The Psychology of the Gita
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Manuals of Life

The popular idea, especially among the young, is that religion and spirituality are things of the old age. We generally think that spirituality is a post-retirement plan; something which has to be enjoyed with the gratuity, provident fund, and pension that you get after retirement. This is not true. Spirituality is something we need when we are living the life, not just at the end of it. When you purchase a computer, a car, or a refrigerator, or some such thing, it comes with a manual. This manual tells you how to handle the equipment—this instruction is meant for those who do not know much about machines—how to operate the equipment, and so on and so forth. This manual also tells you what to do when something goes wrong; it helps us troubleshoot.

Through our traditional heritage we have been handed over such manuals, manuals of life by our predecessors, in the form of the Bhagavadgita and the Upanishads. They teach us exactly what manuals of equipment teach us—they tell us what to do when things go wrong in our lives. But unfortunately, thanks to our education system, we keep all these manuals somewhere comfortably out of our reach, and then break our heads when some problems occur in our life. Some of us try to commit suicide, some become mad, and some others get depressed and desolate.

We need to remember that these manuals are to be consulted when we are alive, when we are in the heat of the moment. It is probably why Sri Krishna told the Gita to Arjuna in the midst of the battlefield. It was not told in an ashrama. It was not told in a retreat. It shows us that it is when life is happening and when you are here in this life that you need these manuals. These manuals are not merely religious as we make them out to be.

The Underperformance of Arjuna

Swami Vivekananda expounded and exemplified the four yogas—karma yoga, raja yoga, bhakti yoga, and jnana yoga. These were already present in the Gita and had been commented upon by Acharya Shankara, but Swamiji brought out their relevance and showed us how we could practise them in the modern age. These are manuals which have come out from the Gita and have been carefully modelled by Swamiji according to the needs of the modern age.

Raja Yoga is the manual of meditation, Karma Yoga is the manual of action, Bhakti Yoga is the manual of devotion, and Jnana Yoga is the manual of knowledge.

Out of these, two are non-theistic paths—you don’t need to believe in a God, you don’t need to believe in any system of faith, you can follow any belief system; these yogas are pure science. These non-theistic yogas are raja yoga, the yoga of mind or meditation, and karma yoga, the yoga of action. These are scientific methodologies given to us so that we can use them in our daily lives to cope with problems and also to find out direct and practical solutions. This is what we see in the Gita; we see the psychology of the human mind and the means to master this
psychology. This is the psychology of the Gita. Gita begins with psychology, ends with psychology, and has psychology in it throughout. We need to have a clear understanding of this.

How does the Gita show us the psychology of the human mind? What is the entire Gita about? What is its essence? The first chapter of the Gita is about the despondency of Arjuna. It is called *Arjuna Vishada Yoga* or ‘The Despondency of Arjuna’. What is that? We can call it ‘The Underperformance of Arjuna’, because that is what actually happened.

Suddenly, Arjuna finds himself unable to deliver. He philosophises, rationalises his inability, as almost all of us do at one point or the other in our lives. So, why is this so not correct in the case of Arjuna? Because before the war started, Arjuna was quite resolute that he will see the end of Karna. He wanted to see the complete destruction of the entire Kaurava dynasty but when he came to the battlefield, in front of his cousins, his teachers, his kith and kin, he adopted the stance of the cat on the wall; he became deluded and confused. He was just ruminating on what to do and was thinking what would happen at the end of the war.

The proverbial question of ‘to be or not to be’ was the question here too. Confused, he expressed his inability to fight the war to his charioteer. Now, here was a glorious charioteer, driver, chauffeur, whatever we might call him, in Sri Krishna. There has never been a more powerful charioteer. Arjuna asked this eminent chauffeur to take the chariot to the middle of both the armies ready for battle. Then Arjuna saw the warring parties, he saw his brothers, his teachers among his opponents and he became weak. This is what Arjuna says in the Gita: ‘O Krishna, seeing my own people assembled for battle, my limbs are weakening, my mouth is going dry, my body is trembling, and I am horripilating. My bow, the Gandiva, is falling from my hand, and my skin is also burning.’

Arjuna shows physical symptoms of stress. Most of our ailments are psychosomatic. Our mental agony takes its toll on the body. If you feel happy, you feel energetic, and if you feel sad, you feel fatigue. Here, Arjuna’s mouth goes dry, and a great warrior like him is unable even to hold on to his bow! Gandiva is the name of the bow of Arjuna. It was a remarkable weapon, probably much more powerful than the present-day weapons. And it was slipping from his hands. This is a classical situation of nervous anxiety.

When we seek employment, we know what we would be expected to do in that job even
while applying for it. That is mentioned clearly in the job advertisement. We apply for the job and thereby tell the prospective employers that we are ready to do that work. After that, there is the process of selection, which could involve many interviews. Now, the person who has applied for the job has a clearer idea of what the expected work is.

Finally, one gets the job and ends up in the office and faces the work. After sometime, suddenly one feels that this job cannot be done. Why does this happen? This is because one starts fearing the possibility of not achieving the goals, not achieving the targets. The possibility of ‘underperformance’ looms large on our minds. One suddenly feels that one would not be able to perform. This is what happened to Arjuna. All of a sudden, he realised that the war is not of any use. He said: ‘O Krishna, I am unable to maintain my calm and my mind is wavering. Also, I do not see any good signs. I do not see any good coming from the killing of my own people in the battle. O Krishna, I want neither victory nor the pleasures of the kingdom’ (1.30–31).

When faced with difficulties in life, what do people generally do? They quit. They philosophise, rationalise, and make a big fuss of not doing anything. Just like the proverbial fox and the sour grapes, for the majority, most of the things are sour, they are unable to get it, so they fancy having renounced it. They idealise their situation of being in the misery of wanting and not getting the wants.

Here, Arjuna’s mind is wavering, he does not know what to do. He, who was intent on killing Karna, now finds nothing good about this war. He sees in his enemies, his own people and does not want to kill them. He asks: ‘Why should I kill them? What good would that bring? I do not want victory; I do not want any comforts.’ This is fake renunciation called *markata vairagya*, monkey-renunciation. A monkey sits calmly on a tree, closing its eyes. It has already seen someone eating under the tree. So, this meditation is a ‘planning meditation’ and if the monkey does not get anything, or fails to snatch anything, it becomes calm again. This is monkey-renunciation; nothing but a lull before a storm. Arjuna also got this monkey-renunciation.

People always get such renunciation. Once a young man went to one of the centres of the Ramakrishna Mission, met a brahmachari there, and expressed his desire to join the Ramakrishna Order as a monk. Now this brahmachari asked the young man some questions and came to know that he was working as a software engineer in a reputed company. Sensing a case of monkey-renunciation, the brahmachari asked: ‘You are an intelligent young man, you work in a good company, draw a nice salary, have your parents with you, so why do you want to become a monk?’

If the young man were a true spiritual aspirant, he would have talked about the unreality of the world, the spiritual quest, and related matters. However, our young man, stammered and stuttered, and then blurted out with watery eyes, that it was because of a girl! He had fell in love, and then he fell out of purpose in life! What kind of love is that!

Love should give purpose, not rob you of it. This love failure or the failure of what he thought was love, led him to attempt suicide. He could not commit suicide, because he did not have the courage, but somehow he presumed that he could become a monk. That is what most people think: That becoming a monk is very easy. Quite the opposite, it is very difficult. It is like walking on the edge of a razor. This is what happens to most of us. We turn our failures to pretexts for renunciation. That is not possible. Renunciation does not come from not getting, it comes from not wanting.
People find the whole world devoid of meaning when they do not get what they desire. This is when the sad music sets in. This theme is used over and over again in literature, music, visual art, movies, and all forms of pursuits that is exclusively claimed by humanity. Sorrow from rejection or failure is not dispassion, it is just disturbed passion.

Arjuna dons the role of a seer, a wise man, because he is afraid of the enormous army confronting him. He develops this halo behind his crown, he realises that war is not good and he becomes an advocate of peace. Why? Because he cannot fight, that is why. He finds Kripacharya, Dronacharya—all these stalwarts, his masters, and suddenly it dawns upon him that he cannot fight them. He underperforms. He knows what he is supposed to do. He was told about his duties, rather he wanted it. Now suddenly, he does not want the war. This is nothing but underperformance.

The Tricks of the Mind

The mind always plays in circles. The Gita gives us a very strong idea, a strong foundation for understanding the workings of our mind. In the space of two verses, it gives a masterly exposition of the psychology of the mind and how the mind works. The Gita says: ‘Thinking of the objects of enjoyment, people develop attachment to them. Out of this attachment arises desire and desire leads to anger. Anger leads to delusion and delusion leads to the confusion of mind. Confusion of mind leads to the loss of the thinking faculty, which leads to destruction’ (2.62–63).

This has been told in simple Sanskrit. Contrary to popular belief, Sanskrit is an easy language. Majority of the Indians understand Sanskrit because it lives through all the Indian languages. The verses quoted above talk of human beings in general. These verses do not talk only of men or only of women.

Human beings think of sense objects. It could be any sense object, an object of enjoyment, say some dessert. You think of some dessert. This thinking becomes almost like a meditation. Then you picture yourself having that dessert. You start wanting it badly, you even start salivating. Your entire being becomes an intense desire for this dessert. This is the process of attachment to sense objects.

This could happen with relationships also. You see someone and then you want to know that person; you want to have a bonding and relationship with that person. Suddenly, your life seems meaningless without that person. Whenever we have desires, we also face obstacles while trying to fulfil those desires. When you want to eat a dessert, there comes your parent, friend, or spouse, who does not allow you to eat the dessert. This person does not want you to eat the dessert because you are ill and should not eat sweets.

But for this obstacle, you probably would not have bothered much if you could not eat the dessert. Now that there is an obstacle, your desire for the dessert increases a thousandfold. This obstacle makes you angry. Anger leads to confusion and you start quarrelling with this person. You start misbehaving, calling names—all such behaviour that you know to be improper. You have been educated not to act in this manner and this anger and confusion leads to your forgetting such learning.

You are deluded and forget your nature, your relationship with this person. You are probably in a position to instruct this person, you are more educated, more learned, and yet because of this intense desire for dessert, you forget your standing in life and society. You may even slap this person because of this attachment to dessert. This is the external sign of the loss of wisdom. That leads to complete destruction. You lose people who love you and care for you.
This is what happens in our lives on a daily basis. We are always in a dichotomous situation: ‘To be or not to be’ is the question, always. We always think whether to do something or not to do something: ‘Shall I phone him or not’ or ‘He did not phone me so I too will not phone him’. These are the trivial, yet existential questions that gnaw at our minds. And of course, phone companies make money out of such situations!

If we understand the source of the problem, we can solve it. Where is the source of the problem? It is in desires. Does that mean we should not have desires or does that mean we should not enjoy anything?

**The Secret of Controlling the Mind**

Robert Ingersoll was a great agnostic. Swamiji met him on many occasions and discussed philosophy with him. Swamiji recounted one such discussion: ‘Ingersoll once said to me, “I believe in making the most out of this world, in squeezing the orange dry, because this world is all we are sure of.” I replied, “I know a better way to squeeze the orange of this world than you do; and I get more out of it. I know I cannot die, so I am not in a hurry. I know that there is no fear, so I enjoy the squeezing. … Get every single drop!”’

What did Swamiji mean? One can have some desires, harmless desires. How do we understand what is harmful and what is harmless? Anything which does not drive you to the position where your life’s purpose, your mind, and life—everything you have worked for till now, is undone. Such a desire is quite harmless. Even then one has to be careful to have no strong attachment. It is alright to eat dessert, but one should be able to abstain from it if one has diabetes.

This discerning faculty is *buddhi*, the faculty of understanding that you need to always have. Some kind of cyber patrol should always be there in your brain, much like the cyber patrol one installs on one’s computer to prevent the misuse of the Internet by children.

This is what we need to do and we would do this if we understood that the lack of a proper discerning faculty is the source of all problems. The Gita and all the commentators on it, starting from Acharya Shankara, clearly tell that if we understand that the lack of a discerning faculty is the source of our problems, we can just nip it in the bud, we can control it. But the Gita also gives the solution or the methodology to find the solution. It says: ‘But by perceiving objects with the organs that are free from attraction and repulsion, and are under one’s own control, the self-controlled person attains tranquillity.’

We should always understand who the master is here. The dessert is not the master; I am the master. This thinking, this idea should come to a person.

(To be continued)

**References**

3. Gita, 2.64.
We generally have peculiar notions about austerities and their role in spiritual life. Swami Vivekananda asked: ‘Should Rishis come flying through the air; because you have blown three times through the nose? Is it a joke?’ However, many people think that if they blow their nose, gods would indeed appear before them.

Having these strange notions about spiritual life, we do not use even the ordinary things that are available to us. If we possess things, we should also use them. Else, we should refrain from possessing things. Possessing things and yet not using them shows a limited or wrong idea of spiritual life. For instance, some people have qualms about using the Internet or other forms of technology. Why do not they use technology? Technology is meant to be used. One should be careful, however, to not get used by them. One must have a strict discipline of the mind. One should tell the mind: ‘O mind, this is what you should do.’ Sri Krishna was the most glorious driver ever. Imagine being driven by none less than God! Arjuna has God as his charioteer. A glorious charioteer. Yet, Arjuna’s mind gets clouded.

There is a popular story about Sri Krishna and Arjuna. It is a convention of chariot-riding that the charioteer would first get down and give a hand to the person riding the chariot to get down. Similarly, it is a convention that the charioteer would first get up the chariot and then give a hand to the person riding the chariot to alight the chariot.

However, at the end of the last day of the Mahabharata War, Sri Krishna asked Arjuna to first get down the chariot. This disturbed Arjuna though he knew very well that Sri Krishna, the Lord, was his charioteer. Arjuna felt that he was not being given the proper respect. That is how delusion sets in. We know that it is not right, yet we want something that is not right.

Here, Arjuna felt that he should be given the respect that he deserved. Particularly, at the end of the war, he had the proud behaviour of a victorious person. Arjuna forgot that he had severe underperformance issues at the beginning of the war and that it was Sri Krishna, his charioteer, who had persuaded him to fight the war.

Forgetting all that, Arjuna became angry. He felt that Sri Krishna was insulting him and said to Sri Krishna: ‘O Krishna, get down!’ Sri Krishna smiled. He had a wonderful smile. Sri Krishna told Arjuna: ‘You get down.’ This conversation, back and forth, went on for some time. However, though Arjuna was great, he was not the Lord, and he did not have the magical and powerful weapon, the disc named Sudarshana Chakra. Arjuna was afraid of Sri Krishna and was helpless in front of Sri Krishna, and he got down the chariot.

After Arjuna, Sri Krishna also got down the chariot, and immediately, the chariot burst into smithereens and became powder. Arjuna was shocked and asked Sri Krishna the reason for this blast. Sri Krishna then told him that all the weapons and missiles that were hitting the
chariot throughout the war failed to have any effect due to Sri Krishna's power and since the war had ended, Sri Krishna had removed his protection, and that is why he asked Arjuna to get down first and did not want to insult Arjuna.

This is how our mind works. We know the facts and try to do everything properly. However, while doing things, we get this idea that we have somehow become somebody in life, we have attained some position, and the ego of this false understanding leads us to think great of ourselves. The Bhagavadgita gives us the example of the leaf of a lotus plant. This is an oft-quoted example from the Indian scriptures. If you take a lotus leaf and put some water on it, the water drop does not get absorbed or stuck to the leaf but rolls down the leaf. The water drop is unattached to the lotus leaf. That is how we should be in our lives. That is what we should aspire to become in our lives, completely unattached.

**The State of an Uncontrolled Mind**

The Gita says: ‘For, the mind which follows in the wake of the wandering senses, carries away one’s wisdom like the wind diverting a boat on the waters.’

It is not easy to be completely unattached. Now, one might say, ‘I do not care. What would happen if I do not follow all these instructions on controlling the mind? It is easy to give a lecture and somehow I can listen to a lecture, but that does not mean that I have to follow in toto all that has been said.’ Fine, one might take that kind of position. One might not follow these instructions on controlling the mind.

But, what would you do then? You would do exactly what your senses tell you to do. Wherever your senses take you, you would go and whatever your senses would show, you would see. A person who blindly follows one’s senses loses one’s intellect and wisdom. What would be the condition of such a person? It would be exactly like the condition of the famous ship Titanic that was shipwrecked and sunk into the ocean. People thought that the Titanic was the ultimate ship and that it was a ship that will never sink but it sank all the same.

**Ways to Control the Mind**

Similarly, a person who blindly follows one’s senses, without having any checking mechanism, any restraint, would sink and be destroyed. Without a patrolling of the mind one would have to face the consequences of the free run of the mind. Then, what should one do? The Gita offers the solution: ‘Therefore, O mighty-armed, one whose senses are withdrawn from their objects in all their varieties becomes established in steady intelligence’ (2.68).

According to Sri Krishna, if a person shows one’s mastery over the senses that person gets steady wisdom. There are many events in the Olympics. One of them is an event involving a horse, where the rider and the horse have to be in perfect synchronisation. It is called the equestrian event. It is great to watch because it shows the perfect mastery of the relationship between the human being and an animal. This event is almost on a par with gymnastics. There is music and dance and there is perfect coordination of movements.

We too need such synchronisation of the intellect, the mind, and the senses. We need to note that the mind in Indian philosophy is not the same as the brain. The intellect or buddhi in Indian philosophy is not the same as the brain. We need to practise and remember whatever we have been taught since our childhood. Whatever we need to know for having a good behaviour and leading an ideal life has been taught to us in the primary school and one needs to just follow them. But, whether you will follow this advice
or not is the real task ahead of you, that is the real challenge.

What we should do is very clear before us. All of us know what is right, but we are perplexed while trying to do that. How one follows the right path, the challenges in following the right path, and how one copes with those challenges are the real crises. One has to have mastery over one’s senses, much like the riders in the equestrian events of Olympics, who actually ask their horses to lift the toe a little or to walk, to trot diagonally, to dance with the music, and so on. Similarly, we should have that kind of control over our mind.

Should we not enjoy music? Of course, we should enjoy music. Should we not watch movies? Of course, we should watch movies. But, we should also know when to stop. We should have a policing mechanism in our mind. The Gita says: ‘One, who after rejecting all desires, moves about free from hankering, without the idea of “me” and “mine”, and devoid of pride, attains peace’ (2.71).

Here, the Gita is talking about giving up desires. Some people think that to desire is to sin. Swamiji said that there is no sin, there is only progress ‘from lower truth to higher truth’.3 So, there is no error or sin, there is only lower truth and higher truth. When people waver from their ideal, they think they have committed a great error, a great sin. It is just that they have wavered from the path to their ideal. It is not a sin; it is just a learning experience. However, a person who has wavered from the ideal has great difficulty believing that such a person has not committed any sin. It does not ring true to their ears. They say, ‘Really? I have committed a great mistake, a great sin, and Swamiji says that it is not an error or a sin.’ Yes, it is not an error or a sin. No one has to suffer in hell or burning hells for that. It is just an opportunity to progress from the lower truth to the higher truth.

This journey from the lower truth to the higher truth is facilitated by the Gita, which is a manual that talks about the present situation of a person. That is why the Gita says that one has to have detachment in the here and the now. You will have to give up attachment, you will have to come away from sorrow or suffering, here in this lifetime, in this place; not anywhere else, not in any heaven or hell.

The Practice of Meditation

People have funny ideas about meditation. Generally, people think that when they meditate, they will see some light or there will appear a halo behind their head, and that such things would mean that they have become enlightened. Then they would not need to listen to any talks on the Gita or read anything on the Gita. One could also write another book on the Gita. Some years ago, someone published a book titled Yet Another Book on the Gita. There are so many books on the Gita! It is difficult to say what happens on enlightenment. Almost every person who attained such spiritual enlightenment talks about seeing an ocean of light. Sri Ramakrishna also says that.

The descriptions of the experience of enlightenment are difficult to understand because as Sri Ramakrishna said, such experience is inexpressible or indescribable, because it is beyond the realm of speech. However, as the Gita says, an enlightened person attains tranquility.

There happened a funny incident about seeing light in meditation. A person used to regularly visit the temple of a centre of Ramakrishna
Math. This person used to attend the evening prayer and would meditate after that. After doing so for many months, this person felt that there was some enlightenment and said to the monk in charge of the temple that this person could see a light every day. The monk enquired all the details of the seeing of the light and found that it was always at a particular fixed time that the person saw the light. Immediately, the monk told him that it was the exact time when he switched on the light in front of the person! All the while that person was seeing an actual light, an electric lamp, and mistook it for enlightenment!

Therefore, one should be very careful in matters related to meditation or spiritual experiences. These things could be misleading. There is another incident that happened in one of the centres of the Ramakrishna Math. Once a young man approached a brahmachari of the Ramakrishna Math and said that he had a spiritual experience, a realisation of God. He explained that his kundalini had risen up, up, and up. That is what people generally think would happen. They think that the moment they start meditating their kundalini would rise up and suddenly something great would happen, like a magical spell of abracadabra. This young man also thought so and was explaining his experience. When the brahmachari asked him to give more details of what had happened, the young man said that he had this experience while he was ironing his clothes. Immediately, the brahmachari said that probably it was an electric shock that he had experienced, and the young man said that his psychiatrist also thought the same! The young man added that the psychiatrist also thought that he was experiencing the initial phase of the terrible psychological ailment called schizophrenia.

This is only a glimpse of what could go wrong if one is not careful about how one goes about managing the mind. Spirituality is changing the way you live, changing the way you think; it is changing one's very perspective towards everything. It is not some kind of mystery-mongering or something miraculous.

There is an interesting book written by a leading neuroscientist, V S Ramachandran. The book is titled *Phantoms in the Brain*. This book is fascinating as it has been written by a person who lives outside India and approaches the mind from a neuroscientific perspective. He followed the research of Dr Wilder Penfield, who pioneered brain mapping and first published his findings in 1951.

Wilder Penfield inserted electrodes in the interpretive cortex of the brain of the subjects of his experiment and was surprised to find that a miniscule amount of electricity introduced to this part of the brain doubled the stream of consciousness. When a person talks, that person’s consciousness is working in two streams, one stream engages in the talking and the other thinks something. Penfield found that when a fraction of a volt of electricity was passed through the interpretive cortex, the subject could simultaneously think of two things and talk of two things, that is, the stream of consciousness doubled, which he calls the ‘doubling of awareness’. This sounds almost impossible but it actually happened and it has been reproduced over and again in many neurological experiments. Penfield published his findings in the much acclaimed book *The Mystery of the Mind*.

V S Ramachandran describes the various experiments done by Penfield and many who came
after him, including Ramachandran himself, in his book *Phantoms in the Brain* and concludes that if these experiments do not prove that the idea of the human body being owned by a particular person is an illusion, then nothing will. That is a great statement. Ramachandran says that the idea that a person owns one’s body is an illusion from the neuroscientist’s point of view: ‘If these examples don’t convince you that your “ownership” of your body is an illusion, then nothing will.’

Ramachandran explains how some patients who underwent surgery of the brain reported experiencing ‘intense pleasure, “like a thousand orgasms rolled into one”’ (175). Though many of his patients compared this experience to the experience of God, these experiences are not life-transforming or enlightening experiences. For most people in the world, the acme of joy is from physical pleasure and that is the only point of comparison. Sri Ramakrishna also quoted Gauri Pandit and said: ‘Gauri used to say that when a man attains ecstatic love of God all the pores of the skin, even the roots of the hair, become like so many sexual organs, and in every pore the aspirant enjoys the happiness of communion with the Atman.’

Sage Patanjali in his *Yoga Sutra* talks of experiences that could be brought about by the consumption of drugs much like psychedelics. He says: ‘The siddhis or supernatural powers come with birth or they are achieved by means of herbs or drugs, mantras, austerities, or perfect concentration.’

Then, one might think that these experiences are comparable to the experience of ecstasy or samadhi mentioned in the Upanishads. However, this experience that a brain stimulation brings about does not change one’s character, does not bring a qualitative change in one’s life. There is no behavioural change. This means that just having a blissful experience or just seeing a light does not mean that one has become a master of one’s senses.

**Mastering the Senses**

The road to becoming the master of your senses is not an easy one. However, if one takes up that road, one eventually come to a state of mind where no matter what happens, one can prevent one’s senses from destroying one’s life. This has been portrayed by the Gita in this verse: ‘Many who were devoid of attachment, fear and anger, who were absorbed in me, who had taken refuge in me, and were purified by the austerity of knowledge, have attained my state.’

Here, Sri Krishna talks about these wonderful people who take his shelter. He uses a phrase, ‘jnana-tapas’, the austerity of knowledge, the tapasya of knowledge.

There was a French philosopher named Jean-François Lyotard, who was one of the pioneers postmodern thinkers. In 1979 he wrote
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The important and popular book *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. In that book, Lyotard says that knowledge would be eventually commoditised, knowledge would be made a commodity. He writes: ‘Knowledge in the form of an informational commodity indispensable to productive power is already, and will continue to be, a major—perhaps the major—stake in the worldwide competition for power.’

Lyotard is effectively saying that there would be a price tag on knowledge and that is what you would have to pay to become knowledgeable. Similarly, Einstein says: ‘I don’t burden my memory with such facts that I can easily find in any textbook.’ These thoughts give us an idea of how knowledge has become a commodity and how it has become specific to the selection by the user of knowledge. All you need for knowledge today is the mantra googlay namah, salutations to Google! ‘Google’ has become a verb in the Oxford English dictionary which means to search the Internet. Once you know this mantra, you have access to an infinite amount of knowledge. You just need to search the Internet and you get the knowledge that you need.

However, the intellectual austerity, the jnana tapas that Sri Krishna talks about in the above mentioned verse of the Gita, is not knowledge in the sense of data or information. That is just information, not wisdom. Gita talks here about wisdom. There is a process by which one acquires knowledge and there is a process by which one becomes a master of a particular knowledge. Here, Gita is not talking about such empirical knowledge. In empirical knowledge or knowledge in the form of data or information, one acquires some quantitative input but there is no qualitative enhancement of life or there is no holistic comprehension.

It is a qualitative, transforming, holistic knowledge that we need to be in true control of ourselves. Swamiji says that when a spiritual teacher or a guru teaches, it is not just some words that travel from the guru to the disciple but spiritual energy or understanding is transferred from the guru to the disciple: ‘Some power, real and tangible, goes out from the teacher and begins to grow in the mind of the taught.’

The austerity of knowledge talked about by the Gita is nothing but the training of the mind. That is what all of us need to do; train the mind. How is it possible when our mind is attached to the sense objects? Seeing the objects of desire and consequent attachment to those objects is the root of all evil. So, the austerity of knowledge or jnana tapas is like having someone in your brain saying, ‘No, I will not have this sense experience’.

The word *poo* means having become pure or purified. Here, it means being purified by the austerity of knowledge. That does not happen overnight. One has to constantly deny oneself unnecessary sense experiences. In Sanskrit, there is a beautiful word, *apaparigraha*, which means possessing only that which is necessary. Our possessions must be minimal. Our utilisation of resources should be optimum.
Some people have a fleet of cars in their house. One can ride only one car at any point of time. Some people have so many wrist watches, so many mobile phones. Even the concept of a mobile phone with two SIM cards cannot be understood completely because at any point in time, one can attend only one phone call, so what is the point of having two SIM cards? Some might justify that it is for various service providers with varying network capabilities.

If one practises *aparigraha*, one would tell one’s mind: ‘No, I will not possess more than what I need. This is an allurement, this is a temptation, but I will not give in to this temptation.’ In practice, all this struggle with the mind takes only a few moments. It only takes a few moments to give in to temptations. It also takes only a few moments to successfully withstand them. It also takes only a few moments for one to lose the hold on oneself.

After these few moments of struggle, once you have successfully overcome the temptations of the mind, you wonder how simple it was. The Ramakrishna Mission runs many educational institutions across the length and breadth of India and many such institutions have a hostel attached to them. There is an interesting incident about a student who was studying in one the hostels run by the Ramakrishna Mission. This boy had just joined the hostel and was understandably homesick. He wanted to return to his home and was not feeling well.

The monk in charge of the hostel knew how difficult the initial months of a student in hostel could become. This monk asked whether the student had eaten his lunch and asked him to have his lunch, have an afternoon nap, and then think of going to his home. The monk then instructed the kitchen to sumptuously feed and completely stuff that boy. Apart from other delicacies, the boy was fed the characteristic dessert of all the centres of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, the Indian porridge, also called kheer or *payash*.

Finally, the boy, with a fully stuffed stomach, fell asleep. In the evening, when he woke up from his siesta and was having his tea, the monk asked him when he was leaving for his home. The boy asked: ‘What are you talking about? Where would I be going?’ The homesickness of that boy lasted only for some time and then it went away. This is so with all our temptations. It is only in the heat of the moment that one feels that one needs to do something or that one wants something, and that one cannot live otherwise. But, once the mind is turned somewhere else, it forgets about that want. This is how one can channelise the mind.

(To be continued)

References

You are your own friend and your own enemy. It is just like doing pull ups. You pull yourself up using your own strength and then you let yourself go slack, and again you repeat the process. You are the person who can bring yourself up and you are the person who can let yourself down. That is why one has to be careful. There is no other person who is responsible for your growth or fall. One should never blame any person for what happens in one’s life.

Some people spend their entire lives blaming others. They say: ‘But for you, my life would have been much better.’ Many novels and movie screenplays are written on these lines. However, one should not blame anything or anyone other than oneself for one’s suffering.

When one gets angry, it is because one wants to get angry. When one suffers, it is because one wants to suffer. This might sound crazy, but this is both the philosophy and psychology of human life. One suffers because one wants to suffer. One cries because one wants to cry. Some people shed tears so often and so naturally that it is almost as if they have a water pipeline fitted to their eyes. In short, all this happens because one has wants or desires.

The Path of Controlling the Mind

This is what the Gita tells us. First it tells us that we generally do not want to even address our problems and we underperform as a result. Gita then shows us our problems, mainly the problem of the uncontrolled mind and then it gives us the
solution to these problems. Who has to act upon the solutions? You have to do it. We have to do it.

How do you go about implementing the solutions offered by the Gita? First, one has to have a strong resolve, not like the resolutions one takes during the dawn of a new calendar year! The Gita says: ‘By completely giving up all desires which arise from thoughts, and restraining with the mind itself all the organs from every side, one should gradually withdraw with a steady intellect. Fixing the mind on the Self, one should not think of anything else whatsoever. One should bring the mind under the control of the Self itself, by restraining it from all those causes, whatever they might be, due to which the restless, unsteady mind wanders away’ (6.24–6).

Once you have a strong resolve, how do you proceed further? It is not that you sit for meditation and in one hour flat, you achieve illumination. It does not happen like that; it always takes time. There is a funny story about being slow and steady. A person was advised to be active and brisk. That person asked the reason for this advice and was told that by being so, he would live long and be happy. That person replied: ‘No, I follow the tortoise model.’ Tortoise is slow but it has a very long lifespan. That does not mean that if one wants to live long, one should lay all day on a bed!

It is probable that Swamiji’s message, ‘Arise, awake, and stop not till the goal is reached,’ has been misunderstood by Indians. Studies reveal that India is one of the most sleep-deprived nations in the world! When Swamiji gave the clarion call to arise and awake, he definitely was not asking Indians to not sleep!

It is necessary for a person to have a good night’s sleep. Eight hours of sleep is necessary to remain healthy. Many young Indians have fallen ill or even died because of problems in their heart that was caused because of a lack of adequate sleep. Some people believe that four to five hours of sleep is enough. That is not true. One needs at least seven hours of sleep every day.4 Sleep is a great stress buster. One would not get stressed if one sleeps properly.

After having a strong resolve to control the mind, one needs to slowly and steadily proceed with the controlling of the mind. Then, the progress would be also steady. One should not get distracted; the mind should not waver. However, it is the nature of the mind to waver and get distracted. The moment the mind is asked to not do something, that is exactly what the mind would do. If you say to the mind, ‘Do not do this’, it will do exactly that. Parents should never tell their children not to do something because then they will do exactly the thing that was prohibited.

What to do when the mind does exactly the opposite when it is asked not to do something. What to do when the mind wavers or gets distracted? The mind behaves better when it has a goal. That is why goal setting is very important in our lives, more so, in spiritual life. While we make blueprints and plans for constructing buildings, we seldom have any plan or goals for building our lives.

The mind wavers more, gets distracted more, without a goal. Hence, one should set a goal. After setting a goal, and after slowly and steadily trying to fix the mind on the goal, when the mind is deflected from the goal, one should bring it back and fix it on the goal.

Swamiji in his Karma Yoga talks about a ghost, who did whatever his master asked him to do. Every work the master gave it, it completed within seconds. The condition was that the ghost would kill the master if it did not get any work. Unable to give any more work to the ghost, the master gave him a dog’s curly tail and asked him to straighten it. The ghost tried to do that and finally gave up and let the master have
all possessions that it had given and assured him that no harm would be done to him.\footnote{5}

The mind is almost like the dog’s curly tail. Every time one tries to fix it on something, it runs away. The mind is a monkey. It keeps on jumping from one thing to the other. One has to bring the mind back again and again and fix it on the goal. And if this is done in a sustained manner, in time, one can control the mind.

It is like handling our mobile phones. Often the mobile phone makes us restless. However, there is a way out of this problem. When one becomes desperate to use the mobile phone, one should switch it off and do something else. When one does this regularly, one understands that one’s existence does not depend on that mobile phone or the SIM card. Even a fifteen-minute break helps one see that switching off the mobile phone or not using it for some time does not create any problem, nothing changes, and it does not matter. Before the advent of mobile phones, did not people live and work happily?

Indians are passionate about mobile phones because they are passionate about talking. Indians are obsessed with talking. Most of their time is spent in talking. The time they spend in talking is wasted, hardly accomplishing anything. All the mobile phone companies and the mobile service providers of the world invest in India because they know that Indians love to talk and they will have huge profits. Indians love to talk, which might not be the same as communicating.

The Gita describes the restless nature of the mind: ‘Arjuna said: “For, O Krishna, the mind is unsteady, turbulent, strong and obstinate. I consider its control to be as greatly difficult as of the wind.” The Blessed Lord said: “O mighty-armed one, undoubtedly the mind is difficult to control and restless. But, O son of Kunti, it is brought under control through practice and detachment.”’\footnote{6} Arjuna says that this mind is so restless, it is not resting in peace but resting in pieces and it is as difficult to control this mind as it is difficult to control the wind. How can you control the wind? Is it even possible to control? No, it is not. So, what do we do?

We have been given all this wisdom about controlling the mind. You might say: ‘All this wisdom is good but when I do not want to think about a pizza, that is exactly what my mind would be thinking!’ Though I now know that I should bring back my mind to the object of my concentration, that is not quite simple.’ So how to control the mind?

Sri Krishna gives the answer. He uses two key words: abhyasa, practice and vairagya, dispassion. Sri Krishna says: ‘Yes, there is no doubt that the mind is restless and difficult to control.’ Controlling the mind is not as simple as writing a few lines of programming code and creating a content filter. It is very difficult. However, through practice and dispassion the mind can be controlled.

An interesting incident happened in the life of Swami Bhuteshananda, who was the twelfth president of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission. He used to live in a centre of the Ramakrishna Math in Kolkata and used to go on morning walks every day. One day when he was having his regular morning walk, he saw a boy, probably in his teens, coming from the opposite side on a bicycle, throwing rolled newspapers to various houses. Swami Bhuteshananda was intrigued to see that the boy deftly threw the newspapers, sometimes to a balcony, sometimes to the second floor of a building, sometimes to a veranda, and every time the newspaper landed on the intended spot. This the boy was doing all the while riding the bicycle. This is a common sight in the morning in India.

When the boy came near him, Swami Bhuteshananda asked the boy the secret of his skilful
throwing of the newspapers. The boy did not get down from his bicycle and passing by Swami Bhuteshananda, said in Sanskrit: ‘Abhyasena tu kaunteya’. Spirituality lives in India. This is proven by this incident. That boy also knew that the secret of controlling the mind is practice. Even if some so-called intellectual says that spirituality does not exist amongst the Indian masses, one should not believe that.

Swamiji said: ‘This, our motherland, has religion and religion alone for its basis, for its backbone, for the bed-rock upon which the whole building of its life has been based. ... Do you want that the Ganga should go back to its icy bed and begin a new course? Even if that were possible, it would be impossible for this country to give up her characteristic course of religious life and take up for herself a new career of politics or something else.’

All politicians know that religion is the backbone of India and they use it to their advantage. But they do not tell this to the public. Religion being the backbone of India can be seen every now and then in India. Some years ago, on 21 September 1995, an idol of Lord Ganesha in south Delhi started drinking milk and within a few hours, Ganesha idols around the world started drinking milk.

In India, one generally finds that a truck driver, usually drunk from the previous night when he had probably indulged in much sense pleasure and spent the night in a roadside motel, comes to his truck the next morning, burns some incense sticks and waves them in front of the steering wheel when even the stench of his liquor has not yet gone. Even while having a glass of alcohol, some Indians first sprinkle some drops as an offering to some invisible god. That is the extent of religious practice in India. Religion truly lives in India. Therefore, it is quite normal for a newspaper boy to quote the Gita. By practice one can achieve things that are seemingly difficult.

**Gita’s Purification System**

The Gita presents the following systems of purification or tapasya, austerity: ‘The worship of gods, twice-borns, venerable persons and the wise; purity, straightforwardness, celibacy, and non-injury are said to be bodily austerities. Speech that causes no pain, which is true, agreeable and beneficial; as well as the practice of study of the scriptures are said to be austerities of speech. Peace of mind, gentleness, reticence, withdrawal of the mind, purity of heart—these are called mental austerities.’

There are certain moral or values systems which are good to follow. It is like an antivirus software for your computer. If you have a good antivirus software installed on your computer, your computer is safe. The first thing that one does when one buys a new computer is to install an antivirus software and get it updated. Then one can use the computer.
Similarly, one needs to have some kind of control at the three levels of the body, speech, and the mind. What are these controls? One needs to worship or respect gods and wise and knowledgeable people, and one’s teachers. One has to maintain cleanliness, be straightforward, be pure in thought, words, and actions, and not injure any one.

This is what the Gita tells us. This is simple psychology. The moment we have these teachings clearly in our mind, automatically many problems are avoided. You do not speak in such a way that would create trouble and you speak the truth.

One has to speak the truth that is pleasant to hear and never speak the truth that is unpleasant. However, one should never say something that is pleasant if it is untrue. One should not polish or sugar coat one’s words. Sri Sarada Devi said: ‘Should one speak such words as would hurt the feelings of another? Even if it is truth, it should not be told in an unpleasant manner. Finally, you will end up with that kind of nature. If one’s sensitivity is lost, then nothing would control one’s speech. The Master used to say, “If you have to ask a lame man how he became lame, you must only say: How did your leg get bent this way?”’

You do not call a person fat, but call them healthy. One should not insult a person by telling them their evident shortcomings. At the same time if a person is doing something wrong, you need to tell it to that person’s face.

Thus, one should continue to learn till the last breath and continue to practise the control of the mind and the senses. That is the austerity at the level of speech. One should be always cheerful. According to Swamiji, the ‘first sign that you are becoming religious is that you are becoming cheerful.’

One has to also practise silence. It does not mean that one should not speak when it is required. It only means that one should not become garrulous or turn into a chatterbox. One should also have the purity of intention and sincerity of purpose. We all commit mistakes, but the biggest mistake is to have a wrong intention.

It is not sufficient to be disciplined; one should also have good intentions. We have many examples of highly disciplined people having bad intentions in Hindu mythology. Ravana also performed austerities as did his brother Kumbhakarna. But their intentions were bad.

One should worship or respect gods and the twice-born. The word dvija or twice-born is used for the brahmans. Why? Because they are first born out of their mother’s womb and then they are born again when they are invested with the sacred thread.

The Gita gives us the remarkable method of withdrawing our senses from the sense objects: ‘And when this person fully withdraws the senses from the objects of the senses, as a tortoise wholly withdraws the limbs, then this person’s wisdom remains established.’

We have briefly seen how the mind has been analysed in the Gita. Only select verses were discussed here. However, the Gita is full of such verses. We saw how the Gita explains the entire workings of the mind in just two verses in the second chapter and describes the chain of events that lead to one’s destruction. So, what does the Gita want us to be?

In this verse, the Gita gives us a very graphic imagery. It asks us to take things as they come. One should not sit in value judgement of things. One should have a firewall protection just like one has in a computer. You should not allow any unwanted data packet to enter into your system. The firewall would see what is entering your system. It would be like a tortoise, which withdraws its limbs when it senses danger. A common experience we have is that of someone constantly talking to you irritably over the phone without
listening to what you have to say. When all attempts at trying to calm that person fails, we sometimes keep the phone aside and then pick it up after say five minutes only to find the person still going on with their annoying chatter!

This shows that when we withdraw ourselves from a situation, we get much peace, much serenity. This cracks the whole of the psychology of the human mind. Starting with the two verses in the second chapter and ending with the above mentioned verse with the imagery of the tortoise, the Gita gives us a complete manual on how to deal with the mind. Now, whether we would actually do it entirely depends on us.

The manuals of life like the Gita help us differentiate the good from the bad. Whenever one does something good, one gets an ennobling feeling and a feeling of tremendous strength. Swamiji said: 'Anything that makes you weak physically, intellectually, and spiritually, reject as poison.'¹³

These manuals of life tell you that you should speak the truth and that you should not speak a lie. Nowadays, everyone around you, including your parents, would encourage you to speak lies. They would ask: ‘What is the harm if you speak some lies?’ They would have the same line of argument for accepting bribes, being corrupt, and other immoral practices. Their logic is that everyone is doing such things, so why should you also not do that?

The children of such parents would say: ‘We have deposited a lump sum amount with the old age home. Please go there. We will regularly send you the monthly maintenance charges.’ And the parents would ask: ‘Why do you say such things?’ To which the children would reply: ‘Because you were telling us that since everyone is doing such things we should also do them. Everyone is sending their parents to old age homes and that is why we are also doing that!’

Therefore, though your parents, family, teachers, or friends might not be telling you what is right, you can know what is right from these manuals of life and you can know what you have to do in a particular situation. And the test would be whether such action gives you strength.

Another thing that one might feel confused about is whether to help a person who is seeking help from you. This confusion has been cleared by Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi. Once the monk in charge of the Ramakrishna Math at Jayrambati asked her: “Mother, in our free dispensary those who are fairly well off also come to take medicines. But our dispensary is meant for the poor only. Is it right that such people are served?” The Mother thought for a minute and said: “My dear, in these parts all are poor. Yet, knowing all the details, if they still come to wait for free medicine, you will of course serve them if you can. Anyone who comes begging may be considered poor.”¹⁴ Sri Sarada Devi said that if somebody asks you for something, then that person is in need and has to be helped.

Of course, you have the freedom of choice to help or not help. However, we should not judge that person. Usually, we do not want to
help someone, but yet want to maintain a good relationship with them and so do not give them a clear and straightforward answer. This should not be done. One has to politely tell that person that one cannot help.

Often, it is asked whether it is possible to work in an unattached manner. Yes, it is definitely possible. Strong desire could be distracting but a strong resolve or a clear purpose is good. Desire and resolve are two different things. Desire will bring attachment; resolve need not always bring attachment.

Medical associations across the world consider it unethical for medical practitioners or doctors to treat their kith and kin. For example, if a surgeon were to operate a family member, that person’s hands would shake and tremble because the surgeon is directly connected with the result of the surgery. Surgery requires much precision. And if the surgeon’s hands shake or the surgeon is otherwise agitated, it would be difficult to do the surgery.

This is what happened to Arjuna in the beginning of the war. When a surgeon is operating on one’s relatives, there is a desire that the surgery should go well, there is attachment. However, when the surgeon is operating some other person, there is purpose, but no strong desire or attachment. The surgeon does the operation with complete involvement but if the patient dies, the surgeon is not as affected as when it is a relative. But when the surgeon is emotionally attached to the patient and wants that the patient should survive at any cost, there would be poor judgement.

This is a strong desire as opposed to a strong resolve. Even when the patient is unrelated, the surgeon operates with the intention to save the patient. That is a strong resolve but not a strong desire or attachment.

Another problem that one often faces is handling dejection or depression. First, one has to find out the cause of dejection or depression. Then, one has to think about the worst possible thing that could happen because of that cause. Prepare your mind for that and also remember that it is the worst possible outcome that you are preparing yourself for which might never happen.

Also, you should have an idea about yourself. Who are you? Are you merely this body and the mind or something else, something higher? Most of the time, we worry about things that are temporary, that do not matter much in the larger scheme of things. If you consider yourself to be temporary and think you are affected because of losing temporary things, you would have a nightmarish life. That is why one should understand that we are not temporary and that we are the Atman, which is beyond all these temporary names and forms.

With a limited idea of oneself, people make foolish decisions. For example, a person commits suicide just because their email account was hacked. In the fairy tales of olden days, we find that a person’s life-force was stored in the heart of a parrot or split into several parts and stored in various places. Similarly, nowadays, our life-force seems to be stored in our mobile phone, email, social networking profiles, and such things. That is why, when something goes wrong with these things, we try to end our lives.

The question one needs to ask is: ‘Is this my real existence?’ This is one of the questions that Arjuna asks in the Gita: ‘Now then, O scion of the Vrishni dynasty, impelled by what does a person commit mistakes even against one’s wish, being constrained by force, as it were?’

Arjuna says that he does not want to commit mistakes but somehow someone is forcing him to do mistakes. Sri Krishna replies: ‘This desire, this anger, born of the quality of rajas, is a great devourer, a great sinner. Know this to be the enemy here’ (3,37).
Sri Krishna says that it is desire and the accumulated impressions of the actions that we have done in the past that propel us to do what we do. In the Hindu tradition, it is believed that a person is born and reborn across many lifetimes till one gets moksha. All the actions of this life and previous lives have their impressions on the mind. These impressions or samskaras determine a person’s character.

That is why the Gita says that one should be dispassionate and should accept things as they come. Often, the amount of things that we accumulate create attachment and stress. Sometimes, all that we need for living could be contained in a backpack.

That is what is shown in the English movie *Up in the Air*. In the movie, the main character played by George Clooney, is a downsizing expert, who goes from company to company, firing people. He gets an intern, who eventually takes his job. On her first trip, the intern finds it difficult to move her big bags and Clooney shows her that most things she was carrying were not necessary and that a small backpack is all that she needs.

Of course, the above mentioned verse of the Gita should not be interpreted to mean that we do not have any control over our lives. Everything is in our control. We see this universe in a particular manner because of our ignorance. The associations that we have with objects and persons are very much in our control.

All these temptations, desires, and tendencies are within us. For example, a naked person is seen differently by an infant, by that person’s child, by that person’s spouse, and by that person’s friend. If the problem was outside you, why are there these differences; all of them should have seen the person in the same manner. Definitely, the problem is not in the external object or person, but in the subject.

We need to have a strong resolve to achieve a goal, not strong attachment. However, we are not trained for facing failures; we are always trained for succeeding. But, what would happen if you do not succeed? One should have various plans, plan A, plan B, plan C, till plan Z.

Failure brings dejection and sorrow, and success brings pleasure. But instead of being carried away by these temporary sorrows and pleasures, one should have a definite purpose. One should have a vision and be passionate about that vision. However, one should not be dejected on failure and also not be elated on success. That is the lesson of non-attachment that the Gita teaches us.

References
1. Gita, 6.5.
12. Gita, 2.58.
15. Gita, 3.36.