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## UNIVERSAL IMPERATIVES OF THE BHAGAVAD-GITA

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THE Bhagavad-Gita is one of the most popular scriptures known to man. It has been translated into almost all the literary languages of the world. The immense popularity of this ancient scripture in the modern world is indeed a wonder.

Two reasons may be pointed out to explain the Gita's popularity. First, Sri Krishna, who is worshiped by millions of Hindus as God incarnate, was himself the teacher of this gospel. In a certain place Sri Krishna himself said: "The Gita is my heart, Arjuna—my very essence." In other words, the Gita contains the essence of divine wisdom. Second, the Gita is a truly universal gospel. It is an ancient scripture; but its fundamental teachings, being eternal and universal, have perfect relevancy for our times, and for our lives—individually, personally.

Anyone daily practicing a few teachings of the Gita will experience beneficial effects. He will be a better human being every succeeding day. He will overcome his difficulties more easily than others. He will discover an unending source of inspiration for his whole life. He will grow in strength, wisdom, inner stability, in one word—spirituality.

IN EVERY great scripture of the world there are three types of teachings. First, there are narrations of eternal truths, universally applicable, such as: "Truth alone triumphs, not falsehood." "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." A second type of teaching concerns the *ought*—what should be done and what should not be done, such as: "Whatever you give to others, give with love and reverence. Do not offer gifts with disdain in your heart. Gifts must be given in abundance, with joy, humility and compassion." In the third type of teachings there are the direct imperatives from the Lord: "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you." Equally,

Give me your whole heart,  
 Love and adore me,  
 Worship me always,  
 Bow to me only,  
 And you shall find me:

In the Bhagavad-Gita—which is one of the most comprehensive of all world scriptures—are to be found these three types of teachings. But of all the teachings in the Gita, the most important, significant, and helpful are those teachings of the Lord through which, with all his authority, wisdom, omniscience, and understanding, he directly commands us to do, or to refrain from doing, certain things. In such teachings the Lord speaks in powerful imperatives, sweeping aside all chance for argumentation on the part of the hearer. As such, the Lord uses imperatives not as a dictator, trying to exert his will, but as an omniscient benefactor, asking faltering man to do or not to do certain things, in order to help him toward his spiritual evolution and fulfillment.

Of the seven hundred verses in the Gita, in more than

sixty the Lord speaks in the imperative mood. Among those sixty-odd verses, in twenty-four the imperative mood is used to convey the Lord's direct commandments. In the remaining the imperative is used with conversational casualness, such as: "Listen, O Arjuna"; or "Know this for certain."

We intend here to study these twenty-four imperatives and understand their universal applicability in our lives.

THE FIRST imperative of Sri Krishna in the Gita occurs in the third verse of the second chapter:

**Do not yield to unmanliness, O Son of Pritha. It does not become you. Shake off this base faintheartedness and arise, O Scorcher of Foes. (II, 3)**

This verse is charged with enormous redeeming power. Proper understanding of it can restore life to a person half-dead, and clarity to a man most deeply confused.

Under what circumstances did Sri Krishna thunder this rebuke to Arjuna? It came about in this way. Two related Indian royal families had declared war on each other. By deceitful means the Kauravas drove out the Pandavas from their lawfully inherited share of the kingdom. Friends and relatives sought a reasonable and amicable settlement. Sri Krishna, who was kin to both families, tried his best to bring about an honorable settlement. The Pandavas were reluctant to go to war. But when Duryodhana, the spokesman for the Kauravas, declared that not even that much of land as could stand on the point of a needle would be given to the Pandavas, war became the only means for settling the dispute.

In response to an appeal from each of the parties, all the rulers and fighting men of India allied themselves to one

or the other of the parties. Krishna gave his army to the Kauravas and himself became a non-fighting ally of the Pandavas. He undertook to drive the chariot of Arjuna, the great general of the Pandava army.

It should be remembered that Krishna was not an ordinary human being, but an avatar—an incarnation of God—playing his part on the world stage, at a critical time in Indian history.

On the eve of battle Arjuna went to view the two armies poised for fighting. He almost fainted at the prospect of relatives and friends killing each other. Shaken and nervous, Arjuna told Krishna that he could see no good coming out of the war. It would only multiply sin and suffering. Indeed, he would rather die at the enemy's hands than kill. Arjuna gave cogent arguments in regard to the evils that would be multiplied by the conflict.

Arjuna's plea against war no doubt contained some logic. But, clearly, he was confused as far as the principles of righteous conduct under a given set of circumstances were concerned. In a declared war, coming about after all attempts at honorable, amicable settlement have failed, the commander of an army has no business to be squeamish or faint-hearted. He has to fight and not philosophize. He has to shoot and not sob. Therefore Sri Krishna administered shock treatment to Arjuna with that rebuke. And it worked as nothing else would have.

Sheer weakness often masquerades as piety and deludes a man. Whatever he does under that delusion is wrong; and can produce evil results. Sri Krishna, therefore, shattered Arjuna's delusion with a sudden blow. And then he proceeded to teach him in regard to higher truths and their place in life for the fulfillment of life's high destiny.

Undoubtedly this first great imperative of the Gita had

a tremendous effect on Arjuna's life, as well as on the outcome of the Kurukshetra war, and on Indian civilization itself. More important, however, is the fact that this imperative has a very crucial and far-reaching significance for every single person in the world.

The Gita is called the *moksha-shastra*, or the scripture which shows you the way to attain liberation. But the Gita does not propose to take you out of the context of your own life in order to make you wise and free. It proposes to inform and transform your life in all its details without doing any violence to the roots of your own being. The Gita teaches you to meet every situation of your life—not someone else's life—in a way which will be conducive to *your* spiritual progress. This "you" is anybody, anywhere in the world, no matter what religion he professes or whether he professes any religion at all.

It is significant that the Gita was taught in a battlefield, for it is in the greatest crises that the ministrations of the highest wisdom are most urgently called for. This, however, is not always very well understood. If we act in a crisis in a blind manner, we are sure to get battered and shattered. It is not the physical suffering alone that will be our lot under such circumstances. We shall, so to say, also damage our soul. Whether you like it or not, life is indeed a battlefield. You have to wrest everything out of it by fighting.

Generally speaking, in life we may have two aspirations: *abhyudaya*, or worldly prosperity; and *nishreyasa*, or spiritual illumination. To attain worldly prosperity we have to fight with external nature and compete with our fellow human beings. To attain spiritual illumination we have to fight our inner nature, our lower propensities, and conquer them.

In any case, you are in a battlefield. You cannot escape this fact. You are required to fight bravely and withal dexter-

ously, if you intend to achieve your chosen ends. One who refuses to fight will not make any mark in life. For those who have not yet spiritually transcended the relativity of good and evil, fighting in the right manner with clean motive for a good cause is always good. Crisis after crisis, trial after tribulation, will come. You will have to stand firm and hold your ground in righteousness, before you can fight well and become victorious.

Those who get defeated in life are mostly victims of their own cherished and nourished weaknesses, doubts, indecisions, and cowardices. And these weaknesses have nowhere any root in the truth of your being. Therefore, the Lord's first imperative is directed towards strengthening man from within. Any help that a person is given without strengthening him from within is of little use, spiritually speaking. And after a person has been strengthened from within, it does not matter if no other help is given.

We will need to understand these truths about life. If you merely want to survive somehow in any situation of life, you will not survive at all. To be able even to survive, you must aspire to live. If you want just somehow to live, you will not live at all. To be able even to live, you must aspire to conquer. If you want just to conquer, you will not conquer at all. To conquer for all time you must aspire for that victory, which defeats none, but enlivens, ennobles, and enlightens everybody. And this can be done only by immolating the self totally for the happiness of the many, for the welfare of the many, in the manner of a Buddha, a Christ, or a Ramakrishna. In every sphere of life this is the law.

Do not curse yourself, or think lightly of yourself, for the Atman is all that you are. "That thou art." Be firm in this conviction. Throw out from your mind all ideas to the contrary. Do not curse the world, for it is God's. God is

here and now. God is in everything. God is everything. We may not have yet known it experientially. But nothing is truer than this. After realizing this fact, the sage of the Mundaka Upanishad exclaimed: "Yea, this is the best of the worlds; this is the best of the worlds." Indeed it is.

Thank the Lord, O moping man, O weeping man,  
Thank the Lord, O groping man, O thankless man,  
That the world is not other than what it is!  
Here Karma works: you can do and undo.  
Here mettle tells; good is valued.  
Here austerities bear fruit.  
Self-application is rewarded.  
Sincerity is understood, murder known.  
Here seeds sprout, flowers blossom, fruits ripen;  
You cannot escape here blessings of virtue and burnings of sin.  
Here the wheel comes full circle, without stopping anywhere.  
Here oppressor's head someday rolls on the ground.  
Deferred justice is referred to and applied.  
Here truth always triumphs, never falsehood.  
Here hatred never succeeds, love never fails.  
Here if you bring light darkness everywhere disappears.  
Here there is no dogmatism except in minds of perverted men.  
Here no doubt a sword-thrust brings forth flowing gush  
of warm red blood.  
Again, here wounds are healed,  
Tears are wiped, prayers are heard:  
Here, in God's world, you can die and be reborn.  
Here God is seen. Aye, God is verily seen!  
Here you can become liberated while living in this body.  
Where could you find, O foolish man, a better world than  
this world of cause and effect, of sowing and harvesting?  
Moreover, of grace?

Whom can you truly blame in this world, if you would at all, except yourself? Are you really failing, being defeated? Then know for certain it is not because the world is wicked,

*Sri Rama Krishna Vivekananda Seva Sadhana*  
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but because you are weak. And you are weak not because you are really weak, but because you have not cared to tap and use your neglected strength.

Are you in a crisis? Are you in a difficult situation? Then the first thing for you to do is to hold on with all your might to this teaching of Sri Krishna: "Yield not to unmanliness." In these words of the Lord there is power to rejuvenate the whole world.

Why should you not yield to unmanliness? Simply because: It just does not become you. It is beneath your dignity—you, the Atman. It is beneath your dignity, because within you is *all* strength! You are the Atman, which fire cannot burn, sword cannot pierce, air cannot dry, water cannot drown: you are the immortal spirit, over whom even all-destroying death has no power. Nothing but this in you makes sense. Above all this is something we require to hear.

Weakness is that fictitious state of your being, is that self-falsification, which you find yourself to have when you become oblivious to your inalienable high connection with God; or when you forget that you are not just this much flesh and bone, but the Atman.

Therefore, in his first imperative, Sri Krishna builds the foundation, without which you can do nothing worthwhile in life, but on which you can build any superstructure.

First banish all weakness from within you. Swami Vivekananda says: "Know that all sins and all evil can be summed up in that one word—weakness. It is weakness that is motive power in all evil-doing." Therefore banish all weakness. Be a man. Be a woman, heart-whole, full stature. Then invade life and make out of it whatever you choose.

In the second line of the verse, the Lord says: "Shake off this faint-heartedness and arise, O Scorcher of Foes." When it does not become you to yield to weakness, what

should you do? You have only to shake it off as you would a creeping snake from your body. Fill your inside with courage and faith, and arise with firm determination to face up to whatever life may bring you. Face hard facts with harder determination. Remember, there is nothing in this universe more powerful than the spirit of man. Assert your might. Blast your problems with the power of your character, born of Atman-awareness. It is not external oppositions, problems, or temptations that destroy a person. But it is the subversion from within which functions in devious forms of rationalized, sanctified, and ritualized weakness.

No weakness of yours, however, can be afforded any moral sanction whatever. Weakness has nothing moral about it. It is the matrix of all immorality in the world. It has, in fact, no roots in you. It is just none of your business to be weak. You may have any number of faults. You may have committed any number of sins. Never mind. Only do not sin anymore. Strength is forever your birthright, for the Divine Mother is not your stepmother, but your very own mother, as Sri Ramakrishna says.

Being fed by negative thoughts all the time, we have either become weak or wicked. Let us throw them off, as the Lord says, and arise out of somnambulism, and awake out of stupor. Dehypnotize yourself. It is indeed very important to have shaken off unmanliness, given up faint-heartedness, and arisen.

BUT NOW, practically speaking, after awakening what are you going to do with yourself? This awakened self will now have to be trained in a special way, for the fulfillment of your great destiny. In his subsequent imperatives Sri Krishna clearly points out how this is to be done. He says:

**That by which all this is pervaded, that know for certain to be indestructible. None can cause destruction of what is Immutable. (II, 17)**

This is the beginning of the training of the awakened self. The awakened self must stay aware of its imperishability.

When you are aware, even theoretically, that you are the indestructible spirit, you function in one way. Should you consider yourself otherwise, you function in a different way. You are either a lion or a jackal. In fact, without being aware of one's imperishability, one can never have a spiritually sound and rewarding perspective of life. All other views of life fall short of the highest truth about yourself; hence are unsound.

With this right perspective born of your awareness of the imperishability of your soul, what are you expected to do? The Lord says:

**Being established in yoga, perform your actions, casting off attachment and remaining even-minded both in success and failure. This evenness is called yoga. (II, 48)**

To the imperishable that you essentially are, success cannot add anything; for the same reason, failure cannot take away anything from you. When you stay aware of this fact, the mind will develop a propensity for evenness, which is the secret of yoga. Without even-mindedness there cannot be any true spirituality. Mere action is inferior to action performed with evenness of mind.

Hence, proceeding, the Lord says:

**Seek refuge in this evenness. (II, 49)**

In other words, practice this evenness of mind incessantly, in order to be well grounded in this fundamental discipline.

What will you attain by being grounded in this discipline? Being grounded in evenness of mind, you will develop the power to cast off the binding effect of karmas, good and bad.

This skill in action is also called yoga, which is productive of liberating power and ineffable bliss. Hence the Lord says in the next imperative:

**Therefore strive for this yoga. (II, 50)**

Now, naturally the question arises, when yoga depends on evenness of mind, why not give up all work, for it is work which generates all kinds of huff and puff, tensions, and difficulties in human relations?

Oh no, says the Lord, you just cannot do that. For even the bare maintenance of your body will not be possible if you remain inactive. The Lord, therefore, says:

**Do your allotted action. (III, 8)**

Whatever action you have come to have on hand by righteous means at any stage of life—that is your allotted action. Through doing that alone, with evenness of mind, you are bound to grow spiritually.

True, work can create bondage. Again, through work alone we have to find our salvation. The world, says Sri Krishna, becomes bound by action unless the action is done “for the sake of the sacrifice”; in other words, unless it is done as an offering unto the Lord.

The strategy is to get God somehow involved with everything we think or do.

Suppose you have a flashlight tied on your forehead. Then you may enter into a dark cave. You may turn in different directions, but you cannot help seeing all things before you lighted. With God as the guiding spirit, whatever we may think or do can only bring us liberation.

So says Sri Krishna in the next imperative:

**Therefore, give up attachment, and do your work for the sake of the Lord. (III, 9)**

That is very well said and easily said, too. We would like to do it. But what do we do, then, with our household work, office work—work that is somehow “our work”—in the kitchen, in the garden, in the workshop, in clinics, in firms, in studios?

This brings us to one of Sri Krishna’s most helpful teachings. The Lord shows us the skill and technique of transforming every work—“our work”—into a spiritually liberating instrument. His next imperative is:

**Always do without attachment the work you have to do; for a man who does his work without attachment attains the Supreme. (III, 19)**

This is, however, more easily said than done, this working without attachment. All sorts of questions and doubts arise in our mind. Yet we know that this is a magnificent precept.

No one knows our difficulties in this matter better than Sri Krishna. So he further instructs us and teaches us the technique of such action:

**Surrendering all actions to the Lord, with mind centered on the Self, getting rid of hope and selfishness, fight—free from mental fever. (III, 30)**

Yes, we want to. But we cannot. Why can't we fight without mental fever? Who prevents us from doing this? Alas! No one from outside. It is our uncontrolled senses that cloud our vision and subvert our will. We know what is right, but we cannot do it; we know what is wrong, but we cannot desist from doing it.

So SAYS Sri Krishna in his following imperative, in the most understandable way:

**Therefore, at the outset, control the senses, and slay this foul destroyer of knowledge and liberation. (III, 41)**

Further:

**Destroy this enemy who comes in the guise of desire and is hard to overcome. (III, 43)**

Now, do not be frightened at the prospect of having to do something impossible. You are not being asked to blaze a new path with all its hazards. People in ancient times, the seekers of liberation like you, knew this and worked like this. It is the path which has been tried and found helpful.

So the Lord says persuasively:

**Therefore, do your work in the manner the ancients did in olden times. (IV, 15)**

All those doubts and other obstacles can be surmounted only by firm resolution to become a yogi. It is not that a particular type of person only has to and can become a yogi. Every person who does not want to stay a fool of the world,

a creature of maya or spiritual ignorance, must aim at becoming a yogi. Through whatever he does in life, he should seek union with the Supreme Spirit.

The yogi is greater than men of austerities, greater than men of knowledge, greater than men of action. So the Lord insists:

**Therefore, become a yogi, O Arjuna. (VI, 46)**

Do not say: "O, I am a householder. I cannot become a yogi." Arjuna was a householder. Sri Krishna asked him to become a yogi. But how do you become a yogi? Where do you have to go to become a yogi? You have not to go anywhere. In your own apartment you can become a yogi. It is so easy! And so great indeed is the challenge.

Sri Krishna teaches the easiest way of becoming a yogi, and in effect, of conquering the battle of life. He says:

**Therefore, at all times remember me and fight. (VIII, 7)**

What is yoga in practice? Sri Ramakrishna says it is linking or uniting the mind with God, somehow or anyhow. Life is a battlefield. Here you must fight to win. If, however, you fight with mental fever, then you are sure to lose the battle, for that will make you forget God. To forget God is to be reduced to dust and straw, mud and filth. How can mere dust and straw win against all the forces of life? Christ very significantly said: "Without me ye can do nothing."

The battle of life will be won only if you constantly remember God and fight. When you remember God and fight, you are then armed with God's wisdom and power. You then become invincible. No power on earth can then defeat you.

THE SNAG, however, comes here. How to remember God constantly?

Well, what makes you forget God? Is it not your work or your various other preoccupations? But suppose you do your work, every bit of it, for the sake of God alone, then how can you forget him?

So comes the Lord's most strategic imperative:

**Whatever you do, whatever you eat, whatever you offer in sacrifice, whatever you give away, and whatever you practice in the form of austerities—do it all as an offering to God. (IX, 27)**

Here is the secret of remembering God constantly: to do everything as an offering to God.

Yet the wayward mind may ask obstinately: "How am I to do everything for God? Why should I?"

If you only know how tenderly the Lord watches over you, protects you at every step, you would not find it difficult to do everything for the Lord's sake. If you were convinced that God loves you—and that he is more loyal to you than you ever had the capacity of being to him, then, for sheer love's sake you would delight in doing everything for the Lord's sake.

Indeed, in order to assure us that God loves us, Sri Krishna anxiously makes it a point to say:

**Proclaim it boldly, O Son of Kunti, that my devotee never perishes. (IX, 31)**

There are various concepts of God. Some concepts place you on the run after a continually receding God. He is like a mirage in the desert. He is constantly the conqueror. And you are perpetually the fool.

Deal not with this indifferent, this ever-receding, God. Let him go his way. Go after the anxious God, the God of love. Go after the God who watches your steps as you move away and celebrates your return when you come back. Go after the manward-moving, anxious God.

This manward-moving God wants you to know that by loving him you can become indestructible. Almost impatient to insure your safety, Sri Krishna importunes:

**Having come unto this transitory, joyless world, worship me. (IX, 33)**

Moreover:

**Fix your mind on me, be devoted to me, sacrifice to me, bow down to me. (IX, 34)**

What a heart-rending agony of the Highest! God coming and begging for your love. Whoever understands this anguish of God—the poor, poor thing!

After giving himself away in a general way the Lord wants to be sure that he has reached you in a personal way too. So he says:

**Fix your mind on me alone, rest your thoughts on me alone, and in me alone you will live hereafter. Of this there is no doubt. (XII, 8)**

But could it not be that someone would be unable to pin his mind on God? Should he be left without grace because he is unable to lodge God in his heart?

This is unbearable to the anxious God, who is law, no doubt, but particularly is love. So even before being asked, the Lord says:

**If you are unable to fix your mind steadily on me, then seek to reach me by yoga of constant practice. (XII, 9)**

But could it not again be that some are unable even to do this yoga of constant practice? Will they be lost because they do not know how to keep their minds centered in God? Such a prospect is not bearable to the anxious Lord. So he exclaims:

**If you are incapable of constant practice, then devote yourself to my service. For, even by rendering service to me for my sake only, you will attain perfection. (XII, 10)**

Could it not be again that there is a poor pathetic fool somewhere like me who cannot do even this? What will happen to him? Will there be no grace for the hapless, nay the least?

With what tenderness, what unthinkable understanding the Lord comes to our level and says these soul-soothing words:

**If you are unable to do even this, then be self-controlled, surrender the fruit of all action, and take refuge in me. (XII, 11)**

The Lord has given us all that he could give by way of helping us to proceed step by step toward the fulfillment of our high destiny, which is union with the Supreme Spirit.

But then, but then, how many of us are capable of taking such ever-wakeful spiritual care of ourselves? After advancing two steps do we not next seem to fall back five, out of sheer inner exhaustion? Then are we going to be buried in ignominy under the debris of our futile spiritual efforts? Have we then no spiritual future?

The Lord in effect says: Who says you haven't? You have rather a more assured future.

To have finally known that, left to yourself, you can not, is to have at long last known that God alone can. That is resignation, when you have really known it. Do not then worry in the least.

In order to get us grounded in this state through life's functional process, the Lord had earlier exhorted:

**Arjuna, be an instrument in God's hand. (XI, 33)**

Allow God to course through your being. That is wisdom attained.

Then, concentrating all his compassion in one supreme imperative, the Lord opens the floodgate of his grace on all seekers for all time. He says:

**Abandon all formalities of religion and come to me alone for shelter. I shall deliver you from all sins. Do not grieve. (XVIII, 66)**

SUCH are the universal, and yet so personal, imperatives of the Bhagavad-Gita, the Lord's direct thrusts into our souls.

It would appear that it is not a case of our knocking and God's opening. The case really is of God's knocking and knocking, and perchance our opening. He has tried in ever so many ways down the ages. In this anxious and vibrant way, in this direct, appealing, and imploring way in the Gita he keeps on trying, keeps on crying, keeps on calling, "Come unto me!"

Should we not respond? Can we have the heart not to respond?