
Symbolism of the Chariot of Arjuna

Gita Upadesam

In the opening scene of the Bhagavad Gita, Arjuna asks Lord Krishna to steer his chariot into the middle of the field of Kurukshetra to survey his opponents on the brink of battle. This scene is a rich metaphor for human life with each element symbolizing different aspects of ourselves.

The chariot is symbolic of the body (sarira). The charioteer Krishna is the higher intellect (buddhi), while Arjuna as the passenger represents the jivatma (embodied soul). Krishna (intellect) holds the reins (operations of the mind) that guides the horses (senses). Krishna leads the chariot to the center of the battlefield of Kurukshetra, where the Pandavas, representing the forces of righteousness (dharma), and Kauravas, representing the forces of evil (adharma) are arrayed and poised to fight.

What the image of the Gita Upadesam teaches us is how to be victorious in the internal battle we constantly face between dharma and adharma. We, the jivatma, can triumph over adharma only with a pure intellect that can guide the chariot by the perfect control of the mind (reins) and senses (horses).



On the other hand, if our lives are driven by the senses and an uncontrolled mind, the chariot and horses will all end up wrecked or lost in a ditch. It's up to us to ask: Who is driving the chariot right now? Are the horses driving, or the charioteer?

Only when the intellect is fully in charge, with the senses and mind under full control, can we skillfully navigate through a battle raging between powerful forces of dharma and adharma.

Nothing short of our eternal liberation (moksha) depends on our ability to triumph in this battle, day after day, from decision to decision that we make in each moment.