

To Be Illumined

Reading: 'A Garland of Questions and Answers' by Shankara

Once upon a time, there was a kingdom. There are two parts of the royal family in this kingdom, a virtuous and good part of the family and a corrupt and evil part of the family. Through a series of schemes and tricks the evil branch of the family comes to power and rules the kingdom. It is not right. The virtuous and good part of the family wants to restore their rightful place as the leaders. The two sides prepared for battle. And then, just before the battle began, Arjuna, the leader of the good faction, goes out to no man's land at the center of the battlefield with his charioteer, who is actually the God Krishna in human form. Arjuna is distraught. He looks across the field and sees his family, his teachers, his friends all ready to fight against him. He knows his cause is righteous, but is it worth killing his family for?

Arjuna speaks, 'O Krishna, I see my own relations here anxious to fight, and my limbs grow weak; my mouth is dry, my body shakes, and my hair is standing on end. My skin burns and the bow... has slipped from my hand. I am unable to stand; my mind seems to be whirling. These signs bode evil for us. I do not see that any good can come from killing relations in battle. O Krishna, I have no desire for victory, or for a kingdom or pleasures. Of what use is a kingdom or pleasures or even life, if those for whose sake we desire these things – teachers, fathers, sons, grandfathers, uncles, in-laws, grandsons and others with family ties—are engaging in this battle, renouncing their wealth and their lives? Even if they were to kill me, I would not want to kill them, not even to become rulers of the three worlds. How much less for earth alone?...

Though they are overpowered by greed and see no evil in destroying families or injuring friends, we see these evils. Why shouldn't we turn away from this sin?... Better for me if the sons of [the king], weapons in hand, were to attack me in battle and kill me unarmed and unresisting. (1:28-39, 46¹) Arjuna then throws his weapons aside and sits down on his chariot in the middle of the battlefield.

This is the opening scene of the *Bhagavad Gita*, one of the most important sacred texts in Hinduism. The *Bhagavad Gita* is part of a much larger Hindu epic, called the *Mahabharata*, which is longer than *The Bible*, *The Iliad*, and *The Odyssey* combined. The story came into being roughly two thousand years ago and tells the story of the family feud that Arjuna finds himself in the middle of.² The *Bhagavad Gita* itself is short, only 700 verses. If the story I tell today intrigues you, please pick up a copy.

After this opening scene, the text continues, largely as a dialogue between Arjuna and Krishna, the God who has taken human form as his charioteer, with Arjuna asking questions and Krishna answering them, describing several spiritual paths available to Arjuna, and in turn, to all of us.

Krishna responds first by telling Arjuna not to be afraid and to take the long view – and rooted in a tradition that believes in the reincarnation of souls – the long view is very very long indeed. Krishna says, 'You speak sincerely, but your sorrow has no cause. The wise grieve neither for the living nor for the dead. There has never been a time when you and I and the kings gathered here have not existed, nor will

¹ all quotes from *The Bhagavad Gita* are from *The Bhagavad Gita*. Eknath Easwaran, trans. Tomales, CA: Nilgiri Press, 2007.

² Prothero, Stephen. *God is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions that Rule the World*. New York: HarperOne, 2010. Page 160.

there be a time when we cease to exist. As the same person inhabits the body through childhood, youth, and old age, so too at the time of death he obtains another body. The wise are not deluded by these changes....

The impermanent has no reality; reality lies in the eternal. Those who have seen the boundary between these two have attained the end of all knowledge. Realize that which pervades the universe and is indestructible no power can affect this unchanging imperishable reality. The body is mortal, but that which dwells in the body is immortal and immeasurable. Therefore, Arjuna, fight in this battle. (2:11-12, 16-18)

Krishna is speaking an important truth of the Hindu tradition – that we all possess immortal souls – and our souls are connected to the transcendent God. Each of us carry a spark of the divine within us. Some in our tradition hold similar beliefs and see them as the basis for our principle that every person has inherent worth and dignity.

Coming to this knowledge, that we are more than our bodies, our desires, and our senses, is one of the spiritual paths of Hinduism. These paths are called yoga and the path of wisdom is called jnana yoga. Yoga is a Hindu word we likely know. It shares the same root as the English verb to yolk and, roughly, means discipline. In Hinduism there are several yogas, several spiritual disciplines that an observant person might pursue. Jnana yoga is one of these, the discipline of wisdom. Those who practice jnana yoga cultivate their intuition and their ability to see through present circumstances to enduring truths. They develop this ability through meditation.

Arjuna is trying to figure all of this out. He asks what it looks like practically. He says, ‘Tell me of those who live established in wisdom, ever aware of the Self, O Krishna. How do they talk? How sit? How move about?’

Krishna, in one of the most famous passages in the text responds with a description of those who have achieved this wisdom, ‘They live in wisdom who see themselves in all and all in them, who have renounced every selfish desire and sense craving tormenting the heart.

Neither agitated by grief nor hankering after pleasure, they live free from lust and fear and anger. Established in meditation, they are truly wise. Fettered no more by selfish attachments, they are neither elated by good fortune nor depressed by bad. Such are the seers...

When you keep talking about sense objects, attachment comes. Attachment breeds desire, the lust of possession that burns to anger. Anger clouds the judgment; you can no longer learn from past mistakes. Lost is the power to choose between what is wise and what is unwise, and your life is an utter waste. But when you move amidst the world of sense, free from attachment and aversion alike, there comes the peace in which all sorrows end, and you live in the wisdom of the Self.

The disunited mind is far from wise; how can it meditate? How be at peace? When you know no peace, how can you know joy? When you let your mind follow the call of the senses, they carry away your better judgment as storms drive a boat off its charted course on the sea.

As rivers flow into the ocean but cannot make the vast ocean overflow, so flow the streams of the sense-world into the sea of peace that is the sage. But this is not so with the desirer of desires.

They are forever free who renounce all selfish desires and break away from the ego-cage of "I," "me," and "mine" to be united with the Lord. This is the supreme state. Attain to this, and pass from death to immortality. (2:55-71)

In a Hindu context, passing from death to immortality means to achieve union with God and escape the cycle of rebirth. Often when we talk about reincarnation in the West, it is seen as a good thing. In Hinduism, it isn't. The spiritual task to escape this cycle of reincarnation by achieving liberation and union with God and then to exist as part of God forever. Some translate achieving this union as 'becoming illumined.'

Krishna lifts up the practice to jnana yoga, but he doesn't tell Arjuna that that is what he should do. No, Arjuna, a warrior is a man of action, so another spiritual discipline, another yoga, is a better fit with his personality and the challenge before him. Karma yoga is the spiritual discipline for Arjuna – and for all people of action. Some of us might know the word karma as the idea within Hinduism and other religions of India, that the universe is completely moral. That everything happens for a reason. The word karma, at its simplest means action. Karma yoga is a way of taking action, without being attached to outcomes, with all action done as an offering to God.

Krishna says, 'You have the right to work, but never to the fruit of work. You should never engage in action for the sake of reward, nor should you long for inaction. Perform work in the world, Arjuna, as a man established within himself – without selfish attachments, and alike in success and defeat. (2:47-48)

Krishna continues on this theme later, 'The awakened sages call a person wise when all his undertakings are free from anxiety about results; all his selfish desires have been consumed in the first of knowledge. The wise, ever satisfied, have abandoned all external supports. Their security is unaffected by the results of their action...

They live in freedom those who have gone beyond the dualities of life. Competing with no one, they are alike in success and failure and content with whatever comes to them. They are free, without selfish attachments... they performed all work in the spirit of service and their karma is dissolved. (4:19-20, 21-23)

As you might imagine, by this point in the story, Arjuna seems to be overwhelmed with all of the profound spiritual wisdom his charioteer Krishna is sharing with him. It all feels so challenging. It's a lot to take in. Like many of us when faced with these lofty descriptions, Arjuna doubts his abilities. Can he really do this, achieve this sort of wisdom? He has good intentions, but maybe not the commitment and self-discipline necessary to get the job done. Arjuna asks, what if I can't do what you've just described? "Krishna, what happens to one who has faith but who lacks self-control and wanders from the path, not attaining success in yoga?" (6:37)

Krishna is reassuring. All good work is valuable. If you do not achieve success in this life, you will try again in the next life, but your efforts now will make that next life easier. You will retain the wisdom and discipline you have gained in this life. You might be born in a family that can help you move further along your spiritual path.

As the conversation continues, Krishna describes a third spiritual discipline, a third yoga, bhakti yoga. This is the spiritual practice of devotion, of love. It is the task of adoring God with every element of one's

being. This is by far the most popular of the yogas today, practiced by most of the world's Hindus. It is practiced at shrines and in temples, as people make offerings of food and flowers to the God or Goddess they are devoted to. As they look lovingly at statues of their Gods. People praise their Gods with hymns and seek to love them fully, to be united with them.

Krishna describes this practice, "whatever I am offered in devotion with a pure heart – a leaf, a flower, fruit, or water – I accept with joy. Whatever you do, make it an offering to me – the food you eat, the sacrifices you make, the help you give, even your suffering. In this way you will be freed from the bondage of karma, and from its results both pleasant and painful. Then, firm in renunciation and yoga, with your heart free, you will come to me.

I look upon all creatures equally; none are less dear to me and none more dear. But those who worship me with love live in me, and I come to life in them. (9:26-29).

The conversation continues, with Arjuna continuing his questions and Krishna continuing his answers. At one point, Arjuna asks Krishna to reveal his divine form and the descriptions of what follows is spectacular and terrifying. The descriptions of the spiritual life continue with compelling metaphor and example.

At the end of his final discourse, Krishna asks Arjuna, 'Have you listened with attention? Are you now free from your doubts and confusion? (18:72)

Arjuna replies, 'You have dispelled by doubts and delusions, and I understand through your grace. My faith is firm now, and I will do your will.' (18:73)

The story ends there. We can assume that Arjuna then leads his people into battle against his extended family. The text doesn't tell us what happens, but there is a strong hint in the final words from the narrator: 'Wherever the divine Krishna and the mighty Arjuna are, there will be prosperity, victory, happiness and sound judgement. Of this I am sure! (18:78)

Like any story that has endured for thousands of years of being told and retold, this story can be read in a number of ways. There is the surface reading, the debate between Arjuna and Krishna about what is the best course of action, the best way to approach a situation where there are no right choices. This reading, and the teaching that sometimes violence is the best of the bad options, resonates for many – and was an important inspiration for the Indian independence movement, even though that movement was largely nonviolent. It resonates for anyone trying to see the way through a situation that seems impossible.

There is an allegorical reading of the story. In this reading, the battlefield is within each of us. The good and virtuous parts of ourselves are up against the evil and corrupt parts. This reading of the story was especially resonant for Mahatma Gandhi, who called the *Bhagavad Gita* his spiritual dictionary. He writes, 'It is the description not of war between cousins, but between the two natures in us – the good and the evil. I regard [the king] and his party as the baser impulses in man, and Arjuna and his party as the higher impulses. The field of battle is our own body. An eternal battle is going on between the two camps, and the poet-seer... vividly describes it. Krishna is the Dweller within, ever whispering to a pure heart.'³ Gandhi believes that Krishna is that still small voice deep inside that sings to us all.

³ quoted in Mohammadi, Amir. "Truth is My God:" Mahatma Gandhi and the Bhagavad Gita. *Darshan: In The Company of Saints*. 96 (March 1995), page 51.

I share this story this morning because it's an important story to know. If we are going to hang that quilt with symbols of many of the world's faiths on it, we should know the sacred stories contained in those traditions. This is part of the learning we will be doing as a community this year. I hope this year we will cultivate an appreciative understanding of other traditions, that our learning together will enrich our spiritual lives and help us to be better neighbors to people in our community, both within this church and beyond, who practice other faiths.

I also share this story because it reminds us of the best of our tradition too. In Hinduism, there are various yogas, various ways to practice the faith, to seek spiritual liberation. We as Unitarian Universalists share this idea. There is not one way to practice Unitarian Universalism. We have our contemplatives, those who pray and meditate and seek wisdom through books and discussion. We have our active types, who practice selfless service in their work lives, as they pursue social justice, in service to friends and family. We have those among us for whom adoration is part of their spiritual practice, whether it is adoration of the holy as they understand it, the natural world, the people they love, or their highest ideals. And of course, there are many whose religious life and spiritual practices might not fit the Hindu formula, who are nevertheless a valuable part of this community. And many of us practice two or three of these spiritual pursuits. And we can all encourage one another along these different ways of practicing our shared faith.

Unlike the Hindu community, we cannot point to one of these ways of being as overwhelmingly the most common – and that creates tensions here sometimes. When I meet with church leaders to plan worship, we talk about what ideas and emotional content each service will hold – and we talk about who might not be served on that particular Sunday. We try to make sure that we rotate who is not served from Sunday to Sunday, so everyone gets a turn being satisfied – which also means everyone gets a turn being dissatisfied. This is the challenge of being a community with many different worldviews and many different musical and worship preferences. I know I've shared a teaching with you before about how, as a spiritually diverse community, only 75% of what happens in worship should be meaningful to you. That other 25%, which you might find boring, or you might actively hate, is serving the spiritual needs of someone else in our community. And then in turn, that someone else will have moments that they dislike that are speaking to you. I wish there was some magic formula that would allow what we do here to serve everyone all of the time, but no one has yet discovered that. 75% is our goal here.

And that's a beautiful thing, to hold space for one another like this, to make room for the different languages, the different rituals, the different types of music that speak to one another's hearts.

Thank you for holding this tension with me. Most of the time, we hold it gracefully.

And may we continue to face our struggles, both internal and external with courage.

May we pursue meaning, insight and truth is the way that illumines us.

May we make room for everyone else to follow their path where it takes them.

May there be prosperity, victory, happiness and sound judgement wherever we go.

May it be so. May we make it so. Amen.