

Frequently Asked Questions About Gītā

SWAMI HARSHANANDA

QUESTION: What is Gītā?

ANSWER: The *Bhagavadgītā*, popularly known as the *Gītā*, is one of the outstanding religious classics of the world. Hindus, irrespective of their sects and denominations, cherish great reverence for this book. A ceremonial reading of the book, or even a part thereof, is believed to confer great religious merit.

The book itself, comprising eighteen chapters, forms an integral part of a much bigger work, the great epic, *Mahābhārata* (*vide Bhīṣmaparva*, Chapters 25 to 42). It is a poetical work in the form of a dialogue between Śrī Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna, on the battlefield of Kurukṣetra. The setting of the battlefield contributes a dramatic element to the book and relates religion to the realities of life.

The *Bhagavadgītā* is one of the most translated religious classics of the world. The beauty and the sublimity of the work, its eternal relevance to the problem of human life and its universal approach that helps us view the whole of creation as one, may have prompted the scholars to undertake the task of translating it as a labour of love.

QUESTION: What is the reason for its popularity?

ANSWER: The greatness and the popularity of the *Gītā* can be attributed to several factors. It is a part and parcel of the

epic *Mahābhārata* which itself has been highly venerated as the fifth Veda (*Pañcama-Veda*). The teacher of the *Gītā* is Śrī Kṛṣṇa, who is regarded by the Hindus as an avatāra or incarnation of God Himself. An ideal friend, a great statesman, an invincible warrior, a wise preceptor and a *yogi par excellence*, he harmonizes in his life the various conflicting activities of life. It is precisely this that makes him the fittest person to preach such a religio-spiritual classic. Arjuna, the recipient of the teaching, though himself a great warrior, is a typical representative of the humans, liable to be upset or confused during periods of crisis. Hence, his predicament, very much represents ours, in a similar situation. The questions, doubts and misgivings he raises and the solutions that Śrī Kṛṣṇa offers are not only relevant but also valid even today.

There is an additional reason too. The Hindu Vedāntic tradition has always regarded the *Prasthānatraya* (the three foundational works) as its basis; and the *Gītā* is one of them, the other two being the Upaniṣads and the *Brahmasūtras*. That is why Śaṅkara (A.D. 788-820) and other ancient teachers have chosen to write commentaries on it.

QUESTION: Can we assign any date and authorship to Gītā?

ANSWER: Since the *Gītā* is an integral part of the epic *Mahābhārata*, its date and authorship



A senior monk of the Ramakrishna Order, the author is the President of Ramakrishna Math, Basavanagudi, Bangalore. He is a versatile speaker and a prolific writer having several publications in English, Kannada, and Sanskrit to his credit. His monumental work *A Concise Encyclopaedia of Hinduism* was published in 2008. □

are obviously those of the epic itself. Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana, better known as Vedavyāsa, is reputed to be its author. As per the Hindu oral traditions based on their notion of time as the yuga-system, the Kurukṣetra war must have taken place during 3139 B.C. The dates given however by the modern historians (mostly of the West) vary from 1424 B.C. to 575 B.C. At the present stage of the research, it may be difficult to clinch the issue on such chronological matters.

QUESTION: Tell us how the Gītā was delivered.

ANSWER: Dhṛtarāṣṭra, the blind king (father of the Kauravas) asks Sañjaya, his companion who had been endowed with divine sight to see and describe the war, to tell him as to what happened on the battle field. Sañjaya starts by telling how Duryodhana approaches Droṇācārya, the preceptor and describes the various warriors on both the sides. Just then, Bhīṣma, the grandsire and commander-in-chief of the Kaurava army blows his conch to indicate the commencement of the day's battle. This is followed by all the others including the Pāṇḍavas, blowing their respective conches. At the request of Arjuna, the Pāṇḍava hero, Śrī Kṛṣṇa, his charioteer, brings his chariot and stations it in between the two armies, but right in front of Bhīṣma and Droṇa! Seeing them and observing all the others assembled there for the war, Arjuna sinks in horror and sorrow. He describes his pitiable condition to Śrī Kṛṣṇa, argues against this fratricidal war by portraying its various evil consequences which will ultimately result in the total collapse of the socio-political system and sits down in the chariot abandoning his weapons.

QUESTION: What is Śrī Kṛṣṇa's response to Arjuna's situation?

ANSWER: Śrī Kṛṣṇa at first tries to rouse Arjuna from this stupor by strongly

admonishing him for his psychological collapse at a critical moment, his un-Āryan and unmanly behaviour which does not befit a great warrior like him and urges him to bestir himself to action. Even such strong words fail to awaken him. He continues to sermonize, conveys his decision to retire, but in all humility, seeks his guidance. Then realising that Arjuna's confusion and delusion have gone too deep to be dispelled by cursory replies, Śrī Kṛṣṇa starts his immortal spiritual discourse aimed at curing his malady from the root itself by giving him a correct perspective of the whole picture, in fact, an entire philosophy of life. Arjuna is really sorrowing for those who should not be sorrowed for. All the people including those assembled on the battlefield are, in reality, immortal souls. Death or deterioration belongs only to the body and not to the soul or the spirit. Even supposing it is accepted that one is born with the body and dies with its death, there is no use lamenting it, since it is inevitable. Being a kṣatriya warrior on whose shoulders is cast the responsibility of defending dharma or righteousness, it is his sacred duty to fight and win, or, die for the cause on the battlefield. For a man like him, celebrated for valour, death is preferable to ignominy which will surely accrue to him if he withdraws from the battle now.

QUESTION: So, how should one fight the battle of life?

ANSWER: It is action motivated by selfishness that binds a man whereas when the same is performed without an eye to its fruits and with equanimity, it liberates. This is the 'buddhi' or 'yoga' or 'buddhi-yoga'. Then at Arjuna's request, Śrī Kṛṣṇa describes the characteristics of the sthitaprajña or the man of steady spiritual wisdom as a model for Arjuna's emulation. The sthitaprajña has

abandoned all desires, and is ever contented in his own Self. He is unmoved by pleasure and pain. He is free from attachment, fear or anger. He has absolute mastery over his senses. He is ever awake to the Highest Truth and is indifferent towards the world. He is well-established in the state of Brahman, even at the last moment of his life.

QUESTION: What is the secret of right activity?

ANSWER: For most of the people, performance of one's duties with a controlled mind, for the good of the world, is the easier and the better path. The world-cycle as set in motion by the Creator needs everyone to do his allotted duties, so that it works smoothly. The path of work is in no way inferior since many great persons like Janaka in the ancient days, attained perfection through it alone. Leaders of society (like Arjuna) are expected to show the way to the less enlightened ones by doing their duties perfectly. By cultivating the right attitude towards work and by offering it to him (i.e., Śrī Kṛṣṇa, who is God Himself), one is not tainted by it even while working. Doing one's own duty, however imperfect it may appear to be, is far better than the performance of others' duties, relinquishing one's own. What normally spoils one's work and even impels one to evil ways of life, is selfish desire as also anger. These two have to be conquered by subduing the senses and raising the mind to the level of ātman or the soul.

QUESTION: How does an action take place?

ANSWER: Every action has five causes like the body and speech; and it is foolish to consider the ātman (the self) as the doer. One who does actions without the sense of doership and with an untainted mind is never bound by them.

QUESTION: 'Who' is God? How can we approach Him?

ANSWER: He is all—the various items of a sacrifice, the father, mother and sustainer of the universe, the goal and the Lord, the place of origin and dissolution. He is the sun that shines, the rain that pours. He is immortality as well as death. It is he who is propitiated through sacrifices. If people worship him only, are eternally devoted to him, then he will take over the responsibility of taking care of them. Those who worship other deities reach them, whereas those who worship him, come to him. However he is the Self of all these deities also. What really matters in worshipping him is devotion. He accepts even a leaf or a flower or water if offered with devotion and faith. He has no enemies nor friends. Even the worst sinner, once he realizes his mistakes and worships God with devotion, becomes transformed into a righteous soul.

QUESTION: Tell us something about the way God works.

ANSWER: God holds all beings and objects of the created world from within like a thread holding the beads. He is in fact the best and the essence in all beings and things. His māyā, comprising the three guṇas (sattva, rajas and tamas—which, incidentally is his aparā-prakṛti) can delude all and is difficult to overcome. Only those that totally surrender themselves to him can transcend it. The foolish and the evil ones do not surrender to him and hence will not attain him. As for his devotees, they are of four types: ārta (one afflicted), arthārthi (one desirous of worldly gains), jijñāsu (one interested in knowing him) and the jñāni (the knower). The last one is the best among them. People generally take recourse to different deities to fulfil their numerous desires. However, it is he (Śrī Kṛṣṇa, the Supreme Lord) that grants their desires, through those forms. He, the Supreme Lord, being enveloped by his own yogamāyā is not

revealed to all. Only those who have performed good deeds and are sinless are devoted to him to get liberation.

QUESTION: What can we learn from this advice of Śrī Kṛṣṇa?

ANSWER: Arjuna is advised to remember the Lord always and fight his battles of life. Then he describes abhyāsayoga or yoga of repeated practice of thinking of the Lord. The yogi who practises it, especially at the last moment of his life, will reach the Supreme Lord. The repetition of the syllable Om at this juncture is a great help. If a person departs from the body in this way, he will not come back to this mundane existence. Attaining other worlds through meritorious deeds will be of no use since one has to return to this earth once again. Here Śrī Kṛṣṇa mentions about the two well-known paths—Arcirādimārga (path of light) and Dhūmādimārga (path of smoke)—mentioned in the earlier works like the Upaniṣads. The former leads to Brahmāloka (the world of Brahmā) from which there is no return, whereas the latter leads to Pitṛloka (the world of manes) from which one returns once again to the mortal world. A yogi who knows about these paths is never again deluded.

QUESTION: How does one meditate?

ANSWER: A person aspiring to meditate should sit in a clean place, keeping the body erect and steady. Controlling and gathering the forces of the mind, he should direct it towards Śrī Kṛṣṇa (who is God Himself). Thus he will attain peace. Such yoga is possible only for a person who leads a balanced life, avoiding all extremes. Such a yogi will be able to see all beings in God and God in all beings. He of an equanimous mind is the best of yogis. Here Arjuna raises two questions: How can one control this fickle mind? What will happen to a yogi who fails to attain the goal? Śrī Kṛṣṇa

replies that though it is difficult to control the mind, it is not impossible. It can be achieved by vairāgya (renunciation) and abhyāsa (practice). As regards the yogi who has slipped from the ideal, he will be born once again in the family of yogis and, getting a conducive atmosphere, strives even harder, ultimately attaining the goal. A yogi, he concludes, is superior to men of austerity or knowledge or works; and exhorts Arjuna to become one.

QUESTION: It is said that Arjuna actually had a vision of God. Is it so?

ANSWER: Yes. Arjuna's curiosity being roused by what Śrī Kṛṣṇa said, he requests Lord Śrī Kṛṣṇa to show to him his divine form. The Lord endows him with a divine sight and reveals his Viśvarūpa or universal divine form. Decorated with divine garlands and garments, the wondrous cosmic form is more brilliant than a million suns. The whole world of variegated forms, constitutes only a small part of his being. Excited by wonder and joy, Arjuna starts praying to that Divinity. This beautiful prayer hymn of 17 verses gives a moving description of the Viśvarūpa or the cosmic form. All beings—divine, human and subhuman—are being seen in Him. He has several arms, bellies and faces. He is extraordinarily brilliant. He has pervaded the whole space. All beings like gods and sages, are praising Him with folded hands. The various heroes arrayed on the battle field are entering into Him and getting destroyed like moths in the fire. Grippled with fear and wonder, Arjuna prays to Him to reveal who He is. The Lord replies that He is Time, the eternal destroyer, come to annihilate the warriors in the enemy armies. Since this task will be achieved by Him even without Arjuna's involvement, the Lord advises Arjuna to fight, get victory and fame, and enjoy the kingdom.

QUESTION: Who is a true devotee?

ANSWER: Lord Śrī Kṛṣṇa describes the characteristics of a bhakta or an ideal devotee. He does not hate anyone. He is friendly to all. He is compassionate and free from egoism as also possessiveness. He is equanimous in pleasure and pain, ever forgiving and ever contented. Having mastered his passions he has dedicated his mind unto the Lord. He is never the cause of unrest for the world, nor can the world upset him. He is free from joy and anger, fear and anxiety. He is beyond pleasure and hatred, sorrow and desires, and has abandoned all actions, good or bad. He has devotion and looks upon friend and foe with an equal eye and is equanimous in honour and dishonour. Ever contented, having no particular place to lay his head, he has steadiness of mind. Such a devotee is ever dear to him.

QUESTION: *Tell us something about the 'three guṇas'?*

ANSWER: This *prakṛiti* [or Primordial Nature] gives rise to the three guṇas—sattva, rajas and tamas. Sattva is pure and bright, produces pleasure and knowledge, and binds the soul through them. Rajas is of the nature of passion, produces desire and attachment and binds the embodied soul through action. Tamas, born out of ignorance, deludes beings through inadvertence, sloth and sleep. Sattva creates attachment for happiness, rajas for actions, and tamas, covering knowledge, binds one to inadvertence. The three guṇas are constantly acting on one another. The rise of sattva can be inferred by the rise of jñāna or knowledge, of rajas by the rise of greed and activity and of tamas by the rise of inadvertence and delusion. Death at the time when sattva is on the ascendant takes one to the pure realms. Ascendance of rajas and tamas at the time of death leads one to birth in the families of those addicted to actions and in

subhuman bodies. Anyone who realizes that it is the guṇas that act and knows the Self untouched by them, attains to my being.

QUESTION: *Can we go beyond the guṇas?*

ANSWER: Yes. Śrī Kṛṣṇa says that one who is unmoved by the effects of the three guṇas (like knowledge or action or delusion) is a guṇātīta (one who is beyond guṇas). He is equanimous in sorrow or happiness, looks upon a clod of earth or stone or gold as of equal worth, is unmoved by the pleasant and the unpleasant or by praise or blame. He is the same to enemies and friends. He abandons all undertakings. He serves me (the Lord) with undeviating love. Such a one is a guṇātīta and becomes fit to attain Brahman.

QUESTION: *In Gītā, divine versus demoniac traits are mentioned. What are they?*

ANSWER: The list of daivī-sampat (divine traits) comprises 26 qualities, the chief ones being: fearlessness, purity of mind, self-control, Vedic studies, austerity, non-violence, truth, spirit of renunciation, compassion, forgiveness and absence of pride. The other list, of the āsurī-sampat (demoniac traits), consists of six vices: hypocrisy, vainglory, egoism, anger, harsh speech and ignorance of higher values.

Gītā also gives a long but interesting description of the demoniac or evil persons and their way of life. They know neither the performance of good works nor the need to withdraw from the evil ones. They have neither purity nor truth. They consider kāma or lust as the sole cause of creation. Being addicted to it, they out of delusion, try to get unholy things. They boast about their wealth or works and exult in destroying their enemies. They dislike the Lord who is the Self of all beings. Such persons are thrown by me (i.e., Lord Śrī Kṛṣṇa) into abominable births.

The gateway to hell that ultimately causes self-destruction is threefold: lust, anger

and greed. One who is free from these attains the highest abode. For this, one needs to act according to the Vedas and the śāstras (holy books) but with śraddhā or faith.

QUESTION: What are the three types of food mentioned in the Gītā?

ANSWER: Food is of three types. Food conducive to health, strength and purity of mind, and is pleasant is sāttvika. Foods that are very bitter, sour or saltish, pungent and produce diseases are rājasik. Old and stale food, the food that has lost its taste and flavour, petrified, spoiled and impure is tāmasik.

QUESTION: What are the types of tapas?

ANSWER: Tapas or austerity is of three types—śārīra, vānmaya and mānasa (pertaining to the body, speech and mind respectively). Worship of gods, brāhmaṇas and preceptors as also observing purity and continence, is tapas of the body. Truthful and unoffensive speech as also the study of one's branch of the Vedas is tapas of the speech. Peace of mind, control of thoughts and speech, and a pleasant demeanour is tapas of the mind. When this threefold tapas is performed with faith and without the desire for its fruits, it is sāttvik. If it is done in an ostentatious manner for name and fame, it is rājasik. If done without regard to one's capacity and for harming others it is tāmasik.

QUESTION: And what are the types of dāna?

ANSWER: Dāna or gifts given as a matter of duty to persons of the right type and in the right manner belong to the sāttvik type. If given with the desire for future rewards and not very willingly, it becomes rājasik. Gifts given in disdain to unworthy persons, transgressing the rules are tāmasik.

QUESTION: What are the types of buddhi and dhṛti?

ANSWER: Buddhi (intellect) and dhṛti (fortitude) are also of three varieties. Sāttvik

buddhi is aware of bondage and liberation. Rājasik buddhi is that which is unable to understand dharma (righteousness) and adharma (unrighteousness) properly. Tāmasik buddhi understands everything in the wrong way. Sāttvik dhṛti helps in self-control. Rājasik dhṛti makes one to be selfishly attached to things. Tāmasik dhṛti impels one towards sleep, fear and vanity.

QUESTION: What is Gītā's view about happiness?

ANSWER: Gītā categorizes sukha or happiness, into three kinds. That which appears unpleasant in the beginning but gives happiness at the end, after a long practice leading to the mind being established in the ātman (Self) is sāttvik. Happiness got by sense-contact with sense-objects, which appears pleasant in the beginning but ends up in disaster, is rājasik. Tāmasik happiness causes delusion and induces laziness.

QUESTION: So, how do we summarise Gītā's message?

ANSWER: Though part of the *Mahābhārata*, it can as well stand on its own as an independent work. Though taught on the battlefield of Kurukṣetra, urging Arjuna to fight, it has nothing to do with wars or battles or bloodshed, but only with the discharging of one's sacred duties of life, however unpleasant they may be. Though given by Śrī Kṛṣṇa to Pārtha or Arjuna in the days of yore, its declarations like, 'Remember Me and fight!' (8.7) can help and inspire anyone of us, beleaguered with serious problems in life, even now. Though recognizing multiplicity here, its principle of unity in diversity as signified by the cosmic form (11.9-13) and the underlying divinity (as taught in 7.7), help us to cultivate a holistic approach to the whole universe of which the much talked of ecological balance too is only a small aspect. □