Development of the Bhagavad Gita

The Opening Scene

And thus we come to the gathering of the forces at the great battlefield of Kurukshetra, field of the Kurus. The army of the Pandavas is on one side, led by Arjuna. Facing them is the powerful army of the Kauravas, led by the eldest brother, Duryodhana. Dhritarashtra, now old as well as blind, does not travel to Kurekshetra. The battle, however, will be described to him by Sanjaya, his personal driver. Sanjaya will be Dhritarashtra's eyes and ears; he will describe for him all that occurs on the battlefield. For the occasion Sanjaya has acquired magical powers of perception. With the power of clairaudience, he can hear everything that is said, even though the speakers be far away. The author of the Mahabharata uses this device to make Sanjaya the narrator of the entire dialogue that is about to take place between Krishna and Arjuna. Sanjaya is relating the conversation to Dhritarashtra. It is for this reason that the opening line of the Bhagavad Gita, delivered by Dhritarashtra, reads thus:

O Sanjaya, tell me what happened at Kurukshetra, the field of dharma, where my family and the Pandavas gathered to fight.

As we saw at the beginning of this chapter, Arjuna asks Krishna to take him out to the center of the battlefield where he can get one last look at the enemy before ordering the attack. What he saw, of course, were "grandfathers, teachers, uncles, sons-in-law, grandsons-in-law, and friends. Arjuna was overcome by sorrow. Despairing, he spoke these words:"

O Krishna, I see my own relations here anxious to fight, and my limbs grow weak; my mouth is dry, my body shakes, and my hair is standing on end. My skin burns, and the bow Gandiva has slipped from my hand. I am unable to stand; my mind seems to be whirling.

O Krishna, what satisfaction could we find in killing Dritarashtra's sons? We would become sinners by slaying these men, even though they are evil. The sons of Dritarashtra are related to us; therefore, we should not kill them. How can we gain happiness by killing members of our own family? Though they are overpowered by greed and see no evil in destroying families or in-juring friends, we see these evils. Why shouldn't we turn away from this sin?

Paralyzed with sorrow and confusion, Arjuna slumps to the floor of his chariot, utterly unable to stand and lead his men into battle. "I will not fight," he says. In the heavy silence that follows this declaration the attention turns to Krishna. Krishna now must find a way to get Arjuna back into the fight. He must persuade Arjuna to do his duty, and lead his men into battle against the enemy.

The Bhagavad Gita as Metaphor

This is an appropriate place to consider a most significant question regarding the Mahabharata in general, and the Bhagavad Gita in particular. Was it the intent of the author of the Mahabharata that the story of this war be taken literally, or is the battlefield of Kurukshetra meant to be seen as a metaphor for a very different kind of conflict? Is Krishna, as his words clearly seem to indicate, encouraging Arjuna to really join battle with his Kaurava kinsmen and visit slaughter on them? Or do these words hold a different meaning, a metaphorical meaning, and the battle that Krishna has in mind is of a totally different sort from what is being literally described?
These questions have no easy answers. From the historical perspective, it is probably true that the battle described in the Mahabharata is based on an actual event that occurred in northern India sometime around the tenth century B.C.E. We know very little about this great conflict, but it became enshrined in folk legends, and would eventually become the unifying theme around which the Mahabharata was composed. In this way it was very much like the Trojan War, an actual historical event, which became the basis for Homer's Iliad. But the Iliad was not a documentary retelling of the Trojan War, and neither was the Mahabharata a retelling of its Indian war. Both epics used a dramatic event popularized in the traditional legends to provide a highly charged setting for a story about human strength and weakness.

Throughout the centuries some scholars have argued that the Mahabharata is meant to be understood in a literal sense; that the battle imagery is just that and nothing else; that Krishna is indeed urging Arjuna to fight and kill the enemy. This is not glorification of war, nor even a resigned acceptance of its inevitability. It is a story about honor and duty; it is the duty of Arjuna as a member of the Kshatriya class to behave as a warrior should; to courageously accept the responsibility of war when it is destined to be. To do otherwise would be to shirk his duty, to upset the working of Dharma, and thus to bring dishonor and evil to his family and to the entire social order.

It is difficult for many modern readers of the Bhagavad Gita to accept the point of view expressed above. A far more compelling interpretation is to see the Gita as metaphorical. But what is the metaphor? Eknath Easwaran puts it this way:

Scholars can debate the point forever, but when the [teachings of the Gita are put into practice] I think it becomes clear that the struggle the Gita is concerned with is the struggle for self-mastery. It was Vyasa's genius to take the whole great Mahabharata epic and see it as metaphor for the perennial war between the forces of light and the forces of darkness in every human heart.

Arjuna and Krishna are then no longer merely characters in a literary mas-terpiece. Arjuna becomes Everyman, asking the Lord himself, Sri Krishna, the perennial questions about life and death—not as a philosopher, but as the quintessential man of action. Thus read, the Gita is not an external dialogue but an internal one: between the ordinary human personality, full of questions about the meaning of life, and our deepest Self, which is divine.

Seen in this way, the real battlefield is right inside every man and woman ever born. It is the battlefield where the struggle between the higher nature and the lower nature is waged every day. Or to put it in the language of the Upanishads; the conflict is between Avidya and Vidya. Arjuna represents the ordinary, unenlightened man or woman. He is bound up in his ego attachments and the fear and suffering generated by this state of mind. Arjuna is the self with a small "s"; Krishna represents the atman, the Self with a capital "S." Krishna represents our innermost Self. In the terms of this metaphor Krishna is lovingly urging Arjuna to do battle against his own infatuation with his ego attachments; to attack and "kill" them, as it were. His reluctance is perfectly understandable, but it is the only way that he can liberate himself from the grip of delusion and hope to awaken to knowledge of the Self. The way of liberation is yoga, and Krishna will teach Arjuna yoga.

Eknath Easwaran tells the personal story of his journey by train one time in northern India. The train stopped at Kurukshetra, the legendary site of the great battle, and everyone got off the train in excitement to see this dramatic place. Everyone that is but Easwaran. He didn't have to get off the train to see the battlefield; it travelled with him wherever he went, and the same is true for everyone else. The battlefield of the Bhagavad Gita is to be found in our hearts and minds, not in the soil of North India.

Seen in the terms of this striking metaphor, the Bhagavad Gita becomes a personal message to all of mankind. It is universal, and it is relevant to everyone's life in every age and every culture. The metaphorical interpretation of the Gita elevates the entire Mahabharata to the level of sublime literature.
It transforms the Mahabharata from being simply the action-packed adventure story of one noble Indian family, to becoming the story of every person’s odyssey from darkness to light.