



The Bhagavad Gita and the Psychology of Inner Transformation

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Abstract

The purpose of the paper is to re-interpret the Bhagavad Gita as a psychological document of an early time period, which anticipates some of the modern counseling, psychotherapeutic, emotional regulation and behavioural transformation theories. It has been proposed that Arjuna's *vishada* (emotional breakdown) represents some of the earliest recorded instances of emotional breakdown and that of Krishna's therapy a finely-tuned form that falls somewhere between what is called modern day CBT (Cognitive Behavioural Therapy) and existential psychology, trauma counselling and transpersonal psychology. The six therapeutic stages (i.e., stabilization, cognitive reframing, self-knowledge, behavioural activation, emotional integration and transpersonal expansion) are the items discussed in the conversation between Arjuna and Krishna. The paper embeds the Gita in the context of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), focusing on the Gita's message on human behaviour, personality, ethics, and well-being. It is a comprehensive model of psychological healing from crisis to clarity that can be found in the Gita and is a profound and ageless text for mental health, ethical choices, and the inner strength of today's world.

Keywords: Bhagavad Gita, psychology, counseling, cognitive reframing, Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), existential psychology, transpersonal therapy.

Introduction

The Bhagavad Gita, which is part of the *Bhishma Parva* of the Mahabharata, is regarded as a spiritual and philosophical text. But, under its theological veneer, is a well-developed psychological matrix. The Gita is a philosophical text in world literature that is unique in its setting, as the warrior is immobilized by despair on the battlefield. The Gita is not a purely metaphysical discussion but it begins with the most human of situations: Arjuna's paralysis, fear, moral dilemma, and emotional crisis. This is the opening crisis of a complex and profound dialogue between the warrior Arjuna and his charioteer-guru Krishna.

In this paper, the Bhagavad Gita is described as a spiritual text as well as an early textbook in human psychology and counseling. This therapeutic curve of the Gita from dismay to enlightenment is similar to that of modern psychotherapy. Krishna's style of questioning, promising, thinking, directing behaviour, integrating emotions and trans-personal revelation is one whole psychological trip from crisis to self-realization.



By analysing the Gita through textual interpretation and in the context of comparative psychological understandings, this paper explores the Gita as a proto-psychological text that anticipates key concepts of modern psychology. The study highlights that the Gita is a universal document of psychological wisdom that can enhance the psychological concepts of the contemporary world in relation to emotional health, leadership, and inner strength.

Arjuna's *Vishada*: The Symptomatology of Emotional Breakdown

The battlefield of Kurukshetra is not only an external battlefield of war, it also is an internal battlefield of the human mind:

The *Bhagavad Gita* is framed in a unique setting: a war is about to begin, and Arjuna, the leading warrior, suddenly develops a case of nerves. He becomes overwhelmed and confused. This state of emotional and mental paralysis is not due to cowardice but arises from a deeper conflict within him. (Charan)

Arjuna's dilemma is not merely a military or strategic one, but an existential one, and one that is psychological, in which duty, emotion, morality, kinship, fear and identity intertwine. The chariot, situated between the two armies, is a psychological battlefield on which uncertainty, sadness, moral confusion and emotional overdrive overpower him. This is well pictured psychologically in chapter one of the *Bhagavad Gita*. The symptoms of Arjuna are symptoms of acute stress reaction or panic reaction according to modern psychology. Begins to let him down: his legs tremble, his mouth becomes dry, his skin is on fire, his heart is heavy, he cannot stand up and the *Gandiva* falls from his hands. This is the physical symptoms that he is suffering from and that his emotional illnesses have taken over his body. Meanwhile, he has intense emotional responses, such as sadness, pity, fear, guilt, helplessness and intolerable empathy for people he must battle against. He also loses his ability to think logically: he enters the world of disastrous thinking and a confused moral framework, hopelessness and impaired judgment. Behaviourally, he is perceived as being avoiding, withdrawing, not doing something and wanting to get away from what is asked of him. Arjuna's state can be compared to what is referred to today in medical terms as "moral injury", "panic-like symptoms", "anxiety-induced paralysis", "existential dread" and "trauma-related response". Because it is a crisis that is common to everyone, who has been burdened with too many responsibilities, with moral dilemmas, with too many emotional problems and with irresponsible fear of the consequences that cannot be reversed. It is noteworthy that the *Gita* does not begin with any abstract philosophy, and it begins with psychology. It begins in an unbalanced unclear mind, and a mind that needs to be led back to the purposeful action.

Krishna as Counsellor

The first and most important job of the counsellor is to bring the troubled person to a state of equilibrium, this is the job that Krishna has to perform in the beginning. In order to establish a safe relational connection with Arjuna, Krishna says to him, *sakha*, friend, before he gives him his metaphysical knowledge and moral teachings. This is similar to the therapeutic relationship that is established with the counsellor in contemporary psychotherapy in which the trust in the therapist is the foundation of healing, reflection and transformation with the client:

Krishna, after recognising the cause for Arjuna's fear, taught him skills to cope with this issue by teaching the awareness of job devotion, reflection, the endless spirit, the non-duality and work detachment principle. (Thakur et al. 30294)

Krishna neither condemns Arjuna's sadness, nor does he leave him there. Rather than that, he gradually helps Arjuna to emerge from the emotional abyss and stops him from becoming more and more panicked, avoiding and paralyzed. He questions the worrisome negative thoughts that have taken over Arjuna, and starts to remove the mental darkness of sorrow and fear. Krishna questions Arjuna's irrationality and recalls him of who he is, a



warrior, his capacity, strength and responsibility. The interventions are similar to the grounding, crisis stabilization and cognitive de-escalation strategies employed in modern counselling. As poor cognition makes them more emotionally distressed, less likely to be able to make judgments, more fearful and without any sense of ability, it becomes a significant problem. The rational questioning method, therefore, is used by Krishna, somewhat akin to the method used in CBT (Cognitive Behavioural Therapy). He questions Arjuna - why should he be sad? Why was he weak at a critical time, and why does he fear? This questioning, by no means humiliates Arjuna, but rather, it cuts into his perspective, which is somewhat skewed. This questioning is not a sign of shame to Arjuna; it is a place where he can re-cognize and look at it from another perspective. Thus, Krishna calms the emotional storm in Arjuna's mind, removes his misunderstandings, gets him to realize, and puts the brakes on the possible paralysis of the mind stemming from panic.

Cognitive Reframing through Jnana Yoga

Once Arjuna begins to learn to manipulate his emotions, Krishna shows him a new paradigm to think and feel, one that is beyond his current life, the *Atman*. Arjuna's understanding of death is changed by Krishna's explanation in Chapter 2.13: "Just as the boyhood, youth, and old age come to the embodied Soul in this body, in the same manner, the attaining of another body is due to the soul's migration" ("What Happens After Death").

Death is no longer an end in itself; it is now proposed that death is a transition, a continuation of the journey of the Self. This is an answer to Arjuna's fear of loss, fear of death, identity crisis, and meaninglessness. From this point of view, the teaching of Krishna is akin to existential therapy dealing with the face of death, suffering, freedom, responsibility, and the quest for meaning. When Krishna shows the impermanence of the body and the permanent nature of the Self, Arjuna is able to see past the urgency of the moment and be able to elevate his consciousness to a higher level. This is also aligned with the idea of the practice of self-distancing exercises, and to mindfulness based cognitive therapy, in which the person is taught to not fully identify with their thoughts, feelings and body sensations. "Mindfulness is the practice of paying attention to the present moment without allowing thoughts to spiral into anxiety or judgment ("Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) Benefits")." This psychological insight of Krishna is further enhanced with the doctrine of the three *Gunas* (*Sattva*, *Rajas*, and *Tamas*). *Sattva* is aware, harmonious, pure, witty, and balanced. *Rajas* - to be restless, ambitious, agitated, to desire, excessive activity, etc. The four *Tamas* signs are sloth, delusion, stupor, and lack of discrimination. In this analysis, Krishna offers another 'finer' classification of the human personality, motivation, and action. In essence, his explanation foreshadows a number of the questions raised by contemporary personality psychology and behavioural sciences by demonstrating the variations between mental qualities and perception, action, and emotion. At this stage, Arjuna is no longer in the emotional state of confusion, but he has begun to look at his dilemma from a new perspective, from a new angle, and viewed with greater clarity, detachment, and depth.

Behavioural Activation through Karma Yoga

When the mind becomes clear, Krishna shifts to an action-oriented therapeutic path. His instructions on Karma Yoga are like behavioural therapy; the focus is on disciplined action, inner detachment, commitment to duty, and action without undue concern with the results ("What Is Karma Yoga? Essence of Karma Yoga Philosophy"). Modern behavioural therapy works on similar principles, establishing the person in the world around them through purposeful action, minimizing aversive behaviour, bringing back their control of their situation, and challenging their mental paralysis by giving them structured responsibility. The doctrine of Krishna further lowers performance anxiety by helping move the thoughts away from success/failure and into dharma based action, through the use of the word *nishkama karma*. This redirecting takes away the worry about results and



lets the person act with more calmness and self-confidence. Likewise, the concept of *samatvam* (the balance of emotions) which is broadcasted by Krishna is important in this regard to note that there is a balance in terms of eating, sleeping, work and emotional expression. The teachings are remarkably similar to contemporary approaches of wellness psychology, which consider moderation, emotion management, and intentional action as crucial factors in mental wellness.

Emotional Integration through Bhakti Yoga

Emotional integration is essential to heal the emotional wounds; this is where Bhakti comes into the centre of Krishna's healing vision, beyond the level of cognition and action. Devotion and surrender (bhakti) does not mean weakness or passivity. Instead, it is about surrendering control, believing in a greater moral and spiritual law, and relinquishing fear-based selfishness. "Shree Krishna asks Arjun to give up all doubts and surrender his intellect with his mind fixed in loving devotion to God alone ("Bhagavad Gita Chapter 12: Bhakti Yog")".

Emotional flexibility, resilience, and inner stability are the psychological effects of Bhakti. The emotional burden is so completely changed into peace through Krishna's gift of *prasāda*, or grace, because it makes it possible to accept, to be self-compassionate, and to be emotionally healed. This is similar to contemporary strategies like acceptance therapy, self-compassion therapy, and other healing processes, which assist people to shift from resistance to reconciliation. Krishna's stress on the habit of remembrance or *smriti* can also be seen as a prefiguring of meditative attention and of the mind being rooted in a sustaining spiritual awareness. Therefore, Bhakti adds the emotional aspect to therapy, turning anxiety, fear, and grief into acceptance, trust, and devotion.

The next step of Krishna's therapeutic approach transcends the personal and emotional to the transpersonal realm. In Chapter 11, the *Vishvarupa Darshana* is a transpersonal experience in which Arjuna sees Krishna in his cosmic form and sees everything that was, is, and will be in one glance. This is an experience beyond the confines of the Small Self and opens up the space of a Greater Order. Transpersonal psychology recognizes that there are parallel experiences in mystical experience, intense meditation, altered consciousness, and near-death insight that involve the individual transcending his or her personal boundaries. These experiences can help alleviate the fear, attachment, isolation, and self-absorbed anxiety that can be experienced in the face of suffering by trying to situate it in a larger existential and spiritual context. Now, Arjuna is taken beyond the individual limits of fear and enters the cosmic consciousness, and thus he now perceives his dilemma not only as an individual tragedy but as part of the universal laws of the cosmos.

Transpersonal Psychology and the Cosmic Vision

The *Vishvarupa Darshana* in Chapter 11 represents a peak transpersonal experience in the Bhagavad Gita. In this moment, Arjuna witnesses Krishna's cosmic form and sees past, present, and future simultaneously within it. This extraordinary vision breaks the narrow confines of the ego and reveals a larger cosmic order in which individual life, duty, suffering, and destiny are placed within a vast universal framework. Transpersonal psychology recognizes similar experiences in mystical moments, profound meditation, altered states of consciousness and near death experiences, where the individual's sense of self transcends the boundaries of personal experience. These experiences expand awareness and diminish fear, attachment, and isolation as the individual is able to view his or her existence from a perspective greater than personal. Therefore, *Vishvarupa Darshana* takes Arjuna beyond the parameters of fear and instills him with cosmic awareness.



Integration and Rebirth of Agency

Krishna shares with Arjuna the transpersonal revelation of the Vishvarupa and then unites Arjuna's knowledge and returns him to a more purposeful way of living. The cosmic vision does not leave Arjuna unengaged or out of the world; it empowers him to be more re-engaged and well-balanced with the world, more connected, mentally alert, and emotionally attuned. Krishna recalibrates the action-oriented self of Arjuna; He enables him to develop a well-balanced spiritual and psychological structure by weaving in knowledge, devotion, and duty. This is the final word of Arjuna: It is *karishye vacanam tava*, 'I will act as you instruct', which restores Arjuna's agency (Prabhupada). These words are an indicator of the restoration of decision-making authority, an end to emotional paralysis, new confidence, and psychological wholeness. He's no longer the broken and confused warrior of Chapter 1 but has become a self-realized warrior who can now act with clarity, courage, and inner stability.

Comparison with Modern Psychological Schools

Krishna's therapeutic approach in the Bhagavad Gita can be effectively juxtaposed with a number of contemporary psychological schools; important to note here is that Krishna guides Arjuna through cognition, emotion, action, meaning, and self-realization:

The timeless wisdom of the Gita, when integrated with modern psychological practices, can provide a holistic approach to addressing the complexities of the human mind and promoting overall well-being. (Kalia et al. 725) The techniques of cognitive-behavioural therapy are very similar to those the Gita teaches: recognising the irrational thoughts, questioning them, changing their approach to duty, changing their notion of suffering, and making rational choices. In Chapter 1, Arjuna is emotionally overgeneralizing, worrying about what may happen, has some moral confusion, and catastrophic thinking. These misconceptions gradually get corrected by Krishna, who gives him a wider spiritual, moral, and philosophical perspective. Similarly, existential psychology appears in the Gita, where there is a dialogue that confronts questions of meaning, obligation, death, freedom, responsibility, and authenticity. Arjuna's love for Krishna is similar to Viktor Frankl's or Rollo May's love for God; like the existential thinkers, Krishna does not take suffering away from Arjuna, but rather gives him meaning in suffering and a way to live his life that is in accordance with his dharma. It is also in the Gita that the focus is on the inner potential, the realization of the self, personal growth, and the fulfillment of the higher nature of man, which is Humanistic Psychology. This is in line with Carl Rogers' and Abraham Maslow's theories, which showed that self-actualization is one of the principal areas of psychological health. The first things that Krishna does to Arjuna's breakdown are also the same as in trauma and crisis counselling – stabilising Arjuna's mind, preventing another breakdown, listening to his distress, and slowly bringing Arjuna back into a state of clarity and agency. The Gita also follows the principle of “sakshi bhava” (a witness-consciousness and discarding attachment to the outcome and disciplined awareness and inner steadiness) in parallel with the principles of mindfulness psychology. They are similar to some mindfulness based therapies we have today in which people learn how to ‘watch’ their thoughts and feelings but not get taken over by them. Modern experts often conclude:

Nevertheless, it appears beneficial for psychologists to continue to explore the ways in which the Gita can contribute to mental wellness by offering a culturally sanctioned, time-tested way of approaching life's dilemmas.(Dhillon)



The Gita as Part of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS)

The Bhagavad Gita is another important text in the Indian Knowledge System as it provides a holistic understanding of human life that incorporates psychology, ethics, education, spirituality, and social responsibility. It gives a lot of psychological anthropology in the form of a discussion about the nature of self, mind, intellect, ego, emotions, desire, attachment and inner conflict. It also provides an ethical norm, which establishes a standard of values other than personal gain, but also personal duty, self-discipline and greater good. The Gita also has a profound understanding of the interdependence of the environment and the cosmos which puts human life in a larger framework of ecology, social, obligation, and divine. It is a dialogic methodology that consists of questioning, reflection, counselling, progressive teaching and experiential insight, which is very effective in the field of pedagogy. It is a book of spiritual psychology and does not even try to differentiate between mental health, and moral clearness, emotional balance, disciplined action, and inner realisation. These models can be adapted to improve the current education system with the NEP 2020 vision, and seamlessly bring together knowledge with values, leadership with self-mastery, mental health with cultural rootedness etc. The knowledge in the Gita is thus not only of religious or philosophical nature, but it has been used as models in education, leadership development, counselling, emotional strength and mental health in Indian Knowledge Systems as well.

Conclusion

The Bhagavad Gita is not just a religious or philosophical text; it could be seen as a great psychological manual on how to deal with conditions of crisis, confusion, fear, and moral dilemmas. The initial natter between Krishna and Arjuna isn't a calm conversation of contemplation, but it's a conversation of breakdown. Arjuna's breakdown on the battlefield is among the first and best literary representations of psychological suffering, encompassing physical, emotional, cognitive, moral and behavioural aspects. His crisis is a very human one because it reflects that of anybody who's feeling overwhelmed by what he or she should do, who's in a dilemma about ethics, who feels they can't do something because of sadness, fear, and uncertainty. The teaching of Krishna here is a healing and transformation, gradual. He quiets Arjuna's disturbed mind, reveals the fallacy of mind, reveals the fallacy of death, duty, and self, then teaches him Karma Yoga to get him into action, tells him about Bhakti, and then enlarges him by bringing him to *Vishvarupa*. They have some striking parallels with modern-day therapeutic approaches.

The Gita is still relevant because it has a comprehensive understanding of human suffering. Not mentalistic but a holistic approach which doesn't separate the mind from ethics, action, emotion, society or spirituality. Instead, it provides psychological health, as the fruits of inner clarity, disciplined action, emotional balance, self-knowledge, devotion and action according to dharma. In all the discourse, Krishna does not tell Arjuna that he should avoid the truth of his predicament, that it was not a moral dilemma, or that his life should be given up. Instead, he educates him to look, feel, act, and find his own conflict in a wider cosmic context. This not only helps as a spiritual guide but also as a means of strengthening the mind, gaining control over it, and living positively. The healing wisdom of the Gita is extremely relevant in today's world, in which the stresses of anxiety, stress, identity conflict, work stress, emotional exhaustion, and moral dilemmas are on the rise. Offers a robust framework for mental strength, ethical values, emotional rejuvenation, leadership, and empowerment. Finally, the Gita shows that healing is not a matter of simply letting go of the pain; it's about changing the attitude of the individual to the pain by means of knowledge, action, devotion, balance and self-realisation. The Bhagavad Gita is still a timeless guide to mental wellness and spiritual wisdom in this respect.



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