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## KRISHNA AND ARJUNA: A MODEL OF GURU-ŚISHYA RELATIONSHIP

The *guru-śishya* relationship plays a central role in the development and transmission of Hinduism; its roots go back to the Vedic period, wherein the *guru*, occupying a hermitage as a *vanaprastha*,<sup>1</sup> lived with his students. The Vedas describe the *guru* as the source and inspirer of the knowledge of the Self and as the one who blesses the disciple and enhances his spiritual life.<sup>2</sup>

### I

The *guru-śishya* relationship becomes even more explicit in the Upanishads. In the *Katha Upanishad* it is proclaimed: "To many it is not given to hear of the Self. Many, though they hear it, do not understand it. Wonderful is he who speaks of it; intelligent is he who learns of it. Blessed is he who, taught by a good teacher, is able to understand it."<sup>3</sup> This realization of the Self is as difficult as the "passage over the razor's edge," in the words of the same Upanishad; therefore, "let the *Guru* be your God,"<sup>4</sup> admonishes the *Taittiriya Upanishad*. Given the difficulty of the journey, the *śishya* hands over his autonomy to the *guru* (at least in the initial stages) and cuts himself off from the lived-world. "Having scrutinized the worlds that are built by work," says the *Mundaka Upanishad*, "a Brahmin should arrive at indifference. The world that was not made is not won by what is done. For the sake of knowledge let him go fuel in hand to a *guru* who is learned in the Scriptures and established in Brahma."<sup>5</sup> Thus,

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1. The third stage of a Hindu life in which the householder relinquishes worldly attachments and prepares to become a *sanyasi*.
  2. *Rig-Veda* IV. 5:6; also *Yajur-Veda* VII, 27.
  3. *Katha Upanishad* II. 7.
  4. *Taittiriya Upanishad* I. 2. 2.
  5. *Mundaka Upanishad* I. 2:12.

in *para-vidya* (higher learning), the role of the *guru* is crucial and the journey is long and arduous.

Perhaps a story on the *guru-śishya* relationship may illustrate. According to the *Chandogya Upanishad*, even Indra, King of the gods, had to live with his teacher for 101 years, practising self discipline before Prajapati prepared him to receive the highest knowledge of the Self. The entire account is typical of a number of important characteristics in the *guru-śishya* relationship. After the preparatory stages which involve an ethical, austere, disciplined life, the *guru* teaches the *śishya* through a progressive technique. Prajapati, after having given a course of successively higher instructions on the self as the body, on the self in dreams, and on the self in deep dreamless sleep, and having found that the enquirer in each case could realize that this was not the truth about the self that he was seeking, ultimately gave Indra the ultimate and final instruction about the self which is that "this body is the support of the deathless and bodiless self. The self as embodied is affected by pleasure and pain, the self when associated with the body cannot get rid of pleasure and pain, but pleasure and pain do not touch the bodiless self."<sup>6</sup>

A true *guru*, therefore, is more than one who hands over the sacred thread (*upanayana*) and whispers the sacred formula (mantra); a true *guru* in the fullest form is one who, while reorienting the *śishya's* moral cords and teaching a doctrine, also transposes the *śishya's* being to a higher level. A true *guru* is said to be on a double plane: at the apex of his self he enjoys that experience which surpasses common experience, however, on the common experiential level the *guru* strives to draw the disciple's inner eye to his own level, i.e. to his own degree of wisdom. As the *Taittiriya Upanishad* tells us: "The teacher is the first letter. The student the last letter. Knowledge is the meeting place. Instruction is the link."<sup>7</sup>

Too often, too much attention is given to this Upanishadic viewpoint of the *guru-śishya* relationship and the conclusion drawn that salvation in Hinduism implies a total denial of the secular. A more balanced view of the *guru-śishya* relationship may be found in the

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6. *Chandogya Upanishad* VIII. 7. 1ff.

7. *Taittiriya Upanishad* I. 3. 3.

*Bhagavad Gita*. It stands as a classic of the *guru-sishya* relationship. As one hears the tumult of the drums and cymbals, the shouts of the warriors, the neighs of the horses, the cacophony of the quarreling cousins and the multiplicity of theological voices and interpretations, one may forget the central theme of the Holy Song which is that *sishya* Arjuna is being led by Guru Krishna to higher levels of spiritual understanding. The *Gita* highlights Arjuna's spiritual ascent from darkness to light.

Arjuna is a deeply troubled soul who is seeking peace and perfection. He is assailed by doubt and despair. Just before the battle, Arjuna ponders the disastrous consequences of the war. He becomes acutely aware that it is a futile family fight; blood relatives, teachers and friends are on both sides. Arjuna drops his bow and declares, "I will not fight!" Why should he lead men to death so that he can regain an empire? Does power, wealth and honor overcome the killing and suffering that the battle will entail? The battleground becomes the arena wherein the immediate moral dilemma is pushed deeper and deeper so that it merges with the problem of salvation itself, i.e., total release from the limitations and tensions of human life. The questions raised and the answers given involve the most basic moral and theological issues of the human race.

"In this dark night of the soul," says Arjuna, "I feel desolation. In my self-pity, I see not the way of righteousness. I am thy disciple, come to my supplication: Be a light unto me on the path of my duty."<sup>8</sup> Herein is the starting point of the *Gita*. Over the next seventeen chapters, Krishna will respond to Arjuna's queries on action and renunciation, on Brahman, Atman and Karma, on worship and transcendence, on diverse pathways in salvation. Arjuna is also granted that shattering experience of the "Holy" and finally returned to the phenomenal world of ordinary experience: "By thy grace, I remember my Light, and now gone is my delusion. My doubts are no more, my faith is firm and now I can say 'Thy will be done'."<sup>9</sup> Repeatedly, through analogies of darkness and light, Krishna is portrayed as a *guru* in the pristine sense of the term *guru*, i.e., as "darkness dispeller."<sup>10</sup> Furthermore,

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8. *Bhagavad-Gita II. 7* (Herein after referred to as *B. G.*)

9. *B. G. XVIII. 73*.

10. *Advaya taraka Upanishad 14-18*.

one receives an impression that Arjuna stands as a symbol and signpost for a traveller who, though highly moral, is deeply distressed and is seeking the light in the raging storms of the night.

### A. Morality and Religion

To Arjuna's query, "Why dost thou enjoin upon me the terrible action of war?", Krishna's rejoinder is that in this phenomenal world evil has to be resisted. Krishna warns Arjuna that "to forego this fight for righteousness is to forego duty and honor and thus to fall into transgression."<sup>11</sup> However, evil has to be resisted under the modality and ethics of selfless action. Any action performed for selfish reasons or through utilitarian guidelines binds the so-called "good resister" as much as the evil doer.

"Set thy heart upon work, but never on its reward.  
Work not for a reward; but never cease to do thy  
work. Do thy work in the peace of yoga and,  
free from selfish desires . . ."<sup>12</sup>

Krishna steers Arjuna to a "new" model of man and a "new" concept of work which is patterned on the Supreme.

King Janaka and other warriors reached perfection by the path of action: let thy aim be the good of all, and then carry on thy ask in life. In the actions of the best men, others find their rule of action. The path that a great man follows becomes a guide to the world. I have no work to do in all the worlds, Arjuna—for these are mine. I have nothing to obtain, because I have all. And yet I work.<sup>13</sup>

In order to drive the point deeper, Krishna again and again returns to the theme of work so that Arjuna has to understand that even the *Sanyasi* while continuing "to light the sacred fire" and offering the holy sacrifice," has to continue work in the phenomenal world but

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11. *B.G. II. 33.*

12. *B.G. II. 47ff.*

13. *B.G. III. 20-22.*

“not for an earthly reward.”<sup>14</sup> Krishna is teaching Arjuna that further reflection upon the human condition necessitates an explicit link between religion and morality. Arjuna learns that religion is based on an enlargement of the sense of duty to include the interpersonal community as well as the Supreme. Arjuna is brought to realize that the ultimate meaning and purpose of intentional human activity has to be religiously understood through some doctrine of Divine Reality and that Reality’s relation to the world. Furthermore, this Divine Reality ought to be understood as a helper in human efforts to secure salvation.

Even as one Sun gives light to all things in the world, so the Lord of field gives light to all in the field.<sup>15</sup>

For the salvation of those who are good, for the destruction of evil in men, for the fulfillment of the kingdom of righteousness, I come to this world in the ages that pass.<sup>16</sup>

Step by step, hand in hand, Krishna reorients Arjuna’s theoretical and practical understanding of the human situation. Arjuna is called upon to recognize Bhagavan as the origin, source and goal of all beings as well as to recognize our common human situation. The weaving of the Divine and the human occurs within the vessel of daily human activity. Therefore, to Arjuna’s question concerning the best way to attain salvation, Krishna’s reply is: “Concentration is better than mere practice, and meditation is better than concentration; but higher than meditation is surrender in love of the fruits of one’s actions, for on surrender follows peace.”<sup>17</sup> Precisely because of this, Krishna is careful to point out, that irrespective of these differences, that Krishna as *avatar* is with “the man who has goodwill for all, who is friendly and has compassion; who has no thoughts of ‘I’ or ‘mine’ whose peace is the same in pleasures and sorrows, who is forgiving.”<sup>18</sup> In these waters of goodwill, compassion, selflessness and forgiveness, Krishna locates the starting point of the human spiritual journey. Starting from this common basis, perhaps the best way to portray the ascent of Arjuna is to show how Krishna reorients and deepens the conception

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14. *B.G. VI. 1.*

15. *B.G. XIII. 33.*

16. *B.G. IV. 8.*

17. *B.G. XII. 12.*

18. *B.G. XII. 13.*

of an ideal person so that religion becomes not just an affirmation of an Eternal Order of Being, but a testimony of the human relationship to the Eternal Divine Order. Early in the Gita, the ideal person is described as a man of steadied vision "who is free from attachments, and with a mind ruling its powers in harmony, works on the path of *Karma-yoga*, the path of consecrated action."<sup>19</sup> This individualistic yoga, however, is broadened so that a loving relationship develops between Bhagavan and man as partners in salvation:

By love he knows me in truth, who I am and what I am. And when he knows me in truth he enters into my Being. In whatever work he does he can take refuge in me, and he attains then by my grace the Imperishable home of Eternity.<sup>20</sup>

### B. Tolerance and Truth

The "truth" of religion, however, has to take into account the truth of the human condition which includes a particular historical and cultural situation. Traditionally, the Vedas and Upanishads have reconciled the divine and human poles of religion through a two-fold approach. The many gods of the Vedas are recognized as different aspects or dimensions of the same Reality. The One is expressed through many names; as the *Rig-Veda* tells us: "With their words the wise poets shape the One into many forms: Agni, Yama, or Matarisvan."<sup>21</sup> It is further suggested that the One cannot be expressed in worldly, human terms since it does not exist in the same way that other things in this world of plurality do." Now, where knowledge is of a dual nature, there, indeed, one hears, sees, smells, tastes, and also touches; the self knows everything. Where knowledge is not of dual nature, being devoid of action, cause are effect, unspeakable, incomparable, indescribable—what is that? It is impossible to say!"<sup>22</sup>

However, in the Bhagavad Gita, the focus is not on *jñāna* in the Upanishadic sense but on *avatarana*, i.e., the descent of the Divine into the world in order to communicate the *Divine Truth*.

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19. *B.G. III. 7.*

20. *B.G. XVIII. 55-56.*

21. *Rig-Veda X. 114. 5.*

22. *Maitri Upanishad VI. 7.*

I will speak to thee of that wisdom and vision which, when known, there is nothing else for thee to know.<sup>23</sup>

I will tell thee a supreme mystery, because thy soul has faith. It is vision and wisdom and when known thou shall be free from sin.<sup>24</sup>

How then does Krishna reconcile the truth of revelation to the multiplicity and diversity of pathways which Arjuna knows? Simply by pointing out that this revelation of truth does not entail any arrogance or rejection of other pathways because "whatever is beautiful and good, whatever has glory and power is only a portion of my radiance."<sup>25</sup>

Among the sons of light I am Vishnu, and of luminaries the radiant sun. I am the Lord of the winds and storms and of the Lights in the night, I am the moon.<sup>26</sup>

Even those who in faith worship other gods, because of their love they worship me, although not in the right way.<sup>27</sup>

The worshipper of Vishnu is convinced that his God is the only true One, but he is asked to implicate other views and paths in his faith by telling him that they all refer to Vishnu. Therefore one can say that Krishna regards faith in transcendence as decisive, not any particular name or idea of the One. This faith implies an openness of being and a rejection of narrowness, dogmatism and lack of charity.

Krishna, however, at the same time points out that this tolerance is not an uncritical tolerance. Evil which snaps the bonds between human beings also tears asunder the relationship between humanity and Bhagavan:

In their chains of selfishness and arrogance, of violence and anger and lust, these malignant men hate me: they hate me in themselves and in others. In the vast cycles of life and death I inexo-

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23. *B.G. VII. 1.*

24. *B.G. IX. 1.*

25. *B.G. X. 41.*

26. *B.G. X. 21.*

27. *B.G. IX. 23.*

rably hurl them down to destruction: these the lowest of men, cruel and evil, whose soul is hate.<sup>28</sup>

Hate is hell according to Krishna. On the other hand, the portals of "heaven" are open to all who treasure:

Freedom from fear, purity of heart, constancy in sacred learning and contemplation, generosity, self-harmony, adoration, study of scriptures, austerity, righteousness; non-violence, truth, freedom from anger, renunciation, serenity, aversion to fault-finding, sympathy for all beings, peace from greedy cravings, gentleness, modesty, steadiness; energy, forgiveness, fortitude, purity, a good will, freedom from pride.<sup>29</sup>

By way of conclusion, despite questions of *atman* and *Brahman*, despite questions of diverse ways of salvation, despite the hair-raising and traumatic experience of the Holy, Arjuna is brought back by Krishna into our ordinary human world. Krishna calls upon Arjuna to be faithful to those basic principles which promote the search for Truth without "deceitfulness, insolence and self-conceit, anger, and harshness and ignorance."<sup>30</sup> It is this generosity of spirit which *Guru* Krishna recommends to *śishya* Arjuna as the starting point for human spiritual endeavour.

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28 *B.G. XVI.* 18-19.

29. *B.G. XVI.* 1-3.

30. *B.G. XVI.* 4.