

Impressum

Ashutosh Vardhana: The Patient's Dilemma: A modern Gita

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TECHNICAL NOTE

Note: This is fiction! Any models used have been profoundly changed and amalgamated!

EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

On a long coach journey from Leicester to London, the narrator, Ashok, tells the story of his relationship with his Guru, the Patient. The title of the story alludes to Shaw's play "The Doctor's Dilemma". The decisions to be made "Go ahead with the heart surgery, or not", and, "will the outcome be improved health and longer life or immediate death", resemble those of Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita "To fight or not to fight" and "Will his fight be successful, or will he be defeated". The attitudes of the Guru's westernised children clash with the traditional values which Ashok, the disciple, seeks to practise under the guidance of his Guru. The existence of a narrator, Ashok, corresponds to the role of Samjaya in the Mahabharata and keeps the plot at an objective distance from the author.

Ashutosh Vardhana: The Patient's Dilemma: A modern Gita

A spiritual novella

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^1. What to Expect

An old Hindu priest, astrologer, Sanskrit scholar and guru living in Leicester, England, suffers from a congenital heart defect and is slowly dying. He is offered an operation which will greatly improve his health and extend his life span. He has a devoted disciple, Ashok, who cares for him, and five resentful adult children who have grown up in England, do not understand the Hindu tradition, and for mysterious reasons bear a grudge against their father and neglect him. After many weeks of pondering the pros and cons, the Guru decides to undergo the operation. His children do not show much interest in his medical condition and do not aid him in his difficult decision. Two days before the operation, Ashok takes him to the hospital and stays at his bedside day and night. Final tests are made to determine if he is still fit for the operation, and they show that he is stronger than expected. When the Guru speaks to the surgeon, he confirms that he is ready to undergo the operation. Three hours later, on the evening before the operation is due, his family descends on him. They suddenly see a chance of gaining status by putting on the act of concerned relatives and challenging the professionals. Having taken no interest in their father's health for many years, they start questioning the details of the operation and making their father insecure while refusing to give any clear-cut advice. They merely reiterate: "You must decide", which can only mean: "Do not have the operation for which you have come here."

This is twelve hours before the operation is due to start. A dispute arises between Ashok, who favours the operation, and the family. Ashok is accused of bullying the Guru into having the operation. The Guru, as yet undecided, hears of the dispute and the attack on the one person who truly cares for him, unlike his biological children. During the night preceding the operation he decides against it and in favour of a slow decline. He fears that, in the event of the operation failing, his beloved disciple will, for the rest of his life, be accused by his family and his own conscience of having caused the Guru's death. He also wants to give his uncaring children, who he thinks have suddenly become aware of their duties as children, a chance to make up for their past neglect by looking after him properly while "death is eating him in small bites", rather than killing him in one fell swoop as the operation might have done. When he arrives home again, the facade of love displayed at the hospital is forgotten. The children declare that their father does not love them, therefore he cannot expect more than minimal care from them. The Guru's gamble on his children has failed. Ashok accuses himself for not having spoken up more forcefully in favour of the operation, for not having accepted the risk of being blamed for his Guru's death. While the Guru is asleep, Ashok sneaks out to discuss his plight with one of the Guru's friends. The Guru phones him and reminds him of the virtue of doing one's duty regardless of outcome, to accept destiny, to accept that life is chaos, that chaos is divine, and that there are many routes through life, none of which is the only or perfect one. Ashok accepts the

teaching. A week later the Guru is invited by the Surgeon to explain his seemingly irrational decision against the operation. Ashok has learnt from his previous timidity, decides to take a risk and speak up strongly. He quotes the same scriptures used previously by the Guru. But they show that we must not accept destiny without battle. The Gita contains two doctrines:

- (1) To fight the battle,
- (2) To accept destiny.

The doctrine of destiny must not lead us into passivity. Even making no decision is to make a decision and results in responsibility. We cannot escape from responsibility. We have to make positive decisions. We have to fight the battle with the best weapons and with all our might. But we cannot be sure of the outcome of the battle. We might win, or we might be defeated. Only now the doctrine of destiny is applicable. It helps us accept the outcome of the battle (but not to avoid battle), especially if it is defeat. Even that defeat is only apparent. In fact both defeat and victory is only one step forward on our road from birth to death. All roads lead to Benares, all steps take us to death. Every step is a step forward, every step means progress.

Ashok who is bound to serve his Guru does him the greatest service yet by reminding him in his hour of weakness of his own teaching. Ashok dares to speak with a prophetic voice. Guru and disciple agree to accept the risk together, to accept a renewed chance for the operation, and to live or die with the consequences in the knowledge that they have done their duty.

In passing, Ashok tells how he learnt love and service from his sister disciple, how they cleaned the Guru's kitchen which had deteriorated into a pig-sty, how they admired the apparent chaos in a temple, why chaos is divine and the Western preoccupation with order may be deadly.

^2. Departure

"Look at this photograph", my old friend Ashok said to me after we both had taken our seat on the coach from Leicester to London.

"This is a happy, or if not happy then at least an ideal, Hindu family. My Guruji in the car about to be taken to hospital for heart surgery. Me at the steering wheel. The sun is shining. His family out in the street to wave him good bye and giving him encouraging and loving smiles. His youngest son seems to be close to tears though. He has been cooking his father's food for the last year or two and looks after his house a little.

Guruji's wife died quite a few years ago. He has two sons and three daughters. All are assembled here in their father's honour, except Prakash, the eldest son, who lectures on Indian Philosophy in Oxford. Quite an ascent from a poor terrace house in Leicester

to a post in Oxford! He could only come on the following day. It's a brainy family this. Here is his son-in-law, there his daughter-in-law and there one of his grandchildren. Everybody out in the Leicester sunshine seeing us off.

I am happy to have this photograph. It will remind all of us of how much happiness there can be in a united family. Not happiness over the risk and the pain that he was about to face, but happiness over the improvement in his health for which we were all hoping.

I am happy to have this photograph. If you do not believe in the power of maya, this photograph shows her at work.

This was a Monday in May, counting as Guruji's first day in hospital.

Yes, he is only ten years older than me. We are both no longer young. But over the years, he has become also a friend and a father to me, and I a son, without some of the problems which occur between parents and children when the children are attached to their parents by destiny rather than by choice, as I was.

^3. History

What is wrong with Guruji? Why did he need an operation? Oh, that's a long story. He has a congenital heart defect and as a result of the knock-on effect, his health is now rapidly deteriorating. His condition was correctly diagnosed only after many wasted years of wrong suspicions, and it took some further years of exploration before an eminent cardiologist advised him that an operation could greatly improve his quality of life, even though it could not cure him entirely. An operation was offered, he accepted in principle and was put on the waiting list. That was in autumn last year. He expected to have several months to make up his mind, prepare his house, organise aftercare, but within a few weeks (sometime in November) he was given an appointment for the operation. He had only five days' notice. He was shocked. He did what no National Health Patient on a waiting list has ever done before, he asked for the operation to be postponed. The doctors were surprised, and now he had to wait for a long time.

Meanwhile, however, he could ponder the issue properly, take advice from friends and family, and make up his mind about the operation and its risks in peace.

In January 1997 Guruji told me that he had at last decided in favour of the operation and informed the hospital. We were now waiting for a fresh appointment. I saw his condition deteriorate and was waiting with increasing anxiety. In his weak state, each cold, each infection, might lead to his death. And there was his almost continuous pain and suffering. In the end I asked his

friend, Dr Rajgor, to remind the hospital of the urgency of the case and chase them to give Guruji an appointment soon.

At last he got it. He was told to come to the hospital on Monday, 5 May. The operation would take place on Wednesday, provided his condition had not deteriorated too much. The cardiologist (Prof. Henderson) and the surgeon (Mr Jones) wanted these two days to get an up-to-date picture of his health. Everybody's intention was to proceed with the operation unless there were medical circumstances making it undesirable.

As I live in London now, I had to travel to Leicester to be with Guruji. I came to his house on Saturday, 3 May, in order to keep him company during his last two days at home and help him prepare. It was also agreed that I would be by his bed-side, hospital regulations permitting, so-to-speak "round the clock". He would receive love and attention and encouragement (more than a nurse can offer) during the difficult weeks he would have to spend in hospital. I would sleep in my caravan parked just outside the hospital, so that I could be with him early in the morning, leave him late at night, and run any errands for him that he might require. He had introduced me to the hospital staff as his son so that they would give me access to him under circumstances when it might be refused to an ordinary visitor.

^4. Parents and children

His five biological children should be mentioned here, three daughters, two sons. Their relationship with their father was difficult. I do not want to try a thorough assessment of this relationship here. That would require a novel. Suffice it to say, therefore, that the unseen fault presumably lay on both sides. It always does, even if one can only see one side, as I see Guruji's. Which parent does not sometimes think that he had made mistakes in the way he conducted his life and in his approach to his children!

But it is not my task to criticise or even assess my Guru. I have to learn from him and serve him as best I can.

Children also always make mistakes in the way they treat their parents. The older they get the more they are responsible for their actions. But they are not utterly free to love or not to love. Their experiences with their parents have established emotions, of love, or of resentment, of fear or unease, which make it impossible for them behave towards their parents as these might wish.

My Guruji loved his children dearly and could easily have listed many things he had done for them, the sacrifices he had made for them, and how he truly had their happiness at heart. All parents could do that. But one does not list such things. The moment you try to prove your love by listing tokens and giving evidence of love, love itself disappears like a bubble. It cannot be defined

and cannot be proved. Perhaps the reason is that all tokens of love can be simulated - or argued away. Perhaps they become true tokens of love only when they are accepted. If that is so, then love is always reciprocal. Unilateral love is not love. Therefore I must simply say, without giving examples: Guruji loved his children. I know.

A person who loves wants some response. He wants to be loved. He is not asking for a trade. But he needs love, and he wants it especially from those people whom he, by nature and tradition, is bound to love, his children, and from whom, by nature and tradition, he expects love.

Unfortunately, the children cannot always give it.

In our culture, it is the duty of the children to be absolutely dedicated to their parents, just as Ashok must be absolutely dedicated to his Guru, and in return, both children and disciples get the absolute dedication of their father and their Guru, both of whom assume the role of God, who cares for all of us.

A father cannot disown his children nor a guru his disciple, however ungrateful they may be, however much they may fail in performing their traditional duties, which are virtually the same for all.

Children (or disciples) have to practise all the general virtues (truthfulness, unselfishness, respect, loving kindness) in relation to their parents (guru), which they have to in relation to God, and more to parents and guru than to any other person.

Usually parents (or genuine gurus) do not fail in their duty to love their children and take care of them. Nature induces them to do so. But for children it is not always so easy, because children also have the overpowering urge to establish their own identity and to strive for independence. They are likely to be relatively, not absolutely, dedicated to their parents, especially if they have grown up in this country and therefore have many aspirations which their parents do not share.

Parents have to train their children, give them orders, deny them requests, and the wishes of parents and children can therefore conflict, especially if the children, as so often, want to move in an unexpected direction; if they want their liberty, if they want to do things their parents do not want them to do. There must therefore be conflicts between parents and children, and the question is how they are resolved. Who compromises? Who gives in?

Western culture, these days, has much more to say on children's rights and individual liberty than on their duties towards their parents. The ancient Honour-Father-and-Mother has worn quite thin, and European parents do not expect much from their children. They rely on the National Insurance, the National Health Service and Old People's Homes, and see nothing wrong with it. Since they expect nothing, few conflicts can arise over

whether these expectations of love and care are fulfilled. And since there are no conflicts of that type, the children have less reason to kill in themselves that love which the parent could otherwise use as a lever to demand from the child a degree of service and dedication which the child does not want to give. To demand love is therefore the surest way of not getting it and of utterly destroying it. Did this happen in Guruji's family?

The force with which our tradition formulates the duties of ideal children can raise the expectations of parents greatly, especially if the parents are great lovers of the ancient tradition, as a Pandit is likely to be. They can be raised so high that the parents demand as of right what the children should give them out of a sense of love or duty. The children might refuse it, at least in part, especially if they have grown up in a Western environment, which knows nothing of such unconditional and total love and dedication.

It is not easy for a child to love if the parent demands love, to be grateful if the parent demands gratitude.

The father is dissatisfied with his child who wants to love him because the child does not follow the father in every respect. The child senses the dissatisfaction and feels that his tokens of love have been rejected by the father.

The child thinks that his father is never content, never satisfied, always condemns him. Relations between father and child become increasingly strained, and whatever love there is on the part of the child becomes extinguished. It may be replaced by indifference, or by hatred. The child feels, wrongly perhaps, but he does, that the parent does not love him, does not want him to succeed. The child does not see how the father himself also wants to be loved. The child sees only one way out of the conflict, to separate himself completely from his father and forget that the relationship ever existed. The father does not understand what is happening.

Has he not always loved his child? Is he not now suffering for the love of his child? Has he not paid for his child's studies? Has he not arranged an expensive wedding for his daughter, exactly as she has always wanted. Why are they accusing him now? And what of?

Has he not sent money to help his son, the son who refers to him as "that man" and would not talk to him or accept anything from him. Instead he turned to his sister who herself had no money. She came to the father, and through this secret channel that father supported the son, while the son abused him for being a fraud, a charlatan, a mere pollinator.

But how can one enumerate the tokens of love! Love simply is there and has to be felt regardless of tokens. And in sad cases like this one, the children simply cannot perceive it. Let the

father do what he likes, all this is seen as attempts to buy love. And that cannot be done.

Guruji loved his son. How often did he not speak to me about his worries. He saw him involved in acrimonious disputes with his brothers and sisters and feared that he might have no-one to talk to, having manoeuvred himself into an extreme state of isolation.

He worried: What will happen to my children after my death. My one daughter suffers from depression, two are unmarried and are desperately lonely. Will my sons be taken for a ride by women who are only out to exploit them, as happened during my life time?

Guruji was offered a new house where he could live in comfort. But he said he could not leave his children, adults though they were: "One of them suffers from depression. As long as they live in my house, I must be there for them. I cannot abandon them. This is my duty as a father." He followed the Hindu tradition of unconditional responsibility. He did his duty and could only suffer in silence if his children did not do theirs. He was not entitled to pursue his rights.

Is he not always thinking of his child and of his well-being? Why should this child, so much beloved, be so cruel and tell his father to his face so many hurting things which he would not even say to a stranger? Why should he try to demolish utterly the father's self-confidence, the father's pride in his achievements, especially as a father? Is he not like a woman teasing a man about his potency, and thereby causing and perpetuating his impotence? What has been said once is difficult to forget. And fear and misgivings become deeply ingrained.

The father does not understand in his own children what he would readily understand in others'. He has been hurt too much. The children, even as young adults, are too young, too deeply hurt. They are not yet able to forget since the father is still alive and the pain is renewed every day, the demand for submission, perhaps silent, is repeated every day, and submit they will not. The demand for love feels like a demand for submission. And the father waits in vain for what his son cannot possibly give, least of all when it is demanded or so eagerly hoped for. "It is your duty to love me. I am your father".

"What is that to me! You are the pollinator, needed for my conception, that is all. Did you beget me out of love for me, who did not even exist at the time? Why should I be grateful for an act you committed because it gave you pleasure? You have had your pleasure. Now you are paying the price."

Nor can the father submit: does not the tradition say that he should be honoured and obeyed!

When he is dead, when the children have escaped his expectations, his demands, when the pain and disappointment have worn off, then perhaps they will be able to forgive and to understand. By then

they will have seen similar mechanisms operating in other families. They will have learnt to compromise, even in the face of somebody else who could not compromise. They will have mellowed by their own suffering, not the suffering of their childhood, but that melancholic suffering that permeates all life. Life, in which nothing is perfect, in which everything goes wrong, and which we must accept, like our parents, with an understanding smile. But that attitude of acceptance is not possible for one who is still young and sees life in terms of future successes rather than in terms of much inevitable failure and disappointment.

But when the children at last have learnt the limitations of their father, have seen that he was as unfree as they were, that none of us are able to make really free decisions, when they are then able to forgive and have a kind word for him, for him as a fellow sufferer, as we are all sufferers in this life without even knowing why, then it is too late for the words of love and understanding which parents and children, as fellow-sufferers rather than as victims and oppressors, might say to one another, and comfort each other for the fact that both were born on this earth, and both were born into the same family, there to play out their roles.

This is how I, Ashok, the disciple,
 who, 45 years ago, also was at odds with my father,
 I, who also hated the word "gratitude"
 because it meant a demand which I thought was
 unreasonable and which I was unwilling to give into,
this is how I, Ashok, the disciple,
try to reconstruct what may have been going on over twenty years or so between my Guru and his children. I cannot fully understand it because I did not participate, because I came on the scene only after these attitudes had already been firmly set on both sides. And yet I can understand it because I am not their father, they are not my children. It is always easier to admit the possibility of fault on both sides of a dispute if you are not a party to it. But I dare not raise the issue with my Guruji because I fear that he will become agitated and will not understand the destructive truth: it is not my task to teach him, and my affection does not allow me to embarrass him. It is my task to learn from him and support him. It is my task to behave as his children should have, and would have, behaved if things had not gone wrong somewhere in the distant past.

How can I talk about such things to my Guruji, even though I can see that both sides do have a point! I would like to see him happy by helping to restore harmony between him and his children. But what I analyse here in talking to you, I cannot say to him without stirring up a hornets' nest. Such feelings between parents and children, cemented by so much misunderstanding, are beyond rational discussion and control. I can do nothing, except be a new son to him, and serve him with all the attention and affection which he would have wanted from his natural children.

^5. Judgement

"Our community" is always that part of the community which is conservative and knows how ideal and traditional families should work. This community is quick to judge anyone who steps out of line. In this community many parents have succeeded in bringing up their children without destroying the bond which enables children to be independent and yet love their parents. Did they demand less of their children? Were they better able to compromise? Not to expect the impossible?

If you set your ideals too high, if you expect too much from your wife and your children, you are more likely to fail than if you are vulgar and ignorant.

But imagine a father with great love for our traditions, but with a wife who has a more modern outlook and with children brought up in her likeness. The father's ideals will be destroyed, he will try to enforce his lifestyle. He will be frustrated. How will he behave to his wife and children in his frustration? Will he turn violent? So many of our sages are irascible, always ready to put a curse on anyone who crosses them, even inadvertently. They do not have the calm of the Gita, they do not accept with an equal mind whatever comes by chance. If our famous sages are so weak, how much more so an ordinary young Pandit, who sees that he cannot create the ideal family because, in order to do so, he needs the co-operation of a wife and of children who are not under his control.

If you want to achieve perfection, you have to do it alone. That is the reason why our sages recommend brahmacharya. You can be a sage when you have a family, but it is extraordinarily difficult.

Those who are breaking away from the tradition and adopt Western ways to a greater or lesser extent, no longer make a point of saying that they belong to "the community". You are part of the community if you adhere to traditional values. Disciples do this by choice. Children cannot choose their father and his values. They do not always conform. Disciples do and can. The community judges my Guru's children (all of whom are now adults and two of whom are married) very harshly. For them they are simply "bad children" who are neglecting their ailing father, a modern King Liri, treat him harshly, hurt him with their words, do not do any of the things which a well-brought up, loving Hindu child would be expected to do, which is much more than is expected of an English child. Especially they are expected to give without being asked. For English children it is enough if they respond when being asked.

Gurujii's children feel that the Community condemns them and are therefore doubly hurt, by the perceived rejection they receive from their father and by the criticism they receive from the community, which, they say, does not know their father as he is or was with his family.

I know that my Guru can be uncompromising. I want to make him happy. Therefore I praise the achievements of his children wherever I can. His life, after all, should be continued in them. He was very proud when his eldest son got his post in Oxford. I studiously point out any service which they do for him, when they washed his clothes or made his bed, even if only occasionally (and is not that the trouble!), that nicely cooked meal he cooked, that glass of water she brought, that toast which she produced today, the fact that they give him my telephone messages. I treat the smallest thing as a good sign and as praiseworthy. Is not a small gesture better than nothing? When I praise them I do not ask about their manner or their motivation. He has also seen these gestures. But he has also observed that if she made him toast today, she did not do it on the last five days, and today not for him but only because she had other visitors. He notices whether the gestures are made caringly or mechanically.

I prefer to fudge these issues. For me fudging is a virtue. This is my eternally optimistic character. I try to make him see somebody else's action in a better light than it deserves. I think such a fudge is beneficial for everybody concerned. But he is oh so clear-sighted. He will not let me get away with it. He will spot the fudge and instantly uncover the unpleasant truth. He will apply the standards of the Gita about good gifts, indifferent gifts and bad gifts. I will then give in. What is the point in arguing? Probably he is right. I only wanted to give him an anaesthetic, an escape, an illusion. I believe in the beneficial power of some well-meant deception or self-deception. He is concerned only with absolute truth. And so are his children. They fling THEIR absolute truth straight in his face, and that hurts.

What does the Gita say about gifts, you ask.

^6. The ideal gift

The Gita gives many examples of how actions are to be evaluated. They are classified as sattvic (good), rajasic (indifferent), and tamasic (bad). This classification helps us assess and improve our own behaviour.

The Gita talks about gifts, but the same concepts apply to any behaviour.

A good gift is one which is given without expecting anything in return, out of a feeling of duty, for instance filial duty, given in the right place and at the right time and to a deserving person. (Gita 17:20)

This is what Guruji expects from his children. What he receives falls well short of it. If he has to beg for every drop of water and every morsel of food, for every helping hand, then what is

given is not a generous gift, not a good gift. Even the word "duty" here, is only the Indian equivalent for what the West calls "love". The rota arrangement falls short of what the Gita means by "duty". That is why Guruji declines to ring the "room service bell". He does not want room service. He regards it as demeaning. He wants care. Is that uncompromising?

Gita 17:21 says: Gifts made in the hope of a reward or of future gain, or made when it hurts to give, are indifferent.

These are the gifts made by selfish people. Much of what Guruji receives may be of that kind. His children minimise their effort and organise it well because they manage to do it only with difficulty. They are reluctant rather than generous: "it hurts them to give".

Such food can feed Guruji's body (for which he cares but little) but it cannot make him happy. He wants his children to do the proper thing. Is he expecting too much?

Finally the Gita lists: gifts which are made at the wrong time or place, to an unworthy person, without proper ceremony or with contempt. Such gifts are bad; they have no value whatsoever. (Gita 17:22)

You see, Guruji is concerned with the spiritual value of what his children do. But they, having adopted the culture of the West, do they even understand what it is all about?

Guruji sees too clearly. Is that good? But perhaps even I would see so clearly, could not be bribed and deceived if I were in his position.

I have to speak harshly about Guruji's children. And it is therefore only fair to say that they have their reasons, their explanations, their excuses.

Now you know a little about the family in this happy photograph. I had stayed with Guruji for the weekend. Now it was Monday. All his family had by now assembled; two still lived in his house, one in the neighbourhood, two had come from Oxford and Nottingham. His son-in-law and daughter-in-law were also there. He sent me away to do some last-minute shopping. While I was away, he called his children one by one and spoke to each of them in private. Then he assembled them all and spoke to them jointly. I do not know what he said to them. But he knew that he might not survive the operation, and whatever he said therefore were his final words and his final blessing for them. As he got into my car, there was a rare show of family feeling. While in the past his children would not even acknowledge him when passing him in the street, they had now all come out of the house and smiled and gave him a splendid send-off. Perhaps he would have wished such a family spirit all his life. It very much looked like a united, friendly family.

^7. Hospital

We arrived in hospital. The cardiologist, the surgeon and various doctors and nurses attended to him, took specimens, carried out tests and reiterated the risks.

They were very cautious to start with: a 20% risk (as opposed to 10% if he had accepted the operation last November) of not leaving the hospital alive. An expected benefit of a vastly improved quality of life, less breathlessness, less danger of infection, if the operation was successful. Here too a 20% risk, that he might survive the operation but that the expected benefits might **not** occur. He confirmed that he was willing to accept the risk and just wanted the potential benefits spelt out again.

The doctors were protecting themselves by putting the risks so high. Guruji had been warned. As the day progressed, the cardiologist and surgeon were becoming increasingly optimistic. Guruji's heart turned out to be much stronger than expected. The risk was less than they originally believed. It might now be as low as 15 or 12.5%. Guruji was happy, and so was I because I had felt all along that the risk was worth taking and I had seen him suffering during the years preceding the operation.

So came Tuesday, the second day, the day before the operation. I emerged from my caravan before 6 and managed to wash myself in a hospital toilet. The cardiologist was to see Guruji at 7.45h to give him a summary of the results of the tests of the preceding day. They were positive and I was happy. The doctors pointed out that Guruji had, of course, the option of withdrawing from the operation until it was carried out, and he started thinking. I was at his bedside all day long just looking at him, but never dared to ask a question because I knew that I must not influence his decision in any way. Even a question such as "Have you made up your mind?" might indicate to him that I wanted him to maintain the decision in favour of the operation, or otherwise. I did not want to be responsible. Therefore for hours I looked at him, but I said nothing. The decision was to be his and his alone.

In the early afternoon his eldest son, Prakash, arrived from Oxford.

During the day various doctors and nurses came and asked: "Are you still thinking?" Yes, he was still thinking. But the decisive moment came when Mr Jones, the surgeon, himself arrived at 3 p.m. and summarised the situation, explaining the technical details of the operation again.

They would close two holes in his heart, repair a defective valve, all of which shunts the blood in the wrong direction, detach a number of veins in front of the heart where they are connected to the wrong heart chamber and connect them to the

correct side. They would not detach and reconnect the veins at the back of his heart because this would make the operation much longer, put more strain on him and therefore increase the risk.

Finally the surgeon asked the decisive question: "Do you want to go ahead with the operation as we have discussed it?"

Guruji said "Yes".

The surgeon said: "All right. In that case you will be my second case tomorrow. We will operate on you at about 11 or 12."

So there we were. The decision had been confirmed. I pressed Guruji's hand in encouragement.

^8. Family in action

All Guruji's children had announced that they would visit him in hospital on that Tuesday, well knowing that this might be the last time at which they could see him alive. But so far nobody had shown up yet. Guruji's youngest daughter, Savitri, had taken Tuesday off work in order to visit her father in hospital. But why had neither she nor anybody else arrived yet? Did they not want to spend the whole day with him if this was such a special occasion? We wondered. Had the excitement about Pitaji's great step worn off so quickly. Between 5 and 6 gradually they all arrived, including some other old and loyal friends. I withdrew from Guruji's bedside because I did not want to intrude between him and his children. I wanted to give them every chance to be private and intimate, even though in the past many of them had rather neglected him. But this was perhaps their last chance. I should not stand in the way.

While family and other visitors were standing and sitting around his bed, the surgeon's registrar arrived and asked, quite needlessly (since Mr Jones, the surgeon, had already been told), if Guruji had decided in favour of the operation.

The registrar should not have asked that superfluous question and thereby opened up the whole problem again, a decision which Guruji had found so hard to make. And he should not have asked it in front of children and visitors.

But they were all there and they all suddenly felt called upon to participate in the decision making process, in discussing a decision which had been made long ago, about which they had known, and a decision which they kept declaring was Guruji's alone to make.

They had known for six months about the technical details of the operation and about the risks and had taken very little interest in it. Now all of a sudden they started putting on a show of being the caring family. Daughters and sons were trying to find the surgeon and the cardiologist and started talking to the

nurses because they wanted to find out about the operation and its risks. What was the surgeon trying to do? They started claiming (wrongly) that the doctors were trying to bully Guruji into having the operation. They kept re-iterating that Guruji alone had to make the decision for or against the operation. Nobody else had the right to do it for him or to advise him.

Yet, was it not quite clear, that they were bullying him into not having the operation by making him, with their tremendous agitation, uncertain of the decision he had already made. If your life is at stake, as his was, it is very easy for an outsider to shake your determination, to undermine your courage.

If you have made a decision and declared it to the surgeon and then people keep repeating to you: "Oh, Pitaji. It is you who has to make the decision, and you alone. We do not want to interfere," then that very buzz is interference. It is telling the patient that he should change his mind. That is bullying.

I kept out of their way and watched the goings on from the distance. I knew everything about Guruji's medical condition since I had accompanied him to all his medical consultations for the last nine years, at least four times a year. Only on three occasions had one of his children shown enough concern to come with us. And now here they were, on the evening before the operation, when the patient should be resting and should be encouraged in the rightness of his decision, should be made optimistic and not doubtful and fearful, here they were at that last moment, when the surgeon and the cardiologist had already gone home, asking for, and challenging, details of the planned operation. An obvious sham.

Suddenly they felt how important they were if they could fuss over their father, whom they had neglected for so many years and whom they did not love, how good it felt if, in the name of family solidarity, they could challenge the doctors and nurses and tell them that they had no right to bully their beloved father. This gave them power over the professionals. All of a sudden they could feel important.

I also suspect that they had seized on this subject because they had nothing else to say to their father. They do not normally have even brief conversations with him unless it is to sort out essential problems. What then should they talk about him in this hospital where they had come as a matter of duty and had several hours to kill? So they milked the topic at hand: The decision about the operation.

I was talking to Prakash in the corridor some distance away from the bed and watched all the excitement, the brothers and sisters rounding up the staff and trying to ask them excited questions. Young Savitri, all flushed and eager, was rushing past us: "I must find that Surgeon, he must be somewhere, I am not going to let them do that to my father. I want to know what is going on. I insist. What are these people up to?"

I felt a surge of irritation as the spoilt little brat came out with these arrogant remarks.

"You will not find him,"

I said,

"It is too late. He has gone home. You should have come earlier. And what do you mean by saying 'What is going on'? Nothing is going on. Your father made his decision before he came to the hospital. This afternoon again he told the surgeon categorically that he wanted to go ahead with the operation. Your brother Prakash and I were both present. Nobody has been trying to bully him. A question was asked: Your father said Yes without hesitation. Anyway, how come you are so concerned on the very evening before the operation. You had taken the whole day off work to visit your father. Yet you arrive only in the evening when shops and offices are closed. Why then did you not go to work? Why did you take time off? You knew that final tests were being carried out. If you had cared, you could have been present all day and hear the doctors discuss the operation with your father. You could have known and discussed the technical details with your father for the last six months. Nothing will be done tomorrow that was not discussed and decided six months ago. How come your concern for your father has developed so late and so suddenly?"

Savitri grew livid with anger. "You will not stop me from finding out. Who are you to speak to me like this? The relatives have a right to know, and the decision is his, and his alone." With this she rushed off.

Five minutes later she came back. In an even greater rage.

I am half a head taller than her. She therefore had to look up to me, trying to destroy me with her laser eyes and spewing her venom at me from below:

"I have just spoken to my father. He himself told me that you are bullying him into having the operation. There you are. You are not qualified to interfere anyway. You have not studied medicine, so don't try to stop me doing what I have decided to do. I will protect my father from people like you. Let me make this clear to you once and for all. We are the family, you are not. What right do you have to be here at all! We will not allow you to kill our father. Neither you nor the doctors will be allowed to bully him. We will protect him. We will not let you get away with it. Get your hands off my father. Leave him alone! Just remember that in relation to him you are nothing!"

Her brother Prakash, himself at present in disgrace with his fiery sister, stood by my side and watched this scene in amazement.

I restrained my anger and tried to make myself taller in order look down upon her and to affect the proper condescending tone.

"Now it is my turn to speak, My Dear. I do not want to use unparliamentary language, I would if I could, but we are here in a hospital and I do not want to make this matter worse by having a slanging match. So I simply insist that your father can never have said that I bullied him into having the operation. I never gave him a single word of advice about it until he had made his decision. I did not even ask him about his final decision today. Your brother was present this afternoon when your father told the surgeon quite firmly that he wanted the operation.

Apart from this I am delighted that you care so much for your father. But why does this concern show itself so suddenly and so late, on the

eve of an operation about which you have known for over six months? Why does it show itself at a time when a patient should be supported and allowed to be calm and composed?

I am very impressed with your having succeeded in getting a second class degree in pharmacology. This must make you quite an expert in cardiology. I noticed you reading up on the subject two days ago. But shouldn't you have done that much earlier? At the time when your father made his decision, three months ago? Aren't you taking yourself just a bit too seriously? Where were you during the last six years when I accompanied your father to every check-up, every consultation with four eminent cardiologists, at least four times a year? You could have received, like me, private lessons in cardiology then?"

I do not remember what she replied to that but she must have stormed off to continue her agitation, or perhaps I turned my back on her.

Meanwhile other visitors had arrived at the bedside and were participating in the debate. Guruji was sitting there almost silently and giving only the shortest of replies, as is his wont. How can a patient ponder, reconsider a difficult decision, once made and suddenly called into question, in such an atmosphere, with no peace, no solitude, no time to think?

All the time he knows
that the clock is ticking away,
soon the surgeon will come.
Have you made up your mind?
It is already 7 o'clock,
the buzz of the visitors
continues around him,
no peace for thought
no progress with his decision.

I stayed away from the hornets, watching the hue and cry from a safe distance. I must not be involved in the discussion, not risk being accused of interfering, or of pushing myself forward where there are no ties of blood. I do not need to, for I know the place I occupy in his heart. There is no need for me to make a show of rights or status.

He told me later how he asked all his children, and even his visitors, what they thought. What advice would they give? Should he, or should he not, go ahead with the operation?

All his children abstained; they spoke neither in favour nor against: "It is absolutely up to you, Pitaji. We do not mind. We will be content whatever you decide."

Only his daughter-in-law, Sushumna, she who is the most practical, rational and efficient member of the family (lucky the son who married her!), spoke in favour.

Oh, were these children not showing the democratic spirit! Were they not playing it safe! They will not interfere with their father's right to decide. But neither will they help a lonely

man, who asks for help, to make his decision. Are they considerate, or are they cowards?

One of them tells me: "Poor Pitaji is so confused. He cannot make up his mind."

It sounds like a weakness in him. But why is he confused? He was not confused when he decided in January, after two months of quiet thinking, to have the operation. He was not confused when he said his farewell to his children two days before the operation. He was not confused when I took him to the hospital. He was not confused when the doctors told him that his heart was stronger than expected. He was not confused when he confirmed to the surgeon himself, at 3 o'clock on Tuesday, that he wanted to go ahead.

When did the confusion start? It started at 6 o'clock that day when his family arrived, when they heard the Registrar ask whether he had made up his mind and when they then felt like putting on the act of the concerned and loving relatives. Loving family - after having neglected him for years.

A decision has been made. A patient is in hospital for no other reason but to undergo an operation. Then the eager family arrives and says: "The decision is utterly up to you, Pitaji. We have no interest in the matter. It would be presumptuous if we expressed an opinion."

Is this a neutral family? Since the decision had already been made and all of them knew it, it can mean nothing but: "Do not take the doctors' advice. Do not have the operation." Cum tacent clamant.

By not expressing an opinion but asking him to decide, they are telling him to reverse the earlier well-considered decision. By being there in such numbers and combining with naive visitors, they are putting pressure on him to stop the operation.

And why?

Because they want him
to live longer?

They do not care, they do not give
a damn!

They want to shine,
experience their moment of glory,
demonstrate through him,
that they,
the democratic, the caring family,
are more powerful
than the arrogant professionals.

They want
to demonstrate their virtue,
their power and their glory
in defending their dear helpless father
against his enemies.

It feels so good
to raise up this dummy.
Oh, it feels so good
to be on the side of the righteous!
Oh, what fun
to put on this charade!

^9. Learning from example

I had been with Guruji all day long, sometimes doing little things for him. Bought some baby oil and massaged his legs and feet. Giving him water and tissue when he had a fit of coughing. Giving him an encouraging smile. Making him lie down when he was tired. Listening intently and asking the odd question when one of the doctors turned up at the bedside. Writing down in my notebook his blood pressure and other measurements when they were taken. Returning the portable telephone to the nurses' desk after he had received a call. Making him feel cared for. Showing him that he was not alone. Showing him that, even though his wife died many years ago, even though he was unsure of the affection of his children, he was not alone in this world, that there was at least one person who unconditionally cared for him.

We all need at least one such person who gives unconditional love. Love which can be learnt through service as many a woman knows. Otherwise the cold and the loneliness and perhaps the fear can be very painful. Usually you get that love from your wife, you get it from your children.

Sadly for Guruji, he could not get it from any of these. Luckily for Guruji, the tradition which may have contributed to the destruction of his family, provided him with two disciples who could, after many years of learning (looking after his cows, as the Scriptures term it), give him that love.

How long have I been his student now? Perhaps 15 years. How long have I been his disciple? For just over four years. I had known him for a long time before I decided to devote myself to him and before he accepted me.

He does not believe in having disciples. There are too many false gurus and false disciples about, money makers and disciples who follow the fashions. He advised many people, many, many became steady friends. Many touch his feet when they meet him, but none became his disciples. He made an exception only twice, with my "sister" Sita, who was initiated one year before me, and with myself. He felt he could make an exception with us. This would not be a sham. He would be a true Guru and we would be his true disciples.

It was from her, his first disciple, who, as a woman, knew what it meant to serve, that I learnt how to be a disciple.

She had been the Didi, the eldest sister, in a poor Kerala family with ten children. She had been the second mother to her younger brothers and sisters, she had washed their "nappies" (of course, they did not have any in that poor household), had bathed them, fed them, cooked for them, seen them off to school.

Managed to get herself an education in England, then supported some of her siblings while they were studying, trying to lift them out of their poverty and make them independent.

Developed an intense desire for truth, wanted to study the scriptures, learn Sanskrit. Wary of karma cola, of Guru mania, of Western pop esoterics and the instant enlightenment industry.

She was the one to find Guruji. She was the first to call him "Guruji", which then simply meant "Teacher". And over many years, even before she became his "disciple", I watched her taking care of him as only a woman can.

His house was in an awful state. He was too weak to clean it himself. His children, those who were still at home, were unable to do so for other reasons. Were they too busy? Unable to see dirt? Not able to take care of themselves? Suffering from depression and therefore not responsible for what they were doing or not doing? Some of all.

Guruji suffered it all and he, whose tradition has cleanliness as one of the highest religious virtues, had to live in a pig-sty.

And he suffered it patiently. No picture of a television guru here. No designer robes. No halo of curly hair. No miracles. No flowing beard. No publicity photographs. Just an utterly obscure but much loved and learned priest.

What he had to give was hidden inside him. And only those who insisted could tease it out of him. "As the man who digs with a spade obtains water, even so an obedient pupil obtains the knowledge which lies hidden in his teacher." (Manu 2:218)

Sita came and visited him every week. She cleaned his house in which everything that dropped on the floor was left lying where it fell and trodden into the carpet, bread crumbs, rice, potato peelings, breakfast cereal. She washed and folded and stored his clothes, she did his shopping, she massaged his body, an ancient custom, not only in India but in many other countries, such as the Philippines, which are still civilised. One wonders: Is industrialisation the end of culture and civilisation?

I remember that she invited me one memorable weekend, an Easter Weekend, many years ago now, when we were both off work. She decided to clean his kitchen, with a vengeance.

The cooker was encrusted with dirt, the walls were dirty, everything was abysmally filthy, all dirt had hardened because this kitchen had not been cleaned for years. We donned our

overalls and our rubber gloves, bought a huge supply of industrial detergents, pads of steel wool, and started soaking and scrubbing. We wanted to clean this kitchen, however long it might take, square inch by square inch, which was the only way to do it.

We spent two days working in this kitchen, under the bemused but quite commentless eyes of Guruji's children. They never asked what was happening, never helped, never expressed surprise, never said Thank You. What we did simply did not concern them, just as their father, in whose house they lived, did not concern them, or the dirt in the carpet and the encrusted cooker did not concern them.

Much of the time Guruji was there with us, watching with pleasure, teaching us the Gayatri and other mantras and chanting them with us. This is how he showed his gratitude, by teaching us while we were working. This is what is meant in the Upanishads by the expression "looking after the Guru's cows".

Some years later Sita became ill. She was no longer able to visit Guruji regularly, but she persisted with her Sanskrit studies. She left Leicester and is now a student of Sanskrit at SOAS in London. Now I see her at his house at least twice a year, at Ram Naumi and at Guru Purnima.

I also had moved from Leicester to London and could no longer visit Guruji frequently. But I visited him in Leicester when I could. I had learnt by observing Sita, and she had given me courage.

I was initiated at Ram Naumi one year after her, and I followed her footsteps in looking after Guruji - even though with much less frequency.

I knew from her how much he enjoyed a massage, how it relaxed him, how it helped him sleep. I had never in my life touched a man, except for a brief handshake. But I learnt to touch him, first very timidly, then with more confidence.

I learnt, over the weeks and months, to massage his cracked feet, his dried out swollen legs ('oedima' the doctors call it, and Oedipus Swell-Foot suffered from a similar condition), his hands, his arms, his back, his head.

This is the debt I owe to Sita. I learnt from her how to be a disciple.

^10. Vigil

The family were still milling around in the ward. They would not leave before the end of visiting time. I went to a plastic restaurant, took out a book and waited for a few hours. When I returned to the hospital I saw the family standing outside. At the completion of a job well done!

Well done!

It was ten thirty, long past the end of visiting hours. They did not see me, and I kept walking up and down waiting for them to come out into the street so that I could enter unseen. They did not come for a long time. When they had left, I went to the ward. It was a quarter past eleven and the night nurse looked very cross when I arrived. I begged her for two words with my father, and she allowed me two minutes. He took me into the visitors' room in order not to disturb the other patients.

"What is the position?" I asked.

"I am still trying to decide", he said.

I took his hands. "Whatever you decide, you know I will be with you in spirit. If you decide to have the operation, I will keep out of sight tomorrow. I will give way to your children. They will come and I do not want to be here and wait with them and increase the tension. They have been very nervous already and I have even been accused of bullying you into having the operation. Therefore it will not be good if I sit with them tomorrow and participate in all the agitation. If you do not see me, it does not mean that I have deserted you. I will be in my caravan outside the hospital or in the cafeteria and I will think of you and pray for you. I will be with you in spirit all day, even though you will not see me in the flesh. I very much wanted you to know that, when you go to the operation tomorrow. When the operation is over, then of course they will all go home, and then I will come back immediately and look after you. Is that all right, do you agree?" He tried to persuade me to be present tomorrow but then left it to me to decide. "I never said you bullied me. All I said was that you were in favour of the operation."

At this moment (do they not always come five minutes too soon!) the surgeon's nursing assistant came yet again. "Have you decided?"

"No, I'm still thinking."

"All right", and she left again.

Then the night nurse beckoned me to leave.

"Good night, Guruji. I will be back at 7.30 tomorrow morning when Professor Henderson comes."

^11. Morning

I was there at seven. Guruji was sitting on a chair beside his bed reading the Gita. I looked at him questioningly.

"There will be no operation", he said. "I have decided against it." My heart stood still.

"Last night I was still undecided, and I had a very wakeful night. I will tell you that it was your visit last night which turned the balance and made it easy for me to decide."

My heart stood still: if only I had not come! "But, how, why, Guruji?"

He took my hands into his. "You gave me two new reasons against the operation. I know you truly love me. You have done more for me than anyone could possibly imagine. I thought, this operation may be successful or it may fail. What does it matter to me if it fails. But hearing what you said about the dispute with my children, I suddenly realised that you would be accused for the rest of your life of having caused my death. I did not want this to happen to you. And I had another reason: you have been a true son to me. If I died as a result of the operation, I would have lost my sixth son. I did not want this to happen to me. Not as yet, anyway. I made up my mind during the night. I phoned my children at five o'clock, told them about the decision and told them not to come to the hospital today. Now death will not take me suddenly but devour me piecemeal. I have given them a chance to mend their ways, to put their money where their mouth is. I will need care. That is the result of my not having this operation. I wonder if they will give it to me."

I do not know what I replied. Oh, how I wished I had not come last night, how I wished I had not spoken! I wanted to give him comfort during the operation and explain my absence. Instead I had made him abandon the operation in which I so much believed.

Why do words have a life of their own? They are like knives which you throw blindly. You never know where they will fly, whom they will hurt, how they will be understood, what effect they will have. What is the point of speaking at all! Should we not always be silent? As Guruji tends to be?

Had Guruji sacrificed his health and his life for me? I did not want this sacrifice, and I tried to tell him so. I was still hoping he would change his mind.

It was five to eight. Time for the first operation of the day. His would have been the second, perhaps at twelve. I was sitting

on his bed talking to him intensely, I do not know exactly what I said but it was related to his decision.

I was speaking slowly because I wanted, still, to choose my words and arguments carefully; not to transgress; not to appear to be interfering in a personal matter. And yet make my point with respect. I was still pussy-footing around, expressing myself with so many cautions. Why did I not speak fast and without weighing my words when there were only seconds left!

As always when I was talking intensely, like last night, I was cut short by an outside event. Here was the surgeon. Already dressed in his gown. Why could he have come at this hour? What other purpose could this visit have but to give Guruji a last chance to accept the operation.

"I hear you have decided against the operation?"

Guruji nodded.

"So this is final? Your last word?"

"Yes."

"Fine. So you agree if I take your name off the waiting list? There are 230 persons on it. I will do that then. Good luck."

I raised my hand and tried to interject something, seeing it was a last chance.

"Sorry, I have no more time for discussion now. I am expected in the theatre." And he was gone. And I bowed my head. Guruji comforted me.

"Can we go home now?" I asked the nurse.

"No, you have to wait until you are discharged. You have to wait till the doctor comes who dispenses the medicines. That will be at about twelve o'clock."

We had a long time to sit together. Very peacefully. More peacefully than at home. The big decision had been made. There was nothing to worry about any more. The bed was clean and tidy. There was no telephone, no visitors yet. The sun was shining, it was early in the morning. We were ready to start a new life, with new assumptions, new rules.

He let me read the Gita to him to help me practise the devanagari script. I noticed he was getting tired and made him get into bed and sleep. Meanwhile I read a book by Ahdaf Soueif. I was amused by a passage in which a group of people are listening to a religious talk. One of them gets up and steps over the heads and shoulders of the other listeners to reach the door. When Guruji woke up, I read it to him.

^12. Divine chaos

"I love this story," I said. "Not only for its own sake, but because we are in England here. And whenever I read it, I cannot help also imagining an Englishman reading it without warning and preparation. He will be bewildered: 'What on earth is going on here? Is this a giant? How can he walk over people's heads and shoulders?' Of course, the people are sitting on the floor. One has to know that.

It reminds me of a time some years ago when I was sitting with Sita in a mandir. We had been singing bhajans in the afternoon. Some of the women had brought their children, who, from time to time, took off on their own, started playing at hide and seek, or tried to catch each other, or simply raced around the mandir, like cheeky Balakrishna, for sheer joy of living. Isn't a temple a wonderful playground!

They were allowed to carry on like this for quite a while, but from time to time one of the women, perhaps the mother, perhaps somebody else, would catch some of the children, cuddle them, or try to quieten them or make them sit down. At last, one of the men had had enough of it. He grabbed three of the children and said to them imperiously: "Now, that's enough. Behave yourself. This is a temple. Sit down. Meditate!"

Instantly the three sat down, cross-legged and upright, and became quiet, for what seemed an interminably long time, at least thirty seconds, perhaps even more. How I admire that absurd and yet beautiful command! Just as absurd as the order: "Love me, instantly!"

Is not life beautiful when you accept its absurdity? When you have incongruent things side by side. Singing bhajans and praying to God, yet having the children racing around, seeking the utter silence and concentration of meditation, and trying to trigger it by a military command.

The bhajans were followed by arti, and after that, prasad was eaten. It was a festival day, and prasad consisted of a full meal. The mandir did not have a dining hall, so people remained sitting on the white sheets in the prayer hall where they had been sitting all afternoon, and there they consumed, from paper plates, rice, chapatis, curry and sweets which everybody fetched from the kitchen. In India they would not have eaten off paper plates but off biodegradable banana leaves. The mandir was packed. Between the people on the floor were their plates heaped with food. There were no corridors. Those coming in balancing their plates in their hands and those who wanted to leave the mandir had to tip-toe between the people eating contentedly and their food on the floor, and if they were women they also had to control the flow of their saris. They were indeed stepping over the heads and shoulders of the congregation. Since it was feeding time, even the children were fairly quiet. Sita saw the funny and

beautiful side of it and remarked with deep admiration: "Divine chaos!"

That was illuminating. It was more than ten years ago but I have never forgotten that remark. It has become proverbial with me. I have often pondered on it. Chaos is divine. Our chaos is not our weakness, it is our strength. It is the essence of life. Affirming and loving chaos is saying Yes to life - and to the traffic in Naples and Delhi.

Compare it with the Western or Christian attitude to life. Everything is aimed at the elimination of chaos. One never quite succeeds but people keep trying. Sometimes they almost succeed, as in Nazi Germany. Thank God in Italy and in England trains do not run on time, the best guarantee against an Italian or English Auschwitz ever being set up. The Nazis were so utterly convinced that they knew right from wrong. They then used the technology of order to eliminate all that was evil, such as Jews and chaos. Ordnung muß sein.

Look even at a church compared to a mandir. Everything functions like clockwork. People are neatly arranged in rows, everybody has his seat or chair. Everybody sits or gets up or kneels down exactly as he is told, the readings and prayers for each Sunday are prescribed. And they all love each other on cue, and exactly for the duration, when the signal for the Pax Tecum is given.

The choir sings, like Coca Cola devotees, in perfect harmony and the organ keeps the congregation in pitch, in rhythm and in order.

I wished, Guruji, I could take you to my mandir, the one I now go to when I am at home in London. It is the most democratic place imaginable. You should come and hear arti there. All right, they start more or less at the same time, but everybody chooses his own pitch. That means that in Western music there would be twelve different starting points, and if there are twelve people in the mandir, I assure you, no two people will choose the same pitch. This gives a new meaning to the term "dodekaphonic music". If a Parisian had ever heard this, the Rite of Spring at its first performance would not have raised an eyebrow or lowered an auricle in the audience.

But Indian music has quarter tones as well, and usually there are more than twelve people present for arti. They all can handle quarter tones: that gives you twenty-four different pitches, truly a primeval sound. I have had musical training and am well able to pick up my pitch from somebody else, but on these occasions it is pointless to pick it up from one person only to be in disharmony with somebody else.

Therefore even I howl in praise of God at whatever pitch comes naturally. But God loves people who chant, or even howl, with devotion. That's why he loves dogs. He created man in his image and dog in his mirror image. In that mandir we all have devotion.

We are not aiming at beauty, not at effect, not at art, but only at sincerity, each on his own. We assert our individuality. We all know that when pursuing the road to moksha, each of us is entirely alone.

But in the world outside the mandir, law and order are à priori virtues. Of course, the English are not ultimately responsible, nor are the Germans, who are even better at it. No, it is their God who led them astray. The God of the Bible started it all, and it ended with the destruction of the primeval forests to be replaced by neatly arranged plantations. God's first act in the Bible, his act of creation, was one of destruction. In the beginning was God. In the beginning was the divine chaos, and not only the earth was *tohu wa bohu*. And God created order out of chaos. Chaos was life, order is death. He separated the heavens from the earth, the sea from the firm land, light from darkness, he put the sun and the moon and the stars into a straight-jacket, and he created man to continue his work of destroying the world, of making it orderly by subjecting it. He threatened us with a paradise on earth: no crime, no television, no whodunnits, no tears, with eternal laughter. We did not accept his poison chalice, we did not want to be bored. We did not want a paradise on earth. He gave us earth movers to deprive us of mountains and valleys and gave them their charter - all in the name of simplicity and order: "Let every valley be filled in, every mountain and hill be levelled, every cliff become a plateau, every escarpment a plain, and every field turned into a motorway" (Isaiah 40:4). What joy it will be to live in that level, orderly world. He set himself up as the sole god. Ein Gott, Ein Papst, Ein Volk, Ein Reich, Ein Führer.

We Hindus are luckier. We have our three million 3,265 gods to take care of us. *Quot homines, tot dei*. Take your pick.

Could this God of the Bible not have contented himself with saying: I exist, therefore I exist. I am chaos, therefore I am chaos. He did not accept himself as he was. He had to make himself orderly first, or so those who created him in their own image see it.

For me the chaos in our mandirs is a sign for the acceptance of life, which is just as chaotic, just as unpredictable, as what happens in the mandir. And we have to accept it, love it, sometimes cry over it, and somehow muddle through. We do not try to reorganise it, make it more efficient, more predictable. The Mahabharata is a comforting book because it shows life in its utterly chaotic, unpredictable and uncontrollable nature. If I read or remember the Mahabharata then the specific events in my life shrink into insignificance, just as when we consider the earth as a tiny speck in the vast universe. That's why I find chaos comforting. That is my chaos theory. What do you think?"

Guruji was tired. He saved his breath, as so often, and just nodded. "You may have a point there."

At two o'clock we decided to leave without the medicines and go for a nice Indian meal in a nearby restaurant, our traditional treat after every check-up in this hospital. We returned to the hospital to pick up the medicine and drove home.

^13 Who cares

Most of the family were still there when we arrived at Guruji's home. They had prepared a special meal to welcome their father and were disappointed that he had already eaten, that we had not told them that we would be so late. We, of course, had not expected any preparations. So often had we returned from check-ups without anybody even asking about the results, that we did not expect anybody might now be waiting or even have prepared a sumptuous meal for us. Yet our late return enforced in the children the idea that their father did not care for them, was inconsiderate, did not tell them where he was going or when he was coming back - what then was the point of caring for him if he cared so little, was so inconsiderate to them!

Thus one misunderstanding creates another.

Next time there will be no special reception for Guruji, and he will conclude that his children do not care for him. Is not this whole story an example of absolutely everything going wrong! No action had the expected or desired effect.

Aruna asked me for a summary of her father's condition and his prospects, now that he had been discharged from the hospital. We were standing in the hall. Guruji was settling down in the background.

"Shall I explain, or will you", I asked.

"You do it."

"All right. He had the option of having the operation, with the risk of death before leaving the hospital but the hope of greatly improving his health and strength if the operation was successful. The alternative was to accept his present state of health, as it was before he went into hospital and unchanged as it is now. Instead of a sudden death or a sudden return to greater health with less need for care, he will gradually deteriorate. He will continue to suffer from breathlessness, from pain, and be able to do less and less for himself. An infection may suddenly take him away. It may come soon, or later or never. But he will not get better. That was implicit in the decision not to risk the operation. He will get weaker and weaker, perhaps rapidly."

Aruna: "But if he gets worse, something can be done, can it not?"

"No, nothing can be done. This decision was final. If the risk was too high this morning, it will be higher next time. The more he weakens the less he will be able to stand an operation. The only prospect is the need for an ever increasing amount of care.

I do not only mean "care" in the technical sense, in the way the social services and the "caring professions" use the word. I mean he needs

that people not only care for him, that is do things for him, but also that they care about him.

I do not know whether you understand. The word "care" is so ambiguous.

Let me use an example from your own experience as a mother (and I do not, of course, want to imply that your father should be treated like an infant or is anything like an infant, I only want to explain what I mean by "caring"). You have your son here, and you remember him when he was a baby. You did not only do the necessary things for him, you did not only respond when he asked for something. You also watched over him, you worried, you went to his room from time to time to see if he was all right. You anticipated his needs. If he was playing in the garden and you had not heard his voice for a while, you would go out and check why he was so quiet. It is some concern like this which your father needs, he needs to be watched over. That concern will automatically make sure that he gets the right food, gets water at the right time, that he has a clean and peaceful room and that he does not have to exert himself and worsen his condition. Do you hear what I am explaining, Guruji? Is that the situation?"

Guruji nodded in the background.

Aruna said: "You mean he needs Love?"

"Well, that is an emotional and ill-defined word, and I am therefore trying to avoid it. It can mean so many things and can lead to so many misunderstandings. For a start it is something which one cannot consciously control. So it is not a good word for me to use when I am explaining what your father needs in the new circumstances. I am just trying to explain through some examples the kind of care your father needs if you want to keep him alive for as long, and to make his life as pleasant, as possible, now that he has decided against the option offered by the operation."

Aruna: "Yes, but you cannot avoid that word. You have given the example of Dinesh. And what you have described is the result of love."

"Well, I would not use that word but if you want to put it like this, perhaps there is something in it."

Aruna: "Ah", and a bright shine, perhaps of triumph, came into her intelligent big eyes, "but what about me? I also need love. I also need someone to care for me."

What on earth did she mean? Did she mean that she missed her absent husband, that she was deprived of his love and had to bear it, that we all, including her father, have to bear our fate and our deprivations?

Did she mean that she found it too hard to cope with the daily household tasks, found it too hard to look after herself and her teenage son, without anybody helping her, and that therefore she had no energy to spare to care for her father in the way I had suggested?

Or did she mean - something dawned on me, but I could not accept that she meant what she seemed to be saying: "We get no love from my father, he will therefore get no love or care from us." I did not dare to put that meaning into words, for fear of hurting her or hurting Guruji who listened to all this while he was unpacking his bag.

"I am not quite sure if I am getting you right. Of course you need love, we all do. But I do not quite understand why you are saying it just now and what it has to do with the care that your father needs. Can you spell that out for me? This is a difficult subject, I am very tired and always very bad at guessing deeper meanings. I cannot read between the lines. Please tell me exactly what you mean."

At this point her sister Pushpa intervened. "Leave that topic, Aruna. These are family matters. Ashok would not understand this. Just leave it."

Pushpa drew me into the kitchen. "I just want to say that I am very grateful for what you have done for our father. This is much more than could ever be expected. I know how the papers are piling up on my desk while I am away, so I can imagine how it must be with you. You too must have work of your own to do, and yet you have spent so much time with him. We do appreciate that."

"Well, I am his disciple. That makes me part of the family. It also puts me into a special relation to all of you. For example, I could not marry any of you. It puts on me the duties which any child would have for its father. I just try to follow tradition as best I can. Otherwise there is nothing special about what I am doing."

"Ah, I suppose you are a confirmed bachelor now and would not marry anybody even if you were allowed to. But you are hearing many things here without being able to understand them fully. You say that our father needs care. But you must remember that he is a very difficult man to care for. The community condemns us as being bad children. But they do not know our father, and neither do you, as we know him. He can be very difficult. He wants our love, but he wants all or nothing, he cannot compromise, he wants everything on his own terms. His friends do not know this. We, his children, also have to breathe. We also have to survive. Sometimes it is necessary to break away entirely in order to survive. We were not pushing him away from the operation. We only wanted to give him freedom to decide."

A few minutes later she was gone, said good-bye to her father and returned to her job in Nottingham.

^14. Nevermore

It was six o'clock then, and a warm and sunny evening, just a couple of hours to go before sunset, and I persuaded Guruji to get into my car and drive to the nearby park, sit in the car and watch the pond and the ducks on it. He was silent, a muni, as always. I had to speak, stick out my neck, and try to elicit an interpretation from him.

"You have heard my conversation, Guruji. I do not think you will get any better care than you had when you went to hospital. Your

stay there and your decision to withdraw did not make any difference. You are not likely to get any more care than before, unless the shock of your stay in hospital makes them do more for you than they seem to promise now. We will wait and see."

Silence.

"I keep racking my brain, but I am so unhappy about the finality of it all. But really nothing can be done now. They will never put you back on the waiting list. If they did, the same thing would happen all over again. Your children will come and stir up such a fuss that you will change your mind about the operation."

"No, my children did not make me change my mind, I decided for myself. None of them, except Sushumna had an opinion. They all said, It is up to you."

"Well if, considering all that happened tonight, you wanted to have the operation after all, the only possible way would be to do it privately, provided the money could be raised, provided it could be done very soon, before you get worse, and provided Mr Jones would be prepared to do it, because he is the only person who knows you well enough and could do it without further painful tests. I know it is unlikely to become reality, but please keep it in mind, Guruji, just in case you regret your decision and then this possibility does not occur to you. It would also have to be done in absolute secrecy. You would have to leave the house without saying where you are going, say no good-byes to your children, not tell any friends, invite no visitors until the operation is over. Otherwise they will all turn up again and repeat yesterday's farce - at your expense."

^15. Night thoughts

That evening at home, I massaged Guruji again. Then he went to sleep on his bed and I in my sleeping bag on his settee. My head was close to his and I could hear him breathing as I fell asleep. In the middle of the night, I heard, as on many other occasions before, that he was sitting up in bed, gently chanting the Thousand Names of Vishnu and Chapter Three of the Gita, which he was then committing to memory. This is what he does when he cannot sleep.

My brain also started working. I fell asleep while he was chanting and woke up again later. I was thinking through the dramatic changes in my expectations which had occurred during the last few days. I had taken him to hospital in the hope of a successful operation, expecting to stay there with him for a month and then bring a greatly strengthened Guruji home and start life, work and study with renewed vigour. What on earth had gone wrong?

Something had gone wrong. He had decided after much thought to have the operation. He had changed his mind at the last minute,

in the face of much better prospects than expected when he went to the hospital. He had changed his mind as a result of a charade, put on by his children on an ego-trip. Why had I not spoken up more strongly? Why had I not spoken up at all, when they had agitated for their irrational point of view so strongly? When they had claimed the right of close relatives to have a say in the matter, while at the same time denying that their father had any right to their affection. How can sons and daughters who do not love their father and are not prepared to look after him, even for good reasons, have the right to speak with more authority about his fate than a stranger?

They had agitated against the operation simply by repeating the mantra "It is your decision", when the decision for the operation had already been made. They had refused to advise him when he asked for their opinion. They had made him insecure and then had left him utterly alone in making that most difficult decision of his life. Why? Were they really democratic, or were they simply cowards, not willing to shoulder the consequences of a clear-cut opinion?

But had I not done exactly the same? Was I not a coward not to have spoken? Oh, yes, my sweet, but conservative and not brave friend Amrita had warned me some time ago: "Do not meddle in other people's affairs. Do not say anything either way. Let him decide for himself. You do not want to be blamed."

That is utterly against my character. I always speak before being asked. I always stick my neck out and get into trouble. But that is me. And I should be proud of it. I should follow my nature. But I know I get into too much trouble, and it is good that sometimes I can turn to someone like Amrita, be restrained by her, and through her advice get her to make me behave a little more like ordinary people who do not get their fingers burnt as often as I do. It is often useful to listen to Amrita: in practical matters she usually turns out to be right. So here I had listened to her as well. But was it right to listen to her on this occasion? Should my Guruji's life depend on Amrita's common sense, her conventionality, on her cowardice, on her habit of playing safe?

No, it was not right. Perhaps I could have saved Guruji. Was not his present condition a lingering death? Would not our studies come to a slow and sad end, work which not only I but he also enjoyed. Because he loves teaching and he loves an eager student.

I could not have spoken in front of the children without making things worse. But I could have spoken in the evening, after they had all gone, when he was still undecided. I could have spoken forcefully.

I could have spoken quickly and forcefully the following morning when he told me that he had wanted to protect me from the future hatred of his children. Of course I did say that this was not a

good reason, but I could have said it more forcefully and more quickly, before I was interrupted by the arrival of the surgeon at eight o'clock. I could have said:

"Guruji, I do not care whether your children will hate me. I do not want to lose you, I want you to live. That's why I am in favour of the operation. I support you in that decision. If it turns out to be wrong and your children hate me, I do not care, because I had only good intentions. We do not control the outcome of our decisions. I will be hurt enough by losing you. And yet I think it is better for you to have the operation. You also wanted it, I know that. I support you in the decision. And I will bear the risk with you. We both will lose if the operation fails, we both will gain if it succeeds.

I will bear the greater risk, therefore you can accept that my advice is not lightly given. Your risk is small. It is your life, I know, but you may lose it anyway even if you do not have the operation. If you die as a result of the operation to which I have contributed by having given such forceful and strong advice, then you will have no further suffering and no further regrets in this life. And none of us knows what your next existence will be like. Perhaps you have suffered enough, so I hope, because I have seen your suffering. You have paid dearly for any wrong you may ever have committed.

Your children will not much care. They will make the usual show, but if they do not care while you are alive, why should they care when you are dead? You therefore do not have to protect your life, a painful life, and die a slow death, for the sake of your children, they do not care, as you have observed in the past and as they explicitly said last night. And you will be rid of these cares if you die.

But I am the one who will suffer, because I will live with the knowledge of my advice and I will have deprived myself of one or several years of having you as a friend and teacher. But, (I should have said), I want to take that risk and I want you to take yours. Because I am sure you will live, and your life will be easier and longer. Therefore I give this advice. Do not worry about me, go ahead with the operation. Trust the surgeon, he knows what he is doing. He does not want a corpse on his hands. If he offers to operate on you, it shows you how confident he is. I have trust in him and share his confidence. You do same, be confident, go ahead and stick to your old decision. Do not be afraid, Guruji, not for yourself, not for me, just go ahead and do it, you will be all right!

We both will be happier as a result.

Why did I not say this to you - that evening in the visitors' room, that morning while sitting on your bed just before the surgeon came at 8 o'clock, giving you your last chance? Why did I not speak?

Why did I not jump up at that very moment and say: "No, Guruji, this is your last chance. Make a snap decision, take it. Just jump, you will be all right. I will bear the responsibility. I am strong enough for it. I am your friend. I care for you. That's why I say it. Just say Yes!"

Why was I so timid and silent, so civilised and dead, and let every chance slip away, even this last one?

Did you not need a friend and companion in your decision making? Why did I desert you? How on earth could you be expected to shoulder such a great risk when only the professionals but not your closest friend would strongly support you?

Oh, how did I let you down, Guruji? Now it is too late. Why do all these thoughts and words only occur to me when it is too late?

^16. Flight at dawn

These thoughts were going around in my head in ever new formulations and variations. Anger with myself mounted in me. I had been a coward, I had done nothing. I thought by saying nothing or speaking feebly, by ending every argument with the idiotic mantra "but it is your decision Guruji, I do not want to influence you", I thought that with these tactics I could escape responsibility. But I could not.

"I see now, the responsibility is mine. I knew better, I did not speak, I did not act. Your slow death, your lack of care, your lack of love, is my responsibility."

I could sleep no longer. It was six o'clock. I was agitated. I went and had my cold shower. I came back to your room and got dressed. I saw you sleeping peacefully, there was no suffering on your face. The restless night for you was over, your time of rest was there.

"What can I do to make up for my failings? Never again will the National Health Service trust us. By twice rejecting the operation, once after actually going into hospital to have it done, by rejecting it after the frenetic agitation of your children (for without them, say what you like, you would never have changed your mind - it is now time that I make my opinion clear, even if it hurts your children), by thus rejecting the operation we have discredited ourselves at the hospital. We also have discredited Dr Rajgor who so strongly recommended the operation and put pressure on the hospital to have it done soon. They know that what happened this time can happen again. They will not offer you another chance of an operation when they have to fear that you will be dissuaded again. They will not want to risk expensive bed space and hospital resources -- unless, yes, unless it costs them nothing because you put your own money at risk.

As I said last night at the pond: if the money could be raised for a private operation, then you would have another chance. Then I too would have another chance. I could be courageous, I could speak loudly. I would not bully you. This is not bullying, but I could support you clearly and unswervingly, not leave you in this dilemma which can only be resolved by making a jump into the dark. I will help you make that jump by jumping with you. By saying clearly, "I approve of this decision", I will face the consequences, yes I, I, I, because if you die, the consequences in this life are mine, not yours. You will go on to another life and you do not know which and how and where. You will forget how you got there. But I will remember for the rest of my life what I advised you to do, and how strongly I did it. And I tell you, do not feel sorry for me, for I am ready to bear the consequences, they are mine. I have more to gain than to lose. So do you. Therefore go ahead and have the operation. My support is well considered because I have as big a stake as you in the outcome."

Thus I spoke to Guruji in my mind, and I had to act quickly, because the next step should be taken before he got worse, before the whole possibility of an operation was forgotten. Now was still decision-making time. But who would help me to move on to this next step. How could the money be raised, who knew Guruji's friends and could approach them? Who could broach the suggestion to Guruji?

There was only Dr Rajgor. It was 7.30 in the morning. I could drive over to him before he went to his surgery. I let Guruji sleep, quietly slipped out of his house and drove off to Dr Rajgor. I found him at home and joined him for breakfast. I poured out my heart to him for an hour. He allowed me to rest and read at his home while he was in the surgery. We had lunch

and continued the discussion. Money. How could one raise the money? A lot of money would be needed.

I had not told Guruji where I was going, I had not phoned him during the morning, because I did not want him to stop me in what I was doing. Especially not out of generosity. I wanted to sort the matter out first, for once I did not want to be timid and lazy.

When Dr Rajgor understood my concerns and knew all that had happened during the three days at the hospital, he phoned Guruji in order to enquire how he felt.

"Tell him I am here, that I was rather upset and that's why I came here in the morning, to discuss things with you."

"Come here, Ashok. Panditji wants to speak to you. He is all right. He is content with the decision he has made."

"I have been worried about you, Ashok, why didn't you tell me where you were going?"

"You were asleep."

"Yes, but you could have phoned me later."

"I was upset that's why I did not want to talk to you before calming down."

^17. The Guru speaks

"There was no reason for you to be upset." And now Guruji used what I call his prophetic voice. He has many voices. His most common one is silence. It can have many meanings. I can say things that may upset him, but he will not venture an explanation unless I ask repeatedly. He may be pondering what I have said. He may feel that a reply is superfluous. He may be tired and be saving his breath. Why speak if I am not interested enough to repeat my question or to make it more precise. He may then give me a Yes, a No, or a Perhaps.

He has the voice he uses when he chants in public, resonant and strong. He has the voice which he uses when, during sleepless nights, he chants the Gita or the Thousand Names of Vishnu, more gentle than the voice of public chanting.

He has the voice of the teacher, of the lover of scriptures, of scholarship and knowledge. He will then be animated. His mind will entirely overcome the listlessness, tiredness and breathlessness which is so normal with him. His words will come fast and strongly. He will make fine distinctions. He will energetically reject wrong opinions and abuses. He will have the voice of a man half his age. He will tell stories to illustrate his point, quote Sanskrit and Hindu proverbs, cite or chant

Sanskrit texts, reel off lists of names and philosophical and ethical categories. That is the strongest voice of his I know, and seldom have I had a chance to provoke it. But I have heard it often enough. The right kind of question triggers it.

He also has the fatherly and reassuring voice. When he speaks with affection. And he has the broken father's voice, on the rare occasions when he has been deeply hurt. When he has been attacked, when his love for his children has not been seen, when he sees them in trouble or running into trouble, when he is trying to stop them and to help them, but when they misunderstand his intentions, do not listen, or even make a positive point of insulting him in the name of "telling him the truth". Is truth really so much more important than love? Or even mercy? He does not want mercy, but he deserves at least that.

He also has the night voice, a voice from the grave, the voice of a survivor from a concentration camp, the voice of a man whose vocal chords have been slashed. He has this voice when he is very ill or woken up from his sleep. It is just a low rumble, hardly intelligible, emanating from his suffering chest. Then one would not dare to ask anything or to put a strain on him. That is a terrifying voice.

But today I heard a different voice. The prophetic voice. It was slow and clear. It was not breathless. It was the voice of a tenor and not of a bass. It was the voice of conviction, of authority and reassurance. The voice that permits no doubt and therefore removes uncertainty and fear.

"Why were you upset, my child. There was no reason for you do be upset! You have done your best and that is all that counts. You make a mistake if you think life offers only one route and that only one route is desirable. There are many routes. And the other routes are not failures. They are merely different. Whatever route we choose, we do not know where it will lead us. But it will lead us somewhere. And that somewhere will be good.

Did you not yourself speak to me yesterday so beautifully about divine chaos, and how life is easy to bear if we accept that chaos? We all get through somehow, from birth to death, only those two points are certain, but we do not know how we will manage or which route between the two is best.

There is only one absolute target, God, and all routes ultimately lead to him. But on this earth we do not know the target, therefore there is no good route and no bad route. And since we do not know the route, there can be no success or failure. If there **IS** no success and failure, then you can be 'even-minded in success and failure'. That is what the Gita means.

योगस्थः कुरु कर्माणि	<i>yogasthaḥ kuru karmāṇi</i>	in Yoga fixed, perform actions,
सङ्गं त्यक्त्वा धनंजय ।	<i>saṅgaṁ tyaktvā dhanamjaya</i>	attachment having abandoned, Conqueror of Wealth,
सिद्धयसिद्धयोः समो भूत्वा	<i>siddhyasiddhyoḥ samo bhūtvā</i>	to success or failure indifferent having become
समत्वं योग उच्यते ॥	<i>samatvaṁ yoga ucyate</i>	indifference (is) Yoga, it is said.

(Gita 2:48 - Interlinear translation by Winthrop Sargeant)

Fixed in yoga, do your work,
abandoning attachment,
with an even mind in success and failure,
for evenness of mind is called yoga.

(Gita 2:48 - Translated by Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan)

यदृच्छालाभसंतुष्टो	<i>yadṛcchālābhasantuṣṭo</i>	chance gain content,
द्वन्द्वातीतो विमत्सरः ।	<i>dvandvātīto vimatsaraḥ</i>	the dualities transcending, free from envy,
समः सिद्धाव् असिद्धौ च	<i>samaḥ siddhāv asiddhāu ca</i>	constant in success and in failure,
कृत्वा ऽपि न निबध्यते ॥	<i>kṛtvā 'pi na nibadhyate</i>	having acted even, not he is bound.

(Gita 4:22)

He who is satisfied
with whatever comes by chance,
who has passed beyond the dualities
of pleasure and pain,
who is free from jealousy,
who remains the same in success and failure,
even when he acts, he is not bound.

(Gita 4:22 - Translated by Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan)

We **think** we choose the route, we **must** agonise over our choices, we must consider what is morally right and what is wrong, what is better and what is worse. But when we have made the choice, it is made. We must consider the choice we **have** made, and its results, as our destiny. Our destiny is not in our hands. And that is very comforting. Remember what the Gita says:

ईश्वरः सर्वभूतानां	<i>īśvaraḥ sarvabhūtānām</i>	the Lord of all beings
हृद्देशे ऽर्जुन तिष्ठति ।	<i>hṛddeśe 'rjuna tiṣṭhati</i>	in the heart region, Arjuna, he abides,
भ्रामयन् सर्वभूतानि	<i>bhrāmayan sarvabhūtāni</i>	causing to move all beings
यन्त्रारूढानि मायया ॥	<i>yantrārūḍhāni māyayā</i>	on a machine fixed by power of illusion.

(Gita 18:61 - Interlinear translation by Winthrop Sargeant)

The Lord abides
in the hearts of all beings.
His power of illusion makes them turn round
as if they were mounted on a machine.

(Gita 18:61 - Translated by Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan)

When we look forward, the decisions are in our hand. When we look back, however, they were in the Lord's hand, and so are their consequences. You have no reason to be upset. You have done your best. That is all that matters. The consequences do not matter at all. You and I will live with them and accept them whatever they are. We do not know whether they are good for us or bad. Remember the Gita again:

कर्मण्येवाधिकारस्ते	<i>karmaṇyevādhikāraṣte</i>	in action alone the jurisdiction of thee,
मा फलेषु कदाचन ।	<i>mā phaleṣu kadācana</i>	never in fruits at any time,
मा कर्मफलहेतुर्भूर्	<i>mā karmaphalahetur bhūr</i>	never action-fruit motive should arise,
मा ते सङ्गो ज्ञस्त्व अकर्मणि ॥	<i>mā te saṅgo 'stv akarmaṇi.</i>	never of thee attachment let there be in inaction.

(Gita 2:47 - Interlinear translation by Winthrop Sargeant)

To action alone have you a right
but never to its fruits;
you should not be motivated by the fruits of action;
nor be attached to inaction.

(Gita 2:47 - Translated by Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan)

We simply have to do our duty as best as we can recognise it. We do not know where the different routes lead. Wherever they take us is neither good nor bad. It simply **IS**. Just as God is neither good, nor bad, neither just nor unjust, neither loving, nor unloving, but simply **IS**. And just as we, simply **ARE**. Not

happy, not unhappy, not rich, not poor, not clever, not stupid, not successful, not failures - but simply **ARE**.

We live in the midst of confusion. We have to recognise that confusion as divine, while we are searching for firm ground to which we can anchor ourselves.

I am not upset by what happened. I have made the decision, and it is my responsibility. It took me long to make up my mind, because I had the illusion that human intervention could improve my fate, my life, for as long as it is destined to last. I made a mistake in starting this whole drama?"

I interrupted, seeing a ray of hope: "What do you mean, Guruji, by 'having started this whole drama'? Do you mean that you should not have let your family and visitors know that you were still pondering the decision? I agree. Because if they had not known that there was still uncertainty, they would not have agitated as they did and shaken your original determination."

"No, I do not mean that at all. I listened to them, but I was not swayed by them. I hoped that by participating in the decision making they would learn something for themselves and about their relationship with me. I wanted to give them a chance to interrelate to me, in a matter of life and death. To show their concern. I hoped they would become aware that, if I live without an operation, I will need care. If they learn to care, it will be good for them, even more than for me: since their care will be aimed at my body, but the benefit will be reaped by their souls. Since last night I know that they have not learnt any lessons, and I will have to live with the consequences.

But my mistake was made much earlier. It was made during those years when I explored the physical causes of my condition and implicitly the possibility of an operation, hoping to extend my useful life. In the end that determined exploration lead to the plan for the operation. Now that I have decided against the operation, I have come to see even the exploration as a mistake. Whatever happened in the hospital during the last few days was the result of my decision to pursue that route for so many years. It was my fault, not yours, or anybody else's.

Now all this is behind us. There is no point in mourning. I am content and accept what comes. You need not be upset. Come home now."

^18. Aftermath

"All change here!" rang out the voice of the conductor. We had arrived in London. Our coach had been empty for some minutes. I parted from Ashok.

I met him again a few weeks later. "How is your Guruji?"

"Physically he is slightly better. He now does his yoga in the evening rather than in the morning. His body is warm then and it is easier for him. He can do more, and more strenuous, poses than before his stay in hospital. He also sleeps better as a result. I think he still hopes that with yoga and his iron discipline and will-power he can be stronger than his defective heart."

"And the children, do they look after him any better? Perhaps their bark is worse than their bite."

"Not much hope there. It is the same as before or slightly worse. They have worked out a rota for looking after him. That is indeed a good idea, terribly orderly and efficient, from the European point of view. But in a way it is also utterly heartless and mechanical, especially since they seem to stick to it with trades union rigidity. It is a method of minimising the trouble caused by an unpleasant duty, and that is how my Guruji takes it. Is he demanding too much of his children? I dare not say. Should he be grateful for the little attention he gets? I dare not say. Is it true that he demands all or nothing, that he wants everything on his own terms? I do not know. It is quite beyond me. I only see him suffering and feel sorry for him. And I wonder why his children cannot see it and feel equally sorry - whatever childhood complaints they may have against him.

Does a man not pay heavily
for having got married
and for having children!
Once you have them,
they can affect you deeply,
can cause you great pain,
but you cannot control them
as you can control your own body and mind.

There are six days covered by the rota. The daughter and son who live with him have shared these out. The one or the other gives him dinner on alternate days. He has to make his own breakfast and lunch. During the day nobody checks on him, gives him anything, enquires after his well-being, or even asks if he is lonely. Nobody has asked him if he is content with these limited arrangements. That is what they have decided, he can take it or leave it. He takes it. He follows the Gita which tells us to be content with whatever comes by chance, be it good or bad.

It has happened that he has requested food from the "off-duty" son or daughter, only to be told: "Sorry, it is not my turn to look after you today, I am busy, you must wait for my brother or sister to come home." Imagine the humiliation, especially in our culture, where children are supposed to do things voluntarily. So he has now learnt not to make requests. Such a refusal is more than his dignity can bear. And it is not good for his health. It will shorten his life, for which his children were so concerned when they were canvassing at the hospital. Is it

surprising that they find him silent? He says nothing and so avoids rejection and humiliation.

Until about a year ago when he needed some help he had to shout in order to attract the attention of his son or his daughter somewhere in the house. He could not climb the stairs, he could hardly walk to the door of his room. But even the repeated shouting was too tiring to him. I suggested he should install a bell that he could ring from his room. He used it for a while and it worked in a way. But sometimes the bell is simply ignored. He feels he is being a nuisance. Now he is so embarrassed and humiliated by the whole situation that he does not use it any more. What do I care about my body, he says. And what is the value of a service that is given so reluctantly? What is the value of being given some food after ringing a bell when, without ringing the bell, nobody would come into his room and ask him if he is hungry or thirsty, even at the obvious times. Shall I ring for breakfast and lunch every day? Is it not clear that I need these, without having to ask?

Is this what the children mean by saying: "He wants all or nothing?" And is he wrong in seeing it in those terms?

Perhaps they are only concerned with what his body needs. In that case it makes no difference whether he gets his food as a result of ringing the bell or whether his children anticipate his needs.

But he is clearly concerned with the ethical implications of their actions. He suffers for his children because by their actions they betray their state of mind, a deep-seated unhappiness. No happy child would behave like this towards his father. They are, so too speak, mentally ill. He suffers not because he is being deprived of their attention but because he cannot bear to see them so ill and unhappy.

One of his sons, Ramesh, lives a few miles away. He comes every Thursday with his wife, Sushumna. It is then her turn to cook Guruji's dinner, which she does very nicely and lovingly. She also cleans his room, gives him water and is affectionate to him in other ways. She is also the only one who dared to speak in favour of the operation. She is normal. She is not his child. She does not carry the ancient childhood hang-ups of his children. But his son, on arrival, simply slumps down in front of the television set and watches cricket. He says Hello and Good-bye to his father, but no more. He has no interest in talking to him. He is totally self-absorbed. Guruji observes: He does not come to visit me, he comes to accompany his wife. So what is his presence worth to me?

I have tried to cheer Guruji up by pointing out how nice it is that they come and visit him regularly, compared to six months ago when they did not come at all. But I cannot deceive Guruji: "There is no feeling behind it. They might as well send a cook, or send me a cheque so that I can employ one". He points out

that his son does not talk to him and only goes through the motions of a visit. So where is its value? This son does the minimum he can get away with. How often and how thoroughly, during these visits, could the operation have been discussed, and was not!

Well, is Guruji too strict, or should he praise the son for at least putting in an appearance? So he says nothing. He neither praises nor complains. The children perhaps think that he is unfeeling. He does not even complain to me. But when I try to give undue praise to the children, then he is incorruptible. He points out the weaknesses, the defects of their actions. Then there is nothing more that I can say in their defence. Perhaps he is right, perhaps he is wrong. I dare not say because I neither want to criticise him nor condemn his children.

There is no doubt that they all have their own problems and are in various ways deeply disturbed. They are different from ordinary people. They do not interact well with other people, find it hard to compromise - they too. They are to different degrees argumentative, touchy, quarrelsome, jealous of each other, politically hyperactive - unnecessarily fierce about everything they do. They are razor-sharp.

You might simply call them "characters", but the way in which they interact with each other and with their father makes life very difficult for all concerned. They are capable of forming parties within the family, ganging up on one member of the family, not talking to someone for years, flying into rages, bearing grudges. One brother was able, in his grudge, to boycott his sister's wedding. It is not only their father whom they treat badly. Are they abnormally self-centred?

Usually you find one such strange person in a family, but I have never found a whole family consisting exclusively of people with such extreme characteristics. The only silent one is Guruji, but then now he is out of breath and I do not know what he was like when he was younger. I am sure you have come across the stories of our irascible saints of olden days. Was he ever one of them, or was he always a muni? I wonder.

^19. Muni

Perhaps even being a muni, while ideal for a hermit, is not ideal in a society which is noisy and which expects noise and emotional responses. To be even-minded in success or failure, neither to laugh nor to cry, to treat heat and cold, pleasure and pain, as the same, to be always calm and collected, as the Gita recommends, will not go down well in a society which makes a virtue out of these human weaknesses. Even I who love him am sometimes surprised to find how understated his responses are, how seldom he laughs (but he does), how little he engages in trivial talk, of which our life consists. Is it this, perhaps, his pursuit of the ideals of the Gita, not incompatible with

love, which, through misunderstandings, has engendered the coldness which the children now show to their father?

If even I who have chosen him and am dedicated to him sometimes worry about his silences, about his lack of reactions, how much more would his children, whose ideals are those of the West, have missed, when they were children, great displays of affection! Imagine the situation twenty years back, about which I know nothing, but about which I must speculate, seeing what is happening now: Once resentment has set in on the side of the children and they act accordingly, he cannot help but withdraw into himself even more.

If he meets coldness at every turn, it is impossible for him to go around and smile at those indifferent faces. He has to protect himself, not give out signals which will be rejected, face inwards, and move through the house, past his stony children, silently, withdrawn and unobtrusively. In turn perhaps they wonder why their father is so emotionless. *Circulus vitiosus*.

He loves his children, but cannot show it in the ways they expect. He carries out "secret acts of love", providing for his family, worrying about their well-being, but expecting no rewards, as the Gita prescribes. The children are not aware of this, because the customary show is missing.

The Gita also prescribes that we should display the emotions which are expected of us, but not in earnest. We may have to pretend to be angry, but we should not really be angry, because deep down there is no reason to be angry. Similarly we should go through the motions of pleasure when receiving a present, even though real pleasure on receiving any material thing is a sign of lacking wisdom. Did Guruji, when his children were younger, at least go through these motions, or did he miss out on that aspect of the Gita's teaching, something the Gita recommends because without it we cannot survive in this relative and material world. Rama went through all the human emotions of pain and pleasure when he lost Sita and when he regained her, even though he should, of course, have known that both events were, in a way, illusory.

There is a novel by Camus: "The Outsider" (*L'étranger*), whose hero, who commits some criminal acts, in many ways behaves as one thinks the Gita recommends. And yet, I think, no devotee of the Gita, would like to see him as the ideal man. Certainly most Westerners would loathe him, especially his utter lack of feelings, his deadly rational objectivity. Yet this is what the Gita seems to recommend. Theoretically and emotionally he seems to act in accordance with the Gita, even though his motives may be different. His resulting conduct, however, seems detestable. His lack of emotion and remorse ultimately leads to the death sentence, imposed by normal people expecting normal behaviour. I must really look into this question properly one day.

Does following the Gita lead to trouble, at least in a Western environment where different norms apply?

None of the happy Hindu families I know are as deeply immersed in the Gita as is Guruji. They respect the Gita, they know its principles but their primary concern is material success. They use the common sense of the relative world in their behaviour. They are not, and do not try to be, sages, and they have, relatively, happy families and, relatively, straight children.

Could it be that
if you want to be a sage,
you cannot have a family,
and if you want to have a family,
you must not behave like a sage:
Being a sage, puts you outside the community.
Could that be the cause of all this misery?

With that heavy question hanging in the air, Ashok left me.

^20. Nashto mohas

Five days later, I had an excited telephone call from Ashok.

"You would not believe this. I have just spoken to Guruji. He has received a hospital appointment to see Mr Jones. Out of the blue."

"Ah, the cardiologist."

"No, the surgeon."

"The surgeon? What for? His role is finished."

"That's what I wonder. But I think I know. Just remember: He had offered Guruji an operation with splendid prospects. Guruji was convinced. Guruji was optimistic. At the last minute Guruji bails out. No good reason is given. Guruji seems to be throwing his life away.

This is what he cannot understand. He suspects that Guruji has been put under pressure to change his mind, and so it was.

There was a great injustice done to Guruji. While the family was milling around, Mr Jones could not discuss the matter quietly with him. It would have appeared as interference. After the final decision at eight in the morning, there was no more time for discussion or explanations.

I think Mr Jones wants to find out what really went on during that day, and if he finds out that Guruji has been bullied, he may give him another chance, perhaps immediately. Can I come and see you?"

Sixty minutes later, Ashok arrived.

"The situation in the hospital was such that nobody could give Guruji clear and firm advice and help: they all felt, or said, that they wanted to protect his rights.

The people involved felt free to speak their mind only after the bad decision had been made. When it was too late. Beforehand they felt they had no right to speak forcefully:

- Before the decision Professor Henderson warned mainly of the risks, while recommending the operation. After the decision he said categorically: "You have made the wrong decision." He knew all along what the right decision would have been but did not dare say it plainly.
- I did not fight for my point of view until my visit to Dr Rajgor. Until I was ashamed of having let Guruji down. And even then I allowed Guruji to silence me by his exposition of the Gita.

But at that time Guruji was no longer free. He had made a decision and his task was to dispel my depression. He had to find arguments to make me content and make himself content with what had happened, no matter whether it was for the best or not. He found these arguments.

For the same reasons, I supported his decision in favour of the operation on our way to hospital and showed contentment with the very opposite, with his withdrawal from the operation on our way home. We were trying to help each other on the chosen route, whichever it was.

But now I have learnt. I have learnt that I must have courage and be outspoken, just as Guruji must have courage and take the operation if it is offered again.

I have reconsidered the Gita. What Guruji said about the Gita in his prophetic voice was what one must say after an event, after a battle. But now we are again before an event. The decision is yet to be made. When we see Mr Jones.

And before a decision, the teaching of the Gita is quite different. It is not passivist.

Therefore this weekend I shall travel up to Leicester to see Guruji. This is what I will tell him:

When we see Mr Jones, we must explain to him what really happened. You were put under pressure by your children. When you decided against the operation, you had hoped that at last they would care for you. The moment you reached home they denied that they had any duty to do so. You should not have given in to their pressure. I was wrong in not defending you forcefully

while you were sprayed with the "you-decide" grapeshot to weaken your resolve.

You must take the operation if they give you another chance, but you must do it secretly until the operation is over. This requires only a two-day unexplained absence from home. Or a two-day stay in the private wing of the hospital, where your children cannot trace you. Afterwards you can be transferred to the general ward.

The decision against the operation was not in accordance with the Gita. On the contrary, the spirit of the Gita obliges you to undergo the operation.

Lord Krishna in the Gita told Arjuna to fight, rather than do nothing. The same applies here.

Having the operation is to fight, as Arjuna is told to do. Not having the operation goes against the spirit of the Gita.

You told me that your life and death is in God's hand. So it is. But that does not mean that you should not use whatever medical techniques are available. In your case, Mr Jones is God. And his hands are God's hands. Your life and death is indeed in God's hands. If you argued differently about the role of God and of destiny, no operation, no blood-transfusion, no birth control, no painkiller would be acceptable. They would all be interfering with the will of God. But in fact they are all the instruments which God uses, indirectly, to help us or to let us fail - as he sees fit. But first we must try to use them.

Arjuna is told that the result of his battle, defeat or victory, is in God's hands. (That is what the doctors call "risk".) But first he has to take up his arms, first he has to fight.

He is not allowed to sit back and let God decide defeat and victory without a battle taking place. He is not allowed to let "nature take its course".

By the same token, you are not allowed, according to the Gita, to sit back and rely on medication and yoga, as you were proposing to do when you withdrew from the operation, like Arjuna when let drop his bow and arrow and said: "I will not fight."

You have taught me the Gita. Let me therefore, just for today, remind you of the Gita:

यद् अहंकारम् आश्रित्य न योत्स्य इति मन्यसे । मिथ्यैष व्यवसायस् ते प्रकृतिस् त्वां नियोक्ष्यति ॥	<i>yad ahaṁkāram āśritya na yotsya iti manyase mithyāiṣa vyavasāyas te prakṛtiś tvāṁ niyoṣyati</i>	when egotism taking refuge in “not I shall fight” thus thou thinkest, vain this resolve of thee; (thine own) material nature, thee, it will command.
(Gita 18:59 - Interlinear translation by Winthrop Sargeant)		
<p>If in self-conceit you think 'I will not fight', your resolve is in vain. Nature will compel you.</p>		
(Gita 18:59 - Translated by Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan)		

स्वभावजेन कौन्तेय निबद्धः स्वेन कर्मणा । कर्तुं नेच्छसि यन् मोहात् करिष्यस्य अवाशो ऽपि तत् ॥	<i>svabhāvajena kāunteya nibaddhaḥ svena karmaṇā kartuṁ necchasi yan mohāt kariṣyasy avaśo 'pi tat</i>	by born of own nature, Son of Kuntī, bound by own karma to do not thou wishest, what, from delusion thou shalt do, against will, even that.
(Gita 18:60 - Interlinear translation by Winthrop Sargeant)		
<p>That which, through delusion, you wish not to do, that you shall do even against your will, fettered by your own karma born of your nature.</p>		
(Gita 18:60 - Translated by Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan)		

Therefore, Guruji, do not resist any more. Follow your own instincts which were to take advantage of modern medical skills. When you made your first decision, you were right. That decision represented your true instincts, your swadharma.

Arjuna was obliged to take up his best bow and arrows. Similarly you must allow the surgeons to take up the weapons they have. That is the spirit of the Gita.

It you do not do so, you set a bad example by encouraging a passivist interpretation of the Gita.

Only when the surgeons have done their best, can you sit back and accept the consequences as ordained by destiny. Next week when

we go to see Mr Jones, we will enrol him as an ally in our battle, we will not hide behind the cover of destiny.

I will write to Mr Jones and explain to him the background of your withdrawal from the operation. Your determination collapsed after your children arrived in hospital, started agitating and put on their charade of filial love. They participated in a decision in which, as you now know, they had no moral right to participate since they disowned you the moment you returned home from hospital. When we go and see him, you yourself should tell him the truth as I told it, or at least confirm what I said. If he gives us another chance, you should take it - immediately and ask for the operation to be carried out as soon as possible. On the very next day, if he can. I shall stand by you. That is all that matters.

I have suffered much confusion during these days. But now I am speaking strongly. I take the risk of speaking out. Both of us have been in a terrible dilemma, but now at last the right way ahead, whatever the consequences, is absolutely clear to me.

We must battle first.
We will battle together.
Let us go.

नष्टो मोहः स्मृतिर्लब्धा	<i>naṣṭo mohaḥ smṛtir labdhā</i>	lost delusion, wisdom gained
त्वत्प्रसादान् मयाच्युत ।	<i>tvatprasādān mayācyuta</i>	from thy grace by me, Unchanging One;
स्थितो जस्मि गतसंदेहः	<i>sthito 'smi gatasandehaḥ</i>	standing I am (with) dispelled doubt.
करिष्ये वचनं तव ॥	<i>kariṣye vacanam tava</i>	I shall do command of thee.

(Gita 18:73 - Interlinear translation by Winthrop Sargeant)

Destroyed is my delusion,
your grace, Kṛṣṇa, has made me remember.
I stand firm,
my doubts are dispelled.
I shall act according to Your word.

(Gita 18:73 - Translated by Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan)

^Glossary

arti:	Evening prayers
auricle	Outer ear
Balakrishna:	God Krishna in his childhood
bhajans:	Popular religious songs
brahmacarya:	Sexual abstinence
Circulus vitiosus	Vicious circle
Cum tacent clamant:	Latin (Cicero): By being silent they shout. Their silence cries to high heaven.
devanagari:	Script used for writing Sanskrit and related languages
Ein Gott, Ein Papst	German: one God, one pope
Ein Volk, Ein Reich, Ein Führer	German: Nazi slogan: One people, one empire, one leader
Gita:	Bhagavad Gita: Best loved holy scripture of Hindus; the "New Testament" of the Hindus, if the Vedas are seen as their "Old Testament"
Guru Purnima:	Full moon festival used to honour all teachers and the guru
Guruji:	Honorific for a teacher or guru
Kerala	State in South India
mandir:	Temple
moksha:	Liberation from the cycle of birth, death and rebirth
muni:	Sage who practises silence
nashto mohas	Sanskrit: Destroyed is my delusion (Gita 18:73)

Ordnung muß sein:	German: There must be order, proverbial saying used to justify, for instance, disciplinary measures
Panditji:	Honorific for a priest and scholar
Pax Tecum:	Latin: "Peace be with you", brief ritual in Christian Churches when devotees shake hands with each other as a sign of peace
Pitaji:	Honorific for father
prasad:	Consecrated food distributed in temple
Quot homines, tot dei:	Latin (after Terence): As many gods as there are men. One god for each human being.
Rama	Incarnation of God. His life on earth is described in the Ramayana epic.
Ram Naumi:	Birthday of God Rama
tohu wa bohu:	Hebrew: chaotic and empty, without form and void, a formless void, (Genesis 1:2)
SOAS:	School of Oriental and African Studies, of London University
swadharma	One's personal duty
Vishnu:	Name of God