

The Yoga of Sorrow

Introduction: Strife and Sadness

New readers of the Bhagavad Gita are often struck at the onset by two seeming anomalies: the book's setting, and the title of the book's first chapter. The setting is a battlefield, and the first chapter's title provides the *seitz in leben* (life setting) of a man's grief: "*Arjuna Vishada Yoga*" (The Yoga of Arjuna's sorrow). Thinking to encounter the highest truths of the spiritual life through what is quaintly termed "India's Bible", the reader is immediately grounded in two dimensions that may prove a deterrent to further pursuance: strife and sadness. The battlefield of the Gita has often been allegorized away, and the title of its first chapter similarly sterilized. But these methods are closer to spiritual bypassing than to spiritual realism.

The battlefield of Kurukshetra is ripe with potency *because* it is a battlefield. It is a place of conflict, clash, crass treachery, harshest finality, baneful and irrecoverable loss. Such has been every battlefield from the dawn of time, and such shall it always be. War is archetypical for the human experience, and it is as lamentable as it is inescapable. But the battlefield of Kurukshetra is not *only* this, for no battlefield has been *only* this. It is a place of strength, clarification, instruction, and above all, the gut-check, heart-check, and soul-check that is the pith and marrow of the searching and finding of God. Dispense with the battlefield, and much blood will be saved. But so will much wisdom and the evolutionary lessons without which the human person will not and cannot grow. While only a cold calculus would adjudicate that war is, then, "worth it"—and only a fool would deny it—the sage sits in the tension in between and accepts it fully. His acceptance is his fight.

Arjuna is that would-be sage of the Bhagavad Gita: a warrior of lustred reputation, a talent in the art of war the likes of which many legends fall short, and a role that is singularly crucial for the rectification of countless wrongs through the heartbreaking inevitability of an imminent *dharmayuddha* (righteous war). In an innocent enough request, Arjuna beckons his charioteer, Sri Krishna, to take him to a vantage point where he may see all of the warriors before him—a kind of "last look" before the first arrow is slung and the fighting begins. And herein begins this great one's descent from heightened acclaim into the humus of sanctity. In this moment, when what Arjuna sees in the faces of life before him brings him to his knees and out of his senses, his humanization through sorrow's dregs likens and forever links him to the experience of each one of the Gita's readers who has known or will know such

a threateningly crippling sorrow. It is Arjuna's despair that stirs our sympathy, even more than his heretofore heroism had elicited our admiration. "I, too, am like this...". Yes, you are. We *all* are.

Pandits and acharyas may be tempted to translate "yoga" in the title of the Gita's first chapter as simply that: "chapter", thus rendering it "The Chapter dealing with Arjuna's Sorrow". And of course, it *is* that. But, borrowing from Western exegesis, if we are permitted to—and indeed, for the fullest benefit, *must*—read a sacred text multivalently, extracting meanings at once literal, allegorical, moral, and anagogical, then this method appropriately applies to something even as seemingly small as the title of the chapter of a book, especially one as axiomatic as the Gita. At a fair first glance, "*Arjuna Vishada Yoga*" *can* legitimately be read simply as "The chapter of Arjuna's sorrow". But something far richer lies beneath.

Yoga as Path, Way, and Principle

Of the many vocabularic exports from the Far East, perhaps none is so susceptible to assumption and misapplied interpretation as the word "yoga". A good Sanskrit dictionary will elicit dozens of definitions, all of which are united yet unique. Here, in the Bhagavad Gita alone, this very word will turn up some of the richest adages and connotations, all of which are meant to encourage and spur the devotee to a higher and better life: virtuous skill in action (II:50), equanimity of mind (II:48), severance from suffering (VI:23), and a host more. One of the safest and richest applications of the word "yoga" in several contexts, and especially in the one considered here in the Gita's first chapter, is to understand yoga as "path" or "way".

A path *leads* somewhere, if a person follows it faithfully. When that path winds and weaves through terrain that is uncertain, challenging, even dangerous—all applicable features of the spiritual life—then its careful trodding is all the more important. It is the intentional, and not the happenstance, who will walk their path, and find their way. A *way* is yet more nuanced than a path, connoted with dimensions of transcendence, malleability, a kind of quantum shaping that has as much to do with the one engaging as the proverbial road engaged. Seeing yoga in this lucid frame gives new appreciation not only to what is being signed in speaking of Arjuna's sorrow as a "path" or a "way", but also to each of us symbolically present in Arjuna's agony at the Gita's very onset; an agony which will cede through wisdom and his guru's companioning guidance to victory over adversaries seen and unseen. This is a near-perfect analogy for life in all of its resonant and resistant dimensions, but particularly for that life that we call "spiritual".

Borrowing from the perennialist author Frithjof Schuon's book title, *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, yoga, too, is this, and in the most evocative sense. For if yoga is a path and a way, each path and way also has a "principle". Again, we encounter a word with nuanced meaning. "Principle" bespeaks in one sense a fundamental law, a doctrine of truth, and a context of proceeding. But a principle is also a *beginning*, a first step without which the journey—or the battle—simply cannot and does not begin. Yoga is all of this. It provides qualifying touchstones, contextual guardrails, and aspirational signposts which mark the evolution of the aspirant, the battle-doer. It is a manual, written on the heart, the mind, and deep within the body to tell us (in keeping with its oft-cited definition of "union"), "You are not alone". And as a step-by-step progressive pedagogy—for each yogic path carries its own tradition, its own history, its own masters and their own sagacious and compassionate instruction—yoga is laden with graspable handles for every strain and striving of the climb *upward* which will always be a part of the journey *forward* for all of us.

Sorrow as Path, Way, and Principle

We can see from its rich nuances that to relegate the meaning of yoga to a mere "chapter" and to leave it at that is not a fully adequate way to understand the Gita's beginning any more than it would be to understand the spiritual life's beginning. "Chapter" is clean, and it is safe, but too sterile, too stifled to convey on its own a word of such meaning and importance, especially when conjoined with the wounding experience of sorrow. Sorrow as yoga is more than a "chapter", a word which bespeaks a more or less predictable beginning, middle, and end. Sorrow is what *yoga itself* is: a path, a way, and a principle. As a path, sorrow is well-trodden and its company is every person who has ever shed a tear and lived or died to tell of it. As a way, sorrow is tailor-made to each individual artisan, to the collective artisan of humanity, and to the archetypal artisan of the human experience itself all of which become sorrow's bearers.

As principle, sorrow fits well with the above-mentioned strata of the word: law, doctrine, context, and beginning. Sorrow *is* a law of its own, but not one that plays fair, for its rubric seems to be ever-changing. When we navigate one of sorrow's serpentine byways, its rules, textures, and topographies transform even in the knowing of it. Sorrow, then, if it is said to be a law as a principle is a law, is more like the law of God than the law of the land: Forged by a divine hand, it is as mysterious as that Hand that has first wielded it and delivered it to us. As doctrine, sorrow shape-shifts constantly, teaching us viscerally as an amorphously morphing pulse, the forest of its objective content often obscured for the

trees of its subjective centripetal force. The doctrine of sorrow can thus be our greatest torturer or our greatest teacher. Quite often, it is both. Uncontestably, and lastly for our purposes, sorrow is often a beginning. For many spiritual practitioners, it is a moment, a season, or even a perceived lifetime of disappointment, disarray, and deranging disillusion which we follow *back through* these waves' wake into their inception, their principle: the sorrow that has been their cause and manifestation. And when that trip back to the origin of such pain is honestly endeavoured, we encounter what we cannot *not* see: the opportunity through this pain to *begin again*. Sorrow has birthed the search for God. And this is the Gita's genius: the revelation of the human spirit's tenacious existential cry, determined to ride wisely sorrow's currents and crests as a path, a way, and a principled beginning of something truly beautiful.

Yoga's sorrow and the Man of Sorrows

Of course, the Bhagavad Gita is not alone in its couching of truth in terms of battle and sorrow, two of the spiritual life's most towering and always-tandem'd inevitabilities. Christianity posits a salvific path through precisely such would-be obstacles. As to battle imagery, the Church's self-understanding as the *ecclesia militans* ("Church Militant") lends well to classical texts like Scupoli's 16th century *Spiritual Combat* in the Christian West or Brianchaninov's 19th century *The Arena* in the Christian East, titles that tell a life's story in a line, and pages giving a vivid map of just what this life entails. As to the imagery of sorrow, we need look no further than the devotionally haunting *Via Crucis* ("The Way of the Cross") or to titles of Mary such as *Mater Dolorosa* ("Mother of Sorrows") to see what pride of place without abashment Christianity gives to sadness as a way. Like the tradition of the *Sanatana Dharma* ("eternal truth") into which the Gita is centrally inscribed, Christianity makes no attempt to cover up the unseemly sights of such a setting. Each tradition—seemingly separated by a multitude of sundry details—stands united on this point: The spiritual life is a *sorrowful fight*. The implications of this are manifold and not ancillary to the fruits promised through fidelity to such a difficult path.

Like the tradition of the *Sanatana Dharma*, Christian tradition does not posit sorrow as an externalized idea or a pious ideal located somewhere *outside* of the human experience, but one unflinchingly situated precisely at its center. And that center has a heart. For the *Sanatana Dharma* at the dawn of the battle of Kurukshetra which represents the battlefield of the hearts of us all, it is Arjuna's heart that takes center stage. For Christianity at the dawn of the Passion in Gethsemani which represents that pleading place in the hearts of us all, it is the heart of Jesus. We think often of Christ's heroic and miraculous life, but perhaps not enough of the tears of that life. We glimpse these precious

tears in his weeping over Jerusalem, in which he likens his own love for his people to a love tender and maternal (Mat. 23:37), and again, at the death of his friend Lazarus, where the evangelist's description of Christ's response is poignantly terse, in what is said to be the shortest of all Bible verses: "Jesus wept" (Jn. 11:35). These are but precursors, though, to what is the most demonstrative of his sorrows, that of his Passion. As Jesus prays that his destined cup may pass from him (Mat. 26:39), we can empathically see the tears run down his face as through well-worn tracks earned by a singularly compassionating and surrendered perseverance. And when he rises to face a destiny that would make its indelible mark on the world, it is not *around* sorrow that he proceeds, but *through*: a "yoga", understood as a way, a path, and a principle of his life and of the countless who endeavor throughout the ages to make this same life their own.

A Salutary Sadness

There is something about the coupling of battle and sorrow that is strangely fulfilling. For the spiritual aspirant, *ahimsa*—non-violence—is laudable and always has pride of place. Yet we are not infrequently called to a *dharma yuddha* (righteous war) of our own: values to uphold, truth to stand for, love to wrest from a hate that plagues, innocence to be guarded from the jaundiced eyes of a world at once starved for and blind to beauty. These and more become the story of a life staked upon something greater. And when we have something greater to live for, something that calls from a place far more vast than the finite world or the finite mind, we—once champions of the banal—are ready to stand as warriors of the infinite.

What is that feeling that creeps over us like a slow-moving moss when we realize that our heretofore non-threatened placid peace must be given over for the spoils of a greater victory? It is sadness, battle's handmaid. We feel deep in our peace-loving bones that fighting—even when utterly noble, and utterly necessary—is a sorrow. And it is right that it should be so. Standing for "something more" means turning from something less. And even this dead skin can be a loss for its necessary shedding, as it often spells the certainty of leaving much behind: comfort, confirmation, pleasure, and more, as we feel the wrenching away of the sweet nothings of yesterday which are fast losing their luster in the face of a higher loyalty to a greater cause drawn forth from inside of us. What once seemed so vital, that nostalgic phantom called "yesterday", now has no life, for life itself has taken new meaning in the scope of the infinite. We who would turn with a saddened glance at what we leave behind risk annihilation and the becoming of another spouse of Lot—a deadened pillar, a salt with no savor.

There arises then the façade, nay, the *charade* of choice...for really, there is no choice for such a one. When the God-wrestler in each of us has already won and come this far, a determination by a Will much greater than ours of formerly constant vacillation has triumphed before choice ever had a chance. There is only *one* answer: *Yes*. The words of Sri Krishna which quickened Arjuna's spirit—"Stand up and *fight!*" (Gita II.3)—have not only roused but now defined *our* very spirit. The warrior is awakened, and he will not sleep again. Into the battle his steps will take him, all of the virtuous weapons of spiritual war a girding about his waist which will see him to victory, sorrow the first among them, no longer a barrier but a spur to salvation by whatever name.

It is in this sense—its spurring, sparring, warring and winning sense—that sorrow is salutary. This word connotes both that which heals and that which saves. Sorrow is an intimate helpmate to both healing and salvation. Sorrow heals by *opening* the heart to a wider world of divine light, a light that can only enter in through a wounded heart, penetrating never into the heart that is closed and walled. In this case, the light stands waiting at the gate of the heart not because it cannot enter, but because in its gentle honoring of an entry denied, it *will* not. And sorrow saves, for without it, how likely it is that the fight would never have been waged or won, for the warrior may never have responded to a call from the deep if he had not the salved eyes to see it. Sorrow is that salve. The salvation which it heralds goes by myriad names naming the nameless points of access to an equally nameless destiny...but it is *good*, and this the seeking soul knows more deeply than any iterated truth.

Yes, sorrow heals. But it heals the way that medicine heals. Medicine can kill, too, if not handled with a careful knowing. Its dosage can be lethal if languished or lathered in, if administered too strongly, or if no kindly wizened nurse is there to pull out the needle or to temper the pills being doled. It is *not* the case, then, that sorrow is an unequivocal good when untempered and left absolutely untamed. This is precisely why Arjuna's sorrow is answered by Krishna's teachings of wisdom before any other thematic teaching is offered, and why Jesus' sorrow cedes in the end to pure and unabated light. Sorrow is, then, never an end in and of itself, but a crucial means so that the end of victory may be had and well won.

And yes, sorrow saves. But it does not save *from*. It saves *for*. Sorrow—despite our plea—never saves us from that from which we beg most to be delivered: *itself*. Sorrow keeps itself woven into the textured grief of the seasons of human experience as a teacher, and indeed, as a friend: For a friend *does*, after all, enact his friendship in all of sorrow's yogic connotations: A friend is a companion on the path, a light for our way, a witness of the principled beginnings which are endless until the battle is done. In being

this oft-unrecognized friend, sorrow saves us *for* a greater good, a more noble end. And only at that end may it be removed as an expert surgeon's hand extracts at long last a blade that has done its difficult and thankless job of the healing that saves.

Conclusion: Together at the margins of the Yoga of Sorrow

What have the two proverbial halves of the spiritual world—the no longer so deftly or accurately named “East” and “West”—to learn from one another? So much...so, *so* much. And what a gift that this is so. The first lesson we learn is that the best lessons in this life we call “spiritual” are foundationally imbibed at the junctures of commonality and togetherness. For only when our experience of this mystery called “life” is first realized to be *one* can our differences be seen as beautiful complements rather than suspicious or alien threats. Kurukshetra is a battlefield in India, and it housed an epic and tragic war thousands of years ago. Gethsemani is a garden in the Mount of Olives, and it housed a murderous betrayal of a man whose very life began what we know as the “common era”—fitting, for the common grounding that sorrow brings to us all. But there is a Kurukshetra, a Gethsemani, ever-present in that spiritual landscape which is placeless, boundaryless, and timeless, a well-staked territory in the hearts of us all. Its rite of passage is atemporal and primordial. We all live there. And we are there together.

When the battle is on and sorrow strikes and the stakes are as high as heaven's reach, there are no more “sides”. The fight and the sorrow at its heart does not so much homogenize as galvanize the human spirit and the human experience across lands and times, faiths and foundations. If I may look across a spiritual landscape which I once perhaps too provincially considered “my own,” and look into yours which I once perhaps too hastily considered utterly other, and see therein no longer two, but one, no longer disparity, but unity, what greater and indeed more gorgeous lesson could be learned than this? It is our common struggle that makes this possible, the sorrow at its core which so agonizingly yet intimately makes it liberating and free. Sorrow is a yoga—a way, a path, a principle—an *alpha* and *omega* experience as inescapable as death, more companioning than our own life's breath. As yoga well-beckons us to do, let us *breathe* into this life-unto-death, for the battle has already been won.

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