

The Eternal Message of the Gita

SWAMI SIDDHESHWARANANDA¹

Source: *Vedanta Kesari*

April 2003²

1. Action and Inaction

*He who sees inaction in action,
and action in inaction,
he is a sage, a yogi,
and he accomplishes all action. (BG 4.18)*

It seems that the *Gita* is giving us a strange teaching here. Should one have recourse to such a paradox? Since, here, we are concerned to know, to realize the truth in the simplest, most direct way possible, why point it out to us through an enigma?

However, this first verse which we are studying, bewildering though it may seem, illustrates one of the basic principles of Vedanta: *Truth can only be expressed through contradiction*. As one will see, it is not through logical reasoning. through a series of properly interrelated ideas, that the truth may be known. All reasoning leads to the adoption of a position which opens but one perspective to us. And it would be equally vain to multiply these points of view, for the comprehension of the Reality is not the sum total of all perspectives, *it is not a totalisation*. It is through an intuition going beyond logic, outside the play of opposites, that we will be able to

1 A monk of the Ramakrishna Order, India, Swami Siddheswarananda (1897-1957) taught Vedanta in Europe from 1937-57—he was the Minister-in-Charge of Centre Védantique Ramakrichna, Gretz, France.

2 First of a series of independent commentaries by the Swami on various themes of the Gita-teachings published in French from Gretz in their *Bulletin des Activités Culturelles* No.1 August 1955. English translation and edit by André van den Brink and Rene Tien of Centre Védantique Ramakrichna.

understand the nature of the Real.

The sage, this verse tells us, sees action in inaction. It would at least be convenient to give a definition of what inaction is. This initial problem is not without raising some difficulty. However, for our purposes it will be sufficient to accept the common notions dealing with action and inaction. What do we see in our daily lives? That all action is encountered by obstacles, is provoking contradictions; and these contradictions, these obstacles are such that they persuade us that the highest freedom corresponds to the abandoning of all action. Thus it would suffice, we believe, to stop acting in order to be finally free.

This temptation is deceptive, because such abandonment, if at all possible, would not enable us attain any worthy state. Is it not obvious that the fact of ceasing to act is still an action, that *any initiative taken by the ego is an action*? We will only be changing the direction of the energy that is driving us outwards. In fact, there is no greater effort involved than to oppose a natural movement, than to want to work against the normal course of thought and action. 'To see action in inaction' is to understand that none can refrain from acting.

But the action itself-*who* accomplishes it? When one is acting, everyone imagines that the force which is thus expressing itself, comes from the ego, from the sovereign individuality. On reflection, however, one will recognize that this belief is not well-founded, for one realizes that it is Nature itself that is accomplishing everything: "I don't do anything", thinks one who knows the truth. 'Whether he is eating, whether he is moving or whether he is sleeping. whether he is breathing or whether he is speaking. whether he is taking or whether he is giving, whether he is opening or whether he

is closing his eyes, he knows that it is only the senses that are active among the sense objects' (*Gita*, V. 8-9). Such is the understanding that we need to gain: *A total vision of Nature*, a vision that will replace the narrow and false views. Thus we shall cease to believe that the source of action lies within ourselves. We shall understand that it is 'the Nature of things', the cosmic energy which is acting.

But it is not enough to say that the effort that would be aimed at stopping all action, thus establishing us in inaction, would be vain. Such effort would not only be useless, but would also plunge us more and more into ignorance. At the same time, if we want to escape the hold of ignorance, it is important to understand that *Atman*, our proper nature, is free from all action, because It is unborn. 'He is never born nor does He ever die. Having been, He cannot cease to be any more. Unborn, permanent, eternal, ancient, He is not destroyed, when the body is killed' (*Gita*, 11,20). It is only Nature, *prakriti*, that acts. The sense of ego and the external objects, the notions of something being internal or external of action and inaction, only exist in *prakriti*

Atman, the Self of each being, knows neither interiority nor exteriority. The *Gita* as well as the *Upanishads* teach the oneness of the individual soul and the cosmic Soul, independent of their expressions in *prakriti*. He who wants to know and realize *Atman* should therefore take up a position outside of *prakriti*. But, in doing so, he will run up against an insurmountable obstacle, because no one can place himself outside of *prakriti*. In fact, this is only a way to point out the direction that we need to give to our spiritual efforts. Another important observation to be made is that the wisdom and the sage are identical. Indeed, the realisation of *Atman* is not an abstract notion, separate from the one 'who real-

izes'. The sage, like the wisdom, is impersonal.

Naturally common sense will exclaim: 'How can you say that the nature of the sage is impersonal? Doesn't one see a person acting or not acting, sleeping or walking?' But our intellect which analyses and divides, cannot grasp the impersonal character of the realized man. The impersonal remains beyond our comprehension, beyond all grasp. And when the *Gita* treats of the sage's conduct, it refers to an altogether exterior point of view, the description of that which appears within *prakriti*, Nature. Let us remember that, in this *prakriti*, Indian thought distinguishes three modes: *sattva* (purity), *rajas* (passion), and *tamas* (inertia). In the eyes of all, the sage remains on the plane of *sattva*, and his conduct constitutes an ideal for those who observe him. And, surely, he accomplishes such or such action 'in conformity with his nature', for, the whole universe, the *Gita* teaches, is in action; the whole universe is the multiple expression of energy. When wisdom is reflected in *prakriti*, the realized man appears as the highest degree of *sattva*.

None, however, is able to understand the sage in his essence. No one is able to give the reason for his behaviour. The sage, being wisdom itself, is impersonal. If he sees action in inaction, and inaction in action, it is because in that wisdom there is no more place for the sense of ego. Whatever he may do, the sage does not think he is acting: It is Nature as a whole, *prakriti*, and not he whom he sees acting.

This man with his intelligence firmly established, this eminently sattvic man, gives the impression of perfect harmony. Indeed, when the vision is not veiled by any preferences, there is equilibrium and harmony. The sage looks with the same impartiality upon 'a brahmin, a cow, an elephant, and

Gita - Action and Inaction - Swami Siddheswarananda

even upon a dog or a pariah', as it is said in the *Gita* (verse 5.18):

*One should not abandon one's duty
though it is attended with evil.
All undertakings are enveloped by smoke,*



Circulated as a service by:
John Manetta
Beles 28 (Koukaki)
117 41 Athens, Greece
Phone: [+30] 210 923 4682
email: jmanveda@otenet.gr
website: www.vedanta.gr