

War from a Yoga Perspective

by Georg Feuerstein, Ph.D.

Once again Americans and the world are facing the specter of a devastating war, and it is a war that unquestionably will mobilize Muslim radicals all over the globe and greatly accelerate terrorism.

In light of the current developments, it makes sense to take a close look at the phenomenon of war, which seems to have been with our human species from the earliest days. I propose to do so from the perspective of Yoga, a 5,000-year-old spiritual tradition that has grappled with all the great problems of human existence, including war and peace, justice and injustice. Whole libraries have been written about war, but it would appear we are somewhat short on wisdom when it comes to peace. The yogic heritage, I believe, has some fundamental insights to offer.

To begin with, some maintain that human beings are innately aggressive and that therefore aggression and war are inevitable and even have survival value. These same individuals often point to our bloody history as offering ample proof for this opinion. They typically omit, however, taking into account all the countless acts of self-transcendence, love, charity, and kindness that allow human life to thrive.

Yoga, which is at the heart of the three great Indic cultural traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, does not subscribe to such a pessimistic view of human nature. Rather it emphasizes our kinship with all beings. In this sense, it can be said to be the oldest deep ecological teaching. Behind this notion stands a crucial insight: We are not only active and reactive beings, but our psychological makeup also includes the capacity for observation, including the remarkable facility for self-observation. Some Yoga schools speak of this capacity as the "witness" (*sākshin*), and they claim that it transcends all the incidental qualities of the human personality—our character, likes and dislikes, and projections. This insight and claim are based on thousands of years of introspection and "psychonautic" experimentation by means of intensive concentration and meditation.

Yoga admits that aggression (*dvesha*) is epidemic and a huge problem with human beings. It refuses, however, to see aggression as an ultimately defining characteristic of our species. Yoga's history is full of examples of adepts who entirely mastered negative emotional patterns and consequent behavior. The ideal of nonharming (*ahimsā*) is in fact considered absolutely foundational to the yogic process of self-transformation.

Aggression, as the Yoga masters see it, is a product of ignorance (*avidyā*), which obscures our capacity for self-observation, or witnessing. With a few rare exceptions, we all are born ignorant of this inner observer, which seems to be the price of embodiment in a human form. Psychologically speaking, however, we are not born as blank slates. Rather, we come into the world with a package of mental dispositions similar to our unique DNA at the somatic level. Socialization and education merely modify this initial set. According to Yoga, we are the product of volitional activity in a previous life.

Not surprisingly, therefore, there also are differences in the degree to which we are either inclined or disinclined to animate our inner witnessing function. Another way of

putting this is that we are variously capacitated for introspection and standing back from our sensations, drives, impulses, emotions, feelings, thoughts, and behaviors. Some people demonstrate a great presence of mind in this regard, while others are perpetually lost in the drama of psychological ups and downs.

Yoga seeks to augment the observer in us, so that we can become disentangled from automatic internal and external behavior. The problem with automatic behavior is that it typically revolves around the axis of ignorance of our deeper (or higher) nature. This means that such behavior is an expression of the ego (*ahamkâra*), which is a mistaken identity, an artificial construct by which we identify with the observed rather than the observer.

The observed is everything that goes on in the mind: perceptions, emotions, thoughts, desires, volitions, etc. So long as we are not in touch with the inner witness, we inevitably act out of a false center of gravity—the ego—that constantly defines itself by its involvement in all the numerous activities of the body-mind. This is reflected in and also strongly reinforced by our language: "I am tired" instead of "the body is tired" or "the mind is fatigued." "I dislike broccoli" instead of "dislike for broccoli is arising in the mind." "I have a lot of money" instead of "there is a lot of money associated with this particular body-mind." "My day is ruined" instead of "there is a sense that the day is ruined for this body-mind."

Self-centered notions, sentiments, and actions are admittedly the substance of much, if not most, of human life. This is the reason why a great percentage of our social interaction is marred by negative mental patterns and why it is so difficult to create lasting peace in the world. This state of affairs, however, is not irremediable. As we cultivate the witnessing function, the fictional ego-sense is seen for what it is and gradually is rendered innocuous. We cease to take everything so personally, which elicits internal and external behavior patterns that most people would consider desirable. In other words, as we free ourselves from the tyranny of the ego, our thoughts, feelings, intentions, and behaviors correspond increasingly to what we would call "good" or "virtuous." We become more peaceful, content, compassionate, loving, caring, giving, patient, tolerant, and so on. Our focus is not on "I," "me," and "mine" but quite naturally on the welfare of all beings. Abraham Maslow spoke of these as "Being values," which he understood as by-products of what he called "self-actualization."

From this perspective, interpersonal conflict and war are ultimately a failure to be present as the witness. The fully accomplished Yoga master is firmly grounded in the witnessing position; he or she is the witness. From this vantage point, conflict and war are not an option. But this requires immediate qualification.

We know from the history of Yoga that sages are by no means all of a piece. Inwardly they may share the same realization, but outwardly they manifest that realization in different ways. Some realizers are entirely contemplative, while others remain actively engaged in the world. Some have opted to live in remote mountain caves apart from the rest of humanity, while others in the past have retained their professions as weavers, shoemakers, cowherders, bards, and even kings. The case of kings is highly relevant to our consideration, for how can rulers—even if enlightened—maintain political and economic stability without confronting the many conflicts provoked by unenlightened people?

The teachings of the *Bhagavad-Gîtâ* ("Lord's Song"), an early Hindu work on Yoga, furnish a whole philosophical and practical argument in response to just this question. While most yogic approaches favor a form of quietism that upholds the supreme virtue of nonharming in an uncompromising way, the *Gîtâ* takes a different route. Its extraordinary teachings were formulated against the backdrop of an eighteen-day devastating war, which in all likelihood was an actual historical event.

The hero of the militaristic scenario depicted in the *Gîtâ* and the *Mahâbhârata* epic, in which the 700-verse text of the *Gîtâ* is found embedded, was Prince Arjuna. He, along with his four Pândava brothers, had been cheated out of their kingdom, which was now run unlawfully by their Kaurava cousins who embodied the ego rather than the witness and all this entails. That is to say, the moral and spiritual fabric of the country was threatened with extinction. In Hindu ethical terms, *dharma* was at stake.

The Sanskrit word *dharma* stands for "virtue," "righteousness," "law," "morality." The word is fashioned from the verbal root *dhri* meaning "to hold" or "to bear." Thus the primary meaning of *dharma* is "bearer," the foundation of human life. Without *dharma* there can be no social stability or personal happiness. Running a kingdom or nation on *adharma*—the opposite of *dharma*—can only lead to much individual and collective harm.

What is a ruler to do when facing the collapse of *dharma* and when he or she happens to be committed to the yogic path? The *Gîtâ* and the *Mahâbhârata* as a whole seek to answer this question, and so we can benefit from the deliberations of the sages who formulated the teachings we find in these scriptures. The spiritual master featured in the *Gîtâ* is none other than Krishna, made famous in the West largely through the Bhakti-Yoga of the Krishna Consciousness movement. The message of the *Gîtâ* may come as a shock to some spiritual seekers. Krishna, who is Prince Arjuna's guru, does not support his disciple's misgivings and emotional distress (*vishâda*) at the morning of the first of eighteen battles. On the contrary, he reprimands, coaxes, and counsels him to do his duty as a warrior.

Arjuna's distress at facing the enemy on the battlefield sprang not from any conventional fear of being wounded or killed but from the fact that he would have to harm and slaughter the enemy, consisting of respected teachers, family members, and valiant fighters. In other words, his feeling of kinship with the enemy was at the root of his dejection, which made him put down bow and arrows. In those days, warriors still engaged in close-up combat, which allowed them to see each other eye to eye. Today the enemy has become an abstraction and wars are largely fought at a distance, with guns, mortars, bombs, and invisible germs or radiation. The enemy has been rendered truly faceless, and maimed or killed human beings on the opposite side in a war are reckoned as being acceptable "collateral damage."

Arjuna was overwhelmed with compassion that was marred, as Krishna made clear, by a hefty dose of self-pity and ignorance. As an enlightened master, Krishna saw the larger picture, which he readily shared with the prince. That picture included a sense of the karmic inevitability of certain situations, specifically the imminent war, which had been brewing for a long time.

As a warrior, Arjuna had been groomed to protect the social order of the land, which, in turn, Krishna knew to be founded in the moral order (*dharma*). Failure to fulfill this sacred

obligation, Krishna reminded his disciple, would have all kinds of unpleasant consequences, with the most important being the further decline of the *dharma* and the subsequent rise of social and moral chaos leading to ever greater suffering for the multitudes. He painted a broader perspective for Arjuna in the hope that it would help the prince understand the deeper meaning of dharma and rightful action. This perspective included as a pivotal concern the impulse toward spiritual freedom (*moksha*) as the highest value accepted within the framework of Hindu ethics.

In fact, the *Gîtâ* and the *Mahâbhârata* as a whole can be seen as an incisive effort to define the relationship between *dharma* and *moksha*, or morality and freedom, or voluntary self-constraint and essential liberty. This theme grew out of a long-standing historical tension between these two superlative values within Indian culture. On the one hand, there was the large population of householders who engaged life fully in alignment with the ideals of material welfare (*artha*), enjoyment (*kâma*), and morality (*dharma*). On the other hand, ancient India had a growing body of "dropouts" for whom the ideal of liberation held greater interest than the other three goals, or ideals, of human existence. In order to regulate this quietistic trend and prevent premature abandonment of family life, the Hindu lawmakers at one point instituted the four stages of life (*âshrama*). This model was meant to sanction the progression from student (*brahmacarin*) to householder (*grihastha*) to forest-dweller (*vânaprastha*) to radical renouncer (*samnyâsin*). All were supposed to orient themselves to the spiritual values of Hindu culture, but only the radical renouncer was expected to dedicate himself or herself unstintingly to the supreme ideal of liberation.

When Arjuna and Krishna had their famous dialogue in the war chariot, the former was still at the householder stage of life. He therefore had certain obligations, and these were closely tied to his inherited role as a military and political leader from the warrior class. As Krishna put it, Arjuna's "own norm" (*sva-dharma*) was to protect the people against social anomy (*adhharma*). He would undoubtedly have given a different message to a member of the priestly class, whose central obligation lies in the protection and continuation of Hinduism's cultural and spiritual heritage. He would also not have expected for a radical renouncer to take up arms. In modern terms, he would have insisted that farmers wield the plough and writers the pen.

The fact, however, that a great Yoga master would endorse a war and hence violation of the supreme moral principle of nonharming (*ahimsâ*) is both extraordinarily significant and controversial. How can we harmonize the universal yogic prescription for nonharming, which is considered the foremost moral virtue and discipline (*yama*), with Krishna's militaristic admonition for Arjuna? Successive generations of Indian thinkers have debated this point, and there are two major camps. The camp of radical renouncers finds every form of harming unacceptable. This is the uncompromising stance taken by Patanjali in his *Yoga-Sûtra* or Gautama the Buddha in his Pali sermons. The camp of householder yogins, by contrast, accepts that life sometimes forces on us situations in which the ideal of nonharming must be suitably modified so as to protect the larger good. In the eyes of Krishna and the bards of the *Mahâbhârata*, the Bharata war was such an exceptional situation.

As is evident from the *Gîtâ*, despite his warrior background, Arjuna was not easily convinced. The mood of renunciation was dawning in him, and he was questioning everything. But this inner development, which had led many others to radical renunciation, was premature. The historical moment called for a different response from

Arjuna, who was not yet at the level of a sage. As Krishna made clear in the *Gîtâ*, for the aspiring adept appropriate action is the norm, whereas an accomplished sage may enjoy perfect quiescence (*shama*), or the cessation of all activity. Arjuna's appropriate action as a warrior was to fight and rectify the increasing state of social anomy. It is perfectly all right for a fully realized master to abstain from all kinds of actions and live out his or her life in isolation if that is what is arising in the enlightened mind. At the same time, it is equally fine for a realized sage to engage in any kind of action if he or she should feel so prompted. Everything the enlightened sage does is in harmony with the unfolding conditions or, as theistically inclined practitioners might put it, with the will of God.

The sage's spontaneity springs from moment-to-moment ego-transcendence and thus is markedly distinct from what is normally called "spontaneity," which is often little more than the arbitrary exercise of our self-will in disregard of the welfare of other beings. Flawless spontaneity is not anchored in the patterns of the untransformed unconscious but issues from the freedom of our true nature, which is the transcendental witnessing Subject (*âtman*). This is an all-important point, which is frequently misunderstood.

All our volitions leave imprints (*samskâra*) in the depths of the mind. Similar imprints link together to form complex traits (*vâsanâ*), and their totality constitutes what the *Yoga-Sûtra* refers to as "karmic deposit" (*karma-âshaya*). Volitional activity can be conducive either to enlightenment or to continued unconscious living. Yoga favors the former type of volitional activity and seeks to overcome the latter. Within the quietistic approach mentioned above, generally only contemplation is deemed to produce imprints favorable to enlightenment. All other mental activity is thought to lead only to continued "recycling" (reincarnation) within the various realms of the finite world (*samsâra*). Krishna revolutionized India's spirituality by teaching the ideal of inaction in action (*naishkarmya-karma*), which underlies Karma-Yoga, that is, the path of self-transcending action.

In the early Vedic age, sacrificial rituals were credited with the power of taking worshipers beyond the limitations of the mind and connecting them to the hidden dimension of existence—the divine realm. Thus, ritual activity can be viewed as an early form of Karma-Yoga.

But in Krishna's Karma-Yoga, any activity can have such a liberating function providing two important criteria are met. First, the actor must inwardly cultivate the correct motive by renouncing the "fruit" (reward) of his or her actions, which amounts to an act of self-transcendence. Second, he or she must act from the witnessing disposition or what Krishna calls "even vision" (*sama-darshana*). Additionally, the action itself must be "right" (*kârya*), that is, spiritually sound and appropriate. This last qualification, which is sometimes ignored when Yoga students are asked to explain Karma-Yoga, is essential. Otherwise a mass murderer could excuse his or her heinous crimes by arguing, à la Charles Manson who cited the *Gîtâ's* teachings in his defense, that he stays quite calm while killing them. His pathological mind might even construe his murders as a favor to his victims.

In what way, then, can war be considered "right"? Can there ever be a "just" war? This is really the crux of the present consideration. Krishna had no doubt that it was absolutely necessary for Arjuna and the other four Pândava princes to participate in the Bharata war; *dharma* had to be preserved. The situation was extreme and called for an unusual response. Peace and harmony are infinitely more desirable than war and chaos, but when extreme situations threaten the possibility of such peace and harmony, drastic

measures are necessary. Pacifists and quietists will want to know how violence can possibly rectify social disorder, and here is a paraphrase of Krishna's argument :

Life is action, and much of life's activity has the nature of conflict, because the world is powered by the pairs of opposites—heat and cold, moisture and dryness, pleasurable and displeasure, and so forth. Underlying these pairs are the three primary qualities (*guna*) of cosmic existence, consisting in the principle of activity (*rajas*), the principle of inertia (*tamas*), and the principle of lucidity and harmony (*sattva*). These always function together dynamically but exist in varying degrees of preponderance. In conventional human life, inertia is evident in the form of ignorance, delusion, laziness, enslavement to habits, etc. In order to foster the principle of lucidity—represented by wisdom, peace, tolerance, and kindness—we must first overcome inertia by means of the principle of activity. It is impossible to move from ignorance and delusion directly to lucidity and wisdom.

One expression of the principle of activity is war, which vigorously removes conditions blocking the manifestation of the principle of lucidity. In Krishna's time, the decline of spirituality and morality made it impossible for him to reestablish dharma without a great purging first. The Kauravas, who were mired in self-delusion, were altogether unreceptive to a peaceful solution. It is important to understand that the Bharata war was not merely a matter of rectifying a political wrong or gaining economic profit. The God-man Krishna would never have endorsed such a war. Higher principles were at stake, which we might relate to the cherished ideal of liberty. The liberty that the Pandavas sought to recover, however, was not merely political freedom. Their concern was to restore social conditions favorable to the pursuit of a morally sound life and thus to the ideal of spiritual liberation (*moksha*) itself, which traditional Indian society deems the supreme goal of human life.

Krishna's position is in accord with the realism expressed elsewhere in the *Mahābhārata* as well. For instance, in 3.207 we can read: "Long ago, nonharming was ordained by men who were ignorant of the truth. . . . There is not a single person on Earth who is free from the sin of doing injury to creatures." With his sanction of the Bharata war, Krishna challenges many students of the *Gītā*. Some pacifist translators of and commentators on this work—like Gandhi and Tilak—even dismissed the notion that Krishna meant to refer to literal war and prefer to interpret what he says in allegorical terms: the war within our own mind.

There is unquestionably a strong symbolic component to the entire *Mahābhārata* epic, as can readily be seen from the prominence of the number 18, but this should not blind us to the ethical teachings of Krishna. While the *Gītā*'s teachings can and should be applied to our inner conflict, it would be wrong to confine Krishna's counsel to the allegorical level. As the great medieval saint Tukaram pointed out: "Night and day, within and without, in the heart and in the world, we are at war."

In an interview published in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* (November 19, 2002), Wendy Doniger, a well-known professor of the History of Religions at the University of Chicago, called the *Gītā* "a dishonest book," which justifies war. In his famous *Essays on the Gita*, sage-philosopher-yogin Aurobindo Ghose conversely argued that until we are capable of transforming adverse situations by more subtle means (what he calls "soul-force"), we must take appropriate physical actions, including war. Otherwise, our "neutrality" merely aids the dark, destructive forces in the world.

But how do we know when it is appropriate to engage in conflict? We can know "right" from "wrong" only when our mind vibrates at a higher frequency, or in yogic terms, when the higher mind (*buddhi*) is operational. As long as the lower mind (*manas*) is dominant in us, we cannot hope to arrive at wisdom, because the lower mind is simply a relay station for sensory input. It is closely associated with the brain, whereas the higher mind belongs purely to the mental level and is the seat of refined knowledge and intuition.

When the higher mind steps forward, we can learn to control our affective behavior. In particular, we become able to neutralize negative emotions like anger, hatred, envy, jealousy, intolerance, and lust. Through the higher mind, the organ of wisdom, we can direct our will to wholesome thought patterns and actions. The higher mind, which is governed by the principle of lucidity (*sattva*), can be cultivated by means of Yoga. In fact, all of Yoga can be understood as a comprehensive process of sattvification. Wisdom, like a good captain, will steer us past all the many eddies of life into calm waters. Sometimes, in order to reach untroubled waters, we must brave turbulence. As long as humanity is governed by ignorance, greed, hatred, and indifference, we must expect such turbulence. Only a fully operational higher mind can guarantee safe passage in those moments.

Krishna's teaching allows the option of quietude (*shama*) for those who have elevated themselves beyond the concerns of ordinary existence. They are, to put it simply, done with the world, and it would be inappropriate to expect or force them to take specific actions, least of all participation in conflict. All others, however, are inevitably embroiled in the business of human life. For them, the only honest option is to bravely face the fact that life has a dark side to it, and that sometimes they must actively oppose it even if that means they have to resort to violence. Krishna's Karma-Yoga still affords them, however, a pathway out of the karmic quagmire resulting from violence. A lawful war conducted from the perspective of the higher mind to safeguard humanity's greatest ideals leaves no karmic residue.

Krishna was not a war-monger, as some critics have suggested. Neither was he an unrealistic pacifist. He would happily have chosen peace over war, but the karmic conditions of the world were not in favor of a peaceful resolution. From our present-day vantage point it would appear that humanity is always on the verge of war somewhere on this planet. The question we must ask ourselves is whether any of these wars are motivated by the same ideals that were at risk during Krishna's days or whether they are merely artifacts of ignorance, delusion, greed, and hatred on the sides of both parties. If the latter, we must not expect any good to result from them—all political persuasion notwithstanding. Violence in these cases will indeed only beget more violence and destruction.

Clearly, as human beings endowed with self-awareness and a thinking brain, we can and must choose. May our choices be wise and benefit all beings.

Copyright ©2006 by Georg Feuerstein. All rights reserved.
Reproduction in any form requires prior permission from Traditional Yoga Studies.