

THE BHAGAVAD GITA is one of the greatest scriptures known to the world. A fresh pure spring of universal thought, it is non-denominational in its vision, and is a message of love, courage, hope and sustaining faith for all mankind. Not the least remarkable aspect of the Gita is that it is part of the Mahabharata, one of the world's longest epics and certainly one of its bloodiest. The epic is a vast saga with a tremendous sweep and huge cast of characters, a story of strife and rebellion, and betrayal redeemed in parts by nobility; of treachery and deceit and the end of hubris in the defeat of war. The story unfolds across the deeds of kings and queens, warriors and sages, to focus on two groups of opposing kinsmen who eventually face each other on the battlefield. Against this backdrop of hatred and turmoil, within the darkness of the bitter threads that run through the epic, the Gita shines like a gem, the one calm radiant arc of spiritual quietude in a thunder of turbulence.

The Gita answers the moral dilemma of a man torn between his emotions, which threaten to drive him into inaction — in this case, reluctance to take up arms against his cousins and former teachers, those whom he has known and honoured — and his ethical duty. The immediate setting for this dilemma is dramatic, and vividly described in the opening verses of the Gita. On the vast battlefield, the opposing armies are arrayed against each other, the forces of good and evil. Arjuna is in his war chariot, with Krishna as his charioteer. This image is striking, and echoes other similar allegories. In the Katha Upanishad it is written:

" Know thou the soul as riding in a chariot,  
The body as the chariot,  
Know thou the intellect as the chariot driver,  
And the mind as the reins."

...except that here it is a greater presence than the intellect that guides the chariot. It is the radiant power of the Lord Himself, whose Light is more brilliant than that of a thousand suns, who illuminates all darkness with Divine wisdom and redeeming love. Seeing the two armies, Arjuna's resolve fails him, his emotions overcome him; Krishna, he says, I cannot go on, I cannot fight my kinsmen. It is almost as if he is on the verge of withdrawing from battle. Krishna's answer to Arjuna is a call to throw off his paralyzing despondency, and in these sublime verses is also the solution to the conflict that rages in the heart of mankind. And what is Krishna's answer? Arjuna, he says, you must act and do your duty, nothing can be resolved by inaction. In the recurring cycle of life and death, the wise do not shed tears over those who are about to die: for to those who die, the coming of new life is certain; and to those who take birth, nothing is more inevitable than death. The soul alone remains immortal, unchanging.

The means of liberation from this cycle of life and death is the realisation of the Self, and there are many paths to this end. In the wondrous, complex and rich Sanskrit of the Gita, they are carefully detailed. The Gita is about liberation, yes, but it is also about life in the here and now, and how to live it with harmony and joy. Some scholars have described it as a "map of life", and a plan for serene living, and it is not surprising that so many commentaries on its verses exist, or indeed that interpretations of the Gita and its essence abound. But you do not need to be caught up in the welter of semantics, translation or transiteration to grasp for yourself its core message: this is directly addressed to those who seek, to those who are troubled and want hope, to those whose life is filled with the need for equilibrium and calm, and its thrust is simply this — whatever kind of person you are, whatever your capabilities, you

can achieve your Self and be one with God. There are those who will follow the path of knowledge, the Jnana yogis; those who will set the course of action, the Karma yogis; and those who dedicate themselves to the love of God, the Bhakta yogis; and the promise of the Gita is that they will all attain salvation. Even those who do not consciously follow these paths, but who are filled with devotion, will be gathered to the Supreme Being.

But whether you choose the path of light or knowledge, the path of life or Action, the path of love or Bhakti, you must act. The Gita does not tell you to withdraw from your circumstances, it tells you how to live with them in joy. Not for the Gita the isolation of the hermit; its verses are addressed to you and me, who each day face the tasks of the household. And you are told that you must do your duty and fulfil your obligations. Moreover, it is your duty that you must do, and not someone else's. Better your work, however humble, than another's, however great, says the Gita, for man attains perfection by devotion to his own duty. How? By worshipping Him through the performance of duty, by consecrating each act to Him, thus can man attain perfection. Work is indeed worship, for every little act of life can become an act of creation, beautiful and holy.

In its philosophy, I think the Gita should be viewed in the context of the great scriptures that precede it. The earliest verses of pan-Hindu thought are the Vedas, those magnificent resonant hymns to the Ultimate Reality as embodied in the forces of Nature, so imbued with a sense of vastness and a metaphysical search for the Divine. The Vedas are steeped in the consciousness of the outward world, and its essential connection to everyday life. The great hymn of the Purusha Sukta breathes the power and the mystery of creation; the reverberations are cosmic. And the questions posed in the other great Hymn of Creation reveal a searching, seeking mind-set, thirsting for answers. This probing reached a profundity in the Upanishads, works rarely equaled in human civilisation for their ability to go within the heart of being and to penetrate, with a sharp cerebral insight, the secrets of the seed of existence. But in the Gita, we find the clarion call to love, the love that perceives the universality of all beings, that calls on us to see with pure eyes that God is within us, and within everything around us. The Gita offers us a way to God that does not necessarily demand the rigid austerities of penance, or the arduous tasks of painfully gained knowledge. It simply says to us: love Me, see Me in all that is around you, offer Me your actions with a humble and devout heart, and I will never leave you.

To me, this is the fundamental message of the Gita, and one to which we return time after time. And, importantly, the Gita is the first text to stress Bhakti, that personal love between man and God, the bonding that forges the link between Divine and human, and that makes the omnipresence of God a reality. Over and over again, throughout the Gita, Krishna reminds us of this bond, and its power to transcend the pain of everyday existence. This love is not a vague and unfocussed emotion a wash in sentimentality. It expresses itself in concrete action, and in a disciplined approach to life, to oneself, and to the world. Its demands are many, for the path to God is not an easy one. But those who are resolute of mind, steadfast of purpose, and above all, loving of heart, will find Him within themselves. This is the promise of the Gita.

If the Vedas taught us to look outward to a vast horizon, and the Upanishads plunged us into deep and intense introspection,