

GUEST EDITORIAL

Building resilience in the COVID-19 era: Three paths in the *Bhagavad Gita*

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has emerged as a major stressor of a global scale, affecting all aspects of our lives, and is likely to contribute to a surge of mental ill health. Ancient Hindu scriptures, notably the *Bhagavad Gita*, have a wealth of insights that can help approaches to build psychological resilience for individuals at risk, those affected, as well as for caregivers. The *path of knowledge* (Jnana yoga) promotes accurate awareness of nature of the self, and can help reframe our thinking from an “I” to a “we mode,” much needed for collectively mitigating the spread of the coronavirus. The path of action (Karma yoga) teaches the art of selfless action, providing caregivers and frontline health-care providers a framework to continue efforts in the face of uncertain consequences. Finally, the path of meditation (Raja yoga) offers a multipronged approach to healthy lifestyle and mindful meditation, which may improve resilience to the illness and its severe consequences. While more work is needed to empirically examine the potential value of each of these approaches in modern psychotherapy, the principles herein may already help individuals facing and providing care for the COVID-19 pandemic.

Key words: Bhagavad Gita, Covid-19, Yoga

The COVID-19 crisis has changed our world in just a matter of months, thrusting us into danger, uncertainty, fear, and of course social isolation. At the time of this writing, over 11 million individuals have been affected worldwide (India is fourth among all countries, 674,515) and over half a million people have died. The COVID-19 pandemic has been an unprecedented global stressor, not only because of the disease burden and mortality but also because of economic upheaval; the very fabric of the society is disrupted, affecting housing, personal relationships, travel, and all aspects of lifestyle. The overwhelmed health-care system is among

the most major stressors, leading to a heightened sense of vulnerability. No definitive treatments or vaccine is on the horizon yet. Psychiatry has to brace up to an expected mental health crisis resulting from this global stressor, not only with regard to treating neuropsychiatric consequences but also with regard to developing preventive approaches and building resilience.

Thankfully, there is a wealth of wisdom to help us in our ancient scriptures such as the *Bhagavad Gita*^[1] for building psychological resilience. The *Bhagavad Gita* is a dialog between the Pandava prince Arjuna and his charioteer Krishna in the epic *Mahabharata*, the great tale of the Bharata Dynasty, authored by Sage Vyasa (c. 4–5 B.C.E.). The dialog occurs in the 6th chapter of the epic and has over 700 verses. In this epic story, Arjuna, the righteous

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Pandava hero was faced with the dilemma of waging a war against his cousins, the Kauravas, for territory. Arjuna is confused and has no will to initiate the war. In this context, Krishna, his charioteer and spiritual mentor, counsels him. The key principles of this spiritual discourse in the Gita are embodied in the broad concept of yoga, which literally means “Yog” or “to unite.” Applying three tenets of yoga can greatly help developing resilience at individual, group, and societal levels. A fourth path, Bhakti yoga, is a spiritual approach in the Gita which emphasizes loving devotion toward a higher power or principle, which may or may not involve a personal god. In this editorial, I focus on three paths that have considerable relevance to modern approaches to reliance-focused psychotherapy that may be especially relevant in the COVID-19 era.

PATH OF KNOWLEDGE

The first concept in the Gita is the path of knowledge (*Jnana Yoga*, chapter 2). The fundamental goal of Jnana yoga is to liberate oneself from the limited view of the individual ego, and to develop the awareness of one’s self as part of a larger, universal self. Hindu philosophers were among the earliest to ask the question of “who am I” and concluded that the self is not what it seems. The self as we all know is a collection of our physical, mental, and social attributes that we create for ourselves with input from our perceptions, and input by our families and society. Such a world view leads to a tendency to crave for the “I” and for what is mine, and not consider the “We.” As Krishna in the *Bhagavad Gita* points out, the person who sees oneself in others, and others in oneself, really “sees.” Such awareness, which guides action in service of self as well as others, is critically important in our goals of collectively preventing the spread of the coronavirus. A glaring example is the use of face masks, known to effectively slow the viral infection. Using the mask is as important to protecting oneself from the virus as well as protecting others from oneself. Nations such as the USA (and their leaders), who have given mixed messages to the public about the need to wear masks, have been showing a strikingly high number of cases as well as mortality. Unfortunately, such reluctance to wear masks (and thus model protective hygiene for the population), as in the case of the US leader, has stemmed from ego or vanity-related issues (i.e., how he would appear to other leaders!). This factor may at least partly underlie the worse COVID-19 outcome in the USA; the simple lesson here is that it is important to first flatten the ego if one wants to flatten the pandemic curve!

PATH OF ACTION

The second key concept is the path of action (Karma yoga, chapter 3). Karma yoga is all about taking action without thinking, “what’s in it for me.” As such, it seeks to mainly let go of one’s ego. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Arjuna is ambivalent

about fighting because of the conflict regarding the outcome brought on by waging the war, i.e., having to kill some of his own kith and kin. Krishna reminds him that he should not hesitate, because it is his nature and duty (or Dharma), as a warrior, to protect the larger good, though it will have some downside consequences. The frontline health-care worker caring for severely ill patients with COVID-19 is likely to have a similar emotional reaction as Arjuna, facing a lack of adequate treatments, high likelihood of mortality and of unpredictable negative outcomes, and risk to him/herself. Compounding this, especially when resources such as ventilators are limited, the doctor may have to make tough decisions of whose life to save and whose not. Adding to this are personal emotions when facing with the death of patients, having to deliver bad news, and dealing with grieving relatives.^[2] All these are likely to result in emotional anguish and guilt, leading to burnout and a war “neurosis.”

So, what should the frontline health-care provider should do? Krishna’s counsel would be that the doctor should continue to perform his/her own dharma, but do so without desire or attachment, thereby performing action in the spirit of Karma yoga. Such action would be with detachment, without a desire for personal gain and being unperturbed by success or failure. Such “Nishkaama Karma” (or selfless action) may help doctors working today in the COVID outbreak to carry forward their work with compassion, and accept the results of their actions with equanimity and without guilt. Krishna points out that training one’s mind to engage in selfless action is not easy but requires practice (Abhyasa). Krishna is also emphatic about the need to protect oneself, in order to be able to effectively carry out one’s duties.

PATH OF MEDITATION

The third core concept in the Gita is the path of meditation and self-reflection (Raja yoga, or Dhyana yoga, chapter 6). It is considered the royal path (Raja means royal) for attaining self-realization, and often considered the 8-fold path of yoga (Ashtanga yoga) designed to discipline lifestyle, the body and mind toward realizing mindfulness and self-reflection. These techniques, which originated in India over two millennia ago, have evolved over recent decades and anticipate several approaches to contemplative psychotherapy, including dialectical behavior therapy, acceptance and commitment therapy, and mindfulness-based stress reduction.^[3] These approaches are of particular relevance for stress reduction and resilience building in individuals faced by COVID-19-related emotional difficulties as well as health-care providers.^[4]

The majority of people affected by the COVID-19 virus recover, but about 20% have severe disease, and the mortality is around 5%. Older individuals, those with obesity and comorbid medical illnesses such as diabetes

and lung disease, are particularly prone to developing severe disease. It is possible that a state of chronic low-grade inflammation which underlies each of these conditions may increase the risk of disproportionate host immune reactions (with excessive release of cytokines), characterizing severe disease in those with COVID-19.^[4] With this in mind, it is important to note that exercise, some forms of meditation, anti-inflammatory and antioxidant diet (such as turmeric and melatonin), and yoga have known benefits in reducing inflammation.^[5-9] Sleep loss also elevates inflammatory cytokines; healthy sleep may reduce inflammation.^[10] Clearly, a healthy lifestyle, including healthy sleep, exercise, and diet, may be protective against developing COVID-19-related severe complications. These principles of healthy living are beautifully summarized in the *Bhagavad Gita*.

Yuktahara-viharasya yukta-cestasya karmasu

Yukta-svapnavabodhasya yogo bhavati duhkha-ha

He who is temperate in his habits of eating, sleeping, working and recreation can mitigate all sorrows by practicing the yoga system.

–*Bhagavad Gita*, Chapter 6, verse 17.

The relevance of the *Bhagavad Gita* for modern psychotherapy has been widely reviewed.^[11,12] However, relatively little empirical literature exists on the effectiveness of versus spiritually integrated psychotherapy incorporating Hindu psychotherapeutic insights. Clearly, more work is needed, and COVID-19 may provide an opportunity for conducting further empirical research.^[13] In the meantime, using the principles outlined here may already be of benefit in helping those in need, and may be rapidly enabled in the emerging era of telehealth and digital health.^[14]

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