

Krishna in the Sky with Diamonds, Prologue and Introduction

PROLOGUE

At the outset of the Bhagavad Gita, a man named Arjuna finds himself on the verge of a supremely challenging battle involving everything he holds dear. No matter who wins, he can foresee only madness and destruction as the outcome. His instinct, even though he is a famous warrior, is to turn and flee. He doesn't even want to think about it any more. But his chariot driver, Krishna, insists that he stand his ground. He tells him, "You only want to run away because you don't understand this situation and your place in it. Stay here with me and I will teach you."

Certain he is trapped in a predicament with only disastrous options, Arjuna agrees, and the two enter a deep dialogue. They sit right in the middle of the battlefield, with swords clashing and arrows whizzing all around them. It is very important that they can have this seemingly impossible conversation without any need for protection. It tells us in pictorial language that the Gita's teaching is focused on how to live in this world, right in the thick of things, and is not about finding a better life somewhere else. In the final analysis there is nowhere to escape to, nowhere to hide.

After a lengthy instruction, Arjuna's fears are calmed and his intelligence is satisfied. All his questions and doubts have been resolved. Yet he has one more request. "Dear Krishna, it all makes sense to me now, and I appreciate that very much. But I would like to have a direct experience of what you have described to me. Intellectual understanding is wonderful, but I need to feel it in my heart too. In my very bones. Is there some way for me to know this truth more intimately?"

Krishna answers, "Yes, certainly. I'm glad you asked." He mixes a special decoction known as soma, brewed from herbs and mushrooms, and in a sacred ceremony with a longstanding tradition he serves it to his disciple.

The soma he drinks blows Arjuna's mind wide open, revealing the underlying oneness of all existence to him. The impact is searingly direct and undeniable. It is as though a level of reality Arjuna had utterly forgotten was at last restored.

No matter how fine a teaching might be, it is only words and their associated concepts until it is converted by the learner into a direct experience. Chemists study up-to-date theories about the elements and their properties, but they don't become true chemists until they handle actual chemicals and start mixing them together. Before that they are merely students. Teachers first learn the principles of teaching in school, but they are only in training until they go out and stand up in front of a classroom. This is a common progression for nearly all expressions of *dharma*, a person's true calling, including in matters of the spirit. The time has come in Arjuna's unfoldment to move from theory to practice, to put his knowledge into action via realization—in other words, to make the wisdom he has imbibed real. The soma ceremony impels him to do just that.

The inner nature Arjuna discovers is our inner nature too. It is charged with intense joy and energy, but we have lost touch with it. Abstractly believing that we are an integral part of a coherently interconnected universe is well and good, but knowing it as a living reality sweeps away layer after layer of illusion, of false speculation. Soma peels back the veil our own minds have woven and restores us to harmony with our true being. There is no greater bliss on Earth.

One likely result of such an overwhelming experience is that we do not have any way to comprehend it, to wrap our minds around it. What we face transcends our definitions, no matter how bountiful they might be. But to live a viable life as an embodied being we need to integrate this new awareness into our knowledge base. Krishna will spend the rest of the Gita—seven more complete chapters—helping Arjuna to do just that. When his integration is fully accomplished, Krishna lets him know that he has become a truly independent soul, capable of making his own

expert decisions. He no longer needs to be subservient to any person, system, or idea. He is free.

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INTRODUCTION

The Bhagavad Gita is one of the most important of the ancient writings of the human race. It forms part of the Mahabharata, probably the world's longest epic, which gleans the cream of the wisdom of a large and disparate group of thinkers in what is today northern India. Of uncertain date, the earliest changeover from oral to written form is likely to be roughly contemporary with the Buddha, around 500 BCE. Chapter XI of the Bhagavad Gita, titled "Visvarupa Darsana Yoga" or "The Unitive Vision of the Absolute," is one of the most eloquent descriptions of a complex psychedelic experience ever recorded. The present book is intended to decode its archaic language and symbolism to clarify the helpful intentions of its anonymous author, known only as Vyasa (Writer).

In the Gita, as it is affectionately called, there are just two main characters, the seeker Arjuna and his guru Krishna, plus a narrator, Sanjaya. Krishna is a human being, but in the reverential attitude of India, a guru is also a living incarnation of the Absolute, the supreme principle, that which leaves nothing out. In Vedanta, the philosophical system of the Gita and its close cousins the Upanishads, everyone and all things are the Absolute in essence, and the seeker's path, such as it is, is to come to know this truth. It is a path that begins and ends right where you are.

Arjuna and Krishna are talking on the battlefield in the middle of a great war. Some people are bothered that the Gita unfolds in such a discordant environment, imagining that a scripture should be set in a garden of paradise. But life is filled with conflicts, great and small. The Gita's message is that we are sure to face difficulties throughout our life, but we can learn to

manage them well. It is not about how to avoid problems by making an escape, or by holding on to a single predetermined viewpoint.

The setting of the battlefield also tells us that the way to peace is not through rearranging the outside world. The world, with all its complex problems, will almost certainly not be fixed by us no matter how hard we try. But we are eminently capable of major improvements to ourselves, especially given some expert guidance. Life is a struggle and a fight much of the time, and no one has ever succeeded in taming it for long. We need to find solid ground within ourselves, so that whether the winds blow fair or foul we will not be knocked over. Paradoxically, once we heal ourselves and become stabilized we can begin to have a beneficial impact on our surroundings, but if we confront the world's ills from a discordant perspective our efforts will be plagued with unintended and often tragic consequences.

SOMA

The Bhagavad Gita presents a detailed scientific psychology lightly clothed in the type of religious-sounding narrative in favor at the time. Being a textbook on what is required to produce a truly liberated adult human being, it does not impose any rigid structure or set of rules to follow. Its goal is to teach people how to make their own decisions based on their deepest nature, because, while that nature is constant and dependable, circumstances are forever in flux. What is appropriate in one instance may be a deadly mistake in another. A truly awakened human being will know how to act well without having to seek direction from any scripture or law library.

As in the era when the Gita's was composed, the preceding Vedic Age was a period of intense religious ferment and exploration. The writings that have been preserved from it, the Vedas, record the poetic fancies and psychological insights garnered by seekers of truth over a long period of time. The

Bhagavad Gita and other contemporary writings were written to highlight the best ideas of the Vedas while discarding their excess baggage. Their authors also added new insights, the most important being monotheism in the sense of recognizing the overarching unity of life.

The Vedas are replete with references to the ritual use of a substance called *soma* for religious inspiration. The soma ceremony, in which the potion was imbibed, was a frequent practice in ancient India, and it infuses the Vedic scriptures to a remarkable degree. The formula for its preparation is unknown, but soma is thought by many to have included psychedelic mushrooms. As we will see from the record presented here, soma's effects are quite similar, if not identical, to the psychedelics we know of today, particularly psilocybin and LSD.

Although the later philosophical critiques of the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita tend to be rationally oriented, ecstasy remains as an important feature. *Gita* means “song,” and enlightenment lifts the heart like a song. A song differs from ordinary speech in the same way that ecstasy differs from ordinary life. The Gita’s teaching is designed to convert the individual notes of knowledge we are composed of into an enchanting musical symphony.

We don’t know why the formula for soma was lost over the passage of many years, but changing attitudes may have redirected the exploration of the mind to other, more ascetic practices. With the sacred soma ceremonies forgotten, what they had once accomplished began to be viewed solely as a mystical transmission from guru to disciple, brought about by a certain touch or ritual, or simply some secret knowledge. Today this is the firmly established orthodox position, but when the Gita was written there was no doubt that what brought about realization was the ingestion of soma. Mental preparation was important, even crucial, but only in rare cases was it enough to ignite a breakthrough. With the assistance of the soma medicine, however, any properly prepared disciple could benefit from a mind-expanding experience.

Fasting, wandering in the desert, meditation, extreme exercise, near-death experiences, and many more techniques can produce profound mental and emotional states, and all have been practiced by humans since ancient times. However, there is every reason to believe that the events described in this chapter are a psychedelic medicine trip. Nothing is explicitly stated, yet the resemblance is striking for anyone who has undertaken one. There is an archetypal opening-up process being described here that can tell us a great deal about how the mind responds spiritually to a variety of intense stimulations. While occasionally harrowing enough to be severely unpleasant, a carefully planned and guided soma trip is comparatively civilized and much less hazardous than most of the alternatives.

Modern orthodox sensibilities have overlaid a puritanical blanket of denial onto the innocence and sacredness of the ancient soma rituals. Only in the second half of the twentieth century did these ceremonies come to be appreciated anew as having tremendous spiritual potential. Now that they have, they demand a place in a fully realized commentary.

PROPER PREPARATION

As far as we know, the Bhagavad Gita has become a highly revered scripture only in recent times. In keeping with the worldwide historical trend toward puritanism in religion, the drug element implied in it, which is limited to a single chapter, has been replaced with a belief in a purely inspirational experience such as can be achieved through yoga exercises or meditation. While this is a healthy development in some respects, psychedelic medicines have the capacity to confer the equivalent of many years of strenuous practice or therapy in a much shorter period of time and without pushing the body to the edge of death, as occurs with fasting, dehydration, solitary confinement, and similar techniques. In the modern era, the use of psychedelics has been aggressively

suppressed, but they are beginning to find their rightful place in a sane but cautious pharmacopeia once again.

Psychedelics contribute to a long list of positive mental attitudes, aiding in internal adjustments that foster happiness and expanded intelligence, while promoting outwardly-directed values such as tolerance, humility, loving kindness, compassion, and so on. In the Gita, the pupil Arjuna, guided by his guru Krishna, uses soma to help him make his theoretical training real. The first ten chapters detail his lengthy course of mental preparation. Chapter XI deals with his psychedelic sojourn in which he converts the theories he has been taught into direct experience, and the remaining seven chapters show him how to integrate his experience into a viable way of life.

Very few people who have taken psychedelic medicines in the last fifty years have undergone the extensive preparation that was once considered a prerequisite, as evidenced by Arjuna's regimen. Even fewer have had the opportunity to be guided back into a dynamic life-expression by such an incisive helpmate as Krishna. It is to fill this important vacuum that the present interpretation is offered. For those interested in the complete psychology, the entire Gita is interpreted from a modern standpoint on my website, [Nitya Teachings](#).

The Gita does not explicitly recommend any specific form of ritual behavior, but it does provide intelligent guidelines for bringing each life to its full potential. The way taken will depend on the individual's choice and the co-called accidents of fate. Because of my own familiarity with psychedelic medicines, especially LSD, I feel qualified to describe their spiritual efficacy in broad outline. The Gita's illuminating perspective on Arjuna's visionary experience, whatever it might have been, could well serve as a blueprint for anyone in a position to safely attempt a comparable experiment.

OVERCOMING RESISTANCE

The longstanding hostility of mainstream society toward psychedelic medicines is well known. Scriptures like the Gita have shared in that acrimoniousness to some degree by having their message diluted and even inverted. Where the original idea is to promote human unity with the cosmos, scriptures are often interpreted to exalt certain individuals and reinforce the widespread conviction that liberation is only for one single rare and exceptional person, who may or may not have existed in the distant past. That means there is no possibility of freedom for the rest of us without divine intervention on our behalf, or the miraculous return of that special person. The Gita is frequently cited to promulgate Krishna in such a role, and doing so totally undermines its most important tenet: that the Absolute is inherent in everyone and accessible to all who look for it.

The central claim of Vedanta, the philosophical system that includes the Bhagavad Gita and the Upanishads, is that each person is the Absolute in essence, and our challenge is to come to remember that truth in a world where objects and events constantly distract us from it, often even intentionally. This not only gives us unlimited hope, it empowers us to do our best. We are accorded the highest respect imaginable, in advance. If everyone and everything is sacred, then there is no possibility of sacrilege. We have no need for divine intervention, because we are already miraculous. Life is a continuous “divine intervention,” so what more could be needed?

The marginalizing of psychedelic drugs by a paranoiac power elite is no accident. Like the Gita, psychedelics impart revolutionary insight in its truest sense. The realization that all humans, indeed all entities comprised of atoms, are essentially one, and our nature is therefore equally “divine,” instantly puts the lie to the attitudes of the vested interests that benefit from our world being structured on the basis of masters and slaves, chosen and cursed. The falsity of beliefs that elevate one small group and denigrate the rest is immediately obvious to a mind expanded by psychedelic medicine.

Along the same lines, author Barbara Kingsolver asks rhetorically, in her recent book *The Lacuna*, “Does a man become a revolutionary out of the belief he’s entitled to joy rather than submission?” Nothing could be more central to our happiness than this type of conversion.

An important part of the revolutionary nature of psychedelic substances is that they encourage nonviolence. Their action resembles a rising tide gently melting sand castles on the beach, dissolving temporary structures that loom large while the tide is out. By contrast, the sand castles of an elite can only be defended with overt and covert coercion, and so their position depends on inducing violent opposition and then smashing it. If one side can discover how not to be drawn into hostile reaction to the other, the game will come to an end. Thus there is no greater threat to the status quo than realization.

The special technique taught in the Gita is to unify all polarizations, inwardly and outwardly, through what is called *yoga*, uniting. If we stop feeding the differences, they will melt away. The way to achieve this is to become fully realized human beings. No external goal, and certainly no aggressive action, can bring it about. The temptation to engage in partisan battle can only be resisted with an inner calm founded on wisdom.

Timothy Leary’s exhortation to “Turn on, Tune in, and Drop out” should be understood in this light. “Turn on,” of course, means take LSD or another psychedelic. “Tune in” is to rediscover your true nature as an enlightened and joyous spirit being. “Drop out” doesn’t mean drop out of life. Quite the contrary, it invites us to abandon the death trip of submission to authority and remain tuned in to our full potential. We should drop out of all the attitudes that prevent us from tuning in. The revolutionary nature of Leary’s phrase echoes the call of the Gita from the ancient past. We must not make the common mistake of treating dropping out as the most important part. “Turn on” and “Drop out” are the thesis and antithesis; “Tune in” is the synthesis, the main course. Tuning

in to what we really are is the key to a life worth living, one that substitutes joy for submission.

Scientists are constrained to limit themselves to a search based on facts, strictly from the outside looking in, but philosophers, and particularly yogis—dedicated seekers of truth—are free to employ an inside-out approach also. The ideal is for both orientations to mutually reinforce and correct each other. Obviously, psychedelics instruct from the inside out. Afterwards, balancing their inner influence requires tempering with some careful “outside-in” analysis.

Despite the postulation of an Absolute, which keeps consciousness properly oriented and is common to all systems, whether philosophical, religious or scientific, there is no such thing as absolute realization. Anything realized has to be relative, less than the whole, which means there is no absolute right or wrong, or any last word. Whenever the mind goes beyond its accustomed boundaries, it undergoes an expansion that feels like liberation or realization, but no one has yet ascertained any end to human potential. Greater expansion is a perennial possibility.

Because of this, there is always more to be discovered. Once we realize that our knowledge is inevitably partial, we will know that learning never ends and there is no ultimate panacea. Anyone claiming finalized answers is in fact seriously deluded, and is very likely intending to manipulate others for their own benefit. In any case the idea of finality brings growth to a halt. Psychedelics convincingly drive this truth home by flinging the doors of perception wide open.

In the aftermath of an intense psychedelic experience like Arjuna’s, there is a period of profound openness and vulnerability to suggestions. Arjuna is fortunate to be under the guidance of a wide awake and compassionate guru who will carefully ease him back into the flow of everyday life. After the brief period of legal psychedelics in the mid-twentieth century came to an end, many who experimented with them were unsupervised and unprepared. They might have encountered all sorts of bizarre and negative

influences during the critical recovery period, eventually including intentional sabotage by governmental agents provocateurs, and some serious damage occurred. Even a seemingly simple act like watching television can lodge twisted attitudes deep in the psyche, which continue to cause confusion for a very long time afterwards. The wake of a trip, like early childhood, is a time for great care in nurturing only the best aspects of life, because what is encountered goes much deeper than usual and is very hard to dislodge. The Gita's attitude is clear: only take these medicines in the right circumstances, with proper preparation, and under the guidance of a loving person you trust and who knows you well.

In a way, this part of the Gita makes more sense as an instruction manual for the guides, rather than for the ones taking the soma. The presentation is rather frightening for a prospective tripper, but it prepares the guide for some touchy situations that may well occur. And of course it has a great deal to offer those with no interest at all in psychedelic excursions.

THE PRESENT COMMENTATOR*

I had the good fortune to study the Gita with an exceptionally intelligent and broad-minded guru, Nitya Chaitanya Yati, who taught it almost continuously to enthusiastic audiences in Portland, Oregon from 1970 to 1976. After that I worked with him to prepare the typescript of his own Gita commentary, and since then I have had numerous occasions to teach the work myself.

Due to my dissatisfaction with aspects of a number of the better-known commentaries, which among other things universally downplay soma, I began compiling a detailed version of my own thoughts, working through the Gita verse by verse. As I contemplated Chapter XI, a nagging suspicion that it really was about a soma experience grew into a certainty with verse 6, where the "demigods" mentioned symbolize important stages of a trip. Because of strikingly similar experiences I had had many years before, that part of my commentary blossomed into the small book

you hold in your hands. The first part of the book presents the unadorned text, while the second part adds a detailed commentary for each of the verses. Sanskrit is such an allusive language that a vast amount of information is transmitted in a very few words. My comments are examples of the kind of meditative expansion that any student of the Gita is expected to make as they progress through the work, fleshing out the bare bones with resonant insights.

My guru's teacher, Nataraja Guru, electrified the world of Gita commentary with his own scientifically-minded interpretation in 1961, and his book has been continuously in print in India ever since. His translation, which is the one used here, replaces the typical religious attitude with a more scientific and philosophical one. Neither of us employs what Nataraja Guru called "Lord Lordism," the displacement of the meaning of life to a remote and superior god, which is nearly universal in Gita commentaries while being foreign to the spirit of the Gita itself.

The majority of commentaries refer to Krishna as Lord or God, but those of my lineage prefer the more philosophical term *Absolute*. The Absolute is all-inclusive: there is nothing that is not it. If you think something isn't the Absolute, then your idea of absoluteness is flawed. Obviously Lord and God are more specific and limited terms, calling to mind a gap between them or it and us. With Krishna, they make us think of a blue-skinned, flute-wielding playboy, rather than an all-pervasive principle.

The Absolute is more an ideal than a fact, and therefore it is not accessible directly through any accumulation of knowledge. As ideas are refined, they can approach the Absolute ever more closely from the outside, but there is always a gap, most beautifully depicted in Michelangelo's painting *The Creation of Adam*, where an anthropomorphized Absolute and a primordial human reach toward each other in a cosmic gesture, fingers nearly but not quite touching.

Many techniques can be successful at causing a spark to jump the gap, and the smaller the gap the easier it becomes.

Intelligent understanding brings the sides closer together. When a seeker and the object of their speculative approach are finally sparked into direct contact, it is known as union with the Absolute. In everyone's life there is plenty of scope for action—good, bad, or indifferent—but what makes it fully realized and particularly valuable is some type of direct experience of the Absolute itself. As we will see, the impact of such an experience is profound, infusing and informing every aspect of existence with dramatically heightened awareness.

Like the Absolute, the guru is a principle rather than an actual human being. Guru means whatever removes the darkness of one's ignorance. Bhagavan is commonly translated as "Lord," but here it is used to indicate Krishna as a guru representing the Absolute. The word *bhagavan* means radiance or glory, the Light from which all things manifest. The historical trend of religion is to start with a vision of pure light, but as it fades over time into a concept instead of a direct experience, the light becomes personified as a god before which everyone should bow. We are aiming to return to the firsthand version here, in which Bhagavan is not used as a term expressing abject devotion to a deity, it is indicative of respect and admiration toward an excellent teacher, which is the correct attitude to have toward a guru.

Nataraja Guru visualized the eighteen chapters of the Gita as forming an arch shape, with the first and last chapters resting on the solid ground of everyday life, which he called the horizontal plane, and the two middle chapters, IX and X, forming the keystone and dealing only with the most sublime aspects of the Absolute. In between are graded series linking the two poles of the horizontal and vertical, the everyday and the spiritual. Chapter XI is the first reentry of the seeker Arjuna after the transcendental portion, where his mind is lifted as high as it can go. This chapter is somewhat anomalous with the rest of the Gita, and can more easily stand on its own than any of the others.

We might expect Arjuna's mind-blowing vision of the nature of the Absolute to come at the high point of the Gita's arch, in

chapters IX or X. In fact, Arjuna's experience takes place a little past the peak. The reason for this is that the two central chapters are focused exclusively on Krishna's nature as the Absolute. In their purely vertical orientation, there is not yet enough of Arjuna present to have any kind of experience, no matter how sublime. Krishna's glowing description of the Absolute in those two chapters did clarify his mind, though, and now he is properly prepared for a brief but vital merger with the fundamental ground of existence, well deserving of its own chapter.

The Gita is one of the most commented upon books of all time, and it would seem its subject matter should be exhausted. This is by no means the case, and my version is unique in many ways. In particular, Chapter XI has not to my knowledge been interpreted in terms of a psychedelic experience. Because of humanity's pressing need to find noncoercive methods to ameliorate its violent and destructive tendencies, this aspect of the ancient knowledge has a special value. How to use powerful mind-altering agents wisely being more attractive to many people than wading through an entire discipline of understanding the universe, that is the main focus here. I am not dismayed, because the one undoubtedly leads to the other. Psychedelics are indeed "gateway drugs" in that they are very likely to lead to an indulgence in stronger stuff: open exploration of the mind and the meaning of life.