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“If”—: The Sacred Art of Self-Mastery**Jayantakumar Panda****Abstract**

Rudyard Kipling’s “If—” stands as one of the most beloved and inspirational poems of the 20th century, resonating with readers across generations. Constructed as paternal advice, it conveys values of stoicism, resilience, humility, and moral fortitude. This paper explores the poem through nine analytical lenses—literary devices, structure and form, theme, tone, philosophical alignment, historical context, the poet’s psyche, intended audience, and a conclusive reflection. It illuminates how Kipling masterfully transforms simple counsel into timeless wisdom relevant across cultures and eras.

Preface

Rudyard Kipling’s “If—” is not merely a father’s counsel to his son; it is a timeless guide to the cultivation of inner fortitude, self-discipline, and ethical clarity. Though composed within the cultural backdrop of late 19th-century England, the poem transcends temporal and geographical boundaries, offering a vision of manhood rooted in **self-mastery, restraint, and courageous detachment**.

This poem, when examined through the lens of **Vedantic** and **Upanishadic wisdom**, reveals profound parallels with the spiritual teachings of the **Bhagavad Gita**, the **Vedas**, the **Upanishads**, the **Vachanamrut**, and the **Shrimad Bhagavat Mahapurana**. It embodies the eternal values of **equanimity, detachment from dualities, steadfastness in dharma**, and the supremacy of the **will aligned with truth and virtue**.

Kipling’s verses serve as a secular sadhana—a poetic manual for becoming a true seeker, or a *sthitaprajna*, who remains calm amid the storms of praise and blame, success and failure, joy and grief. In this way, “If—” becomes not just a literary classic, but a spiritual teaching veiled in poetic beauty.

1. Literary Devices and Figures of Speech

Kipling enriches “If—” with a rich palette of poetic devices that subtly reinforce his messages:

- **Metaphor:** The entire poem hinges on extended metaphor—life as a test of character, e.g., “If you can make one heap of all your winnings / And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss.”
- **Personification:** Triumph and Disaster are personified—“two impostors”—suggesting their illusory nature.
- **Imagery:** The poem paints vivid scenes of crisis and resolve—“twisted by knaves,” “worn-out tools,” “pitch-and-toss”—anchoring abstract virtues in relatable visuals.
- **Alliteration:** “Talk with crowds... keep your virtue” or “heart and nerve and sinew” enhance rhythm and emphasis.
- **Assonance & Consonance:** Assonance in “dreams your master” and consonance in “hold on when there is nothing in you” generate musicality.
- **Irony:** The notion that both “Triumph” and “Disaster” are impostors is a powerful ironic insight that flips conventional value systems.
- **Symbolism:** “The unforgiving minute” symbolizes time’s urgency and the need for meaningful living.

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2. Structure and Form

- **Rhyme Scheme:** The poem follows an **ABAB** rhyme scheme throughout, maintaining lyrical consistency.
- **Meter and Rhythm:** Primarily written in **iambic pentameter**, which gives the poem a stately, formal tone befitting its didactic content.
- **Stanza and Line Breaks:** The poem consists of four 8-line stanzas, which organize thoughts clearly while building a cumulative moral vision.
- **Enjambment:** Frequent enjambment, e.g., “And yet don’t look too good, nor talk too wise: / If you can dream...” lends fluidity and a natural speech-like rhythm.

3. Theme and Subject Matter

The poem’s central theme is **self-mastery**—developing an inner strength that is undisturbed by external circumstances. It touches on:

- **Resilience in adversity**
- **Control over emotions and reactions**
- **Balance between humility and confidence**
- **Time management and endurance**

While not overtly religious, the poem explores **ethical, moral, and philosophical ideals**, advocating the path of detached excellence.

4. Tone and Mood

- **Tone:** Kipling’s tone is **earnest, instructive, and paternal**, offering firm but loving guidance.
- **Mood:** The mood is **uplifting and empowering**, instilling courage and introspection in the reader.

There is neither bitterness nor sentimentality—the emotion is grounded and tempered by stoic rationality.

5. Philosophical and Spiritual Interpretation

Kipling’s poem aligns remarkably with **Vedantic and Upanishadic** teachings as well as **Stoicism**:

- **Bhagavad Gita (2.14, 2.38):** “Treat pleasure and pain, gain and loss, victory and defeat alike”—mirrors “If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster / And treat those two impostors just the same.”ⁱ
- **Katha Upanishad (1.2.6–7):**ⁱⁱ The path of inner discipline, not swayed by joy or sorrow, is advocated in both texts.
- **Vachanamrut (Gadhada II-37):** Emphasizes equanimity in the face of praise or insult—echoing Kipling’s call for non-attachment to public opinion.
- **Stoicism (Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius):** The Stoic value of **self-control over external chaos** is echoed throughout the poem.

The poem also upholds **Dharma** (righteous conduct), **Shraddha** (faith), and **Titiksha** (forbearance), integrating universal ethical and spiritual ideals.

Rudyard Kipling’s poem “If—” resonates deeply with **Upanishadic and Vedantic wisdom**, as well as with teachings from the **Shrimad Bhagavad Gita**, the **Vachanamrut**, and the **Shrimad Bhagavat Mahapurān**. Although Kipling was writing from a Western context, many of the values he espouses—**detachment, inner**

strength, equanimity, self-mastery, and steadfastness—are central to **Sanatana Dharma**.

Below is a thematic alignment of the poem “If—” with scriptural references from these traditions:

1. Equanimity in Success and Failure

Poem Line:

“If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster / And treat those two impostors just the same;”

Scriptural Parallels:

- **Bhagavad Gita 2.38:**ⁱⁱⁱ

“Sukha-duḥkhe same kṛtvā lābhālābhau jayājayau / tato yuddhāya yujyasva naivam pāpam avāpsyasi”
(“Treat pleasure and pain, gain and loss, victory and defeat alike, and then engage in your duty—thus you will not incur sin.”)

- **Katha Upanishad 1.2.6:**^{iv}

“Na jāyate mriyate vā kadācin nāyam bhūtvā bhavitā vā na bhūyah”
(The self is beyond birth and death and is thus unaffected by loss or gain.)

- **Vachanamrut Gadhada II-37:**

“A devotee of God should remain unaffected by honour or insult, just as the sky is unaffected by clouds.”

Kipling’s counsel to treat success and failure alike reflects the **Vedantic emphasis on detachment from dualities**.

2. Self-Mastery and Inner Willpower

Poem Line:

“If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew / To serve your turn long after they are gone, / And so hold on when there is nothing in you / Except the Will which says to them: ‘Hold on!’”

Scriptural Parallels:

- **Bhagavad Gita 6.5:**^v

“Uddhared ātmanātmānam nātmānam avasādayet”
(“One must elevate oneself by the self; do not degrade yourself.”)

- **Shvetashvatara Upanishad 2.9:**

“Yoked to the Self, the mind becomes fearless and strong.”

- **Vachanamrut Gadhada III-28:**

“The greatest strength of the soul is its resolute will to remain firm in dharma even when afflicted by misery.”

Kipling celebrates **the supremacy of willpower**, echoing the Vedantic view of the **Atman as the inner ruler** and strength of man.

3. Detachment and Restraint

Poem Line:

“If you can dream—and not make dreams your master; / If you can think—and not make thoughts your aim;”

Scriptural Parallels:

- **Bhagavad Gita 3.7:**^{vi}

“Yas tv indriyāṇi manasā niyamyārabhate’rjuna / karmendriyaiḥ karma-yogam asaktaḥ sa viśiṣyate”
(“One who controls the senses and acts without attachment excels.”)

• **Isa Upanishad Verse 1:**^{vii}

“Tenā tyaktena bhūñjīthā mā grdhaḥ kasya svid dhanam”
(“Enjoy by renunciation; do not covet what belongs to others.”)

This reflects the **Vedantic teaching of balance**—engage with the world, but don't be enslaved by it.

4. Patience, Truthfulness, and Forbearance

Poem Line:

“If you can wait and not be tired by waiting, / Or being lied about, don't deal in lies, / Or being hated, don't give way to hating”

Scriptural Parallels:

• **Bhagavad Gita 16.1–3:**^{viii}

Lists divine qualities like *kṣamā* (forgiveness), *satya* (truthfulness), *dayā* (compassion), and *ārjava* (simplicity).

• **Mundaka Upanishad 3.1.5:**^{ix}

“Satyameva jayate nānrtam”
(“Truth alone triumphs, not falsehood.”)

• **Shrimad Bhagavatam 11.19.36:**^x

“Titikṣā – forbearance” is described as an essential virtue for those walking the path of liberation.

Kipling's message of truth, endurance, and non-retaliation aligns with **Dharma and Satya**.

5. Humility and Moderation in Pride

Poem Line:

“If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue, / Or walk with kings—nor lose the common touch,”

Scriptural Parallels:

• **Bhagavad Gita 5.18:**^{xi}

“Vidya-vinaya-sampanne brāhmaṇe gavi hastini... samadarśinaḥ”

(*The wise see the same divinity in a learned Brahmin, an elephant, a dog, or an outcaste.*)

• **Vachanamrut Gadhada I-24:**

“Even if he is praised by the whole world, a true devotee considers himself a servant of all.”

This reflects the **Vedantic and Bhakti view of humility and universal respect**.

6. Time, Duty, and the Value of Every Moment

Poem Line:

“If you can fill the unforgiving minute / With sixty seconds' worth of distance run”

Scriptural Parallels:

• **Bhagavad Gita 2.47:**^{xii}

“Karmany-evādhikāras te mā phaleṣhu kadāchana”
(“Your right is to perform your duty, not to the fruits thereof.”)

• **Vachanamrut Gadhada II-28:**^{xiii}

“A moment wasted without remembrance of God is a moment lost forever.”

• **Shrimad Bhagavatam 2.1.12:**

“Ayur harati vai puṁsām...”—Every rising and setting of the sun takes away one's life except for those who use time in spiritual pursuit.

Kipling's emphasis on the value of **each minute** echoes the spiritual view of **time as sacred** and duty-bound.

7. Detachment from Praise and Criticism

Poem Line:

“If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you, / If all men count with you, but none too much;”

Scriptural Parallels:

• **Bhagavad Gita 12.15:**^{xiv}

“Yasmat na udvijate loko lokan na udvijate ca yah”
(*He who does not disturb others and is not disturbed by others is dear to Me.*)

• **Vachanamrut Gadhada I-19:**

“He who is unaffected by praise and insults alike is a true devotee.”

This detachment from the **opinions of others** reflects the **realized soul's freedom** from bondage.

Conclusion: Vedantic Manhood and Spiritual Heroism

The culmination—

“Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it, / And— which is more—you'll be a Man, my son!”

—mirrors the **Upanishadic concept of the Purusha or Jivanmukta**—one who has attained complete mastery over his senses, ego, and reactions.

This idea also parallels the **Bhagavad Gita's description of the Stitha-prajna** (BG 2.55–2.72)^{xv}—a person of steady wisdom.

Final Reflection

Kipling's “If—” can be viewed as a **modern Vedantic sadhana manual**—a secular scripture that prescribes the path of **self-discipline, detachment, and ethical living**. It upholds the **Sanātana values** of:

- **Shraddha** (faith),
- **Viveka** (discernment),
- **Vairagya** (detachment),
- **Dharma** (righteous action),
- and **Atma-nishtha** (self-dependence).

Though born in colonial Britain, Kipling here unknowingly voices the **timeless spiritual ideals of the Vedas and the Gita**, making this poem universally resonant and deeply Indian in its philosophical undercurrent.

6. Historical and Cultural Context

- **Written in 1895**, in the wake of British imperial decline and societal instability.
- Kipling was grappling with the fallout of the **Jameson Raid** in South Africa—an ill-fated political scandal that possibly inspired the poem.
- The Victorian ideals of **masculine virtue, stoicism, and duty** find reflection here.
- While a product of British colonial culture, its universal values transcend time and geography.

7. Poet's Perspective and Emotional Mindset

Kipling's voice in the poem is that of a **father, mentor, and moral philosopher**:

- The poem was dedicated to his son **John Kipling**, who later died in World War I—adding emotional gravitas in retrospect.

- Kipling's own life was fraught with personal tragedy and political disillusionment. The poem reads as a **response to suffering**—a prescription for dignified endurance.
- Emotions of **hope, restraint, and deep moral concern** underpin the piece.

8. Target Audience and Purpose

- The direct address “my son” reveals the **primary audience**: Kipling's child, but metaphorically, all young men stepping into the world.
- The poem's purpose is **moral instruction**, but it also **inspires inner strength**—making it relevant to educators, leaders, and seekers alike.
- It serves as a **guidebook for manhood**, but its deeper message applies equally across gender and age: the making of character.

9. Personal Interpretation

Kipling's “If—” is a **blueprint for integrity** in a chaotic world. Its final couplet—“Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it, / And—which is more—you'll be a Man, my son!”—does not just celebrate victory, but the evolution of moral character.

Personally, the poem inspires a **stillness within motion**, reminding us that dignity is not found in success or fame, but in our **response to adversity**. In a world of fleeting certainties, Kipling invites us to develop the one thing that endures: **the self** governed by wisdom, humility, and inner power.

Conclusion

Kipling's “If—” culminates in the promise of wholeness: “Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it, and—which is more—you'll be a Man, my son.” This is not the masculinity of power or conquest, but of spiritual nobility—**the fulfilment of human potential through inner balance, resilience, and wisdom**.

In harmony with **Sanātana Dharma**, the poem echoes the voice of the *Guru*, offering a map to transcend the fleeting illusions of life and awaken to one's higher self. It reflects the *sāttvika* path described in the Gita, where actions are performed without attachment and the self stands untouched by external circumstances.

Thus, “If—” endures not simply as an ode to ideal conduct, but as a mirror to the **Atman**, the inner Self, which rises above turmoil with the steady glow of spiritual strength. Whether read as paternal advice, poetic excellence, or a path of inner realization, the poem continues to inspire those who walk the path of **truth, patience, humility, and fearless living**.

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- Marcus Aurelius. *Meditations*.
- Epictetus. *The Discourses*.
- George Orwell, *Essay on Kipling* (1942)

Foot Note

- I. मात्रास्पर्शास्तु कौन्तेय शीतोष्णसुखदुःखदाः |
आगमापायिनोऽनित्यास्तांस्तितिक्षस्व भारत || 14||
- II. न सांपरायः प्रतिभाति बालम् प्रमाद्यन्तं वित्तमोहेन मूढम् ।
अयं लोको नास्ति पर इति मानी पुनः पुनर्वशमापद्यते मे ॥ ६ ॥
- III. सुखदुःखे समे कृत्वा लाभालाभौ जयाजयौ |
ततो युद्धाय युज्यस्व नैवं पापमवाप्स्यसि || 38||
- IV. न सांपरायः प्रतिभाति बालम् प्रमाद्यन्तं वित्तमोहेन मूढम् ।
अयं लोको नास्ति पर इति मानी पुनः पुनर्वशमापद्यते मे ॥ ६ ॥
- V. उद्धरेदात्मनात्मानं नात्मानमवसादयेत् |
आत्मैव ह्यात्मनो बन्धुरात्मैव रिपुरात्मनः || 5||
- VI. यस्त्विन्द्रियाणि मनसा नियम्यारभतेऽर्जुन |
कर्मेन्द्रियैः कर्मयोगमसक्तः स विशिष्यते || 7||
- VII. ईशावास्यमिदं सर्वं यत्किञ्च जगत्यां जगत् ।
तेन त्यक्तेन भुञ्जीथा मा गृधः कस्य स्विद्धनम् ॥ १ ॥
- VIII. श्रीभगवानुवाच
अभयं सत्त्वसंशुद्धिर्ज्ञानयोगव्यवस्थितिः ।
दानं दमश्च यज्ञश्च स्वाध्यायस्तप आर्जवम् ॥ १ ॥
अहिंसा सत्यमक्रोधस्त्यागः शान्तिरपैशुनम् ।
दया भूतेष्वलोलुप्त्वं मार्दवं ह्रीरचापलम् ॥ २ ॥
तेजः क्षमा धृतिः शौचमद्रोहो नातिमानिता ।
भवन्ति सम्पदं दैवीमभिजातस्य भारत ॥ ३ ॥
- IX. सत्येन लभ्यस्तपसा ह्येष आत्मा सम्यग्ज्ञानेन ब्रह्मचर्येण नित्यम् ।
अन्तःशरीरे ज्योतिर्मयो हि शुभ्रो यं पश्यन्ति यतयः क्षीणदोषाः ॥ ५ ॥
- X. शमो मन्निष्ठता बुद्धेर्दम इन्द्रियसंयमः ।
तितिक्षा दुःखसम्पर्षो जिह्वोपस्थजयो धृतिः ॥ ३६ ॥
दण्डन्यासः परं दानं कामत्यागस्तपः स्मृतम् ।
स्वभावविजयः शौर्यं सत्यं च समदर्शनम् ॥ ३७ ॥
अन्यच्च सुनृता वाणी कविभिः परिकीर्तिता ।
कर्मस्वसङ्गमः शौचं त्यागः सन्न्यास उच्यते ॥ ३८ ॥
धर्म इष्टं धनं नृणां यज्ञोऽहं भगवत्तमः ।
दक्षिणा ज्ञानसन्देशः प्राणायामः परं बलम् ॥ ३९ ॥
- XI. विद्याविनयसम्पन्ने ब्राह्मणे गवि हस्तिनि |
शुनि चैव श्रपाके च पण्डिताः समदर्शिनः || 18||
- XII. कर्मण्येवाधिकारस्ते मा फलेषु कदाचन |
मा कर्मफलहेतुर्भूर्मा ते सङ्गोऽस्त्वकर्मणि || 47 ||
- XIII. किं प्रमत्तस्य बहुभिः परोक्षैर्हायनैरिह ।
वरं मुहूर्तं विदितं घटते श्रेयसे यतः ॥ १२ ॥
- XIV. यस्मान्नोद्विजते लोको लोकान्नोद्विजते च यः |
हर्षामर्षभयोद्वेगैर्मुक्तो यः स च मे प्रियः || 15||
- XV. श्रीभगवानुवाच
प्रजहाति यदा कामान्सर्वान्पार्थ मनोगतान् ।
आत्मन्येवात्मना तुष्टः स्थितप्रज्ञस्तदोच्यते ॥ ५५ ॥