

# Arjuna Vishadha Yogam: A Study in Intrapersonal Conflict

Geetha Anand\*

Research Scholar, California, US

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\*Corresponding author: Geetha Anand, Research Scholar, California, US

## Abstract

Conflict is inevitable when mutually exclusive options or incompatible entities exist. Interpersonal conflicts and intergroup conflicts have been addressed elaborately by economists, sociologists, behavioral scientists and psychologists. However, conflicting entities do not always have to exist outside of each other. In fact, most of the interpersonal conflicts often stem from an intrapersonal conflict an incompatibility within the same organism that manifests externally. The Mahabharata [1] is one of the most famous conflicts captured in South Asian literature. While the epic is a primary example of interpersonal conflict between two warring clans, the Pandavas and the Kauravas, this paper aims to show that it is also a study of intrapersonal conflict and its resolution. It will specifically focus on Arjuna Vishadha yogam, a passage from the Bhagavad Gita [2], a part of Mahabharata, where one of the Pandavas, Arjuna and his advisor and charioteer, Sri Krishna discuss whether to fight the Mahabharata war. This paper will demonstrate how Arjuna Vishada Yogam explains the nature and resolution of intrapersonal conflict, aligning with modern theories.

**Keywords:** Yoga; Psychologists; Arjuna vishadha yogam; Weakness; Loss of energy

## Arjuna's Intrapersonal Conflict

Intrapersonal conflict stems from the perception of two conflicting "selves" emerging from the same person. In the Bhagavad Gita, Pandavas and the Kauravas, the two clans of cousins, are prepared to fight on the battlefield. The Pandava Arjuna stands between the two armies, conflicted about the ethicality of this war. One of his selves knows that as a kshatriya, a warrior, it is his duty to fight the Kauravas and restore good for his people. His other self recognizes that the Kauravas are his people his uncles, teachers, and cousins and cannot bring himself to fight them. Arjuna's selves represent two kinds of ethics, subjective and objective, each providing a compelling enough argument to cement the intrapersonal conflict. A decision is subjectively ethical when the person deciding thinks it is ethical and others may or may not agree with him. An objectively ethical decision, on the other hand, is made based on general rules or laws [3]. Objective ethics aims to uphold laws that apply universally. Objectively, Arjuna's duty or dharma as a warrior demands him to fight the Kauravas. The Kauravas have acted unlawfully, stealing the land that rightfully belonged to the Pandavas. By permitting them to continue ruling, Arjuna is permitting injustice. Subjective ethics applies to the specific circumstances of an individual. Subjectively, Arjuna would be killing members of his own family, which saddens him and would be a sin. The two warring selves also represent what Arjuna 'wants' to do and what he 'should' do. Kathleen et al. [4] describe the 'want' self as more impulsive and emotional. Its

strength fluctuates over time, growing more powerful during the moment of decision. During Arjuna's moment of decision on the battlefield, his 'want self' desires to stop the war, providing him short term relief even as the conflict between the Kauravas and Pandavas persists. The 'should self' is rational and concerned with 'long-term interests. Arjuna knows that he should fight this war to establish long-term peace and justice. Anticipating the conflict can strengthen the 'should self', allowing a person to create distance between themselves and their emotions. When a person is in a heightened emotional state the sheer nature of emotion will prevent a cognitive response. While Arjuna anticipated the conflict, he was not able to maintain a level of emotional state to allow him to put a distance between him and the conflict so that the 'should self' would take precedence over his 'want self' and resolve the intrapersonal conflict.

A person's emotions and personality traits impact their inner conflict. Arjuna displays low ego strength, field dependence, and an external locus of control, characteristics that fuel his intrapersonal conflict. A person's ego strength is their confidence and conviction in their decisions. Field dependence measures a person's independence from others. Mc Devitt et al. [5] state that a person with a strong ego and high field independence will do what they think is right. Arjuna questions his decision to fight his cousin, after beginning the war. At the moment of the war, he is unable to distinguish between right and wrong, and thus demonstrates low ego strength. He is also confused about societal expectations and norms. As a field dependent person, he

asks Sri Krishna to help remove the ambiguity from his ethical dilemma. Locus of control refers to how much a person believes he has control over his decision. A person with external locus of control feels that the situation is beyond their control while those with inner locus of control feel that they have command over the situation. Even though the conflict occurs within him, Arjuna believes that its solution is beyond him and appeals to Krishna for help. Before appealing to Krishna, Arjuna's initial reaction to his interpersonal conflict is avoidance. He attempts to avoid the war even though it would cause his family and clan to suffer. Rahim [6] categorizes a person's response to an inner conflict under one of the three choices. Approach response is when a person chooses between two goals, and both have a positive outcome. Approach-avoidance response is when a person pursues one goal and avoids the other with both goals having positive and negative consequences. In the avoidance-avoidance response both goals have negative consequences. In Arjuna's case both the options have negative and positive consequences and he tries to pick one.

Intrapersonal conflict, even though mental, has a physical consequence as well. Arjuna feels dizzy, weakness, loss of energy, drying of face, burning sensation in the body and a general sense of fatigue. His weapons slip from his hands, and he feels lost. His inner conflict manifests as anger, self-pity, emotional instability and depression characteristics of neuroticism Widiger [7]. He himself tells Krishna that he is afflicted with the 'dosha' or fault of not being able to decide the course of action. Stangier et al. [8] found strong correlation between intrapersonal conflict and deficits in problem solving skills and interpersonal interaction. With dysfunctional attitude, the subjects were more self-critical and sought perfectionism. High discrepancies were found between ideal and real which decreased drive and motivation for change. The authors suggest that 'cognitive restricting of inconsistent goals or values, integrating goals into self-concept and problem-solving training to clarify, initiate and practice new strategies to cope with intrapersonal conflict' will be crucial to resolve intrapersonal conflict.

### Sri Krishna's Resolution

Arjuna's intrapersonal conflict may be defined as citta vritti or fluctuations of consciousness that Patanjali describes in his Yoga sutra [9] (I.6). According to Patanjali, mental fluctuations are of five types: those due to pramana or knowledge we gained from various sources, viparyaya or misconception, vikalpa or imagination, nidra or lack of awareness and smriti or memory. Arjuna's knowledge gained from learning the rules, social norms and perceptions led to his mental agitation. He misconstrued that it was wrong to fight the Kauravas as he looked at them as 'my people'. He imagined that fight the war would lead to dishonor and disgrace. His lack of awareness about the situation led to his arguments against the war. His memory of his interaction with the Kauravas, his teachers and others in the army led to the conflict. In his state of helplessness Arjuna seeks a solution from Krishna. According to Silverman [10] seeking an external help is

the first step in intrapersonal conflict resolution therapy. A third party, allows a person 'to look at reality from many perspectives instead of being too absorbed in (their) own world that they cannot see from beyond the framework of reference (they) are working with.' Krishna shows Arjuna that his inner conflict is due to five afflictions that Patanjali calls as avidya (not knowing the truth), asmita (the sense of mine), raga (like), dvesha (dislike) and abinivesham (existential crisis) [9] (II.3).

Krishna argues that if Arjuna is conflicted about fighting his relatives, he is worrying about the perishable body when he should really focus on the imperishable soul. The Kauravas are related to him only through the perishable body when, in reality, they are all everlasting and unattached souls. Thus, it is Arjuna's avidya or lack of knowledge about the truth that leads to his mental agitation. The sorrow Arjuna experiences for the Kauravas is due to the meaning he ascribes to them, not because of any inherent value they possess. Arjuna would only be destroying bodies that were destined to perish. Redekop [11] states that human act towards objects and events is based on the meaning they have for them. These meanings are not self-evident but ascribed by the person based on his interaction with them over time. Patanjali calls this as asmita, raga and dvesha. Arjuna considered the contenders more as 'my teacher', 'my friend' or 'my uncle' instead of as supporters of evil. While abinivesha is defined as 'fear of death' many commentators explain it as fear and anxiety that lead to suffering. Arjuna's abinivesha leads to him throwing the bow and arrow and declaring that he will not fight the war.

Through his dialogue Sri Krishna address each of the five afflictions that Arjuna suffers from. He explains that Arjuna's sorrow is due to the interaction of external stimuli with the senses. "O Son of Kunti! The nonpermanent appearance of happiness and distress and their disappearance in due course, are like the appearance and disappearance of winter and summer seasons. They arise from sense perception, O scion of Bharata, and one must learn to tolerate them without being disturbed." (Chapter 2 verse 14). As these signals, happiness and sorrow, are impermanent Arjuna should consider them on an equal footing. Thus, Krishna takes the first step in conflict resolution, that of bringing aspects of the conflict that the person is not fully aware of into his consciousness. Powers [12] states that the survival of all living organisms is dependent on their ability to control and inability to control leads to emotional distress. Through his explanation about permanent and impermanent entities, Krishna triggers a reorganization in Arjuna's mind. According to Carey [13] the more creative or tangential the idea is the greater potential it has to bring about reorganization. Reorganization takes place wherever mental awareness or consciousness is focused. When attention is sustained at the required level, reorganization takes place and new perspectives, thoughts, insights and beliefs occur. With Krishna's help, Arjuna is able to reorganize and internalize the locus of control. He realizes that he has the power to solve his intrapersonal conflict by adjusting his

mindset. A regained sense of control, Powers explains, reduces emotional distress and is crucial to a living organism's survival. Without his emotions clouding his judgment, Arjuna realizes that in viewing the Kauravas as his family he was ignoring their support for evil. As a kshatriya, it is his duty to uphold justice and goodness. He resolves his intrapersonal conflict and decides to fight the war.

Besides providing an immediate solution to Arjuna's conflict Krishna paved the way to his transformation. As Redekop noted, the resolution of two different aspects of the self leads to a more constructive and peaceful state than ever before. However, resolving a current conflict does not guarantee that inner agitations will not rise again in future. A lasting solution for intrapersonal conflict should, hence, involve an inner transformation. A person's perspective, attitude and personality should undergo a change through understanding the nature of one's 'self' and why the conflict arose in the first place. Thus, solution to an intrapersonal conflict involves turning 'within' to understand about oneself so that lasting changes can be brought about. Sri Krishna lists the qualities of a person, a sthithapragna, who is free from inner conflict. Such a person will take care of his mind, senses and intellect. He will not be buffeted by likes and dislikes that cloud the mind and pull him towards unworthy desires thus taking away the chance of peace and progress. He will not be affected by happiness or sorrow. All his actions will be performed with utmost care but with detachment. He will know inner relaxation in the midst of activities. Sri Krishna recommends determination and patience as ways to attain mental discipline. Patanjali reflects this as abhyasa (practice) and vairagya (fortitude), the two essential steps to control citta vritti [9] (I.17).

### Conclusion

Bhagavad Gita is a classic text on intrapersonal conflict and its resolution. While conflict is inevitable in the world filled with duality it is imperative to develop methodologies to address it successfully. This is especially important as interpersonal, intergroup, and international conflicts can all be traced to intrapersonal conflicts. Krishna, in Bhagavad Gita, provides a permanent solution to resolving inner conflict besides helping

Arjuna with an immediate solution. He provides a stepwise procedure to transform the body through action, mind through knowledge and realization so that one can achieve the ultimate state of liberation. By beginning with a solution to the immediate problem on hand and building up the knowledge up to its frontier, Krishna helps Arjuna remain focused and committed in the journey towards total freedom.

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