

Holy Work: Thoughts from The Bhagavad Gita

A paper prepared by Professor David Cadman, May 2008

In our time, the word “holy”, which is an old and a good word, has, for many, come to feel uncomfortable, with tones of piety and even sanctimony. This will not do, since the word shares its roots with ordinary words such as “healthy” and “whole”. And in banishing it, we mightily diminish the quality of our lives.

One of the great stories that can restore this word to its proper place, its place at the centre of our lives, is *The Bhagavad Gita*, and that which follows is an attempt to present some aspects of that story that tell us how “holy work” – or, as the *Gita* has it, True Action – needs must be part of all that we do every day and, most especially, in the doing of small things.¹

At the core of the teaching of the *Gita* is the notion of vocation or *svadharma*, that is the way of life that is the true expression of our nature. This concept is the very foundation upon which True Action must be based – knowing (and indeed accepting) what it is that we must do and not being distracted by that which others might wish of us if this proves to be contrary to our true purpose. For “every individual has his own distinct *dharma*”² or being and “one’s *dharma* consists in following one’s true vocation”.³ This vocation cannot be thrust aside. It is inescapable and we are born to fulfil it. Indeed, to disown one’s *svadharma* is to disown oneself.

This vocation can only be understood properly in the light of two prior principles which together provide the ground, as it were, upon which it is founded. They are: that the body is mortal and transient; and that the spirit is deathless and invisible. Only with such an understanding, and with a pure heart and mind, are we able to see clearly the character and quality of our vocation. It is this that leads us towards a proper understanding of the art of action itself, that which is called *karma-yoga* – that which I would call “holy work”.

Most importantly, this work can only be undertaken by daily practice. Indeed, Krishna makes it clear to Arjuna that he has no option but to dwell in the everyday, in the world of action. To muse and to do nothing is not an option. The question is not “Shall I act?” but “How shall I act?”. And it is in response to this question that the Lord Krishna begins his teaching. Indeed, it is said that the

¹ All that follows is based upon two texts: *The Bhagavad Gita*, Penguin Classics, 1962, translation by Juan Mascaró and Vinoba’s, *Talks on the Gita* published by Sarva Seva Sangh Prakashan, 14th Edition, November 2000.

² Op cit, Vinoba, 6.

³ Ibid, 7.

particular contribution of the *Gita* within the Upanishads is to teach the art of action, to teach *karma-yoga*.

From the outset it is made clear that for action to become true it must express certain qualities. Firstly, it must be guided by mindfulness and purity of feeling. Secondly, it must be selfless: “The great thing in karma-yoga is giving up the fruits of one’s action”.⁴ And, thirdly, our actions must be “moistened with love”.⁵ For example:

If the karma-yogi is a farmer, he will till the land, considering it his *svadharma*. His stomach will, of course be filled; but he does not work for filling his stomach. He looks upon food as a means by which he keeps his body fit for the task of tilling the land. The end is *svadharma* and food is the means. But to the farmer who is not a *karma-yogi*, filling his stomach is the end, and his *svadharma*, farming, is the means. The two attitudes are thus the reverse to each other.⁶

For it is in this way that the action of the *karma-yogi* is united with all creation:

If we will not eat without first watering the *tulasi* plant, we create, by this resolve, a bond of love between ourselves and the vegetable kingdom. How can I eat, while leaving the *tulasi* hungry?⁷

Learning in this way to identify ourselves with animals and plants, we attain oneness with the whole universe and thereby purify our action. For in this way, *karma-yoga* becomes a form of prayer. And thus our lives flow naturally.

The way of True Action therefore requires a life that finds a place for prayer, worship and ritual. For such actions deepen and “moisten” our way of life:

There is a proverb among farmers – “Sow deep, but sow moist.” It is not enough to sow deep; there must be moisture in the soil too.⁸

So whilst the action must be deep, that is well cultivated, it should also be moist with the love of God, that is with a sense of dedication.

The *karma-yogi*’s actions are sown deep and surrendered to God.⁹

⁴ Ibid, 24.

⁵ Ibid, 25.

⁶ Ibid, 27.

⁷ Ibid, 28.

⁸ Ibid, 31

⁹ Ibid.

We have so far discussed the art of desireless action, achieved in part by following the true expression of one's nature, one's vocation or *svadharma*. However, the pursuit of one's vocation is not enough for even such a pursuit can be full of desire. Desirelessness is a quality of the mind and for this one requires purity of mind, or *vikarma*:

...in order to achieve freedom from desire through the practice of *svadharma*, something more is necessary – victory over...craving and anger. As long as the mind is not as pure and peaceful as the waters of the Ganga, desirelessness will not come to us. These actions performed to purify the mind, the Gita calls “*vikarma*”.¹⁰

And so it is that action plus purity of mind lead to *akarma* or True Action:

When *vikarma*, the action of the mind and heart, enters into *karma*, the outward action, desirelessness grows within us, little by little. As the body and the mind are separate, each has its own means of growth. When they are in harmony the goal is within reach.¹¹

Without purity of mind and heart, the potency of vocation remains latent. The soil remains dry and barren. But when *karma* is moistened by *vikarma*, True Action arises.

However, for many of us it is rather difficult to see our vocation clearly since there are always obstacles that get in the way: the distractions of “busyness”; the insistent demands of those that want us to be other than we truly are; the insecurities and fears that plague our innermost thoughts. But the teaching is clear: action (or holy work) is an art that can only be truly undertaken with love, humility and courage. And as the story unfolds, we begin to discover how this might be attained – especially through meditation, devotion, and constancy.¹²

And in relation to what we have learnt about our vocation and our quest for holy work, it is interesting now to note that the characteristics of the first of these, the way of meditation, include establishing order and discipline into our lives, accepting the need to set bounds and developing a balanced outlook.¹³ In this, we are shown the path of devotion or *bhakti*, where we begin to see that whilst we need to become detached from the fruits of our actions we are, at the same time, to surrender all that we do to the Lord.

¹⁰ Ibid, 34.

¹¹ Ibid, 35.

¹² Op cit, Mascaró's *Gita*, Chapters 6, 7 and 8.

¹³ Op cit, Vinoba, 63.

Gradually, we are led along this path until we begin to enter into the heart of the *Gita*. And lest we should suppose that this is all beginning to seem impossibly difficult, we discover¹⁴ to our delight that this is not so, that ordinary and everyday work of service can be, is to be, undertaken as a sacrifice; that this is “the royal road”¹⁵ of *raja-yoga*. In all of this, in what is, indeed, holy work, we surrender to the Lord the fruit of our action however small:

He who offers to me with devotion only a leaf, or a flower, or a fruit, or even a little water, this I accept from the yearning soul, because with a pure heart it was offered with love.

Whatever you do, or eat, or give, or offer in adoration, let it be an offering to me; and whatever you suffer, suffer it for me.¹⁶

Thus speaks the Lord Krishna.

In this way of devotion, we are being taken deeper and deeper into the teachings. So far we have been concerned with seeing our own actions more clearly and seeing how these actions may be related to, or rather dedicated to, God. Now we turn to face towards the Divine. How shall we see God?

In this next part of the story,¹⁷ we find that God is to be found all around us – and not just in the big things but in the small things as well.¹⁸ The language is so beautiful that I am tempted to quote it at length, but perhaps the following will give a taste:

I am the Way, and the Master who watches in silence; thy friend and thy shelter and thy abode of peace. I am the beginning the middle and the end of all things: their seed of Eternity, their Treasure supreme.¹⁹

And know, Arjuna, that I am the seed of all things that are; and that no being that moves or moves not can ever be without me.

There is no end to my divine greatness, Arjuna. What I have spoken here to thee shows only a small part of my infinity.

¹⁴ Ibid, Chapter IX.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Op cit Mascaró's *Gita*, 9.26 and 27.

¹⁷ Ibid, Chapters 9 and 10.

¹⁸ Op cit Vinoba, 107 et seq.

¹⁹ Op cit Mascaró's *Gita*, 9.26.

Know that whatever is beautiful and good, whatever has glory and power is only a portion of my own radiance.

But of what help is it to thee to know this diversity? Know that with one single fraction of my Being I pervade and support the Universe, and know that I AM.²⁰

Vinoba says that if the Lord were to stand before us in all his glory and in “the fullness of His power”²¹ we would be overcome and overwhelmed. And so it is that we are offered the possibility of seeing Him in those things that are close to us and which we can understand and bear – in our friends and in those that are dear to us, in plants and in animals, in birdsong and the sound of summer’s breeze, in the rivers and mountains, in the rise and fall of the tide and the pebbled beach.

And now as we move further into the second half of the Gita we come to see that the pathway along which we are being led is, of course, the pathway of Love:

Only by love can men see me, and know me, and come unto me.

He who works for me, who loves me, whose End Supreme I am, free from attachment to all things, and with love for all creation, he in truth comes unto me.²²

To summarise the journey so far then: in our quest to understand the holy life of work we have come to see that in the expression of our own vocation our actions can become the gift of devotion; and in this, we have turned our face towards God to find Him in all that is around us however great or small. We have discovered that, with purity of mind and heart, the devoted life can be found in the everyday, and that through meditation, constancy and, above all else, love, we can become united with the Divine.

In all of this, Vinoba encourages us to look for God first in the close at hand:

If I am not able to recognise wheat when I am shown a handful of it of what use is it to put before me a sackful? If I do not recognise Him in the little models before me, how can I recognise Him in all his vastness? ... To understand the small form is to understand the big.

²⁰ Ibid, 10.39-42.

²¹ Op cit Vinoba, 108.

²² Op cit Mascaró’s *Gita*, 11.54 and 11.55.

Hence I have no desire that the Lord should show me His cosmic form.²³

And Arjuna says:

When I see thy gentle human face, Krishna, I return to my own nature, and my heart has peace.²⁴

And in this there is one matter that is of interest and, in particular, is a challenge to a Quaker brought up on simplicity and an absence of any form of imagery. For Vinoba makes a compelling case for the importance of images in the practice of devotion. Talking of this, he says:

When we see a circle or a sphere we are filled with joy, for there is an order, a shapeliness in it. This shapeliness is a divine quality. The Lord's creation is beautiful in all its parts and relations. There is perfect harmony in it. The sphere is an image of the shapeliness of the Lord. But even so is the twisted tree in the undergrowth of the forest. There is in it the freedom of the Lord. The tree knows no bondage. Who can bind the Lord? The Lord who is beyond all bonds is in that contorted, unshapely tree. A tall straight column reminds us of the Lord. In the highly wrought ornamented pillar we see the Lord who has painted the sky with stars. In a well-trimmed garden we see the restraint of the Lord and in the primeval forest we see his grandeur and freedom. In both we find joy. Are we then mad? No, there is joy in both, because there is in each a quality of the Lord...²⁵

It is because the Lord is present in every object through a distinct quality, that we find joy in it, we feel at one with it. ... Why do we feel joy? We are somehow related to it, and hence the joy. ... To strengthen this kinship is to increase joy. There is no other means for joy. Begin to establish the link of love everywhere, and then watch the miracles happen. You will see then in every grain and drop the Lord who pervades the boundless universe. When we have the power to see this, what else do we need? For this, however, it is essential to discipline and train the senses. When the desire for enjoyment goes and the holy outlook of love is gained, then we shall see God alone in all objects.²⁶ (my emphases)

²³ Op cit Vinoba, 122.

²⁴ Op cit Mascaró's *Gita*, 11.51.

²⁵ Op cit Vinoba, 123.

²⁶ Ibid, 123-4.

It is, of course, this “holy outlook of love”, practiced in small things and every day, that is the root of “holy work”.

Incidentally, on the matter of devotion, we are shown two forms. It would seem that the first form of devotion, *saguna*, comes primarily from a faithful and loving heart whereas the second, *nirguna*, is more head-centred, coming from the understanding that arises from a refined and thoughtful mind. The first form is said to be easier than the second, since in *saguna*, we go to the Lord with a loving and humble heart; we rely less upon ourselves than upon Him. Indeed, Krishna says:

Those who set their hearts on me and ever in love worship me, and who have unshakeable faith, these I hold as the best Yogis.

And yet we are taught that there is a place for the second form of devotion, *nirguna*. For without it we may lack the discipline gained from mindfulness, from understanding and knowledge. Without this, the devotion of love may overrun its proper bounds. Likewise, to be complete, the devotion of knowledge requires the cleansing waters of love.²⁷ Thus, the Lord Krishna says to Arjuna:

Set thy heart on me alone, and give to me thy understanding: thou shalt in truth live in me hereafter.

But if thou art unable to rest thy mind on me, then seek to reach me by the practice of Yoga concentration.

If thou art not able to practise concentration, consecrate all thy work to me. By merely doing actions in my service thou shalt attain perfection.

And if even this thou art not able to do, then take refuge in devotion to me and surrender to me the fruit of all thy work – with the selfless devotion of a humble heart.

For concentration is better than mere practice, and meditation is better than concentration; but higher than meditation is surrender in love of the fruit of one’s actions, for on surrender follows peace.²⁸

²⁷ Ibid, 133-136.

²⁸ Op cit Mascaró’s *Gita*, 12.9-12.

For although *nirguna* is all knowledge, *saguna* is full of love and of feeling. “There is the moisture of the heart in it...”²⁹ And in the end *saguna* and *nirguna* become one.:

Though the stream of *bhakti* springs from *saguna*, it reaches *nirguna* in the end.³⁰

And:

The truth of the matter is that *saguna* and *nirguna* complete each other.³¹

In the final chapters of the *Gita*, we reach the fulfilment of all the teachings of the *Gita*, teachings that are regarded as “the essence of the Veda”.³² We have already been introduced to action, to knowledge and to devotion. Here, and at last, we find that as the Lord is in all that is, the way of devotion is not different from the way of knowledge and action. Within the realm of the Spirit Supreme, they come together in divine service. Devotion, action and knowledge “together make a single form [and] from it springs naturally, wonderful service full of love and full of knowledge”.³³ This is what I am calling “holy work”. This is *purushottama-yoga*, “the distilled essence of the infinite Vedas”:³⁴

In the end, no explanation of mine can match the words of the *Gita* itself. Thus, at this high point, Lord Krishna speaks to Arjuna:

And I am in the heart of all. With me come memory and wisdom, and without me they depart. I am the knower and the knowledge of the Vedas, and the creator of their end, the Vedanta.

There are two spirits in this universe, the perishable and the imperishable. The perishable is all things in creation. The imperishable is that which moves not.

But the highest spirit is another: it is called the Spirit Supreme. He is the God of Eternity who pervading all sustains all.

²⁹ Op cit Vinoba, 133.

³⁰ Ibid, 141.

³¹ Ibid, 142.

³² Ibid, 175.

³³ Ibid, 186.

³⁴ Ibid.

Because I am beyond the perishable, and even beyond the imperishable, in this world and in the Vedas I am known as the Spirit Supreme.

He who with a clear vision sees me as the Spirit Supreme he knows all there is to be known, and he adores me with all his soul.

I have revealed to thee the most secret doctrine, Arjuna. He who sees it has seen the light, and his task in this world is done.³⁵

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As the teaching of the *Gita* is brought to a conclusion, all the pieces of the jigsaw puzzle come together and the complete picture can be seen. Arjuna asks of the Lord Krishna:

Speak to me, Krishna, of the essence of renunciation, and of the essence of surrender.³⁶

In reply, Krishna returns to the central notion of vocation or *svadharma*. If you like, this is our destiny, being who we truly are and who we are truly meant to be, and living our lives as fully as we can in the service of the Lord. We know now that such service requires the “art of action”, *karma-yoga*, that we must bring to our lives the cleansing waters of a pure heart and a pure mind, *vikarma*, and that we must learn, with love, to surrender the fruits of our actions and sacrifice them to the Lord. We have learnt that this requires discipline, that we must overcome inertia by work and distracted action by mindfulness. But perhaps most of all we have learnt that all of this requires *bhakti*, the devotion of a humble and loving heart and a clear mind. Ironically perhaps, in the end, there is only the everyday action of the devoted and loving servant – holy work. In the end, this is all that we need to fulfil our vocation.

In Vinoba’s translation, Krishna says:

Arjuna, give up your will, your effort; give up everything, and come and take refuge in me.³⁷

And in Mascaró’s translation, it is said:

³⁵ Op cit Mascaró’s *Gita*, 15.15-20.

³⁶ Ibid, 18.1.

³⁷ Op cit Vinoba, 232.

Give thy mind to me, and give me thy heart, and thy sacrifice, and thy adoration. This is my Word of promise: thou shalt in truth come to me, for thou art dear to me.

Leave all things behind, and come to me for thy salvation. I will make thee free from the bondage of sins. Fear no more.³⁸

³⁸ Op cit Mascaró's *Gita*, 18.64-66.