

The Bhagavad Gita II  
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Good evening, bodhisattvas.

We're in a series of talks on the *Mahabharata*, the great epic poem of ancient India that has been called the autobiography of the human race. It's a poem eight times as long as the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* combined. In the midst of this roiling, teeming, energy-filled autobiography is one section which is a hymn or praise song. In the midst of life this hymn rises up — a praise song for the largeness and beauty of things, even in times of great difficulty; that is the *Bhagavad Gita*.

Last week we talked about the theme of renunciation. The *Bhagavad Gita* was coming into written, fixed form about the same time that the buddhist teachings were moving from oral into written forms. They were, in their terms, becoming fixed as well. The *Gita*, the *Mahabharata* as a whole, and the buddhist teachings were looking at many of the same questions, sometimes coming to similar conclusions and sometimes quite different ones. What's interesting in looking back at them is how those questions are still our questions today.

At this pivotal time, something like renunciation, which had meant what you did or didn't do, moved into an internal event, something happening in your own heart-mind. A renunciate had always been someone who gave up family life, or gave up all of their possessions, and became a homeless wandering holy person; it had to do with your activity and conduct. In the *Gita*, renunciation takes on an inner meaning : giving up the fruits of your actions. We would say, giving up attachment to outcomes. All of a sudden renunciation, which had been about *acting*, became renouncing a *need* for a certain outcome : we act for the act itself and then we let it go.

The *Gita* 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." It's not a matter of being passive and not doing anything. "Self-possessed, resolute, act without any thought of

results, open to success or failure.” Or as the *Daodejing* says, “Do you work, then step back — the only path to serenity.”

We left it with Gandhi last week, who wrote an essay on the *Gita*, saying, “Renunciation ... is not attained by an intellectual feat. It is obtainable only by a constant heart-churn.” I want to talk about that heart-churn tonight.

The *Gita* describes one way to give up attachment to the fruits of actions. Krishna says to Arjuna :

The whole world becomes a slave  
to its own activity, Arjuna;  
if you want to be truly free,  
perform all actions as worship.

It tells us in another place what ‘all actions as worship’ means. This is within a theistic religion, a religion that believes in God, but it’s easy to substitute our own definition of God, that presence in which you feel awe.

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

If renunciation became an inner event, so that they could talk about it in terms of becoming an act of worship, the Buddha had a similarly revolutionary understanding of what sacrifice meant. In that time the streets of the towns were literally running red with the blood of sacrificed animals. Animals were being slaughtered all the time. It was a normal part of daily life, again with the sense of sacrifice being an outer event : you killed something and offered it up.

The Buddha changed what the idea of sacrifice meant. He said that what you sacrifice is your delusions, the habitual patterns of action that cause you to be separated from life. You sacrifice your *inattention*. You sacrifice being caught up in your passions. You sacrifice aggression and ignorance and all those things that cause pain to you and to others around you. That’s what gets its neck tied, not some poor fellow creature. When you let all that go, what’s left is a fidelity to the moment that we call mindfulness, awareness, attention, attending to, caring about, etc. The fidelity to

the moment is the truest sacrifice; that's the worship — that attention, that mindfulness, that caring.

In a way, the old sense of sacrifice that meant killing something was a kind of spell in the culture that the Buddha was trying to break. It's a spell that is still resonant to us, one that we can still find ourselves under.

The conversation in the *Gita* between Krishna and Arjuna takes place right before a great battle. Arjuna's family and their followers are about to fight their cousins and their followers. It's a very painful moment for Arjuna, and he's not sure he can go through with it. So he asks Krishna to drive him out into the space between the two armies before the war starts. There comes a blessed moment when the battle might not happen; there are still possibilities, other things can happen besides slaughter. Their conversation happens within that blessed moment. Arjuna, to whom Krishna appears in human form as his charioteer, asks Krishna to show him his godlike qualities, show him what he really looks like. Krishna asks him if he's sure and Arjuna says yes, so Krishna appears to him in his vast cosmic form. This is how Arjuna describes how he sees Krishna (the names are all of warriors involved in the battle) :

All Dhritarashtra's men and all those multitudes of kings, Bhishma, Drona, Karna, with all our warriors behind them, are rushing headlong into your hideous, gaping, knife-fanged jaws. I see them with skulls crushed, their raw flesh stuck to your teeth. As the rivers and many torrents rush toward the ocean, all these warriors are pouring down into your blazing mouth. As moths rush into a flame and are burned in an instant, all beings rush into your gullet and are instantly consumed. You gulp down all worlds, everywhere swallowing them in your flames and your rays. You, Lord, fill all the universe with your dreadful brilliance. Who are you in this terrifying form? Have mercy Lord, grant me even a glimmer of understanding to prop up my staggering mind.

Krishna then says a line that has been made famous because it's what Robert Oppenheimer said when the first atomic bomb blast happened : "I am Death, shatterer of worlds, annihilating all things." He goes on to say a chilling thing to Arjuna :

With or without you, these warriors and their facing armies will die. Therefore stand up, win glory, conquer the enemy, rule. Already I have struck them down. You are just my instrument, Arjuna. Drona, Bhishma, Jayadratha, Karna, and the other great heroes have already been killed by me. Fight without hesitation. Kill them.

That's a pretty strong spell! It's a spell that we haven't put behind us, that we still grapple with every day. It is the spell that I think the Buddha was trying to break. He could only do it by complete renunciation, by everybody turning their backs and walking off into the forest together. In that time and place, with that intensity of feeling, he could find no way to navigate through that, to negotiate with it. It was simply a matter of walking away from it.

Even though Arjuna is under this spell (he's a warrior, it's his job to make war), he can't stand to look at it. When he sees Krishna in this form, he begs him to go back into the box, to go back to being his charioteer. And that also seems to have great resonance for us in this moment : that we're aware somehow of that horrible vision, of the destruction that's happening in the world, and we can't bear to look at it. We know it's there, but in some ways we don't really look at the cost of our actions, we hide them from ourselves.

At the end of this conversation, Arjuna is convinced that he will go to war. There's been a pause, a reprieve in the story, but after this transcendent conversation, the very next thing, the very next paragraph comes :

Then, seeing that Arjuna again held his bow and arrows, the great warriors again roared their approval. The Pandavas and their followers cheerfully and gallantly blew their conch shells. Kettledrums, hand drums, cymbals, and cow horns were sounded in unison; and the noise was tremendous. Gods, gandharvas, ancestors, hosts of siddhas and charaṇas assembled to watch. The lordly seers, placing Indra, God of a Hundred Sacrifices, at their head, gathered there to watch the great holocaust.

Is that not one of the most sorrowful passages in literature? There'd been a moment in which things got big and spacious and serene and real, and instantly the waters closed over it and everybody started to cheer for war. I think that too is something familiar to us these days—how quickly an opening, a sense of largeness and spaciousness can get eaten up and rolled right over. You can understand the Buddha saying that there's no way to fix or reform this. We just have to turn our backs on it absolutely.

Another possibility occurred as the Dharma evolved and moved to China, our root tradition. The Chinese looked at this and said that there's got to be a third way, something other than sounding the cymbals and blowing the conch shells or turning your back and walking away — because it's still happening, even though you've walked away.

The Chinese third way comes from the *Daodejing*, a Chinese classic, written at about the same time as the *Bhagavad Gita*. It says :

Weapons are the tools of fear;  
a decent person will avoid them  
except in the direst necessity  
and if compelled, will use them  
only with the utmost restraint.  
Peace is the highest value.  
If the peace has been shattered  
how can he be content?  
His enemies are not demons,  
but human beings like himself.  
He doesn't wish them personal harm.  
Nor does he rejoice in victory.  
How could he rejoice in victory  
and delight in the slaughter of people?  
He enters a battle gravely,  
with sorrow and with great compassion,  
as if he were attending a funeral.

That spirit carried on in East Asian Buddhism until you get to the story of Tokimune, who was the regent in Japan at the time of the Mongol invasion. He was in charge of defending Japan against the so-far unstoppable Mongol army. He did succeed in stopping them with a little help from the *kamikaze*, the divine wind that came up and destroyed the Mongol fleet in the harbor. What is so moving about the Tokimune story is that the first thing he did when the war was won was to build a memorial to the dead on both sides. That seems to me to be exactly in the spirit of the *Daodejing* : entering a battle with great sorrow and great compassion as if you were attending a funeral. This was a new and important spirit that came into Buddhism at that time.

One of our own wild Buddhists, though he really didn't know it, was Walt Whitman, who was profoundly affected by the Civil War and worked in hospitals attending to wounded and dying Union soldiers. In one of his poems he says *exactly* the same thing. He says: "My enemy is dead. A person as sacred as myself is dead." I think we should have that on billboards and street corners; it would be great if that were the ticker running under CNN.

The *Gita* also addresses joy and how to come to joy even in the midst of all of this. I'm going to quote something, and you should know that yoga in this context doesn't mean what we think of as physical yoga. Yoga is a way, a practice, a spiritual discipline.

This is true yoga : the unbinding  
of the bonds of sorrow. Practice  
this yoga with determination  
and with a courageous heart.

Now, that doesn't mean that if you do this you will never feel sorrow again. What it means is that sorrow, suffering, the attitude of melancholy, will no longer be your fundamental orientation towards life. It won't be the bass note under everything. If you stop and think a moment, in this time when we're so aware of how much is happening around the world, it's quite easy to have a bass note of sorrow, of fear and pain and regret. The *Gita's* language is very precise. It says you're unbinding the bonds of sorrow, not that you're eliminating sorrow, or that you wouldn't be moved by the pains and sufferings of the world, but that you would not be bound by them in the same way. It wouldn't be the bass note, always there underneath it all.

Neruda has a stanza in one of his poems, "Keeping Quiet", that makes this point :

If we were not so single-minded  
about keeping our lives moving,  
and for once could do nothing,  
perhaps a huge silence  
might interrupt this sadness  
of never understanding ourselves  
and of threatening ourselves with death.

The *Gita* is saying that there is a way to let that huge silence in to interrupt the sorrow. There is a way, in any moment, to feel the bigness of things, the deep serenity and spaciousness of things that opens up for a moment before the war starts. Any moment has that potential, that trap door through which we can fall into the largeness and spaciousness and serenity of things.

The *Gita* says :

The undisciplined have no wisdom,  
no one-pointed concentration;  
with no concentration, no peace;  
with no peace, where can joy be?

There is the explicit promise of joy here. This concentration is ‘each act as worship’, or attention and mindfulness. From that comes a kind of peace, and from that peace comes joy. It’s not happiness in the sense of *I used to feel bad; now I feel good*. It’s a joy that’s a different bass note in the way that sorrow can be. This joy can be underneath everything, not conditioned by circumstances. This joy is so big, capacious, and strong that it can hold our rising and falling sorrows, difficulties and pains and fears. It can hold all of it and not be extinguished. *That* becomes the new bass note.

In closing, one last verse from the *Gita* :

The person whom desires enter  
as rivers flow into the sea,  
filled yet always unmoving —  
that person finds perfect peace.

So it’s not a matter of turning away from our heart-mind, from our thoughts and feelings and things that happen in the world. It’s a matter of developing this joy that is strong enough to let all of that flow in like the rivers that flow into the sea. To accept all of it and not be extinguished by it.

That’s the promise of the *Gita*, and in many ways the promise of this practice. It is possible to develop a bass note, a grounding, a bedrock of unshakeable joy that doesn’t need to be protected from anything. It can allow everything into itself and remain.

Q1 : Why do you use the term “trap door”?

JS : Because it's sudden, unexpected, un-engineerable, unplanned, out of our control, a complete grace. And a complete and instantaneous shift in state; there's no transition.

Q2 : I'm thinking of what Krishna said, "I've already killed these warriors." That's really strong.

JS : It's another really big view. But it's one that's very, very difficult to take on.

Q3 : When you were speaking about having a hard time being with the cost of our actions, I immediately thought about how many of us think about global warming and how hard it is for many of us to look at it before we have to stop. It's so big with big implications. One of the ways that I've understood that is that some part of the brain just can't go there and hold that possibility. How do we 'be' with the enormity of something like that?

JS : My experience is that we're afraid that if we really let that in it will completely break our hearts and we won't be able to bear it. The 'joy as a bass note' that I was talking about can hold the broken heart so that it's possible to feel the whole range of emotions that come up when you look at something so big, and bear it without being shattered by it. You can hold the feeling all the way to the bottom and you can hold staying whole in the face of that. That seems tremendously important because if you shatter that's no help to anyone, and if you turn away, that's no help to anyone, either. Turning our warm attention toward what's happening in the world and toward our own heart-minds is important so that we can develop that joy that enables us to not turn away and then to wonder about what we might do.

It's also true that we don't know the end of the story. That doesn't mean we shouldn't act urgently, but it gets back to the idea in the *Gita* about renouncing the fruits of your action. You act, completely focused on the act. You act because it seems like the best thing you can do. But if you need a certain outcome in order to feel okay, that's where suffering comes in. It's a radical practice of *just acting* without knowing the outcome, without knowing the end of the story, and being willing to hold that not

knowing mind. So we have our best guess about what we ought to be doing, and we act on it, and then we wait and see.