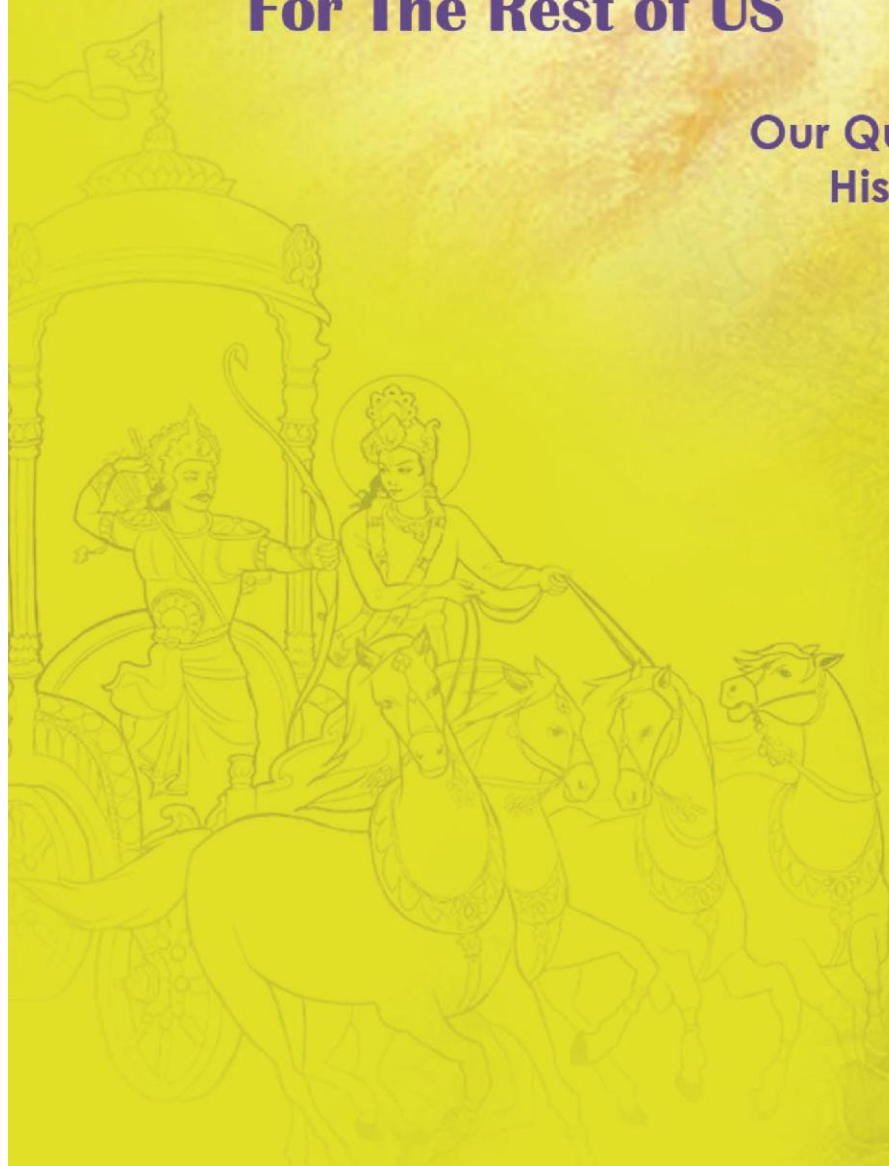


The Bhagavad Gita

For The Rest of US

**Our Questions,
His Answers**



Dr. Giridhar Boray

The Bhagavad Gita for the Rest of Us

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Foreword

The author is deeply indebted to many commentators and authors who have written or spoken extensively about the Bhagavad Gita based on the interpretation of 12th century ascetic, Sri Madhwacharya and latter day savants such as Sri Raghavendra Swamiji. The author has benefitted greatly by scholarly lectures (in the Indian language of Kannada) on the Gita by Sri Visweswara Thirtha Swamiji of Pejavar Mutt, Dr. Prabhanjnachar and Dr. Bannanje Govindacharya. The author respectfully acknowledges his initial tutelage on Sri Madhwacharya's school of thought from his father Late Prof. Krishnaswamy Rao.

The author acknowledges extensive review and comments by Mrs. Prabha Venkatesh which helped in improving the readability of a rather complex subject. The author gratefully acknowledges words of encouragement by Mr. Prasad Bhargava. Thanks to Mr. Raghavendra of Vagartha Printers for help in cover design and book formatting.

1. Introduction - Background and Battleground

Over centuries, the Bhagavad Gita has been considered an important spiritual guidebook and has influenced many thought leaders in human history. The Gita is a conversational poetry and is part of the great Indian epic 'Mahabharata', which is a story about the families of two brothers who inherit a kingdom from their father. These cousins are known as the 'Pandavas' and the 'Kauravas'. The Kaurava brothers are 100 in number and the Pandavas are 5. The Kauravas, not wanting to share the kingdom with their cousins invite them to a game of deuce. They use dubious means to defeat the Pandavas and annex their kingdom as a result of winning the bet. As per the rules of the bet, the Pandavas complete their stay outside the kingdom and come back to ask for their fair share of the kingdom so they can rule with dignity. The Kauravas refuse to honor the agreement and even deny the Pandavas a settlement of 5 villages so that they can live in peace. As the Kauravas refuse to budge an inch the Pandavas have no choice but to declare war on them to get back their fair share of the kingdom. During this period, The Lord who has incarnated as Krishna offers the cousins a choice between His army and Himself, but makes clear that He Himself would not be participating in the war. The Kauravas choose His army as Krishna would not be fighting, and the Pandavas are happy to just have Krishna on their side. Krishna takes on the role of charioteer to Arjuna's chariot (Arjuna is the middle brother among the five Pandavas).

Before the war starts, the two armies assemble on the battlefield, facing each other. At this point, Arjuna requests Krishna to place his chariot in the middle so he can get a full view of the warring forces. Since this is a war between cousins, Arjuna sees his cousins, uncles, grandfathers, great grandfathers, nephews, friends, classmates etc on both the sides. He is overcome with emotion and grief at the prospect of bloodshed among his family and friends for the sake of a kingdom. He declares his intention to renounce from fighting and let the Kauravas keep the kingdom, thus abdicating his responsibility as a prince and a warrior. It is at this stage that Krishna teaches him the 'Gita' which is structured as a series of questions from Arjuna and answers from Krishna. Krishna extols the virtues of performing one's duties regardless of the outcome and not getting attached to the action itself even when the work is difficult and unpleasant. As Krishna starts to talk to Arjuna on the virtues of doing one's work (in this case Arjuna needing to fight a rightful war), Arjuna asks a series of questions on the bigger issues of life, individual souls, the Lord Almighty, the universe, the circle of life etc, for which Krishna provide clear, unambiguous answers. He finally convinces Arjuna that his fears were unfounded and that he should fight to free the Kingdom from the Kauravas and provide a just and compassionate administration to his citizens.

At first it would appear that a battleground is hardly the place for someone to be preaching philosophy. However, many of the questions that we have in life are about choices we make, especially in challenging times. It is interesting to note that Sanskrit verses lend themselves to multiple meanings and in one interpretation, the battleground in The Gita is compared to the

human body (and mind), and the battle between Pandavas and the Kauravas is compared to the constant strife between good and evil thoughts that we encounter on a daily basis. The Gita is indeed a teaching for all of us with Arjuna acting as an example of an individual at cross roads desperately looking for guidance and support.

The Gita is one of the most widely read and commented upon spiritual works in human history. There are several excellent books on this topic in various languages. Given that the original work is in Sanskrit, most of the scholarly commentaries have been in Sanskrit or other Indian languages which are closer to Sanskrit. There are relatively few books in English on this topic. To read and comprehend many of them, one would need some training in Indian spiritual studies as many of them liberally use Sanskrit words albeit transliterated in English. It was felt that there is a need to present the key concepts of The Gita in plain English for everyday folks without using many Sanskrit words. Further, since The Gita itself is a conversational poem and is actually a series of sermons from the Lord to questions raised by prince Arjuna, it was felt that a Q&A format would be useful. This would be hugely helpful to many of us who have natural questions about the concepts in The Gita. These observations led to the development of this manuscript.

While there are many learned commentaries on the Gita written over the centuries, this author has been greatly influenced by the authoritative commentary and lucid explanations of difficult concepts by Sri Madhwacharya, the 12th century ascetic who propounded the philosophy of dualistic theism (concept of difference between the almighty Lord and individual souls at all times and places). Sri Madhwacharya's commentary has been further elaborated and summarized by later day savants such as Sri Raghavendra Swamy (17th century) and others. The key concepts appearing in this work are based on the works by these savants and many other derivative works by their followers.

The book is organized as a series of questions and answers in keeping with the spirit of the conversational poem that The Gita is. This book is not meant to be a translation of The Gita in its entirety. The Gita has 700 verses (hymns) organized into 18 chapters. The chapters in this book are organized largely based on topics rather the chapters numbered in the Gita so as to make it easy for the reader to pick and choose the topic of his/her interest.

The book chapters are organized as follows. The chapter 'Work is Worship' deals with issues related to performing one's chosen activities (or work or career), under all circumstances. Given that the genesis of The Bhagavad Gita is Prince Arjuna's attempted withdrawal from waging a rightful war and Krishna's sermon to Arjuna extolling the needs and virtues of performing one's duties, this chapter covers various questions one would have on the conduct of day to day activities. The chapter 'Mind Matters' covers various questions concerning the human mind, its voracious appetite and how to control one's mind. After all, for one to perform any activity it is important that the mind be in a settled state. The chapter titled 'The Universe – Five Fold Differences' provides a summary of the contents of the universe and the relationship among its constituents. The chapter 'Glory of God' attempts to summarize the principle attributes and characteristics of the Lord Almighty as enunciated in The Gita by the Lord Himself. The chapter titled 'Circle of Life' answers common questions on the cycle of life as experienced by living beings. The chapter 'Mother Nature' summarizes the constituents of nature that is an integral

component of the universe and how living beings interact with each other. The short chapter on 'Yoga, Meditation and Diet' summarizes some key concepts appearing in The Gita on these topics. The chapter on 'Final Frontier' is meant as a summary and a 'bottom line' on the various concepts covered in The Gita.

2. Work is Worship

The core concepts covered in this chapter are from the initial chapters of the Gita where Lord Krishna addresses critical questions raised by Arjuna who has decided to withdraw from the war. The first question that arises is ‘Why should anyone work at all (especially if the work is unpleasant)’? The Lord provides compelling arguments for one not to abstain from performing prescribed duties, however difficult or unpleasant they might be. The next question that arises is the definition of prescribed duties. How does one know the profession one needs to take on? Then we dig deeper into the constituents of any act and their classification, namely the act itself, the doer and the knowledge about the mechanics of the act. This chapter also addresses natural questions related to performing duties such as – is it possible for anyone not to do any work, how about souls who have achieved salvation, how about the Lord Himself etc. The next set of questions posed by Arjuna deal with potential alternatives for avoiding unpleasant work such as complete renunciation. How about following the path of knowledge as opposed to the path of labour? Is there a choice here? Note that the terms work, activity, duty, labour are all used to mean the same thing – the primary activity with which a person is associated in a life time.

2.1 Why Work at all?

Q: Why do we need to work, especially if it is unpleasant?

A: Everyone has a special place in this world and a special purpose in their life. People express themselves through their work which should be performed as a service to society. Even as we earn a living, we should dedicate the work to the Lord without any specific expectations on the outcome. Continuous, serial execution of naturally chosen activities over multiple life times in this manner ultimately leads one to get released from bondage and achieve eternal bliss through the express grace of the Lord. Work or labor is an integral part of the ‘cycle of life’ without which the world does not function.

Q: Different people seem to have different aptitudes and talents, and choose different professions. Who decides what will be one’s profession?

A: Everyone is born with a purpose in life. Each one of us has an innate nature and talent which largely determines the type of work or career that is best suited for us. The goal is to excel in our naturally ordained activity and serve society and the Lord to make our lives meaningful. In a broad sense, the categories of professions are classified as: Scholars, Administrators, Business professionals and Craftspeople.

Every one largely falls into one of these categories. Scholars would typically include people who normally pursue intellectual activities such as teaching, legal profession etc. Administrators include those who pursue Governance, military etc. Businessmen are those who focus on financial activities. Craftsmen are those who express their creativity with their hands etc. These classes are not hereditary but manifest based on one’s innate nature. No one group is superior to

another. Everyone regardless of their profession and abilities can and should work towards self realization by focusing on performing their stipulated duties to the best of their abilities. This should be done without expecting material returns and all the while focusing on the Lord. Further one should not abdicate his/her responsibilities if a particular task gets unpleasant or difficult. It should be noted that everyone has in their character, elements from the four identified categories but in different proportions. For example, one who is predisposed to pursuing scholarly pursuits such as teaching can also have administrative capabilities. Similarly, a business person may also have an intellectual bent of mind. Hence the categories are loose and broadly defined.

Q: Performing one's naturally chosen duties is mandatory for everyone. That said, what exactly constitutes these duties?

A: There are basically 4 categories of duties that are mandatory for everyone-

- Performing one's naturally chosen profession with sincerity and dedication
- Dedicating all activities to the Lord
- Helping the less fortunate in the society
- Observing discipline and self control in daily living

Q: What are the constituents or prerequisites of action?

A: To perform any activity, there are 3 prerequisites which are the essential components of any action. They are-

- Knowledge about the particular activity
- The act itself
- The person who is performing the action

For example, for a soldier to fight in a war the essential components are,

- the knowledge or training about fighting;
- the act of fighting itself and
- The soldier.

To understand what constitutes proper action, one needs to comprehend how the components of the action are structured.

Q: Since knowledge is identified as an essential component of any action, how is one to decide what is meant by proper or pertinent knowledge?

A: Knowledge is of 3 kinds-

- Satva or Superior knowledge
- Rajasa or Incomplete knowledge
- Tamasa or Wrong knowledge

Superior knowledge is when one is aware that an omnipotent, absolute Lord is present in all living beings (who are themselves varied and different). It is He who powers inert objects. Such knowledge will lead one to perform right actions.

Incomplete knowledge is when someone believes that the Lord who resides in different living beings and powers inert objects, has multiplicity and that He is not omnipotent and absolute. Incomplete knowledge leads to activities of no real or lasting value.

Wrong knowledge is when someone equates ordinary living beings and inert objects with the Lord, and believes in concepts not supported by experience or logic or scriptures. For example, equating ordinary souls who have naturally chosen activities with the Lord who has no such restriction is contrary to logic. Such knowledge leads one to perform wrongful acts with negative consequences.

Q: The second component of any action is the act itself. How can one know what is the right act to perform? In other words, how are the acts classified?

A: Activity is categorized three fold as follows:

- Superior Activity
- Ordinary Activity
- Negative Activity

Superior Activity is that which is performed for the right purpose and offered to the Lord without any attachment or expectation on the outcome.

Ordinary Activity is that which is performed egoistically with specific expectation on the outcome and often conducted with great effort. Even charitable activities when performed with great pomp and show are classified as ordinary activities. Such activities do not help a seeker on the path to salvation.

Negative Activity is that which is performed with delusion, without realizing the consequences, often performed beyond one's capacity and causing hurt or harm to others. Such an activity has negative effects.

Q: The last component of any act is the person doing the act or the 'doer'. What are the different types of doers?

A: There are again three classes of doers, namely, Superior doers, ordinary doers and inferior doers.

- Superior doers perform their naturally chosen activities with enthusiasm, with positive attitude, without ego and do not expect any specific outcome (except that of pleasing the Lord). They are not perturbed by perceived success or failure of their acts. Such doers are favorites of the Lord.
- Ordinary doers perform activities expecting recognition, and rewards and are often miserly in spending time and effort. They are also greatly influenced by the perceived success or failure of their acts.
- Inferior doers often approach work with laziness, contempt, without thinking of the Lord and are afraid of failure. Such doers never accomplish anything of lasting substance.

Q: With what intentions should one perform naturally chosen duties (work)?

A: In general, one should perform naturally chosen duties without expecting ordinary pleasures or objects. Only God has the ability to grant the fruits for labor performed. One should not aspire for worldly pleasures. However, it is perfectly acceptable to desire loftier goals such as God's grace and to seek knowledge, devotion and renunciation from worldly bonds.

Q: Is it possible for anyone to give up all activities?

A: No. Even breathing is an activity to stay alive. So, how one can give up all activities? The issue is the choice of voluntary activities where one needs to exercise sound judgment.

Q: Are the souls who have already attained eternal bliss, bound by any activities?

A: No, but they act out of choice.

Q: The Almighty God doesn't have any stipulated activities? But why does He still perform various activities?

A: It is His nature to perform activities, and incarnate Himself many times to serve as a role model to other souls. Else, no one will do any work and also will not have a way of distinguishing between doing right things, wrong things and not doing anything at all.

Q: If the goal of performing naturally chosen activities is to achieve everlasting salvation and not temporary worldly pleasure, why do the scriptures detail rituals meant for achieving temporary treasures?

A: For many people who are not in the path of performing naturally chosen duties but are wasting time on pursuing sensual pleasures, it will be difficult to change overnight to a mode of performing duties with loftier goals. For them, an intermediate path is to perform activities to appease various deities to achieve temporary treasures. Even these fruits are in fact granted by the Lord Himself although they appear to be routed via the other deities. Once a person develops the habit of performing these naturally chosen duties and rituals, it will be easier to move towards performing activities with focus on loftier goals.

Q: So how should one interpret the scriptures such as the Vedas?

A: Merely following the procedures indicated in the Vedas and performing various rituals with expectation of worldly pleasures or heavenly treasures in the afterlife only yields temporary results. One should not merely pluck flowers from a tree, but wait for the flower to blossom into a tasty fruit for longer lasting result. Similarly, performing activities indicated in the scriptures without any expectation on the outcome and dedicating all actions to the supreme Lord will put one on the road to eternal bliss.

Q: Even if one does not intend to commit sinful acts, what makes one do it often?

A: In one word, the answer is 'Desire'. Among the six enemies that constantly attack individual souls, desire is the most dangerous entity. The surest way to avoid repeatedly committing sinful acts is to control or conquer desire, which is easier said than done. Even learned people and those held in high esteem in the society are not immune to mundane desires, which often befall them. Desire is a quality that is never fully satiated. For example, desire for tasting of good food can be fulfilled by consuming such foods, but in a few days (or hours), that desire is back asking for more.

Q: What makes one forget any spiritual knowledge learned?

A: Desire (or lust) clouds a person's mind and prevents any spiritual knowledge from taking root. Just as fire is clouded by smoke, a mirror is blemished with dust and an embryo is held captive in the womb, desire similarly clouds and imprisons the mind. The three examples here refer to the extent of control by desire experienced by the three categories of people – noble souls, ordinary souls and evil souls. Smoke covering a fire can be easily warded off by blowing

wind, similar to the temporary loss of control over the mind experienced by noble souls. A mirror blemished by dust requires some effort for cleaning, similar to the plight of ordinary souls who are under the spell of desire. An embryo held captive in a womb cannot escape from the womb, signifying the extent of control desire has on an evil person's mind. In all these cases, controlling the mind by focusing on the Lord is the only way to rid the mind of corruption by desire (or lust).

Q: What happens if someone has been on a wrong path going after sensual objects, but somehow has developed devotion to God?

A: Once that person starts focusing on God, he/she will slowly be rid of bad habits and move towards a more pious life. Basically by focusing on God, one is able to replace negative thoughts in the mind with positive attributes. This helps settle the mind and move it towards more positive thoughts and activities which leads to a more fulfilling life.

Q: The Sanskrit word 'Karma' appears in many places in The Gita in different contexts. What is the meaning of this term?

A: As with many other Sanskrit words, 'Karma' has different meanings depending on the context in which it is used. The most common meanings for 'karma' are as follow:

- Act or action. For example 'Karma Yoga' means 'Path of Action'
- Destiny or Fate which is actually 'Consequence of prior action(s)'. We often hear phrases such as 'good karma' which actually means 'pleasant consequence which is a result of good deeds previously performed'. Similarly for 'bad karma'
- Helping out those in need is an obligatory act just as paying taxes to the Government is ('kar' in Sanskrit also means taxes)

Q: What type of offerings does one need to make to please the Lord?

A: The Lord who owns the universe has no need for any offerings from anyone. Those desirous of pleasing the Lord make offerings in many ways:

- Some people meditate on the Lord as a form of offering -
- Some focus on working diligently in their naturally chosen profession, without any material expectation, with their mind focused on the Lord as their offering
- Some focus on controlling indulgence in sensual pleasures as their offering
- Some donate time and resources to charities
- Some focus on gaining spiritual knowledge and then spreading the same
- Some focus on breath control in order to help them minimize their eating (eat just enough to sustain the body)

In summary, activities that society recognizes as selfless endeavors performed with some element of sacrifice of pleasures are considered as offerings accepted by the Lord.

Q: How does one achieve eternal bliss and freedom from the cycle of births and deaths?

A: One should perform naturally chosen duties without expecting worldly fruits and simultaneously focus on the Lord through various means such as meditation, listening to Lord's glories etc. This leads one to a clear and pious mind which allows the percolation of pure, spiritual knowledge which ultimately leads one to the state of bliss. The one who achieves this is called 'Sthitha Prajna' or an 'equi poised person' or a 'calm person'.

Q: How does one identify such as ‘calm person’? Is it by the way he/she walks, talks, sits?

A: A person with pure mind devoid of any blemishes or desire for worldly objects is a ‘calm person’. The second question is rhetorical. The real question is why does such as ‘calm person’ need to do any activity as he/she is already on the way to attaining eternal bliss? It turns out that everyone, including those who have already attained eternal bliss is always performing some activity. The Lord Himself is continuously performing benevolent activities. That is in the nature of things.

2.2 Path of Knowledge v/s Path of Labour

Q: Which is superior: Karma Yoga (Path of Labour) or Jnana Yoga (Path of Knowledge)?

A: Both are required by a seeker who has to perform naturally chosen duties (Path of Labour) while having the requisite knowledge in performing the action (Path of Knowledge). Merely following the path of labour without proper knowledge may lead to temporary fruits at best. Similarly, merely acquiring knowledge (Path of Knowledge) without actually implementing the tasks (Path of Labour) will not help one achieve salvation. However the proportion of time traversed on the path of labour or the path of knowledge may be different for different individuals based on their innate nature. Thus, a Karma Yogi is someone who by nature is more inclined to be in the path of labour while Jnana Yogi is one who is more inclined to be in the path of knowledge.

Q: Why should one indulge in actions (labour) which may entail hurting others? An example would be a warrior fighting a war which could result in injury and death to opponents. Why not focus only on studies of scriptures, meditation and perform minimum activities required for survival?

A: There are broadly two ways to cross the ocean of life and reach deliverance. Those who are predisposed to intellectual pursuits often pursue professions such as teaching etc, and those who are inclined towards physical activities engage in professions such as armed forces etc. The former are ‘Jnana Yogis’ and the latter are ‘Karma Yogis’. Suffice it to say that Jnana Yogis also have to partake in Karma Yoga and Karma Yogis also have to partake in acquisition of knowledge. For soldiers, participating in a just war is a naturally chosen duty and their way to eternal glory is by carrying out their duties in a just way without getting attached to the activities. Such professionals cannot abdicate their naturally chosen work which at times might be unpleasant. Indeed they cannot take shelter solely in intellectual pursuits and hope to achieve salvation. In fact, the preferred way for such professionals would be to focus on their work and pursue intellectual studies when possible and at all times dedicate their work to God.

2.3 Knowledge Management

Q: How does one go about acquiring right spiritual knowledge and manage the knowledge so obtained?

A: Among all the objects that one can find in the universe, knowledge is the most important and useful treasure that helps one to cross the ocean of life and reach the ultimate goal of salvation.

- It is important to seek the right teacher and gain the teacher’s confidence in order to ensure error free learning
- Learning is a lifelong activity

- Mere acquisition of spiritual knowledge in and of itself is of no use, unless one puts the knowledge to proper use and leads a life with conviction based on the teachings learned
- The seeker also has an obligation to help spread the knowledge learned so that others in society can benefit from the same

2.4 Renunciation v/s Sacrifice

Q: What is the difference between ‘Renunciation’ (Sanyasa) and ‘Sacrifice’ (tyaga)? Which is superior? They appear similar.

A: Sanyasa or Renunciation is renouncing any activity that may result in temporary pleasures. For example, practicing fasting as a way to control excessive intake of food is a type of renunciation. Another example is controlling anger. Sacrifice or ‘tyaga’ refers to a situation where one does not per se renounce activities but performs those activities without expressly expecting any specific outcome (except the Grace of God). While both these are recommended approaches for a seeker, the latter is superior as one has to perform naturally chosen activities, but do so without expectation on outcome. An even better approach is a combination of the two, where a seeker performs naturally chosen activities, without expectation of outcome and at the same practices self control by means of renunciation.

The former is normally practiced by ascetics who have given up worldly life and the latter is the recommended path for most other people. In general, a seeker needs to incorporate both these aspects in all activities.

Q: Are there degrees of renunciation?

A: Renunciation is a generic word. There are 3 levels of renunciation, namely, superior, ordinary and inferior renunciation.

Superior Renunciation is when someone performs naturally chosen duties without expecting any material outcome. This is obviously the best kind and leads one to salvation.

Ordinary Renunciation is when someone avoids performing naturally chosen duties if they are unpleasant, harmful to others etc. (ex: a soldier not wanting to fight even a just war for fear of hurting the enemy). This type of renunciation does not help someone looking for salvation.

Inferior Renunciation is when someone refuses to perform naturally chosen duties for reasons such as laziness, ignorance etc. This leads to darkness and misery.

2.5 Takeaways

- ✓ Everyone born in this world has a purpose and a naturally chosen vocation
- ✓ No one should abdicate their responsibilities but should discharge them with diligence even if they are unpleasant
- ✓ Faithful discharge of responsibilities without expecting any outcome while focusing on the Lord will put one on a path towards eternal bliss
- ✓ Like the Lord, liberated souls continue to be active even though they have no specific task because it is their nature to do so. They act to set an example to other souls.

3. Mind Matters

In this chapter, questions covered are centered on various issues associated with the human mind. As everyone knows, the mind is the most complex sense organ and it often works in mysterious ways. It is said that The Gita is as much a psychological manual as it is a spiritual guide. It provides a comprehensive explanation for complex human behavior and more importantly equips one with the understanding of workings of the mind which eventually helps in developing counter strategies to manage mind matters. Gita clearly explains how the mind moulds our behavior and spells out specific ways to modulate the workings of the mind. The complex relationship between the mind, the intellect and the external sense organs are beautifully explained. Finally, the aspects of ‘memory’ an essential temporal component of the mind are explained.

3.1 Impact of Mind on Human Behaviour

Q: Why are the sense organs (eyes, ears, nose, tongue and skin) difficult to control?

A: All sense organs constantly crave for pleasure and are never fully satisfied. For example, the tongue is very difficult to control as it constantly craves for tasty food. As the body ages, most sense organs lose their effectiveness gradually (eye sight weakens, hearing weakens etc), but the tongue remains fully active till the very end. Even when someone is unable to digest food, the tongue still craves for taste. The only solution for keeping the tongue under control is via the mind which in turn can only be truly stabilized by intense practice and the grace of God. Likewise, the skin which is constantly craving for touch is also very difficult to control as it pervades the entire body. Even if someone is handicapped with loss of sensitivity on a limb, the skin in other parts of the body still craves for touch.

Q: How do sense organs lead one astray? Is there a method to the madness?

A: Excessive indulgence in sensual activities leads one to be shackled by the so called ‘six enemies’, namely lust, anger, greed, attachment, arrogance and jealousy. The typical procedure for the six enemies to control a human being is as follows:

- Mind comes in contact with sense pleasures by constant exposure
- Mind develops attachment to sense pleasures
- Attachment leads to desire to satiate the thirst
- Anger sets in when such desire is not fulfilled
- Anger clouds mind’s judgment
- Clouded mind is unable to differentiate between right and wrong things leading to errors in judgment
- Error in judgment leads to intellectual failure
- Intellectual failure leads to destruction

Q: How can one then avoid getting shackled by the ‘six enemies’ and get liberated?

A: The first step would be to immerse oneself in performing naturally chosen duties without expecting any gratification. (The analogy quoted is ‘detachment like drops of water on lotus flower’. Water drops can never stick on the petals of the lotus, and in the same way the mind should never get attached to any work or its outcome). In parallel, meditate on the Lord, which helps to calm the mind. A calm mind is a fertile platform for gathering noble thoughts which allows the mind to grasp spiritual studies. This leads to mental equanimity and a strong mind can withstand and repel the attack of the six enemies and move towards God.

3.2 Relationship between Sense Organs, Mind and Intellect

Q: How does desire arise in a person?

A: Sense organs such as eyes, ears etc, the mind and the intellect together determine the need and extent of desire in a person which often clouds the mind’s clarity of thought and leads a person astray.

Q: How does desire lead a person astray?

A: The addictive attribute called desire finds home in a person’s sense organs, mind and intellect. The external sense organs are the first entities which by way of perception creates desire in a person. For example: the desire to taste food upon seeing or smelling tasty food. Once a person yields to the desires of the sense organs, such desires takes root in the mind and gets stronger. Once this stage is reached, the intellect whose job it is to reason and rationalize issues develops the conviction that the particular desire is indeed worth pursuing and fulfilling. At this stage, it is too late to control the desire which would have taken over the person. Any obstacles in fulfilling these desires result in anger which causes one to commit undesirable and dangerous activities. So, it is better to handle desire at the first stage itself by minimizing or avoiding initial contact.

Q: How can one control or conquer desire?

A: The sensory organs (eyes, ears etc), the mind and the intellect are involved in the activities of perceiving, capturing, distilling and storing knowledge. The sensory organs, mind and intellect themselves are inert objects but are activated and controlled by various deities. The Almighty God is the controller of all deities. The deity who controls the intellect is superior to and more powerful than the deity who controls the mind which itself is superior to the deities who control the sense organs. Thus, to control the sense organs (which actually implement any activity desired by a person), it is necessary to control the intellect which can then control the mind. Since God is the controller of all in the universe the surest way to control desire is to focus the mind on God and perform one’s naturally chosen task without any mundane expectations. This helps one to control and conquer desire.

Q: What different practical ways can one follow in order to gain control over the sense organs so they do not lead one astray?

A: There are three ways that one can follow to help gain control over the sense organs. For maximum effect, one can simultaneously follow all three ways. Firstly, it is important to minimize or avoid indulgence in activities which feed the senses. For example, to gain control over excessive eating, one should resort to periodic fasting. Secondly, one should indulge in spiritual activities which prevent the mind from wanting to indulge in activities to please the sense organs. The third and most important way is to surrender completely to the Lord with full

confidence that He will help one overcome addiction to sensual pleasures. It goes without saying that a combination of these three ways will surely help one gain firm control over the sense organs.

3.3 Mind Control

Q: While it is easy to say that one should control the desire for sense objects, how can one do that in real life?

A: Slowly and in steps. The key to controlling the desire for sense pleasures is to control the mind. This is done by slowly withdrawing the mind from thinking about sense objects and replacing those thoughts with the focus on God. Scriptures give the example of a tortoise that can withdraw its four limbs and head into its shell with ease. Similarly, the learned ones are able to withdraw their five sense organs inwards (i.e., focus them within and not get attached or perturbed by external stimuli). Over time, one can experience self control and such a person ends up seeing God in all beings and in all things and will have surrendered to the Lord unconditionally.

Q: Mind is an extremely difficult entity to control as it is always wandering. How then can one focus continuously on God and meditate, as the mind will invariably stray towards extraneous thoughts:

A: While sense organs have limited scope, mind has an almost infinite area of coverage and is constantly wandering. But it can be controlled and moderated by sheer practice as evidenced by many great souls whom we have seen in human history. There are abundant examples in scriptures also. There is no short cut, but a sincere effort goes a long way.

Q: If someone is sincere in intentions, but is unable to control the wavering mind and hence unable meditate on the Lord and gather spiritual knowledge, what then happens to that person? Is that soul destined to fail?

A: No. Anyone with sincere intentions but unable to focus the mind will not experience negative consequences. Such souls will in future births be born in better circumstances with easier access to more spiritual education and knowledge and move towards activities leading to a more fulfilling life.

Q: How does one control the desire to eat delicious foods? Does fasting help?

A: No. Fasting only weakens sense organs and their ability to enjoy food, but does not itself help quench the desire for tasting food, which can only be controlled by the mind. So, it goes back to controlling the mind. Ultimately, it is only by the grace of God that one can hope to control the sense organs.

3.4 Memory Management

Q: What role does memory play in mind control?

A: A very important aspect of the mind is memory which has the capacity to store events from the past and recall them based on need. Memory is a capability that the Lord has given to living beings to help them in their conduct of daily life and their spiritual journey. The importance of memory in one's life cannot be overstated. One cannot even imagine how life would be if there

was no such thing as memory. Memory (or Smriti in Sanskrit) is a direct mental perception of the past. The past can be just the previous second or an event that happened years back. Events recalled by memory as just as valid and true as events currently witnessed by the sense organs.

The Gita teaches us memory management which is an important and integral part of mind control. In general, happiness or sadness caused due to an event that occurred in the past should have no bearing on our current situation. Yet many of us 'live in the past', unable to let go of past events. True memory management means that one should capitalize on the beneficial aspects of memory and discard the harmful aspects. This means one should not dwell on 'what should have been' based on previous choices made in life as we cannot alter those. Of course, positive aspects of memory such as remembering the lessons learnt in life, memorizing spiritual texts for later recall etc are extremely beneficial and help one lead a purposeful life. Memory is thus a vital tool that the Lord equips living beings with and it is up to us to put it to good use.

3.5 Takeaways

- ✓ The sense organs, the intellect and the mind together instill desires in humans and control them
- ✓ Mind is extremely difficult to control and is always wandering
- ✓ The only way to control and moderate the mind is by constant focus on the Lord which only comes through practice and patience
- ✓ No sincere effort in controlling the mind will go unrewarded. It may take many lifetimes for a soul to achieve the state of self realization
- ✓ Memory management is an important aspect of mind control and involves capitalizing on the positive aspects of memory such as recall of learnt lessons and discarding of dwelling on past negative experiences

4. The Universe – Five Fold Differences

This chapter relates to questions on the Universe, its constituents and the relationship amongst them. The physical universe has always been a puzzle to humankind in terms of its evolution and workings. The Bhagavad Gita provides a convincing rationale not only for the evolution of universe but also the reason for its existence. Gita provides a description of the components of the universe and how the inert matter is related to sentient matter (living beings) and how the Lord interacts with these elements. The concepts of time and space as they relate to the constituents of the universe are also covered.

4.1 Constituents of the Universe

Q: What constitutes the Universe?

A: The Lord describes the universe using the analogy of a tree, in particular, the Banyan tree. The ‘Tree of Universe’ is broadly comprised of the following constituents:

- The Lord Almighty as the foundational basis much like the earth which supports the tree and which provides the nutrients (‘life’) for the tree to exist and grow
- Lakshmi, the consort of the Lord who controls all nature is analogous to the root of the tree
- The five primary elements of nature (earth, water, ether, fire, air) are the equivalent of the trunk of the tree
- The individual souls are like the secondary branches of the tree
- The objects of sensory consumption are represented by the twigs
- The scriptures (Vedas) are represented by the leaves
- The results of actions performed by living beings are like the fruits of the tree

Q: What is the significance of comparing the universe to a banyan tree?

A: The banyan tree is an apt comparison to the universe in many respects:

- The tree is (almost) everlasting without natural destruction just like the universe
- The earth which supports the tree is in some sense comparable to the Lord as it is the sole supporter of the tree and is independent of all other components of the tree. Even if the fruits, leaves, twigs, branches of the tree are cut, as long the roots are healthy and on solid ground, the tree will emerge again
- The tree is continuously transforming itself in the same manner as a running stream of water with new leaves replacing old leaves just as souls take on new physical bodies upon exiting old bodies

Q: How are the constituents of the ‘Tree of Universe’ related to each other?

A: The Lord who is signified by the supporting earth in the analogy is supreme. The Lord’s consort Lakshmi who is the controller of Mother Nature represented by the roots of the tree is dependent on the Lord. All other individual souls, represented by the secondary branches of the

tree are dependent on the tree and indeed the ground on which the tree stands signifying dependence on Lakshmi and the Lord. The twigs which denote the objects of desire are likewise temporary in nature. The individual souls utilize their sense organs in their physical bodies and pursue the objects of desire and reap the appropriate fruit. The leaves represent the scriptures which are available for the individual beings to utilize for guidance in pursuing actions leading to longer lasting fruit ('eternal bliss'). It is said that during the dissolution of the universe, the Lord will be resting on the leaf of a Banyan tree. This is a symbolic analogy to indicate the fact that scriptures such as the Vedas, being eternal continue to exist even during the dissolution of the universe.

4.2 Fivefold Differences

Q: What are the 'fivefold differences'?

A: The triumvirate making up the universe, namely – The Lord Almighty, the individual souls and the inert nature are distinctly different as follows:

- The Lord is supreme and different from individual souls
- The Lord is supreme and different from inert nature
- The individual souls are different from inert nature
- The individual souls are different from each other
- The various objects in inert nature are different from each other

What this implies is that the individual souls retain their identity even after achieving final salvation and continue to be guided and supported by the Lord. They do not 'merge' with the Lord.

Q: Are the individual souls ever subject to destruction?

A: No. Just like the Lord, the individual souls have always existed and will always do. They are not subject to destruction from any of nature's implements such as weapons, fire, water, wind etc.

Q: How does the Lord interact with individual souls?

A: It is said that the relationship between the Lord and the individual souls is like the one between an object and its image in the mirror. The image in the mirror is completely dependent on the object for its existence; likewise individual souls are powered by the Lord who gives them the physical bodies to express themselves to enable them to move towards redemption. It is said that the Lord resides in every living being in five forms (identical powers but apparently distinct) controlling and directing every aspect of a living being namely – the physical body, the energy centers, the mind, the intellectual faculties and the innate self with the ability to experience pure bliss. The five forms of the Lord are named as – Aniruddha, Pradyumna, Samkarshana, Vasudeva and Narayana. The Lord, who sports seemingly contradictory characteristics such as simultaneously having an atomic form and an infinite sized form resides in living beings in these five forms each one of them being complete and full of infinite, auspicious attributes.

An even more powerful illustration to explain the relationship between the Lord and the individual souls is through the example of a rainbow. Raindrops receive the Sun's light and due to refraction result in a splendid, colorful, vibrant rainbow. Likewise, the individual souls which have innate capabilities find expression by the grace of the Lord. Unlike the mirror, which is a

passive object, a raindrop is an active agent which receives the Sun's light and emits a glorious rainbow. Hence this is a better simile to illustrate the dependence of individual souls to the Lord.

Q: What are the roles of the individual souls, the Lord and the inert nature in any activity that we see in the universe?

A: Every activity that we perceive in the universe can be attributed ordinarily to an individual being or inert object and most importantly to the Lord. For example, when we see a running stream of water, the motion is due to the will of the Lord, while the action itself is performed by the river (an inert object). When someone writes an article using a paper and a pen, the act of writing is performed by the pen on the paper, the movement of the pen is performed by the person who has the intention of writing the article and the power for that motion is granted by the Lord. In summary, the inert objects involved in any act are mere mechanical devices; the individual soul involved in an act expresses the intention of performing the act, but is not independently able to implement the action. The supreme Lord is the ultimate, independent authority who powers all activities in the universe.

Q: God as the regulating authority controls all actions of individual souls, how can one ascribe fruits of good or evil deeds to the individual souls as they seem to have no say in their actions?

A: The Lord enables individual souls to pursue a course of action chosen by the souls themselves. The souls have the freedom to pursue a course of action which is influenced by the innate nature of the soul and accumulated past karmas. Hence the individual soul which exercises its right to pursue a course of action is responsible for that action, although the action itself is executed by the Lord on behalf of that soul. It should be noted that the Lord being blemish less harbors no ill-will towards nor shows any special favours to anyone. He merely executes the actions on behalf of the souls based on their free will. The individual souls based on their innate nature have varying levels of good and evil. This explains the constant struggle we find between good and evil in our actions and the dilemma we face daily. By constantly focusing on the Lord and performing one's naturally chosen duties faithfully without expecting any fruits, one can hope to overcome evil forces and maximize the content of goodness and achieve redemption.

4.3 Reality of the Universe

Q: How real is the universe?

A: Very. Just as the Lord Almighty and the individual souls are eternal and real, the universe is also real. However, the material world and its contents continuously undergo changes, but they are real in every sense of the word. Many objects in the world may be temporary in nature, but they are nonetheless real and the experience one feels during interaction with these objects can never be negated. Many experiences in life may fade away over time and hence appear illusory, but nonetheless the fact that the experience occurred and had impact on the person cannot be disputed. The universe is hence real, eternal and always under the control of the Lord. The very fact that the Lord has Himself has declared that He originates and controls the eternal cycle of creation, sustenance and destruction of the universe is proof enough about the reality of the universe.

4.4 Concept of Space, Time and Spoken Words

Q: What are the characteristics of space, time and spoken words?

A: Space and time are eternal, cannot be destroyed and are self supporting because of the will of the Lord. Further, space and time are infinitely divisible. Words are composed of basic alphabets which are 51 in number. These 51 alphabets are also eternal and pervade space and time. They survive every cycle of creation and destruction of the universe. Words which are formed by certain combination of alphabets are, in general temporary. However, Scriptures (Vedas) are eternal and are not composed by anyone. Every word and indeed every letter is an epithet of the Lord (11-18). Further, every sound made or heard in the universe primarily sings in praise of the Lord (and the fact that we use sounds to express our thoughts and feelings is secondary). It is said that even the sound of lizard's chirping is a sound expressing the amazement at the glory of the Lord. It is interesting to note that even in human conversations, despite the plethora of words and languages available for us to express our thoughts, in times of absolute amazement (or great shock) we resort to making a chirping noise like lizards!

Q: How do the entities in the universe compare on the basis of time, space and associated characteristics?

A: The Lord pervades all time and space and has infinite auspicious attributes. The individual souls are also eternal and hence pervade all time, but they have limited presence in space and have limited attributes. The physical bodies of the individual souls (during any specific birth) have limited presence in space, time and have limited attributes. The basic letters (51) from which any word can be composed are eternal in time and space, but have limited attributes. The implication of the differences outlined here is that the Lord is independent and supreme and controls the functioning of the universe and hence every action that we perform must be to please Him as He alone can grant us freedom from the cycle of births and deaths.

4.5 Takeaways

- ✓ The five fold differences narrate the difference among the constituents of the universe, namely, the Lord Almighty, individual souls and inert matter, with the Lord being the supreme controller of all
- ✓ The individual souls adorn many physical bodies in its journey towards the final abode and these physical bodies undergo changes and perish. The soul itself is indestructible, has always existed, will always exist and is always under the control of the Lord
- ✓ The universe is real, has always been and will always be. The state of its constituents such as inert nature is subject to change during the course of its evolution (and destruction)!

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5. The Glory of God

It is impossible for anyone to fully describe the nature and glory of the Lord. In fact the best description of the Lord is that 'He is beyond comprehension'. However, some of the aspects of the Lord find expression in the Gita and they are covered in this chapter. Gita also points to the source of divine knowledge and the methodology to gain true knowledge through which one can attempt self realization. The divine presence of the Lord's consort, Sri Lakshmi (or Maya) also finds elucidation in the Gita. An attempt is made in this chapter to address the above mentioned issues.

5.1 The Lord's Infinite Auspicious Attributes

Q: How does one describe God?

A: As God possesses infinite, auspicious attributes, it is impossible for anyone to completely describe God's glory. Some of the important attributes of God are:

- God is supreme and always superior to all other souls, and inert matter in all of the universe at all times
- God has no beginning, no end and has always existed and will always exist
- God pervades all of the universe at all times
- God resides in all souls and is the source of life and energy in all objects in all of the universe at all times
- God's attributes are infinite and each attribute is infinite both in content and extent
- God has infinite forms and each one is complete in all sense
- God possesses seemingly contradictory attributes such as being smaller than the smallest object in the universe and also larger than the largest object in the universe
- God is perfect and without defects
- God is absolutely independent
- God has unlimited powers (Omnipotent)
- God is present everywhere (Omnipresent)
- God knows everything (Omniscient)
- God has no negative qualities such as hatred, partiality etc
- God is completely independent and controls everything in the universe
- God is always just and right
- All letters, all sounds, all words refer to God only
- Even souls who have attained final deliverance (Nirvaana) are under the control of God
- God can advance or retard time at His will. He can expand or shrink space at His will
- God creates the universe, sustains it and destroys it in an eternal cycle
- God offers protection to individual souls without any expectation of return

Q: How can the same Lord take on different forms simultaneously, each supposedly being complete in all respects?

A: This is explained through an attribute called Visesha (a differentiating or a particularizing agency). The concept of Visesha provides a philosophical framework for explaining the relationship between an object and its attributes. Visesha performs the function ordinarily performed by difference enabling us to differentiate. For example, when we perceive a mango, we also perceive its colour and size. However, the colour and size are not different from the mango. There is identification of colour and size with the mango as we do not perceive colour alone or size alone. The existence of the attribute Visesha allows us to distinguish between the colour and the size which are actually identical with the mango. Similarly, the Lord and His attributes (and forms) are identical with His self and with the concept of Visesha one is able to differentiate Lord from His actions and attributes.

Q: Can one truly understand God completely?

A: No. One in a thousand makes an attempt to truly understand God and among them, one in a thousand gets some understanding. No one can completely comprehend God's infinite attributes.

5.2 The Source of Divine Knowledge

Q: Where can one find information on God's attributes?

A: The Lord is knowable through the scriptures ('Vedas'). Since, the Lord has infinite auspicious attributes, it also means that the scriptures are all infinite, and have no bounds. In the same vein, since the Lord has neither beginning nor end, this also means that the scriptures also have no beginning and no end. This further leads one to conclude that the Vedas are hence not composed by anyone, but have always existed, will always exist and are an infinite series. Even though only a finite amount of infinite Vedas are available, the knowledge about the Lord that can be found in them is still correct, but never complete.

Q: Individual souls experience many births. God Almighty also incarnates Himself many times? What are the differences in these rebirths?

A: God reincarnates Himself at will, while individual souls are not aware of their various births and have no choice in the form they are born as it is naturally chosen by God. Individual souls get a physical body by coming in contact with primordial matter which is controlled by God. The Almighty appears in human form many times, but does not Himself have such a physical body as He has a transcendental body, which is beyond ordinary nature.

5.3 The Lord's Activities

Q: It is evident that God reincarnates Himself at different times in history. On what basis does He choose the time to reincarnate and for what purpose?

A: While God does not need any reason or time to reincarnate Himself, in general, he appears in human forms whenever there is significant diminishing of righteous forces and ascent of unjust and wrongful influences in the society. Often He incarnates in a human looking form and leads a life by example to act as a role model for the population. Just as a mother who is teaching walking to her baby walks very slowly to allow the child to learn, similarly the Lord appears in human form and acts similarly to set an example to mankind. In some incarnations such as Lord

Rama, He sets an example for others by showing the way to lead an ideal life. In other incarnations, such as Lord Krishna, He focuses on teaching to guide people on ways to lead an ideal life. As Krishna, the Lord taught Bhagavad Gita to Prince Arjuna (and to the rest of humanity) and also taught Uddhava Gita to another Prince called Uddhava.

Q: Does the Lord incarnate Himself at specific predetermined times?

A: No. The Lord Himself decides the right time to appear on this earth to provide guidance to people. In many instances, the Lord instructs other deities such as Vayu, Indra, Agni etc, to incarnate themselves and guide the people based on need. Only in extreme circumstances where there is a complete breakdown of morals in the society and very high influence of evil forces threatening the very existence of righteous forces, the Lord reincarnates Himself to set the house in order.

Q: Does God ever get attached to any of His objects of creation?

A: Just as the sky which is omnipresent does not alter its characteristics by coming in contact with physical objects, God creates all objects in the universe, and gives bodies to souls but does not Himself get attached or entangled with any of His creations.

5.4 The Lord's Consort

Q: Is there any other soul which has as much pervasiveness and has as much powers as God in all of universe?

A: The Lord's consort (referred to as Lakshmi) is always with the Lord at all times and in all places and hence is as pervasive as the Lord, but she also operates under the control of the Lord. Just like the Lord, Lakshmi also has a transcendental, non physical body. The entire universe is supported by Lakshmi, who derives her powers from the Lord.

5.5 The Universe of Individual Souls

Q: How many souls are there in the universe and how are they organized?

A: There are infinite numbers of souls in the universe who are granted different physical bodies by the Lord at different times to enable them to move towards self realization. All these souls are under the control of the Lord and His consort Lakshmi. The souls differ in their learning capacities, knowledge, their prescribed duties etc. The supreme among them is the God of Life, Vayu Deva, who controls breathing in all living organisms through the powers granted to him by the Lord.

5.6 Takeaways

- ✓ The Almighty Lord has infinite, auspicious attributes and the human mind is not capable of comprehending His greatness
- ✓ One has to resort to the scriptures such as the Vedas to get some idea of the Lord's attributes
- ✓ The scriptures whose primary purpose is to describe the Lord are infinite, have no beginning or end and are not composed by anyone. They always existed, and always will

- ✓ The Lord's consort, Sri Lakshmi has always been and will always be with the Lord at all times and in all places
- ✓ There are infinite individual souls moving at different velocities in their quest towards self realization

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6. The Circle of Life

Questions about the origin of the universe and its age have always fascinated human beings. While most people find it easier to accept the eternality of souls and also that of the Lord, the origins and age of the physical universe continue to confound mankind. Strong views have been expressed by camps belonging to either creation or evolution. Gita teaches us that life is actually a sequence of cycles within cycles forming a perfect tapestry. Aspects of science and theology co-exist and work with each other to reveal the secrets of ‘evolutionary creation’ where every aspect of evolution is planned, controlled, monitored and indeed executed by divine will and not a series of thoroughly improbable accidents. This chapter attempts to answer some questions on the Grand Cycle of universe and cycles within cycles.

6.1 The Grand Cycle

Q: What is the cycle of creation and destruction of the universe?

A: The individual souls and the Lord Almighty are eternal, have always existed and will always exist. The material world including the physical bodies adorned by the individual souls, objects appearing in nature (‘Mother Nature’) such as the five basic elements, the physical world, the planets, the stars etc are subject to the cycle of creation, existence and destruction. There is a specific periodicity for this grand cycle. Each cycle is termed ‘maha kalpa’ (which is about 311.04 trillion years). At the beginning of each such ‘maha kalpa’, the Lord creates the objects in the universe, gives physical bodies to the individual souls (except Lord’s consort, Lakshmi who like the Lord always has the transcendental body), gives rise to planets, stars, the 5 basic elements of nature etc. Note that space and time are eternal. The physical space that we observe (ether) arises out of the primordial space that is eternal. The involution (or destruction) of the universe occurs in the reverse order of events occurring during the creation process. During the existence of each ‘maha kalpa’, the individual souls undergo many births and deaths and adorn different physical bodies. At the end of each ‘maha kalpa’, those deserving souls eligible for salvation move to the final abode, and the rest will continue to be part of the next ‘kalpa’ and this cycle continues.

Q: What happens to those who fully intended to focus their minds away from material objects and towards God, but for various reasons did not succeed in one birth? Will they be reborn?

A: It is extremely difficult for one to completely move their minds away from material objects while participating in worldly activities and this seldom happens in a single birth. If one is sincere in intentions and has made honest attempts, he/she can expect to be reborn in much better circumstances with more opportunities to realize the Lord. For example, the next birth could be in a richer, nobler family where there may be more natural opportunities for higher learning and ability to help more people. Of course, the Lord Almighty provides more such opportunities in future births based on a person’s deeds in a particular birth, but it is up to the individual to make use of such opportunities.

Q: What causes some people to experience high degrees of success or failure in life while others who put in similar effort do not seem lucky? Is it due to the planetary positions during one's birth and if so, can astrology help one achieve success and ward off failure?

A: Success or failure (happiness or sadness) that one experiences in life is purely a result of past actions, either in current birth or in previous lives. Planetary positions do not cause someone to prosper or despair. However, a trained, capable astrologer may be able to predict someone's fate to some extent based on planetary positions. These planetary positions are like a clock which can estimate the time when someone experiences some events in life but they are not the cause of these events. For example, if someone gets hungry say at noon everyday and that person looking at a clock which shows the time as 11:45 AM can conclude that he will need to eat in 15 minutes. The clock did not cause the hunger. It merely indicated the time when someone naturally would feel hunger daily.

Q: If planetary positions are not the cause of someone's events in life, why do astrologers prescribe one to perform rituals to please those planets to ward away the ill luck?

A: Planets and their positions govern the concept of time. A year made up of 365 days (366 in leap year) is based on the earth completing one revolution around the Sun. At a deeper level, relative positions of planets and stars have some predictive capabilities. Each of these planets is governed by a deity which itself is under the control of the supreme Lord. Performing rituals to appease these deities and more importantly the Lord residing in them is a way of atoning for sins committed and praying for forgiveness with an express commitment for not repeating past mistakes.

Q: Can all sins committed in past be washed off by performing rituals and prayers?

A: No. It depends on the type of sins committed. For some types of sins, one has to suffer consequences and no amount of rituals or prayers can help one avoid such consequences completely. Let's illustrate this with an example. In general, one performs activities in one of three ways: mentally, verbally and physically. Suppose a person has abused another person either verbally or physically. In the latter case, even in this world one has to face the law and suffer consequences. Even if that person evades punishment in this world, it cannot be avoided in the God's Kingdom. If the abuse is verbal, depending on the severity of the abuses one can seek relief from courts claiming defamation. In general, when someone commits a sin which results in some type of injury (mental or physical) to others, one has to face the consequences as the other party has already experienced injury. In some types of sins where no one else is hurt, it may be possible to resort to rituals such as charity, perform some service to society, and take solace in prayer etc, to lessen the punishment.

6.2 Cycles within the Cycle

Q: What is meant by the 'cycle of life'?

A: For the world to function, it is important that the integral components of the 'cycle of life' work closely. The cycle is as follows – the primary source for sustenance of life forms is food, food becomes plentiful when there are adequate rains, rains fall in a timely manner when the Lord is satisfied with the offerings (positive acts) from people, and the human race thrives when there is adequate food.

Q: What happens to a soul when a person moves on?

A: A soul undergoes many births and deaths. Based on one's deeds in a particular birth, the soul after death traverses to a temporary abode such as heaven or hell and in general will be reborn on the earth. The exception is for those souls who during many of the births have progressively realized the Lord, have rid themselves of all sins and ultimately reach the Lord's abode (commonly known as Nirvaana or state of Bliss), never to return to earth.

Q: In what forms will humans be reborn? Will they continue to be born as humans?

A: A soul that has not yet achieved redemption will be reborn in some form determined by the Lord and the determination is based on deeds performed in a specific birth. Future birth need not always be in the form of a human being. It can take the shape of an animal also. Taking birth as a human is the ultimate reward as a human has fully developed sense organs, mind and intellect. He/she has the ability to discriminate between right and wrong and has the capability to help others. Animals do not have the same abilities to the same extent. Even among animals, there are varying traits and abilities. A dog for example has the sense of loyalty and is able to protect its owner in time of need. Cows and buffaloes etc are enormously helpful to society as their milk is a staple diet for humans. On the other hand, animals such as tigers and lions do not have such helpful instincts and hence are kept away in reservations. Human beings are endowed with the faculties and abilities to read, comprehend, think, remember, teach, communicate freely in society – in other words they have enough tools to make an honorable living and worship the Lord by serving those who are less fortunate.

Q: When in a physical form, a soul is able to have contact with the external world through the use of sense organs such as eyes, ears etc. What happens to these sense organs when a person dies? Does the soul have innate sense organs?

A: A living, breathing organism is able to interact with the external world with sensory organs as long as the Lord is resident in that being and powering the sense organs. Death occurs when the Lord leaves that physical body. At this stage, the Lord carries the souls to a different world along with sense organs intact in a miniature form. Just like gently blowing wind carries the fragrance of a flower, the Lord carries the sense organs of a being along with the soul. Just as when wind carries the fragrance of a flower, it does not carry all the fragrance and the flower retains much of it, bulk of the sense organs remains with the physical body and perish along with the physical body. The fact that the soul is equipped with sense organs allows the soul to experience pleasure and distress between births (in other words experience heaven and hell between births).

In addition to the external sense organs with which a person gains knowledge, there is an innate perceiver of knowledge which is part of every soul. This entity is called 'Saakshi' (or direct witness or imbiber of knowledge). There are two types of knowledge – external and internal. External knowledge is attained via the sense organs such as eyes, ears etc. External knowledge can sometimes be falsified (for example if there is an error in perception). Internal knowledge is always true and is never negated. Saakshi is the source of internal knowledge. Note that internal knowledge cannot be attributed to the mind, as when someone is in dreamless, deep sleep (when the mind is inactive); the person does remember the experience of sound, deep sleep after waking up. So, the perception of time and space during deep sleep must be attributed to Saakshi, which is the ultimate arbiter of truth as its knowledge is based on real experience and not gained from

studies or from external sense organs. Even the mind is liable to errors and doubts, but Saakshi is free from such defects. Any extreme pleasure or pain experienced by a person will always be remembered throughout one's life. This knowledge is memorized in Saakshi. The concept of innate knowledge associated with a soul can be illustrated with an example. When a cow gives birth to a calf, within no time is the calf able to draw milk from its mother without any training. Such natural abilities of a newly born organism can only be attributed to the concept of innate knowledge.

It should also be noted that while the mind can sometimes have doubts about some events resulting in incomplete or improper knowledge, the knowledge gained by Saakshi is based on conviction and is not subject to any doubts.

Q: What are the states which living beings experience in their lives?

A: In general, on a daily basis, living beings are in one of three states: awake, dreaming and deep sleep. When awake, typically all sense organs and the mind are functioning. When one sleeps and is dreaming, the sense organs are shut off, but the mind is still active, hence one is able to experience dream and often recollect the dream later. When one is in deep sleep, even the mind is shut off and the living beings experience a very restful sleep and wake up feeling very fresh.

Q: What actually happens during deep sleep?

A: As indicated during the period of deep sleep, all external sense organs as well as the mind shuts off. During this period, living beings experience extreme relaxation and almost inexplicable joy. Normally one experiences joy in life by consuming worldly pleasures through the use of sense organs (such as eating tasty food etc). Most people will agree that the joy experienced after a restful, deep sleep is incomparable to any other worldly pleasure. During deep sleep, one is not aware of the surroundings, attachments etc, but one is fully aware of the self. It is said that the experience one feels during deep sleep is similar to what is experienced when one achieves eternal bliss. In that sense, deep sleep is like a preview provided by the Lord for everyone to sample the eternal bliss. The message is that one can experience bliss by ridding one of attachments.

Q: How can one ensure consistent periods of deep sleep?

A: It is a matter of common experience that very few people are able to enjoy long periods of consistent deep sleep. A troubled mind is normally a reason for interrupted sleep. Prayer before sleep and also focusing the mind exclusively on the Lord when one is attempting to sleep normally helps one experience deep sleep. The period just before sleeping is also an excellent time for one to reflect on how the day was spent and if one is indeed prepared to face the eventual death which is now a day closer than it was in the previous night.

6.3 Interpersonal Relationship

Q: We come across different types of people in our lives with whom we have different types of interaction. Not all of them are pleasant. How do we handle such interactions?

A: Effective people management is one of the most important characteristics of anyone who wants to succeed in life. The Gita tells us that these are broadly the various types of people that one deals with in one's lives:

- Acquaintances
- Friends
- Neutral Types
- Indifferent Types
- Antagonistic Types
- Enemies

Acquaintances are those with whom one normally has pleasant interactions. Friends are those who are close to one's heart and go out of their way to help one in need. Neutral types are those with whom one has business like relationships (for ex: daily interaction with a shop keeper). Interaction with those in the neutral group can be pleasant or unpleasant based on the outcome of the transaction and approach. Indifferent types are those whom one meets rarely and with whom one has neither positive nor negative interactions (for ex, a friend's friend who one might meet very rarely). Antagonistic types are those with whom one generally has a frosty equation. Enemies are those who are determined to carry out acts to hurt someone mentally and/or physically.

The Gita teaches very useful lessons on how to interact with these different types of people. First and foremost, it is important to realize that people's behavior is not a reflection of their innate nature, but is conditioned based on their prior deeds, and that conditioning is expressly attached to them by the Lord. By this account, when a friend helps us, in addition to thanking the friend we also need to thank the Lord for granting the friend a helpful nature. Similarly, when someone tries to harm us, we should pray to the Lord with a request to reduce his/her enmity and in parallel take defensive steps to avoid getting hurt. But by no account, should one contemplate hurting the enemy back, as that will lead to a downward spiral of hatred with destructive consequences. We have seen evidence of mutual enmity and attendant consequences among families, groups, societies and indeed nations. When one realizes that the root of the problem is not the innate nature of that person or entity, but a condition bestowed by the Lord, it makes sense to look towards the Lord for a solution. A realization that the Lord resident in all types of people is the same entity will help modulate our interaction with different people.

The scriptures prescribe four different ways that one should express one's emotions when dealing with people: (a) Friendliness, (b) Compassion, (c) Happiness and (d) Indifference. One should treat all acquaintances, well wishers and friends with utmost friendliness. One should display compassion in dealing with anyone who is hurt, regardless of one's personal equation with that person. One should rejoice at another's legitimate success, again regardless of our personal equation with that person. Lastly, one should avoid unnecessary interaction with those who do not believe in the Lord and do not practice righteous living.

6.4 Takeaways

- ✓ The universe is governed by a grand cycle which includes the stages of creation, sustenance and destruction of the universe which takes trillions of years. This cycle then repeats ad infinitum.
- ✓ Within each grand cycle, the souls are granted physical bodies by the Lord to help them undertake the task of self realization. These souls transmigrate to different bodies and are reborn in different circumstances based on their performance in a specific birth

- ✓ There is a cycle within each birth where the living beings are either awake, dreaming and in deep sleep, with each state having specific implications on the status of sense organs. The deep sleep which is a joyous state is like a preview of the state of bliss that a soul experience upon redemption.
- ✓ Recognition of the fact that the Lord is resident in everyone and conditions people's behavior greatly helps resolve conflict among people, societies and nation.

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7. Mother Nature

This chapter deals with the 3rd component of the universe, namely, Nature and its interaction with the other two components of the universe, namely, the Almighty Lord and the individual souls. The sentient beings (individual souls) come in contact with the physical nature and are granted the bodies and faculties to allow them to express themselves and perform the acts necessary to achieve self realization. What distinguishes human beings from each other is the way that they use the tools and techniques granted to them by the Lord. This chapter attempts to answer some questions related to the physical nature, its relation with individual souls and the Lord, and the nature of bondage.

7.1 Nature – Its Constituents

Q: What constitutes ‘Nature’?

A: Inert ‘Nature’ primarily consists of eight things. They are: the five basic elements of nature, namely, earth, water, fire, wind and ether, the mind, the intellect and the ego. These are essential constituents of the universe and interact with the individual souls, and act under the supervision of the Lord’s consort, Lakshmi, who is often referred to as ‘Mother Nature’.

Q: In what manner does inert nature interact with the Lord?

A: Both inert nature and its controller, Mother Nature act under the control of the Lord. The Lord and His consort Lakshmi utilize inert nature and give expression to individual souls through association with the elements of inert nature. The Lord is compared to a string that holds a bunch of pearls which refer to all other elements in the universe (inert nature, individual souls etc). Just as one normally does not see the string that holds a bunch of pearls, likewise the Lord holds the universe together but He is not seen. Just as one cannot see salt in sea water, but can experience it upon drinking, similarly the Lord resides in all objects but is never seen.

7.2 The Theatre of Activity

Q: What constitutes the ‘Theatre of Activity’ wherein the individual souls, inert nature and the Almighty Lord act?

A: There are totally 32 entities that comprehensively constitute the ‘Theatre of Activity’ in which the individual souls and the Lord act. The 32 entities are made up of 25 basic entities and 7 derived entities.

- The 25 basic entities are:
- The five basic elements of nature (earth, fire, water, wind, ether)
- The six preceptor sense organs made up (eyes, ears, nose, tongue, skin) and the mind – organs through which living beings perceive things around them
- The five sense organs of activity such as hand, legs etc
- The five objects of preceptor sense organs (sight, sound, smell, taste, feel)

- The cosmic intelligence (mahat), the intellect (Buddhi), the ego (ahamkaara), and the primordial root (avyakta) which is the cause of material nature

These 25 entities result in 7 transformations which are:

- The physical body
- Desire
- Hatred
- Joy or Happiness
- Misery
- Courage or Determination
- Extent or scope of the mind

Note that some of these are physical entities that one can touch and feel (such as the physical body), some are qualities (such as desire, hatred etc). By way of example, a person gets happy and content when he/she is fed with good, tasty food in the same way the same person feels happy when he/she hears good news. In the former case, the cause of happiness was a physical, tangible entity such as food, while in the latter case, the cause is mental.

Q: Are there specific categories among these 32 entities in the theatre of activity?

A: By way of illustration, let us examine the 3 entities – intellect, determination and joy. Each of these is of 3 types as explained below.

Intellect is of 3 types, Superior Intellect, Ordinary Intellect and Inferior Intellect. Superior Intellect is one that is able to distinguish between activities that immerse one in an endless cycle of births and deaths and activities that lead one to eternal salvation. Ordinary Intellect is the result of incomplete knowledge and leads to confusion between right and wrong actions. Inferior Intellect is when a person denies the existence and supremacy of the Lord and stubbornly indulges in negative activities.

Similarly, Determination or courage is of 3 types. Superior determination is when a person is focused on the Lord with total control of mind and sense organs, and dutifully performing naturally chosen activities. Ordinary determination is when a person approaches all activities egoistically with expectations of specific outcome. Inferior determination is the case when one is lazy, sleeps excessively, enveloped by ignorance and ignores the Lord.

Likewise, joy as experienced is also of 3 types. Superior joy is a result of activities which initially cause hardship but later yields endless pure joy by the grace of the Lord. Ordinary joy is borne out of activities driven by sense organs and while it initially feels pleasurable, the after effects are quite poisonous. Inferior joy is one where the activities performed are painful and poisonous at all times and the person performing is often deluded, tardy and ignorant.

Q: Given that there are these 32 entities in the theatre of activity, how then does one use these to attain spiritual knowledge and realize the Lord?

A: There are 20 special attributes that one needs to possess (and inculcate) in order to reach the Lord's abode. They are enumerated below:

- humility
- devoid of conceit
- non-violence
- tolerance

- being straightforward
- obedience to one's teacher
- purity in thoughts and actions
- conviction
- control over mind and body
- renunciation of sense pleasures
- rid of ego
- knowing that the various stages of life, namely, birth, death, old age, disease cause misery and imperfection
- not overly attached to kith and kin
- not elated with worldly success
- not dejected with worldly failures
- focused on the Lord only and not on lesser deities
- content being lonely (as one is never lonely since the Lord is everywhere)
- avoiding crowded places
- interest in learning more about the Lord
- pursuing spiritual knowledge to realize the Lord

7.3 Nature and Bondage

Q: How do the three qualities of material nature bind living beings?

A: The three qualities of material natures are –

- Purity (Sattva)
- Passion (Rajas)
- Ignorance/Darkness (Tamas)

Living beings experience varying amounts of these qualities at different times. For example, one who engages sense organs such as ears in listening to spiritual discourses has heightened quality of Purity (Sattva). Likewise, one whose mind is occupied with worldly pleasures experience higher levels of tamas.

Sattva quality enables one to imbibe knowledge; rajas quality gives motion to pursue activities to earn worldly riches, while the tamas quality instigates laziness and ignorance.

Q: What are the characteristics of a person who manages to get beyond the clutches of the three qualities and attain the Lord?

A: Following are the typical characteristics of a person who is considered to have transcended the three qualities. Such a person:

- Neither actively desires nor rejects association, involvement or attachment with issues related to worldly activities
- is largely indifferent to mundane on goings in the world
- is aware that all activities are entirely due to the will of the Lord
- faces happiness and sadness with equal poise
- does not distinguish between a pack of mud and a bundle of gold
- is neither elated by praise nor dejected by abuse
- handles moments of pride and shame with equanimity
- treats friends and foes alike

- does not indulge in activities solely related to worldly pleasures

Such an individual, who has indeed transcended the three qualities, performs naturally chosen activities without expecting worldly riches, while focusing on pleasing the Lord with pure, unadulterated devotion earns the pleasure of Sri Lakshmi, the Lord's consort who then leads that individual to the Lord's abode.

Q: It is said that to attain the Lord, one should move beyond the clutches of the three qualities of material nature, one of which is 'Purity' or 'Sattva', which is a desired quality. While it is understandable that one should move beyond the undesirable traits of 'Rajas' and 'Tamas', why should one move beyond 'Sattva' also?

A: Sattva quality can also refer to traits leading to noble, worldly activities, which however may not be performed as an offering to the Lord. For example, a scientist conducting research to understand the nature of some elements might be working exceedingly hard in a sincere way and this effort is indeed laudable. That scientist can be a role model to society. But if such work is not performed as an offering to the Lord, then it does not help one move towards the Lord even though it is Sattvic activity. Hence in order to achieve salvation, one needs to move beyond the three qualities of material nature and focus on the Lord in all their activities.

7.4 Takeaways

- ✓ Inert nature is the third component of the triumvirate that comprises the universe
- ✓ Inert nature is controlled by the Lord's consort Lakshmi. The individual souls come in contact with nature and gain physical bodies with sense organs etc, whose sole purpose is to equip these souls in their journey to redemption
- ✓ Contact with the qualities inherent in nature also binds the individual souls who need to transcend these qualities to escape bondage and move towards self realization

8. Yoga Meditation and Diet

While the Gita talks a great deal about the importance of knowledge, it also places a great emphasis on specific actions that one needs to take on a day to day basis to reduce some of these learning into practice. Given that the physical body is granted to individual souls by the Lord to enable them to indulge in activities leading to self realization, it is but natural that the Gita should dwell on how one needs to manage the body (and the mind). Yoga and meditation techniques are part and parcel of the Vedic scriptures and their importance have been recognized by modern medicine. Gita goes a step further in its treatment of yoga and meditation to drive home the point that these should not be executed mechanically but should be performed as a part of a well thought out prayer regimen to the Lord. Gita also teaches on the importance of diet, the impact of the nature of food on human emotions/behavior, in addition to the physical health. While, modern dietary studies focus only the impact of food consumption on physical health, the Gita provides insights into the impact of food on mental health also.

8.1 Yoga

Q: What is the meaning of the term Yoga?

A: Yoga, in general means a path or way or method or procedure to attain a goal (in specific to attain God).

Q: What are the common types of Yoga taught in Gita?

A: The most common types of Yoga taught in Gita are:

- Karma Yoga (Path of Action or Labour)
- Jnana Yoga (Path of Knowledge)
- Bhakti Yoga (Path of Devotion to Lord)
- Sanyasa Yoga (Path of Renunciation)

Q: How about the Yoga as it is known in popular culture?

A: Yoga, as known in popular culture is the so called 'Patanjali Yoga' which is made up of three components: (a) Meditation (b) Regulated Breathing and (c) Physical exercises (Asanas).

Basically, the first component helps calm the mind, the last component increases body flexibility and the middle component regulates breathing and hence blood circulation. A calm mind and a relaxed body make it easy for one to concentrate better and help in all activities.

Q: What is the purpose of yoga and how should one perform the same?

A: Yoga has three purposes, namely, physical, mental and spiritual. For maximum effect, one should pay attention to all these aspects. The physical and mental aspects and benefits from performing the three parts of yoga, namely, Asanas, breath control and meditation are well understood and advertised. The spiritual aspects of yoga are extensively addressed in Vedic scriptures and its import is best illustrated by an example. Surya Namaskar (Sun Salutation) is

one of the most popular yoga exercises. In addition to the physical and mental aspects of this exercise which is well understood, the spiritual aspect of this exercise is actually salutation to the Sun God (as the name suggests) as an expression of our gratefulness for favours received. Of the 5 basic elements of nature (earth, water, fire, ether, wind), we owe the 2 important elements namely, fire (light/energy) and water to the Sun God. These 2 elements are essential for sustenance of life. Without sun light there will not be vegetation and hence there will not be any food. Sun also absorbs the (salty) water from the oceans and results in clouds/rain which is the sole source of clear water for the planet. It is only natural that we should express our gratitude to the Lord who powers the Sun God to help sustain life on this planet. When one performs yoga exercises with grateful salutation to the Lord, one can experience lasting benefits in all three aspects – physical, mental and spiritual.

The primary purpose of ‘Yoga’ is to stabilize and steady the mind. The first aspect towards stabilizing the mind is to make sure that the physical body is steady. This is achieved through the use of ‘asanas’ or ‘poses’. This will ensure that the mind is not distracted because of physical movement. Once the body is steady, it is important to stabilize breathing, as irregular or fast breathing can impact the mind. Once the body is steady and breathing is steady, it is easier to focus on the mind. At this stage, one needs to start meditation to focus the mind on a specific object which over time will help stabilize the mind.

8.2 Meditation

Q: What is the purpose of meditation and how does one meditate?

A: The basic purpose of meditation is to cleanse and calm the mind. By nature, the mind is always wandering and can never be idle. Meditation is the solution to focus the mind away from sundry thoughts and gradually fill it with positive thoughts. The mind can never be empty. Many meditation techniques teach ways to rid the mind of negative thoughts, but it is important to fill the mind with thoughts about the Lord which then allows positive thoughts to take over the mind.

Q: What is the proper procedure for meditation?

A: The environment, the body setup and the meditation process is explained below:

- It is important to find a relatively quiet location where one’s mind is not easily distracted. A platform that is neither too low nor too high is recommended for comfortable seating.
- While seated comfortably, it is important to align the head, neck and back in a straight line
- With relaxed, slow breathing one should focus the eyes on the edge of the nose (preferably the top edge which is the area between the eye brows or alternatively the bottom tip) and slowly withdraw the mind away from worldly thoughts and focus on the Lord

Practicing meditation daily can lead to fairly quick results with a more relaxed mind, and body. Relaxed breathing, less stress and more energy is experienced in conducting day-to-day activities.

A more rigorous form of meditation that involve the various sheaths or layers of a human body is described below.

Human beings are comprised of five sheaths or layers. These are identified as:

- The physical sheath

- The sheath of energy
- The sheath of mind
- The sheath of intellect
- The sheath of bliss

The five steps of meditation that involve these five layers are outlined below:

Step 1: The first step in any meditation is to ensure that the body is in a comfortable position to help one concentrate and implement the other steps. Hence it is recommended that one be seated comfortably and not attempt meditation while walking, running or sleeping. At this stage, it is important to take control of the external sense organs to help calm the nerves. The eyes should focus on the upper end of the nose (that is the area between the eye brows) or at the lower tip of the nose. This step this deals with the physical aspects of the body (the physical sheath).

Step 2: In this step, one should start regulating the breathing operation. After inhaling a deep breath, one should hold the breath as long as possible (internal breath control) and start the meditation during this phase. Other possibility is to take a deep breath, exhale, and then hold the breath (external breath control). Initially one may be able to hold the breath for few seconds, but over time it is possible to be in this phase for many minutes (Note: Those with heart disease etc, should perform breath control only under medical supervision. In general, they may find it easier to hold the breath externally rather than internally). Since breathing is directly related to energy, this step is associated with the sheath of energy or life force.

Step 3: Having completed steps 1 and 2, the next stage is to start bringing the mind to focus. This is the most difficult step as human mind is always wandering. It is impossible for mind to focus on 'nothingness', as thinking never stops while one is awake. The solution to this is to ensure that the mind starts focusing on the Lord, either through mental chanting of the Lord's names or singing of hymns etc. This step is appropriately associated with the sheath of mind.

Step 4: This step is related to the sheath of intellect. To be able to control and focus the mind, it is important to develop the conviction in the power of meditation. This conviction is often a result of knowledge accumulated over time. Strong conviction powered by the intellect will clear any doubts in the mind and make it easier for the mind to focus on the Lord during meditation.

Step 5: Meditation performed with successful implementation of these steps, will over time allow the soul to experience unexplainable joy, which will be almost on par eternal bliss experienced after salvation. This step is rightfully associated with the sheath of bliss.

Q: How does meditation help in daily life?

A: The benefits and indeed the requirement of meditation as an integral part of the set of activities prescribed for a seeker is well known. On a more mundane level, meditation has been demonstrated to help reduce stress, induce calmness and clear the mind. In particular, meditation helps one conquer three of the major ills that attack human mind- namely, desire, fear and anger.

Q: What is the best time of the day for performing meditation?

A: While one can meditate at any time, for maximum effectiveness the best time is the period starting from 90 minutes prior to sun rise and the time of sun rise. When one has just woken up from sound sleep and the mind is still fresh and not encumbered by daily activities; it is easier to focus on meditation. It also happens that during this period, external noise is less as it is too early in the day. So, both from spiritual and practical points of view, early morning hours are the most optimum time for meditation.

Q: What is the significance of the word 'Om' that is used often in meditation, prayers etc

A: 'Om' is a very special word in Sanskrit and is one of the most common names by which the Lord is known. Grammatical analysis of the components of letters that make up 'Om' yields a meaning: the one that pervades the universe, in other words, the Lord Almighty. 'Om' is a root word from which the scriptures originated, just like a single seed gives rise to an entire tree. The transcendental sound vibration 'Om' is comprised of three letters 'a', 'u' and 'm' which when incorporated in yogic breathing exercise involves stomach, chest and clavicular breathing and has enormous health benefits. It is for such reasons that 'Om' is used as a prelude to meditation, prayers, rituals etc.

Q: How does one visualize the Lord while praying or meditating?

A: It is very important to visualize the Lord in some form during meditation to ensure that one's mind is completely focused on the Lord. There are essentially three forms of visualization adopted during meditation and prayer:

- Most people resort to praying to an idol of the Lord. This is the simplest and the most common method. While the idol itself is not the Lord, one can visualize the Lord as existing in the idol and use the idol as a symbol to concentrate the mind. This is the same effect when one visits temples and prays to an idol of the Lord in different forms and shapes
- Some visualize the Lord in the form of fire in rituals. This is a bit more advanced than visualizing the Lord as an idol as fire does not have any specific shape or form. However, fire is a symbol of purity as it can engulf any object but continues to stay pure. It is for this reason that fire is an integral part of ancient rituals.
- Even more advanced practitioners visualize the Lord as resident within their hearts and meditate with full focus. Such practitioners do not need any external objects such as idols, fire etc, but are able to meditate at any time and any place of their choosing as they are able to invoke the Lord within themselves and pray with ease.

It is important to feel the presence of the Lord always, and especially at the time of leaving this physical world as that will ensure eventual redemption for the soul.

Q: Since the Lord is omnipresent, why is it that many people resort to visiting specific places of worship such as temples? Can't everyone just pray at home?

A: The Lord is indeed omnipresent and one can just as easily pray at home or any chosen location. The reason most people visit places of worship is that temples generally have an environment which encourages pious behavior and allow people to take their minds away from worldly things. In that sense, many people feel divine vibrations in such surroundings. Unless one is in an advanced stage of concentration and meditation, one will not be able to focus on the Lord in normal surroundings. In such cases, the order, the discipline and the structure present in temples help one to concentrate on the Lord. Additionally, the benevolent Lord indeed will

bestow His blessings on those who spend the time and effort in visiting places of worship, the accent being on the 'time and effort spent'. This is indeed the reason that many people undertake arduous journeys and visit places of worship in the remotest of corners.

Q: What is the significance of the emphasis on remembering the Lord at the time of death? Most people will be suffering from some disease and will be in pain. How then can they think of anything other than their pain at that time?

A: It is said that when a soul traverses from one physical body to the next, the thoughts that occur in the mind will determine the context of its next birth. This means that if someone is focused on the Lord at the time of death, that soul is destined to reach the Lord's abode. While it is true that during last moments most people will be thinking of the pain they are experiencing none of this pain will be present at the time of the soul leaving the physical body. It is said that at that precise moment, the soul will feel liberated as if it has been freed from captivity. So, it is not inconceivable that noble souls who have realized the temporary nature and limitations of the physical body will be able to remember the Lord during their death.

Q: How can one ensure that one is able to remember the Lord at the time of death?

A: There is no magic formula and this can only be achieved through rigorous practice. For one who is constantly aware of the presence of the Lord with the mind unattached to worldly matters, the probability of remembering the Lord at the time of death is very high.

8.3 Diet

Q: Can one control the seemingly uncontrollable desire for eating by resorting to fasting?

A: No. Fasting only diminishes the ability of sense organs to enjoy consumables, but does not quench the in-built craving to taste food. The desire for tasting food, even though it is expressed as a requirement to appease the tongue, basically has its roots in the mind. Note that a sick person may have lost craving for food and it would appear as though that person has conquered the desire for food. But it is only temporary. The sense organs of a sick person are weakened; hence there is no desire to consume food. Even then among all sense organs that get weakened due to fasting or sickness, the tongue still retains its desire and craving to taste good food. Once that person recovers, the desire returns. It should also be noted that very aged persons who may have lost ability to digest food fully, often still crave for tasty food. This basically confirms that the desire emanates from the mind not from sense organs themselves. So fasting does not solve this issue. The only solution is to surrender to the Lord while practicing mind control. Ultimately, it is only through the grace of God that one can hope to control the sense organs.

Q: What are the guidelines on the amount of food that a person should consume?

A: One, who is focused on balanced living and meditation, should neither over eat nor under eat. Excessive eating leads to lethargy, indigestion and other ill effects. Under eating renders one weak and unable to concentrate on daily activities and hinders meditation. Similar approach applies to sleep.

Q: How does the process of food digestion work?

A: The Lord powers the digestive organs in the body to be able to successfully digest the 4 types of food consumed by a person. Food is categorized as following based on the method of

consumption: food that is chewed, sucked, licked or drunk. Foods chewed includes those that are masticated before swallowing such as rice, bread etc. Honey is an example of a food that is sucked and swallowed. Mango pulp is often licked and then swallowed. Liquids such as milk and water are drunk. Given that the Lord Powers the organs of digestion, it is important that one always offer food to the Lord before consuming.

Q: Since there are a wide variety of foods available for consumption, which are the recommended categories for those focused on living an ideal life?

A: Food is basically categorized into 3 classes based on the effect they produce on the body and mind.

- Foods which are tasty, moderately sweet, salty, spicy, or pungent are generally considered to promote healthy body and mind
- Those foods which are excessively salty, spicy, pungent, or hot are known to promote excessive passion and do not allow for a calm mind and also cause bodily discomfort
- Those foods which are stale, not tasteful, unhealthy and have negative impact on mind and body (ex: alcohol and non-vegetarian food) are known to excite negative feelings, apart from harming the body.

Q: How can one avoid consuming unhealthy (and harmfully addictive) substances such as alcohol, tobacco etc?

A: It is interesting to note that even passionate consumers of such addictive substances usually refrain from offering them to their parents, Gurus and elders out of respect. They will certainly avoid consuming them in temples and such places out of respect for others. It is however, ironic that they feel comfortable consuming them in other circumstances as perhaps they feel that they are not amongst elders, Gurus or parents. Once they realize that the Lord is everywhere, including every nook and corner of their bodies and anything one consumes is indeed consumed by the Lord within, perhaps such behavior may change.

8.4 Takeaways

- ✓ Yoga is a generic term meaning way or path. The Gita introduces the concept of different types of paths which are essential for a seeker travelling on the road to self realization
- ✓ Aspects of Patanjali yoga such as physical exercises, breath control and mediation have the beneficial effects of calming the mind and relaxing the body which allows one to concentrate better in daily activities
- ✓ Human behavior is also impacted by the type of food that one consumes. Reduction of food consumption or dieting does not necessarily result in reduction of craving for food, which can only be achieved by mind control.

9. The Final Frontier

This chapter attempts to summarize the teachings in The Gita and attempts to answer some questions on the 'Final Abode' and the way to self realization. A discussion on supposedly different paths to redemption and the design of an optimal path for the seeker is indicated. The behavior, activities and responsibilities of redeemed souls are also addressed.

9.1 The Final Abode

Q: What is the definition of 'Redemption' (also known as salvation, deliverance, Nirvaana, Moksha etc)?

A: Redemption is defined as the casting off of what is not natural to the soul and remaining in its true nature for all eternity. The souls are in their intrinsic nature of pure intelligence and happiness. It is a state upon reaching which, the souls will not get entangled in bondage and will not have to return to the earth.

Q: How does a soul get entangled into the beginningless bondage in the first place?

A: This is one of the greatest spiritual mysteries. Just as the Lord relieves a soul of bondage, He also is the cause of the bondage. However, this should be viewed as a benevolent act where the Lord provides the tools, accessories, environment and capabilities for individual souls to engage in conduct over many births to achieve self realization and ultimately redemption.

Q: How can one relate to a state such as bondage which has no beginning but a well defined end?

A: The same way that most people relate to the state of Moksha/Nirvaana which has a specific, well defined start date but no end date (as it is an eternal state).

Q. How does one attain Nirvaana?

A: Through the express grace of the Lord. An example is Arjuna's reply to Krishna at the end of the sermon that his doubts have been cleared by the 'Grace of Krishna' and not because he completely understood everything Krishna taught.

Q: What do liberated souls experience in the 'Final Abode'?

A: The liberated souls have the following characteristics:

- The souls are in their intrinsic nature of pure intelligence and happiness
- These souls are constantly meditating on the Lord and are always under His control
- These souls enjoy eternal bliss without any taint of unhappiness
- They are not subject to aging
- The souls have gradations in terms of amounts of bliss, happiness and devotion to the Lord

- Such gradation does not lead to any jealousy, as absence of jealousy is a pre-requisite for liberation
- These souls never return to the state of bondage
- These souls while atomic in nature can take any material body of pure consciousness and cast them away at will
- These souls experience no sadness, disease, disappointment or any other such defects
-

Q: Do the liberated souls have any obligation to perform any activity?

A: No. Just like the Lord they act out of pure choice and many times in order to set an example to souls still in bondage. It should also be noted that the liberated souls will not have contact with anyone in the physical world. Once a soul has been designated by the Lord for liberation, it is possible that the soul might have to spend some time in the physical world before moving to the Lord's abode in order to expend any excess credits it might have accumulated due to good deeds performed over many life times. Such evolved souls typically expend such credits by bestowing spiritual favours to seekers in the physical world.

Q: It is stated that the liberated souls have gradation in terms of enjoyed bliss and other capabilities. How can that be?

A: Basically every individual soul is different and unique in terms of its capacity, ability etc. Each and every action performed by the soul in every life has consequences. The consequences are of 3 kinds:

- Accumulated consequences from prior deeds (both good and bad)
- That part of consequences from (a) that is in the process of being experienced by the soul
- Consequences from acts not yet undertaken

Once a soul has reached the state of redemption, through the grace of the Lord all accumulated consequences from prior deeds will vanish (that is the soul does not have to face these consequences). However, the part of consequences from prior actions that is currently being experienced by the soul has to run its course. It turns out that consequences from prior good deeds are of two kinds: (i) beneficial consequences and (ii) worthless consequences. Of these, the first kind results in increased level of bliss and abilities in the Final Abode, while the second kind of consequence from prior good deeds has to be experienced by the soul before final redemption. The following example will illustrate the two kinds of consequences from prior good deeds. Suppose one contributes generously towards the education of two students. The first student makes use of the opportunity to get quality education, does well financially, remains grateful to the donor and helps others. The second student also does well financially but fritters away all his wealth on selfish, worldly activities. The donor will get credit for good deed in educating both these students. But the credit from first student will permanently accrue to the donor and increase his level of bliss and the credit from second student has to be spent before final redemption.

Q: It has been concluded that there are broadly two paths towards self realization based on the intrinsic nature of the practitioner, namely 'the path of action' and 'the path of knowledge'. How do these practitioners traverse the path?

A: The practitioners in the path of action are those who have a naturally chosen vocation and strive for perfection in their activities in service of society and the Lord. These individuals typically are called 'tyaagis', meaning they do not seek any fruits from their labor. The prescribed method for them to achieve self realization and reach the Lord's abode would be to

conduct their activities with complete control of their mind and sense organs and offer all their activities to the Lord with no expectation on the outcome.

The other set of people who are predominantly in the 'path of knowledge' are those who have renounced any activity that would normally result in worldly material. Examples of such people include ascetics, monks etc. They are typically characterized by the following attributes:

- Intellect does not deliberate on objects on sensory pleasure
- Steely determination in mind control
- No desire in sensory pleasures
- Devoid of jealousy, hatred, ego, conceit, arrogance, anger
- Always at peace
- Content with minimum food (for sustenance)
- Always meditating on the Lord
- Avoid crowded places and normally stay solitary
- Detached from materialistic bonds
- Do not hoard/store excess food, clothes

It must be noted that the classification of people as those on 'path of action' and 'path of knowledge' is coarse. No one can be fully in either path. Those in 'path of action' certainly need to have the right knowledge and those in the 'path of knowledge' certainly cannot avoid all activities. The classification is rather based on the attribute which is in majority.

Q: How do people immersed in activities leading to self realization and redemption, interact with the society at large?

A: Such a person does have a specific obligation to help others in society who is in need of help. He/She has an obligation to help those who may be sick or in need of spiritual guidance. This is indeed an obligation in the same way as someone pays taxes to the Government. However, those who have attained self realization do not have such obligations but often indulge in helping others out of pure compassion.

Q: The path of devotion is often indicated as the ultimate path for one to achieve salvation. How is this route characterized?

A: Achieving pure, unadulterated devotion to the Lord is very difficult. Those who are on this path are characterized by the following 4 attributes:

- mind is completely focused on the supreme Lord
- always devoted to the supreme Lord
- always worshipping only the supreme Lord
- always praying to the supreme Lord

Such people completely surrender to the Lord and avoid all activities extraneous to their naturally chosen vocation. They perform this with full devotion to the Lord as service to society without expecting any fruits. The Lord will surely reward them with eternal bliss.

In summary, everyone has to perform their naturally chosen activity to earn their place in the world and do so with right knowledge, with complete control of mind and sense organs, all the while submitting to the supreme Lord. This is the surest way to freedom from bondage of births and deaths and a place in the Lord's abode.

Q: What are the different categories of people who meditate on the Lord and how are they different?

A: There are broadly 4 types of people who pray and meditate on the Lord:

- Those who are sick and need relief
- Those who desire material objects
- Those who have a thirst for knowledge
- Those who have already gained spiritual knowledge

Among these, the last category of beings are favored by the Lord as they do not have any specific needs but pray and meditate on the Lord out of pure devotion. Also for these people, the supreme Lord is their favorite always. All these four categories of people are superior; however, the last category will ultimately be guaranteed eternal bliss.

9.2 Summary of Various Paths to Redemption

Q: What are the various paths traversed by practitioners in their quest for self realization?

A: There are various paths available for practitioners of self realization in their journey towards beatitude.

- The ‘path of action’ refers to that path where the person is solely focused on sincere discharging of responsibilities in his/her naturally chosen profession.
- The ‘path of knowledge’ is the one where the practitioner focuses on accumulation (and dissemination) of knowledge (about the Lord, the universe etc).
- The ‘path of devotion’ indicates the state where one completely submits to the Lord and spends time solely in prayer and on activities to please the Lord.
- The ‘path of renunciation’ refers to the case where the practitioner has renounced all worldly activities.
- The ‘path of sacrifice’ refers to the case where one is focused on action with no expectation whatsoever on the outcome.

9.3 The Bottom Line

Q: Given that there are various paths available for one to choose in one’s journey towards the final abode, how can one decide on an optimal path?

A: The optimal and the correct path is one which is actually a combination of these various paths and is summarized as follows:

Those desiring permanent escape from the cycle of births and deaths and reaching the Lord’s abode focus on performing sincerely in their naturally chosen profession (‘path of action’), armed with proper knowledge of the activities (‘path of knowledge’), dedicating all activities to the Lord (‘path of devotion’), avoiding activities geared only towards worldly pleasures (‘path of renunciation’), with no expectation on the outcome of the activity (‘path of sacrifice’).

In summary, the optimal path is an integrated route comprised of these various paths. Depending on the nature of the practitioners, the relative magnitude of the paths may differ (for example, a scholar focuses more on the path of knowledge; a soldier focuses more on the path of prescribed activity such as administration etc).

While liberation from the cycle of births and deaths is the goal of any seeker and the optimal path will help achieve the goal, the level of bliss experienced in the final abode does vary depending upon the individual and the amount of effort spent on activities leading to salvation. In discussing the greatness of messages contained in the Gita, the Lord describes three categories of seekers:

- Those who listen to the Gita as taught by a teacher, with utmost sincerity and devotion to the Lord;
- Those that not only listen to the Gita, but also spend time and effort in further studies and investigations to develop deeper conviction; and
- Those that not only learn the key concepts in the Gita, but also help spread the message so others in the society can also reap the benefits.

The Lord indicates that the third category of souls is most dear to Him, followed by the second and the first. However, all three categories are destined for eternal bliss with the relative level of bliss graded on the basis of relative efforts.

Q: What are the characteristics of people who are dear to the Lord?

A: It is important to recognize the characteristics of people who are considered dear to the Lord as they can be expected to be the recipients of His grace which leads to eternal bliss. In that sense, they set an example for everyone to follow:

- They are compassionate people who brook no hatred towards anyone
- They are devoid of selfishness and arrogance
- They treat success and failure with equanimity and have enormous patience
- They are always content with whatever God has given them
- They have complete control over their sense organs and mind
- They have a resolute mind and are always focused on the Lord
- They are not perturbed by events in society, nor do they cause any commotion
- They are devoid of anger, fear and do not experience the emotional roller coaster
- They do not crave for worldly desires, avoid activities not related to the Lord, have a pleasant demeanor and are indifferent to any praise or insult

Q: What is the surest way for attaining eternal bliss?

A: Ultimately, the only sure way for someone to attain eternal bliss is to earn the grace of the Lord. The various paths described are the necessary conditions, but themselves are not sufficient to attain Nirvaana, which can only be reached through His grace. Those following the optimal path are dear to the Lord and hence it can be deduced that they will earn His grace and attain Him.

Q: Since it is important to earn the grace of the Lord to achieve redemption, what is the recommended procedure?

A: The surest way to earn the Lord's grace is to completely immerse the mind in the Lord. If that is not possible, one can start by learning about the Lord from scriptures and slowly practice focusing the mind on the Lord. If this is also not possible, one can perform activities that are dear to the Lord such as giving to charity etc. If this option is also not possible, then one can focus on their normal activities but at least mentally dedicate them to the Lord. Over time, the sincere souls will realize ways to focus the mind fully in the Lord and earn His grace.

In general, scriptures detail the following steps in any journey towards redemption by Divine grace:

- Detachment (ridding one of attachment to worldly affairs)
- Devotion to the Lord
- Study of scriptures
- Reflection on studies
- Meditation
- Redemption through Divine grace

Detachment from worldly affairs is the first and foremost step for one on the path to redemption. As indicated many times before, one cannot stay away from discharging one's worldly responsibilities, but one can ensure that one does not get carried away or get attached to work itself or expectations on outcome. Once the seeker of redemption is able to conquer attachment, that person develops more intimate devotion to the Lord. At this stage, the seeker feels the urge to know more about the Lord and focuses on study of right scriptures under the guidance of a competent teacher. The next step is reflection on studies done where one evaluates the matter of studies using logical and philosophical examination to convince oneself of the truth embedded in the scriptures without any doubts or reservations. At this stage, the seeker has all the necessary tools to meditate consciously on the Lord which leads to redemption through the grace of the Lord accompanied by direct vision of the Lord.

9.4 Takeaways

- ✓ The goal of every living being in every life is to utilize the opportunity provided by the Lord and achieve self realization (or eternal bliss or Nirvaana), where one experiences pure bliss and will escape permanently from the cycle of births and deaths
- ✓ While Gita teaches the various yogas or paths for a seeker to pursue, the optimal path comprises of all these paths such as 'path of labor', 'path of knowledge', 'path of devotion' etc.
- ✓ Final redemption can only happen through the grace of the Lord and the stages to achieve this are – worldly detachment, devotion to the Lord, study of scriptures, reflection on the studies to develop conscious meditation on the Lord and finally redemption.

Epilogue

Lord Krishna, at the conclusion of his teachings to prince Arjuna asks him if his doubts have been cleared and if he is convinced on the way forward. Arjuna who had decided to abdicate his responsibility to wage war with his opponents (who had unlawfully usurped his kingdom) answers to Krishna indicating that all his doubts have been cleared and his conviction is back- all because of the grace of Krishna. It is interesting to note that Arjuna does not say that he has heard Krishna completely and that he has understood Krishna's teachings fully. He only says that his doubts have been cleared because of the express grace of Krishna. This is the central concept of the Gita. It exhorts us to feel the presence of the Lord everywhere and at all times as it is only through His grace that one can hope for redemption. We are never alone and when we feel the presence of the Lord at all times and in all places, our thoughts, speech and actions get more purposeful and sincere leaving no room for negativity. This awareness allows one to lead a joyous and peaceful life and to embrace death as a natural culmination of a life well lived. Indeed it is a bridge to an even better life hereafter, moving one closer to salvation.

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