

CHAPTER I: Arjuna Vishada Yoga The Yoga of Arjuna's Conflict

Virtually everyone glosses over the first chapter of the Bhagavad Gita as being merely introductory. It was Nataraja Guru in his groundbreaking commentary of 1954 (published in 1961) who first stressed its profound significance. In his introduction he remarks:

The first chapter is... the only one which contains the problems of the Gita stated correctly before the discussion by the Guru Krishna. This chapter therefore requires the closest attention. And yet oddly enough, commentators even like Sankara, have almost ignored it or even treated it as superfluous. Sankara's commentary begins only with verse 10 of Chapter ii, and he dismisses what precedes in a summary fashion not at all in proportion with the rest of his labours. The remaining seventeen chapters of the Gita make an attempt to dialectically revalue these same problems. It is, therefore, very important not to leave unnoticed even those minor peculiarities of this chapter in which the author hides here and there certain indications for the guidance of the intelligent reader. (32)

In order to find a cure, it is essential to recognize the disease, and before entering a path of self-correction we must not only be dissatisfied with our current state, but have some inkling why we're unhappy. To properly present oneself at the feet of a guru, someone who can throw light on our predicament, we must have already recognized our own limitations. The patient cannot expect the doctor to do all the work, but must be committed as an enthusiastic participant. These crucial elements of a transformative experience are introduced so artfully in the first chapter that for over two millennia almost no one noticed.

At the moment the Gita begins, two factions of the Kuru clan are intent on battle. The Kauravas have deviously usurped the

rightful territory of the Pandavas, the family that includes the two protagonists of our story, Prince Arjuna and his friend and chariot driver Krishna. Conventional wisdom urges the Pandavas to go to war and redress the crime. Negotiations have been tried and abandoned, since the triumphant usurpers dare not allow the situation to be framed in moral terms. Warfare is their only hope of maintaining their dominance.

Arjuna's hurt feelings as the loser impel him to just give up and slink away, as he is certain that fighting is a lose-lose proposition. But the Gita wants him—and by proxy, us—to discover a third route, to stand up *as a neutral* for his rightful place in the world. For someone caught in a paradoxical dilemma, both fighting and escaping lead to endless complications. Only wisdom, which Arjuna will soon seek out from his servant Krishna, can bring about a felicitous outcome.

Arjuna thus stands for each one of us. His challenges symbolize ours, and in our journey through the Gita the parallels will be made clear. With this first chapter we are entering a path of enlightenment that bursts all the boundaries of orthodoxy and grants us the right to be utterly and spectacularly ourselves.

1) Dhritarashtra said:

In the field of righteousness, the field of the Kurus, gathered together, intent on battle, what did my people and also the sons of Pandu do, O Sanjaya?

Dhritarashtra has only one line in the Gita, and this is it. He is the king of the Kauravas, the overwhelmingly powerful oppressors of their cousins the Pandavas. He is asking his aide Sanjaya to describe the action because he is blind, but also to promote Sanjaya to the role of narrator. Besides Krishna and Arjuna, Sanjaya is the only other speaker in the entire Gita, except for this one verse.

Longstanding Sanskrit tradition demands that the parameters of a work be set out in the first verse. Here the king and his assistant are looking out over a field of battle that symbolizes the

whole world and wondering what's going on in it. This means the Gita will address questions of action and conflict. Unlike many scriptures, it is not an escapist tome promoting an afterlife or invoking divine intervention. It is about taking control of our life and living it not only to the best of our ability, but to a better ability than we are even aware we possess.

All actions are intended and performed to produce happiness. The opening verse is a view from afar, as from the clouds or an ivory tower, peering down on the panoply of the world and asking what's going on? What is the meaning of all the chaos down below? One thing is certain: these humans are intent on fighting. The realm of humanity is the field of growth and the struggle for happiness through conflict.

The most important question each of us has to ask ourselves as we mature is What do I do to make my life a success? In other words, How should I act in this world that appears so like a battlefield wherever I look? In a sense each person's life is a long drawn-out four-dimensional answer to this ongoing challenge.

Right at the outset, the author Vyasa tips us off that there is more here than meets the eye. The battlefield on which the impending war is going to take place is the field of righteousness, meaning the domain of proper conduct. The war of the Gita, then, is a metaphysical one addressing broad issues of right livelihood, and is not about the actual physical war that surrounds Arjuna and Krishna in the context of the Mahabharata epic.

The field of dharma, often translated as righteousness, refers to the ground of the Absolute, or the unitive principle; while the field of the Kurus—the participants on both sides—means eternal happiness and refers to the realm of action. The dharma field is what we call the vertical aspect of eternal values, while the field of the Kurus represents the horizontal world of specific behaviors. In spiritual life we need to bring both aspects, the horizontal and the vertical, into balance, as well as into harmonious alignment with each other. The Gita's aim is to show us how to accomplish this, and in the process to optimize our life.

The Gita takes an interesting slant here. Dhritarashtra is the blind king who leads the faction that has usurped the rightful domain of the sons of Pandu, the Pandavas, who include Arjuna. When the leader of a nation is blind to moral values it invariably precipitates a crisis. The nation becomes divided into those who adhere to upright behavior and those who debase themselves for profit and position. This is a perennial problem, and it should not be hard for the reader to think of examples more recent than 500 BCE.

In our day the blind king might represent the entity that far exceeds the power of a President or king: the limited liability corporation. Intentionally morally blind, while wielding stupendous power, they threaten to consume the entire world in their unbridled appetite for profits. The thrust of corporate intent is as problematic to parry as the vastly more powerful Kauravas are for Arjuna. There is no way to attack them head on, and fleeing from the confrontation just leaves the field open for more rapid exploitation. Since their charters outlaw moral considerations, they are immune to ethical appeals. A new solution is necessary.

Arjuna's dilemma may also be viewed as the battleground we find ourselves in on a daily basis. We can think of spouse, friends or coworkers. Let's say the problem is that your coworker has got the boss's ear and convinced him that he alone is responsible for what the two of you have accomplished together. In fact, you did most of the work, and he is jockeying for the credit. Now he's in line for that promotion and they're thinking of firing you. If you lodge a protest, it will look like you are being selfish and manipulative. Put simply, your opponent is using aggressive tactics to have the argument framed on his terms, and to cut you out. Such a self-seeking attitude is very dispiriting, and the immediate reaction is likely to be that you should just resign and concede everything the aggressor claims. You have to get a grip and calmly present your side, no matter how dire the circumstances, or you will lose everything. If you allow yourself to be drawn into quarreling and bickering, you are even more likely to be fired.

The actual problem may be very difficult to assess correctly. In the confusion of the battle, separating truth from fiction is essential and requires constant striving to maintain a clear perspective. A clever opponent can win through kicking up clouds of dust to heighten the confusion, as is often seen in political confrontations, for instance. All models of truth without exception have their limitations, which over time cause them to be supplanted by revised models. Therefore it is a *process* under consideration, not a finalized viewpoint. This is a primary failing of the scientifically minded nearly as much as the religiously minded. Tenaciously holding on to a particular viewpoint may prove less successful in the long run than remaining flexible.

As far as spiritual technique goes, your attackers should not necessarily be taken at face value, though the wise person will consider it. Greedy people often use disinformation to blame their selfishness on you or confuse the issue so they can more easily get away with their scheme. The conflict needs only to be viewed as a field (*kshetra*) for the mining of deeper truths. The goal is always to have truth revealed despite the chaos.

Farther back in the epic, the blind king's wife has done an interesting thing: she has wrapped her eyes in a blindfold in order to be on an equal footing with her husband. This is universally considered to be a magnanimous gesture on her part. Sri Chinmoy calls it "a sacrifice worthy to be remembered and admired by humanity." As Ram Das puts it in his generally very excellent commentary on the Gita, "Such devotion!" Such devotion indeed. One step above suttee, where the widow casts herself on the funeral pyre to join her husband in death. Comments like these merely reveal a sexist cast on the part of the interpreters.

The Gita does not necessarily approve of everything it portrays. Much of it is set down to demonstrate how what seems reasonable can go terribly wrong. Why is it so difficult to think that a revered scripture could be presenting the foibles of the ignorant along with exemplars of the wise? It says more about the

reader than the book whether something is unquestioningly accepted as literal truth or whether they dare to remain skeptical until they really get the gist. Such skepticism is not blasphemous, it is merely intelligent.

The penalty for taking symbolic instruction literally is blindness, or what we sometimes call spiritual death.

Here's what Vyasa was really trying to tell us, as clarified later in the epic: the powerful demand for conformity makes us afraid to stand by our own vision. Anyone who is married to or otherwise serves a blind despot is generally required to close their eyes to truth in order to retain their post. Blindfolding themselves is the typical behavior of sycophants. If they notice something their leader is doing wrong, they'd better keep quiet about it.

The Bible offers a similar moral teaching in Genesis 9, where Noah is drunk and "uncovered" in his tent. This means that his ugliness is on display. His son Ham saw him and proclaimed it to his brothers, and so Noah cursed him for all eternity when he awoke. His less honest brothers, keeping their eyes averted, backed into the tent and covered Noah, and so were blessed by him.

The organizational catchword is "you go along to get along." It permeates civic life from the lowest level right to the top, and is a key cause of disasters great and small. Where a group of individuals freely examining matters in detail could steer the ship of state through rough seas, those fearing for their security must shut their mouths while watching the waves crash on the reefs dead ahead. To warn the captain would be to display a lack of faith, and to very likely lose your job. So let the chips fall where they may!

Once again it shouldn't be hard to recall recent examples and their horrifically tragic consequences.

One of the rarest of human types is the leader who recognizes the inevitability in themselves of degrees of blindness and welcomes contradictory points of view into the decision making process. This is important to remember on the personal level as well. If we can keep in mind our own limitations, we will be more open to input from our friends that might be very helpful. They

may well be seeing faults to which we ourselves are blind, so they should be encouraged to speak up without fear of losing our friendship.

Many of us were punished as children for our faults, and we learned to pretend we were blameless to avoid pain and humiliation. One of the hardest and most essential steps in spiritual life is to admit to ourselves that we are flawed and imperfect, because there is a smack lurking in the back of our mind to punctuate the admission. Until we face that simple fact, though, we can never make any real progress.

When a person is psychologically blind, it signifies they are unable to see the results of their actions. This is especially exaggerated in the rich and powerful, but it epitomizes a universal human condition. We all live to some degree in a fantasy world created by our ego and buttressed by our separation in time and space from the effects of what we do. The fact that our fantasies are a poor match with reality remains hidden from us. We are almost always forced to act on the basis of partial knowledge, and have to fill in the blanks with our own hopes and fears. As new stimulation captures our attention, we turn away from previous involvements and comfort ourselves that all is well, whether or not that is the case. But the awakening impulse that throbs in the human spirit directs us to open our eyes to the actual effects of what we do, to enlarge our vision from the circumscribed here and now toward the everywhere and always. Thinking globally involves time as well as space. For most of us, if we knew the impact of our actions on others, we would positively modify our behavior. One key role of a teacher is to redirect our attention to that which we are too blind to realize yet.

Kings, queens, princes and princesses live in a guarded world where they are shielded from reality. This is pictorially communicated most famously by the story of Prince Siddhartha in his palace. He lived in ease and splendor, while his subjects suffered manifold privations, partly to support his lifestyle. Only when he sneaked out in the dead of night and began mingling with

his subjects did the veil fall from his eyes. What he saw shocked him into a dedicated search for the meaning of life, and what he found eventually transformed him into the Buddha, the awakened one. He was the exception, and therefore our inspiration. The blind king Dhritarashtra, on the other hand, never did try to escape from his predicament, as it was far too lucrative and comfortable. He personifies all the habitual character traits we need to overcome in order to see clearly. If there is an enemy in this story, he is it, and he is us.

2) Sanjaya said:

On seeing the army of the Pandavas in battle array, Prince Duryodhana, having approached his teacher, then gave utterance to the following speech:

Although he appears in it but occasionally, Sanjaya is the third character in the Gita, dominated as it is by the dialogue between Guru Krishna and disciple Arjuna. It is said that God has given him the boon of being able to see everything that transpires on the battlefield. This is nothing more than a poetic way of empowering him as the narrator by the author, Vyasa. A narrator must be able to describe events and conversations at a distance, and hence must “see” much more than any ordinary person could.

Throughout the epic of the Mahabharata, the stories are related by a third party witness to someone else, and that narrative technique is followed here as well, with Sanjaya reporting the tale to Dhritarashtra. Whoever inserted the Gita within the epic expertly deployed its format to maintain continuity.

Religious-minded readers often think, “Oh, God is so great! He makes a man able to see everything everywhere!” Next comes the argument with a skeptical person who doesn’t believe there ever has been such a fellow. As with most fundamentalist issues, it’s completely irrelevant. The point is solely that Sanjaya is the narrator of this story. False arguments leading up blind alleys are to be dismissed whenever encountered, as one essential tactic of

the spiritual search. We have much better places to put our energies.

Duryodhana is the son of King Dhritarashtra, and is the leader of the Kaurava side. Prince Duryodhana's teacher referred to in this verse is Drona, who taught everyone present on both sides the art of war. Having the teacher of skill in conflict addressed at the outset properly sets the stage for this archetypal drama, reenacted repeatedly throughout human history.

In our day, unfortunately, soldiers do not study peace, and therefore peace is no longer the goal of war. Perhaps it seldom was. If the resolution of actual military battles was its actual subject, the Gita would be obsolete. But the truth of the matter is that it deals with the individual's relationship to life, and the extended metaphor of the battlefield proves extremely apt as the vision of the work unfolds. As long as we have problems to solve, the Gita's insights will never be out of date.

In a sense we are all schooled in the art of warfare, having been taught to stay on guard, defend our turf, compete. We have learned an overarching orientation to conflict with our fellows. It should come as no surprise that we find ourselves time and again on a field of battle ready to let the arrows fly.

Modern psychology terms the girding of ourselves with mental armor as our defenses. Defenses not only offer protection, they also trap us inside them. They can easily become habitual features, taking away our freedom of movement. So we must be very clear about what we are walling in or walling out.

This is a good time to relate another symbolic event that took place the day before the battle. Over the course of the epic, the Kauravas have seized the entire kingdom. Caught up in their obsession with domination, they didn't want to leave the Pandavas even enough earth to stand on. The Pandavas had made concession after concession, but it never quelled the usurpers' desire for more. At last they had no choice but to stand their ground, because there was nowhere left to go.

Krishna had been trying to intercede to stop the war, but his every offer was rejected by the aggressors. Just as today, they were determined to fight no matter what, cocksure of victory, and peace talks were just part of the maneuvering for a more advantageous position.

Duryodhana, leader of the Kaurava army, decided to go see what help he could get from Krishna. When he arrived at his room, he found him resting on his bed, asleep. Being an arrogant king, he wasn't going to stand humbly by waiting on anybody, so he pulled a chair next to the head of the bed and sat down.

Arjuna also thought of going to his friend Krishna for a final consultation before the war. When he found Krishna asleep, he humbly made his way to the foot of the bed and stood there. Their relative positions emphasized the hauteur of the king and the respectful deference of Arjuna.

When Krishna awoke he was naturally looking at his feet, and so saw Arjuna first. When he greeted him, Duryodhana became furious and demanded that he speak to him instead, since his rank was higher. Krishna determined that they both sought his help, so he made them an offer: they could either have all his troops and horses, chariots and weapons, or they could have him alone, unarmed and pledged to peace. In other words, they could choose either his material or spiritual aspect.

The Kaurava king thought that just having an unarmed man was useless. Focused on tangibles, he couldn't grasp that Krishna was the Absolute incarnate. Weapons and armies are what counted to him. He greedily took the hardware. Arjuna, by contrast, picked Krishna solely for his own sake.

The entire scene is a beautiful allegory for materialism versus spirituality. Krishna is a symbol of the fecund, all-embracing Absolute, generously supporting everyone in the way they find most suitable. Some choose wealth and solidity, and sneer at those who find solace in poetry, music, love or any other immaterial substance. Others don't see much value in piling up their treasures where moths and rust can get at them. The companionship of the

Absolute means more to them than all the opulence and power in the world. These are the two sides that are at odds on the battlefield of life, in an unending clash of values. One side takes whatever it can grab and the other gives ground, until some cosmic blast of fate turns the tables.

3) O Teacher, look at this grand army of the Sons of Pandu, marshaled by your talented pupil, the Son of Drupada.

As narrated by Sanjaya, Duryodhana will reel off the war's preeminent participants through the eighth verse, and describe the setting for several more. While striking the modern reader as nothing more than a meaningless list of names, to those familiar with the Mahabharata epic it is the equivalent of an overture to a grand opera, building tension and expectations even before the curtain goes up.

It is important to keep in mind that we are entering a profound psychodrama here. The actual war scene is receding into the background, as the personal factor moves to center stage. We are going to explore humanity's perennial quest for understanding throughout the entire Gita.

Arjuna's impending battle could be described in terms of limitation versus liberty. The Kauravas collectively represent the binding forces of conditioning, and the Pandavas the liberating forces of freedom. To be utterly honest though, both sides have constricting and expanding elements in them. Each warrior mentioned in Duryodhana's list stands for one of these forces, and a lengthy study could be made of their symbolism. To avoid getting bogged down with this, it is sufficient to make a few general comments.

Most crucially, the realization propounded by the Gita is going to transcend the very categories of good and bad. Arjuna will be led to a neutral, balanced vision, where he "will be liberated from the bonds of action, whether its results are good or evil" (IX, 28). Unlike many scriptures, the Gita's goal is not to accumulate

good (or merit) and minimize the bad, but to achieve a balanced state of mind that is superior to both. That's what yoga is, in fact: a dialectical synthesis of opposites. The inherent tragedy of fighting for good is that good and evil are actually two sides of the same coin, so if you amplify one you simultaneously energize the other. Well-intentioned people battle against evil, not realizing they are making it stronger by doing so. This paradox has confounded humans since the dawn of time, but its resolution will be revealed as we proceed. There is nothing simple about it, however. Arjuna has a lot to learn before he will properly grasp this.

The throng of warriors surrounding Arjuna reminds us we are bound in many different ways. We have physical limitations, psychological conditionings, social constraints, and the workings of fate, the "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune," all conspiring to knock us off course. Most of our limitations have their pluses and minuses, and sorting them out streamlines our existence, promoting expertise in our undertakings. Let's take a brief look at each of these four broad categories.

The way we are physically constructed necessarily limits our options. Humans can do many things very well with our bodies, but we can't fly or stay underwater for long. We have to breathe air and consume food and water. So our physical structure is both helpful and unhelpful, carrying us forward while also demanding a lot of care and attention.

The psychological unfolding of life, with its rewards, punishments and traumas, causes certain possibilities to become available and others to be voided. Each time we make a decision we open up some potentials and close off others. To the extent we are caught in a flow of inevitability we are bound to make certain choices, which may or may not be in anyone's best interests. Since psychological factors are probably the most important shapers of our destiny, dedication to rectifying our decision making process is central to a spiritual search. Our available options have many implications, so we need to be as aware as humanly possible to avoid becoming snarled in necessity.

The type of social setup we are born into forces us to either put up with numerous strictures or fight against them; either way we are helpless pawns in someone else's game. Curiously, those "someone elses" were themselves pawns in their predecessor's games, who were pawns of their predecessors in turn, regressing ad infinitum into the past. Who will dare to bring intelligence to bear on the age-old conventions that bind us, often reinforced as they are by being attributed to God?

Lastly, we live in a historical setting over which we have little or no influence, yet we ignore it at our peril. Modern people prefer the term 'luck' over 'fate', but it's the same thing. We tend to imagine that the way things are at the moment is normal and eternal, but with a small amount of contemplative distance it is easy to see that this is not the case. We are all swimming in a powerful tide, content to remain unaware of it. This can lead us into dangerous waters.

The Kauravas represent the rules and regulations of the social world, embodied in family members, teachers and spiritual preceptors. On the more evil end of the spectrum they are people who manipulate others for their own benefit, and who are greedy and selfish. On the positive side, they act with admirable, though narrow, aims.

The Pandavas are also family members, teachers and preceptors. They bind with good intentions, and such bindings are often more difficult to extricate ourselves from than the obviously negative ones. They exhort us to do things "for our own good." We learn to behave socially because some recognized authority or parental figure promotes it. Schoolteachers help us to fit in to the current static image of society by citing lofty ideals. Someone we love may have their heart broken if we choose to deviate from their favored outlook, so to be considerate of them we comply. The bottom line is we are entangled in both good and evil obligations, divested of our individuality and freedom, and made to act helplessly in response to outside forces.

Arjuna, bound by all of these factors, is now caught in the ultimate trap to which they lead: full-scale war. Although there are fates worse than death, war is the vehement unleashing of extinction, threatening the ultimate eradication of our personal freedom. Soon Arjuna will be chafing at both his good and bad constraints, seeking to distance himself from them so he can become empowered as a free individual. We are invited to join him in his transformation from a hapless victim of circumstances into a liberated being empowered to choose his own way.

4) Here are heroes, mighty archers, equal in battle to Bhima and Arjuna, Yuyudhana, Virata, and Drupada, of the great chariot.

Yes, those heroic binding forces are our “equals in battle” all right! Often they are our betters, able to defeat us handily. If we believe we can ignore them and they will just go away, they have won. That’s because they don’t go away on their own: they stay underground and grow even stronger.

Archers have always symbolized concentrated determination to achieve a goal, and an arrow of intention striking the target dead center is the ideal result. Curiously the word ‘sin’ comes from the same imagery, and means “missing the mark.” The most essential prerequisite for a spiritual search is a burning desire to cast off our fetters so we can explore the unknown and discover its significance. A lukewarm attitude is likely to allow us to drift into trouble, possibly as an unwitting pawn of a charlatan or demagogue.

The first step to take in the thousand mile journey of spiritual transformation, then, is to recognize the oppressive elements that have brought us to the moment when we can no longer bear to remain in their clutches. Surging through us are the urgent voices of all our caregivers and teachers, which as unformed beings we have relinquished our sovereignty to. At some point we realize we have vacated our true calling, our dharma, at their behest. We begin the process of self-renewal by deciding to reclaim our

integrity as a legitimate participant in our world. We must seek out our authentic “still small voice” within the cacophony of competing shouts for our attention, and help it to grow.

If you want to read quickly over this section, Arjuna will be doing the very same exercise in the middle of the chapter. He will step into the no-man’s-land between the armies to take stock of all the factors he is engulfed by: the dear friends, teachers and family members that have brought him to his seemingly inescapable predicament. We can hold off until then, but at some point we must face up to the realization that the beliefs we once accepted without question have got to be carefully scrutinized, and all that is false in them rejected. Otherwise we will never recover.

5 & 6) Dhrishtaketu, Chekitana, and the valiant King of Kasi, Purujit and Kuntibhoja, and that bull among men, Saibya.

The heroic Yudhamanyu, and the brave Uttamaujas, the Son of Subhadra, and the Sons of Draupadi, all of great chariots.

Our blind spots are literally a “cast of thousands,” as they used to say of old movies. The most oppressive to our psyche are the authority figures, the prominent men and women we cede our decision-making power to. We casually surrender our individuality to these outside entities, because everyone else does. But the Absolute has only one route into our psyche: from the inside, and it becomes ineffectual when we look to others for our cues to act. Another giant step toward maturity is to recognize that everyone is as ignorant as we are, and their authority is nothing more than a fragile construct held up by mutual consent, and not due to divine dispensation, as they might like you to believe.

Verses 4-6 list the warriors on Arjuna’s side, which from Duryodhana’s viewpoint are the enemy, and he will afterwards list a few of his own. From a spiritual perspective, both friends and foes can be equally binding, or for that matter, liberating, if they goad us to a breakthrough. These forces are like a blindfold we wear throughout our life, ceding authority to others who also wear

blindfolds. If we start to remove it, we will quickly learn just how complicated and clingy the blindfold is, and how much the “well adjusted” blindfold wearers resent us making the attempt.

7) But know who are the most distinguished among us, O Best of the Twice-born, the leaders of my army; these I tell you, for you to recognize by name:

Sanjaya the narrator is still describing the scene to the blind king Dhritarashtra, but remember he’s telling him in this section about what Duryodhana is saying to his teacher Drona. The previous list of names is the “good guys,” the Pandavas, and now he names the key “bad guys.” As already noted, the good and bad sides can be viewed as liberating tendencies and binding tendencies, both of which are present in every situation. Arjuna has finally been forced by them into such a dire position that he is impelled to change his mind.

In most cases I have used the given name for people, and omitted the descriptive terms, which occur frequently in the Gita, such as Partha for Arjuna and Bhagavan for Krishna. Often these occur merely to keep the meter, which is eight syllables per line, with an occasional poetic outburst of eleven per line. But here we may get a whiff of ironic wit on the part of Vyasa, which tempts me to leave “O Best of the Twice-born” alone. Twice-born describes a member of the brahmin caste, and carries roughly the same implication as Born-again Christian. A holier-than-thou attitude is typical of such types, and of course having degrees of holiness is an absurdity in the context of absolutist wisdom, in which all beings without exception are equally holy. Drona, a brahmin, is indeed an exceptional teacher, but he basically stays within conventional bounds. At this juncture he has cast his lot with the Kauravas, the oppressors. As the Gita is aimed at having us throw off all oppressions, including caste and religious conformity, we may perhaps detect a derisive smile from Vyasa behind what would ordinarily be a merely polite form of address.

8 & 9) You and Bhishma, and Karna, and also Kripa, the victor in war, Asvatthama and Vikarna, and also the Son of Somadatta, and many other heroes who are willing to die for me, who have various missiles and weapons, all skilled in warfare.

The Kaurava side is caught in the egotistical myopia of gauging everything in terms of its own interests. All those heroes are prepared to die for a cause, and the cause is “what I want.” Remember that back in the very first verse, Dhritarashtra asked about “my people.” The Gita is going to direct us to transcend our petty interests and think in global or universal terms. The planarian perception that what immediately appeals to “me” is the sole criterion needed, is about to give way to an appeal to higher reasoning. The law of the jungle is to be transformed by a seeker of truth into the kind of compassionate and thoughtful behavior often described as spiritual.

Children begin their conscious development thinking in terms of ‘I’, ‘me’ and ‘mine’, but after a growth struggle of many years some of them become adults who can think in terms of ‘we’ and ‘ours’. Unfortunately, very many stay stuck in selfishness, and true adulthood is rare. Being concerned with yourself doesn’t seem too heinous at first blush, but it can be manipulated into dangerous states of mind all too easily. Arjuna finds himself being drawn in to just such a conundrum, in which the “blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere the ceremony of innocence is drowned;” in the famous words of W.B. Yeats. Author Vyasa knows this well, as indicated by his telling us that the Kaurava strongmen are willing and even eager to die for their leader.

Possibly the most contrary state of mind to the nature of a human being, testifying to a lifetime of trauma, is a willingness to die for a cause. History is filled with churning hordes who believe their death in battle will bring about some utopian state, but who are in actuality nothing more than tools of power-crazed leaders. If they learn their lesson in time and decide to live for a cause instead

of dying for it, they are simply replaced by the next youthful hothead. Psychologist Alice Miller attributes this warping of normal intelligent sensibility to strict upbringing. If you are taught to obey your parents unquestioningly, it is easy to be made to obey your leaders, political or religious, in the same manner. Where your parents may well have your best interests in mind, few leaders do. The Gita is a powerful antidote to this mentality, passionately urging us to reclaim our integrity without abandoning our quest for justice.

Sadly, most of us learn early on to be “skilled in warfare,” in our dealings with other people, first coming to conceive of them as enemies, then firing verbal missiles to destroy their positions, sniping at them, laying booby traps and mining pathways, taking pride in undermining the opposition in any way we can, most often with words, but with deeds when they are deemed necessary for conquest. It takes someone like a yogi to rise above the fray, converting it into a civilized discourse based on mutual concern and respect.

10) That army of ours which is under the care of Bhishma is insufficient, but this army of theirs which is under the care of Bhima is adequate.

Here is the first strong indicator of the true profundity of the Gita’s wisdom. For some reason, the much more powerful army is described as *insufficient*, while the weaker one is *adequate*. (The Sanskrit root is identical, even though Nataraja Guru has shaded the translation to heighten the contrast.) It echoes Arjuna’s earlier choice of an unarmed Krishna over all his armaments.

One idea that has been grasped by some commentators is that the Kaurava army represents the relativist, partisan orientation, which is inadequate or “insufficient,” while the Pandava army represents righteous, absolutist values, which in the matter of justice are sufficient or “adequate.” This is undoubtedly correct. The whole underpinning of justice is that it is based on universal

norms rather than partisan whim. A mere selfish opinion or preference is not adequate, but a well thought out system embracing as many aspects of the situation as can be included does indeed measure up. The rule of kings and dictators is ever the former, while constitutional law attempts to fulfill the latter. But laws can never perfectly embody absolutist wisdom, which has to adapt itself to every circumstance. Arjuna, on his own, will soon be seeking—and finding—this elusive goal of humanity.

Some commentators have reversed the order given here, because they couldn't fathom why a vastly stronger army would be less adequate. It's because the true field of battle here is the psyche, not the physical world of war. In spiritual life at least, might does not make right. A non-material factor accounts for the difference. In this the Pandavas are far ahead.

A similar distinction of adequate/inadequate may be observed between verifiable scientific facts and wishful thinking. A corporation may hire mercenary scientists and mount an advertising blitz to support its contention that logging a forest is the best way to preserve it, but the facts cannot be denied that what replaces the forest is another entity entirely, namely a tree farm, or perhaps a desert. Or it may be claimed that unhealthy food is good for you, but the doctor's bill will have to be paid despite the claim. So the Gita's assertion that absolute wisdom trumps relativistic knowledge is of paramount importance. It is crucial that each of us distinguishes one from the other, and steers our way by the light of truth rather than by closing our eyes tightly and going on faith in our acquired (or supplied) prejudices.

There is a second level here which is less obvious. Almost all of us start out as children who are subject to the dictates of an adult world. Over and over our impulses and ideas are squelched in favor of what our parents, teachers and religious leaders tell us is "right," and we learn to doubt ourselves. We come to believe that what we think—what we *are*—is somehow flawed, but those who tell us what to do are so clearly full of confidence and certainty themselves, we are sure they must be in possession of superior

knowledge. Children cannot distinguish that this is a charade. There are many strategies to cope with this frustrating and humiliating state of affairs, but most children adopt the attitude that they are wrong and the grown-up world is right, because it evades the issue rather neatly. The only problem is that it isn't true.

Thus we enter adulthood wearing a straitjacket: the belief that we are inadequate but all the seemingly well-adjusted people around us are adequate. Since these universal feelings are internalized and masked by bluster, we don't see that everyone has them. We become unsure of ourselves, and readily grant those who pretend to be sure of themselves authority over us. By doing so we lose the full humanity that Arjuna is going to reclaim during the course of Krishna's upcoming course of instruction.

All you Arjunas, look around and know that everyone is in the same predicament as you. We are all in this together. The Gita sweetly sings this song throughout, and it will lift your hearts if you can but hear it.

11) And so let all of you, standing in your respective positions at the entrance to every formation, keep guard on Bhishma.

Bhishma is the old Kuru patriarch mentioned in the next verse. He is singled out as representing the highest achievement of the old order, the religious meritocracy featuring celibacy and purity. The Gita intends to dispense with all merit-based religious thinking, which is dualistic at its core. Here the oppressing forces are directed to protect the old order at all costs.

Because the army of relativity is inadequate, everyone must be on guard! Since its position is false, it may fail at any moment. This is the position of the fearful. You are inadequate. You don't know where you stand. If your leader is lost, you are nothing. Your psychic castle is built on sand, and the tide is coming in.

When your position has been gained by treachery, there is no guarantee that it won't be taken away by treachery. You must mistrust everyone, take nothing for granted. Your days are

consumed in anxiety and the struggle to maintain your perch. What a miserable way to live!

The spiritual message is to look into our soul and see where we have posted guards, and grant them a furlough. We will be moving toward an unguarded state of openness as we go forward.

12) So as to cheer him, the mighty old Kuru patriarch roared loudly like a lion and blew a conch.

Bhishma is the patriarch referred to, leader of the Kauravas on the battlefield. There is a modern phrase for what he does: blowing your own horn, or simply, boasting. What's more, a lion has ever been the symbol of pride. In ordinary life, each participant in a conflict puts forth their own point of view, loudly and forcefully. According to the Gita, this is exactly the way to become mired in a disaster; extrication can only come by embracing the whole picture through a yogic or dialectic synthesis.

When you are fearful and confused, it is a relief to join forces with a group or gang that promises a protective fraternity. Then the leader sounds the call to battle, and you rally to his side, ready to do his bidding. Nowadays we speak of things like waving the flag instead of sounding the conch, but the idea is the same. In this way, in place of allegiance to the unlimited Absolute we become partisans of nations, religions, tribes, towns or families. Any limitation on the extent of our identification with the whole brings about a limitation of justice, and is therefore a basis of conflict. The Gita is going to counsel the abandonment of all limitations, but in order to do this we have to know what they are first. Right now we stand with Arjuna in the midst of them, and the pressure is building fast.

13) Then conches and drums and gongs, (other) drums, and horns, were played together suddenly, and that sound made a confused clang.

The blast of noise roars out to begin the battle. Its horrible, mind-numbing clang epitomizes the relativist side of the war, symbolized by the Kauravas, and their braying battle instruments are still metaphorically echoing down through the ages to our time. Everyone shouting in favor of their own selfish interests is a recipe for social chaos and collapse. After a few brief forays into civil communication as a species, we are back to living in a time when bellowing as loudly as possible from permanently entrenched positions is the mark of public discourse.

Common complaints about the Gita include that it takes place in the middle of a war, and therefore advocates fighting and so is just about male problems. While historically actual war is mainly a “guy thing,” conflict is the lot of everyone. The battle here is symbolic of the painful dilemmas and paradoxes we are doomed to confront no matter what our gender. For example, in divorces both men and women suffer. Girls are hurt by the pains of adolescence possibly even more than boys. Childbirth has even been used as a prime example of necessary, inevitable action. Most importantly, mental distress knows no boundaries based on sex. It is not helpful to imagine that women are nothing more than innocent victims of male derangement. While men tend to be more outwardly aggressive than women, all of us are confronted by both inner and outer challenges and need to learn how to cope with them. The noisy chaos of the present setting is an apt image for the spiritual struggles we all too often find ourselves in.

To be honest, conflict may be a necessary stimulus to our spiritual growth. Most of us enjoy routines and can easily become content with comfortable habits. Until we learn to make progress without the goading of uncertainties and threats, we will continue to experience them. The universe seems to want us to evolve, and encourages it in whatever way works. But fighting is not the way to make progress, and Arjuna knows this. He desperately wants to find an alternative.

Although the literal setting is all male at this moment, if we can accept its archetypal symbolism as universal it will be

supremely educational. Whoever we are and whatever our problems, the Gita provides a general template to assist us in meeting every challenge. Our job as astute readers is to tailor the teachings to our own conditions by transposing the terms.

14) Then standing in their great chariot, to which white horses were yoked, Krishna and Arjuna together blew their divine conches.

Yes, there is also a divine or spiritual point of view, which, while in outward appearance no different from any other, can lead us to freedom rather than bondage. Such is the Aum-like song of the divine conch, sounded by the guru and disciple who are about to take center stage.

Touchingly, the two protagonists blow their horns together first, symbolizing the unity of their endeavor. Then in the next verse they will begin a “roll-call” of the righteous, the Pandavas.

Arjuna is by no means the nonconformist hippie type we associate with spaced-out spirituality. In the Mahabharata epic he is a straight arrow, sincerely pious, and obedient to society’s beliefs. He is thus a typical human being, albeit with well developed skills in the art of warfare. By using him as the archetypal disciple, the Gita is demonstrating how ordinary attitudes, when carried to their logical extreme, lead to the very conflicts that require extraordinary solutions. They bring us to a dead end, from which the only escape is transcendence, and the only help available comes in the form of a special teacher or guru. By singling out Arjuna, there is a clear implication that the path being presented is open to all. No one needs any special qualification to learn wisdom, only an attitude of dedication.

It is nearly impossible to not think of Arjuna as a soldier participating in a war taking place long ago and far away. But that should be kept in the background. There is no doubt that Arjuna is meant to represent you, the reader. If you do not identify with him

or his problems the profundity of the work will be vitiated to a significant extent.

15) Krishna blew Panchajanya, and Arjuna blew Devadatta. He of wolf-like appetite and deeds of enormity (Bhima) blew his great conch, Paundra.

Notice that the forces of bondage all conspire together, blowing their horns in a blaring cacophony, but the forces of liberation weigh in independently. Even right at the beginning of the Gita a sublime symbolism is apparent. The way the conches are blown implies that upright individuals are the ideal and mob behavior—even “respectable” mob behavior, a.k.a. society—is degrading. Societal madness is a *collective* psychosis; the cure is individual enlightenment.

In *The Wisdom of Crowds*, James Surowiecki (Doubleday, 2004) explains the quasi-mystical decision-making power of a group of individuals, as opposed to groups that are swayed by peer pressure. The former routinely outperform the latter in measurable ways:

Diversity and independence are important because the best collective decisions are the product of disagreement and contest, not consensus and compromise. An intelligent group, especially when confronted with cognition problems, does not ask its members to modify their positions in order to let the group reach a decision everyone can be happy with. Instead, it figures out how to use mechanisms—like market prices, or intelligent voting systems—to aggregate and produce collective judgments that represent not what any one person in the group thinks but rather, in some sense, what they all think. *Paradoxically, the best way for a group to be smart is for each person in it to think and act as independently as possible.* (xix-xx) (emphasis mine)

We should keep this in mind throughout our Gita study, which is a textbook of individual empowerment, with little or no concession to social demands. What the rishis realized and scientists are coming to appreciate, is that agreement is overrated. Certitude must be found within, in our connection with the Absolute, while the false certitude we experience from going along with others may usher us into a fool's paradise.

Independence is often characterized as pure selfishness, but they are not the same thing. A truly independent person is unselfish, always taking into account as much as possible of every reasonable perspective. Selfishness—raised to an absolute virtue in the modern political miasma—is inimical to independent and dependent people alike, because it degrades everything. It blocks out way too much important information to form the basis of sound judgment. By contrast, generosity and unselfishness, intelligently exercised, are much more inclusive. By aiming for universal benefit they contribute to the betterment of everyone.

The Gita focuses almost exclusively on the development of independence through freedom from all conditionings, and so it appears to be highly antisocial. There is only the barest implication that the hard won independence of a disciple, product of a strenuous and intense period of study under an uncompromising yet compassionate guru, is to be applied to the social realm. But that is precisely where it *is* exercised. No one is totally free of entanglements with their fellow humans, and most of us are deeply dependent on the entire web of human interactions. And yet we must learn independence not only for our own happiness but, as Surowiecki so ably demonstrates, for the happiness and well-being of all.

16) Prince Yudhishtira, Son of Kunti, blew Anantavijaya, and Nakula and Sahadeva (blew together) the Sughosha and Manipushpaka.

After Krishna, we now have met Arjuna and his four brothers: Bhima, Yudhishtira, and the twins Nakula and Sahadeva. Notice that each blows his horn in the order of his spiritual importance—Prince Yudhishtira is only third. Graded series will be found throughout the Gita, usually with the most valuable quality first.

As far as we are concerned, there is no point in introducing all the characters mentioned in the first chapter, since they will all be quickly swept into the background, leaving only Arjuna and Krishna in their guru-disciple dialogue, along with Sanjaya the narrator. If you read the Mahabharata epic you can get to know all these interesting people at that time.

17 & 18) And the King of Kashi, excellent bowman, Sikhandin, great charioteer, Dhrishtadyumna and Virata and the unconquered Satyaki,

Drupada, and the Sons of Draupadi, O Lord of the Earth, and the Son of Subhadra, of mighty arms—from all sides each blew his conch separately.

In case we haven't quite caught on yet, the Gita now makes it more explicit: the absolutist side is made up of free individuals, therefore each blows his conch separately, though harmoniously, like a symphony orchestra. Earlier the relativist gang of thugs expressed themselves in a confused blast of party loyalty, without coherence, but here we find personal dignity and integrity highlighted.

In the Gita we are in the presence of a subtle masterpiece, with nearly every word freighted with significance. The "Lord of the Earth" is Dhritarashtra, and is an epithet that shows the limitations of Arjuna's assailants. Their interests are in worldly matters only, whereas he is about to begin a search for higher values. Material goals are no longer enough, as Arjuna will soon state quite definitely. Nor is Arjuna aiming to become a Lord of Heaven, in direct opposition to outright materialism. He will become a yogi, meaning he will treat earth and heaven as two poles of a dialectic,

which he will unite in a synthesis that reveals the Absolute in all its transcendent grandeur. In plain words, humans require both physical and spiritual nourishment to thrive.

19) That loud blast, filling earth and sky with sound, pierced the hearts of Dhritarashtra's Sons.

We have more subtle hints of yoga here, with the Absolutist blast filling both earth and heaven, synthesizing the dialectic. The clarion call of freedom reaches far beyond the limited world of selfish interests, and is the weapon by which the Pandava side launches their attack. It goes to the heart, uplifting instead of destroying. This type of warfare was echoed by the flower children of the mid-twentieth century, who placed flowers into the barrels of the rifles being brandished in their faces.

Psychotherapist Thomas Moore, in *Care of the Soul* (Harper Perennial, 1992, p. 20), writes, "It takes a broad vision to know that a piece of the sky and a chunk of the earth lie lodged in the heart of every human being, and if we are going to care for that heart we will have to know the sky and earth as well as human behavior."

20) Then, beholding the Sons of Dhritarashtra standing marshaled in order, while the flight of arrows was beginning, Arjuna, the Son of Pandu, of monkey ensign, took up his bow;

The opening drum roll has built to its peak, and the curtain now rises on Act One, where Arjuna steps to the center of the action. He takes up his bow, symbolizing his intention, not to fight, but to understand. Before long he will be overwhelmed with doubt and sorrow, causing him to lose his grip on the bow and drop it, and he will not take it up again until the very end of the final chapter. He has an awful lot to learn in his transition from an ordinary socialized being to an enlightened and independent soul.

The arrows symbolize projections of particularized points of view. Everyone is putting in their opinion, offering advice, pressing for their side to prevail. This typical and ordinary tumult has now escalated to a lethal degree. Here on the battlefield of life, arrows of selfishness are zinging around all the time, from every direction. When they strike home, they wound you, they draw blood.

Jungian psychologist Marion Woodman made some relevant comments about arrows in an interview by James Kullander, in *The Sun* magazine, August 2006, from a slightly different perspective:

Woodman: Personal growth and spiritual development are based on honesty and integrity, and it's only in intimate relationships that real honesty and integrity surface. Life with an intimate partner is no bowl of cherries, and you've got to be strictly honest with each other and recognize your unconscious projections onto each other and deal with them. If you don't, you drift apart.

Kullander: What sort of "unconscious projections?"

Woodman: Say, for example, something about the other person really annoys you. That annoying quality likely also exists in you, but you don't know it, so you attack the other person for it. The quality that you hate in the other person is also something that you hate about yourself. That's a negative projection. A positive projection can be something you admire in another person but unconsciously devalue in your own life. There are even qualities in others that we hate and admire at the same time. Whenever we refuse to accept something as a part of us, we project that something onto others. A projection is like an arrow that flies out of your unconscious and finds its mark in someone out there.

21) and, O King, he spoke thus to Krishna: O Acyuta! Stop my chariot right in the middle between the two armies,

Arjuna and Krishna are very old friends, but their relationship is about to grow into one of the deepest possible: that of guru and disciple. It involves an intense discipline of releasing your conditioned mindset in order to discover your actual nature beneath its camouflage of borrowed behavioral clothing, and its course is filled with many ups and downs.

Arjuna has found the correct place for a seeker of truth: right in the middle between the warring factions. The importance of this position cannot be overstressed. Contrast it with verse two, where Duryodhana is looking strictly from his own side, which gives him a skewed perspective.

If you want to have substantive, positive change, you have to pull your “chariot” (or whatever you’re riding on) into the middle of the situation and calmly study both (or all) points of view. If you’re attached to one side or the other you won’t be able to do this. In the search for truth you cannot be partisan. Similarly, looking on from a remote location as an “armchair philosopher” or “detached observer” is not helpful. Nataraja Guru used to say, “Armchair philosophy bakes no bread.” Detachment usually fails in this respect. You have to be in the thick of the action, or your reactions become abstracted and distant. Finding the neutral position in the center means you are still engaged, even though you are detached from partiality or prejudice.

Positioning the chariot in the middle is a pictogram of dialectics or yoga, which the Gita will present in detail throughout its course. One great secret it espouses is that the Absolute is revealed by the yogic or dialectic balancing of the poles in any and every situation. An honest yogic appraisal requires your side and your opponent’s side to be treated neutrally, given equal weight. When we retain our affiliation with our side, even if we strive for evenhandedness, our view is inevitably tilted toward our own team. Importantly, our team includes “I” and its assessment of the “Other.” Any emotional coloration prejudices the process even further. A wise referee or guru is invaluable at this point, because

they can see what we are blind to. Only when a true picture emerges from the chaos can an effective act of yogic harmonization occur. The inwardly or outwardly guided seeker must find the position of neutrality equidistant from the poles and harmonize all the elements. This automatically extricates them from their conditioning to reveal the optimal perspective of a judicious overview.

A good example of yoga dialectics as it relates to public affairs is in terms of the degree of independence in our lives. We begin our sojourn on earth as totally dependent beings, and our early adjustments are mainly to incorporate the directives of others—parents, teachers, and government officials like police officers—into our programs. When Arjuna steps into the no-man’s-land between the contending armies, these are who he sees all around him. What is taught to children is usually done with the best of intentions, but the result is a person who has had to abandon their free will in deference to very rigid social norms.

At some stage of a healthy life, usually around the mid-teens, the developing person feels a powerful need to be more independent, to find out who they really are, and to become themselves. They feel strong desires to do things that are not permitted or not polite. Quite properly and logically, the first steps in the direction of independence are to reject the innumerable dependencies that they have relied on up till then. Rebellion is a kind of visceral rejection of the bondage experienced by awareness of our prior conditioning. But it is still based on, and therefore controlled by, the rules and regulations of society. Rebellion produces a false sense of freedom that comes from the relief we feel from throwing off the chains of ordered existence, but it is still dependent on those chains for its impetus.

Advertisers and entertainment corporations play to this imaginary freedom and sense of relief, finding it incredibly lucrative. As a side benefit, the rebellious become tamed by

watching televised images of rebellion as a polite substitute for actual rebellion. That way you don't rock the boat!

Most of society is made up of these two types, those who advocate a "return to traditional values" or "the good old days," who insist that "being good and behaving yourself" are the keys to heaven, and those who scorn such childish attitudes, who experience the thrill of being "bad" once in a while, sneer at others' conformity, and so on.

Philosophic types find that both these attitudes have their limitations. A yogic thinker steps back and embraces both, allowing them to see the pluses and minuses of each, as well as to experience a state of neutrality that is the true ground of freedom. From this contemplative state unbounded action can arise in a natural and unforced way.

As already noted, the lion's share of the Gita is aimed at achieving this state of neutrality or balance between contending factors. Don't despair if you are somewhat confused about these ideas here at the outset, because we still have a lot of ground to cover. Best of all, "Even a little of such a way of life saves one from great apprehension," as the next chapter puts it. That means we will benefit very quickly from the efforts we make, as long as they are well directed. It's just that the Gita's philosophy can't be compressed into a few slogans. We have to really think about it.

22) so that I may behold these standing eager to fight by my side in the present battle-undertaking,

Arjuna stands out in the open, sizing up his side in this verse and his antagonists in the next. This is not a wise strategy for an actual battlefield. It's easy to imagine that Arjuna and Krishna would be instantly annihilated if this was about real warfare. Author Vyasa can only be speaking of a metaphorical or metaphysical conflict. As the sage Ramakrishna advised, loving everyone and everything doesn't mean we should kiss the hissing

cobra. Appropriate, intelligently directed action is called for at all times in the external world.

But while not realistic in the literal sense, figuratively this is exactly what has to happen. We have to surrender our outpost and move to a place where we can observe the entire field. We have to shed our defenses and permit ourselves to be vulnerable.

In particular this movement to the middle is essential for a proper relationship with a guru, or for that matter in any kind of intimacy. Even as we recognize their superiority, if we treat the teacher or friend as being “other” than us, it sets up a disruptive state where we remain somewhat guarded and closed off to their influence. The process of gaining and giving trust allows for a closeness in which the inculcation of wisdom (or affection) can successfully take place.

Yoga is also applicable to very practical matters. Take the case of relationship problems with a spouse or other close friend, for instance. Your spouse has become the “enemy” side, at least temporarily. You are obviously identified with “your” side. The fight will only escalate when one side is pitted against the other, even if both are trying to move toward an armistice. When you step to the middle of the field, you go to a vantage point between your positions, from where you can scrutinize both with an air of detachment. You concede that the other person’s position has value, even though you probably don’t agree with it. Within the pain of ruptured friendship, it is a heroic accomplishment to move to neutral ground, and a lot of the preliminary work in yoga is to learn how to get there. But it is the only location where a balanced perspective is to be obtained.

It may be that your significant other is still in the wrong, but in any case you will see their side in a new light. And it is virtually certain that you share part of the blame for the blowup, skirmish or battle between you. When we defend our side we automatically make ourselves blind to our own faults and exaggerate the other person’s. From a neutral post we can honestly assess both sides. And it goes without saying that you can only lay out an intelligent

course of action if you have an accurate idea of everyone's feelings and vested interests.

It's not that this technique is "only" relational psychology, either, and spirituality is something more spectacular. The Gita's vision of spirituality is to work with intelligent expertise right within the transactional frame of reference. It is very practical, and not in any sense pie-in-the-sky, intangible hocus-pocus. Wisdom is not to be divorced from action; it only counts when it is applied to something significant. The relationship between wisdom and action will be explored in depth, particularly in Chapters III and IV, but for now we can see that Arjuna, representing all of us, is embroiled in a dilemma so real that his very life is at stake.

23) and might observe those here gathered together who desire to please in war the evil-minded Son of Dhritarashtra.

Down through the ages Arjuna has been reviled by commentators as a cowardly loser, a warrior who has lost his nerve, primarily a hapless foil for Krishna's teachings. This completely misses one of the most important themes of the Gita: that he is a model seeker who epitomizes what the role of a disciple requires. These commentators have missed the boat because they are intent on having Arjuna return to his prescribed duties as a social being. It reveals their own veiled attachment to the status quo that undermines their grasp of the Gita's message.

Guru and disciple mark the two ends of a continuum, a dialectical polarity defining the highest arc of evolution humans are capable of. Both poles are equally necessary for wisdom transmission to take place. The role of a worthy disciple is to be skeptical and ask probing questions, to which the wise Guru provides original answers to clarify issues and allay doubts. Guru and disciple are thus equal partners in the learning process, the former striving to express truth in ever more suitable terms, while the latter works equally diligently to bring the words to life in their own being. A mutual transformation takes place in the process

wherein the disciple becomes conjoined with the Guru in a bond of perfect rapport that is the ideal learning situation.

Arjuna's willingness to go straight to the middle and examine both sides of the conflict reveals his extraordinary degree of preparation for the upcoming evolutionary leap. He is in fact the best possible candidate for wisdom in the entire field. Everyone else remains attached to their allotted role, but the time is ripe for Arjuna to go beyond his. Again, it is not a weakness but a strength that there is no happy path for him in this field of conflict. The utter dead end he will soon see on all sides leaves him no other option than to mentally prostrate at the feet of a liberated being. Such an act not only produces a true disciple, in a sense it creates the Guru as well. In this celestial dance the disciple must take the initiative and make the first move, which Arjuna routinely does throughout the Gita. The gesture is always mirrored by a response from the universe at large, in the form of a compassionate teacher.

Guru Nitya Chaitanya Yati describes the initiation of a disciple (*diksha* in Sanskrit) in his commentary on Patanjali's Yoga Sutras, titled *Living the Science of Harmonious Union*:

The discipline called *diksha* is essentially to keep all four aspects of the individuated consciousness free from blemishes. The Sanskrit term *diksha* is very important because it suggests absolute bipolarity and continuing attention being given whole-heartedly to the persons, things, and events with which you are involved in the situation of your search. Only the most attentive can find his or her path inspiring. In such a discipline, you do not excuse yourself. Actually, initiation is from the side of the initiated rather than from the side of one who is initiating. The person who is seen to be ritualistically giving an initiation is at best only a witness. Absolute dedication has to come from the initiate. (176)

So the guru does not exactly initiate the disciple. The disciple is initiated by their own burning interest, after which the guru may acknowledge the fact with a ceremony of initiation.

Dejected apologists lament that Arjuna is abandoning his social duty, and bend the meaning of the text so it appears that Krishna intends to restore him to that tightly circumscribed role. But the Gita is presenting the story of the rarest and most meaningful event in human life: the moment when a great soul, after a lifetime of preparation, begins to turn away from the bondage of ordinary duties and discover true freedom. In almost every case it is the reciprocal pair of Guru and disciple that potentiates the quantum leap. For his part, Krishna is ecstatic that someone is at last willing to take the leap, and will coax Arjuna through his learning curve with unmatched cleverness.

This is the Gita's primary teaching, inexplicably glossed over in virtually every commentary. When one has grown as far as one can in the ordinary course of life, it becomes necessary to expand one's consciousness to another level. The Gita is a textbook for how to effect the transformation. Whether the seeker thereafter returns to a mundane social role or not is a private decision between the indwelling Absolute and the transformed one, and must not be determined by the demands of bystanders, lest the whole process turn out to be a snare and a delusion.

24) Sanjaya said:

Thus addressed by Arjuna, Krishna, having stationed that excellent chariot right in the middle between the two armies,

Sanjaya has been speaking all along, but he is reintroduced here because we may have gotten mixed up by all the complex layers of the narrative.

The "excellent chariot" of Arjuna underlines that he is a great seeker of truth, not some befuddled nincompoop. The Guru moves with him to the middle of the scene, just as Arjuna requested, reminding us that it is the disciple who has to ask for aid, and not the guru's role to offer it. There are expert maneuvers, exactly right for the intricate interplay about to unfold between them.

Structurally speaking, the Kurukshetra or field of battle stands for the horizontal world of actuality, with the Pandavas ranged on the positive side and the Kauravas on the negative. Arjuna detaches himself from his assigned place in the actual world and together with Krishna moves to the exact center, the point of symmetry and balance where horizontal and vertical meet. In a moment he will ask Krishna to become his guru. This deeply heartfelt action is symbolized by a ninety degree turn from the horizontal to the vertical, while facing each other. Then by recognizing Krishna's guruhood and requesting instruction, Arjuna moves himself to the vertical negative or alpha pole, while Krishna rises to the positive, omega pole. Within this perfect bipolar relationship, Arjuna reaches up as a seeker and Krishna showers down the grace of enlightenment, in the mystic marriage of guru and disciple.

25) facing Bhishma and Drona and all the rulers of the earth, Krishna said: O Arjuna! Behold these Kurus gathered here.

Both sides taken together are Kurus. Note that Arjuna looked at first one side and then the other, but here Krishna indicates them together, as forming a single group. These are the before and after versions of the yogic vision. We start by assessing each separate element and striving to unite them, and we finish when we attain the cosmic view of universal oneness.

It is perfectly appropriate that at the outset the Guru calls the disciple's attention to the whole panoply of existence, the entire field in all directions, preparatory to beginning the quest for independence from its undue influence. The Gita's way is inclusive, and in no way escapist. If you are not willing to look at the total context, you are not ready to accept the complete honesty required for liberation. What you leave out of your philosophy will inevitably trip you up.

26) Then Arjuna saw standing fathers as well as grandfathers, teachers, maternal uncles, brothers, sons, grandsons, and companions too.

Arjuna immediately does what Krishna asks of him, demonstrating his openness to the man who he will soon ask to be his guru. Everywhere he looks he sees friends and relatives, which is the vision of an insightful person. Those caught in the web of actual events see the world as filled with hostile enemies and masses of indifferent souls, along with a handful of friends and allies. Only a philosopher with a neutral and unselfish outlook can perceive the unity beneath the chaos that makes the human race one huge family.

Arjuna is beginning to use dialectic thinking. As we've noted, our normal way of intellectualizing about situations is to identify with our own side and treat the other as separate. Linear thinking can embrace the dichotomy, but it doesn't truly resolve anything. That's because we're still visualizing it in terms of I and You, or whatever the polarity is. The transformation comes when we realize we're already in the happy median, where I and the Other are aspects of the universal Self, albeit modestly delusional aspects from an absolutist perspective. The act of withdrawing from identification with the polarities and centering in the Self is the essence of the Yoga of the Gita. That's why Arjuna and Krishna actually go to the center of the battle, rather than standing on their own side, safely behind a barrier, and trying to imagine the other side as equal in status. That would be the rational way. In Yoga, you visualize all the aspects as being within yourself, and draw them together still within yourself. If this sounds confusing—and I'm sure it does—a lot more clarification lies ahead. Krishna is going to make sure we really get it.

It's relatively easy to accept the idea of unity, but very challenging to feel it as an undeniable truth of the heart. Even though he sees his connection to everyone on the battlefield with him, Arjuna remains confused. He still has to learn how to make

the theory convincingly real, and that will take a lot of work, plus perhaps a touch of mystical good fortune.

For now, here are a couple of examples of yoga made practical. There is a continuum between the apparent opposites of light and dark. In pure darkness you can't see anything. Pure light is likewise so bright you can't distinguish anything. Only when there's a mixture of the two do objects become distinguishable. In one sense it's the dark (evil!) that makes us able to apprehend light. So we shouldn't lean one way or the other; what's called for is balance. This is true in physical as well as metaphysical situations. Consider also the binary computer. All information of one type of bit is no information at all. There has to be an alternation of on and off or yes and no to produce a meaningful stream of data.

27) And upon seeing these relatives, fathers-in-law, and friends, all standing, in both armies,

Every person is born unlimited and a genius, barring physical damage in development, but over a lifetime we usually learn to think of ourselves in less than ideal terms. We begin to identify with an 'I' that's limited with an endless string of conceptions. Negative identities include 'I' am stupid, incapable, ugly, frivolous, irrelevant. Positive identifications are limiting in the same way, although they do provide a broader canvas for expression: 'I' am desirable, clever, talented, friendly, better than others. Then we have family and tribal identities, 'I' am from the Smith-Jones-Teitsworth clan, 'I' am a white-black-red-yellow shade, 'I' am Spanish-Indian-Arab-Jewish; and religious identities, 'I' am Zoroastrian-Sikh-Pantheist-Atheist; and we identify with our gender and species: 'I' am female-male-transgendered, even 'I' am human. While there is a powerful attraction to these identifications, none of them is as unlimited as the Absolute, because they each have contrary positions such as 'I' am not a Sikh. So without denigrating any of these categories, when we seek

our common ground in the Absolute we need to treat them as useful within the transactional world but inhibiting of the natural absolute freedom that is our birthright and philosophical lodestar.

We really *are* in this together. Somehow we are all cells in an ever-developing organism that mysteriously unites us for superconscious purposes. This is a yogically balanced view that embraces everyone. And, contrary to the teachings of some exclusive religions, this Being grows through each and every individual expressing their uniqueness in new ways. The envelope is especially stretched by those who dare to plunge into unknown territory. The Gita is extolling a creative approach to life, not self-extinction in the tried-and-true, in stepping in someone else's footprints. How boring to have everyone behaving the same way, following necrotic rules! What a dull world that would make for.

The noosphere is Teilhard de Chardin's word for the planet's zone of interconnected consciousness. It is light and flexible at its outer perimeter, propelled and enlarged by artists and lovers, thinkers and poets, but becomes denser and more static as you go toward the center. Those who are afraid to do anything but what they're told form the stony core of this planetary being. Those filled with hate are crushed in the most lifeless places of all.

We move to the delightful periphery of the noosphere by embracing more and more of the light within everything around us, in other words, responding to the call of the spirit. But before doing that himself, Arjuna spends some time being overwhelmed by the tragic side of life. It's a legitimate place to start, and probably the most common.

One of the key distinguishing marks of a spiritually inclined person is that they care about their world and the people in it. The Gita makes this point by depicting Arjuna supremely depressed by surveying the scene and seeing how everyone is out to rob, kill and otherwise abuse each other. All those innately divine beings have so lost their self-awareness as to sink to the level of what he will soon describe as a marauding rabble. Given that kind of milieu, people either decide to become enthusiastic competitors in the

melee, or they ponder how to break out of it and foster a change for the better. Sadly, by the Gita's reckoning not more than one in a thousand takes the latter vow and acts on it. Arjuna is the only soul courageous and insightful enough out of all the extraordinary people gathered on the Kurukshetra battlefield to turn away from the chaos and seek wisdom.

28-31) Filled with a supreme pity, in mental distress, said:
Beholding my own people, O Krishna, standing together, wanting to fight,
my limbs fail and my mouth dries up, my body trembles and my hair stands on end,
(the bow) Gandiva slips from my hand, my skin feels as if burning all over, I am unable to stand, and my mind is whirling round,
and I see conflicting portents, O Krishna, nor do I foresee good from killing one's own people in battle.

Up to this point in his life Arjuna has had full confidence in the beliefs instilled by his upbringing. Now that he is thrust into a real-life conflict, the paradoxes and inconsistencies of social dogmas are thrown into stark relief, and they no longer satisfy him. Make believe arguments—even if they are wildly popular and form pillars of the society—don't hold up under close examination.

It is a familiar theme in spiritual life that we will adhere to our habits of thought as long as we can. Only when they really make us uncomfortable will we be motivated to change our lives. Shankara famously compared setting out on the spiritual path to the feelings of a fish in a pond that is drying up, or a deer caught in a forest fire. All you know is that you have to get the hell out of there!

Arjuna's distress is intensified by the illusions of his customary attitudes being stripped away, not only by the stark reality of his situation but by his willingness to look closely at it. This is the first prerequisite for spiritual growth. As Arjuna has just

done, every seeker must abandon all their guarded positions, move to a neutral vantage point, and scrutinize the entire picture. From there they are free to go beyond what is visible to its invisible inner support system. Failure to take this step means we will stay bound to limited beliefs, and chained to imaginary benefits such as merit that lead to imaginary goals such as heaven. Krishna will disabuse Arjuna of those concepts very early in his training.

Again, we can think of everyday examples, such as when your dear spouse suddenly reveals that they no longer love you and are leaving for good, or the job you excel at and count on for your daily bread is suddenly stripped away by a heartless decision in a distant boardroom. Arjuna's emotions are how anyone would naturally feel when the core assumptions of their very being are suddenly dissolved. It is a deeply shocking and painful confrontation, and like Arjuna in the coming verses, we naturally cast around for any interpretation that can give us consolation. It is easy to take refuge in strange mental configurations when you are grasping at straws. Arjuna is fortunate to have a wise counselor by his side, to prevent him from jumping to tempting but false conclusions.

In the early stages of life, humans are taught by their caretakers to defer to various authorities. Parents and relatives initially dominate the decision-making process, but over time relinquish the task of inculcating social beliefs more and more to church and school. Most of them do not even realize that that is what they're doing. They think they are simply helping us to fit in, which will make us safe and happy.

Because of our childhood reliance on all-powerful caretakers still lurking in the back of our mind, what we want more than anything is for a knight on a white charger to ride up and take command. Most religions satisfy the puerile desire to have someone else handle our decision making, and it can be a very profitable occupation. Governments tend to vie for this same power slot, which is why even dictators pay lip service to being democratic. Separation of church and state was intended to

dismantle the awesome power of their conjunction, since otherwise they would make *all* our decisions. (Oddly enough, religious zealots were the first to call for the divorce of politics and religion, which were historically wedded, whereas they now work tirelessly for a closer marriage.)

Once you begin to look for it, the “savior syndrome” can be seen everywhere, in westernized countries especially. It makes it seem that the only way out of the impossible predicaments we perennially find ourselves in is for some god or his chosen emissary to come down and set things to rights. The impact of such beliefs is to divest us of our faith in ourselves, in our own ability to accomplish difficult things. To put it plainly, it makes us impotent.

The Gita does not support this crippling power of external authority in any form, and it maintains we are the only legitimate upholders of our own lives. It was composed during one of the many periods of history when religious insiders were stifling and bleeding the populace. The Gita’s thrust is always towards personal freedom and liberation, and away from blind trust in fixed forms. Although in classic Indian fashion it posits a wise teacher to deliver its message, Krishna’s prescription is to pull yourself together and make up your own mind, and not simply do what you are told. The student is not expected to surrender their personal integrity to any outside agency.

The curious claim that schools train the young to think independently is understandable if we realize this actually means that they are being trained to correctly regurgitate pre-selected choices of “right” and “wrong.” In a complicated world this is a huge project, since every possible contingency must have a memorized option available. Only after a person is thoroughly brainwashed can they be considered to properly “think for themselves.” The process of successfully defeating and socializing an independently-minded spark of the divine now takes 25 years or more.

Derrick Jensen has written eloquently about this. Here's a sample from *A Language Older Than Words* (Context Books, New York, 2000, p 102-5):

I've since come to understand the reason school lasts thirteen years. It takes that long to sufficiently break a child's will. It is not easy to disconnect children's wills, to disconnect them from their own experiences of the world in preparation for the lives of painful employment they will have to endure. Less time wouldn't do it, and in fact, those who are especially slow go to college. For the exceedingly obstinate child there is graduate school.

I have nothing against education; it's just that education... is not the primary function of schooling....

A primary purpose of school... is to lead us away from our own experience. The process of schooling does not give birth to human beings—as education should but never will so long as it springs from the collective consciousness of our culture—but instead it teaches us to value abstract rewards at the expense of our autonomy, curiosity, interior lives, and time....

Schooling as it presently exists, like science before it and religion before that, is necessary to the continuation of our culture and to the spawning of a new species of human, ever more submissive to authority, ever more pliant, prepared... for the rest of their lives to toil, to propagate, to never make waves, and to live each day with never an original thought nor even a shred of hope.

Jensen has endured shocks as intense as the one currently energizing Arjuna. Alternatively, human beings could operate much more openly with a small handful of commonsense principles, if society didn't fear chaos and joy quite so much. Free choice threatens the profitable immobility of the establishment.

This is why law books and rule books are ever-expanding, as a substitute for common sense justice. In my own career as a firefighter, I observed this process first hand. The Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) in use when I first hired on were

highly stretched to barely fill 80 pages in one small book. We were expected to grasp the basic principles, and then use them in combination with our own intelligence to handle the welter of emergencies we would encounter during our careers. But soon managerial committees were formed to specify our actions in every possible type of incident. The human brain being what it is, each quantum leap in the SOP manual merely opened new cans of worms to be addressed by future committees. By the time I retired our operations manuals ran to thousands of densely packed pages, and even the authors were unsure about the contents. Of course, any failure to comply with any of it incurred a range of penalties as well. So this is the “blessing of education”: to turn the free and happy planet into a nightmare world of misery filled with threats of punishment.

Thinking is pure pleasure when allowed free rein, and tormenting when constrained with anxiety-producing restrictions. It is no wonder, after a lifetime of stressful “education” laden with tests of the degree of its assimilation, that the confused and miserable result of the process finds great relief in abdicating their responsibility to others who are willing to “take the burden” on themselves. Religions have even been known to use this exact terminology.

A select few assimilate their own abdication of personal integrity so obediently that they become well adjusted to it. These are “the leaders of tomorrow” who will happily guide the next flock of lambs to the slaughter. Often these burden-takers manage to stay outside the rules they have foisted on others, as with sexually abusive celibate priests and law breaking legislators. The drug police are often the very sources of contraband. And so it goes.

Despite its quiescent exterior, the modern world has become a vast sea of disconnected individuals either begging for help from those who appear confident or else seeking solace in whatever guise it most luridly presents itself. Unscrupulous people are waiting in the wings to offer false nostrums and simplistic

solutions to whoever will buy them. The world economy is practically based on this, it is so widespread.

The difficult and isolating struggle to extricate ourselves from this miasma is what the Gita teaches. How do we make our way back to ourselves as fully functioning, free individuals?

That “civilization” suffers war after war is just one of the disasters that emerges from our loss of integrity. The feeling that we end up with is of trying vainly to breathe life into the empty image of an imaginary persona we have constructed to satisfy the demands of society. The gap between our true feelings and our learned “right” ones is the measure of modern humanity’s schizophrenia. It is filled with empty pleasures, depression, and mental derangement. Vast quantities of drugs are required to stifle our innate passion for freedom, and to breed compliance. Conversely, realigning ourself with our core nature resolves these problems in the same way that focusing the lens eliminates a blurred image in a camera or telescope.

The Gita is vividly depicting the gap between the unitive state and duality, which stops Arjuna in his tracks. His distress is by no means overstated. And like him, finding our way back to unity is the only struggle worthy of our efforts.

32) I do not wish for victory, O Krishna, nor kingdom, nor pleasures; what is kingdom to us, what enjoyment, or even life?

As we’ve been noting, most people are more comfortable with guidance from without than freedom from within. Real independence requires constant scrutiny and open-minded consideration of circumstances. What passes for freedom is most often an ease and fluidity in accepting dictated behaviors. Only when the “tried and true” leads us to a dead end do we begin to question it and seek alternatives. Until then we take the path of least resistance. Some “good citizens” would rather follow orders to bomb children than buck their early training in obedience and risk their position in the social order. Pyramidal management

structures where all orders come from the top and are to be obeyed unquestioningly—typical of the military but also essential to many business models—reinforce the strictures, making independence virtually a vow of poverty and a guarantee of social ostracism.

Arjuna is intelligently renouncing the dog-eat-dog world of the rat race, demonstrating he is ready to learn higher spiritual values in place of struggling endlessly for material gains, which so often come at the expense of less well-connected rivals.

In the interpersonal context, defeating our enemy means driving a friend with whom we are in conflict away. Victory in the traditional sense is thus a total loss in the spiritual sense. Arjuna does not want to gain the whole world and in the process lose his own soul.

33 & 34) They for whose sake kingdom, enjoyments, and pleasures are desired by us, are standing here in battle, having renounced their interests in life and wealth—

teachers, fathers, sons, and also grandfathers, maternal uncles, fathers-in-law, grandsons, brothers-in-law, as well as other kinsman,

Verse 33 voices a paradox from ancient times, when the actual interested parties did their own fighting. Nowadays war is more often fought by proxies with little to gain and a lot to lose from the outcome. Here Arjuna realizes that he is fighting for the benefit of the very people who have joined in the conflict, and thus surrendered themselves to possible destruction. They seek constructive ends but embrace destructive means. Logically this is absurd, but such illogic continues to plague the human race to this day.

Only if we step back and survey the whole scene, as Arjuna is doing at the moment, can we learn the lessons of the battles we fight in the course of our lives. Frequently we find that our own weaknesses and faults have led us directly into the crisis in which we find ourselves. Usually, during calm times, we can readily

ignore our faults. Only when we are challenged by some seemingly hostile force, when we're "under fire," do our weaknesses come to the fore so we can consciously deal with them. The intensity of the conflict is instrumental in overcoming our ego defenses.

As Arjuna notices here, it's his own beloved friends and family that embody those apparently hostile forces. That means they are blessings in disguise. Very often the lessons we need to learn are played out with friends and associates rather than some obvious "enemy." They could well be treated positively as spiritual problems rather than negatively as undeserved adversity.

At first, when our friends reveal our faults to us, we may try to bluff our way through with some aggressive bluster, not unlike the clangor of conches echoing over the Gita's field of battle. Some of us never stop pretending, and most of the rest succumb to the urge to retreat or flee. Once our ego is thwarted we initially feel an impulse to simply give up—abandon the field—and let the other side have its way. Arjuna is voicing the same desire to abdicate the struggle in this section of verses. Yet ultimately, with Krishna's support, Arjuna will do the right thing and stand his ground. He will turn to his wise counselor and begin to work honestly and fearlessly on his impossible dilemma instead of retreating into ordinariness.

The Gita here underscores a crucial truth: when the course of our life leads us to a spiritual crisis, it is the greatest blessing disguised as opposition. Don't fight and don't run, but stand firmly on truth, and learn. Benign help is invariably nearby, ready to serve you. Its form may be hard to recognize, but it will be there.

35) These I do not want to kill, though they kill me, O Krishna, not even for the sake of dominion over the three worlds—how then for the sake of the earth?

The three worlds are earth, heaven and in between. This is Arjuna's cosmology, and is a widely held belief even today. Now we might call them the physical, metaphysical and intermixed

realms. Arjuna pleads that the war is only about earthy, material issues, which are of little import to him, certainly not worth killing over. He doesn't want dominion, or domination, over anyone or anything. Such an attitude represents an early but substantial stage of progress on the spiritual path, of beginning to dissociate himself from the context of suffering. Making other people's decisions for them definitely leads to suffering all around.

Spiritual quickening notwithstanding, we can distinctly hear the note of despair here. Arjuna is in a lot of pain. He is willing to admit defeat and surrender without a fight. Slinking away may seem like an honorable way out, but our troubles follow us wherever we slink off to. We can let our spouse go, and insist we don't care any more, but the hole in our heart has not yet been healed. Even if we take the enemy here as corporate greed, we must not compromise our principles in confronting it. If we combat evil with evil, we have already lost. History is replete with high-minded revolutions that were rapidly co-opted in this way to become the next wave of oppression.

At this early stage, Arjuna is struggling with renunciation, which is admirable, but his take on it is negative, which is not. Renunciation will be treated in depth toward the end of the Gita, but it has to be exquisitely balanced. A positive or negative slant will contaminate the result, making it egotistical instead of pure. When we tell our friend "Okay, just go!" we don't really mean it, we really mean "Please stay!" Quitting is the ego's response, and not the heart's. Over the course of the Gita, Arjuna will learn how to take Krishna's impending advice (in II, 3) to "cast off this base faint-heartedness."

36) Having killed the sons of Dhritarashtra, what delight can there be for us? Only sin would come to us after killing this marauding rabble.

While apparently straightforward, there is a lot of subtle confusion evidenced in this verse. Arjuna is ostensibly renouncing

his personal delight, and yet he justifies his attitude here based on that very value. He may be beginning to suspect that his prescribed duty is not designed to produce delight, which is a spiritual state, but exists merely for others to use him as a tool to tinker with the status quo. Yet his inner urge is for happiness, spiritual satisfaction. He needs help in resolving this conflict. Furthermore, he has been inculcated with the unjustified belief that his actions accrue either future merit or demerit, the latter popularly known as sin. While actions definitely do have consequences, there is no celestial scorecard being logged towards a looming Day of Judgment. Krishna will disillusion him of this and many other erroneous beliefs in his upcoming instruction.

As a proper guru, Krishna addresses sin in the Gita because his disciple specifically brings it up. Since it is widely misunderstood, sin is an obsession for many people, and Arjuna is presenting it on everyone's behalf for correction. Gurus have to dispel all the darkness brought to their attention, and we will see how diligently Krishna answers every question Arjuna puts to him as we go along.

The Gita is dealing here with a key factor in the oppression of the human race. Arjuna has been taught to respect all the social strictures and rules of decorum, and that it would be sinful to do away with them, since they have come from something like "God" and are divinely ordained. Societies have often enforced their more or less arbitrary systems with exhortations about hell worlds and sin, casting disobedience as an outrage against everything sacred and a guarantee of doom. The Gita, by contrast, considers socio-religious systems themselves to be stumbling blocks to wisdom and spiritual freedom, repeatedly advocating their ouster from the seeker's orientation.

Most commentators side with Arjuna's confusion in this matter and advocate proper path-following and rule-following behavior, revealing their lack of understanding of the Gita's radical outlook, and furthering the very systematic imprisonment of the spirit the Gita aims to sweep away.

37) And so we ought not to kill the Sons of Dhritarashtra, our relations; for how indeed can we be happy after killing our own people, O Krishna?

Arjuna has been taught that the way to happiness lies in venerating the social order, not abandoning it. He believes that salvation comes through following a well-defined pathway, that of orthodoxy, and he is still identified with it. But confronted as he is by stark reality, his fantasies no longer seem adequate. He needs to discard them and replace them with a more solid framework. It is doubts, much more than convictions, that lead intrepid souls to a search for truth.

In the literal story line we've been observing, Arjuna does not want to defeat his friends. He realizes that "beating" them means losing their love, and possibly their very existence. The paradox clutches at his heart, because he knows the path of happiness does not lie here. But where is it to be found?

In any case, Arjuna is clear that killing is not going to make him happy. This is a logical enough inference, but we will see over the next few verses how he goes from this point of universal agreement to some wildly bizarre assumptions. This is typical of humans. We start with plausible ideas and don't notice when we move away from them into untenable waters, even when we drift far out to sea. The Gita will teach us how to recover our solid ground through diligent contemplation.

Nataraja Guru attributes Arjuna's exaggerated speculation to his relativistic stance, indicated by the phrase "our own people" here and in verse 28. Separating people into *his* and *not-his* is an unwarranted division. Absolutism holds to universal truth, while relativism or dualism can lead us far afield. Therefore yogis do not allow themselves to indulge in relativism. The Guru insists that:

Contemplation is not different from commonsense in its keenness of the sense of the actual. Lazy indifference to

actuality is not the kind of mysticism upheld in the Gita. [It] underlines the need for seeing things as they actually are before the contemplative life is recommended, so that no escapism may be implied in the teaching. (32-3)

Unlike Arjuna here, a yogi is not thrown off balance by circumstances, or at least they are able to minimize their disturbance. If our happiness isn't dependent on external events, our sadness shouldn't be, either. A yogi remains the same, grounded in truth, no matter what happens. Even laughing or crying about it, the yogi's core is not disturbed. This will be homed in on much later in Arjuna's training.

For now we have to move away from the literal interpretation and penetrate to the symbolic meaning. In order to fully appreciate the Gita's teachings, we have to sense that there is an internalizing transition going on here. The focus is fading away from the actual battlefield and moving into the psychological realm. The warriors become symbols of conscious limitations. Most importantly, killing them as people is changing over to killing them as elements of the psyche that inhibit full awareness. The semi-literal cover story becomes a figurative passion play. Nataraja Guru speaks of several curtains or filters that progressively enclose more and more subtle considerations. Only at the very end will we return to the actual battlefield, where we can apply our newfound wisdom to every practical aspect of our life.

The "Sons of Dhritarashtra," then, represent the various conditionings and mental blocks creating mayhem in Arjuna's psyche, epitomized as *desire* in Chapter III. Knowing this, his question in this verse becomes, "How does happiness arise from wiping out the attractions and motivations I have been taught to yearn for and work toward?" In other words, if we turn away from the transactional realm we know so well, what will we find, and will it make us happy? Without a satisfactory answer to this initiating perplexity, a person has no incentive to enter a spiritual path.

The double entendre here about “killing our own people” is usually missed. Arjuna is having recourse to a Guru who will most definitely tell him how happiness does come from “killing” the conditioning laid down in him by his own people. He will show him how it oppresses him and estranges him from his dharma, his authentic self. Arjuna is confused; Krishna is not.

Commentators who believe the killing advocated is of real people are also confused, and they have seriously damaged the Gita’s reputation, converting a paean to peace, justice and living with expertise into a call to slaughter. We will examine this fallacy in detail in a number of places. For now, suffice it to say the Gita advocates kindness to all beings, compassion and non-hurting, among other “wisdom virtues.” It is really a shame that such an unparalleled masterpiece has been shunted to the sidelines by those who insist on a literal interpretation of its symbolic genius.

38) Even if they, whose minds are overpowered by greed, see no wrong in the destruction of family, and no crime in treachery to friends,

Arjuna’s complaint over the next seven verses is often taken as part of the Gita’s gospel, but it is in fact his previously accepted unexamined position that will be subject to radical revision by the Guru Krishna. We can see that Arjuna is cast as being subject to the representative prevailing beliefs of his time. Author Vyasa is saying “Here is a typical human, and what they typically believe.” Fortunately for the relevance of this section, modern attitudes aren’t much different: ancestor worship and divinity worship are the two main strands of religious beliefs of all times. Modern religions cherish their sacred history and immanent mysticism, while science bows to evolution and nature. We all take cognizance of the past and try to make sense of the present based on what we believe about it. It works adequately, until it bumps up against something that reveals its falsehood.

According to Vedanta, Arjuna's position is the anterior skeptic, that is, the starting point of the investigation. The anterior skeptic asks why, and the preceptor offers clarification. Krishna will revise and reevaluate all of Arjuna's assumptions in several ways, with the intention of converting his disciple to a much more liberated viewpoint.

There is so much evidence in our present day of the destructive power of greed that it seems almost ludicrous to discuss it. The political cabals and giant corporate entities that dominate the Earth's power structures are currently rapt in a paroxysm of looting. They see no evil in what they do, because not only are corporations morally blind by law, the psychopaths who gravitate to power positions are neurologically incapable of distinguishing right from wrong. It appears that the entire world economy may well be shattered by unmitigated greed, which will truly be destructive of families and friends in the long run.

Martial law and electronic surveillance of the populace is the logical outcome of the belief in social systems being more important than individual freedom. Human beings have a strong inclination toward repression and setting their power positions in stone, but unchecked power opens a Pandora's box of unintended consequences. Who will watch the watchers is a reasonable question.

Real freedom, certainly, is less about bodily movement than about freedom of thought. Free speech is merely a subset of freedom of thought. While paying lip service to freedom, political and religious leaders preach subservience to binding laws. Contrary to popular misconception, freedom produces artistic beauty in thought and deed; it is the conditioned and constrained soul that has to seek its outlets in crime. Unhappy people sometimes cast about for happiness through unhealthy and even execrable means.

All this we will delve into in due course. The important thing to keep in mind here is that Arjuna has gotten to the point in his development where commonly accepted beliefs are seen to be

contradictory and even hypocritical. They no longer can satisfy him. He wonders where to turn, and miraculously there is a guru close at hand. The invisible hand of Providence is always ready to assist in the next stage of spiritual growth.

39) yet why should we not learn to turn away from this sin—we who do see wrong in the destruction of family?

A very subtle psychology is revealed by close examination of Arjuna's confusion. When we enter a crisis, we cling tenaciously to our models of truth regardless of their relevance. Since we're grasping at straws to ameliorate the danger, when the first straw breaks we flail around for another, and another, and another. As this section unfolds, Arjuna becomes increasingly desperate and melodramatic. He begins with the reasonable premise that the war will quite literally destroy his family, at least a significant part of it. Then step by step he uses ever more ridiculous arguments to prop up his house of cards.

Over the course of our lives we have become supported and cushioned by the myths of the society in which we live. Unable to stand up to rational examination, these are often enforced by threatening concepts like sin. As a child, when I asked my father why some arbitrary rule forbade my doing something, his answer was always "Because I said so!" If I didn't accept it, I would be smacked. The use of force precludes the need to understand, allowing unexamined beliefs to persist. The child learns to self-censor its natural urge to question, and grows up to be a supporter of the prevailing social climate.

Marital relations are likewise often based on mythical assumptions, and a delusional couple does not dare to probe too far into their beliefs, lest they discover they don't actually agree. They live in hope of the apple cart of mutual fantasy never being upset, and when it is they scramble to put it back together and reload it with all the old apples. Only the brave of heart can rejoice that their cart was bound to overturn, and now a new way is open to

them. They leave their rotten apples for compost and look around for fresh produce.

On the literal level, there is a devilish paradox here. The enemy has been busily destroying Arjuna's family for a very long time, and his role is to defend it. Yet the prescribed way to defend it, war, will destroy even more of it. Obviously he will have to seek a new way to remedy matters. As do we.

40) In the destruction of family, the immemorial clan traditions perish, and on the loss of tradition the whole clan comes under the sway of lawlessness.

Now we encounter Arjuna's conservative streak. There is a widespread assumption even today that current social standards are rooted in traditions dating from the beginning of time. Even a casual perusal of history explodes this myth. The world and everyone in it experience continuous change and fluctuating circumstances. Fads come and go. The elders of the tribe aren't upholding immemorial tradition, only their preferred interpretation of it. The "good old days" never were what they claim. Nostalgia for an imaginary past is a sure sign, not that the past was so great, but that we are discontent with the present. And that's perfectly understandable, but there are far better things to do about it than try to reconstruct a vanished and imaginary historical period. We need to resurrect the present, not the past.

Anyone who has lived through an important moment of history knows how impossible it is to describe that moment accurately. Each person has a unique perspective on it, and the whole is vastly more than any fragmentary sum of parts. The victors write history, it is said. Whoever prevails in a conflict or is merely promoted in the communication media has their own description of events ratified by default. Admittedly, myths enshrining a particular interpretation of history have some value in maintaining social coherence, but they mainly serve to keep the

weak subservient to the mythmakers. A spiritual seeker has to call all of them into question.

Behind these conservative attitudes is a lack of faith in the light of the unitive Absolute as a source of inspiration and a guide for life's unfoldment. Creativity springs from the removal of inhibitions and restraints, which allows our inner resources to emerge from the depths. Ordinary conditioned responses to life's challenges act to close off these wellsprings. It's another frustrating paradox that the devout actively block out the divine while piously praising it, substituting familiar imagery for living reality. Fledgling philosophers crave laws set in stone, and learn to mistrust the dictates of the heart. The only article of faith necessary at the outset of a spiritual quest is that there is a guiding light within us that we are going to open our eyes to. It starts as a hypothesis, but one that is soon confirmed by experience. Or else a lucky accident like near death or a psychedelic trip reveals the light right at the start.

Since humans value stability and dread change, tyrants have ever invoked "law and order" to rally the populace to their cause. Their typically egregious behavior is propped up by a widespread fear of lawlessness. We can either have a deranged leader, a blind king perhaps, or be hurled screaming into the void. "You're either with us or against us." Black and white belief-systems leave no healthy option. It appears Arjuna has been conned by this sophistry, still flourishing in the modern world, but now he's beginning to wonder if it's claims are valid or not. His reeling off the prevailing beliefs of his milieu will help the scales fall from his eyes as they prove untenable.

Contrary to Arjuna's fears, the aftermath of war appears to be the time when sanity is most likely to prevail in public affairs. International pacts—related to the Latin pax, or peace—succeed every bloodbath. The League of Nations was formed after World War I, the United Nations in the wake of World War II. Immediately after the Vietnam War, the last attempt to reign in the United States secretive military-industrial complex brought legal

restrictions that held up for a decade or two. Unfortunately, these cautious steps in the right direction seldom have a lasting impact. As long as citizens willingly surrender their independence to their leaders, this dismal state of affairs will persist.

This pattern can be discerned in many places. Regarding marital relations, for instance, in the midst of a disadoption or breakup everything appears to collapse. It can be painful in the extreme, but it is also liberating. It is a golden opportunity when static forms fall apart to permit regeneration, either with the old partner or perhaps not. Whatever the eventual outcome, this is the time for serious personal reassessment, perhaps along the lines of Krishna's yoga instruction, which will soon make its appearance.

41) When wrong ways prevail, O Krishna, the women of the family become corrupt, and when women become corrupt, mixing of clans arises.

Now Arjuna progressively abandons all good sense. First he assumes that if his traditions are wiped away, their replacement will inevitably be terrible. This is a pure presumption, springing from his fear of the unknown. As noted above, traditions are created to support a static view of the present, usually benefiting the dominant interests, so they are often more a curse than a blessing. Breaking out of them allows more individual freedom, which leads to a healthier community.

Arjuna continues to struggle with his beliefs here, like a snake slowly shedding a skin that's too tight. He imagines that if women dare to marry out of their tribe, it is a form of corruption, even if there are no men from their own tribe left alive. He has been taught that the mixing of tribes is evil. The genetic facts that species are strengthened by diversity and weakened by inbreeding hasn't percolated into Arjuna's awareness yet. Worst of all, he blames women for all the corruption, even though the need for it was brought about by men in the first place.

Implicit as well is the outdated assumption that war is wholly the domain of males. At the time of the battle of Kurukshetra, the tactic of civilians being legitimate targets in warfare was still two thousand years in the future. Women were thus left over after a war. They would either have to marry the victors or die, as they couldn't be permitted to live alone.

As a corrective, the Gita will proclaim a transcendent vision of the unity of the human species that has been echoed by generations of sages and recently become scientifically confirmed by the human genome project. The Gita definitively states (IX, 32) that women and members of all levels of society, including the most humble, can attain realization of the highest truth, which acknowledges their equal status as infinitely capable beings.

We now know that humanity is a single "clan" or family descended from a common ancestor about 50,000 years ago, though with plenty of superficial diversity due to local variations. Every war is thus a civil war. Nor is there necessarily any "corruption" of women possible, so long as they are given free choice in the matter. Mating across the entire spectrum is not only perfectly normal, but is healthy for many reasons. Provincial attitudes like the ones Arjuna is repeating have consigned women to second class status for millennia, despite the Gita's sincere effort to end the problem.

We live in a time of a great "mixing of clans," where the branches of the human race are sharing their DNA far and wide. This can only benefit genetic diversity, producing new forms of genius along with fewer distinctions for making out an enemy.

In this section, Vyasa is not presenting timeless truths to be upheld, but the foundation of sexism and provincialism prevailing in Arjuna's day. That most societies still suffer from these ills is partly due to inertia, but must also be blamed on generations of commentators who used Arjuna's pleading to reinforce their delusory attitudes instead of following the Gita's advice and discarding them. Little wonder that 'pundit' has become a derisive term, though it was not so originally.

42) This mixing leads (both the) family and the destroyers of the family to hell, for their ancestors fall when deprived of their offering of rice balls and water rites.

Arjuna's religious training is increasingly shown to be absurd. We should be able to hear Vyasa laughing uproariously in the background. Oceans of ink have been spilled to justify such religious references, but the point is to make fun of these outmoded (even by 500 BCE) practices, not to support them. That modern humans cling to such absurdities is tragic and humorous at the same time. There is humor in the illusory fulfillment to be gotten from arbitrary beliefs, and the tragedy comes when such beliefs inevitably lead generation after generation into abject misery, by fostering misguided pursuits up to and including warfare.

The Gita does not support the idea of hell, beyond the negative effects of a person's actions. Its three worlds are heaven (or the beyond), earth, and in between. Heaven and hell are psychological states of existence in the present, not the future.

43) By these misdeeds of the destroyers of families, causing intermixture of clans, the immemorial traditions of clan and family are destroyed.

Arjuna's desperation is reaching a peak, as he spirals down to the negative limit of psychic despair. He lashes out with ridiculous imaginings, which are—not coincidentally—the bedrock beliefs of his very conservative society. Author Vyasa is not just making fun of these notions, he is setting them up to be reassessed and revalued over the course of the Gita.

An example of the failure to understand that these verses express the uninstructed, confused attitude of upholders of caste and other destructive beliefs is found in Eric J. Sharpe's *A Universal Gita* (Open Court Pub. Co., La Salle, Ill., 1985) p. 162:

There are passages in the Gita which speak as clearly as one can imagine of the necessity of observing one's own specific caste duty. It is better to perform the duty of one's own caste badly than another's duty well. To confuse castes leads to the most horrendous consequences, even to the extent of women being debauched and the ancestors toppling out of heaven, deprived of their offerings of food and drink....There can be no two opinions: the Gita does indeed advocate caste and uphold the notion of caste law.

Well, there *are* at least two opinions. With the exception of the second sentence in the above quote, which refers obliquely to III, 35 and XVIII, 47, all these points are stated by Arjuna right here as a seeker who has come up against the limitations of the beliefs he was taught by his society. He is turning to Krishna to resolve these issues, and Krishna is going to—by sweeping them all away as relativistic drivel.

One can readily understand that at first blush these verses do appear to support Sharpe's opinion, which is very widely held. However, it is unconscionable that a commentator should fail to bring enough insight to the task as to see that the Gita clearly and unequivocally treats such beliefs as ignoble stumbling blocks to a proper spiritual orientation.

44) Men of families whose clan traditions are destroyed are destined to live in hell—thus we have heard.

By saying "Thus we have heard," Arjuna makes it clear that the ideas he has been reeling off are all things he has been taught. He is questioning the value of his religious beliefs, as anyone should who is caught in a dire emergency. From here on he will couch his despair in more philosophic terms, which is a prerequisite for asking for the aid of a guru. First a seeker must realize that they are caught, which occasions a substantial degree of despair. Then they must assess their own limitations, and the

limits of what they have been taught. Only then are they fit to approach a guru.

Those whose lives have collapsed through divorce, bankruptcy, criminal activity and the like, are in a state of hellishness, no doubt about it. The misery of their state is in direct proportion to how hard they cling to the familiarity of the past. Life is forever opening up new venues, if we can but see them, but we perversely want to promulgate the old, even when it proves disastrous. If we cannot adapt to and even promote new circumstances, we will be consigned to live in the hell world of those whose hopes don't match their actualities. And no amount of wishful thinking is going to restore what has already passed away.

The key quality for excellence in a disciple is the ability to ask good questions. In the Indian model, at least, the sishya or student is required to ask well-considered questions of the teacher. The teacher or Guru is merged in contemplation of the Absolute, and so only responds when a disciple draws them out. The image often invoked is of a milkmaid milking the great divine Cow that supplies all nourishment. You must pull on the udder to get the nourishing milk of wisdom. If you don't pull, the milk stays where it is, out of reach. Pondering deeply in order to come up with a germane question is the sacred duty of the sishya. Guru and sishya are therefore locked in a dialectical, reciprocal dance, and one is not superior to the other. Both are equally nourished in the process of question and answer. Arjuna is moving rapidly toward the moment when he will offer himself to Krishna as just such a seeker of truth. The "thus we have heard" also shows he is separating himself from what he has been taught, and is becoming prepared to learn intensely through alert questioning of his teacher.

45) Alas! A great sin are we engaged in committing in endeavoring to kill our own people through greed for the pleasures of kingdom!

Because Arjuna speaks of sin in his pained outburst, pundits through the ages have taught that the Gita treats sin as a great evil, and something to be avoided. In Chapter V, verse 15, Krishna says, “The all-pervading One takes cognizance neither of the sinful nor the meritorious actions of anyone,” which should be taken as the Gita’s final say in the matter. Arjuna is still correct that killing is evil of course, within the horizontal, social milieu in which he is presently bound, but Krishna is going to draw him out of the limited context to one that is infinitely vast and unlimited. Moral codes are only appropriate for social interaction. Arjuna’s greatness has led him to need to incorporate the transcendental—here represented by the person of Krishna—into his world. As of yet he does not know how to infuse his present circumstances with a cosmic perspective. He is truly caught in the toils of necessity.

46) It would be better for me if the Sons of Dhritarashtra, arms in hand, should kill me, unarmed and unresisting, in the battle.

The section bringing Chapter I to a close presents a wonderful example of how rational, linear thinking can take the seeker far afield. Arjuna is now so confused he would rather die than act normally, even to defend his own life. It is crucial to remember that he began his train of reasoning from a shaky premise, which has now led him to all sorts of unwarranted conclusions. He based his ideas on unquestioned attitudes passed on to him by society, along with his direct perception of objects and actions. Such logical but futile thought patterns are plentiful in our day as well. They actually serve well enough in everyday, material matters, but fall short in the domain of the mind and spirit, such as in contemplation, where we seek to rise above mundane considerations. The Gita will counter this ordinary and unexamined process with dialectic reasoning, which it sometimes calls yoga or else merely implies by the juxtaposition of opposites in the text. Where linear thinking can lead one astray, dialectics converges on a central truth value. Because Arjuna is evolving

from an ordinary bumbling mortal into a contemplative seeker of truth, he is ready to incorporate this higher form of reasoning into his arsenal of mind-weapons. A full appreciation of dialectics will emerge gradually from a study of the Gita as a whole.

47) Sanjaya said:

Thus having spoken in the midst of the battle, Arjuna sat down in his chariot seat, casting away his bow and arrow, his mind overwhelmed with sorrow.

Being moderately upset just won't launch you properly onto the spiritual path. Arjuna is now seriously miserable, which gives him the energy to break out of his dilemma. Symbolically he drops his weaponry, the tools of his trade, which he will equally symbolically pick back up at the end of the Gita, when he is ready to carry on with his life as a fully instructed disciple. A seeker must take a break from their routine—no matter what it is—in order to plumb the depths. The Bhagavad Gita is an eighteen chapter lacuna in the epic Mahabharata, a break which transforms Arjuna from a seeker into a seer.

In summation, most people lose themselves in their allotted role in life. When asked “Who are you?” they answer “I’m a student,” or a housewife or a middle executive or a bricklayer. They become intimately identified with their role. Only when the chips are down and the situation becomes charged with tension and unhappiness will they question this identification. It is important for us to discover that we are much more than what we do, what we enjoy, and even what we know.

Our first response to excessive stress is generally to want to run away from it. Arjuna contemplates a noble escape, desiring to become a religious renunciate. In our day the more usual options are to throw ourselves into work, be entertained, or use stress-relieving drugs. None of these is sufficient by itself to reveal the Absolute, the core truth of our inner being.

Whatever the chosen escape, Krishna will point out that it is dishonorable. It doesn't make the grade. The only valid option is to stand and face the music. While he appears to be exhorting Arjuna to literally fight in the next chapter, this is only because Arjuna is indeed a warrior in an actual war. It is not meant as an exhortation to fight per se, but only to do what is appropriate. Krishna first counsels action in tune with one's role in life. If that is not satisfactory—and for a sincere seeker it seldom is—then one should go beyond to become what the Gita sees as the optimal choice. It is unequivocally recommended at the end of Chapter VI that Arjuna should become a yogi.