

THE SPIRITUAL SCIENTIST

An Ezine for Those Who Think

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GOD PROPOSES,

MAN ACCEPTS



“Man proposes, God disposes” has been the cause of immense frustration for humanity since time immemorial. The best plans are often foiled forever in a single moment by factors beyond human control. Misery can be said to be the condition in which we are unable to get what we want and / or are forced to accept that which we don't want. A thoughtful person can perceive that misery is an unavoidable, inescapable companion during the sojourn through this world (Bhagavad Gita 8.15). Everyone is put repeatedly in the unenviable position of watching helplessly all of one's cherished plans wrecked one after another, by the inexplicable and seemingly cruel will of providence.



LITTLE CONTROL MEANS NO CONTROL

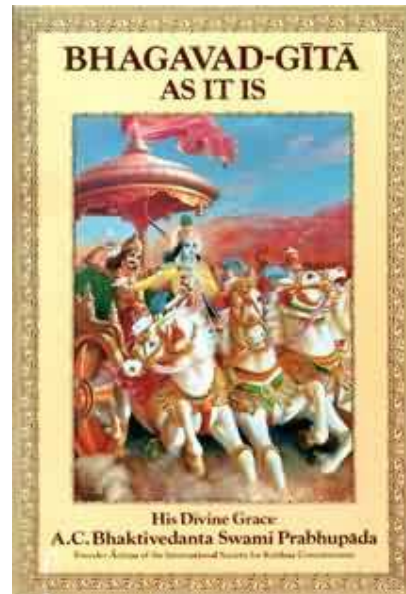
Most people try to tackle this existential dilemma by trying to increase their ability to control their situations by acquiring wealth, power, knowledge, fame, beauty and even renunciation. But do these material acquisitions really solve the problem? They seem to give us control over our lives and surroundings, but actually they themselves are beyond our control. For example, a wealthy person imagines that his monetary power gives him control over his life and so wants to increase his wealth unlimitedly (16.13-15), but he can lose the wealth itself - his source of control - due to events beyond his control, such as a stock market crash. Thus wealth creates an illusion of control, while in reality it only increases one's anxiety by making one further dependent on things that are beyond one's control. Moreover money cannot bribe death, which in one moment strips one of everything (10.34). Hence the Gita asserts that these material solutions offer no actual relief (2.8). Srila Prabhupada succinctly states the futility of mundane attempts to control our lives and surroundings, "Little control means no control."

The Bhagavad-gita offers a dramatically different remedy for this existential perplexity: God proposes, man accepts. It asserts that all attempts to become happy in the material world are ultimately misdirected, as they keep us out of harmony with God. The perfection of our intelligence is when we harmonize our human will with the divine will (7.19). Accepting reversals faithfully and gracefully as the inconceivable will of the Lord is a teaching mentioned in all the major religions of the world. The prayer of Jesus the night before he was crucified, "Let Thy will be done, not mine" is a well-known example. In times of pain and grief, this prayerful surrender to the will of the Lord has the potential of bringing immediate and immense relief. However most people are unable to muster the faith necessary for offering such a bold prayer. The Bhagavad-gita holds a unique position among all the world's scriptures in that it offers a solid intellectual springboard and a well-defined spiritual trajectory for this leap of faith. The philosophy delineated in the Gita is so cogent, coherent and comprehensive that, after understanding it, Arjuna not only accepted the will of the Lord that his relatives be killed, but went way ahead. He agreed to himself be instrumental in bringing about the execution of that divine will: *karishye vacanam tava* "I will do whatever You say." (18.73)

INSIGHTS FROM THE GITA

This extraordinarily empowering perspective to the reversals of life, as explained in the Gita, can be summarized as follows:

1. We are not gross bodies or subtle minds, but are eternal souls (7.4-5). Therefore the sufferings due to the mind, the body and their extensions - relatives and friends, possessions and positions - no matter how devastating, do not deprive us of our essential spiritual identity and purpose in life - to revive our loving relationship with God. Knowing that we have a changeless core, which can never be taken away from us by any vicissitude and which can always bring us inner happiness, is in itself a source of tremendous solace and strength when everything around us seems to be falling apart.(2.13-16)
2. The Lord is our Supreme Father (14.4), and He unconditionally loves all of us - even those of us who spurn His love and even deny His very existence. The practical manifestation of His selfless, causeless love is that He creates and maintains all the background material arrangements by which we - His wayward children - can enjoy material happiness. He maintains the entire material world - the arena for material enjoyment - by arranging for all the universal necessities such as heat and light (15.12-13) He further maintains the material body - the vehicle for material pleasure - by keeping all the bodily functions such as digestion in proper order (15.14). Not only that, according to our desires to enjoy life, He gives us the corresponding inspiration and intelligence (15.15) Thus the Lord is our supreme well-wisher and benefactor (5.29)
3. All events in the material world occur as per the universal laws of action and reaction. Reversals don't come upon us by cruel chance, but are a result of our own past misdeeds - either in this or earlier lives. Acceptance of the law of karma is not fatalistic, creating feelings of helplessness and impotence, as some people misunderstand. Nor is it psychologically damaging, creating haunting feelings of guilt, as some others allege. Rather a mature understanding of the impartial law of karma is highly empowering, as we understand that we still have control over our lives. By harmonizing with the universal laws of action, as explained in the God-given scriptures, we have the power to create



a bright future for ourselves, no matter how bleak the present may seem to be. (3.9)

4. For those unflinchingly devoted to the Lord, things don't go wrong just by karmic laws. The Lord personally orchestrates the events in the lives of His devotees so that they are most expeditiously elevated to the platform of unlimited, eternal, spiritual happiness. (12.6-7) Indeed for the faithful the Lord transforms material adversity into spiritual prosperity. An intelligent transcendentalist is therefore able to see a painful reversal as a spiritual catharsis performed by the Lord to free him from the shackles of the lower self and to unleash the potential of the higher self. He sees suffering like a surgery, which, though painful, frees the body from dangerous infection and promotes the recovery of health.



WISDOM IN ACTION

Let us see how the wisdom of the Gita empowered its original recipient – Arjuna. The setting on which the Gita was spoken – a battlefield between two huge armies poised for war - is highly intriguing. Fratricidal friction within the ruling Kuru dynasty had erupted into a massive conflagration on the sprawling plains of Kurukshetra. As thousands of soldiers, chariots, horses and elephants stood waiting for the war-cry to be sounded, Arjuna, one of the principal warriors, suffered an emotional breakdown, being overwhelmed by the prospect of killing his own relatives. In the face of extreme adversity he lost sight of his duty and turned for guidance to his friend, Krishna, who was the Supreme Godhead playing the role of a human being. Then in the midst of the belligerent armies, Krishna enlightened his friend Arjuna – and through him all of humanity for all time to come - about the temporal and eternal identity and duty of the self entrapped in material perplexities.

After hearing Krishna's message, Arjuna experienced a complete paradigm shift. He realized that Krishna was not urging him to fight the war for petty personal gains, impelled by feelings of selfish greed or mundane vengeance. Rather, he had the privileged opportunity to play a crucial role in a divine plan for re-establishing order

and harmony in human society by destroying the anti-social elements who had unscrupulously grabbed power. Hence his fighting was actually necessary and beneficial service to God and to all living beings as the children of God. He realized that all the warriors assembled there – including his loved ones – were eternal souls, who would continue to live after their bodily death. But by dying in the presence of the supremely pure Lord Krishna, they would be purified of their sinful mentality and would attain spiritual emancipation. Before hearing the Gita, Arjuna had felt that he was in a lose – lose situation (2.6). If he killed his relatives he felt he would be doing a heinous sin (1.36) and if he chose to not kill them by abstaining from fighting, he would have no means of sustenance and would be disgraced for having abandoned the battle like a coward (2.33-36). After hearing the Gita, he recognized that his situation was actually win-win. He had no need to fear sin because action harmonized with divine will brings not sin and suffering, but purification and elevation (18.65-66). His killing his relatives would benefit not only himself, but also the whole world and the slain relatives too! Even if he happened to die while fighting – which he would not because the supreme will is always triumphant (18.78) – still he would attain the highest spiritual realm of everlasting happiness by laying down his perishable body in a holy war. Therefore after hearing the Gita, Arjuna confidently picked up his famed Gandiva bow, which he had dejectedly cast aside earlier, and emphatically declared his willingness to execute the all-beneficial will of the Lord (18.73). Thus the original setting of the Gita is a graphic illustration of action in accordance with spiritual wisdom transforming a disastrous reversal into a glorious triumph.



THE MARCH TO DIVINE HARMONY



The comprehensive philosophical explanation of the Gita serves as a map for the aspiring transcendentalist on his spiritual odyssey back to harmony with the Lord (16.24). Yoga - linking one's consciousness with the Lord - is the means to return to harmony. The Gita states that meditation (dhyana-yoga),

speculation (jnana-yoga), detached action (karma-yoga) and devotional service (bhakti-yoga) are means by which a soul can advance on the path back to harmony. Ultimate success however comes only by devotional service (11.53-54); other paths are only stepping stones to the attainment of that devotion (6.47, 7.19, 3.9). The best method of devotional meditation for the current period in the cosmic cycle (Kali Yuga) is mantra meditation (10.25), especially the chanting of the maha mantra Hare Krishna Hare Krishna Krishna Hare Hare Hare Rama Hare Rama Rama Rama Hare Hare, which nourishes the higher self. Abstaining from the self-destructive activities of meat-eating, gambling, intoxication and illicit sex, thus starving the lower self, accelerates the return to harmony. Bhakti-yoga progressively leads to the full blossoming of our higher nature and culminates in prema, selfless love for the Supreme Lord Sri Krishna. This love leads to unconditional loving surrender to the will of the Lord and the resulting harmony of divine love makes life a joy at every moment even in this life. This divine love is the ultimate achievement of life; it conquers even death, for it continues eternally after bodily death in the highest abode, the spiritual world, the realm of pure consciousness.

Shripad Shankaracharya explains, in his Gita-mahatmaya, the unique position of the Gita within the vast Vedic library. He compares all the Vedic scriptures to a cow, Krishna to a cowherd boy milking the cow, Arjuna to a calf and the Gita to the milk of the cow. Thus the Gita is considered to be the essence of all the Vedic literature. Appreciation for the Gita is not limited to Vedic circles. Many Western scholars have found the Gita to be amazingly lucid and relevant. Ralph Waldo Emerson's remark is a sample, "I owed a magnificent day to the Bhagavad-gita. It was the first of books; it was as if an empire spoke to us, nothing small or unworthy, but large, serene, consistent, the voice of an old intelligence which in another age and climate had pondered and thus disposed of the same questions which exercise us." When Srila Prabhupda, the founder-acharya of the International Society for Krishna consciousness (ISKCON), went to the West to teach the message of the Gita and was asked in the United Kingdom about the purpose of his visit, he poignantly replied, "When you Britishers ruled India, you plundered her off all her wealth, but you forgot to take her most precious jewel. I have come to give you what you forgot - the wisdom of the Gita."



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