

Sermon: “The Bhagavad Gita: The Path of Consecrated Action”

Hinduism is an ancient religion. For over 5,000 years, a spirituality has flourished on the Indian sub-continent, producing some of humanities greatest religious literature, notably the Vedas, Upanishads, Ramayana, and Mahabharata. Hinduism is a multi-dimensional faith, with a theological spectrum including polytheism, monotheism, and monism. The Hindu tradition has a vast literature, complex religious rituals, innumerable folk ways, and vibrant art. While India remains the ancestral home of Hinduism, Hindus, in significant numbers, can be found around the world.

Of course, one could study Hinduism for a life time. In this brief sermon, I will draw from the famous Hindu scripture, the Bhagavad Gita, which is a small part of the Mahabharata. Composed before 500 BC, it is a highly revered scripture. Mahatma Gandhi called it his infallible guide to moral action.

The Bhagavad Gita means “The Lord’s Song” and contains the words of Lord Krishna as spoken to Prince Arjuna. The Bhagavad Gita (or simply called the Gita) is about two armies, representing two factions of the same family. They are fighting for control of the nation. Arjuna leads one side which has the legitimate claim to power. On the other side are rebellious clansmen, who fight not for righteousness, but for power and self importance. Krishna is the voice of wisdom, speaking to Prince Arjuna in his time of need, helping him to understand right action. Krishna and Arjuna stand together, in the royal chariot, between the two opposing armies.

While the Gita employs a battle scenario, most Hindu scholars consider the battle to be symbolic. As one wrote: "...it is obvious that the war in the Bhagavad Gita has symbolic meaning. We find in the Gita that there is going to be a great battle for the realm, and how can we doubt that this is the realm of the Soul? Are we going to allow the forces of good or the forces of evil to win within us?" This is the interpretation favored by Mahatma Gandhi.

The Gita is about our human condition. Each of us, like Arjuna, is in the middle of a messy life, trying to choose between right and wrong. The choice is not always an easy one. There are people we love on the good side, and people we love on the bad side, and the people on the good side are not always good, and the people on the bad side are not always bad. In fact, each one of us is a mixture of good and bad intentions, and it is often hard to tell the difference. Ethical choices are rarely neat and clean. We can feel confused about what to do. Like Arjuna, we can be discouraged, and even paralyzed, by the complexity of a moral dilemma. What is the right thing to do? How do we decide? This is the battle field of human life, in which Krishna shares his wisdom with humanity.

The religious figure of Krishna ranks in importance with Jesus, Mohammed, Buddha, and Moses. He is a central God-Prophet in Hinduism. He has reincarnated many times, to help guide humanity. His face is often depicted as blue in color. This is a metaphor of looking up into a blue sky, in which one can see through into Eternity. For a traditional Hindu, Krishna is an Avatar, an Incarnation of God. For a student of the world religions, Krishna is a spiritual prophet. For a humanist, Krishna represents the depth of human wisdom, as symbolized by a mythic character. How we understand the identity of Krishna is a matter of faith. His message, however, contains universal wisdom.

At Harvard Divinity School I had the privilege of studying with one of the world's foremost Hindu scholars, who specialized in the Bhagavad Gita. I asked him once: "If you picked the one most important theme in the Gita, what would it be?" He answered: "Karma Yoga" and pointed to this quotation from Krishna in the Gita: "Great is the person who works on the path of Karma Yoga, the path of consecrated action."

Yoga means "union" and Karma means "action", thus karma yoga means acting in a way which brings us into union with the Divine. "Great is the person who works on the path of Karma Yoga, the path of consecrated action." To consecrate means to make Holy. Consecrated action means acting in a manner which makes life Holy or Whole, that is, of the highest value.

The principle of consecrated action is like the difference between a holiday meal, with close friends and family, compared with a quick stop at a greasy, fast food restaurant. Both are experiences of eating – but what a difference! With the holiday meal we plan and prepare with care and love. We want the meal to be a special experience. We want to give joy to our loved ones. On the other hand, the fast greasy food meal is harried and hurried. We expect mediocrity and that's what we get. The point is: if you treat life as cheap, you will get cheap in return. If you treat life as Sacred, you will get Sacred in return. And Sacred does not have to be a fuzzy, confusing word. It means simply that life is deeply precious. We experience life as precious rather than mediocre.

Essentially (getting to the core), consecrated action means doing the simple things of life with great love. What makes life Sacred is not how much we do, but how much love we put into the doing. This is the Gita's wise advice for everyone. What ever is your place in life (living alone, living with family, living with friends)...what ever is your place in life (working, retired, volunteering)...what ever is your place in life (cooking dinner, tending a garden, teaching a child, negotiating a contract)...what ever is your place in life (however messy and humble) – do it with great love. Consecrate your life: make it Holy.

I once went on retreat at a monastery, and had a Catholic Priest as my spiritual advisor. His left arm was paralyzed. He mentioned one morning that he was going golfing that afternoon, and I asked him how he golfed with one arm. He answered:

“After my stroke, I expected to recover the use of my arm. But after six months, I realized the loss was permanent. I gave up my favorite game. But my friends would not give up on me. They kept inviting me to play again. I refused. I was embarrassed. So they came to the priory and got me. At first, it seemed silly to try and hit the ball with one arm. But week after week they came and got me, and gradually I relaxed. Now, I enjoy golf more than I ever have. I no longer worry about my score. I walk with gratitude, I love my friends, I enjoy the curious challenge of learning how to swing with one arm. Playing golf now is more joyful than ever.”

This is consecrated action: doing the small things of life with great love. Swinging a golf club, one armed, with great love – that is consecrated action.

In the Gita, Krishna says: “Do your duty, even if it is humble, rather than trying to do the duty of another, even if it be great...trying to do the duty of another is fraught with fear.” --- In short, be yourself. Do the simple things of your daily life with great love. Make your bed with care. Eat your breakfast with gratitude. Walk gracefully. Meet your neighbor with kindness. In this moment now, listen respectfully. And, when it is time to suffer what is unavoidable, suffer with dignity, and grow in spirit. In this life your heart will be broken many times. Let it break into compassion and not bitterness.

Karma yoga means doing our imperfect best in the moment without being obsessed with the outcome: doing our imperfect best without being too attached to the final result, doing our imperfect best without clinging to how it must turn out. This is what the priest learned: the ultimate golf score did not matter. What really mattered was the love he put into each moment of the game. If we live each moment with that mindfulness, then the final outcome will take care of itself.

In order to be able to live with such grace, we need to place our small self within a larger, spiritual context. This is a central theme of the Gita and it is something everyone can do. A Humanist can feel how each action they do is part of a larger, mysterious, complex universe. A Theist can feel how each action lives within the Being of God. So whether we are a Humanist or a Theist, we can place our little life within a larger, spiritual context.

This is what every religion and philosophy encourages us to do. A Christian can feel how each person they meet is part of the Body of Christ. A Pagan can feel how each foot step is a blessing from the Nature. A Hindu can feel how everything in life is a different reflection of the One Great Being. A Muslim can be grateful to Allah. A Buddhist can feel everything within the crucible of compassion.

The purpose of any religion or philosophy is to place our little life within a broader spiritual context, which then makes our daily life meaningful and precious, encouraging us to act ethically.

Krishna says in the Gita: “Great is the person who works on the path of Karma Yoga... With the same evenness of love they behold a Brahmin, or a cow, or an elephant, or a dog, or even the man who eats the dog.” To place our life within a spiritual context means we have a center deeper than pleasure or pain, a center deeper than success or failure, a center deeper than any outcome. Having such a spiritual center liberates us from narrow judgment. Our petty judgments are replaced with compassion. We no longer live in fear, but in hope. We no longer live in resentment, but in love.

The Bhagavad Gita is widely read around the world because it speaks profoundly to our human condition. The confusion of Arjuna, his struggle to know right from wrong, the battle of his psyche, his need to find a spiritual center: all of this is our dilemma as well. Amidst the messiness of human life, the Gita gives us some helpful guidance: do the small things of life with great love. Do your imperfect best without clinging to the outcome. This common sense advice can consecrate our daily life, that is, make our humble life more deeply precious.

I invite you to join now in a time of meditation. Sit comfortably with your eyes open or closed as you wish.

In this moment, let us consecrate our life. Let us appreciate this simple, humble moment as sacred.

Begin by feeling yourself breathing. Just feel your breath move in and out of your body.

It took the earth 5 billion years to make the human breath.

Each breath you take is the miracle of life....We can appreciate the preciousness of our breath or we can take it utterly for granted.

Which way of living do you want?

Now feel your body. Just feel the sensations of your body sitting in the pew or chair.

It took the earth 5 billion years to make your human body.

Your body is a tremendous accomplishment in this universe.

We can appreciate our body or we can utterly take it for granted and complain about it.....Which way of living do you want?

For a moment, be aware of the other people in this room.

We are all sitting together in this moment in this room.

Between us, there is around 3,000 years of human experience. Yes, count all the years we have all lived in this room, and it would be more than 3,000 years of experience. Three thousand years of love and hope and hardship.

We can appreciate being part of this beloved community, full of imperfect wonderful struggling people, or we can take each other for granted and even complain or gossip...Which way of living do you want?

Do you want to embrace your life as precious, moment to moment, or do you want to take it for granted and complain?

This is the wisdom of the Gita: live this humble moment with love ... live this imperfect, sometimes painful, moment with care ... and your life will be precious to you. Namaste.

