

Yoga and Terrorism

by Georg Feuerstein, Ph.D.

"Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully
as when they do it from religious conviction."—Pascal, *Pensées*

Our contemporary problems of overpopulation, pollution, ozone depletion, dwindling of natural resources, threat of nuclear war, terrorism, and so forth are global problems and require that we tackle them together. Many of us—individuals and nations—are still trying to resist this globalization process, but it is inevitable if we are to survive as a species. No one country or belief system can solve these problems independently. What happens on the other side of the world can profoundly affect us where we live. It is increasingly becoming apparent that the only solution to the present world crisis is to build a global civilization, which requires a clearly articulated view of one humanity.

The above sentences can be found on pages 271-272 of *In Search of the Cradle of Civilization*, which was published in 1995 by Quest Books. The book was a collaborative effort between Subhash Kak, David Frawley, and myself. Two years later, in my book *Lucid Waking*, I wrote about the presence of irrationality in our "rational" human society and particularly referred to the terrorist attack on innocent Japanese commuters by the Japanese Aum Shinrikyo sect.

Since that time, my thoughts have intermittently returned to the problem of terrorism. The horrible terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, killing over 3,000 people on American soil, have brought the magnitude of the problem to the attention of the whole world. I think many people are still too much in shock to think clearly and others prefer denial out of complacency or fear. It is my belief, however, that the "Ground Zero" event may only be the beginning of a horrifying specter that in the years to come will claim many more lives and challenge the economic, military, political, and moral resources of numerous countries in the world.

Although terrorism is a unique development that has no parallels in premodern times, humankind is not new to war and its material and moral devastations. The 1.1 million casualties claimed for all the American wars since the Revolution of 1775-84 pale into insignificance when we know that, in the twentieth century alone, an estimated 185 million people have been killed through political action (war, persecution, etc.). *1

If I am right—and I hope I am dreadfully wrong—then we must expect to live in something of a combat zone for an indefinite period of time during which we will never know when, where, or how the next attack will occur. Today, thanks to the irresponsibility, machinations, and shortsightedness of governments, terrorists are in possession of a variety of weapons of mass destruction, which some experts fear may include biological, chemical, and nuclear means. Governments will have to find their own solutions to this formidable challenge. But how should we as individuals conduct our lives in the shadow of these developments?

Apart from whatever political and others steps we may choose to take to protect ourselves and our interests and those of the country we live in, we also must face the moral issues involved. I believe that no complete moral consideration is possible without including the question of the spiritual destiny of our species. This is where the wisdom of the East, notably Yoga, becomes immediately relevant.

On the assumption that terrorism is a form of warfare, the philosophy of the *Bhagavad-Gîtâ* ("Lord's Song")—a 2,500-year-old Sanskrit scripture that "Mahatma" Gandhi called his "mother"—is an obvious first choice for our consideration. The *Gîtâ*, which is to Hinduism what the New Testament is to Christianity, in fact contains teachings that were given by the God-man Krishna on the morrow of one of the fiercest wars fought on Indian soil. They were intended to provide a spiritual framework for dealing with war and violence and are as relevant today as they were then.

The gist of Krishna's teachings is that as long as we are alive, we are forced to act. His message came at a time when large numbers of spiritual seekers were abandoning their householder existence and heading into the forests or remote mountain caves to pursue a contemplative lifestyle. He conceded that there is some legitimacy to such a world-weary quest for inner peace, but questioned both its philosophical foundations and the motivations of many of those who were choosing that particular path. In his view, action is simply superior to inaction. The problem with action, however, is that it leads to karmic consequences, which may be positive (auspicious) or negative (inauspicious). Of course, inaction also has repercussions in the realm of karma (or the law of moral causation). The reason for this is that both action and inaction involve the human mind, which is the seedbed of all karma.

Every thought or intention, depending on its moral quality and emotional charge, leaves a residue in the depth of our mind. This imprint is not passive, but rather, as the Sanskrit word *samskâra* suggests, a potent "activator" that constantly seeks to express or fulfill itself. In other words, by our thoughts and intentions we are actively shaping our destiny. Therefore the sages of India have been eager to discipline the mind by means of Yoga in order to avoid disastrous karmic consequences. In fact, they have always sought to overcome not only negative karmic activity but all karmic activity.

Here is Krishna's formulation of the yogic position:

Not by abstention from actions does a person enjoy action-transcendence (*naishkarmya*), nor by renunciation (*samnyâsa*) alone does he approach perfection (*siddhi*).

For, not even for a moment can anyone ever remain without performing action. Every [being] is unwittingly made to act by the constituents (*guna*) born of Nature (*prakriti*).

He who restrains his conative organs (*karma- indriya*), but sits remembering in his mind the objects (*artha*) of the senses, is called a hypocrite, a confused self.

But more excellent, O Arjuna, is he who, controlling the [cognitive] senses (*indriya*) with the mind, embarks unattached on Karma-Yoga with the conative organs.

You must do the allotted (*niyata*) action, for action is superior to inaction; not even your body's processes (*yâtrâ*) can be accomplished by inaction.

This world is bound by action, save when this action [is intended] as sacrifice (*yajna*). With that purpose [in mind], O Son of Kunti, engage in action devoid of attachment.

Bhagavad-Gîtâ (3.4-9)

Action, inaction, wrong action, and action transcendence are four concepts proposed in the *Gîtâ*, which we must understand clearly. The first three leave a karmic residue, and only the last represents a way out of the maze of karma. Not only does Krishna strongly urge us to be active but also to engage in proper (*niyata*) action, or action that is in accord with our place in life and our inner capacity. In contemporary terms, proper action means action that arises for us when we are "in the flow" of things. Action transcendence is proper action done without egocentric motivation or attachment, as a "sacrifice." It is service of the highest order.

This teaching of Karma-Yoga (the path of self-transcending action) was given to Prince Arjuna, who led the army of the Pândavas. He and his four brothers had been cheated out of their kingdom and were now reclaiming it. Alas, when Arjuna saw family members, friends, and honored teachers standing with the enemy army, he wavered in his mission. Krishna had to remind him that he was not fighting for any selfish purpose but to restore *dharma*.

The vital concept of *dharma* can be translated as "morality," "virtue," "order," "norm," "duty," "law," etc. The Sanskrit word stems from the verbal root *dhri* meaning "to bear" or "to carry." Thus *dharma* is that which sustains human life, namely the moral order, which is reflected in us in the form of life-enhancing values or virtues. The Kaurava princes, cousins of the Pândavas, were unjustly and unfairly governing the country and had thrown it into moral and spiritual darkness. Krishna, acting without self-interest and only out of the spontaneity of full enlightenment, had incarnated on Earth to restore the moral order, and the Pândava princes were merely the instruments for executing his plan. The Hindus look upon Krishna as a theophany (*avatâra*), but we can also see in him simply a prophet, visionary, sage, or spiritual teacher who wishes to promote the spiritual and moral welfare of the people of his time.

Moral lines are not always as clear cut as they are traditionally painted in the case of the Pândavas and Kauravas. Today the world is far more complex, and the nations of the world are entangled in a long common history of political intrigue, economic competition, ideological division, and not least warfare. In Hindu terms, every nation on Earth is suffering from an overdose of heavy-duty karma. There are no black and white sides, only a lot of gray areas. Thus the September 11 attack on the United States also did not occur in a vacuum. Terrorism, inexcusable as it is, has definite causes, and these need to be understood before terrorism can be overcome; but this is not within the scope of the present essay.

What is relevant, however, is to appreciate the fact that our society—humankind as a whole—is in exactly the state of moral and spiritual decline that Krishna spoke of. Contrary to New Ageism, which is principally confined to the middle class of the USA

and the developed nations of Europe, we are not at the cusp of a great spiritual upliftment. The accomplishments of the "Aquarian Age," which are hailed as harbingers of a better world, are at best mini-peaks in a valley of unfortunate developments. Let us just recall that every year some 100 million people are dying of hunger and a similar number are killed in wars, revolutions, and persecutions. These are surely not signs of a current or an imminent golden age. Writing in 1964, C. G. Jung accurately observed:

Modern man does not understand how much his "rationalism" (which has destroyed his capacity to respond to numinous symbols and ideas) has put him at the mercy of the psychic "underworld." He has freed himself from "superstition" (or so he believes), but in the process he has lost his spiritual values to a positively dangerous degree. His moral and spiritual tradition has disintegrated, and he is now paying the price for this break-up in worldwide disorientation and dissociation.*2

Once we accept that we do not live in the best of all possible worlds, we can perhaps also see that we are co-responsible for our present situation. As Jung observed, we must see the shadow in our own psyche if we want to perceive reality clearly or, as the Buddhists put it, "see things as they really are." We cannot become whole without this work on our shadow, the swampland consisting of all those aspects of our personality that we prefer to deny and instead project onto others: egotism, fantasy, greed, cowardice, laziness, irrationality, fanaticism, etc.

To put it starkly: In order to become whole, we must discover the potential of terrorism in the complex circuitry of our own psyche. Terrorism is an expression of spiritual deafness, moral blindness, and irrational anger. Only when we can acknowledge the presence of these dark forces within us can we take responsibility for them. This brings me back to the mental discipline of Karma-Yoga by which action is transformed in such a way that it is not rooted in the shadow and therefore is not karmically tainted.

Morally and spiritually sound action must be accompanied by self-observation, self-understanding, self-acceptance, self-transformation, and self-transcendence. Without these disciplines, we are likely to succumb to projection and wrong action (*vikarma*). These, in turn, are not conducive to inner and outer peace. On the contrary, if our behavior fails to be anchored in sound spiritual virtues and practices, it will predictably cause disturbance, disharmony, harm, hurt, and even chaos in the world.

Krishna taught that there are circumstances when it is not only appropriate but essential to take a firm stand against evil. He was not a romantic pacifist who, in the interest of an abstract principle (however noble), allows evil to conquer good. When the moral or spiritual order is at stake, we must actively oppose the forces that seek to undermine it. He even condoned war to accomplish this end, though a war not tinged with hatred and conducted for selfish reasons.

The question that presents itself here is: Which or whose moral or spiritual order justifies war and violence? According to the Muslim terrorists, the Western capitalist system that they wish to destroy is inherently evil. Their own belief system, however, is intrinsically right, lawful, and absolutely deserving of their support, protection, and if necessary violent promulgation. When they speak of *jihâd*, they do mean "holy war" against a nation or interest group that, in their eyes, falls short of Muslim morality. This use of the

concept, however, is a misuse. The Arab word means literally "striving"—the endeavor to live a just and virtuous life, both individually and collectively.

Even though many Muslims dangerously consider the conquest and conversion of non-Muslim peoples as a religious duty, the *Qur'ân* itself sanctions war only against an aggressor who is threatening the moral order. The verses dealing with *jihâd* in the familiar sense of holy war can be understood from the sociopolitical context of the early Muslim community, which was widely opposed by the Arab society of its day. That these *sûras* should now prove the seed for fundamentalism and unreasonable hostility is profoundly regrettable but a fact of life that both Muslims and non-Muslims need to examine carefully in their endeavor to build a prosperous and peaceful future for themselves.

To be sure, the original and moderate concept of *jihâd* meshes with the Hindu position, as mapped out by Krishna, who also urged his disciple Prince Arjuna to fight on moral grounds. When we examine the Muslim notions with what constitutes a morally sound and virtuous life, we quickly find that they are not in contradiction to the core values of Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, and any of the other great religious-spiritual traditions of the world. In all these traditions, including Islam, hatred has no place but love, kindness, mercy, tolerance, generosity, and forgiveness are recommended to all. There have of course been failures to live up to these great ideals in all traditions, though some of them, more than others, have a history of severe infringements, notably Islam and, yes, Christianity.

When we look at the traditional concept of "moral order," we are looking at moral universals, not culture-specific moral rules or expectations. The morality recommended by Krishna, the Buddha, Jesus of Nazareth, and Mohammad consists of the moral values and attitudes that arise spontaneously in any pure heart, whatever the culture or religious affiliation may be. These values and attitudes are intrinsically life enhancing and promote inner freedom and peace.

When Krishna recommended combative action to Prince Arjuna, he took into account Arjuna's *sva-dharma*, or "inner law." Arjuna was an aristocrat, whose duty was to defend the state and protect its citizens from harm and exploitation. As a member of the warrior estate (*kshatra*), it was his obligation by birth to uphold the moral order (*dharma*). He was trained to lead soldiers into battle.

Krishna would not have given the same advice to a member of the priestly or merchant estate. While today the boundaries between social classes are drawn differently and also are perhaps more fluid than in the days of Krishna, the notion of *sva-dharma* still deserves our attention. It is closely associated with the notion of *sva-bhâva* or "inner being," which is our personal makeup—the quality of our mind, character, or personality. From a traditional perspective, a person who is by dint of his mind, character, or personality more artistic than combative is considered constitutionally unfit for aggressive action such as a war demands. It would be morally questionable—as well as psychologically unsound—to expect such an individual to pick up arms and fight at the frontline. Similarly, it would be outright wrong for a member of the priestly estate (*brâhmana*) to join in aggressive action. His or her appropriate task would be to pray and conduct rituals for the success of a military campaign.

We must come to know our own *sva-bhâva* and the *sva-dharma* connected with it, and then we must act in accordance with our moral and psychological constitution and the attendant moral obligations. As a writer with strong pacifist leanings, I myself would make a bad soldier. In fact, I have not had any military training, for which I am grateful. However, as a writer I have the capacity and obligation to support the high moral and spiritual values that help create or sustain the kind of environment in which humankind can thrive. I wield my pen instead of a sword, just as a farmer employs the plow.

"Mahatma" Gandhi, a lawyer by profession, used the weapon of passive resistance to end the hegemony of the British in India and helped to achieve India's independence in 1947. He found violence abhorrent and held high the ideal of *ahimsâ* or nonharming. Yet even Gandhi admitted:

Whilst all violence is bad and must be condemned in the abstract, it is permissible for, it is even the duty of, a believer in *ahimsa* to distinguish between the aggressor and the defender. Having done so, he will side with the defender in a non-violent manner, i.e., give his life in saving him.*3

Gandhi realized that we live in an imperfect realm, and so he allowed for the existence of a military and police but regretted that there was a need for them. This dilemma demonstrates that while we must uphold and aspire to the highest moral and spiritual values, we cannot turn away from the realities of the "real world." In our daily life, we are constantly confronted with situations of potential or actual conflict. How we react depends on who we are. Gandhi was an extraordinary individual who, in his homeland and abroad, is remembered as a saint. To his credit, he had a more modest opinion of himself. Few of us have the courage of our convictions. He died for his idealism on January 30, 1948, while on his way to evening prayer. Applying the existing law, the government was unforgiving and promptly executed the assassin Nathuram Godse, a brahmin who fanatically objected to Gandhi's pro-Muslim stance.

We must find our own response to all situations of violence. As Yoga practitioners, we certainly must pay due attention to the superb moral imperative of nonharming. But we can always only act in accordance with our *sva-bhâva* and *sva-dharma* lest we should animate a false sense of self. In this context, the *Gîtâ* makes the important statement that it is better to fulfill one's own law (*sva-dharma*) imperfectly than another's perfectly. To do so we must know who we are and behave truthfully. If our inner truth, or conscience, leads us to abandon the guiding ideal of nonharming, then we must act accordingly and also courageously accept the consequences of our action. If, however, our inner voice prompts us to adopt nonharming as our foremost principle, then we must choose stillness and boldly accept the repercussions of the pacifist path, even if it costs us our life.

Like Hinduism, Buddhism holds nonharming in the highest regard and recommends it for both monastics and lay followers. The Dalai Lama's nonviolent response to the invasion of his country by the Chinese is a superb example of the Buddhist stance. Yet, according to World Tibet Network News (March 30, 2000), the exiled leader of the Tibetans and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989, too, admitted:

. . . theoretically, violence can be permitted depending on the motive and if a greater goal is sought. But in practice, it is very difficult. The nature of violence is very unpredictable. In today's world, destruction of your neighbor is destruction of yourself.*4

We have here the same contrast, already noted in Gandhi's comments, between the theoretical or abstract principle of nonviolence and day-to-day reality. While the Dalai Lama has consistently maintained a nonviolent orientation to the atrocities committed in his homeland and advocated the same principle in all other situations of violence, it is interesting that at least theoretically he allows violence "if a greater goal is sought." As a Buddhist monk, he is absolutely committed to nonharming. As the leader of an exiled nation, he steers the same course but not without concern and perhaps a certain unease that his pacifism has caused a schism among Tibetans and not done anything to stop or even slow down the raping of his country.

Those of us who are nonmonastics, living in the world with families to worry about, must find our own answer to the present crisis—any crisis involving violence. Krishna tried to show a middle path long ago, which emphasized not only skillful action in the world but also skillful inner action—through mental discipline. When we are free from anger and feelings of revenge, we may—with a centered and peaceful mind—take appropriate action to defend what would be considered good and life enhancing by any person of sound and clear mind.

If terrorism is here to challenge us in the years to come, we must not let it poison our heart but, on the contrary, strengthen our resolve to spread peace and happiness to all our fellow humans. We must cultivate this higher orientation even if, in specific situations, we feel the need to defend ourselves and others.

There has been much talk of a new world order. Often this concept is promoted by ruthless industrialists and politicians, who are motivated by greed and power rather than the betterment of the material and spiritual welfare of all peoples on Earth. In their hands, this is indeed a dangerous concept. At the same time, commerce has brought disparate nations closer together, and slowly everyone is realizing that humanity is one and that all of us are interdependent. Globalization is happening. The challenge before us is to give it the right direction. We can contribute to this commission by cultivating, in our own relationships, the sublime values that are upheld by all the religious-spiritual traditions of the world. World peace starts with inner peace and mental clarity, or wisdom. When we have no axe to grind but possess serenity, we also enjoy tolerance, compassion, and love. These are the great, universal virtues that are recommended on the path of Yoga. Who could reasonably argue against them?

Notes

1. See Matthew White, "Deaths by Mass Unpleasantness: Estimated Totals for the Entire 20th Century," <http://users.erols.com/mwhite28/warstat8.htm>.
2. C. G. Jung, "Approaching the Unconscious," in *Man and His Symbols*, ed. by Carl G. Jung (New York: Dell Publishing, 1968), p. 84.
3. Harijan, October 21, 1939, p. 325.

4. See http://www.tibet.ca/wtnarchive/2000/3/30_2.html.

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