

Chapter 23

Family

The Sunday Call

Reena's phone buzzes at exactly 3:00 PM. Sunday. Like clockwork.

Mom calling.

She stares at the screen, debating. Answer and endure another hour of thinly veiled criticism? Or let it go to voicemail and deal with the guilt text tomorrow?

She answers.

"Hi, Mom."

"Reena! Finally. I've been waiting all week to hear from you."

Three days. It's been three days since they last spoke. But Reena doesn't correct her.

"How are you?"

"Oh, you know. Your father's knee is acting up again. And your brother still hasn't called—can you believe it? Three weeks! But that's Arun. He only calls when he needs something."

Reena shifts her phone to the other ear, mentally preparing for the familiar script.

"And you? Still working those crazy hours?"

"I'm managing."

"You know, Mrs. Kapoor's daughter just got married. Beautiful wedding. They're saying she'll have her first baby by next year."

Here it comes.

"That's nice for them."

"You're thirty-five, Reena. When are you going to think about settling down?"

Reena closes her eyes. They've had this conversation seventeen times in the past year. Seventeen. She's counted.

"Mom, I'm focused on my career right now."

"Career, career. What good is a career if you have no one to share it with? You're wasting your best years—"

"I need to go. I have work to finish."

A pause. Then the wounded tone. "Always too busy for your own mother. Fine. Go."

Reena hangs up and sits in the silence of her apartment.

She loves her mother. She does. But every conversation leaves her feeling like she's failing an exam she didn't sign up to take.

Not married. Not close enough. Not calling enough. Not *enough*.

And the guilt—God, the guilt—follows her everywhere.

The Ties That Bind and Wound

Family.

We don't choose them. We're born into their patterns, their expectations, their wounds. And they shape us before we're old enough to understand we're being shaped.

The problem isn't that we love them. Love is natural.

The problem is that love gets tangled with obligation, guilt, expectation, and duty in ways that strangle us.

You're supposed to call more. Visit more. Forgive instantly. Tolerate endlessly.

Because they're *family*.

And if you don't—if you set boundaries, if you choose distance, if you prioritize your own well-being—you're selfish. Ungrateful. A bad daughter, son, sibling.

Reena carries this weight constantly.

Every decision she makes—where she lives, how she spends her time, who she dates (or doesn't)—is shadowed by the question: **What will my family think?**

Not: **What do I think?**

And that's the cage.

Family can be a source of love, support, belonging. But it can also be a prison built from expectations you never agreed to.

The Gītā understands this. Intimately.

Because the entire teaching happens in the context of family. Arjuna stands on a battlefield, looking at his uncles, cousins, teachers—people he loves—people he’s being asked to fight.

And he breaks.

The Gītā Speaks: Duty Beyond Blood

Arjuna’s crisis isn’t abstract. It’s visceral. It’s *family*.

“How can I fight my own kinsmen?” he asks Kṛṣṇa. “These are my teachers, my relatives. Killing them would bring only sin.”

He’s paralyzed—not by fear, but by the weight of familial obligation.

And Kṛṣṇa’s response is shocking:

“For the soul there is never birth nor death. Nor, having once been, does he ever cease to be. He is unborn, eternal, ever-existing, undying, and primordial.”

— *Bhagavad-gītā* 2.20

Wait—what does this have to do with family?

Everything.

Kṛṣṇa is saying: The people you call *family* aren’t just their roles. They’re souls. Eternal. Beyond the temporary relationships of this life.

Your mother isn’t just your mother. Your brother isn’t just your brother. They’re individuals on their own journeys.

And you—you aren’t just a daughter, son, sibling. You’re a soul with your own path, your own *dharma*, your own duty that extends beyond family expectations.

This doesn’t mean abandon your family. It means: Stop confusing love with obligation. Stop letting guilt dictate your choices. Stop sacrificing your actual purpose to fulfill roles that were assigned, not chosen.

And then Kṛṣṇa says something even more radical:

“It is far better to perform one’s own prescribed duty, even though it may be of lesser quality, than to do another’s duty perfectly. Destruction in the

course of performing one's own duty is better than engaging in another's duties, for to follow another's path is dangerous."

— *Bhagavad-gītā* 3.35

Read that again: **Following another's path—even if it's your family's path—is dangerous.**

Not wrong. Not bad. *Dangerous.*

Because when you live according to someone else's expectations, you abandon your actual self. You betray your own *dharma*. And that betrayal—no matter how well-intentioned—leads to suffering.

Reena's mother wants her to get married, have children, follow the traditional path.

And maybe that's Mom's path. Maybe it brought her meaning.

But it's not Reena's duty to fulfill her mother's unlive dreams. Her duty is to discover her own.

Living the Teaching: Honoring Without Obeying

So what does Reena do?

Cut off her family? Rebel? Burn bridges?

No.

The Gītā doesn't teach rejection. It teaches clarity.

Here's the practice:

Practice

The Family Dharma Practice

1. **Distinguish love from obligation.** Ask yourself: "Am I doing this because I genuinely want to support this person? Or because I feel guilty if I don't?" Love acts freely. Obligation acts from fear.
2. **Identify your actual duty.** What is /your/ *dharma*—not your role in the family, but your essential function in this life? Are you honoring that? Or sacrificing it to meet someone else's expectations?
3. **Set boundaries with compassion.** You can love someone and still say no. You can honor your parents without living the life they want for you.

Boundaries aren't rejection—they're clarity.

4. Accept that you can't control their reaction. Your mother may be hurt. Your father may be disappointed. You can't fix that. You can only be true to your own path and trust that's enough.

This is hard. Brutally hard.

Because family taught us that love means sacrifice. That saying no means you don't care. That boundaries are betrayal.

But the Gītā says: That's not love. That's attachment.

Real love honors the other person's soul—their eternal nature beyond the role. And it honors yours too.

Reena can love her mother without becoming who her mother wants her to be. She can honor her family without abandoning herself.

That's the path.

The Way Forward: The Honest Conversation

The next Sunday, Reena's phone buzzes at 3:00 PM.

She answers.

"Hi, Mom."

"Reena! I was just telling Mrs. Sharma about you. She asked if you're seeing anyone—"

"Mom," Reena interrupts, gently but firmly. "I need to talk to you about something."

A pause. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong. But I need you to understand something. I know you want me to get married. I know you think I'm wasting my life. But this is *my* life. And I'm living it the way that feels right to me."

Silence.

Then: "You think I don't want you to be happy?"

"I think you want me to be happy in a way that makes sense to you. But your path isn't mine, Mom. And that's okay."

"I'm your mother. I know what's best—"

"No," Reena says, and the word feels like freedom. "You know what was best for you. I need to discover what's best for me."

Her mother's voice cracks. "So I raised you just to have you reject everything I taught you?"

And this—this is the moment.

Reena could crumble. Apologize. Take it back.

Or she could stand firm.

"I'm not rejecting you," she says quietly. "I'm honoring myself. And I hope one day you can see that's not the same thing."

The call doesn't end well. Her mother is hurt. Angry. Reena knows it'll be days, maybe weeks, before they speak again.

And the guilt is there. Familiar. Heavy.

But beneath it—something new.

Peace.

Not because the relationship is fixed. It isn't. Maybe it never will be.

But because Reena finally chose her own *dharma* over someone else's expectations.

And that, the Gītā says, is the only path to freedom.

Reflection

- Where are you living according to your family's expectations rather than your own dharma? What's the cost of that betrayal?
- Can you distinguish between love and obligation in your family relationships? What would change if you acted from love alone?
- What boundary have you been afraid to set? What would honoring your own path require you to say or do?