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## Psychiatry in sacred texts

### Psychiatry and the Bhagavad Gita

Aarti Datta 

It was another evening of sweltering heat during the first lockdown, and shortly after an overtired 3-year-old and a new-born had (thankfully) started to dream, I found the Bhagavad Gita. It had been pushed to a corner of our family bookshelf, losing its spot to a mountain of books on psychiatry, parenting and, of course, the likes of *The Gruffalo* and *The Tiger Who Came to Tea*.

Exhausted, sleep deprived and wearing clothes stained with every bodily fluid a new-born can and will produce, I still deemed it a good time to open the Bhagavad Gita. The same copy that had humbly sat, unopened, on every one of my bookshelves since the day I started university.

I was struck by the sheer amount and conveyance of psychiatric themes. The literature was not too far away from what I have framed 'medical advice' during engagement with children and families.

There was another reason I was hooked immediately and became a fervent reader – the setting of the Gita, in the middle of a battlefield, during a crisis that is consuming the world. At its centre is a warrior, Arjuna, mentally drowning in his own despair and loneliness. He turns to Lord Krishna for some perspective, help, insight, understanding, or what we call 'therapy'.

The discourse that ensues between Lord Krishna and Arjun provides a framework for pursuing a habitual mindset that strives for both physical and mental health. The verses that explore mental well-being do so via treatises on the experience of worldly gratification alongside the need for self-made gratification as an end in itself.

Gratification free from worldly attachment arises from a strong awareness, mindfulness, starting with one's breathing, *pranayama*. This is in tandem with awareness of bodily needs: '*nāty-āśnatas tu yogo 'sti na caikāntam anaśnataḥ na cāti-svapna-śīlasya jāgrato naiva cārjuna*' ['There is no achievement of harmony, O Arjuna, if one eats too much or too little, sleeps too much or does not sleep enough']. And then there is a move to *dhyana yoga*, the pursuit of truthful knowledge for the purposes of self-empowerment. The mere acquisition of this varied knowledge becomes a self-fulfilling act, preventing mental and physical inertia: '*karmaṇy evādhikāras te, mā phaleṣu kadācana, mā karma-phala-hetur bhū, mā te saṅgo 'stv akarmaṇi*' ['Perform your prescribed duty, without entitlement to the fruits of your action, you are not the cause of the results. Do not resort to inaction']. And finally, loneliness. The concept of self-comfort *vis-à-vis* a free-flowing state of consciousness is indeed a strong theme, though not exclusive of the concept of being one of wider humanity and of numerous species. This refers to the concept of Brahman, 'that which contains all'.

It wasn't long before my children were awake after my episode of spiritual indulgence. I was still in stain-covered maternity clothes, still exhausted and sleep deprived; but also a bit more peaceful, gratified – and breathing.

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