What to do with the self?

Good and bad behaviour in the corporate world

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This is the use of memory:
For liberation—not less of love but expanding
Of love beyond desire, and so liberation
From the future as well as the past.

T.S. Eliot, "Little Gidding" III,
The Four Quartets.

You do me honour by inviting me here this evening, but I'm not sure I am worthy of this honour. To be amongst old friends in my favourite city is reward itself; to be invited to speak in the memory of the admirable Subhas Ghosal, someone I looked up to all my life, is a privilege. I am going to speak this evening about a work-in-progress, a new book, and that too at an early stage. This talk falls somewhere between business, philosophy and literature, and I fear that it might leave everyone dissatisfied in the end. My excuse for giving it in this forum is that its hero is an advertising person.

In the spring of 2002 I decided to take an academic holiday. My wife thought it a strange resolve. She was familiar with our usual holidays, when we armed ourselves with hats, and blue and green guides, and trudged up and down over piles of temple stones in far away places like Khajuraho and Ankor Wat. She also knew of our visits to our beach house near Alibagh, where we took a dozen

books and did nothing but read. But she was puzzled by an 'academic holiday'.

I explained to her that in college I had read Aristotle, Euripides, Dante, Marx and other classics of western civilization, but I had always yearned to read the Indian classics and had never got a chance. The closest I had come was to take Professor Ingalls' Sanskrit class at Harvard when I was an undergraduate. It was only for a year, but it was enough to whet my appetite. So, now forty years later I wished to read the texts of classical India, if not in the original, but at least with a scholar of Sanskrit.

My wife gave me a sceptical look, and after a pause she said, "It's a little late in the day for a mid-life crisis, isn't it?" A few minutes later, she added, "Why don't we go instead on a cruise to the Greek islands?"

At Laxmi's dinner party

Somewhat to my annoyance, my 'academic holiday' became the subject of animated discussion at a dinner party in Delhi the following week. Our hostess, Laxmi, innocently asked what we were doing this summer, where we were going? My wife replied in a voice that couldn't hide her frustration, "Ask him, he is the one who wants to go back to school." Laxmi gave me a look of mild disapproval, and took my wife's

hand and in a confidential voice said, "Now, now, you better tell me all this about, my dear?" And the two sat down and began to talk in hushed tones as though it was the latest scandal in our city.

Our hostess is a snob. She is famous in Delhi's society for cultivating the successful, the famous and the powerful. She had ignored us for years but this changed in the past two years and we had become regulars at her brilliant dinners. I thought her friendly and captivating but my wife reminded me more than once that her warmth and charm were in direct proportion to my recent success as a columnist and writer. She always introduced me as 'an old friend', but I don't think she had a clue about the meaning of 'friendship'. Her only interest in people lay in their social position, and mine, I suppose, was in the ascendant. Even in Delhi society where money is now the chief symbol of status, a published author seems to command prestige. She was using me, but I was happy to be used, not only because I met interesting people at her gatherings, but also because she was always making herself useful, helping us out with things that we couldn't easily do for ourselves.

"So, what is this I hear about wanting to go away to read old books?" Laxmi suddenly

turned to me accusingly, "Of what possible use is that?"

"Knowledge, I suppose?" I answered with a weak smile.

"It doesn't sound very practical."

Two women in exquisite silk sarees, one from Kanchipuram and another from Benares, now came and joined us. One had a string of pearls around her neck and the other lovely diamonds on her wrists. Both had heavily mascaraed eyelashes, painted lips, and rouged cheeks, and it was apparent how much their lives consisted in a desperate struggle to keep their faded charms. They began to speak in loud, metallic voices without a moment's pause, as though they were afraid that if they stopped they might not be able to start again. A young man from the Ministry of External Affairs also joined our group, but seeing that he couldn't get in a word, he remained silent. A younger man followed him. He was from an aristocratic but impoverished family near Lucknow, and he was dishing out the most outrageous compliments to everyone around him.

"At least you could be reading new books," resumed Laxmi. "Don't tell me you are going to turn religious on us?" And she began to explain to the others my idea of an academic

holiday, giving suitable and sympathetic looks to my wife as she did so.

"There is little risk of that happening," said my wife. "He is too much of a sceptic. But his father -- now that is a different matter -- his father was a mystic. Did you know that?"

"Really, I didn't!" said the lady in Benares silk.

"Every day he meditated, all his life, and he died two years ago without having had any effect on his son." She looked at me indulgently and added, "He wants to believe, but he cannot. It is some kind of flaw, I suppose, but he just cannot believe in God."

I was irritated that my wife was talking about my deepest beliefs in the most nonchalant way, as though she were referring to the latest features on an LG washing machine in Khan Market.

"You haven't turned Hindutva, have you?"

"But tell us, what books are you planning to read?" asked the diplomat

"Oh, this and that, you know."

He insisted on knowing the texts. So, I admitted somewhat reluctantly that I had been

thinking of texts like the *Mahabharata,* the *Manusmriti,* the *Kathopanishad….*

"Good lord, man!" exclaimed Benares silk. "You haven't turned *Hindutva*, have you?"

I think her remark was made in jest, but it upset me. I asked myself, what sort of secularism have we created in our country that has appropriated my claim to my intellectual heritage? The pain, however, did not go away. I was reminded of a casual remark of an acquaintance from Pune, who mentioned that she had always visited the Shiva temple near her home, but lately she had begun to hide this from her 'secular' friends. She feared they might pounce on her, quick to brand her an extremist or superstitious.

I was born a Hindu, had a normal Hindu upbringing, and like many in the middle class I went to an English medium school that gave me a "modern education". Both my grandfathers belonged to the Arya Samaj, a reformist sect of Hinduism that came up in the 19th century, which advocated a return to the Vedas, a diminished role for *brahmins* and vigorous social reform -- of the caste system, widow remarriage, etc. But my father decided to take a different path. When he was studying to be an engineer, he was drawn to the syncretic sant tradition of *bhakti.* He found a kindly Guru, who taught him the

power and glory of direct union with God through meditation.

When I was growing up, I remember we had to be quiet in the evenings as he meditated in the adjoining room. My sensible mother would encourage us to get our homework done at this time. After he completed his meditation, he would get up, come over and tell us a story before dinner, usually from the *Mahabharata*, which was a nice reward for our silence. But we didn't appreciate that our friends went on holidays to Kashmir but we had to visit the Guru's ashram in Beas.

The striking thing about growing up Hindu was the atmosphere of chaotic tolerance. My grandmother in Lyallpur used to visit the Sikh *gurdwara* on Mondays and Wednesdays and a Hindu temple on Tuesdays and Thursdays; she saved Saturdays and Sundays for the discourses of holy men (including Muslim *pirs*) who were forever visiting our town. In between there were lots of Arya Samaj ceremonies when anyone was born, married, or died. My grandfather would jest that she would also have made room in her busy schedule for the Muslim mosque had they allowed her in. But my practical uncle thought her approach sensible. He felt she was merely taking out enough insurance so that someone up there heard her.

Despite this religious background, I grew up agnostic. I have a liberal attitude that is a mixture of scepticism and sympathy towards my tradition. I believe that our most cherished ends in life are not political. Religion is one of these and it gets demeaned when it enters public life. Hence, religion and the state must be kept separate, and to believe this is be secular. I think that India would die if secularism were to die, and if we abandon secularism we would become like tragic Pakistan.

"You will spend a lot less time worrying about what people think of you if only you realised how seldom they do."

After we got home from the dinner party, and as we were changing for bed, my wife and I talked about the evening. I was still smarting from Benares Silk's remark about *Hindutva*, and I burst out accusingly, "I wish you hadn't talked about my project! And you know what she's like -- now all of Delhi will be talking about it."

"What does it matter?" retorted my wife. "You will spend a lot less time worrying about what people think of you if only you realised how seldom they do."

She was right, of course. I told her that I wanted to read the texts to find out more

about the wonderful concept of *dharma*, duty. Unlike my father, whose chief end had been *moksha*, I was seeking a different perfection. I wanted to know the *right* way to live in this world. Mine was a moral quest, and I wanted to know what is my duty in the world, especially now, in the third stage of my life. Did it include, as Mahatma Gandhi had thought, having to fight injustice, poverty and bad behaviour? Manu's orthodox answer was that one's dharma is one's caste duty, but Bhishma in the *Mahabharata* says that dharma is subtle (*sukshma*) and it is not easy to grasp. "I am an engineer," my father once said to me, "So, what is my dharma?" And then he answered his rhetorical question, "My *dharma* is to be the best possible engineer I can be." Clearly, he and many in the educated Indian middle-class attached 'excellence' to their teleological concept of duty.

Gradually, I calmed down as my wife turned the conversation subtly, and we went on to do what anyone does after a party. We analysed the people and what they had said. We called someone too aggressive, and another too retiring; someone too self-satisfied, and another too self-critical; someone too conceited, another too modest. So we went on and soon I forgot about my anxieties and indeed about myself.

As she turned around to sleep, I realised that she was right -- I was becoming touchy and self-absorbed. Ever since my last book, I had begun to worry too much about myself. I was anxious that academics still did not accept me as a writer and thought of me as a corporate interloper pretending to be writer. I worried that journalists disliked me, thinking that I was muscling in on to their turf. I fretted about my public image, my writer's persona, and the more I worried the more dissatisfied I became. I began to notice slights when none were intended.

However, once I stopped thinking about myself, I tended to become all right. As I thought more about it, I recognized that my 'self' or my 'I' seemed to loom large in my consciousness. But once my attention got diverted away from myself, my 'I' seemed to diminish and other things or other people entered and filled the vacant space in my mind. When I had been absorbed in writing my last book I had no time to think of myself -- my consciousness was always filled with other things. And I seemed to be happier. So, I wondered, does the secret to happiness lie in replacing the 'I' in my consciousness with the 'other'?

I could tell from her steady breathing that my wife was now fast asleep. I thought with a smile about how she had cleverly turned my

mind away from my 'self'. I later learned from the Upanishads that the awareness of the 'I' or '*ahamkara*' occupies an inordinately large space within the consciousness of each one of us. The reason is that we are not only conscious, but we are also conscious that we are conscious. We are two selves inside, one that is doing and acting and another that is watching the one who is doing. The *Munduka Upanishad* likens these to two birds, sitting on a tree. "One who eats the fruit, while the other, eating nothing, looks intently on." There is a duality built into us, and the Upanishad sees in this duality the beginning of the idea of the human and the divine; the one who eats the fruit is the human self, while the observer is the spirit or the principle of the divine. While I have failed to grasp the latter, I do clearly perceive the negative quality in '*ahamkara*' or excessive I-ness in my daily life, which is not only the cause of so much of my grief but also of much bad behaviour in the world.

I take an academic holiday

In the end, my wife decided to be a good sport. She gradually bought the idea of an academic holiday. And so in the fall, we found ourselves at the University of Chicago, surrounded by young men and women with considerably more hair on their heads and substantially less cynicism in their hearts. On Tuesdays and Thursdays in the afternoon we

could be seen in Swift Hall sitting in class on straight back oak-plank chairs listening intently to Wendy Doniger lecture with great charm and humour on the *Mahabharata.* My fellow students were too polite to say it but I was an implausible student -- a husband, a father of two grown up boys, and a taxpayer. I wondered if this book might help me to recover my soul -- a soul that was heavily overlaid with decades of weighty attention to the market shares of Vicks Vaporub, Ariel detergent, and Whisper napkins. Could I become in some ways a better human being as a result of reading this book?

Over the next two years I read eight ancient texts. It was the perfect student's life, filled with ideas, but without the tension of exams, papers, credits, careers, and the dreaded future. When things got too academic we hopped on bus number 6 from across the street of our apartment and spent an afternoon in downtown Chicago. But there were hard times as well. On the occasional blistery morning, as I trudged to the library in the snow and the wind, I sometimes wondered what we were doing so far away from home. These moments of self-doubt usually came on days when the texts refused to speak to me, but fortunately they were rare and far between.

Our most unusual class, by far, was with an engaging humanist, Paul Friedrich, who made us read the philosophical poem, the *Bhagavad Gita*, as a work of literature. There were seven of us in his class, including my wife; he made each of us buy a different translation of the text from the dozen or so on the shelves of the local bookstore. On Fridays between 9 am and noon in a small seminar room we would read the ancient text, line by line, from our different translations. There was a timeless quality about our Socratic discussions where only truth, goodness, and beauty seemed to matter. Sometimes we might spend an hour over a single verse, but usually we were able to cover two chapters over three hours.

One of the finest moments in all of literature occurs in Book 6 of the *Mahabharata*, when Arjuna refuses to fight. A great war is about to begin between the virtuous Pandavas and their evil cousins, the Kauravas, who have usurped their kingdom. Nearly all the royal families of the Indian subcontinent are ranged on one side or the other on the battlefield of *Kurukshetra*. This is also the setting for the *Bhagavad Gita*, whose opening lines inform us that this is no ordinary battlefield -- it is also a moral field (*dharmakshetra*) between good and evil within each of us and the state of our mind.

Arjuna's Dilemma

Arjuna, the Pandava prince and commander in chief, stands at the head of his troops at the beginning of the war. As he is about to lift his bow something goes wrong, and he speaks to his charioteer:

Krishna,
halt my chariot
between the armies!

Far enough for me to see
these men who lust for war
ready to fight with me
in the strain of battle.
(1. 21-22)

After Arjuna spoke, Krishna halted their splendid chariot between the armies, and

Arjuna saw them standing there:
fathers, grandfathers, teachers,
uncles, brothers, sons,
grandsons and friends.
(1.26)

As he surveys the field full of his kinsmen who want war, Arjuna gets dejected and is filled with strange pity and says:

My limbs sink,
my mouth is parched,

my body trembles,
the hair bristles on my flesh.

The magic bow slips
from my hand, my skin burns,
I cannot stand still,
my mind reels.
(1.29-30)

He sees no good in killing his kinsmen in battle. Everyone empathises with Arjuna's dilemma, certainly, but this is also rich poetry, and it reminded me of the Greek poet, Sappho, who expressed similar sentiments in a poem about jealousy. Arjuna sees so many on the enemy side are blameless, for whom he has great affection, and with whom he played when he was young. In the ensuing war he will have to kill as many of them as possible. How can it be right to kill the ones you love?

Saying this in the time of war
Arjuna slumped into the chariot
and laid down his bows and arrows,
His mind tormented by grief.
(1.47)

Arjuna had hitherto been of the war party; hence the charioteer is dumbfounded at this sudden volte-face, as indeed Eisenhower's driver might have thought it strange if he had dithered on the eve of Normandy landings.

Arjuna sat dejected,
filled with pity,
his sad eyes blurred by tears.
Krishna gave him counsel.
(II.1)

Seeing him thus, Krishna asks,

Why this cowardice
in time of crisis, Arjuna?
The coward is ignoble, shameful,
foreign to the ways of heaven.
(II.2)

And Arjuna replies,

It is better in this world
to beg for scraps of food
than to eat meals smeared with the
blood of elders
(II.5)

'I shall not fight,'
[and] he fell silent.
(II.9)

Arjuna does not doubt that his cause is just, the war is necessary, and his side will win given the relative strengths, not least his own skills as a general and a soldier. To avoid killing so many that he holds in affection, he suggests that perhaps he ought to give up the kingdom as the lesser of two evils. Although

its ostensible purpose is to persuade him to fight in 700 fratricidal verses, the poem, in fact, is about the deepest questions of human action, about time and the relationship of man and God.

Nishphala Karma

Krishna offers many reasons for fighting, some more persuasive than others, but his dominant refrain is to fight because it is his duty as a soldier, and when he acts for the sake of the action rather than for personal reward, he will not only do the right thing, but he will, in fact, be successful. This moral insight is famously called *'nishphala karma'* (or *nishkama karma*). '*Nish*' means 'without' in Sanskrit; '*phala*' is fruit, '*karma*' is action'-- literally, 'disinterested action' or an action performed without thinking of its fruit. And Krishna expresses it famously in the 47th verse of Book II:

> *Karmanye vadika raste*
> *Ma phaleshu kadachana!*
>
> *Be intent on action,*
> *not on the fruits of action.*

And then goes to explain the discipline of *karma yoga* as the way to get there:

> *Perform actions, firm in discipline,*
> *relinquishing attachment;*

be impartial to failure and success --
this equanimity is called discipline.
(II.48)

Whereas my father had been attracted to the idea of *bhakti* in the *Gita* -- the love of the devotee for a personal God -- I found myself drawn to Krishna's exciting moral insight of *nishphala karma*. At first the concept seemed hopelessly idealistic -- it didn't seem possible for one to act in this selfless way, not for any length of time at least. But as the days went by, and I thought more about it, the concept seemed to grow on me. It didn't seem so impractical after all.

I wondered what it might mean to be 'intent on action and not on its fruits'. I was being exhorted to transfer my attention away from myself to something outside me, for example to my work. What sort of action is it, I asked, where the doer disappears? To be moved by the activity and not by one's ambition implied that one ought to be driven by the excellence of the activity without the distraction of one's ego. Put that way it sounded almost Aristotelian. Then I stumbled on a quote of Harry Truman's. In his folksy way the former American president once said, 'Your work will succeed as long as you don't care who gets the credit.' This seemed suspiciously similar to *nishphala karma*, and suddenly I felt there was a universal quality to this ancient Indian

wisdom.

Thank God, it is Friday!

So, I asked if this idea from the *Bhagavad Gita* could be a motivator of day-to-day human action, to promote excellence and improve performance in the workplace. I began to examine the psychological conditions that make possible high performance in organizations in the same way that Max Weber explored the psychological conditions that motivated the Protestant entrepreneur (and made possible the development of capitalist civilization). My premise was that even if one does not believe in rebirth or in God this could be a useful and attractive principle -- as a way to freedom from human bondage based on the wonderful potential for growth of ordinary human beings.

The truth is that most people hate their jobs and are bored at work. 'Thank God it's Friday' is a ubiquitous feature of modern work life, both in the West and in urban India. Work is seen as the unpleasant price that one pays in order to earn weekends and holidays, which are meant to be the main determinants of human happiness. Only a few seem to actually enjoy work, and most people when they retire end up feeling that their work-lives have been wasted. Jack Nicholson recently portrayed this feeling poignantly in the film, *About Schmidt*. This is also why CEOs

are constantly seeking after training programs to motivate their employees.

Of blue, green and red circles

To further our understanding of this concept I am going ask you to play a thought game with me. Draw a big circle in your mind. Colour it blue. Inside this blue circle draw another big circle and colour it red. The blue circle represents your consciousness; the red circle is your 'self', and it naturally occupies a large space within your consciousness; hence, the red circle is obscenely large. Since Krishna wants us to learn to diminish our troublesome ego, the red circle, you must now imagine the red circle growing smaller and smaller. Since our consciousness, the blue circle, abhors a vacuum much like nature, other things, like work, friends, maybe even God enter the consciousness. So now draw smaller circles to represent these other things and colour them green. A *karma yogi*, I believe, is one whose healthy blue consciousness is peopled with a small red 'self' and many 'green' others. But the question is how does one make this happen?

I think we have all experienced the feeling where our 'self' seemed to diminish and even disappear. When you are deeply absorbed in anything, you tend to forget yourself. After a few hours, you find yourself saying, "Is it already six o'clock? I thought it was only

four." You had forgotten yourself for two hours, when the red circle had diminished to a singularity and the green one, in this case whatever you were absorbed in, had grown bigger. Without the distraction of the 'self' your attention was single-mindedly devoted to what you were doing. As a result that work was probably good and you seemed to feel more cheerful afterwards. You felt liberated from the bondage of the ego. You felt a sense of mastery over yourself and over the world. Is Krishna, then, exhorting us to learn this attitude of self-forgetting in his concept of *nishphala karma*?

The reason he is asking us to transfer our passion from ourselves to something outside us (for example, our work) is the old Indian idea going back to the Upanishads that the 'self' usually produces harmful thoughts of 'me and mine', selfish desires, craving, attachment, hatred, ill-will, conceit, pride, egotism, and many other problems. It is also the source of much trouble in the world, from personal conflicts to wars between nations. In our daily work-life it often comes in the way of performance. Instead of focusing on the job, we get easily distracted and find it difficult to get absorbed. Hence, we brood and mostly about ourselves. Our thoughts stray too often to our neighbour. "Why did I get a smaller raise than he did?" Not only does this generate negative energy at the

workplace, but it also leads to boredom -- what is an exciting task at hand that might fully challenge one's capabilities suddenly becomes 'work'.

Hierarchy blues

When I was a working as a product manager in Bombay in the late sixties, I had a colleague, Ramesh, who spent two miserable years agonising over the size of his room. We were at the same level in the company but his room was two inches smaller than mine. It meant the terrible fate of being denied a sofa and thus appearing less considerable in the eyes of the world. I caught him one day measuring my office with an inch tape. Seeing the puzzled look on my face as I walked in, he turned red. He tried to hide the tape, but he couldn't conceal the guilt on his face. He confessed. It was embarrassing to listen to a person who was older, whose skills I admired, and who was babbling like a baby. Finally, I couldn't take his whining any longer. I asked him to stop, and on an impulse I did something very strange. I offered to exchange rooms with him. Before you get the wrong idea that I am some sort of selfless saint let me quickly add that I immediately regretted this decision. Why? I didn't want the world to think that I had been demoted either. In the end, we didn't shift rooms because our boss

came up with a simple solution -- he just removed the offending sofa. This is an example of the sort of bad behaviour that the mischievous red circle is capable of.

From the day I joined my company they taught us to compete ruthlessly against our competitors in the market, but in my experience managers compete far more viciously with their own colleagues within their own company. The reason for this destructive internal competition is precisely what Krishna warns us about -- an excessive preoccupation with our selves. While competition outside is indeed a big motivator, I found both at Richardson Vicks and later at Procter and Gamble that brand managers tended to think of each other as the enemy and not their counterparts at competitor companies, say at Lever or Johnson and Johnson in our case. Part of the reason for this, I suspect, is that as colleagues we come face to face each day; each regards the other as a far more serious threat to the next promotion -- forget the guys at Lever, the enemy is inside, sitting in the next room.

This is not unique to marketing -- it is true at all levels and in all parts of a company. Internal competition among P&G brand managers at headquarters at Cincinnati was especially severe because the company hired more persons that it needed and it weeded out

those who did not make the cut. Neither is P&G unique in this respect -- this is the universal experience of hierarchy in every organization, be it a company, or a hospital or a school, or the government bureaucracy. You find the boss competing against you; when you become the boss you do the same; the abused becomes the abuser as you move up. No wonder stress and heart attack is the illness of our age, and companies deal with a heart attack of an employee by saying, "Ah, perhaps, he is not strong enough to cope -- perhaps, we should let him go." Now, if we could get people to diminish the red circle there might be some hope of mitigating some of the destructive and senseless internal competition inside the firm.

The day our account executive taught us the fine art of self-forgetting

Every human relationship is unequal and one of the two persons is more vulnerable. Just as a woman is more often at risk in a marriage, the agency is in a weaker position in the world of marketing. I learned this lesson from the worthy Gerson da Cunha. Just as literature is about how people cope with this inequality in human relationships, so the drama of our business lives is about how we manage this unequal power equation between our associates in all sorts of subtle and not so subtle ways. When I became product manager at Richardson Hindustan I plunged headlong

into this daily drama between our advertising agency and us. I enjoyed being taken to lunch -- right here, at the Taj when a buffet in this ballroom cost Rs 17 -- and I enjoyed having my ego fed by agency and media types. It is heady stuff when you are 24 -- you begin to think you invulnerable and start playing god, as the red circle begins to bloat.

One day an extraordinary account executive, Amar, appeared from our advertising agency. He serviced our brands but never took us out to lunch. He was shy, quiet, and he rarely spoke. His natural silence was in contrast to the articulate members of his extrovert profession. He was not cold, merely remote. He seemed to listen with his eyes, and from somewhere far away. There were long silences in the conversation. I can still remember the day he took on my boss' boss. It was at our agency's annual campaign presentation for Vicks Vaporub. All the agency and client big guns were present. We even had a senior member from our parent company in New York.

As we were looking at the agency's proposed copy, my managing director stopped the show suddenly. Inside him there was a copywriter and he insisted on a particular headline: 'Stops colds overnight!' The top guns at the agency broke into smiles of approval, commending the all-knowing managing director for coming

up with a wonderful headline. But Amar got up and quietly but firmly defended his creative team's work. 'Stops colds' he said gently, was an over claim and it was not true that Vaporub stopped colds. Nothing could stop colds, in fact. There were many things that helped relieve the distressful symptoms of a cold, and Vicks Vaporub was one of these. And that is why his agency had recommended, 'Helps relieve colds overnight!' He added that his version might be stronger way of saying it because it was more believable.

"Young man," rose the managing director to his full height, "Don't teach me about coughs and colds. I have spent my life thinking about it… and making money out of it." At this everyone in the room tittered approvingly as though the MD had said a profound thing, and especially at his wonderful frankness in admitting that the purpose of the meeting was to make money from Vicks Vaporub.

"Of course, of course," spoke the head of the agency. "You are absolutely right, sir, and we shall go back and examine how we can strengthen the headline along the lines you have suggested." But Amar was unmoved. He spoke again in his ever soft but resolute way. "I am sorry, sir, but what you are saying will not work. We would be lying to the public."

“Are you saying that I want to lie to the public?”

“No. I know you don’t want to lie, and that is why I am insisting that we have to use ‘Helps’ at the beginning of the headline.”

“Okay, then what about ‘Helps stop colds!’ ”

“That is certainly better.”

“He approves! How about that!” said the MD with sarcasm. “Our young new accounts executive approves.”

Ignoring the irony, Amar continued, “The honest thing to say would be that ‘Vaporub relieves the distressing symptoms of a cold.’ But that is obviously not headline material. The problem with ‘Helps stop colds’ is its lack of credibility -- it still sounds as though Vaporub stops colds, and that would be misleading. People wont believe it because they know that nothing stops colds.”

“What about ‘Clears colds overnight?’ ” suggested the managing director, who was now beginning to listen to Amar. Again there were admiring *oohs* and *aahs* at the profound wisdom of the MD.

“That is better than ‘Stops colds’ ” said Amar.

"I'm getting better, Amar, aren't I?"

Amar disregarded the sarcasm and added, "But you would have to say, 'Helps clear colds symptoms'. It would be false to suggest that Vaporub cleared colds."

There was a long pause. The Managing Director realised that Amar was right. He looked at the young man. Amar's warm, shy smile lit up his entire face. The Managing Director saw, as everyone did that there was not an ounce of malice there. There was something modest and friendly in him that was very appealing. There was also a lot of self-possession for someone in his mid-twenties.

Amar did not stay long in the advertising business. He tired of it, I think, and he left just as quietly as he had come. I don't know where he went. I made some enquiries, but no one seemed to know. But for the year and a half, he lit up my life and became something of a role model for me. I couldn't help but compare Ramesh and Amar, the two persons I came into contact almost every day. Ramesh was a normal fellow, whose first thought was of himself and then of others or of the business. Amar was unusual: he never seemed to think about himself. He is the only person I have met who seemed to be free of anger, hate, or greed. I wondered if he was just

clever, and kept his ego under wraps, and did not let it spill out. But I don't think so. I think he genuinely cared for others and about his work. It's just that his ego never seemed to come in the way, as Ramesh's or mine did. Although he was remote, I am convinced the he cared passionately for others and for results. But he disguised it all in a cloak of detachment and good humour. His detachment was from his 'I-ness', from his 'self' and not from the world. That is an important distinction.

The *Upanishads*, the *Gita*, and other Hindu and Buddhist texts suggest that my I-ness is the source of most of my troubles. While the agenda of the texts may be different -- to help find *moksha* or *nirvana* -- their basic insight, I believe, can be useful for living in this world. All of us recoil from a display of too much self-regard or self-importance. Amar was attractive because he was self-effacing, and I have often wished that more such persons could people my world. Beginning with myself. I am reminded of that innocent dinner party two summers ago in Delhi, which had upset me so much. Its memories, I realise, are unhappy because of my excessive pre-occupation with myself, what others think of me, and my unfortunate tendency to judge others. I thought my hostess 'snobbish' because she did not invite *me* to her home until *my* book was published -- hence, she was

using *me*. It all seemed to be about *me* and not about *her*. Similarly, *I* had thought Benares Silk's innocent remark insensitive (not others) because it reflected on *my* political and religious affiliations. The problem seemed to be *my* touchiness, based on *my* excessive regard about *myself*. It is again the big red circle, isn't it, which made me self-centred and touchy; it made my hostess snobbish; it made Benares Silk aggressive.

I generally don't read business books, but I learned from *The Economist* last month that Jim Collins', *Good to Great* had sold 1.5 million copies in hardback, breaking the record set by the 1982 classic, *In Search of Excellence*, by Tom Peters and Robert Waterman. So, I decided to get it, and I found in it a great deal of common sense. The best leaders, says Collins, are self-effacing, modest, and wilful. They sacrifice their personal goals to those of their organization. Inspired managers do it for love and executive compensation is not correlated to performance. If Amar had stayed on he would have been such a leader, I am sure. My experience at P&G in Cincinnati was not very different. While middle managers drove expensive Jaguars and BMWs, many top executives lived more modestly. One drove a beat up 15-year-old Ford, which broke down one day as we were driving to a meeting. I suggested he change his car. He looked at me innocently and asked if I could recommend

one to him. Imagine, here was the czar of American consumer products in America and he had never thought about replacing his car. He had never had the time for it. He was like Henry Moore, the sculptor, who was perpetually absorbed in his work. Moore's wife had to drag him home from his studio at midnight because he had forgotten lunch, dinner, and to send bills to his customers. Einstein was the same -- when he died, they discovered lots of cheques that he had just forgotten to deposit. Athletes call this feeling of absorption, 'being in the zone'. Not only famous people, but our carpenter, when we lived in Worli, used to be constantly in this state.

From performance to reputation

Red circles tend to puff up quickly in the corporate world because of managers feel the need to constantly promote themselves in order to convert performance into reputation. I remember once walking into a training session at P&G College in Cincinnati where a senior manager from the Human Relations Department was teaching his charges how to give an 'elevator speech'.

"Imagine," he said, "that you find yourself in the elevator with a group vice-president. He is a captive, and your job is to deliver a

rehearsed thirty-second speech, which tells him subtly your major achievements between the second and the tenth floor, and leave him with an impression about how good you are."

Someone asked, "But why 'subtly'?"

"Otherwise, he'll think you are selling yourself," replied the *eminence grise* from HR.

"But isn't that what I am doing?"

"Oh, but it is so much more effective if he doesn't know it."

"Aren't I conning him, then?"

"My friend, you have just learned the first lesson about 'power and influence in the corporation'."

I did not say anything that morning but I thought about it for days. The most successful managers I had met during my career were 'self-effacing', and this also made them attractive. Many such CEOs people Collin's book as well. They do not give elevator speeches. I wanted to tell those young people that morning that good results don't remain hidden -- they speak loudly, and don't need to be advertised. But internal competition in the corporation is so strong that it is hard to believe this truth when you are young. And by

the time you become middle-aged you have been promoting yourself for so long that it has become a nasty habit. It's a pity because it ruins the atmosphere and considerably diminishes the pleasure of working in an otherwise exciting environment.

What should Arjuna do?

I want to return now to that moment in the *Gita* where I left off with Arjuna's dilemma. What should Arjuna do? In a practical sense it is clear that throwing away his arrows would achieve nothing; the war would still go on; and there might in fact be more killing on his side than if he did fight; moreover, his just cause would be lost. So, he should fight.

But this practical sort of reasoning, which thinks about the consequences of acts and costs and benefits, does not really solve his moral dilemma. Arjuna must choose: he can either be a dutiful soldier, fight this righteous war (*dharmayuddha*) and rid the world of truly wicked people; but in the process he will kill his family members and friends. Or he can be a non-violent human being, save the lives of his family and kin, but lose the kingdom that rightfully belongs to him and his brothers, and worse, allow the forces of evil to prevail. He must choose between these two courses. It is a tragic dilemma (*dharmasankat*) because either choice is bad; both choices involve serious wrongdoing, and in that sense there seems to

be no right answer. There is often no right answer in the *Mahabharata*.

Krishna points to Arjuna's duty to fight irrespective of the consequences. It is a just cause, and as a warrior and as a general, he must obey his duty and take up arms. Krishna's advice assumes that intent matters more than consequences in judging the morality of an act, and he suggests that the single-minded pursuit of duty without any thought to the unpleasant consequences, somewhat in the way Immanuel Kant might have advised -- pay attention to motives in judging moral worth.

Nishkama or *nishphala karma* was an innovative and a revolutionary idea in its time because it created obligation without reference to the consequences of the action. Till then, Indian ethics had been under the sway of the notion of *karma*, which is, of course, a theory of consequences. You do good deeds because you will reap the rewards of your good actions; you don't do wrong because you will be punished in this or the next life. Arjuna's position, similarly, is based on thinking about the consequences of his actions, not unlike the Utilitarians, who judged moral worth based on the greatest good for the greatest number.

Who is right, Arjuna or Krishna?
Certainly, in the poem Krishna succeeds in persuading Arjuna and wins the argument. Whenever I have asked this question of Indian military leaders, their response uniformly is, "Quite right, Arjuna should realise where his duty lies and he ought to get on with it without this fuss. We don't want officers to agonise self-indulgently; it's harmful and it weakens the resolve of the troops." Historically, people in India have tended to identify with Krishna's position (not least because he is God) and the *Gita* has become one of the most influential texts in the history of philosophy. Even Mahatma Gandhi, the great apostle of non-violence in the 20th century, felt inspired by Krishna's words, even though Arjuna's duty is to fight and kill in a violent war. The poet, T.S. Eliot, also seemed to endorse Krishna's high deontological position in the *Four Quartets*, when he wrote in 'The Dry Salvages':

> *And do not think of the fruit of action.*
> *Fare forward…*
> *So Krishna, as when he admonished Arjuna*
> *On the field of battle.*
> *Not fare well,*
> *But fare forward, voyagers.*

Arjuna too has a strong case, and some would argue that in many ways he is a better model of ethical deliberation than Krishna for he

takes responsibility for the consequences of his actions and this ought to have moral value. In an insightful paper, Amartya Sen, the Nobel Prize winner, argues that "Arjuna is bothered not merely by the fact that many will die if war were to take place, but also by the fact that he himself will be killing lots of people and by the further fact that many of the people to be killed are persons for whom he himself has affection…. Another observer who is uninvolved in these events need not attach any special importance to the fact that Arjuna (not *he*, but *Arjuna)* will be killing people, and that among the dead will be people for whom Arjuna (not he, but Arjuna) feels closeness and affection." Arjuna cannot reasonably take a similarly detached view of the consequences of his choice. Sen's position of agent-sensitive evaluation is in contrast to the utilitarian formula that the evaluation must be independent of the evaluator; he believes that moral responsibility demands situated valuation by agents.

I must confess that I too applaud Arjuna for being aware that his action may be immoral. The recognition that one may have 'dirty hands' is not just self-indulgence: it has significance for future actions. It informs the chooser that he may owe reparations to the vanquished, something we have become aware of since the Nazi trials in Nuremberg after World War II. Arjuna's tragic dilemma

teaches us that moral choices are not merely private, but should be deliberated in public, and a sense of tragedy should inform decent moral human beings. We all know too many people who think that if they wring their hands enough they can do anything they like, especially politicians of George W. Bush's variety.

But what is my duty?

Hegel, the great German philosopher, tried to make sense of this moral idea of the *Gita*'s in two articles in 1827. While he recognised the attractiveness of 'doing one's duty only for duty's sake', he had a serious objection. He felt that this was great moral intention, but the practical problem lay in knowing what is my duty. The problem is not so much that Krishna does not specify the agent's duties, but that the moral law of acting disinterestedly might result in immoral actions, such as killing one's kinsmen. The principle of disinterested action might lead one to kill in a disinterested manner or become a '*karma yogi* serial killer'. In this sense Hegel is right: this moral principle does not provide content for my action or my duty.

Such problems beset other such moral theories as well, especially Kant's, who, for example, has been criticized on the grounds that being compelled to tell the truth (as a duty) to a murderer might force one to tell

him where his potential victim is hiding. Although morally unacceptable consequences could result in extreme cases, I think, the principle of *nishphala karma*, like other duty-oriented ethics, can serve as a useful guide based on our normal intuitions of right and wrong, and it can steer our behaviour. Acting in this self-forgetting way ought to lead normally to doing the right thing. I have exposed this idea to more than a dozen groups of executives, both in India and America, and they have found it, almost unanimously, a useful moral principle. Some of them said, for example, if my boss would follow this principle, we wouldn't have these problems of corporate governance.

Its historic influence on Indian society

I have dragged in poor Kant and Hegel into this discussion not for pedantic reasons but because I genuinely believe that moral philosophers can help us to better understand this ancient Indian ideal, especially in thinking of it as an actionable moral concept in our contemporary world. Let me briefly note the historic influence of this concept on Indian society, and then I shall return to its performative role before I close.

When defending the importance of action and of right action the author of the *Gita* treads a fine balance between the two reigning ideologies of his time, neither of which he

seemed to like particularly but nor was willing to alienate. He strikes a fine balance of political correctness between the overzealous advocates of Vedic ritualism on the one hand and the heterodox renouncers and ascetics of Buddhism, Jainism, who believed that all acts in this world should be given up so as to avoid accumulating karma. The *Gita* says that one cannot help but act, but if one performs the action in the right attitude of *nishphala karma* then it will not accumulate *karma* and not result in rebirth. Thus, one does not have to renounce the world. In this revolutionary way the *Gita* makes action possible in the world.

At the same time the text is conservative and it upholds the prevailing norms of social action, stating clearly that Arjuna's duty is to act according to his *swadharma*, his caste duty as a *kshatriya*. However, it soon undercuts the caste system by another revolutionary move -- it offers the democratic path of *bhakti* or devotion, which is open to all irrespective of caste. And by the end of the poem it expresses a clear preference for *bhakti* in comparison to the paths of action and knowledge. In this way, it goes around both the powerful brahminical forces supporting the stratified social order as well as the strong pull exerted by the renouncers of the new religions, without overtly criticising them.

The renouncer (*sanyasi*), who stands tall and splendid, a theatrical figure in ochre robes has always fascinated Indians. Louis Dumont, the celebrated sociologist wrote, 'the secret of Hinduism may be found in the dialogue between the renouncer and the man-in-the-world (*grihasti)*.' This ideal took a mesmerizing hold on the ordinary householder with the advent of Buddhism and Jainism, so much so that the *Manusmriti* had to forbid men to become renouncers until they had successfully fulfilled the previous three stages of life and discharged their debt to secular society. To the humble householder the path of *karma yoga* offered a way to combine the best of both worlds -- to live in the world but with the attitude of the renouncer. It gave new meaning to his ordered life of day to day action in which he has to make a living, look after his family, live as a citizen in society, be a good friend and neighbour, discharge his caste responsibilities, and prepare for the next stage of his life. To him the *Gita* offered the solution of stoically living life by acting self-forgettingly, and in the process it devalued the attractions of the rituals of the Brahmins and of the ascetic life of renunciation. It offered the ideal of a 'secular ascetic'.

What Nishphala karma is not

Some of you might still think that the *nishphala karma* attitude is hopelessly Utopian, somewhat like the equality of Marxism. Hence, I want to clarify what *nishphala karma* is not. It is *not* to become a do-gooder. When the red circle diminishes in my consciousness, I do not suddenly become benevolent and start doing good to others. It is morally neutral -- the attitude of self-forgetting can be practiced in solitude or on an uninhabited island (while morality needs the existence of others).

It is akin to the notion of 'self-interest' in capitalism. Many glibly equate capitalism with selfishness. However, when Adam Smith wrote about self-interest he was thinking of ordinary people going about making sensible decisions in their day-to-day life. When I go out to buy mangoes, I naturally want the best quality at the lowest price. When it rains I take an umbrella. This is not being selfish; it is being self-interested. A selfish person, on the hand, is not morally neutral -- he promotes his interest at another's expense, and that is wrong. So, it is with *nishphala karma*; this is why I do not speak of it as 'unselfishness', which conjures Utopian images, but as 'self-forgetting', which is more morally neutral.

Equally, renouncing personal reward doesn't mean that we don't care for the goals and

consequences of our actions; on the contrary, we care for them passionately because we are not distracted by our ego; our goals and consequences are no longer mixed up with our 'I-ness'. As the red circle of concern becomes smaller and the green circle of say, work becomes larger, we find it easier to focus. We discover that we are acting rather than being acted upon. In thus acting, we set the agenda, and this brings a sense of liberation and satisfaction.

Finally, many take the *Gita*'s message about detachment to mean 'detachment from the world'. It is detachment from the 'I', *ahamkara* or excessive absorption with oneself. People are also wrong in believing that detachment leads to resignation and world-denial. What I have been talking about is the opposite. It is about getting so absorbed in the 'other' that one forgets oneself, and that seems to me to be life affirming.

A number of psychologists have tried to describe this state of selfless absorption in the job. Maslow described such a person as 'problem-centred rather than ego-centred' and he placed her at the stage of 'self-actualisation in an ascending hierarchy of human needs; his faith in the perfectibility of human beings fifty years ago brought a healthy antidote to the depressive determinism of Freud. Chiksentmihaly calls it 'flow' or optimal

experience, which he describes as 'something that we *make* happen' rather than something that happens to us, such as a passive moment of relaxed pleasure. It is 'when a person's body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile.' David McClelland described such motivated persons as being more concerned with the job's achievement than the rewards of success, either money or praise. Money was only valuable as a measure of their performance, and the main claim to their attention was how to do the job better.

We can easily imagine artists and scientists behaving in this way, but can the ordinary person on the job act with this self-forgetting attitude? Can the distribution manager in my company, for example, behave in this manner? In short, can we create conditions at the work place that will elicit this sort of response?

How to create conditions for self-forgetting behaviour?

I have found that in small, entrepreneurial start-ups it is more common to find such behaviour. The reason is that there is a family feeling in the company and there is greater sense of ownership. Even in large companies where the leader delegates authority to the lowest practical level, employees tend to feel a sense of autonomy and this improves

motivation and promotes selfless behaviour. Employees seem to feel more valued and work towards goals rather than tasks. Studies suggest that when 'one feels in charge over even the smallest decision or detail', it tends to improve one's performance. Another condition for fostering *nishphala karma*, I expect, is trust and fairness. Where people trust each other and where they perceive a level of fairness in the organization's dealings within and without, they are likely to behave less selfishly.

In the end, I do not think people in any number will act outside their own interest, and the art is to shape that interest in order to encourage self-forgetting behaviour. In the early nineties when Procter and Gamble, was vigorously becoming a global company, I recall that we found ourselves with operations in 58 countries, but our managers continued to be inward looking and behaved as though we existed in only one country -- the country where they worked. In the larger subsidiaries they tended to be arrogant, suffered from the 'not invented here' disease, and were immune to learning from their peers elsewhere. Thus, we had the odd situation of 58 product managers in 58 countries solving the same problems everyday.

To change this dreadful situation we embarked on a program called 'Search and

Reapply', which turned out to be so successful that in a few years it resulted in making Pantene, for example, the world's number one shampoo based on an advertising commercial that had been created in Taiwan. The behaviour change was so dramatic that managers stopped saying 'I did it', and instead began to say, 'I got this idea from Taiwan, and this is why I am successful'. Earlier, they might have said, 'Where is Taiwan?' This cultural change came about because top management began to reward unselfish behaviour or at least the appearance of it (not in terms of cash, but through recognition, verbal strokes and brownie points). Narcissistic behaviour became unacceptable to the point that managers began to invent people to whom they could give credit for their own ideas. This is not an unusual thing in many large successful companies. Goldman Sachs, the famous investment bank, has been practicing the most extraordinary levels of teamwork for generations, and it employs a relentless selection process wherein as many as thirty partners and associates will interview a new candidate in order to ensure his or her potential for unselfish teamwork.

Does disinterest go against the capitalistic ethic?

There is rich irony in my ambition, I realize,

to employ disinterest in the cause of the most self-interested institution in society, the private corporation. It is not unlike Max Weber's ambition with the Protestant ethic. I view this ancient principle as a motivational tool and not a replacement for material incentives, somewhat in the way of Abraham Maslow's framework of the hierarchy of needs, which has consistently resonated in the business world. Reading Maslow I was struck by the similarity between his 'peak experience' and this ancient Indian prescription. Enthusiasts of Ayn Rand, an unabashed apologist of capitalism, might recall that her protagonist in the *Fountainhead* did not want to put his name on the building; he was not driven by the desire for fame but rather by excellence in architecture. Similarly, I recall a number of senior managers in Procter and Gamble, who quietly and anonymously mentored dozens of younger managers through their long careers with no obvious rewards to themselves.

I have concluded that there is a natural distribution in any random group of talent as well as of attitude. The top ten percent, perhaps, will perform in any society; they are already motivated and they seem to be able to easily transfer their egos to the task and away from themselves. (It is somewhat ironic, I think, that American corporations think it necessary to shower excessive stock options

on them -- for they are precisely the ones who will perform without them.) Equally, the bottom ten or twenty percent, will fail to perform regardless. Where an attitude and behaviour change through *karma yoga* might be successful is amongst the vast majority in the middle, especially those on the margins of higher performance. If one could get, say the next ten to fifteen percent from the top, to change there could be a huge pay-off to society.

The governance failures in America have wounded the social myth that defines the moral terrain of corporate life everywhere, including India. There is a healthy search for model of behaviour within the capitalist system, and I wonder if *karma yoga* might help to fill this vacuum? My preliminary empirical work with American business executives suggests that this ancient ideal is not only consistent with contemporary Western moral sensibility, but it resonates as a moral tool with them. Indian managers, on the other hand, are far more attracted to its ability to create cohesion, teamwork and high performance in their organisations. They see in secular asceticism a powerful intellectual construction -- a new ethic of passionate work combined with ceaseless renunciation of the fruits of one's toil -- that could offer an economic and moral foundation for our post reform capitalist age in India. Much more

empirical work, however, needs to be done on both counts.

The fine art of self-forgetting

Over the past hundred years *Bhagavad Gita* has acquired the status of a national text somewhat like Cervantes' *Don Quixote* in Spain, but in the process it has become white noise. By this I mean that it is part of the background din of our lives in India, quoted platitudinously, masking rather than provoking thought. The *Gita* is honoured more than read, and understood less than recited. Technically, white noise like white light contains all the frequencies and is used to hide other sounds -- the way one uses a fan sometimes to shut out the noise of traffic in order to sleep. In the same way the *Gita*'s presence is imperceptible yet comforting, like the random sounds of a Hindi film song in the bazaar.

During my 'academic holiday' I have attempted to pull it out of this complacent role and give it contemporary significance. Traditionally, *nishphala karma* has been regarded as a way to spiritual enlightenment and to freedom from bondage imposed by the law of *karma*, and in the way *karma* determines mundane happiness, suffering and repeated births and deaths. There is a long tradition of interpreting to suit one's needs. The brilliant Shankara offered an influential *Advaita*

Vedanta reading; Ramanuja had an attractive 'modified non-dualist' interpretation, closer to the *bhakti* spirit of the *Gita*. The generation that struggled for freedom in the early 20th century had first Tilak's rendering, then Mahatma Gandhi's, both of whom employed it to rally people for the purposes of Independence. So, I think of myself as a part of a long tradition -- I have explored its relevance for our dispirited post-Nehru, post-Mandal, post-reform, post-modern generation.

If *nishphala karma* is at the heart of the *Gita*; if the *Gita* is at the heart of the *Mahabharata*; if the *Mahabharata* is at the heart of Hinduism; then, I think we may have touched the very heart of Hinduism this evening. Although I have examined this idea in the context of the business world, it could easily serve generals, lovers, and others. Arjuna is, after all, a soldier, and as we sit here spectators in the aftermath of this bizarre war with Iraq, I think Arjuna's moral dilemma might help inform the judgment of many thoughtful soldiers. Similarly, it might compete successfully with the *Kama Sutra,* our famous self-help book of erotic love. It can serve lovers because love essentially entails giving rather than taking and in that orgasmic moment the self does tend to disappear.

T.S.Eliot compared the *Gita* to the *Divine Comedy* in its greatness as a philosophical poem. In 'Little Gidding' in the *Four Quartets* he expressed the same notion of love beyond desire, and he saw in it the possibility of liberation from the future and the past:

This is the use of memory:
For liberation—not less of love but expanding
Of love beyond desire, and so liberation
From the future as well as the past.

In it Eliot seemed to find the answer to the riddle of life and death and time. He agreed with Krishna that striving after an illusory and imaginary future was futile and could even be destructive. He saw *karma yoga* as teaching one to live for the moment. Hence, he advises one to act with the mind fixed not on the fruits (future) but on the pleasure one gets in performing the activity, in being alive and vital in the present. In the following, he imagines Krishna telling Arjuna:

'At the moment which is not of action or inaction
You can receive this: "on whatever sphere of being
The mind of a man may be intent
At the time of death" – that is the one action
(And the time of death is every moment)
Which shall fructify the lives of others:
And do not think of the fruit of action.

Eliot I think understood that *karma yoga* is an attitude or disposition. It is a presence of mind, a certain quality of the human spirit attained through renunciation. Having mastered one's own mind one is now ready to become the master of the universe.

Thank you.

Footnote

A short guide to selecting the right translation of the Bhagavad Gita

From the thirty or so translations of the *Bhagavad Gita* in English that were available I chose Barbara Stoler Miller's translation to read and to quote from because it is both accurate, poetical, and has the great virtue of simplicity. Before she died in 1993, she was professor of Sanskrit at Barnard/Columbia and she created the translation for our generation.

When I first discovered that there were more than thirty translations to choose from, I became confused like the Pandavan hero of the *Gita*. But listening to the different translations every Friday morning for ten weeks in Professor Friedrich's class I was drawn to Stoler Miller. An article by Gerald

Larson, 'The song celestial: two centuries of the *Bhagavadgita* in English.' also guided me. *Vedanta* enthusiasts directed me to the slim Isherwood-Prabhavananda translation, which has an introduction by Aldous Huxley on perennial philosophy. While I thought it satisfying as literature -- after all Christopher Isherwood is a great writer -- I felt it was not the most accurate, and its interpretation was a de-ethnicised Shankara combined with western mysticism. Radhakrishnan's rendition I found to be dull and commentarial. Indologists recommended Zaehner, and although his translation turned out to be stilted, his wonderful discussions on Ramanuja, Shankara and the *Upanishads* that run parallel in the text make it quite exciting. Although an accomplished Orientalist, Zaehner was clearly attracted to the notion of the love of a personal god.

The most poetic is still the Victorian version of Sir Edwin Arnold, and it has the virtue of being the cheapest in the Dover thrift edition. Those seeking pure accuracy should read either Edgerton's translation or Van Buitenen's, who views the Gita as an integral part of the epic and challenges the traditional idea that it was inserted later. Don't trust Mascaro's version, which tries unsuccessfully to be poetic. Bhaktivedanta's rendition is a dull, sectarian, Sunday school textbook, reflecting the *Vaishnavite* values of Chaitanya.

Since I am a beginner in Sanskrit, I found Winthrop Sargeant's very useful (but expensive); it is accompanied by an interlinear Sanskrit text, a word for word grammatical commentary and vocabulary.

Through this process of selecting I have come to realise that there is no right or wrong translation and each one serves its particular audience. Van Buitenen's version is no good to a follower of Sai Baba, as Arnold's account will not interest a Sanskritist. Mahatma Gandhi's or Tilak's use of the Gita in our freedom struggle is as valid as Edgerton's reading of the text as a *Vaishnava* Brahmin document of the 1st c. AD. Emerson and Thoreau used Wilkins translation. Hegel used Humboldt's (and Schlegal and Wilkins). Gandhi used Sir Edwin Arnold's, while post-Independence Indians turned to Radhakrishnan's. The translation for our generation is that of Barbara Stoler Miller, and that is why I have quoted from it this evening.