

Charles Andersen
Dr. Patrick Mahaffey
Hindu Traditions MS 503
Fall Quarter 2003

Panel Presentation on the Bhagavad Gita Selfless Service

I must begin my presentation about the Bhagavad Gita today with a confession—I have been to these shores (Hindu Traditions) before, not as an explorer but more like a tourist. Each time I have gone away charmed but unchanged; enchanted but not enlightened. However, this trip is different, and I must confess that I have been moved by my encounter. Let me explain.

In the Zimmer book, which is a masterful exploration of Indian art and mythology, he makes the very bold statement that Hinduism is essentially monotheistic.

Hindu philosophy and enlightened Hindu orthodoxy are fundamentally monistic, monotheistic, in spite of the hosts of gods and super human beings with which the mythology teems. (Zimmer 135).

I have never encountered that particular claim before and was somewhat surprised. Zimmer then goes on to explain by saying,

They are the changing phenomenal self-expressions of the one divine substance or energy of life, which though revealed in a three fold way, is finally beyond the unaffected by, all the changes that it seems to inflict upon itself. (Zimmer 136).

Furthermore, when the recent conflagration was consuming the Southern California countryside, I found my self hearkening back to the Mahabahrata and the god Agni who I encountered in that tale. As you may recall when Arjuna asks Agni why he must consume the forest at Khandava, he says,

“I am dull and weak,” answered Agni, “because I have eaten too much butter from the sacrifices of kings. I am sick, and only this will revive me. But I

have tried seven times to burn Khandava and always failed, for each time Indra comes and protects it with soft rain.” (Buck 81)

Afterward, when Agni had completed his task we get the sense of renewal and transformation that occurred because of this process,

Arjuna looked around them. The forest was nearly consumed and Agni was visible again as a man, but strong and swift and bright. His eyes were blazing scarlet; his crimson tongue flaming; his hair all fiery—and he was chasing someone. (Buck 85)

While filled with compassion for the people who lost their homes and particularly for those who lost their lives dealing with that horrifying ordeal, I was also filled with the wonder of the forest renewing itself. It's as if the forest had to take care of the beetle infestation in it's own way—the way it has always renewed itself, through fire. Like humans who use fever to fight infection, the forest on a vastly different scale does the same thing. While it will take a hundred years for the scars to heal, what's a hundred years to the forest? We humans are just accidental victims of the endless cycle of death and re-birth. Certainly a different perspective than I would have adopted earlier.

However interesting, those notions are not the focus of my presentation. Never having read the Bhagavad Gita before, I again was astounded to learn that there are two paths in yoga. In the text we encounter Krishna instruct Arjuna by saying,

At the beginning of time I declared two paths for the pure heart: *jnana yoga*, the contemplative path of spiritual wisdom, and *karma yoga*, the active path of selfless service. (Easwaran, ch. 3, sec. 3).

Whenever anyone spoke of yoga to me, I have always thought of boney bodied ascetics sitting around contemplating mystical wonders. My thought was a bit judgmental in the sense that exalting asceticism was certainly a neat way of not dealing with the systemic cruelty seemingly inherent in the caste system. However, once I encountered

this text I became aware that karma yoga was indeed an acceptable path to perfection. So, much like Christianity, the fault for misery, injustice, and suffering was in the application of principles, not in the principles themselves. For instance, Krishna says to Arjuna,

Strive constantly to serve the welfare of the world; by devotion to selfless work one attains the supreme goal of life. Do your work with the welfare of others always in mind. It was by such work that Janaka attained perfection; others too, have followed this path. (Easwaran, ch. 3, sec 19-20).

What I find so interesting about this is essentially the same conflict exists within the Hindu mythic system as occurs in the Christian mythic system. Both advocate selfless service to the world—yet within both cultural milieus there exists considerable poverty and misery. The seemingly more attractive alternative is the ascetic way—jnana yoga in Hinduism and monasticism in Christianity. The fundamental difference is that the monastic way is not given scriptural support as a valid alternative to selfless service, while in Hinduism, in the Bhagavad Gita it is.

According to the Bhagavad Gita, the impediment to selfless service to the world lies in the gunas, specific qualities that harmonize life. Arjuna wants to know,

What is the force that binds us to selfish deeds, O Krishna? What power moves us, even against our will, as if forcing us? (Easwaran, ch 3, sec. 36).

According to the Bhagavad Gita there are three gunas at work in the phenomenal world: sattva (positive energies) rajas (negative energies) and tamas (inertia and ignorance). So, in answer to Arjunas question above, Krishna says,

It is selfish desire and anger, arising from the guna of rajas; these are the appetites and evils which threaten a person in this life. (Easwaran, ch. 3, sec. 37).

Having encountered the Bhagavad Gita, I feel that I have explored not only the mystic/ascetical basis of the Hindu mythic system, but also the ethical/moral basis of that system as well. Though forced by ignorance to read these texts in translation, I nevertheless no longer feel like a tourist in this complex, wonderful world of Hindu traditions. While admittedly just a novice, my excitement for this voyage of discovery continues to grow.

Works Cited

Buck, William. Mahabharata Retold by William Buck

London, University of California Press, 1973

Easwaran, Eknath. The Bhagavad Gita

New York, Vintage Books, 1985

Zimmer, Heinrich. Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization

Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1992