Bhagavad Gita for the Physician

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Abstract

This communication presents verses from the Bhagavad Gita which help define a good clinician’s skills and behavior. Using the teachings of Lord Krishna, these curated verses suggest three essential skills that a physician must possess: Excellent knowledge, equanimity, and emotional attributes. Three good behaviors are listed (Pro-work ethics, Patient-centered care, and Preceptive leadership) and supported by thoughts written in the Gita.

Keywords: Chronic illness, compassion fatigue, emotional equipoise, equanimity, health care, patient-centered care, physician burnout, physician stress

Modern Challenges

Modern health-care professionals face multiple challenges at work today. Created by a combination of social, environmental, academic, medicolegal, and professional issues, these challenges may have a negative impact on physician health – physical, psychological, and spiritual. Stress, frustration, and dejection work together to produce a state of compassion fatigue and burnout, which in turn impairs self-health as well as delivery of health services to patients.

While health professionals and nurses have been speaking about the need to focus on their own health, few resources are available to help them to do so effectively. What is needed is an expert physician teacher, who leads by example, to help health-care professionals optimize their health. Such guidance, delivered with the strength of experience, will be accepted with the confidence of trust.

Timeless Solutions

Indian literature is a storehouse of wisdom. The Bhagavad Gita, a classic Sanskrit epic, describes a conversation between guru (teacher) and disciple. Arjuna, confused and unable to handle stress on the battle field, seeks guidance from Lord Krishna. [1-2] Lord Krishna explores and analyzes (diagnoses) Arjuna’s condition, explains its origin and underlying basis (psychoeducation on pathophysiology), and helps him overcome his distress by equipping him with positive coping skills (intervention). Thus, Lord Krishna fulfills the responsibility of a physician teacher, by helping his student overcome his limitations and achieve his full potential.

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This brief communication presents selected verses from the Bhagavad Gita which will help modern health-care professionals understand their role in society and fulfill their duties as a clinician and healer in a satisfying manner. This will enhance their own coping skills and assist them in handling external stressors more effectively. These skills are especially important in today’s world, grappling with increasing distrust and violence against health care professionals.

**Physician-friendly Taxonomy**

We categorize the physician-friendly advice contained in the Bhagavad Gita as follows:

**Attributes of a good physician**
- Excellent knowledge
- Equanimity
- Emotional equipoise.

**Behavior of a good physician**
- Pro-work attitude
- Patient-centered care
- Preceptive leadership.

**Excellent Knowledge**

The medical profession is based on scientific knowledge and skills. For health-care professionals, continuing medical education is an essential part of professional life. The Bhagavad Gita reinforces this by praising the pursuit of knowledge. The verses below encourage us to learn from esteemed teachers and strive to improve ourselves with focused dedication.

Lord Krishna encourages Arjuna to approach his teacher to learn the truth, in a submissive manner, while rendering service to him. He also gives the confidence that “self-realized” souls will impart knowledge to improve the student because of their experience. This is exactly how learning occurs in the medical profession.

Lord Krishna encourages Arjuna not to get dejected but upgrade himself so that he can deliver his duties with a clear mind and soul, – his biggest friend. At the same time, he reminds him that the same mind, if contaminated, can become his biggest enemy. Urging Arjuna, the Lord says.

“**tad viddhi pranipātena pariprasnena sevayā, upadeksyanti te jñānam jñānīnās tattva-darsināḥ.”**

4:34

“**try to understand the true nature of knowledge by approaching illumined soul. Asking him to question them with an open and guileless heart, suggesting those wise seers of Truth will instruct him in that knowledge. In a way he urges to continue upgrading with a humble mind with the help of wise men.”**

“**uddhred atmanatmanam, natmanam avasadayet, atmaiva hryatmano bandhur, atmaiva ripur atmanaha.”**

6:5

Glorifying a devoted professional as the one with sublime knowledge, who continuously updates himself by his own efforts avoiding degradation. This is an important attribute of a good physician.

“**nāsayāmyātma-bhāva-stho jnāna-dēpena bhāsvatā”**

10:11

“**-----dispel-----darkness born of ignorance by the illuminating lamp of knowledge”**

“**na hi jñānena sadācāra pavītram iha vidyate, tat svayaā yoga-saāsiddhah kālānātmāni vindatī”**

4:38

“**On earth there is no purifier as great as knowledge: ------”**

“**shraddhāvāllabhate jñayam tat-parah saāyatendriyaha, jñānām labdhvā parām sāntim aĉhirenādhićcchati…”**

4:39

“He who has mastered his sense, is exclusively devoted to his practice and is full of faith, attains Knowledge; **Equanimity (Humane Values)**

Gently reminding that science alone does not make a good physician, Lord says one also needs to inculcate humane values of compassion and care. These, and other such values, are listed in the Bhagavad Gita. The suggestion contained in verse 6:9 reminds us to treat all patients alike, irrespective of their background. Time and again, doctors are faced by patients with different backgrounds and behaviors. The Lord reminds us that a doctor should continue to work for patient betterment in an unbiased manner.

“**suhrn-mitrāry-udāsina madhyastha-dvesya-bandhusu, sādhusv api cha pāpesu sama-buddhir visisyate”**

12:13-14

“He who is free from malice towards all beings, friendly and compassionate, rid of ‘I’ and mine balanced in joy and sorrow, forgiving by nature, ever-contented and mentally united with Me, --has a firm resolve, --is dear to Me.”

“**advestā sarva-bhūtānām maitrah karuna eva cha, nirmano nirahankārah sama-duùkha-sukhah ksami”**

“**santustah satatam yogi yatātmā dṛḍha-nācayah, mayy arpīta-mano-buddhir yo mad-bhaktah sa me priyah”**

13:7

“absence of pride, freedom from hypocrisy, non-violence, forbearance, straightness of body, speech and mind, devout service of the preceptor, internal and external purity, steadfastness of mind and control of body, mind and the sense.”

“**icchā dvesah sukham duùkham sanghätas cetanā dhrtih, etat kṣetram samāsena sa-viśārma uddhṛtam”**

18:5

“Acts of sacrifice, charity and penance---must be formed—are purifiers of wise men”

“**yajna-dāna-tapah–karma na tyāyam kāryam eva tat, yajno dāno tapas caiva pāvanāni manisinām”**

6:9
Finally, Lord Krishna says he who looks upon well-wishers and neutrals as well as mediators, friends and foes, relatives and inimical, the virtuous and the sinful with equanimity stands supreme.

**Emotional Equipoise**

The Gita advises us to aim for a state of emotional equipoise. Emotional equipoise is not a “dissociative” or emotionless state. Rather, it is a state which allows expression of empathy, without letting subjective or reactive responses cloud one’s clinical judgment. Though the term “emotional equipoise” is being used for the first time in the context of health-care delivery, it has been used earlier by poets.\[3\]

We propose the term “emotional equipoise” to describe a balanced and rational mental state, which allows the health-care professionals to perform their duties in an appropriate manner, irrespective of external stimuli. This may also help minimize compassion fatigue.

“vēta-rāga-bhaya-krodhā man-maya mām upāsritāḥ, bahavo ātman-saṃsāraḥ ca bāhūvam āgatāḥ” 4:10

“completely rid of attachment, fear and anger, ———”

“Constant equipoise of mind both in favorable and unfavorable circumstances”

“yadrācchā-lābha-santustō dvandvāteto vimatsarah, samah siddhāv asiddhāv cha kātvāpi na nibadhyate” 4:22

“The Kārmyogi, who is contented with whatever is got unsought, is free from jealousy, ———and in balanced in success and failure, is not bound by his action.”

**Moderation and control**

Apart from learning science and humanity, the health-care professional is expected to practice moderation and control in every field of life. This habit, which overlaps with emotional equipoise, can also be termed an equipoised lifestyle.

“nātya snatas 'tu yogo 'sti na chaikāntā manasātāḥ, na chātī-svapna-shilasyā jāgrato naiva chārjuna” 6:16

“———this yoga is neither for him who overeats, nor for him who observes a complete fast: it is neither for him who is given to too much sleep, nor even for him who is ceaselessly awake.”

“sadrāsām cestate svasyāḥ prakṛte jñānāvān api, prakṛteṁ yānti bhūtāṁ nirgréhāṁ kim karisyati” 3:33

“All living creatures follow their tendencies; even the wise man acts according to the tendencies of his nature. Of what use is any external restraint?”

**Anger management**

The concept of emotional equipoise includes anger management as well. The Bhagavad Gita reinforces the importance of anger management, suggests ways of anger management, and suggests ways to improve one’s skills in this regard. These teachings are especially important in today’s world which is full of situations stimulating irritability and frustration. The Gita suggests simple, yet effective, methods of meditation and relaxation as the way to overcome these emotions.

“kāma-krodha-vimuktānāḥ yatēnāḥ yata-chetasām, abhito brahma-nirvāṇāḥ vartate viditāmanāṁ” 5:23

“He alone who is able to withstand ———the urges of lust and anger, is a Yogi; and he alone is a happy man”

“sparśhān kṛtvā bahir bāhūyāṁ ca kāsadvarūh, prānāpānaṁ samāu kṛtvā nāśībhūtyānta-kārīnau”

“yatendriya-mano-buddhāḥ munir moksa-parāyanāḥ, vigatecchā-bhaya-krodho yaū sadā muktā eva saḥ” 5:27-28

“———Shutting out all thoughts of external enjoyments, with the gaze fixed on the space between the eyebrows, having regulated the outgoing and the ingoing breaths flowing within the nostrils, he who has brought his senses, mind and intellect under control—such a contemplative soul——is ever liberated.”

“sāmām kāya-sīro-grivām dhārāyān achalam sthirāḥ, sampreksya nāsikāgraḥ svam disās chānava-lokāyān” 6:13

“———Holding the trunk, head and neck straight and steady, remaining firm and fixing the gaze on the tip of his nose, without looking in other directions.”

Lord thus urges an ideal physician to perform his/her duties with full commitment keeping anger, irritation, and frustration away.

**Pro-work attitude**

The Bhagavad Gita repeatedly calls upon us to perform our duties as efficiently as possible. Working for the sake of work, rather than any external reward, should be our aim. There is no excuse for not working according to the needs of our profession. This is perhaps the strongest message of the Gita.

“niyataṁ kuru karma tvam karma jāyō hy akarmanah” 3:8

“———do perform your allotted duty; for action is superior to inaction”

“yajnārthāṁ kārma tvam karma jāyō hy akarmanah” 3:9

“———do efficiently perform your duty, ———”
“perform your duty, for the sake of sacrifice alone”
“equiv pravartitam chakram nānuvartayatihi yah, aghāyur
indriyārūmō mogham pārtha sa jivati”

3:16

“——he who ——does not perform his duties ——lives in vain”

“śhreyān swa-dharmo viguṇaḥ para-dharmāt sv-anuṣṭhitāt
svabhāva-niyataṁ karma kurvan nāpnoti kilbīṣham”

“One’s own duty ——is preferable to the duty of another well performed.”

Action
While the construct of action overlaps that of duty, it is not
exactly similar. Action reminds us to translate our theoretical
knowledge into practical work. It also covers the sphere of
physical activity and exercise. Action is a synonym for duty
and work. Lord Krishna enjoins us to act, i.e., to work, in life.
This reminds us not to shirk our professional work, and to keep
ourselves physically active.

“na hi kaschit ksanam api jātā tisthaty akarma-krt,
kāryate hy avasah karma sarvah prakrāti-jair ganaū”

3:5

“Surely, none can remain inactive even for a moment; ——”

“sharīra-vātrāpi ca te, na prasiddhyed akarmanah”

3:8

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

“sannyāsah karma-yogah cha nihsreyasa-kārāv ubhau, tayos
tu karma-sannyāsāti karma-yoga visisyaūt”

5:2

“——the Yoga of Action being easier of practice is superior
to the Yoga of Knowledge”

“sānkhya-yogau prthag bālāh pravadanti na panditāh,
ekam api āśhītaḥ samyag ubhayor vindate phalam”

5:4

“It is the ignorant, not the wise, who say that Sankhya yoga
and Karmayoga lead to divergent results.”

“kāyena manasā buddhyā kevalair indriyāir api, yogināh
karma kurvanti saigaț tyāktvāma-suddhaye”

5:11

“The Karamyogi perform action only with their senses, mind,
intellect and body; without the feeling of ‘mine’ in respect of
them———”

Patient-centered Care
The patient–physician relationship is a complex one. While
Arjuna looks up to Krishna for assistance, the Lord has no
qualms in accepting the humble post of Arjuna’s charioteer.
Similarly, the physicians work as a charioteer for their patients,
serving to steer them to health. This process can be achieved only
though continuous interaction, marked by reciprocal respect.

“——be you only an instrument”

“Thus has this wisdom, more profound than all profundities,
been imparted to you by me; deeply pondering over it, now
do as you like.”

“iti te jnānam ākhyātām guhyād guhyataram mayā,
vimāṣyaitad aśesena yathecchasi tathā kura”

18:63

Quite often, medical inaction is preferred to unwarranted action.
Avoidance of unnecessary investigations, diagnosis or labeling,
and treatment, described in modern parlance as quaternary
prevention, is alluded to in the Gita. It reminds the physician
to act in right direction and not in the wrong way. These lines
also strongly discourage practices such as cross pathy, claiming
false qualifications, and treating beyond ones limitations.

“karmano hy api boddhavyam boddhavyam ca
vikarmanah”

4:17

“For mysterious are the ways of action”

“karmany akarma yah pasyed akarmani ca karma yah,
sa buddhimān manuṣyeñu sa yuktāh kṛṣṇa-karma-kāt”

4:18

“He who sees inaction in action, and action in inaction,
is wise among men; he is a Yogi, who has performed all
actions.”

Preceptive Leadership
Health-care professionals are respected people in the
community. Other members of the society look up to them for
advice and guidance. Therefore, we should strive to put our
thoughts and theories into practice. It is expected, therefore,
that the diabetes care professional should follow a healthy diet
and lifestyle. This will help improve acceptance and adherence
to suggested interventions.

“yad yad ācharati sreṣṭhas tat tād evetaro janaḥ, sa yat
prāmāṇam kurute lokas tād anuvartate”

3:21

“For whatever a great man does, that very thing other men
also do; whatever standard he sets up, the generality of men
follow the same.”
“na buddhi-bhedam janayed ajnänäm karma-sanginäm, josayet sarva-karmānī
vidvān yuktah samācaran”
3:26
“A wise man—should get them to perform all their duties, duty performing his own duties.”

OUR WORK IS FOR A KING
(Motto of Dame Edith Brown, Founder Principal, Christian Medical College, Ludhiana, India).

Finally, we must remember that being part of the medical profession is a blessing. Whatever work we do, is not for ourselves or our patients alone; we must view every clinical consultation, every diagnostic or interventional procedure as an offering to a higher power. This will ensure that we have performed it to the best of our ability. This in turn will lead to all-round satisfaction and health, both for doctors and for the community we serve.

“dravya-yajīśa tapo-yajīśa yoga-yajīśa tathāpare, svādhīśa-jnāna-yajīśa ca yatayah sansita-vratāh”
4:28

Lord encourages you to strive for knowledge both of your profession as well as sacred texts which will help you perform your work better

“...some striving souls, observing austere vows, perform sacrifice in the shape of wisdom though the study of sacred texts.”

“sa eviṣya mayā te ‘dyā yogah proktah purātanah, bhakto ‘си me sakhā cetā rahasyam hy etad uttamam”
4:3

“...sacrifice through Knowledge is superior...”

“anuśritah karma-phalam, kāryāḥ karma karotī yah, sa sannyāsi cha yogi cha na niragnir na cākriyah”
6:1

“------He who does his duty without expecting the fruits of action is a Sanyasi and Yogi both------”

“yuktah karma-phalā tyaktvā sāntim āpnoti naıṣṭhiḥikām”
5:12

“Offering the fruit of actions to God, --------”

SUMMARY
The teachings of the Gita eassure us that a true professional, by dedicating all his work to the almighty, attains an eternal, imperishable state. In his devotional service (here medical profession), he should rely entirely on, and be fully conscious of the creator. Anyone who works with these thoughts in mind is truly able to serve humanity with utmost dedication. Introspecting these words brings a sense of belief in, and relief to, our increasingly beleaguered/challenged profession.

“sarva-karmānī api sadā kurvāno mad-tyāgāsrayah, mat-prasādad avāpnoti sāsvatam padam avyayam”

“chetasā sarva-karmānī mayi sanyasya mat-parah, buddhi-yogam upāsritaḥ maça-citāḥ satataḥ bhava”
18:56-57

“The Karmayogi-----attains by my graces the eternal, imperishable state, ----mentally dedicating all –actions to Me--

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