

SPIRITUAL PSYCHOLOGY: LESSONS FROM THE GITA FOR MENTAL WELL-BEING

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Abstract

In the current ever evolving world and the lifestyle of human beings, anxiety, depression and other mental illnesses have become quite prominent. In these times of stress and global mental health crisis, ancient philosophical texts and the scriptures from the ancient India like The Bhagavad Gita provides great insights and tools to cope with the modern psychological challenges prominent in the world. This paper explores the teachings of Bhagavad Gita and how they help with the psychological contradictions and problems faced by individuals in current times. The key concepts of Bhagavad Gita like Equanimity (Samatva Bhava), Detachment (Vairagya) Self-realisation and transient nature of suffering are discussed in the paper to show how they can contribute and help in resolving the psychological issues being faced by individuals. According to the teachings of Gita, Equanimity teaches an individual not just to treat everyone equally but also to face the dualities of the world by attaining the inner calm and remain unstable in difficult times. Furthermore, the concept of Detachment (Vairagya) as presented in the Gita states that an individual becomes even more stronger mentally when he practices the virtue of Vairagya as it helps in engaging the mind with the world objectively and not subjectively. It is difficult to restrict or hold back the mind but by practice and detachment it can be attained. The concept of self-realisation focuses on the alignment of one's actual self with their concept of self. It focuses on the fact that an individual's self-image is constructed by the social factors but it is way different from one's actual self so an individual should be aligned with their actual self and not get misguided because of the social construction of image as it can lead to pain and misery. The nature of suffering has been explained in the Gita as transient, non-permanent and something which is ever changing, if an individual understands it truly, it will help him in not getting stuck in the worldly misery and understanding it as permanent. Thus, this paper argues that combining all these concepts together will help not only in resolving psychological problems of the individuals but would also greatly contribute in helping them to face the polycrisis evident in today's world. The Bhagavad Gita not only provides the spiritual study but also can help an individual to cope with the stresses of contemporary life.

Keywords: bhagavad gita, mental health, mental resilience, equanimity, psychological wellbeing

Introduction

The Bhagavad Gita, an ancient Hindu scripture, is recognized not only for its spiritual and philosophical teachings but also for the great insights and tools it provides to cope with the modern psychological problems widespread in the world. In the current constantly changing world and the lifestyle of individuals, depression, mood irregularities, sleeping disorders, anxiety and other mental illnesses have grown increasingly well-known.

The Bhagavad Gita explores many psychological subjects that correlate with modern psychology. They not only correlate but rather can be used in today's times to make the mental health better. The concepts discussed in the Gita are still relevant in the current times and somewhere provide a framework which we can refer to resolve mental health challenges being faced by individuals today.

This paper aims to explore the teachings of The Bhagavad Gita and how they can help in addressing the

psychological conflicts and challenges encountered by individuals in present times. The four key concepts of The Bhagavad Gita, Equanimity (*Samatva Bhava*), Detachment (*Vairagya*), Self-realisation (*Atma Jnana*) and Transient Nature of Suffering (*Dukha*) will be discussed in the paper to show the important role they play in keeping an individual's psychological well-being and help resolving their problems.

In this paper, I would like to give a detailed exposition of these four concepts as mentioned above. In the first section I shall discuss the Concept of Equanimity (*Samatva Bhava*) as mentioned in the Gita and analyse how is it still relevant in today's times. The second section will discuss the concept of Detachment (*Vairagya*) and benefits of its implications in the current times. In the third section, I shall discuss the concept of Self-realisation (*Atma Jnana*) and how important is it in a person's psychological wellbeing. In the fourth section, The Transient Nature of Suffering (*Dukha*) will be discussed to

show its importance in present times followed by the last section in which I shall briefly conclude my paper by throwing light on the fact that how all these concepts are extremely important in psychological well-being of an individual.

Equanimity (*Samatva Bhava*)

In Sanskrit, the word *Sama* or *Samatva* has been translated as equanimity. It is discussed in Buddhism as one of the *brahma viharas*, termed as *Upekkha* which plays an important role in developing wisdom leading to the path of liberation for an individual.

In the Bhagavad Gita, equanimity, or '*samatva bhava*' is considered to be as an important attribute for growing spiritually and maintaining the inner peace. It has been described as a stable state of mind in the time of dualities. When the outside world and the ups and downs of life cannot shake the state of mind of an individual and he or she remains stable mentally is how '*samatva bhava*' can be explained according to the Gita.

Krishna Emphasizing the Value of Equanimity Say in the Following Verse

योगस्थः कुरु कर्माणि सङ्गं त्यक्त्वा धनञ्जय ।
सिद्ध्यसिद्ध्योः समो भूत्वा समत्वं योग उच्यते ॥48॥

yoga-sthaḥ kuru karmāṇi saṅgaṁ tyaktvā
dhanañjaya

siddhy-asiddhyoḥ samo bhūtvā samatvaṁ yoga
uchyate

The true balance comes not just by balancing the correct yoga postures physically but also to bring this balance mentally (*yoga-sthaḥ*). The emphasis has been laid on the mental equanimity and has been said that a person's mind should stay unruffled in the times of success and failures alike. Equanimity has been described as a true essence of yoga (*samatvaṁ yoga uchyate*). It is not important to practice yoga only physically but mentally a person should be in a state of mental equanimity which is the true essence of yoga.

In the Gita, when Arjuna is stuck in a morally difficult situation torn between his duty to fight the war and physically hurting his own relatives, there is an internal conflict between duty and emotion, righteousness and attachment. When Arjuna sees his own kinsmen in the

battlefield he turns to Krishna and says, "I see my own relations here anxious to fight and my limbs grow weak; my mouth is dry, my body shakes, and my hair is standing on end." (2010:80). Krishna, his charioteer guides him and highlights the significance of maintaining equanimity in the middle of external and internal conflicts and advises that "You have the right to work, but never to the fruit of work. You should never engage in action for the sake of reward, nor should long for inaction." (2010: 94)

Thus, Krishna reminds Arjuna of his duty and advises him to do his duty without getting affected mentally and physically. The state of equanimity is highlighted as the true essence of yoga as it helps an individual in functioning efficiently.

If we look closely, the concept of equanimity is present in contemporary psychology as well. The technical term is emotional regulation, which in simple terms is the ability to be less sensitive to the extremities of life. To achieve a high degree of this ability, Cognitive Behavioural Therapists guide their patients in recalibrating their cognitive responses from being highly reactionary (catastrophizing, black-and-white thinking, etc.) to being more tempered in its approach, be it towards a negative or positive outcome.

This method of psychotherapy is highly similar to Krishna's teachings to Arjuna on the battlefield. Krishna helps Arjuna overcome his exaggerated fears about the outcome of battle. The teaching of distancing oneself from the "dualities of success and failure" has noticeable overlaps with the methods of CBT. Therefore, it can be said that the teachings and principles on equanimity as imparted by Krishna in the Gita are very much relevant in today's times contributing to mental wellbeing of individuals.

Detachment (*Vairagya*)

The sanskrit word *Vairagya* has been derived from *Vi* (without) and *raga* (attachment) which means being free from the material desires and emotional attachments. There are many schools in Indian philosophy who talk about detachment as an important characteristic of their philosophy. Both Buddhism and Jainism lay emphasis on the notion of detachment, the main difference between the two is that on one hand where Buddhism focuses on

practicing detachment moderately while being engaged with the world compassionately, with the middle path being the main philosophy practiced by its followers.

In the Bhagavad Gita, detachment has been discussed as one of the most important tenets. However, Vairagya or detachment in the Gita should not be mistaken for as a practice to abandon one's duties and escape commitments rather it focuses on fulfilling one's responsibilities or observing one's moral duties without being attached to the result.

Krishna Emphasizing the Value of Detachment Say in the Following Verse

कर्मण्येवाधिकारस्ते मा फलेषु कदाचन।
मा कर्मफलहेतुर्भूर्मा ते सङ्गोऽस्त्वकर्मणि ॥47॥

Karmanye vadhikaraste Ma Phaleshu Kadachana Ma Karmaphalaheturbhur ma Te Sangostvakarmani

Krishna while guiding a rather perplexed and anxious Arjuna in the battlefield, encourages him to direct his attention to his duty rather than its results. When Arjuna was being apprehensive about the outcome of performing his duty as he was standing against his kinsmen in the battlefield, Krishna highlights the importance of the philosophy of *Nishkama karma* and emphasises on a person living in the present and doing their duty without getting attached to the outcome of it.

This verse is quiet applicable in the current times too, as the individuals have a growing pressure of performance, career, fulfilling their goals and desires which make them endure a lot of stress, the key message of this verse, " that one should do duty for duty sake and not get attached to the outcome" if applied in practical life can definitely help in coping with stress.

Even in psychologists and mental health practitioners, under the therapies like ACT and CBT teach their clients to deal with the problems in a detached way. The term used is detached mindfulness where the patient is asked to look at the situation or mental thoughts in a detached way and to not get attached to it specially not to get worried about the results. For instance, if an athlete is anxious about his performance, the CBT approach would be to focus on the performance and not to think about the result as it depends on various factors which are all not under control so

somewhere the underlying message is "do duty for duty sake and not worry about the results".

Self- Realisation (*Atma Jnana*)

The concept of *Atma Jnana* in the Gita signifies the knowledge of the self. It can be denoted as self -realisation or realisation of an individual's innate nature as the immortal and transcendent. In the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna advises Arjuna that self-realisation is the path to liberation. Furthermore, in the Gita it is explained that one's body is transient or impermanent whereas only the soul or *atman* is infinite, imperishable and beyond mortality.

Krishna emphasizing the value of self- realisation say in the following verse:

न त्वेवाहं जातु नासं न त्वं नेमे जनाधिपाः।
न चैव न भविष्यामः सर्वे वयमतः परम्॥

*Na tvevāhaṁ jātu nāsaṁ na tvam neme janādhipāḥ
Na caiva na bhaviṣyāmaḥ sarve vayamataḥ param*

Krishna addressing Arjuna in the battlefield proclaims that everyone including himself, Arjuna and all the other kings have continuously existed in some form across all times. To quote, " there have never been a time when you and I and the kings gathered here have not existed, nor will there be a time when we will cease to exist." (2010:89)

The quote mentioned above explains that the physical form of an individual might perish but the being continues to exist. The material bodies may cease but the soul continues to persist beyond space and time. This verse promotes a new perspective persuading the individuals to not get so attached to the material life and rather concentrate on unchanging nature of the soul.

Furthermore, Krishna emphasising the eternal nature of the soul advises Arjun that:

न जायते म्रियते वा कदाचिन्

नायं भूत्वा भविता वा न भूयः।

अजो नित्यः शाश्वतोऽयं पुराणो

न हन्यते हन्यमाने शरीरे॥

na jāyate mriyate vā kadācin

nāyaṁ bhūtvā bhavitā vā na bhūyaḥ

ajo nityaḥ śāśvato'yaṁ purāṇo

na hanyate hanyamāne śarīre

In this verse, Krishna tells Arjuna that “You were never born; you will never die. You have never changed; you can never change. Unborn, eternal, immutable, immemorial, you do not die when the body dies.” (2010:90). He explains to Arjuna that the soul does not go through the cycle of birth and death like the physical body as it is unborn, eternal and immemorial. Krishna strives to enhance Arjuna's perception of life and death and urges him to detach himself from the mortal or earthly world by understanding the true nature of self or *atman* as he will be able to fulfil his duties as a warrior with no apprehension of harming the imperishable soul.

Furthermore, if we look at the concept of self-realisation in the psychological realm, it is another key teaching of the Bhagavad Gita which is also akin to self-actualisation in modern forms of psychology. Realisation and acceptance of oneself occupies the highest place in Maslow's hierarchy of needs. And Carl Jung's concept of individuation - that the 'Self' is a mere amalgamation of different parts of one's psychological makeup - is close to the concept of Atman.

Transient Nature of Suffering (*Dukha*)

The transient nature of suffering or *Dukha* has been discussed as an important aspect of an individual's life. It is an intrinsic characteristic of a person's existence and cannot be avoided while dealing with the world. It is ever evolving and impermanent just like joy and happiness.

Lord Krishna emphasising on the transient nature of suffering advises Arjun that:

मात्रास्पर्शास्तु कौन्तेय शीतोष्णसुखदुःखदाः।

आगमापायिनोऽनित्यास्तांस्तितिक्षस्व भारत॥

Mātrā-sparśās tu kaunteya śītoṣṇa-sukha-duḥkha-dāḥ |

Āgamāpāyino 'nityās tāṁs titikṣasva bhārata ||

In this verse, Krishna tells Arjuna in Bhagavad Gita that, “when the senses contact sense objects, a person experiences cold or heat, pleasure or pain. These experiences are fleeting; they come and go. Bear them patiently, Arjuna”. (2010:90) Thus, Krishna is emphasising on fleeting nature of sorrow or *dukkha* by comparing it to the changing seasons. He says just as the seasons change so does the state of pain and pleasure or our

emotional temperament. He repeatedly urges Arjuna to build resilience instead of being consumed by transient struggles.

Krishna furthermore emphasises on the concept of detachment and says that if a person lives a detached life as discussed before in this paper, then he/she would be able to understand the transient nature of suffering better. They would be able to live a more present and fulfilling life.

If we look at the relevance of these teachings in the current times specially in terms of psychological practices that are currently in use, we would find similarities of this theory in the practice termed as DBT. In psychology, Dialectical behaviour therapy is used to teach patients that emotional pain and impulses can ascend and descend very rapidly and if they navigate through it without seeking recourse in harmful behaviours then pain will gradually fade. Also, the practice of mindfulness if looked at closely emphasises on focusing on breath which is also not transient in nature.

Conclusion

In this paper we have examined four central teachings of The Bhagavad Gita namely, the concepts of Equanimity, Detachment, Self- realisation and Transient nature of suffering which are extremely important in today's times. When we analysed the concept of equanimity, we realised that it is very much present in the current psychological theories too. The concept has been of great significance both in the ancient times as well as today. A similarity can be found in the CBT theories in psychology, therefore, it can be said that the teachings and principles on equanimity as imparted by Krishna in the Gita are very much relevant in today's times contributing to mental wellbeing of individuals. When we read up on the concept of detachment which has been discussed as one of the most important tenets. We realised that the way Krishna is asking Arjuna to participate in the battle in a detached manner, similarly in the psychological theories like CBT and ACT, a professional practitioner suggests the clients to deal with the problems in a detached way. Furthermore, when we analysed the concepts of Self- realisation and Transient nature of suffering we found out that both Carl Jung and Maslow give extreme significance to the concept of self-realisation in their theories whereas the transient

nature of suffering has been highlighted by the psychologists in the theories of DBT and acts like mindfulness. Therefore, we can say that a thorough analysis of these four concepts suggests that they are extremely relevant even today for individuals to become mentally resilient.

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