

## IV

# The Core of the Teaching

**W**E KNOW the divine Teacher, we see the human disciple; it remains to form a clear conception of the doctrine. A clear conception fastening upon the essential idea, the central heart of the teaching is especially necessary here because the Gita with its rich and many-sided thought, its synthetical grasp of different aspects of the spiritual life and the fluent winding motion of its argument lends itself, even more than other scriptures, to one-sided misrepresentations born of a partisan intellectuality. The unconscious or half-conscious wresting of fact and word and idea to suit a preconceived notion or the doctrine or principle of one's preference is recognised by Indian logicians as one of the most fruitful sources of fallacy; and it is perhaps the one which it is most difficult for even the most conscientious thinker to avoid. For the human reason is incapable of always playing the detective upon itself in this respect; it is its very nature to seize upon some partial conclusion, idea, principle, become its partisan and make it the key to all truth, and it has an infinite faculty of doubling upon itself so as to avoid detecting in its operations this necessary and cherished weakness. The Gita lends itself easily to this kind of error, because it is easy, by throwing particular emphasis on one of its aspects or even on some salient and emphatic text and putting all the rest of the eighteen chapters into the background or making them a subordinate and auxiliary teaching, to turn it into a partisan of our own doctrine or dogma.

Thus, there are those who make the Gita teach, not works at all, but a discipline of preparation for renouncing life and works: the indifferent performance of prescribed actions or of whatever task may lie ready to the hands, becomes the means, the discipline; the final renunciation of life and works is the sole real object. It is quite easy to justify this view by citations from

the book and by a certain arrangement of stress in following out its argument, especially if we shut our eyes to the peculiar way in which it uses such a word as *sannyāsa*, renunciation; but it is quite impossible to persist in this view on an impartial reading in face of the continual assertion to the very end that action should be preferred to inaction and that superiority lies with the true, the inner renunciation of desire by equality and the giving up of works to the supreme Purusha.

Others again speak of the Gita as if the doctrine of devotion were its whole teaching and put in the background its monistic elements and the high place it gives to quietistic immergence in the one self of all. And undoubtedly its emphasis on devotion, its insistence on the aspect of the Divine as Lord and Purusha and its doctrine of the Purushottama, the Supreme Being who is superior both to the mutable Being and to the Immutable and who is what in His relation to the world we know as God, are the most striking and among the most vital elements of the Gita. Still, this Lord is the Self in whom all knowledge culminates and the Master of sacrifice to whom all works lead as well as the Lord of Love into whose being the heart of devotion enters, and the Gita preserves a perfectly equal balance, emphasising now knowledge, now works, now devotion, but for the purposes of the immediate trend of the thought, not with any absolute separate preference of one over the others. He in whom all three meet and become one, He is the Supreme Being, the Purushottama.

But at the present day, since in fact the modern mind began to recognise and deal at all with the Gita, the tendency is to subordinate its elements of knowledge and devotion, to take advantage of its continual insistence on action and to find in it a scripture of the Karmayoga, a Light leading us on the path of action, a Gospel of Works. Undoubtedly, the Gita is a Gospel of Works, but of works which culminate in knowledge, that is, in spiritual realisation and quietude, and of works motivated by devotion, that is, a conscious surrender of one's whole self first into the hands and then into the being of the Supreme, and not at all of works as they are understood by the modern mind, not at all an action dictated by egoistic and altruistic, by personal,

social, humanitarian motives, principles, ideals. Yet this is what present-day interpretations seek to make of the Gita. We are told continually by many authoritative voices that the Gita, opposing in this the ordinary ascetic and quietistic tendency of Indian thought and spirituality, proclaims with no uncertain sound the gospel of human action, the ideal of disinterested performance of social duties, nay, even, it would seem, the quite modern ideal of social service. To all this I can only reply that very patently and even on the very surface of it the Gita does nothing of the kind and that this is a modern misreading, a reading of the modern mind into an ancient book, of the present-day European or Europeanised intellect into a thoroughly antique, a thoroughly Oriental and Indian teaching. That which the Gita teaches is not a human, but a divine action; not the performance of social duties, but the abandonment of all other standards of duty or conduct for a selfless performance of the divine will working through our nature; not social service, but the action of the Best, the God-possessed, the Master-men done impersonally for the sake of the world and as a sacrifice to Him who stands behind man and Nature.

In other words, the Gita is not a book of practical ethics, but of the spiritual life. The modern mind is just now the European mind, such as it has become after having abandoned not only the philosophic idealism of the highest Graeco-Roman culture from which it started, but the Christian devotionism of the Middle Ages; these it has replaced by or transmuted into a practical idealism and social, patriotic and philanthropic devotion. It has got rid of God or kept Him only for Sunday use and erected in His place man as its deity and society as its visible idol. At its best it is practical, ethical, social, pragmatic, altruistic, humanitarian. Now all these things are good, are especially needed at the present day, are part of the divine Will or they would not have become so dominant in humanity. Nor is there any reason why the divine man, the man who lives in the Brahmic consciousness, in the God-being should not be all of these things in his action; he will be, if they are the best ideal of the age, the Yugadharma, and there is no yet higher ideal to be established,

no great radical change to be effected. For he is, as the Teacher points out to his disciple, the best who has to set the standard for others; and in fact Arjuna is called upon to live according to the highest ideals of his age and the prevailing culture, but with knowledge, with understanding of that which lay behind, and not as ordinary men, with a following of the merely outward law and rule.

But the point here is that the modern mind has exiled from its practical motive-power the two essential things, God or the Eternal and spirituality or the God-state, which are the master conceptions of the Gita. It lives in humanity only, and the Gita would have us live in God, though for the world in God; in its life, heart and intellect only, and the Gita would have us live in the spirit; in the mutable Being who is "all creatures", and the Gita would have us live also in the Immutable and the Supreme; in the changing march of Time, and the Gita would have us live in the Eternal. Or if these higher things are now beginning to be vaguely envisaged, it is only to make them subservient to man and society; but God and spirituality exist in their own right and not as adjuncts. And in practice the lower in us must learn to exist for the higher, in order that the higher also may in us consciously exist for the lower, to draw it nearer to its own altitudes.

Therefore it is a mistake to interpret the Gita from the standpoint of the mentality of today and force it to teach us the disinterested performance of duty as the highest and all-sufficient law. A little consideration of the situation with which the Gita deals will show us that this could not be its meaning. For the whole point of the teaching, that from which it arises, that which compels the disciple to seek the Teacher, is an inextricable clash of the various related conceptions of duty ending in the collapse of the whole useful intellectual and moral edifice erected by the human mind. In human life some sort of a clash arises fairly often, as for instance between domestic duties and the call of the country or the cause, or between the claim of the country and the good of humanity or some larger religious or moral principle. An inner situation may even arise, as with the Buddha, in which

all duties have to be abandoned, trampled on, flung aside in order to follow the call of the Divine within. I cannot think that the Gita would solve such an inner situation by sending Buddha back to his wife and father and the government of the Sakya State, or would direct a Ramakrishna to become a Pundit in a vernacular school and disinterestedly teach little boys their lessons, or bind down a Vivekananda to support his family and for that to follow dispassionately the law or medicine or journalism. The Gita does not teach the disinterested performance of duties but the following of the divine life, the abandonment of all dharmas, *sarvadharmān*, to take refuge in the Supreme alone, and the divine activity of a Buddha, a Ramakrishna, a Vivekananda is perfectly in consonance with this teaching. Nay, although the Gita prefers action to inaction, it does not rule out the renunciation of works, but accepts it as one of the ways to the Divine. If that can only be attained by renouncing works and life and all duties and the call is strong within us, then into the bonfire they must go, and there is no help for it. The call of God is imperative and cannot be weighed against any other considerations.

But here there is this farther difficulty that the action which Arjuna must do is one from which his moral sense recoils. It is his duty to fight, you say? But that duty has now become to his mind a terrible sin. How does it help him or solve his difficulty, to tell him that he must do his duty disinterestedly, dispassionately? He will want to know which is his duty or how it can be his duty to destroy in a sanguinary massacre his kin, his race and his country. He is told that he has right on his side, but that does not and cannot satisfy him, because his very point is that the justice of his legal claim does not justify him in supporting it by a pitiless massacre destructive to the future of his nation. Is he then to act dispassionately in the sense of not caring whether it is a sin or what its consequences may be so long as he does his duty as a soldier? That may be the teaching of a State, of politicians, of lawyers, of ethical casuists; it can never be the teaching of a great religious and philosophical Scripture which sets out to solve the problem of life and action from the

very roots. And if that is what the Gita has to say on a most poignant moral and spiritual problem, we must put it out of the list of the world's Scriptures and thrust it, if anywhere, then into our library of political science and ethical casuistry.

Undoubtedly, the Gita does, like the Upanishads, teach the equality which rises above sin and virtue, beyond good and evil, but only as a part of the Brahmic consciousness and for the man who is on the path and advanced enough to fulfil the supreme rule. It does not preach indifference to good and evil for the ordinary life of man, where such a doctrine would have the most pernicious consequences. On the contrary it affirms that the doers of evil shall not attain to God. Therefore if Arjuna simply seeks to fulfil in the best way the ordinary law of man's life, disinterested performance of what he feels to be a sin, a thing of Hell, will not help him, even though that sin be his duty as a soldier. He must refrain from what his conscience abhors though a thousand duties were shattered to pieces.

We must remember that duty is an idea which in practice rests upon social conceptions. We may extend the term beyond its proper connotation and talk of our duty to ourselves or we may, if we like, say in a transcendent sense that it was Buddha's duty to abandon all, or even that it is the ascetic's duty to sit motionless in a cave! But this is obviously to play with words. Duty is a relative term and depends upon our relation to others. It is a father's duty, as a father, to nurture and educate his children; a lawyer's to do his best for his client even if he knows him to be guilty and his defence to be a lie; a soldier's to fight and shoot to order even if he kill his own kin and countrymen; a judge's to send the guilty to prison and hang the murderer. And so long as these positions are accepted, the duty remains clear, a practical matter of course even when it is not a point of honour or affection, and overrides the absolute religious or moral law. But what if the inner view is changed, if the lawyer is awakened to the absolute sinfulness of falsehood, the judge becomes convinced that capital punishment is a crime against humanity, the man called upon to the battlefield feels, like the conscientious objector of today or as a Tolstoy would feel, that

in no circumstances is it permissible to take human life any more than to eat human flesh? It is obvious that here the moral law which is above all relative duties must prevail; and that law depends on no social relation or conception of duty but on the awakened inner perception of man, the moral being.

There are in the world, in fact, two different laws of conduct each valid on its own plane, the rule principally dependent on external status and the rule independent of status and entirely dependent on the thought and conscience. The Gita does not teach us to subordinate the higher plane to the lower, it does not ask the awakened moral consciousness to slay itself on the altar of duty as a sacrifice and victim to the law of the social status. It calls us higher and not lower; from the conflict of the two planes it bids us ascend to a supreme poise above the mainly practical, above the purely ethical, to the Brahmic consciousness. It replaces the conception of social duty by a divine obligation. The subjection to external law gives place to a certain principle of inner self-determination of action proceeding by the soul's freedom from the tangled law of works. And this, as we shall see, — the Brahmic consciousness, the soul's freedom from works and the determination of works in the nature by the Lord within and above us, — is the kernel of the Gita's teaching with regard to action.

The Gita can only be understood, like any other great work of the kind, by studying it in its entirety and as a developing argument. But the modern interpreters, starting from the great writer Bankim Chandra Chatterji who first gave to the Gita this new sense of a Gospel of Duty, have laid an almost exclusive stress on the first three or four chapters and in those on the idea of equality, on the expression *kartavyam karma*, the work that is to be done, which they render by duty, and on the phrase "Thou hast a right to action, but none to the fruits of action" which is now popularly quoted as the great word, *mahāvākya*, of the Gita. The rest of the eighteen chapters with their high philosophy are given a secondary importance, except indeed the great vision in the eleventh. This is natural enough for the modern mind which is, or has been till yesterday, inclined to be impatient of

metaphysical subtleties and far-off spiritual seekings, eager to get to work and, like Arjuna himself, mainly concerned for a workable law of works, a *dharma*. But it is the wrong way to handle this Scripture.

The equality which the Gita preaches is not disinterestedness, — the great command to Arjuna given *after* the foundation and main structure of the teaching have been laid and built, “Arise, slay thy enemies, enjoy a prosperous kingdom,” has not the ring of an uncompromising altruism or of a white, dispassionate abnegation; it is a state of inner poise and wideness which is the foundation of spiritual freedom. With that poise, in that freedom we have to do the “work that is to be done,” a phrase which the Gita uses with the greatest wideness including in it all works, *sarvakarmāṇi*, and which far exceeds, though it may include, social duties or ethical obligations. What is the work to be done is not to be determined by the individual choice; nor is the right to the action and the rejection of claim to the fruit the great word of the Gita, but only a preliminary word governing the first state of the disciple when he begins ascending the hill of Yoga. It is practically superseded at a subsequent stage. For the Gita goes on to affirm emphatically that the man is not the doer of the action; it is Prakriti, it is Nature, it is the great Force with its three modes of action that works through him, and he must learn to see that it is *not* he who does the work. Therefore the “right to action” is an idea which is only valid so long as we are still under the illusion of being the doer; it must necessarily disappear from the mind like the claim to the fruit, as soon as we cease to be to our own consciousness the doer of our works. All pragmatic egoism, whether of the claim to fruits or of the right to action, is then at an end.

But the determinism of Prakriti is not the last word of the Gita. The equality of the will and the rejection of fruits are only means for entering with the mind and the heart and the understanding into the divine consciousness and living in it; and the Gita expressly says that they are to be employed as a means as long as the disciple is unable so to live or even to seek by practice the gradual development of this higher state. And

what is this Divine, whom Krishna declares himself to be? It is the Purushottama beyond the Self that acts not, beyond the Prakriti that acts, foundation of the one, master of the other, the Lord of whom all is the manifestation, who even in our present subjection to Maya sits in the heart of His creatures governing the works of Prakriti, He by whom the armies on the field of Kurukshetra have already been slain while yet they live and who uses Arjuna only as an instrument or immediate occasion of this great slaughter. Prakriti is only His executive force. The disciple has to rise beyond this Force and its three modes or *gunas*; he has to become *triguṇātīta*. Not to her has he to surrender his actions, over which he has no longer any claim or “right”, but into the being of the Supreme. Reposing his mind and understanding, heart and will in Him, with self-knowledge, with God-knowledge, with world-knowledge, with a perfect equality, a perfect devotion, an absolute self-giving, he has to do works as an offering to the Master of all self-energising and all sacrifice. Identified in will, conscious with that consciousness, That shall decide and initiate the action. This is the solution which the Divine Teacher offers to the disciple.

What the great, the supreme word of the Gita is, its *mahāvākya*, we have not to seek; for the Gita itself declares it in its last utterance, the crowning note of the great diapason. “With the Lord in thy heart take refuge with all thy being; by His grace thou shalt attain to the supreme peace and the eternal status. So have I expounded to thee a knowledge more secret than that which is hidden. Further hear the most secret, the supreme word that I shall speak to thee. Become my-minded, devoted to Me, to Me do sacrifice and adoration; infallibly, thou shalt come to Me, for dear to me art thou. Abandoning all laws of conduct seek refuge in Me alone. I will release thee from all sin; do not grieve.”

The argument of the Gita resolves itself into three great steps by which action rises out of the human into the divine plane leaving the bondage of the lower for the liberty of a higher law. First, by the renunciation of desire and a perfect equality works have to be done as a sacrifice by man as the doer, a sacrifice to

a deity who is the supreme and only Self though by him not yet realised in his own being. This is the initial step. Secondly, not only the desire of the fruit, but the claim to be the doer of works has to be renounced in the realisation of the Self as the equal, the inactive, the immutable principle and of all works as simply the operation of universal Force, of the Nature-Soul, Prakriti, the unequal, active, mutable power. Lastly, the supreme Self has to be seen as the supreme Purusha governing this Prakriti, of whom the soul in Nature is a partial manifestation, by whom all works are directed, in a perfect transcendence, through Nature. To him love and adoration and the sacrifice of works have to be offered; the whole being has to be surrendered to Him and the whole consciousness raised up to dwell in this divine consciousness so that the human soul may share in His divine transcendence of Nature and of His works and act in a perfect spiritual liberty.

The first step is Karmayoga, the selfless sacrifice of works, and here the Gita's insistence is on action. The second is Jnanayoga, the self-realisation and knowledge of the true nature of the self and the world; and here the insistence is on knowledge; but the sacrifice of works continues and the path of Works becomes one with but does not disappear into the path of Knowledge. The last step is Bhaktiyoga, adoration and seeking of the supreme Self as the Divine Being, and here the insistence is on devotion; but the knowledge is not subordinated, only raised, vitalised and fulfilled, and still the sacrifice of works continues; the double path becomes the triune way of knowledge, works and devotion. And the fruit of the sacrifice, the one fruit still placed before the seeker, is attained, union with the divine Being and oneness with the supreme divine nature.