

NON-ATTACHMENT IS NOT THE SAME AS NON-ENGAGEMENT

~by Shivani Hawkins

This is arguably the central teaching of the Bhagavad Gita, the most widely read and influential text on yoga (more so than the Yoga Sutras, in fact).

I keep seeing people who claim to practice yoga sharing that they want to practice non-attachment by doing nothing.

If you're not familiar, the text is a dialogue between Arjuna, a great warrior, and Lord Krishna, God embodied in human form. It's a long story and this is deeply oversimplified, but basically after great injustice and tyranny, Arjuna is now out on the battlefield facing his own family, teachers, and elders, who have sided with the throne, and subsequently with greed and injustice.

And his mind starts to waver, and he is overcome with anxiety, grief, and depression. He starts wondering out loud, "Isn't it wrong to kill my family? Wouldn't it be better if I just give up everything and do spiritual practices? Why do I have to fight, anyway? I don't care to win by killing my own family. It's all too awful. I can't fight!"

And Lord Krishna basically proceeds to explain to him in 18 beautiful chapters the answers to those questions.

Among those answers, he says that we must always take right action that is aligned with our highest purpose, but without any inner attachment to a specific outcome, result, or personal gain. (And that isn't to say there *won't* be gain; it's that we do it because we must, not because we seek that gain).

He also says that it's better to follow our personal dharma (our sacred purpose/responsibility) imperfectly than someone else's perfectly. If you are a warrior, you must fight. If you are a teacher, teach. If you are a healer, heal. If you are a mother, mother. What actions and choices we take will not be the same for everyone. But they must be taken.

We also can not avoid taking actions, because prakṛti (Mother Nature) will compel us to act through the power of our innate instincts. Not taking action is also a karmic action, so it is better to act appropriately.

He also explains that everything originates from the divine, returns to the divine, and is unfolding within the divine. There is no absolute good or bad, and so that is all the more reason that we should play our part fully, without inner greed, hatred, anger, or pride.

There is so, so, so much more wisdom in this scripture, but it's important we understand that NON-ATTACHMENT is an INNER state. It is NOT the same as outer INACTION or NON-

ENGAGEMENT.

By the end of the text, Arjuna bows with deep gratitude and humility, and says, “I will do what you say”. And even though he admits he still doesn’t fully understand everything (do we ever?) he is clear inside himself what must be done.

And that inner clarity and stillness doesn’t mean the task is easy or that he does not grieve as he is doing it. Awakening and inner non-attachment does not mean that you no longer have feelings or human emotion. In fact, while fighting his beloved mentor Bhishma, Arjuna weeps with each arrow he fires at him - the man who taught him how to shoot in the first place.



What we must do at this moment is not easy. How we play our part will look different for all of us. Many of us will find that on the other side of the battlefield, it’s not strangers, but our friends, our family, our teachers, our elders. It will feel overwhelming and daunting to confront them, and we may wonder if it is better to stay silent. It may feel that the “virtuous” action is to be polite and “respectful”.

But for those of us who are committed to upholding dharma, and specifically those of us who have trained to and are sworn to uphold justice, we must play our part. And we must do so with inner peace and compassion for all beings. We can confront and hold accountable those who have sided with greed and injustice even as we hold love and respect for them in our hearts. The divine permeates all beings.

It is not our place to pretend to be someone we are not. It may not be appropriate for certain people to voice their personal political opinions out loud. As a teacher, artist, and trained lawyer, and also a woman of color and mother of an interracial child, my heart AND instincts AND training compel me to speak up publicly and help educate people. This is who I am, and a duty I embrace. (FWIW, I didn't always).

For some of you, you will find yourself on the front lines of the protest, with your body at risk. Others of you will work quietly in offices to change unjust laws, or perhaps some of you will organize and send money to those in need. Perhaps you will finally explain to your old uncle or aunt over dinner how they are still upholding unjust systems, and encourage them to vote differently.

I do not know how your dharma will unfold.

I also do not know what - if anything - we will accomplish or gain by taking actions. All of our scriptures, especially this one, teach us that this is not our domain of control. Whatever the divine has in store for all of us, whatever blessing or hardship we receive, we embrace it, and keep performing our sacred duty anyway.

Yogic practice lies in our ability to keep acting in unbroken union and alignment with the Universal Self. This is a mystical, inner space between you and God; a stillness and sweetness that transcends pain and pleasure and whatever you are asked to do here on earth. It is not something you can artificially fake and show off on the outside. True inner stillness and alignment also may look nothing like what you expect it to on the outside. A mother roaring with weapons in her hands and screaming to save her child from death may also be experiencing this state just as much as the old man sitting quietly in meditation.

No matter what our sacred purpose looks like, the time has come to act. Inaction is not an option. It is also not a yogic virtue.

You must take action. Choose right action. Choose action that is aligned with the highest values of your heart, and what is needed in this moment, not the dictates of religious morality and social civility.

But act. And even if you try not to, your deepest, truest, instincts - placed in your body by God/dess - will compel you to act.

So act wisely. And you will.