

From Self to Self- Positive: Exploring Positive Psychology in the Bhagavad Gita

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ABSTRACT

The paper proposes that spirituality forms basis of positive psychology. It pursues to elucidate the 'Notion of Self' as explained in the Bhagavad Gita; a dialogue between Lord Krishna and Arjuna in the battlefield of Kurukshetra. The message of the Bhagavad Gita exemplifies the theme of the paper- 'From what's wrong to what's strong'. The epic text teaches to identify with our real self, renounce the fruits of our actions, practice detachment, push out of the clutches of materialism among others. Therefore, positive psychology is a sure outcome if one takes to spirituality.

The first section discusses the importance of soul over body. The Self should be understood as soul (atman). The body is material whereas the soul is eternal. It is the eternal nature of soul to be knowledgeable, eternal and blissful. The entanglement in gratification of senses is the basis for all miseries in life. Understanding the distinction between the two is the commencement of our spiritual journey. The second section elucidates the Law of Karma. Karma means activity and Law of Karma regulates the reactions of those activities. The Bhagavad Gita gives remarkable insight about 'renunciation in action'. Faith in the law creates balance in one's life (equanimity of mind), and infuses optimism and hope. It protects from committing heinous sins and stirs positivity in thought and deed. The third section enumerates how spirituality and philanthropy are companions in the process of self-positivity. The paper concludes with reiterating the relation between spirituality and positive psychology, providing pragmatic insights. It's only when one knows the self that one can strengthen it.

Keywords: *Dialogue, self, spirituality, positive psychology*

Introduction

The aim of the present paper is to argue that spirituality forms the foundation of positive psychology. Spirituality is defined as the quality of being concerned with the human spirit or soul as opposed to material and physical possessions. It has been observed that humans are dissatisfied even after the fulfilment of their physical, psychological or emotional needs. Therefore, the fulfilment of spiritual needs is a must to live a happy and balanced life. Spirituality and self-positive can be

understood through the teachings of the Bhagavad Gita, which I argue is a treatise on positive psychology. The Bhagavad Gita exemplifies the central theme of the paper- 'From What's Wrong to What's Strong'. The moral idea connected with human life in all its personal, social or political aspects can be derived from the Bhagavad Gita. Any person in any walk of life, belonging to any sex, religion, or society can extract practical guidance from it. Mahatma Gandhi remarked, "*A true votary of the Gita does not know what disappointment*

is.” Spiritual development helps minimize stress and expands our horizon by helping us experience a subliminal happiness that neither the material riches nor the material relationships can yield. Also, it prepares to accept the inevitability of distress and motivates us to enhance those abilities which are likely to prove most helpful in the times of distress—patience, calm and composed attitude, good health and compassion. It mobilizes our inner strength to face adversity and strengthen a bond with fellow living beings. If we train ourselves according to the prescriptions of the scriptures then we will not be bewildered even in the most adverse situation that life can offer.

The present paper explains the necessary conditions required to cultivate positivity in life through identifying the nature of our real self, renouncing the fruits of action, practicing detachment and working for the welfare of the society. The first section of the paper discusses the ‘Notion of Self’ as explained in the Bhagavad Gita as a dialogue between Lord Krishna and Arjuna in the battlefield of Kurukshetra. Further, it deals with the importance of the Self over body. The Self should be understood as soul or spirit. The body is only a complex machine composed of non-animate matter, but the soul is eternal. Understanding the distinction between the two is the commencement of our spiritual lives. The paper will elucidate how realizing our true constitutional position fills positivity up till the brim.

The second section of the paper is on the ‘Law of Karma’. It preaches the science of renunciation *in* action, not renunciation *of* action. The faith in the law creates balance in one’s life and inflicts optimism. It protects one

from committing heinous sins. Thus, it stirs positivism in deeds as well as actions. This phenomenon is discussed at length in the paper.

The third section of the paper is on the aspect of philanthropy; portraying how spirituality and philanthropy are companions in the journey of life. I argue that one should give up all their possessions to the people who need it. Also, the paper explains the real essence of doing service to others as it involves greater happiness. The joy experienced beyond the clutches of sensual desires, in selfless service cannot be compared to anything else. The ecstasy descending from the spiritual stratum gives real satisfaction to the heart and fills it up with joy. To this end the paper serves as a pragmatic approach to gain optimism.

1: Notion of the Self: Can We Know It?

Ever pondered upon who you are, beyond the tags that the world couples with your name, nationality, designation, race, caste, creed, qualification, social status, financial status, etc.? Are you just a lump of matter which will decompose in the soil one day? Albert Gyorgy, Szent - a noble laureate espouses, *‘In my search for the secret of life, I ended up with atoms and electrons. Which have no life at all’* (SzentGyorgy, 1972, p. 5) This brings us to the question- If we are not this body, why do we associate with it in a way that it refrains us from all the positivity that life offers? In the Mahabharata, Arjuna also makes the same error when he hesitates to fight the battle against his kins. I argue that the fallacy of material civilization is that it equates contentment in our lives with merely the body that holds it. We believe that if our material life is comfortable, the taste of life will be better. Another question

ises the area or the kind of home you live in change the quality of your life? Statistics shows that in the last four years, the 200 richest people in the world have doubled their wealth, whereas 1.3 billion people are living in less than a dollar per day. Maya or illusion, which makes us believe on 'that which is not' impels us to believe that we are this body and material achievement is the truth of life, and in the process, fuels attachment to worldly pursuits and sensory pleasures. The body is subject to transformations; it takes birth from the mother's womb, remains for some time, grows, produces some effects, gradually dwindles, and at last vanishes into oblivion. I argue that the quality of life will only change when we take to spirituality and realize our real identity.

The Vedic scriptures reiterate that we are souls (spirits). We are completely different from our bodies, which are only highly complex machines. One who has knowledge of the same is never deluded. A votary of the scriptures will never be enmeshed with the distinction between the body and the soul. The Bhagavad Gita says, "For the soul there is neither birth nor death at any time. He has not come into being, does not come into being, and will not come into being. He is unborn, eternal, ever-lasting and primeval. He is not slain when the body is slain." (Prabhupada, 1983, B.G 2.20, p.91)

Whether one be a follower of scriptures or modern science, one cannot deny the existence of the soul in the body, and the science of the soul is explicitly described in the Bhagavad Gita. The whole process is to de-identify with that which you are not. Positivity will automatically troubleshoot everything else. Joy should be seen as the very basis of life as it is our eternal nature to be joyous. A layman can

understand that material body without soul is dead body, which cannot be revived by any means. A body without consciousness is a dead body. As soon as consciousness is removed from the body, the mouth will not speak, the eye will not see, and the ears will not hear. Each and every body is the embodiment of an individual soul, and its symptoms are clearly perceived. "Those who are seers of truth have concluded that of the non-existent (material body) there is no endurance and of the eternal (the soul) there is no change" (Prabhupada, 1983, B.G 2.16, p.86)

Atman means the self or the soul. It is above the senses, mind and intelligence. It can never be cut into pieces by any weapon, nor burned by fire, moistened by water, nor withered by wind. One who realizes this is a perfectly self-realized being. It is through the wired mechanism of physical body that we experience the world. The body emanates from the Panchbhuttas (Prithvi, Jal, Agni, Vayu, Aakash). The soul is different from the body, and cannot manifest by itself. The active principle, which animates the inner matter, is the soul or self. The material body affords us the facility to perform spirituality, which will free one from all miseries of the material world. To understand that matter is temporary whereas the spirit is eternal is true knowledge.

On the basis of the notion of self as expressed in the Bhagavad Gita, I argue that the misidentification of our real self prevents us from joy and positivity. The issues of terrorism or corruption and others concerning the world exist because of the misidentification of our real self. Widespread violent crime, rampant inflation or threats of nuclear wars are all by-products of the material civilization. Our real

self is covered with the particularities that the world assigns to us of an Indian, American, Hindu, Muslim, Black, White, Poor, Rich and others. These identifications give rise to negativity. We believe that the purpose of life is to act in the manner that will justify the tags attached. We are all aiming for happiness but we are looking for it in the wrong place i.e. the bodily pleasures. The moment we understand the distinction between the body and the soul and realize our constitutional position, all confusions would dissolve. The nature of the soul is explained as *sat-chit-ananda-vigraha*—the embodiment of knowledge, bliss, and eternity. Bodily pleasures are flickering and intoxicating. We ought to realize that enmeshing ourselves in gratification of the senses is the root cause of all our problems. All attempts to solve an issue, personal or public will be futile until we reach the root cause of all our problems. Giving importance to body over soul is what has made the human civilization an animalistic one. Spiritual inferences provide evidence that attainment of transcendental realization is of immense importance to infuse positivity in life. Also, if someone takes to spirituality, he will be encouraged to give up sinful activities and perform pious activities, which will surely lead to positivism. Thus, as long as we are ignorant of our spiritual selves, we will suffer. But if we understand our constitutional position, we will not be bewildered by mental agony, disease or pain. The outlook should be, ‘to be in the world, but not of it’. This detachment should not be confused with inactivity. In order to attain the higher and transcendental taste, a true seeker of the self gives up on the lower pleasures the body provides. Human beings who focus on real happiness and positivity become true

spiritual seekers. In the sea, there is turbulence only on the surface; deep inside, there is tranquility. Similarly, discomfort exists only on the bodily platform; the soul is free from all bondages.

2: Law of Karma: There are no accidents!

In our day-to-day world we seldom encounter questions like, ‘why do bad things happen to good people?’ ‘Why does that one person out of ten thousand people on the road meet with an accident?’ The Bhagavad Gita teaches us that everything in the universe is happening according to the cosmic law— the law of karma. ‘Karma’ means ‘activity’ and the law of karma regulates the reaction of our activities. The Bhagavad Gita gives practical insights on this subject. The law of karma is impartial and inexorable; it acts on all living entities indiscriminately. One can commit crime and escape the police but one cannot escape the law that underlines all realities. Nature, from microscopic to macroscopic layers obeys laws. Science itself is a study and appreciation of such laws. Christian theology defines Karma as ‘*As ye sow so ye shall reap*’. The Newtonian physics elucidates the philosophy in the third law of motion— ‘*to every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction*’. Karma yoga teaches you to give up the notion that ‘I am the doer’ and instead one must perform duty for duty’s sake. When we start deceiving ourselves as the doer or controller of our activities, we begin to misidentify ourselves. The Bhagavad Gita states the importance of the karma in the following verse— “You have the right to perform your prescribed duty, but you are not entitled to the fruits of your action. Never consider yourself the cause of the results of your activities, and never be attached to not doing

your duty” (Prabhupada, 1983, B.G 2.47, p.121). To this end I argue that duty can be understood at three levels- prescribed duties, capricious work and inaction. The Bhagavad Gita teaches renunciation *in* action, not *of* action. One need not be a monk to develop this discipline; this stage of perfection can very well be attained being a householder. It might appear that such a way of life leaves no room for enjoyment but when one gives up lower enjoyment then he is fit to experience the higher taste, which transcends all material pleasures.. The Bhagavad Gita states, “Though the embodied soul may be restricted from sense enjoyment, the taste for sense objects remains. But ceasing such engagements by experiencing a higher taste, he is fixed in consciousness” (Prabhupada, 1983, B.G 2.59, p.132). Thus, it can be seen that it is not possible to give up sense enjoyment until one is transcendently situated. Therefore, we are desired to perform our duties. Everyone has proprietary right in regard to their assigned duties but one should act without attachment to the result; such disinterested obligatory duties lead one to the path of liberation. The enunciation of karma yoga in the Bhagavad Gita is the most convincing proof of acceptance of the scientific or empirical aspect of the Vedic philosophy as the means to attain liberation.

We can understand the law of karma in the light of Arjuna’s dilemma as discussed in the Bhagavad Gita. Bewildered at the thought of fighting against his kin, Arjuna says, “O Janardana, O Kesava, why do you want to engage me in this ghastly warfare, if you think that intelligence is better than fruitive work” (Prabhupada, 1983, B.G 3.1, p.147). Arjuna confused spiritual advancement with retirement from active life and the practice

of penance and austerity at a secluded place. Arjuna is reluctant to fight and wants to skillfully avoid fighting. The Bhagavad Gita responds to this dilemma through the eyes of a soldier preparing for a war. In order to resolve Arjuna’s doubt, Krishna says, “Not by merely abstaining from the work can one achieve freedom from reaction, nor by renunciation alone can one attain perfection” (Prabhupada, 1983, B.G 3.14, p.150). The epic text focuses on the diversity of action, which a man must adopt in order to be successful in his practical life. Instead of being a pseudo transcendentalist for the sake of wanton living and sense enjoyment, it is far better to remain in one’s own business and execute the purpose of life, which is to get free from material bondage. A sincere street sweeper is far better than the charlatan meditator who meditates only for the sake of earning a living. Simply put, do good without coveting the results of what you do, and you will avoid the noxious effects of selfish behaviour. That is, if you fight because it is your duty and not for egoistic ends, then your actions take place under a mantle of karmic immunity. This also suggests and prepares us for pain and painful duties. The purpose is to train the mind to not allow pain and discomfort to intervene in performing righteous duties.

The message of Bhagavad Gita provides many deep insights to human condition. It prescribes to accept all occurrences as opportunities for spiritual development. We will overpower our weakness only by confronting it. All obfuscations are petty weakness of the heart. ‘I won’t do that because it will hurt others’, ‘I won’t do that because it is disruptive’ are excuses for all those duties which you are bound to perform as a propagator of the law of karma. Action is something that can bind you to

the material world or liberate you from it. By acting without selfish motive, one can get free of the cycle of karma and attain transcendental knowledge of the self and the super self as discussed in the previous section. It is to be noted that the indicators of success for a spiritualist is not the same as that for a materialist. The text teaches one to understand the significance of performing one's duty by not attaching the results of the action and to establish good over evil.

The most essential part of this section deals with the link between the law of karma and self-positivity. The Bhagavad Gita explains the concept of Sthithaprajna or equanimity of the mind which can be reached when one has a stable intellect- an outcome of the belief in the science of karma. It is meant to provide guidance for the common man when he is overpowered by emotions and faces a conflict of sentiments and duties, which appears insoluble. When the individual has conquered his false identity both pain/pleasure, loss/gain, victory/defeat appears equal. Intellect is the very foundation of discipline judgements as well as of value judgements and of philosophic reflection and metaphysical speculation. Bhagavad Gita defines the stable intellect as follows; "When your intelligence has passed out of the dense forest of delusion, you shall become indifferent to all that has been heard and all that is to be heard."(Prabhupada, 1983, B.G 2.52, p.126) The individual gives up all sensual and animalistic desires. He attains the courage to stand against all odds and see the good in the bad. A person with forbearance is not one to lose heart when confronted with sudden calamity, not to be over-elated with prosperity. This kind of penance is a spiritual discipline, which leads to the true knowledge

the Vedic scriptures talk about. A person aiming for forbearance requires being free of attachment towards pleasure and free of distraction in the presence of pain. *Attachment is the cause of all misery*. Thus, negativity cannot even touch if one is not attached to anything- thing or people or country. In the process, the living being learns the art of self-control, lack of which leads to total destruction of character of an individual. Serenity and calmness of mind is not possible without the exercise of self-control. The concept of equanimity of the mind should not be looked upon as a negative attitude of the mind but rather as a positive exercise of reason, withdrawing the mind from all negative and concentrating it on all positive. A man with stable intellect is a man between two extremes of asceticism and mortification. The heart of a man with mental equilibrium overflows with love and compassion for all living beings. Modern psychologists point out that instability of the mind proves fatal to not just the body but even otherwise.

If we need morality in the society, people need to be taught about the law of karma. Fear of karma is very often an impetus of doing our duty sincerely. If there is no fear of karmic reactions, most people will have no motivation to do good deeds. Law of karma helps us to make sense out of our present condition and gives strength to face suffering. A person without spiritual knowledge has no adherence to tolerate the next blow coming up in life. Being well-versed with the law of karma is a big relief as it quenches our thirst by providing reasons for the happenings in life. It also prepares us for the future with confidence. Just by knowing about karma and its law, one is not free from suffering. The pain is still there but

one is free from the sense of helplessness or dejection. Science of karma is not of condemnation but of redemption. Thus, it can be concluded that one should plan purposefully, prepare prayerfully, proceed positively and pursue persistently.

3: From Understanding the Self to Understanding the Universe: Spirituality to Philanthropy

There is a greater happiness in doing service to others than to arrange for one's own self. Winston Churchill has rightly said, 'We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give' (Churchill, 1923). A random act of kindness, paying it forward, or good deeds warm the heart but what is more significant is to understand what actual goodwill means- it goes beyond helping an old lady cross the road or donating in an orphanage. The Vedic understanding of welfare of others is long-term (shreyas). That is why almost every school of thought, religious views, cultural values, principles of morality rewards the performance of good deeds. This can be understood in relation to the Law of Karma discussed in the previous section. Real welfare is to bring one to the end of all miseries by making them realize who they are, what their duty is and what are the actions they should perform in order to live a happy life. It is important to point out that doing good to others transforms the soul and leads to liberation. Even if one does attain liberation, he will be a better version of himself in the process. After all, it is the inherent nature of the soul to love and be loved. Therefore, the attitude of giving is not something which one needs to learn instead it is very much a part of each one of us.

One who cannot understand his own constitutional position can never manifest good qualities in a steady and consistent manner. His/her attempts to be kind, truthful, co-operative etc. will be only conditional. The point at which his/her sense gratification is pinched will be the end of their virtue. One who is well-versed with the science of the scriptures, especially the Bhagavad Gita, which is the synthesis of all Vedic texts, automatically develops all good qualities worth possessing. When such a person acts, it is not simply out of courtesy, formality or obligations, but he is actually concerned and deeply moved by the feelings of compassion. The difference between the act of kindness out of long term spiritual motive and short-term material motive can be understood with the help of a simple illustration. One boy was suffering from typhoid. His mother put him on very strict diet and medical care. His brother felt sorry for him and fed him spicy and oily food which his mother had restricted him from eating. The difference in the attitude of the brother and mother reflects the distinction between normal people and spiritual enthusiasts. The latter aims at lifelong happiness and positivity whereas the former is unable to see the flaw in their deeds. Material amelioration is likened to giving a plate of food to a lost child whereas real and true help is to take the child back to his/her parents. This is to find a permanent solution to the problem, to address the root cause of the suffering. Such exchanges are more meaningful and genuine than what one may momentarily feel while coming across a needy.

The Vedic injunction prescribes the path of Dharma- the code of conduct, which is universally applicable, for all, times and places. It has a broad and indeterminate connotation. It

brings about disciplined control over unlimited and unfettered gratification of the senses. Dharma is one among the four Purushartha (kama, artha, dharma and moksha). Though Moksha is the highest because it is defined as the goal of human life, Dharma is the guiding light for artha and kama. It is also believed to lead to the path of Moksha, which situates one as an eternal spiritual entity in perfect peace and equanimity. Every man has to discharge two kinds of moral obligations- one related to other members of the society and one related to the Self. It is one's spiritual nature to be obliged to be moral both in the sense of self and society. Thus, the spirit of love, kindness, self-sacrifice becomes natural for one to inculcate. Virtues or duties of dana (giving), ahimsa (non-violence), daya (compassion), paropkara (service to others) etc. are important constituents of dharma.

The Bhagavad Gita speaks about three types of giving- that which is given without any expectation of appreciation or reward is beneficial to both the giver and the recipient, that which is given reluctantly and with the expectation of some advantage is harmful to both the giver and the recipient, and that which is given without any regard for the feelings of the recipient and at the wrong time, so causing embarrassment to the recipient, is again harmful to both the giver and the receiver. Any giving motivated by selfish considerations loses its value from the spiritual point of view. The mere giving of gifts can bring no true happiness and peace. Also, the real happiness does not depend on the possession of wealth and that there is no point focusing on the welfare of others without realizing the nature of true self. Any efforts in the absence of the real knowledge will turn out to be mundane. We

should serve others for their good, not for ourselves.

Yudhisthira's reply to Draupadi's skeptical reflections makes the point very clear. He says, "I never act solicitous of the fruits of my actions, O princess, I give away because it is my duty to give, I sacrifice because it is my duty to sacrifice. O Krishna, I accomplish to the best of my power whatever a person living in the domestic life should do, regardless of the fact whether those acts have fruits or not. I act virtuously, not from the desire of reaping fruits of virtue, but of not transgressing the ordinances of the Vedas, beholding the conduct of the good and the wise. My heart is naturally attracted towards virtue, O Krishna; the man who wishes to reap the fruits of virtue is a trader in virtue. His nature is mean and he should never be counted among the virtuous" (Valmiki, Arshia and Vyasa, TrSattar 2018). Developing an attitude similar to that of Yudhisthira will certainly prove to be very beneficial to each individual. It can be established that dharma maintains a social fabric; it helps the members of society move in a peaceful and harmonious way. In the eighteenth chapter of the Gita it is mentioned, "Act of sacrifice, charity and penance are not to be given up; they must be performed. Indeed, sacrifice, charity and penance purify even the great souls" (Prabhupada, 1983, B.G 18.5, p.706). Krishna says that any sacrifice, which is meant for human welfare should never be given up. Charity is the purification of the heart if performed in the correct manner.

The ethics of the Bhagavad Gita are considered the gospel of truth and it is remarkable to point out the message contained in it: on one hand it advocates a life of action and moral duty, on the

other hand it makes the aspirant rise above the relative level of empirical experiences to attain what is called the state of stability of intellect. The message of the Bhagavad Gita is so simple and straightforward that it may be grasped by any man without any philosophical background, yet so difficult to practice that the most intelligent or the most scholarly person may falter following its mandate in critical situations. It can be concluded that spiritual development of self is complete only when it is related to the welfare of other people. The motive is not to achieve individual happiness but creation of a better world. The aspect of philanthropy certainly achieves the purpose of achieving positivity in life by encouraging man to perform his duties to others. The emotional release after doing something for someone is unmatched.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that the understanding of the Self, abiding by the laws of karma, and contributing to the welfare of other living beings necessarily leads to a lifetime of happiness and optimism. It teaches you the ideal way of life, which is given by Lord

Krishna Himself. The identification of the real Self helps you understand that you are not this body but something that goes much beyond that. Therefore, all the issues raised can be annulled just at this step. If you are not the doer, not the beneficiary of your actions, not the recipient of the wealth, then what is that you are battling against? But this does not mean that you don't perform actions. You are bound to perform actions. The nature of those actions is described in the text. You are tied to the results of your actions. Even if you don't believe in the laws of nature, they will still act on you. The adverse conditions faced by an individual in life also push him to elevate from this level of material contamination and attain Moksha, which is the highest goal in one's life. Also, the scriptures encourage you to do service of others as it transforms you from within. These elements combined together provide a link between the *Notion of Self* and how it leads to positive psychology. In selfless service the joy experienced is beyond the clutches of sensual desires. It is known that nothing can quench our desires in the world; thus, one has to take to spirituality at some point of time in their life-sooner or later.

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