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The Bhagavad-Gita: Krishna's Counsel In Time Of War



Synopsis

The Bhagavad-Gita has been an essential text of Hindu culture in India since the time of its composition in the first century A.D. One of the great classics of world literature, it has inspired such diverse thinkers as Henry David Thoreau, Mahatma Gandhi, and T.S. Eliot; most recently, it formed the core of Peter Brook's celebrated production of the Mahabharata.

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Customer Reviews

'Bhagavad-Gita' which means 'Celestial Song' or 'Song of the Lord' is an immensely popular sacred text in India.....What makes 'Bhagavad-Gita' so popular? To begin with, its lines are steeped in extraordinary lyrical grace. The eight syllable or occasionally eleven syllable quarters exude a rare poetic energy. Secondly, the text centres around two very popular characters from Indian religion and mythology: Krishna and Arjuna. Thirdly, the context, that is the great war scene of 'Mahabharata' adds to the drama of the narrative. Apart from all these, the most endearing quality of 'Gita' lies in the practicality of its teachings for all times. The great war is about to begin, but the hero Arjuna is beset with self-doubt, hesitation and remorse. Krishna, his charioteer, engages him in a

long dialogue, which forms the main body of the narrative. Krishna's counsel not only dispels Arjuna's fears and doubts, it also provides solution to the eternal struggle between the spiritual and material in every human being. It answers all existential questions of man. Each man is facing a battle of Mahabharata within himself in his everyday life. To live, man has to fight, for life is a battle in which forces of good and evil are at constant war. Krishna's advice for man is to be deeply interested in his action and moral duty, yet to remain inwardly unattached, because man's real enemy is desire due to attachment. This enemy can be overcome by arming oneself with discipline and acting in a manner so as to cross the narrow limits of desire. Man must perform his duty disinterestedly, without selfish desire and without losing sight of ultimate spiritual reality. This reality is surrender to Krishna himself.

Professor Miller's is not one of the better translations of the Gita. We can see this immediately by her choice of subtitle, "Krishna's Counsel in Time of War," which works against the real significance of what Krishna is saying and misses the profound message of the Gita entirely. If the Gita were only advice about how to act during war, it could hardly have even a minuscule part of the world-wide and timeless significance that it has. Regardless of how literally one may want to read the Gita, it is an unmistakable truth that Krishna's counsel is not about war, per se, but about how to live life, and how to face death. We can also see in her introduction and in the "key words" section following the text that her understanding of the Gita is mostly academic. She has not practiced (at least not to any great extent) any of the yogas central to the Gita. It cannot be emphasized enough that a true understanding of the Bhagavad Gita requires not only study but practice in one or more of the four yogas presented by Krishna, namely bhakti yoga, karma yoga, jnana yoga or raja yoga. To illustrate some of the problems in the text, let's look at the beginning of Chapter Five as an example. Miller calls this, "The Fifth Teaching: Renunciation of Action," which is not exactly right since what is renounced are the fruits of action, not action itself, which according to the Gita, is impossible to renounce. We always act; even in inaction we are acting. Just "Renunciation" would be a better title for the chapter. Miller uses the word "Simpletons" in the fourth verse as the converse of "the learned"; but this is just poor diction. The intent of the Sanskrit is "unlearned" or "immature." Swami Nikhilananda, in his translation (1944; 6th printing, 1979), even uses the word "children."

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