POISED FOR GRACE

Annotations on the Bhagavad Gita
from a Tantric View

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understood more clearly as our own individual responsibility, we may no longer falsely construe others as being in complicity. How do we come to this kind of realization, as Arjuna does? It is, of course, the true beginning of his self-reflection and the opening that leads to new possibilities of genuine learning.

Chapter Two

Synopsis

Krishna accuses Arjuna of cowardice. Arjuna first defends his views but eventually asks for Krishna's advice. Krishna describes Arjuna's misplaced compassion as the result of a serious misunderstanding about the nature of ultimate reality. Death and rebirth need to be understood in light of eternity; equanimity is the practice that will create such understanding. But even without conviction in the eternity of our deepest human Self, birth and death present simple matters of fact: what is worth living and dying for? What really counts is Dharma, without which there are no boundaries or meaning to human life. Refusing Dharma is nothing but disgrace. Arjuna must act with singleness of purpose, without any personal motive for pleasure or power. But what is such a person like? Krishna describes him as equable, serene, and disinterested in pursuing the world as if it were merely for his amusement. In contrast, a self-seeking person acts without principle and responds only to circumstances.

Commentary

The picture of Arjuna at the opening of Chapter Two evokes true empathy. He has not only poured out his heart, he also

has made sober, even convincing arguments. Arjuna is hardly finished making his case, even as he sits "heart-and-mind (*maanasa*) anguished with grief" *(shoka-samvigna-maanasah,* 1.47). Notice here how the text chooses not to separate the heart from the mind, emotion from reason, intuition from argument: only one word, *maanasas,* is used for both heart and mind. This integration of experience is also expressed physically: Arjuna's body trembles, his hair stands on end, and he burns with grief and inner resolve not to fight. We are reminded here of the Tantric teaching that the yogin is never reduced to solely thoughts or even feelings but rather must include all aspects of our person, not the least of which is our bodily experience. And, as we shall see, Krishna's yoga will address all aspects of ourselves.

Krishna's reply is shocking, not only to Arjuna but also very likely to us. He takes a similar strategy as Arjuna, first capturing his friend's emotional attention with insult, irony, and admonition and then driving the argument, as if it were another skillfully maneuvered chariot, to yet another place *between* places; not to a neutral or safe destination but to another razor's edge of alternatives. There is nothing unusual about being confused over our choices or experiencing the anguish of a difficult choice. Krishna emphasizes we need first to seize upon our abilities and not allow the situation to lead us awry.

Krishna's choice of words is a match even for the gifted rhetoric of Arjuna as he rallies all the resources at his disposal. It is both stunningly personal and a crafty appeal to their shared marshal

customs. Both Krishna and Arjuna are born of the warrior class (*kshatriya*) and so share important values that are meant to inform their actions. For example, their mutual concern for reputation and the hero's fame (*yashas*) deeply motivates Krishna's personal assault on Arjuna's sense of pride and identity. Similarly, Krishna will make an important point of noting the material and social consequences of Arjuna's choices because of the warrior's concern for the value of wealth and land. But in practical terms, Krishna first attacks Arjuna as an unworthy representative of his gallant heritage, he calls him *anaaryajushtam,* "unseemly to one born among the Noble," (2.2) referring to their shared, collective identity. "Aryan" is indeed the same word the Nazi's misappropriated to refer to their convoluted notions of "pure race." But here the important implication is not ethnic or racial superiority that would somehow self-confer license to murder. Rather it is a way of drawing Arjuna into the recognition of his responsibility to something far greater than himself: to his ancestral past, to his immediate family, and to the prospects of a future in which true evil will become the sole meaning of "Aryan" if he fails to stem the tide of his malevolent cousins.

Krishna warns us with near-prescience that others with odious intentions will claim our past, rewrite the meaning of our identity, and create our future if we do not lay hold of our collective obligation. What sort of future can Arjuna hope to imagine if he fails to rise to this occasion and make his best possible choice given the requirements of his birth and the demands of his nation?

Krishna then insults Arjuna *personally*, calling him a eunuch (*klaibyam*) (2.3), and not without a certain biting irony since he almost certainly has in mind the fact that Arjuna has already played the role of a eunuch earlier within the *Mahabharata* when he assumed the role of Brihannala the dance teacher in the court of King Virata! Or rather he has pretended to be one during the Pandavas' prior exile in the haven of King Virata's court. Concealing himself within Virata's harem as the cross-dressing dance teacher Brihannala, Arjuna used this disguise as a restraint on his natural inclination to conquer on all fronts. Always inclined to seduce or simply take what he wants, Arjuna had disciplined himself in Virata's court in order to fulfill his role and not fail in his duty to family.

Why should Arjuna now act like a eunuch when he was so disciplined a warrior in disguise? Krishna makes clear that the current situation is no furtive opportunity of coy self-amusement that conceals its real motive; it is so deadly serious he urges his friend to "give up this vulgar weakness of heart" and "stand up!," (2.3) knowing full well that the physical act will further implicate all other emotional and intellectual claims. Arjuna must reclaim who he *really* is beneath this current unwanted disguise of cowardice. As Abhinavagupta explains, the *real* nature (*svabhaava*) of things cannot be destroyed, and it does not change anymore than a pot really changes when you paint it blue (GAS, 2.16)! As it is said elsewhere as well, we have an original nature, one that can be no more separated from us than the sun from its heat (GAS, 2.16).

At wit's end and yet still capable of reverting to a complex poetic expression (differing from the common meter of the song), Arjuna takes the bold step to ask for Krishna's guidance. "I am your disciple asking for your help" (2.7). Krishna's reply begins with the "hint of a smile," (2.10) the signal of grace descending (*shakti-pata*), and promises a radical transformation and awakening. This descent of grace comes from the highest, self-luminating reality and is refined in the awareness of the seeker who opens to its presence in her or his own thoughts (*vikalpa*); our thoughts are not a hindrance to recognizing grace but another avenue of reception (*Abhinavagupta, Tantrasara*, chapter 4, p.22).

With only a cursory reproach for Arjuna's mislaid pity, Krishna launches a strategy that he will develop further in nearly every chapter: understanding ourselves and the nature of reality requires a commitment to eternity, a vision of time in which the past and future are made as real as the present. Access to eternity comes through the terms of our embodied existence, not by refusing or eluding it. Time is *not unreal*, as some would say, an illusion created merely by limited consciousness (see Shankara's commentary on 2.16). Rather, Time is yet another aspect of a beginningless and endless reality. Paradoxically, Krishna will insist that it is focus and discipline – what he calls "singleness of purpose" (2.41)– that grants access to the unending truth of existence. Such insight forever changes our appreciation of life and death even as the volatility of sensual experience remains a challenge.

What ends of this endless embodied being is just bodies, while eternity continually assumes the cloak of yet another body, like new clothes. Still, our true essence can never be affected, for "never was there a time when I did not exist, nor you...nor shall any of us cease" (2.12). If you grieve for death, Abhinavagupta notes, then why do you not grieve in every stage of life or even in every moment? (GAS, 2.14) Do we fail to recognize even at the simplest level our innate continuity through the changes we experience in life? (GAS, 2.19)

Coming from eternity and invariably returning to it, life and death are the simplest facts of embodied existence. Since there is nothing wrong with the way the world is in its true nature, at its very factual core, why should the facts disturb us? The way things *really* are is precisely the way they are meant to be, but only equanimity in awareness can grant us such necessary depth and perspective. We are all entirely capable of sustaining this empowering insight and living *from the seat of eternity*: it is *always* a matter of choice and never obstructed except by our *immediate* choice.

To gain this greater perspective we need to turn within, like a tortoise using its natural resourcefulness (2.58). We are given here the first clear picture of the introspective yogin seated, drawing the senses inward in order to avoid the slippery slope that leads from worldly objects to desire, anger, delusion, forgetfulness, and an inner death of the spirit (2.60-63). Without serenity we are as "one not yoked without power" (2.66), carried off by our

feelings and thoughts like a ship at sea (2.67). In contrast, when we do not indulge all the things we might desire and we choose not to act from craving, possessiveness, or self-centeredness then such a person is truly contented (2.69).

When we reduce life to a competition of gain and acquisition, we become captive of a process that gets far beyond our awareness and management. The alternative is to deepen and so *expand* life beyond the narrow confines of a limited vision. Krishna posits eternity itself as the alternative vantage point, which he tells us casts a radical, new light on the meaning of relationships. Only when we see life and death in light of eternity can we appreciate how limited we become by using only the one to define the other. Put another way, when we see life only in terms of its "opposite" — death, then we become imprisoned by a vision that locks out eternity. But we need not become captive to ignorance. Instead we can *know* that there is always *more* and that more is our eternal nature.

When we cling to life as if death were the end of Consciousness or we fear death so much that we fail to live fully, then we refuse our *natural* yoke to eternity. We are free to neglect the soul, which Krishna reminds us exists even if we fail to acknowledge its presence. Yet this Self is that from which all awareness originates and on which it must rest. Yoga teaches us how to make the soul the critical element in our decision-making process. As Krishna puts it in one of his most quoted remarks, "It is unborn, eternal, everlasting, ancient: it is not slain when the body is slain" (2.20).

With an appreciation of the eternality of the soul, we will act from entirely different motives than if we define ourselves merely in terms of conditional desires. Even when we don't *feel* like we are connected to this inexhaustible resource, we can *act as if* we are. Such faith, Abhinavagupta asserts, distinguishes the wise. Even a small amount of such knowledge makes all the difference, just as even a small bit of sandalwood paste will extinguish the unwanted flame in a pot of burning oil (GAS, 2.41).

The alternative view to Krishna's would be wholly familiar to the Indian philosopher but would seem strange to us. According to the Vedic Ritualist, the only valid kinds of action follow the rigorous prescription of the ritual (*yajna*). Such a solution focuses on solving the immediate problem of performing the ritual perfectly without regard to its ultimate transcendent efficacy. For the Ritualist the perfect ritual performance is transcendence, whether or not any meaning is understood or interpretation offered. Such focus on the ritual as such, Krishna suggests, looks in the wrong and indeed in the opposite direction of our real nature, which requires us to examine carefully how our actions arise from our sense of duty, personal responsibility, and a contemplation of the nature of the Self.

Unlike the Ritualist who insists that each and every act has a separate intention and that individual acts alone create their own distinctive results, Krishna urges Arjuna to use his wits and to apply himself to practice (*yoga*) in order to participate in a far greater and more important reality, one that is "beyond

acquisition and conservation," (2.45) one that no longer clings to the phenomenal world's goals as if they *could* fulfill our deepest, inner aspirations.

To expect the world to deliver what it cannot is folly, for a limited world cannot compare to the plentitude of a genuine spiritual reality. While more classical yogins suggest that Krishna is eschewing and withdrawing from the world, the Tantric view sees Krishna inviting us to a *greater* reality. We should not reject the world but rather be careful not to become captive of it. Such captivity cannot be attributed to karma, Abhinavagupta states, since karma cannot act without our agency (GAS 4.22). *We* bind ourselves by limiting our perspectives and asserting there is only one vantage point from which to see the world and ourselves. The Self is *infinite* and so never presents merely one point of view. There is an important difference between a principled act that comes from the essence (*rasa*) of the Self and reducing our spiritual vision to but one possibility.

Tantrics are keen not to reject the material world but instead invite a more inclusive vision, namely, that *everything* we experience is part of an integrated whole and so *necessarily* spiritual. Rather than reject desire outright, Krishna wants to see our desires through the prism of an infinite rather than finite reality. Should we define ourselves by our limited desires, as the Ritualist states is precisely what qualifies us for our actions, then we will acquire nothing but limited results. We must not allow desires to define narrowly our goals but rather create goals that are not limited by the particularity of our desires.

As arcane as Krishna's argument may sound, it is nothing short of revolutionary. He is not only arguing *for* a spiritual reality that must inform our worldly acts; he is also arguing *against* those who tell us that the spiritual life exempts us from worldly responsibilities or requires us to remove ourselves from the world. The infinite is *always* present no matter what sort of experience we choose. Krishna wants us to know that the infinite is not some *thing* we achieve nor is it a particular goal we reach. If the deepest truth were attained by a particular desire then it would be nothing more than that desire. Instead he suggests a more radical solution: embrace an infinite infinity. Then our finite choices can no more limit us than those choices can define our limits. We are not bound by desires so much as free *to* desire when we don't limit the *true* object of desire. The infinite is infinitely itself and *so are we.*

Krishna wants to free us to act rather than limit our actions in the world. But such acts free us only when they support and nurture the important goals of society. If we survive the challenges and flourish, so much the better, and if we die trying, fulfilling our only real recourse to make the world better, then we will have lived for something worthwhile. But if we live in the world as if the world were only our narrow scope of desires then we do not desire *enough.* Abhinavagupta reminds us that we are limited only by the limitations we mistake for our goals (GAS, 2.45).

Krishna next explains that we are captive of our desires when we fail to become "firm in insight" (2.55) and merely make

objects out of our desires. But we have a choice. We can put aside self-centeredness and possessiveness, the very notion of desire limiting itself to limited goals, and so create a "stance on the expansive" (*braahmi sthitih*, 2.72).

By extinguishing the limited we gain access to the unlimited, not by rejecting action in the world, but by refusing to identify our goals with merely mundane desires. There is always something *more* that must inform our everyday lives. This notion that reality always offers more is the concept of Shri that, once again, takes us from a zero-sum game, a kind of poverty-consciousness that reduces our prospects, to a determination to *create* the life we can imagine. Undaunted in attitude, the yogin dares to wish for something far better than an immediate gratification or cynical fatalism.

Some, such as the Advaita Vedantin Shankara, would have Krishna teaching us to refuse all forms of desire and defining desire as the problem that yoga solves. Will this happen by his simply admonishing our desires? The Tantric, in contrast, sees Krishna urging us to learn the value of the infinite *while in this world.* With the infinite as our guide we cannot fail to understand our desires or the meaning of our actions in the world. An appeal to eternity, to the infinite reality, creates more than hope; it creates a new position for us in the world. We will acquire a whole new "stance even at the last hour" (2.72): the blowing out (*nirvana*) that is the infinite expanse (*brahman*).

Noteworthy Phrases and Interpretations

• "*.aas'caryavat pashyati kascid enam aas'caryavad vadati tathaiva caanyah./ aas'caryavad cainam anyah s'rnoti s'rutvaapy enam veda na kas'cit//*" (2.29). "It is wondrous when one sees this; Wondrous too when another proclaims this; A wonder when one hears this and even if hearing this, no one knows this." Krishna shifts the meter of this verse in order to materially slow the pace of the text again. The pause of the verse mirrors the power of his observation. It is truly remarkable, rare, and extraordinary (*aashcarya*) when a person looks to more than the accomplishments of worldliness as a measure of greatness and rarer still when one lives in the experience of a spiritual reality that informs everyday life. Living *from* a spiritual foundation – what Krishna later calls "standing" or "fixed in yoga" (*yogasthah*) – is not something we should *expect* but rather appreciate as remarkable and, indeed, rare. While there is nothing wrong with human beings in their nature (Krishna never tells us we are inherently flawed or fallen from grace and so in need of redemption), we more often carry ourselves away with the banalities of the world. Krishna urges us to take note of those who have sought something more than the predictable and prosaic and to keep their company.

• *"/traigun.yavis.ayaa vedaa nis.traigun.yo bhava"* (2.45). "The realm of the Vedas is the domain of the three gunas, be one without the three gunas..." Here is the first mention of the crucially important concept of the gunas, the threads or strands that

characterize the nature of material reality and our experience of it. Krishna here proclaims that the ritual and perhaps even the insight of the ancient Veda tells us nothing about the essence of being, but only its features, the threads that hold materiality together, the gunas. Much will be made of the gunas as the distinctive feature of material existence and especially how we can shape our experience *within* them, but here Krishna tells us that we can be *without* them. While he tells us nothing about what this means, he makes two things clear – first, that there is a knowledge and insight that is not bound to the Vedic ritual's results (more about that later) and second, that we are *spiritual* beings, not captive of forces, like the gunas, that are somehow *other* than ourselves. The power of Consciousness is unbound and unimpeded even by forces like the gunas that have such a determinative effect on how things interact in the world and how we experience them.

• "*karman.y evaadhikaaras te maa phales.u kadaacana/*" (2.47). "Your entitlement is only to the act, not at all to its results." Here Krishna provides the summary expression of karma-yoga; the key term is "entitlement" (*adhikara*). Some suggest that Krishna is dismissing all interest in results or consequences – that we should give up all notions of the "fruits" (*phala*) of action. But in the Tantric view this reasoning makes little sense: after all, Krishna is enjoining Arjuna to fight the battle and to seek victory. The Kauravas are genuinely misguided and their plan is potentially catastrophic. Could Krishna really be telling Arjuna not to care about what happens? Rather, Arjuna's

entitlement is *to act* because (1) if he does not focus on the act then he cannot accomplish it – don't be distracted by the fruit (2) if he looks to the effect without considering its cause then he will misunderstand the nature of the action. Without a clear understanding of cause leading to effect, how can acts sustain any clarity? (3) he is always inherently free (*svataantrya*) to act, unbound by the mere limitations of nature (and so unlike other kinds of sentient beings), since humans can *choose* to act but cannot control the outcomes. Choose wisely and you certainly will be able to live with the consequences: hence Krishna's focus on the qualification *for* the act rather than a preoccupation with the results. Results happen but the better question is: what drove you to act?

• "*...prasannacetaso hy aas'u buddhih. paryavatis.t.hate*" (2.65). "For one whose mind is at once serene, the decision-making awareness becomes steady." The power to become *prasanna* or serene creates a foundation for our awareness and intelligence, our *buddhi*, which stands for the capacity of Consciousness to discriminate, choose, and align itself optimally. Throughout the *Bhagavadgita* Krishna invites us to cultivate and grow our *buddhi* rather than to dissociate or abandon this power of the mind-and-heart. With a commitment to clarity we stand a good chance of making better choices provided we rest the *buddhi* on the emotional foundation of serenity.

Questions and Contemplations

• Think about these three questions and use Krishna's teachings about eternity, the healing energy of serenity, and the power of opening to grace. What does Arjuna's dilemma represent for all seekers? What does Dharma mean in a Tantric view? What compelling reasons does Krishna offer to Arjuna for taking up this battle, outwardly and inwardly?

• What role does freedom and choice play in fulfilling life's obligations? What role does personal resolve play in our decision to become yogins? Why do we need help?