

CHAPTER III: Karma Yoga

Unitive Action

Karma means action; karma yoga is unitive action. How reason and action can be harmonized so that each benefits the other is a major theme of the Gita. Crafting a life without forethought is bound to create serious problems, while wisdom without its practical application has no value. Wisdom may even be defined as the expert attunement of reason or thought with action. We must keep in mind that reason in the Gita includes vastly more than the linear rationality it is often limited to in the West.

It is quite common for neophytes to believe that spiritual wisdom and action are distinct and separate categories, and that action must be curtailed to make room for wisdom. When the duties of everyday life impinge on our peace of mind, we often imagine that if only we could get away from our problems, we could be more spiritual. Many popular spiritual pathways are designed to minimize activity in order to free the psyche. The Gita does not accept this as anything more than wishful thinking. Activity is not only crucial to a healthy life, it is unavoidable. Thought being unconnected to action can even be dangerous, allowing wild fantasies to plague the mind and lure it into seductive sidetracks. The mind is much more stable when it is grounded in action. So we should treat the conflicts we find ourselves facing not as obstacles to be evaded, but as opportunities to refine our behavior.

The aim of yoga is to optimize action with intelligence in the service of liberation on all levels, and the practice goes both ways: action must be infused with intelligence, and insight needs practical situations for its unfoldment. Happily enough, with the right attitude meaningful chances to perform karma yoga will continuously present themselves to us. Over the next several chapters Arjuna will be led into the subtleties of this radical approach to life.

1) Arjuna said:

If you are of the opinion, O Krishna, that reason is superior to action, why then in an action that is ghastly do you enjoin me?

Arjuna doesn't quite get it yet. After all, he is just beginning to digest Krishna's teachings. Ultimately the Gita is equal-minded about reason and action, considering both important. They are two ends of the same pole, and both are necessary to a balanced life. However, in II, 49 Krishna did make reason sound more attractive than unreflective action, so Arjuna is not totally off the mark. After all, generations of readers have mistakenly perceived the Gita as prescribing ghastly action. It is widely viewed as the scripture that advocates war. Sorting this out will take some serious analysis.

It is not the least unusual for beginning disciples to see a reflection of their own attitudes in the teachings of the guru. Even though Arjuna is striving to listen and learn, he has to use his own modeling to engage with Krishna's explanations. He is being a proper disciple in asking incisive questions, and he will pay close attention to the answers. The subtly nuanced interchange is indicative of the developing bipolarity between seeker and preceptor.

2) By words that appear to be mixed up you seem to confound my reasoning. Tell me, after taking a decision, of that one (way) by which I may obtain merit.

Arjuna is confounded because Krishna's reasoning is of a higher order than his. Like most people, Arjuna's reasoning is based on a number of unexamined assumptions that will turn out to be false under close scrutiny. The guru's primary task is to reveal the weakness in any and all unwarranted assumptions so that the disciple will no longer lean on them for support. The transition from falsehood to truth, from presumption to solid grounding, is

bound to be unsettling and somewhat confusing, since there is always a tendency for us to cling to the familiar.

Yoga requires a more open way of thinking. To bring it into being our neurons have to forge new connections and decommission old ones, and it takes time for the new system to become functional. In between there is bound to be a measure of uncertainty.

It's good to be confused, good to wonder, good to have more things to investigate, because it facilitates change. Confusion and wondering are a normal part of the process of opening up to larger and larger concepts. The ego, however, is afraid of appearing uncertain, so it can easily become an impediment to growth. It needs to be mollified so it can let go of its favored territory and support the transformative process.

Arjuna is clearly aware of his confusion, and reiterates his supplication for instruction, which is exactly the right thing to do. Since he is not yet enlightened, he couches his request in terms of merit, implying the dualism of better and worse. This does not mean that the Gita is in favor of merit—not at all. The Gita propounds a much more efficient method of decision making than basing it on hypothetical brownie points. In verse II, 50, Krishna clearly stated the yogic position: “Affiliated to reason one leaves behind here both meritorious and unmeritorious deeds.” In V, 15 he will say, “The all-pervading One takes cognizance neither of the sinful nor the meritorious actions of anyone.” We will go further into the subject of merit then. For now, suffice to say that Arjuna does not yet fully comprehend unitive action, so he is still thinking in terms of merit. Getting over it will demand a long struggle.

3) Krishna said:

There are two kinds of discipline in this world, as declared in ancient times by Me, O sinless One—the unitive way of wisdom of the samkhyas and the unitive way of action of the yogis.

The original dichotomy of the human plane of existence is knowledge (or thought) and action. Action is primarily visible, while thought is invisible. In modern terms we refer to the division as between physical and metaphysical, scientific and philosophic, or materialist and spiritual. No matter what names we give them, one without the other is a recipe for disaster, as has been proven over and over throughout history. People all too often act without adequate reflection, and just as often retreat into sterile modes of thought when action is called for. Krishna began his teaching with a broad overview of these two categories, and now they will be examined in depth. Chapter II presented them each in general terms, and the next two chapters will ostensibly tackle them separately. In the Gita's final analysis they are aspects of a unified vision, but for the purposes of discussion it is helpful to split them apart before bringing them back together.

Daniel Siegel, in *Mindsight* (New York: Bantam Books, 2010) writes about when he was in medical school, and helped a patient emerge from depression over the serious disease he had contracted, simply by supplying him additional information. His supervisor took him aside and chastised him, telling him, "If you want to be a real doctor, you need to stick to the physical." Siegel notes that the situation today has markedly improved, with medical school offering at least a smattering of information about empathy and stress reduction. The reality of the mind is no longer in question. This is a highly practical example of how unitive action has crept into the medical profession, erasing the thick line once drawn between emotions and the body, between the mind and the brain. While distinct, they depend on each other and affect each other dramatically; therefore they must be taken together, as a whole and not as isolated parts. Our physical health most assuredly benefits from improved mental health, and vice versa.

The reference to ancient times tips us off that the Gita is reevaluating the old dichotomy of thought and action in unitive terms. The upcoming section on Prajapati similarly presents the traditional commonsense attitude and then upgrades it to a more

sublime level. Krishna, as a superb teacher, carefully begins from the mentality of ordinary thinking and then shows where it has to go to be converted to wisdom.

4) By refraining from initiating activities a person does not come to have the attainment of transcending action, nor can one by renunciation alone come to perfection.

Transcending action, a common fantasy of many religions, is discredited by the Gita in no uncertain terms. On first blush, it does seem a simple solution to the problem of liberation from bondage: if you don't do anything, nothing can go wrong. Too bad not doing anything is impossible, as explained in the next verse. And, of course, many things can go wrong when a person fails to heed a valid call to action, as with Arjuna at the outset of the Gita. If you're parked on the train tracks, you'd better move your pickup truck before the 5:09 comes barreling through!

The Gita teaches the dynamic integration of action and wisdom, or the horizontal and vertical aspects of the total knowledge situation, as Nataraja Guru would say. Integration of thought and action is the key to creative, expert activity, meaning nothing less than the ability to act outside of conventional boundaries of every type. Daniel Siegel agrees from the medical standpoint, asserting (p. 55) that integration is at the heart of well-being.

5) Not even for a single instant can one ever remain engaged in no action at all. By virtue of modalities born from nature, all are made to engage in action helplessly.

So, you've gotten to a secluded spot far from civilization. You've had a good meal and hung your mosquito netting over a smooth rock. You sit there. At last there won't be any activity to distract you! You can commune with God! This is the moment you've been waiting for.

Not so. Activity still continues, albeit on a quieter level. All the while you continue to breathe and digest and perspire and shift your position. Soon your nose itches and your legs ache. Thoughts, a subtle form of action, continually come. You can stop them briefly with active suppression, but they spring back stronger than ever. Now, darn it, you have to pee.

Many religions offer hypnotic autosuggestion techniques at this point to “still” the mind, counting beads or chanting mantras and so on. Generally they are nothing mystical, but merely repetitive activities, which our minds, geared as they are to notice changes in the sensory environment, rapidly inure to. For awhile they might distract you, and they can even produce unusual states of mind, but the rishis do not consider them spiritual. They are beside the point, even contrary to it. The aim is to achieve an alert mentality, not a stupefied one.

This is not to say that setting aside some time for meditation at the outset isn't beneficial. Necessities can certainly get in the way, presenting an endless stream of petty problems to be dealt with. You have to break out a place apart, step out of the war zone of life and into a sheltered nook where you can ponder wisdom in the company of your teacher or with helpful books. Once you are familiar with an inwardly focused mind, you have to develop steadiness to carry the meditative state into your everyday activity. Then life's incidents become part of the solution instead of adding to the confusion: opportunities to put your spiritual growth into practice. This will be dealt with in more detail as we proceed.

Imagining that there is a goal shimmering in the future, a perfect moment to be attained, instead of continuously participating in an endless flow of perfect moments in the present, is a common misunderstanding. The Gita will suggest setting aside a place for an open form of meditation, simple yet profound, in Chapter VI, and provide plenty of tips for controlling the wandering mind, in the early going especially.

Centering of consciousness is the essence of all meditations, but the Gita avoids self-hypnosis and espouses a

“wisdom sacrifice” of contemplation coupled with an active, vital engagement with life in all its vicissitudes. The yoga of the Gita produces clarity coupled with aliveness. There is no presumption that life is a disease for which meditation is the cure. Meditation is a way of becoming more attuned and more adept at living. Yoga dialectics—the active uniting of opposites—is the Gita’s primary technique.

6) He who sits controlling the organs of activity while ruminating mentally over items of sensuous interest—such a lost soul is said to be one of spurious conduct.

The most common error of religious aspirants is to take the instructions of their faith literally and outwardly conform to them. They believe that by “being good” they will get right with God or get to heaven or whatever. Inwardly they are unreformed, but they force their persona, their social mask, to follow the dictates they aspire to, so that they appear holy to their compatriots. Krishna is wise to warn Arjuna of this foible early in his course of instruction.

We call such people as described in this verse hypocrites, but it is easier and not at all uncommon to begin one’s path by imitation of an ideal rather than by grasping the subtleties of the unitive state all at once. A seeker doesn’t truly become a hypocrite until the imitation becomes fixed in place. A guru can help a lot here, by not allowing the disciple to become complacent or idolatrous. Sometimes they can be rather fierce about it, offering an aggressively moving target that parries every attempt to arrive at a simplistic resting place.

Holiness in the religious context is often a euphemism for the derangement produced by suppression of healthy, natural inclinations and needs. To outward appearance such “lost souls” are well behaved and intense, even to the point of appearing “spiritual.” The inner struggle to maintain control is largely invisible, until it bursts forth like a volcanic eruption. Wars such as

the one raging around Arjuna and Krishna are an explosive release from repression, which accounts for their popularity.

Another way the seething anger of repression manifests is through public hatred of what the “holy” person secretly desires. Self-righteous types commonly release their pent up hostility on those of “loose morals,” which is what they desperately want to have too. Their morals are crying out to be loosened. Since they have denied enjoyment to themselves, and suffered mightily in the process, they howl with rage when someone else refuses to perform the same auto-castration. Their rage is magnified by doubt, since God doesn’t seem to be punishing the miscreants. (The doubts come from the psychic system trying to rebalance itself, but such people don’t dare admit to even having doubts—it would impute a lack of faith.) This leads to the further humiliating behavior of putatively spiritual people being harshly delighted at the sufferings of others, because they imagine God is finally ratifying their derangement. All too often found in the pulpit, or the bully pulpit of political office, these are truly lost souls, who substitute loud noise and aggression for wisdom. Their conduct is spurious in the extreme: a sham put on for the benefit of others, usually to con them one way or another, often accompanied by strong desires to inflict pain and suffering.

Mere socialized behavior even outside the religious context wields the same repressed resentments. Citizens are invariably shocked when their well-behaved and seemingly “normal” neighbors release their repressions by shooting up a shopping center or joining a lynching party or some other mob. Atheists and agnostics are by no means exempt from having disproportionately negative reactions to perceived faults in other people. The best recourse is to remember to focus any criticism primarily on your own shortcomings, and to try to give the other person the benefit of the doubt. Jesus put this idea beautifully in his parable of the mote and beam, which appears in both Matthew and Luke:

And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but perceivest not the beam that is in thine own eye?

Either how canst thou say to thy brother, Brother, let me pull out the mote that is in thine eye, when thou thyself beholdest not the beam that is in thine own eye? Thou hypocrite, cast out first the beam out of thine own eye, and then shalt thou see clearly to pull out the mote that is in thy brother's eye. (Luke 6:41 & 42)

True holiness, though it should never be called that, is the incidental outgrowth of profound understanding, of a direct appreciation of the Absolute. There is no forcing or fakery involved, and the benign activity is wholly natural. When the connection with the Absolute is there, “all things are added unto you,” as the Bible puts it. Speaking of the Bible, the Tower of Babel is a symbolic story of how constructing an artificial edifice (a hypocritical persona) to try to reach heaven inevitably breaks down sooner or later. When we are not integrated we inevitably dis-integrate.

7) He, on the other hand, who keeps the senses under control by means of the mind, then commences unitive activity while still unattached—he excels.

The Gita keeps everything in balance all through, so after railing against hypocrites in the previous verse, Krishna immediately provides the antidote. In place of either wanton behavior or the active suppression of activity, the mind is used to dialectically sublimate the inner urges, redirecting the energy to an intelligently selected purpose. Unattached unitive activity means you act according to the situation and your dharma, without selfishness and without imagining what the outcome might be. Expectations about the outcome block you from acting as freely as the changing situation may require. If you can break free of all those impediments, your actions will truly excel.

Selfishness and expectations go hand in hand, and neither is necessarily conscious. Unconscious selfishness includes the way suppressed traumas impel us to unwittingly turn away from the best choices, guarding and blocking any number of valid alternatives. Expectations also generate a great deal of energy below the radar, emerging into consciousness in veiled or distorted fashion. It takes determined contemplation to recognize how these obstacles impede the free flow of our intelligence, which alone gives us the incentive to sublimate them.

Contemplation and sublimation are more effective in the presence of conflict than its absence. It is a mistake to postpone these practices until the waves on the pond die down.

For those of us who are not monks or nuns, our lives must be lived even while we are still works in progress. We suppose we should become fully knowledgeable before taking action, but the truth is we will never figure things out completely. Sooner or later we have to shake off our doubts and plunge in. There is not just one right way, there is the way we go. Right and wrong are tangential, incidental, and inevitable. Life is not a problem to be solved but an adventure to be lived.

Mistakes, too, are inevitable. Often we make them despite our best intentions, and we should not be afraid to admit what we've done. We will not go to hell for them, but if we anxiously cover them up we will be cursed with a hellish state of mind. If we can put ethical matters in their proper perspective, it will be much easier to repair our inadvertent transgressions. It's the inner child's dread of punishment that foists good versus evil dualism onto natural, unitive behavior.

What science has discovered is that our brains learn more by making mistakes and then correcting for them, than from straightforward good intentions. That means we should welcome mistakes as learning opportunities instead of shrinking from them as inviting suffering. This also shows how wrongheaded punishment is, especially for well-intentioned mistakes, training us

to avoid the very things that help us to grow. No wonder the human race is in such a mess!

Nitya Chaitanya Yati laughingly relayed some thoughts on mistake making from two gurus, in *That Alone*, p. 680:

We should see the light side of life rather than becoming so grumpy about everything. If you make a mistake it's because Mother Nature wants you to make it. So don't have any sense of guilt, make your mistakes gladly. If you don't make little mistakes, God will call out to you: "Fool! I gave you a chance. I sent you to the world, and you didn't make any mistake. Stupid! Get out!" If you are here in this world, make some mistakes. Maya is sitting there and asking us to do all these things. Nataraja Guru used to tell us in the Gurukula that we should make interesting mistakes, not stupid or clumsy ones. Whatever mistakes you make should be very clever and interesting.

Fritz Peters tells a great story about Gurdjieff. At his school one time he had to be away for a few days, so he put a trustworthy woman in charge in his absence. On his return she showed him a little black book in which she had kept track of all the offenses the students had committed. It was quite a long list. To everyone's surprise, Gurdjieff took out his wallet and started giving each one money, paying so much per offense. Fritz had been at the top of the list so he got the most money, but he was ashamed to spend it, feeling the old woman had been let down. She had carefully chronicled all the crimes, and now Gurdjieff was giving everyone presents for their mistakes. But Gurdjieff said life was like that, and if you didn't make mistakes life would never be interesting.

A lot more will be said about unitive action—one of the Gita's main themes—over the course of the work. This is only the beginning of Krishna's instruction on the matter. In the early chapters the emphasis is more on crude problems like hypocrisy, while as we attain to the heights of the arch the teaching becomes more and more refined.

It is interesting to note the parallel between verses 62-65 in Chapter II and 6-7 here. They cover basically the same subject with the same negative-positive dialectic presentation, but we have moved up a notch in subtlety. I recommend taking a moment to read them both over in the Verses Only section.

8) Do engage yourself in action that is necessary; activity is indeed better than non-activity, and even the bodily life of yours would not progress satisfactorily through non-action.

There is a whole school of thought that believes if you don't do anything, nothing bad can happen to you. Krishna does not agree. Inaction leads to stagnation, and then the system begins to break down. Our bodies, including the brain, are designed to thrive on feedback and stimulation, including exercise. The Gita's yoga aims to hone in on acting with expertise by minimizing distractions. It does not ask us to avoid life's bounteous invitations to evolve.

Humans mainly stumble forward impelled by necessary actions, meeting problems only as they arise, in the "crisis management" mode. Only at rare moments do contemplative intelligence and a significant course of action become joined, which produces a quantum leap of creativity. Otherwise we employ a kind of "unnatural selection" of more or less successful responses to emergencies. For the Tao or evolution to felicitously unfold, we should at the very least respond optimally to necessary demands made by the environment. Once we become expert in unitive action, we can chart our own course above and beyond the dictates of necessity.

There is nothing "unspiritual" in living our personal life with a modicum of preparedness and foresight, warding off future complications. Unfortunately, contemplatively-inspired thinking has a low status in the public arena at present. In the political realm, for example, those who seek to avert disasters in advance are considered "naysayers" and marginalized or even turned out of

office. It doesn't seem to matter how obvious or essential the impending problems are, they haven't arrived yet so they don't exist. Only when they finally do arrive is there concerted action, by then possibly futile or at least much more demanding.

In the Gita's day, fasting and other extreme forms of self-abnegation were widely practiced. The idea was if you totally suppress or even destroy the self, whatever is left will be free from the demands of necessity. These extreme practices sometimes produced forms of delirium that the gullible might mistake for possession by the gods. Mainly they weaken the body and invite illness. Being sick or weak from hunger is about as distracting from contemplation as you can get. Hence Krishna's advice, which doesn't sound especially foreign to us moderns: take care of your body and it will take care of you. Ignore it and it will keep you riveted to its aches and pains. Don't go to extremes of either indulgence or abnegation; find the balanced, middle way.

Moderation in renunciation will be addressed in detail toward the end of the work, but the Gita is unequivocal from start to finish that yoga in the best way to become a full participant in life. Tuning out is considered at the very least a waste of our potential.

9) Outside of activity with a sacrificial purpose, this world is bound by action. Even with such a purpose, do engage in work, O Arjuna, freed of all attachments.

Here we encounter Krishna's first mention of the broad subject known as sacrifice. As with much of the Gita's wisdom, it goes against the grain of popular understanding. To the casual contemplative, sacrifice calls up religious ceremonies, offerings placed in a fire, giving things away or giving up enjoyable activities. Throughout the next two chapters, Krishna will refine the idea of sacrifice to bring it in line with unitive action. If we look carefully at this verse, he is saying that sacrificial acts are those that are not driven by necessity in the way the rest of our actions are.

Most of our behavior is more or less obligatory. Bodily activity such as breathing, digesting, sensing, or nurturing a fetus goes on continuously with little or no volitional involvement on our part. These are mandatory actions that we can't avoid even if we try. Social demands such as one's role in a family or tribe, job requirements, and upkeep and presentation of the body are a bit more flexible, but can only be curtailed at a significant price. They are quasi-mandatory actions, often involving explicit or implicit quid pro quo. Thus nearly everyone is constrained to carry out all sorts of behaviors. Sacrificial action, on the other hand, is that which is performed freely, solely at the individual's discretion. This is the arena where choices can affect the trajectory of life dramatically, either toward or away from bondage.

Most of what is usually thought of as sacrifice falls under the semi-mandatory category. Religions enjoin us to do certain activities aimed at a god or gods, in order to bring about anticipated results. We may also be pressured by the threat of divine retribution or hell, or we may have become convinced by others that such activities are the way to become spiritual. There is an implied contract in all such actions: if I do this I'll get that particular benefit from it. The Gita takes great pains to redirect the seeker away from this type of superstitious, goal-oriented sacrifice toward a truly noncontractual way of life.

Imagine for a moment that you are a king, or even a god. What would please you more, that your supplicants kowtow to you according to strict rules laid down and enforced by other people, or that they address you in a spontaneous manner, of their own volition? In the first case they are being forced to do it, while in the second they are doing it out of genuine respect. Clearly the latter is much more meaningful and valuable, unless you are a tin pot dictator afraid of losing your untenable position.

We must be on guard to avoid stereotyped ideas about sacrifice and remember to read it as "freely chosen activity." This is to be transferred to how we interact with the world as well as in our private creative life. Instead of following rules of good conduct

or polite conversation, behaving the way we “ought” to behave, if we can learn to express ourselves without conditioning, directly, out of our unique and sovereign nature, we will be connected with the onrushing wave of Life with a capital L. Krishna’s teaching is all about how this can be accomplished.

Anger and harsh reactivity are perfect examples of how our conditionings and attachments produce unhappiness. There are times when anger is a legitimate response to the situation, and others when it is an exaggerated, conditioned reflex, but we have learned to repress both kinds equally. Even when anger is a genuine reaction to something stupid or harmful, the invisible hand of our parents and teachers reaches out of the past to tell us no, it’s bad to get angry. We must stifle our emotions. Between our honest feelings and our self-generated suppression of them, we naturally feel conflicted. Often there is a sense of shame too, which is a replay of how we felt as children in such situations. Remember how your cheeks burned when you were humiliated for doing something exciting and innocent that was officially frowned on? It was precisely because you didn’t think what you did was wrong at the time. It felt unjust and arbitrary to be punished for your openness, as indeed it was.

This suppression of personal authenticity is our common plight as civilized humans, and it is exactly the recurrent conflict that the Gita seeks to disentangle us from. If we’re less conditioned than most, we may still be aware of the upsurge of righteous feelings within us, but then we immediately bottle them up. Very often we feel guilty about even having them. Those feelings are not approved! Bad boy! Bad girl!

Freud was right that as we “mature” we take over the job of self-policing from our parents and teachers. A socially “healthy” adult has an active superego so that everyone can leave them to their own devices, safe in the knowledge that they will behave themselves according to conventional standards. The “healthiest” ones hardly notice their true feelings at all any more.

In order for us to trust ourselves enough to produce authentic expressions again, we need to turn away from the socially conditioned world to the much vaster realm of the spirit, the divinity within us. The Gita's recommendation is to learn to see the Absolute in everything and everyone. This frees us from the fear that our natural tendencies will be bad or evil. Freud's great failing was to accept the Judeo-Christian view that our true nature is evil and must be beaten out of us, and so to treat suppression as necessary. The Gita celebrates the spirit of life as neutral yet full of beauty, something that should be promoted rather than eradicated. Insight into this benevolent part of our own nature is a tremendous relief, in that all our self-denial can begin to be mitigated. As it is withdrawn, our naturally loving and compassionate essences flood back in to assume their rightful place in our life.

The dialectical balancing of control versus no control is the key to this opening up process. Our spontaneous reactions are routinely stifled by the controlling side of the mind. A yogi should step back and examine the situation contemplatively, perceiving that neither of these by itself is adequate, but some kind of dynamic equipoise can bring about the ideal response. A wholly unmonitored reaction invites an equal or greater negative reaction in the other party, and a stifled reaction produces heartburn and all the other symptoms of a repressed personality. Finding a balanced synthesis is the Gita's way out of all such impossible conundrums, and it is filled with advice on how to accomplish this.

Once you regain balance in your life, the anger inside dissipates. It turns out that anger builds up from the very act of stifling yourself and frustrating your expression. Once the dam is breached you will begin to discover that your reactions are more compassionate and more in tune with positive solutions. The desire to self-censor can be eased off simultaneously. This most definitely leads to a happier life.

10) In ancient times, having created the peoples with sacrifice as pertaining to them (necessarily), Prajapati said: “By this shall you grow and multiply; let this be to you the milch-cow of all desires.

This verse begins a section where the Guru Krishna recalls the ancient wisdom of Prajapati, the primordial Lord of All Creatures. Most commentators take it as yet more injunctions of the Gita, but it is not. One must carefully read Krishna’s comments at the end of the section, in 16-19, where he makes it clear this is *not* his recommendation, though it is good enough as far as it goes. Prajapati is brought in to present the dualistic, pre-Gita idea of sacrifice, as a more or less physical ritual to unite men and gods, which is the commonly accepted version followed unquestioningly even today by many Hindus. The Gita is going to revise it significantly for the serious seeker of truth.

Right away we get an opportunity to remind ourselves that sacrifice is freely chosen activity, and not some arcane ritual from the distant past. It is not a prescribed outer action but an inner attitude of personal integrity that is rarely found in socialized human beings.

We have to turn the order of the verse around to catch its drift: Whatever causes us to grow and multiply, in other words to expand our consciousness, is sacrifice. In the next chapter a number of types of sacrifice, ranging from mindless to mindful, is delineated. Rote, repetitive activity may have some effect of freeing consciousness, but the Gita’s highest recommendation is the wisdom sacrifice, where intelligence is intensely focused to probe the mysteries of life. As we investigate the Unknown with an open mind, it gradually reveals its secrets. There is apparently no end to the human potential to learn more and more about our infinite universe and how to relate to it.

The laws of nature are grounded in reciprocity, and this section featuring Prajapati elaborates how it works. It’s important to realize there is a coherence to life, that it doesn’t just exist in a vacuum where what we do can be detached from its effects. Life is

not a heap of distinct grains of sand in a desert, it is a meaningful garden of delights, where each specimen affects the rest. That's the essence of Prajapati's wisdom. After reviewing it through verse 15, Krishna will explain how we can transcend the reciprocal effects so that our life can be as free as possible. That's not at all the same as acting in ignorance of reciprocity, as if you can get away with murder. Living in reciprocal parity is a thesis, and a moral vacuum is its antithesis. Their synthesis is unitive activity, which is simultaneously unbound and interconnected with everything.

The wish granting cow, Kamadhenu, symbolizes the reciprocal principle that the seeker has to reach out to the guru for wisdom transmission to take place. Scientists investigate their chosen subjects confident that they can discover meaningful secrets, even though they may have little or no idea what they might be. The Bible codifies the same principle for religious seekers in Jesus' famous exhortation to "seek and ye shall find; knock and it shall be opened unto you," (Matt. 7:7). Similarly, Hindus visualize the universe as a divine cow brimming with delicious milk, just waiting to be poured into a cup and tasted.

A guru is the principle of enlightenment, or call it the alluring potential for enlightenment. If we don't pull on the cow's udder, no milk comes. That means we have to go looking for knowledge; it doesn't spring up on its own. A lot of religions portray wisdom as arriving as if by magic, delivered by some savior to worthy recipients, but the Gita sees it as a reciprocal exchange where a seeker has to actively dig it out of its repository.

Guru Nitya offers an important consideration we should keep in mind throughout this section: "Prajapati is only a personification of the process of individuation." (Isa Upanishad commentary, n.d., p. 71.) Seen in this light, Prajapati epitomizes the self-interest of the ego that Krishna will immediately upgrade to a more spiritual perspective.

A close examination of verses 10-19 will reveal the gist of the difference between Krishna's and Prajapati's approaches. Prajapati is an earlier incarnation of Vishnu, the sustainer god, and

Krishna was the present incarnation in the Gita's time. They are thus the same in essence, although Krishna will soon be refining Prajapati's earlier teachings. Not only does the ego become transformed in spiritual life, but universal truths of every era must be periodically restated and revised to meet changed circumstances. This will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

11) "With this do you gratify the gods, and the gods gratify you; thus gratifying reciprocally you shall reach to supreme merit.

Arjuna's last question involved merit, so it is only fitting that his Guru answers in terms of merit. Part of the art of teaching is to begin precisely at the level of understanding of the student, and proceed from there to the revised view. Arjuna's attitudes are based in the old Vedic outlook epitomized in this section. Krishna is basically saying, "Your questions are grounded in an outdated philosophy." Many commentators love this section, because their attitudes are old-fashioned too.

Keep in mind that the Gita will be presenting a unitive revision of this dualistic outlook. Gratifying gods and gaining merit are intertwined, but Krishna will update us to a more scientific and centered state of mind very soon.

Still, reciprocity is a very important aspect of existence. Krishna isn't quoting Prajapati to put him down, he's describing a world view with plenty of, well, merit to it. Ultimately we can go beyond reciprocity to a unitive understanding, but it doesn't hurt to have a solid grasp of how everything fits together as polarized factors. Krishna will also be going beyond the outdated idea of the gods being responsible for everything that happens, to offer a more scientific perspective of natural processes. Reciprocity is a normal consequence of existence, and doesn't need to be managed by external forces like gods. It just happens.

12) “Those gods shall bestow on you all the gratifications you desire; one who eats what is given by them without giving in turn to them—he is a thief indeed.

This verse and the next compare and contrast selfless and selfish activity. As Narayana Guru puts it in verse 23 of his *Atmopadesa Satakam*, “having given up self-centered interests, the compassionate person acts; the self-centered man is wholly immersed in necessity, performing unsuccessful actions for himself alone.” This means that there is a paradox at the heart of action: selfish activity rebounds to undermine self-interest at the same time as it degrades everything around it, while selfless actions are beneficial to both the performer and the recipient.

As already noted, reciprocity is the major factor in this picture of sacrifice. If we recognize the reciprocal nature of the universe, popularized in sayings like the Golden Rule (do unto others as you would have them do unto you) and the Law of Inertia (for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction), we can easily agree with Krishna’s and Prajapati’s advice. Knowing that the universe embodies reciprocity, we cease imagining that we can steal a piece for ourselves without engendering a compensatory reaction to our thievery. Instead, if we act as willing participants in the good of all, negating our selfish desires, the rebound will be positive.

Most of the time sacrifice is conceived horizontally: I’ll do this for you if you’ll do that for me. I’ll put a flower on your altar and you please send me a proper spouse. There is an implicit contract filled with expectations and obligations, with ample opportunity for things to go wrong. By contrast, Arjuna and Krishna are involved in a vertically reciprocal situation, where the one aspires to the heights of supreme merit and the other sends down showers of grace in the form of wisdom insights. In reality, grace is pouring down on everyone all the time, and thus “merit” is universally distributed. If we take those manifold blessings for granted and don’t consciously honor them, we are what Prajapati

calls a thief. Appreciating the miracle of existence is the least we can do, and it helps us to keep our actions grounded and sane.

And life is indeed a miracle, and as such the best subject for contemplation as well as participation. As Martin Heidegger and others have memorably mused, the fundamental issue of philosophy is “Why is there something rather than nothing?” Our very existence is at once self-evident and extremely unlikely. The popular claims that God made everything, or there really is nothing and something is only an appearance, are actually ways to beg the question, by substituting a preselected assumption for a real answer. A sincere contemplative will discover a world of wonder in pondering the miracle of existence, and what a fortune each of us receives in exchange for the pittance we contribute!

Therefore we are called, both by ancient decree and the implications of the present, to be generous and share our wealth, in whatever form we have it. Everything is given to us by our environment, and we must pass it on to keep it alive. To hold on to what we wrongly desire to possess as “ours” is to kill it. Even to imagine that we have wrested our good fortune out of an unresponsive, unfeeling world “on our own” requires a highly selective view of reality, amounting to ignorance. It is the truest case of thievery to stockpile the sustenance that is freely given to all beings.

13) “The good man who eats of the remnants of a sacrifice is absolved of all faults; however, those sinners eat of evil itself who cook with themselves alone for motive.

Food is used symbolically in the Gita to stand for what we nowadays call input, or what we take in from outside. It is the flip side of gifting, which symbolizes what passes from us out to the world. Both will be addressed in more detail in Chapter XVII. Here Prajapati is using the image of a classical sacrifice where food is first offered to the gods, and then the priest and the congregation eat it afterwards. Those who are not willing to share

the bounty with others are committing a sin and acting evilly. This is good common sense, yet it isn't the Gita's final opinion, which, as we well know, transcends good and evil and does not countenance sin. Learning to share and not covet is a bedrock foundation of moral behavior, and certainly dovetails with Krishna's more advanced teachings on action in this chapter. But the really liberated attitude goes much farther. It is very well expressed by the poet James Stephens, in *The Hill of Vision* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1922):

Good and bad and right and wrong,
Wave the silly words away :
This is wisdom to be strong,
This is virtue to be gay :
Let us sing and dance until
We shall know the final art,
How to banish good and ill
With the laughter of the heart.

Fundamentalist commentators are easy to spot, not only because they don't laugh much but because they get excited whenever sin and evil are mentioned. They refuse to abandon the Prajapati level of understanding and do not comprehend Krishna's excellent revaluation, even though they may consider themselves Krishna devotees. The alert reader should immediately realize that dualistic ideas appear in the Gita only so they can be revalued. What's in store for sin and evil is a parallel to Jesus' teachings in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5) where he refers to the older dog-eat-dog attitudes and then offers his unitive revaluation. The best part of this famous section is verses 43-48:

Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbor, and hate thine enemy.

But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you;
That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.
For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? do not even the publicans the same?
And if ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more than others? do not even the publicans so?
Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.

By the same token as those who claim that Krishna is against sin and evil, should we conclude that Jesus is saying we should love our neighbor and hate our enemies? Hardly. They are both showing the common attitude and then refuting it. As Gandhi put it, “An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind.” These liberating scriptures are intended to raise us above brute reactions to a more sublime relationship with our environment. We are called to stop blinding each other and learn to see.

Remembering that sacrifice is “freely chosen activity,” the verse means that if our options are directed toward benefiting ourself in isolation, it is very unhealthy and leads to disastrous consequences. Short term selfish gains produce long term losses. Breaking the flow of reciprocal beneficence that characterizes Nature to seize and keep a part for ourselves disrupts the entire system. On the other hand, when you think of the world as a unified whole, you realize that your fair share comes naturally as a “remnant” of the actions you perform, as what’s left to you after it is universally poured out.

The use of the word *cook* is very contemporary sounding. Actually, “cooking” is used in modern English slang to mean “operating at high speed or efficiency,” as with a jazz ensemble. When they are playing their hearts out, all in tune with one

another, they are “really cooking.” You can cook for yourself alone or cook with the group. In Prajapati’s traditional view, flying solo is bad, as if the saxophonist is playing strange noises in an unrelated key. Musical improvisation should bear some relation to the song being performed. However, the Gita is very much more about independent, personally directed investigations. Perhaps the ensemble should try to follow the lead of the improviser and see what new territory they can discover. In spiritual life, we can’t always wait for others to catch up to us, we should plunge ahead on our own. Afterwards we are free to share our insights with our fellows, but the community aspect is clearly secondary. If anyone wants to come along with us, it’s their choice.

Bipolarity is treated here in “old fashioned” terms, perhaps to address Arjuna’s understanding, which is grounded in them. If there is no bipolarity with something of value—and it doesn’t have to be a recognized guru—the disconnected person becomes increasingly isolated and distraught. A friend, a spouse, even a pet, can help pull us out of our dark dungeon and into the light, going from spinning our wheels and getting nowhere to really cooking.

Prajapati is about to detail a lengthy chain of causation relating to transactional life, and extending backwards from the symbolic “food” that actually enters into a person’s system. Again, this is all fine as far as it goes, but it falls short of the absolutist vision aimed at in Krishna’s teaching, which breaks free of the bondage of cause and effect.

14) “Food is the cause of beings, and from rain food is produced; sacrifice has its effect in rain, and sacrifice has its origin in action.

If this is taken as a fancy way of saying that action produces food to keep people alive, it isn’t overly profound, despite being poetically expressed. Symbolically though, it can mean that what we do makes us who we are, in other words, we are the product of nurture as well as nature. Although the role of nurture has often

been downplayed until very recent times, accepting it leads to a profound revelation: it opens the door to personal freedom.

Rain and sacrifice are the vertical poles of the dialectic of worship, with rain symbolizing divine dispensation and sacrifice the specific form of action that relates to it. We reach up toward the heights in our aspirations, and grace rains down in response. The world is geared to respond to everything, good, bad and indifferent, exactly appropriately. The “food” this bipolar relationship produces is everything that sustains us, from physical food, through emotional and intellectual stimulation, and on to spiritual enlightenment.

If we think like Prajapati, we will believe we are dependent on external management from something like a god or nature. While this is perfectly logical and even moderately scientific, the Gita’s radical revaluation is to bring us to also appreciate the degree to which we have a hand in shaping our lives, in other words, our independence. We are both dependent and independent at once.

Since support for our existence is built into the very fabric of the universe, it creates an unnecessary division—which is the intrusion of dualism—to view it as coming from outside ourselves. We are free to acknowledge our dependence on a myriad of factors, but we are also called to rise up to a level of co-creators of our world. The more psychologically independent we are, the more creative and beneficial our actions will be. This requires abandoning the hypothesis of gods running the universe, and understanding it is based on immutable laws rather than celestial whimsy. Krishna does not agree with the school that insists we are at our best when we become self-abnegating slaves to “God’s will,” as interpreted by powerful humans who stand to benefit from our docility.

When life is dualistically conceived as a chain of causation it leads to a paradox. If effects are the product of their cause, then in a sense the cause is real and the effect is merely consequential, and so in a sense unreal, or at least dependent on whatever brings it

about. As all effects must have a cause, and their cause is an effect of a previous cause, we can regress to the dawn of time in search of reality. Causation thus leads us to imagine an unreal universe contingent on a First Cause, like God or a Big Bang, which is the only reality. Unitive philosophy, on the other hand, imbues all things with full-fledged reality in the present, since they participate in and in fact *are* the Absolute. They are what they are, instead of being puppets on someone else's string. Interestingly, this implies that causation is the less real part of the picture, rather than existence. The eternal existence in and through the transient flux of becoming is what is true. Our efforts are then bent to comprehend the immediacy of our environment and our place in it, instead of looking elsewhere for its source.

When we carefully scrutinize this seemingly bland section referring back to Prajapati, we can detect a seriously radical tenor. It is precisely here that the Gita makes its great leap forward from bondage to freedom.

15) “Know that action arises from Brahma, and that Brahma traces his being to the Imperishable. Therefore the all-pervasive Absolute is eternally bound up with sacrifice.”

Verse 15 brings us to the end of the summation of Prajapati's world view, with a god residing at the heart of creation. In case we failed to catch the implication earlier, Krishna makes it explicit by mentioning the god Brahma as the intermediary between the Absolute and manifest reality. Not surprisingly, religiously minded enthusiasts are wild about this. The only problem is this is the old-age thinking that the Gita is about to leave behind. It's very nice as far as it goes, but Krishna has a more sublime perspective in store for us.

Brahma, the creative principle, could easily be the favorite god of materialist science also, where the tide of evolution is guided solely by reproduction and survival. Edward O. Wilson, in *The Social Conquest of Earth*, (New York: Liveright Publishing

Corporation, 2012, p.8-9) addresses “the great riddle of the human condition”:

Consciousness, having evolved over millions of years of life-and-death struggle, and moreover because of that struggle, was not designed for self-examination. It was designed for survival and reproduction. Conscious thought is driven by emotion; to the purpose of survival and reproduction, it is ultimately and wholly committed.

There is much to commend this uncompromising belief, and we can always substitute evolution for action in verses like this one. The crushing limitation is that this view does not allow for any possibility of something more enlightened than survival gambits. It consigns us to an eternal bloody battle from which there is no escape. Krishna is about to introduce the possibility of extricating ourselves from the bondage of our animal heritage to actualize our higher potentials. As this verse claims, Brahma definitely binds the conceivable Absolute to respond to old-style sacrifice, but the real Absolute cannot be bound.

The discrepancy between a conceivable Absolute like a god and the all-pervasive, unlimited, transcendent version that is symbolized by Krishna in the Gita is somewhat similar to the difference between conscious thought and consciousness that Wilson is apparently unclear about based on the quote. They are by no means the same thing. Even within the human body, the consciousness that intelligently manages its complex functioning dwarfs conscious thought, which makes up a very small percentage of the overall activity, and is blocked out for many good reasons from interfering in most of those processes.

Another thing to keep in mind is that consciousness definitely precedes and is not dependent on a brain, though emotions may be. Conscious thoughts are just a handy way for humans to observe some limited aspects of consciousness. Unicellular and even bacterial learning has been observed, and plants have been shown

to communicate and respond intelligently to communication. As one example, Guy Murchie, in his delightful *Seven Mysteries of Life*, relates a dramatic experiment demonstrating learning in amebas. None of these creatures has a nervous system, much less a brain. For all we know they do not experience emotions, which in Wilson's view *drive* conscious thought, but that does not render them devoid of consciousness.

In one type of meditation, an object is traced from its objective appearance through increasingly subtle aspects, all the way back to the ineffable Absolute, which will thus be seen by extrapolation to pervade everything. This little excursion into Prajapati's outlook is an example of exactly how to do this. Krishna proceeds by stages of subtlety back to the very source. Here he points out that action arises from the creative principle itself, personified as Brahma, the God of Creation, who is one main aspect of the manifested Absolute, along with Vishnu for Preservation and Shiva for Destruction. This is the essence of enlightened dualism. The Gita, however, is a textbook on non-dualism.

Having led Arjuna all the way in to the core of creation, Krishna returns to the original subject, sacrifice, thus completing one cycle of yogic meditation. We can see that the disciple's instruction is quite profound already by this third chapter. The guru has called up a very beautiful conception of sacrifice as a reaching out for truth, matched with a natural reciprocation to form a bond or union. A familiar example of such reciprocal movement takes place when we strive to understand something and then take a break to "sleep on it." Very often fresh insight emerges from the unconscious after such a pattern of hard work followed by quiet reflection.

The annals of science are filled with tales of great discoveries made while resting or sleeping off the stress of mental gymnastics performed to solve a problem. Recent research has also shown that we consolidate what we have newly learned only when we turn off

our transactional mind and take rest. The conscious effort, the sacrifice, is essential to the process, but it is not the whole story. The effort must be followed by a letting go—another kind of sacrifice—which invites the involvement of a much wider spectrum of intelligence to come into play. Such an attitude can be cultivated regularly, by replacing self-deprecating thoughts such as “I can’t do this,” or “I’m not smart enough,” or even “I have to figure this out,” with “I’m going to open myself to all the abilities hidden within me, and I’m sure they can help me rise to the occasion.” Or “let’s see what the universe has to offer.” A simple change of attitude like this can harmonize many chaotic and disused talents, allowing them to imbue our steps with almost unlimited inspiration. That’s why one of the most important beginning projects in the spiritual search is to befriend yourself, to come to know that you are made of “star stuff” just like everybody else, and that your potential is infinite.

16) He who leads a life hereunder that does not conform to the rotation of such a wheel—such a man of vicious lifetimes lives in vain indeed.

Here we return to Krishna speaking for himself. He endorses Prajapati’s concepts, but only up to a point. The Prajapati section mainly served to demonstrate the intricacies of contemplative investigation, using an important topic, sacrifice. Arjuna will be expected to examine many other subjects on his own using the same technique. Krishna’s final advice to him at the very end is to scrutinize every situation and then act as he thinks best, and doing it correctly requires a holistic vision. Acting on partial information invariably goes off course.

Prajapati’s outlook epitomizes the widely held belief in a world ruled by gods, which was being supplanted by a more scientific outlook even in the Gita’s time. The tension between a fearful humanity unable to embrace a universe of natural laws and a visionary few who refuse to be bound by baseless theories is a

perennial theme of human history. In the second half of the work we will examine some of the impediments that cause people to cling to absurdities and despise those who challenge them. The next three verses propose the unitive solution that a yogi is expected to bring to bear. Yogis are those who—like Arjuna—can no longer be constrained by superstition, who are impelled to make progress in understanding despite entrenched tribal attachments to the status quo.

The wheel Krishna mentions is a symbol of living in harmony with nature, and how give and take must be balanced for life to function smoothly. Those who take for themselves without giving back live vain—empty—lives, and have a vicious effect on the whole. They are the thieves of verse 12 and the evil sinners of verse 13. Krishna has a major diatribe about such people in Chapter XVI. So the spiritual quest begins with learning reciprocity with nature in all its aspects, but that is only a launching pad to spring to the next level. A guru will naturally exhort a disciple to perceive how important it is to be unselfish and global in their understanding. Yet all this is only useful up to a point. It pertains to the transactional plane, but is not essential to a seer who has transcended the bondage of action, as already promised in II, 39, and soon to be a major thrust of the teaching. The Gita's decided recommendation, unitive action, begins in the next verse.

17) But for him who happens to be attached to the Self alone, who finds full satisfaction in the Self—for such a man who is happy in the Self as such, there is nothing that he should do.

In the next three verses Krishna describes the liberated seer who has overcome the wheel of mandatory, reciprocal karmic activity. Once anyone attains a bipolar relationship with the Absolute—the capital S self—there is true freedom. The chains of obligation are broken and need not be reforged. For such a seer “there is nothing he *should* do.” Anything may be done, but there

is no requirement, because the spirit of the Absolute unfolds at all times with perfection. There is no need for any ritual or the propitiation of any god, as they are extraneous to the direct absorption in truth. They do serve as symbolic touchstones for some people, and as such will be tolerated and even encouraged, but in themselves they are not necessary.

Although totally transcending any question of merit, the perfected state of attachment to the Absolute is related to the supreme merit of verse 11 above. The ultimate in terms of merit is attaining entry into heaven or becoming like a god or having a terrific placement at rebirth. Truly supreme merit leaps out of the context of merit entirely. Unity in the Absolute transcends all these alluring but limited states, as will be made clear in the course of Krishna's instruction.

Spiritual unfoldment begins with deep attachments to the needs and requirements of everyday life, not excluding religious matters, and moves to an ever-greater attunement with the subtle, non-obligatory context that the Gita terms sacrifice. In essence, the seeker's trajectory is to transition from bondage to freedom. Prajapati's outlook, while decent, was nonetheless mired in obligatory requirements, which accounts in great measure for the paeans to duty that are so common among Gita advocates. The dedicated yogi should aim to go beyond not only the bad but also the good forms of bondage or duty.

The Gita has frequently been co-opted, like many scriptures, in the service of the rich and powerful who wish to dictate our duty to us. Surprise! It turns out our duty is to serve them and deny our own needs so we can get some future payoff in heaven or the next life. As twentieth century philosopher Bertrand Russell put it, "The concept of duty has been a means used by the holders of power to induce others to live for the interests of their masters rather than for their own." This is a very old sucker play (because it hardly ever fails to work), but it's crucial to realize that that's what it is. In many places such as this one, the Gita is abundantly clear that the individual, with intelligence honed by deep contemplation, is

the final arbiter of their own actions. The few references to duty in the Gita direct the yogi away from external influences to the “duty” of fealty to their authentic nature. The Absolute speaks through the living, not the dead.

The yogi should be especially alert regarding obligatory spiritual or religious rules, which are often designed to convince people of the benefits of denying themselves and serving someone else. There is a fine line between the healthy reining in of the untempered ego and abusive self-abnegation, and it takes a long time to develop the trust required before a disciple can safely surrender their judgment to a guru or other therapist. The Gita counsels caution, and it will take until the eleventh chapter before Arjuna’s trust is grounded firmly enough to completely lay his doubts to rest.

In misreading the Gita as an exhortation to duty, commentators insist that Krishna is teaching Arjuna to get back to his appointed task, back to his war. On the contrary, the Gita is showing us that sooner or later—often in a crisis—our acceptance of an externally defined role brings us to a dead end, from which we must somehow extricate ourselves. In the process of correctly addressing the imbroglio we will rediscover our inner nature, our dharma. Once we know that, we are free to choose our own path.

18) Neither is there anything indeed for him resulting from work done, nor anything from work omitted here, nor is there either for him any dependence in respect of anything derivable from any being whatsoever.

This verse directly contradicts Prajapati’s harmonious setup. The liberated one is outside of cause and effect, the coils of karma, so the ancient laws have no impact. Any results of work could be categorized under the terms of merit and demerit. Such ideas bring the future into the picture, changing the outlook from unitive to dualistic. This cannot be permitted by the Guru of the Gita. Merit is therefore wholly and categorically discountenanced.

Krishna is elaborating the “there is nothing that he should do” (emphasis on *should*) of the previous verse. Any further implications of action beyond itself are false. In truth there is nothing real that persists after action occurs. No action has any real or lasting effect. This is a very radical, enlightened state of mind. Ordinarily we are deflected to endless ramifications by our attachment to what we have done, either positively or negatively. This unitive attitude leads directly to the conclusion stated in the next verse. Because it is counterintuitive, Krishna will spend some time explaining it in detail in the rest of the chapter.

Be sure to note the symmetrical dialectical reduction in this definitive verse: no results from work done or work not done; no dependency on any other being whatsoever. The tangled skeins of action (karma) are to be shed in their totality.

19) Therefore always remain detached, engage yourself in actions that are necessary; indeed, performing actions with detachment man attains to the Supreme.

For the first time the Gita mentions detachment, which is one of several buzzwords like sacrifice and worship in dire need of reevaluation. Simplistic interpretations lead to psychic deadening, quite the opposite of the Gita’s intention. Does a dispassionate attitude mean nonparticipation in life? The usual assumption is that it does; yet the usual assumption is wrong. As with dualistic vs. unitive action, there is a subtle distinction involved that makes all the difference.

We adopt a negative, unhelpful form of dispassion as children, when our enthusiasms are thwarted by adults and we have no way to express ourselves as we wish. We learn to turn off our own feelings and sit in a sullen, resentful stillness, which adults often consider acceptable. After all, to them being still is being “well behaved.” If we’re well behaved we are left alone to work out our personal programs in secret. This is a very common behavioral quirk that gets easily laid over the transcendental

concept of dispassion. We think we are supposed to suppress ourselves in the interest of some externally ordained divine program. It's an extension of following the rules of polite society.

Suppression of action leads to chaos in the psyche. It will appear to be exemplary behavior for a while, and may fool other people, but it has an extremely corrosive effect in the long term. The process of severing ties with the world that passes for detachment is often cruel and unnecessary. The Gita prefers expert interaction with everything one encounters.

Krishna is teaching that detachment is not the mere withdrawal from action, not simply the antithesis of impulsive behavior. By balancing the urge to act with the stillness of inaction, a neutral, poised state of mind emerges as the synthesis, which is the optimal attitude. We can most easily see this in the artist who holds all extraneous thoughts in abeyance while simultaneously plunging ahead with the production of the work.

In a nutshell, when one is satisfied in the Self, fully absorbed and grounded in the eternal Absolute, it is easy and effortless to view fleeting events from a detached perspective. In ordinary life we fixate on the changing and forget the eternal aspect of what we encounter. We are now being asked to reincorporate the eternal into the transient. Both the lasting and the temporary belong together in a total realization of the nature of the universe.

Lastly, it bears mentioning that the necessary actions Krishna is referring to are things like taking care of the body, activities really and truly mandated by nature. Religious-minded commentators always imagine that their particular favorite ideology is "necessary" but that is an unwarranted interpretation contrary to the spirit of the Gita.

20) Janaka and such others reached perfection even performing acts. Again, having due regard for the integration of the world too, you have to act.

Janaka is a famous king of ancient India, whose story is recounted in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad and elsewhere. He is brought in to emphasize the supreme value of living a life of wisdom engaged in the world. A king is subject to an unending series of demands from events and other people. Beginning students of spirituality believe they should discard all activities in order to attend to their inner growth. But life coaxes forth inner growth via a series of outer conundrums we must deal with intelligently. Turning away from them is tantamount to turning away from our innate guru-principle.

The Gita is a textbook of dialectics, also known as yoga. This means in part that you should find a happy medium between your personal self-interest and the world's needs. Your own happiness and that of others should be able to coexist. At least from your side there is no grasping for what belongs to the other. If the other is grasping for what's yours, it often serves them better to be rebuked than to just selflessly be given what they're after. At other times it may work fine to unreservedly give it to them. The trick is that each situation is different. The more you can be awake to the nuances of the moment and the more you are free from acting out of a pre-established formula, the more helpful and in tune with the greatest good your actions will be.

The best thing you can do for the world is to bring your own happiness and wisdom to every situation. You can't teach happiness if you yourself don't experience it. So find it and then share it.

21) Whichever may be the way of life that a superior man adopts—that very one is (followed) by other people. What he makes his guiding principle, the world behaves even according to the same.

The seamless flow of ideas in this chapter takes one's breath away. Particularly in contradistinction with the heterogeneous format of most Indian scriptures, the coherence of the Gita is

spectacular. Each verse leads ingeniously to the next, which simultaneously resolves it and furthers its implications. Even disregarding the significance of the teachings it contains, this organization reveals a masterwork virtually unequalled in human endeavor. No wonder some enthusiasts are tempted to wax rhapsodic, even calling it the work of a god!

Thankfully, though some like to think of Krishna as God—and he certainly symbolizes the Absolute here—few serious scholars argue that the work is anything other than a wisdom teaching written down by an anonymous human being. A very brilliant human at that.

Pardon my digression.

Verse 21 is quite simple, after some previous heavy going. Those in the public eye teach by example, more than they ever could communicate by mere words. Those interested in wisdom use the wise for guidance (just as those interested in arrogance find the arrogant inspiring, the greedy are inspired by the greedy, etc.). Disciples are supposed to study the actions of the guru, which embody the truth of the teachings. Of course if the actions are at odds with the teachings, then the guru is a hypocrite and they should look elsewhere for instruction. Ultimately the disciples are not expected to lift their behavior out of thin air; only the spirit of it needs to be original. The point here is that learning by example is superior to learning by rote.

There is a tremendous implication to this simple idea. So many humans feel that they have to instruct others on how to behave, it amounts to almost a mania of the species. We especially feel a compunction to be didactic with children. But dry argumentation is more off-putting than inspiring, and children especially are acutely sensitive to any discrepancy between words and deeds. What is really communicated is our beingness, not our verbiage. We teach by example much more than by directive. Therefore we should teach ourselves, and hold back on the primal instinct to manage others' lives. If we want to improve others we should improve ourselves.

Assumptions that in this verse Krishna is warning Arjuna to be careful of his behavior are way off base. This is not about adopting an artful persona to parade before the public, as many religious and political figures obsess over. Acting self-consciously is contrary to the unfettered spiritual openness that is a keynote of the entire work. He is merely reminding us to act with expertise, because who we are has a direct effect on people.

22) There is nothing in the three worlds that I am obliged to do, nor anything unaccomplished to be accomplished, while still I remain active (in principle).

A spherical pulsation model of the manifested world characterizes the Gita's overview of existence. Everything emerges from a point or seed, expands to its natural limit, and then contracts to be epitomized once again in a new seed. This contrasts with the linear model adopted by the narrow purview of modern rationalism, where everything is linked in an endless chain of simplistically conceived causation. Local events on planet earth appear to be evolving in a linear fashion, but that is only because such a small sample is being taken. In the same way, the earth appears to be flat to its inhabitants, though those with a wider comprehension know it to be spherical. For those experiencing flatness it would be beside the point to assert that the sphericity of earth mattered, and so commonsense perception can deal with local evolution without particularly taking note of the bigger picture. Expansion of consciousness is a voluntary matter, after all.

In modern times, physicists have looked far enough back in time to posit a Big Bang of our universe bursting from a singularity, and now in the twenty-first century are suspecting the existence of prior Bangs. It is quite logical that the miracle of the universe would pulsate gradually on and off, if you stop to think about it, since everything happens in waves.

When you think about things even more, there must be some kind of impetus to the universe. Theologians call it the inscrutable

Will of God; scientists conceive of an inconceivable primal force. Whatever it is can be described in various ways without losing any of its power. Names do not limit what they are naming, except possibly in the minds of the namers.

So an inconceivable wavelike impetus energizes the universe, or an infinite chain of universes. We go along with the pulsation like fish in a current. In some such manner the Absolute is involved with and yet beyond existence. It's a fine subject for contemplation, as when a true mystic opens their heart to the onrushing wave, as Henri Bergson put it.

The three worlds of ancient Indian philosophy are earth, heaven and the in-between. In modern terms we would say matter, space (or emptiness), and either subatomic particles or energy. Once being created, a universe runs along quite nicely on its matter and energy for a very long time.

There is an additional implication here, that the universe is not building to some teleological goal. It is created for sport, for the fun of it, nothing more or less. Again, if we examine only a small part it looks very much like more complex animals are being evolved from less complex, which implies that there is a super-complex being in our future. Perhaps that is why Bergson also joked that the universe is a machine for making gods. But from a remote enough viewpoint, everything is implicit in the original seed, and it comes into and goes out of existence in a cosmic day and night cycle, purely for the delight of being alive. That's what Krishna means by saying that there is not anything unaccomplished yet to be accomplished. Even the gods that are created by day are dissolved in the absolute darkness of the cosmic night.

Believing we are working toward a divinely appointed end makes for hell worlds of duty and merit, filled with hard work and punishment. Accepting the divine sport model should make for paradise on earth, as humans amplify and share the intended delight of creation. Happiness and kindness make for a more enjoyable journey, wherever we may be going.

23) If I should not remain active (in principle), never relaxing, men in every walk of life would take to my (inactive) way.

People not only emulate other people, they emulate the Absolute without even knowing it, since its currents run in the very veins of the universe. If you take a broad view of history or evolution, you can see large-scale trends in which individual achievements are like single bricks in a gigantic edifice: they have their important place, but its location is determined by the overall structure. Without this coherence, the glorious Taj Mahal of human achievement would more closely resemble a pile of rubble. Nothing can exist in isolation. Life is a web of interrelations.

The world is full of gyroscopes, used ubiquitously in transportation through fluid mediums, in everything from bicycles (their wheels) to spacecraft. They stabilize movement and resist changes in direction, and so are essential to guidance. Spinning atoms are complex miniature gyroscopes as well. There is thus an intrinsic directional force in the very core of nature, and macrocosmic phenomena surf its waves. The innate urges in beings are impelled by these energies. We call the direction these energies take “the meaning of life.”

Without meaning, the coherent direction of evolution would peter out. Humans who lack a sense of meaning act chaotically, and even criminally. Homing in on the unifying hub of the Absolute provides a polar star to sail by.

There is a paradox here. Lazy people like to believe that since a god is running things they don't have to do anything: it is all taken care of. Fate is in charge, not them. But the Gita is saying that precisely because the Absolute is active, humans must also be active. This is because we are the very mechanisms that are able to bring the impetus of the Absolute into being. Conversely, if the universe was static, there would be no need for us to be creative. But it is by no means fixed. It is an experiment to see what we can come up with, and we are integral participants in it.

In this verse, Krishna is merely pointing out to Arjuna that the unfoldment of each universe is coherent and intelligent. As a result, life is coherent and intelligent. It is meaningful. Humans are extremely fortunate this is so, otherwise everything would have to be built up from scratch and there would be no time left over for what we call creative endeavors: tinkering with the raw materials that nature so generously gifts us.

Since crazed fundamentalists have adopted the term “intelligent design” as a code for their god, scientists have been drawn into their game and insisted there is no intelligent design. But how much more intelligent can the world be? It is already spectacularly intelligent. It’s just that the intelligence is intrinsic to every part, and not governed from without. It is a process and not a fait accompli. Try inventing your own plant or animal or star some time, and you’ll realize just how brilliantly complex the ones we see around us on every side are. The yogi is encouraged to wonder and be moved by the amazing intelligence pulsing in every corner of the cosmos, without having to imagine any celestial puppeteer behind the scenes.

24) These (various) worlds would fall into ruin should I refrain from activity, and I would become the agent of (evolutive) confusion, killing in effect the peoples.

The Absolute is the epitome of creativity, and its activity is creative activity. When creativity is absent from activity, it is like a living death. Repetitive, empty action is soul destroying, while variety is stimulating. So in order to live an exceptional life, we must bring the Absolute in as a creative factor. This not only makes every action exciting and productive, it reveals its meaningful relationship to everything else. Confusion occurs when meaning is absent, when the connection with the Absolute is absent. Meaning gives direction and purpose to life.

Krishna is once again providing Arjuna with a rich source of contemplative insight, for him to further pursue on his own. One

example of a typical meditation on this verse could be the development of a fetus, which takes place totally without any direct conscious involvement. An unbelievably complex series of events unfolds with a high percentage of perfect success, completely on its own, so to speak. Where does the guidance for this masterful symphony come from? Can a human (merely) being, as E. E. Cummings would call us, coax a sprout to come out of a seed? How would you train it to reach up and absorb light, and another part to go down and imbibe mineral-filled water? Meditating on the vast preponderance of life that comes to us freely as a form of blessing from the cosmos is like placing a gyroscope of gratitude and stability in your psyche. The bloated ego that imagines itself to be an isolated agent deflates in consequence to a more normal size, while the heart expands to fill the vacuum.

Any disciple who has not imagined that they are a beneficiary of nearly infinite largesse on the part of the universe, and is likewise incapable of giving anything significant in return, is not yet fit to begin wisdom study. This is another preliminary matter the guru is directing us to sort out.

Let me put this same proposition in positive terms, lest all those negatives confuse you. A disciple must imagine that they are the beneficiary of nearly infinite largesse on the part of the Absolute or the universe. Such awareness brings the humility of realizing you don't really have much to offer a wholly complete Source that has nothing unaccomplished to be accomplished. Where you once thought you were a "hot shot" you now know you are just one part of a magnificent process. This brings an even-minded humility that is a proper starting point for the development of wisdom.

25) In the same manner as uninstructed people would take to activity with attachment to work, the instructed man likewise should act without attachment, interested (merely) in world order.

Once upon a time, before time began, the unmanifested Absolute wondered “What good am I?” and all of Creation is the infinite answer to the infinite potential of that question. Each of us is a unique piece of the answer. If we try to imitate somebody else, or worse yet follow in the ruts laid down by self-serving control freaks of the past, we aren’t doing anything to liberate our uniqueness so we can reveal the nature of the Absolute to itself. Creativity reveals the new and repetition preserves the old, and both are to be exercised together to optimize our contribution.

Life affords us a million opportunities to creatively support and love our neighbors around the globe. The justice this engenders is the enlightened world order that Krishna is speaking of. Too often verses propounding order are cited to support a static, joyless, totally programmed workaday world reminiscent of the anthill of fascist imagination. Au contraire: the Absolute’s non-obligatory order is wholly dynamic and creative.

What the verse means is that many people believe they should *be* kind, and so try hard to live up to their expectations. It’s hard work, and their balloon can easily be popped, causing rage and frustration. Others *are* kind, and so their default setting is kindness. When their balloon pops, they are still kind. That’s the difference between dualistic and unitive behavior. We become kind not by trying to be it, but by admiring the absolute perfection at the heart of existence. The more we attune to what the world really is, the more kind, compassionate, loving, and so on we will be. Naturally.

The humble attitude developed in the previous verse is hereby invited to join the fray. We should participate as best we can in lending our energies to the harmonious expression of the divine in life. This is only safe to do after we have thoroughly practiced the foregoing meditation on our true place in the scheme of things and are experiencing for ourselves the benign nature of the underlying paradigm, otherwise we may unintentionally underwrite the nefarious activities of merely human manipulators.

Krishna is well aware that for the uninstructed this teaching can lead to an emphasis on work as an end in itself. Calvinist and Puritan workaholism and fascist slave labor camps are recent examples of how this type of thinking can go wrong in the hands of misery-motivated theologians and philosophers. Those who fantasize an angry, vengeful God inject poison into the system. Fighting in God's army should be ruled out in advance. We are instead called to appreciate the amazing and kindly harmony through which our life is maintained, and to seek to further it, both in ourself and for the benefit of others.

The only way to guarantee that we won't be led astray into some self-righteous mob mentality is to act without attachment. So much blood has been shed in the name of God or some other version of the highest good, we should have learned by now not to take the bait. But over and over again the human race goes to war or builds a police state to "set things right." It takes a lot of creative insight to see how repression and intolerance are the very attachments that must be given up, because they are our gut reactions. The true way to set things right is to learn compassion and tolerance, and practice extending them to everyone.

26) The person who is wise should not give room for disruption in the way of thinking of those who have not attained wisdom, but by behaving unitively should render every kind of action enjoyable.

The operative principle here is making life enjoyable. It's not only that we should aim at increasing the general happiness, but that the impetus of the Absolute is always in that direction. All we have to do is link up with it, and we will be on the right track.

That being said, humans have a penchant for viewing others, especially those from different ethnic groups, extremely critically. Why is it that half-baked thinkers always imagine the other person is the one in need of correction? It is far easier to see someone else's mistakes than our own, but unsolicited advice is a double

fault. It insults the recipient and reveals an ugly pretension of superiority in the proselytizer. The other person is already doing the best they can, so we should tend to our own business unless our advice is asked for.

The secret truth is that many humans learn to point to the faults of others in order to turn attention away from their own shortcomings. They feel exposed and embarrassed about themselves, so they make a lot of noise about their neighbors. The ruse can become magnified into bullying behavior, which is on very public display in the swaggering political pundits of today. All the sound and fury is an expansion of deeply felt insecurity and self-doubt. Those who are comfortable with themselves will also be comfortable with other people and their differences.

Unitive behavior in interactions with ordinary people outside our preferred wisdom context means being attuned to the requirements of the situation as it unfolds, without expectations and without clinging to our limited models. We must relinquish the evidently normal assumption that we are on the side of right, and folks who feel differently are wrong and in need of discipline. Once we imagine we are helping someone as their superior, that fantasy deflects our attention from full participation and corrupts the interchange. What could be enjoyable becomes bitter. When we are unitively engaged in meeting contingencies as they arise, especially with another person, and even more especially with someone outside our normal comfort zone, the exchange becomes a deeply exciting and satisfying challenge.

The easiest way to cure the nearly universal impulse to enlighten others is to meditate on the perfection and wonder of every aspect of creation, and in particular of each human being. They are so completely unique, despite sharing a common structure, we could learn an infinite amount from every one of them. Merely appreciating how special they are could keep us entertained for years. Meditating on how little we actually know of even our closest friends takes this even further. We have only to step out from behind our assumption of knowing when we really

know almost nothing, and we can easily relinquish our false sense of superiority. The ego is afraid to admit its ignorance, but yogis should take their own immeasurable limitations for granted.

Some people who think they are wise intentionally disrupt the thinking of trusting folk who are searching for wisdom. They are pleased to win them to their preferred cause by whatever means, and consider it a victory to scramble the truth and then serve up a persuasive facsimile. The outcome is usually an increase in hostility based on factionalism. To distinguish between proper and improper actions, Krishna offers a measuring rod of unitive activity: it renders every action enjoyable. True joy is felt by all involved. Although some humans take delight in expressing hatred and cruelty, their victims do not share their pleasure. Joy is not only gentle and kind, it fosters similar sentiments in those in the neighborhood.

We don't have to agree with the wild notions that others may be carried away with, but we can smile and nod and not combat them, so long as they are not particularly harmful. Toxic beliefs are a different matter, and we are counseled to stand firm against them. Yet, as always, the real battleground is in our own psyche. Our example to others should be of the manifold blessings that come from a well directed self-examination.

The wise always seek opportunities to improve themselves. Nitya Chaitanya Yati nicely sums up the practice of yogic self-examination in his commentary on Patanjali's Yoga Shastra (pp. 195-99):

- understand the screen on which the play of life is projected and that you are not different from the experiences you are projecting
- create a conducive environment by carefully structuring your world
- withdraw your mind from the marketplace where it gets easily soiled

- respond to your nightmares arising from irrational fears by going deeply into the areas of the mind and illuminating them with the inner light of the Self
- see the impermanence of the causes of misery
- avoid that which can be avoided, mitigate that which can be mitigated
- live simply

27) Irrespective of the occasion, it is nature that through the gunas accomplishes every act. One possessed of egoism, however, thinks of himself as the actor.

The Gita maintains that life is nature unfolding and expressing itself according to its innate potential. We are fortunate to be able to witness the process, the “greatest show on earth!” as the circus marquees state, but are in charge of only the tiniest part of it. The ego tries to validate itself by taking credit for making things happen, but the Absolute, which really does animate the whole game, bears no such sense of inadequacy. As we mature, we should get over the need to prove ourselves, and just be who we are, which is wonderful enough. We should identify with the Absolute and not so much with our ego. Spiritual unfoldment includes enlarging our identity from the ego to the Absolute.

When Rabindranath Tagore visited Narayana Guru and complimented him on all his achievements as a social reformer, on the “great work” he was doing for the people, his response was immediate. “Neither have we done anything in the past nor is it possible to do anything in the future. Powerlessness fills us with sorrow.” The Guru could see many things he would like to have happen, but he knew he was at most an incidental cause, and life was ripening all around him at its own pace. Relinquishing the egoism of imagining oneself as the actor, doer and enjoyer of things that will eventually happen anyway releases us from much frustration and misery.

On the other hand—and in yoga there is almost always a flip side to any argument—historical personages can on rare occasions have a very influential role in the unfolding of collective karma. They can function as a kind of shorthand for the mysterious dynamism taking place, becoming a rallying cry and uniting link for widely divergent factions. They can inspire transformative efforts, whether they themselves are active or not. Most subtle of all, they can be, as in the case of important religious or mystical figures like Narayana Guru or Muhammad, scientists like Einstein or Newton, political theorists like Marx or Jefferson, and so many more, living channels for the transformative energy itself. The key is that the energy only flows when there is little or no ego to block it. The moment you think, “I’m in charge,” or “I’m bringing light to the people,” etc., the transparency of the original impetus becomes tainted. The clear light of the Absolute becomes colored. Once the fountain source is cut off, the pool it previously refreshed begins to stagnate. Thus Narayana Guru had to firmly reject Tagore’s compliment, in order to preserve his purity as a disinterested conduit.

All that aside, isn’t it amazing that we so often imagine ourselves to be the initiators of events, when in actuality we have only the slightest imaginable effect, and are really only going along with what is already taking place? We see how an act of ours causes certain trivial effects, and get a swelled head over it. We say we do this or that, but what we are actually doing is meeting contingencies as they arise. Our present is a bundle of effects from previous causes stretching into the infinite past. Even those few who “change the course of history” are mainly in the right place at the right time with the right tools. Leo Tolstoy, in *War and Peace*, makes the same point:

In historical events great men—so called—are but the labels that serve to give a name to an event, and like labels, they have the last possible connection with the event itself. Every action of theirs, that seems to them an act of their own free will, is in

an historical sense not free at all, but in bondage to the whole course of previous history, and predestined from all eternity.

A healthy spiritual attitude recognizes this fact and doesn't have any problem letting go of imagining it is in control. Instead we should be admiring the magnificent way that life unfolds and includes us in its wide embrace, inviting our participation.

It is a tribute to the boundless hubris of human beings that they can believe that man alone in all the universe has achieved the ability to think and act unconditionally, thereby transcending trial-and-error methods. Yet all other forces, including the impulse that created the universe, are bound by ironclad laws. The human mind, due to its unique complexity and nothing else, has at long last succeeded in bringing reason onto the scene. As Mark Twain would say, "Isn't that just like an oyster?" that being another creature that Twain humorously supposed imagines it is the end point and shining pinnacle of evolution. Such conceit is highly destructive, as a glance at the current state of the planet will attest.

I apologize for picking on E. O. Wilson, because he's not the most execrable of the materialists by a long shot. That's why I'm reading his book. But speaking of oysters, there is no hint of tongue in cheek in his statement:

In every game of evolutionary chance, played from one generation to the next, a very large number of individuals must live and die. The number, however, is not countless. A rough estimate can be made of it, providing at least a plausible order-of-magnitude guess. For the entire course of evolution leading from our primitive mammalian forebears of a hundred million years ago to the single lineage that threaded its way to become the first Homo sapiens, the total number of individuals it required might have been one hundred billion. Unknowingly, they all lived and died for us. (op cit. 21-22)

Twain's ghost must be roaring with laughter!

The gunas or nature modalities will be described in detail through much of the last third of the book, being one of the Gita's major themes. Briefly, they are three aspects of nature that combine in various ways to affect or color each person's experience. As a group they may be read simply as "nature." The Upanishadic attitude presented in this verse is closely akin to that of modern materialist science, which finds very little if any room for original actions, holding that consciousness is nothing more than a conditioned response of complex structures of inert matter. While perhaps an excusable corrective for egoism, as it is here employed, it smacks of rampant fatalism. Happily, Vedantins (and some postmodern scientists) do postulate in addition to our helplessness a state of creative, unconditioned consciousness, the exploration of which is the goal of the Gita's teachings.

28) On the other hand, the one who knows the principle underlying guna as distinct from karma, holding the view that (subjective) modes inhere in (their corresponding objective) modes, is not affected.

This is a difficult verse, but if thought of as the dialectical opposite of the previous one, it becomes much more clear. Taken together, the pair is quite spectacular. We can either think of ourselves as making decisions based on our wants, or we can posit that our decisions can entrain a kind of "cosmic background radiation" of natural forces. The former attitude generates anxiety and fear of failure, while the latter breeds trust and appreciation; the first is grim and the second is permeated with a sense of humor: an unbearable lightness of being.

The gist could be rendered as saying that if you know that actions pertain to the realm of action, and you relinquish the sense of agency, you will not be caught by the chains of effects that your actions produce. Or: if you don't think of yourself as the actor, and keep in mind that the action realm is automatic and predetermined, you are not bound, even though you continue to perform actions.

In practice this means that before starting a spiritual quest we have been trained to totally identify with what we do. We think our actions define us. Gradually we come to realize we are much more than the field of action: our true being is far greater than any of our actions, our knowledge, or even our enjoyment of living. When we know this greater self (which we often capitalize as Self), we can still own our experience but it doesn't have the devastating impact it once did. If we know that our deepest being is eternal and remains steady through all the vicissitudes of existence, it is easy to keep a "cool head" under pressure.

The Gita is agreeing closely with modern notions of the brain and mind, where all thoughts, desires, and mental states are viewed as the inevitable outcome of chemical processes. The rishis somehow were also aware that most of our apparent freedom of choice is merely learned behavior in fresh guises, and our drives are subconsciously impelled by memories and neural wiring and trace metal contamination and so on. The Gita acquiesces that it is very rare for anyone to escape this natural bondage, yet the book has no reason to exist beyond showing us the way it can be done.

Today, the search is on to discover the physical basis of every disease or disquiet of the mind, to say nothing of consciousness itself. Such a viewpoint must bring despair over the totality of the shackles we are subjected to. Inherent structural defects that dictate our actions are virtually impossible to rectify, so we must accept them as our lot in life.

Modern science thus preaches its own brand of fatalism. It may some day seek a route to liberation from all this determinism, which would be a useful science indeed. It would then be following the glowing traces of the Science of the Absolute as bequeathed by the ancient seers.

Unitive philosophy agrees with science that the mental and physical aspects of life are not two separate things; if not identical they are at least intimately related. All liberation is imaginary that does not take every aspect of bondage seriously. That's the correct starting point of the search. Arjuna's despair on the battlefield is

due to this exact awareness of how constrained he was to ghastly options, and it pressed him to seek a radical solution. Bondage can either force our resignation or motivate us to a powerful effort. As Shankara put it, you must desire wisdom as much as a deer caught in a forest fire wants to escape. Lukewarm indulgences don't motivate you enough.

There literally *must* be room for creativity in life, for new things to occur. Otherwise the universe would be completely static, with all options decided in the first nanosecond. No creativity means either everything was made at the very outset, or at least the blueprint for everything was set in stone, predestined. These are very unappetizing options, sounding much more like religion than science. Anyone who believes in evolution, for example, should have no problem with accepting a potential for freedom of some form of choice within the sea of fixed conditioning. Are we probing into the Unknown, or merely replicating the known, like placing our feet on a dance chart on the floor? And who made that dance chart in the first place? Even if free choice is exceedingly rare, the smallest amount of it must outweigh all the forced choices in the galaxy. The real tragedy is that so many are striving to stamp it out in its infancy, rather than promoting it to the crucial role it could play in furthering evolution.

In the perspective of the ancient rishis, the first division of a unitive world-situation was into two: purusha and prakriti, usually translated as spirit and nature. Nature is the part that conforms to physical laws, while spirit is creative and metaphysical. We can think of it as the realm of ideas, with different laws than the physical. Its parameters are the laws of harmony, synthesis, reciprocity, and the percolation of inventiveness into life. Creativity. Exploring this terrain is an excursion in freedom.

For science to imagine it has completely grasped reality is an absurd conceit perennially disproved by a flood of new findings. If science does not intend to explore human liberation, it will be consigning itself to backwater issues of minimal importance. The

self-limiting hypotheses it adopts should be properly understood as temporary gambits and not some kind of finalized wisdom.

29) Those confounded by the modalities of nature become attached to objective modalities existing in works. Such men who are not all-wise, and are dull, should not be unsettled by those who are all-wise.

When nature—the creative urge and manifestation of the Absolute—impels us to act, we don't notice the impulse itself, we only see the interface we have with the world around us. We become embroiled in wrestling with "things," and so in a sense become captivated by them. We have to deal with the effects of the unseen Cause, and they can come at us fast and furiously, like a volley of arrows. Wisdom consists in remaining aware of the overarching cause behind the myriad effects, which automatically allows a substantial degree of healthy detachment from their demands. The First Cause is of course what philosophers call the Absolute, symbolized in the Gita by Krishna.

The Gita lumps everyone who loses sight of the Cause and becomes mired down in aftereffects dull witted, no matter how intelligent they might be. There are some very intelligent people who stringently insist on limiting their parameters to a very narrow window. The ninth verse of the Isa Upanishad famously says: "Into blinding darkness enter they that worship ignorance. Into darkness greater than that, as it were, they that delight in knowledge." The Upanishad is asserting that an ignorant person will at least potentially have an open mind, while an intellectual who insists that the panoply of effects is all that matters will refuse to admit anything else into their consciousness, and by zealously guarding their darkness they become permanently confounded.

Still, science vaporized the imposing walls of materialism based on appearances at the beginning of the twentieth century. More than a hundred years later we have still not fully grasped the

implications of relativity, uncertainty, and quantum mechanics, none of which are aligned with “common sense.”

More than once the Gita counsels the wise to not upset the balance of those who aren't interested in contemplation. If you want to relate solely with the apparent “facts” of the sensory world, you should be free to do so. Only when those facts bare their teeth in a crisis situation do some begin to wonder about the wizard behind the curtain, as L. Frank Baum pictured the invisible causative principle of disorienting illusions in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*.

The Buddha is reputed to have said, “Do not teach those who do not want to know.” This is excellent advice. Pressing your beliefs on a resisting party has only negative effects. Yet once someone becomes “unsettled” they most certainly may be offered succor if they request it.

30) Renouncing in Me all works, coming to be without expectation or possessiveness, with a full awareness about the Self, do fight with fever gone.

Verse 30 culminates the very important section on the gunas and action begun in verse 27. When Krishna speaks of himself, we must always remember the Gita is referring to the Absolute, the unlimited, incomprehensible, supreme mystery. Krishna is a guru teaching Arjuna, but guru nature is identical with the Absolute. We will be led very far astray into absurdities if we mistake the temporal embodiment for the eternal Source. We may certainly honor the embodiment, but we must always refer to what it is an embodiment of, or we are guilty of idol worship. Substituting an idol for the Supreme kills the spirit and leads to the creation of beliefs and religions. The Gita considers this a serious error, as will be frequently noted.

The guru's instruction here is to renounce all actions into the Absolute, which permits us to be without possessiveness or expectations. What exactly does this mean?

First of all, we can't help but have hopes for our endeavors, and stifling them outright is not healthy. They are intrinsic to our vision and sense of purpose. Hopes—which after all are a lighter version of expectations—are a natural part of action, and should be treated as such. We should take note of them with compassionate amusement. The yogic technique to deal with them is to bring in doubt as an antithesis to expectation, by assuring oneself that the future isn't going to happen the way we imagine or wish it would. The opposing propositions of hope and doubt then cancel each other out, leaving us with an open, balanced mind, expectant but not anticipatory.

Knowing that expectations color results no matter how strenuously we try to keep them at bay is the reason scientific experiments employ a double blind format, where the participants don't even know what they're testing. It has been repeatedly demonstrated that our unconscious assumptions have a measurable impact on our environment. We can have the best intentions in the world to remain unbiased, but simply because we view things from a particular perspective they take on a certain slant. Like dedicated scientific investigators, spiritual seekers of truth don't want to impair their vision with prejudices, but rather see clearly what is in front of them. Attaining the proper frame of mind requires substantial effort to annul both conscious and unconscious desires. If we are able to keep our mind open, life will always exceed our expectations.

By examining the entire spectrum of possible feelings on any conceivable continuum we can attain a balance of mind that precludes the need for conscious expectations, at least. In other words a clear-eyed assessment is adequate enough that we don't need to lay any additional desires onto the situation. Moreover, a state of equipoise doesn't require any additional input from us to become what it already is. Once we are in tune with our dharma, our innate propensities, our actions will unfold naturally and do not need to be prodded along with any goal-orientation. Until we know

our dharma, though, the goal of discovering it is a reasonable expectation to have.

If you meditate on action as a general category, the specific impulses arising from your personal needs are lessened and eventually brought to a minimum. Certain actions still are necessary, and these are to be understood as arising from the Absolute as the supporter of the General Good. What you do is no longer selfishly motivated, but is in keeping with the greatest benefit of everyone involved, including you. Admittedly, this is very tricky and requires a lot of thought. The Gita describes it as “elusively subtle indeed” (IV, 17). But even a beginning effort weans you away from selfish motivations, which are the source of most of the misery and conflict on the human plane of existence.

The Gita has a very practical plan to achieve unitive action, recommending that you subtract any expectations about the outcome from the actions you perform. By not having expectations you become totally open to what’s happening in the present moment, and can truly experience things as if for the first time. This artistic, zenlike attitude of direct involvement has been watered down and muddied by countless interpreters peddling slavish adherence to doctrine and duty, which is clearly the opposite of the Gita’s intent.

Unitive action is poetically presented in the Bible, especially Matt. 6:25-34, part of the Sermon on the Mount, well worth a reread, by the way. Jesus asks his followers to consider the lilies of the field, which don’t fret about anything but just grow. Birds are mentioned also, because they are more active than plants but live elegantly without premeditation or fearfulness. He concludes this beautiful passage by recommending his disciples seek the Absolute first and foremost, and all their needs will mysteriously be taken care of. This is the same concept as Krishna’s “renounce in Me all works.” As with many religions, the purity of the initial teaching has been redirected later on into manufacturing zombie-like rule-obeying acolytes by certain power-mongers.

Much more will be said about action as we proceed, but one of the key teachings of the Gita is that we should arrive at a place where we are no longer driven by possessiveness and expectations for future gains. We can and should have things, especially those essential to our well being, but we need to be free from attachment to them, so that we don't grieve when they inevitably disappear. An inner confidence can be cultivated in the all-supportive Absolute, which has ever, and will always continue, to provide for our needs. There is no spiritual benefit to worrying about these matters, even as we attend to them with our own best efforts. More on possessiveness can be found particularly at IV, 21.

The last part of this verse is also the first significant transmutation of the battle cry that opened the war. In the first chapter there is a real war about to break out, and Arjuna wants to learn how to resolve the crisis with intelligence rather than bloodshed. In II, 37, in the section devoted to rationalism, Krishna says "Therefore arise, O Arjuna, making up your mind to fight." Because the war is meant to stand for the ubiquitous challenges of life, the Gita has rapidly moved up from the transactional setting to the level of thoughtful reflection. Now we have come to the idea of a balanced actor performing actions without attachment to the pressure of necessity, as epitomized by the gunas. There remains a vestige of the battlefield context in Krishna's call to fight, but the battle is to be fought as a calm contemplative, not as an impassioned warrior. If you stop here you would believe Arjuna should still go ahead and fight as a righteous warrior in the actual war, but with a sense of detachment. This is as far as many people go in adopting unitive action from the Gita—doing what they were going to do to begin with, only without desire—but it is by no means the final word, as we shall see.

Increasing refinement of this subject lies ahead. At the end of this chapter, Krishna tells Arjuna to "kill that enemy in the form of desire, so difficult to overcome." At the end of the following chapter Krishna's exhortation becomes: "Therefore, sundering with the sword of Self-knowledge this ignorance-born doubt

residing in the heart, stand firm in the unitive way, and stand up, Arjuna.” Beyond that the directives become even more sublime, including “at all times remember Me and fight,” (VIII, 7), culminating in the conclusion at the end of the work: “critically scrutinizing all, omitting nothing, do as you like.” These developments will be discussed as we come to them. Whether Arjuna as a warrior should actually fight or not can be argued until doomsday. Leaving that issue aside, the Gita is aiming for a general exhortation for all people in all circumstances who are mature enough to include unitive wisdom in their purview. We are being called to engage in life, and not try to escape it.

31) They, too, who ever adhere to this doctrine of mine, men full of faith and free from any mistrust in respect of it—they gain release from (obligatory) works.

In his commentary, Sri Aurobindo is worried by the idea of freedom from obligations, fearing the collapse of civilization if people don't do their duty, but he makes a terrific point in favor of freedom first. Citing the famous story of the Buddha stealing away in the night from his wife and child, seeking long and hard, and finally giving up and becoming enlightened, he compares it to the widespread belief that Krishna is instructing Arjuna to get back into the battle and fight. Does this mean that the Buddha shouldn't teach after he becomes enlightened, but instead merely return to his family and his principedom? Should Swami Ramakrishna hie back to the humble grade school in which he was teaching and avoid the limelight? Not likely. We turn away from false or trivial obligations to find the truth of our inner nature, and afterwards we will be on a new trajectory that cannot be directed by anyone else. We will follow the promptings of the Tao within.

The notions of faith and trust mentioned here will be discussed in due time, faith especially in Chapter XVII and trust at the beginning of Chapter IX. We should once again remind ourselves that Krishna has a very open mind when he says “They

who adhere to this doctrine of mine.” His doctrine so far is simply to infuse action with wisdom, and he has just recommended the abandonment of possessiveness and expectations as the means to accomplish this. Nowhere is there any implication that there is a prescribed code of behavior tied up with this “doctrine.”

32) On the other hand, those soulless ones who look upon this my doctrine with mistrust and adhere not to it—know them as shut away from all knowledge and as lost.

Krishna again mentions his doctrine, and we have to remember that it is not a typical one, but extremely open minded and open hearted. We are more familiar with doctrines that specify rules and punishments in detail, but Krishna’s doctrine is intended to help us break free of rules, habits and conditionings. It’s more like an invitation than a doctrine.

Actually, most commentators use *teaching* in place of doctrine for the Sanskrit *matam*. MW has *matam* as (in addition to doctrine and belief) intention, purpose, even simply *idea*. Krishna is making an argument for a radically revised, very liberal view of the whole shebang, but perhaps with an excess of hyperbole here. Probably he is goading Arjuna to get more serious, because the ball is really starting to roll. In any case, the flavor of “my way or the highway,” in this verse should be compared to upcoming verse IV, 11: “As each chooses to approach Me, even accordingly do I have regard for him. My very path it is, O Arjuna, that all men do tread from every (possible) approach.” You can’t get much more open than that!

Most of us tend to have too narrow a view of what spirituality or spiritual growth consists of. Since our upbringing is largely based on tangible forms and concrete ideas, we associate this very invisible and free flowing noncondition of spirit with buildings and books and classes and so on. This inevitably limits our self-image drastically and unnecessarily. If we don’t go to church or practice our meditation, we think we aren’t doing

anything spiritual, and sometimes we get down on ourselves because of it.

Actually, spiritual growth is something that goes on whenever we ponder something, contemplate an aspect of existence, admire a beautiful object, spend time with a child (or even an adult!), take a hot bath, make love, walk in the woods, and lots more. It's something we participate in almost all the time, and when we aren't, it's because we're storing up energy for another go at it. Thoughts like "I'm not doing anything spiritual right now" or "I need to get my life in order so I can begin to do spiritual things later" are impediments that can easily be discarded. Instead, adopt the simple attitude that "life itself is spiritual unfolding" and your self-image will instantly and permanently improve.

Spiritual growth happens especially when we aren't directing our energies into narrow channels with predictable outcomes, but are open to what the "guru" of life itself brings our way. It's almost never what we expect, because we don't have a clue what's ahead, really. But being open to the flow teaches us quite quickly that life has a big heart and is embracing us even before we open our arms to receive it.

To consider a concrete example of "denying Krishna," one who denies the doctrine of non-possessiveness is one who clings to possessions. Such a one is lost in the same sense as the person who is dull witted in this chapter's verse 29, because they don't see beyond the obvious. They aren't really even having a spiritual practice at all, whatever they may think. The Gita ever strives to turn our attention from the things that come and go to what is eternal, but it is battling deeply entrenched habits that drag the disciple back to transient interests again and again. This explains Krishna's surprising vehemence here.

33) Even a man of wisdom behaves in conformity with his own nature. All creation goes on subject to nature. Of what avail is control?

At first blush this verse seems to indicate that we have no role to play in our lives; that we should just go along with it and “put up and shut up.” Since this is absurd, we know we have to look a bit deeper.

Early on in contemplative practice we are well advised to examine just what parts of our life are under our control and what parts are not. This allows us to work effectively and not waste our time trying to repress our natural proclivities. The next verse gives an instance, advising us to steer clear of attraction-repulsion situations, to help maintain a neutral posture as we tread our path. In any case, there is much we can do and much we cannot, and sorting this out is an excellent meditation. Where the worshipful disciple might bow down and think “Oh, Krishna is telling me not to try to control anything!” the intelligent disciple should realize the verse is posing a question that demands an answer: Just what exactly does control avail?

If we are to meet the Absolute face to face on its own terms, we must not put our faces to the ground. We are called upon to be expert and fearless, to “stand up.” An excess of humility can definitely be a fault rather than a virtue. It drives gurus crazy that people just accept what they say with a reverent nod, in place of responding with an original thought of their own. They know that the momentary pool of insight will be evaporating from the mind shortly, and the reverent one will be complacently slipping back into old habits.

Everyone and everything on earth is part of an overriding flow that determines the parameters for what we can express, and even what we can be. While humankind mainly tinkers with one edge of this stream of consciousness through developing technology and social evolution, by and large we are flotsam in a sweeping flood of events over which we have very little control. We should admire this flood as pouring from the very mouth of the Divine Source, rather than trying to manipulate it based on our personal wants and very limited viewpoint. No one knows where the flood is taking us. This does not mean we should be

complacent about the injustices perpetrated by greedy people. The flood is carrying us toward universal justice and higher consciousness, but on the way there are plenty of rocks, eddies and whirlpools we have to avoid so we don't get stuck. We participate to whatever degree we are capable of.

As psychologists are well aware, humans are very clever to disguise our unsavory personal predilections in altruistic terms, terms we believe will sound acceptable to other people. When this blanket of verbiage is stripped away, the self-interest at its core is revealed. The Gita recommends we be more honest with ourselves, and take a good hard look at our motivations, both inner and outer, as an early stage in aligning our actions with the Absolute. When our action stands uncamouflaged, we are in tune with our *svadharma*, our finest action proclivities. Once that happens we can “go with the flow” instead of floundering against it.

Our normal training directs us to constantly ask “What do I do now?” and we are expected to approach this question from a self-interested point of view, bringing in everything we've been taught.

The Gita suggests instead that we subtract the idea of ourselves as agents of action (“I am the doer”). We should sit back and contemplate the most general possible overview of the situation. By sitting calmly (“with fever gone”) and without prejudice in favor of our own position (tricky!), we can come to understand what is required in any predicament. This equal minded position is only truly possible when we apprehend the Absolute as universally present in all things. We also need to know our own inner nature and predilections, having shrugged off society's molding of us into its idea of “normal”, which is to a greater or lesser extent foreign to us.

By tuning in with this global perspective, our own course of action will be intuitively seen to flow naturally out of the whole.

When all is said and done, what is being gotten at here is that we should be satisfied with who we are, and not try to be someone

else. The trick is that we arrive at this point in life as an imitation of others, and we have lost touch with our essential nature. Practically from the day we are born we observe those around us and model ourselves after them. It's not a bad thing, as far as it goes, because it allows us to fit in and survive, but it is not fully satisfactory. We also need to add our own unique contribution as the finishing touch to a life well lived. Adulthood is achieved not when we become praiseworthy imitators, but when we take the next step and become creatively independent actors in tune with ourselves.

Humans are attracted to famous and talented people, and think "That's what I want to be!" They may spend a lifetime trying to fulfill the role they covet. The Gita's advice is to forget all that. Instead we should unleash our authentic nature, our dharma, and in that way we can actualize much more of what we have in us. Even if we become rich and famous by putting on an act, there is a hollowness to it that kills the joy.

Sooner or later, living as an imitation of a mirage loses its thrill, and we insist on knowing the truth of our self. We arrive at this crossroads of our life as a bundle of contradictions and poorly developed hypotheses, and we desperately need to find our true being somewhere in the midst of them. Arjuna's confusion at the beginning of the Gita can be understood as his becoming aware of the gulf between who he knows he is and who others expect him to be. Krishna relentlessly directs him into himself, counseling him to throw off both his own and everyone else's expectations. He definitely does not teach him to be satisfied with his mediocre existence and step back into his allotted role.

In place of "To what avail is control?" Radhakrishnan has "What can repression accomplish?" This gives the sense better. We repress our true nature in order to force ourselves into our imitative social role playing. Repression, then, is the opposite of the spiritual impulse, which aims at freedom. One of the primary causes of the misery of the human race in the midst of Paradise is the glorification of repression and the denigration of individual

authenticity. The Bhagavad Gita stands firm against this foolhardy reversal of good sense.

34) Attraction-repulsion abide mutually, between the senses and their sense-objects. One should never come under their double sway. They are indeed one's twin path-hindering factors.

The Absolute is everywhere, so isn't everything just fine? Well yes, but in actuality our minds can and in fact must produce the illusion of separation, for us to function as individuated beings. This is an intriguing paradox. We develop from birth into dualistic beings who have learned—quite appropriately—to separate one thing from another. In the process we invariably forget the oneness out of which we have bifurcated. Since the Absolute is unitive, we need to move from duality to unity to reunite with it. We begin by seeing it as yet another separate item to be obtained, but the seers advise us that it is nothing like that. In the transition from seeking the Absolute as a distinct item to seeking it as our own beingness, we convert from duality to unity. Therefore, when a reconnection with our unitive core is desired—as a way to bring us back to our native perfection—certain intermediate steps may be found to be very helpful.

The steps taken to go from duality to unity are called a spiritual path, even though the path doesn't really lead anywhere. We are journeying from our self to our Self. But “all roads lead to Rome,” as the saying goes. In IV, 11 quoted earlier, Krishna affirms that we are free to choose the way we take to the Absolute, and it can't help but deliver us there, since it is our true nature. The Gita doesn't make a list of sequential steps. It merely provides a number of extremely helpful suggestions for us to incorporate into our personal journey as we see fit.

The ego is the sum total of our decisions regarding what is attractive and what is repulsive. In the transition to maturity we go from “the kid in a candy store” mentality to a deliberate selection of what will be most beneficial. We learn that candy in excess will

produce a stomach ache, and that immediate gratification may give us a hangover or make us ill. We also find that deferred gratification for a loftier goal can be much more rewarding. In the final chapter (XVIII, 37-39), Krishna sums this up based on the three gunas of purity, activity and darkness:

that happiness which is like gall at first, ambrosial at the end, born of lucid self-understanding, is called sattvic;
that happiness arising out of contact of the senses with objects, at first like ambrosia, at the end like gall, is called rajasic;
that happiness which at first and in after-effects is self-confounding, arising from sleep, lassitude and listlessness, is called tamasic.

From this we can conclude that not all repulsions are to be avoided; some are to be worked through. The most valuable projects often present “difficulty at the beginning,” as the I Ching calls it. Remember that Krishna tried to repel Arjuna at the beginning of his discipleship, to test his dedication. You may meet with a frowning dismissal at a first approach to a guru. Likewise, if you go to her and she hands you a lollipop and tells you to come back in a year, you should politely decline it and ask for instruction instead. If you take the lollipop and go away, you are a sucker.

Once we grow beyond immediate attractions and repulsions and begin to focus on the One Beyond as a supreme goal, we can make better decisions. We choose what appeals to our better judgment, logically enough. Still, our choices are complicated by many competing voices offering advice from perspectives that may not serve us well. We have to sort out what advice to take and which to leave behind. It’s not easy, because the loudest and most immediately attractive voices are often the most deceptive.

Jonah Lehrer, in *How We Decide* (Boston: Mariner, 2009), reviews the complex science of decision-making in detail. The book is an excellent adjunct to the study of the Gita. Lehrer notes that pure reason by itself is not adequate, because it is too limited.

The brain compounds vast amounts of information into emotional cues. What we have to learn is when these cues are legitimate wise decisions or when they are selfish short-term desires in disguise. Our ability to judge between our wise and foolish impulses is a high art form that requires considerable practice, and does not lend itself to hard and fast rules.

This verse offers a key distinguishing mark to differentiate intelligent advice from merely attractive advice. We are drawn to what attracts us, by definition. But if we are attracted and afterwards repelled, it is an unmistakable mark of duality. We should be seeking an attraction which is ever attractive and never repulsive, and this sustainability is a helpful mark to aid us in distinguishing between the lasting and the transient.

There are many types of repulsion. Religions play up guilt, but that is learned repulsion, for the most part, and highly abstract. Repulsion also appears as various physical and mental illnesses, social rejection, failure to develop, wasted efforts, depression and downheartedness, and so on. It is worthwhile to try to figure out in advance what actions may blow us off course, but when we inevitably blunder, repulsion provides negative feedback to urge us to change direction.

Depression is not mental illness: it is the brain's way of impelling a change of face. It informs us that we have not found our true calling. If we medicate it away, we will stay stuck where we are instead of blazing a new trail. There are some serious problems that are often miscast as depression, and that's a different matter, obviously.

Because both unity and duality are attractive, and the difference is difficult to notice at first, we very often go wrong in our initial efforts. As Krishna says, this hinders our progress on the path, because we spend time on things of little or no value. Contemplative assessment will help sort these matters out. If we make a mistake and put our energies into dualistic attractions, a state of repulsion eventually comes along to remind us to seek elsewhere. But we have to be alert for early signs of being caught,

because many activities are addictive. Look around, and you will see a world filled with addicts of various stripes, stuck fast in mediocre and unsatisfactory states of mind.

Beyond the obvious addictive activities, there is a plethora of more clandestine ones. The most important example for the spiritual neophyte is the lure of simplified means to enlightenment. They may imagine that some savior or charismatic teacher will do their work for them, or that by practicing certain body postures or chanting mantras they will rapidly evolve to some imaginary exalted goal. These are subtle types of sensory attraction, forms of veiled eroticism. When the results don't appear as hoped, they either reject that path and look for another or force the issue until they have a breakdown and go mad. Frittering away one's efforts on superficial matters or becoming deranged will indeed hinder one's progress, possibly for an entire lifetime.

Repulsion itself is an attraction to many people. If you aren't seeking liberation, then magnifying the surges of attraction and repulsion may increase the impact of temporary pleasures. If your life seems meaningless, intensity of sensory experience may be an appealing substitute for the sense of emptiness you feel. This is fine up to a point, so long as no harm is done to unwilling participants, but it is not what the unitive flow of spiritual life entails. A spiritual search is all about finding the true meaning of your life, which then provides satisfaction and steadiness beyond all of life's ups and downs. The all-too typical and very tragic response to emptiness is to cram more and more distracting activities into the day. The Gita's advice is that emptiness is an indicator that we need to change direction, to seek within instead of without. No amount of "stuff" can fill up the hole in our psyche made by the absence of the Absolute. We have only to rediscover it, though, and it instantaneously refills the emptiness.

35) Better is activity rightly conforming to one's own nature, though lacking in superior quality, than activity foreign to one's own nature, although it may be well done (otherwise). (Even)

death by the performance of what fits one properly has merit.
Activity foreign to oneself is fraught with danger.

Here we have a key teaching of the Gita, repeated near the end of the work in (XVIII, 47). It is imperative for each of us to discover and explore who we are. If there is any “Divine Plan” this is it! Each of us is a unique being charged with holding our place in space, in other words, with being ourselves. When we become clones of some static idea, we die to the spirit. What is the point of such an imitation existence? None, really. It is only the bad dreams of control freaks that urge them to advocate conformity. This is such an important point that Krishna says to stay with it even to the death. Don’t ever let other people bully you into being what they want you to be, if it doesn’t accord with who you are.

The attempt to avoid death is in fact one of the reasons we most avoid life. If we have full confidence in our true nature we will have no impetus to try to be someone else, or to try to unduly prolong our existence either. The threat of death is a powerful tool to force us to accept inferior conditions. If we know that in advance, we are prepared to resist such manipulation. This attitude bubbles up periodically in the revolutionary spirit, epitomized in the State Motto of New Hampshire, USA: Live Free or Die.

Looking back to Eric Sharpe’s characterization of this verse (mentioned in I, 43) as meaning “It is better to perform the duty of one’s own caste badly than another’s duty well,” we can see first of all that there is no duty suggested here at all. Nor is caste mentioned. Krishna is trying to show Arjuna how to uncover his own true nature, and thereby find the best way to act: to become attuned to his svadharma, as it is called. Our pure, untrammelled nature which springs from the Absolute is covered over by layers of beliefs and exhortations laid down by society, as recognized by Arjuna back in the first chapter. Fixations such as caste and duty are included in these unhealthy conditionings that stifle the freedom within, leading to strife and misery.

The well-respected Gita commentator Radhakrishnan says of this verse, after some well-intentioned platitudes, “However distasteful one’s duty may be, one must be faithful to it even unto death.” What a horrific concept! One’s “duty” or dharma is determined by what you enjoy; anything less could be an excuse for someone else to manipulate you. Make no mistake, after subtracting reactions that may be pleasing to the ego alone, following your joy is the way to realize your own dharma. Sure, there will be challenges and setbacks, but once you are firm in your resolve, these can be taken in stride. In a perfect world everyone would be performing activity in keeping with their personal tastes and predilections. In an imperfect world, the strong enslave the weak with the help of concepts like duty, honor, and country.

We act as we have been taught. Almost everyone is thus busily engaged in activity foreign to their nature. How does the Absolute’s beneficence flow out into the world, when it is bottled up by “shoulds” and “oughts” and other “duties”? The untrammelled expression of our divine nature requires perfect flexibility and openness, unbound by conditioning. The Gita’s whole reason for being is to teach us how to achieve this freedom, which is central to a meaningful existence.

This verse applies to much more than a person’s work. The key is to understand dharma as activity in accord with a person’s inner nature, as opposed to externally applied duty. Activity in keeping with one’s inner nature applies to the whole of life. Sexual preference is a major issue that can be resolved with Krishna’s perspective here. Traditional society holds a powerful anti-homosexual bias, and the lives devastated by homosexuals repressing their true feelings are legion. According to the Gita, following your inner promptings, even in a tentative and confused way, is better than a well executed life of fakery, such as many homosexuals and other non-regulation types have been condemned to live throughout history.

Because of the strong emotions kicked up by sexuality, there is a lot of confusion about it. Homosexuals engender the hatred of some heterosexuals, and then respond in various ways, including returning the hatred. A detached viewpoint is thus hard to come by. The wise yogi can easily see that a harmonious blend of male and female elements comes closest to the neutral poise recommended by the Gita. Scientifically speaking, all humans contain both male and female chemicals. The most extreme polarities measure in at 52 percent male hormones, or 52 percent female, with the norm much closer to 50-50. The differences are so slight, it's readily apparent how a person's body type might be out of phase with their chemistry. Isn't it wonderful, though, that no matter how we're tilted, everyone can find a suitable partner! Such is the potential of a reciprocal universe, where everyone's needs are met by what they seek. Only societal terror tactics stymie the natural propensity for widespread happiness.

It is very important in this and all matters to carefully examine yourself to separate out reactions to conditioning from your own true inner nature. (In the meantime, go ahead and have that fling—how else will you know?) Very often what we believe to be our real self is nothing more than an internalization of outside forces, and those need to be countermanded to arrive at a clear self-image. Much of society consists of antisocial people, especially those making the transition from childhood to adulthood. All of us are vulnerable to fads, which appeal to our desire to be ourselves but are in reality veiled forms of conformity. The contemplative has to resist going along with the crowd, and instead look within. It takes courage, sometimes even to the degree of facing death threats, to hold to your guiding star. The Gita is part of your support group in finding your true path and avoiding the pitfalls.

Eugene Hutz, of the gypsy-rock group Gogol Bordello, starts the song *Ultimate* with words in the spirit of this verse:

If we are here not to do

What you and I wanna do
And go forever crazy with it
Why the hell we are even here?

Why, indeed!

To sum up, although perfect attunement is possible while being engaged in both pleasant and unpleasant activities, it is far easier to become unitively involved in action if it is something you like, something in keeping with your true nature. You can't fake what turns you on. At the same time, most of our actions spring from a more superficial level than our essential core, and so are a mixture of our learned behaviors and outside influences (or the rejection of them). The more we can set these aside to dive into our dharma, the more our actions will be true to our real self, and not just a subtle form of mob psychology.

36) Arjuna said:

Then impelled by what does man lead such a life of sin even against his will, as if forcibly enjoined?

The disciple hereby does his duty and responds to Krishna's question from verse 33, "Of what avail is control?" He is not yet confident enough to give an opinion, but is engaged enough to ask a question that furthers the dialogue on this very important matter.

Arjuna has felt inner impulses that contradict his better judgment, which is the big question of this chapter: How do we bring ideals and actions together harmoniously? And why are our impulses so powerful, so much stronger than our best intentions?

We start out in life with untamed urges springing up inside, the germinating seeds of genetic potentials (*vasanas* in Sanskrit) bursting into rampant growth. They offer us a wide range of capabilities to be actualized. Some of our *vasanas* are survival-based and dangerous, while others encode our most highly evolved attributes, with most falling somewhere in between. The tragedy is that as we grow up we are taught to repress them all and substitute

a traditional generic blueprint laid down in the distant past. In the process our uniqueness is destroyed or driven underground. Arjuna is now in the process of reclaiming his integrity as an individual.

Society gives us strict moral codes to set in opposition to our *vasanas*, regardless of whether they are good, bad or indifferent. Some people—the wild ones—stick with their urges, and others, the law-abiding ones, follow the codes. Arjuna has come to realize that neither version is wholly acceptable to him. The codes only repress the urges, and don't in any way further them, but the raw urges could well lead him into serious trouble. He wants to know the elusively subtle secret of how to bring his urges and his intelligence into harmony. At this early stage, though, he is content to hear more about the effects of the impulses themselves. The more he knows about them the easier they will be to harness.

Be sure to take note that once again it's Arjuna the seeker who mentions sin, which, like merit, lies outside the scope of unitive action. The threat of punishment for sin is the voice of social repression. Krishna, like any good guide, offers positive encouragement rather than punitive intimidation.

Arjuna's dilemma is critical, amounting to how we can have free will when so much of our makeup is fixed. Neuroscience is now at a pass where it appears that humans are utterly at the mercy of hardwired decision making from the unconscious, and free will is nowhere in evidence. While this is an important first step in comprehending consciousness, it is a premature conclusion, to say the least.

The science involved, while admirable, is statistical analysis of the responses of limited groups in measurable scenarios. For instance, David Eagleman reports, in his book *Incognito*, that at least some aspects of sexual attraction is unconsciously motivated.

Leaving aside the fact that many of these studies are made with college age students, who are cheap and readily available, and also powerfully driven by hormonal forces, all of the studies I am aware of focus on easily measurable quantities like this, aspects of

desire and anger. Several thousand years ago this type of response was already known to be conditioned, and Krishna is about to go off about it. He calls it “the eternal enemy of the wise,” because it is conditioned thinking that produces predictable behavior. The spiritual position, if you will, is that there is a region of tremendous creativity and excitement beyond the reach of conditioned thinking. The spiritual seeker of truth aims to transcend the bonds of conditioning to achieve their full potential. Their potential may still be limited, but it is limited in the way Mozart or Leibnitz or Hypatia were limited. We should be so fortunate! The contributions of such geniuses far outshone anything previously evolved, demonstrating there is something more than programming at work in creative expression.

It isn't presently possible to have a statistical analysis of unique, creative thinking. If we presume, as some scientists are doing, that all thought is conditioned, it implies that everything has already been invented. There is nothing new under the sun, only its slow emergence from the depths over time. This is perhaps plausible, but it is still a very large presumption. The simpler explanation is that creative people can go beyond their conditioning to come up with new inventions. Evolution is then a creative process, even if you attribute it to accidents.

Psychedelic drugs are fantastic boosters of the psyche, out of the gravitational field of conditioned thought, giving explorers an inviting glimpse of their genius potential. When the doors of perception once again close as the drugs wear off, many of them are inspired to work toward more open states of mind, in the most exciting journey anyone can undertake.

Neuroscience will have to find new ways to measure conditioning and creativity before it can admit the existence of exceptional abilities. Genius in our highly conditioned societies is rare, and people under the influence of psychedelics are not quantifiable. They are not interested in providing test answers, and if they do they will be all over the map. In an unconditioned state, no one wants to define themselves, which reinstates a conditioned

perspective. Basically, answering questions constrains consciousness to a narrow band, already highly conditioned.

I have a motto: self-description is stultifying. In other words, it makes you stupid, conditioned. It limits you. If you are trying to transcend limits, you don't want to keep describing yourself in familiar terms.

We definitely have to acknowledge the value of knowing that most of our seemingly free choices are in fact not free at all. The Gita is a psychological science that instructs us on how to detect our unconscious bondage and overcome it. As such it is among the most valuable tools available to us, at least those of us who don't want to capitulate to our limitations. Arjuna is really chafing at his limitations, because Krishna has helped make him aware of them.

How much more inspiring it is for us to know we have an infinite potential than to feel doomed to naturally selected mandatory choices!

37) Krishna said:

Such is desire, such is anger, born out of the modality called rajas, all-devouring, all-vitiating; know this to be the enemy here.

Desire is one form vasanas take as they emerge into consciousness, struggling to become actualized. If they are thwarted—as they usually are—the pressure to push forward against the obstacles produces the heat of anger. Anger is the one of the ego's primary responses to opposition.

Since they are so closely related, desire and anger are often lumped together, but they aren't exactly the same. One definitely proceeds and produces the other. Anger is consequent to desire. If we relinquish our desires, anger flickers out like a flame whose fuel has been turned off.

Desire and anger are the strongest emotions—especially when hyperbolically inflated by fear—that grab us by the lapel and motivate us to all the actions that bring devastation to our world. Unless they are subdued, the seeker of truth remains a pretender, in

every sense of the word. The thirteenth century sage Dnyaneshwar Maharaj waxes wroth about them:

These enemies are ruthless and they are like death itself.... Being enemies of life [desire and anger] are held in great respect in the city of death. There is no limit to their hunger, and hope itself increases their activities.... [They] have their root in egotism. Desire and anger create hypocrisy and the suppression of truth. They destroy mental peace and substantiate maya, which overpowers even the sages. They undermine discrimination, disinterestedness and patience. They ruin tranquility, courage and joy. They cut at the root of knowledge and make happiness impossible. They are born with the body and are inseparable from it. In this way they run parallel with consciousness itself and appear before the mind's eye under the pretence of being judgment. Hence it is, that these are difficult to control. (*Gita Explained*, p. 78)

Sounds like he was watching a lot of television! Plenty of florid melodrama there. But the Maharaj is onto something essential. Our deepest emotions are inseparable from the body, from our self-identity, so they appear perfectly natural to our mind's eye. We aren't able to see how they cloud and blinder our vision, unless we step back and take a long view. The essence of meditation or spirituality is to carefully observe the subtle winds that blow us off course and correct for them. The neutral state we always speak about is "shelter from the storm," a calm refuge protected from the howling gales of cravings and frustrations, where we can make good decisions.

Dnyaneshwar is revealing an important truth in alleging that desire and anger are at their most insidious in the guise of judgment, or indignation about other people's behaviors. Nothing expands the self-righteous ego more than anger. It's as if the furious opinion of the moment was received directly from God. History is filled with murderous, self-assured, angry zealots

bubbling over with fire and brimstone. They can always find a scripture to sanction their obsessions. Obviously yogis take care not to be carried away by their emotions, reserving judgment until wisdom can be brought to bear in a pacific manner.

Achieving neutrality is an important step, but it is not the whole project. We are then called to bring forth our best abilities, promoting the vasanas that further psycho-spiritual evolution. Spreading conflict and misery are not the yogi's calling.

Anger is not just an individual emotion: whole societies can be gripped by it. In a build up to war, propagandists fuel the anger and resentments of entire populations, until an explosive conflagration results. A yogi is always alert to not be drawn into such a vortex, either personal or societal. At every moment we can choose whether to abandon ourselves to the prevailing mania or not. Staying free takes serious intentionality.

The consumer societies of modernity—Dnyaneshwar's medieval "cities of death" as we know them today—are addicted to artificially creating desire in order to sell products to satisfy the desire. Vast amounts of energy and psychological expertise are directed to keeping us all enslaved to our "needs," which are really wants, things we have learned to desire, very different from the desires of our natural abilities trying to express themselves. The ancient rishis would easily have predicted that such an unhealthy system would breed tremendous anger and consequent violence. As rampant greed torpedoes the shaky structure of consumer societies, desperation over the prospective loss of prosperity fuels wars far and near. Angry "pundits" lash out at the well intentioned, the innocent, and even the victims, seeking to place the blame anyplace but where it belongs. "The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere the ceremony of innocence is drowned," as Yeats put it in his poem, *The Second Coming*. Krishna characterizing this delirium as a serious enemy is not at all overblown.

38) As smoke shrouds fire, as a mirror (is beclouded) by dirt, as the fetus is enclosed in the amnion, likewise by such is This surrounded.

In the materialistic model of the universe, everything is built up out of small pieces, like the parts of a machine or a building. The constructs only last a short time, and then they fall apart or die. Because of this, nothing means anything. This attitude blots out the glowing heart of creation with a deadening pall of ignorance.

The Upanishadic model, by contrast, is one of continuous pulsation. There is a central core of truth, stable and unchanging, that manifests outwards, radiating in all directions as the world of name and form. Where the former model is linear, the latter is spherical or multidimensional, and filled to the brim with meaning because every part retains its connection with the central hub, termed the Absolute here. The meaning of life itself is the struggle to reconnect with the blissful core of life whenever it is obscured by the blinding effects of manifested existence.

Unfortunately for our everyday awareness, only the outermost shell of the sphere is perceptible to beings on the periphery, and since we are oriented looking outward, awareness of the core can only be arrived at intuitively. It isn't so much hidden as we are looking in the wrong direction. In a healthy philosophy, outward-oriented manifestation is balanced by inward contemplation, the movements being complementary and reciprocal. By doing so, the meaning is not lost even as the details are assessed critically. The twin aspects of reality, form and meaning, do not have to be in conflict.

In the pulsation model, the perceivable outer shell—what we call the everyday world—is necessarily dual, made up of things that are relatively high and low, hot and cold, helpful and useless, etc., while the core is a unity that transcends all such attributes. Krishna is calling our attention to the neglected core of wisdom, because where we go wrong is by treating the perceptibles in

isolation, divorced from their source. Taking everything separately and forgetting the unifying continuum, we become needy and greedy, imagining we have to scheme how to get things from our surroundings. Instead of participation in a benign symmetry, we learn to desire what we prefer, and we become angry when something thwarts its attainment. And in a world of needy and greedy people, satisfying our needs becomes ever more daunting. Yogis are directed to avoid such unnecessary traps.

The three gunas have a role in verses 37 and 38. The previous verse explicitly mentions rajas, the activist guna, and the present verse explores aspects of tamas, the obscuring guna. Awareness of the heart of manifestation is sattvic, whose classic image is a clear mirror. Sattva is also compared here to a bright light unobscured by smoke, and—in a very charming and unusual touch—to an unborn babe that has not yet undergone any conditioning.

Krishna says that the Absolute *resembles* these things, because they are after all descriptions. Sattva is the most accurate resemblance of concepts to the underlying reality. The Absolute is the true essence, and the clearest conception of it, as unadulterated as possible, is called sattvic. Still, an image is not the reality, and the danger with sattva is that it can easily be mistaken for reality. When the Absolute is partially obscured we are in a rajasic condition, and when it is totally hidden we are in a tamasic state. The gunas perennially rotate in ordinary awareness, from clear to agitated to muddy, and then (if we are lucky) back to clear.

There is another subtle relationship in these images, described in Vedanta as sat-chit-ananda; or in English, truth, consciousness and value. As an elemental manifestation of powerful invisible forces, fire stands for truth. A mirror reflects what is going on in the vicinity, making it a favorite symbol of conscious awareness. The third image must then indicate the meaning, the ananda, usually translated as bliss. It is almost unbearably sweet that the value or meaning of all manifestation is exemplified by the new life, well hidden in its protective womb

and swelling toward birth. To Krishna, then, the meaning of the universe is life. Other than life, what would be the point of it all?

Atomistic materialists pulverize everything and then can find no meaning in the detritus. Their very logical philosophy—which we share to a significant degree, whatever we may believe—takes us to the brink of despair. Rishis and other lovers know that meaning emerges from complexity, from relationships. A single note may have very little significance, but a symphony can move and inspire its listeners every time it is heard.

Apparently it takes billions and billions of years for a universe to produce complex enough creatures to animate its emptiness with intelligence. Humans, with our immense potential for creative expression, are a spectacular achievement, whether we have evolved randomly or otherwise. How tragic that many bright minds can see nothing but meaninglessness wherever they look, when every drop is charged with significance. Everything is happening for the very first and very last time. Each instant of life should be cherished, fostered, and used as a springboard for further artistic achievements. Then the hungry soul can be replete with joy, while despair vanishes in a puff of tamasic smoke. In this final section of the third chapter, Krishna is urging us to make the herculean effort required to overcome our mundane obsessions and open our eyes to the stunning reality of existence.

39) Wisdom is enveloped by this which is the eternal enemy of the wise, remaining in the form of desire, Arjuna, which is a fire that is difficult to satiate.

The importance of not being bewildered by desire is emphasized by it receiving an unusually long section of verses by the Guru, Krishna. Yes, we have to address all the issues of maintaining our existence, but these can be done gently and without grasping. Then equal attention can be paid to the core of wisdom, which sustains the whole.

Like much else, desire is most often taken in the most literal, obvious sense, to mean sexual desire and similar appetites, like hunger and thirst. Seekers spend their lives trying to suppress their natural (and healthy!) biological urges, but they are much less of an issue if they are simply given an unexaggerated place in our life. Suppression places them at center stage and entices them to grow huge. On the other hand, Krishna is right that they don't go away by satiating them, either; that can also make them more prominent. The advice from II, 59 is apt: the more the blissful Absolute is the center of attention, the more the ordinary diversions lose their allure. The Gita's advice is to locate the Absolute right in the center of whatever activity we are doing, which enhances its beauty and harmonizes its effect on everyone involved. The simple fact that action in tune with the Absolute is more blissful than action without it causes it to stabilize around the central hub of truth.

As usual, though, treating desires as objective entities misses the mark. It isn't so much the actions themselves, but the attitude with which they are performed that counts. Like most activities, sex can be beautiful or ugly depending on whether it's done lovingly or abusively. So can tennis or soccer, for that matter, or business.

The really problematic desires are things like greed, selfishness, coveting possessions, and the like. These substitute material objects for the desirable goal of union with the Absolute, and so really are the eternal enemy of the wise, because they distract us from what is truly important. As an endless litany of abusive celibate priests has proved, giving up sex doesn't confer any benefit by itself. The urge has to be transmuted and sublimated into something else just as stimulating, or there will be trouble.

The Gita was composed long before the puritanical era of spirituality set in, and its advice tends toward moderation rather than suppression. More will be said about sex renunciation in VI, 14 and elsewhere. Modern science has observed that sex has a number of health benefits, including for the brain. Kelly Lambert,

in *A Tale of Two Rodents*, reports on a study of rats at Princeton University, “Even though sexual behavior is stressful, at least in the beginning, the rewarding aspects of the behavior appear to lead to both new nerve cells and more sophisticated connections among existing neurons in a brain area critical for learning and memory. This study suggests that sex builds more complex brains.” (Scientific American Mind, Sept/Oct 2011.)

The fire analogy is apt. In the last verse the fire stood for the Absolute, but here it symbolizes desire. Desires can be beneficial or detrimental depending on their relationship with the Absolute, and distinguishing the two kinds of fire requires expert attention and almost invariably outside assistance. We are too easily fooled, so friends or advisors should be consulted whenever possible.

If we attempt to placate our desires by satisfying them, without any contemplative distance, it is like throwing another log on the fire to try to put it out. The seeker should merely observe as the fire burns itself out, possibly stirring up the ashes so it will burn a little faster. Once the exciting and mesmerizing fire goes out, peace creeps in on little cat feet.

Those who are as yet happily motivated by their desires can still learn a great deal from the Gita, but what separates seekers from the regular folks is their being burned out on and wishing to go beyond desire-prompted action.

40) This is said to be lodged in the senses, mind and reason. By means of these, this (desire) bewilders the embodied one by veiling his wisdom.

The chapter ends with a grouping of four verses, 40-43, presenting three main aspects of the individual in a graded series. Different types of desire are present in each aspect—senses, mind and reason—but all lead the seeker away from the core. They are like arrows directed outward. Meditation and contemplation redirect the flow inward toward the Self or Absolute. In the pulsation model, desire expands outward towards objects, and has

to be counterbalanced by a movement back toward the center. The subtle teaching here is to finish with unhelpful desires by working simultaneously from the outside in and the inside out, dialectically.

The schizoid tendencies of spirituality stem from treating desire as an external enemy and pitting ourself against it. The battle then is us against ourself, and it is very destructive. It is most often energized by self-loathing stemming from social rejection. The wise assure us that desire is an integral part of our very self. Our first step, therefore, should be to befriend our self, including its desires. We have to make peace and unify our splintered psyche before we can live and act harmoniously.

We are easily deluded by desire precisely because it is integral to us. It is who we think we are. The Absolute is the principle that transcends our limited identity with what we see and think. It is outside the context of desire. Thus, if we identify with it, desire surrenders without a fight, so to speak, and we can be content to simply be ourself.

41) Therefore, mastering first the senses, slay this which is of sin, which can destroy both pure and practical wisdom.

The most obvious way we are led astray by desire is through the senses. Despite indisputable scientific knowledge that they are deceptive, our sense inputs are so convincing we repeatedly fall under their spell. We believe what we see. It takes a serious philosophical dedication to functionally realize that what we see is a performance staged in our mind's eye, colored by our beliefs, hopes, fears and desires. Until we can step back and gain a little distance from the play we're putting on, we remain utterly spellbound by it. Like Sleeping Beauty, its spell will render us unconscious forever, unless we are fortunate enough to be awakened by a royal kiss.

Krishna mentions sin because his disciple is confused about it, not because it exists independently. His teaching is to do away with desire and anger, which are perfectly normal but cloud our

intelligence. If there is any sin it is just the confusion that shrouds truth, diverting wisdom in both its pure and practical senses. We should think of sin as a stumbling block, which takes away the taint of evil associated with it. It is certainly an internal factor, not something imposed by hostile outside forces.

Recall that Arjuna's question was why he couldn't actualize his visions easily, that there was some invisible force pressing him off course. Krishna's response is that desire arises from within, with its own agenda more or less out of synch with our conscious intentions. It is a part of us, not some alien creature to be rejected but our own psyche to be redirected. The language is harsh, but the taming must be done artfully, because desire is clever enough to draw strength from the very efforts pitted against it.

Desire destroys (or at least undermines) pure wisdom or equipoise by superimposing multiple layers of emotion and conceptualization on its unitive essence, like the wind making ripples on a still pond. It raises us out of our peaceful seat to go in search of its satisfaction. At the early stages of a spiritual practice like meditation, desire must be struggled with and made to wait for the period of time allotted to the practice. Here too, slaying desire is a bit strong in terminology, though it implies a certain heroic energy that can be helpful. Doing away with desire completely is a very rare condition, and imagining that to be the goal causes inner conflicts that are far more detrimental to spiritual calmness than the original desire. There is every temptation to hate oneself for one's desires, and to hate others who unintentionally activate those desires. It's better to treat desires like unruly children, well-intentioned but in need of gentle discipline and guidance.

Krishna often mentions the pure and the practical together, as the Gita is always trying to integrate them. Here the dialectic isn't especially important, however. He is merely asserting that desire can deflect the efficacy of both types of wisdom. An artist who produces paintings for money exemplifies how desire perverts practical matters, since the art will suffer in direct proportion to the extraneous considerations involved. The money may not suffer—in

fact “selling out” may be highly lucrative—but the mysterious quality called artistic inspiration surely will. Likewise any worker will be less enthusiastic if they are doing their job only for the money than if they enjoy their task. Probably the term destroy is a bit excessive for the practical considerations in this verse. Disrupt is more like it.

At any rate, desires are not susceptible to direct attack. The Gita recommends affiliation with the Absolute as the means to truly lay them to rest. The bliss of the Absolute is far more attractive than individual habitual desires, and so they are naturally effaced as the attention turns to That. Again we should recall II, 59, where Krishna said of desires: “Even the residual relish reverts on the One Beyond being sighted.”

42) It is taught that the senses are great; beyond the senses is the mind, beyond the mind is reason, and beyond reason is That.

The senses are given their due here as windows on the world, vast and enchanting, but even in ancient times it was well known that they weren't absolutely trustworthy. They aren't particularly accurate, and can lead us astray on many levels. The mind is viewed as a kind of sixth sense, collator and coordinator of sensory input. This roughly corresponds to the material brain of modern science, extremely useful but subject to many delusions and misunderstandings. Reason or intellect is metaphysical, the part of the individual that soars beyond the chains of actual objects and events. It can learn to compensate for the defects of the mind and senses. At its best it is aimed at union with the Absolute, though as we know it is more often used to control the actual world through manipulation. Whether or not it is an epiphenomenon of the material brain is irrelevant to Krishna's teaching.

The graded series telescopes inward and upward. The senses are great because they translate the objective universe into a form of computer code that can be used by the brain. They perform a vast reduction of the myriad manifested things to a manageable

level. The mind then utilizes this input to perform transactional assessments, further sorting and abstracting the data. Afterwards the intellect may make generalizations, grouping similar events so it can draw conclusions, make excuses, and so on.

As to desire, the senses begin the game by being tickled by stimuli, and they have a natural interest in stimulation. After all, that's their game. The mind then decides preferences, and directs the body to repeat the experiences it likes and avoid those it doesn't. Again, that's its natural and most important role. As a person becomes more sophisticated, desires are cloaked in all sorts of rationalizations and excuses. The intellect can vindicate detrimental desires because it always knows exactly the argument the mind will agree to.

It's important to remember that *param*, translated as beyond, doesn't necessarily have any spatial component. Beyond, within, transcending, exceeding, prior to, and much more are implied in the term *param*. The mind is not only beyond, it is *within* the senses, animating and supporting them; the intellect is likewise within the mind, and the Absolute is within everything. In addition to its utter immanence, the Absolute is beyond even the very concept of beyond, and its mysteriously indefinable status will be sung throughout the entire work. Needless to say, infusing the intellect, mind and senses with the harmonizing factor of the Absolute is the aim of Krishna's teaching.

The word used in this part of the Gita for the ultimate beyond, *sah*, refers to the purusha of Samkhya philosophy, which is a little like the western God and will be definitively dealt with in Chapter XV. Sah is usually translated (correctly) as he, but since the Gita is in the process of revaluating this ancient concept to that of the nongendered Absolute, *brahman*, I have translated it here as That, which also clarifies its contrast to This (desire) of the previous verses. Gods are famous for their desires, but the Absolute is beyond all such mundane considerations.

43) Thus knowing That to be beyond reason, stabilizing the self by the Self, kill that enemy in the form of desire, so difficult to overcome.

Krishna's call to Arjuna as a warrior now begins to be seriously reevaluated (compare III, 30, "do fight with fever gone"). The true enemy is not anything "out there," it is desire and anger limiting one's purview. That Arjuna is asked to kill it is a distant echo of the battlefield context. So yes, in a way the Gita does ask the seeker to kill—to kill desire. But not to be a killer of men, though, which would violate the call to *ahimsa* (non-hurting) given in Chapter XIII and elsewhere.

Desire is famously hard to overcome, since it is lodged deep in the psyche, for the most part out of reach of the will and the intellect. By the time a desire becomes apparent to consciousness, exactly like the tip of an iceberg, it already has a tremendous momentum. Deep-seated biological desires like hunger, thirst and sex must be addressed to maintain the health of the organism, and they are repressed at our peril. Techniques like fasting, wandering in the desert, and celibacy do provide temporary respite from those imperatives. While they may induce visions, whether these are due to divine contact or chemical stress on the body is open to question. A less risky method is to satisfy desires in moderate amounts, after which they retreat into the background. The aim in any case is to neutralize their influence on the thinking and decision-making processes. Anyone who spends all their waking hours satisfying various bodily urges has no time for the contemplation of wisdom.

More superficial predilections are a different subject altogether, not especially a part of this study. They are mainly a matter of personal taste. The Gita's recommendation is to cultivate an overriding interest, which will subsume distracting factors and eliminate them by attrition. The Absolute is the most attractive of all interests.

Drawing a conclusion from the sequence of the last verse, a secret teaching is made as plain as possible here, worded as “stabilizing the self by the Self.” For stabilization of the psyche, the senses are gathered into the mind, and the mind is gathered into intelligent reason. From this point a leap is to be made, for a kind of inner connection with the Beyond. We do not know (since it is beyond reason) how to do this or what to aim for, yet we can have an inward gesture that opens us up to the kindly light of the Absolute. When we can relinquish our sense of agency into the “arms of the Divine,” our personal self becomes stabilized in the universal Self. Stabilization means that the self and the Self become unified. At this point desires lose their grip and will become irrelevant to the centered consciousness.

Atman or self is a very complex term. At one end of an imaginary continuum, the small ‘s’ self refers to an individual person, and at the other end the capital ‘S’ Self is indistinguishable from the Absolute. Grasping which is meant by *atman* is sometimes a slippery business, though clear enough in this instance. Since in the final analysis the individual and the Absolute are not two, the difficulties interpreting *atman* are an aid to contemplation rather than a stumbling block.

Nataraja Guru concludes this chapter with an important corrective well worth quoting:

Karma Yoga (unitive action) in popular Vedantic literature, lapses into a trite picture of a man who is offering all actions prayerfully to the lotus feet of the Lord. In the light of the contents of this chapter... such a pious and holy version of karma yoga is, to say the least, puerile. Much eloquence is often wasted by religious enthusiasts in the cause of such piety. God does not eat the fruits offered to him. It is the priest or the worshipper himself who finally gobbles them up, and to speak of offering to God the fruits of action which seems to follow close on this imagery, does not make any meaning at all. The whole purport of the Gita as a critical study, full of

precise definitions and enumerations belonging to an exact or positive science, and not to a sentimental theism, would be completely and sadly compromised.

The static picture of simplified karma yoga that Nataraja Guru describes is very widely held. The problem with any formulaic spirituality is that it becomes lodged in the ego, which thinks something like “I am doing what I am supposed to by performing actions this way.” The transcendent brilliance of unitive action is nowhere to be found in such an attitude. Part of the challenge is to relinquish the learned desire for a simple formula to reduce life into, and to recapture an open, dynamic and flexible approach to living.