

Chapter II

Arjuna's despondency at having to fight; Krishna's teaching, beginning with chapter 2 verse 11; Krishna-Arjuna become guru-disciple.

The first chapter is better named “Arjuna *Gita*”, rather than Krishna *Gita*. Overcome by sorrow and delusion, Arjuna turns from war and keeps his weapons aside. He is dejected in his chariot, halted between the two opposing forces. He turns this way and that, puzzled and perturbed. He surveys the faces of his kith and kin; he is overcome by pity. His famous bow slips from his grasp, and he is too weak to stand or even sit; his mind wanders into the dictates of the *purva mimamsa* school of thought (a theology that interprets the action/ritual oriented portion of the *Vedas*). He swears he will not engage in fighting.

When Sanjaya reported this to the blind King Dhritharashtra, the king was overjoyed, for victory was within grasp! He had neither foresight nor far sight —much less divine vision— so he felt happy that his dream of an undiminished empire had come true, without bother.

But Sanjaya, who had divine vision, felt, “What is this insane joy that is affecting him? When the Lord Himself is on the side of the Pandavas, how can this king's wicked plan succeed?” Then he pictured to himself the ghastly consequences of Arjuna jumping into the fray.

But Arjuna had teardrops falling down his cheeks. There were whirlpools in his eyes. Even the Lord could not bear the sight; He could not remain silent. He felt Arjuna's pulse beat and diagnosed the malady. He knew in a trice that the malady of delusion caused by false evaluation had penetrated his three bodies: the gross, the subtle, and the causal. He saw that the pity that enveloped Arjuna was not genuine. For, genuine pity will be endowed with divine elevating impulses and motives; it will not disregard the orders of the Lord. Egotism was really under this veil of pity. So the Lord decided to cure him of that weakness. Arjuna was helplessly “overwhelmed by pity (*kripayaa vishtham*)”, the *Gita* says, and that had to be cured.

Just as a spirit entering a person has to be exorcised, Arjuna has to be freed from fear and cowardice. People who have the Lord by their side need entertain no fear. What can any spirit do to one who is the Lord of all the five elements (*bhuthas*)? “The Lord is the supreme doctor.” *Narayana* was the doctor Arjuna needed and got.

How lucky Arjuna was! Even from the depths of grief, joy will swell. Until the eleventh verse of the second chapter, it is the story of the despondency of Arjuna, the effect of “the possession”. That is why the first step in the cure is the exposition of *sankhya yoga* (the path of spiritual knowledge (*jnana*)).

Krishna's immortality-bestowing teaching begins from this eleventh verse. In fact, the *Bhagavad Gita* starts from this point. Up to this point, it is the description of Arjuna's delusion born of ignorance and dullness of intellect. Krishna, acting the role of witness, allowed the despondency to deepen and darken. When at last Arjuna threw down his bow and refused to fight, when he confessed that he had lost all sense of right and wrong, when he prayed that Krishna should teach him the way that would best solve his problems, then Krishna came forward and said,

“Arjuna! How could this miserable shade of cowardice overtake you now, when you have been clear and bright all along? This is quite unbecoming to the hero you are. The word Arjuna means pure unblemished character. Why then this grief? The battle is imminent. The clouds of war have gathered and are thundering. The foes

in front are awaiting the moment when they can jump into the fray. They have heaped countless injustices and cruelties on you, and now they are ready to grab the land that must come to you as of right. So far, you have borne all the agony they have poured over you, without stirring even an iota away from truth. You have fulfilled all the conditions they imposed, and you have passed through the years they prescribed for your exile. Your attempts to effect a compromise were futile, and you cannot avoid the clash of arms. We have yielded as much as we could. Now war is the only method by which the eyes of the evil-minded Duryodhana can be opened to his own iniquity.

“This war was decided on after long deliberation. It was not a hasty resolution taken in a fit of anger. Responsible elders weighed the pros and cons and came to the conclusion that resort to arms was inevitable. You and your brothers approved all this and appreciated the decision. You have been preparing for this battle with enthusiasm. In fact, you have been immersed in it more than others. How wrong is it for you now to turn back?

“This war did not pounce on you in a trice. You have been collecting the wherewithal for it for a long time. Remember how you struggled and starved and lived on roots and fruits of the forest in order to win the missile from Lord Siva, how you went as far as the region of the Lord of gods, Indra, in order to win celestial weapons for this battle.

“I thought that the moment of destiny for the annihilation they deserved had come for the wicked Kaurava brood, but now you have started this mourning dirge! Why this ominous note? Which scripture lays down this attitude? Think of your duty as a member of the warrior caste: to uphold *dharma*, to protect justice. Yours is the wealth of courage, adventure, and steadiness. But you are overpowered by this strange detachment, which is pathetically out of place.

“This cowardice brings shame on you and even on your far-famed forefathers. Fie on you! You have dragged down the warrior race into disgrace. War is the royal road for your kind, the road that leads to Heaven. How can you escape infamy if you withdraw from the field now? You have earned the title “Conqueror (*Vijaya*)” by the prowess of your arm. Don’t tarnish the reputation that you won by a lifetime of effort. Give up this weakening delusion.

“Listen to me. Remind yourself of what happened at Amaravathi. You disregarded the approaches of the divine damsel Urvashi, and when she wanted a son through your grace, you replied, ‘Take me as your son.’ That revealed you as an incomparable hero. The curse she put on you in her discomfiture helped you at the court of the Virata King to pass off as a eunuch, teaching dance to the royal princesses, didn’t it?

“Where has that heroism gone? Tell Me. How has this cowardice come over such a stalwart? You came to Me and disturbed Me in sleep with your request for help in this battle, from which you are now running away. Am I to help you thus? Have I to watch while you are fleeing? Pluck this delusion by the roots; reduce this fear to ashes. Become a hero again.” Thus exhorted Krishna.

Krishna used four words in this context: faintheartedness (*kasmalam*), ignoble nature (*an-aarya-jushtam*), the quality that destroys the Divine in humans (*a-swargyam*), and the quality that causes the decline of the fame that is lasting (*a-keerthi-karam*).

These inspiring words, which would make the blood of any warrior boil, had a tremendous effect on Arjuna. The thick cloud of ignorance that had overwhelmed Arjuna started to melt a little. The dullness (*thamas*) that had made him forget the truth was removed; passion (*rajoguna*) returned, and Arjuna found words to ask, “How?” That term reveals much—it shows that the *Gita* expounds not merely on what has to be done but even on how it

has to be done.

Arjuna asks Krishna, “Oh Madhusudana! Listen to my words: Those who are in the forefront of the battle line are all worthy of worship. The great Bhishma took care of us when we lost our father, brought us up from childhood, and shaped us into what we are. He is as a father to us, the grand old man of our clan. And what shall I say of Drona? He loved me more than he loved his own son, Aswathama; I had all his love. He is the guru who, through that love, took me as his favourite disciple and made me into the bowman that I am. Do you want me now to use the skill he taught me to overthrow him? Is it right for a son of India to do such a thing? In battle we have to kill our enemies, don't we? Or can we fight with fathers and teachers, who deserve reverence?”

“You say that Heaven can be won by battle. I cannot understand how Heaven can be obtained through the killing of these revered gurus. If this idea spreads, few gurus can survive! Whatever you say, let me tell you this: rather than earn happiness and power through these means, I feel it is better to live on alms collected from door to door. Food won through killing such people is mixed with their blood, and I would prefer a meal got through beggary. Well, even if I give up all these qualms and fight, how can victory be counted upon? Expecting victory to come to us, how can I resolve to slaughter these elders and lose both worlds? If by chance they win, then beggary is inevitable; if we win, it is as bad as losing, for of what gain is victory if the price we pay is the destruction of kith and kin? We gain but inconsolable grief for the rest of our life, Krishna! I am at a loss to solve this problem. My intelligence has deserted me. My nature has undergone a vast change; I do not know why. I cannot distinguish between right and wrong (*dharma* and *a-dharma*).

“My warrior blood rises up in protest when you prod it so; it is pushing me forward into battle. Fear of becoming the murderer of these revered elders is pulling me back. I am helpless. As you guide this chariot, guide me also and show me the way. Moreover, I am no longer concerned with worldly prosperity; I crave only spiritual progress,” Arjuna said.

From that moment, Krishna became the guru and Arjuna the disciple. Arjuna prayed for that status and got it. Until Arjuna accepted this attitude of a learner, his heart was filled with egotism and weakness. The hero had become a zero. He had taken a position the very opposite of that taken up by Krishna.

The reason for all this, if you study the situation carefully, is nothing but “egotism”. Love is the viewpoint of Krishna and delusion (*bhrama*) the viewpoint of Arjuna. Arjuna suffered from agony because of that. Then he realized that egotism led only to further ignorance and confusion. He surrendered his judgement to the Lord and saved himself. He said he was but an instrument in the hands of the Lord.

Recognizing one's error is the first excellence of a good disciple; it is the beginning of wisdom. Only the foolish will feel they know all and suffer from the dire disease of a swelled head.