

Bhagavad Gita

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Themes

- The Self and Losing One's Self
 - Attitudes in Action
- Ethical Action
 - Path to Liberation
- Society & the Individual
- (and, the themes from the Upanishads)

Synthesis and Change

- The *Bhagavad Gita* is consistent with and extends the message of the Upanishads
 - Ultimate reality (Brahman) is one and unchanging
 - The self (*atman*) is one and unchanging and identical to ultimate reality
 - Purpose of life is the self-realization of *atman* is Brahman
- *Atman* is Brahman is symbolized by God
- The divine becomes human and establishes a connection between finite and infinite
- Provides a message of hope of how ordinary persons can achieve enlightenment

Questions of the Bhagavad Gita

- What is the relationship between the ordinary, day-to-day self and *Atman*?
- How can one come to realize *Atman*?
- How can individual lives and social institutions be structured to aid in self-realization?

Upanishads and Self-Realization

- In the Upanishads, self-realization of *atman* is Brahman is achieved through complete devotion of one's thinking that *atman* is Brahman
- One's thinking is constantly focused and consumed by this thought
- There is no distinction between knower and known
- There is no room for distractions or activities other than meditation on *atman* is Brahman

Arjuna and Krishna

- The warrior Arjuna and his charioteer, Krishna, are on the eve of battle. Arjuna is reluctant to enter the battle when he realizes that the battle is against his family and friends, who will likely die in the battle. Krishna talks him out of not fighting. The resulting dialogue of the Gita is about the nature of existence, action, and right conduct.
- These questions about the nature of ultimate reality, the self, duties, and right conduct are staged within the context of Arjuna's moral decision.
- Arjuna's initial refusal to go into battle reflects his misunderstanding about the true nature of reality and the self

Krishna's Revelation

- In response to Arjuna's reluctance to enter battle, Krishna responds:
 - "One man believes he is the slayer; another believes he is the slain. Both are ignorant; there is neither slayer nor slain. You were never born; you will never die. You have never changed; you can never change. Unborn, eternal, immutable, immemorial, you do not die when the body dies. Realizing that which is indestructible, eternal, unborn, and unchanging, how can you slay or cause another to slay?"

Arjuna's Mistake

- Arjuna's mistake is due to his failure to distinguish the lower self (*jiva*) from the higher Self (*atman*).
- How can Arjuna escape this mistake and see things as they really are?
 - To prevent the mistake from happening, one must bring the *jiva*-self under control (through discipline) so it does not confuse one about one's true Self (*atman*)
 - Krishna realizes that one cannot escape the illusion immediately. One must progress through stages of awareness and understanding until one is liberated.
 - Liberation results from the pursuit of actions without being attached to results of those actions
 - Bondage results from attachment to the *jiva*-self

What Should Arjuna Do?

- Since it really doesn't matter what one does, it appears the Gita implies that any action is equally justified or unjustified
- So, what should Arjuna do? Krishna says that Arjuna should act according to his caste obligations
 - One's caste obligations trumps one's personal relationships
 - Ideally, the caste duties are meant to bring about the best conditions for all of society
 - Does Krishna's advice imply that not everyone should be governed by the same morality?

The Self and Losing One's Self

Lower Self and Higher Self

- The lower self is *jiva*
 - *Jiva* is the individual, empirical self
 - Some claim that *jiva* is a reflection of *atman*
 - Gunas are strands of energy-matter that make up things
 - Gunas condition *jiva*
 - Attachment to the empirically known gunas creates the mistake that *jiva* is the real self and not just the reflection of the real Self (*atman*)

Three Gunas

- *Jiva* is the empirical, lower self that is made of three gunas, combined in differing proportions
 - *Sattva*: energy disposing one to intellectual (mental) activity
 - *Rajas*: energy disposing one to vigorous action or passionate pursuit
 - *Tamas*: energy disposing one to inaction and laziness
- Different lower persons (*jivas*) are the result of different combinations of the three gunas
- The three gunas result in three different kinds of attachment to the lower self

Action is Unavoidable

- Upanishads state that liberation (loss of self) is achieved through the awareness that *atman* is Brahman
 - Awareness that *atman* is Brahman is achieved through meditation, self-discipline, and the elimination of distractions
 - Passivity and inaction is the best means of achieving liberation
- Krishna in the *Gita* disagrees
 - The choice not to act is a choice, inactivity is a type of activity
 - Since the *jiva* is constituted by the three gunas and the gunas are dispositions to act, then one cannot avoid action

Nonattached Action Liberates

- Liberation results from the discipline to act without being attached to the outcome or results on one's actions
 - The task of liberation is to free oneself from the gunas while still acting in cooperation with them
- One is to lose one's self in total absorption in the action
 - Experiences of "flow" in sport or other consuming activities results in optimal experiences and self-fulfillment

Flow

- Csikszentmihalyi's research on optimal experience reveals certain features of "flow"
 - Sense of enjoyment and happiness arises from the merging of awareness and action, from concentrating on the immediate action, from lack of self-consciousness, from exercising control in one's situation
 - Flow activities are autotelic: autotelic action refers to "a self-contained activity, one that is done not with the expectation of some future benefit, but simply because the doing itself is the reward." (67)
 - Flow experiences are valuable because they enrich the person

Intrinsic Motivation

- Intrinsic motivation is autotelic activity
 - When one is intrinsically motivated, one is focused on the activity itself and not on factors extrinsic to the activity
 - One is not focused on the extrinsic factors of reward, punishment, pleasure, the future, or anything extrinsic to the activity itself
 - Intrinsically motivated actions reflect the attitudes of the agent

Nonattached Action

1. Non-action is not possible.
 2. If one is to achieve self-realization, then one must have the correct attitude/motivation in action.
 3. Outcomes or results cannot change the unchangeable atman
 4. Thus, the correct attitude in action is one which is not attached to outcomes or results.
 5. Thus, Self-realization is achieved through the attitude of nonattachment to outcomes and results.
 6. Through finite pursuits and activities (love, work) one can achieve only finite nonattachment.
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7. Ultimate and permanent Self-realization results only from intrinsically motivated devotion to the infinite Brahman (Krishna)

Bringing About Self-Realization

- How must the life of the individual and the society in which the individual lives be structured to bring about Self-realization? (three part answer)
 1. Understand basic human aims
 2. Functions of society must be fulfilled by those who are most capable
 3. Each person's life should be divided into life stages with the goal of Self-liberation

Basic Human Aims

- Four basic human aims with rules corresponding to each of the aims:
 - i. Virtuous living (dharma)
 - ii. Means of life (artha)
 - iii. Enjoyment (kama)
 - iv. Self-liberation (moksha)
- There's a tension between the first three aims and the last aim-- the first three aims are focused on living a valuable life in this world, and the last aim is focused on a valuable life the the world beyond this life

Dharma

- *Dharma* refers to that which one should do because it is the right thing to do, both for oneself and society
- *Dharma* is a moral guide to action with moral duties determined by one's place in the family, one's social class, the roles one assumes in life, and one's stage in life
- *Dharma* has social ramifications in specifying how one is to act in society to aid in self-fulfillment and how one can contribute the self-fulfillment of others in society

Artha

- *Artha* refers to the things or states of affairs toward which one aims
 - Success is a common meaning
- *Artha* is expressed in some texts as the seeking of wealth
 - At the same time, the expression of artha condemns actions which deprive others of their wealth
 - *Artha* is to be pursued as long as it does not violate dharma

Kama

- *Kama* refers to the enjoyment of the objects of the five senses
 - *Dharma* and *Artha* are valuable not for their own sake but for the pleasure and enjoyment they make possible

Moksha

- *Moksha* refers to freedom of the higher Self (*atman*) from body, mind, and the world
 - Ultimate perfection is understood as the awareness of one's identity with Brahman
 - Achieving the aims of *dharma*, *artha*, and *kama* are necessary to achieve *moksha*

Social Classes

- In order to help people achieve the four basic human aims, Indian tradition structured society to assist in this goal
- Ideally, those individuals who have certain skills and talents were to work in professions that could best utilize the individual's natural ability
 - Not only would society be best served by having people in positions which suited their natural dispositions, the individual would also aid the individual in reaching his/her true self
- Varna is the fourfold class system with additional divisions within each caste
 - While the ideal is to have individuals in casts according to their natural dispositions, caste membership is determined by heredity

Life Stages

- How should an individual's life be structured so that one can make progress toward the four basic human aims and contribute to society?
 - Four life stages (*Ashrama*)
 - First stage: student stage is a time of learning about one's religious, caste, and life-stages duties. This is the stage where self-discipline is learned.
 - Second stage: householder stage is where one works to build and maintain a family and household. This stage supports the economic well-being of society. It is the stage where one is supposed to enjoy one's worldly successes.
 - Third stage: the forest-dweller stage is when one retreats from society and gives up striving for success and seeking worldly pleasures. This stage is for preparing for the fourth stage.
 - Fourth stage: stage where one seeks moksha. This stage is characterized by the renunciation of all worldly objects and desires.

Overall Argument?

1. Atman is Brahman.
 2. Atman is unchanging.
 3. If Atman does not change, then what happens in the world does not affect Atman.
 4. Non-action is impossible. One always acts and one's actions have outcomes.
 5. Thus, the outcomes of one's actions do not affect Atman (in essence, one's actions change nothing).
 6. If one's actions change nothing and one must act, then one should pursue one's action with an attitude that does not strive for or care about particular outcomes.
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7. Therefore, one should live with an attitude of nonattachment toward the outcomes of one's actions.

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