Conflicts of various kinds constitute an important aspect of the human condition. In everyday life people are frequently put in situations where the choice between available options becomes difficult. In psychological literature, such conflicts are categorized in terms of positive and negative vectors associated with the options. Accordingly a typology of conflicts is created, that is, positive–positive, positive–negative, and negative–negative. Continued or chronic conflicts often become sources of stress and maladjustment. The existential conditions of the modern world pose the challenge before us to analyse the conflicts and exercise our choice wisely, so that we may avoid the negative effects, grow and realize our potential. In this endeavour, the model of man becomes very important as it plays a decisive role in choosing our position while perceiving our problems, and responding to them. Individuals are, over and over again, confronted with choices that lead to ethical dilemmas as they perceive them, and there is consequent confusion in action. Such dilemmas leave us groping, divided and bewildered, and so always in a state of stress or dejection. A dilemma arises when the person who has to act, is committed to two or more moral obligations, and he cannot fulfil one without violating his duty to another.

The *Mahābhārata* explains to ordinary persons, in the simple form of stories, how the ancient personages behaved in the numerous difficult circumstances they had to confront in the course of their lives. It presents situations where imperfect people have to act in an imperfect world; where everything has shades of grey. In the story the most difficult moment of choice is found in the case of Arjuna who was duty-bound to fight in the war where the enemies were his own kith and kin.
The key dilemma

The choice was difficult and Lord Krṣṇa had to counsel Arjuna at that juncture. After the counsel, Arjuna undergoes a self-transformation and recognizes his true nature. The Lord’s teachings, which are in the form of descriptions and directions for undergoing the various kinds of yoga, form the part of the text called the Śrī Bhagavad Gītā.

In fact, ‘What shall I do?, ‘How shall I act?, are the questions that confront the protagonists of the Mahābhārata at every turn of their lives, as they do us. The fratricidal war between the Kauravas and the Pāṇḍavas, for the throne of Hastināpura, is pivotal to the Mahābhārata. The Kurukṣetra war is hedged in on either side by the breakdown of the two chief protagonists—Arjuna and Yudhiṣṭhira. The biggest dilemma is that of Arjuna at the beginning of the battle of Kurukṣetra. All, including Arjuna, are aware that the war would lead to massive destruction and devastation in which the entire family would be involved and face annihilation. Yet they go into it with eyes open, but of course each of the chief protagonists has a different motive or perception, apart from the common cause or aim.

Arjuna, as he confronts the two armies, is filled with despair and paralysed in action. After the war, Yudhiṣṭhira is overwrought with despair, and refuses to accept the throne of Hastināpura for which the war itself was fought. He finds it impossible to escape his share of the guilt for the carnage. Both find themselves unable to act. Thus initially Arjuna collapses, and, at the end, Yudhiṣṭhira. They attempt to adopt an apparently high moral ground that seems utterly rational, convincing and ethical to justify their positions, and thus try to escape the more difficult path of action.
The path of the *Gītā*

Arjuna’s dilemma is the supreme ethical dilemma. Similarly the extreme anguish of Yudhiṣṭhira at the carnage caused by the war, and his inability to ascend a blood-soaked throne, are real and entirely comprehensible. It cannot be forgotten that Yudhiṣṭhira must feel particularly guilty, as he blames himself for it. Whatever may have been his justification for playing the game of dice—it is part of *rajasūya yajña*; he cannot refuse the invitation of Dhṛtarāṣtra and Duryodhana, especially when Vidura is the carrier of it. He cannot annoy his cousins in view of Vyāsa’s prophecy of an extremely destructive war between them, which he wants to avoid at all costs—he cannot escape the responsibility of staking his brothers and Draupadī. He should have known when to stop. The guilt of the difficulties of the thirteen years in the forest and the war itself, must weigh down heavily upon him. Draupadī and Bhīmasena also repeatedly point out his culpability to him. Yudhiṣṭhira wants to do penance for his mistakes and the hardships that they have caused, but he does not realize that the greatest penance that he can do is to accept his responsibility, rather than escape it, and rule over Hastināpura. However, his despondency has first to be transformed into a frame of mind where he can accept this and act with equanimity.

Equanimity in life

Śrī Kṛṣṇa’s teachings to Arjuna are nothing short of preparing the human warrior to fight the battle of life with equanimity. As Lokmanya Tilak (2000) points out, the very first advice of Śrī Kṛṣṇa to Arjuna is that it is not proper to give up action because numerous difficulties arise in the consideration of what should be done and what should not be done. For Tilak, the subject matter of the *Gītā* is to show whether or not there are any means of ascertaining what course to follow when a person is beset by ethical dilemmas, and by what means to resolve them. The word *karma* as he says, comes from the root ‘ṛ’ which means ‘doing’ ‘affairs’ or activity and *yoga*, in this context, means some special skill, device,
intelligent method or graceful way of performing actions. This is because all methods of *yoga* given in the *Gītā* are not for the ascetic, but for one who continues to perform actions in this world so that he can do them in an equitable frame of mind.

**Motivational transformation**

In motivating Arjuna to act, Śrī Kṛṣṇa presents to him the most detailed exposition of *karmayoga*, the *yoga* of action, which can only be performed through true knowledge (*jñāna*), and devotion (*bhakti*). The transformation is essentially a psychological one, as it changes the way the protagonist views the situation, the action that he thinks he has to perform, and the motivation behind that action, so that the suffering or its perception is minimized, accepted as justified or sublimated. *Sri Aurobindo explains that*

All action of the mind or inner instrument arises out of this chitta or basic consciousness, partly conscient, partly sub conscient or subliminal to our active mentality. When it is struck by the world’s impacts from outside or urged by the reflective powers of the subjective inner being, it throws up certain habitual activities, the mould of which has been determined by our evolution. One of these forms of activity is the emotional mind, — the heart, as we may call it for the sake of a convenient brevity. Our emotions are the waves of reaction and response which rise up from the basic consciousness, cittavṛtti. Their action too is largely regulated by habit and an emotive memory. They are not imperative, not laws of Necessity...we are not obliged to give responses of grief to certain impacts upon the mind, responses of anger to others, to yet others responses of hatred or dislike, to others responses of liking or love. All these things are only habits of our affective mentality; they can be changed by the conscious will of the spirit;
they can be inhibited; we may even rise entirely above all subjection to grief, anger, hatred, the duality of liking and disliking...and yet the true emotive soul, the real psyche in us, is not a desire-soul, but a soul of pure love and delight; but that, like the rest of our true being, can only emerge when the deformation created by the life of desire is removed from the surface and is no longer the characteristic action of our being. To get that done is a necessary part of our purification, liberation, perfection. (Synthesis of Yoga 621-622).

Yoga as psychology

The basic problem faced by humanity is the search for an answer to the question of mental and spiritual suffering, which is inevitable. Therefore all living beings strive for freedom from suffering (duḥkha nivṛtti). This involves four related issues. One is āhyā or the real nature of duḥkha. The second is āhyā hetu or the real cause of suffering. The third is hāna or what is the condition when there is complete absence of suffering. And the fourth is hānopāya or what are the means or method of achieving the complete absence of suffering. In examining these questions, three ontological categories are postulated. One is cetana-tattva, puruṣa or jīva or the life principle. The questions are: Who suffers? What is the nature of the one who suffers? Is suffering its natural property? The argument is that once one is face to face with this real Self, there is complete absence of suffering or ‘hāna’.

The second is jāda-tattva or inert matter, prakṛti. Suffering originates in it and is its necessary attribute. Not being able to distinguish between this inert matter and the life principle is the cause of suffering. Therefore, attaining the discriminating knowledge to distinguish between the two is the means of putting an end to suffering or hānopāya.
The third is the *cetana-tattva* or the great Self which is called by various names like *paramātmā*, *iśvara* and *brahman*. This is the goal of the individual self. When one becomes one with this, the individual self becomes independent of the inert matter and thus immune to suffering (Sri Aurobindo, 1999, pp. 38-39).

The *Gītā* argues that the root of all suffering and discord is the agitation of mind caused by desire. The only way to douse the flame of desire is by stilling the mind through disciplining the senses and the intellect. However, this does not mean abstinence from action as that is just as detrimental as extreme indulgence. According to the *Gītā*, the goal of life is to free the mind and the intellect from their complexities and to focus them on the glory of the Self by dedicating one’s actions to the Divine. This goal can be achieved through the *yogas* of meditation, action, devotion and knowledge. These four major kinds of *yoga* are: *rājayoga* or psycho-physical meditation, *bhaktiyoga* or devotion, *karmayoga* or selfless action, and *jñānayoga* or self-transcending knowledge. Then there is the most popularly known *yoga* of the physical body, or the *hathayoga*. ‘*Yoga* Sri Aurobindo (1999, p. 44) points out, ‘is nothing but practical psychology.’ Its aim is self-perfection by a methodized effort so that the latent potentialities of a human being can be brought to light and perfected. This is done by the union of the individual with the universal and transcendent existence which is partially expressed in man and in the cosmos.

*Yoga* then, is primarily a change of the inner consciousness and nature. People are not so much disturbed by the things that happen to them but by the way they view them. The processes of cognition, emotion and behaviour are interdependent. Therefore emotions and actions can be modified by rectifying the errors in thinking and language. Conflicts arise because human beings have a tendency to not only think irrationally but also to convert their strong preferences into absolutistic demands. This is because of their perception of themselves as right and their inability to see any other point of view. For
example, a person may be unhappy that his son does not obey him and convert that into an absolute value without realizing that the extent of obedience being demanded by him is probably unrealistic. Human beings also have the power to step back and view their own thoughts and then to choose to work towards changing their irrational thinking. Once the ground has been prepared, they can actively and continuously work towards changing their own perceptions.

It must be remembered that while the *Gītā* presents the triune path, it foregrounds the path of action and not of renunciation. Krṣṇa’s injunction to Arjuna is quite clear; conquer the kingdom and enjoy it, not renounce it. That is why, later Yudhiṣṭhir has to be similarly motivated to rule over Hastināpura with his brothers, and not leave it. Arjuna himself is unambiguous in his request to Śrī Krṣṇa, ‘Do not confuse me by placing before me several courses of conduct, but point out to me definitely only one course, which is the proper course.’ Śrī Krṣṇa is trying to motivate Arjuna to act, by making him see the situation from a totally different perspective from the one he is viewing it through.

Initially, Arjuna is overconfident. He asks Śrī Krṣṇa to take him to the middle of the battlefield between the two opposing forces because he wants to teach the Kauravas a lesson. However, he gets caught in a dilemma himself. The enormity of the situation acts as a blow delivered at the very centre of his sensational, vital and emotional being. He reaches a state bordering on the virtual collapse of his entire being—physical, psychological and physiological. He cannot even stand, overcome as he is by great fear and confusion. The psychological stress manifests as palpitation of the heart, profuse perspiration, trembling of limbs, drying up of the tongue, parching of the throat, tears in the eyes and dizziness. The bow slips and falls to the ground. The moral sense awakens to justify the revolt of the sensations and emotions. It is a sin it tells him. How can mutual slaughter be right and just. His action would be a violation of the most sacred feelings and nothing could be a more heinous crime. Similarly, Yudhiṣṭhir at the end of the war is in a state of utter despair. He
cannot bear the destruction that has been caused and he condemns himself in the strongest terms possible.

It is interesting that Yudhiṣṭhira should say this at the end of the war because unlike Arjuna, he faced no such qualms at the beginning. He was convinced that the war was happening in spite of him and not because of him. On the face of it, therefore, both Arjuna and Yudhiṣṭhira are wise men who appear to be speaking both rationally and ethically. Kṛṣṇa’s teachings to Arjuna in the battlefield are the most outstanding example of how the psyche can be transformed and a changed perspective lead to a radically different action. Similar arguments are used later to persuade Yudhiṣṭhira but the exposition is not as compact or cogent. The teaching of the Gītā is a part of life and presents the inner conflicts and dilemmas that an individual faces, and how he can grapple with them.

**Ignorance: The challenge of understanding reality**

The Gītā gives the individual the necessary strength to act by revealing the hidden and underlying reality of the situation. Kṛṣṇa not only changes the cognitive paradigms of Arjuna as he motivates him to act, but takes the process even further to spiritualize it. He uses the dialectic method in approaching the question of the individual in the universe, his situation in life and the various problems and conflicts that surround him. It is an educative process of bringing the individual soul from the state of wrong understanding, a state of mixed up interior, a state of confusion, into a higher state of right understanding, clarity of perception and vision, and a very clear interior.

Arjuna refuses to fight saying they are all his kinsmen and those whom he reveres. As though he had not known all along that the opposing Kaurava forces were his relatives! Similarly, Yudhiṣṭhira refuses to ascend the throne saying that he finds every grain to be drenched in the blood of those bound by the most
intimate and sacred ties to him, and whom he has caused to be killed. Again, it isn’t as if Yudhiṣṭhīra did not know whom he was fighting and whom he was killing. Arjuna is driven to fight by the egoism of his strength as a *kṣatriya*. He is repelled from the battle later, by the contrary egoism of weakness. His spirit shrinks and a false pity overcomes him. He says he would much rather be a mendicant and live by begging, than rule over a kingdom won by the bloodshed of his relatives.

Arjuna’s laying aside his *gāṇḍiva* and refusing to battle should ordinarily be considered a shining example of renunciation but Śrī Kṛṣṇa is not deceived by it. He rebukes him by terming his words as weakness, delusion and egoism. He tells him to open his eyes to the true knowledge of the situation and to purify his soul of egoism.

Śrī Kṛṣṇa chides Arjuna because he sees him in a state of ignorance and confusion. It is not true renunciation but faint-heartedness, impotence full of a weak self-pity, recoil from the mental suffering that would be caused by fighting. As Sri Aurobindo points out, it is ignoble because the apparent pity for others is also a form of self-indulgence, a physical shrinking of the nerves from having to perform the act of slaughter, the egoistic emotional cringing of the heart from the destruction of the *Kauravas* because they are ‘one’s own people’ and without them life will be empty. Therefore, it is weakness and not compassion, which motivates Arjuna. It is not the path for the developed man who must not be allowed to give in to weakness, but must grow from strength to strength. Arjuna has been chosen by the Divine to do a particular act. It is after all Śrī Kṛṣṇa who is his charioteer. It is not for him to escape his duty but to do it as an instrument of the Divine, with equanimity of heart. Up to this moment, Arjuna has followed the current standards of action. It is his *kṣatriya dharma* that has led him to a hideous chaos where his emotions and morality are in conflict with each other, and into a situation where he finds no moral standing-ground.
Removal of ignorance

Since Śrī Kṛṣṇa sees ignorance as the root cause of Arjuna’s reaction, he first sets about removing it. Arjuna, he says, is deluded. He thinks he is going to kill someone but who can kill whom. These people whom he regards as mortal beings are really imperishable and eternal. Weapons cannot injure them, fire cannot burn them, water cannot wet them and wind cannot dry them. They are unborn, eternal, beyond time. How can they be killed and who can kill them. One who claims as much is ignorant. The Reality never ceases to be and the unreal is only an appearance. Therefore Śrī Kṛṣṇa says that Arjuna has to first rid himself of ajñāna or avidyā. For this, he must first become aware of it. Arjuna is a warrior and not a seer. Hence, eventually Śrī Kṛṣṇa has to show him his ‘virāṭ rūpa’ in which he sees not only the divinity of Kṛṣṇa but also the paradoxical nature of time. All have already been killed and yet all are eternal. This is because time is transitory and Time is eternal. Śrī Kṛṣṇa makes him realize that running away from action is not going to solve his problem. He must see things clearly and in the right perspective. The real question is not of his action or inaction. The wise know that there is a third way, which is the right and proper way—that of wisdom filled action.

Śrī Kṛṣṇa now points out a physical and psychological truth. All creatures, whether they desire or not, must act. It is in the very nature of life on earth and of the human individual, that all are driven to activity. We are all a part of the Cosmic Nature or prakṛti that has brought manifestation into being and she contains within Herself this impulse to action. Thus, action is inevitable. She is the mechanical executive force although instinct with an Absolute Intelligence or puruṣa. Nature as prakṛti is the Force that works out the movements imposed on her but all the while within her is the one that knows, although inactive, that is the puruṣa. He gives sanction to prakṛti’s works but does not himself execute. Sri Aurobindo points out that this is the distinction maintained by the Sāṁkhya and
although it may not be seen as the highest truth by all, it is still a useful, valid and indispensable practical knowledge in the lower sphere of existence.

The individual soul or the conscious being may identify itself with the experiencing puruṣa or with the active prakṛti. If the latter, it is not master, knower, or the enjoyer but reflects the modes and workings of prakṛti. It is in the very nature of things that man has an incomplete, hampered and baffled ascension towards the true character of the puruṣa, who is the free master, knower and enjoyer. Prakṛti works in the human and earthly experience through the guṇas or the relative modes – sāttvic, rājasic, and tāmasic. None gives its single and absolute fruit because all are intermixed with each other. It is their confused and inconstant interaction that determines the experiences of the egoistic human consciousness and limits it. It results in a constant inequality of the mind and heart, confusion and disharmony in the varied reactions to experience. Sri Aurobindo (1999, p.100) explains this idea of Sāṁkhya philosophy thus:

The human reactions sway perpetually between the dualities created by the soul’s subjection to Nature and by its often intense but narrow struggle for mastery and enjoyment, for the most part ineffective. The soul circles in an unending round of Nature’s alluring and distressing opposites, success and failure, good fortune and ill fortune, good and evil, sin and virtue, joy and grief, pain and pleasure. It is only when, awaking from its immersion in Prakriti, it perceives its oneness with the One and its oneness with all existences that it can become free from these things and find its right relation to this executive world-Nature. Then it becomes indifferent to her inferior modes, equal-minded to her dualities, capable of mastery and freedom; it is seated above her as the high-throned knower and witness filled with the calm intense unalloyed delight of his own eternal existence. The embodied spirit
continues to express its powers in action, but it is no longer involved in ignorance, no longer bound by its works; its actions have no longer have a consequence within it, but only a consequence outside in Prakriti.

He points out that while it is not necessary to accept the Sāṁkhya philosophy embedded in the Gītā to understand karmayoga, it provides a useful tool to analyse the psychological experience: philosophy is ‘after all’ only a way of formulating to ourselves intellectually in their essential significance the psychological and physical facts of existence and their relation to any ultimate reality that may exist.

**Overcoming egotism**

Therefore, the desired goal that Śrī Kṛṣṇa is taking Arjuna to is the elimination of egoistic activity which has its foundation in egoistic consciousness. Desire has its source in emotions, sensations and instincts and, from their affects, it pervades thought and volition. The ego sense not only lives in these movements but it can also be found in the thinking mind and its will where it becomes fully self-conscious. Desire takes many forms but the most powerful is the craving or seeking after the fruit of works. Egoism gives us a sense of mastery and idea of freedom not letting us realize that we are actually bound by our own desires. Therefore, Śrī Kṛṣṇa tells Arjuna the first rule of actions—do work that needs to be done without any desire for fruit, *nīskāma karma* (detached action).

How do we know that we are truly working desirelessly? The test is the absolute equality of the mind and heart to all results, reactions, happenings. If we are not moved or react to good or ill fortune, respect or insult, fame or notoriety, victory or defeat, then we have the absolute liberation to which the Gītā points us, but not otherwise. Even the smallest reaction shows that at least some part is still bound by ignorance.
But how can such equanimity be arrived at? Certain steps have to be taken. First, the shocks of the world have to be borne in such a manner that the core of our being remains untouched and silent even when the surface is shaken. This implies that the watching soul has to separate itself from the outer workings of nature. Only then will it gradually become possible to radiate peace from the luminous centre to the dark peripheries. Help on the path can come from various sources like stoicism, calmness and a sense of religious exaltation. Or, the powers of the mental nature can be called upon, but eventually all these have to be discarded or transformed to achieve true equality and peace within.

But then the question arises would action at all be possible because a human being is motivated by his desires or because he has certain mental, vital or physical wants. These may be for riches, honours or fame, or he might crave personal satisfaction of the mind or heart or be driven to acquire power or pleasure. It may even be a moral need to fulfil his ideals, bring his ideas to fruition or to serve his country or his gods. What is the incentive to act if all these, many of them being the noblest that we can think of, are said to constitute desire that must be discarded.

Regaining consciousness

The Gītā’s answer is that all action must be done with the consciousness fixed on the Divine. The works must be done as a sacrifice to the Divine and eventually our entire being inclusive of our mind, will, heart, sense, life and body have to be surrendered. God-love and God-service must be the only motive. This transformation of the motive force and very character of works is the foundation of the unique synthesis of work, love and knowledge or the triune path to which the Gītā points. In the end, it is not the individual desire but the consciously felt will of the Eternal that remains as the sole driver of our actions and the sole originator of its initiative. Equality, renunciation of all desire for the fruit of our
works, action done as a sacrifice to the supreme Lord of our nature constitute \textit{karmayoga}.

Hence, what Śrī Kṛṣṇa advocates is that it is better to act wisely and thus liberate oneself from the consequences of action rather than to act foolishly or attempt to give up all action. The true path is to act with knowledge, because such action cannot bind the individual. It goes beyond the law of action and the inevitable experience of the fruits of action. It is almost like engaging in action and yet being actionless. The key that Śrī Kṛṣṇa presents is the union of two largest and highest states or powers of consciousness, equality and oneness.

\textbf{Yudhiṣṭhira’s grief and its transformation}

At the end of the Kurukṣetra war, Yudhiṣṭhira like Arjuna at the beginning is bowed down with grief. He feels that it is because of their covetousness that the dreadful carnage of the kinsmen has been caused. Because of him, he says, Kṛṣṇa will find it difficult to face his people in Dvārakā on his return. Draupadī, too, has been left childless and Subhadrā has lost her only son, Abhimanyu. His sorrow has been increased because Kuntī had hidden the truth of Karṇa from him. He felt they owed a debt of gratitude to Karṇa because he had kept his promise to Kuntī to spare four of her sons even if he got them under his power in the battlefield, and he had kept his word on various occasions. The only person he had declared that he would fight to the finish was Arjuna and the result was that he had not only lost to him but Arjuna had ended up slaying his uterine brother. Yudhiṣṭhira repeatedly grieved for the death of Karṇa.

While Yudhiṣṭhira condemned himself for having been the cause of the death of all those who were dear to them—kinsmen and friends for the sake of sovereignty—he acknowledged that they too had been at fault as they had always been full of envy and hate, hankering after earthly objects. Duryodhana’s heart was always full of guile. Since their childhood he had tried every means to
destroy the Pāṇḍavas. He was malicious and deceitful and because of his actions, neither the Kauravas nor the Pāṇḍavas could enjoy the sovereignty of Hastināpura, or the pleasures of the world. The Kauravas did not listen to the advice of their ministers, friends or the learned men. Dhṛtarāṣṭra, too, followed the evil policies of his son. Hence, it was because of Duryodhana’s acts that the race had been exterminated. It was because of this that the Pāṇḍavas had been pushed into slaying those whom they should never have harmed, thereby incurring the censure of the world. However, this realization did not lessen Yudhiṣṭhira’s stupefying grief, and therefore, he said he would go to the forests and live the life of an ascetic.

Seeing Yudhiṣṭhira’s despondent state, all the brothers, Draupadī, Vyāsa, Nārada and Śrī Kṛṣṇa himself tried to transform his thinking to bring him to a level of stability so that he would accept the throne of Hastināpura and not nullify all the exertions of the past. Several arguments are marshalled between them. In fact, Draupadī, who has lost all her sons, shows remarkable courage in contrast to Yudhiṣṭhira’s dejection and despair.

A great feat was achieved by winning the war and why should everything be abandoned because of Yudhiṣṭhira’s fickleness of heart, asks Draupadī. Besides, as she points out, why does Yudhiṣṭhira not take pride in his brothers, each one of whom was like a celestial being capable of resisting all foes and all of whom had so loyally obeyed and followed him. Moreover, throughout their sojourn in the forest he had promised them that their sufferings would end by fighting and defeating Duryodhana, and that they would enjoy the sovereignty of Hastināpura. They had accepted his decisions and kept the word given by him at the time of the game of dice, and now he could not make everything futile by his folly and madness. Since he was the eldest, the others felt bound to follow him but, as she says, to do so now would be lunacy. If they had any sense, they would imprison him and take upon themselves the governance of Hastināpura. A person who acted from dullness of intellect, the way Yudhiṣṭhira proposed to do,
never prospered and mad people needed to be treated, not followed, otherwise adversity and danger befell them.

Bhīmasena hit upon a great psychological truth when he pointed out to Yudhišṭhira that there were two kinds of interdependent diseases—physical and mental. He, who regretted past physical or mental woes, repeated them, suffered twice over. Cold, heat and wind were the three attributes of the body. When they were in harmony, there was health. Remedies had been laid down for when one prevailed over the other. Cold was checked by heat and heat by cold. Goodness, passion and darkness were the three attributes of the mind. When these three were in harmony, there was mental health. If one of them predominated, disease resulted and remedies had been provided for it. Grief was checked by joy and joy by grief. One living in present enjoyment remembered his past woes, while living presently in suffering, recollected his past happiness. Yudhišṭhira, however, had always risen above both sorrow and joy in the past. He should not, therefore, now get embroiled in such emotions, using his memory to become sad at a time of joy.

_Bhīma_ points out that Yudhišṭhira had now to fight another battle that was with his own mind alone. If he did not win this battle during his lifetime, he would then have to war with these very foes again in another life even after his death. Therefore, he had to fight without delay. He had to conquer and identify his mind’s foes himself, with the help of his own actions. Otherwise his condition would become pitiable. But if he won over his mind’s demons, he would attain the goal of life.

Besides, as Arjuna points out, Yudhišṭhira had no reason to grieve because he had injured his friends and kinsmen because no one could live in this world without doing injury to another. All life in the world is dependent on another. Animals lived upon animals, the stronger upon the weaker. Finally, all things were destroyed by the great Destroyer. The man of knowledge was never stupefied by death. It was only foolish _kṣatriyas_ who took refuge in the woods.
Even ascetics could not support their lives without killing creatures. There were innumerable creatures in the water, on the earth and in the fruits. One slaughtered them because there could be no higher duty than supporting one’s life. There were many living things that were so minute that their existence could only be inferred not seen. They were destroyed even by the falling of the eyelid. So how could anyone escape destroying other living things?

As far as slaughter of kinsmen was concerned, Arjuna gives the example of the gods and the dānavas or the demons. Even the gods wished for the slaughter of their kinsmen who were the demons. They, too, had won their prosperity through internecine quarrels and so what sin could there be in such quarrels? There were two issues here, says Arjuna: abstention from injury and injury promoted by righteous motives. Of these whatever action was needed to procure righteousness was considered superior. There was no act that was wholly meritorious or wholly wicked. Something of both could be seen in all actions. Therefore, there should not be any despondency in slaying foes and he who did it was not sinful. A person who took up a weapon to slay an armed foe advancing upon him was naturally provoked to wrath and could not be condemned for a wrong action. Besides, the inner soul of every creature was incapable of being slain so how could another kill it. As a person entered a new house, so also the soul entered successive bodies. Abandoning forms that were worn out, a creature acquired new forms. People incapable of seeing this truth regarded this as death.

Then, two interrelated questions are dealt with: What constitutes doing one’s duty according to one’s station in life? And what is true renunciation? Arjuna points out that Yudhiṣṭhira was born in the race of kings and it was his duty to govern. If he abandoned the kingdom he would be committing a sin because in the absence of a king, the kingdom would be neglected and virtue would be destroyed. Yudhiṣṭhira had to do his duty as a kṣatriya and as a king. Bhīmasena points out that a life of renunciation should be adopted by kings only
in times of distress, when they were overcome with decrepitude or were defeated by foes. A *kṣatriya* should never lead a life of renunciation as he had the capacity to support not only himself but also others. Only that man should lead a solitary life of contentment in the woods that could not support sons and grandsons, the deities and the *ṛṣis*, the guests and the *pitarah*. The deer and the boars and birds, although they led a forest life, did not attain heaven. Similarly, mountains and trees lead a life of renunciation and do not injure anybody, but they gain no merit by it. If all those who just filled their own stomachs could attain success, then all aquatic creatures would do so as they had no one to support but themselves. A *kṣatriya* had to lead a life of action. Bereft of action, he could never succeed. The world could only be sustained when every creature was employed in doing acts proper to its nature. Therefore, action was essential as without action nothing could succeed.

Nakula, too, tried to persuade Yudhishṭhira. Know, he said, that the gods themselves depend upon the fruits of action. The *pitarah* or the ancestors engage in action, and give rain even to the disbelievers as they have to abide by the laws of the Creator as declared in the *Vedas*. The domestic way of life was said to be superior to all other modes of life by all those who knew the *Vedas*. Therefore, a person who gave away his righteously acquired wealth to the *brāhmaṇas*, well versed in the *Vedas* and in sacrifices, and restrained his soul was said to be a true renouncer. But a person who discarded domesticity for renunciation was only labouring in darkness.

The four different modes of life, said Nakula, were once weighed in balance. When domestic life was placed on one scale, the other three had to be placed on the other before it could be balanced. Therefore, a real renouncer was one who followed the domestic way of life as his duty without any desire for fruit, and not one who went to the woods abandoning home and society. A man, who hypocritically exposed righteousness, but failed to forget his desires even while living in the woods, remained limited by mortality. Such acts were done
from vanity and were unproductive even of fruits. On the other hand, acts done in the real spirit of renunciation resulted in plenty. True virtues were tranquillity, self-restraint, fortitude, truth, purity, simplicity, sacrifice, perseverance and righteousness. True renunciation meant renunciation of every internal and external attachment, and not simply leaving home to live in the woods.

Sahadeva too supported his brother when he said that one did not attain success by renouncing external objects only. Even after renouncing mental attachments, success was doubtful. There was no religious merit and happiness for one who left external objects but internally coveted them. The word ‘*mama*’ (mine) spelt death while the opposite ‘*nā-mama*’ (not mine) was the eternal *Brahma* itself. *Brahmā* (God of creation) and death both were part of every individual and motivated him to act. If this be true then that which was called soul was not subject to destruction and the one who destroyed the body could not be guilty of slaughter. If the soul and body were both created and destroyed together then all the rites and acts prescribed in the scriptures were futile. Therefore, concludes Sahadeva, driving away all the doubts about the immortality of the soul, a man of intelligence should adopt the path shown by the righteous and wise ancestors. He thought that the life of that king was fruitless who, having conquered the earth, did not enjoy it. A person could live in the forests but if he remained attached to things, he lived within the jaws of Death. The hearts and outward forms of all creatures were only manifestations of one’s own self. Only they who perceived this, who saw it like that, escaped the great fear of destruction.

Kings, says Arjuna, could not govern without wealth and without having the power to chastise. There was no virtue in poverty because a poor man could easily be exploited and falsely accused. Only one with wealth could sustain himself, and had friends, kinsmen, family honour and respect in the world. Even religion cannot be practiced without wealth. Further, wealth created more wealth. Not only that, monarchs had to necessarily appropriate wealth from
others because that was the means of their prosperity, and wealth could not be earned without doing some injury to others. Hence kings had to conquer and then appropriate to themselves what they won. Similarly, sons spoke of the wealth of their fathers as their own.

Draupadī points out that a kṣatriya who could not punish could never succeed or enjoy the earth. Even the subjects of a king could never be happy with a ruler who was not firm. Friendship for all creatures, charity, study of the Vedas, penances—all these constituted the duties of a brāhmaṇa, and not of a king. The highest duties of a king were to restrain the wicked, cherish the honest, and never retreat from battle. In him should be both forgiveness and wrath, giving and taking, terror and fearlessness, chastisement and reward. Yudhiṣṭhira, she said, had not acquired the earth through study, gift or mendicancy, but by defeating and slaying the army of Duryodhana with its invincible warriors.

Supporting Draupadī, Arjuna said that the man armed with the rod of chastisement, governed all subjects and protected them. Therefore, the wise had characterized the rod of chastisement as righteousness itself. One class of men desisted from wrong because of fear of punishment from the king; another from the fear of death; a third from the fear of the next world; and yet another from fear of society. Therefore, the course of the world was dependent on the administration of penalties and the fear of it. It was fear that prevented men from devouring one another. It restrained the ungovernable and punished the wicked. When the king was righteous the subjects never forgot themselves. The brahmacārī, the householder, the recluse in the forest and the religious mendicant all walked their respective ways through fear of chastisement. Now that the kingdom had been won, righteously or unrighteously, it was their duty, said Arjuna, to stop grieving, enjoy it and to perform the necessary actions. It was only fortunate men who lived with their wives and children, ate good food, wore excellent clothes and cheerfully acquired virtue. All actions were dependent
on wealth and wealth was dependent on chastisement, and duties had been declared for all, so that the world could be maintained.

Even Vyāsa told Yudhiṣṭhira that the only way out for him was to do his duty. Penances were for brāhmaṇas. A kṣatriya was the protector of all persons in respect of their duties. That man who, addicted to earthly possessions, transgressed wholesome restraints, that offender against social harmony, should be chastised with a strong hand. A person who tried to transgress authority, whether he was an attendant, a son, or even a saint, was sinful and had to be punished or even killed. That king who conducted himself otherwise was sinful. If he did not protect morality when it was being disregarded, he was an abettor in the offence and committed sin. Vyāsa emphasized that the Kauravas had scant regard for morality and so they together with their followers had been slain by Yudhiṣṭhira. Then why did he indulge in such grief? The king should slay those that deserve death, give gifts to persons who deserve charity, and protect his subjects according to his dharma.

Yudhiṣṭhira held up Janaka, the king of Mithilā as his ideal. Arjuna took up the example and recounted the discourse between Janaka and his wife, to show Yudhiṣṭhira how false was his understanding. King Janaka preparing to renounce everything, shaved off his head and wore the clothes of a mendicant. When his wife saw him thus she reproved him by saying that having abandoned abundant wealth and corn, he had by this action reduced himself to desire a handful of barley. How could he now gratify his guests, gods, the seers and the ancestors? As a renunciate he had cast off all action but he had been supporting thousands of brāhmaṇas, and many more besides. How could he now beg the same people for his own food? His mother had been made sonless by him and his wife a widow. Rendering them helpless, what regions did he hope to attain. What he was doing was sinful and he would have neither this world nor the other. He wanted to wander around as a mendicant, but he had been like a large and sacred lake to all the creatures whose thirst he had quenched and sustained. He
had been like a mighty tree worth adoring, as it gave shelter to all. How could such a one wait and worship others. If even an elephant desisted from all work, he would be eaten up by carnivorous creatures and destroyed by worms. If Janaka claimed that a kingdom and a handful of barley were both the same to him, why abandon the former? But if he got attached to a handful of barley then he was obviously not detached from everything. Mendicants were supported by householders. A giver of food was the giver of life. Coming out from among those who led a domestic life, mendicants depended on those very persons from amidst whom they came. Therefore, one did not become a mendicant by renouncing possessions, or by adopting a life of dependence on charity. A true mendicant was one who renounced the possessions and pleasures of the world in a sincere frame of mind. Unattached at heart, though attached in outward show, standing aloof from the world having broken all his bonds, and regarding friend and foe equally, he was truly emancipated. Therefore, she advised Janaka, he should resume his kingdom and keep all his passions under control. Even the great ascetic Devasthāna advised Yudhiṣṭhira not to abandon the earth that he had righteously won. Instead of renouncing his wealth, he should use it to perform sacrifices.

Once Janaka requested a wise brāhmaṇa, Aśmaka, to resolve his doubts. He asked him how he who desired good should behave on occasions of the accession and the destruction of both kinsmen and wealth. Aśmaka said that immediately after the formation of the body, joy and grief attached themselves to it. Although there was a possibility of either of the two overtaking the person, yet whichever overtook him more quickly robbed him of his reason like the winds drove away the gathering clouds. In times of prosperity such a person became arrogant as he regarded himself to be of high birth, free to do whatever he liked, as he was convinced that he was not an ordinary man. He got addicted to all earthly enjoyments, and began to waste the wealth collected by his ancestors.
All mental sorrows, said Āśmaka, arose from two causes—delusion of the mind and the admittance of distress. Different sorrows arose out of attachment to earthly enjoyments. Decrepitude and Death devoured all creatures whether weak or strong, short or tall. No one, no matter how powerful could escape them. The evils of life could overtake one in early, middle or old age. They could never be avoided. Good and evil, both followed Destiny. All was transitory. Even associations with wives, relatives and well-wishers were like travellers at a roadside inn. Life and its enjoyments were constantly revolving like a wheel and the companionship of those that were dear was transitory. Things that were today were not there tomorrow. Therefore, a king could only act righteously and this would free him from sorrow. Kṛṣṇa himself told Yudhiṣṭhira not to indulge in grief, as those that had been slain in battle would not come back. They were like objects in a dream that vanished when one awoke. His foes were also great heroes and had died heroic deaths. Hence, they had gone to heaven and there was no reason for Yudhiṣṭhira to lament. All were subject to happiness and misery, and had to die. What cause was there then for sorrow?

Vyāsa asked Yudhiṣṭhira why he thought of himself as the slayer of his kinsmen and foes. Who did he think was the doer, the Supreme Being or a human being? Was everything the result of Chance in the world, or were the fruits that were enjoyed or suffered, the results of previous action? If man acted according to God’s wishes, then the consequences of his actions should also attach to the Supreme Being and not to him. For example, if a person cuts down a tree with an axe, then the one who cut the tree has to take the consequences, and not the axe. It could not also be said that the one who made the axe should take the responsibility of the tree being cut. If it was not reasonable for one man to bear the consequences of an act done by another, then, Yudhiṣṭhira should really hold the Supreme Being responsible for all that happened as he was only the means, as with the axe. But if Yudhiṣṭhira saw himself as the agent of all his acts why not throw all responsibility upon the Supreme Being, and therefore
whatever he had done could bring no evil consequences. No one, points out Vyāsa, can ever turn away from that which was destined. If, Destiny was the result of the acts of former lives, then no sin could be incurred in this life, just as the consequences of cutting down a tree could not touch the maker of the axe. If Yudhiṣṭhira found it necessary to ascertain what was good and what was evil in the world, then he should attend to the scriptures where it had been laid down that kings should stand with the rod of chastisement uplifted in their hands. Acts, good and bad, continually revolved here as a wheel and men obtained the fruits according to their actions. One sinful act proceeded from another. Therefore, Yudhiṣṭhira should avoid all evil acts and not set his heart upon grief. He should adhere, to the duties, of his own order even if he found them distasteful. Self-destruction did not sit well on him. If he thought he had sinned, he could expiate for it, but that was possible only if he lived. He who died could not perform the prescribed sacrifices. Therefore, he should do his duty and all the expiatory acts required, or he would have to repent in the next world.

Conclusion

Thus, as with Arjuna, so with Yudhiṣṭhira. He has to be schooled into doing his duty with equanimity and detachment for the sustenance of the earth and his own salvation. The situation at the onset of war does not change. It is only the perception and understanding that is transformed. Yudhiṣṭhira had gone into the war without qualms, knowing that it was taking place in spite of his best efforts to avoid it. Arjuna accepted that he had to fight in spite of himself, as an act of duty. Similarly, Yudhiṣṭhira had to accept the kingship of Hastināpura after the war, whatever may be his psychological and emotional revolt at the prospect of it, and do his duties as its king. This is the supreme renunciation and it can only be achieved in terms of Kṛṣṇa’s ‘mahāvākyā’ at the end of the Gitā:

Forsaking all (religious) duties come to Me as thy sole refuge. I will deliver thee from all sins. Do not grieve. This is not to be ever
declared by thee to one who practiseth no austerities, to one who is not a devotee, to one who never waiteth on a preceptor, nor yet to one who calumniateth Me. He who shall inculcate this supreme mysterm to those that are devoted to Me, offering Me the highest devotion, will come to Me, freed from (all his) doubts. Amongst men there is none who can do Me a dearer service than he, nor shall any other on earth be dearer to Me than he (Ganguli, 1991, p. 97).

Taken out of its context, it might appear to mean that Kṛṣṇa’s final word is to leave everything to him. This would be inaccurate and quite opposite to what has gone both before and after.

The argument of the Gītā actually resolves itself into three steps by which action arises out of the human into the divine plane, leaving the bondage of the lower for the liberty of a higher law. First, by the renunciation of desire and in perfect equanimity, works have to be done as a sacrifice by man as the doer, a sacrifice to a deity who is the supreme and the only Self, not yet realized by him in his own being. This is the initial step. Second, not only the desire for the fruit of action, but even the claim to be the doer of works has to be renounced in the realization of the Self as the true Doer, an immutable principle. Works are simply the operation of the universal creative force or prakṛti, which is the dynamic mutable power. Lastly, the supreme Self has to be seen as the supreme puruṣa governing this prakṛti. He directs all works while simultaneously transcending them. Individual works have to be done in a spirit of sacrifice and offered to him. This implies that the whole being has to be surrendered to Him and the whole consciousness has to be raised to dwell in this divine consciousness, so that action can be done in perfect spiritual liberty. This is the lesson taught to Arjuna in the battlefield, and later to Yudhiṣṭhira after the war.

Therefore, the first step is karmayoga, the selfless sacrifice of works, and here the insistence is on action. The second is jñānayoga, the self-realization and
knowledge of the true nature of the self and the world and here the insistence is on knowledge. But the two are not separate and they act together. Contemporary psychology, too, would insist on the individual having a true knowledge or perspective of the work that he has to do and then act with joy and satisfaction. But here it would stop. The Gītā and the Mahābhārata as a whole take the third step, that of bhaktiyoga, or devotion, the seeking of the supreme Self as the divine Being. However, knowledge and action are not subordinated but only raised, vitalized and fulfilled. Works still continue in true knowledge but now are done as stationed in the Divine. The double path becomes the triune way of knowledge, works and devotion which leads to oneness with the Divine who is posited as the true source of all liberation, truth and joy in all our actions; not in any world or state hereafter but here itself in this imperfect world of complications and complexities.

References


Endnotes

1 All quotations from the Mahābhārata are taken from the translation of Kisari Mohan Ganguli.