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HRST 2700 - Paper
February 17, 2014

The Bhagavad Gita and the Twelve Steps

The author of Ecclesiastes writes “What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun.” (Eccles 1:9). Is this the case with universal spiritual truths? Do they keep re-manifesting in different forms in both time and place? Are our religions and spiritual programs drawing from the same well of inspiration to form different operating systems that allow us to connect with God and move us toward wholeness? It would seem so when we look at the Bhagavad-Gita and compare it to the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous to find evidence of the Gita’s spiritual messages in this contemporary world-wide fellowship and the groups it has spawned.

How does a Hindu scripture written in a time before Christ make its way into the healing steps of a 21st century American spiritual movement to free humans from the devastating disease of alcoholism? My theory is that it does this through a metaphysical interfaith dialogue that is not limited by the boundaries of time and space. It is similar to a spiritual Wikipedia where traditions borrow from each other to create new forms. This dialogue draws from a universal well of wisdom to manifest in his-story in forms and shapes that speak to the needs of the day. In this paper we will explore the key spiritual messages of the Bhagavad Gita through the eyes of Mohandas K. Gandhi and Sri Prabhupada in our search for their application in the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. My hope is that this investigation will be a step in offering proof that the spiritual principles in this ancient text (The Gita) are alive and well in the present day spiritual movement that is The Twelve Steps of AA.

Step 1

We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.

This is the first step towards humility and surrender to a Higher Power in the Twelve Steps. All of our lives we have been fighting-trying to do it ourselves-trying in vain to control the uncontrollable with God nowhere in sight. This is the story of the alcoholic/addict and is part and parcel of the disease of addiction as it manifests from a dis-eased ego. When we try to control we are acting as if we are God and in the Christian tradition this is what the great angel did known as Satan-and that's why he fell. He (Satan) wanted to be like God in his ability to control peoples, places, and things. It is also why we fall - why are lives become unmanageable is because we are trying to manage what is not ours to control.

The Gita speaks to unmanageability and the need to control outcome as attachment to the ego. It is a metaphor for the inner battle that goes on in our hearts, according to Gandhi.¹ The first chapter of the Gita is about Arjuna's despair as the First Step in the Twelve Steps is about our despair. The battle is between our hearts and our ego minds. Our effort is corrupted when we try to control the outcome. In other words, we have to let go and admit that we are powerless over outcome. The admitting of powerlessness is the first form of surrender and the planting of the seed of humility. The only way to see God and know God is through surrender. His Divine Grace A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada says that "Kṛṣṇa is not obliged to reveal Himself unless one surrenders fully in Kṛṣṇa consciousness....."²

¹ Mohandas K. Gandhi, (2013-02-20). *The Bhagavad Gita According to Gandhi* (Kindle Locations 7). Start Publishing LLC. Kindle Edition.

² His Divine Grace A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada (2010-12-15). *Bhagavad-Gita As It Is* (Kindle Locations 9822-9823). The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust. Kindle Edition.

Step 2

Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.

In this second step God begins to enter our awareness. If there is a power greater than the self we have been worshipping, then maybe that Power can restore us to sanity. This is a big step because it requires a measure of trust in the Unseen, and trust of self and others is not high on the list of virtues in the life of an addict. The step begins to shift our gaze away from the unhealthy focus on self toward right relationship with the God of our understanding.

This shift in focus from the self to God is echoed in the Gita. In Chapter 12:2 of the Gita Krishna says “Those who fix their minds on My personal form and are always engaged in worshipping Me with great and transcendental faith are considered by Me to be most perfect.”³ In the Gita, the devotee Arjuna is learning to trust in Krishna (God) and Gandhi writes that “We should identify ourselves with Arjuna and have faith that Sri Krishna is driving the chariot.”⁴

Step 3

Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.

The Third Step Prayer

*God, I offer myself to Thee- To build with me and to do with me as Thou wilt.
Relieve me of the bondage of self, that I may better do Thy will.
Take away my difficulties, that victory over them may bear witness to those I would help of Thy
Power, Thy Love, and Thy Way of life. May I do Thy will always!⁵*

³ Swami Prabhupada. *Bhagavad-Gita As It Is* (Kindle Locations 9822-9823). Kindle Edition.

⁴ Gandhi, and John Strohmeier. *The Bhagavad Gita According to Gandhi* (Berkeley, Calif: Berkeley Hills Books, 2000), 16.

⁵ From <http://silkworth.net/aa/3rd.html> -The Third Step Prayer from AA Big Book (accessed on 02-17-14)

The Third Step Prayer is thought to have been written by Bill W., co-founder of AA. However, it may have been borrowed from the Oxford Group which was a popular Christian movement to which founders Bill W. and Dr. Bob belonged, and many of A.A.'s spiritual principles were drawn from that movement.⁶ Remember Ecclesiastes 1:9? In any case here we have the themes of submission (God, I offer myself to Thee) and letting go of ego (Relieve me of the bondage of self) so that we can be aligned with God's will. The only way we can make this decision is thorough God's grace - "God make me willing to be willing!"

In Gandhi's commentary on chapter two of the Gita he says "Krishna is the *Atman* in us, who is our charioteer. We can win only if we hand over the reins of the chariot to him....we are smaller than even puppets. We should therefore trust everything to God..."⁷

Step 4

Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.

Now that we have turned the reins over to God we can turn our sites back to ourselves in an exercise that isn't meant to punish, but to in-lighten. We couldn't do this objectively before because we would have been doing it from our own distorted egos. With the help of God we can now truly begin to uncover why we do what we do. In fact, before we weren't looking - we were too afraid to look so we dwelled on our-selves without seeing the Self. We have to dig through the layers of the false-self to experience the real Self.

⁶ From AA.Org page on frequently asked questions - <http://www.aa.org/lang/en/subpage.cfm?page=287#dos> (accessed on 02-19-14).

⁷ Gandhi, and John Strohmeier. *The Bhagavad Gita According to Gandhi* (Berkeley, Calif: Berkeley Hills Books, 2000), 16.

In his commentary on the Gita (Ch10) entitled *River of Compassion*, Father Bede Griffiths says “The highest knowledge one can have is the knowledge of the Atman, The Spirit, the Self, and that cannot be had by any academic learning at all but only by Self-realization, by experience of the Spirit within.”⁸ Chapter ten of the Gita points to that Spirit within and Step Four is designed to uncover it through a searching and fearless moral inventory.

Step 5

Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.

This is another step on the road to humility called confession. We can't be free of our wrongs until we confess our wrongs. In the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ of the Christian tradition our sins are forgiven, but we have not received God's forgiveness because we haven't forgiven ourselves. We carry around our wrongs like so much baggage and the load gets heavier and heavier. In Step Four we opened the baggage. Having seen our wrongs its now time to admit them - to take responsibility for our actions, and let them go.

In the court system admitting evidence brings something out into the light of day that had been perviously hidden. Father Griffiths says “Evil is simply the negative element in us which cannot affect the light in itself, and the more we open ourselves to virtue, to grace, the more the light shines in us and purifies us...”⁹ Step Five brings our wrongs into to the light and prepares us to clear out the baggage of sin so we have room for something new.

⁸ Bede Griffiths, *River of Compassion: A Christian Commentary on the Bhagavad Gita* (Springfield, Ill: Templegate Publishers,1987), 196.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 198.

Steps 6 & 7

Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.

Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.

Being entirely ready is quite a proposition. How many of us are entirely ready for anything much less having our character defects removed. The fact is our character defects are habits and habits are hard to break. The good news is this is not an exercise in will - it is an exercise in humility! In this program God is in charge as is Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita. We are not doing the removing - we are humbly asking God to do the heavy lifting. Humility is a hard thing to do for do-it-yourselfers. In fact, for some of us it is harder than living with the character defects that drag us down.

Gandhi speaks to this spirit of humility throughout his commentary on the Gita. In his discourse on Chapter Two he says that Arjuna has “the genuine spirit of submission and humility”¹⁰ which is a key characteristic of having a relationship with God as it is in the Twelve Steps. He goes on to reinforce the message of surrender and humility saying that we should trust everything to God including “uncooked food”. That’s what is happening in Step 6 & 7 as we “Let Krishna the cook prepare and give us the food of grace.”¹¹

¹⁰ Gandhi, and John Strohmeier. *The Bhagavad Gita According to Gandhi* (Berkeley, Calif: Berkeley Hills Books, 2000), 14.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 16.

Steps 8 & 9

Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.

*Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so
would injure them or others.*

Two more steps that require humility. Now that we humbly asked God to remove our defects of character it's time for us to do our part. It's hard to apologize-especially when we are wrong. What's even harder is the fear of how people are going to respond. Steps 8 and 9 are Gita steps because they require action without attachment to outcome. If we are worried about outcome we will never have the courage to take these steps. This action is yoga - it is practice. Gandhi explains that the word Yoga as it is used in the Gita "explains how to act."¹²

In Chapter 2:39-40 of the Gita, Krishna says "Thus I have set before you the attitude of knowledge (Sankhya). Bear now the attitude of action (yoga). Resorting to this attitude thou shalt cast off the bondage of action. (40) Here no effort undertaken is lost, no disaster befalls. Even a little of this righteous course delivers us from great fear."¹³ Gandhi drives home the point that action emanating from Yoga is never wasted and calls this action "the royal road" and "the path of truth."¹⁴ What could be more supportive in providing a foundation for Steps Eight and Nine? These steps are not wasted because it is more about the person making the amends than the one receiving them. That's why the receivers response is immaterial to the outcome. This is the path

¹² Gandhi, and John Strohmeier. *The Bhagavad Gita According to Gandhi*. (Berkeley, Calif: Berkeley Hills Books, 2000), 20.

¹³ *Ibid*, 21.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 21.

of Truth (Krishna) and as we read in the New Testament “the Truth (Jesus) will set you free.” (cf: John 3:28).

Step 10

Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.

As humans we have a tendency to slide and slip. This is why we need to be reminded time and again to keep us on the path. Step 10 is designed to remind us to be humble lest we become intoxicated with the power of God’s grace that we have experienced in the first nine steps. We find the same pedagogy in the Gita in that there is a revisitation of themes. Chapter 13 of the Gita serves the same end as Step 10 - to remind the student of what he has learned and the need to be humble. Chapter 13, Verse 7 lists “Humbleness, sincerity, harmlessness, forgiveness, uprightness, devotion to the spiritual master, purity, steadiness, self-harmony;”¹⁵ as key virtues in the practice of yoga. We have to keep coming back to humility or else pride has a tendency to sneak in the back door and sabotage our growth.

Step 11

Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God, as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.

This step is key to our ongoing growth in relationship with God. Now that we have a relationship with God we have to work on it through prayer and meditation. God wants to be in relationship with us, but in the cloud of our addictions we failed to see that relationship is a two

¹⁵ Simon Brodbeck (2003-01-30). *The Bhagavad Gita* (Penguin Classics) (Kindle Locations 1809-1810). Penguin Books Ltd. Kindle Edition.

way street. For many of us our lives have leaned in the direction of taking rather than giving. The only time we turned to God is when we wanted God to take away our pain. We never thought to give God the source of our pain because we didn't believe that God would or could help us with our problems. Instead, we shouldered challenges our-selves until they became too hard to bear and then screamed out for help. In this step we are changing that pattern and learning to trust in and rely on God by turning to God through prayer and meditation in order to know His will for us and the power to carry it out (without attachment to outcome).

This is one of the primary messages of the Gita. The Bhagavad Gita is about developing a personal understanding of God and so is the Twelve Steps, and just like the Gita we do this through practice. Once a person surrenders to God as the addict did in Step Three and has had a spiritual awakening as Arjuna does in the Gita, he or she is freed up to become a devotee. This practice is called devotional service by Swami Prabhupada and consists of fixing his "mind and intelligence entirely on the Supreme Lord. Such a standard of devotional service is undoubtedly very rare, but a devotee becomes situated in that stage by following the regulative principles of devotional service."¹⁶ The devotional service in the case of the Twelve Steps is prayer and meditation. If there is a goal it is to know God's will and have the power to carry it out. Another way of saying this is "The devotee does not desire any achievement other than pleasing the Supreme Personality of Godhead."¹⁷

¹⁶ His Divine Grace A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada (2010-12-15). *Bhagavad-Gita As It Is* (Kindle Locations 11036-11038). The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust. Kindle Edition.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, (Kindle Locations 10868-10872).

Step 12

Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these Steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

When we have been given the gift of freedom through the yoga of the Twelve Steps it is not out of obligation that we pass it on to others but out of love for the God that saved us. This is the essence of Step Twelve service. It is born out of devotional service to God and manifests in action to help others by carrying the message and practicing the principles we have learned in all our affairs. We become an example of the power of God's healing, especially to people who may have known us before we accepted the gift of God's grace. The change in us helps others to awaken to the God in all of Us.

This type of service is one that is done with unconditional love, the same type of love that God has shown us. Sri Prabhupada says "for spiritual life, one must be elevated to the pure stage of love. That stage of love can be achieved by practice of devotional service....."¹⁸ He goes on to say that a person should "always engage himself in Kṛṣṇa consciousness and with love and devotion render all kinds of services."¹⁹ Twelfth Step service is devotional service manifested in love for one's Higher Power that helps others on their path to healing and wholeness. Gandhi believes the author of the Gita has Krishna say "..... those who will give this precious treasure to My devotees will, by the fact of this service, assuredly reach me."²⁰

¹⁸ His Divine Grace A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada (2010-12-15). *Bhagavad-Gita As It Is* (Kindle Locations 10930-10935). The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust. Kindle Edition.

¹⁹ Ibid, (Kindle Locations 9198-9201).

²⁰ Mohandas K. Gandhi, (2013-02-20). *The Bhagavad Gita According to Gandhi* (Kindle Location 12). Start Publishing LLC. Kindle Edition.

Key concepts in the Twelve Steps are *Humility, Surrender, and Service*. Key concepts in the Bhagavad Gita are *Humility, Surrender, and Service*. They both have a similar literary structure in their repetition of these main points. There is simplicity in the Gita as there is simplicity in the Twelve Steps. In fact early Christianity had this same spirit of simplicity before being co-opted by the Roman hierarchy with its Greco-Roman focus on rules/laws. In the Twelve Steps everything is a suggestion. It is a form of yoga (practice) that keeps us on a path of right living (dharma). The Hinduism of the Gita shares the same character with its focus on practice and experience. It is designed to help people develop their personal relationship with God as exemplified in the relationship between Arjuna and Krishna. This is true of the Twelve Steps where we surrender to the God of our understanding in order to be free.

My goal in this paper was to point out the similarities between the Bhagavad Gita and the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous with the help of Mohandas K. Gandhi and Sri Prabhupada to support the theory of a metaphysical interfaith dialogue or spiritual Wikipedia that is not bound by time and space. There are aspects of the Bhagavad Gita that are inherent in Christianity and both of these religions (Hinduism and Christianity) are foundational to the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. Each religion and spiritual movement borrows from the other to take on new forms and shapes to help humans at particular points in His-Story. Life is group work. We are all in a state of becoming and while there may be new forms we can rest assured that Truth is unchanging and “what has been will be again, what has been done will be done again.....”

Amen.

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