

## **‘How the Battle Ends...’**

It is just after dawn, on a day 3000 years ago, give or take a millennium, on a vast plain in northern India. Facing each other across the plain, ready to do battle, are two of the biggest armies ever assembled: hundreds of thousands, perhaps more, of foot soldiers, charioteers, archers, horses and elephants. The pre-battle din is shattering. There are blasts from conches and trumpets. Drums are beaten. Cymbals clash. War cries ring out. Horses neigh. Elephants trumpet.

The Battle of Kurukshetra, which will last 18 days, is about to begin. Despite its huge scale, ironically it is a family matter: two branches of one noble family, the Pandavas and the Kauravas, descended from the same grandfather, are fighting grimly to rule the kingdom.

The battle is the central event in the longest – and perhaps earliest – epic poem: the Mahabharata. It is 10 times – yes, 10 times – longer than the two ancient Greek epics, the Iliad and the Odyssey, combined. But the subject, the subject of them all, is the same: war... human carnage.

Why since the beginning of time, have we been fascinated by the so-called heroic tales of violence, anger, and slaughter? We worry about the violent computer games our children play and violent shows they watch on TV and the Internet. *Our* parents worried about the violent comic books we read. No doubt *their* parents worried about their children’s violent stories and games – cowboys and Indians or war games. Spacemen ... soldiers ... gangsters and police ... cowboys and Indians ... medieval knights – the list goes on and on back into history and forwards into the future.

If only they were just stories! But of course generation after generation, century after century, in our own and in every era, millions of young men (mostly they’re men) enlist and go into battle. Sucked in by the lies about power and glory, they are wiped out by the juggernaut of war.

And yet sometimes a man pauses and questions the process. And on that morning on the plain in India, all those eons ago, it was Arjuna, the mightiest of the warriors. Contemplating the fray ahead, he was overcome by grief and dismay. He turned to his charioteer and said (as many a soldier must have

done): " I cannot do this." On the opposing side, he said, were his cousins and uncles and brothers-in-law, including a much-loved great uncle and his own teacher and mentor, from whom he learned his great skill as an archer. "How can I bring myself to slaughter these people, my family, whom I love?" he asked.

Arjuna was speaking to no ordinary charioteer. This was Krishna – a mighty leader and warrior in his own right, but much more ... an enlightened being who was essentially the Lord in human form, the Great Spirit who informs and imbues and is the source of life itself. Out of his love for Arjuna, he had elected to serve him as his charioteer and mentor. Arjuna really had God on his side!

The dialogue between Arjuna and Krishna, at the heart of the great military epic, is the exquisite poem called the Bhagavad Gita – the Song of God. Of the battle itself, essentially Krishna tells Arjuna flatly: "You must fight: it is your *duty* to correct the wrong that is being fought over." From then on Krishna answers Arjuna's questions about what is the right way to live, how one can follow a path to enlightenment, even what is the right way to die. This almost three-thousand-year-old poem has been called "a textbook on the supreme science of yoga" – the art of re-connecting mind, body and spirit and find the peace that passeth understanding.

Krishna instructs Arjuna on karma yoga, the yoga of action – more precisely, of selfless action. There is no more talk of the battle – except for the internal battle all humans face: the battle between lust, anger and greed on the one hand, and love, peace and selfless service on the other.

Back in the main game, in the Mahabharata, the battle is of course fought, and the outcome is inevitable: almost all the hundreds of thousands of warriors, on both sides, die. Only a half-dozen of the Pandavas, on the side of so-called "right", survive to reap the bitter legacy.

In our own time, a disciple of the Bhagavad Gita fought a different battle – without ever fighting at all. The diminutive lawyer Mohandas Gandhi was determined that the British, who had colonized and ruled India for two centuries, should leave and grant India independence. He pursued this aim relentlessly – but with just as relentless commitment to the principle of *ahimsa*, non-violence. He lived by the creed of the Bhagavad Gita, and called

the famous poem his "mother". Of course Gandhi did succeed in having the British leave India and even in reducing – though not eliminating – the hatred and killing that broke out between Hindus and Muslims when the country was partitioned into India and Pakistan. Gandhi was revered by people throughout India, who called him "Bapu" or Father. Another great Indian contemporary (himself a Nobel Peace Prize winner) christened Gandhi "Mahatma", meaning Great Soul, the name by which he is still best known.

Gandhi's story ended with deep, some would say tragic irony: this man of non-violence died violently. At 79, taking his nightly walk in a park in Delhi, he was approached by a fanatic from his own religion, a Hindu – and shot dead.

And yet he may have died as he had lived, by the precepts of the Bhagavad Gita. Certainly he is loved and admired as a sort of demi-god of peace and devotion by millions who never knew him, all over the world. And in the Gita Krishna explains to Arjuna just what it is to die well: in the moment of death, he instructed, turn your attention to God, and you will go the place of enlightenment and peace (Heaven if you will) and not be re-born into this world of suffering. It is said that as Gandhi died, shot in the chest, the last words he uttered were "He Ram" - "Oh God." Perhaps he went straight to that place of peace, to join Krishna.