

The Bhagavad Gita

A Study Course

By John Algeo

Analysis and commentary in 28 lessons



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P.O. Box 270, Wheaton, Illinois 60189-0270

THE BHAGAVAD GITA, Lesson 1

A. Preface to the Bhagavad Gita

The Bhagavad Gita is one of the world's most important books—indeed, one of the great books of human culture, Eastern and Western alike.

In India, the Gita is many things: it is the major guidebook to the spiritual life in the Hindu tradition; it is an *eirenicon*—a work that harmonizes the diverse views of life that find a place within traditional Indic religious philosophy, and it is an inspirational and culture-defining book that is to Indian society what the gospels are to the West. It is hard to overstate the importance and centrality of the Gita to Indian life.

The Gita has been also, however, a powerful influence in the West. It is indeed part of a remarkable chain of links connecting East and West. The New England Transcendentalists—a group of nineteenth-century Americans who were an important school of thinkers and writers, in a number of respects anticipating later Theosophical thought—read the first English translation of the Gita. Henry David Thoreau, one of that group, in particular wrote about reading the Gita on the shore of Walden Pond, and its philosophy inspired a famous essay of his, “On Civil Disobedience,” about how to cope with societal injustice. Much later, when Mohandas Gandhi was a young man and a law student in England, he was introduced to the Gita by Theosophists, and then he read Thoreau's essay, which in turn inspired his policy of *satyagraha* or passive resistance. Later Martin Luther King was in turn inspired by Gandhi's policy to create his own program of nonviolence. So the Gita has echoed back and forth across the globe between India and America, as a defining document of contemporary thought and action. No other work has had a comparable influence across cultures in binding together East and West.

But what is the Gita in itself?

The Gita is a poem (the word *gita* means “song”). It is a very small part of the greatest and longest epic ever written—the Mahabharata, which is far longer than the Greek *Odyssey* and *Iliad* combined. It recounts the story of a great civil war. Epics typically show the values and defining characteristics of a people. The Mahabharata is in that way the quintessential story of India. But it is also the story of all human beings, a universal epic, for it deals with fundamental human motives, frustrations, quandaries, and joys.

The Gita deals with a basic theme in the Mahabharata—*dharma* or the way we should act because of who and what we are. In particular, the Gita is about a moral quandary in which the hero in the Mahabharata war faces fundamental questions about the right way to live. The poem operates on two levels—historical and archetypal. It is a history of an actual battle fought near modern Delhi at a turning point in human history. But it is also an archetypal myth about the struggle that each one of us experiences within ourselves.

The dual level of the poem is made clear in the opening two words of the poem: “Dharmakshetre, Kurukshetre,” which mean “On the field of dharma, on the Field of the

Kurus.” The Kurus were the ruling family of India at the time of the poem, and Kurukshetra is an actual geographical location, a field, near modern Delhi where the ancient civil war was fought. So the second word of the poem tells us that we are dealing with a particular place and time, millennia ago, in the heroic age of India, and half way around the globe from twenty-first century America.



But the first word of the poem tells us that we are dealing with a timeless reality. *Dharma* (a central word in the poem) means, among other things, the essential nature of a thing or person. And so the poem is about the “field” or subject matter of what is essentially real in life. In reading the Gita, we cannot ignore its historical setting, on the Field of the Kurus, but what is most important for all peoples everywhere is what the poem has to say about the field of dharma.

The story centers on Prince Arjuna, the middle of five sons of the royal house (called Kauravas—descendants of the ancient king Kuru), whose father has died, leaving them as wards of their uncle, who himself has many sons. Arjuna’s cousins (called Pandavas), under the leadership of the eldest, the wicked Duryodhana, have plotted to cheat Arjuna and his brothers out of their legitimate inheritance and even to murder them.

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Arjuna, who belongs to the *kshatriya* or warrior caste, is called upon by his duty in life to fight against evil and for the right. He therefore is required by his social duties to defend his brothers’ legitimate claim to their kingdom against their usurping cousins. On the eve of the battle, however, Arjuna experiences a crisis of conscience. On the one hand, he knows that his duty as a *kshatriya* warrior compels him to defend his brothers’ rights; on the other hand, however, his duty to his family requires that he harm none of them, whatever they may be or have done. And those he will be fighting include his cousins, his grandfather, and even his teacher, with whom the bond of support is even stronger than with blood relatives.

Arjuna sees the terrible price to be paid for killing members of his own family. He sees no good coming from the battle and only evil from his own part in it. He therefore calls upon his friend and charioteer, Shri Krishna, for advice. Krishna is a cousin of Arjuna’s and a childhood friend, but he is not merely human. Though Arjuna does not realize it at the start of

the poem, Krishna is a divine incarnation—god made flesh. The Bhagavad Gita, which means “The Lord’s Song,” is Krishna’s answer to Arjuna’s desperation.

The archetypal meaning of the poem is that within each of us a battle rages between selfish impulses that ignore the claims of justice and mercy and a realization that ultimately we are all connected in a unity that embraces all humanity and the whole world. Arjuna is our conscious mind, which must make the choice of how we will live. The wicked cousins are our impulses to self-centeredness and greed. Krishna is the divine spark within us, our higher Self, which is always available to rein in the horses of our feelings and thoughts and to guide us in the battle of life, if we will only seek that help.

Arjuna’s quandary is a threefold one. Generalized to the common human situation, its three aspects can be formulated as follows:

1. How can we act freely and unconditionally?
2. How can we have confidence in the power of goodness to make all things right?
3. How can we choose between unclear alternatives to resolve the dilemmas we face?

The message that Krishna, our higher Self, gives to Arjuna, our conscious mind, is a threefold one. First, in all our actions, we must be motivated to do what is truly right, not what seems comfortable or convenient. That will give us the skill in action that we need and for which Karma Yoga (coming to wholeness by right action) is the answer.

Second, if we act out of that motive and with a realization that a divine plan orders all things in the world, the results of our actions will be good. That will give us the vision of Reality that we need and for which Bhakti Yoga (coming to wholeness by devoted confidence) is the answer.

Third, we can know what we should do—what is truly a right action for us—only if we first know ourselves—who we, in truth, are. We are not the selfish desires of the wicked cousins. We are not the confused and uncertain mind of Arjuna. As Arjuna discovers at the end of the poem, we are, in fact, ourselves Krishna, the divine spark, the higher Self. That gives us the knowledge that we need to choose between unclear alternatives and for which Jñana Yoga (coming to wholeness by direct insight into the nature of things) is the answer.

The Gita is a song sung in the midst of a battle. It is a celebration of peace and harmony in the midst of life’s confusion. It is a timeless assurance that we each have within ourselves the answers to all our questions and confusions. We need only call upon that inner power to discover who we are, what we can trust, and how we should act.

B. The Text of the Poem

Participants in this seminar may use whatever translation of the Gita they prefer. In fact it is good to use several translations at the same time—to compare how they express the ideas of the poem. There is an old Italian proverb: *Traduttore, traditore* “The translator is a traitor.” The play on words works better in Italian than in English, but the point of the proverb is that it

is impossible to translate exactly the meanings, nuances, and associations of one language into another. So, in reading translations from another language, we are helped by using several different ones for the same text. Different translations will focus on different aspects of the same words and so help to convey a better-rounded understanding of the original.

In these papers, quotations will generally be from, or based on, Annie Besant's translation of the Gita. There are several reasons for that choice. First, Besant's translation stays very close to the original, so in it we get something like the literal meaning of the Sanskrit Gita. Second, Besant was a great master of English style, so her translation reads well. Third, she was sensitive to the Theosophical meaning of the poem, so that also comes through well in her version. Occasionally, we will paraphrase Besant's translation somewhat because it was first published in 1895, and so is in spots rather Victorian in style—particularly in imitating the archaic language of old-style English scriptures (with words like *thee* and *hath*).

If you use a literary translation, such as Sir Edwin Arnold's poem, *The Song Celestial*, or Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood's very readable translation, *The Song of God*, be aware that they are much freer versions, often not corresponding verse by verse with the original, but attempting to capture the general sense rather than the particular meanings. A very useful scholarly version is Winthrop Sargent's edition, *The Bhagavad Gita* (2nd ed. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), which gives an interlinear translation and a word-by-word gloss of the Sanskrit (in both devanagari and transliteration) and has a helpful introduction.

C. Activities

Choose a translation (or several translations) of the poem to use for this seminar. You might go to a library or bookshop and browse through a number of translations, comparing the same passages in several to find one that particularly appeals to you. If you are still in doubt—try Annie Besant's.

Skim over the translation(s) you choose to get a general sense of the poem, but don't worry about details, which we will be considering later. Chapter one (which we will start next month) is both difficult and untypical, so don't get bogged down in or discouraged by it. It is a transition from the plot of the epic and uses a great many typical epic conventions.

