



**CHETANA**  
International Journal of Education (CIJE)

Peer Reviewed/Refereed Journal  
ISSN : 2455-8279 (E)/2231-3613 (P)

Impact Factor  
SJIF 2024 - 8.445



Prof. A.P. Sharma  
Founder Editor, CIJE  
(25.12.1932 - 09.01.2019)

### The Metaphor of Gitopnishad: *Dealing with Stress and Dilemma during Pandemic*

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First draft received: 05.04.2025, Reviewed: 18.04.2025  
Final proof received: 11.05.2025, Accepted: 28.05.2025

#### Abstract

*During life challenging times like the present COVID-19 pandemic, the peoples of the world are faced with a number of questions of an existential nature. There is a sense of guilt, anguish, helplessness, uncertainty and powerlessness when one is neither fighting an enemy we cannot see nor figure out its path and effects. Something which is so powerful and widespread that the entire human and animal race seems powerless to treat and tackle it. With limited resources and no definite end in sight the situation today has caused potential moral injury along with psycho physical effects. Spiritual practices and advice may help to deal with moral paradoxes and ethical dilemmas when other secular supports are undermined or inaccessible. The Holy Indian Epic, the Bhagwad Gita has described the moral distress of the warrior Arjuna, during the battle of Kurukshetra and the advice given to him by the Lord Krishna the gist of which can be encapsulated in the form of the four Ds- Detachment, Duty, Doer-ship and Dhyana or meditation. This article will focus on dealing with the effects of the pandemic by offering solutions to existential dilemma, with moral and psychological distress by imbibing and emulating the teachings in the verses of the Bhagwad Gita.*

**Keywords:** Pandemic, existential, dilemma, distress, spiritual etc.

#### Introduction

As a book of scripture the *Bhagwad Gita* has assumed a position of universal interest, while its teachings have gained appreciation not only in India, but far beyond its borders. It has been translated into Seventy Five languages and is widely read worldwide. The thoughts in it are so deep that none can arrive at their end even after constant study throughout lifetime. Each day they exhibit new facets of 'Truth', therefore they remain ever fresh and new. When scrutinized with a concentrated mind, possessed of faith and reverence every verse of the Gita will clearly appear as full of the deepest mystery. The manner in which the verses describe the virtues, glory and secrets of God is unique only to the Gita, for no other scripture has the utterances of God Himself. It is an incomparable book where not a word is without some spiritual import. In the Gita, we find Arjuna experiencing a similar feeling of sorrow at having been placed in apposition where he has to inflict injury to his own kin. Krishna's introduction of the principle of Detachment can be of great relevance to the Corona inflicted patients, victims as well as their relatives and well wishers. He tells Arjuna to recognize

that all emotions are just fleeting sensations of mind and ask him to engage in *Karma Yoga* stating "*Yoga Karmasu Kaushalam*" meaning detachment, yet excellence in works is Yoga. The important thing to note here is that detachment does not mean running away or shrugging away responsibility. It just means being detached from the consequences of the action that is performed to the best of one's ability, whatever the circumstances one is placed in right now. <sup>[1]</sup>

"Vested you are with the authority to perform

But not seek your action's fruits in any form

When by the fruits of actions you aren't motivated

From discharging your duties, you never get deviated  
2.47

Perform your every action in this Yogic way

all attachments Arjuna, you must throw away

From accomplishments and loss find your release

Then you shall attain the Yogic poise and peace". 2.48  
<sup>[2]</sup>

In any acute health care crisis, such as during the current pandemic, psychological and moral injury can result given a number of scenarios within clinical and non-clinical settings. There are numerous bio-ethical choices to be made. These include allocation of scarce resources like ventilators and protective equipment, obeying the institutional and hierarchic rules, personal safety and the risk to one's family as a result of performing one's duty—to name a few. Moral injury in this situation can lead to impaired mental and physical functioning of the individual, including a number of psychosomatic symptoms like insomnia, fatigue, muscular tension, myalgia, headaches and gastrointestinal upset. Psychological symptoms of depression, anxiety, suicidal ideas and demoralization are to be expected in this situation<sup>[3]</sup>. Conventional protective factors like social support, company of friends and means of entertainment have also been restricted; worsening the situation. COVID-19 has actually unleashed a pandemic of global mental ill health.

Today the COVID-19 pandemic has forced the entire seven billion population of the world to live in a war-like situation and no choice but to bear its risks. The HCWs (health care workers) dealing with the COVID 19 pandemic are especially at a high risk of stress, anxiety, depression and other mental health problems. There is an urgent need to implement interventions that promote mental health in these professionals. Unfortunately, access to formal psychotherapy is often limited, impractical due to time constraints or fraught with stigma. Another issue is the scarcity of experienced mental health professionals.

In such troubled times, one looks everywhere for answers, and may even turn to spiritual guidance through the teachings of prophets, saints, spiritual leaders and to the wisdom of the ancient texts to find answers to tormenting existential questions. The teachings and message in the verses from the Bhagavad Gita, the relevance of the advice contained therein have benefited people in the present turmoil. The therapeutic effect has reduced mental stress and psychological trauma experienced by the people at large and more specifically the HCW's to some extent.

The Bhagavad Gita (Gitopanishad) literally means—Song of the Divine. It is revered as holy by the Hindus. It originally appears as an episode in the Mahabharata, the epic story of the battle between cousins, the children of Pandu (Pandavas) and Dhritharashtra (Kauravas). The Pandavas, who had to face persecution and injustice from their own kin, had Lord Krishna on their side as friend, mentor and adviser. He motivates the third of the five Pandavas, Arjuna, to fight, offering himself as his charioteer and guide. Lord Krishna is revered as an avatara or incarnation of Lord Vishnu, the sustainer of the universe in the Hindu holy trinity of Bhramha (the creator), Vishnu (the sustainer) and Shiva (the destroyer).<sup>[4]</sup>

The ancient wisdom of the Gita imparted by Krishna, which is essentially a friendly dialogue between a wise teacher and a disillusioned student, has of late kindled interest as a model for psychotherapy. The teachings comprise 700 verses and 18 chapters (25–42) of the Bhishmaparva of Mahabharata. We see, in these verses, how a demoralized Arjuna expresses his

ethical dilemma about killing his own cousins and teachers in the battlefield of Kurushetra. He expresses his unwillingness to perform his duty as a warrior, of fighting against 'Adharma' or injustice. After Lord Krishna's counsel, he comes a full circle and declares with confidence that his delusion has been destroyed and he is now ready to fight to uphold his Dharma—his duty.

The *Shrimad Bhagavad Gita* enlightens everyone on how to cope up with various situations in life. It uses the conversation between Lord Krishna and Arjuna to highlight initial negative coping mechanisms exhibited by the latter. It goes on to showcase positive coping skills suggested by Lord Krishna and implemented by Arjuna. The Bhagavad Gita, through this "case based methodology," teaches us how to cope with a demanding situation. Diabetes is a lifestyle disease, which warrants a thorough change in one's lifestyle, including changes in basic activities such as diet and exercise. This brief communication utilizes the teachings of Bhagavad Gita to help in coping with illness, especially chronic illness such as diabetes. The article cites verses from the Bhagavad Gita to show how one may cope with the stress of illness such as diabetes. Lord Krishna, while describing the immortality of the soul, sings verses which help us understand how to tackle illness. There is no better example of motivation to perform the right action, in an unbiased manner, than these slokas by Lord Krishna, which precede the description of sthithpradnya. The first step, he states, is equanimity coupled with acceptance of reality.<sup>[5]</sup>

Yogastha kurukarmani, sangamtyaktva dhananjaya (2:48).

This acceptance allows us to handle the various conflicting positive and negative emotions, thoughts, and information that we are exposed to when illness is diagnosed. Moreover, finally, we are able to choose the right ones, in an unbiased manner, reaching the state of yoga. Siddhya siddha samobhutva, samatvam yoga uchyate (2:48).

Lord Krishna tells Arjuna to keep all abominable activities away from himself, similar to a health-care professional who guides the patient to stay away from things that worsen diabetes. Durena hravaram karma, buddhiyoga dhananjaya (2:49)

Finally The Lord says:

When your mind is no longer disturbed by flowery language and it remains in a stance of self realization, then you have attained divine consciousness

Shrutivipratipannate,  
yadasthasyati nischalaha,  
samadhawachala buddhihi,  
stada yogamawapsyasasi (2:53)

A relaxed mind is a prerequisite for diabetes management. Glycemic control cannot be achieved until your mind is stable and calm. The Gita helps reduce counter regulatory hormone levels by promoting calmness of mind.

Lord Krishna supports action, rather than grief or depression, as a means of coping with a stressful situation. Multiple slokas of the Gita reinforce this

message, which is equally relevant for persons with diabetes.

“...stand up, Arjuna, determined to fight”

tasmad uttishtha kaunteya, yuddhaya kritanischayaha. 2:37

“...nor let your attachment be to inaction”

Ma karma phala he turbhur, mate sangastva karmanihi 2:47

Lord Krishna promotes both the paths of knowledge and action but clearly supports action. This is true in health as well. While we should equip ourselves with knowledge and information about our illness, we should not limit ourselves to this. It is more fruitful to take tangible action to fight disease. This may be in the form of investigations, nonpharmacological therapy, drug treatment, or other modalities such as surgery<sup>[6]</sup>

“The Yoga of Action, being easier of practice, is superior to the yoga of knowledge 5:2 Sanyasa karmayogaschya nishreya sakara ubhau, tayostu karma sanyasat karmayogo vishishyate “...he is no yogi who has merely given up all activity”

Na sanyasi cha yogicha, na niragnir na chakriyaha 6:1

“Man does not attain freedom from action without entering upon action”

Nakarmanam anarambham, naishyakarmyam purushoshruite 3:4

“He who outwardly restraining the organs of...action,...is called a hypocrite.” Indriyathe vimudhatma, mithyacharsa uchyate (3:6)

Lord Krishna emphatically calls for maintenance of physical health through activity and exercise. He clearly states that one cannot even maintain his body without physical exercise. This is an apt reminder for people to remain physically active so as to prevent diabetes (the need of the hour), as well as for persons with diabetes/other lifestyle disorder patients to view exercise as an important part of disease management.

“Desisting from action, you cannot even maintain your body”

Niyatam kuru karmatwam, karmajayo hrukarmanaha 3:8

The Gita clearly states that one who engages merely in materialistic pleasures and not in sacrifice, does not lead a meaningful life. The real meaning of life is in sacrifice and doing your karma rather than engaging in worldly pleasures. This narration gives meaning to life of a person with diabetes<sup>[7]</sup>

“He...who does not perform his duties,...he lives in vain.”

Aghayur indriyarmo mogham, partha SE jivati 3:16

“...go on efficiently doing your duty...”

Tasmad asaktha satatam, karya karma samachara 3:19

Lord Krishna has a word of advice for diabetes care professionals, too: He observes that great men should lead by example and “work” (remain active) even if they do not need to.

Four concepts from the Gita namely—(1) ‘Detachment,’ (2) ‘Doer and the concept of Self,’ (3) ‘Dharma or Duty’ and (4) ‘Dhyana or Meditation’; the four Ds hold specific relevance and therapeutic potential in offering psychological support to the victims, survivors and kin of all those adversely affected by the disease. A special mention should be made specifically to chapters two and three of the Gita, i.e. ‘Sankhya Yoga’ or Yoga of Knowledge and ‘Karmayoga’ or Yoga of Action.

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