**Reading the Bhagavad Gita today**

**By Charles Martin, Updated: July 24 at 8:01 am**

The *Bhagavad Gita* begins at a moment of extreme crisis. At the outset of this poetic dialogue of 700 numbered stanzas of Sanskrit verse composed in India during the Axial Age, the heroic warrior Arjuna is about to undertake a war against his cousins for control of the kingdom of Bharata in northern India. The two sets of cousins have been raised together, and as Arjuna rides in his chariot onto the battlefield, he realizes with horror that he must slay his own friends, teachers and relatives.

Out of compassion for his enemy and despair over his own helplessness, Arjuna addresses his charioteer, who happens to be the god Krishna, in the guise of a mortal:

“I am unstrung: my limbs collapse

beneath me, and my mouth is dry;

there is a trembling in my body,

and my hair rises, bristling….”

Arjuna, with “his mind overcome with grief,” collapses into his chariot, and the *Gita* unfolds as a discussion of Arjuna’s moral dilemma, with Krishna explaining that Arjuna must overcome his revulsion and attend to his duties as a warrior.

The *Gita*,  a section of the enormous Sanskrit epic poem, the *Mahabharata,* is one of the great classics of world literature, one that deeply affected the thought and actions of Henry David Thoreau, Mahatma Gandhi, and Christopher Isherwood, among many others. It may seem initially strange that such prominent individuals in the civil disobedience movements of their times should have been directly influenced by the *Gita*, but there is much in the poem besides Krishna’s argument that Arjuna should engage in battle.

Krishna’s reasons are deeply set in Hindu doctrine and practice: as a member of the warrior class, Arjuna has a duty to wage war, and it would be shameful for him to turn away from his responsibility. Besides, though the body may die, the soul cannot, so what appears to be murder is actually something other. Finally, Krishna argues that the opposing warriors, seen *sub specie aeternitatis*, are already dead; killing them is of no great matter.

The contemporary secular reader is unlikely to find Krishna’s reasoning as persuasive as Arjuna’s argument for compassion. But Arjuna himself is persuaded, and the *Gita* ends with him poised to commence battle.

Even in the 19th century, Henry Thoreau, one of the earliest Western adopters of the *Gita*, dismissed the divine position out of hand: “Krishna’s argument, it must be allowed, is defective. No sufficient reason is given why Arjuna should fight. Arjuna may be convinced, but the reader is not.”  And, as the contemporary scholar of Hinduism, Wendy Doniger recently admitted, if Buddha had been Arjuna’s charioteer, the advice given would have been quite different, and quite possibly more palatable to the modern reader.

Whether Eastern or Western, the reader today no longer lives in an archaic, heroic culture, where warfare was preferable to intermittent states of peace, and where the class system conferred on men their responsibilities and inescapable obligations. Arjuna may have had to engage in battle, but not Thoreau: “we are freemen of the universe, and not sentenced to any caste.”

Given the difficulties of persuading a contemporary, secular reader of the validity of Krishna’s argument, one might expect that the *Gita*would not have found much of an audience in the modern West, but the surprising fact is that it has, and that its most sympathetic readers have been just those who have argued that the *Gita* does not sanction war and violence.

Despite his unwillingness to be persuaded by Krishna’s argument, Thoreau found in the *Gita*“a moral grandeur and sublimity akin to Western scriptures,” Gandhi argued that the forthcoming battle is merely an allegory of the human soul: no actual warriors were slain or injured in the making of this poem.  And Isherwood, espousing pacifism even as he worked on a translation of the *Gita*with his guru, Swami Prabhavananda, argued that in the absence of a system in which one’s identity, with its attendant duties and responsibilities, came from one’s class, Krishna’s argument could be seen as directed to the ethical responsibilities of each particular individual.

These three great thinkers were attracted to the *Gita,*despite its call to war. In fact, a great part of its value for the contemporary reader lies in Krishna’s emphasis on the importance of action in order to sustain the order of the world.

Among the lessons that the Bhagavad Gita still has to teach each of us is that of living one’s life by acting deliberately, since action is always preferable to inaction; to act by those principles that are inherent in one’s own nature, since, as Krishna tells Arjuna, it is “Better to do one’s duty/ ineptly than another’s well.” Thoreau almost seems to be translating Krishna’s speech into the idiom of a plainspoken Yankee when he write: “A man’s own calling with all its faults ought not to be forsaken. Every undertaking is involved with its faults as the fire with the smoke.”

Moreover, one must act without concern for what Krishna refers to as the fruits of one’s actions, that is to say, without fear of loss or desire for future gain. Krishna’s advice is miles away from “Follow your bliss,” Joseph Campbell’s easily misunderstood mantra, which seems to call upon no sense of duty or responsibility to one’s own nature: if something no longer seems blissful to you, you may turn from it to follow something else.

Krishna would not have you follow, but lead, as he tells Arjuna, praising the qualities of leadership and the standards of excellence that the best leader sets. To lead in this way, acting out of responsibility to one’s own nature, and not out of fear or desire, is inherently risky. We have only to consider the actions of such men as Thoreau, Gandhi and Isherwood, frequently attended in our time by the contempt of their fellows, by jailings, beatings and even assassination.

Such action is heroic in the way that many of us would now understand the term. It demands a measure of devotion, which as Gandhi reminds us, “…is not mere lip service; it is a wrestling with death.”  And so, though our cultural situation is very different from the context for which the*Bhagavad Gita* was written, we can still draw on it in the 21st century as a resource for living our lives in a meaningful way.

1. Who has been influenced by the Bhagavad Gita?
2. The article discussed the appeal to modern readers because of the idea of ACTION. Summarize the authors interpretation of the Bhagavad Gita’s message on action.

Be prepared for a short reading quiz on Monday at the beginning of class on this article.