

The Truth of the Matter... Life that is...

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Readings

from chapter 3 of the *Bhagavad Gita*, verses 25 and 35
(Stephen Mitchell trans.):

Though the unwise cling to their actions,
watching for results, the wise
are free of attachments, and act
for the well-being of the whole world.

It is better to do your own duty
badly, than to perfectly do
another's: you are safe from harm
when you do what you should be doing

from *The Great Work of Your Life: A Guide for the Journey to Your True Calling*,
by Stephen Cope:

Each of us must have one domain, one small place on the globe where we can truly meet life – where we can meet it with every gift we have. One small place where, through testing ourselves, we can *know* the nature of life, and ultimately know ourselves. This domain, this one place that is uniquely ours, is our *work in the world*... the one place where we really have the opportunity to wake up.

Sermon

I'm going to begin this morning with a story I shared several years ago, a story told by the American spiritual teacher Ram Dass (who had begun his career as Harvard professor Richard Alpert). The story had to do with his 1970 encounter with a state trooper on the New York Thruway:

Ram Dass was driving what he describes as “a 1938 Buick limousine converted into a camper.” It was, he says, a car that necessitated his driving slowly.

And as he drove, he was, he tells us, chanting to Krishna (one of the Hindu manifestations of God); and he was steering with one hand and counting his mala prayer beads with the other. As he put it: “I was ecstatically hanging out with blue Krishna and driving along the New York Thruway when I noticed a blue, flashing light in my rearview mirror.” (Ram Dass quotes taken from his book *Polishing the Mirror*.)

It wasn't Krishna of course – it was a state trooper.

So then came the stop and the usual tight-lipped request for license and registration. But through all of this Ram Dass wrote that he “was looking at him as Krishna... Wouldn't Krishna come as a state trooper?” Ram Dass wonders. After all, “Christ came as a carpenter.”

In that spirit, then then Ram Dass wrote that he would have given the state trooper, aka Krishna, anything: flowers, love, his very life!

Well, the trooper spent some time back at his car, as troopers do in such situations, then returned. Then he asked Ram Dass what was in a box on the seat.

“Mints. Would you like one?”

Then the trooper told Ram Dass he was driving too slowly, and should drive off the thruway if he needed to drive that slowly.

“Yes, absolutely,” replied Ram Dass, who then commented to his readers: “I was just looking at him with such love.”

Ram Dass goes on with his telling of the story:

If you put yourself in the role of a state trooper, how often do you suppose they get looked at with unconditional love, especially when they're in uniform? So after he had finished all the deliberations, he didn't want to leave, but he had run out of state trooper-ness. So he stood there a minute, and then he said, “Great car you've got here!”

That allowed me to get out.

So for a while they admired the car together, kicked the tires, and so on.

Then we ran out of that. I could feel he still didn't want to leave. I mean, why would you want to leave if you're being unconditionally loved? So finally he ran out of digressions. He knew he'd have to come clean that he's Krishna, so he said, ‘Be gone with you,’ which wasn't state trooper talk, but what the hell. As I got into the car and started to drive away, he was standing by his cruiser. I looked in the mirror and saw that he was waving at me.

Tell me, was that a state trooper or was that Krishna?”

Well, it *was* 1970 – flower power, beads, love and peace, and so on. But all that is really beside the point. Better to ask how would Ram Dass want us to understand this story all these years later? To put it more directly: what might it mean to say the state trooper was, actually, in some sense, Krishna?

Maybe the answer is as simple (on the surface) as the question: that *each* of us is Krishna, and usually – maybe always – we do not own up to it, not even to ourselves.

Or we could put all this another way. *Something* in that encounter loosened the trooper's usual way of experiencing himself. Maybe Ram Dass's friendliness and his lack of defensiveness metaphorically disarmed the trooper, so that he could for a few minutes step out of or let go of his role as state trooper and just be another human being. Something like this might also happen to a trooper (as to any of us) when hanging out with good friends outside of our usual roles or identities in the workaday world.

In any case... who *do* we think we really are? Is there, might there be, some sort of underlying identity beneath all the roles we play, beneath or other than our identities within our families or places of work and so on? Or are we nothing but these shifting, sometimes even conflicting, identities and roles?

Let's go back in time a couple of thousand years or so, to the *Bhagavad Gita*, the Hindu text often thought to be the heart and soul of Hinduism, a text which has been the inspiration for millions over the centuries, including Mahatma Gandhi.

The *Gita* takes place in a context at least as unlikely as the New York Thruway: a battlefield just before a great battle, a sort of civil war that is about to take place between forces of good and evil. The warrior Arjuna is having second thoughts about fighting. He laments that he has relatives, cousin, aunts, uncles, teachers, on both sides. How can he fight? He is tormented by doubt and puts his weapons aside.

Well, for Arjuna, Krishna appears not as a state trooper, but as his charioteer.

And Krishna takes the opportunity to instruct Arjuna, to teach him who he truly is... and how he should live.

In my own words, and to put it far too simply, but maybe not too simply: Arjuna, like all of us, was an individual manifestation of the divine, of the whole, of cosmos, of God – choose your language. To use the Sanskrit: Within each of us is the *Atman*, our true, deepest Self, which is at one with *Brahman*, the whole, what Emerson called the “oversoul” – Krishna.

Okay then, if that's the case how should we live?

Well, there are eighteen chapters in the *Gita*, but at the heart of the several paths in answer to this most important of questions – how shall we live – is this, at least this:

As we heard in the first reading, one of the paths to liberation (*moksha* is the Sanskrit word) from a sort of unhappy imprisonment in the feeling of being only an individual utterly separate from others, from anything larger than our own skin and bones and role in life... is the path of *karma* yoga, which is the path of selfless service without attachment to the results, the fruits of our actions. Yes, of course have a goal, but let go of attachment to things having to be exactly this way or that way. Do what you can in service to others, with love of course – maybe unconditional love – and then let go.

And all you have to do (all!) is to *be yourself* in this way of living.

Which leads to another Sanskrit word: *dharma*. Many translations and understandings of this word. But here we just need to keep in mind two things: There is *dharma* in the large sense of how things are, how the world and life works.

Then there is our individual *dharma* (*svadharma*) (which is what Stephen Cope was writing about in this morning's second reading). This is the *dharma* of who we are and what we can do, how we can serve in the *uniqueness* of our individual manifestation of life: Whether as a friend, parent, sibling, teacher, carpenter, clerk, lawyer, preacher, activist, writer... for though we are not in essence any of those identities or roles, it is *through* those unique roles that we serve and help and heal.

Now, I first read the *Bhagavad Gita* in college. And have returned to it in all the decades since, acquiring over the years different translations which offer different angles of vision and commentary on this ancient text.

Why do I return over and over again? Why am I leading a class on the *Gita* one more time?

Well, among other things I find I need to be reminded of that central teaching over and over again: Act without attachment to the fruits of your action. Do what you can where you are with what you've got and with who you are... and then let go.

It is so easy, all too easy, to think we *can* control the outcome of our actions and, further, that the outcome somehow defines our success or failure as human beings. So I don't know about you, but I need that reminder. And it turns out it makes it easier to live when you realize that all you can do in serving life is to do your best with whatever limited knowledge and ability is yours... and then let go... because we are each part of larger realities than our individual selves.

Further, importantly, the instruction is do whatever we do with love – that's the other reminder: Love for a dear one in our lives, love for a church, love for the Earth. The *Gita* talks about love for Krishna, for God, the path of *bhakti* or devotion. For me, as far as I can get is to see and love that spark of God, of love, in you and you and you, in each person.

As Whitman put it:

Why should I wish to see God better than this day?

I see something of God each hour of the twenty-four, and each moment then.

In the faces of men and women I see God, and in my own face in the glass...

Finally, then, I wouldn't spend much time talking about a text like the *Bhagavad Gita*, or others like the *Tao Te Ching*, or the Buddhist *Dhammapada*, or the *Gospels*, if I didn't have a sort of faith that the more of us who were to live according to the ancient wisdom in these texts, the better chance we would have for the flourishing of our lives and the flourishing of all life.

This, anyway, is my trust and hope.

And... really finally... to return to Ram Dass's story: Might it be that we can do no better than to look at one another and behave towards one another with the sort of unconditional love with which Ram Dass looked at that state trooper, as if that trooper was indeed Krishna?

After all, this might be where genuinely happier lives, flourishing lives, for each and all begin.

And again, whereas I'm not sure what it means to love God or to love Krishna, I do know what it means and feels like to love my neighbor.

I expect that's enough and more than enough – this new year and always.

May it always be so.