

The Reality of Difficult Decision Making Situations¹

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Decision making is an inevitable thing for every one of us. Many of us work in offices holding responsible positions. Constantly we are confronted with decision making situations. Should we accept what the sub-ordinate says? Should we accept the customer order on the stipulated terms and conditions? Should we agree with the boss's viewpoints? These are some examples. Students confront decision making situations. Should I skip the class and go for the cricket match? How much preparation is required for the examination? Should I tell the parents about something that happened in the school? Even a two year old child has to make decisions. Should the child cry to get elder's attention? Should he/she cooperate with the mother for eating? etc.

What is also common is that all of us often complain about the difficulty in making decisions. However, none of us have really paused to make an objective assessment of how difficult is it for us to make decisions. We have no idea of what exactly is called "difficulty" in decision making. We merely use the phrase "difficult to make a decision" to explain many things. One common use is "because it was difficult to make decisions, we ended up with not so good performance". In this sense, we use this for conveniently blaming things and people around us for a bad outcome based on our decisions.

When do we end up with a "real difficulty" in decision making? How will we react under such conditions? *Bhagavad Gitā* has a wonderful introduction to this topic. In fact the genesis of *Gitā* itself could be traced to this very idea. We shall see it in some detail.

Arjuna's Predicament

The genesis of *Gitā* is Arjuna's predicament to fight the war, which is vividly, described in chapter 1 of *Gitā* and the first 8 ślokas of chapter 2. Arjuna advances four arguments for not fighting the war:

Argument 1: No motivation for the war: Arjuna made several arguments in support of this idea. These include "Of what avail is this kingdom and wealth and pleasure?", "I do not want to kill the *Kauravās* even if I get killed or even if it means conquering the three worlds", "By killing the *Kauravās*, what pleasure do we get?, we will only accumulate sin by this act" (See ślokas 1.32 to 1.36 in *Gitā*).

Argument 2: Happiness not guaranteed: Arjuna asked Krishna how one can have peace of mind after killing one's own people? Further he observed, "the *Kauravās* may commit sins, destroy the clan on account of overpowering greed. On the other hand, we are aware of these sins, why not we avoid committing these sins?" (ślokas 1.37 to 1.39).

¹ Mahadevan, B. (2013). "The Reality of Difficult Decision Making Situations", *Sadguru's Blessings*, Vol. 10 (10), June, 2013, pp. 23 – 24.

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Argument 3: War creates bigger problem: Arjuna strongly argued that on account of war there is a greater chance of creating confusion in the society as well as the social order. This he felt would lead to a permanent disruption of the class and family values (*ślokas* 1.40 – 1.43).

Argument 4: An Impractical Idea: Arjuna placed an even stronger argument in his support. He observed, “On both sides of the army teachers and students, parents and off springs, close relatives and good friends are pitted against one another in war” (*śloka* 1.34). He asked Krishna “How can I kill (*katham sañkhye*) Bheeshma and Drona who are worthy of worship (*pūjārha*)?”

कथं भीष्ममहं सङ्ख्ये द्रोणं च मधुसूदन ।

इषुभिः प्रतियोत्स्यामि पूजार्हो अरिसूदन ॥ 2.4.

*katham bhīṣmam aham sañkhye dronam ca madhusūdana
ishubhiḥ pratiyotsyāmi pūjārha arisūdana*

What do you mean by difficulty in decision making?

If we go by the previous examples, many of the decision making situations that we confront in our life will pale in comparison. Real difficulty in decision making is when it is simply impossible to even think of taking one step in the direction in which we need to move. For example, whatever be the gravity of the situation, nobody will think in terms of killing his/her teachers and respected elders. The very thought of such alternatives will blur our thinking faculty, confuse our mind and make us feel very nervous. However well considered our thought has been, it will just collapse like a pack of cards. It will raise afresh fundamental questions about what we are attempting at. We will try to run away from the situation and even go the extent of avoiding taking such a decision at any cost. Arjuna felt the same way. He was shivering in the battlefield at the very sight of the people he saw on either sides of the army waiting to fight. The *Gāndiva* was slipping out of his hands, his skin was burning and his head spinning. He said that he was simply unable to go through this experience (*ślokas* 1.29 – 1.30).

Arjuna was known to be a great warrior. The Mahabharata war was fought only as a last resort after every possible avenue to avert the war was explored with great deal of patience and restraint. Moreover, the unjust ways of the *Kauravas* in administering the country meant that a *Kṣatriya* was duty bound to restore the order back in the society. Despite all these favourable conditions to fight the war, Arjuna buckled under huge pressure. Unbecoming of a true warrior he even went to the extent of saying, “now that I am not armed with weapons (*mām apratīkāram aśastram*), the *Kauravas* who are holding weapons in their hands (*śastrapāṇayaḥ dhārtarāṣṭrāḥ*) can kill me in the battlefield (*raṇe hanuḥ*) and it will be good for me (*tanme kṣemataram bhavet*)”.

यदि मामप्रतीकारं अशस्त्रं शस्त्रपाणयः ।

धार्तराष्ट्रा रणे हन्युः तन्मे क्षेमतरं भवेत् ॥ 1.46.

*yadi mām apratikāram aśastram śastrapāṇayah
dhārtarāṣṭrā raṇe hanuḥ tanme kṣemataram bhavet*

Gitā – A source for our inspiration

Arjuna's predicament clearly demonstrates to us that the difficulty that we complain of decision making situations is indeed overstated. Whenever we feel that we are facing a difficult situation it will be useful to remember the issues discussed in chapter 1 of *Gitā* and benchmark the severity of our difficulty in decision making with that Arjuna faced. If we objectively do this exercise, we may come to a different understanding of this issue. We may realize that there is a need to explore the problems and the solutions with a focused mind and concentrated action. When we approach a decision making situation with inadequate preparation, we end up hiding behind the excuse of "difficult decision making situation". There are perhaps a fewer occasions in life when we may truly face real difficulty in decision making.

The other lesson that we learn is that when we face difficult decision making situations, there is a greater possibility for us to run away from the situation. We may buckle miserably and end up with either a bad decision or meekly surrender to it with a feeling of helplessness. This is not the way to handle such a situation. The question is how will we come out of this impasse?

The greatest motivation to read *Bhagavad Gitā* lies here. If Arjuna, who faced a miserable situation could redeem himself from this and get back to the thick of action, we will also be able to get motivated enough to face some of the toughest challenges in life. The conversation between Lord Krishna and Arjuna, laid out in a systematic fashion in the *Gitā*, could very well be the ultimate source of inspiration for us to develop clarity of thought, purpose of life and strength of inner character to face "head on" difficult decision making situations in our life. Let us partake the nectar of *Gitā*!