warrant a merely academic solution of the problem. It must take all the facts into consideration and give guidance there and then. It is this that the *Gītā* proceeds to do through the great teacher Śrī Kṛṣṇa. Śrī Kṛṣṇa is in a

sense a party and not a mere spectator who has nothing to do with the battle. This realism imparts to the *Gītā* a greater philosophic depth and moral sweep than what partakes of a mere academic discussion of ethical problems. This is its special appeal.

So, in the first chapter, we have this picture of Arjuna facing an army of relations and friends and teachers. He is moved to pity and grief and says: 'What is the use of fighting such a battle? I would rather be a mendicant than engage in this fight.' In moving words Arjuna presents his case and even takes Śrī Kṛṣṇa to task for inducing him to fight: 'Do we not know the misery that is going to be caused? Since we know it, it is better that we desist from such a battle.' Arjuna then declares that he would not fight. There is so much conflict of feeling in Arjuna that he breaks down; his bow and arrow fall from his hands; his voice gets choked and he sinks into his chariot.

This kind of situation comes to us whenever we are faced with conflicting things. In all such situations when we are unable

to decide our duty and the circumstances become puzzling, we exhibit a type of behaviour similar to that of Arjuna. Our nerves fail us ; but we do not detect it. We bring in arguments to support our behaviour ; but they are false arguments which cannot stand the scrutiny of reason and philosophy. Philosophy with most people is, according to Bradley, the finding of bad reasons for opinions which they hold by instinct to be true. This is bad philosophy, the product of rationalization, but not of reason. This is the case with Arjuna ; his nerves and judgement fail him at a critical time owing to an excess of attachment, delusion, and grief ; it is rationalization that is seen at work when he invokes the aid of 'non-violence', 'non-resistance', and 'humanity' for withdrawing from the battle. The great virtues of non-violence and non-resistance are brought in to help the tired nerves of Arjuna when he says that it is better to withdraw or die than to fight and kill. He appeals to Kṛṣṇa for support in his arguments. But, strangely enough, he does not get that support. Philosophy cannot sup-

port rationalization, for it is based on reason which takes all the circumstances and conditions of a problem into account before offering a solution. So, when Arjuna says 'I don't want to fight' and seeks the support of Śrī Kṛṣṇa for his act, he is startled to find that he does not get it. Here philosophy is typified by Śrī Kṛṣṇa, and the moral conflicts and the confusion resulting therefrom are typified by Arjuna. The one is calm and collected, whereas the other is all confusion, shaken in his resolve to fight, and nerve-broken. Thus ends the first chapter entitled, in the very telling words of Vyāsa, *Arjuna-viṣāda-yoga*—"The Grief of Arjuna". The calm reason of philosophy is face to face with the confused unreason of dynamic life. The product of this encounter is the philosophy of life contained in the seventeen subsequent chapters of the *Gītā*.

When we come to the second chapter, we are at the very dawn of true philosophy. The very first task for philosophy is to bring steadiness and confidence into the mind of the student. That is what Śrī Kṛṣṇa does to Arjuna. This is the

significance of verses 2 and 3 of the second chapter'.

*Kutastvā kaśmālam idaṁ viṣame  
samupasthitam ;*

*Anāryajaṣṭam asvargyam akīrtikaram  
Arjuna.*

'In such a crisis, whence comes upon thee, O Arjuna, this dejection, un-Ārya-like, disgraceful, and contrary to the attainment of heaven?'

*Klaibyaṁ māśma gamah Pārtha  
naitattvayyupapadyate ;*

*Kṣudraṁ hṛdayadaurbalyaṁ tyaktvo-  
ttiṣṭha parantapa.*

'Yield not to unmanliness, O son of Prthā! Ill doth it become thee. Cast off this mean faint-heartedness and arise, O scorcher of thine enemies!'

In these two verses we have the application of a mental tonic by Śrī Kṛṣṇa to Arjuna ; and that tonic is necessary before any teaching could be fruitful. When a person is grief-stricken and his nerves are shattered, no amount of teaching or advice whatever can bear fruit ; and much less

philosophy. Intense calmness is necessary, a calmness that is dynamic and not merely passive. The spirit of the whole teaching of the *Gītā* we can derive from the latter of these two verses. Says Swami Vivekananda, in his 'Thoughts on the Gītā' (*Complete Works*, Vol. IV, Eighth Edition, p. 110): 'If one reads this one *śloka*—"*Klaibyam . . . parantapa*"—he gets all the merit of reading the entire *Gītā*; for in this one *śloka* lies imbedded the whole message of the *Gītā*.' It is not merely for Arjuna, but for every person who is at his wit's end this teaching comes to rouse him up. We require to be roused up again and again, for the mind has always a tendency to sink and slumber but there is also the other capacity to rouse up the mind and apply it to the battle of life, which capacity is practically dormant in the majority of people. But this capacity is to be developed. If we cannot do it ourselves, we shall require somebody else to do it for us; that is what a great teacher, a scripture or an ideal does for us. Śrī Kṛṣṇa played this part in the case of Arjuna. We require some great man to

do it for us. The Vedānta says that infinite resources are there in every individual ; man is divine, but he has to tap the resources ; and a great teacher has the power to bring out this potential capacity from out of himself as well as from others. By the mere touch of a great teacher we begin to manifest great energy and power of which we were not even conscious before. Śrī Kṛṣṇa gave that magic touch to Arjuna by the words *naitattvayyupapadyate*—‘Ill doth it become thee’.

In the sentiment contained in that famous short sentence we have the appeal through psychology to every individual to rise higher and higher, and to find new sources of strength within himself. The educational value of this appeal is supreme. How to help another person, how to make him stand on his own feet, is a great educational problem. How to undertake the task of making that person rise higher and find ways and means to develop his own life and power ? In this larger context, this consideration becomes relevant ; because Śrī Kṛṣṇa’s appeal is a general appeal. It has a positive content.

The earliest method of inducing behaviour in another was through fear. This appeal to fear was to one's social and religious emotion. But the appeal to fear is fraught with danger ; it entails much that is bad along with a bit that is good. In all religions you find this appeal to fear in the theories of hell and judgement, etc., designed to induce good behaviour in the individual. This is a primitive conception in religion: that through the hope of heaven or the fear of hell men do good or abstain from evil. Coming to the social sphere, we find people desisting from evil for fear of the police and social boycott. This is what obtains either in primitive society or religion or even in civilized society. But these appeals do not serve to bring out the best in the individual, for it is only a negative way. Corresponding to the appeal to hope and fear is the appeal to vanity. These have played their part in the evolution of humanity. Probably, at some stage humanity has need of their services. This is the utmost that we can say of them. But the least that we can say of them is that they are not the best means

available for inducing correct behaviour. We may not be able to give them up for the reason that humanity is at varying stages of evolution. Behaviour based on fear is all that most people are capable of understanding as also behaviour based on the prospect of enjoyment. But when you come to educational psychology, when you come to the question as to what is really beneficial to the individual, the best is what Śrī Kṛṣṇa does when he appeals to the sense of self-respect of the individual. In all cultured families influencing the behaviour of children is done through this appeal to their self-respect and not to their sense of fear. In uncultured societies parents resort to the fear-appeal either through ghosts or through darkness, which are sources of fear. But in all such cases, what we seek is not the education or development of the individual, but merely the temporary influencing of his outward behaviour through methods that tend to leave permanent scars on the inner man. That proves their worthlessness as an educational appeal.

If we want to institute an appeal which

is constructive and positive, which will help one to develop his or her capacities more and more, that must be based upon the notion of the self-respect of the individual. When we tell a child, 'This conduct of yours is not fit for you ; I expect you to be better ; this is not up to the mark', we are appealing to a positive element in the child. It is positive and constructive, and not negative and destructive. Modern psychology throws much light on this problem.

Modern psychology recognizes self-regard or self-respect as the foundation of character-building. According to McDougall, it is the master sentiment and character is the product of the organization of sentiments and emotions round this master sentiment of self-regard. No character can be built without self-regard as the basis. Take away whatever self-regard a man has, and you can never make him a man or help him to develop his character. The difference between a man and a brute is this self-regard or self-respect. Men have been reduced to the level of brutes as a result of the taking away from them this precious

quality of self-regard by social tyranny and social neglect. Take a slave ; there is little of self-regard left in him ; for society, by continued oppression, has all but destroyed this quality in him. The instilling of this fundamental virtue in such a person is a difficult process. It will have to be done by those who are themselves free. That we can re-kindle in him this virtue is because in becoming a slave he has only forgotten, but not forfeited, his real nature. A slave must therefore first develop self-regard as the very first step in self-development. The greatest harm that one can do to another is to touch his self-respect. Whatever you do, do not destroy another's self-regard, for by that we pave the way for his ruin. This maxim is a sure and wise guide in all social relationships. Unfortunately, this is observed more in its breach than in its observance, for we are not capable of informing action with thought. We see the masters treating their servants as if they are lifeless property. The servant works for the master, but he has not sold his soul to him. The master, through his thoughtlessness, in-

jures the servant's self-regard. That is why sensitive servants complain to the master: 'You may beat me, but please don't abuse me'; for abuse touches the very sensitive part of an individual—his self-respect. If we want to educate a man and do real good to him, we must preserve and develop this priceless quality in him. Modern theories of education are based upon this supreme psychological fact.

Psychology teaches the great value of this master sentiment in the formation of character. Teachers and parents who destroy the self-respect of their wards through their thoughtless dealings are enemies of society. The modern theory says that we are not dealing with pots and pans when we are dealing with children. We are dealing with delicate, vibrant, living personalities. We are dealing with unformed minds, and whatever we do sticks on; hence the need for expert care.

In this lies all the essence of the Vedānta. Swami Vivekananda put it in his own memorable words: 'Each soul is potentially divine. The goal is to mani-

fest this divine within, by controlling nature, external and internal. Do this either by work, or worship, or psychic control, or philosophy, by one, or more, or all of these—and be free. This is the whole of religion. Doctrines, or dogmas, or rituals, or books, or temples, or forms, are but secondary details.’ In our dealings with an individual, we are dealing with a vast reservoir of power which at present is lying dormant. But given a proper training, it can develop into an immense flood. One who is rightly trained is a powerful personality, and one who is badly trained is a truncated personality.

This great psychological truth is embodied in the appeal contained in Kṛṣṇa’s exhortation to Arjuna: *Naitat tvayyupapadyate*—‘This does not befit you.’ The world knew who Arjuna was—one who had fought many a battle victoriously. Should he be subject to fear and despair? Should he not rather try to pit his inborn heroism against the challenge of a trying environment, bringing out more and more of his inborn power and perfection in the process? This is true education in the

hard school of life. And Śrī Kṛṣṇa is the guide of Arjuna in that profound educational process. It is education based on a profound philosophy. Vedānta and modern educational theory are in full accord here.

We shall come to the ethical implications of this Vedāntic teaching in the course of our discussion of the verses of the second chapter. Vedānta holds that if we express our real nature, we can never be criminal or wicked men. In committing sin or wicked acts we are not expressing our real nature, which is pure and perfect, but only our apparent nature which is centred round the ego. Ethical conduct, according to the Vedānta, is the expression of one's own real nature. Man lives the true life when he expresses the divinity within him. Selfishness is not our real nature ; it is only on the surface. When you express the surface nature, you are not expressing your real nature. Only then am I perfect when I am living the true life, that is, when I am expressing my true self. That is highest ethics according to Vedānta.

Arjuna's action has to be viewed from the context of the ethics of duty, and the ethics of duty from the context of the metaphysics of the Real. Ethics leads us to the problem of Reality; that is metaphysics. The *Gītā* has tried to place ethics under the guidance of metaphysics. In modern times, many thinkers ask us not to bring into ethics the question of Reality. That is what certain sections of positivists tell us. But in this country, we discussed it long back and found that no problem could be discussed in thoroughness without bringing ultimate questions. About any action, if you ask, 'Why should I do it?', you enter into wider spheres of thought and discussion. The *Gītā* places ethics under the guidance of a metaphysics which deals with life in its totality. The second chapter of the *Gītā* deals with the subject of the true nature of the individual and of the supreme Reality and studies the nature of conduct and action in the light of this knowledge and wisdom. It weaves round the immediate problem of Arjuna a philosophy and ethics of action which, in turn, becomes a guide to other men in all situa-

tions of life. This applicability to one and all is the fruit of philosophy. If philosophy was not at the back of the advice to Arjuna, that advice could not have become applicable to others. The *Gītā's* advice, therefore, was not meant for Arjuna only. Its scope is universal; that is why, even after these four thousand years, it appeals to us. If it was a mere matter-of-fact advice and guidance, it would not have appealed to one and all. It might at best retain a literary appeal, but not a philosophical appeal. But when you put the literary in the context of the philosophical, it becomes universal. That is what Śrī Kṛṣṇa has done in the case of *Gītā*.

The *Gītā* lights the lamp of wisdom in the hearts of men and leaves them to solve their own problems. In a later chapter, Śrī Kṛṣṇa would say that what he does to every individual is to light a little lamp of wisdom in his heart by which he would see truth and avoid error. He does not give the final decision for us. Philosophy does not decide things for us; it only offers to guide us. The *Smṛtis* do prescribe what we should do every minute of the twenty-four

hours. It becomes soul-killing. It makes us serfs and slaves. Philosophy releases mankind from these bondages. It gives only stimulation ; it places a light in our hands by which to find our way. Anything more would take away from our initiative. But man is weak ; he says, 'I want all help ; I want some one to come and take me by the hand'. Then come the Smṛtis. Here is no true ethics, but only routine ethics. It is a kind of complacency of mind which requires something to hang on. True philosophy does not burden us with a huge lumber of books or a rigorous set of rules. It is like the light of a lamp. It just imparts wisdom. Philosophical guidance is the simplest guidance. Philosophy does not require us to elbow out other contents from life. We can understand philosophy without the aid of many books. Some people say: 'Action and thought cannot be done at the same time. If I have to think of philosophy, I have to stop work. But you ask me to combine philosophy and action. This is impossible.' Śrī Kṛṣṇa wants us to combine both philosophy and life, for it is life that needs the

guidance of philosophy. When there is no life there is no guidance required. How shall we solve the problem? Some say: 'Cease from acting; congeal life to a point; that is the best solution of the problem. Take away the world, for it is the cause of all problem.' But if there is no problem, what is the use of the solution? A solution is no solution in the absence of the problem itself. Another comes and says: 'There is no solution; so don't worry about the problem at all, but just go on acting and living with whatever faith you can muster.' It is here that Vedānta comes to our help. In all boldness it dares to face the problem and give us a solution. Unfortunately, even our people have not understood this aspect of Vedānta. What we understand is the Vedānta of books, the Vedānta of leisure. But this is only academic Vedānta. Śrī Kṛṣṇa did not teach this Vedānta. He taught the Vedānta of and for a battlefield. It is not a pursuit of leisure hours. It is a pursuit of excellence in the midst of difficult situations and struggles of daily life. This aspect of Vedānta has been

mostly neglected in the later developments of religious ideas in our country. We have now to bring out this aspect of the *Gītā* in all its practical bearing.

The *Gītā* has a simplicity which we very often miss. We are accustomed to complicate things. We cannot appreciate simple things. The human mind wants, in the name of philosophy and religion, something striking in the form of books, dress, rituals, etc. Simple character or simple ethical beauty is not much appreciated. Simple beauty is not understood by ordinary men. Truth which is simple is clothed in a variety of ways, and we get not the naked truth but a clothed truth. When you come to the *Gītā*, we have the presentation of this simple truth which helps to take us across life's problems. It frees us from all attachments to joys and sorrows and good and bad. It gives us absolute calm, and a freedom from all conditions—external and internal. We want this independence and freedom of the individual to be maintained at all costs. This is what philosophy seeks to confer on life. If we have this, what else do

we require ? One who attains this remains fresh in spite of life's aging and retains the freshness of a new-born babe even unto death. He has philosophy to guide him. This is the true test of philosophy—a philosophy which helps us to pass through life's struggles without getting scorched, which helps us to remain as fresh at the end of the journey as at the beginning.

At the very beginning of the second chapter, Śrī Kṛṣṇa has given out these life-giving ideas. Those who have the requisite courage and strength of mind can understand the true teaching of the *Gītā*. A mind which is grief-stricken and attached cannot understand these mighty ideas. A tired mind cannot understand truth ; it has to be made calm and strong before the advice can take root. Grief-stricken Arjuna is first calmed and steadied and then is taught the wisdom of Truth. In a grief-stricken state we see things in a narrow perspective ; when we are calm, we see things in their true perspective. That is why Arjuna says: 'My mind is confused as to what is really to my welfare ; therefore, tell me clearly what is to my welfare, teach

me now that I have taken refuge at your feet.'

In the eighteenth chapter (verses 72-73), after all the teaching was over, Kṛṣṇa asks Arjuna, 'Are you satisfied ; is your mind calm and doubt cleared ?'

*Kaccid etat śrutam Pārtha tvayaikā-  
greṇa cetasā ;  
Kaccid ajñānasaṁmohaḥ praṇaṣṭaste  
Dhanañjaya ?—*

'Has this been heard by thee, O Pārtha, with an attentive mind ? Has the delusion of thy ignorance been destroyed, O Dhanañjaya ?'

Arjuna replies:

*Naṣṭo mohaḥ smṛtirlabdhā tvatprasā-  
dāt mayā Acyuta ;  
Sthito'smi gatasandehaḥ kariṣye vaca-  
naṁ tava—*

'Destroyed is my delusion, and I have gained my memory through Thy grace, O Acyuta. I am firm ; my doubts are gone. I will do Thy word.'

The Gītā brings light and removes the umbra of confusion. The Gītā removed

Arjuna's confusion ; that is its originality and power. In the case of all of us also, it will have fulfilled its purpose only when it will have removed our confusions and doubts and enabled us to see life steadily and see it whole.

## SRI KṚṢṆA: THE IDEAL TEACHER

**S**TRIKING a note of robust optimism, Śrī Kṛṣṇa asked Arjuna to shake off his weakness and to steady himself. It was the intention of Śrī Kṛṣṇa to make Arjuna's mind steady before he could give him any kind of wisdom, for a grief-stricken mind is not at all a fit receptacle for wisdom. Unless we get out of the depressed state and become calmer, we shall not be able to assimilate any lofty advice. This is seen in our everyday experience. Therefore, the first thing necessary was to pacify the mind of Arjuna and then only could he listen to reason and advice. So Śrī Kṛṣṇa exhorts Arjuna in powerful accents (*Gītā*, II. 3):

‘Yield not to this kind of unmanliness, O Arjuna, for it does not befit you ; give up this faint-heartedness and rise up and do your duty.’

The result of this kind of rebuke was wholesome ; it steadied the mind of Arjuna. For, as we proceed on, we find that Arjuna becomes calm and there is

some sort of reason in his talk with Śrī Kṛṣṇa. Now he begins to put forth his doubts in a more cogent language and without much sorrow and emotion. He says (*ibid.*, II. 4):

‘How shall I fight against Bhīṣma and Droṇa with these sharp arrows? They are fit to be worshipped by me; they are my elders and are respected by one and all.’

Again (*ibid.*, II. 5):

‘Instead of killing these great ones, who are our *gurus*, respected and honoured persons, instead of that, I would rather live a mendicant’s life. If I kill them because they have joined the enemies’ party, who are running after wealth and power, even if I get all this wealth and power it will be blood-smeared. I shall secure the enjoyment of wealth and power, but it will be smeared with the blood of innocent people and our own relatives.’

Arjuna then surrenders himself to his teacher (*ibid.*, II. 7):

*Kārpaṇyadoṣopahatasvabhāvaḥ  
prcchāmi tvāṁ dharmasammūdhacetah;*

*Yacchreyaḥ syāt niścitaṁ brūhi tanme  
śiṣyastehaṁ śādhi mām tvām*

*prapannam—*

‘With my nature overpowered by weak commiseration, with a mind in confusion about duty, I supplicate Thee. Say decidedly what is good for me. I am Thy disciple—Instruct me who has taken refuge in Thee.’

Arjuna, in these words, places his problem before Śrī Kṛṣṇa and seeks his guidance. In the midst of destruction and confusion the mind bows down to some higher power. Arjuna was fortunate in that he had Kṛṣṇa to show him the way. ‘I am in confusion as to what is right and what is wrong. I am in the midst of a piquant situation ; therefore I fall at your feet. My nature has been smitten by narrow-mindedness. Therefore I ask you this question. I am unable to decide what is *dharma* and what is *adharma* ; what is my present duty in reference to my true welfare ? I want your answer taking into full consideration the circumstances of my case.’ In all critical situations we shall

have to seek a way leading to our true welfare and not merely what is pleasing to us. We want what is *śreyas* and not what is merely *preyas*. This we see in the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* (I. 2. 1) where Yama tells Naciketas:

*Anyat śreyo anyadutaiva preyaḥ te ubhe  
nānārthe puruṣaṁ sinītaḥ  
Tayoḥ śreya ādadānasya sādhu bhavati  
hīyate arthāt ya u preyo vṛṇīte—*

‘One thing is the good and (quite) different indeed is the pleasant; having been of different requisitions, they both bind the Puruṣa. Good befalls him who follows the good, but loses he the goal who chooses the pleasant.’

A fool takes what is pleasant and comes to grief in the end. He misses the true end of life. That is how Yama discusses a most important problem of ethics in the second chapter of the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*. Here Arjuna asks this question: ‘What is the most excellent thing for me to do? Of the two, pleasant and beneficent, please tell me what is beneficent and I shall do as you tell me. Decide for your-

self what is to my welfare, for I am in confusion and do not know what is to my good ; I am your disciple and I accept your decision. I accept you as my friend, philosopher, and guide.'

Thus the beautiful seventh *śloka* of the second chapter opens the way for the imparting of the wisdom of the *Gītā*. For here, troubled and confused, Arjuna surrenders to, and seeks the guidance of, Śrī Kṛṣṇa—the confused mind surrenders to calm philosophy. It is not that we should surrender to every A, B, or C who comes to lord over us, and destroy what little wisdom we possess. The *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* (I. 2. 5) warns us of this danger:

*Avidyāyām antare vartamānāḥ svayaṁ  
dhīrāḥ paṇḍitaṁ manya mānāḥ ;  
Dandramyamānāḥ pariyaṁti mūḍhāḥ  
andhenaiva nīyamānā yathāndhāḥ—*

'Fools, dwelling in the very midst of ignorance yet vainly fancying themselves to be wise and learned, go round and round staggering like blind men led by the blind.'

From what we have seen of Śrī Kṛṣṇa,

we realize that he was a man of wisdom and the world around him looked up to him for guidance. It is no wonder, therefore, that Arjuna asked him for guidance. As I have often pointed out, Kṛṣṇa was always detached, deep in the midst of things yet keeping his mind above the things. Emerson, when discussing the ideal life, paraphrases a famous *śloka* of the *Gītā* and says that it is easy to lose oneself in the crowd or to be calm when alone, but the ideal man is one who, remaining and functioning in society, keeps his head in solitude. If when the world orders we weep and when the world orders we smile, it is but a very ordinary thing, but perfection comes only when even in a market-place the mind is kept calm. Otherwise, it is one-sided development only.

While Arjuna is in confusion, Kṛṣṇa is calm and speaks with a smile, knowing fully well that he could remove it. So, to surrender to such a person is to ensure our progress. Here the disciple is a great soul and the teacher too; and when a great disciple is facing a great teacher, we expect

the statement of a life-giving thought as the issue of that contact. The *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* (I. 2. 7) refers to this in these words: *Āścaryo vaktā kuśalo'sya labdhā āścaryo jñātā kuśalānuśiṣṭaḥ*—'When a wonderful disciple and a wonderful teacher come together, there is born great wisdom.' Arjuna accepts, therefore, Śrī Kṛṣṇa as his guide. If, after examining the credentials of a person in all aspects and finding him worthy, we surrender ourselves to him, we are safe in his hands. On the contrary, if we give away our independence into the hands of any and every person without discrimination, there is every chance of our ruining ourselves. In this country we have to take notice of this. Where there are many *gurus* and a few disciples, you do not know to whom to surrender. There is a beautiful verse which makes a caustic remark about this state of things:

*Guravo bahavaḥ santi śiṣya-vittāpahāri-  
ṇaḥ ;*

*Tam ekaṁ śaṅkaraṁ vande śiṣya-  
santāpahāriṇam—*

‘There are thousands of *gurus* who remove the wealth of the disciple ; but different from all such *gurus*, I bow down to the one *guru*, Śaṅkara, who removes the miseries of the disciple.’

Once we get such a teacher, there is no harm in surrendering ourselves to him, for we are not surrendering to any particular person, but to the wisdom incarnated in him. On the contrary, if we surrender to any and every person it will be harmful both to the teacher and the disciple. As Sri Ramakrishna used to say: ‘Once a water-snake caught a frog, but it could not swallow it. The frog was croaking in pain as the snake could neither swallow it nor leave it out. The snake also was put to great hardship. But if a cobra had caught the frog, it would have been silenced with one or two croakings.’ If the *guru* is not a man of wisdom, both the *guru* and the disciple will suffer. The *guru* must have great power to digest his own as well as the students’ miseries. He must be able to lift him up and save him.

In the *Vivekacūdāmaṇi* (verse 33) Śrī

Śaṅkarācārya gives the qualifications of a true *guru*:

*Śrotriyo'vrjino akāmahato yo Brahnavit-  
tamaḥ ;*

*Brahmanyuparataḥ sānto nirindhana  
ivānalah ;*

*Ahetukadayāsindhuh bandhurānama-  
tām satām—*

‘Who is well versed in the Vedas, sinless, unsmitten by desire, and a knower of Brahman *par excellence*, who has withdrawn himself into Brahman, is calm, like the fire that has consumed its fuel, who is a boundless reservoir of mercy that knows no reason, and a friend of all good people who prostrate themselves before him.’

Every word in this verse is full of meaning and significance: *śrotriyo*—A true guru must know the spirit of the Śrutis ; not the mere letter, but the spirit of the Śāstras ; he must have lived the life which the Śāstras teach. *Avrjino*—Free from sinfulness ; only a sinless man can possess the saving powers. And this belongs to one who

has achieved perfection in morality and ethics. *Akāmahataḥ*—He should not be smitten by any desire, he must be absolutely free from the promptings of selfish desires ; his sole desire must be to do good to others. *Brahmavittamaḥ*—He who is the best among the knowers of Brahman, one who is merged in God, so that any point you touch you get only God out of him. *Śāntaḥ*—Absolutely tranquil ; you cannot bring tranquillity to another without yourself being tranquil. He need not teach ; but wherever he is he becomes a living temple, a living church, or a living mosque, because he has touched the feet of God. How does he attain it? *Nirindhana ivānalaḥ*—Like a flaming fire which has burnt itself out ; the human mind is compared to a flaming fire ; for desires are there like a burning fire and the objects of desires are like the fuel. The true *guru* must be a person in whom all fire of desire has burnt itself out. When the fire ceases to be fed by fuel, it is put out, and it is all calm and quiet. That is the mind which has destroyed all desire, which has become ‘*Āptakāma, Ātmakāma, and*

*Akāma*—‘the mind which has fulfilled all desires, which has *Ātman* for its content of desire, which is desireless in every other sense’. We have various desires, and we want to satisfy them. But his heart is full. How does he become full? Because his desires pertain to the *Ātman*. ‘*Ātmakāmatve ca āptakāmatā*’—*Ātmakāmatā* connotes the fullness of heart; it is also the catalytic agent which destroys all other desires.

Desire in the heart of an individual is, from the modern psychological point of view, in the nature of a craving for fulfilment. Everyone of our desires is prompted by a vacuum in our heart which craves for fulfilment. All desire, therefore, signifies a vacuum in our heart. It requires an action outside to satisfy it. There are thus two stages preceding every action. First, there is the feeling of a want within, an urge which seeks satisfaction. This urge takes the form of a desire for a corresponding object which is capable of conferring this satisfaction. And lastly, there is the action for the satisfaction of the urge. Psychology lists about fourteen primary

urges of man like hunger, sex, etc. Taking the most familiar one of hunger, for instance, we find its three stages in (1) the urge within, (2) the desire for an external object, and (3) the act of appropriating that object. The last stage, act, ends in the fulfilment of the urge. When the stomach is full, there is no hunger, there is no desire for food, and there is no corresponding activity to satisfy that urge. Activity, therefore, is conditioned by the urge within and the desire for the corresponding object without. In the absence of the urge, there will be no desire and no activity. Life is a round of activity because the heart is a volcano of urges and desires. If you can conceive of a hypothetical state of existence where these urges and desires are not there, you get a state free from all desire-ridden activities as well. The Vedānta speaks of a state of perfection free from craving, desire, and desire-prompted activity. This desirelessness—*akāmatā*—comes from *Ātmakāmatā*, the desire for the *Ātman*. Lest we mistake this state for emptiness of heart and death, the Vedānta adds a third important characteristic

feature of this state which connotes the fullness of being—*aptakāmatā*. The tranquil mind without any desire is compared to a beautiful calm lake without a single ripple on it. The tranquillity of the lake is disturbed by the throwing of a stone into it; the desires that arise in our mind cause waves in it. In ordinary life the mind is never calm except in deep sleep. Through meditation and self-control, we have to capture this calmness as a feature of our waking state. Even a bit of this tranquillity is a great asset in our daily lives. What to speak of the value and power of the fullness of tranquillity attained by a perfected soul! He is a teacher, *par excellence*, an ocean of compassion—*ahetukadayāsindhu*—his compassion flows in a steady stream to tranquillize the world; there is no self-interest to check it. It just overflows its bounds and seeks to tranquillize the minds of others around. It wants to impart its tone to others around it, to those who are confounded and confused. He works without any motive. The flow of his love does not depend upon anything on our part. There is no artificial attempt; it simply

overflows. That mercy knows no kind of contractual relationship. *Bandhurānamā-tām satām*—he is a friend of all who resort to him. Such a guru will be our unfailing friend, because whatever he does will be for our good only.

Śaṅkara exhorts us to take shelter under such a person, if we can get one. Such a teacher can really do something to lift us up. But, unfortunately, such teachers are few and far-between ; surrendering to anyone less than such is fraught with danger. And therefore, it is good for us to learn to depend upon ourselves till we secure the shelter of such a guide. But, then, we can get help from lesser guides also. We can take lessons from any and everybody, provided we have a dynamic mind. A dynamic mind takes lessons from everything in nature. Everything in nature is a source of wisdom to such a person. For him every river and brook is a *guru*. It is best, therefore, to learn to depend upon one's own clear understanding. To surrender one's independence to lesser *gurus* is absolutely foolish. The Vedānta does not permit it. But in the case of Arjuna, it was

his good fortune that he was able to get an universal teacher like Śrī Kṛṣṇa.

So Arjuna takes refuge in him. In our case Śrī Kṛṣṇa may not come in flesh and blood and whisper to us in audible language ; but his teachings come to us in clear accents. Short of his presence in flesh and blood, we can have recourse to his teachings and have every other advantage.

Again, humility is an essential condition for the acquisition of wisdom. It may not be so much necessary for worldly wisdom, but even there it is necessary to a certain extent. But when you come to spiritual knowledge, it is absolutely necessary. Arjuna's humility was born of strength, and so his humility is true humility. Such occasions do come to all when he or she feels the stress and strain of circumstances and the whole personality bows down and asks, in a mood of supplication, for wisdom. Arjuna is in such a mood when he is asking Śrī Kṛṣṇa in all humility to guide him. Arjuna is in the right mood for the seed of advice to sprout and bear fruit. In the absence of this humility and earnestness, ethical and spiritual quests

lose their fruit-bearing power. All idle quests are sterile. A man while passing by the road flings an idle question: 'Is there God?', and does not even wait for an answer; he is indifferent. For him the question has no meaning. In the case of most people, questions regarding God and the spiritual life belong to this category. Without the backing of earnestness, questions and their answers lose their vitality and fruit-bearing power. The value of a teaching is heightened by the interest you take in the subject. In the case of Arjuna it was a burning question with him. Arjuna's question is born out of the crucible of the moral struggle. This vitality of the question makes for the tenfold vitality of the answer.

Thus begins the teaching of the *Bhagavad Gītā*. The problem that is presented is a problem of confusion resulting from the conflict of moral duties. The wisdom that is imparted in the answer is meant to remove that confusion. Did Śrī Kṛṣṇa's teaching remove the confusion in Arjuna's mind? Only if it did does it deserve our reverential acceptance. In the

case of Arjuna, we can very well say that the imparting of wisdom on the part of Śrī Kṛṣṇa did remove the confusion in his mind. In the eighteenth chapter Śrī Kṛṣṇa asks Arjuna (*Gītā*, XVIII. 72):

*Kaccidetat śrutaṁ Pārtha tvayaikāgreṇa  
cetasā ;*

*Kaccit ajñānasaṁmohaḥ praṇaṣṭaste  
Dhanañjaya—*

‘Has this been heard by thee, O Pārtha, with an attentive mind ? Has the delusion of thy ignorance been destroyed, O Dhanañjaya ?’

And Arjuna answers (*ibid.*, XVIII. 73):

*Naṣṭo mohaḥ smṛtirlabdhā tvaṭprasādāt  
mayācyuta*

*Sthito’smi gatasandehaḥ kariṣye  
vacanaṁ tava*

‘Destroyed is my delusion, and I have gained my memory through Thy grace. O Acyuta, I am firm ; my doubts are gone. I will do Thy word.’

How can doubts go without right knowledge ? Doubt which is creative is the

mother of all knowledge ; and with the rising of knowledge, all doubts are destroyed. This is the function of philosophy in relation to life. Life raises problems at every step ; the mind is assailed by doubts and confusion ; we turn to the wisdom of philosophy, as to a lamp, for guidance. Every individual is the possessor of a little wisdom which helps him to negotiate life's placid waters. But this little wisdom and light fails us when storms and stresses set in. It is then that the human mind seeks for a steadier light and asks the question : 'Is there a better light, a light which will not flicker and which will be of use in every circumstance ?' We want a steadier wisdom which will stand us in all circumstances of life. Philosophy is the pursuit of that wisdom which is itself steady and which helps to steady our feet in the midst of life's slippery path. We want the guidance of a steady wisdom to steer the bark of life through the tempests of circumstances. The Vedānta has the capacity to provide us with this wisdom which will help us to keep our feet steady and head firm. Śrī Kṛṣṇa seeks to give us this wisdom ; he

seeks to impart right knowledge to bring order out of doubt and confusion. As a result of the teaching we find Arjuna saying that his doubts are gone and that he is prepared to do whatever he was asked to do. But Śrī Kṛṣṇa does not direct him to do this or that. He says: 'Thus have I taught you wisdom which is subtler than the subtlest; having examined it well, act as you think best.' The best teachers are those who help the disciples to solve their own problems, never imposing set solutions of their own on them. They never ask their disciples to surrender their independence of judgement. The mention of a great name should not result in the surrendering of our independence of judgement. That is what Śrī Kṛṣṇa would say, and also the great Buddha. In fact, every right type of teacher would say the same. Turn whatever they say upside down and examine it well. Or as Yama said in the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* 'Go round and round and examine it well from all sides and from all points of view.' First examine the teacher and the teaching, and then accept it. Sri Ramakrishna used to say, 'Test me as a money-

changer would test his coins'. That is what he said to Swami Vivekananda. How few are the teachers that can stand this test! We have to see how many of them have the true ring. A true teacher would say: 'I am here to place the lamp in your hand, and you go on your own way.' Philosophy is a lamp which you can take in your hand for a guide through the jungle of ignorance. In the tenth chapter Śrī Kṛṣṇa again says: 'I put a little wisdom in the hearts of the seekers by which they find their own way. My function is just to light the lamp.' That is the little help we get from outside, but that is more than enough if we can utilize it properly. The true teacher demands independence for himself as well as for the disciple. After all, we create a disciple out of our own mould. If the teacher is a small mould, the disciple who is cast in it will also be of the same type, even though he may have larger capacities. A teacher who is himself subject to confusion creates more confusion in the disciple. So there must be independent judgement.

In the *Gītā*, in all the eighteen chapters, we are face to face with a philosophy

which seeks to impart redeeming wisdom by which men may work out their own salvation. This is its dynamic feature. On our own endeavours depends the taking hold of this wisdom and making something out of it. Philosophy, understood in the Vedāntic sense, should not be mere academic study and discussion, but should be closely related to life and its problems, sustained by life and helping to sustain life in turn. That is the philosophy which is going to be revealed in the succeeding verses of the *Gītā*.





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