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Satinder Dhiman

Woodbury University, satinder.dhiman@woodbury.edu

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Bhagavad Gītā & the Art of Leadership:¹ Old Text, New Context!

SATINDER DHIMAN, PhD, EdD | WOODBURY UNIVERSITY | BURBANK, CALIFORNIA



Introduction

While the leadership literature is quite vast, very few writings explore the psychological, philosophical, ethical, and spiritual underpinnings of leadership function with reference to a particular wisdom text in a concerted manner. In this article, the author employs hermeneutics,² a qualitative methodology involving the interpretation of wisdom literature and philosophical texts, to the Bhagavad Gītā, to draw important leadership lessons. The Gītā contains timeless leadership lessons for contemporary organizations. The modern leadership concepts such as vision, motivation and empowerment, self-awareness, self-mastery, excellence in work, importance of ethical means in achieving righteous ends, attaining meaning and fulfillment at work, service before self, wellbeing of all beings, are all lucidly discussed in the Bhagavad Gītā. Likewise, we find that many contemporary leadership

constructs such as authentic leadership, servant leadership, and values-based leadership, were already discussed, in the Bhagavad Gītā thousands of years ago. The Gītā is a non-sectarian spiritual text with a universal message.

From Battlefield to Boardroom

It has been observed that the Bhagavad Gītā is as relevant in the boardrooms of the twenty-first century as it was on the battlefields of ancient times.³ Within the compass of 18 dynamic chapters, it unfolds the whole spectacle of human drama full of challenges met, victories won, and freedom attained. It teaches us how to emerge from a state of utter apathy, gloom, sorrow, and dejection to a state of perfect engagement, understanding, clarity, wisdom, renewed strength, and triumph. The Bhagavad Gītā (a part of the great Indian epic – the Mahābhārata) can be approached as a powerful tool

¹ Partially based on a chapter from author's forthcoming book *Gandhi and Leadership: New Horizons in Exemplary Leadership* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2015) and author's co-edited book *Leading Spiritually: Ten Effective Approaches to Workplace Spirituality* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2014).

² Originally an approach used for the interpretation of ancient and biblical texts, hermeneutics has over time been applied to the human sciences more generally. Hermeneutics as an interpretive methodology of understanding has much to offer those interested in qualitative inquiry, and is especially suitable for work of a textual and interpretive nature. Given that the emphasis in qualitative research is on understanding and interpretation as opposed to explanation and verification, the connection between qualitative research and hermeneutic thought becomes self-evident. Hermeneutics employs the art of interpretation, and the transformative possibilities within, to seek in-depth understanding of a key text.

See Kinsella, Elizabeth Anne (2006). Hermeneutics and Critical Hermeneutics: Exploring Possibilities within the Art of Interpretation. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 7(3), Art. 19, Retrieved: Oct. 10, 2014. url: <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs0603190>.

³ Debashis Chatterjee, *Timeless Leadership: 18 Leadership Sutras from the Bhagavad Gītā* (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2012). Front flap matter.

for change management and as a catalyst for organizational transformation. It teaches us how to harmonize the needs of the individual with the needs of society, and by extension, how to harmonize the needs of employees and the organization. It employs an inside-out leadership development approach based on self-knowledge and self-mastery, the two highly important areas for practicing true self-leadership. The Gītā is a non-sectarian spiritual text with a universal message.

The Gītā contains timeless leadership lessons for the contemporary organizations. Modern leadership concepts such as vision, motivation and empowerment, self-awareness, self-mastery, excellence in work, importance of ethical means in achieving righteous ends, attaining meaning and fulfillment at work, service before self, wellbeing of all beings, are all lucidly discussed in the *Bhagavad Gītā*. Likewise, many contemporary leadership constructs such as authentic leadership, servant leadership, and values-based leadership, were already discussed, albeit notionally, in the *Bhagavad Gītā* thousands of years ago. The message of the Gītā fosters holistic development of human personality within all of its dimensions (physical-psychological, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual) by providing guidance about the three essential spiritual practices: “training the mind,” “transforming the passions,” and “guarding the heart.”⁴

The *Bhagavad Gītā*, the classic Hindu scripture par excellence, holds a special place in the world’s sacred literature. It has wielded an enduring influence on the spirit of humankind. Noting its widespread appeal and popularity, Robert N. Minor, a modern exegetical commentator, states that the *Bhagavad Gītā* has become “*the most translated text after the Bible*.”⁵ Count Hermann Keyserling, a German philosopher, hailed it as “*perhaps the most beautiful work of the literature of the world*.”⁶ Mahaṭmā Gāndhī, who referred to the Gītā as his “spiritual dictionary,” scribed: “When disappointment stares me in the face, and all alone I see not one ray of light, I go back to the *Bhagavad Gītā*. I find a verse here and a verse there and I immediately begin to smile in the midst of overwhelming tragedies — and my life has been full of external tragedies — and if they have left no visible, no indelible scar on me, I owe it all to the teachings of the *Bhagavad Gītā*.”⁷

Old Text, New Context

Although traditionally interpreted as a religious-spiritual text, the Gītā encompasses great practical leadership lessons for modern times. Peter Senge, one of the key management thinkers of our time, has quoted the Gītā in two of his celebrated books, namely, *Fifth Discipline* and *Presence*. The Gītā unfolds as an infallible guide for those higher order leaders who *externally* live a life of full engagement in the world, while *internally* always remaining steadfastly anchored in the wisdom of their Higher Self. Its non-sectarian,

⁴ This conforms to the threefold disciplines enunciated in various Indian wisdom texts— Path of Knowledge (*Jñānāyoga*), the Path of Action (*Karmayoga*), and the Path of Devotion (*Bhaktiyoga*). Madhusudana Saraswati, a preeminent commentator, divides the Gītā into three sections of six chapters, each section dealing successively with *Karmayoga*, *Bhaktiyoga*, and *Jñānāyoga*, the first leading to the second and the second to the third. (Gambhīrānanda, 1984, p. 21) Another sacred text provides the following order of spiritual disciplines:

Yōgās trayo mayā proktā narnām shreyo-vidhītsaya;
Jñānam karma ca bhaktis ca na upāyaḥ anyo asti kutrचित्.
(*Śrīmad Bhāgavatam* 11.20.6)

[I have enunciated three paths for those who want to attain spiritual welfare—the Path of Knowledge (*Jñānāyoga*), the Path of Selfless Actions (*Karmayoga*), and the Path of Devotion (*Bhaktiyoga*). Besides these three, there is absolutely no other path for the spiritual advancement of human beings.]

⁵ Robert N. Minor, *Bhagavad-Gītā: An Exegetical Commentary* (Columbia, MO: South Asia Books, 1986), 5.

⁶ Cited in Will Durant, *The Case for India* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1930), 6.

⁷ Cited in S. Radhākṛishnan, *The Bhagavad Gītā: With an Introductory Essay, Sanskrit Text, English Translation, and Notes* (London, Great Britain: George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1958), 10.

universal message speaks endearingly to people from all walks of life who are in search of abiding answers to the fundamental questions of life.

The Gītā is universal in its message, comprehensive in its outlook, and concrete in its suggestions. It is a non-sectarian spiritual text with a universal message, completely free from sectarian dogma. As Scott Teitsworth has rightly observed:

*There is no vengeful God in it, only a benign and loving principle, called Brahman, or the Absolute. It is replete with the finest spiritual advice tendered without compunction or guilt....There are no chosen or cursed souls, only more or less damaged and confused ones. The game here is to rectify the damage and dispel the confusion with clear thinking and action....In learning from the Gita, we have to find and express our own inner motivation.*⁸

It is important to remember that though in its ultimate bidding, the Gītā is essentially a manual for spiritual freedom (*mokṣa shastra*) – as Śāṅkarācārya, its greatest commentator and exponent reminds us – however, in its practical aspect, it is also a great manual for living and not an esoteric treatise on spirituality. As A. Parthasarathy has rightly noted, “The Bhagavad Gītā is a technique, a skill for dynamic living, not a retirement plan.”⁹

At what point of one’s life one should pursue the goal of *mokṣa* or self-realization? Many believe that spiritual quest is something to be pursued during the last phase of one’s life. Dispelling this popular notion, Gandhi tells us in his autobiography that people had a “superstition” that self-realization could be attained only in the last stages of life. Those who deferred it until then attain not self-realization, but “a second and pitiable childhood living as a burden on this earth.”¹⁰

Understanding the Fundamental Problem¹¹

The fundamental seeking of all human beings is security, peace/happiness, and liberation. All human pursuits can be essentially reduced to these three basic endeavors. More often, we tend to search for these goals among external sources such as objects, people, and situations. However, we soon discover that no lasting peace and security can be found in external things because, in their ultimate bidding, they are transient, unpredictable, unreliable, and subject to constant change.

By gently pointing out that our whole problem is a misdirected search due to self-ignorance, the Gītā tells us that the only place where permanent and complete happiness and fulfillment can be found is within ourselves. The Gītā tells us that no level of external objects, attainments, and knowledge can remove the gnawing sense of self-inadequacy except self-knowledge of the fullness of our being and help us attain a sense of intrinsic fulfillment. The Gītā further explains that it is the self-ignorance that covers our intrinsic fullness of being and only self-knowledge can lift the veil and lead us to the eternal fountain of abiding security, peace, and happiness that lies within us all. We finally make the pleasant discovery that searching for peace is like searching for one’s glasses everywhere when they have been perched on our nose all along. Interestingly, we

⁸ Scott Teitsworth, *The Path to the Guru: The Science of Self-Realization according to the Bhagavad Gita* (Rochester, Vermont, Inner Traditions, 2014), 3-4.

⁹ A Parthasarathy cited in Dennis Waite, *Back to the Truth: 5000 Years of Advaita* (Winchester, UK: John Hunt Publishing, Ltd., 2007), 519.

¹⁰ M. K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1983), 302.

¹¹ These opening observations about our quest for happiness are primarily inspired by Swāmī Paramārthānandajī’s discourses on the Bhagavad Gītā and other texts and sub-texts of Vedāntā.

even tend to forget that we have been searching *for* them while unknowingly looking *through* them!

The journey therefore is more of the nature of a “re-discovery” than a fresh “discovery.”

From Self-ignorance to Self-knowledge

The Gītā teaches us that the fundamental human problem is the lack of self-knowledge and the resultant extroverted-ness of our search for happiness and the mistaken way we relate to the world. In all our quests, we approach people, objects, and situations through the prism of our likes and dislikes (*rāga-dveṣa*) which leads to attachment or aversion. Attachment leads to sorrow and sorrow leads to delusion which in turn compounds our misery.

When the self-knowledge (*aṭam-jñāna*) dawns, we realize that whatever we have been seeking is already within us. It is in fact our own very nature or self. J. Krishnamurti once said, “Truth is a pathless land.”¹² This pithy, enigmatic quote does not really mean that there is no path to truth; rather it signifies that we are already the truth that we are seeking. Since there is no separation from the truth (Reality) to begin with, no path is really needed. Thus, self-realization is a matter of “recognizing” what “Is,” a matter of attaining the ever-attained (*prāptasya-prāpti*). It is not a problem of “becoming;” it is a problem of “being.” It is a journey from “here” to “here.” Scott Teitsworth puts it succinctly:

*In Vedānta – the philosophical system of the Gita and its close cousins, the Upanishads – everyone and all things are the Absolute in essence, and the seeker’s path such as it is, is to come to know this truth. It is a path that begins and ends right where we are.*¹³

The Gītā identifies *kāma*, a state of constant desiring and wanting, as life's fundamental problem. This constant feeling of lack springs from a mistaken sense of inadequacy about one’s self. This leads to running constantly towards objects to fulfill the sense of incompleteness. The fascination for an object (*vishaya*) thinking that it can give security and happiness is called *shobhana adhyasa* in Vedāntā. The proper resolution of this problem is to be found in the understanding oneself, through self-inquiry and contemplation, to be the full and complete self (*aṭman*). Such knowledge enables one to act in the world from a deep sense of peace and inward fulfillment.

Self-knowledge transforms our motivation and liberates us from the narrow confines of selfish action to the freedom of serving others. Through this re-discovery of our intrinsic freedom, we are also able to experience the calm bliss of the fullness of our Self and intuit the harmonious oneness of all existence. When the false divisions and distinctions based on our narrow personal likes and dislikes disappear, we are able to extend our benevolence without preference or prejudice in all directions and our very existence benefits the whole universe. Our very existence then becomes an offering to the Supreme, a celebration to the Whole. And our feet get firmly planted on the path that leads to peace, happiness, and liberation. The teachings of the Gītā gently guide us toward this *summum bonum* of all human quests and pursuits.

¹² This is the historic statement that Krishnamurti made when he dissolved “The Order of the Star in the East” that was founded in 1911 to proclaim the coming of the World Teacher. Krishnamurti was made Head of the Order. On August 3, 1929, the opening day of the annual Star Camp at Ommen, Holland, Krishnamurti dissolved the Order before 3000 members. This was the title of his speech. The full speech can be found at the following URL (*retrieved* October 3, 2014): <http://www.jkrishnamurti.org/about-krishnamurti/dissolution-speech.php>

¹³ Scott Teitsworth, *The Path to the Guru: The Science of Self-Realization according to the Bhagavad Gita* (Rochester, Vermont, Inner Traditions, 2014), 11.

Ethics: The Very Foundation of Human Conduct

In the scheme of the Bhagavad Gītā, ethical conduct (*dharma*) furnishes the essential foundation for the quest for spiritual freedom. The scriptures do not cleanse the ethically impure. It is interesting to note that the very first letter of the first word of the first verse (*śloka*) of the Gītā – “*dharmakṣetre*” (1.1¹⁴) – and the very last letter of the last word of the last *śloka* of the Gītā – “*mama*” (18.78) – virtually form the word “*dharma*.” Hence, the *dharma* (lit., that which supports or sustains) is the province of the entire Gītā! The opening words of the Gītā (1.1) are: *dharmakṣetre kurukṣetre. Kurukṣetre* literally means “the field of actions.” And *dharmakṣetre* means that basic principle that sustains everything. So, the Gītā is about the domain of our actions, actions guided by the law or principle that sustains everything within the cosmic sphere.

In the Gītā’s terminology, the performance of actions selflessly as a service or as an offering to the Supreme sustains the cosmic system. In turn, such actions purify the mind and make it a fit vessel for the reception of Self-Knowledge which alone is the true means to spiritual freedom. Śrī Kṛṣṇa, the teacher Par Excellence in the Gītā, does not merely want to make us philosophically learned only but to help us realize the Truth *experientially* – not to merely *instruct* but to make us truly *wise* and *free*.

Thus, underscoring the role of ethics in life, the Gītā upholds a vital competency that is sorely needed in modern corporate world plagued by rampant financial frauds and inveterate moral ineptitude. It has been rightly observed that “ethics lies at the very heart of leadership.”¹⁵ As Al Gini has pointed out, “...without the witness of moral leadership, standards of ethics in business and organizational life neither emerge nor be sustained.”¹⁶ When leaders forget this vital point leadership regenerates into a narcissistic pursuit of self-aggrandizement to the detriment of the society. In the final reckoning, “the only true leadership is values-based leadership.”¹⁷

The spirituality of the Gītā is firmly rooted in the ethical values. There is no progress on the path of spirituality if there is no harmony and unity between our *vichāra* (thought process) and *aḥāra* (conduct). Without ethical purity, the true message of the Gītā will elude us. Gandhi who made his life his message believed that one needs to observe five disciplines to arrive at the correct understanding of the interpretation of the Gītā:

But you must approach it with the five necessary equipments, *viz.*, *ahimsa* (non-violence), *satya* (truth), *brahmacharya* (celibacy), *aparigraha* (non-possession), and *asteya* (non-stealing). Then and then only will you be able to reach a correct interpretation of it. And then you will read it to discover in it *ahimsa* and not *himsa*, as so many nowadays try to do.¹⁸

These five disciplines are called *yamas* (abstentions) since they represent “moral restraints” or rules for living virtuously. These rules can be very effective in the workplace to create an atmosphere of amity and harmony. Practicing these abstentions, however,

¹⁴ All quoted verses are stated in this manner: chapter and verse number. Therefore, the number “1.1” denotes chapter one, verse one of the Gita. All translations of the quoted Sanskrit words or (partial) verses are by the author.

¹⁵ *Op. cit.*, Joanne B. Ciulla, ed., *Ethics, The Heart of Leadership* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004, Second edition), xv.

¹⁶ Al Gini, *Moral Leadership and Business Ethics*. In Joanne B. Ciulla, *Ethics, The Heart of Leadership* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004, 2nd ed.), 43.

¹⁷ Harry M. Jansen Kraemer Jr., *From Values to Action: The Four Principles of Values-Based Leadership* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, April, 2011). See also: James O 'Toole, “Notes Toward a Definition of Values-Based Leadership,” *The Journal of Values-Based Leadership*, 2008, Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 10, p. 4.

¹⁸ Cited in Raghavan Iyer, *The Essential Writings of Mahatma Gandhi* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press/Oxford India Paperbacks, 2012), 69.

does not equal becoming “ineffectual” or allowing ourselves to be taken advantage by others. Commenting on these five *yamas*, Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood have rightly noted, “We must think of ourselves as the servants of the mankind, and be ready to put ourselves at the disposal of those who need us. It does not mean, however, to lend ourselves to the evil purposes of others ...The truly helpful man is like public trolley car, available to all who care to use it, but travelling, nevertheless, along a fix route to its destination.”¹⁹

From Apathy to Engagement

The *Gītā* starts with temporary apathy (*na yotsya*: 2.9) on the part of its warrior hero, Arjuna, and ends with his promise for full engagement (*kariṣye vacanaṃ tava*: 18.73) in the fulfillment of his duty. Thus, Śrī Kṛṣṇa demonstrated leadership qualities in evolving and guiding Arjuna to successful engagement in the just war. The whole *Gītā* is dedicated to enlighten us, through the example of Arjuna, about how to fully engage in our duties efficiently, effectively and ethically while at the same time ensuring our highest goal, i.e., spiritual freedom (*nissreyas*). Through the practice of selfless work (*nishkāṃ karma*) for the well-being of all beings (*sarvabhūtahite*: 5.25) and by developing steadfast wisdom, the *Gītā* teaches us how to discover the sacred in life while remaining fully engaged in the secular activities.²⁰

Thus, the key lesson the *Gītā* teaches us is how to transition from the state of inertia to one of righteous action, from the state of alienation to a state of self-confidence in the ultimate victory of ethical action. By leading from within, Śrī Kṛṣṇa inspires the warrior hero Arjuna to engage in his rightful duty by cultivating mental equilibrium and objectivity to deal with any situation or crisis. The *Gītā*'s ideal is not indifference to the world but love and compassion born out of the identity of oneself with all beings.

The Setting: Doing the Right Thing

The *Gītā* starts with the classic management dilemma: What is the right thing to do? Although Arjuna had agreed to undertake the challenge of a just war, fully aware of the gravity and the implications of the situation, at the final hour when the battle was just about to begin, he realizes the terror of the situation — that in this war, he has to shot arrows at his close relatives and teachers. His warrior nature is overcome by faint heartedness and his mind becomes confused about his allotted duty (*kārpaṇyadoṣopahatasvabhāvaḥ...dharmasammūḍhacetāḥ*: 2.7). Arjuna beseeches Śrī Kṛṣṇa to guide him about the best course of action (*yac chreyaḥ syān niścitaṃ brūhi tan me*: 2.7) as he does not see any way out of this grief which was drying up his senses (*ucchoṣaṇam indriyāṇām*: 2.8).

Warren Bennis, a preeminent leadership scholar has observed, “Leaders are people who do the right thing; managers are people who do things right.”²¹ While this may be bit of an oversimplification — *since both leaders and managers need to do things right as well as do the right thing* — doing the right thing remains the perennial leadership challenge. But doing the right thing presupposes knowing what right thing is in the first place. *This is exactly the point where the Gītā begins.* What is the highest right thing to do in any given situation? Surely, answer to this enigmatic question holds the keys to many a management conundrums. And the *Gītā* is an extended Ode to the attainment of the

¹⁹ Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood, *How to Know God: The Yoga Aphorisms of Patanjali* (Hollywood, CA: Vedanta Society, 1953/2007), 148-149.

²⁰ Satinder Dhiman, trans., *Sahaḥja-Gītā: The Essential Gītā*, p. 14.

²¹ Warren Bennis, *An Invented Life: Reflections on Leadership and Change* (New York: Perseus Books Group, 1994), 78.

ultimate, the highest good (*nissreyas*) – the knowledge of our oneness with the Ultimate Reality (*aṭma-jñānam* which is *Brahma-aṭma-aikyam*).

Mind: Our Greatest Friend and Foe

The Gītā reminds us that an unruly mind is our greatest foe and a stable mind is our greatest friend. Hence the Gītā places great emphasis on self-restraint and mental discipline. It is a common knowledge that mental strength and determination are the keys to leadership success; for leaders who are mentally weak and wayward cannot achieve a durable organizational vision or mission.

One of the hallmarks of unrestrained mind is a life given to selfish desire, anger, and greed. The Buddha also warns his disciples of these three mental traps. All wisdom traditions of the world are in agreement on this point that the self-centered desire is the source of all sorrow and evil. The Gītā calls desire, anger and greed as triple gates of hell. It clarifies that the (unsatisfied) desire is the cause of greed as well as anger. The reason the Gītā lays so much importance on curtailing the desires is because all evil proceeds from self-centered desires. A person who is selfish cannot serve others. Such a person becomes a bane to the society. Therefore, a leader must first conquer desire if he or she is to serve others.

These three traps are present in every dysfunctional organization manifested to the highest degree in its leaders. Elsewhere, Kṛṣṇa explains that attachment breeds desire, and from desire (unfulfilled) ensues anger; anger clouds judgment and when judgment is beclouded, reasoning power is lost; and with the loss of reasoning one falls from one's status as human being (2.62-63). A leader should, therefore, manage his anger well and should not let anger gain control over him. Mastering the emotion of anger is a not an easy task as many sages of past and present have reminded us. As Aristotle has deftly noted, "Anybody can become angry, that is easy; but to be angry with the right person, and to the right degree, and at the right time, for the right purpose, and in the right way, that is not within everybody's power and is not easy."²²

Many methods are recommended to control the anger, with varying degrees of effectiveness. Most people recommend the delay tactic – to not to respond at all in the heat of anger. That is effective only if one remembers to not forget this counsel of perfection at the onset of anger. Gītā says that to control anger, we need to pay attention to its root cause. Anger arises when someone stands in the way of our object of (unfulfilled) desire. And attachment to things, ideas, and opinions lie at the root of desire. Basically, to control anger, we should first guard and calm our mind. If our mind remains in a state of calm then no negative emotions can arouse in it. To be peaceful at mind, the easiest way is that we let our mind dwell within our own inner nature rather than all the time hankering outside after the worldly objects.

We should also consider cultivating a daily practice of some form of meditation, since in meditation mind becomes naturally calm and tranquil. One needs to be patient with oneself as well as with others. Practicing loving-kindness and forgiveness toward all also help us develop understanding and tolerance. One of the most effective techniques to manage anger is to keep in mind the acronym "F.I.R" denoting frequency, intensity, and

²² Quoted from Edith M. Leonard, Lillian E. Miles, and Catherine S. Van der Kar, *The Child: At Home and School* (New York, American Book Co.:1944), 203.

recovery. To manage anger effectively, we have to patiently work on reducing the frequency of the anger, its intensity, as well as the recovery period.²³

The Ultimate Recipe for Self-Leadership

If leadership is an extension of who we are, then leaders first need to manage themselves before they can aspire to lead others. Underscoring the importance of self-leadership, the Bhagavad Gītā further stresses that an individual leader must uplift himself by his own self and he must not let himself be undermined when facing a crisis. Leaders must elevate themselves by their own self-efforts (*uddhared ātmanātmānam*: 6.5) and this requires a deep understanding of the workings of the mind. For one who has conquered the mind, the mind is the best of friends, but for one who has failed to control their mind, the mind will be the greatest enemy (*ātmaiva hy ātmano bandhur ātmaiva ripur ātmanaḥ* 6.5). An untrained mind is very weak and unstable and cannot carry out any task, let alone lead. Arjuna told Śrī Kṛṣṇa that his mind was unsteady, restless, very powerful, and as difficult to control as the wind. Śrī Kṛṣṇa agreed that the mind is not easy to control, however, he said that it is possible to control the mind by constant practice and detachment or dispassion (*abhyāsenā...vairāgyeṇa ca*: 6.35).

Leaders need to employ their intellect effectively to direct their mind. In this regard, *Katha Upaniṣad* 1.3.3–4, another Indian wisdom text, likens the human body to a chariot (*ratha kalpanā*) to describe the position of individual Self (*ātma*) vis-à-vis senses (*indriya*), mind (*manas*), and intellect (*buddhi*). Mind is the reins and the five senses are the horses. The objects perceived by the senses represent the chariot's path. The intellect is the driver and the Self as the passenger acts as the enjoyer or sufferer in the association of the mind and senses. Whereas an ordinary leader is constantly driven by the wayward mind and unruly desires for sense objects, a wise leader uses the power of intelligence to discern between what is pleasant (*preyas*) and what is right (*shreyas*).

In many respects, the Bhagavad Gītā is similar to the *Katha Upaniṣad*, the one from which some of the teachings of the Bhagavad Gītā are believed by many to have been drawn. Then the *Katha Upaniṣad* goes on to describe spiritual practice using a bow-arrow simile. A seeker of the Truth should take the sacred syllable *Om* told in Upaniṣads as bow, the seeker's Self purified by constant meditation as arrow, Supreme Reality as target; by pulling back the senses from their sense objects, with heedfulness, the seeker should become one with the Supreme Reality (Brahman) as the arrow in the mark (2.2.4). This is the great identity between the individual and the universal (*Brahma-ātma-aikyam*) spoken of in the Indian wisdom texts called Upaniṣads.

This is the desideratum and the *summum bonum* of all human aspiration and quest.

Leaders See Themselves as Work-in-Progress

This is what great leaders do — they see themselves as a work in progress, and they sculpt themselves to get progressively closer to their ideal form. And their impact on the world, as a result, grows exponentially. In a letter Mandela wrote from jail to his wife Winnie, he wrote, “Never forget that a saint is a sinner who keeps trying.”²⁴

What guidance does the Gītā provide in developing transformational leaders, leaders who lead from within and put service before self? The Gītā focuses on developing

²³ Swāmī Paramārthānanda, “The Spiritual Journey: Guru Purnima Talk 2008.” Retrieved: Oct. 5, 2014. url: http://www.vedanta.gr/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/SwParam_GP2008_Spiritual-Journey_ENA4.pdf. Also see: Swāmī Paramārthānanda. General Talks. Understanding Anger (#71)

²⁴ Hitendra Wadhwa, “Nelson Mandela and the evolution of great leaders,” *Fortune Magazine*, December 6, 2013.

qualities of head and heart, entirely focusing on self-mastery. Before we can aspire to lead others well, we need to manage ourselves effectively. If leadership is an extension of who we are, then cultivation of self-discipline and self-mastery becomes our priority. The Gītā provides an extensive list of such qualities, some of which are stated below:

1. Humility, 2. Unpretentiousness, 3. Non-violence (not causing any injury to anyone through one's body, mind, and speech), 4. Forbearance, 5. Simplicity of body, mind, and speech, 6. To realize self-knowledge, approaching, serving, and following a teacher (one who is liberated-in-life), 7. Purity of body and mind, 8. Steadfastness of purpose, 9. Self-restraint, 10. Dispassion towards sense-objects, 11. Absence of egoism (absence of the sense that "I am body"), 12. Abandonment of worldly attachment, 13. Even-mindedness in favorable (desirable) and unfavorable (undesirable) circumstances, 14. Perceiving God everywhere and in everything (BG 13. 7-11).

It is important to note that all these qualities are geared towards the service aspect of leadership – preparing a leader in the service of others. A leader who is arrogant and too self-absorbed cannot really lead an organization to success. The imposter ego of the leader will stand in the way of organizational goals. In his now classic book, *Good to Great*, Jim Collins notes that compelling modesty is one of the two key competencies of what he calls level-5 leaders, the other being fierce professional will. In their now classic study of 1423 leading companies, Jim Collins and his colleagues found the most successful leaders blend “extreme personal humility with intense professional will.”²⁵

Empowering vs. Disempowering Work Culture

In order to understand human behavior better, the Gītā makes a special reference to the psychological make-up of individuals comprising three basic modes of nature – *sattva* (purity/goodness) that brings truth/harmony; *rajas* (movement/passion) that kindles action/activity, and *tamas* (ignorance/ inertia) that leads to delusion/confusion. The key to follow this tripartite division of human nature is to understand that no individual has absolute *sattvic*, *rajasic*, and *tamasic* qualities. Depending upon our inherited tendencies and current mode of living, several permutations and combinations are possible on this broad spectrum of psychological types. This knowledge fosters understanding, tolerance, and patience. At the same time, it provides guidance to effect change based on fuller information and greater understanding.

In Chapter 16 of the Bhagavad Gītā, we find very practical guidance on building an empowering (*Daivi*) work culture – characterized by fearlessness, purity, self-restraint, sacrifice, straightforwardness, non-violence, truthfulness, tranquility, gentleness, modesty, forgiveness, absence of fault-finding, greed, ostentatiousness, and envy and pride. Leaders should strive to enshrine these qualities and should try to foster such an environment where these qualities can be nurtured (16.1-3).

Similarly, the Gītā goes on to describe what may be called disempowering (*Aśuri*) work culture – characterized by hypocrisy, arrogance, self-conceit, anger, harshness, and lack of sense of discrimination between real and unreal, duty and non-duty (16.4). Leaders are aware that a strong work ethic marked by empowering qualities goes a long way to achieve workplace excellence. It is to be noted that mere work ethic is not enough to attain in as much as a hard core criminal has also a very good work ethic. What is needed is a work ethic guided by ethics in work.

²⁵ Collins, Jim. “Level 5 Leadership: the triumph of humility and fierce resolve,” *Harvard Business Review*, January 2001, 67-76.

The deeper message here is that we should not pry on the faults of others; rather, we should improve our own shortcomings. A too critical, carping attitude towards our fellow-beings is a source of much unhappiness. “If you want peace of mind,” said Sri Sarada Devi, “do not find fault with others.”²⁶ Swami Dayananda says that the purpose knowing about these values is not self-judgment or judgment of others. All kinds of people make up this world. You want to change others so that you can be free, but it never works that way.... People are what they are because they have their own backgrounds — and they cannot be otherwise.²⁷

Thus, the Gītā teaches a higher level of accountability based on one’s own innate duty (*swadharma*). The very *raison d’être* of the teachings of the Gītā was to re-awaken Arjuna to his sense of responsibility which he had temporarily lost due to delusion born of ignorance (*ajñānasamohaḥ*: 18.72). The higher accountability is garnered by renouncing egoism (*amanitvam*: 13.7), cultivating humility, team work, dignity, sharing, co-operation, compassion, harmony, trust, sacrificing lower impulses for higher needs, seeing others in you and yourself in others (*sarvātmabhāva*), etc.

Equanimity (*Samatā*): The Touchstone of Perfection in Wisdom

The Gītā regards “equanimity” or “evenness of mind” to be the *Yoga* (2:48). And the finest teaching on this topic is provided in the Gītā as follows:

*yogasthaḥ kuru karmāṇi saṅgaṃ tyaktvā dhanañjaya /
siddhyasiddhyoḥ samo bhūtvā samatvaṃ yoga ucyate // 2.48*

[Abiding in equanimity, abandoning attachment, perform actions, O Arjuna, viewing with equanimous mind success and failure. Evenness of mind (*samatvaṃ*) is *Yoga*.]

When we perform an action, we have certain expectations about its results. The actual results can be equal to our expectations, less than our expectations, more than our expectations, or totally opposite to our expectations. Whatever be the outcome, the Gītā teaches us to accept it gracefully by maintaining a state of evenness of mind (*samatā*) towards the results of our actions. By not fighting with “what is,” we conserve a lot of energy which can then be fruitfully applied in addressing the situation at hand.

Samatā (equanimity) is the “fulcrum” around which the entire teachings of the Gītā revolve. Wherever Śrī Kṛṣṇa has mentioned the highest peaks of the paths of action, knowledge, and devotion, He has very carefully interspersed “*samatā*” in their consummation (2.48, 53, 57; 5.6, 18-20; 12.13-19; 14.24, 25; 18.10, 26). So, *samatā* is the crest-jewel of perfection (*siddhi*) in all the paths to God-Realization. All virtues obtain in the mind which has cultivated equanimity. Whatever the spiritual practice, if evenness of mind (*samatā*) is not there, the goal is still far away. When our mind has become pure and our intellect “*sama*” — “balanced and equanimous” — we have attained oneness with the highest principle of existence. Such is the supreme importance of *samatā*!²⁸

²⁶ Cited from Swami Satprakashananda, *The Goal and the Way: The Vedantic Approach to Life’s Problems* (St. Louis, Missouri: The Vedanta Society of St. Louis, 1977), 93. We are told that this is the last recorded message of Sri Sarada Devi, the worthy consort of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, the greatest Indian sage-saint of the 19th century.

²⁷ Cited in Ramananda Prasad, *The Bhagavad Gita: The Song of God* (Freemond, California: American Gita Society, 1999), 246.

²⁸ According to Swāmī Rāmsukhdāsī, evenness of mind or equanimity (*samatā*) is the “acid-test” of realization according to all three disciplines (*Karmayōg*, *Jñānayōg*, *Bhaktiyōg*). In the Bhagavad Gītā, the very first definition of *Yōg* (communion with Divine) is said to be “*samatā*” — “*samatvaṃ yōgah ucyate*” (BG 2.48). Then in BG 6.23, we read “*dukha-sanjog-viyōg yōg sanjittam*.” That state is called *Yōga* which transcends the contact of sorrow. This is the “dexterity/skillfulness” in actions — “*yōga karmsu kaushalam*” (BG 2.50). Swāmī Rāmsukhdāsī states that the verses 2.48 and 6.23 “define” what the *Yōga* is according to the Gītā; and the verse 2.50 states the glory of *Yōga*. So, *Yōga* according to the Gītā is *samatā*. See:

Too often, great decisions are marred by the leader's inability to see beyond the surface in a calm and collected manner. Leaders can benefit greatly from this unique state of equanimity and objectivity in dealing with perennial leadership challenges without being disturbed by the pulls and pushes of personal likes and dislikes. *Samatā* is the best antidote to the agitations of the mind.

Attaining Equanimity through the Path of Action (Karma Yoga)

In practicing the path of action, Arjuna is advised to perform actions as an offering to the Supreme, renouncing attachment to actions and their results, remaining steadfast in equanimity. The *Gītā* tells us that the equanimity (*samatā*) can be attained both through the Path of Knowledge (*Jñānayoga*) as well as through the Path of (selfless) Action (*Karmayoga*). After having explained the *Yoga* of equanimity according to the Path of Knowledge (involving discriminating reasoning regarding the body and the soul) [2.11-2.30], Śrī Kṛṣṇa now explains equanimity (*samatā*) from the standpoint of the Path of (selfless) Action (*Karmayoga*) [2.39-53], following which one overcomes completely the fetters of *Karma*.

This equanimity has four qualities:

1. Performing actions while established in equanimity, a person does not get entangled in the shackles of *Karma*;
2. There is no loss (forfeiture) of efforts directed towards attaining this equanimity;
3. There is no fear of adverse results due to any omission in following this path; and
4. Even a little observance of this practice saves one from the great fear (caused by the unending wheel of birth and death). In other words, even a little practice of this virtue of selfless actions grants liberation.

Then comes one of the most popular verses about *Karma Yoga* (2.47): Your right is only to perform your allotted duty; that is, your right is for action alone. But you have no right whatsoever to the results thereof; that is, you are not free in this regard. Therefore, let not the fruits of action be your motive, i.e., do not become the cause of the fruit of your actions through attachment (with the instruments of actions such as body etc.); nor become attached to inaction (indifference, laziness, etc.). It means that “doing” is under our control; “happening” is under the purview of *Prārabdha*²⁹ (our earned destiny). Therefore, one should be “careful” about what one “does” and be “happy” with whatever “happens.”

As a matter of fact, the need for *Yoga* (equanimity) is paramount in the performance of actions because the path of action is marred by selfish desire and attachment. In order to act as “free-agents,” we need the discipline of “equanimity” — *yoga* — in the form of *Karma Yoga*. Do your duty for duty's sake and do your work as an offering. Work, said Khalil Gibran, is love made visible. Maintaining the evenness of mind, grow beyond the warring pairs of opposites (*nirdwandhattvam*) and strive for excellence in work (*yoga karamsu kaushalam*). This is the secret of the path of Selfless Action.

As a practical teaching, *Karma Yoga* furnishes the best set of guidelines to put service before self and to perform actions for the well-being of all beings. Regarding its efficacy, we have the testimony of Mahātmā Gaṇdhī, who verified its teachings in every sphere of

Dhiman, S., trans. (2014). *Kripāmayi Bhagavad Gītā: The Benedictory Gītā*. [Selection & Compilation, Rajendra Kumar Dhawan]. Based on Paramśraddheya Swāmījī Shrī Rāmsukhdāsī Mahārāj's Discourses. Gita Prakāshan: Gorakhpur, India.

²⁹ According to Indian philosophy, there are three kinds of *Karma*: (1) *Sañchita* or accumulated or stored up in past lives; (2) *Agāmi* or that which is yet to be done; (3) *Prārabdha* or that which is already bearing fruit. This last is that part of the accumulated actions (*Sañchita*) which has brought about the present life and will influence it until its close. — Swāmī Swarūpānanda (1909/1976, p. 406).

his life with great success. He called the Bhagavad Gītā the “Gospel of Selfless Action” and used to regard the Kurukṣetra war as an allegory of the battle that is fought in human heart. As a matter of fact, the Bhagavad Gītā’s emphasis on selfless service was the prime source of inspiration for his life and leadership. He considered selfless service as the path to self-discovery: “The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others.”

Leaders Should Lead by Example

Śrī Kṛṣṇa tells Arjuna that those in leadership position should act responsibly since whatever standards or example the leader sets people in general will follow. Leaders’ actions do speak louder than their words. In essence, leaders are really brand-ambassadors of an organization. Humanity has yet to discover a more effective way to bring about change and to lead others than by setting the example. All great leaders lead by example. Gandhi inspired emulation not so much by his professed set of values and beliefs as by the exemplary nature of his life and conduct. *He made his life his message.* This virtue of “being the change” became Gandhian hallmark and his most precious legacy by which he is remembered the most. He was the rare soul who *preached what he practiced!*

The Gītā teaches that the wise leaders act:

1. To set an example to the masses, so the unwary do not go astray (3.26);
2. For the unification of the world at large (*lokasaṃgraham*, 3.20, 3.25);
3. For the welfare of all beings (*sarvabhūtahite*, 5.25);
4. For the purification of the self (*ātmaśuddhaye*, 5.11).

All these four goals furnish an integral touchstone for leadership success in any setting. Leaders do their duty for duty’s sake (cf. Kant’s Duty Ethics), to set an example for others, to bring the communities together, for the well-being of all beings, and above all, for the purification of the mind and the heart. No higher teaching on the sublimity of a leader’s work ethic can be conceived.

In the ultimate analysis, leadership is not about changing outer conditions or others. More often than not, there is not much that we can do to change what is external to us. However, we have full control over our own conduct. “When we are no longer able to change a situation,” writes Viktor E. Frankl, “we are challenged to change ourselves.”³⁰ And when we are able to do that, in due course of time, we are also able to change the situation, unexpectedly. This is the alchemy of all social change.

From Consumer to Contributor

The Gītā is a practical manual of living. It lays down the guidelines for leading a meaningful life — a life marked by goodness and contribution. Pablo Picasso put it succinctly: “The meaning of life is to find your gift. The purpose of life is to give it away.” What makes our life purposeful and meaningful? What is the essence of being good and doing good? What does it mean to grow in goodness? How can one grow from being a consumer to becoming a contributor? The Gītā holds the keys to all these existential questions.

The Gītā recommends to approach life as a network of mutual interdependencies in which everyone has to contribute their share. And the touchstone is not mere human

³⁰ Viktor E. Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy* (New York: A Touchstone Book, 1984, 3rd ed.), 116.

welfare, but well-being of all beings. Only then we can ensure the mutual maintenance of the universe. This understanding holds the key to a sustainable future for all.

The Gītā (18.5) recommends the threefold acts of sacrifice (*yajña*), charity (*dāna*), and austerity (*tapas*) and considers them as the “purifiers of the wise.” In order to grow spiritually, one has to convert one’s whole life into an offering to the Divine. This will inspire trust, faith and hope in those led.

Selflessness is the Best Thing You Can Do for Yourself!

Misplaced ego is the greatest enemy of workplace amity and harmony. Understanding the workings of the imposter ego and thereby rendering it ineffective is the first step on the path of wisdom. In the thirteenth chapter of the Bhagavad Gītā where Śrī Kṛṣṇa begins to describe the marks or means of True Knowledge (Gītā 13. 7-11), we see “absence of self-pride” (13.7) listed as the very first mark. In the very next verse (13.8), Śrī Kṛṣṇa again states... “and absence of egotism also” (*ahamkāra’eva ca*). Please note the word “also” after the word “egotism.” Out of the 20 marks of True Knowledge listed in verses 13. 7-11, the word “also” is appended only next to “self-pride” (*“ahamkāra”*)! Something to ponder over very deeply!

As long as one is harboring a sense of distinction/superiority, regardless of any reason—justified or unjustified — one is still belaboring in vain, not much unlike the ox that turns the oil press going back and forth. When God is all there is (*Vasudevaḥ Sarvam: 7.19*), where is the need for entertaining any feelings of distinction or superiority — no matter what the justification may be?

Those who are truly awake become awake to the fact that ‘God is all there is’ — including the ones who may not be yet awake, in their estimation! This knowledge fosters amity, understanding, and harmony in all settings and removes the conflict inherent in the “game of one-up-ness” that plagues most human interaction. Likewise, we come to realize that most psychological and emotional stress is caused by our excessive self-centeredness.

Selfless service, the cardinal doctrine of the Gītā, has a great application in the realm of leadership. First and foremost, leadership is a responsibility — a call to serve — and not a position to wield power or influence. The power that is bestowed upon the leader by the followers is of the nature of trust and good faith. In other words, leadership is a fiduciary relationship. Viewed in this manner, the only reason a leader exists is to enable and empower the followers. Great leaders approach their work as a contribution, as a service, without any sense of entitlement whatsoever. “Like ‘Guardians’ of Plato’s *Republic*,” writes Al Gini, “leaders must see their office as a social responsibility, a trust, a duty, and not as a symbol of their personal identity, prestige, and lofty status.”³¹

Self-centeredness is a condition borne with a deeply ingrained sense of separateness, anchored in self-ignorance. Self-knowledge is freedom from self-ignorance; when self-ignorance transforms into self-knowledge, our need to maintain our separateness is resolved into the fullness of our being. We no longer feel the gnawing sense of inadequacy, incompleteness, and insecurity. We have arrived at an unassailable stillness, blessed with the fullness of our essential nature. We have made peace with the universe.

Marks of a Wise Leader

³¹ Al Gini, “Moral Leadership and Business Ethics” in Joanne B. Ciulla, ed., *Ethics, The Heart of Leadership* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004, 2nd ed.), 36.

There are at least four places where characteristics of an ideal sage are presented in the Gītā from different perspectives: BG 2.55-72; 12.13-20; 14.21-27; and 18.49-56. In addition, we also find reaffirmation of the same theme in selected verses of two other chapters: BG 13.7-11 and 16.1-3. For example, chapter twelve (verses 13-20) describe the marks of a devotee (*bhakta*) which have a striking similarity to the qualities of a person who has transcended the sway of three modes of material nature – *guṇatīta* (14.21-27), which in turn bear a great similarity to the characteristics of a person steadfast in wisdom (*sthitaprajñā*) as described in chapter two (verses 55-72) as follows:

That person is dear to me who is free from ill-will, friendly and compassionate; free from the sense of “I” and “mine;” equanimous in joy and sorrow, forgiving, ever-content, firm in faith with his mind ever united with Me; who has subdued his mind, senses, and body; and has surrendered heart and mind to Me.... Not agitating the world, nor agitated by it, above the sway of delight, envy, desire, and fear; who regards equally friend and foe, praise and blame, pain and pleasure, free from selfish attachments; quiet, ever-content, in harmony everywhere, firm in faith – such a person is dear to Me.³²

It is noteworthy that almost all of these qualities of an ideal sage more or less focus on emotional maturity – the ability to manage emotional disturbances and reactions calmly. Cultivating these qualities is important for everyone both in personal and professional arena. For example, being friendly and compassionate and free from malice (12.13: *adveṣṭā sarvabhūtānāṃ maitraḥ karuṇa*), being free from attachment, fear, and anger (2.56, 4.10: *vītarāgabhayakrodhaḥ*), and not being a source of annoyance to fellow-beings and not feeling vexed with the fellow-beings (12.15: *yasmān nodvijate loko lokān nodvijate ca yaḥ*) – all these are signs of emotional stability which is the key to harmony in personal and professional relationship.

This is a tall order of personal qualities for any leader to cultivate and requires years and years of dedication, commitment, and perseverance. These qualities represent the highest level of emotional maturity, self-awareness, and self-discipline, equanimity, and detachment that may appear to be unattainable by any leaders according to modern standards. Exemplar leaders like Gandhi act as “witness” of high moral leadership without whom the limits of higher human possibilities will neither be known nor sustained. In Easwaran’s estimation, who was present at one of the prayer meetings that Gandhi regularly held, Gandhi “fulfilled every condition that the Gītā lays down.”³³

Keys to a Fulfilled Life

It is important to understand that the key to life’s fulfillment according to Gītā lies in self-realization through self-knowledge. Self-realization is the means as well as the end. And all the keys to self-realization are presented in the very beginning in the Gītā (2.55-2.61): When one, finding contentment by the Self in the Self alone, completely casts off all selfish desires of the mind; neither agitated by the sorrow nor hankering after the sense pleasures; free from lust, fear, and anger; free from attachment; neither elated by good fortune nor depressed by bad; with senses subdued and mind ever absorbed in the Divine within – such a person is truly wise. The net result of cultivating these qualities is the peace, fulfillment and real happiness.

Śrī Kṛṣṇa started the teaching declaring that “the wise do not grieve” (2.11: *nānuśocanti paṇḍitāḥ*) and concludes it with an assurance “do not grieve” (18.66: *mā śucaḥ*). So, if

³² Eknath Easwaran, cited in Louis Fischer, Ed., *The Essential Gandhi*, xvii. [author’s adaptation].

³³ *Ibid.*, xvii.

you want to overcome the sorrow, attain to the liberating wisdom. What is this liberating wisdom? Just this: perform your actions as an offering to the Supreme (*Ishvara-arpanabhaṁvānā*), performing your duties without the expectation of any reward, and, above all, surrendering to the Divine within. A Western disciple, Elizabeth Usha Harding, once wrote a letter full of despair to Swami Gambhirānanda, the great Advaita Vedānta³⁴ scholar and translator. He replied: “I hope you realize that true peace can only come by surrendering to the Divine within us. The world will always go on in its own way. There can never be any permanent solution to problems created by human nature.”³⁵

Concluding Remarks: The Ultimate Psychological Security System!

Building its stance on the unshakable Law of Karma, the Gīṭā provides the ultimate security package: “No doer of good ever ends in misery:” *na hi kalyāṇakṛt kaścīd durgatiṁ tāta gacchati* (6.40). “When you do the *right thing*,” says Krishnamurti, “*right things* happen to you.” By teaching that good means lead to good ends and vice versa, the Gīṭā provides the greatest motivation to act ethically.

In keeping with the tradition of Indian philosophy, the Gīṭā starts with presenting the highest human goal to be reached first: Access the Inner treasure-house of Self-sufficiency: *ātmany evātmanā tuṣṭaḥ* (2.55), everything else will follow on its own accord. At the heart of the Gīṭā, there lies the conception of a sage of steady wisdom (*sthitaprajñā*) who has gone beyond the pair of opposites such as pleasure and pain, success and failure, virtue and vice. Steady in wisdom, the *sthitaprajñā* enjoys the constant bliss of the Self, regardless of the changing circumstances. The Gīṭā (2.55) defines *sthitaprajñā* as follows: “When a person completely casts away all the desires of the mind, *satisfied in the Self alone by the Self*, then that person is said to be one established in steady wisdom.” This wisdom is the only security worth seeking and the sure-fire armor to human sorrow and suffering.

In sum, become an instrument of the Divine in all that you do. Let all your actions be for the well-being of all beings (*sarvabhūtahite ratāḥ*: 5.25); be a role model for the bringing of the world communities together and maintenance of the world order (*lokasaṁgraham*: 3.20). Above all, accept the results of your actions with graceful equanimity, as a Grace of the Lord (*Ishvara-prasāḍabhaṁvānā*). Then your actions will never taint you. Attain the highest pure knowledge by which the One Imperishable Being is seen in all the existences, undivided in the divided: *...avibhaktaṁ vibhakteṣu*. This knowledge of the essential oneness of all existence (*sarvabhūteṣu yenaikaṁ bhāvam*) the Gīṭā regards as the purest (*sāttvik*) knowledge: *taj jñānaṁ viddhi sāttvikam* (18.20). Living with this understanding, by the Divine Grace, you will attain the communion of the individual self with the Supreme Self.

This is the timeless message of this manual for life, leadership, and liberation.

Based on the teachings of the Gīṭā, we present below 15 leadership lessons by way of concluding summary. They are set as self-evident aphorisms representing the archetypical perennial philosophy as applied to the contemporary leadership and workplace.

³⁴ Advaita literally means “not-two” and represents the knowledge of the truth of oneness of all existence. And Vedānta literally means the end of vedās (*veda-anta*) and represents the culminating wisdom of the vedās. It is also denoted by the term Upaniṣad.

³⁵ Elizabeth Usha Harding, “Reminiscences of Swami Gambhirānanda.” At the Feet of the Mother. Blog entry, *Retrieved*: Oct. 6, 2014. url: <http://ushaharding.blogspot.com/2011/03/reminiscences-of-swami-gambhirananda.html>.

Key Leadership Lessons from the Bhagavad Gītā

1. Leadership is an internal affair. All wars are first fought within the mind.³⁶ Mind matters most in life and leadership. Ultimately, right thinking and right conduct serve as the two unshakable pillars of leadership.

2. Effective Leaders master their senses instead of letting their senses master them. The leader should manage his anger and should not let anger gain control over him. Śrī Kṛṣṇa explains that from anger, delusion arises, and from delusion bewilderment of memory. When memory is bewildered, reasoning power is lost and with the loss of reasoning one falls from one's status as human being.

3. Therefore, effective leaders do not lead by anger or fear. They practice forbearance and use forgiveness as their principal armor. They are well aware that leading by anger and fear is unproductive and leads to disempowerment and disengagement.

4. Effective leaders approach life and leadership as peaceful warriors—bereft of attachment and personal likes and dislikes. Every decision they make represents a concrete choice between the right/wrong means for a just/unjust end.

5. The Gītā teaches the high art of *detached engagement* – to focus on the actions rather than the results. When we shift our attention from goal-orientation to process-orientation, the results take care of themselves.

6. Gītā teaches that selfless service is the highest principle of life and leadership. Effective leaders become instruments of the Whole and work for the well-being of all beings. This is the essence of the servant leadership.

7. The Gītā teaches us to choose the right goal (common good) and follow the right means (non-violence) and be detached from the results (by dedicating them to the Supreme).

8. Effective leaders know that self-awareness is the key to leading from within. They manage their awareness alertly to lead others effectively.

9. Self-awareness ultimately depends upon Self-knowledge. The Gītā presents detailed instructions about attaining steady abidance in Self-Knowledge (2.52-72; 13. 7-11).

10. Self-knowledge means the knowledge of one's true self at the "soul-level"—beyond senses, mind, and intellect. While all other knowledge pertains to knowing everything that can be objectified externally, self-knowledge is about knowing the knower.

11. Selfish desire obscures self-awareness and meddles with achieving life's true ends. Self-aware leaders are not motivated by personal desires or interests. Their goal is contribution through service.

12. Leader's true inspiration comes from doing selfless work. Selfless work brings equanimity of mind which in turn contributes to leadership effectiveness.

13. It is only when a leader is able to relinquish self-interest and egotism that he is able to know the true peace – rejoice and repose of the true self. Such a person then has nothing left here to do for himself (*ātmany eva ca saṁtuṣṭas tasya kāryaṁ na vidyate*: 3.27).

14. To rejoice and repose in the true self is to be the true Sage of Steadfast Wisdom of the Gītā – a *sthitaprajñā* (*ātmany evātmanā tuṣṭaḥ sthitaprajñas tadocyate*: 2.55)

15. The greatest practical lesson that the Gītā teaches us is Karma Yoga – the highest discipline to live by: *use the right means for a just cause and leave the results in hands of God.*

³⁶ Debashis Chatterjee, *Timeless Leadership: 18 Leadership Sutras from the Bhagavad Gītā* (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2012), 3.

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About the Author

Professor Satinder Dhiman, Ph.D., Ed.D.:

Satinder Dhiman, PhD, EdD, is Associate Dean, Chair & Director of the MBA Program, and Professor of Management at Woodbury University, Burbank, California. Professor Dhiman has also served as the Chair for a special MBA Program for Mercedes-Benz executives, China. He holds a PhD in Social Sciences from Tilburg University, Netherlands, an EdD in Organizational Leadership from Pepperdine University, Los Angeles, and a Master's degree in Commerce from Panjab University, Chandigarh, India, having earned the Gold Medal. *He has also completed advanced Executive Leadership Programs at Harvard, Stanford, and Wharton.* He is recipient of the prestigious 2004 ACBSP International Teacher of the Year Award and the Steve Allen Excellence in Education Award, 2006. A widely-published author, co-editor, and co-author, his most recent book, *Seven Habits of Highly Fulfilled People: Journey from Success to Significance* (2012), presents seven gifts as transformative habits of mind geared toward attaining lasting meaning and fulfillment in both personal and professional life. In addition, two of his forthcoming publications include: *Gandhi and Leadership: New Horizons in Exemplary Leadership* (forthcoming, 2015: Palgrave-Macmillan); *Leading Spiritually: Ten Effective Approaches to Workplace Spirituality* (2014: Palgrave-Macmillan).

Dr. Dhiman has published research with his colleagues in various eminent international journals such as *Organization Development Journal*, *Journal of Management Development*, *Journal of Social Change*, *Journal of Applied Business and Economics*, *Performance Improvement*, *Business Education & Accreditation*, *Business Renaissance Quarterly*. On April 18, 2013, Dr. Dhiman also served as the **opening speaker at TED-x Conference** @ College of the Canyons, CA. Dr. Dhiman has served as a Chair and member of ACBSP Peer Review Team (PRT) and also serves as an ACBSP mentor to several universities in the USA, Europe, and India. He has been recently elected as the President of International Chamber for Service Industry (ICSI): 2014-2015.