

Bhagavad Gita I  
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Good evening, bodhisattvas.

Last week I was talking about the *Mahabharata*, the sprawling ancient Indian epic of poetry and philosophy that has conflict and love and betrayal and redemption in it. The *Mahabharata* is sort of the autobiography of the human race. In the middle is one section, the *Bhagavad Gita*, that is a psalm to God or praise song to the vastness that rises right out of that story of human life. From the koan perspective we might say that it's the trap door under any moment in the *Mahabharata*, through which they might have fallen into the vastness.

Tonight I'm going to talk about the *Gita's* perspective on the nature of renunciation, action, and the fruits of action. Next week I want to talk about sorrow and joy and devotion and longing.

When Ralph Waldo Emerson read the *Gita*, he said, "It was the first of books; it was as if an empire spake to us, nothing small or unworthy but large, serene, consistent, the voice of an old intelligence which in another age and climate has pondered and thus disposed of the same questions which exercise us."

This is the voice of our kin, coming down through the ages; this is what connects us into this long pageant of human history and this great mystery play that is human life. We can hear and recognize the voice of those kin over time. It connects us through the ages in the same way that we're so concerned about connecting ourselves horizontally to other people in the world who are alive with us now.

The *Gita* is a conversation between one of the warrior heroes of the *Mahabharata*, Arjuna, and the god Krishna, who was his charioteer. This was a time when the lines between the humans and the gods were not so well-drawn. On the night before the culminating battle between two sets of cousins who are at war with each other, when all the armies are lined up on both sides, Arjuna asks Krishna to drive him out onto the space in the battlefield between where the two armies are arrayed.

They arrive and Krishna makes everything stop for the duration of their conversation. Arjuna looks around and sees not only his own brothers and friends on his side of the battle, but he sees cousins and mentors and people he's known all his life on the other side. And he says, "I can't do this."

The *Gita* is the conversation that Krishna has with Arjuna, trying to come to some kind of resolution about this most fundamental question : Do I act when I know that my act is going to create suffering and sorrow and death, if I think I have to, if there seems to be a good reason to do it?

I don't think it's an accident that this takes place on a battlefield. This is happening in the most difficult place in human life; the place where we have the most confused and conflicted circumstances with other people. It is right out of the densest, shadowiest, most difficult place that this song arises.

I also think it's not irrelevant that Krishna causes everything to pause for a moment. From what we know in our practice, even in those most difficult of moments, it is possible to pause. It is possible to stop and step back into the moment before and think about it and see what it is like there before we commit to the action.

In that moment before, many things are possible. Arjuna could decide to fight, or leave the battlefield, or try to reason with his cousins. There are a million different ways it could go. The first lesson of the *Gita* is that we always have that choice to stop and step back into the moment before and reflect before we act—and to remember that the trap door that the *Gita* so beautifully describes is available to us any time, even in those most difficult of moments.

Before I dive in I want to heartily acknowledge that this is Joan's tour of the *Gita*. Like most great works of philosophy and art it can be interpreted in a number of different ways. You can go through and pick out other quotes that say what seem like contradictory things. It's one of the things I love about the *Mahabharata* as a whole : it isn't afraid of throwing in different viewpoints and emphases and ways of thinking about things, putting them next to each other and allowing that creative tension to exist — therefore allowing each of us to find our own way through. This is my way through.

I'd like to speak about renunciation, action, and the fruits of action — what we would probably call 'outcomes' today. Gandhi wrote a lovely essay, "The Message of the *Gita*", in which he talked about what it meant to him. He said that his practice was the practice of the

*Gita*; it was what had inspired him and helped him thread his way through so many difficult circumstances. Gandhi, ultimately being a tremendously practical man, has a different view of the *Gita* than I just related. For him, it revealed “the most excellent way to attain self-realization”. He called the central message of the *Gita* ‘renunciation of the fruits of action’. “This renunciation is the central sun around which devotion, knowledge, and the rest revolve like planets.”

Gandhi describes renunciation of the fruits of action like this : “How are you to be free from the bondage of action, even though you may be acting?” For those of you who may be familiar with Indian philosophy, ‘action’ here is taking the place of *karma*, the consequences of our actions that bind us to this world. How are we to get free from the ways in which karma can bind us, even though we continue to generate karma, we continue to act? “The manner in which the *Gita* has solved the problem is, to my knowledge, unique. The *Gita* says, ‘Do your allotted work, but renounce its fruit — be detached and act — have no desire for reward, and act.’ That was Gandhi’s interpretation. The *Gita* itself says :

You have a right to your actions,  
but never to your action’s fruits.  
Act for action’s sake,  
and do not be attached to inaction.

So the *Gita* is saying that the opposite of not being attached to the outcome of your actions is not inaction.

Self-possessed, resolute, act  
without any thought of results,  
open to success or failure.

As the *Daodejing* says in its pithy way :

Do your work, then step back —  
the only path to serenity.

In another place the *Gita* talks about the kind of equanimity that it’s describing :  
With no desire for success,  
no anxiety about failure, ...  
nothing that you expect,  
nothing that you fear, ...  
content with whatever happens.

That's a pretty good list. This is what is meant by the renunciation of the fruits of action, which is the central idea, according to Gandhi, of the *Gita*. I want to pick up on a couple of elements in that. The first is, "Do not be attached to inaction". The idea is, therefore, do not go to sleep, or take drugs, or in any way become inactive. In another place the *Gita* says:

Not by avoiding actions do you gain freedom from action,  
and not by renunciation  
alone, can you reach the goal.  
No one, not even for an instant,  
can exist without acting ...  
Do any actions you *must* do,  
since action is better than inaction ...  
The whole world becomes a slave  
to its own activity, Arjuna;  
if you want to be truly free,  
perform all actions as worship.

The point is not to be passive, but to change how you feel and think about acting, change how you approach acting. In another place, the *Gita* speaks about this idea of all actions as worship. It says that when all actions are worship :

God is the offering, God  
is the offered, poured out by God.  
God is attained by all those  
who see God in every action.

The *Gita* speaks in the language of God because it's from a theistic philosophy and religion, but it's very easy to make the translation into the vastness or buddha nature or however you want to see that thing that brings us to the experience of awe : Buddha nature is the offering, buddha nature is the offered, poured out by buddha nature. Buddha nature is attained by all those who see buddha nature in every action.

There are some beautiful passages throughout where Krishna is speaking of himself, but he's speaking from the perspective of the vastness or the dharmakaya or God or buddha nature. From that perspective he says :

I am the ritual and the worship, the medicine and the mantra, the butter burnt in the fire, and I am the flames that consume it. I am the Father of the Universe and its Mother, essence and goal of all knowledge, the refiner, the sacred *om* and the three-fold Vedas. I am the beginning and the end, origin and dissolution, refuge, home, true lover, womb and perishable seed. I am the heat of the sun. I hold back the rain and release it. I am death and the deathless and all that is and is not.

If that feels a bit grand, in another place, the vastness speaks and says, “I am the taste in water ... the light in the moon and sun ... the sound in air ... the fragrance in the earth ... the humanity of humans.”

To perform all actions as worship is to remember that this is the context in which you do them. You do them knowing that everything you see and experience is *that*, however you see *that*. It's to know that *that thing*, that vastness, that buddha nature, is everything you pick up and put down. It's everything you plant and prune, create and preserve and destroy. It's what you're talking to, or about, what you're seething about or yelling at, or what you feel tender towards — all of that. That's how every action can be worship.

Another question that often comes up in terms of action and the fruit of action is the question of getting it right. How do we get it right? How do we know that we've gotten it right? How do we discriminate and choose? One of my favorite passages in the *Gita* says :

It is better to follow your own dharma  
badly than to perfectly do  
another's : you are safe from harm  
when you do what you should be doing.

Don't you find that consoling? It's better to bumble along and try to find your own dharma. *Dharma* in the Vedic context is your role, your relationship with other people, your duties, what you do in the world that is particularly yours to do that harmonizes with everybody else's dharma simultaneously. That's what you're supposed to find — that path through, and better you should do your own badly than somebody else's perfectly.

A few more comments about renunciation, which can be a tough word; it can have resonances that are uncomfortable, but here renunciation is the very specific renunciation of the fruits of our actions, renunciation of our attachments to what is going to happen because of what we do.

Gandhi says clearly that renunciation is not indifference : to renounce the fruits of your actions is not at all to be indifferent about what happens. He says, “One who gives up action, falls.” So if you think the answer is to be passive and not do anything, you collapse, you fall, there's nothing happening. “One who gives up only the reward, rises.” If you can give up the attachments to the fruits, you're elevated, you rise. “But renunciation of fruits in no way means indifference to the result. In regard to every action, one must know the result of what's

expected to follow, the means thereto, and the capacity for it.” You have to have an idea of what you expect is going to happen, how you plan to do it, and whether there’s the capacity in the situation for this result to actually occur. “One who, being thus equipped, is without desire for the result, and is yet wholly engrossed in the due fulfillment of the task, is said to have renounced the fruits of their action.” This kind of renunciation is a way of thinking about right action. Krishna says :

Know that right action itself  
is renunciation, Arjuna;  
in the yoga of action, you first  
renounce your own selfish will.

What’s being suggested here is that the first movement is to renounce your own selfish will, and *that* renunciation leads then to the renunciation of the fruits of our actions.

Gandhi says, “Renunciation ... is not attained by an intellectual feat. It is attainable only by a constant heart-churn.” We’ll take up the nature of that heart churn next week when we talk about sorrow and joy and longing and desirelessness.

For tonight I’d like to hear any comments or questions you have about that bit.

Q1 : When it was said, “Know what you want to have happen and know the means to get to that place”, how does that compare with an idea of seeing what’s there? The jump, taking that risk? Because to me that’s a bit more like planning, or just knowing that something is going to happen.

JS : I think that what Gandhi is saying is that you don’t just wander into the situation blindly and then whatever happens is *whatever*. But that you have a sense of, *Here’s something I’d like to try; here’s something I think would help the situation*. You go in with a sense of the direction in which you’re heading, a vision about what you imagine might happen, what you think might help toward getting there, and you look at the capacity so you are being realistic as to whether it can happen in that situation. And then you let the situation change all of that, modify it, reinforce it — whatever it does in relation to what you come in with. So you come in with a general direction and some ideas, but you let the situation inform how that develops.

Q1 : So it's not so much planning as having good intentions and knowing what you'd like and then you just see what happens.

JS : Yes, and the interesting thing is having a sense of real commitment toward something and being completely content with whatever the outcome is of your work. You must also be willing to be wrong.

Q2 : What this is calling for is basic de-programming of most of what we're conditioned to value and to use as a guide for our actions. We are so oriented to the outcomes. It's our motivations, how we gauge if we're successful, where we're conditioned to get our satisfaction in life. So the theory is one thing, but the doing is another. How do we de-program ourselves? What does this look like if you were to really take this renunciation for yourself?

JS : The rest of the *Gita* is an answer to that question. The rest is the practice, the method, the yoga, the discipline. I would say that the koan way is a yoga as well.

Q3 : Could you say that knowing you've done your best yet you fail, or don't even reach the goal, is joy in and of itself? Or is this attachment, too — to knowing that you've done your best? Where do you draw the boundary between attachment to the goal and success?

JS : That's a subtle thing, but the question would be, *How feeling at the end of the day that you've done your best become the goal?* If you take up the idea of actions as worship, if you worshipped, if you gave it your all, then that's a complete thing, and there's no reason not to feel that that's a complete thing. There's no reason not to feel satisfied by that. As long as the satisfaction hasn't become the substitute goal.

Q4 : Where does fear fit in? I think fear is a part of it if we're going to talk about being human.

JS : This is an ideal to aspire to. The realistic version of it for most of us, most of the time, is to be aware of how fear is functioning in the situation and not to allow that to take control

of what happens. There's a consciousness of the fear and a not ceding the situation to the fear. That's our ordinary daily version of the perfect list.

Q5 : Can you say a bit more about what worship means in this context of worship as action?

JS : This is my interpretation. The *Gita* itself doesn't elaborate a whole lot on it : I think it is the sense that everything we do is taking place in a really big context. It's taking place in the dharmakaya, it's taking place in the vastness. To remember that big context changes things. When I speak with you, I'm speaking to the vastness and the vastness is listening and you're speaking back to me. There's an awesome, deep, very big quality that changes the nature of our conversation.

Worship is a tricky word. Keep remembering that this is the vastness sitting in the vastness, lit by lights of the vastness and darkened by the vastness. Treat things with the feeling that arises when you remember, *Oh wow*. What's it like to remember *Oh, wow*? And what's it like to act from that place in the most ordinary moments of our lives? That's what I think 'action is worship' means.