

## **Integration through Spirituality according to the Bhagavad Gita**

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*Abstract:* The Bhagavad Gita is the most well-known book of the Indian spiritual heritage. It offers a way to spiritual integration that includes the four-fold relationship of human persons with themselves, with the Divine, with others and with nature. In this process of integration the diverse aspects of the human person are taken into consideration, the rational and emotional, the personal and the communitarian as well as the social and the ecological. The Gita helps a person to get rooted in the divine centre of being and from there to get engaged in the liberative work of God in the world. Beyond the barriers of religions, serious seekers of spirituality could find in the Bhagavad Gita an integrated vision and way of life.

*Keywords:* Bhagavad Gita, *Gitasadhana*, self-integration, *Samadarsana*, *Lokasamgraha*, *yoga*, *kama*, *yajna*.

Spirituality is the experience of the Spirit: the awareness of the orientation to the Absolute, to the Divine. Spirituality unfolds the divine depth of reality and gives ultimate orientation to life. It is an awakening to the ultimate concern, a sense of being grasped by the sacredness of reality. Spirituality is the vision-and-way of life that gives integration to life. One may not succeed in defining spirituality, for that which spirituality is concerned about, is beyond all definition. Life is shrouded in mystery, and spirituality is the sense of this all-embracing mystery of life. One may be able to describe the dynamics of spirituality without claiming to have any final comprehension of it or be able to give it a definitive expression. The symbolic language of poetry may be better suited to

describe spirituality. Hence the classics of spirituality are often works of poetry.

One such spiritual classic is the Bhagavad Gita. It is a relatively small book with 700 verses. But no other scripture of India has reached farther horizons of humanity as the Gita. With over 2500 translations and editions in world languages the Gita is the best known scripture of India. The reason for this wide acceptance of the Gita is that it offers an integrated spirituality: it touches upon the mental and the emotional, the rational and the intuitive, the personal and the communitarian, the social and the ecological dimensions of the spiritual evolution of human persons. The Gita does not merely point to the depth of God-experience, but it also shows the ways of attaining this depth. The Gita does not just moralize about issues of life, but it opens the mystical perspectives which can effectively meet these issues. The Gita is not just a doctrinal work, but a handbook of *spiritual exercises* too. It has been a spiritual guide for thousands of seekers for the past twenty-three centuries.

During the last 200 years the Gita has been shaping the spiritual life of seekers beyond India. The spiritual leaders of Indian renaissance propagated the message of the Gita worldwide. In the Independence Struggle, the Gita played a significant role. Tilak worked out the Karmayoga of the Gita as an effective spirituality for commitment to the country. For Mahatma Gandhi Gita has been the *mother* and source of inspiration. Vivekananda, Aurobindo, Radhakrishnan, Vinobha Bhave, Chinmayanada and many others presented the Gita as a timely message for awakening and empowering the people of India. Beyond the boundaries of religions and cultures, the Gita is being accepted and studied as an inspiring spiritual classic of humanity. Several insightful commentaries and essays on the Gita have been written by seekers and scholars who do not belong to the Hindu dharma.

I have shared my reflections on the Bhagavad Gita in three articles in the previous issues of Jnanadeepa. In the first article in 1/1998 (19-30), the dynamic elements of the process of spiritual

integration through jnana-bhakti-karma have been described. In the second article in 2/1999 (27-33), the theological and cultural context of the text was presented and on that background the liberative meaning of the spirituality of the Gita explored. The mystical character of the text, was the theme of the third article in 2/2002 (23-30). The basic paradigm of my interpretation of the Gita has been already presented in these articles. Hence I do not want to repeat what has been said there. Against the background of these articles, I would like to explore how an integration could take place through the spirituality of the Gita.

For the last thirty years the Gita has been accompanying my spiritual growth as a source of inspiration and integration. With the Gita, I have been giving retreats (*Gitasadhana*) lasting 6-8 days in India and in Europe. Through eight daily sessions of guided meditations, the participants were initiated to the spiritual process described in the Gita. Retreatants were thus helped to enter into the inner dynamics of the encounter between, the God who embraces humanity in love, and the human disciple who seeks God in surrender. It is a process of inner awakening to the dialogue between God and the human person. Christians, Hindus as well as seekers with no religious affiliation have taken part in these retreats. For Christians, this was a deepening of their experience of life in Christ. For Hindus, it meant an assurance that their life is secure in the hands of the divine Master. For others it made possible an access to spirituality beyond the confines of religiosity. And for me, the Bhagavad Gita confirms my conviction that within the diversity of religions there is a deep unity in spirituality.

Any reflection on spirituality has to deal with four basic themes of relationships: with oneself, with God, with others and with nature. With the paradigm that I have described in the foregoing articles, I would like to share some reflections on these themes here:

## Spirituality as Self-Integration (Samadarsana)

Describing the structure of the human person the Gita says: “Noble are the senses, nobler than the senses is the mind, nobler than the mind is the buddhi, what is beyond the buddhi is the Self.” (3:42. cfr. Kath.Up. 6:7-8). There are, therefore, two faculties of inner perception: mind and buddhi. Mind (*manah*) objectifies everything and analyses reality in its individuality and diversity; buddhi enters into the depth of reality by uniting it with the perceiving subject. Through the mind (*mens*), one is driven to the fascinating diversity of things while the buddhi (*intus ire*, intuition) delves into the mystery of the unity of reality. Mind pursues the logic of reality; buddhi explores the mystique of reality. Mind speculates on the horizontal level and acquires conceptual knowledge of persons and things (*vijnana*), while buddhi contemplates reality in its depth dimension and attains intuitive wisdom (*jnana*).

To the spiritual seeker the Lord of the Gita communicates ‘wisdom combined with knowledge’ (7:2). Self-integration demands that the extrovert search of the mind must be integrated with the introspective movement of the buddhi. (*buddhiyogam*, 2:39; 18:57). For this, the Gita recommends meditation (*dhyana*). Dhyana is journey (*yana*) into the buddhi (*dhi*) (6:20-23; 13:24). The grace of dhyana is the intuitive experience of ‘seeing the self in the Self through the Self’ (6:20; 13:24). It is a holistic vision of reality. One perceives oneself in harmony with the totality of reality. This is *atmabodha*, the core experience of spirituality.

When, however, one is confined to the realm of the senses and driven solely by the extrovert power of the mind, one develops a neurotic sense of the ego (*ahamkara*). (18:58). One tends to think that the ego is the ultimate subject of everything. “Deluded by *ahamkara* one thinks, ‘I am the sole doer’ ” (3:27). This sense of the ego can be so powerful that it wants to conquer and possess everything. “This I have gained today, tomorrow I shall conquer that also. I have this much wealth now, much more will be mine very soon...” (16:13) Ego-centredness engenders greed (*kama*), which is the root cause of all disharmony and suffering. (2:62-

63). Kama is the inbuilt enemy in the mind of every human person. (3:37; 4:4). Kama viciates senses, mind and buddhi, the entire inner realm of the person. (3:40) Hence the basic demand of spirituality is to control kama in the mind. “Stand up and slay this enemy, quench this insatiable fire.” (3:39,43).

For this inner warfare, the Gita recommends three aids: ascetical outlook on life (*tapas*), devotion to the divine Master (*bhakti*) and intense pursuit of meditation (*dhyana*). Through *tapas* (18:5) one develops the inner energy to control the senses, (5:7, 6:8,12), bring the mind to focus (6:12; 6:15, 6:24), streamline the movements of the subconscious mind (*cittah*, 6:18-20) and open the buddhi to the inner Self (5:20; 18:51). Through the self-consciousness (*atmabodha*) that evolves in the *buddhi*, one reaches inner integration. One realises that the ego is not the real subject of liberative activities, (5:9) but the inner self united with the divine Self (5:10). This is not the annihilation of the sense of the ego, but the integration of the ego-sense (*ahamkara*) with self-consciousness (self-consciousness); not the destruction of individuality but the insertion of the individual into the totality of reality. Spirituality gives a holistic outlook on life.

When one is thus enabled to do works from the *atmabodha*, one realises that the divine Master is the ultimate subject of one’s activities. “In the body the supreme divine purusha is the Lord that perceives, supports, approves and experiences everything. Through meditation one realises this inner Self in oneself through the (grace of) the Self.” (13: 23,25) Hence the seeker is invited to ‘surrender all the activities to the divine Lord in devotion’ (12:6; 18:57). Devotion to the Lord leads to contemplation of the divine Self and contemplation manifests itself in devotion. Loving self-surrender and ecstatic meditation are complementary; *bhakti* and *jnana* merge into one. This spirituality of inner harmony runs through the entire Gita discourse.

The fruit of this spiritual process is inner freedom, because this process evolves the dialectics between divine grace and human responsibility (18:63-66). Devoted to the divine Lord and

united with the divine Self, one overcomes the forces of *kama* (greed) and grows to *dharma* (harmony). As one is freed from inner bondage through the grace of the divine Master, one looks at life with all its commitments as participation in the dharma of the divine Lord. Fear is overcome and a certain calmness permeates the inner world.(6:14). One develops equanimity in relation to ‘friend and enemy, relative and stranger, saint and sinner’. (6:9). One is not perturbed by the extremes of ‘ joy or sadness, victory or failure, gain or loss, praise or calumny’ (2:38;14:24). “Equanimity is spirituality” (2:48)

### **Spirituality as Union with God (Yoga)**

The Gita was composed on the background of the Upanishads. Hence the apophatic aspect of the experience of the Divine is the undercurrent of the spirituality of the Gita. The human mind cannot fully grasp the divine reality; the buddhi cannot fully reach it. The Divine is absolute mystery. Arjuna overwhelmed by the unfathomable immensity of the reality behind the Lord, exclaims: “You are the primal *Brahman*, the primal *purusha*, the ultimate abode of this universe. You are the primal knower and that which is to be ultimately known, and the supreme goal as well. By your infinite forms this entire universe is pervaded.” (11:38). Human persons experience the Divine primarily and ultimately as the ‘unthinkable’ (12:3; 8:9), the ‘indefinable’ (12:3), the ‘unmanifest’ (9:4;8:21), the ‘immutable’ (8:3; 11:21), the ‘imperishable’ (9:13; 7:13), the ‘ultimate ground’ (10:12), the ‘supreme person’ (15:17; 13:32) and the ‘final goal’ (8:21). The divine reality is ‘being and non-being’ (9:19;13:13;11:37), ‘unmoving and moving, far and near’ (13:16). No name or symbol can fully express the mystery of the Divine. This sense of mystery opens an infinite horizon for growth in spiritual life. Spirituality is a relentless search for the inner experience (*jnana*) of the divine mystery.

The Gita experiences the Divine not merely as the transpersonal mystery, but as the personal God too. Out of the depth of the mystery the Divine, unfolds as the God of love. “The greatest mystery of the Divine, the highest word about God, is

this: you are dear to me...I love you immensely.” (18:64-65). The *tremendum* becomes *fascinosum* here: the mysterious *It* evolves as all-embracing *I*. With this God, human seeker can enter into a relationship. Hence the repeated invitation: “Take refuge in me with all your being; surrender yourself to me totally; may your mind be fixed on me and may your buddhi enter into me.” (18:62,64,65; 9:34; 12:6-8). ). The Lord will ‘not let his devotee perish’. (9:31) The one who surrenders oneself totally to the divine Lord will ‘go to him’ (7:23;9:25), ‘reach him’ (8:7; 18:65), ‘live in him’ (9:29; 12:8) and ‘become one with him’(7:18;14:19). The love of the divine Lord is an unending drive within the devotee. Spirituality is response in-loving-surrender (*bhakti*) to the dynamics of the divine love.

The divine mystery that reveals itself as a personal God, unfolds in the universe as the transforming power at the heart of reality. “I am the Self (atman) at the heart of all beings. I am the beginning, the middle and the end of all.” (10:20). As the creative source of reality God is the ‘undying seed of all’ (7:10), ‘the generating father’ (14:4) the ‘origin and birth-place’ (10:8) and the very ‘life itself’ (7:9). As the supporting ground and vital energy God pervades the entire reality. (9:4; 8:22; 18:46). The cosmos is the ‘body of the Lord’ (11:13) and the ‘field of activity’ (13:2). As the ultimate abode unto which everything moves, God is the ‘final goal’ (8:21) and ‘ultimate end’ (10:20). Hence the invitation to the God-seeker: “See the Self in all and all in the Self; see the Lord in all and all in the Lord, and be united with the Lord present in all things. And perceive in all things, reflections of the Self.” (6:26-32). With this perception, one is given a new motive to engage oneself in the promotion of the ‘welfare of the world’ (3:25). Such a commitment will then come not from *ahamkara*, but from an experience of oneness with the divine Master present in the world (6:31). Spirituality is participation in the work of God (*karma*) in the world.

## Spirituality as Commitment to the Welfare of Society (Lokasamgraha)

The Gita speaks of two types of activities in the world: those done out of attachment to the ego and those done out of concern for others. (3:25) Works done from the *kama* dominated ego-centre (*ahamkara*), lead to bondage within oneself, (4:14). On the other hand, when one is engaged in the world with a deeper *atmabodha*, works lead to inner freedom(4:41). Out of inner freedom (*nishkama*) one works in tune with the divine Master who is at work (9:9). This is *karma yoga*. The motivation for *karmayoga* is not ego aggrandisement, but the 'passionate concern to bring about the welfare of the world'. (*lokasamgraha*, 3:25). *Loka* refers to the humanity at large as well as the concrete society in which one finds oneself. *Samgraha* means holding together, integration, welfare. The *karmayogi* is not an inactive person, but with a great passion (*chikirshu*), he/she is involved in bringing about peace and justice, harmony and integration, in human society. The one who emerges out of the contemplative introspection (*dhyana*) is not an introvert, but one endowed with a *divine eye* (11:8) to 'see God in all things and all things in God' (6:30) and an inner passion (*rati*, 12:4) to engage oneself for the integral well-being of others.

With this mystical consciousness, the *sadhaka* is invited to look into the deeper self and discover his/her God-given duty in the world. Every person is born with some inherent talents and temperaments shaped by the 'constituent factors' of nature (*gunas*, 18:41). With respect to them, one has to discern one's role in society. External factors like caste and family (18:41-44) and formative elements like education and religion (4:34; 16:24) are only means to make this discernment. The Gita wants to give individuals the inner freedom (18:63) and spiritual maturity to discern for themselves their proper role and duty (*swadharma*, 18:47). Thus one is enabled to fulfil one's duty 'with great joy' (18:45) and 'skilfulness' (2:50) and reach 'ultimate liberation' (18:45) through works of service. Joy comes from the realisation that one is en-



gaged in the work of the divine Master. Skilfulness is the fruit of the conviction that one is an effective instrument in the hands of the divine Master, for God is the ultimate *subject* of the works of service. The Gita thus offers an integrated spirituality for social commitment. Work becomes worship here. “The Lord from whom the works of all beings emanate and through whom all the world is pervaded – by worshipping him through the dedicated performance of one’s duty, one attains fulfilment” (18:46).

A person who thus develops a spirituality of social commitment, will be above all, a compassionate person: ‘friendly and compassionate to all without any touch of hatred’ (12:13). Hatred comes when one finds the other as a threat to oneself. A spiritual outlook, however, enables the person to look at others as ‘reflections of the self’ (6:32) Thus one is motivated to ‘look with equal-mindedness’ (*samadarsana*) at friend and enemy, relative and stranger, saint and sinner, Brahmin and sudra, (6:9; 12:18; 14:24; 5:18). The social barriers of discrimination and psychic forces of prejudice are overcome through this attitude of equanimity. “Equanimity is spirituality” (2:48).

Some other characteristics of the spiritually liberated person are: ‘an abiding joy’ in the service of others (12:14,19; 18:45), ‘firmness of conviction’ in one’s commitment (12:14), ‘non-possessive attitude’ in relation to things (6:10), ‘control of oneself’ in all undertakings (12:14), ‘skillfulness’ (12:16, 2:50), ‘freedom from craving’ for material possessions (12:16), ‘emotional stability’ (2:56), ‘inner serenity’ (6:27;12:15) and ‘purity of mind’ (12:16). Spirituality is genuine relatedness to the other human beings within the divine orbit. Spirituality is commitment to the liberation of persons and integration of society (*dharma*).

## **Spirituality as Concern for the Harmony of Nature** **(Yajna)**

Written against the background of the Upanishads, the Gita shows a keen eco-sensitivity in spirituality. The entire cosmos is looked upon as the body of the Lord. This is magnificently pre-

sented in the vision of the cosmic form of the Lord in chapter 11 (*viswarupadarsana*). With the God-given 'divine eye' (11:8) Arjuna sees the presence of the divine Lord vibrating powerfully in every atom, in the womb of matter, in the galaxies. It was like an experience of 'a thousand suns blazing forth altogether' (11:12). The divine Master graced the disciple with this awe-inspiring vision to make him feel that 'the whole universe is pervaded by the infinite forms of God' (11:38).

In the other chapters of the text, this experience of the divine immanence is communicated in poetic symbols: 'In the light of the sun and the moon the divine light shines forth' (15:12). Through the world of vegetation 'the divine sap streams down' (15:13). 'In the earth, God is the fertilising smell: in water, the flavour; in fire, its brilliance and in all living organisms, their life principle' (7: 8-10). The divine presence vibrates 'at the heart of all beings' (15:15; 18:61). God is the soul (*atman*) of this universe (10:20), and the cosmos is the body (*deha*) of the Lord. (11:15). God is the life-generating seed of the world (7:10), and the world is like the tree that grows out of it. (15:1).

In a contemplative vision one perceives the transforming work of the Divine in the world. This dynamic presence of God in the world is described as *yajna* (self-giving, sacrifice). The cosmic wheel of life rotates through the power of *yajna* that arises from the divine axis. (3:15-16; 9:10). God turns the wheel through *yajna* and the human beings are to take part in this cosmic process of *yajna* through their works. Works done in the sense of *karmayoga* nourish *yajna*, and the divine *yajna* supports human works. "Works done in the sense of *yajna* lead to final integration." (4:23); 'works done out of egoism cause bondage'. (3:9). Through the constant churning of this cosmic wheel, heavens fertilise the earth through rain, and food is generated. (3:14). With this vision, the Gita makes it clear that the destiny of the universe depends on the coherent collaboration of humans with the divine Spirit in the world. This gives a sense of tremendous responsibility to the humans for the preservation of environmental harmony.

Yajna is the bonding not only between the human persons and the Divine, but also between humans and the powers of nature. In fact, God created the things of this world with the mandate: ‘through yajna you shall multiply and prosper!’ (3:10). Creatures have to grow and bear fruit through ‘a mutually nourishing process’ (*sahayajnah*). Human persons have to take care of the life-giving powers of nature (*deva*), and they in turn will sustain and nourish humans (3:11-12). “Sustaining one another you shall attain supreme harmony.” (3:11). There is a cosmic web of life in which human beings and the powers of nature constantly interact in the process of the turning of the cosmic wheel activated by the divine Spirit.

But the Gita is aware that there is a tendency in the human mind to isolate itself from this cosmic process. It is human intervention that disturbs the ongoing life-generating process of yajna. Under the impulse of *kama* the human mind tends to keep things in possession with greed and consume them for ego-aggrandisement. The Gita calls this ‘robbery’. Humans have the right to consume things *only* after making sure that the matrix of nature has had its full. We can harvest from the earth only after having given to mother earth all that she needs for her further sustenance. Those who ignore this and exploit the resources of nature are thieves. (3:12) “Those who eat only what is left over after fulfilling the requirement of yajna are freed from all sins. But those who cook food only for themselves, such degraded ones eat sin.” (3:13). An integral worldview therefore calls for a commitment to the protection of the environment. A ‘passionate concern for the well-being of all things’, not only humans, is an integral element of spirituality (*sarvabhutahiteratah*, 12:4; 5:25). Spirituality is the awareness of being deeply in harmony with the things of nature and the resultant commitment to the welfare of all things.

The holistic spirituality that is advocated by the Gita is, therefore, a call to a fourfold integration: with one’s true self at the depth level, with God at the mystical level, with other humans on the social basis and with the things of nature in a mutual bonding.

This fourfold integration is an experience of grace (*siddhi*), for it is a gift of the divine Master. It is also the fruit of human endeavour (*sadhana*), for it is human responsibility(18:66). It is a responsibility towards oneself, to others, to nature, and ultimately to God. In mature freedom one has to exercise this responsibility (18:63). In one key phrase the Gita summarises the heart-beat of spirituality:

*Yogastah kuru karmani!*

Be united with the Divine and get engaged in the works (2:48)

Article Received: May 10, 2004

Article Accepted: June 14, 2004

No of Words: 3,726