

The Bhagavad Gita

A Study Course

By John Algeo

Analysis and commentary in 28 lessons



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 Pandavas after their father Pandu). Their father has died, leaving them as wards of their uncle, who himself has a hundred sons. Arjuna’s cousins (called Kauravas—descendants of the ancient king Kuru), 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.

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.



THE BHAGAVAD GITA, Lesson 2

A. Outline

The treatment of each chapter or discourse in the Gita will begin with an outline of that discourse to show its structure and identify its chief subjects. The numbers in parentheses are of the verses (or slokas) of that discourse.

Discourse 1: The Despondency of Arjuna

Introduction: Transition from the epic context

Setting: The double location (1)

Duryodhana's concern and a catalog of participants (2–11)

Exchange of challenges with a further catalog (12–19)

The problem of the Gita: Arjuna's crisis

The view from the center (20–25)

Conflict of duty (26–37): Cause of despondency

Social consequences (38–44): Meaning of *dharma*

Dilemma of selfish action vs. nonaction (45–47)

B. Commentary

The Gita is a small part of a large epic. It is mainly a conversation between Krishna and Arjuna—although the conversation is rather one-sided since Krishna does most of the talking. And the conversation is held on the eve of a great battle. It is a song sung in the midst of a struggle, a harmony in discord.

Discourse 1 does two things. First, it is a transition from the epic account of the battle to a philosophical discourse about the nature of reality, the purpose of life, the terrible dilemmas we all find ourselves in, and the means for resolving those dilemmas and achieving the purpose of life. Epic conventions and themes are very prominent in this first discourse, but become much less so as the poem progresses.

The first line of the poem tells us where we are—on the battlefield of the Kurus, but more important, on the field of *dharma*—our destiny in life. And that is the second thing that discourse 1 does. It establishes the problem that the protagonist, Arjuna, faces and to which the remaining seventeen discourses of the poem are the solution. His problem is one that every human being has to deal with, namely what choice to make when we are confronted by two options, both of which seem bad to us.

The Greek philosopher Plato said that normally all human beings will do the right thing if they know what the right thing is. To do wrong is to harm oneself, to open oneself to pain. And since no person really wants to do that, when people actually do wrong, they have done so because they did not know that what they were doing was wrong. They have acted, not out of a bad motive, but out of ignorance. Some Indic philosophers would have agreed with Plato, and so—as we shall eventually see—did the author of the Gita.

Arjuna is going to be confronted with a dilemma. He has to do something, but whatever he might do seems wrong. He does not know what the right action is, and so he has lost the ability to choose—to discriminate between alternatives. Arjuna’s problem is in fact a problem that all of us share every day of our lives. Charlie Brown, in the “Peanuts” cartoon, once complained that he had to take a test and had gotten ready for it, but he had prepared for a true-false test, and it turned out to be multiple choice. That’s Arjuna, and that’s us. We expect a nice clear set of alternatives: right or wrong, true or false. But what we get are multiple choice questions, and we don’t know how to choose.

Let us now turn to the poem and see what Arjuna’s problem is.

The first verse (or “sloka”) of the poem is spoken by the old, blind King Dhritarastra. He is the father of the wicked Kaurava brothers, led by Duryodhana (whose name might be somewhat freely translated as “dirty fighter”). Duryodhana and his brothers have persecuted their cousins, the Pandavas, by stealing all their possessions, trying to murder them, and driving them into exile. Dhritarastra knows that what his sons are doing is wrong—but they *are* his sons and he does not have the clear-sightedness to correct them. In fact, he does not have any sight at all. He is blind—both physically and morally. Because he cannot himself see, he asks his charioteer, Sanjaya, to tell him what is happening—what his “people” (his sons) and the Pandavas (Arjuna and his four brothers) are doing on the field of battle and on the field of life.

Because ancient warriors rode in chariots and needed their hands free to wield their weapons, each warrior had a charioteer to handle the horses and guide the chariot. The charioteer did not fight himself, but merely observed the events of the battle and guided the chariot to the appropriate place on the field. (All of this readily lends itself to a moral or allegorical interpretation. For example, we can see the chariot as the body, the horses as the senses, the warrior in the chariot as the mind or ego, and the charioteer as the higher self or “silent witness” within us.)

Dhritarastra’s charioteer has the gift of clairvoyance, so he can tell the blind king everything that is happening. And the whole of the Gita after this first verse, in which Dhritarastra asks Sanjaya what is going on, is Sanjaya’s answer. The Gita has several levels of reality and of discourse within it. First, there is the reality of the battle at Kurukshetra. Then there is the conversation between Dhritarastra (verse 1) and Sanjaya (the rest of the Gita) within that battle. Then there is the conversation between others, such as Arjuna and Krishna, which Sanjaya shortly begins to report. We have worlds within worlds in the Gita, just as we do in life itself.

In verse 2, Sanjaya begins to tell what is happening. He says that Duryodhana (the eldest of the wicked cousins) has looked at the army of the Pandavas and decided that they are disturbingly strong. He is worried that they might win the battle, so he goes to talk with his teacher, Drona (who was also the teacher of the Pandavas in happier and more peaceful days). In verses 3–11, Duryodhana describes to his teacher the state of affairs as he sees it. This description is part of the transition from the epic style of the larger work, the Mahabharata. Epics all over the world include, as part of their technique, lists or catalogs—especially of

names of warriors. And these verses are such a conventional list of some of the chief warriors in the battle.

Duryodhana's speech to his teacher leads up to an urging in verse 11 that, in view of the strength of his cousins, the Pandavas, all his troops should do everything they can to guard Bhishma. Bhishma is the grandfather of both the Kauravas and the Pandavas. As a young man, he made a heaven-shaking vow that included the promise always to support the ruler of the land and never to oppose that ruler. Because of his great virtue, the gods granted him the gift of choosing his own time and place of death. He is the most respected person in his entire family, so Duryodhana made him General of his army—an appointment Bhishma could not refuse because of his vow. But Duryodhana is terrified that, if Bhishma is somehow killed, the Pandavas will win the battle, so he wants the old Grandsire to be protected at all costs.

To encourage his fearful grandson, and perhaps to shame him a bit as well, Grandfather Bhishma sounds a loud blast on his conch shell. The shell of the conch mollusk was used as a horn; blowing into it produces an eerie deep-toned sound. Bhishma's blast of the conch begins a noise exchange between both armies of other conches, drums, horns—a tumultuous uproar. This sort of exchange was a conventional challenge to battle and a boast of prowess. Verses 12–19 describe this exchange by cataloging the warriors and their conches (each of the instruments having a name, just as weapons often do).

In verses 20–23, Arjuna responds to the exchange of conch and other blasts of noise by asking his charioteer, Krishna, to take him to the center of the field so that he can survey the two armies about to fight. Several details in these verses are significant for the moral interpretation of the poem. For example, Arjuna is said to have an ape as his crest. This helps to identify the allegorical role Arjuna plays in the poem. He is the human mind, the monkey mind, not yet enlightened by gnosis or buddhi. He is you and me in our daily lives, jumping here and there, not focused.

Arjuna invokes the highest in himself—his charioteer, Krishna—to “stay” his chariot “in the midst, between the two armies.” The two armies represent the conflicting and striving opposites of life. If we are to be engaged with them in their struggle, it may seem prudent to know where we are, to behold the situation around us, to gaze on those with whom we must come to terms. But Arjuna has already had much experience with the warriors on both sides and should know them all. His request to be quiet in the middle suggests an unwillingness to make the difficult choice in circumstances requiring that a choice be made. The naming of characters with a variety of epithets is another characteristic of all epics and often tells us something about the characters. In verse 24, Arjuna is called “Gudakesha,” which means “Lord of Sleep.” In Arjuna, buddhi (the faculty of being awake and of making right choices) is still asleep.

There is, however, an irony about verses 20–23. We can look at them in two different ways. If Arjuna were awake, had the insight of buddhi active in him, knew how to choose—then to stay his chariot in the midst of conflicting forces would be the right way to act. He would then be in the middle of the field—not to find out what was going on—but to be at the still point of the turning world. As it is, however, Arjuna does not want to act at all. He is

nonplussed by the situation in which he finds himself, and does not know how to respond to it.

When Krishna drives Arjuna's chariot to the middle of the field, he says to the warrior (24–25), "O Partha, behold these Kurus gathered together," or, as we might put it in more contemporary idiom, "Well, Arjuna, just look at this family reunion!" And that remark initiates a crisis of conscience in poor Arjuna. He looks, and everywhere he sees relations and friends (26–27). On one side, his brothers. But on the other side, his grandfather, his uncles, his cousins, and even his teacher. The bond between student and teacher was a sacred one—as strong as, if not stronger than, blood ties. Now Arjuna's crisis of conscience is to begin.

[to be continued]

C. Activity

The poem is not quite as exotic as it might seem. Heroic societies all over the world and in all ages have been much the same—in ancient India, in classical Greece, in legendary Japan, and in the inner cities of America. List the values to be found in such heroic societies. To what extent do those values still operate among us? Are they universals of human behavior?



THE BHAGAVAD GITA, Lesson 3

A. Outline

Arjuna's dilemma has three aspects, each of which requires a different solution. The threefold dilemma is set forth in the last half of chapter 1. The numbers in parentheses are of the verses (or slokas).

Discourse 1: The Despondency of Arjuna (continued)

Family duty versus caste duty (28–39): Need for knowledge to choose

Destruction of the social order (40–44): Need for faith in final good

Withdrawal from all action (45–47): Need for skill in action

Colophon: The nature of the Gita

B. Commentary

1. *Family duty versus caste duty.* When Arjuna looks around himself in the midst of the battle, he thinks he has a conflict of duties (or dharmas). He is a kshatriya or warrior-ruler. His caste duty is to right wrongs, to defend the oppressed, to punish evil, to serve justice. His brothers have been wronged and oppressed; his cousins have done evil and injustice. Arjuna's caste duty is clear. But unhappily, those he must take action against are also his family—his cousins, uncle, grandfather, and teachers. And there is a clear family duty never to harm one's relatives, but always to help them.

Arjuna is trapped between these two conflicting duties and does not know how to resolve the conflict. He must discriminate, but is unable to do so. Discrimination is a faculty of buddhi, and buddhi (the principle of being awake) is asleep in Arjuna. Arjuna needs knowledge—not knowledge of facts, but knowledge of what is most important in life, knowledge that will let him make difficult choices correctly, knowledge to discriminate between alternatives. Arjuna articulates this personal dilemma in verses 28–39. To resolve this dilemma Arjuna needs discriminative knowledge (*jñāna*) which comes from being awake to the Truth (*buddhi*).

All of us share Arjuna's dilemma. We are Arjuna. Like him, we find ourselves faced throughout life, not with a clear choice between good and evil (which would be easy to make), but with a murky choice between partial goods and partial evils. Every day, we have to decide what we will do, what duties we will perform. And we need guidance in choosing.

Part of the problem is that both Arjuna and we think of "duty" as something imposed on us from without. "Duty" is something we have to live up to. If we are told, "It is your duty to do this or that," we do not usually respond with great joy. "Duty" implies a limitation on our freedom. It is something we have to do, whether we want to or not. But that is not what the Sanskrit word dharma (often translated "duty" in English) really means. The basic meaning of dharma is our essential core identity. Everything in the cosmos has its own dharma or unique nature and purpose. To follow our dharma is to be genuinely and authentically ourselves. To

fail our dharma is to be false to ourselves. To know what our dharma or duty in life is, we must know who we are. That is one thing Arjuna must learn. And we also.

2. *Destruction of the social order.* But Arjuna's personal dilemma of choosing whether to violate his caste duty or his family duty, which springs from his lack of knowledge of who he really is, has a further implication. The family is the basis of the whole social order. If the family is destroyed or disrupted, so will be society as a whole. Arjuna understands that, and in verses 40–44 he articulates his fear over the future of society as a whole, which will be affected—adversely as it seems to Arjuna—by the family feud in which he is engaged.

In fact, Arjuna is right, or at least partly right. The great battle at Kurukshetra is going to result in the destruction of the social order he has known. The Mahabharata marks the end of the heroic age of India and the beginning of the next period of Indian and human history. It is the boundary between the heroic Bronze Age and our contemporary Iron Age or, as it is called in Hindu chronology, the Kaliyuga. In Indian dice, kali is the one-spot; and to throw a kali is to lose the game—to crap out. So the Kaliyuga is the most degenerate era of history, the losing time. Arjuna foresees that the onset of the Kaliyuga will result from the battle, and he has no faith or confidence, as Tennyson expresses it in his poem *In Memoriam*:

Oh yet we trust that somehow good
Will be the final goal of ill.

All the news is not bad. We must pass through the Iron Age before a new and better Gold Age can start. The old game must end before the new one can begin. We must die to one life before we can be reborn in another. Cycles, as Madame Blavatsky points out in the proem to *The Secret Doctrine*, are the essence of existence. If we are paralyzed by fear of endings, we can never experience new beginnings. What we, and Arjuna, need is the confidence in a final good outcome to life that comes from recognizing an intelligent governing order. The world process is not accidental, but is guided by a plan that may be said to exist in the mind of God. If we devote ourselves to serving that plan, we will have the confidence we need to face the downside of the cycles we experience. That is the second thing Arjuna must learn. And we also.

3. *Withdrawal from all action.* Faced with this double crisis, Arjuna has still a third one. Not knowing how to choose, having no faith that a divine providence is governing the world, Arjuna sees no way to act without karma ensnaring him in the effects of his action. And so he abandons himself to despair and tries to avoid taking any action (verses 45–47).

Arjuna would rather give up his life (46) than do the wrong thing from the wrong motive (45). And so he abandons all action (47). Instead of standing upright in his chariot, he sinks down on its seat—a position of inactivity. Arjuna does not know how to act rightly, and so he thinks he will not act at all. He lacks the skill to act with confidence and decisiveness. That is the third thing Arjuna must learn. And we also.

As it is, however, Arjuna casts aside his bow and arrow, which signifies his rejection of his dharma, his caste duty. But since the bow is also a symbol of the mind and the arrow of thought intelligently directed, Arjuna's casting them aside is also symbolic of the

mindlessness and lack of intelligence in what he is doing. His mind is not buoyed up by devotion, but overborne by grief. Thus he seeks relief in escape and abandon. This is Arjuna's dark night of the soul, his utter despondency.

The first discourse, like all the succeeding ones, ends with a colophon, which is in effect the title of the discourse. All of the colophons follow the same pattern in their wording. We will consider the significance of this pattern later. For the present, it is enough to observe that each of the discourses is called a Yoga, that is, a way of achieving wholeness within ourselves, between ourselves and others, and with the ultimate Reality that is the ground of our being. And the first discourse is no exception. It too is a Yoga; for to achieve wholeness, we must first recognize that we are in a condition of fragmentation. To be buoyed up, we must acknowledge our despondency.

The first discourse is "The Despondency of Arjuna." That is where Arjuna begins the process of learning. That is where we begin our upward journey. He and we will take that journey on the three paths (or margas): the path of knowledge of who we are and hence how to choose (jñāna marga), the path of devotion to the governing intelligence of the universe (bhakti marga), and the path of acting skillfully without being trapped by the consequences of our action (karma marga).

C. Activity

People today sometimes also experience despondency (or "depression" as it is currently termed). Such despondency may be associated with a chemical imbalance in the body, but its symptoms may not be unlike those of Arjuna. Consider the role played in all of our lives (not just in a state of clinical despondency but in everyday experience) of (a) a sense of self-identity and purpose, (b) a faith in providence—a beneficent guiding intelligence in the world, and (c) the ability to act confidently without being paralyzed by an ambitious or neurotic concern over results.



THE BHAGAVAD GITA, Lesson 4

A. Outline

The first discourse of the Gita establishes the problem: Arjuna's threefold dilemma: (1) his lack of discrimination in choosing between conflicting duties, (2) his lack of confidence in a good outcome of the battle, which implies a lack of faith in a beneficent order in the universe, and (3) his lack of skill in action, which leads him to try to withdraw from the world, to renounce action and sink down on the seat of his chariot. In the second discourse, Krishna begins to help Arjuna cope with this dilemma, and he begins with the third aspect: how to act in the world without becoming entrapped by the consequences of one's action. Discourses 2–6 are focused on Karma Yoga, the way to wholeness by acting rightly. Discourse 2, which begins the exposition of Karma Yoga, can be outlined as follows, the numbers in parentheses being those of the verses (or slokas):

Discourse 2: The Way to Wholeness by Reasoning about It

- Krishna's appeal to Arjuna's pride (1–3) and Arjuna's confusion (4–9)
- Krishna's reasoning response (10)

The philosophical argument:

- The Self is immortal (11–25)
- The Self is not a thing, but a process (26–30)

The argument from dharma:

- Heavenly reward, reputation, and earthly reward (31–37)
- Dispassionate action (38)

The argument from Yoga:

- Theory and practice (39–41)
- Vedic action (42–46)
- Nishkama karma (47–53)
- The Sage of Stable Mind (54–72)

B. Commentary

Krishna, like a wise teacher, begins where his student is. Arjuna is a prince, raised to be a warrior, to take pride in his military achievements, to value the macho qualities his calling in life requires, to expect just reward for deeds well done, to be zealous about his reputation, and above all to be courageous in action. So Krishna begins by reminding Arjuna of all that, of everything that the prince's life has implied up to this point, but all of which Arjuna is on the point of abandoning.

To abandon all that Arjuna has thus far been taught to hold dear may be a good thing, or it may not. Everything depends on the motive. As the Master KH wrote to A. P. Sinnett, with

an ironic self-characterization: “We, half-savage Asiatics, judge a man by his motives” (*Mahatma Letters to A. P. Sinnett*, Letter 21, Chronological Edition / Letter 27, 3rd Edition) and again “*motive* is everything for us” (*ibid.* 54/92). What is ultimately important is not what one does, but why one does it. As we shall see, that truth is central to resolving one aspect of Arjuna’s dilemma. It is the key to skill in action. But at this point, Arjuna’s motive is murky. He has not carefully considered what he is doing and why. He is merely responding in a confused way to the dilemma he finds himself in. He does not know what he is doing or why.



Thus Krishna tries to shock Arjuna into introspection by shaming him, by calling him “ignoble,” literally “un-aryan” (2). The ruling class in heroic India were the “noble ones,” the aryan. But Arjuna is behaving in a way that is inconsistent with his upbringing, without having thought it all through.

In all epics, the main characters have many epithets or descriptive names that characterize them, and so do Arjuna, Krishna, and the rest in the Gita. At this point (3), Krishna addresses Arjuna with an epithet that is ironic and therefore shaming: “Parantapa,” which means “conqueror of foes.” Arjuna is giving up before the battle even starts, so how can he conquer any foes? The foes Arjuna must conquer are, of course, not just the other army on the battlefield of Kurukshetra, but the foes within himself on the life-field of Dharmakshetra.

Arjuna responds to this shaming speech of Krishna’s with a confession of confusion—and a demonstration of it as well. Arjuna does not understand Krishna’s point that motive and self-understanding are the critical factors. He thinks only that Krishna is urging him to do something he does not want to do, something that seems to him to represent a conflict between his duties to society (his caste duties) and his duties to his family (not harming any of them). And so he confesses, “My mind is confused as to duty” or dharma (7).

By that confession, Arjuna unwittingly identifies the core of his problem. He is thinking of “dharma” as a complex of duties imposed on him from outside himself: what society or family or religion tells him he ought to do. What others tell us we should do is often a source of conflict and confusion.

In addition to those exterior dharmas or duties imposed from outside, each of us has also a *swadharma*, which arises from within ourselves and indeed is the natural and inevitable expression of who we are. As long as we depend on others to tell us what we should do, we will be in a state of confusion. But when we come to know who and what we really are, we will know what we should do because then what we do arises naturally from our own deepest nature. All religious, philosophical, and mystical traditions tell us that the most important thing in life is to discover who we are, our true nature. That discovery resolves all problems.

By the end of the Gita, Arjuna will discover who he really is, and then he will have no doubt about what he should do. But at the beginning of the Gita, he has not yet made that discovery, and so he is in a state of confusion about who he is and what he should do. He hears voices all around telling him different and conflicting things.

Krishna laughs (10), not at Arjuna, but at his confusion, because Krishna knows how easily that confusion will be removed when Arjuna comes to know his own nature, and he speaks words of understanding and of comfort. Arjuna has spoken wise words (11) because he has recognized the problem of mortality. But Arjuna has missed the solution. Nothing is ever destroyed; things are only transformed. Shiva, one of the three forms of the Supreme, is called the Destroyer, but that is wrong; he is really the transformer and so the regenerator.

The natural condition of the world is impermanence; everything is constantly turning into its opposite, just like the yin and the yang in the great Chinese symbol of the divided circle. The pairs of opposites come and go (14). Amid all this change and impermanence, we as observers must be steadfast and balanced (15, a theme that is elaborated at the end of the discourse in verses 54–72).

Pervading the changing flux of nature, however, there is an indestructible Reality (17). It alone is real; all else is illusion and error—a misperception of the truth. When we come to know the Reality, we perceive that the impermanence and change is only a shadow show (21–25).

But even if we think of the Real as undergoing all these changes we see around us, we should not despair (26–30). Reality does not consist of things, but of processes; and processes are change. There is nothing except the process of change, and what we call “things” or “states” are only momentary snapshots of the change in progress, imaginary boundaries between one phase and the next; they have no reality apart from the ever-changing process itself. This is both a very old and a very modern way of looking at life. Norbert Wiener, the mathematician and developer of cybernetics, said, “We are not stuff that abides, but patterns that perpetuate themselves.” That too is what Krishna is saying.

Krishna follows this philosophical disquisition (11–30) with a return to his earlier appeal to Arjuna’s understanding of his place in society and its externally imposed duties, with honor, shame, rewards, and the expectations of others as the carrot-and-stick of motivation (31–37). It is almost as though, having appealed to Arjuna’s ability to understand the nature of Reality and the implications of that understanding for human behavior, Krishna is saying, “All right, now what do you think about all that conditioning you have had? Shall I talk to you as a thinking man or as a child who has to be bribed and threatened? In either case, what you must do is clear. Recognize it.”

And then, in a meaning-packed verse (38), Krishna tells Arjuna how to act without being snared by the consequences of action: “Taking as equal pleasure and pain, gain and loss, victory and defeat, gird thou for the battle; thus thou shalt not incur sin.” On one level, the simplest one, Krishna is giving Arjuna the advice of Kipling’s poem “If”:

If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster
And treat those two imposters just the same, . . .
If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,
If all men count with you, but none too much;
If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
And—which is more—you'll be a Man, my son!

On another level, Krishna is defining the principle of successful action, called in Sanskrit *nishkama karma*, “action without expectation of results.” But we will return to that later.

[to be continued]

C. Activity

Consider the extent to which motive is a factor in assessing actions—in ordinary life, in legal circumstances, in moral situations. What are the advantages and difficulties in assessing the motive of actions? What is the attitude of society towards motive as a factor in judging actions? For example, what is the difference between murder and manslaughter? What about the maxim “Ignorance is no excuse”? Are there other inconsistencies in our attitudes?

Make a list of all of the duties you have in life—of whatever kind and from whatever source. Do you ever find yourself in Arjuna's position of being faced with incompatible, conflicting duties? What do you do in such circumstances?

The Temple of Delphi is said to have had written upon its walls, *Gnothi seauton*, “Know yourself.” Look for other such examples of exhortations to self-knowledge.

D. References:

Chin, Vic Hao. *The Mahatma Letters to A. P. Sinnett in Chronological Sequence*. Adyar, India: Theosophical Publishing House, 1998.

THE BHAGAVAD GITA, Lesson 5

A. Outline

In the second discourse of the Gita, which opens the third of the poem focusing on Karma Yoga, Krishna first gives several arguments urging Arjuna to fight in the battle. The first of those arguments are philosophical ones about the immortality of the soul and its nature as a process, rather than a thing. Next, Krishna presents arguments based on one's dharma (duty or "calling," to use a Western term), stressing first the rewards for doing one's duty and second the necessity to act without concern for rewards. Krishna is arguing on all fronts, even contradictory ones. The aim is to show Arjuna that whatever kind of reasoning one uses, the conclusion is always the same.

In the last part of the discourse, Krishna gives arguments from Yoga, that is, in this case, ways of acting that unify our divided sense of self. In response to a query from Arjuna, Krishna closes the chapter with a description of what a person who is so unified is like. The last part of the chapter can be outlined as follows, the numbers in parentheses being those of the verses (or slokas):

Discourse 2: The Way to Wholeness by Reasoning about It (continued)

The argument from Yoga:

 Theory and practice (39–41)

 Vedic action (42–46)

 Nishkama karma (47–53)

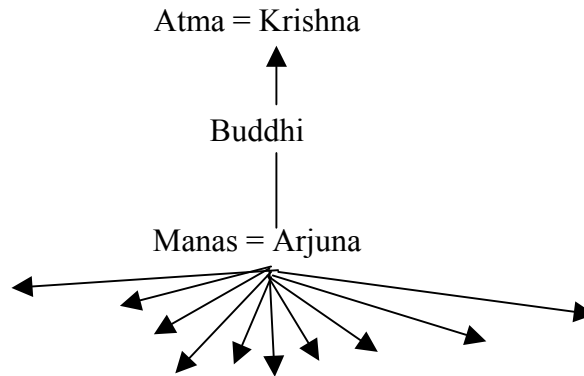
The Sage of Stable Mind (54–72)

B. Commentary

Verse 39: Krishna says in effect: So far we have been talking about theory (*samkhya*, the philosophical system of categories and counting up things); now we're going to talk about action (*yoga*, the process of getting your act together and becoming whole). If you are yoked (Besant translates "imbued with" but the Sanskrit word is *yukta* "yoked" and is a pun on *yoga*) to insight (*buddhi*), you will escape being tied up by your actions. That is, if you really understand yourself, you will know how to act without being bound by the results of your action. This verse addresses particularly the third aspect of Arjuna's dilemma, his lack of skill in action, which is the ability to act successfully.

Verses 40–41: When Krishna tells Arjuna, "In this (practice of yoga) there is no loss of effort," he is saying much the same thing as the Master KH told Mr. Sinnett: "We have one word for all aspirants: TRY" (*Mahatma Letters*, Letter 54, Chronological Edition / Letter 35, 3rd Edition). No effort is ever in vain. And Krishna adds, "Even a little of this knowledge (true dharma, or knowledge of the essential nature of things and of oneself) protects from great fear." Arjuna is afraid—not of death or being injured himself, but of making decisions, of the consequences of his action, and of action itself. He is in an existential funk. Because dharma (who we are and what we should do) is known by *buddhi* (insight into ourselves), the mention

of dharma in this verse leads immediately in the next verse to a consideration of buddhi, which verse 39 has already told us will enable us to act freely and successfully. When buddhi is awake within us, we are one-pointed, focused, we know what we're doing. When buddhi is asleep, we waiver and are irresolute because our minds go this way and that, our thoughts being "many-branched and endless." Buddhi is "one-pointed" and its point is directed toward Atma, the Self, personified by Krishna. But irresolute manas (which is personified by Arjuna) is "many-branched":



There are two kinds of conscious action. In one kind, we do something because of what we expect to get out of it. In the other kind, we do something because it is the thing to do, not because of what we get from it. Verses 42–46 consider the first kind of action; and verses 47–53, the second kind.

Verses 42–46: The Vedas, the Wisdom Hymns of the ancient Indians, were often interpreted literally (just as the Judeo-Christian scriptures are by Jews and Christians in the West). And those who interpreted the Vedas that way were *kamatmana* (43: "with desire for self"), that is persons who identified themselves (*atma*) with their desires (*kama*). So the Vedas were associated with performing ritual sacrifices, with the aim of influencing the gods to get something from them. Thus, Vedic action becomes a synonym for acting with the expectation of getting something for ourselves. That, of course, is a perversion of the underlying wisdom of the Vedic scriptures, but the world is full of perverted interpretations of sacred texts. The Vedas, when viewed that way, instead of being the water of life, are as much use for a wise person as a well in the middle of a flood.

Verses 47–53: Next, Krishna turns to the second kind of action. In verse 47, he gives Arjuna a neat summary statement of Karma Yoga and the solution to the third aspect of Arjuna's dilemma about how to act successfully, that is, without being bound by the results of one's action: "Thy business is with the action only, never with its fruits; so let not the fruit of action be thy motive, nor be thou to inaction attached." That is, do something because it is the thing for you to do. Be concerned with doing it the right way, not with what it accomplishes. Don't worry about what you may get out of it. And don't not act because you are afraid of how an action may affect you.

What Krishna is telling Arjuna is very practical advice and direction. He tells him to act

while “dwelling in union (with his own divine self).” Toward the end of the Gita (18.66), after Arjuna has discovered his true nature, his union with Krishna, and thus his own dharma, that directive is going to be repeated: “Come unto me alone for shelter.” Krishna continues: “Don’t be attached to things. It doesn’t make any difference whether you succeed or fail. Yoga is equanimity” (48). This is the same as the advice from Kipling’s poem “If,” quoted in last month’s paper, to “meet with Triumph and Disaster / And treat those two impostors just the same.” Arjuna is getting this advice from Krishna in the middle of the battlefield, “in the midst between the two armies” (1.21), so he is told to act at all times with that same equanimity, centered, whole. That is the secret of right action.

Action has to be guided by the insight that leads to union (49). We must act out of an understanding of who we truly are. Yoga is skill in action (50), which comes from the insight of buddhi. Persons who are truly wise, who have insight into their own nature, have no need of being told what to do or not to do. They don’t need rules; they know and hence do right naturally. They become indifferent or disgusted with “what has been heard and shall be heard” (52). The term for religious scripture in Sanskrit is *shruti*, meaning literally “what has been heard.” So verse 52 is saying that all past and future scriptures are as useful to a wise person as that well in the middle of a flood (46). But, of course, for the rest of us—who are not yet wise—scriptures, rules, and rites have their uses. It would be an act of what the Greeks called hubris, or arrogant self-pride, to suppose that because the wise don’t need rules, we don’t either. When buddhi or insight is awake and we know who we are, we don’t need scriptures and directions—including those of the Gita (53). But until that time, the scriptures can be very useful.

But what about this wise person who has attained union or wholeness, this person who is steady in wisdom, in meditation, and in thinking? What is such a person like? How does that person talk, sit, and walk—that is, manage the everyday affairs of life? This is what Arjuna wants to know and asks Krishna (54).

Krishna’s answer (55–72) is one of the most famous passages in the Gita. It is called “The Sage of Stable (or Steady) Mind” and is recited by those who are entering the fourth and last stage of life by becoming *sannyasis* or “renunciants,” the complete renunciant being, like the wise person, free of all restrictions. The passage consists of the last eighteen verses of the second discourse. Eighteen is a very important number. The epic of the Mahabharata has eighteen volumes. The Gita has eighteen chapters. The great war on Kurukshetra lasted eighteen days. The battle involved eighteen armies. So eighteen is said to be the number of the Gita and the Mahabharata. But it is not limited to those Indic works. Eighteen is the number of the “anu” or elementary particles in an atom of hydrogen, according to the clairvoyant investigations of Leadbeater and Besant, hydrogen being the lightest and most abundant of the elements. Eighteen is also the sum of five, six, and seven (the numbers of the highest three principles, manas, buddhi, and atma) and so represents yoga or unity with our higher Self. Eighteen is also the numerical equivalent of the Hebrew word *chai*, meaning “life.” And there are other eighteens as well. It is a number to meditate on.

“The Sage of Stable Mind” speech includes two exceptionally important verses (62–63) that come exactly before the halfway point of the whole speech and are a summary of

Arjuna's problem (and ours), and point the way to solve all such problems. It is such an important eighteen-verse passage that we will save it to talk about next month.

C. Activity

Consider what it means to act without regard for the fruit of the action. It does not mean to act without considering what results will be—that is not wisdom but stupidity. Think of particular actions of your own or of other persons that were not motivated by what the person got out of the action but because you or they knew the action was “right.”

Think about the number eighteen and what it symbolizes or where it occurs.

D. References:

Chin, Vic Hao. *The Mahatma Letters to A. P. Sinnett in Chronological Sequence*. Adyar, India: Theosophical Publishing House, 1998.



THE BHAGAVAD GITA, Lesson 6

A. Outline

The “Sage of Stable (or Steady) Mind (or Understanding)” speech (Gita 2.55–72) introduced in the last paper goes like this (in a recension less poetic than Annie Besant’s translation):

- The one who gives up all desires (kāmā) originating in the sensory mind (manas) and is content in himself by himself—he is said to be of steady understanding (prajñā). (55)
- The one whose mind is not agitated by miseries, freed from greed for pleasure, with passion, fear, and anger gone—he is called a sage of steady understanding. (56)
- The one who is without attachment to anything, who when he encounters this or that whether pleasant or unpleasant neither rejoices nor dislikes—his understanding stands firm. (57)
- And when, as a tortoise completely draws in its limbs, he withdraws his senses from the objects of sense—his understanding stands firm. (58)
- The objects of sense turn away from the abstemious dweller in the body, but the taste for them remains; even the taste turns away from the one who has seen the Supreme. (59)
- The agitating senses of even a striving wise person forcibly carry away his mind. (60)
- Restraining all these senses, he should sit unified (yukta); centered on me, in control of his senses—his understanding stands firm. (61)
- A person, dwelling on the objects of sense, conceives an attachment to them; from attachment, desire is produced; from desire, anger is generated. (62)
- From anger arises delusion; from delusion, a wandering memory; from a wandering memory, destruction of intelligence (buddhi); from destruction of intelligence, he is lost. (63)
- But passion and hatred eliminated, even though he moves among the objects of sense, with self-restraints, controlled by the Self, he attains peace. (64)
- In that peace, all sorrows cease for him; for him whose mind is peaceful, the intelligence becomes steady. (65)
- There is no intelligence in the disunified person, nor is there any concentration in

the disunified person, and for the one without concentration there is no peace, and for the unpeaceful person where would happiness come from? (66)

- When the mind is guided by the wandering senses, then it carries away the understanding, as the wind drives a ship on the water. (67)
- Therefore, the one whose senses are completely withdrawn from the objects of sense, his understanding stands firm. (68)
- In that which is the night of all other beings, the person who is restrained is wakeful; in those things in which they are wakeful, that is night for the sage who sees. (69)
- As the waters flow into the ocean, which even while being filled is unmoving, standing steady, so he whom all desires flow into attains peace, not the desirer of desires. (70)
- The person who abandons all desires acts free from yearning; free from the sense of “mine,” free from the sense of “I,” he attains peace. (71)
- This is the state pertaining to ultimate Reality; the one who has attained this is not deluded; standing firm in it even at the hour of death, he reaches the Liberation of ultimate Reality. (72)

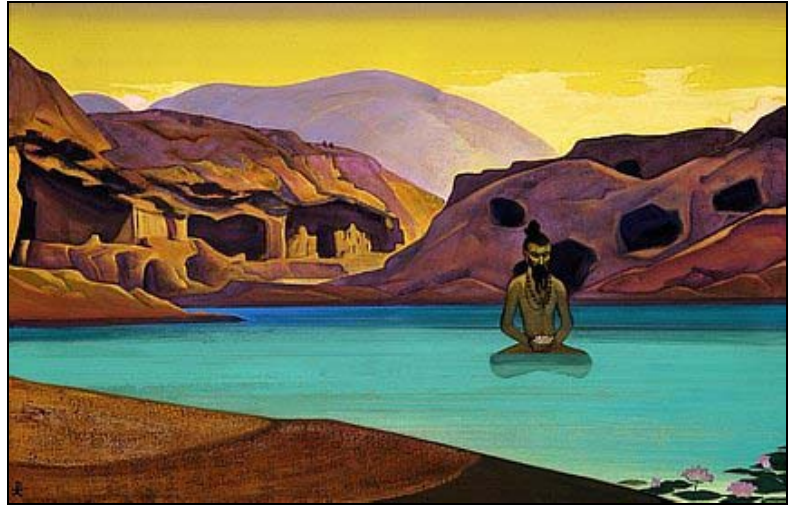
B. Commentary

The first seven verses (55–61) tell Arjuna and us what sort of person the sage of stable mind or steady understanding is. Such a person has given up all the desires that spring from the personality, the lower mind, and has become centered—that is, knows who he is and is content to be that. Such a person has an unwavering understanding of himself and of the world around him. The miseries that the Buddha said are the common experience of life in this world do not agitate him, which is not to say that he does not experience them, but rather that he does not respond to them. Put another way: pain is inevitable, but suffering is optional. He experiences pain and pleasure, but is not attached to them.

Half way through these seven verses (in verse 58) Krishna uses a metaphor to help us visualize what he is talking about. The Sage of Steady Understanding is like a tortoise that draws all of its legs within its shell, away from contact with the world around. Don't misunderstand the metaphor. It does not mean that a wise person is a hermit. It is rather a graphic illustration of one of the eight “limbs” or practices, which include four preliminary bodily practices (abstaining from wrong conduct, observing right conduct, posture, and breath control). They are followed by four other limbs, the last three of which are spiritual practices: concentration, meditation, and unification. Between the four preliminary bodily practices and the three final spiritual practices is a transitional practice that helps us turn from the outer world to the inner one. It is called in Sanskrit *pratyāhāra*, literally “gather toward oneself.” It is the practice of withdrawing sensory awareness from the objects of sense, turning from

sensory input to our own inward awareness, becoming aware, not of what's out there, but of what's in here.

The last three verses of the first seven continue the characterization of the Sage of Steady Understanding. Verses 59–61 tell that we can put the objects of sensory desire out of our minds, so that they appear to turn away from us, but the desire itself is another matter, not so easily disposed of. As long as we are immersed in this world, we will experience desire. But once we become aware of the Supreme Reality, that which is really Real, even the desire for unreal worldly objects fades away. Until that time, however, we must expect to contend with desire. However hard we strive, the unruly senses can erupt and overpower us. But if we work at controlling the effect of our senses on our mind, if we practice yoga (whose aim is to unify our nature), and center ourselves on the Supreme Reality within ourselves, then we can control our senses and become a Sage of Steady Understanding.



The last two verses (62–3) in the first half of this passage are very important, for they diagnose the cause of Arjuna's problem, which is also ours. Arjuna, you may recall, is confused about his duty in life. He doesn't know what to do. He is unable to discriminate between the conflicting duties he knows about. He is a poor lost child. How does that condition come about? That is what these two verses tell us. They describe a sevenfold causal chain that results in our not knowing what we should do in the world.

(1) That causal chain begins with “dwelling on the objects of sense,” that is, being preoccupied with the things that give us pleasure or pain. And we can be preoccupied with either. You might think that we try to forget about the sources of pain and only dwell on the sources of pleasure, but anyone who has ever had a toothache knows that the impulse is to probe the sore tooth with one's tongue.

There is an old Hindu parable about two birds in one tree. One of the birds is constantly occupied with eating the berries on the tree. If it eats a sweet berry, it thinks how good that berry tasted and seeks another even sweeter. If it eats a sour berry, it thinks how bad that berry tasted and seeks another berry that may be sweeter. So no matter what or how much the bird eats, it is always looking for more. We are like that bird. Whatever experiences we have in life, we want more. If they are pleasant experiences, we want more like those; if they are unpleasant experiences, we hope for better ones.

It is important to recognize what this first link in the chain is really about. It is not about

enjoying life (or finding life painful either, for that matter). It is about “dwelling” on the things that give us pleasure or pain. The Hindu tradition is quite realistic; it acknowledges that pleasure is one of the four goals of human life, the psychological goal. The others are wealth (economic), righteousness (moral), and liberation (spiritual). The Hindu tradition is not puritanical; it sees nothing wrong with pleasure. (H. L. Mencken, the Baltimore newspaperman and social critic, once defined a Puritan as one who is afraid that somewhere, somehow, somebody may be having a good time.)

Pleasure is fine. But pleasure is transitory, so what is not fine is trying to hold on to pleasure, to make it last. That is not fine because it is impossible, so it is doomed to failure and frustration. If we experience pleasure (or pain), enjoy the experience (or not), and then let it go, there is no problem. But if we try to sustain the experience or repeat it, we will be disappointed, because it is the nature of pleasure (and pain) to be ephemeral. We can no more preserve or prolong pleasure than we can catch the wind in our fist. Like the wind, pleasure and pain are processes, not objects. If we forget that and start to treat them like objects, we are “dwelling” on them. We are trying to make them our home.

The Catholic tradition in Christianity talks about something similar. It distinguishes between enjoying a thing and using a thing with joy. We should enjoy only what is inherently good. The “good things” of this world are not inherently good, so we should not treat them as though they were. In doing so, we are making idols of them—treating them as though they were worth having in themselves. That is “dwelling” on the objects of sense. But on the other hand, it is fine to use a thing with joy, provided we are using it for the purpose for which it was intended. Then we are not making an idol out of it, not treating it as though it were an intrinsic good, but using it for what it is worth, and enjoying the use in the process. If the bird in the tree eats berries because it needs them to live, and enjoys their sweetness, that bird would not be led to gorge itself on berry after berry. It would be using the berries with joy, rather than trying to enjoy the berries for their own sake.

This first link in the causal chain is extremely important because it is, in fact, the only link in the chain that we can control. All of the others follow automatically and inevitably. But we can decide whether or not we will “dwell” on the objects of sense. That is a matter of free choice. And that is what the metaphor of the tortoise is about. The tortoise’s drawing in of its legs, is like our withdrawing our attention from the objects of sense—not ignoring the world around us, but not dwelling on it.

This is also what Jesus was talking about when he said, “Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal. But lay up for yourself treasures in heaven . . . For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Matt. 6.19–21). Laying up treasures upon earth is the same thing as dwelling on the objects of sense. And the reason for not doing that is the certainty of moths, rust, and thieves. Earthly treasures, like the objects of sense, are transitory. They may be nice, but they don’t last.

(2) The second link in the causal chain is that whoever dwells on the objects of sense “conceives an attachment to them.” Whatever we dwell on, we become attached to. We form

an association with it. We are connected to it. It is part of us. Dwelling involves repeated concentration, and that produces close and intimate links between us and whatever we have been dwelling on.

(3) The third link is that “from attachment, desire is produced.” Whatever we are attached to, whatever we have decided is part of us, we naturally desire. We want what is ours, and even more we want what is us. It is inevitable that once we have become attached to something, we desire it. The counterpoint to desire is fear; we are attached to unpleasant things by fear of them.

(4) The fourth link is “from desire, anger is generated.” We want the objects of sense we have become attached to because we have dwelled on them. But it is the nature of reality that all things are constantly changing. The Buddha said it in India, and Heraclitus said it in Greece at just about the same time. Everything is fluid, flowing, changing. Nothing remains the same. And therefore, our desire to preserve the experience of pleasure cannot be satisfied, and that makes us angry. We are like a little child who, when refused a toy or a candy or whatever it wants, throws a temper tantrum. The frustration of desire generates anger.

(5) The fifth link is “from anger arises delusion.” When we are angry, we cannot see clearly. Our auras, we are told by clairvoyants, are shot through with black clouds and scarlet lightning flashes. We are blinded by the clouds and lightning of our anger. This is obviously true. A person who is angered does not see the world as it really is, but only as the anger permits. And when we do not see the world clearly, we live in a world of delusion. Reality is not what we see; we are deluded by our emotions into seeing what is not there at all.

(6) The sixth link is “from delusion arises a wandering memory.” When we do not see present reality as it really is, but only as our emotions have colored it, we cannot remember the past as it really was, but only as it is filtered through the emotional haze around us. Our memory wanders and is confused. Again, that should be quite clear from our own experience. People who live in delusional worlds have delusional pasts as well.

But it is not just the events and people of the past that a wandering memory fails to recall. Most of all, what we have forgotten is who we are and why we are here. That is the most important bit of knowledge in the world. It is what Arjuna has forgotten; he does not know what he should do because he does not know who he is. We are Arjuna. When he and we remember that bit of knowledge, there is nothing else that we need to know. We are like Svetaketu in the Chandogya Upanishad. He is a young student who has failed to learn from his teachers the one thing, knowing which, nothing else need be known—namely, who he is. That’s the bit of knowledge we have all forgotten. And the forgetting comes from this causal chain we are considering, beginning with dwelling upon the objects of sense.

(7) The seventh link is “from a wandering memory arises destruction of intelligence.” This intelligence is buddhi, the faculty of intuition, insight, understanding, and especially discrimination. It is the faculty that allows us to choose rightly, intelligently. But if we do not know who we are, then we cannot make right choices. The Temple at Delphi is said to have

had engraved over its entrance the Greek motto *Gnothi seauton* “Know thyself.” The Greek philosophers said that we are all in a state of amnesia—we have forgotten who we are. Self-knowledge is the beginning of all wisdom; and nothing worthwhile can be done without it. So without the memory of who we are, we have no way of intelligently deciding what we should be doing here.

And so this is where Arjuna is. And it is where we are too. We are lost because our intelligence has been destroyed, because we have forgotten who we are, because we are deluded about reality, because we are wrapped in anger, because our desires are frustrated, because we have become attached to what we cannot have, because we have dwelt upon the objects of sense. The seven links of this causal chain correspond very neatly to the four worlds or planes on which human evolution is progressing:

Buddhic or Spiritual	destruction of intelligence (buddhi) = not choosing rightly
	↑ wandering memory = not remembering rightly
Mental	↑ delusion = not perceiving rightly
	↑ anger
Emotional	↑ desire
	↑ attachment
Physical	↑ dwelling on the objects of sense

The solution to Arjuna’s problem and ours is to reverse the process. And doing that produces a different sort of causal chain:

Buddhic or Spiritual	viveka = discrimination, making intelligent choices
	↑ anamnesis = the process of remembering who we are
Mental	↑ illumination = the process of seeing things clearly
	↑ love
Emotional	↑ acceptance
	↑ vairagya = dispassion
Physical	↑ choiceless awareness

If, instead of dwelling on the objects of sense, we are aware of them without choosing to lay them up as our treasures upon earth, then we will not be attached to them, but will regard them with dispassionate objectivity. With dispassion, we will not desire or fear things around us, but will accept them as they are. With acceptance, we will not be angry at not possessing things, but will love unconditionally and impersonally. With love we will not be deluded but be illumined. With illumination, our memories will not wander, but we will re-member our identity in anamnesis. With anamnesis, we will not suffer our intelligence to be destroyed, but will preserve our ability to make intelligent choices. We will not be lost, but will know who we are and why we are here and be able to act rightly.

C. Activity

Apply this sevenfold causal chain to ordinary experiences in life. You may not be able to see every link clearly, but take any problem or difficult decision in your life and see how far back on the causal chain you can trace it. At what point did the problem begin, or what made the decision uncertain? Buddhism talks about “mindfulness” as a quality to cultivate. Where on the causal chain does “mindfulness” belong?



THE BHAGAVAD GITA, Lesson 7

A. Outline

The last paper pointed out that verses 62–3 of the “Sage of Steady Understanding” passage (Gita 2.55–72) analyze Arjuna’s problem (and ours) and by implication give a solution to it. The Gita could end at this point, except that these verses deal with only the action aspect of our quandaries; the emotional or confidence aspect and the mental or understanding aspect have still to be dealt with, and even the action aspect can benefit from a bit more explanation. We could deal at much greater length with the “Sage of Steady Understanding” speech, which is a central passage in the Gita, but we will pass on to the third discourse.

Discourse 3: The Yoga of Action

The third discourse, called “The Yoga of Action” or “Karma Yoga,” begins the direct consideration of the first of the three Yogic Paths with which the Gita is concerned. This and the immediately following discourses concentrate on how to act successfully in the world. They treat the following topics:

- There are two kinds of action:
 - Action for fruit* = conditioned action, which constrains and binds
 - Dispassionate action* = free action, unconditioned and unbinding
- Action in this world is tied up with passion (desire and anger); this is action for the sake of the fruit it produces. Action so motivated by passion binds us.
- Dispassionate action is done because it is right to do it, regardless of its consequences for the doer. Such action is done as a sacrifice—for the sake of others. It does not bind, but is free.
- Passion is overcome, not by the senses, mind, or intelligence, but by the Self acting freely, unconditioned, identified with the Logos, the Center of Reality.

The chapter also hints at a dialectic process that was a historical reality in Indic religious history, but also applies more generally. The process involves these contrasts:

<u>Thesis</u>	<u>Antithesis</u>	<u>Synthesis</u>
convention	knowledge	skill
Vedic ritual	Sankhya philosophy	Yoga practice
Action for fruit	Renunciation of action	Renunciation of fruit
Prescribed action	Inaction	Free action

B. Commentary

In verses 1–2, Arjuna misunderstands Krishna’s speech about the “Sage of Steady

Understanding” as implying that it is better not to act in the world, but to abstain from action and instead rely on intelligent thought to deal with life’s problems. Arjuna, like many of us, wants a simple, clear set of directions that do not involve any unpleasantness or make demands on us. He wants the equivalent of ten easy steps for attaining freedom and enlightenment. He assumes that there is “the one way” everything will work out and that it is the business of the teacher to tell him what that way is.

With verse 3, Krishna begins patiently to tell Arjuna that there is more than one way. Krishna here speaks of a “twofold path,” but of course there are more than just two ways; Krishna, like any good teacher, starts where his pupil is. And where Arjuna is, is in a quandary about action and inaction, which he sees as a dichotomy. Like Hamlet, Arjuna is worrying: “To act or not to act, that is the question.”

Krishna explains to Arjuna that the dichotomy is a false one. It is like the false dichotomy we still have with us, between the “thinker” and the “doer,” between the “academic” or “policy wonk” and the “practical business person” or “ordinary person.” There is a path of knowledge and a path of action, but they are not exclusive. On the one hand, it is no good doing things unless you know what you’re doing. On the other hand, you don’t get anywhere by not doing anything (verse 4). In fact, it is not even possible to be inactive because activity is the nature of life; everything in nature is actively changing (5). We may fool ourselves by sitting quietly, but even then our mind will be active, and it is hypocritical to pretend we are inactive just because our body is still while our mind is busy (6).

There are really three states: inaction, which is largely illusory; wrong action, which is conditioned by our past or by what we hope to gain in the future; and right action, which is free of constraints from the past or future, done without concern for our personal selves, in fact a sacrifice, an offering of ourselves to that which is greater than we are (7–9).

The sacrifices of the old religions, including the Vedic sacrifices, are actually symbolic of acting according to the universal order and of the interdependence of all life. In Hindu mythology there was a milk cow named “Giver of Desires,” which was the source of plenty and the fulfiller of all wishes (10). It was the Indic equivalent of the Greek cornucopia (literally “horn of plenty”), which came from a goat whose milk fed the god Zeus when he was an infant. When Zeus grew up, he broke a horn from the goat and gave it to the princess Amalthea, who had fed him the goat’s milk, promising her that the horn would always produce in abundance whatever its owner wanted. Amalthea’s horn and the cow “Giver of Desires” are mythic motifs of an unending source of satisfaction.

Some people have the idea that a sacrifice is a sort of bribe: I’ll sacrifice this for you, so I expect you to repay me in some good way. That is action motivated by desire for fruit or a goal, and is rejected by Krishna. Instead, he puts forth a quite different view of sacrifice, one that has no personal benefit in its motive, but is part of a universal, cosmic action that began when the Father of All Beings (*Prājapati*) sacrificed himself to bring forth the world. Now all of us in the world must follow his example, and sustain each other and the whole ecological chain by acts of sacrifice. As a symbol of this universal interlinkage of all life, the Gita sets forth a causal chain: human beings sacrifice to make rain, rain produces food, food sustains

human beings, who sacrifice to make rain, and so on it goes. The ancient Hindus were ecologists long before the word was invented. We do not sacrifice because we want to get something by the action, but because sacrificial action is the very nature of life. We do not act because we want to rise to the highest state, but we rise to the highest state by acting without concern for ourselves (10–19).

But even the “bargain” view of sacrifice is transmuted by Krishna into something quite remarkable. In verse 11, the Primal Sacrificer, the All-Father, is quoted as saying: “By this sacrifice, may you nourish the Shining Ones [the gods], and may the Shining Ones [the gods] nourish you; thus nourishing one another, you will reap the highest good.” The verb translated “nourish” in this verse literally means “cause to be.” Thus the verse is saying that by our sacrifice to the gods, we create them; and in turn they create us; we create one another by acts of sacrifice. That is not a bargain, but a statement of the radical interdependence of all life, including human and divine.

Verse 20 refers to Janaka, an ancient philosopher-king who did not rely on the traditional Brahmin priesthood to perform his sacrifices but did them himself. This is a statement that each of us can also be a priest and need not depend on others as our intermediaries. It is also part of a worldwide tradition of the existence in ancient days of great and perfect kings who lived for the welfare of the world. Confucius also talked about such ancient worthies who alone had attained complete humaneness of character. The book of Genesis (6.4) says, “There were giants in the earth in those days.” And the book of Ecclesiasticus (54.1, 7) urges, “Let us now praise famous men, and our fathers that begat us. . . These were honored in their generations, and were the glory of their times.”

The characteristic feature of all such ancient worthies—philosopher-kings, giants in the earth, and famous men and women—is that they lived, not for themselves, but for others. Their lives were a sacrifice. Their importance, as verse 21 indicates, is that they provide models for us in these latter days. They are the Masters, the teachers of humanity, not by what they have said, but by who they were and how they lived.

Krishna, the perfect human being, incarnating the fullness of divine consciousness, has no need to act in the world; he has attained everything that can be attained. Yet he continues to act in the world, not for his own sake, but for the sake of others. This is what in Buddhism is called the bodhisattva ideal—to act, not for one’s own sake, but for the sake of all beings. This is the great compassion (22–24).

C. Activity

Make a list of all the things you did yesterday, from rising until retiring. Then beside each action, make a note of why you did it. What are the dominant motives for your actions?

THE BHAGAVAD GITA, Lesson 8

A. Outline

Discourse 3 of the Gita is called “The Yoga of Action.” It ends with a discussion of the factors that lead to wrong action and of how we can act rightly.

B. Commentary

Verse 25: The essence of *nishkama karma*, “desireless action” is doing what one does, not out of personal motives, but because it will help the whole world. That is what HPB called real Theosophy, which she said is altruism. It is also the Bodhisattva vow. The phrase “desiring the welfare of the world” could also be translated as “intending to hold the world together.” We are all interlinked. Each of us depends on others for every aspect of our lives. Desireless action is action that maintains the wholeness of our collective lives, that keeps us all together.



Verse 26: At the same time, it is not wise to impose our own values on others. Most people in the world do things because of what they hope to get out of the doing. It is pointless to tell them that they shouldn't be motivated by the product of their work. Acting for personal benefit is the worldly norm and is not inherently wrong. There is an old Scottish motto (which actually goes back to ancient Greece, but in this form it is Scottish): “They haif said. Quhat say they? Lat thame say.” In modern spelling, it is “They have said. What say they? Let them say.” That motto (which is carved over a doorway at Marischal College in Aberdeen, founded in 1593) is somewhat cryptic in its import, but one interpretation is that it asserts the freedom people must have to say (and do) things that are different from what others say (or do). Or, as the modern idiom has it, different strokes for different folks. Many people need the incentive of attachment to action, but the bodhisattva, who acts for the welfare of all, can show them the possibility of another way of life. As the old cliché has it, actions speak louder than words.

Verse 27: Most of what people do is not an intentionally chosen action, but a conditioned one. We do things every day throughout our lives because we have acquired the habit of doing them. To a large extent, that is inevitable. A way of talking about such conditioned action is to attribute it to the *gunas* or “qualities” or “strands” of matter. All matter is composed of three such qualities, to which the Gita often refers. Every bit of matter in the universe has all three qualities in it, but in differing proportions and relationships. Matter is, as it were, woven out of these three qualities or “strands.” They are *tamas* “inertia,” *rajas* “activity,” and *sattva* “harmony.” They represent three contrasting qualities: the tendency to resist any change, the tendency to change without control, and the tendency to rhythmic alternation—and to be sure

a great deal more, which we will look at later. Actions are generally just the conditioned result of the fluctuations of these three qualities of matter.

Verses 28–29: If we are not aware of the effect of the qualities on everything around us and on our own actions, we think that we are deciding these matters and get attached to the results of the actions because they are “our” actions. But if we realize that the actions have not been chosen, are not intentional, but are just conditioned results of the qualities of matter, we realize that they have nothing to do with the real us, and so are not attached to their results. On the other hand, it would be easy to misinterpret this concept as saying that it doesn’t matter what we do, so we can do whatever we like and thus take it as an excuse for failing to control one’s own actions. Most people need to consider the consequences of their actions—good or bad—as motivation for acting rightly.

Verses 30–32: But if we live in the higher self, centered in it, we will act without generating consequences for ourselves because we are not acting out of personal motive. Then we are truly free. Then we are no longer conditioned by our past or the qualities of matter. That is the condition that Dante described in the third part of the Divine Comedy, when he wrote: “E’n la sua volontade è nostra pace,” “In His will is our peace.” “His will” is the divine will in Dante’s Christian context, Krishna’s will in the context of the Gita, but it is not some external, imposed will. It is instead our own inner intention that we discover when we realize who and what we are, when we come to know our own nature. Others are “lost and unaware.” They are lost because they are separated from their own reality; they are unaware of their own nature. They do not know the one thing that is necessary to learn in life: that we are not our personalities, but a spark of the One Life animating everything that is.

Verses 33–34: As long as we are in this world, we are subject to its conditioning. We are “in this world” to the extent that we identify with it, with our personalities, and with our likes and dislikes. That identification keeps us “in this world” and subject to all the conditioning of the qualities of matter.

Verse 35: This verse makes a very important point. Each of us has a dharma or duty in life. That duty is not something someone else tells us we must do. Instead it arises naturally and inevitably out of our own nature. It is a consequence of who we are. The word *dharma* means literally “what holds together.” It is that which holds us together, that which makes us what we are. Not to follow our dharma is to be untrue to ourselves. To try to follow the dharma of another individual instead of our own is to be alienated from ourselves. And that is a danger in comparison with which death is better.

Verse 36: Arjuna asks a question that people all over the world have puzzled about. Why do people do wrong? Sometimes it seems that, whatever their intentions are, they are driven to wrong action. Why?

Verses 37–43: In the last seven verses of this third discourse, Krishna answers Arjuna’s question. The answer is a summary of the whole discourse. People do wrong because they have been overcome by passion, which manifests as a desire to have something we want or as an anger at having something we don’t want. Passion is the result of the quality of *rajas* or

uncontrolled activity dominating our personalities. It is the smoke around the flame, dust on the mirror, the caul on the newborn baby. It springs from the senses, overpowers the mind (*manas*), and even confuses the intelligence (*buddhi*) or discriminative faculty. That, of course, is precisely the position Arjuna found himself in at the beginning of the poem. He did not know what was best for him to do because he was overpowered by his emotions, his passions.

It is, however, very difficult to be free of desire, because desire is of the very nature of life. The solution to this problem is to identify, not with our senses, or with our minds, or even with our intelligence, but with the highest within us: the Self, which is identical with the One Self in all. If we realize our unity with that Self, rather than with the passion-dominated self, we can overcome passionate desire and anger, rather than letting them overcome us.

C. Activity

Socrates is said to have held that the unexamined life is not worth living. At the end of the day, think back over your actions during the whole day. Don't praise or blame, but just be aware of the things you did and think about why you did them. How much of what you did was the result of conditioning or habit? How much expressed your own inmost nature?



THE BHAGAVAD GITA, Lesson 9

A. Outline

Discourse 4 of the Gita is called “The Yoga of Knowledge.” In it, Krishna explains to Arjuna the basis of Karma Yoga: its history in the doctrine of avatars, the nature of action and inaction and the kinds of action, and the identity of right action as sacrifice. Krishna ends with a panegyric on knowledge. We cannot act rightly if we are in ignorance, so Arjuna must come to know what right action is.

B. Summary and Commentary

Krishna begins (verses 1–3) by saying that what he has been teaching Arjuna is the Ancient Wisdom. He taught it to the legendary Sun god Vivasvan, who taught it to his son, the Manu or progenitor of our race, who taught it to his son, Ikshvaku. And so it was passed on from one generation of kingly seers to another. But eventually it was lost, so Krishna has now once again set it forth for Arjuna as the greatest secret of all. It is secret, not because it has been concealed, but because it can be known only by practicing it.

Arjuna, who is somewhat literal minded and limited in his understanding, objects that Krishna is, after all, a cousin of his, born long after the time of those legendary king-seers (4). So how could he have possibly taught them this knowledge at the beginning of time?

Krishna responds that both he and Arjuna have had many incarnations in the past. Arjuna does not remember his earlier lives, but Krishna does remember his (5). More than that, Krishna is actually unborn and undying; he is the imperishable Self of all beings; he has control over all nature, which is his; so he comes into being by his own power, which is the power of *maya*, creating the illusory appearance of things (6).

Most of us are born willy-nilly. We have no control over the process; karma simply brings us into birth at an appropriate time. But Krishna is far beyond that. He is one who has made contact with the Real and become one with that Reality. So he can choose when to be born and when not to be. Whenever goodness and order (*dharma*) in the world wane, and badness and disorder (*adharma*) increase, then Krishna manifests (7). In every age, when he is needed to protect those who do good, to destroy evil-doing, and to reestablish the principle of Law (*dharma*), Krishna is born again (8).



Those who recognize Krishna's embodiment and action, when they die, are not caught up in the cycle of automatic birth and death, but are united with Krishna instead (9). Most people are filled with greed, fear, and anger—the three basic passions: the desire to possess, the desire to escape, and the desire to destroy. But those who are absorbed in Krishna have those burning passions extinguished by another sort of fire, the fire of knowledge, and they enter into Krishna's own state of being. They become Krishna themselves (10). This is not unlike what Paul says when he refers to “them which are in Christ Jesus” (Rom 8.1).

This concept of being “in Krishna” or “in Christ” is not an exclusive one. It makes no difference what we call that supreme reality, that consciousness of unity, or how we come to it. It is One, however we name and think of it. In Annie Besant's memorable translation (11):

However men approach me, even so do I welcome them, for the path men take from every side is mine, Arjuna.

Having indicated something of his nature, culminating in that statement of universalism, Krishna turns to a discussion of the nature of action, which Arjuna must understand if he is to act rightly. This is the second part of the discourse.

Some people perform action by sacrificing to the gods, hoping by a sort of mutual bargain that the gods will help them in return. And in fact that happens (12). Krishna is here doubtless thinking of the sacrifices to the gods of the Vedas according to the ceremonies associated with the ancient Vedic hymns. But very much the same sort of thing goes on in our own day and our own culture. Our sacrifices may be what we think of as “religious,” that is, some of us go to church, pray, keep the rules, and expect to be rewarded by God for being “good people.” Or our sacrifices may be “secular,” that is, we work hard in our occupation, apply ourselves, are good neighbors, and expect to be rewarded for that by the government or the community for being “good citizens.” In all those cases, it is a quid pro quo. I scratch somebody's back and expect to be scratched in return. I give up something (sacrifice) and expect to get something back. That is a kind of action and a kind of sacrifice. And it works within limits. In fact, it is the basis of much social order.

Krishna does not condemn the existence of such mutual aid relationships. In fact, he says that he created them (13). India had a system of four castes that was the foundation of its social life. Those castes were, in order of priority or honor: (1) Brahmans, the learned and priestly class, not necessarily wealthy in possessions, but the preservers of information and customs, who study and teach others; (2) Kshatriyas, the ruling, fighting, and governing class, who protect others; (3) Vaishyas, the trading and mercantile class, who buy and sell and thereby provide others with the necessities of life; (4) Sudras, the serving and laboring class, who support all the others by doing the necessary chores to keep society intact.

In fact, every society of any size and complexity has a class system more or less of this kind. What differentiates one system from another are such factors as how many classes there are, how the members of one class regard those of other classes, and how permeable the class system is (that is, how easy or difficult it is to move from one class to another). Because a class structure something like the Hindu one (albeit differing in many details) is universal, it seems to be a part of human culture. Krishna acknowledges that fact by saying that he brought

the system forth or emanated it. But he immediately adds that, although he created it, he is not bound by it. It is a system for human beings to act in, but he is actionless, the eternal non-doer. That is, such human systems to channel action have only relative, not absolute value.

Krishna goes on to observe (14–15) that, although he acts in the world, he is not affected or sullied by those actions because he has no desire for the fruit (or results) of the action. And those who understand what that means are also not tied up by the actions they perform. Ancient wise people knew this, so we should follow their example.

Next (16–17) Krishna distinguishes three things: right action (referred to in the text just as “action”), inaction, and wrong action. These three correspond to the three qualities of matter (the *gunas*), which will be much discussed later in the Gita. All matter is composed of three qualities in varying proportions. They are inertia (*tamas*), passionate or uncontrolled energy (*rajas*), and ordered or harmonious energy (*sattva*). They are, respectively, inaction, wrong action, and right action. Inaction (*akarma*) is simply a refusal to do anything; it is a negative response. Wrong action (*vikarma*) is action motivated by what the actor hopes to get out of the action. (So those sacrifices to the gods mentioned in verse 12—whether the gods are those of the Vedas, of Christianity, of Wall Street, of City Hall, or of public opinion—are all wrong action, not wrong in themselves, but wrong in the motive that activates them.) Right action (*karma*) is free action. It is not conditioned by the past, but is consciously chosen in the present. It is not a tit-for-tat bargain, but action done because it is the right thing to do.

Wrong action is acting out of the desire for a particular result, to get something for ourselves. Such wrong action produces results; it may even get us what we want. But it also gets us something we do not want, namely it conditions us to respond in the same way in the future and it produces karmic effects that bind us to the action, the people involved, and the situation. Verse 18, about seeing inaction in action and action in inaction, is reminiscent of the Tao Te Ching and the Chinese concept of *wu wei*, doing nothing and thereby accomplishing all things. Free (or right) action is like what we think inaction should be in producing no bonds that tie us. Inaction, however, is the refusal to act, and that is a type of action in that it produces karmic consequences, just as all wrong action does.

Verses 19–23 describe the sage whose actions are all free, one who neither refuses to act nor acts out of purely personal and selfish motives. The sage’s karma is consumed because the sage knows how to act freely. Sages act without attachment to the results (or fruit) of the action, always content with whatever comes, in effect seeming not to do anything because they are not straining or striving to get things done. The sage performs actions “by the body alone” because the personal desires and schemes of the mind are not involved. Everything done in that state is good. It is rather like what today is called “going with the flow” or “being in the zone.”

Someone in that state accepts what is, whether pleasure or pain; does not worry about comparisons with others, so is without envy; accepts with equanimity what the world would call success or failure; and therefore is not tied to the action. All actions done by someone in that state dissolve without a trace, melt away without residue, leave no karmic results behind them. That kind of action is sacrificial. The word *sacrifice* comes from Latin, in which it

meant literally “to make holy.” And *holy* is from the same source as *whole*; to be holy is to be whole, entire, unified. And that is the object also of *Yoga*, a word that means “united, connected, unified.”

The last part of this fourth discourse deals with the nature of sacrifice. It will be the subject of our next paper.

[to be continued]

C. Activity

According to Plato’s *Apology*, Socrates said, “The unexamined life is not worth living.” The connection between knowledge and action (the focus of the Gita’s fourth discourse) has often been noted. That connection exists on many levels, from the most mundane and commonplace to the most spiritual and unusual. Make a list of the actions you have engaged in during the past twenty-four hours. Then beside each of the actions you have listed, note the kind of knowledge needed for that action. Include both ordinary sorts of knowledge and sorts of knowledge that seem relevant to the Gita’s discussion in this discourse.



The Death of Socrates

THE BHAGAVAD GITA, Lesson 10

A. Outline

Discourse 4 of the Gita is located halfway through the first third of the poem, dealing with Karma Yoga, the Yoga of action. Discourse 1 sets the problem, which is how the hero Arjuna is to act when confronted with a triple crisis: he does not know which course to choose, he has no faith in a good outcome, and he lacks skill in acting in a way that will not produce entrapping results. Discourses 2 to 6 treat the last aspect of his crisis: acting rightly. Discourse 4, in the middle of that group is on “The Yoga of Wisdom [or Gnosis].” It also brings in the question of faith or confidence. Thus it treats all three of the main themes of the book: action, knowledge, and faith. The last half of this discourse focuses on sacrifice: its nature and kinds, including the sacrifice of wisdom or gnosis (direct knowledge).

Discourse 4: The Yoga of Action (continued)

B. Summary and Commentary

“Sacrifice” is one of those words that we understand in various ways. Generally we tend to think of a sacrifice as an action by which we give up or lose something. So we say that parents make sacrifices for their children, by which we mean that the parents give up something they would like for themselves in order to provide something else for their offspring. Or we say that the Egyptian government sacrificed some historical archeological sites in order to build the Aswan Dam, by which we mean that those sites were destroyed by the water that the dam backed up. Or in baseball we say that a batter makes a sacrifice hit, by which we mean that the batter bunts the ball to let another runner advance one base while the batter is put out. Or we say that a merchant is selling goods at a sacrifice, by which we mean that the price charged for the goods is set at less than the cost of providing the goods in order to get them out of the store. In all those uses, “sacrifice” involves losing something in order to gain something else, with the focus on losing.

But the word “sacrifice” has an interesting origin. It comes to us from Latin, in which it was a compound of *sacer* meaning “holy” and *facere* meaning, “to make.” So originally “sacrifice” was the act of making something holy. And the word “holy” is also noteworthy, as it comes from the same root as “whole,” “heal,” and “healthy.” Thus whatever is holy is healthy because it has been healed of its fragmentation and has become whole. Becoming whole is also the aim of Yoga, whose name means, “joining together.” Thus Yoga and sacrifice have a natural connection, because both aim at a uniting their object into a wholeness.

The philosophical position of the Gita (like that of Theosophy) is that there is only one ultimate reality in the universe. In Indic thought that ultimate reality is called *Brahman*, translated by Annie Besant as “the Eternal.” The word *Brahman* comes from a root that means, “to expand,” which is appropriate because everything that is, is an expansion of Brahman. Verse 24 says that everything connected with a traditional sacrifice of the old Vedic religion is Brahman: the act of offering, the thing offered, the fire in which it is offered, the

one who makes the offering. Whoever sees Brahman in everything that is done, in every action of every kind—such a person attains Brahman by that insight.

Sacrifice is not just an offering of an animal or more ahimsically of a flower upon an altar. It is any action that makes the object holy. So verses 25–32 mention several varieties of sacrificial holy-making: the traditional Vedic sacrifice to a god, a sacrifice of the act of sacrifice itself to the Ultimate Reality, the restraint of the senses, the use of the senses to perceive the objects of sense, all uses of the organs of action, material possessions, ascetic practices, study, the very breath of life, and the food that sustains life. In other words, anything we do can be done in a way that makes us whole and thus holy. And that is a sacrifice.



Eucharist Celebration

When a traditional Vedic sacrifice was made to the gods, whatever remained after the sacrifice was over could be consumed by humans. It was holy and was like the fabulous nectar that conferred immortality on those who consumed it. It had been touched by the gods and thus was a channel of divinity (not unlike the Christian concept of the Eucharist). Verse 31 alludes to the practice of consuming the remnants of a sacrifice as a communion with Brahman, the Ultimate Reality, which is, as verse 24 asserted, everything connected with a

sacrifice. This world of time and space and the other world of eternity and infinity are both the locales of sacrifice, and for us to be in either of those worlds is to perform sacrifice.

The last ten verses of the chapter (33–42) are devoted to gnosis (wisdom, knowledge) as sacrifice. At first, the subject of these verses may seem odd. In what sense is gnosis a sacrifice? But if we remember that a sacrifice is something that makes holy or whole, then the opening of verse 33 makes perfect sense: “Better than sacrifice of any objects is the sacrifice of wisdom.” Wisdom (that is, *jñāna* or gnosis) is the best sacrifice because it is the best way to come to wholeness.

The relationship of this wisdom-gnosis to action is noteworthy. Wisdom-gnosis is the theme of this discourse, and action is the theme of the first third of the Gita, of which this discourse is the center (being number four in discourses two to six). So the relation of wisdom-gnosis to action is highlighted here. The second half of verse 33 says literally “all action-without-a-gap is finished in gnosis”; or as Annie Besant phrases it, “All actions in their entirety culminate in wisdom”; or as Winthrop Sargeant, another translator, renders it, “All action without exception is fully comprehended in wisdom.” That statement can be understood in several ways, for example: “All actions that we do lead us to Wisdom” or “Wisdom includes every action that can be done,” that is, “All possible actions are wise.” Either of those interpretations can be understood in a way that makes sense, but neither is obviously right.

The statement might also be read in another way that fits the general theme of the Gita very well. Action is of two kinds: bound or free, incomplete or complete, done for some external motive because the doer hopes to gain something by it or done for its own sake just because it is right. Bound action is action that is incomplete because done for some reward or “fruit,” and without that fruit is not complete. The motive of acting for a reward makes the action incomplete and generates karmic effects, that is, the consequences of the action. On the other hand, free action is complete because done for its own sake as a right action without regard for personal consequences. That motive makes the action complete and generates no karmic effects, having no consequences.

Bound action is tied to the results we want; it is incomplete because there is a gap between the doing and the results. That gap has to be filled eventually, and that is what we normally mean by “karma.” The unfilled gap between our action and its results brings us back into incarnation to complete the unfinished action by living its consequences. But free action is not tied to results; it is complete and without a gap because nothing follows on it, and so it does not require that we return to finish it. It is already finished, finished in gnosis because it was done with the knowledge or wisdom of how to act without generating incomplete consequences. That is exactly what Arjuna is learning in the first six chapters of the Gita.

How do we reach this wisdom that makes action complete and produces no effects? Verse 34 tells us: “Learn this by prostrating yourself (falling at the feet of the Master or humbly submitting oneself), by investigation, and by service.” These three steps to wisdom correspond to the three main types of Yoga and to the three ideals of a Theosophical life. “Prostrating oneself” or “falling at the feet of the Master” is exercising devotion, practicing bhakti Yoga, or entering into meditation. Investigation is exercising the mind, practicing jñāna Yoga, or entering into study. And service is exercising the body in altruistic action, practicing karma Yoga, or entering into a life of service. The three steps can also be understood as finding the Master, asking of the Master, and waiting on the Master. But that is just another way of looking on devotional meditation, mental study, and bodily service. The end of the verse tells us that, if we do this, the Master of Wisdom will teach us.

When we come to this wisdom, we will see that all beings are part of one whole (verse 35), and then, whatever mistakes we have made in the past, all of our karma will be complete and we will cross to the other shore by the boat of gnosis (verse 36). Just as fire burns wood to ashes, so the fire of gnosis reduces all actions and leaves none behind (verse 37).

Faith leads to gnosis, verse 39 tells us. This “faith” is not what Blavatsky in *The Key to Theosophy* called “blind faith,” that is, a belief with no basis other than someone’s authority. It is instead a matter of “logical and accurate thought.” Like the Greek faith (*pistis*), it is a confidence based on experience and reason. Most of what we “know,” we do not have direct and immediate knowledge of, but instead a rational faith about. For example, I have no personal knowledge that the earth is turning on its axis and that its turning is what causes the sun to appear to rise and set. But considering the various alternative explanations of what I have experienced and what I have learned about other persons’ experiences, I have decided that it is very likely the case that the earth is indeed turning on its axis. Since I have never actually seen the earth turning, that decision is not based on direct knowledge, but on “logical

and accurate thought,” rational faith: confidence in what I have learned, in my own observations, in the reasoning behind the explanation of the sun’s apparent motion, and in the trustworthiness of those who have explained the matter to me. Such rational faith can lead me to direct knowledge, to discovering the fact for myself. Blind faith cannot. And neither can adamant skepticism.

Verse 41 tells us that we are not bound by our actions if we have renounced them (that is, renounced any motivation by their consequences), have cut away doubt, and have done so by gnosis. Here again we have the threefold path of Yoga: karma, bhakti, and jñana: free action, confident devotion, and knowledge. And finally in verse 42, Krishna exhorts Arjuna to use knowledge to cut away doubts born of ignorance, to stand up (from the seat of his chariot to which he had sunk at the end of the first discourse) and to go forward in action. Confidence, knowledge, and action are the themes of this discourse and of the whole book.

C. Activity

Think about the connection between the two senses of “sacrifice”: giving something up in order to make something else whole. Identify something in your own life that you can lose or give up and thereby increases the healthiness or wholeness of life. As an act of discipline, give up that thing at least for a particular period of time: an hour, a day, a week, a month. Don’t do it because you expect to be the better for giving it up, but purely as an impersonal act for the good of the whole.



THE BHAGAVAD GITA, Lesson 11

A. Outline

Discourse 5 of the Gita is called “The Yoga of the Renunciation of Action.” It is the shortest chapter of the Gita we have encountered so far, consisting of only 29 verses (the two shortest in the whole work are chapters 12 and 15, each with only 20 verses). It begins in verse 1 with a question put to Krishna by Arjuna, and the remainder of the discourse (verses 2–29) is Krishna’s response.

Discourse 5: The Yoga of the Renunciation of Action

B. Summary and Commentary

The focus of the first six discourses of the Gita is on action; the particular focus of this fifth discourse is on renunciation. Renunciation is an important concept in Indian life and in the Gita, but it is a complex one. It is not just asceticism. Annie Besant once said that the trouble with many ascetics is that they confuse discomfort with holiness. That is, renunciation of comfort becomes an end in itself—a fruit to be striven for. That is not the sort of renunciation the Gita is concerned with.

The Sanskrit term for renunciation is *sannyāsa*, whose parts are *sam* “complete,” *ni* “down,” and *ās* “to throw,” hence “to throw down completely.” (This analysis of the word and the following comments are based on John Grimes’s excellent book *A Concise Dictionary of Indian Philosophy: Sanskrit Terms Defined in English*, revised edition, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996. Any serious student of Indian thought or of Theosophical terms derived from Sanskrit will find this work invaluable.)

Sannyāsa or renunciation is a term for the fourth stage in life. Human life has often been divided into a number of stages. Shakespeare in *As You Like It* recognizes seven of them:

All the world’s a stage,
And all the men and women merely players:
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages.

Shakespeare’s seven ages are typified by the infant, school child, lover, soldier, justice, old person, and one in second childhood. Many other schemata of this sort have been proposed at various times and places. Hindu social theory has four such stages: student, house-



holder, forest dweller or retiree, and renunciant (*sannyāsin*), who is an ascetic or homeless mendicant. These four stages represent a cumulative process of freeing oneself from the bond of selfishness. Young persons or students are properly focused to a great extent on themselves, as they seek to find their way in the world and to discover the roles they are to play. Mature persons or householders broaden their focus to include their families, for whom they have special responsibilities. Forest dwellers or retirees have yet a wider focus of attention on the whole community in which they live; they are the wise old men and women who can devote themselves to communicating the wisdom they have acquired to society at large. Finally the renunciant lives for the sake of the Eternal in time, for the benefit of all beings.

Renunciation in the Hindu pattern of four life stages is of two kinds. One is the renunciation of dependence on the world and possessions; it is largely a negative virtue and traditionally involves many rules of proper conduct to ensure the right sort of renunciation. The other kind of renunciation is the discovery of the Self in all beings and is thus the renunciation of separateness; it is an affirmative virtue involving complete freedom from all bonds. It is not just a renunciation of things, but a state of awareness in which things are irrelevant because the only reality is the Self. It is not a detachment from things, but an attachment to the One Reality, which is No-thing. It is the renunciation Krishna is talking about in the Gita.

The noun “renunciation” is based on the verb “to renounce,” and that verb originally meant “to report back.” (The “nounce” part of the verb is the same as in “announce,” which means “to report to.”) So renunciation is reporting back to the one who sent us, to our Source, the Ground of all Being. That concept of renunciation is developed by Krishna throughout this discourse.

Arjuna’s question, which begins discourse 5 (verse 1), shows that he does not understand the liberating, affirmative nature of this renunciation. He is thinking only about giving up things and actions; specifically he is still worried about whether or not he should fight in the battle on the field of Kurukshetra. So he says in a somewhat complaining tone, “Krishna, you have praised the renunciation of action, but also Yoga (which is concerned with acting rightly). Tell me straight out, which of those two is better.” Arjuna sees what looks like a contradiction and, like students all over the world, wants the teacher to tell him the right answer.

Like an infinitely patient teacher, Krishna responds by starting where Arjuna is and then goes on, trying to show Arjuna that he has not asked the right question because he has not understood either what action is or what renunciation is. Krishna says (2) that both renunciation and Yoga lead to the same place (because in fact they are the same thing), but since Arjuna is thinking of renunciation as something negative, as abandoning action, then it is better to (as the old popular song has it) “accentuate the positive, eliminate the negative” and follow the Yoga of action.

The real renunciant is not someone who owns nothing and does nothing, but one who is not owned by things or bound by actions (3). Only children in wisdom think that theory and

practice are two different things; every theory implies a practice, and every practice is based on some way of looking at the world, which is a theory; theory and practice go together (4–5).

Renunciation of separateness and acting rightly are the same thing. The person who acts without selfishness, but instead for the sake of the Self in all beings, is not trapped by acting. Such action produces no personal consequences, because it is not the result of personal motives (6–7). Such action is the same thing as nonaction; just as the Tao Te Ching also says, it is action in nonaction (in Chinese, *wu wei*). Just as water runs off the waxed leaf of a lotus, so do the effects of actions done for the sake of the Self, rather than of oneself, leave no trace on one who has renounced selfish motives (8–11).

The person who is united with the Self and has therefore renounced selfish action can act in peace. Persons who are concerned about how the results of their action are going to affect them are trapped by their concerns (12). Those who are mentally uninvolved with the personal consequences of their actions are like a king sitting serenely in a city with nine gates (that is, in the body, whose nine gates or openings to the world are the two eyes, two ears, two nostrils, mouth, organ of generation, and organ of excretion); such a king neither acts nor causes others to act, yet accomplishes all things (13).

So the spark of the Self in us (the “Lord of the world”) has nothing to do with action and reaction; it is nature, the field of existence, that is involved with acting. That divine spark within us is not concerned with “good karma” or “bad karma.” People are misled about all that because their ignorance has shrouded their knowledge of what really is. But those whose ignorance is dispelled by knowledge see the Supreme Reality shining like the sun. Those who see that Supreme Reality are not reborn again because their limitations are shaken off by knowledge (14–17).

Those who are wise see the same Self in all beings: in humans of the highest and lowest estates, in animals, both those useful to and respected by us and those people scorn (18). Those who are grounded in the Ground of Being and are, like It, equable in all things have conquered the need to be reborn. It is not important whether what we experience is pleasant or unpleasant; what is important is that we know the Ground of Being. If we are not attached to the sensory world around us but have found happiness in the Self within and if our inner Self is united with the Ground of Being, we will have achieved lasting happiness (19–21).

All the pleasures that come from outside us are sources of pain, because they come and go—they don’t last even though we want them to. A wise person does not find contentment in them. The person who can manage the agitation that comes from both desire and anger, who is whole inside despite them, that person is happy. The one who find happiness inside, rather than outside, is one who attains the Ground of Being (22–24). Seers whose sins and doubts have been done away with, who are whole within themselves, who rejoice in the well-being of all others, are those whose separateness is extinguished in the Ground of Being. Those who control their own thought, who recognize that they are not their desires or angers, who know who they really are—they find the bliss of the Ground of Being everywhere (25–26).

Freeing ourselves from dependence on what is outside; focusing our awareness within; harmonizing our exchanges with the world (these are literally descriptions of Yogic techniques but have perhaps a wider application as metaphors for our relationship with the world around us); controlling our senses, mind (*manas*), and intuitive intelligence (*buddhi*); aiming at being free above all else; having lost desire, fear, and anger—we are wise ones, forever free (27–28). Whoever knows Me, the enjoyer of the sacrificial energy, the Lord of all the world, the Friend of every creature—that person comes to peace (29).

C. Activity

Think about your own life and the stages you have passed through during it. Write down what seem to you to be the major stages you have experienced so far. How do they compare with the four stages of Hindu thought?

“Renunciation” is not a word or a concept that is very popular with most people, precisely because it has strongly negative implications of giving up something, of doing without, and we are not fond of giving up or doing without what we want. But if “renunciation” is thought of in its original sense of “reporting back,” of making contact with something we have been separated from that is more important and more interesting than anything else—as a result of which we just cease to care about those other less important and less interesting things—then it is quite a different concept. Think about your own life experience, and make a list of things that you once cared greatly about, but ceased to care about because other more important things had come to the center of your life.

THE BHAGAVAD GITA, Lesson 12

A. Outline

Discourse 6 of the Gita is entitled “The Yoga of Self-Subdual.” “Self-Subdual” is Annie Besant’s translation of the Sanskrit term “Atma sam yama.” “Atma” means “Self” in various meanings but especially the ultimate Self in us. “Sam” comes from a root meaning “join together.” And “yama” means “abstention, restraint, self-control.” So we might gloss the chapter title as “The method of controlling our separate self so as to join together with the One Self.” The chapter title is sometimes translated as “The Yoga of Meditation,” because that is what meditation does—joins our separated self with the one Self.

This is the final discourse of the first third of the Gita, concerned particularly with the question of how to act in the world without being trapped by the consequences of our action, that is, with Karma Yoga. The 47 verses of the discourse can be seen as falling into 5 groups.

Discourse 6: The Yoga of Self-Subdual

- Review, focusing on free action (1-9)
- Conditions and techniques of the practice of Yoga (10-19)
- The process of Yoga (20-32)
- Getting started on the Path (33-36)
- Ending without concluding (37-47)

B. Summary and Commentary

(1) Review

The first verse of the discourse summarizes the basic principle of Karma Yoga: To practice Karma Yoga is to do things because they are to be done, that is, because they are right to do, being in harmony with what is called “the Way,” or “the Plan,” or the flow of the universe. That motive contrasts with doing things instead for the sake of their “fruit,” that is, because we hope to get something we think is good for us out of doing them or to avoid something we think will be unpleasant for us. Motive, as one of the great Teachers said, is everything (*Mahatma Letters*, Letter 92, Chronological Edition / Letter 54, 3rd Edition).

What is to be renounced is not action, but the wrong motive for action (verse 2). Krishna repeatedly makes this point. We need not, and indeed should not, withdraw from the world, but rather live in the world, fulfilling our dharma or duty here. Christ made the same point in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5.14-16):

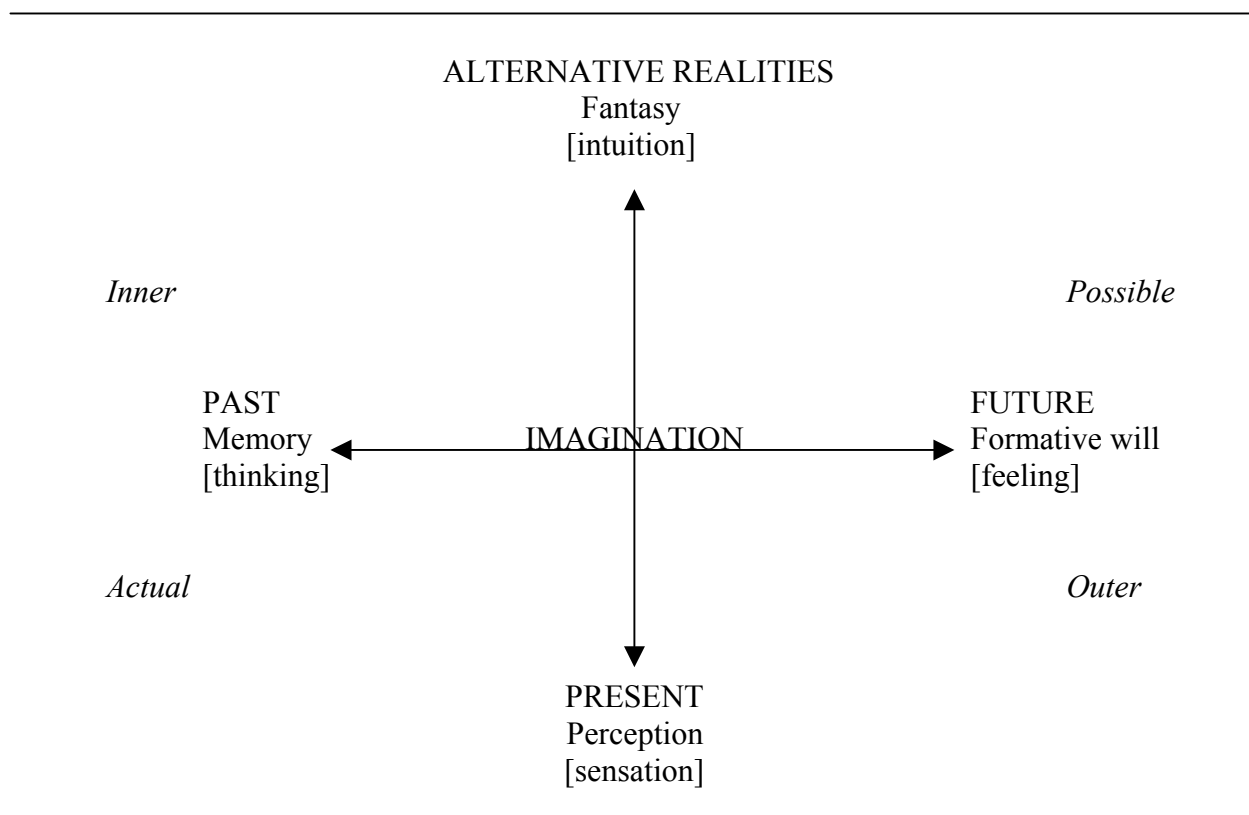
Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hid.
Neither do men light a candle and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick;
and it giveth light unto all that are in the house.
Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and
glorify your Father which is in heaven.

The wrong motive for action, which we are to renounce, is called in Sanskrit *samkalpa* (or *sankalpa*), which Besant translates as “the imaginative faculty that makes plans for the

future” and is also translated as “desire, will, intention.” None of those terms alone quite captures the meaning of that wrong motive, which is deciding to do something because of the personal effect we anticipate from the action. It may help to place samkalpa within a general scheme, shown below on this page. (This general scheme is not from the Gita, but is offered only to help envision the nature of samkalpa in relation to other components of our psychological nature.)

We live in a fourfold world of the past, present, future, and alternative reality (the last being neither past, present, nor future, but might be). We access each of those dimensions of our fourfold world by our image-forming ability (or imagination) exercised in a different direction. Imagination directed to the past produces memory; directed to the present, perception; directed to the future, anticipation (or samkalpa); directed to alternative reality, supposition (or fantasy).

Those four faculties are analogous respectively to the Jungian functions of thinking (which is based on memories of past experiences), sensation (which is perception of the present reality), feeling (which is the desiring will of samkalpa that anticipates future fruits of our action), and intuition (which is fantasy, or the image-forming of alternative reality—not what Theosophists mean by “intuition” but a lower function). Memory is an inner experience of actual past reality. Perception is an actual experience of present outer reality. Supposition or fantasy is an inner experience of possible alternative reality. Anticipation (samkalpa) is a possible experience of outer future reality.



We, as fourfold personalities, are compounded of sensory input, thoughts, fancies, and desires. We swivel in the four directions, at one time motivated by perception, at another time by memory, at yet another time by fantasy, and at still another time by desire-actuated anticipation (*samkalpa*, which is our desire to have or avoid the personal consequences, or fruit, of our actions). Those four faculties are like electric magnets that pull us now this way, now that way. The second discourse of the Gita (verse 41) is relevant here:

The determinate Reason [*buddhi*] is but one-pointed . . . many branched and endless are the thoughts of the irresolute.

While we are attracted and controlled by the four faculties, we are “many-branched” (going in a variety of different directions) and “irresolute” (continually changing our orientation). When *buddhi* points us, as individualities, in a new, fifth dimension out of the plane of the four times and faculties, in a totally new way, toward the Self or *atma*, we become “one-pointed” and “resolute.” That change of orientation is from the fourfold lower nature to the threefold higher nature of higher mind (*manas* or *nous*), discriminative wisdom (*buddhi*), and Self (*atma*).

Christ as well as Krishna talked about this change or *metanoia* (as it is called in Greek), a fundamental change of mind and character, when he said, “Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all this will be added unto you.” Seeking the kingdom of God is stepping out of the flat world of our fourfold personality with its concerns, especially the anticipation of the fruit of action, into a new dimension. It is renouncing the formative will and becoming enthroned in the unity (or *yoga*) of the Self. Then all the uncertainties, confusions, fears, and conflicts of life are resolved. Then, as Arjuna will say in the eighteenth discourse, “Destroyed is my delusion. I have gained memory . . . I am firm, my doubts have fled away. I will do according to Thy word.” Or as Dante says in *The Divine Comedy*, “In His will is our peace.”

To live in the world is to act. But if we perform our actions in the spirit of Karma Yoga, that is, not as personal actions but as expressions of the eternal order of things and as steps in the evolutionary plan of the Logos (as we understand that plan), then we are united with our higher Self. Then we are in a state of serenity, “neither acting nor causing to act” (5.13) in the sense of producing personal karmic results. So verses 6.3-4:

For a Sage who is seeking Yoga [the practice of uniting the lower and higher selves], action is called the means; for the same Sage, when he is enthroned in yoga [the state of union], serenity is called the means.

When a man feelth no attachment either for the objects of sense or for actions, renouncing the formative will [*samkalpa*, desire for fruit], then he is said to be enthroned in yoga.

Verses 5-7 play with the several meanings of the word “self” (*atma*). Besant’s translation attempts to sort out the polysemy (many meanings) of the word by distinguishing three senses:

- SELF = the monad or ultimate Self in us, which is one with the ultimate Reality,

- higher Self = the individuality or reincarnating unit in us,
- self = the personality or this-life ego.

The result of being “enthroned in yoga” is a perfect equanimity and an assessment of the value of things and actions on a completely different basis from that of worldly life (verses 8-9). The particular example used is that of a person who is harmonized (has all three of those “selves” united), “to whom a lump of earth, a stone, and gold are the same.” That example echoes one of the tales of the Brothers Grimm, in fact the first tale in the first English translation of their folktales. It goes like this:

Jack was apprenticed for seven years and, being a good workman, was rewarded with a lump of gold as big as his head. He set out to return home to his mother, carrying it. But the lump of gold was very heavy to carry, and on the way he kept meeting other people, with other objects that he traded for. First he traded his lump of gold for a wild horse, then the horse for a desiccated cow, then the cow for a stolen pig, then the pig for a squawking goose, then the goose for a grindstone that was actually just an old rock, “a lump of earth, a stone.” He finally lost the stone, which was very heavy to carry, in a deep well, and he jumped with joy to be rid of his burden and returned happily to his mother’s house.

For Jack in the Grimm’s tale, “a lump of earth, a stone, and gold” were the same. They were just burdens to carry. And being rid of them allowed him to return unburdened to the Mother from whom he came. He was “enthroned in yoga.”

(2) Conditions and Techniques of Yoga

The second section of this discourse (verses 10-19) deals with the conditions or techniques of the practice of Yoga, which lead to the state of yoga (or union among all the “selves” in us). It specifies some rather particular and specific matters:

- (Verse 10) The practice should be constant. It is no good working at the goal now and again, stopping and starting. Our efforts must be continuous; otherwise we have to start anew each time. New starts are easier than first starts, to be sure, but easiest is to keep at it.
- We need to have a place set apart to practice. This may be an actual physical place set aside for meditation and spiritual activities, a “shrine room” or “meditation corner” in our home. Many find that helpful. Or it may be a “secret place” within ourselves rather than in the external world. In the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 6.6), Christ advised his followers:

When thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret.

A “closet” or “secret place” may be a physical location, but, if so, it is only a symbol of the “secret place” in our heart, which is the true abode of the Father.

- In that “secret place” we should be without asking and without grasping (“free from hope and greed” in Besant’s translation), that is, content with what is.
- (Verse 11) Our seat in that place should be clean (“pure”), firm (“fixed”), a medium between extremes (“neither very much raised nor very low”), and composed of three layers: on the bottom, fragrant kuśa grass; in the middle, an antelope skin; and on top, a cloth. As with the “secret place,” there are some aspects of these directions that may be taken literally (though kuśa grass and antelope skin are not readily available!). However, the directions have clear symbolic value.

The “seat” we take, that is, our habitual position in life, needs to be “pure” and “fixed,” not mixed up or vacillating. It should follow the Buddha’s middle way, avoiding extremes. And we should rest upon our threefold inner nature. Kuśa grass is vegetation and so represents the vital part of our nature; the antelope skin is animal and so represents the emotional and lower mental part of our nature; the cloth is a product of human activity and so represents the human or higher mental part of our nature. All three rest upon the ground, the mineral or dense physical part of our nature. If we aspire to spirituality (the buddhic and atmic), we cannot separate ourselves from our lower aspects, but must base our spiritual quest on them. “Yoga” means “union,” so all parts of our nature must be united in the spiritual quest.

- (Verse 12) Our mind should be one-pointed, which means (as observed above) that the mind should be guided by the discriminative wisdom of buddhi, controlling both thought and all activity of the senses, so that the self of the personality is purified and united with the great Self within us.
- (Verse 13) We should hold our body, head, and neck erect and steady. On the one hand, this is straightforward advice about how we should sit in meditation. But it also metaphorical and symbolic of our inner posture: straight (not bent) and firmly steady (not wavering).
- We should fix our gaze on the tip of our nose and not let it wander around. Again, this is practical physical advice. Some people close their eyes altogether while meditating; others focus them downward (“at the point of the nose”); but one should certainly avoid letting one’s gaze wander around. However, the advice is also symbolic. We need to keep our attention on the task at hand and not let it jump from one thing to another. The outer vision is a metaphor for our inner attention.
- (Verses 14-15) In this position, our mind should be quiet (“serene”), confident (“fearless”), and committed to following the Path (“firm in the vow of the Brahmachari”). The last quality needs some comment. A “Brahmachari” is a person who practices “Brahmachara,” which means literally “the Brahman path” or “the way to the Ultimate.” More specifically it refers to the first of the four stages of life, which are those of the student, the householder, the retiree, and the renunciant. Those four stages are points of passage in a completed life, the beginning of which is that of the student. (We may not all complete our lives, but the four stages are the abstract ideals of such a life.) Because students are supposed

to attend to their studies before they get married and have families (the stage of the householder), the word “Brahmachara” came to mean sexual continence or celibacy. And that is the sense in which it is often understood. But in as much as Krishna is telling Arjuna that he should practice the Brahmachara vow, and Arjuna had long since passed into the householder stage (having several wives and children) and had even spent time as a forest-dwelling retiree before coming back into the world of action, the reference at this point of the Gita cannot be the derived one of student celibacy. The literal sense of the word “the Path to Brahman or the Ultimate” is what makes sense here. We must be committed to following the Path, a commitment that takes different forms in different stages of life, but always “thinking on Me, harmonized, . . . aspiring after Me,” that is, the highest within ourselves, which is also one with the Highest in the universe. Setting out on this Path to Brahman leads ultimately to peace and nirvana (“the supreme Bliss”).

- (Verses 16-17) The notion of moderation in all things is central to Yoga, as it is to Buddhism and to Greek philosophy. (“Nothing in excess” is said to have been inscribed over the entrance to the temple at Delphi.) So in these verses we are cautioned about moderation in eating, sleeping, entertaining ourselves, and indeed in all actions.
- (Verses 18-19) When we control our thought, fix ourselves in our highest Self, and free ourselves from longing and desires, then we are made whole. The word translated as “harmonized” by Besant is “yukta,” which is the result of “Yoga.” It is being united within ourselves and with the ultimate Reality all around ourselves.

[to be continued]

C. Activity

Meditate on (1) how your remembrance of past experiences conditions your life, (2) how your perception of present reality is limited by those experiences, (3) the extent to which you make up scenarios that have no correspondence with reality but which then affect your actions, and (4) how your anticipation of the future, as it affects you personally, motivates your responses. How might a discrimination between what is real and unreal affect your responses, which are otherwise conditioned by those factors.

What conditions or techniques have you found most effective in meditation or other spiritual practices? Try out (either literally or metaphorically) some of those dealt with in verses 10-19 to see what their effect is.

THE BHAGAVAD GITA, Lesson 13

A. Outline

Continuing with discourse 6 of the Gita, we come to the last three groups of verses: verses 20–32, dealing with the process of Yoga; verses 33–36, about how to get started on the Path; and verses 37–47, on ending without concluding.

B. Summary and Commentary

(3) The Process of Yoga (verses 20–32)

By the practice of Yoga, the mind comes to rest, being made quiet because it is no longer fragmented but unified (which is what “yoga” means). And then we know who we are. The little self in us sees the greatest SELF by means of the higher Self, and so is satisfied in the knowledge of its true identity (20).

That knowledge of who we are is the only real happiness (or “supreme delight”), which the intuitive wisdom (buddhi or “Reason”) takes hold of. It is beyond all pleasures of the senses because it reflects the joy or bliss of ultimate Reality, being a recognition of what Reality truly is. The Sanskrit word used here for “Reality” is *tattvatah*, literally “that-ness,” the way things are (21). There is nothing greater than this real happiness, and whoever has it is not oppressed by even heavy sorrow. This is what yoga is—a very practical way of life leading to peace and happiness (22–23).

Our minds are normally occupied with the stimuli that our senses give it, or else with the imaginative projections we put onto the world around us, which often have little relationship to Reality (the that-ness of *tattvatah*). Those projections are the “formative will” or “anticipation” (*samkalpa*) spoken of earlier in verse 4. But when our minds are centered on the great Self within us and all around us, then we experience the greatest happiness and peace because we are in touch with the Ground of all being and ultimate Reality (24–28).

When we are in touch with the Ground of all being and ultimate Reality, everything makes sense because we recognize that we are part of that ultimate Reality and it is present in us and in everything in the universe. The last four verses in this group (29–32) address two matters. First, they point to a solution for the problem of evil, which is Job’s question in the Bible. That problem is how pain and suffering can exist in a world whose essence or Ground is love and joy. Or in more explicitly Judeo-Christian terms, how a caring and powerful God can permit bad things to happen to good people.

The question about the problem of evil is not, in fact, capable of a logical, rational answer. In one sense, it is the ultimate Western koan. Koans do not have logical answers. Any rational answer proposed for a koan is wrong. A koan can be answered only by our ceasing to think about it in the usual way and instead discovering a radically new way to approach it. We cannot think about a koan with our logical mind; we have to think about it with our intuition. We have to think “out of the box.”

The solution pointed to by these verses is to tell us to stop thinking of ourselves as separate from the world and as victims of something forced on us from outside. There is no “outside.” No one is forcing anything on us. There is only the “Good Law,” which, as Dante says, is “the Love that moves the sun and the other stars.” There is only *tattvatah*—the way things are. And what is that *tattvatah* like? How are things? That is the second matter addressed in these verses, and they deal with it in a way that anticipates the theme of the middle third of the Gita (discourses 7–12).

In the central six discourses of the Gita, Krishna speaks no longer as Arjuna’s cousin and childhood friend, no longer as his charioteer and military advisor, no longer even as an avatar or embodiment of divine wisdom, but instead as Love-Wisdom itself, Love-Wisdom personified. We tend to think in dichotomies and exclusive options—that is especially true in the West, but it is a common human pattern of thought. So when we think about God or the ultimate Reality, we think it must be either an impersonal force or a personal God who, in the words of the hymn, “walks with me, and he talks with me, and he tells me I am his own.”

But all exclusive dichotomies are false. What we call “God” is neither an impersonal force nor a personal being with whom we can enter into a relationship. Those dichotomous options tell us nothing about God; they tell us only something about ourselves. They are like the problem of the nature of light that is resolved by Neil Bohr’s complementarity principle.

When physicists study light in certain ways, it seems to consist of waves in some mysterious substance (although there doesn’t seem to be any substance for it to be waves in). When they study light in other ways, it seems to consist of a lot of very small bits of something (although what that something might be is unclear). The paradox is that light behaves like both a wave and a particle. Which is it? That is the dichotomous question. Bohr’s answer is that light is neither one. Light is light. It is our method of looking at it which makes it appear to be either a wave or a particle. So the waviness and particleness are not in light; they are in us.

Similarly, God is neither an impersonal force nor a personal being. We can see it/him in either of those ways, but those ways of seeing God (or a lot of others too, for that matter) are not what God is; they are what we are. And it may be useful at different times, for different purposes, to see in different ways. Verses 29–32 see the divine Reality as personified in Krishna. Krishna is all that is. Krishna is the *tattvatah*.

(4) Getting Started on the Path (verses 33–36)

The fourth group of verses in this discourse are a short conversational exchange between Arjuna and Krishna. Arjuna points out that Krishna has been telling him that to practice Yoga he has to control his mind. But that is a very difficult thing to do. Everyone who has practiced meditation or Yoga (not the exercises, but real Yoga) knows what Arjuna is saying. The mind is inherently restless—impetuous, strong, and as hard to control as the wind. “The wind,” as the Gospel of St. John says, “bloweth where it listeth.” You can’t control how the wind blows. And our minds seem like that to us. So what good is it to tell us we have to control something we can’t control? That is Arjuna’s question.

Krishna's answer is, yes, controlling the mind is certainly hard, but it is not impossible. Controlling the mind depends on two things: *abhyāsa* and *vairāgya*. *Abhyāsa* is “constant practice, repeated efforts.” The Master KH repeatedly told A. P. Sinnett: “We have one word for all aspirants: TRY” and “But still—TRY” (*Mahatma Letters*, Letter 54, Chronological Edition / Letter 35, 3rd Edition). *Abhyāsa* is trying to do something—not casual, offhand trying, but constant, repeated, dedicated trying. We are not asked to succeed, but only to try as well as we can. However, if we try repeatedly, the old adage “Practice makes perfect” proves true. Anything we do—playing the piano, doing martial arts, operating a computer, cooking dinner—requires practice, trying. And if we keep at it, we will eventually learn.

The other thing that mind-control depends on, according to Krishna, is *vairāgya* (or in another form, *virāga*), which is the second qualification for entering the Path in *At the Feet of the Master*, where it is translated “desirelessness”; it is also sometimes translated “dispassion” or “renunciation.” But the root meaning of the word throws light on what this term means. It comes from the word *rāga*, which some people in the West know in connection with Indian music. The ragas are ancient traditional musical patterns or modes, each associated with a time of the day or an emotion.

The basic meaning of *rāga*, however, is “color.” So the ragas are the various “colors” of music. And colors are always associated with emotions. We are in the *pink* when we are happy and see *red* when angry. We are in a *blue* mood when sad, or a *black* mood when despairing, or a *gray* mood when depressed. We are in a *brown* study when distracted. We are *green* with envy or *yellow* when cowardly, or *purple* with rage. Clairvoyants tell us that when we are overpowered by an emotion, our auras are flushed with a color corresponding to that emotion. So then we perceive and respond to the world through that emotional coloration. Then we are not seeing the world as it is, but as we have colored it with our emotion.

The basic meaning of the prefix *vi-* is “apart from.” So *virāga* or *vairāgya* is being “apart from emotional coloration.” It is seeing the world as it is, not as our emotions make it appear to us. We are back to good old *tattvatah*, the way things really are. If we make a continued effort to see things as they are, not as our emotions color them, we can learn to control our mind. That is what Krishna tells Arjuna.

(5) Ending Without Concluding (verses 37–47)

The sixth discourse ends with another question-and-answer exchange. Arjuna, who is no optimist, wants to know what happens to the poor person who doesn't make it. Surely some people do not succeed in controlling their minds, do not get their lives together (do not perfect Yoga). What happens to them? Do they just disappear like a cloud that evaporates? Or what? In Christian terms, he is asking about what happens to the unbaptized or to those who hear the Gospel but are not converted, or who are converted but backslide?

Krishna replies that no effort is ever lost. No one who tries is ever destroyed. After a period of rest, they get to try again. As HPB said, “For those who win onward, there is reward past all telling . . . for those who fail, there are other lives in which success may come.” We pick up where we left off, and give it another TRY. Eventually we will succeed.

Those who succeed in becoming united within themselves, with their higher Self, and with the Cosmic SELF of the universe are greater than ascetics who renounce the world, greater than the wise or learned scholars who theorize about the world, greater than the men of action who carry on the work of the world. They are greater than any of those because they have realized that they, in the words of Krishnamurti, “are the world.”

The final verse of this discourse (47) is an introduction to the next discourse and the next, middle set of discourses, dealing with Bhakti Yoga, the Way of Union by Devotion:

Among all those who have achieved union, the person who has merged himself in Me, honors Me, has faith in Me, that person is the most firmly united of all.

C. Activity

Select a quality, skill, ability, or attitude to develop, and devote a reasonable amount of time to practicing it, very regularly, over a period of time. Regularity is more important than length of practice in any single session. Keep a record of your progress, recorded with complete honesty and no emotional coloration. Be aware of what you do as you practice, as well as how the practice affects you. Do not praise or blame yourself; do not excuse or congratulate yourself. Just observe what is.

D. References:

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THE BHAGAVAD GITA, Lesson 14

A. Outline

Discourses 7–12 deal with the second aspect of Arjuna’s dilemma and its solution. That second aspect is that Arjuna has lost his confidence in the governing order of the cosmos and its beneficence. The solution to that dilemma is bhakti yoga, becoming whole by devotion. The seventh discourse, which consists of 30 verses, is called “The Yoga of Discriminative Knowledge,” and what it discriminates is the double nature of reality—and of us as well. This discourse can be seen as falling into four parts, concerning the one thing that needs to be known (verses 1–2), the two natures of reality (verses 3–7), the attributes of the higher reality (8–11), and that reality as the source of everything and the types of pilgrims on the journey back to it (12–30).

Discourse 7: The Yoga of Discriminative Knowledge

B. Summary and Commentary

Verse 1 of discourse 7 provides a general summary of the whole Gita (these are given periodically throughout the work). The phrase “clinging to me” (also translated “absorbed in me”) is a statement of the condition produced by Bhakti Yoga, appropriately placed first here, as this is the beginning of the treatment of that yoga. The phrase “performing (or practicing) yoga” suggests action and doing, and so is a statement about Karma Yoga, the yoga of action, which was dealt with in the first six discourses. The promise “thou shalt without doubt know Me to the uttermost” looks ahead to the last six discourses, which treat Jñana Yoga, the yoga of knowledge.

In verse 2, Krishna tells Arjuna that he is going to explain to him that “which, having known, there is nothing more here needeth to be known.” That declaration echoes one of the great stories of the spiritual quest, one set forth in the Chhândogya Upanishad, concerning a Brahmin who had a son named Shvetaketu. The father sent his son away to be educated, and when the boy returned, he came back all puffed up with his new learning. So his father asked him, “Have you learned that, knowing which, nothing else needs to be known?” Shvetaketu, having no idea what his father was talking about, replied, “No, sir, I have no idea about that. What is it?” And his father proceeded to instruct him with a series of experimental actions.

For example, his father told Shvetaketu to go over to a nearby fruit tree and pluck a fruit from it, and bring it back. When the boy had done so, his father told him to cut the fruit open. And when he had done so, his father asked him what he saw inside. Shvetaketu answered, “A lot of very small seeds.” Then his father told him to cut open one of the seeds, and when he had done so, his father asked him what he saw inside the seed. Shvetaketu answered, that he did not see anything inside the seed. And his father exclaimed, “Ah, you see nothing, yet from that nothing, which you cannot see, grew that great tree that produced all its fruit. That which you cannot see is the essence of the tree; it is everywhere; it alone is real. You are that! (In Sanskrit *tat tvam asi*, one of the great mantras.)

Then his father told Shvetaketu to fetch a bucket of water and some salt, and when Shvetaketu brought them, his father instructed him to put the salt into the water and to put the bucket aside but to bring it back the following day. The next day, Shvetaketu brought the bucket to his father, who asked him where the salt was. Shvetaketu looked into the bucket but could see no salt, for it had all melted, so he said he did not see anything in the water. Then his father told him to take a sip from one side of the bucket, and the boy did; then from another and yet another side of the bucket; and then his father asked him what he tasted. And Shvetaketu answered that, wherever he sipped, he tasted salt, and his father exclaimed, “Ah, you see no salt, but the salt pervades every drop of the water; it is everywhere; it alone is real. You are that!”

And so Shvetaketu’s education continued through many such object lessons until he finally understood what his father meant. The one thing in life we need to know is that there is a single Reality pervading all existence. It is not, as the Three Truths of the White Lotus say, “seen or heard or smelt,” but it can be perceived by the one who desires perception. And, most important, we are that unseen Reality.

The thing, “which, having known, there is nothing more here needeth to be known” is a theme in all mystical traditions, all religions, all philosophies, all sciences. It is the answer to the question, “Who am I?” The entrance to the temple of Apollo at Delphi is said to have had carved upon it the injunction “Know thyself.” And that theme is the subject of all the Upanishads. It is the question that Christ asked his disciples: “Who do men say that I am?” and further “But who do you say that I am?” If we know who we are, there is nothing else of importance to know. All other knowledge is substitute knowledge; that alone is genuine knowledge.

So Krishna makes the point, by implication, at the beginning of the discourses on the yoga of devotion, that Arjuna, as well as you and I, are—all of us—the unseen Reality pervading everything. As such, when we are devoted, it is not to some external reality, some god outside the world, but rather to the One Reality in all things, including ourselves. That point is made at the very beginning of the treatment of devotion, so we should keep it clearly in mind throughout.

Verses 3–7 deal with the dual nature of Krishna, who is the personification of the all-pervading Reality and whom scarcely anyone really knows. Verse 4 lists the eight aspects of his material or lower nature. Five are the elements earth, water, air, fire, and akasha (space or ether). These are, of course, neither generally “elements” as we know them nor the specific earth, water, etc. that we know. They are rather symbols for various states of matter. Three other aspects are mind (*manas*), reason (or intuitive insight, *buddhi*), and the sense of “I” (*ahamkāra*). This list makes several points. One is that material nature is divine; another is that what we call “mind” and “intuition” and even our sense of separate ego are all material in nature.

The following verses talk about Krishna’s other, higher nature. That nature is the source (the womb) of all living beings (the monads). It is sometimes called *daivīprakṛiti* “divine

nature” or the Light of the Logos. So Krishna’s dual nature is both material stuff and a divine “other,” that is the source of all living entities. Nothing is higher than that nature.

Verses 8–11 are a series of poetic assertions that Krishna is the essence of everything. Particularly, he asserts himself to be the essence of all things and to be the senses associated with the elements: taste with water, hearing with ether, smell with earth, sight with fire. The catalog culminates in an ecstatic celebration in verses 10–11:

Know me as the eternal
Seed of all beings;
The intelligence of the intelligent, am I;
The splendor of the splendid, I;
And the might of the mighty, I;
Free from desire and passion,
In beings, I am the desire harmonious with
What holds all things together.

The last part of the discourse (12–30) deals with the sorts of beings that come from Krishna’s nature. In particular beings characterized by the three qualities (*gunas*) of nature: the inertial (*tamasic*), the explosive (*rajasic*), and the harmonious (*sattvic*). Those qualities are dealt with in some detail later in the Gita, but basically they are three characteristics found, in varying proportions, in all material entities. The point here is that beings of all natures originate from the same source. Krishna’s statement “These know as from Me; not I in them, but they in Me” defines a religious-philosophical position called “panentheism,” which contrasts with another position called “pantheism.” The latter maintains that the universe as a whole is God, and that there is no God apart from the universe. Panentheism, on the other hand, maintains that the universe is a part of God, but that God is more than the universe.

As verses 14–15 go on to clarify, the universe is a sort of veil God throws over himself. The veil is woven of the three strands (*gunas*) by the magical power of illusion (*maya*). To come to a knowledge of God, we must pass through the veil. Persons of the lowest sort are unable, not only to pass through the veil, but even to recognize that it is a veil, and so they live lives associated with the demonic, that is, the *asuras*, mythological beings who are wholly immersed in the material.

Verses 16–19, on the other hand concern the four types of devotees who do pass through the veil of materiality, the lower nature of Krishna, to come to his higher nature. They are those who are suffering, those who want to know, those who want the greatest treasure, and the one who knows (the *jñānī* or gnostic). The last of the four is the greatest and is in fact a *mahātmā*, or person “of great soul” (19).

Verses 20–23 are a statement of nonexclusiveness. Many people form their own ideas of what God is like, according to their conditioning, their wishes, their imaginations. And that is all right; Krishna is actually the source of their devotion, even though they are unaware of the fact. But, of course, the benefit people get from such conditioned religious practices is temporary and limited (23).

Verses 24–27 concern the errors into which we fall. Some people think of the divine as manifesting itself in the universe (pantheism). But that is not correct; rather the universe is a sort of magical appearance whose source is the divine but which does not limit or exhaust the divine (panentheism). The divine comprehends everything—past, present, and future; but nothing comprehends the divine. In this world, we are caught up in the delusion of duality, snared by the interplay of the opposites.

Verses 28–30 round off this discourse and introduce several ideas that will be dealt with in the next discourse. Those who rise above the opposites, the delusion of duality, give their devotion to the unseen Reality personified in the Gita by Krishna. They know the “Eternal,” “Self-knowledge,” and all “action”; and they know Krishna as the knowledge of the “elements,” the “Shining Ones,” and the “Sacrifice” (to use the terms in Besant’s translation). These six terms provide a segue to the next discourse, which begins by discussing them.

C. Activity

Consider what is meant by saying that, if we know who we are, we don’t need to know anything else. In what sense do you think that statement is meant?

Have you ever encountered what you might call a “double nature” in your experience of the world? What did the “doubleness” consist of?

What might be a practical difference between regarding the universe as coterminous with the divine or as a magic show produced by the divine but not identical with it?



THE BHAGAVAD GITA, Lesson 15

A. Outline

Discourse 8 is called “The Yoga of the Indestructible Supreme Eternal,” that is, of the Ultimate Unmanifested Reality. It has five parts: (Verses 1–4) Arjuna asks and Krishna tells him about six concepts introduced at the end of discourse 7, which are aspects of both the manifested and the unmanifested worlds. (Verses 5–16) Krishna speaks of the way by which we can reach him. (Verses 17–19) Krishna speaks of the cosmic cycles of activity and rest between the unmanifested and the manifested. (Verses 20–22) Krishna reveals what is beyond the cosmic process of activity and rest, the highest Spirit. (Verses 23–28) Krishna identifies the two paths between which we must choose and the “supreme and ancient seat” at the end of all paths.

B. Summary and Commentary

In the last two verses of the preceding discourse, Krishna had mentioned to Arjuna the Eternal (*brahman*), Self-knowledge or the Supreme Self (*adhyatman*), and action (*karma*), which are known by those who strive for liberation from birth and death. He also mentioned the elements or supreme being (*adhibhuta*), the Shining Ones or supreme divinity (*adhidaiva*), and the Sacrifice (*adhiyajña*), which are Krishna himself, as he is known by those of harmonized mind at “the time of forthgoing.” Discourse 8 opens with two verses (1–2) in which Arjuna asks Krishna what these six rather puzzling things are and how one is to know Krishna at the “time of forthgoing,” that is, at the hour of death.

Krishna responds (verses 3–4) with brief definitions of the six terms. The first three relate to ultimate reality in its own nature prior to manifestation, and the second three relate to the manifested world. First, the terms relating to unmanifest reality:

1. “The Eternal,” or in Sanskrit *brahman*, is said by Krishna to be indestructible and supreme. The Sanskrit term is derived from a root *brh*, which means “to expand,” so *brahman* is that which expands into the universe. As we see later (in verses 20–1), there are really two unmanifested states of being, of which this is the “lower.” In Theosophical terminology, it is sometimes called *mulaprakriti*, “root nature” or “primordial matter.”
2. What Besant translates as “Self-knowledge” is in Sanskrit *adhyatman*, which is also translated as “Supreme Self.” Krishna says it is the “essential (or inherent) nature.” It is the Logos of Greek philosophy or the Cosmic Purusha of Indic philosophy, that is, pure consciousness, that which knows itself (hence Besant’s “Self-knowledge”). These first two terms thus complement each other: one is primordial substance or objectivity, which expands into all matter; the other is primordial self-awareness or subjectivity, which radiates as all consciousness.
3. The third term is *karma*, meaning simply “action.” Krishna says that it is “the emanation that causes the birth of beings” or “the creative power that produces all states of being.” It is the connection between primordial substance and primordial

self-awareness; in Theosophical terms, it is *fohat*, which the Theosophical Glossary says is “the universal propelling Vital Force,” also called *daiviprakriti*, primordial light or the Light of the Logos.

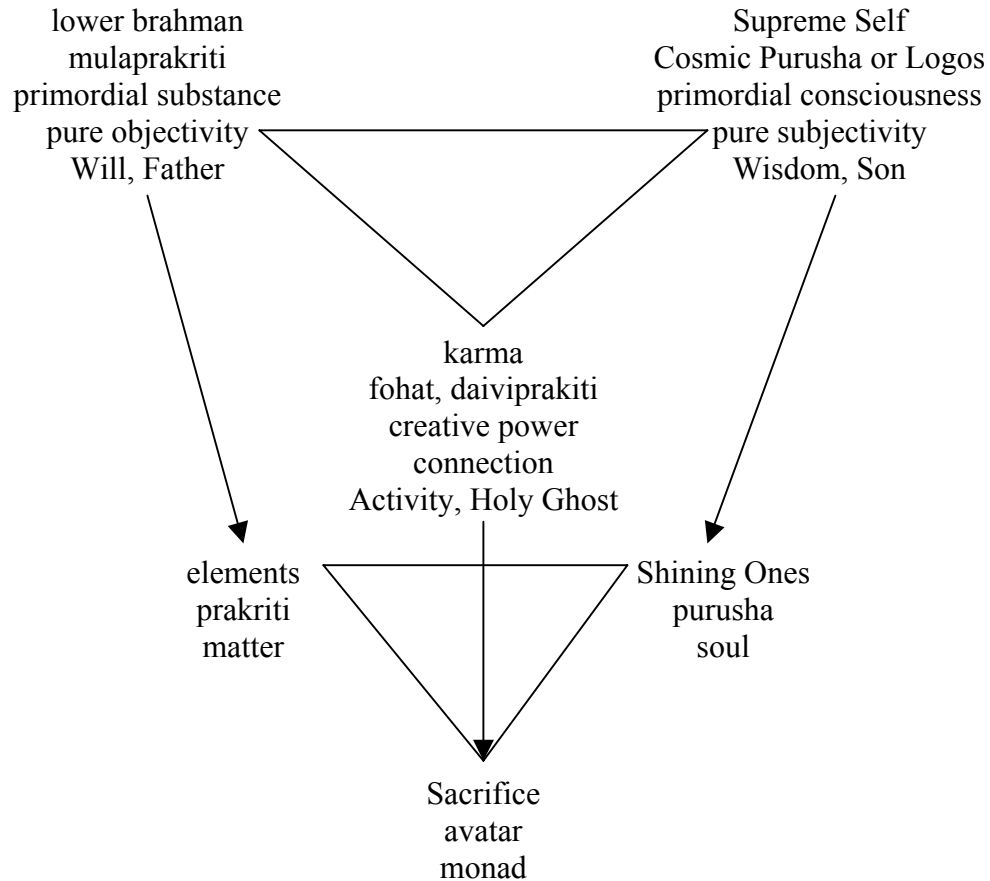
Another way of looking at these three aspects of ultimate reality is to say that they are, respectively, Will, Wisdom, and Activity (or Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, or Shiva, Vishnu, and Brahma, and so on)—the three aspects of the divine.

Next, the three terms relating to the manifested world, which we know Krishna as being:

4. The elements or supreme being (*adhibhuta*) is said by Krishna to concern his perishable nature, so we know that we are in the realm of manifestation, where everything is impermanent and changing. It is nature, prakriti—mulaprakriti manifested—matter in all its manifold states and forms.
5. The Shining Ones or supreme divinity (*adhidaiva*) is the individual expression of consciousness—and is the complement of the preceding, just as the Logos is the complement of mulaprakriti. It is the Cosmic Purusha expressed as the individual purusha or soul.
6. The supreme Sacrifice (*adhiyajña*) is Krishna himself, the embodied divine consciousness, and since (as the Gita will ultimately reveal) we are Krishna, it is us. It is the avatar, the monad, the Pilgrim of Eternity.

So to know Krishna, that is, ourselves, we must know the second three qualities, which are aspects of the world process and of our pilgrimage in it. To come to liberation, we must know the first three qualities, which are aspects of the unmanifested state of reality, free from birth and death. The six can be diagrammed as follows:

[See diagram on next page]



Those who know who they are (the second triangle) and where they come from (the first triangle) know Krishna at the time of death, and need come into birth no more. We achieve this knowledge (verses 12–13 tell us) by closing our eyes and ears and mouth, that is, by becoming mystics (the Greek word from which *mystic* comes means “one who has closed eyes and mouth”), by confining our mind (or manas) in our heart (which represents buddhi or intuition), by fixing our life-breath (our creative power or fohat) within our own head (that is, at our highest point or atma), “concentrated by yoga” (that is centered by uniting all aspects of our being), reciting “Om” (the symbol of the underlying unity of existence), and thinking on Krishna (the personalized embodiment of all).

The universe alternates between day and night, manvantaras of activity and pralayas of rest (17–19). During the manvantaric day, the manifested universe (the lower triangle of the diagram) comes forth into existence. During the pralayaic night, it returns to its unmanifested state (the upper triangle) to await a new day, when it again “streams forth.”

But beyond the unmanifested triangle of primordial substance, consciousness, and power is yet a further Unmanifest. It is what *The Secret Doctrine* calls Parabrahm. It does not participate in the alternations of day and night, manvantara and pralaya, activity and rest. We cannot even say that it “is.” Blavatsky calls it “Beness.” It is the source of all that was, is, will be, or can be. It is the “Indestructible” of the title of this discourse. It is called the “highest

Path” or “supreme Goal.” (It is noteworthy that the word *gati* in Sanskrit means both “path” and “goal.”)

How do we reach that goal? What paths lead to the highest Path? Verses 23–27 describe two contrasting paths between which we must choose:

- (1) fire, light, day, waxing, summer, sun, returning not, going to Brahman
- (2) smoke, darkness, night, waning, winter, moon, returning, being reborn

It might seem that the Gita is advocating our taking the first path as pleasant and avoiding the second as unpleasant. But it is clear that the Yogi has a choice between them: they are both available. These two paths suggest the two paths of *The Voice of the Silence*. One is the path of immediate freedom for the individual. The other is the path of the Bodhisattva, who returns voluntarily to aid the world, and *The Voice* urges us to choose the second. Things are not always what they seem. We may at a certain point leave this world, or we may remain in it as helpers.

The last verse (28) of the discourse tells us that the three actions of sacrifice, austerity (or discipline), and almsgiving (charity) are good and earn “the fruit of meritorious deeds.” These three actions (which are major subjects of discourse 17) represent our duty to God or the divine (sacrifice), to ourselves (austerity), and to others (almsgiving). It is such good actions that earn for us the right to take the path of light to Brahman. But this verse tells us that “the Yogi passeth all these by, having known this,” that is, that the second path of returning to help others “goeth to the supreme and ancient Seat,” “the Indestructible Supreme Eternal,” which is Krishna’s own “Supreme abode” (21).

C. Activity

This discourse considers three realities that can be seen as parallel to the three aspects of our own self-identity:

- the Indestructible Supreme Eternal or Parabrahm ——— monad
- the unmanifest reality of mulaprakriti, the logos, and fo-hat ——— individuality
- the manifest reality of matter, souls, and embodied life ——— personality

Think about this parallelism, and list other sets of three that you are familiar with, paralleling them with these two sets. Parallelisms are not equivalences, but are like proportions, as when we say that the sequence 2:4:8 is proportionate to 5:10:20. The numbers of one set are not equivalent to those of the other set. But the proportions between the numbers of each set are the same (each number being the double of the preceding one in the set). Looking for parallelisms (or proportions) of this sort can suggest connections or relationships we might otherwise miss.

THE BHAGAVAD GITA, Lesson 16

A. Outline

Discourse 9 marks the end of the first half of the Gita (which consists in all of eighteen discourses). It is called “The Yoga of the Kingly Science and the Kingly Secret” (or in another translation “Royal Knowledge and Royal Mystery.” This “Secret” or “Knowledge” is what Joy Mills writes about in the July-August *Quest* magazine in her article “The Non-Existent Princes: That Which Ought to Be Known.” The secret knowledge of this discourse is “that which ought to be known,” and is laid forth quite openly in the discourse, which can be divided into five sections.

B. Summary and Commentary

The first section (verses 1–3) announced the subject of the discourse: the kingly wisdom (*rājavidyā*) and kingly secret that releases those who know it from all evils because it combines direct knowledge into the nature of things or gnosis (*jñāna*) and the knowledge of how to discriminate (*vijñāna*). Those who do not recognize the reality of this secret wisdom do not reach Krishna, but are born again in the mortal world of constant change and rebecoming (*samsāra*).

The second section (verses 4–10) deals with the relation of Krishna to the world. He says (verse 4) that, in his unmanifested nature, he pervades the whole manifested world. The world is a part of Krishna: “All beings have root in Me, I am not rooted in them.” That is a statement of a view of the relationship between God and the world called “panentheism.” Pantheism (from *pan-* “all” and *the-* “god”) is the teaching that everything is God, or more precisely that God and the natural forces of the universe are the same thing—that there is no God apart from natural law. Panentheism (from *pan-* “all,” *en-* “in,” and *the-* “god”) is the teaching that everything is in God, or more precisely that the world is part, but not the whole, of God. God is not produced by or located in the world, but is rather the ground of all being.

Krishna causes beings to come into being and sustains them, but he is not in them (verse 5). Rather beings are like the blowing wind, and Krishna is like the space in which the wind blows (verse 6). The world process is cyclical (as the second Fundamental Proposition of *The Secret Doctrine* asserts): At the end of a world period (*kalpa*) all beings go into Krishna’s material nature (*prakṛiti*); and at the beginning of the next world period, he sends them forth again by the power of his will or intention. And so the world process moves on, but Krishna is only its supervisor; he is not limited by the actions of the world (verses 7–10).

The third section (verses 11–25) identifies the various ways people react to Krishna. Those ways are of (a) the foolish, (b) the devotees, (c) the gnostics, and (d) the sacrificers.

(a) The foolish (verses 11–12) are those who do not recognize the divine when it is incarnate in a human form—who do not see Krishna’s higher being or supreme nature as the “great Lord of beings” when it expresses itself through a human body. They are “empty of hope, empty of deeds, empty of wisdom,” that is, lacking in the three qualities associated with

the three paths to Self-realization: devotion or bhakti (hope), action or karma (deeds), and knowledge or jñāna (wisdom). They are deluded by the illusive appearances of lower nature that characterizes the brutes (*rāksasas*, fiends who haunt graveyards) and demons (*āsuras*, opponents of the gods).

Verses 11 and 12, summarized above, in fact identify the condition in which Arjuna found himself at the beginning of the Gita. He did not recognize in his apparently human charioteer the incarnation of the divine nature of Krishna. He was consequently “empty of hope, empty of deeds, empty of wisdom,” for he did not know the way of devotion (Bhakti Yoga), the way of action (Karma Yoga), or the way of knowledge (Jñāna Yoga)—in all of which Krishna is now instructing him. He sank down on the floor of his chariot, senselessly overcome by the deceitful nature of despair, sloth, and ignorance, which is fiendish and demonic, rather than divine.

(b) Devotees (verses 13–14), on the other hand, are those who know Krishna as the source of all being. They are beings of great soul (i.e., mahatmas) because they worship or honor Krishna with devotion. “Devotion” does not refer to some vague feeling of affection or an emotional state at all. Devotion is the action of devoting, that is, of vowing or pledging, oneself to a higher purpose. Those who have made that vow (also called the “bodhisattva vow”) are mahatmas, great souls who have dedicated themselves to the service of all beings in the world.

Arjuna is in the process of coming to know Krishna in this way, and thus to becoming himself a mahatma (a goal we learn in 18.74 that he eventually achieves).

(c) Gnostics (verses 15–19) are those who know what they need to know (“the Kingly Science and the Kingly Secret” that is the theme of this discourse) in order to become devotees—to pledge themselves intelligently to the service of the world. They are the wise ones who by gnosis recognize that Krishna is both the One and the many, various and omnipresent (15). Verses 16–19 are a poetic catalog of all the things Krishna is—sacrifice and offering, father and mother, path and seed, heat and rain, immortality and mortality, being and nonbeing.

(d) Sacrificers are of various kinds. Gnostics are those who “sacrifice with the sacrifice of wisdom” (15). Then there are also those who sacrifice according to the rules of scripture, the three Vedas or holy books of Hinduism (verses 20–21). They too are gnostics of a kind, but what they know is the letter of the law. They are good people, pillars of society, models of behavior in the world; they do what they should, according to the rules. Because of their uprightness, after death, they have their reward in heaven, the land of the gods (or *devachan*). But they have lived with attachment to the rules and forms of life; so in due course, they return to life—and of course also to death. What they get is only the transitory. The Sanskrit word translated “transitory” is *gatāgata*, which means literally “what comes and goes.”

Finally there are the best of sacrificers (verses 22–25), those who sacrifice the self to the Self. If we are looking for security, we will not find it in this world, the place of “what comes and goes.” But if we dedicate ourselves to the divine, then we will have the only security that

counts (22). This verse echoes the words of another of the great teachers who, speaking from the top of a mountain, said:

Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal:

But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal:

For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. [Matt. 6.19–21]

It does not matter what name we give to the divine Self to which we dedicate ourselves. As Krishna says, “who worship full of faith, they also worship Me.” Whatever we call the divine, that Self is “indeed the enjoyer of all sacrifices” (23–24). But those who do not recognize that Self, not by one name or another, but “in essence” (the Sanskrit is *tattva* “thatness”), they fall. Whatever we are devoted to, whatever we have dedicated ourselves to—we go to that: gods, ancestors, spirits (and we could vastly expand on that list), or to the Divine symbolized by Krishna (25). We go to what we have devoted ourselves to. “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.”

The fourth section (verses 26–33) talks about the nature of the devotion or dedication that is the overall topic of the six middle discourses of the Gita. What we do is less important than why we do it. Little things can be just as important as big ones, if they are done with devotion, that is, the right intention: “a leaf, a flower, a fruit, water” are acceptable offerings (26). Whatever we do can be an offering (27). The important thing (and here this discourse reprises the first six discourses on Karma Yoga) is to do what we do, not for what we think will benefit us, but as a sacrifice, an offering, to the Divine (28).

This way is not elitist. It is available to all beings because all beings are in the Divine (“all beings have root in Me”):

The same am I to all beings; there is none hateful to Me nor dear. They verily who worship Me with devotion are in Me, and I also in them. [29]

That, in fact, is “the Kingly Science and the Kingly Secret.” We are all in the Divine Reality, which is the ground of all being, and it is in us. In it all things are equal because all are It. As Blavatsky put it in her wording of the Great Hermetic Axiom (in the Bowen Notes):

As is the Inner, so is the Outer; as is the Great, so is the Small; as it is above, so it is below; there is but ONE LIFE AND LAW; and he that worketh it is ONE. Nothing is Inner, nothing is Outer; nothing is Great, nothing is Small; nothing is High, nothing is Low, in the Divine Economy.

To realize that fact and to act upon it is to “worship . . . with devotion.”

Whatever our social status, whatever our background, devotion to the Divine in ourselves and in all others makes us equal. As verses 30–31 (in another translation) put it:

If even the evil doer worships me with undivided devotion, he is to be thought of as righteous, for he has indeed rightly resolved.

Quickly he becomes virtuous and goes to everlasting peace. Arjuna, know for certain that no devotee of Mine is ever lost.

The next two verses (32–33) go on to say that whoever takes refuge in Krishna (the Divine) will tread the highest Path—without distinction of race, creed, sex, caste, or color. Or, as Saint Peter put it: “God is no respecter of persons. But in every nation he that is devoted to him, and does righteousness, is accepted by him” (Acts 10.34–35).

The fifth section consists of a single concluding verse (34), which is a summary, not only of this discourse, but of the whole Gita. In it Krishna tells Arjuna, “On Me fix thy mind,” the aim of Jñāna Yoga; “be devoted to Me,” the aim of Bhakti Yoga; “sacrifice to Me,” the aim of Karma Yoga. Thus it is that Arjuna is told to “prostrate thyself before Me.” The aim of all Yogas is to recognize “the Kingly Science and the Kingly Secret” of unity with the Divine. This verse is a key verse in the Gita; it is repeated with only slight variation at the end of the poem (18.65).

C. Activity

Pick out some ordinary, trivial activity of your everyday life, perhaps some routine chore that has to be done frequently. Try to do it intentionally, not for its usual purpose, but as an offering to the Divine in yourself, in all other beings, and in the cosmos. Dedicate the action. Don't be discouraged if you have trouble at first. But persevere.

D. References

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THE BHAGAVAD GITA, Lesson 17

A. Outline

Discourse 10 is one of the most lyrically poetic passages of the Gita. It is entitled “The Yoga of Sovereignty” or “Manifestation”; in it, Krishna asserts that he is indeed everything that exists, as all the world manifests him. The discourse consists of three sections. First (verses 1–11), Krishna promises he will tell Arjuna the “supreme word” and provides a summary of discourses 7–9. Second (verses 12–18), Arjuna acknowledges Krishna’s primacy and asks how he can recognize that primacy. Third (verses 19–42), Krishna replies with a poetic catalog of his identities.

B. Summary and Commentary

At the very beginning (verse 1), Krishna tells Arjuna that he is speaking out of a desire for Arjuna’s welfare. This is an important statement. One aspect of Arjuna’s moral dilemma, which called forth the Lord’s Song, the Bhagavad Gita, is that the young prince had lost all confidence in a moral order, a providence that would assure a good outcome of events, so he foresaw only destruction and evil as a consequence of the battle (that is, of life itself). That aspect of Arjuna’s dilemma is addressed by Bhakti Yoga—the way to wholeness through devotion—which is set forth in these middle six discourses. Here Krishna assures Arjuna that he loves him and desires his welfare.

This assurance is reminiscent of Christ’s similar assurance to Saint Julian of Norwich. She too had a crisis of conscience in which she doubted divine order and justice in life. Christ’s answer to her, in one of the “shewings” or visions she had, was quoted and elaborated by T. S. Eliot as the final words of his poem *Four Quartets*:

And all shall be well and
All manner of thing shall be well
When the tongues of flame are in-folded
Into the crowned knot of fire
And the fire and the rose are one.

“All shall be well”—that is the “supreme word” assuring the soul in crisis that there is a conscious power in the universe that desires our welfare.

The Sanskrit term translated by Besant as “desiring thy welfare” is *hitakāmyayā* “with desire for welfare.” The first part of that word, *hita*, is glossed by John Grimes, in his *Concise Dictionary of Indian Philosophy* as “means to the end; beneficial; good; salutary,” so it is a means to a good end—and that is what Krishna says he desires for Arjuna. Grimes also points out that, according to one school of Indian philosophy, it is one of three main aspects of philosophy.

The first aspect of philosophy is *tattva*, literally “that-ness,” the essence of reality, the way things really are. Another is *purusārtha*, literally “person-purpose,” the reason for our existence as individuals, which is fourfold: *artha* “wealth,” *kāma* “desire,” *dharma*

“righteousness,” and *moksha* “liberation”; they are the physical-economic, emotional-esthetic, intellectual-moral, and spiritual values of life. The last main aspect of philosophy is *hita* “the means to achieve the good,” namely, all of those four reasons for existence. We are bodies, desires, minds, and spirits—all together, and all must be tended to. Yoga is a process of uniting, of making whole and entire all parts of ourselves, and of ourselves with the ultimate Reality of which we are expressions.

Krishna desires Arjuna’s welfare—his total welfare. And that involves all aspects of Arjuna’s being: body, emotions, mind, and spirit. When all of those are united (by Yoga) so that “the tongues of flame are in-folded / Into the crowned knot of fire / And the fire and the rose are one,” then “all shall be well and / All manner of thing shall be well.”

Krishna goes on to say (in verse 6) that he is the source of everything. The seven great Rishis or Seers, the Quaternity (which Besant glosses as the four Kumaras, the spiritual leaders of our world), and the Manus (the heads and leaders of each human race), “were born of My nature and mind.” This again is asserting that humanity is not left alone to muddle through, but has guidance and direction, springing ultimately from the Divine Self, expressed through intermediary intelligences in the world.

In verse 8, Krishna gives what amounts to a definition of bhakti. He says (in Besant’s translation): “I am the Generator of all; all evolves from Me; understanding thus, the wise adore me in rapt emotion.” As the genesis of everything, Krishna is ultimate Being. When we know or understand that, we naturally respond with devotion. That is, bhakti is the response of knowledge to Being. Bhakti, jñana, and karma—devotion, knowledge, and action—are all one. And that one is buddhi yoga, “the yoga of discrimination” or enlightened knowledge (verse 10). It is by it that, Krishna says, “I destroy the ignorance-born darkness by the shining lamp of wisdom.”

The second section of the discourse begins with a confession of faith by Arjuna, who says, “Thou art the supreme Eternal.” That is a remarkable statement, for “the supreme Eternal” is Parabrahm, the ultimate Reality. How can an individual be the ultimate Reality? But the claim of such identity has often been made about great spiritual teachers or has been made by them. Thus the Sufi mystic al-Hallaj said, “I am He whom I love and He whom I love is I.” For that blasphemy, he was condemned as a heretic and executed.

Jesus claimed something similar according to the Gospel of St. John (8.51–59). Jesus was in a dialog with some of the orthodox of his day, and he told them that anyone who followed his teaching would never see death. They were scandalized and pointed out that Abraham and the prophets were all dead; they asked whether Jesus thought he was greater than those holy men: “whom makest thou thyself?” That is, “Who are you letting on to be?” Jesus replied:

Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day: and he saw it, and was glad.

Then they said unto him: Thou art not yet fifty years old, and hast thou seen Abraham?

Jesus said unto them: Verily, verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was, I am.

Then took they up stones to cast at him; but Jesus hid himself, and went out . . . through the midst of them.

To understand why his questioners sought to stone Jesus to death, we need to appreciate the meaning of his answer to the question “whom makest thou thyself?” His answer, “Before Abraham was, I am,” evoked a well-known passage in the Book of Exodus (3.1–14). The passage tells that when Moses was in the desert he came upon a burning bush that was not consumed by its fire. God spoke to Moses out of the burning bush and ordered him to go to Pharaoh and tell him that he must allow the children of Israel to leave their bondage in Egypt. But Moses objected that even if Pharaoh did so, the Israelites would not follow him. They would want to know who sent him and would ask:

“What is his name? What shall I say unto them?”

And God said unto Moses, “I AM THAT I AM.” And he said, “Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you.”

God told Moses that his name was “I am.” So when Jesus answered his critics, who asked him who he thought he was, with the assertion “I am,” he was claiming to be God. For one who has merged his identity in that of the Divine—God, Allah, or Parabrahm—there is no difference. They are one. This is what Arjuna acknowledges about Krishna: the latter is the personification of the ultimate Reality, Parabrahm.

But the problem is that, as HPB points out in the first Fundamental Proposition of *The Secret Doctrine*, ultimate Reality is “beyond the range and reach of thought.” So Arjuna asks (verse 17): “How may I know Thee? In what aspects art Thou to be thought of by me?”

The last section of the discourse is Krishna’s answer to that question. He begins (verse 19) by telling Arjuna that he will declare his “divine glory by its chief characteristics . . . there is no end to details.” What follows is a long, gloriously poetic list of ways we can think of the ultimate Reality as embodied. It begins: “I am the Self, seated in the heart of all beings; I am the beginning, the middle, and also the end of all beings.” That is, Krishna is saying he is everything that is. The following items of the list allude to practically all the categories in Indian culture and identify Krishna with the prime example of each.

This identification of a prime example of categories is not just Indian. It can be seen everywhere in human culture. In the European Middle Ages, it was believed that every type of being had a “best” or prime example of its type. And that belief is part of the cultural inheritance of the West; although we may not recognize its basis, we still have it with us. So we say that the lion is the king of beasts; the oak is the chief of trees; the rose, of flowers; gold, of metals; the eagle, of birds; and so on. This is precisely what Krishna is doing in this catalog. He is saying the Indian equivalent of “I am the lion of beasts, the oak of trees, the rose of flowers . . .”

Here we can look at just a few of these I-am’s that may not be otherwise obvious. In verse 22, Krishna says, “of the senses, I am the mind.” According to Indian psychology, we have eleven senses. Five are senses through which the outside world affects us: sight, hearing, taste, touch, and smell; five are senses through which we affect the outside world: speech,

handling, movement, excretion, and generation; the eleventh is the mind, which is the greatest of all.

Early Western psychology had an analog to this. It pointed out that by sight we know an orange is reddish-yellow; by touch we know it is soft or slightly rough surfaced; by smell we know it is pungent; by taste we know it is sweet; and so on. But when we encounter an orange, we do not perceive a bundle of unassociated sights, touches, smell, and tastes; we perceive a unity, an orange. What then is the sense by which we perceive the wholeness of the orange? There must be, early Western psychologists concluded, another sense that perceives what is in common to all the other separate senses, and they called it the “common sense.” The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the earliest meaning of that term as “an ‘internal’ sense which was regarded as the common bond or centre of the five senses, in which the various impressions received were reduced to the unity of a common consciousness.” That is, the “common sense” did not belong to the body, but was an aspect of the mind along with other aspects like memory and imagination. Only later did the term develop its present meaning of “prudent but unsophisticated judgment.” So in the West as well as the East, the mind was the “king” of the senses.

In verse 25, Krishna says, “of speech I am the one syllable,” which is the syllable *om*, the primal and eternal Word. *Om* represents ultimate Reality, God, the Logos. It has four constituents, *a*, *u*, *m*, and the prosody that unites them, symbolizing the four states of consciousness (waking, dreaming, deep sleep, and the fourth state beyond that), the four planes of evolution (physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual), and so on. Like *om*, Krishna is the creative Word that engenders all things.

In verse 33, Krishna says, “of letters the letter *A* I am.” Both the English and Sanskrit alphabets begin with the letter *A*, so to say that Krishna is the *A* among letters is to say that he is first. But in Sanskrit it has a special meaning. For one thing, in Sanskrit the vowel “a” is by far the most frequent of all sounds. But there is more to it than just frequency. In Sanskrit writing, a simple consonant letter (such as that corresponding to English *p*) does not represent the simple consonant sound, as it does in English, but instead it represents the consonant sound followed by the vowel “a”, in this case: “pa.” If you want to write “p” followed by some other vowel, you have to add a diacritic (a mark above or below or alongside) the letter *p* to represent that other vowel. And if you want to represent the consonant sound “p” by itself, without any vowel at all following it, you have to write the letter *p* with yet another sort of diacritic, a little slanting line, below it, which says in effect, “cancel all vowels.” That is to say, the vowel sound “a” is inherent in every consonant letter; and if you want something other than “a,” you have to say what it is; if you don’t say, but just write *p*, it represents “pa.” Like “a,” which is inherent in all consonant sounds, Krishna is inherent in all things in the universe. You don’t see any writing for the “a” sound, and you don’t see any overt indication of Krishna, but both are there.

Krishna goes on to say (verse 37), “of the Pandavas (the sons of Pandu, the immediate family to which Arjuna belongs) [I am] Dhanamjaya (the Conqueror of Wealth, an epithet of Arjuna). That is, Krishna says to Arjuna: “I am you.”

This catalog, and the discourse itself, concludes with these words (verses 41–42):

Whatsoever is glorious, good, beautiful, and mighty, understand thou that to go forth from a fragment of My splendor.

But what is the knowledge of all these details to thee, O Arjuna? Having pervaded this whole universe with one fragment of Myself, I remain.

Krishna is the essence of all that is. But take all from the all, and what remains is the all. The divine reality is not exhausted by what it manifests as. It remains in its inexhaustible fullness.

C. Activity

Think about your own life in terms of the four kinds of value: physical-economic, emotional-esthetic, intellectual-moral, and spiritual. We cannot pursue one of those values at the expense of others. Think back over your past experience to find points in your life when two or more of those values were interrelated.

Make a list of categories and “prime examples” of those categories (like lions among beasts). The prime examples represent the best of their kind. What is it, in each case, that makes the prime example “best”? Is there any quality that appears in all (or many) of the prime examples? From understanding the specific and limited, we can imagine the universal and unlimited. We can, as William Blake said, “see a World in a Grain of Sand, / And a Heaven in a Wild Flower.”

D. References:

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THE BHAGAVAD GITA, Lesson 18

A. Outline

Discourse 11, “The Yoga of the Vision of the Universal Form,” is the high point of the middle section of the Gita. In it Krishna reveals himself in his essential nature to Arjuna. The middle section is concerned with the Yoga of Devotion, but this devotion is not a sentimental feeling. It is rather a commitment of oneself to the awesome Reality behind surface appearances. Arjuna’s request to see Krishna’s true or lordly form and Krishna’s response in showing it are the offering and acceptance of that commitment.

B. Summary and Commentary

Introduction (11.1–8)

11.1–4. Arjuna has heard Krishna’s discourses, but now he wants something more than words. He wants to see for himself, he wants direct knowledge, he wants to experience the reality that Krishna represents. He says that he has heard (in 8.17–19 and 9.7–8) that all things come forth from and finally return to Krishna. Now he wants actually to see the origin of all things and their destiny. He wants to be shown the “imperishable Self” of Reality.

11.5–8. Krishna agrees to what Arjuna has asked and says he will let the prince “behold the whole universe, movable and immovable, standing in one in My Body.” But Krishna also warns Arjuna that no human being can behold that Reality with mortal eyes. So Krishna will, for the occasion, give Arjuna “the divine eye,” with which he can behold Krishna’s “sovereign Yoga” or “Lordly Unity.”

This initial exchange between Arjuna and Krishna, which is an introduction to the discourse, is reminiscent of the dialog between Moses and Yahweh recorded in Exodus (33.18–23). Moses asked God: “I beseech thee, shew me thy glory.” And God replied:

Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me, and live.

And the Lord said, Behold, there is a place by me, and thou shalt stand upon a rock:

And it shall come to pass, while my glory passeth by, that I will put thee in a clift of the rock, and will cover thee with my hand while I pass by:

And I will take away mine hand, and thou shalt see my back parts: but my face shall not be seen.

Both Moses and Arjuna are told that they cannot look upon Reality, God’s glory, directly with human eyes. Or, as T. S. Eliot puts it in his poem “Burnt Norton” (probably alluding to both of these passages, which he certainly knew): “Human kind / Cannot bear very much reality.” If we are to know Reality, in both Exodus and the Gita, a divine intervention is needed. But the nature of that intervention differs.

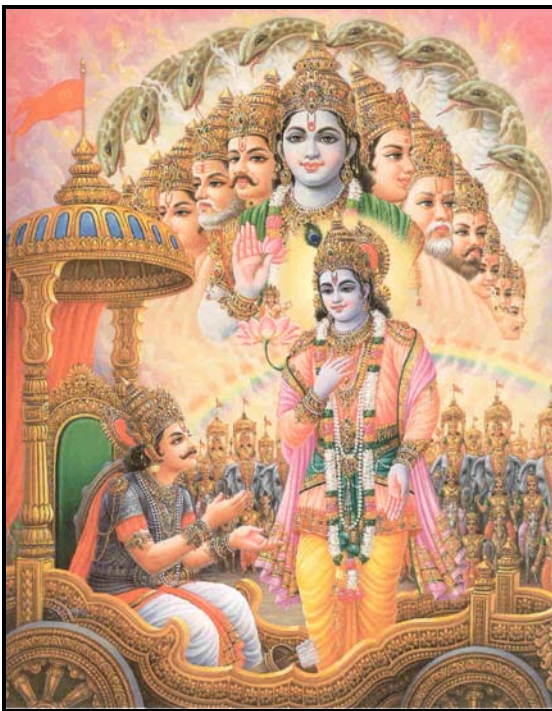
God covers Moses with his hand as he passes by, but removes that hand just in time so that Moses can catch a glimpse of God’s backside. The Jewish tradition tells us that we can

never look inner Reality in the face but only, with God’s help, see something of its back (or outer) side. In the Western tradition, we can know the Real only through the unreal, the Light only through the darkness, the Eternal only through the time-bound—and even so only with divine aid.

Krishna, however, bestows upon Arjuna “the divine eye” so that he can see the sovereign Oneness in the “Vision of the Universal Form,” not with his own eyes, but with divine vision. In the Eastern tradition, we can experience Reality directly, but only by giving up ourselves and our human limitations (our “eyes”) and accepting “the divine eye,” that is, assimilating to the Reality ourselves so that we look upon all things with God’s eye.

Krishna’s Revelation (11.9–34)

11.9–14. Arjuna and other human beings cannot see the divine Reality with their own eyes, so neither can they describe it. Ultimate Reality, as HPB says in the first fundamental proposition of the Secret Doctrine, “is beyond the range and reach of thought—in the words of the Mandukya Upanishad, ‘unthinkable and unspeakable.’” So at this point, Sañjaya, the clairvoyant charioteer of King Dritarashtra, takes over and describes the Vision of “the glory of that Mahatma” as resembling “the splendor of a thousand suns” blazing “out together in the sky.” (Robert Oppenheimer, the nuclear scientist, is reported to have thought of this description when he saw the explosion of the first atomic bomb.) Sañjaya says that Arjuna “beheld the whole universe, divided into manifold parts, standing in one in the body of the Deity of Deities.”



11.15–31. Sañjaya’s description is followed by Arjuna’s ecstatic acknowledgment of the revelation. These verses, which are said to be recited at the ceremony by which a person becomes a sannyasi or renunciant, affirm the vast, illimitable form of Krishna:

I see Thee everywhere, unbounded Form.
Beginning, middle, end, nor source of Thee,
Infinite Lord, infinite Form, I find;
Shining, a mass of splendor everywhere . . .
Blazing as fire, as sun dazzling the gaze,
From all sides in the sky immeasurable.

In Arjuna’s vision, the figure of Krishna, “lofty beyond all thought, unperishing,” opens his mouth, and into it enter all the gods and divine beings, all the human heroes, kings, and warriors—all are absorbed in Krishna. Bewildered at that sight, Arjuna beseeches: “I don’t understand what’s happening. Tell me who you are!”

11.32–34. Krishna answers: “Kālo ‘smi,” “Time am I, laying desolate the world.” In fact, Krishna’s answer is a pun. For the word *kāla* means “time, death, or fate” but also “black.” And Krishna’s own name is a word that means “black” as well (he is depicted in iconography as black or blue in color). It has two roots *krish* “truth” and *na* “bliss” So Krishna is saying, “I am I, Krishna, the Black One, Time, Destiny, whose nature is truth and bliss.”

That exchange between Arjuna and Krishna is paralleled by another between Moses and Yahweh (Exodus 3.13–14). When God directs Moses to go to the children of Israel held captive in Egypt to lead them out of their bondage in that land, Moses objects: “When I come unto the children of Israel, and shall say unto them, The God of your fathers hath sent me unto you, they shall say to me, What is his name? What shall I say unto them?” And God answers, “I AM THAT I AM . . . Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you.”

English cannot translate directly what God said to Moses because Hebrew verbs do not have tense forms that indicate time, as English verbs do (*I am, I was, I will be*). Hebrew verbs do not show the time of an action, but the certainty of the action, one form indicating possible action (“I might be”) and another certain action (“My being is definite”), both without regard to when the action occurs. God responded to Moses with the latter form. What he said in effect was, “The certainty of my existence is beyond question.” That is, “I exist timelessly, outside of time.”

Both Arjuna and Moses want to know who it is they are talking with. Both say, “Who are you?” Both Krishna and Yahweh reply in the same way. Krishna is time, and Yahweh is timelessness (which HPB in *The Secret Doctrine* calls “duration”). But paradoxically those are the same. For time in its entirety, not in its divided form (which we experience with human eyes) but in its wholeness (experienced by “the divine eye”), is timeless duration.

Krishna goes on to tell Arjuna that everything that is going to be already is, existing in timeless duration. Speaking of the opposing army in the battle on Kurukshetra, Krishna says, “By Me they are already overcome, / Be thou the outward cause.” Everything that is, was, or will be exists in potential in eternal duration. We choose which we will actualize in our transitory time.

Arjuna’s Acceptance (11.35–49)

Sañjaya reports Arjuna’s response to the Vision and the identification of Krishna as Time and Eternity. The prince acknowledges his charioteer as “loftiest SELF” (*Mahatma*), “First Cause,” being (*sat*) and nonbeing (*asat*), both God and man, knower and known, the god of the wind (breath, which is life) and the god of death, the god of fire and the god of water. Krishna was Arjuna’s childhood friend, his cousin, his brother-in-law, and his charioteer. Now, suddenly, he is revealed as the Ultimate Reality personified. Reality is embodied in the ordinary and everyday, but to realize that it is so embodied can be a great shock. So it is for Arjuna.

Arjuna accepts the reality of what he has just experienced and falls “prostrate in front of Thee, prostrate behind, prostrate on every side to Thee, O All.” He asks forgiveness for any irreverence or carelessness he has shown, and asks to be treated as a son by a father, as a friend by a friend, as a beloved by a lover. And then he asks Krishna to resume his familiar form:

I have seen that which none hath seen before,
My heart is glad, yet faileth me for fear;
Show me, O God, Thine other form again—

Conclusion (11.50–55)

Sañjaya reports that Krishna resumes his human, gentle form. Arjuna is composed and his amazed mind is restored to normal. Krishna tells him that the Vision he has had is very hard to come by. Even the gods long to see it (but cannot because it is only in the human state that such a sight can be had). Nor can the Vision be forced or won by effort—not by study of the holy books (Vedas) or by discipline (“austerities” *tapas*), charity (“alms” *dāna*), or religious rites (“offerings”). It comes only as a result of devotion—total commitment to the Real.

This conclusion is echoed in spiritual traditions around the world, for example, in the Christian teaching that we are saved, not by works but by grace. The footnote to that is that by works we put ourselves into a state in which we can receive grace. So the first part of the Gita is on Karma Yoga (works) but the central part is on Bhakti Yoga (devotion, commitment, grace).

C. Activity

In one sense, the theme of this discourse, and of the whole Gita, is that, in the most ordinary and familiar things of life, we can discover the most extraordinary and awesome thing: a Vision of Reality, an awareness of transcendence, a “peak experience.” This is the theme of the alchemical transformation of base metals into true gold. It is the theme of the Resurrection.

Think back over your own life. At what points have you had an experience of the extraordinary in the common place?

Take some quite ordinary thing and use it as a focal point for meditation to see in it the extraordinary, the transcendent, the Eternal.

THE BHAGAVAD GITA, Lesson 19

A. Outline

Discourse 12, “The Yoga of Devotion,” is the conclusion of the middle section of the Gita, which focuses upon Bhakti Yoga or the way to Union by dedicating oneself to a higher reality. In this discourse, Krishna answers a question Arjuna puts to him and provides a summary of Bhakti Yoga. This and discourse 15 are the two shortest in the Gita, each consisting of only 20 verses.

B. Summary and Commentary

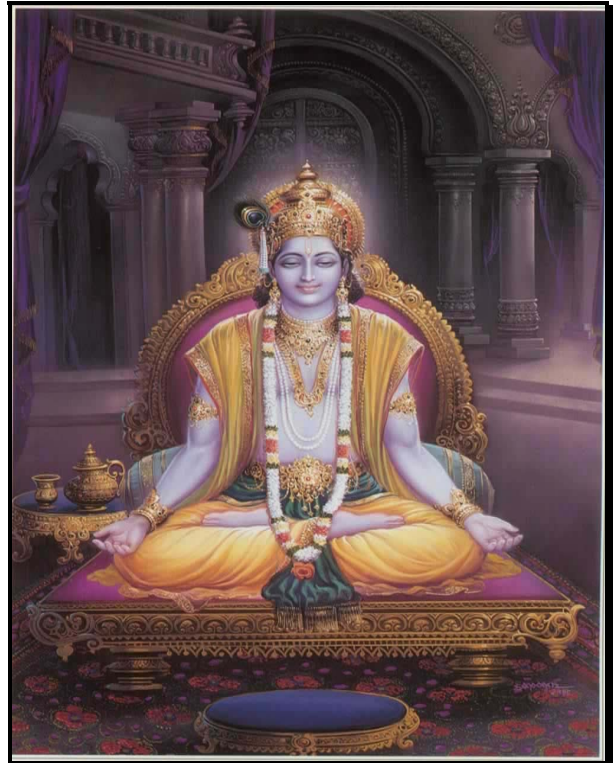
Arjuna’s question (12.1–7)

Arjuna opens the discourse by presenting Krishna with a question, which is one that is still relevant to us in our time. The prince wants to know how we can best conceive of the ultimate reality: as a personal God or as an impersonal, absolute, ultimate Reality:

Those devotees who ever harmonized worship Thee, and those also who worship the Indestructible, the Unmanifested, who of these is the more learned in yoga? (12.1).

To personify the divine and seek to enter into a relationship with that personification is usually thought of as a Western concept, especially characteristic of the Abrahamic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. To regard the divine as an impersonal absolute, on the other hand, is usually thought of as an Eastern concept, characteristic of such religions as Vedantic Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism. But reality is seldom as neat as the ways we think about it. In fact, both conceptions are present in both Eastern and Western religious thought.

Krishna replies that both concepts serve the same end. We may conceive of the divine as a personal God, projecting upon the divine reality our image of it as a person (an all-caring Father or Mother, a lover whose beloved we are, or a teacher, shepherd, and guide). Or we may conceive of it as the Ground of reality, itself unmanifest and without qualities we can even imagine, unchanging, without relation to anything else, beyond all description. In either case, we can reach union with the Reality behind our conceptions, which is the aim of Yoga.



Krishna, however, recommends the first, the personal conception of God, for purely pragmatic reasons: “The difficulty of those whose minds are set on the Unmanifested is greater; for the path of the Unmanifested is hard for the embodied to reach” (12.5). That is, it is easier for us to relate to something like ourselves than to something that is totally other. It is easier for us to conceive of God in our own image and likeness than to struggle with a great abstraction that, by definition, we cannot pin down. We usually think of pragmatism as an American philosophy, but Krishna is a pragmatist: what works best is best.

The path of Bhakti Yoga presupposes a personal God to whom we are devoted. However, it is only one of three main paths of Yoga. Krishna acknowledges that it is not “the” truth; it is only “a” truth, one that is easiest for most people and therefore, in general, recommended. It is also the one that is easiest to talk about, and therefore much of our talk about the divine absolute, even if we conceive of it as impersonal and unconditioned, is in personal and conditioned terms. We must just be sure not to mistake a pragmatic decision for a discovery of ultimate reality.

Four Techniques of Yoga (12.8 –12)

Krishna then goes on to tell Arjuna about four techniques that lead to union with him and to evaluate them for their difficulty (12.8–11). The first and most difficult is keeping our mind and intelligence (our buddhi-manas) fixed on the divine, which is within ourselves (that is, on the atma). This is, of course, the ultimate aim of all religious practice. In Theosophical terms, it is to identify ourselves with the higher triad of atma-buddhi-manas. But, though the ultimate aim, it is not easily achieved.

So Krishna tells Arjuna that, if he finds it difficult to achieve that union of mind, intelligence, and spirit in atma-buddhi-manas, another approach is to practice Yoga assiduously. Constant practice (Sanskrit *abhyāsa*) will eventually bring one to the union of atma-buddhi-manas. This is what the Master KH also told A. P. Sinnett: “We have one word for all aspirants: TRY” (*Mahatma Letters*, 54 chronologically, 35 in 3rd ed.).

But if that continued effort is too much to achieve, a third approach is to do everything we do for the sake of the divine, to perform all actions for God, to dedicate all that we do to the service of the Lord.

And if we find even that too taxing on our ability, then we should do all our actions without concern for their effect on us personally, without worrying about their outcome or “fruit,” but solely because we are devoted to union with God. This last and easiest technique combines the paths of Bhakti and Karma Yoga.

Next Krishna puts the four techniques, expressed in slightly different terms, on a scale of value of which is best (12.12). The best is to renounce the fruit of action; second best, to meditate; third best, to engage in constant practice (*abhyāsa*); and fourth best, to have wisdom (*jñāna*). This scale of value seems to be the mirror image of the scale of difficulty:

Most to least difficult

uniting our understanding with the divine
 uniting atma-buddhi-manas
 constant practice (*abhyāsa*)
 doing everything for God's sake
 renouncing the fruit of action

Least to most valuable

achieving knowledge (*jñāna*)
 of the One Unity
 constant practice (*abhyāsa*)
 meditating
 renouncing the fruit of action

At first, it may seem odd that what is most difficult is also least valuable and what is least difficult is most valuable. Somehow, we think that difficulty and value ought to go hand in hand. But that is because we believe that value is measured by scarceness or the effort required to gain a thing. But that is not Krishna's concept of value. Krishna, again, is a pragmatist. What is of greatest value is what is achieved with least effort. So what these verses are telling us is that we can start where the Gita starts, by doing our duty or dharma without concern for what we get out of it but solely because it is our duty, our inner nature, to do that thing.

From thus acting without regard for the fruit of the action and so purging ourselves of egocentric motives, we can pass on to meditating on God and thus making the divine (rather than ourselves) the center of all we do. From that meditative focus, we can pass on to an energetic and concentrated practice (*abhyāsa*) of a spiritual discipline; and from that we come to a realization of our own union with the divine that pervades all things, including our own hearts. What is easiest to do is best because it leads to the ultimate and most difficult of all realizations.

Who Is Dear to Me (12.13–20)

The remaining verses of this discourse are a sixfold rhapsodically poetic catalog by Krishna of those who are “dear to Me.” His list includes those who are free from “my” and “me”; those “from whom the world does not shrink away and who do not shrink away from the world”; those who are disinterested, pure, capable, and unprejudiced; those who neither love nor hate, neither grieve nor desire; those who take whatever comes and are content with what is; and finally those who take dharma (duty, virtue, wisdom, rightness) as their nectar of immortality, are “endued with faith” (the great virtue of Bhakti and the quality that Arjuna needs in order to have confidence in the action of providence in the world), and are devoted to God—they are surpassingly dear to Me.

Conclusion

And so the second section of the Gita comes to a close.

In the first six discourses of the poem, Arjuna learned about Karma Yoga, the way to act without being trapped by the consequences of our action. Its great secret is that we must act without being motivated by desire for results, to “renounce the fruit of action,” to do what is right because it is right, not because we think it will benefit us.

In the second six discourses, Arjuna has learned about Bhakti Yoga, the way to have confidence that a beneficent and intelligent power oversees the action of this world and will see that all things finally serve the purpose of evolution and rightness (dharma). It is the same message Alfred Lord Tennyson set forth in his poem *In Memoriam*, which includes these lines:

Our little systems have their day;
 They have their day and cease to be:
 They are but broken lights of thee,
 And thou, O Lord, art more than they.

Oh yet we trust that somehow good
 Will be the final goal of ill.
 That nothing walks with aimless feet;
 That not one life shall be destroy'd,
 Or cast as rubbish to the void,
 When God hath made the pile complete.

One God, one law, one element,
 And one far-off divine event,
 To which the whole creation moves.

C. Activity

Whether we personify the divine Reality and think of it as a God who oversees the world or regard that Reality philosophically as an impersonal, orderly Law by which the universe exists and functions tells more about us than it does about the Reality. Spend some time thinking about how you find it best to regard the ultimate Reality and what the advantages are of regarding it in a different way.

Read something about philosophical pragmatism and scientific relativism. How do the two relate to each other? How do they relate to the Gita?

Why is it important to have “faith”? Read what H. P. Blavatsky says in chapter 11 of *The Key to Theosophy* about the difference between blind faith and reasoned faith, and relate that to the Gita.

D. References:

Chin, Vic Hao. *The Mahatma Letters to A. P. Sinnett in Chronological Sequence*. Adyar, India: Theosophical Publishing House, 1998.

THE BHAGAVAD GITA, Lesson 20

A. Outline and Preliminary Remarks

With discourse 13, “The Yoga of the Distinction between the Field and the Knower of the Field,” we move into the last third of the Gita, devoted to Jñāna Yoga, the most technical of the three ways to Union. Jñāna Yoga is concerned with coming into an understanding of the nature of reality—of ourselves and the stage on which we act or, as they are called in this discourse, the Knower of the Field and the Field itself.

Jñāna Yoga aims at achieving that understanding by using the mind to go beyond the limitations of the mind. At the end of her life, H. P. Blavatsky instructed some of her personal students on how to study her great book, *The Secret Doctrine*. She said that such study is in fact a form of Jñāna Yoga and that “this Path of Yoga is the True Path for the Western student.” She described the path of Jñāna Yoga:

This mode of thinking (she says) is what the Indians call Jñana Yoga. As one progresses in Jñāna Yoga one finds conceptions arising which though one is conscious of them, one cannot express nor yet formulate into any sort of mental picture. As time goes on these conceptions will form into mental pictures. This is a time to be on guard and refuse to be deluded with the idea that the new found and wonderful picture must represent reality. It does not. As one works on one finds the once admired picture growing dull and unsatisfying, and finally fading out or being thrown away. This is another danger point, because for the moment one is left in a void without any conception to support one, and one may be tempted to revive the cast-off picture for want of a better to cling to. The true student will, however, work on unconcerned, and presently further formless gleams come, which again in time give rise to a larger and more beautiful picture than the last. But the learner will now know that no picture will ever represent the TRUTH. This last splendid picture will grow dull and fade like the others. And so the process goes on, until at last the mind and its pictures are transcended and the learner enters and dwells in the World of NO FORM, but of which all forms are narrowed reflections.

That is, Jñāna Yoga is the process of perceiving the World of No Form by studying the forms that are only its narrowed reflections. In the following papers, we will be looking at the part of the Gita that does precisely that. In studying these final discourses, we should keep in mind Blavatsky’s characterization, quoted above, of what we are in fact doing.

B. Summary and Commentary

Arjuna’s question (13.1)

Arjuna opens the discourse by posing a question about what he wants to learn, which he names as (1) matter and spirit, (2) the Field and the Knower of the Field, and (3) wisdom and that which ought to be known. Each of those three pairs is important.

Matter and spirit are English translations of Sanskrit “prakriti” and “purusha.” *Prakriti* comes from the roots *kri* “to make or to do” (which also underlies *karma*) and *pra* “forth.” So

etymologically it is something like “that which is brought forth.” It is a term for primordial Nature as the female creator, bringing forth all things. In itself, it is unconscious but is the dwelling place of consciousness. It is *maya* because it causes things to appear to be other than they actually are. Purusha is pure consciousness. It is the one universal Self, appearing as many individual souls when it is reflected in the *maya* of prakriti. Prakriti and purusha are the primal poles by which the one ultimate Reality (Parabrahm) is manifested in the world. Each of us is a consciousness (purusha) functioning through material forms (prakriti)—a reflection of the one pure consciousness in the matter of prakriti.

The Field (*kshetra*) and the Knower of the Field (*kshetrajñā*) are metaphors for talking about aspects of, respectively, prakriti and purusha. The Field is the material world in which we exist and on which we play the game of life. It is also the field of knowledge and activity (as we ask of a person, “What’s your field?” meaning “What do you do in life?”). The Knower of the Field is the player on that field, the one who knows and acts in that field. The Sanskrit for “Knower of the Field,” *kshetrajñā*, is composed of *kshetra* “field” and *jñā* as in “Jñāna Yoga,” so that Yoga is the means by which we come to know the field. The Gita, we should recall, is set (as the first line of the poem tells us) on the Field of Kuru (who was the ancestor of the participants in the battle): *kurukshetra*. Arjuna, who asks Krishna to take him to the center of that field in order that he may survey it (1.21–2), is the knower of that field: he is consciousness amid matter; he is you and me in the world, seeking to understand it and ourselves.

“Wisdom” and “that which ought to be known” are the end of Jñāna Yoga. “Wisdom” is Besant’s translation for Sanskrit *jñāna*, which is what Jñāna Yoga is about; it is the Sanskrit equivalent of Greek *gnosis* (both words being in fact from the same original source, as is also the English word *know*). It is direct and immediate knowledge of the way things really are and also the process of coming to that knowledge. “That which ought to be known” (in Sanskrit *jñeya*) is the core of *jñāna*. It is knowledge of who we are. That knowledge has been recognized as the most important thing in the world by every philosophical and religious tradition that recognizes ignorance as the cause of every ill and knowledge (*gnosis*, *jñāna*) as the means of salvation, liberation, or enlightenment. So over the portal to the Temple at Delphi were inscribed the words “Know yourself.”

The essentialness and centrality of self-knowledge is the point of a well-known story in the Chandogya Upanishad (chapter 6). In a much abbreviated form, it goes like this:

Once there was a Brahmin who had a son named Shvetaketu. When the boy reached the age of twelve, his father sent him away to be educated. Twelve years later, the boy returned home—conceited, with a high opinion of his own knowledge and an arrogantly low opinion of everyone else. So his father said to him, “Well, Shvetaketu, since you now know so much, did you ask to be taught that by which you can hear the unheard, perceive the unperceivable, and know the unknowable? Did you learn that knowledge, knowing which you need know nothing else?”

The boy replied, “How can there be any such teaching and knowledge?”

His father responded, “If you know what clay is, you will know the nature of everything made of clay. If you know what gold is, you will know the nature of everything made of gold. If you know what iron is, you will know the nature of everything made of iron.” This is that teaching.

The boy said, “My teachers did not know that, for if they had, they would have told me. Please, father, you tell me about it.”

“I will indeed, dear boy,” answered his father.

The father then began a long series of instruction by analogy, the purpose of which was to teach Shvetaketu that, if we know the inner essence of reality, we will know everything we need to know about all its manifestations. Especially, if we know the inner essence of ourselves, we will know all “that which ought to be known” about ourselves and the world in which we live. Among the teachings Shvetaketu’s father gave him were these:

The father said, “Bring me a fruit from that great tree over there.” And when the boy had brought it, the father said, “Now break the fruit open and tell me what you see inside.”

The boy broke the fruit and said, “I see some very small seeds.”

“Then break open one of those seeds, and tell me what you see inside of it.”

The boy broke open a seed, looked, and replied, “I don’t see anything inside of it.”

“Ah,” said the father, “that which you cannot see is the subtle essence from which a great tree grows. So there is a subtle essence from which this whole world grows. That is true. That is the Self. You are That, Shvetaketu.”

The boy responded, “Please tell me more, father.”

The father said, “Put this salt into a jug of water and bring it back to me tomorrow morning.”

The next day, Shvetaketu brought the jug to his father, who said to him, “Show me the salt you put into the water last night.” But Shvetaketu could see no salt, for it had all dissolved. Then his father said, “Take a sip from this side of the jug and tell me what you taste.”

Shvetaketu sipped and responded, “It is salty.”

“Take a sip from the other side and tell me what you taste.”

“It is salty too.”

“The salt that you do not see is everywhere in the water. So also that Pure Being, which you do not recognize, is everywhere in the world. That is true. That is the Self. You are That, Shvetaketu.”

After much instruction of the sort, Shvetaketu, who was—like you and me—a bit slow in learning, finally caught on, so the story ends: “Then he understood, yes, he understood.”

The father was instructing his son in “that which ought to be known,” namely “you are That” or in Sanskrit, *Tat tvam asi*. Each of us is the one pure consciousness or purusha operating in the field of prakriti, where we appear to both others and ourselves to be separate, isolated individuals. If we are knowers of the field, however, we will know ourselves, who and what we are. And that knowledge alone is “that which ought to be known,” for knowing it, we know the one thing necessary in life, for it is the knowledge of salvation, liberation, and enlightenment.

This knowledge, *gnosis*, or *jñāna* is the subject of the last six discourses of the Bhagavad Gita. It is what Arjuna asks for in the first verse of discourse 13. Krishna’s response fills the remainder of this discourse, and elaborations on it are the subject of the rest of the Gita.

In verses 2–3, Krishna begins his response by providing a personal answer to Arjuna’s question. He says that, as far as we are concerned, the Field is our body (Sanskrit *śarīra*) and we, in our consciousness of our body, are the Knower of the Field. But in a larger sense, Krishna himself as the divine consciousness is the Knower of the Field in all Fields. That is, there is ultimately only one consciousness in the universe, one Knower of the Field. And each of us is that one consciousness operating in the particular field of our body. *Tat tvam asi*. You are That. This knowledge is what is most important in life.

Then Krishna goes on to promise Arjuna that he will tell him about the Field—what its nature is, what its modifications are, and where it comes from—and who the Knower of the Field is and what his powers are (verse 4). The sages (rishis) have chanted many a poem and verse about this subject, with clear, convincing explanations (verse 5).

In verse 6, Krishna describes the nature of the Field according to the teachings of the school of philosophy called Sankya, whose aim was to enumerate the ultimate objects of knowledge—the contents of the Field. There are 24 components of the Field, listed here in a logical order, with the terms used for them in Besant’s translation plus some explanations.

The first component is the “Unmanifested” (Sanskrit *avyakta*), a term for the primal matter or prakriti, the first stuff in the universe, from which all else evolves. It is also called *pradhāna*.

Next comes “Reason” or *buddhi*, also called *mahat* “the Great.” A striking feature of this view of reality is that much which we would usually think of as consciousness is here classified as part of material reality or nature. Consciousness is instead something that works through nature, including the highest intellect and discriminating faculty, which is *buddhi*.

Third in order is “individuality” or *ahamkāra*, literally the “I” (*aham*) “maker” (*kāra*, from the root *kri*, as in *prakriti* and *karma*). It is the faculty by which we identify ourselves as separate individuals; its expression in the human constitution is the causal body.

Next come four sets of five components each (plus one other component that goes with two of these sets). The five components of each set are correlated with the components of the other sets. The sets are as follows, with their components listed in correlative order:

The “great Elements” or gross elements: ether (*ākāsha*), air, fire, water, earth.

The “pastures of the senses,” also called *tanmātras*, literally “those by which we measure that (the world)”: sound, touch, color, taste, smell. These are the fields perceptible to the senses; when thought of as the subtle elements or elemental essence, they are the source of the corresponding gross elements. That is, ether exists because sound needs a vehicle; air because of touch; fire because of color; water because of taste; and earth because of smell. This reverses the order of priority that we would usually assume, making the experience (sound, touch, color, taste, smell) ontologically prior to the means by which the experience occurs (ether, air, fire, water, earth). Purpose is prior to means.

The “ten senses and the one” include the five organs of knowledge or *jñānendriya* (ear, skin, eye, tongue, nose) by which sound, touch, color or sight, taste, and smell are perceived and the five organs of action or *karmendriya* (mouth, hand, foot, anus, genitals) by which speech, prehension, movement, excretion, and generation are produced. “The one” more is *manas*, which coordinates the other ten. Although today we would not think of mind as a sense, formerly in Western thought it was so considered. When we eat an apple, we hear its crunch, feel its smoothness, see its redness, taste its flavor, and smell its aroma. But we do not experience five things; we experience one, an apple. What is it that coordinates the five sensations? It is the mind that accomplishes that, and in earlier times that aspect of the mind was called the “common sense,” that is, the sense that is in common to the other five and brings them together. Our present use of the term “common sense” is a later development. So there are eleven senses: five receptive, five productive, and one common.

C. Activity

Compare what the Gita says is important to know with what our culture deems important.

Compare the Gita’s view of prakriti with the typical Western view of nature.

THE BHAGAVAD GITA, Lesson 21

A. Outline

Discourse 13, “The Yoga of the Distinction between the Field and the Knower of the Field,” can be seen as consisting of six parts:

- Verses 1–5: on the distinction between the Field and the Knower of the Field
- Verses 6–7: on the Field, its components and modifications
- Verses 8–12: on the qualities of *jñāna*, that is, knowing the Field and its Knower
- Verses 13–19: on the object of *jñāna*, Brahman, which is both the Field and its Knower
- Verses 20–24: on the nature of the Field (*prakṛiti*) and its Knower (*puruṣa*)
- Verses 25–35: on perceiving the Field and its Knower

B. Summary and Commentary

Verses 1–5. As commented upon in paper 20, the opening verses of discourse 13 of the Gita describe manifest reality as consisting of a complementary duality. One aspect of that duality is the “Knower of the Field” (spirit, consciousness, *puruṣa* “the person,” or *paramātmā* “the supreme Self”); and the other aspect is the “Field” (matter, body, *prakṛiti* “nature” or that which is made [*kri*] forth [*pra*]).

Verse 6 lists the 24 components of the Field, thus:

KNOWER OF THE FIELD

THE FIELD

1. The Unmanifest (*pradhāna*, primal matter, ultimate substance)
2. Reason (*buddhi*, highest intellect and discriminating faculty)
3. Ahamkāra (the I-maker or sense of separate individuality)
4. Manas (mind)

<i>Organs of Action</i>	<i>Organs of Knowledge</i>	<i>Pastures of the Senses</i>	<i>Great Elements</i>
5. mouth	10. ear	15. sounds	20. aether
6. hand	11. skin	16. touch	21. air
7. foot	12. eye	17. color	22. fire
8. genitals	13. tongue	18. taste	23. water
9. anus	14. nose	19. smell	24. earth

This schema both sets priorities among the elements of nature and establishes correlations or correspondences between them. The precise correspondences in the schema are less important than the general concept that all things in the manifested world are interlinked by correlations.

Verse 7 continues by listing seven “modifications” of the Field. These “modifications” also are correlated with some of the twenty-four components of the field:

“Combination” (also translated as “organism,” “organic whole,” or “body”) is the

physical modification of the field and corresponds to components 5–24.

“Pleasure” and “pain” are the sensations experienced through the body. “Desire” and “aversion” are the emotional reactions we have to those sensations. These four modifications correspond to the manas or mind (component 4), as it is linked downward to the body.

“Intelligence” (*chetana* or “mind”) corresponds to the manas or mind, as it is linked upward toward the Reason or buddhi (component 2).

“Firmness” (“steadfastness” or “constancy”) corresponds to the ahamkāra (component 3), or causal body, that in us which endures between incarnations and gives us a sense of our own continuance and self-identity.

Verses 8–12 list twenty qualities of “Wisdom” (*jñāna*)—the qualities that are produced by knowing how the world really is and who it is that knows:

- humility (absence of pride or arrogance)
- unpretentiousness (freedom from hypocrisy, absence of deceit)
- harmlessness (*ahimsa*, nonviolence)
- forgiveness (or patience or fortitude)
- rectitude (virtue, honesty)
- service of the teacher (attendance on or sitting beside a teacher)
- purity (integrity)
- steadfastness (stability, firmness, constancy)
- self-control (self-restraint)
- dispassion toward the objects of the senses (*vairāgya* or impartiality for sense objects) absence of egoism (*anahamkāra*, non-I-making, not being self-centered)
- insight into the pain and evil of birth, death, old age, and sickness (keeping them in view)
- unattachment (absence of clinging)
- absence of self-identification with son, wife, or home (not clinging to “what is mine”)
- constant balance of mind in wished-for and unwished-for events (stable in all events)
- unflinching devotion to the Divine by yoga, without other object (full commitment)
- resort to sequestered places (making retreats)
- absence of enjoyment in the company of men (being content to be solitary)
- constancy in the Wisdom of the Self (knowing the Supreme Self and who we are)
- understanding of the object of essential wisdom (knowing what we are about)

Verses 13–19 deal with the object of *jñāna*, which is neither physics (objective knowledge of the Field) nor psychology (subjective knowledge of the Knower), but something that is ontologically prior to both matter (the Field) and spirit (the Knower of the Field), namely the Absolute or Ultimate Real, Brahman. It is “that which ought to be known, that which, being known, immortality is enjoyed” (verse 13), words echoing the story of Shvetaketu, summarized in paper 20.

Brahman is really all that is. Everything, both the Field and the Knower of the Field, are expressions of it. All things that are, are not parts of Brahman; it is “not divided amid beings.” Rather all things that are, are manifestations of it; it is “seated distributively” in them. Brahman is their supporter, devourer, and generator (verse 17). That is, the Ultimate Reality operates with respect to the world in three capacities, a divine trinity recognized in many religious traditions. In Christianity those three capacities are called the three Divine Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. In Hinduism, they are called the Trimūrti or “three forms” of God: Vishnu, the supporter; Shiva, the devourer; and Brahma, the generator. Brahman is beyond everything and is in everything, and is everything; it is transcendent, immanent, and incarnate (verse 18).

Verse 19 summarizes by saying that what has been briefly told are the Field (in verses 6–7), Wisdom or *jñāna* (verses 8–12), and the object of Wisdom (verses 13–19).

Verses 20–24: treat the nature of the Field (*prakṛiti*) and its Knower (*puruṣa*). They are coeternal, being aspects of Brahman in manifestation. And the “modifications” (listed in verse 7) are all aspects of matter (the Field), as are the “qualities.” The qualities (Sanskrit *gunas*) are treated at length in discourse 14, so will be described more fully when we reach that part of the Gita. Briefly, they are the basic components, or “strands,” or we might say tendencies, of all matter. They are (1) a tendency to inertia, which is the property of matter that inclines it to stay in whatever state it happens to be unless some external force changes that state (*tamas*); (2) a tendency to impermanence and change, by which everything is forever and uncontrollably turning into something else (*rajas*); and (3) a tendency to harmony and order, which is patterned development, synthesizing both inertia and change (*sattva*).

Matter is the Field in which karma operates (“the cause of the generation of causes and effects,” verse 21). Spirit operating through matter experiences happiness and sorrow (“the cause of the enjoyment of pleasure and pain”) as a result of that karma. And because of that experience and its attachment to the qualities of matter, Spirit is continually brought back into birth (verse 22). Spirit is the supervisor or witness of what happens in the material world, and permits or consents to it, and in that way is involved with the material world; but in itself, Spirit is the supreme Self (*paramātmā*), and when the realization of this distinction is achieved, Spirit no longer is bound to matter and so no longer is born in a body (verse 24).

Verses 25–35 consider ways of coming to a realization of the distinction between the Field and its Knower. Three such ways are mentioned in verse 25: “by meditation,” “by the Sāṃkhya Yoga,” and “by the Yoga of Action.” These are the three principal paths of Yoga: Bhakti, Jñāna, and Karma. Although in one sense, meditation is a technique used in all the

paths, here it is equated with Bhakti, because its aim is union of the meditator with the object of meditation, and such union is the essence of Bhakti Yoga. Sāmkhya (or Sankhya) Yoga is the practice of drawing distinctions, which is the basic technique of Jñāna Yoga.

The most important thing, from the standpoint of Jñāna Yoga (the theme of the last third of the Gita) is to realize that all things arise from a union of the Field and its Knower and that God, the supreme Lord, is present in all things. Whoever realizes this sees things as they really are, does no injury, and “treads the highest Path” (verse 29).

All activity is activity in matter, not in or by the Self. All the diversity of manifold existence is an expression of the One underlying Reality. The supreme Self is reflected in material bodies, but it does not itself act and is not bound by material action (verses 30–32).

The Self is like the ether, which pervades the whole universe but is not affected by physical laws. It is like the sun, which gives light to the whole earth but is not affected by terrestrial events. Those who realize the distinction between the Field of the world and the Self, which is the Knower of the Field—they are on the Path to the Supreme Reality (verses 33–35).

C. Activity

Consider the twenty qualities of Wisdom. Think about what some of them might mean in your own life and how you might put them into practice.

When you find yourself in the midst of an excited situation or one that involves complex causes and effects, draw back from it with part of your awareness. Feel yourself removed from the action. Observe what is going on with as much dispassion as possible, but do so as a detached observer, rather than a participant in the action. Part of you may need to be involved in the event, but part of you can also observe without involvement. Try to achieve that state.

THE BHAGAVAD GITA, Lesson 22

A. Outline

Discourse 14, “The Yoga of Separation from the Three Qualities,” deals with the three *gunas*, qualities or aspects of matter. It has three main parts:

Verses 1–4: an introduction and summary

Verses 5–20: on the three qualities or *gunas*

Verses 21–27: on the marks of one who has transcended the *gunas*

B. Summary and Commentary

Verses 1–4. In the first two verses, Krishna says he is once again setting forth the highest wisdom, an understanding of which leads to perfection and peace. The next two verses contrast Krishna, himself, and Brahman. The relationship between Krishna and Brahman is metaphorically that between a generating (literally “seed-sowing”) father and a maternal womb. We can understand that these figures are used to represent the two poles of the primordial polarity:

Krishna	Brahman
father	mother
lingam	yonis
yang	yin
consciousness	substance
spirit	matter
potent	receptive
active	latent
purusha “person”	prakriti “nature”

The two are complementary, and the universe cannot exist without either, but they have different roles to play in the divine Dance or Sport of creation. Pure consciousness or spirit (Krishna) is free of all attributes, being just what it is, in itself. But substance or matter (Brahman), has three qualities.

Verses 5-9. The three qualities of matter are called *gunas* in Sanskrit, a word that means literally “strand” or “cord.” The three *gunas* are like strings from which the fabric of matter is woven. Everything that exists has these three qualities or tendencies in it: *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*.

The *gunas* can be thought of in various ways. *Tamas* is the tendency of matter to stay in whatever state it happens to be, that is, inertia. It is the tendency to resist change and to be unresponsive. *Rajas*, on the other hand, is the tendency of matter to change, and to do so violently. It is the tendency to uncontrolled, explosive action. *Sattva* is the tendency of matter to vibrate harmoniously and rhythmically. It is the tendency to regularity and predictability.

In the human constitution, *sattva* corresponds to *buddhi-manas*, intuitive or synthesizing intellect; *rajas* corresponds to *kama-manas*, desire-fueled mind; and *tamas* corresponds to the dense physical body. *Tamas* restrains, *rajas* arouses, and *sattva* harmonizes.

Cosmologically, before the beginning, the three *gunas* are in balance in *mulaprakriti* (the unmanifested source of matter). But when manifestation begins, the *gunas* become unbalanced, or perhaps one might say that their becoming unbalanced is what starts the process of manifestation. From an evolutionary standpoint, *tamas* characterizes the subhuman world of animals, plants, and minerals; *rajas* characterizes human beings; and *sattva* characterizes the superhuman world of *devas* or gods.

Verses 6-9 give a variety of correspondences for the *gunas*:

sattva	rajas	tamas
harmony	motion	inertia
purity	activity or action	dullness
knowledge or wisdom	passion	ignorance
light or luminosity	brightness	darkness
buoyancy	stimulant	indifference or heedlessness
happiness or bliss	pain	laziness or sloth
stainlessness	passion	indolence or negligence
health	thirst or craving	delusion

Verses 10-13. Just like the Chinese symbol of the revolving circle of black yin and white yang, in which each has the seed of the other in it and continually turns into that other, so the three *gunas* form a whole in which from time to time each becomes dominant over the other two. When *sattva* is dominant, the light of wisdom shines. When *rajas* is dominant, greed, restless activity, and desire arise. When *tamas* is dominant, darkness, inertness, heedlessness, and confusion are the result.

Verses 14-18. Whichever *guna* is dominant at the time of one's death determines what one's after-death state is like. Of course, for any *guna* to be dominant, it must be the one that has been cultivated most assiduously throughout life, so this is not a case of a "death-bed confession" changing the course of a lifetime. *Sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas* lead respectively to pleasure, pain, and ignorance; to knowledge, desire, and delusion; to going upward, being stuck in the middle, or going downward.

Verses 19-20. From such correspondences as those listed above, it may seem that *sattva* is far and away the best of the *gunas*. And so, in a relative sense, it is. But in fact what is wanted is not for any one of the *gunas* to be dominant—even *sattva*—but for all of them to be in balance. And to balance the *gunas* is to move out of the ever-changing world of *samsara* into the abiding world of *nirvana*. When we realize that all action in the world is the result of the striving of the *gunas* with one another, and when we know that which is beyond the *gunas* (that is, Krishna), we enter into Krishna's nature and balance the *gunas*, leaving behind their ceaseless striving, one with another.

Verse 21. Then Arjuna asks what a person is like who has “crossed over” or transcended the interplay of the gunas. How does such a person behave? And how does such a person attain that state? This question is similar to the one toward the end of the second discourse, where Arjuna asks about the mark of one who is of stable mind (2.54). And just as Krishna answers Arjuna there by describing the characteristics of such a sage (2.55-72), so he does here in the final verses of this discourse.

Verses 22-23. To transcend the gunas, we must neither reject nor long for any of them: radiance (sattva), energy (rajas), or delusion (tamas). Instead, we must observe them, saying, “Well, the qualities are revolving,” without participating in them. This is similar to the parable of the two birds in one tree from Indian lore. One of the birds is continually eating the berries that grow on the tree. If it gets a sweet berry, the pleasant taste makes it eat yet another berry in the hope of repeating the pleasure; if it gets a sour berry, the unpleasant taste makes it eat yet another berry in the hope of counteracting the pain. And so its whole existence is berry-eating, ceaselessly going from one to the next. The other bird, however, does not eat at all, but merely sits on a branch and watches the berry-eating bird. The bird that eats berries is like us when we are caught up with and by the gunas. The bird that watches is like the sage who stands apart, balanced in pleasure and pain, and says, “Well, the qualities are revolving,” without revolving with them.

Verses 24-25. We transcend the gunas when we respond to pleasure and pain—sweet berries and sour ones—alike. Then praise and censure, honor and ignominy, friend and foe, are all the same. Then a lump of earth or rock and gold are the same.

The last example calls to mind one of the stories told by the Brothers Grimm, namely “Hans im Glück” (“Lucky Jack”). In that story, Jack is a young man who left his mother’s house to seek his fortune in the world. After seven years of labor, he decides to return to his mother and so collects his wages from his employer. As he has been a good worker, his employer gives him a lump of gold as big as Jack’s head.

Jack sets off down the road to his mother’s house. But as he goes, he keeps meeting other travelers, with whom he successively swaps his lump of gold for a horse, a cow, a pig, a goose, and a lump of rock. Finally he loses the lump of rock when it falls into a well while Jack is taking a drink. Then he jumps up in joy, exclaims what a lucky fellow he is no longer to have to carry that heavy rock on his back, and skips off down the road to his mother’s house.

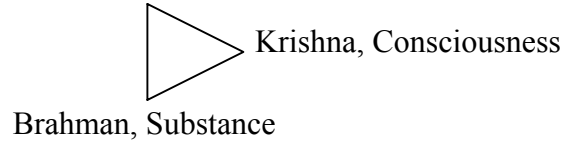
On the surface, “Lucky Jack” is the story of a fool who trades what is valuable (gold) for what is less so and who finally ends with nothing—but is too stupid to know what he has done. On a deeper level, however, it is the story of a wise man, a sage, for whom “a lump of earth, a rock, and gold are alike.”

Verses 26-27. In the last two verses, Krishna says that whoever transcends the gunas is ready to enter Brahman (the Eternal). Further, Krishna says that he is the abode of the Eternal Brahman. The Sanskrit word translated “abode” also means “foundation, support, basis.” Krishna, the ultimate consciousness, is the basis of Brahman, the eternal substance principle.

Substance abides in consciousness. The two are mutually necessary. Each presupposes the other, yet there is a sense in which consciousness is primary, as the abode and foundation of substance.

Earlier in the Gita (8.21), the Highest Path or Supreme (which Blavatsky called “Parabrahm”) is called the abode of Krishna. So there is a triangle, in which all three angles are necessary and mutually implicative, but which are nevertheless hierarchically ordered:

Parabrahm, the Supreme



C. Activity

Practice responding to inertial dullness, passionate activity, and harmonious delight in your own life, all in the same way—not by seeking or avoiding, but by observing.



THE BHAGAVAD GITA, Lesson 23

A. Outline

Discourse 15, “The Yoga of Attaining the Supreme Spirit,” with its twenty verses, is one of the two shortest in the Gita. The discourse can be seen as comprising three parts:

Verses 1–6: on the World Tree and the Supreme Abode

Verses 7–15: on the embodiment of the Spirit

Verses 16–20: on the three Spirits

B. Summary and Commentary

Verses 1–2 introduce the Ashvatta tree, an Indic version of the archetypal World Tree known from many mystical traditions, myths, legends, and customs, and verses 3–6 contrast it with the Supreme Abode.

The Judeo-Christian tradition has several trees of this archetype. Two are spoken of in the Book of Genesis: the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil and the Tree of Life. When Adam and Eve ate the fruit of the first of those trees, they came into moral awareness, that is, acquired a sense of self-identity and responsibility, as a result of which they were clothed in “coats of skins” and were exiled from the garden of Eden so that they could no longer eat the fruit of the second of the trees. Thus they became mortal. The Biblical story is a myth of our individualization as separate, morally aware, and responsible beings and our consequent incarnation in physical bodies (the “coats of skins”), which die. It tells about our loss of the Edenic state of unconscious unity before we were individualized.

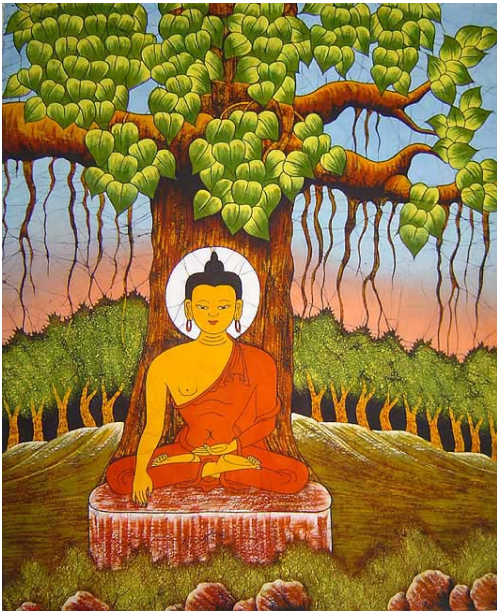
The Christian tradition adds a third, related, tree, namely the tree that is the Cross of the Crucifixion. On one level, the Crucifixion is another myth of the coming of the soul into matter (in this case, being nailed to the cross of matter). But on another level, the Cross of the Crucifixion is a tree that bears Christ, the divine life in embodied form, whose fruit is eternal life for all humanity. So the Cross is a Tree of Transformation of Death into Immortality.

In the European Middle Ages, these three trees were interrelated in a complex legend stretching from Adam to Christ. That legend relates that, after Adam and Eve had been expelled from Eden and had their family, the time came for Adam to die. His third son, Seth, tried to return to Eden to get a fruit from the Tree of Life as an antidote for his father’s mortality. But when Seth reached the gate of Eden, he was stopped by an angel with a flaming sword, who had been placed there to prevent humans from improperly reentering the garden. Seth explained his mission, but the angel would neither let him enter nor give him a fruit from the Tree of Life. However, because of Seth’s great devotion to his father, the angel relented to the extent of giving him a single seed from the Tree of Life. Seth returned to his father, but by the time he arrived, Adam had just died. Grieving at the burial, Seth put the seed into his father’s grave, and in due time, it sprouted there and grew into a great tree, which, however, never bore fruit.

Although this descendant of the original Tree of Life had no fruit, it was very large and miraculously long-lived. Wood from it was harvested for many uses: to construct Noah's ark, to build King Solomon's Temple, and so on. Finally, wood from that tree was used to make the cross on which Christ was to be crucified. When Christ was upon the Cross, made out of wood from the second Tree of Life, that Tree finally bore its fruit: Christ the immortal Life of all humanity.

Another expression of the tree archetype is the Jewish Otz Chiim or Tree of Life of the Kabbalah, which bears upon it the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet, whose combinations form everything that can be expressed or exist. This Tree of Life has two forms: one fallen and one restored, thus echoing some of the symbolism of the Christian tree-cross symbol. The fallen tree is unsymmetrical between top and bottom; the restored tree raises (resurrects or ascends) the sephirah Tiphereth (which corresponds to Christ in Christian Kabbalah) to the position of the mysterious and missing sephirah Daat ("knowledge" or "gnosis"), thus restoring symmetry between that which is above and that which is below.

Norse myth speaks of a World Tree called Yggdrasil, a gigantic ash tree that supports the universe. Its roots are in Niflheim, the Land of Darkness, and in Jötunheim, the Land of the Giants. Its branches reach up to Asgard, the Home of the Gods. And half way between the roots and the branches is Midgard (the "middle garden" or Middle-earth), where humans live. Our Christmas tree is a combination of themes from the Judeo-Christian and the Norse trees.



The Bo Tree or Bodhi Tree is the tree under which the Buddha sat until he saw into the inner nature of things and attained enlightenment. It is therefore the Tree of Wisdom or of Enlightenment, an Indic parallel of the Jewish tree, representing the culmination of learning that began when Adam and Eve first ate the fruit of Eden's Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. The latter tree is a symbol of the fall of humanity into matter; the Bo Tree is a symbol of the liberation of humanity from the ignorance of this material world.

Madame Blavatsky (*CW* 4:347–51) talks about the marvelous Kumbum Tree, which grows in Tibet. It is supposed to have grown from the hair of the great reformer Tsong-Kha-pa, which was shorn when he entered the religious life. The bark and the leaves of this tree have upon them characters sometimes described as Tibetan and sometimes as Senzar. If the layer of bark or of a leaf bearing one of the characters is scraped away, the underneath layer is found also to bear a character—but a different one. In thus bearing written characters, the Kumbum Tree belongs to the same genus as the Jewish Tree of Life.

All of these trees are variant expressions of a single archetype with manifold implications. The Ashvatta tree of the Gita is another such expression; specifically it is a World Tree, somewhat like Yggdrasill. There are, however, two ways to read the description of the Ashvatta in verses 1 and 2. The traditional way is to picture it as an upside-down tree, whose roots are at the top, anchored in the supernal world (called Krishna's supreme abode in verse 6) and the crown of whose branches are at the bottom in the world of matter ("roots above, branches below"). Viewed in this way, the tree is rooted in nirvana but branches into samsara—a very effective symbol of the world process, which comes out of the Divine Mind and grows into the multiplicity of manifestation.

But another way of reading the description of the Ashvatta is to think of it as like the banyan tree, to which it is related. The banyan has the unusual characteristic of dropping shoots down from its branches, which then grow into the ground, establishing new roots and eventually becoming secondary trunks for the tree. Banyans live to great ages and sometimes, as with the great banyan tree at Adyar, the original trunk dies, but the tree continues to live through its secondary trunks. The shoots are in one sense new roots on top of the old ones, but in another sense they are new branches beneath the old ones: "roots above [the ground], branches below [the leafy crown]." In this way, the banyan is a symbol of several facts: things are not what we think they are (branches and roots get confused in our minds); things are continually transformed into new realities (the branch-root shoots become trunks); and life goes on even as it dies.

In either interpretation, the Ashvatta is a symbol of the world of samsara, change, and maya, a tree to be "cut down by the unswerving weapon of nonattachment." It is contrasted with the "path beyond," the "Primal Man" (*purusha* "spirit, logos") from which the ancient energy of creation streamed forth, the "indestructible path," Krishna's "supreme abode"—that is, nirvana.

In the second part of the discourse, verses 7–9 describe the embodiment of the Spirit from the realm of nirvana into the Ashvatta World Tree of samsara. A "portion" of Krishna's own self is transformed into "an immortal Spirit" or *jīva* (in Theosophy called a monad), which contacts the world through the senses and the mind as it enters into material existence. The mind is considered to be one of the senses in both Indic and Medieval European thought. In the latter, the mind was called the common sense, because it coordinates the impressions received from the other five senses, recognizing what they have in common.

Verses 10–11 tell us that those who are deluded by the samsaric world of the Ashvatta do not recognize that it is really the Lord of All—Krishna himself—who is functioning through the individualized life (the *jīva* or monad) in the sensory world. But those who have eyes to see (as Christ told his disciples) and who have made their own inner connection with their higher selves (the Yogis) recognize the One Life in all beings.

Verses 12–15 tell us that the One Life (personified as Krishna) is the source of everything in the phenomenal world: sun, moon, fire, soil, plants, breathing things, memory, wisdom, all beings who know and all "that which is to be known."

The third part of the discourse begins with verse 16, which tells us that there are two Energies (or spirits, in Sanskrit “purushas”) in the world. One is destructible and the other is indestructible. Elsewhere in the Gita (7.4–5), we heard of two natures (prakritis), a lower and a higher. It would seem that the destructible purusha-energy is that which vitalizes the lower nature, and the indestructible purusha-energy is that which vitalizes the higher nature.

Verses 17–19 tell us that there is a third spirit: a “highest Energy” (or purusha), which is the “supreme Self” or “indestructible Lord.” This is Krishna himself, the “Supreme Spirit,” which was also referred to earlier in the Gita (8.20–22 and 13.23) by these same terms: “the highest Spirit” (or purusha) and “the supreme Self.”

The vision of reality in the Gita is thus a triple one. Lowest is the world of mutability and maya: the world of the Ashvatta tree, in which we live. Next is the world in which the Ashvatta tree is rooted (using the traditional interpretation of that symbol), the world of the archetypes, the causal world, which is the source of all the variations and variability of the Ashvatta world. Highest is the Ultimate Source of both the destructible spirit-energy and the indestructible, of both the lower nature and the higher nature. This highest is beyond, but includes, all that is, was, will be, or might be—real and unreal, transitory and permanent. It is what Blavatsky calls “Parabrahm,” that which is beyond the beyond, the source of both the ideal and the real.

Verse 20 ends the discourse by saying that whoever has known this is illuminated and has finished his work in the world. In Sanskrit, the words that Besant translates as “known” and “illuminated” are forms of the root word *budh* “wake up,” so we might say that whoever has waked up to this fact is truly awake and so is no longer in the world of those who sleep.

C. Activity

List any other images of trees you can think of in myth, folklore, or literature. What do they have in common? How do they differ from one another?

D. References

Blavatsky, Helena Petrovna. *Collected Writings, Volume IV*. Wheaton, Ill.: Theosophical Publishing House, 1969.

THE BHAGAVAD GITA, Lesson 24

A. Outline

Discourse 16, “The Yoga of Division between the Divine and the Demoniactal,” is another relatively short chapter, consisting of twenty-four verses. It is also one of the simplest in the Gita, in the sense of developing a single theme. The discourse can be seen as comprising three parts:

Verses 1–6 contrast two types of beings in the world: the divine and the demoniactal.

Verses 7–21 characterize the demoniactal nature.

Verses 22–24 conclude by pointing to the consequences of this division for our lives.

B. Summary and Commentary

The two types of beings in the world are defined by their “properties.” The word Besant translates as “property” is Sanskrit *sampad*, which can also be translated as “acquisition, condition, destiny, endowment, quality, requisite.” It is significant that these two “properties”—the divine and the demoniactal—are spoken of in verses 3, 4, 5, and 6 as something with which one is born and which define types. They are not qualities that one can develop or cultivate, but instead are inherent characteristics of beings.

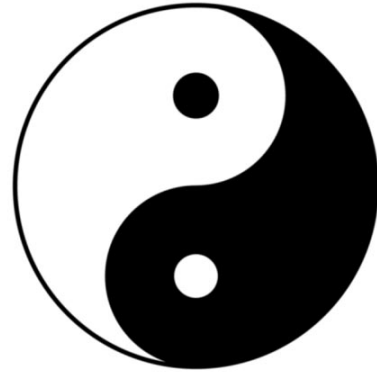
The terms translated “divine” and “demoniac” refer in Sanskrit to the devas and the asuras. *Deva* is often translated as “god” and *asura* as “demon,” but it is not correct to think of them in terms of Christian angels and devils. The devas and the asuras are both necessary in the cosmos. An ancient Hindu myth explains their mutual necessity.

The devas maintained their immortality with a magical potion, the Elixir of Immortality, but it was lost in a great flood when it was washed into the depths of the ocean. The only way the devas could get the Elixir back was to churn the ocean like a great tub of milk, because in the churning all things in its depths would be tossed up to the surface. But the ocean was a very large tub indeed, so the devas needed an enormous paddle to churn it. The god Indra uprooted the biggest mountain in the world to use as a paddle. But then they needed an immensely long rope to wind around the mountain paddle to turn it, so they got the world serpent to use for that purpose. However, they needed a vast number of persons on each end of the serpent to pull it back and forth and thus turn the paddle and churn the ocean. The devas were themselves only half the number needed so could not churn the ocean by themselves. They therefore enlisted the aid of the asuras, and the gods on one end of the serpent and the asuras on the other end together pulled the serpent back and forth, turned the mountain paddle, churned the milky ocean, and retrieved the Elixir of Immortality.

The myth has much more in it than the bare summary in the previous paragraph, but it is enough to make the point that the process of becoming in the world (the churning of the milky ocean) requires the cooperation of opposites. Both the divine devas (the forces of evolution) and the demoniactal asuras (the forces of involution) are necessary. If consciousness is to evolve, it must first involve. The involutory asuras are not evil; they are the agents of increasing materiality, unconsciousness, and separation—qualities that must precede the

action of the evolutionary devas, who are the agents of increasing spirituality, consciousness, and unity. If those immortal goals are to be achieved, they must be reached from the basis of mortality.

The point of the myth of the churning of the milky ocean is like that of the Chinese emblem of wholeness, the t'ai chi or "great ultimate," represented by a circle consisting of two interlinked comma-shaped halves: one black, one white, each with the seed of the other in its midst. The two halves, the yin and the yang, revolve, each becoming the other in a ceaseless process of change, as the two aspects of ultimate reality.



The same point is made by H. P. Blavatsky in her discussion of the first fundamental proposition of *The Secret Doctrine* (1:15): "But once that we pass in thought from this (to us) Absolute Negation [Parabrahm], duality supervenes in the contrast of Spirit (or consciousness) and Matter, Subject and Object. Spirit (or Consciousness) and Matter are, however, to be regarded, not as independent realities, but the two facets or aspects of the Absolute (Parabrahm), which constitute the basis of conditioned Being."

Thus this discourse is not dealing with qualities that are good or evil in themselves, but rather that are both necessary to the total ecology of the cosmos. What makes them good and evil is the harmony or disharmony we have with them at various stages in our evolution. An analogy may help. A newborn infant is completely self-centered, caring for nothing else than itself. It is wholly selfish, completely occupied with its own new life processes. Only gradually does it become aware of and considerate of others and their needs. The infant's self-centeredness and selfishness are not evil; they are appropriate for its stage of development. But self-centeredness and selfishness, if continued when the infant grows up and becomes bodily mature, become evil because they are then out of place. Good is that which is harmonious with our evolutionary development, and evil is that which is discordant with our evolutionary development.

In the case of the Gita's divine and demoniacal properties, we are at a stage of evolution when we should be developing the properties of the devas, not those of the asuras. And therefore the former are good for us, and the latter evil. The Gita is addressed to Arjuna (who is each of us), and Krishna (his higher Self) is urging him to follow his dharma (that which is the "good" for his caste, or stage of evolution). That good is divine, deva-like.

Verses 1–3 describe the "properties" of those who are born of the divine type. The twenty-six qualities listed in these three verses might be compared with "The Golden Stairs" of H. P. Blavatsky. The latter is another statement of the qualities for us to develop at our present stage of evolution and has interesting parallels with those in these verses. "The Golden Stairs" is as follows (*Collected Writings* 12:503):

Behold the truth before you: A clean life, an open mind, a pure heart, an eager intellect, an unveiled spiritual perception, a brotherliness for one's co-disciple, a readiness to give and receive advice and instruction, a loyal sense of duty to the Teacher, a willing obedience to the behests of Truth, once we have placed our confidence in, and believe that Teacher to be in possession of it, a courageous endurance of personal injustice, a brave declaration of principles, a valiant defense of those who are unjustly attacked, and a constant eye to the ideal of human progression and perfection, which the Secret Science depicts—these are the Golden Stairs up the steps of which the learner may climb to the Temple of Divine Wisdom.

Verse 4 briefly characterizes the properties of the demoniacal. Verses 5 and 6 contrast the two sets of properties and begin a long catalog of the demoniacal properties.

Verses 7–21 are that catalog, beginning in a noteworthy fashion. Besant's translation opens verse 7 thus: "Demoniacal men know neither right energy nor right abstinence." The Sanskrit she is translating might be literally rendered as "Demoniacal persons do not know either pravritti or nivritti." *Pravritti* means "activity, progress, involvement in the world" and *nivritti* means "inactivity, cessation, turning away." Those Sanskrit terms have been used in Theosophy to denote the two complementary phases of evolution and involution. So this sentence says that there are those who do not know the difference between these two phases and who therefore confuse the qualities of the two, misperceiving what is the good of their stage of evolution. Or, as *At the Feet of the Master* puts it:

In all the world there are only two kinds of people—those who know, and those who do not know; and this knowledge is the thing which matters . . . the knowledge of God's plan for men. For God has a plan and that plan is evolution.

The demoniacal are those who do not know and who cannot distinguish pravritti from nivritti: activity from inactivity, progress from regression, going forth from turning back. They deny a divine providence in the world and see it as merely the result of random forces of desire. They are therefore agents of destruction in the world, believing that there is nothing beyond physical material life. They are materialists, exploiters, egotists, and hypocrites because of this primary ignorance. There is no possibility of enlightenment or liberation for them as long as they remain in that state of ignorant confusion between the two great phases of evolution. They condemn themselves to repeated rebirths of ignorance, passing through the triple gates of desire, anger, and greed (verse 21), which are the gates of the darkness of *tamas*, the guna or quality of inertia—or continuing in the same old way.

Verses 22–24 turn back to those who avoid the three gates of darkness and embody instead the divine properties. They follow the highest path or goal. Arjuna (and we) are urged to do as they do: take the sacred scriptures (that which the sages of old have recorded for us) as the guide of life and, following their counsel about what to do and not to do, work in this world.

C. Activity

Think about both the divine or deva-like and the demoniacal or asura-like impulses in the world today. Spend a few minutes each day sending out divine, deva-like thoughts into the world.

Think about both the divine or deva-like and the demoniacal or asura-like impulses in your own life (everyone has both kinds). Every time you experience one of the latter, consciously and deliberately replace it with one of the former.

What would be the opposites of the three gates of desire, anger, and greed? Make a list of terms for each of those opposite gates (such as contentment, peace, and generosity), and every day for a month focus on practicing one of those opposites in some simple, practical way. Practice being satisfied with what comes to you, with being calm and accepting, with giving something (it might be a smile or a kind word) to those whom you meet.

D. References:

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THE BHAGAVAD GITA, Lesson 25

A. Outline

Discourse 17, “The Yoga of the Division of Threefold Faith,” returns to a discussion of the three gunas or qualities of matter. Discourse 16 viewed the world as the product of a duality or complementarity: the divine and the demoniac. But every set of oppositions is resolved by a *tertium quid*—a third something. Every thesis calls forth an antithesis, but then every pair of thesis-antithesis opposites is resolved by a synthesis. This Hegelian dialectic can be seen in the three gunas. The first and longest part of this discourse (verses 1-22) concerns those gunas; the last part (verses 22-28) concerns the mantra of the Gita, which can be seen as a resolution or overview of the dialectic process of the gunas.

B. Summary and Commentary

The last discourse ended (16.24) with Krishna telling Arjuna, “Let the Scriptures be thy authority, in determining what ought to be done, or what ought not to be done.” At the beginning of this discourse (17.1), Arjuna follows up on that directive, and asks Krishna about people who have good intentions (faith) but do not follow prescribed methods (ordinances of the Scriptures) in what they do (offering sacrifices). Are they sattvic, rajasic, or tamasic—harmonious, agitated, or inertial? In effect, Arjuna asks which is more important: to follow the rules or to be well-meaning. He phrases the question, however, not in terms of either-or, but of classification according to the gunas, the three qualities according to which every thing and every action can be viewed. Because this discourse focuses on moral matters rather than material ones, the gunas here represent qualities of character: pure, passionate, or polluted.

Krishna answers (17.2-3) that intentions (faith) are themselves of those same three kinds and that we are what our intentions are. This response echoes the statement of one of the Masters of the Wisdom that, with them, intentions are everything. As our intentions are, so are we. Krishna then proceeds to a long exposition of the three kinds of worship, food, sacrifice, austerity, and giving.

Worship (17.4) of the gods is sattvic; of gnomes and giants (or spirits and demons) is rajasic; and of ghosts and nature spirits is tamasic. India has always had “holy” men who engage in the most extreme forms of self-torture as a religious exercise. The Buddha tried that and discovered it does not lead to enlightenment, so abandoned it. Annie Besant once remarked that the problem with ascetics is that they confuse discomfort with holiness. And Krishna has no sympathy with such extreme discipline either. He says (17.5-6) that it is demonic and egotistic and that those who engage in such practices are torturing him within themselves.

Food (17.7-10) that is healthful, satisfying, and tasty is sattvic. Food that is sharp in flavor and causes discomfort is rajasic. Food that is stale, tasteless, or unclean is tamasic.

Sacrifices (17.11-13) that are offered according to the traditional rules, as what ought to be done, and not out of hope of bribing the gods or getting anything in return are sattvic.

Sacrifices that are intended to be a bargain with the gods to get something in return or are done egotistically for self-promotion are rajasic. Sacrifices done with disregard for tradition, insincerely, and without an offering or proper form are tamasic. (This view of ritual worship, incidentally, is very much like that of Confucius, who also emphasized the importance of sincerity and faithfulness to tradition and who thought of the ritual as a means of connecting us with the Way of Heaven and thus helping our evolution into full and perfect human beings.)

Krishna next (17.14-17) points out that there are three kinds of austerity or self-discipline (*tapas*). Austerity of the body is—not what the extreme ascetics think (17.5-6)—but rather honoring the gods, people who deserve honor in society, and teachers; it is practicing purity, straightforwardness, continence, and harmlessness (*ahimsa*). Austerity of speech is what does not annoy others, is truthful, pleasant, and helpful, and is the recitation of holy texts. Austerity of mind is remaining peaceful, balanced, quiet, self-controlled, and clean in thought. To practice those three sorts of austerity is sattvic. On the other hand (17.18-19), acts of austerity that are done to impress others by showing off are rajasic, and those that are done without understanding of what is done, with self-torture, or to harm another are tamasic.

Giving (17.20-22) without expectation of something in return, to someone who is worthy of the gift, and at the right time and place is sattvic. Giving with the idea of getting something back or grudgingly is rajasic. Giving to the unworthy, at the wrong time or place, disrespectfully or contemptuously is tamasic.

The discourse ends (17.23-28) with a passage on the mantra *Om Tat Sat*, which applies to sacrifices, austerities, and gifts—in fact, to everything. The first word, *Om*, is called the *pranava* or “primeval word.” Like the Greek *Logos*, it is the creative word that brings everything into existence. It is written with three letters: *a, u, m*, which symbolize many



Brahma



Vishnu



Shiva

threesomes: the three worlds (heaven, atmosphere, and earth, or mental, emotional, and physical planes); the three persons of the Hindu trinity (Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva: the Creator, Preserver, and Regenerator); the beginning, middle, and end of all things; waking,

dreaming and deep sleep (outer consciousness, inner or sub-consciousness, and higher or super-consciousness). In addition to all these threesomes, however, there is also the totality of the word *Om*, for although written as three letters, it is a single syllable and a single sound. And that single wholeness symbolizes the ultimate reality, Brahman, of which all threesomes are expressions.

The other two words of the mantra are ordinary words in Sanskrit, although they have a special meaning when combined with *Om* in the mantra. *Tat* is the pronoun for “that,” but it often refers to “that reality,” which is permanent and unchanging, in contrast with “this world,” which is transitory and mayavic or illusory. *Sat* is the present participle of the verb “to be,” so means “being,” but it also has the meanings of “real,” “true,” or “good.” (The opposite of *sat*, *asat* (17.28), is nonbeing, unreal, false, and bad.)

Put all together, the three words *Om Tat Sat*, literally “Ah, That Being,” might be translated as “The ultimate reality—That is real and good.” (Sanskrit, like Latin, Russian, and some varieties of English does not normally use a linking verb corresponding with the English “is” in that translation.) The mantra *Om Tat Sat* asserts the existence of that which is absolutely real and entirely good (as this world is not). Tom McArthur, a Scotsman who is both an authority on language and a student of the Gita, has translated the mantra more strikingly as “Well, that’s the way it is!” And that’s the way it is for this second to the last discourse of the Gita.

C. Activity

Make your own lists of things that are sattvic (pure), rajasic (passionate), or tamasic (polluted). Consider such fields as sports, music, TV programs, foods, clothing, methods of communication and transportation, movies, vacations, and places to live. Consider what qualities the things on each list have in common. If possible, compare your lists with someone else’s. Do the similarities and differences imply something about the things you categorized or about you?

THE BHAGAVAD GITA, Lesson 26

A. Outline

Discourse 18, “The Yoga of Liberation by Renunciation,” concludes the discussion focusing on Jñana Yoga and resolves Arjuna’s moral dilemma, which evoked the whole Gita. It is appropriately the longest discourse in the poem. It deals particularly with the relationship between knowledge (Gnana) and action (karma), which is what Arjuna needs to know in order to choose wisely among the options facing him, that is, in order to discriminate (the first of the qualifications for the Path according to the *Viveka Chudamani* and *At the Feet of the Master*).

B. Summary and Commentary

At the beginning of the discourse, Arjuna returns to a topic treated in discourse 5, “The Yoga of the Renunciation of Action,” and asks Krishna again to explain two sorts of “giving up” (verse 1). Those two sorts are, briefly, giving up actions motivated by desire and giving up desire for the outcome (“fruit”) of actions (verses 2-3). The first, giving up actions that are motivated by desire, is the ideal of the sannyasi or “renouncer.”

In the traditional Hindu view, there are four stages in life. The first is that of the student, when we are learning about our place in the world; the second is that of the householder, when we marry, have a family, and take our place in the community; the third is that of retiree or “forest dweller,” when we give up active participation in worldly affairs and set our lives in order—but are still available to give assistance to others; the fourth, is that of the sannyasi, literally “one who has thrown down completely” all ties with the world. That fourth stage is the giving up of all actions motivated by desire, a complete renunciation. It is, however, not for all persons, but only for the few who are called to it, and the Gita does not regard it as the highest kind of “giving up.”

The highest kind of “giving up,” which is said to be “relinquishment by the wise” is not the giving up of actions, but rather the giving up of desire for a particular outcome of an action. That is, it is *nishkama karma*, “desireless action,” as explained in the early discourses of the Gita. The difference between these two kinds of “giving up” may seem to be nitpicking. But in fact it is crucial. All deliberate action as the result of a choice is inescapably motivated by desire of some kind. So the sannyasi’s giving up of action motivated by desire is in fact a giving up of all action—a withdrawal from the world, a rejection of life. And that, in the view of the Gita, is itself an action, but not necessarily a wise one.

The wise course is to give up desire for a particular outcome of any action, which leaves us free to act, but out of a transformed motivation. That motivation is no longer desire for the results or fruit of action, but instead a realization of who we truly are and consequently a realization that there are really no choices for us to make. When we know (not just believe or hold as a concept, but know directly) that, in our inmost nature, we are one with the sole Reality, then we no longer have a separate will or any personal desires. Then, as the title of a lecture by Radha Burnier puts it, there is “No Other Path to Go.” The only path or way is the

Tao of China, the Will of God of the Abrahamic religions, or the Sanatana Dharma, the “Eternal Reality that holds together all things” of India.

Actions in themselves are not evil. What is evil is a wrong motivation for action. Acts of “sacrifice, gift, and austerity” should not be given up, but performed for the right reasons. Acts of austerity are those we do to control ourselves; acts of gift are those we do to help others; acts of sacrifice are those we do to relate to the Holy, the One Reality, however it expresses itself in the world. So those three kinds of actions are interior (in ourselves), exterior (to others), and transcendent (toward divine Reality).

“Giving up,” says Krishna, is really of three kinds (verses 4-12). Right actions directed to the divine, others, and ourselves (sacrifice, gift, and austerity) should be done because, being done out of a right motive, they free the doer from karmic entanglements, so are “the purifiers of the intelligent” (verse 5). To give up such actions is wrong. If we give them up because we think action itself is wrong, we are deluded—under the sway of the *guna tamas* (verse 7). If we give them up because we are afraid of their consequences, which we think of as painful, we are acting out of passion—under the sway of the *guna rajas* (verse 8). If, however, we do an action because it is right to do it—because it is our *dharma* to do it—but give up only our personal investment in the results of the action, then we are acting intelligently—under the influence of the *guna sattva* (verse 9). These are the three kinds of “giving up”: *tamasic*, *rajasic*, and *sattvic*—ignorant, passionate, and wise.

A person who does not avoid action because its results are thought to be painful and who is not attached to an action because its results are thought to be pleasurable—such a person is filled with *sattvic* goodness and so follows the path of *Karma Yoga*; that person is intelligent and so follows the path of *Jñana Yoga*; that person has all doubts cut away and so follows the path of *Bhakti Yoga* (verse 10). *Karma Yoga* teaches us how to act rightly or purely; *Jñana Yoga* teaches us how to act wisely; and *Bhakti Yoga* teaches us how to act with confidence. Skill, knowledge, and devotion are the lessons of these three *Yogas* as the *Gita* expounds them.

It is impossible to live without acting; but it is possible and it is wise to act without being motivated by wrong ideas and desires. When we do anything because we are motivated by the personal consequences of our doing it, those consequences may be good, bad, or mixed—but we will always be trapped because it is the personal element in our motive that snares us. But if we give up concern for how the consequences of our actions affect us and act only “in the zone,” as athletes call it—that is, in harmony with the Tao, the Divine Will, the *Dharma*—then we act wisely, purely, and well (verses 11-12).

Every action has five causes (verses 13-15): (1) the body involved in the action, (2) the actor who performs the action, (3) the various organs or means or instruments by which the action is done, (4) the diverse kinds of energy or motions used to do the action, and (5) the “presiding deities” or the motives for which the action is done. This fivefold analysis of causes is reminiscent of the Aristotelian fourfold analysis: the material cause or substance (in the case of a chair, the wood from which it is made = body); the efficient cause or agent who does the action (in the case of a chair, the carpenter who makes it = actor, but also the organs

or instruments and energies or motions the carpenter uses); the formal cause or pattern (in the case of a chair, the design the carpenter has in mind); the final cause or purpose (in the case of a chair, to produce something to sit on). The last two Aristotelian causes correspond roughly to the Gita's "presiding deities." The implications of these multiple causes are explored in the verses that come next.

C. Activity

As you go through the day, be mindful of what you are doing and of why you are doing it. Are you doing each thing because doing that thing is in harmony with the Way and with your duty? Or are you doing something because of the effect you think its doing will have on you? Just try to be aware of your motive, and let that awareness have its own effect.



THE BHAGAVAD GITA, Lesson 27

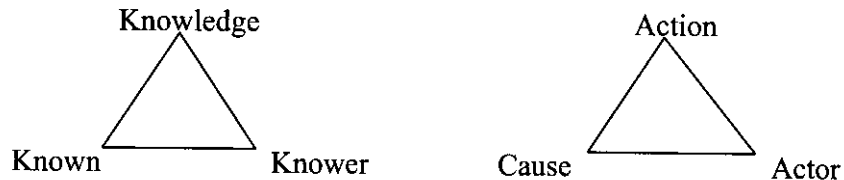
A. Outline

Having explained in verses 13–15 of discourse 18, that every action has five causes (body, actor, organs or instruments, energies, and presiding deities or purposes), Krishna then proceeds in verses 16–40 to an analysis of the nature of action and its constituents and to the types of those constituents. It is impossible for Arjuna, or for us, to act wisely unless we understand what action is. So it is the aim of these verses to analyze the nature and kinds of action.

B. Summary and Commentary

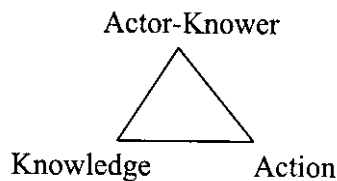
Verses 16–17. Because action is a complex thing, involving the five causes, it is a mistake to think that action is merely something the Self (or Atma) does. On the contrary, it is a complex phenomenon, and anyone whose understanding (buddhi) is clear (and not messed up, as Arjuna’s was at the beginning of the poem) will act appropriately in all circumstances and will not be bound by the results of the action. That is, if we know what is true, we will act rightly all the time. So it is important to know how knowledge relates to action.

Verse 18. Knowledge and action can both be seen as threefold:



Knowledge must precede and result in action if knowledge is to be productive and if action is to be wise. Therefore, the knower and the actor must be the same person: the one who knows must act, and the one who acts must know. When the knower has knowledge, the result is something that is known. When the actor acts, as we know from the principle of karma, the result is also a cause of some kind—of other actions or of freedom from other actions.

Verse 19. Knowledge, action, and the actor-knower, who is the same person with respect to knowledge and action, form another triangle:

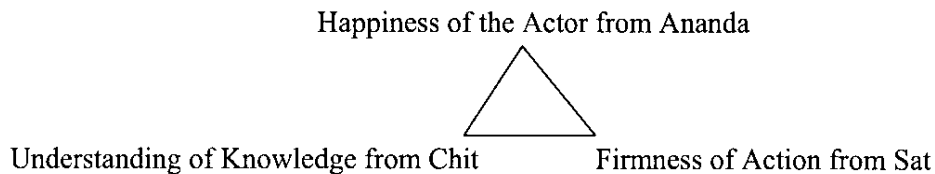


Each of the components of this triangle are of three kinds, according to the theory of the gunas, which holds that everything that exists is composed of three “strands” or reflects three tendencies (the gunas), to varying degrees. The three gunas, as explained in an earlier paper, are *sattva* or harmony (the tendency to equilibrium and right action), *rajas* or uncontrolled energy (the tendency to violent change), and *tamas* or inertia (the tendency to remain in one condition). Knowledge, action, and the actor-knower can thus each be seen in the light of the three gunas and so as of three kinds, as is explained in verses 20–28. The content of those nine verses are summarized in the following table:

	Sattvic	Rajasic	Tamasic
Knowledge	of oneness	of separateness	of a single thing
Action	unattached	desire motivated	deluded
Actor-Knower	liberated	conditioned	discordant

Knowledge can be of the One Reality underlying all existence, of the manifold separate appearances, or of a single selected manifested object. Action can be unattached from personal considerations, motivated by desire for a particular outcome, or ignorantly deluded without considering possibilities or results. The actor can be liberated from attachments, conditioned by experiences and desires, or disharmonious with the circumstances, other participants, and all that is appropriate. The details of this chart are set forth in verses 20–28.

Verses 29–39. Knowledge comes through *buddhi* or “understanding.” Action requires steadfastness, courage, or “firmness.” And the actor aims at what gives “happiness.” These three qualities echo the three ultimate characteristics of Reality: *sat* “being” or “firmness”; *chit* “awareness” or “understanding”; and *ananda* “joy” or “happiness”:



Verses 29–39 treat the three qualities of understanding, firmness, and happiness in the light of the three gunas—for everything in existence reflects those three tendencies. The following table summarizes what verses 29–39 say about the guna aspects of these qualities:

	Sattvic	Rajasic	Tamasic
Understanding	discriminative	erroneous	perverted
Firmness	restraining the mind	attached to desires	stupid
Happiness	evolutionary	degenerative	delusive

Understanding can discriminate correctly among options, it can be erroneous and make mistakes, or it can be so perverted that it chooses harm over help and evil over good. Firmness can be a controlled restraint of the mind and emotions, it can be a firm attachment to desires,

or it can be a stupid insistence on what is harmful out of egotism and vanity. Happiness can lead us from what seems bitter and difficult to what we discover to be sweet and natural, or it can lead us from what we think at first is sweet to what in fact is bitter and disappointing, or it can be the false, deluding “happiness” of stupidity and unawareness.

Verse 40 concludes with the observation that nothing on earth or in the heavens that is, nothing that exists—is free of the three gunas. They are the potentials or tendencies inherent in all matter, and therefore everything that is reflects them.

Verses 41–49. In the next section of this discourse, Krishna returns to a theme he touched upon in the second discourse of the Gita when he urged Arjuna to be faithful to the duties of his caste. Here Krishna discusses the four castes of India with respect to actions. They are brahmins, who should be teachers and exemplars of right action, which includes right thought and states of mind; kshatriyas, who should be the brave defenders of all that is right; vaishyas, who should be producers of goods, such as farmers and herders, or merchants and traders, who distribute goods; and shudras, who should be servers who perform all the support tasks necessary in society.

The four-caste system is particular to India, but its underlying principle is applicable universally. That is, every society must specialize the actions that need to be done to keep the society whole and functioning well. The four Indian castes are simply instances of such specialization. Teachers are needed to preserve and transmit the cultural “glue” that binds society together and to initiate each new generation into the ways of the society. Defenders are needed to see that due order is maintained within the society and that the society is protected from assaults from outside it. Producers are needed to supply society with all the commodities that it needs in order to survive, which include not only physical commodities like foodstuffs but nonmaterial commodities as well, and “producing” is both making and distributing. Servers are needed to perform all the necessary actions that permit the other castes to do their jobs and that form the groundwork of the society, consisting of laborers with a variety of skills.

The recognition of the need for diverse groups with different functions does not contradict the democratic ideal. Democracy does not mean that everyone does the same thing or has the same abilities and responsibilities. True democracy means only that all have the opportunity to find a place in society in which they can function to the best of their abilities. The caste ideal is not undemocratic, although its practice can become rigid and undemocratic. The democratic ideal recognizes differences of functions like those of the four castes, but values each of the caste functions as a necessary aspect of social organization. It also provides a means whereby an individual can change functions when such change is appropriate.

It is equally necessary, however, for all persons to recognize that they do not have all talents—and therefore to develop the particular talents they do have so that they can exercise them to the fullest possible degree. That is the subject of verses 45–49, which make a number of important points:

- Perfection is not an absolute; it is rather doing the best one can with one’s talents.
- Perfection is using one’s talents, not for personal gain, but in the name of the Divine.

- Everyone has an inherent nature (*swadharma*), the following of which is the way to achieve perfection and happiness: “Better one’s own duty, though imperfect, than the duty of another well performed.”
- There is no absolute perfection in this world; therefore, don’t expect it, but (as the Masters tell us) TRY to do the best possible under the circumstances.
- Real perfection is acting unself-consciously (but conscious of the Self), “in the zone” or “with the flow,” or as *Light on the Path* says, “Grow as the flower grows.”

C. Activity

At the end of the day as you are preparing for sleep, think about how, throughout the day, you have acted with your actions based on knowledge of some sort. Recall your actions and identify the knowledge that underlay them. Then consider whether that knowledge, the action that sprang from it, and your role in the event were sattvic, rajasic, or tamasic. Do not praise or blame yourself. Just try to be aware, dispassionately, of the nature of your actions.

THE BHAGAVAD GITA, Lesson 28

A. Outline

The final verses of the last discourse of the Gita draw to an end the dialog of Krishna and Arjuna. They are divisible into six parts: the attainment of knowledge, devotion, and right action (50–58), the inescapability of action (59–62), the Great Secret (63–69), the importance of the Gita (70–71), the final dialog between Krishna and Arjuna, which resolves all of Arjuna’s dilemmas (72–73), and Sanjaya’s coda (74–78).

B. Summary and Commentary

Verses 50–58. Having dealt with the nature of perfection in the preceding verses, Krishna observes that to attain perfection is to attain the Eternal Brahman, the underlying reality of the universe and the highest wisdom or knowledge (*jñāna*). One achieves that state, as verses 51–53 make clear, by uniting one’s consciousness with buddhi and so following a particular life style that leads to peace. The highest knowledge involves devotion to the divine (54–55) and action performed for the sake of the divine (56–57). Thus the three ways or Yogas of knowledge, devotion, and action are all one, leading to the same goal.

Verses 59–62. At the end of discourse 1 of the Gita, Arjuna had cast away his bow and arrow, the symbols of his duty as a defender of what is right, and intended to renounce all action. Krishna, however, points out that it is impossible to live without acting. Our karma puts us in a position in which we must act, so the only question is whether we will act well or ill. Our action is part of the divine plan of evolution for the perfection of the world. If we identify with the divine and dedicate all our action to the divine, we will attain peace.

Verses 63–69. This wise knowledge has been declared to Arjuna (and to us). We have only to reflect on it and then do whatever we want. We can, in that case, do whatever we want because, if we have identified with the divine, we will want only what the divine wants: God’s plan will become our plan. This is Krishna’s “supreme word”:

Merge thy mind in me, be my devotee, sacrifice to me, prostrate thyself before me;
thus thou shalt come even to me.

This “supreme word” is substantially the same as that in the last verse of discourse 9 (the first half is identical). On its first statement the “supreme word” occurred just halfway through the Gita; now it reoccurs at the end of the poem. It is therefore clearly an important statement. Merging one’s mind in Krishna is following the way of Jñāna Yoga; being his devotee is following the way of Bhakti Yoga; sacrificing to him (that is, doing all one’s actions as a sacrifice) is following the way of Karma Yoga. So this “word” directs us to follow the three Yogas as the way to come to the divine and to resolve all the quandaries in which we find ourselves in life: seek knowledge of the Real; have devoted faith in the Good; and act on the Right, unselfishly and dispassionately in all circumstances.

Krishna then advises Arjuna to abandon all duties (dharma). That may seem contradictory as earlier Krishna urged Arjuna to do his duty. The word “dharma,” however,

has a variety of meanings, not a single one. When Krishna urged Arjuna to follow his own duty (or *swadharma*), he was referring to the duty that arises within ourselves because of who we are. To follow that duty is to be genuinely and authentically ourselves. To shun it is to be alienated from our own natures. “Dharma” has other meanings too, one of which is any organized system of thought or action, any human system of belief or behavior. Such dharmas are external duties placed on us by others and do not spring from our own inner core. They are the dharmas we are to abandon. But what our nature leads us to is our true duty because it is us. And that we must never abandon or neglect.

It is, however, easy to misunderstand Krishna’s injunction to “abandon all duties” and to take it as a justification for not doing whatever we find difficult or unpleasant—for shirking what is in fact our own natural duty. That would be a rajasic and erroneous understanding (verse 31) and a quest for rajasic and degenerative happiness (verse 38). So Krishna immediately warns Arjuna to be careful about whom he tells this secret to: “Never is this to be spoken by thee to anyone who is without asceticism [that is, who does not follow Karma Yoga], nor without devotion [that is, who does not follow Bhakti Yoga], nor to one who desireth not to listen [that is, who does not follow Jñāna Yoga]” (verse 67). Only those who are wise, devoted, and properly active can understand this advice.

Verses 70–71. The way to follow the three Yogas is to study the Gita and to put it into practice. Studying the Gita is worshipping (having devotion for) the divine with the sacrifice (action) of wisdom (knowledge). Even hearing it with an open heart is to attain “the radiant worlds of the righteous.”

Verses 72–73 are the last exchange between Krishna and Arjuna in the poem, and are, together with the commentary by Sanjaya in verse 74, very significant. Krishna asks Arjuna, “Have you heard what I’ve been telling you? Have you paid attention? Has your ignorant delusion been done away with?” Arjuna’s delusion was that which paralyzed him on the Field of Kurukshetra, the field of dharma in life. It was caused by his lack of knowledge about what is good, his lack of faith or confidence in providence, and his lack of courage to act freely.

To Krishna’s question, Arjuna replies, “My delusion is gone. I have remembered through your help [what I always knew but had forgotten]. I am standing firm, with all doubts vanished. I will act according to your word.” Arjuna says he has gained *smriti*, which is often translated “wisdom” but literally is “memory” or “recollection.” That is important because everything we need to learn, we already know, but have forgotten that we know. So real learning is not a matter of acquiring new information, but rather of recalling ancient wisdom that has slipped out of our conscious minds. Arjuna’s statement says that he has practiced Jñāna Yoga and so come to Knowledge.

Then Arjuna adds that he can now stand firm because his doubts have vanished. They have disappeared because Arjuna has practiced Bhakti Yoga and so come to a confidence in the goodness of the universe and the presence of a divine providence in it. Finally he says that he will do or act according to Krishna’s word. He now can act because he knows the secret of desireless action: doing a thing, not because one is told to do it, nor because one hopes to get something out of doing it, but because it is the right thing to do in the circumstances. Arjuna’s

threefold declaration is a confession of his accomplishment in following Krishna's teaching. As Krishna said earlier (verses 45–50) to follow perfectly in knowledge, devotion, and action is to attain the divine Ultimate.

Verses 74–78. After the final exchange between Krishna and Arjuna, the poem returns to the voice of Sanjaya, the clairvoyant charioteer of the blind King Dhritarashtra, who has been narrating the whole dialog to his lord, the King. And Sanjaya's first remark is a direct comment on Arjuna's confession in verse 73. Sanjaya says, "I have heard this marvelous dialog between Krishna and the great-souled [literally "mahatma"] Arjuna, which has caused my hair to stand on end. This is the first and only time in the poem that Arjuna is called "mahatma"; and the reason for that is clear: Arjuna has become a mahatma only with his confession that he has mastered the three paths of Yoga. Sanjaya's hair stands on end because he recognizes that Arjuna is in fact every person—you, me, the whole of humanity. And all of us, like Arjuna, have the opportunity to follow Krishna's guidance and become mahatmas ourselves. It is not an easy path; it has to begin in the despondency of the Field of the Kurus, but it ends in the glory of the Field of Dharma.

The last three verses of the poem are a paean rising to a crescendo of praise of Krishna and Arjuna. Sanjaya sings to Dhritarashtra:

O King, remembering, remembering this marvelous and holy dialog between Krishna and Arjuna, I rejoice again and again.

Remembering, remembering, also that most marvelous form of Krishna, great is my wonder, O King. I rejoice again and again.

Wherever is Krishna, Yoga's Lord, wherever is Arjuna, the archer, assuredly there are prosperity, victory, and happiness. So I believe.

We who have heard the dialog of the poem are brought to remembrance of the ancient wisdom it expresses—wisdom we have always known, but have forgotten with our conscious minds. And for that we rejoice. We who have seen, through the poet's words, the transformation of Krishna from a human charioteer to the Universal Form of discourse 11 are brought to wonder at the vision of the divine in human form. And for that also we rejoice. Krishna, the divine teacher of Yoga, and Arjuna, the archer who aims the arrows of thought at the target of wisdom with the bow of the mind, bring us the prosperity of right action, the victory of right confidence, and the happiness of right knowledge.

As the final colophon reads:

Thus the Bhagavad Gita hath ending.
Peace be to all Worlds.

C. Activity

The Gita includes some 701 verses in 18 discourses or chapters. (The precise number of verses may vary from one edition to another because of different editorial practices.) Because of its relatively short length, the whole work can be read almost in one concentrated sitting,

but it is best to take it in small sections and to spend time thinking about the sections and even memorizing some of the verses that seem particularly meaningful to you. If you allow yourself a year to work through the Gita, you can do so easily at the rate of 14 verses a week or 2 a day.

Set yourself a schedule for reading the Gita, and get a notebook in which you record your reactions to various passages as you read and contemplate them. If you fall behind in your reading or note taking at any time, don't be discouraged and don't give up. As verse 48 says, "One should not abandon one's action even though it may be flawed. Indeed all undertakings are enveloped in flaws as fire is in smoke." Keep at it. TRY.



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For more information on Theosophy or the Theosophical Society, contact:

Department of Information
The Theosophical Society in America
P.O. Box 270
Wheaton, IL 60189-0270

Phone: 630-668-1571
Fax: 630-668-4976
E-mail: info@theosophical.org
Web: <http://www.theosophical.org>