

Many Paths to the Goal: Wisdom from the Hindu classic, the Bhagavad Gita

by Alessandro D. F. Gagliardi

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Let me tell you about the first time I remember having a satori-like experience. I remember it vividly. It was 15 years ago. I was not in a church or temple or a meditation hall, or even a forest grove. I was sitting in a café in the East Village of Manhattan in New York. I had quit my job to study the brain at NYU and I was taking a class on cognitive psychology. I was reading a chapter on memory and thinking about how memory is not really ours. That is, we tend to identify with our memories, but we don't have a lot of control over it. If I want to remember what I ate for dinner last night, I have to reach into my memory like its black box and if I'm lucky, I'll come out with an answer, but it's just as likely I'll draw a blank. It occurred to me—and you may not agree with this, but bear with me—that anything that I can rightly identify as “me” or “mine” must be something I have control over. So, memory is out. But what else is there?

Sitting there in that café, I looked up from my textbook and started thinking through it systematically. My memory is not me. My feelings are not me. And so on until I was left with one thing and one thing only [raise finger]: the witness. The fact that I had perspective, that was me. Everything else, all that I was witnessing, including my memories, my feelings, and so on, were just happening. I looked around the café and realized that that was true of everyone else as well. Furthermore, everything that separates us, all that separates the customer from the cashier ringing her up, is incidental. In that moment I experienced a profound sense of oneness with all sentient life, what the physicist Erwin Schrödinger meant when he said, “Consciousness is never experienced in the plural, only in the singular.” and that “The plurality that we perceive is only an appearance; it is not real.”

Schrödinger, besides being one of the most influential quantum physicists of the 20th century, was also a student of Vedanta. Vedanta is a philosophy rooted in the Hindu tradition that started with the Bhagavad Gita and Upanishads around 2200-2500 years ago.

I offer this personal story as an example of what Hindus might call *jñāna yoga* or the yoga of knowledge. *Jñāna* is, in fact, cognate with “knowledge” and with the Greek “*gnosis*”. It is one of many ways of reaching the state of union taught by Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita. These ways were enumerated by the Swami Vivekananda around the turn of the 20th century who twice spoke at our own First Unitarian Church of Oakland not far from here. Vivekananda was the student of Sri Ramakrishna, a name I fear might be confusing because it refers to Rama and Krishna. Krishna we've already heard about. Rama, like Krishna, is also a god or avatar generally associated with the god Vishnu. But just like Christians name their children after saints, Hindus often name their children after gods. To make matters even more confusing, Ramakrishna was not a devotee of Rama or Krishna, but of Kali, the great mother Goddess.

On the topic of the various yogas, Ramakrishna explained,

Innumerable are the ways that lead to God. If you are sincere, you will attain God in the end, whichever path you follow. Roughly speaking there are three kinds of *yog*: *jñāna yog*, *karma yog*, and *bhakti yog*.

What is *jñāna yog*? The *jñāni* seeks to realize Brahman. He discriminates saying, 'Not this, not this'. He discriminates between the Real and the unreal. As he comes to the end of discrimination, he goes into samadhi [or enlightenment] and attains the Knowledge of Brahman.

What is *karma yog*? Its aim is to fix one's mind on God by means of work. If a householder performs his duties in the world in a spirit of detachment, surrendering the results to God and with devotion to God in his heart, he may be said to practice *karma yog*.

What is *bhakti yog*? It is to keep the mind on God by chanting His name and glories.

In speaking this way about *karma yog* and *bhakti yog*, Ramakrishna has in mind a personal God—that is—someone he can have a personal relationship with. And indeed, he did. But for many of us here today, living in a secular liberal society in the 21st century, that might be a difficult concept to deal with. Even those of us who do cultivate a personal relationship with deity might feel a bit embarrassed.

But if we allow that there is something much greater than us—which I think we must do both as religious people and as thinking people—then it is not unreasonable to relate to that which is so much greater than us as a person. This approach lends itself to the path of *bhakti yog*, or the path of devotion.

That is one way to relate to God, or to Brahman, which is the Sanskrit word for the Absolute. It is a very common way. It appears in all religions. But it is not the only way. Indeed, one of the things I admire most about Hinduism is that it is very clear that there are many ways.

At the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago, in 1893, Swami Vivekananda spoke on the history of Hinduism:

From the high spiritual flights of the Vedanta philosophy, of which the latest discoveries of science seem like echoes, to the low ideas of idolatry with its multifarious mythology, the agnosticism of the Buddhists, and the atheism of the Jains, each and all have a place within the Hindu religion.

What does this have to do with us? Walking in the door of many UU churches and fellowships, you might see fliers for Humanist UUs, for Pagan UUs, for Christian, Jewish, and Buddhist UUs; for social justice activists, environmentalists, and so on. In these, I see the same multifarious paths described in Hinduism also embraced in the eclecticism of Unitarian Universalism.

Humanist and Buddhist UUs, each in their own way seek enlightenment through discernment. Christian and Pagan UUs reach toward the transcendent through forms of worship. Meanwhile, our many social justice efforts reach towards those values of ultimate concern through works. Of

course, these different paths are not mutually exclusive. But too often, I've found, people who favor one tend to view theirs as superior to all others. I hear the theist tell me that salvation comes from worship of God alone. I hear the contemplative tell me that only when I sit down and quiet myself will I begin to grasp reality as it truly is. And I hear the activist tell me—paraphrasing the epistle of James—that “faith without works is dead.” All of these people are right in their own way, but they are all seeing only part of the picture, part of religion. In the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna tells us:

Some worship through sacrifice. Others offer the senses, those of hearing and the rest, into the fires of perfect discipline. Still others offer the actions of all the sense and actions of the life-breath.

Some by meditation behold the supreme Spirit in the heart with the help of their refined and sharp intellect; others realize It through the discipline of Knowledge, and others, again, through the discipline of Action.

These are the methods of religion. The word “religion” derives from the Latin *religare* which means “to bind.” In this way, it is similar to the Sanskrit word *yog* I mentioned earlier, which is cognate with the English word “yoke”. But “bind to” what? “Yoke” to what? Ramakrishna would call it Brahman or “God”.

When people ask me if I believe in God, I really don't know how to answer. I tend to agree with Eliphaz Levi who wrote, “that such a God as the majority of atheists conceive does not exist.” Now, in saying this Levi was being a bit ironic as he was in fact a theist and indeed, a mystic. And so, by saying that he doesn't believe in the God that atheists reject, he was careful not to say that he didn't believe in God. So, who or what is Levi's God? What is my God? More importantly, what (or who) is your God?

Recall how God, in the voice of Krishna, reveals himself in the Bhagavad Gita:

I am the Self that dwells in the heart of every mortal creature:
I am the beginning, the lifespan, and the end of all.

I am the radiant sun among the light-givers:
I am the mind: I am consciousness in the living.

I am death that snatches all;
I, also, am the source of all that shall be born.

I am time without end:
I am the sustainer: my face is everywhere.

I am the beginning, the middle, and the end in creation:
I am the knowledge of things spiritual.

I am glory, prosperity, beautiful speech,
memory, intelligence, steadfastness, and forgiveness.

I am the divine seed of all lives.
In this world nothing animate or inanimate exists without me.

I am the strength of the strong;
I am the purity of the good.

I am the knowledge of the knower.
There is no limit to my divine manifestations.

Whatever in this world is powerful, beautiful, or glorious, that you may know to
have come forth from a fraction of my power and glory.

I am Vishnu...I am Indra...I am Shiva...I am Rama...I am Krishna... I am you....

When another student of Ramakrishna—who called himself M—first met his teacher, Ramakrishna asked him, “do you believe in God with form or without form?” M replied, “Sir, I like to think of God as formless.” Ramakrishna answered, “Very good. It is enough to have faith in either aspect.... But never for a moment think that this alone is true and all else false. Remember that God with form is just as true as God without form. But hold fast to your own conviction.”

Returning to the story, as Krishna is advising Arjuna on the correct course of action to take in light of the fact that he is to go to war against his own kin—and are we not all, ultimately, of one kin—Krishna tells him:

Moreover, considering
your own dharma,
you should not waver.

Truly, for a warrior,
nothing better exists
than a battle fought
according to dharma.

What is dharma? It is usually translated as “duty”, sometimes as “law”. As “law” it can carry the same connotation as physical laws, as in the dharma of an electron to bend towards a positive magnetic field. But when talking about people, dharma gets more complicated. Within the context of the Bhagavad Gita, Arjuna’s dharma is clear. He was born into the warrior caste and it is his duty to fight in this war. But for many of us, our dharma may not be so clear. Still, as Krishna goes on to say:

Better is one’s own dharma
even if imperfect

than another's dharma
followed perfectly.

Better is death in following
one's own dharma,
for another's dharma
brings danger.

It is better to stumble falteringly on our own murky path than to follow another's perfectly. Indeed, all we can do is follow our dharma as best we can. Krishna tells us:

It is in action alone
that you have a claim,
never at any time to
the fruits of such action

Never let the fruits of action
be your motive;
nor let your attachment
be to inaction.

Notice that he is careful to distinguish non-attachment to the fruits of action from attachment to inaction, which is actually impossible. You cannot not act. Just the same, non-attachment is extremely difficult. When I participate in a march or a vigil, how can I not be motivated by the fruits of such action? Of course, I want the situation to change, or else why would I be there? On the other hand, marches and vigils so often feel fruitless that I find this reminder somewhat reassuring. I'm reminded of a protest slogan: "When we fight, we win!" On the surface, it sounds a bit absurd. How many fights for justice fail to achieve their end? But if we remain unattached to the fruits of our actions and remember that it is in action alone that we have a claim, then the phrase, "when we fight, we win!" begins to make more sense.

Krishna tells us:

Abandoning all selfish desires,
a person moves through life
free from worldly longings.

Without the sense of 'mine',
without the notion
of 'I am acting'—
that one attains peace.

Abandoning all selfish desires, remaining unattached to the fruits of my actions, nor being attached to inaction: this is quite difficult. And yet, if we can attain it, we can attain peace. But do not confuse this with attachment to inaction, which is, in fact, impossible. As Krishna

admonishes Arjuna, you must act, you must act according to your dharma, but you must release the fruits of your labor, even if it kills you.