

CHAPTER IV: Jnana Yoga

Unitive Wisdom

Knowledge and action (jnana and karma) are generally conceived of as being separate, but the Gita treats them as integral aspects of an all-inclusive unity that is not to be divided. Thus in both this and the previous chapter we are not dealing with two different subjects, but simply refining the concepts of intelligently directed activity. As we proceed we should keep in mind that jnana is “the light by which we grow into our true being, not the knowledge by which we increase our information and our intellectual riches.” (Aurobindo, *Essays on the Gita*, p. 182) What Sri Aurobindo more dualistically classes as high and low we distinguish as wisdom and knowledge, with each having its legitimate place in the scheme of things, symbolized by the coordination of a vertical and a horizontal axis.

1) Krishna said:

This perennial unitive wisdom did I declare to Vivasvan, Vivasvan taught it to Manu, and Manu taught it to Ikshvaku.

While sounding like ancient gobbledegook, as soon as we decode the strange names this verse is seen to agree with the broad outlines of modern evolutionary theory. Vivasvan is the sun, which any chronology of our solar system naturally begins with. Light and heat from the sun permitted life to arise and persist on Earth. Manu is the progenitor of the human race, who has bequeathed us the species name Man, and also to mano, meaning hand, the opposable thumb of which led directly to humanness. The word *moon* also derives from Manu, since the moon shines by a reflection of the solar light just as consciousness shines by reflecting its environment. Manu thus stands for the life principle, born from and sustained by the energy of the sun. The mythological Manu marks the point where life becomes sentient, wherever and whenever that might have been.

Ikshvaku was the first monarch of the human species, symbolizing socialization. In days of old, the wisest person was naturally the leader of the community. We know that pre-civilized people have a much more highly developed inner sense or knowledge of how to live, similar to the instinctive intelligence of the animal and vegetable kingdoms. A king, queen or shaman would naturally be chosen on the basis of their connection with the inner forces—the Absolute, ZPF (zero point field or quantum vacuum), God, or whatever you like to call them. (As we know, the Gita embodies them as Krishna.) In addition to guiding the community, their most important job would be to train others to attune to the Absolute themselves, and the best would eventually succeed them as the next leader.

An evolutionary impulse has thus been traced in this verse from its cosmic origin to the moment it achieves individual expression. It is perennial because it has always happened and will always keep on happening, at least until the sun burns out. Then it can happen around another sun somewhere else. The wisdom of the Absolute cannot be eradicated, because it is not a fiction; it is a description of exactly how the creative principle enters existence via consciousness. If it is temporarily forgotten, it will eventually be found by a seeker of truth, who then can share it with everyone once again. At the beginning of his instruction, it is important for Arjuna to know he is being taught the perennial philosophy, and not merely some parochial belief system limited in time and space. Truth is not susceptible to institutionalization, it is revealed by a direct link between a single mind and the essence of all.

One of the ways human potential is undermined is that we are taught to be dependent on preexisting structures, which takes away the incentive to seek personal solutions to our problems. It isn't that what exists isn't helpful, but by itself it isn't enough. As Arjuna has found at the beginning of his search, static systems are more a hindrance than a help. Wisdom has to be rejuvenated in each person, or it fades away and fizzles out. This idea is important

enough to merit three full verses at the very beginning of the chapter specifically dedicated to wisdom.

Perennial unitive wisdom sounds a lot like it refers to the information field we nowadays call the quantum vacuum. Nearly (or actually) infinite in power, universally present, permeating every cubic centimeter of the cosmos, it appears to lend intelligent patterning to evolutionary development, not to mention energizing consciousness. If there is a god-like force in the universe, this is it. And yet it remains unknown, being perceivable only mathematically or intuitively. It is invisible and its extreme potency acts in all directions at once, so, like fish swimming in the depths of the sea without being crushed by the pressure, we are unaware of its impact.

2) Thus handed down the line in succession, this (wisdom) the king-sages understood; by great lapse of time here (however) this unitive wisdom came to be lost, O Arjuna.

Somewhere along the line the connection with the Absolute Ground was broken, and it faded out of public knowledge. It was probably a gradual process, but imagination somehow began to replace intuitive knowledge of reality. Selfishness must have sooner or later tainted the purity of the inner connection, and eventually nepotism triumphed over direct wisdom transmission. A line of hereditary kings and queens was established. Once that happened, the descent into barbarism would have been fairly rapid. If your position is handed to you on a silver platter, there is no reason for you to strive to know anything. A small group of outsiders might continue the wisdom tradition, but they would suddenly be considered enemies of the state instead of its lifeline to truth. When ignorance attains to power, truth is its biggest threat. Societies in general seek stasis and stability, and the Absolute expresses itself through eternal flux. As such it stands in opposition to the kind of mind-numbing repetition that civilization

thrives on. Because of this, true seekers are marginalized virtually everywhere.

3) That very same ancient secret is being today declared to you by Me, seeing that you are both my devotee and friend.

Democracy, Communism, Socialism, and numerous religious movements are some of the ways that the human race has attempted to reestablish its ancient wisdom heritage in social contexts. The aim is to break the grip of monarchies, oligarchies and kakistocracies both political and religious. Unfortunately, entrenched interests have been able to subvert pretty much every movement that has been instituted in the name of freedom and unfettered intelligence. Brute force trumps the gentle intimations of the intangible information field. Connection with the Absolute, at least among humans, is now a rare and scattered phenomenon, pushed to the extreme fringes of society, lest it unseat the wielders of power. We can note that Arjuna has had to withdraw from the social context (not surprisingly a battlefield) to take his seat at the feet of a wise preceptor. But that's okay: we don't have to wait for connectedness to be institutionalized before we seek it. The important thing is to begin striving to make the connection, and all else follows.

Note that Krishna is willing to teach Arjuna because he is a friend in addition to a devotee. Friendship implies trust and a relaxed intimacy that is much more dynamic than simple worship. Friends dare to challenge and ask probing questions, and they don't fall back on abject devotion if they don't understand something. In essence, a friend thinks independently, while a worshipper defers to the teacher to do their thinking for them. Deference is respectful in moderation, but should not be overdone. As we will see, true friendship between a guru and disciple is a rare and excellent achievement.

4) Arjuna said:

Your birth was posterior and the birth of Vivasvan was anterior; how then have I to understand it that You declared it in the beginning?

In modern language, Arjuna is saying “Hold it! You are, what, 34 years old? And the sun is about four and a half billion years old. So how can you say you are the sun’s guru?” This tips us off, in case there was any doubt, that Krishna is not just the person he seems to be at the moment. He represents the Absolute, pure and simple. Any form he takes on, including that of a god of the Hindu pantheon, is a temporary, incidental condition.

Unitive wisdom relates to a sphere that pre-exists manifestation, which merely comes and goes on its surface. The eternal precedes the changing, always. It is not built up out of transient phenomena. The one is the core of the many. This is why the Absolute cannot be attained by any series of steps. It must be grasped whole, all at once.

It’s beginning to dawn on Arjuna that Krishna is much more than he appears. All beings are a continuum stretching from their manifested aspect back to their unmanifested origins. The implication is that we should see the Absolute in everyone, and if we do it is much easier to be sympathetic and engaged. Embodying this idea, the traditional Indian greeting Namaskara is said to mean, “I bow to the divinity within you.” In Vedanta we alter it to, “I bow to the unity within you.”

5) Krishna said:

Many are the lives that have gone past for me, as also for you, Arjuna; I am conscious of them all; you are not conscious of them.

If Krishna is thought of as an embodiment or avatar of the quantum vacuum, then he could legitimately claim to have been in existence for all of time, not only in this universe but the previous ones as

well, regressing ad infinitum. Exactly this type of claim resurfaces in Chapter IX, where we will examine it in more detail.

The paradox of the one and the many is a central contemplative issue in spirituality. The one and the many are not two, and yet they can only be addressed separately. For individuals to be conscious of their separate existence they must be unconscious of the overwhelming totality of What Is. Oneness overwhelms awareness of manifold entities. Actually, it works both ways: our bedazzlement with the items of our world draw our attention away from the intrinsic unity.

Our brain acts as a kind of reducing valve to screen out the excess of available information so we can function on a simplistic level suited to our stage of evolution. If we were aware of having lived millions of previous lives, for example, the love we would feel for all our millions of mothers and fathers and children would make it impossible to have a moment to relate to the ones we have in this lifetime. We have to lose their memory so we can give our full attention to the present.

The Gita does not advocate disappearing in unity, only incorporating its awareness into everyday life. This is a radical divergence from the many religious systems that play on the desire to escape from the cares of this world. Awareness is not intended to make our present life irrelevant, but to infuse it with the greatest significance. The existence of each person is precious beyond words, and coming to realize this is central to the Gita's liberating philosophy. It is the height of tragedy that so many of us have been taught to think of life as an embarrassing stain on God's perfection, and so go through life feeling like an interloper. We are meant to feel welcome here.

There is an additional secret to that of "perennial unitive wisdom" per se. Krishna the Guru, emissary of the Absolute, is all-seeing; Dhritarashtra the materialistic king is blind. In between these polar extremes is Arjuna, whose name means the wakeful one. One inner story of the Gita is the transformation of the wakeful state from its limiting fixation on the transactional realm

symbolized by Dhritarashtra to its full freedom in unfettered awareness symbolized by Krishna. At the same time, it remains centered in living every moment robustly. Opening our eyes makes us more alive, not less.

Interestingly, quantum biology has introduced the all-seeing aspect into the theory of evolution, which for decades insisted on utter blindness as the mechanism of change. A number of clever experiments in recent years have demonstrated rapid and non-random evolution. Not only is blind, random evolution statistically almost impossible, there is an expanding body of evidence that an intelligent (or informed) process is taking place. Haphazard natural selection can't logically have any effect on something not yet developed, and therefore cannot in itself be the agent of change. For instance, birds don't have a survival advantage in being able to fly until the entire complex of relevant mechanisms is adequately developed, yet all those mechanisms developed steadily and progressively over time, according to the fossil record. Once flight is achieved, then it finally provides an actual advantage, and fliers might well out-survive non-fliers. Regardless, creatures invariably reproduce before they are killed and eaten, and not afterwards, so that part of the selection process comes after the transmission of genes anyway.

In the twenty-first century there is now solid evidence that the genetic code is influenced by environmental factors, and doesn't require random mutations for modification. How long will it be before intentionality is recognized as an important feature of the environment? Something is substantially accelerating evolution beyond randomness, without a doubt. Attuning with the Absolute means, among other things, linking ourselves to a vastly intelligent evolutionary potential.

6) Although I remain ever unborn as the never-diminishing Self, while I am the Lord of Creation too, grounded in my own nature I assume being through the negative principle of my own Self.

Krishna acknowledges an intelligent role in the proliferation of beings. Despite mounting evidence of informed evolution, resistance to the idea of intelligence in nature is deeply entrenched. Nataraja Guru attributes this to a hangover from the Inquisition, when science learned to fear and loathe religion. Actually, science and religion are two contrasting attitudes toward the same subject, and their differences may be readily harmonized by the kind of dialectic reasoning demonstrated in these pages. As in the Kurukshetra War of the Gita, there has to first be an interruption of hostilities so that the subject can be viewed dispassionately from a neutral standpoint. Then it will be seen that the same desires and interests motivate both sides, such as the search for truth and its communication to the community, with sincere adherence to certain beliefs as the guiding principle. Nitya Chaitanya Yati notes the similarities between adherents of science and religion in his *Psychology of Darsanamala*:

Both sides want truth to prevail; both want the mind to be systematically directed towards truth, so that whatever an individual does will be consistent with a truthful conviction; both hold that only truth will set man free from incorrect beliefs and wrongful conditioning; and both want their votaries to be happy. In addition, both spiritualists and materialists believe they should share happiness with others and work towards the perpetuation of peace, justice, love, and happiness for all through the achievement of the goals of their philosophies. (106)

It may well be that the frontiers of science are pressing into the former exclusive domain of religion, and both will soon agree that intelligence (or perhaps consciousness) is the essence of the universe. If it is given different names by different groups, so what?

Krishna calls creation itself the negative principle of the Absolute. Cool as existence is, being at its core the Absolute, it is

inevitably dualistic, and observation shows a tendency for it to run downhill when there is an apparent separation from the Unmanifest. This so-called entropy can be countered by a positive infusion of negentropic energy at discrete intervals to reset the balance. The accelerating rate at which galaxies recede from each other is one observable form of this added energy. And the fact that electrons don't "run down" indicates that they exhibit perfect balance between entropy and negentropy. Biological life itself is a negentropic principle, exhibiting continual renewal. When we become old and tired we are replaced with someone fresh and new.

We habitually think of creation as a positive evolutionary flow, but from the standpoint of the Absolute it is more of a negation. Created beings have to be limited; converting the unlimited to limited dimensions involves a process of negation. Either way it's a stupendous miracle.

7) Whenever there comes to be laxity in regard to right life, O Arjuna, and wrong coming to assert itself, then I bring about the creation of myself.

This idea is interesting on many levels. Basically we have the natural bliss of the Absolute breaking through the accretions of moribund beliefs and mental iron curtains that humans seem condemned to erect when they lose contact with their own nature as the Absolute.

This is one of those verses where the tendency is to think it is referring to other people. After all, *we're* never wrong, never lax. Someone else is to blame! But applying this to our own condition is precisely what is called for. We regularly lose the thread of our inner life, and regaining it is bringing the Absolute back into our heart. Arjuna himself is undergoing such an experience. Being a warrior, he thought he was upholding right against wrong and acting honorably, but he wound up in an untenable position, so something was clearly out of whack. Usually we only realize we have gone off track when we crash into a dead end. If we blame

others, we will never learn any lesson from it. Worse, we'll adopt the attitude of a victim, which is incredibly binding, like a voluntary straitjacket. We have to always keep in mind, with the accidental cosmic tourist Jack Flanders, that "what's coming at you is really coming *from* you."

Traditionalists are thrilled by the prospect of God coming to Earth to straighten things out and punish their enemies, which seems to be implied here. We have to be very careful not to make that mistake. The emphasis is on renewal and regeneration rather than persecution.

The Gita never uses the familiar term avatar, which implies a descent of some sort of deity from above into creation below. Instead it uses *srijami*, with the intimation of a seed sprouting at its appropriate season. A seed may lie dormant for a long time, but its potential is always present. This accords much better with the universality of divinity that the Gita espouses than any supernatural descent. The Absolute arises from within rather than without. It pulses, like a seed growing into a tree, then back into a seed, to become another tree, endlessly. It breaks through the stagnation of fixed notions—"laxity in regard to right life"—like a blade of grass pushing up through a cement sidewalk or a tree root cracking a boulder.

Notions of the Divine becoming incarnate are found in many religions. In the Gita's view, everything without exception is an incarnation of the Absolute. It is not a rare event but the whole ball of wax. Any difference between the divine and the ordinary, the unmanifest and the manifest, can only lie in our level of awareness, as Krishna noted back in verse 5.

As to the idea of avatars or divine saviors, there may or may not be some strange sacrifice performed at intervals by the Absolute to save us from our collective tendency toward evil and stupidity, such as crucifying a beautiful soul in plain sight of everyone. Who knows? The Gita isn't talking about anything like that. If we believe it, such an act should make us infinitely grateful and our hearts should soar with love. We should be so thankful that

we spontaneously forgive our enemies, realizing they are in the same predicament as us. Such an act should galvanize us into working for liberty and justice for all. If that doesn't happen, then we've missed the point. If God's love inspires us to hate rather than accept, we clearly aren't getting the message.

Avatars aside, when the Absolute reenters your heart and fills you once again with wisdom and compassion, it is the resurrection of the divine, a second coming if you will.

In the social sphere, clearly it's healthy to support geniuses or at least some of the exceptional people among us in diving into the unknown to explore new dimensions. Not everyone can abandon the crops or the wheels of industry to dedicate that much extra time and energy, so it's beneficial to support a handful of scientists and spiritual seekers and give them the freedom to make the search for us. The problem often comes after they die (or are killed off by those unwilling to accept the results of their investigations). There is no guarantee their successors will be as enlightened as they. Indeed, competition for paid posts tends to be fierce and ugly, resulting in poor selections. Over time positions become institutionalized and lose their value to anyone other than the post holders themselves, becoming a drain on the collective wealth. Periodically then it is necessary to cast off this dead skin and start fresh, lest the world descend permanently into a negative stasis, called *tamas* in the Gita.

Societies tend toward the accumulation of laws. Laws kill the spirit; they cannot transmit it. When the spirit is totally crushed by laws, it inevitably bursts forth once more. Human history may be viewed as the perennial upwelling of the spirit, followed by its gradual submergence in forms and habits. The spirit is life, and its legally fixed form is death.

In Luke 19, Jesus' disciples are rejoicing in the bliss of the spirit, and the Pharisees, the socially upright ones, ask him to shut them up. He replies that if he did, "the stones would immediately cry out." In other words, the spirit cannot be crushed for long, it

must find an outlet. Then he warns his disciples that those social forces will “cast a trench about thee, and compass thee round, and keep thee in on every side.” (19. 43) Immediately afterwards he starts lashing out at the buyers and sellers who have defiled the temple by introducing mundane transactions into a spiritual setting. This is a rajasic version of the present Gita verse.

The re-creation of Krishna, or the Absolute in manifest form, symbolizes the fresh infusion of energy to sweep away the dead and revitalize the living dynamism of life. In social institutions, this is what managers perennially seek to accomplish, usually with little effect, because it would require permitting individual initiative. Managers always think they can direct it, but the mysterious rebirth of energy into life is an inner process that is not amenable to outside pressure.

Ever and anon, the spirit sweeps away the encrustation of the dead letter of the law in its flood of living bliss. For those not willing to wait a thousand years for the external event of an avatar, it is available within your heart, any time, any place. Right now, even.

8) To protect those who are good and to destroy evildoers, for establishing righteousness, I assume being, age by age.

Once again, this verse resonates with the barbaric tendencies of human beings, because we really get off on destroying evildoers. We’re ready to go out and bash them at a moment’s notice. Unfortunately, unleashing war on evildoers just produces more evil. By contrast, the reestablishment of the goodness of the Absolute does not pit one side against the other. It is a unifying kindness that is a tide that raises all boats. As the Buddha is famously said to have said, “Hatred does not cease by hatred, but only by love; this is the eternal rule.” Love is but one aspect of the righteousness Krishna perennially restores to the world.

Love destroys evildoers not by killing or imprisoning them, but by redirecting them to a more generous frame of mind. And

Krishna isn't just speaking of a gooey, incoherent type of love, but righteousness, which is an incisive, intelligent reconfiguring that takes everything into consideration. The Gita itself is the perfect example of the complexity of Krishna's method of reestablishing righteousness, because that's exactly what it is.

It is believed by some in the psychedelic community that the present incarnation of this type of healing energy was presented to the human race in the form of LSD. For a species that believed in pills, God put itself into tiny drops on a sheet of blotting paper. Why not? There is no doubt that the contemporary influence of what was called soma in the Gita's time has been to turn many away from the nefarious realms of cutthroat competition and stimulate the positive virtues like mindfulness and compassion. At least it should not be surprising that a divine influence doesn't have to take the form of a person, but rather appears as an all-pervasive "tide in the affairs of man."

The Gita's grand solution to the paradox of fighting the impossible battle of Kurukshetra, exemplified in struggles such as humans versus conscienceless corporations, is to withdraw from the "context of suffering" and reestablish contact with the Absolute, the one Source of all existence. The many are only harmonized by reconnection with the oneness at their core, not by rearranging their relative positions.

Greedy actions require greedy actors. If somehow seers can reconnect with their inner nature there will be no one to row that boat any more. We mistakenly think that because we feel the impulse we must fight to stop others from their destructive behavior, but our fight just energizes the cause of destructiveness more. The reentry of Krishna into the world means that the reverence for life that is a primary attribute of the Absolute returns to displace lust, anger and greed, the triple "demonic" qualities, which are immaculately embodied in the souls of limited liability corporations.

In this we must cure ourselves first, like the Biblical "physician," before tending to other people's shortcomings. The

natural mistake is to set out to cure others, since it is so easy to see their faults. But then we are promoting our own egoism instead of ushering in divine harmony, and that marks the difference between success and failure. For instance, those motivated by anger who attack corporations head on are likely to be met at the door by a mild mannered human being rather than a mythical monster.

The religious interpretation here, that we don't have to raise a finger because Krishna will take care of it for us, is nonsensical. The Absolute acts through its manifest aspect, and we are That. We must stand up at all times, but do it as wise neutrals and not as angry and fearful individuals separated from our own heart. The mystical conchs blown in the first chapter still echo and reecho down through the ages as a call for us to wake up and join the fray as enlightened sages.

9) He who understands this divine nature of my birth and work as consistent with basic principles, on leaving this body does not attain to repeated birth, but (only) comes to Me.

Verses 5 and 9 seemingly contradict each other, with the earlier verse asserting that all beings, including Krishna as representative of the Absolute, undergo repeated births and this one allowing for transcendence of the same. Paradoxical teachings like this invite us to dig deeper into what the implications may be.

The sense I have is that bodily reincarnation is used by Krishna as a kind of veiled metaphor for psychological matters. Many people get overly excited about the idea of being materially reincarnated, and look no further. They go rushing out the door, so to speak, leaving the serious students alone in the class. Their excitement is a matter of ego inflation, in which the I-sense imagines it will survive the transition marked by death along with the essence of the soul, the atoms, or what have you. Egos don't realize it doesn't make any difference what they believe: what's going to happen will happen. We'll find out in due time what death has in store for us, so we should just keep an open mind. The

Gita's advice to not have expectations is particularly germane in this subject. We just do not know what will happen when death claims us, so all our pronouncements are ridiculous.

All of manifestation seems to communicate and reverberate as waves of various frequencies. It may well be that life and death are one grand cycle of the wave each of us is propagating, or that is propagating each of us. What could ever stop it as it pulsates across the universe? A close reading of verses 5-9 pictures both created beings eternally vibrating, and an Absolute that cycles in and out of existence in a similar wave pattern, possibly at "right angles" to ours. As we attune with the Absolute through a verticalizing process, our waves become more and more in phase, until they ultimately coincide or merge.

Death is not specifically mentioned here, either, although most every commentator assumes it. Leaving the body could refer to absorption in the Absolute during meditation, for instance. Then the meaning is that when we attune with the Absolute our creativity is unlocked, and the Absolute becomes a source of unending inspiration. It is a very appealing reading.

What it boils down to is that our lives become repetitive when lived in memory, but come alive with ever-new fields of interest when the Absolute is attained. When we live in memories, or else are mesmerized by appearances, we cannot help forgetting our true nature as the Absolute. "Repeated births" are recycled ideas and frames of reference of the habitual mind. When consciousness is infused with the Absolute, it enjoys an eternal fountain of fresh insights.

Krishna mentioned in verse 5 that we are unconscious of our past history, which would require a different type of memory than what we normally have access to. The secret teaching here is about waking up, about leaving our well-worn ruts and exemplifying the zest of enlightenment. We can't make this happen merely by ordinary thinking, which runs in those pre-established ruts. We have to "enter into" the Absolute in some mysterious manner. The entire song of the Gita is an instruction on exactly how to

accomplish this. We have arrived, after extensive preliminary work, at the point where Krishna first mentions our merger with him, which we know means with the Absolute. There will be a lot more instruction about this as we go along.

10) Rid of attachment, fear and anger, wholly filled by Me alone, and surrendering to Me, many who have been purified by the discipline of wisdom have entered into My (very) being.

And here is the first instruction already! The parameters of the wisdom context are sketched out for the disciple, along with an assurance that this has worked plenty of times in the past. Arjuna likely appreciates being reassured, since this is new territory and he may quite naturally harbor some doubts. This also tells us that this discipline is not in any way exclusive. Anyone who can overcome the three hurdles listed and who has refined themselves through wisdom study can enter into the Absolute. The Gita's wisdom is open and accessible to all.

Attachment (or desire), fear and anger are the triple impediments to contemplation that will crop up throughout the work. We first met them in II, 56, you may recall, where their interrelationship was explained. They were dealt with at the end of the last chapter, and will come back in V, 28, among other places. Think of them as the three horsemen of the Hindu apocalypse. They must be rooted out by intense focus on their shadowy presence within the psyche, combined with the acknowledgement that they definitely occur in us, and not solely in others, where they seem much more pernicious.

The part about surrendering to and being filled by the Absolute may sound creepy, like inviting possession by some alien lizard. What's meant here is much more mystical. We have a seeker purified by the discipline of wisdom, the wisdom sacrifice that will be extolled later in the Chapter as the most sublime form of worship. By a mysterious form of surrender, the one purified by wisdom enters the Absolute even as the Absolute enters them. It is

not a one-way possession: each merges into the other like two different fluids undergoing osmosis. In truth, it more resembles two *identical* substances diffusing into each other, like the proverbial raindrop dissolving in the ocean. We only think of ourselves as different from our source, but we are That.

However we may think of it, we are not meant to cling to any fixed concept of what the interpenetration is like. We can only know it by letting go of our well-defined mental imagery.

Surrender is often taken to be a debasing of the seeker in favor of the sought. If you've gotten this far in the Gita you will know that balance and equality are the keys. It's more of an opening up, a letting go of limitations. Both sides of the equation are essential to even have an equation. The Absolute is nothing without created beings, and created beings are nothing without the supreme reference of the Absolute, which comprises their very substance. Similarly, a guru must have a disciple to even be a guru, just as a seeker needs a guru in order to become a disciple.

More on surrender will be found at II, 7 and 8; VI, 6; VIII, 7; IX, 1; and XI, 4.

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.

The Absolute and its universe are wholly reciprocal. What you sow, you reap. What you put in comes back out. There are a million ways to relate to life, and they all have the same golden rule at their core. Here Krishna agrees with Narayana Guru, who reminds us "The many faiths have but one essence. All beings are making efforts in every way, all the time, for the happiness of the Self; in the world, this is the one faith." (Atmopadesa Satakam, verses 44, 49). The Guru reminds us that we should look for the commonality in all the divergent approaches to life, and not get bent out of shape by superficial differences.

Not only religious faith, but all forms of faith are embraced in this verse. No matter what you call the Absolute—including nonexistent, absurd, imaginary, and so on—it is the same concept under reference. If we fight it is over semantics, not truth, because truth cannot contradict itself.

The verse also applies to the three main stages of thought: commonsense, rational and dialectic. A commonsense person sees the world in terms of objects and their interaction; a rational person tends to analyze the world via some form of linear logic; and the dialectician synthesizes the same world in terms of values, seeing especially the coin between the two faces, the heads and tails. All stages of thought are valid in their respective arenas. It might be noticed that they correspond to the Vedantic trinity of *sat*, *chit* and *ananda*. Common sense addresses the existential facts of life, the *sat*; rationality is the expression of consciousness or *chit* seeking to incorporate an understanding of the world around it; and yoga or dialectics reveals the meaning of values in life, their *ananda*. While all three modes of thought are integral parts of a healthy psyche, they often are viewed as being at odds, with people tending to become partisans of one type or another. Whether more limited or less limited, the world as perceived maintains parity with the brightness of the visionary.

The universality of the Gita's teaching is underlined here, as it will be frequently throughout the work. At the end of this chapter even the worst of men will be included in those who can come to wisdom if they so choose. It goes without saying that an open attitude like this deflects conflict, whereas exclusive attitudes encourage it. Too bad a similar verse isn't prominently featured in every scripture.

12) Desiring the benefits coming from actions and thus sacrificing to the gods, quick indeed are the results born of works in this world of men.

This verse is linked with the previous one, emphasizing that the reciprocal nature of the universe applies to the gods. Gods are the personification of the laws of nature. For instance, there is no Thor hurling thunderbolts out of the sky, he merely represents the powerful force that unleashes that energy. If you want to exemplify music, you sculpt Sarasvati as its goddess. Literal-minded folk sometimes mistake the poetic image for reality, but isn't that kind of sweet? It's like a gorgeously embroidered garment compared to the plain cloth of reductionist science.

Humans create their gods by first imagining them and then supplicating them. In fact, the gods *are* what we long for, what impels our actions, we just don't call them gods anymore. The supplication may seem absurd to nonbelievers, yet the votaries do get something meaningful from the effort. A god that falls short of the Absolute still offers blessings commensurate with its degree of universality. For instance, jealous gods offer jealous benefits, angry gods angry benefits. Loving gods loving benefits. Rain gods confer rain, and when they don't they must be unhappy about some oversight on our part. Many people pray to the gods of wealth or power; a business office or parliament building is their temple. Sports gods are worshipped in the gym or on the track. Whether the results obtained there are attributable to the gods themselves, or merely to the efforts expended in pursuing the desirable condition, is pure speculation. To Krishna it is simply a matter of reciprocity: what you want you can and will get if you work for it. It just won't be quite what you expect.

Modern people often worship the god of science. They want to understand how things work, and they put time and energy into making experiments. Before long they begin to get new information, and learn new applications for it. Some of it benefits the world and some causes disasters, in roughly equal proportions. These scientific seekers have similar attitudes to other god worshippers. They possess an inner certainty that there are invisible things to apprehend, and that they can find out what they

are. They believe their knowledge will save the world, or at least be very helpful. They have faith that their efforts will be rewarded.

Taken in isolation, the verse sounds like a recommendation to get quick results by sacrificing to these “gods” or natural principles. Not at all: it’s just how things work in the world of action, and especially how they work in the Vedic religion that is hereby being revalued and surpassed. This is a case of damning by faint praise. The clue we’ve already gotten about this is that the Gita thoroughly discountenances desiring any benefits of action. Recall II, 47 and 49, where Krishna in no uncertain terms tells Arjuna to act with expertise but not to seek the benefits of his action, concluding “pitiful indeed are they who are benefit motivated.” Later this attitude will be further criticized. Krishna teaches going beyond all reciprocal behaviors to attain perfect freedom in the Absolute. The Gita is spiritual instruction, not a how-to manual for transactional endeavors.

Put very simply, we should be careful what we wish and strive for, because only union with the Absolute is completely fulfilling. Everything else, when you get it you want more, or if it has been played out you have to look around for a new indulgence. But once you connect with the Absolute you are completely satisfied. You still do what you do, but you do it as a divine sport, as a happy person, not in a desperate attempt to find fulfillment.

This is actually a crucial teaching. Many very intelligent people worship the gods of material attainment. So many scheme how to get rich, and to hell with anyone who stands in the way. Many dedicate their lives to power trips, secretly lusting to destroy whole countries. A lot of people dream of becoming rock stars, strumming away endlessly in their back rooms and hoping a high powered agent will notice them and catapult them to fame and fortune. All over the globe youngsters are practicing sports, disciplining their bodies almost as strenuously as the hair-shirt wearing religious practitioners of medieval times. Some of them even get what they pray for, only to realize they are trapped by the stringent demands of their worlds of business, politics or

entertainment. Or that that one moment of gold medal glory was the fleeting high point in a life of drudgery under the guise of dedication.

This does not mean that we have to totally discard our attraction to the gods, either. Krishna's advice is to be motivated by absolute values and not by the lesser gods alone, to not become fixated on our preferred aspect of the whole, which can lead to tunnel vision. Do your thing, but see how it fits in with the big picture. In a world fractured by specialization, this is excellent advice.

A further implication here is to find your dharma or native talent and live it with as much expertise as possible. Only in that way will you avoid discovering in middle age that you wasted your life on illusory pursuits. Do your sport for the daily joy of it, because only one in a thousand comes in first. Run your business as a socially and personally beneficial enterprise so it's fun even before you make a million. Play your guitar for the pleasure of making music and developing your innate talents. Or become a politician to solve large-scale problems rather than for fame and temporal power.

Much is made of "the law of karma" which is a version of the reciprocal Golden Rule introduced in the previous verse and expanded here. It is a grand cliché that you reap what you sow. All religions have a variant, as does science itself: for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. The problem is that there are many actions occurring simultaneously, so the counterbalancing actions become disguised by complexity. It's like trying to track a single isolated wave in an agitated pond. There is undeniably an effect, but it is nearly impossible to trace its course through the multitude of chaotic interactions, though we can readily perceive the overall result. Reaping what we sow is a general spiritual truth that does not play out in the actual world in a clear-cut transactional fashion. Still, mathematically—that is, contemplatively—it is possible to take each element separately and examine it.

Let's first parse "as you sow, so shall you reap," from the standpoint of the metaphor itself, an agricultural image of planting and harvesting. Simplistically viewed, you put some seeds in the ground and feed and water them, so you should be able to reap the exact plant you planted, magnified a thousandfold. But in real life birds eat some of the seeds, disease kills some more, and sometimes a drought kills off the whole patch. All kinds of things can go wrong. Environmental factors and mutations play their part. Some years growing a crop is easy and sometimes it is impossible, often due to factors beyond anyone's control, and that's when the metaphor appears to be misleading. The Gita counsels being flexible about results precisely because they are the actual and unpredictable aspect of the entire continuum. But at the outset—the more hypothetical or spiritual end—there is greater correspondence between sowing and reaping. If we plant peas we can expect peas to come up and not corn.

Another version of the Golden Rule is to do unto others as you would have them do unto you. For it to work properly, the self-interest of everyone has to be taken into account, yet people usually invoke it in their own self-interest. They believe if they are good then only good things should happen to them, but the reality is far more complicated. There is no mechanical reciprocity involved. This is a spiritual instruction, and if some day everyone abided by it we would have paradise on Earth. But few do. They hold others to its demands, while excusing themselves without even realizing it. Even in a spiritual community there can be a lot of competitiveness and backstabbing to curry favor with God or the guru, not to mention envy and jealousy, and it would be foolhardy to not take those possibilities into account. Many people resent paragons of virtue, and don't mind committing a bit of sabotage to bring them down a peg.

Several people I know have been frustrated by their simplistic interpretation of the Golden Rule. They have been very nice to their family, really bent over backwards to be kind, and then certain family members took advantage of them. It seemed

like a violation of the Rule, and they felt disappointed and even unfairly treated by fate. They failed to consider that their blanket niceness ignored faults and problems that then allowed those greedy people to take more than their fair share. Being nice should not mean being gullible, and being tolerant does not mean opening yourself to abuse. Reaping what you sow means that if you don't consider all the factors intelligently you may well get burned.

And you are one of the factors to consider. Like worshipping gods, being nice does not mean simply denying yourself and exalting the other. It sometimes means not allowing yourself or someone else to be pushed around. Acting in an exemplary fashion most definitely includes knowing yourself as thoroughly as possible.

The Pandavas of the Mahabharata experienced this exact syndrome at the hands of the Kauravas, and this led to the war at the heart of the epic. Being the nice guys, the Pandavas let the greedy Kauravas have their way, over and over, and they eventually gobbled up everything. Only when they had literally no place left to call their own did the Pandavas realize they had to stand their ground or be swept off the face of the Earth. So unitive action is not the same as being nice. It entails taking everything into consideration, and avoiding being naïve or gullible. Not taking the trouble to stand up for your rights is likely to come back to haunt you.

A friend who had been swindled by her step-grandmother once told me she no longer believed in karma, meaning in the compensating sense of the law of karma. She was an upstanding human being who had never taken advantage of anyone. It seemed unfair to her that someone could then take advantage of her; more than unfair, it was proof that the law of karma was inoperative. I told her that was not the case. The swindler had gained the exact amount my friend and her family had lost, which is the bare bones of karma. Moreover she had worked hard and schemed to appropriate the wealth, while her victims ignored her machinations. I know for a fact that there was advanced warning of

the problem and my friend's family did nothing to prevent it, due to bad advice and baseless hopes, which apparently included a jejune conception of karma.

None of us will ever know if there was further compensating activity on the part of the universe as a whole, either before or after the actual swindle: that's a subject as vague and speculative as what happens in the afterlife. But within the everyday realm there is a unity that envelops everything, while how it plays out in the world of give and take is almost infinitely complicated. Krishna just wants us to not be superstitious about it. There are reasons for everything, just not always the reasons we prefer. The event was more a proof of the teaching found in III, 9: "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."

Or say you are taking care of an elderly person, and you spend years of your life dedicated to helping them and providing companionship. It would be difficult not to hope that later on someone would do the same for you. That might happen, but not as a result of "karma." Reciprocal activity means that what you give to the other person, the other person receives. Therefore it would be foolish to do the service as a form of spiritual bank account. Do it because you love to do it, because you can empathize with a fellow human being, because you care, because you aren't selfish. All those things enlarge your soul as they aid the friend. And if later someone takes care of you in your dotage, don't cheapen it by considering it your just desserts. Be as grateful as if it is a gift freely given, which hopefully it is. It's much more beautiful that way.

Our vertical relationship with the Absolute is different from our horizontal one with our friends and family, because it is guaranteed to be neutral, or modestly benign if anything. Here what we see is what we get. If you believe the Absolute to be loving, you will be filled with love. If you believe it to be vengeful, you will be filled with desire for vengeance. If you believe it is a

demanding taskmaster, you will keep yourself busy. And so on. Most importantly for the spiritual aspirant, if you reach out to it, it will reach out to you. There will be a lot more instruction on this aspect of reciprocity as we continue through the Gita.

13) The fourfold color grades were created by myself on the basis of innate disposition and vocation that accorded with each; know Me to be the maker of such as also to be its undoer, unexpended.

Here we encounter for the first time the famous caste system of India. Unlike the modern degenerate version, officially abolished though stubbornly persisting, this was never intended to inculcate a hereditary system of bondage, but simply to recognize certain general characteristics in the way humans relate to work. As such it is closely connected to the two verses immediately preceding and the two immediately following.

Briefly, people are loosely grouped along a continuum of freedom versus necessity. It can also be thought of as the degree that the vertical, spiritual dimension participates within the practical, horizontal world of answering the numerous demands of necessity. Those who are willing to barter most of their freedom for the basic needs of life are the sudras, largely menial workers and servants. The merchant class, the vaishyas, comes next on the continuum. They work long and hard, but are able to get a little ahead of the game and purchase some freedom with the money they earn. The warrior caste, the kshatriyas, is made up of those able to live with a fair degree of freedom in the service of justice. They are supported by the other castes to act in their interest. At the top of the heap are those who are almost entirely freed from facing necessity, the brahmins, hired by the rest, as it were, to intercede with the gods and explore spiritual nonattachment. A fifth category exists, the sannyasins or renunciates, who reject any burden of necessity to live in the freedom of the Absolute. They

are so uncategorizable as to fall outside the fourfold system entirely.

The developed modern state has essentially the same pattern. Wage slaves and menial laborers still make up the lowest caste or class. Added to it are the soldiers, who have absolutely no independence of action or even thought in the modern military. The kshatriyas of old were more like knights errant, with a large measure of freedom of movement and action. In an attempt to glorify the sordid life of the modern military, it is often compared to the honorable code of ancient warriors, but this is nothing more than a con job to provide cannon fodder for those who profit from the organized theft that is war. No one other than a criminal in prison is more bound than a modern soldier, and their soaring rate of serious mental disturbances bears witness to the fact.

The merchant class still is made up of small farmers and businesspeople, although the tendency to consolidation is producing a few brahmins and a large number of sudras in the mercantile world nowadays. Teachers and bureaucrats of various stripes make up the bulk of vaishyas. The kshatriya caste of the modern state is comprised of those who are hired by the rest to look out for their interests and provide them with entertainment. Movie stars and sports heroes, along with politicians, judges and doctors, are in this class. Police and fire brigades bear a passing resemblance to the ancient kshatriyas as well, though they are primarily vaishyas. Finally there is the brahmin caste with its priests and tenured professors, but primarily consisting of the super rich. In materialist societies, wealth determines caste, since it is the primary determinant of freedom.

The ancients supposed these types were god-given, in other words, fixed at birth, but we can now add additional factors to a person's genetic makeup that make them adhere to mediocre patterns of behavior, such as enduring chemical contamination of the womb, poor nutrition, childhood traumas, toxic beliefs, and so on. It is now self-evident that many who have resigned themselves to a life of submission have been browbeaten into it by others who

stand to gain from it. It's nothing any self-respecting god would inflict on anyone, that's for sure! Krishna makes that abundantly clear in this and the next verse. He is as much the undoer of caste as its instigator. That means caste is not fixed. It is designed to help people find their comfort zone, and the minute it imposes discomfort it is to be discarded. The Gita's advice is to cast off all bondage, systematic and otherwise, and move toward freedom.

The idea that social stratification should be based on merit is an ideal that has occasionally been dabbled in but never achieved, and at the current writing there is a strong worldwide drift back to crushing rigidity based on race and class. The perplexing thing is how easily contented with the status quo most humans are. A meritocracy in the workplace would seem to be obviously of tremendous value to everyone, but it is actively fought by those with the best positions and not eagerly embraced by the rest. Instead there are various arrangements enshrining faintly disguised forms of master-slave relationships. Such necrotic systems are maintained essentially through fear, underlining the importance for the spiritual aspirant of overcoming their fears first. A healthy society would strive to eradicate fear along with injustice, but a strong belief in its efficacy in controlling the population continues to vitiate the Absolute's creation.

The caste system will be examined in considerably more depth at XVIII, 41-45. For now we just need to note that caste according to the Gita is based on innate disposition and not any accident of birth. The real crime is in its rigidity, whether imposed from within or without.

14) I am not affected by works, nor have I any interest in the benefit of works; he who understands Me in this manner comes no more under the bondage of works.

The Absolute's relation to the manifested world is wholly indefinable. The Gita's best effort comes in Chapter IX, 4-6: "By Me all this world is pervaded, My form unmanifested; all beings

have existence in Me and I do not have existence in them. And further, beings do not exist in Me; behold My status as a divine mystery; further, Myself remaining that urge behind beings, I bear them but do not exist in them either. As the great (expanse of) air filling all space has its basis in pure extension, thus you should understand all existences as having their basis in Me.” There is an unresolvable paradox here, a simultaneous connection and unbridgeable gulf.

All works, and most significantly those meant to reconnect the seeker with the Absolute, have an effect only on the manifested realm itself. If works could have an effect on anything, it could not be the Absolute, because cause and effect imply changing from one thing or state to another. The Absolute is necessarily changeless, by definition lacking in nothing. Therefore works have positive and negative impacts on the supplicant and the world, but can in no way impact the One Beyond.

This is the primary distinction between a philosophy like the Gita and a religion like the Vedas. Religion is all about vying for the Lord’s attention, and receiving beneficial paybacks for sacrifices performed. The Gita discountenances all such contractual behavior, and considers adherence to ritual as a form of bondage, which is the precise meaning of this verse.

This does not stop religious-minded lovers of the Gita from reconfiguring its message to suit their preferences. Krishna’s paean to a scientific attitude has been subsumed in a widespread belief that he will reform the seeker himself if properly worshipped.

The “elusively subtle” unitive action includes an awareness of the reciprocal nature of action within manifestation. Pros and cons are balanced and canceled out against each other, resulting in freedom due to apprehension of the Absolute ground that includes all aspects together. But even the term ‘resulting’ is misleading. The ground is there; it is obscured by the play of events, but when they are neutralized by yoga they become transparent. We don’t say the mountain results from sweeping away the clouds in front of

it. It is there all along. Whether or not we can see it, we can know it always is.

A vast amount of effort goes into “sweeping clouds away,” in other words, in striving to attain what is already present. Think of all the rituals in all the religions in the world, and that’s just part of it. This is the bondage of works referred to in the present verse. The clouds keep coming back, because they belong there. The only value in all that effort is that some of it is also beneficial to the world itself. Meaning soup kitchens and clothing drives feed the hungry and clothe the naked, period. That’s the level on which works have an impact, and it’s plenty good enough. The Absolute is not interested or affected in the least.

This does not mean we should turn our backs on the problems of the world and immerse ourselves in a titanic abstraction. The harmony of the Absolute is to be brought into our everyday actions, just not as a way of impressing any imaginary beings or bettering our heavenly credit score. We engage with the world and its complexities simply for their own sake—and for ours.

15) The ancients performed work after knowing in this manner, therefore do that kind of work also, as was performed by the ancients, desiring emancipation in times more ancient.

This is not a call to follow traditional patterns of servile behavior, as often supposed. What the verse says is that even when knowing in an enlightened manner, the ancients continued to do work. They didn’t quit because it suddenly seemed pointless. Arjuna is advised to be active in that way also, in keeping with Krishna’s emancipating instructions.

It isn’t that there is any particular difference in what your actions are, it’s that the way they are done and understood is completely different. For instance, you can do household chores as if they are drudge jobs dictated by your role in life, or you can do them as a fresh and fun way to engage in the world, transforming

your tiny part of it from dirty to clean one bit at a time. The well-known saying, “Before enlightenment, chop wood and carry water; after enlightenment, chop wood and carry water,” embodies this concept. The closer we are to a unitive vision, the more our efforts can be seen for exactly what they are, without excess baggage based on our conditioning.

There is no point in trying to decode what the Gita tells you to do, because it doesn't tell you what to do. It's left up to you. You are the one to decide your actions based on factors you choose, most importantly on which actions bring the greatest happiness to the greatest number. Following guidelines would kill the spirit of freedom the Gita seeks to rekindle.

16) On what is action and what is inaction even intelligent men here are confused. I shall indicate to you that action on knowing which you will be emancipated from evil.

It does not necessarily require more book learning to understand the subtleties of action. Actually, less educated folk often have a better grasp of action's nuances than the eggheads. Common sense, that rarest of human qualities, requires seeing the essence of situations clearly. Intelligence can exhibit the unhelpful trait of appending lots of additional irrelevancies onto simple circumstances. Both religious and rational superstitions may be overlaid onto problems, complicating them no end.

I was listening to a Christian kindergarten teacher read a story to some six-year-olds. The story included a harmless pratfall of the kind intended to make children laugh. On cue all the kids giggled. In horror the teacher stopped the story, and in a severe voice scolded, “Children, children! What would Jesus do! That's not nice! Shame on you!” The kids were all visibly confused and humiliated, suddenly unsure of themselves. There's no doubt that in the future none of them will laugh at something funny in a story without first deciding whether it's okay, if it has the stamp of official approval or not. Then it's no longer laughter, but a

calculated pretense of activity. There's no joy in it, only scheming. Multiply that incident at least a millionfold and you have the modern well-educated person, bound with layer after layer of cords of inhibitions, desperately seeking a list of authorized activities to subscribe to. It's heartbreaking, really.

Over its course the Gita will try to get us back to the Garden of Eden, the state before shame poisoned all our actions. To regain a childlike openness and combine it with a seasoned and nonjudgmental intelligence is one way of understanding the goal of the study. To that end, it is referring to real intelligence here, not the usual muddled state of half-educated mind that passes for intelligence. And we should never presume that acting with expertise is a simple matter, expressible in a trite prescription. Prescriptions, as in lists of authorized beliefs or behaviors, are out of date the minute they are writ in stone. Our motivations have to come from within and not without, or better yet, a happy marriage of inner and outer. S. Radhakrishnan puts it well in his commentary: "We must find out the truth of our own highest and innermost existence and live it and not follow any outer standard. Our svadharma, outward life, and svabhava, inner being, must answer to each other. Only then will action be free, easy and spontaneous." (73)

17) One has to understand about action and understand also what is wrong action; again, one has to have a proper notion of non-action; the way of action is elusively subtle indeed.

Elusively subtle indeed. Comprehensible, but tricky. It helps to have a wise teacher who can explain things adequately. In lieu of that, we have to perform a serious wisdom sacrifice.

One key is to distinguish the horizontal and the vertical with regard to action. The horizontal comprises everyday interactions, collectively called the transactional world. Our job, friendships, physical activities, educational studies—basically everything related to the "outside" world, including our thoughts—are

transactional. We do something and it has an effect, or we do it in exchange for something else. This is the realm of duality, in which distinguishing between right and wrong actions is important. You must do your job well to keep it. If you aren't nice to your friends and family you will lose them too. Poorly performed physical exercise can cause injury, but well done it is very healthful. Education tones the brain muscle, but if you don't pay attention you don't learn anything. Short-sighted government will produce famine and conflict, but well done it harmonizes the nation. The horizontal is the aspect of reality where expertise in the choice and execution of action is eminently desirable.

Spiritual activity, however, above and beyond its practical aspect, is related to the vertical core of life, which must be approached differently. The mystery of tuning in to the Absolute occurs in a direct relationship between the individual and the whole. Dual factors are to be discarded as irrelevant or distracting to a focus on spirit. Often this paring-down process takes place outside of the social arena to minimize confusion, both of the seeker and of the society inevitably steeped in a fixed and limited perspective. Social structures require a time lag that drags us out of the blissful flow of the now. They should be seen as consequential by independent spirits, not causal.

The most elusively subtle part of all this is how to infuse vertical values into the horizontal without disrupting either. A clear grasp of these distinctions is helpful in preventing confusion. An improper integration may lead to religious warfare or a theocracy that mandates purportedly spiritual values that are in fact horizontal. Haphazardly mixing vertical values into horizontal life can even produce a murderous cult where, since good and evil are the same, why not practice evil? Or else imagining that God wants you to kill all those who have different ideas. Instead, the love engendered by diving into the vertical core should be able to permeate the horizontal in a way that enhances the actualization of beauty, truth and goodness in life. It's a gentle process from which

force is necessarily absent. Force is required only to inculcate egotistical, selfish programs.

Expert or unitive action may be defined as the harmonious interlacing of vertical ideals and horizontal practicalities. Thus, as Krishna has been trying to get across to Arjuna since the beginning, situations that come up related to our natural tendencies—no matter how challenging—are a great blessing: golden opportunities to put our ideals into practice.

18) One who is able to see action in inaction and inaction in action—he among men is intelligent; he is one of unitive attitude, while still engaged in every (possible) kind of work.

This pair of concepts perfectly satisfies the Gita's orientation to dialectical balance, and offers a preeminent example of how paradox is transcended in Vedanta. Unitive action is achieved by pondering and nurturing the dynamism within inaction as well as the stillness at the heart of every activity.

There are layer after layer of implications here. One of the more obvious is that in spiritual life we cannot just go on doing what we're used to doing. Realization is not simply a matter of refining our current knowledge to make it better; it's a radically new way of thinking. The synthetic awareness of yoga is not attained by linear logic. If we want to effect a transformation, we have to stop, break out of our familiar patterns, and then begin developing in the new direction. The stopping requires inaction to be brought into our normal course of action.

Meditation in its various incarnations is a simple, non-traumatic way to initiate changes via inaction. Sometimes it isn't radical enough, however, and instead becomes its own security blanket—a tentative gesture in place of a full stop. A soul-stirring event is often required to mobilize the requisite energy. For Arjuna, the intensity of an impending battle pressed him to begin his search. Later, his new orientation will be galvanized by the soma ritual, the ancient ceremony of psychedelic medicine

administered by a wise guide, after which the seeker is almost never content with the same old ruts.

The Upanishads depict the seeker as resembling a large fish gently drifting with the current of a broad river, the river of time and evolution. At intervals it nearly bumps one bank or the other, representing the perceptual and conceptual aspects of life, and with a small but powerful flick of its tail propels itself back into midstream. Because we smoothly immerse ourselves in the flow when we are calmest, this is the model of action in inaction. Inaction by itself would leave us stranded on one of the banks.

We are drawn to become a seeker by the realization that no matter how a person flails and thrashes, the river remains the same. No individual action is able to alter the river's course; therefore there is inaction in every action.

Action arises from the vasanas inside us—what we now call genetic potentials—seeking and finding avenues of expression. Whenever we act in concert with those inner promptings we nourish the seeds to grow into complex entities that also produce more seeds for future occasions. If we make a conscious effort to hold back from expressing them, they may sprout, but then die without progeny, over time reducing their quantity. Attaining to this type of inaction is the most active spiritual enterprise. Conversely, if we merely go along with our promptings, acting as we are impelled, it is our inner inaction that allows the outer actions to proliferate and cause us grief.

The difference between the gushing out of the stream of our vasanas and the great river of life is the difference between the self and the Self, the personal and the universal. The more we hone and focus our individual proclivities, the more they attune with the overarching pattern, and the more harmonized we feel. Conversely the more we allow the universal in, the more our individuation is strengthened in healthy ways.

A helpful technique is to meditate on the concept “I am not the doer.” When caught up in action, we can observe that it is happening and we are participating in it, but we are not the cause.

We aren't really doing anything. The ego has been trained to think of itself as the source of what we do, yet it is merely the final portal through which action passes, as it becomes actualized from its source inside to its expression in the world. Restraining the thought "I am the doer," allows much more room for action to manifest in an excellent fashion.

Schematically viewed, the vertical is inactive and the horizontal is active. The former incorporates our varied potentials, while the latter consists of the ones that have been promoted into existence. The intelligent seeker integrates the vertical with the horizontal elements, bringing each to bear on the other. They are not treated separately. The inaction of the vertical infuses every horizontal action, and the unfolding turbulence of horizontal events is unified and pacified by relating them to the steady state of the vertical.

From another angle, the contemplative who sits outwardly calmly has to fight off a mental torrent of distractions in order to remain focused, patiently setting each one aside as it appears. There is constant activity required to maintain that inactive state. As soon as action is acceded to by getting up from the seat of contemplation and reentering the flow of events, the blissful progress of the quiet state ends.

The next section through verse 23 elaborates this complicated subject.

19) The one whose works are all devoid of desire and willful motive, whose (impulse of) action has been reduced to nothing in the fire of wisdom, is recognized as a knowing person by the wise.

All too often, readers of the Gita come to understand it as advocating a lack of motivation. Radhakrishnan perhaps over-generalizes but has a good point nonetheless when he says: "While the Buddhist ideal exalts a life of contemplation, the Gita attracts all those souls who have a relish for action and adventure. Action is for self-fulfilment." (73)

The real aim of the Gita is to teach us how to come to know ourselves, to know our dharma or innate talents, and then to express them with expertise. Motivation to become free of bondage and discover the Absolute within ourselves and our world is basic to a spiritual life. So seekers need to be eager to learn to function effectively. What the Gita does advocate is not having selfish motivations and not having expectations about where your actions will lead you. We certainly should have goals and pursue them, but just not defray our enjoyment to the future. We should be engaged here and now at every stage of every process.

This is good advice on routine matters as well, whether we know our dharma or not. Take for example that you have found you have a serious illness. Don't imagine the Gita is telling you to ignore it and it will go away. It is an indication that something is amiss and needs to be rectified. You begin to examine yourself with the goal of finding out what's wrong so you can change it. It's not that the Absolute wants you to be sick so you can learn to suffer in silence or expire meekly. You have to deal with it, and there are no printouts with explanations anywhere. You have to go forward in darkness. Subtracting expectations means you don't merely pin your hopes on returning to the state of health you enjoyed when you were five years old. That would be a kind of escapism, trying to be somewhere else. Instead you accept how you feel and tune into it. You take what you learn from tests and doctors and do research, and you adopt a regimen and follow it. You can't be sure if you will recover, but it's fair to want to and absurd not to want to. A popular idea of disinterest or detachment is that you don't care if you recover or not. How awful! No, you care, but you don't put your life on hold until you enter a different state. Caring isn't the same as worrying, either. You do your best even in the thick of the illness.

Many art forms require a honing of craft before they go beyond self-indulgent dabbling. It is very exciting to get better and better at something you love. If you weren't motivated, you might do one thing one day and something else the next, and always

remain a beginner. Dancing or singing beautifully isn't simply a matter of letting go of your inhibitions, there is a lot to bring to the art, and when you do, something spectacular is communicated to your audience. You, too, are uplifted by it. The Gita is saying that you should be motivated by the joy of expressing the possibilities of life, and then every moment is perfect. If you think you won't be any good until you are on stage at the national theater or win a gold medal at the Olympics, you are likely to experience an endless series of disappointments. That type of motivation is strong, but it oppresses your soul and makes your happiness dependent on external circumstances. It's really very warped in terms of personal values. Instead you should enjoy every stage of your growth, while remaining eager to learn the next thing, and the next.

The key to avoiding confusion here is to make the distinction between necessary or obligatory action and voluntary action. The Gita's approach is aimed at the seeker of wisdom, not job applicants. Very often the quest for food, shelter and a mate requires some degree of directed activity stemming from self-interest. But in relationships and learning situations not impelled by necessity, Krishna's advice to abandon desire excels. We block the Tao, the free flow of the moment, to the extent that we have our own agenda superimposed on it. To tap into this ever-renewing participation, we must follow these instructions and reduce our "desire and willful motive" to zero.

Knowing this information fuels the fire of wisdom to burn away all selfish motivations in order to be able to meet life on its own terms, as it is. The fire of wisdom is the same as the action/inaction amalgam of the previous verse, which reduces the impulsion of the vasanas, eventually to a minimum. This distinguishes the intelligent balancing and neutralization of conditionings from their mere suppression.

The knowing person of this verse is a translation of *panditam*—pundit. Current pundits are usually promoting their own agenda, which skews every bit of what they have to say in

favor of their desired ends. The wise recognize this as being of less than no value. Great teachers—true pundits—are those who can accurately apprehend each new situation and respond to it based on its own parameters. They must be wholly open, fluid and flexible, free of hidden agendas.

20) Relinquishing attachment for the benefit of works, ever happy and independent, though such a man be engaged in work, (in principle) he does nothing at all.

As noted before, one of the Gita's main contributions to human refinement is relinquishment of *attachment* to the benefit of works. That is not the same as relinquishing the benefits of what we do. We are not being asked to abandon performing actions, either, only our fixed expectations of what they will accomplish, permitting us to be more open to serendipity.

Works themselves are impossible to give up entirely, and life becomes absurd if we spend all our time trying to stifle them. The knowing person in question responds expertly to the requirements of the moment, but doesn't expect the response to have any particular effect. How the world reacts to our presence is very often a surprise, and that is part of what makes living the miracle of life so entertaining. So we should feel free to enjoy the benefits of our efforts, but not be limited in what we expect those efforts to produce. Disappointment is born of thwarted expectations, and its only value is to teach us to be more open in outlook.

The eminent poet Robert Frost once said that he wasn't a radical in his youth because he didn't want to be a conservative in his old age. Radicals have programs to save the world, and when these fall short of the ideals that spawned them it is almost impossible not to become disappointed. Disappointment in the outcomes of their actions makes people "turn off" to their surroundings, becoming selfish and conservative in the worst sense of the term. Bitter and disillusioned old age is their lot, unless they can relinquish their attachment to success in "fixing" the world.

Once we stop having expectations that our wonderful ideas will have positive repercussions, we are more free to meet the next moment and the next. We become “happy and independent.” Dependency means our state of mind is going to be affected by how the world reacts to us. Independence means we do what we can, but if someone takes it poorly we don’t become disillusioned or bitter. Our well-grounded happiness persists through thick and thin.

Verse 19 and 20 flesh out verse 18, especially the end here that reads “though such a man be engaged in work, (in principle) he does nothing at all.” This is inaction in action at its best.

21) One free of all expectancy and of subjugated relational self-consciousness, who has given up all possessiveness, and is engaged merely bodily in actions—he does not acquire evil.

Continuing the same argument, the Gita makes it plain that having expectations throws things out of balance, which is precisely what evil is: being out of balance. We are reining in the mind here, and its expectations range far and wide, so they must be curbed.

Accomplishing things without entertaining expectations is as thorny a problem as acting with detachment, which is closely related. They may even be two descriptions of the same thing. Our first thoughts are likely to be that this is a form of death: that not having expectations means you can’t have a vision to work toward, you shouldn’t take pleasure in life, or care about outcomes. I can only advise that we take it as a given that we *should* take pleasure in life, have grand visions, and work meaningfully, and that this implies a certain level of care about outcomes. But then we should see what’s extraneous to such a healthy outlook and eliminate it.

Pinning our hopes on things that fail to come about demonstrates the useless side of expectations. Hoping for something particular to happen causes us to defer our presence in the Now in favor of imaginary future gains. Moreover, mentally

transferring the initiative to others saps our abilities and vitiates our need to function. This in turn causes us to look outside ourselves for solutions: somebody else will take care of things. This goes very deep because our early days on earth as babies were dominated by our caregivers taking charge of everything for us, while we lay at ease in our bassinets. Those were most definitely the “good old days.”

To get it right we first have to extract all the false notions from what we’re imagining, which brings our expectations down to size. Then if we realize that things are inevitably going to turn out differently than what we expect anyway, we can adopt a wait and see attitude about what our actions are going to accomplish. Such changes as actually do occur in our world come in part from the tide of the times and in part from the efforts of ordinary people like us on circumstances with which we have a direct connection. They are never accomplished by wishful thinking by itself.

An important part of the wisdom sacrifice, which is the Gita’s highest form of yoga, is to step back and take a good look at what’s bothering us. It’s almost always true that we are being misled or are misleading ourselves. Correcting this may not solve the world’s problems, but it does allow you to keep your head above water and retain your sanity. And sometimes you can even see your way clear to a real solution.

“Subjugated relational self-consciousness,” means that your transactional mentality needs to be put on hold for the period of your meditation. The part of the mind that deals with the world is to be given a rest for awhile, though this is not to be taken as an injunction for every moment. There are times to transact your business, and there are times to contemplate and remain quiet, with wandering thoughts held in abeyance. The rare yogi can remain steady in the midst of every activity, but it takes a lot of practice.

Subjugated relational self-consciousness also includes the corollary idea that in interactions with people you should moderate your own interests and focus on the other person, or better yet the

whole situation. Doing this properly produces a bipolar, reciprocal interaction that is the key factor in apprehending the Absolute, dressed as it is in the clothing of Creation. When we let the other in, we are in essence letting the Absolute in. Just be sure to not let you out when you let it in. The aim is equality, not abasing yourself to raise the other.

One of the key points that makes Nataraja Guru's translation superior to all others is found in this verse. The word *aparigraha* is universally translated as giving up all possessions, but he translates it as giving up all possessiveness. What a world of difference in that slight alteration! For thousands of years sincere seekers have been giving up their possessions, imagining it opened some magical doorway to realization. But the possessions themselves are by and large irrelevant. It's the sense of wanting to possess that needs to be overcome, which is a far more profound and complex matter.

Aparigraha is an interesting word. *A* means not. *Pari* means universally, round, about (in space and time), in the direction of. *Graha* means to seize or grasp for. So *aparigraha* means non-grasping, not always trying to seize everything around in the space-time continuum. Not trying to make everything your own. As the Isa Upanishad says, "Whose is wealth? Renounce and enjoy." We participate even in the enjoyment of our neighbors having something we might otherwise covet. If we're all in this together, why not?

Nataraja Guru calls practices like giving up possessions to achieve a nongrasping mentality "opening the door from the hinge side," in other words, using physical means to bring about psychological changes. It is nearly impossible to do away with possessiveness by merely giving up possessions, many of which might even make living simpler and more pleasant. Religious cults often collect all the material (and monetary) goods of their participants, using this (mis)translation as their scriptural justification. Refugees from these cults frequently discover that the

poverty they have embraced has thrown them into a basic struggle for existence that makes attaining peace much more difficult.

On page 403 of *Love and Blessings*, Nitya Chaitanya Yati offers guidelines for living in an ashram as a dedicated seeker. The last entry gives a clear sense of the meaning of *aparigraha*: “Let one have no material possession which is too dear to part with, especially in a situation where sharing is more beautiful than possessing. However, let one not be deprived of anything for which one has a natural right simply because one is weak or insensitive to its value.”

Taking scriptures literally is perilous. Words take on different meanings over time, and there are often many ways to translate the same word. One needs to dig down to the meaning the words are attempting to convey. This is one of the valuable aspects of “searching questioning,” as recommended in verse 34 below. By contrast, many religions consider questioning to be a sign of loss of faith and a threat to their domination. Because of this, some even treat questioning as a mortal sin, and consign seekers of truth to eternal condemnation in hell.

Possessiveness is an extension of wanting to manipulate circumstances for one’s own benefit. When the advice of this section is put into practice, when we aim for the good of the whole world rather than focusing exclusively on our own wants, the pressure eases off of its own accord, nearly effortlessly, like opening a door by the handle in Nataraja Guru’s analogy.

Lastly, this verse suggests we should engage “merely bodily” in actions. It’s easy to take this wrong and think we should act mindlessly, like automatons, and all the time no less. A recipe for God’s Zombie Army. What the Gita is trying to say in its cryptic language is that our minds and hearts should be directed toward contemplative matters, and that action is primarily used to support the needs of the body. The body is viewed as a platform for meditation and union with the divine, and as such it should be maintained in good order. But it is not to be considered an end in

itself, since that draws energy away from more subtle and rewarding pursuits.

Again, this advice is best applied to periods of contemplation. There is no reason to hold back on artistic engagement with mundane matters, which beautifies and embroiders life. Delicate cooking, decorative environments, spine-tingling lovemaking, and enlightening conversation, among many other things, are not to be ruled out. A very few people are happiest with fulltime contemplation, but for most of us it is just one part of a well-rounded life. Engagement with the divine infuses our everyday activities with intensity and expertise, while in turn horizontal activities provide the field of expression for those very qualities. Arjuna is a case in point. When he wanted to throw it all away and become a hermit, Krishna called him back to his life, in which he is a stalwart upholder of solid, everyday values.

22) Satisfied with chance gains, unaffected by conflicting pairs (of interests), non-competitive, remaining the same in gain or no gain, he remains unbound in spite of having been active.

Hey, take things as they come, because they DO come. Our needs are being met at every moment, if not our wants. The Absolute really does maintain the universe. Imagine the chaos if this weren't so. This verse's model of yogic equanimity is a far cry from the obsessive drive to engineer destiny at the heart of modern beliefs. Knitting acceptance of the universe's support with individual initiative and striving is a truly subtle yogic challenge.

This section is all about maintaining an optimal attitude. Events produce clashes and challenges of all types, and there are many ways to respond to them. Krishna is teaching a way of great depth and maturity, one that should help us get the most from the opportunities that present themselves.

I have several friends who like to "go with the flow," living like modified sannyasins and managing to make ends meet, for the most part. It's eminently possible in an affluent, if not particularly

generous, society. They believe they would be selling out to the enemy if they took a job for money, yet their society insists that money is the basis of exchange, and requires it for pretty much everything. The ancient Indian model—drying up now even in India—provided active support for such people. In most of the world people like my friends are seen as worthless freeloaders, no matter how valuable and caring their contributions. So they must make some compromises to cover their sustenance, and it galls them.

Gainful employment can be treated as one of the inevitably necessary parts of life, and so something to be just taken care of, like washing the dishes and brushing the teeth. The trick is to have faith that we can still be ourselves no matter what compromises we have to make.

While the advice here sounds like it advocates extreme detachment, it doesn't have to be taken that way. The activity mentioned can easily include doing a job for pay, and the advice is just as excellent as if we were living a mendicant lifestyle, sitting by the roadside with our begging bowl, or cardboard sign for that matter. Having the balanced attitude indicated is ideal in every environment, and not too many of us are inclined to a life devoid of mental stimulation. So let's analyze the verse from a practical standpoint.

We can be satisfied with chance gains if we have a modicum of faith that gains will come to us. In a harmonious society, opportunities continually come along, and in a disharmonious one they at least occasionally come along. The first advice is to not be driven by dissatisfaction, the way almost everyone is, because it's reactive. Instead, be driven by an inspired vision or goal, and move toward it as circumstances permit. There will always be setbacks, but they can be taken more lightly if they are considered just part of how chance operates.

Evolution up to now has created creatures who make our decisions based on avoiding pain and moving toward pleasure. Dissatisfaction is painful, or at least irritating, so we are inclined to

try to escape it one way or another. In doing so we may miss important life lessons; therefore as yogis we are directed to accept pain and pleasure as being of secondary importance. We are emerging from simple reactivity to a higher consciousness based on the unshakable strength of a wise vision.

Some people are driven to fight for promotion at work, and are always wheedling and prevaricating with an eye toward improving their prospects. The Gita's advice is to keep your cool, and take what comes as a result of chance in the broadest sense. Keeping cool is remaining in the same heightened state whether the breaks go for you or against you. We are given a lifetime to practice, and we can measure our progress by how upset we are by the luck of the draw. If we are thrown off kilter, it means the baser attitude is drawing us down to its level. Instead, we should exemplify a better attitude, and raise our fellows up to it if we can.

Conflicting pairs of interests are what yogis eternally balance within themselves, and the workplace provides them in bunches. The bare bones conflict of interest is between free time and work time, and a yogi should not chafe over work time as if it were free time lost. Most of us are understandably prejudiced in favor of free time. Type A people chafe the opposite way: free time is work time lost. They feel cast adrift without a program to carry out. Why not realize that we have to work sometimes and not work at other times, and accept each in its proper place and time? Then we won't be either a discontented misfit or an obsessive neurotic with no life outside of work.

Non-competitiveness doesn't mean we don't care, or that we shouldn't strive for excellence. It means we don't try to beat the other guy, even while doing our best. We can be happy that the other person succeeds too. Competitive people secretly desire the failure of their competition, counting that as personal success. It's really a very ugly attitude. A yogi cares about everyone else, even unsavory characters who are competitive toward them.

Life is filled with ups and downs, and is seldom the proverbial bowl of cherries for long. Affiliation with the Absolute

means attaining a steady state of happiness that is not displaced by misfortune. If our happiness depends on our gains, our ups, it will drain away when we experience losses—just when we need it most. Happiness has to be firmly grounded in something stable, meaning the Absolute or the unitive state.

The idea of competition comes from what is essentially a lack of faith in “chance gains.” The fear is that there isn’t enough, therefore I must get mine first or else I won’t get what I need. Part of the problem is that we have magnified our needs beyond all good sense, and those expectations should be reduced lest our fears get out of hand. If we become satisfied that everything is the Absolute and so all our needs will somehow be met, the fear dissipates. This doesn’t mean that everything we need will be handed to us on a platter. We still have to stand up as full participants in life. We are just giving up a certain cultivated cravenness and desperation.

A fixation on making things happen in a certain well-defined way creates bondage on many levels, conceptual as well as actual. By becoming flexible and fearless one avoids the grooves of habitual activity, thereby remaining unbound in spite of being engaged in the world. This is a key goal of Krishna’s teaching.

Everyone knows how a simple act like marriage can bind one legally. There are positive legal bonds, such as marriage, and there are negative legal bonds, such as punishment for criminal activity. Employment contracts fall somewhere in the middle. But the Gita is speaking of something different, the karmic entrainment that ensues from any given course of action. Take an example from the modern world. Two different companies make, let’s say, toothbrushes. One is well made and lasts a long time but is more expensive than the other, which is cheap and wears out quickly. Due to the initial lower cost of the latter, people buy it in droves. Over time they pay more, because they have to replace it so often, but each time it is the cheaper option so it wins out. Soon the better made alternative goes out of business and that option disappears. From now until hell freezes over the only choice is a crappy

toothbrush, and everyone is bound to the results of their unpremeditated and shortsighted actions.

If you lead people to believe you're something other than what you are, they'll believe it and pretty soon you'll have to live up to what you were just pretending to be before. Famous people often feel the sting of this. They live up to a persona that nets them a lot of attention and money, but after the initial rush they begin to feel trapped and have to start wearing sunglasses to avoid all their fans, who want to treat them as if they were exactly what *they* imagine them to be.

All actions create this kind of bondage, unless they are performed in good faith with childlike (but not naïve!) openness, as the Gita is recommending here.

23) In the case of one whose attachments are gone, who has gained freedom, whose spiritual being has been founded on wisdom, his works, having a sacrificial character only, become wholly dissolved.

This verse summarizes the preceding section.

There's a widespread perception that letting yourself go will cause harm to others. Freedom is a dangerous thing. You have to hold yourself in check so that others will be safe from you. Actually, it's the repression itself that causes injury and misery, first to you and then through induction to others around you. Free people are kind and considerate and leave plenty of room for others to operate. They tend to be healers, and bring out the best in those around them. So you are doing everyone a favor by relaxing your fixation on rules and regulations and learning to operate without such crutches.

In some ways our psyche is like a rat, in the ancient Chinese view the smartest of the animals by the way, the first to come sit at the Buddha's feet. Left to its own devices it lives an expert life, unerringly guided by its intuitive unfoldment. Our mind could live expertly and intuitively as well. But for scientific purposes we

prefer to keep it in a cage. We build social mazes, and then feel we have to guide our personal rat through them using some kind of negative reinforcement technique, like an electric cattle prod. Our “rat” would likely do as well or better without such guidance, but we’ve been trained to believe in prodding, and we have no faith in the rat’s—our psyche’s—instincts.

Hoarding is a material expression of our inner state of attachment related to our desire to control. We identify with who we are in terms of what we’ve done, where we’ve vacationed, our family history, and so on. The photographs and memorabilia are proof we exist. They pile up high and deep in the course of a lifetime, and chain us to their static presence. I know people who spend all their free time tracing their family history, or organizing boxes of stuff in hopes it will someday matter to someone. The hoard makes a prison as effectively as solid walls. If the hoarder dared to “sacrifice” the hoard, the gain would be freedom. We already know we exist, so proof is unnecessary. But the dropping of attachments has to come from the inside, from the realization of our intrinsic value, or some other substitute for self-confidence will quickly arise.

Needless to say, preserving historically useful or instructional items does not constitute hoarding. Sorting the wheat from the chaff requires a basic “wisdom sacrifice” of deciding what is worthwhile and what isn’t.

Contrary to popular opinion, memory and attachments are not the same thing. Memory is essential to our existence as full-fledged human beings, as cases of amnesia or Alzheimer’s amply demonstrate. But memories should inform the present in a living, vibrant way. They should be part of the here and now, not a remote place to hide out. Collecting piles of expired matter is not going to inform anyone, it’s just going to be a headache for somebody else to dispose of when we die. The odd mania of a few prominent people like Thomas Jefferson to save everything for future historians has made everyone think they’d better follow suit. But this is just one more curse of fame, which we should be happy to

avoid. J. Krishnamurti has said, in *The Book of Life*, about why we seek fame:

Why? Because we really don't love what we are doing. If you loved to sing, or to paint, or to write poems - if you really loved it - you would not be concerned with whether you are famous or not. To want to be famous is tawdry, trivial, stupid, it has no meaning; but, because we don't love what we are doing, we want to enrich ourselves with fame.... You are just a creative human being living anonymously, and in that there is richness and great beauty.

24) For him the Absolute is the act of offering, the Absolute is the substance offered into the Absolute which is the fire, offered by (him), the Absolute, the end to be reached by him being even the Absolute, by means of his peace supreme of absolutist action.

A long series of verses examining sacrifice begins here. Last and best on the list is the wisdom sacrifice, which is discussed under verse 33. We should keep in mind that sacrifice is much more than giving something up; its literal meaning is “to make sacred.” Sacrifice is activity motivated purely by free will; non-obligatory action. Free choice is a major component of sacredness. Ritual is prescribed, and therefore falls into a second category of partially binding action, voluntarily undertaken.

This verse presents the Gita's highest model for freely chosen activity. Every element of the sacrificial situation is seen to be the Absolute. Nothing is shunted off as separate.

This is about much more than a fire ceremony or flower offering: it is a way of life for every moment. What you offer the world as your energetic participation is the Absolute, and any substantial contributions you make are the Absolute. You are doing this not for some distinct “other” but for the Absolute itself in the form of the other. Even the point of the whole thing is the Absolute. Knowing that every aspect of life is absolute brings the

highest form of peace. Acting in this way precludes egoism, because all things and all processes are understood to have a common ground.

The universe resembles (or perhaps is) a hologram, where every part contains all the information possessed by the whole. If this is true, all we have to do is step back from our fixation on our personal perspective to realize we are in everything and everything is in us.

When every bit of life, including you, is seen as the Absolute, there is no more strife. There is peace supreme. Not a mere absence of hostility, the all-embracing unity remains balanced and at peace even in the midst of turbulent events.

For details of the fire ceremony in the modern context, along with an explication of its symbolism, read Chapter 14 of *Meditations on the Self*, by Nitya Chaitanya Yati. An excellent essay on the universe as a hologram may be found at <https://southerncrossreview.org/9/hologram.htm> .

25) As referring to the gods is (the nature of) sacrifice of some yogis; others offer sacrifice into the fire of the Absolute by sacrifice itself.

The distinction is first made between dualistic and unitive sacrifice. Dualistic yogis address some form of deity, while the unitive ones express the Absolutist version described in verse 24. What this means is that dualism is based on a contractual relationship with life: I'll do this in expectation of receiving that in compensation. Absolutist sacrifice is performed for its own sake, because it is true to who we are, not because we have been told to do it or we are expecting something else from it. The first type of sacrifice listed is religious, and the second is more scientific or philosophic. The choice is mainly a matter of personal inclination. Chapter XII will deal extensively with these two styles of relating to the underlying reality.

Nataraja Guru says of this section (verses 25-32): “Any man who has not attained full enlightenment is bound to offer a sacrifice according to his own lights regarding higher values or ideals. To ask any man to do better than what he can would be neither possible nor fair.” He notes that these are revalued sacrifices, performed by yogis, and not the ordinary rituals carried out mechanically by ritualists.

Easwaran translates sacrifice throughout his commentary as “selfless service,” at its best not too different from my “freely chosen activity.” I much prefer the latter, however, because it includes the self, a factor even in so-called selfless acts, and includes a lot of actions that cannot properly be described as service. Sacrifice can thus describe the way we relate to the world every moment, instead of being a part-time activity reserved for periods of holiness.

I’m going to add a different slant here, too, that sacrifice is what we do to get high, to feel really good. This will throw additional light on the meaning of these verses to the modern mind.

In a sense, spiritual life is all about getting high, about rising above the petty concerns of daily life to access a special state that feels terrific, and at its best provides revelatory insights into the meaning of life. Ananda, bliss, is a key component of realization, and the best highs are sacred to those who experience them. Everybody wants to get high and stay high, but most of the readily available selections are of inferior quality. The Gita grades them according to their value and staying power, with the ideal being a state that is permanent, that doesn’t wear off the next morning.

Dualistic, “worship of the gods” types of high include not only religious worship, but also sex, drugs and rock and roll. In Chapter IX, verses 20 and 21, Krishna describes them as lifting the aspirant to heaven but then returning them to earth when they wear off: “desiring desirable objects they obtain values which come and go.” These include the well-known and popular forms of amusement and entertainment, ranging from bodily sensations to sublime mental gymnastics.

The dualistic high is mainly produced by the temporary annulment of oppressive mental states stemming from our conditioning. Distractions and pain-killing medicines uncover our native joy, but the conditioned state returns when they wear off or the show ends. We have to keep repeating the dosage to maintain the feeling of freedom.

The Gita adds another category, unitive sacrifice, that does not peter out when the carnival is shut down for the night. Through a combination of intelligence, openness, and penetration into the unknown, a permanent high is mysteriously accessed. Needless to say, it is considered the best choice. Krishna graciously concedes that all ways of getting high have some legitimacy, but some are more dangerous or problematic than others. If you want a good time that doesn't fade away at the break of day, seek union with the Absolute.

26) Some offer as sacrifice the ear and other such sense organs into the fire of restraint; others offer the sacrifice of sound and other sense interests into the fire of the senses.

The two sides of the polarity of the senses are referred to here. In meditation one can either quiet the mind through seeking the absence of sense stimuli, or on the other hand treating the bombardment of stimuli as of no importance and tuning it out. Whichever the method chosen, the aim is to free the mind from its fixation on sensory input and release it to penetrate to whatever else there is.

The first method includes meditating in a quiet place, up to and including a cave, monastery or sensory-deprivation chamber. For those without recourse to such places, the same effect may be obtained by simply ignoring whatever stimuli are around while centering the mind. Being a textbook of dialectic science, the Gita is careful to address both sides of any polarity.

Probably the ear is mentioned because sound is by far the most distracting and uncontrollable of the senses. Too bad humans don't have earlids to go with their eyelids.

Sacrifice is usually performed to achieve something in addition to itself. Shutting down the senses is not the objective, but merely an important preliminary step to diving into the flow of the Absolute as a liberated contemplative. Since it is dualistic to distinguish between ends and means, the Gita portrays this as a unitive process. One should always unite ends and means into pure action. The means is already the end in itself. This is the essence of the wisdom sacrifice, which is more effective than all others, according to this section dealing with different forms of sacrifice.

In our second reading of sacrifice, two ways of getting high with sound are presented here. You can be a passive listener, attending concerts or lectures or sermons that inspire you, or you may become a musician yourself, chanting or strumming to get yourself and other people into a great mood. Sound is mentioned because it has the most profound ability to affect people, but the other senses have their moments as well.

27) All the functions of the senses, as also the vital functions, others make as an offering into the fire of unitive discipline, consisting of self-restraint.

Following the ear reference, the idea of restraint or tuning out is generalized to include all the senses, and the vital functions like breathing, digesting, reproducing, moving about, and so on are thrown in for good measure. All these are greater or lesser distractions from the contemplative wisdom sacrifice soon to be recommended by Krishna. Here the act of yoga (unitive discipline) provides the dialectic synthesis of the previous verse's thesis and antithesis. When you are fully absorbed, neither outside stimuli or inner urges to be stimulated can bother you, and the ordinary functions of the body are reduced to a minimum or otherwise harmonized. This is an ideal state of being "tuned in."

Many religious practices revolve around self-restraint in various guises, such as hatha yoga, pranayama, and meditation techniques. The spiritual universe contains worlds upon worlds of paths to realization. The Gita does not advocate any particular one, though partisans will likely read this section as an endorsement of their favorite. It is merely cataloguing broad types of sacrificial or contemplative actions. Forcible restraint as a repetitive practice, while suitable to certain severe types of seekers, is much more strenuous and time consuming than the restraint that comes naturally as a byproduct to absorption of the intelligence.

Holding back is a form of sacrifice, but unitive discipline means that you are absorbed into a fascination with the Absolute, and so interest in sensory and vital functions fades out effortlessly. For example, sex is a delightful activity that occupies a great deal of attention for most people, and it is difficult to suppress the urge for it. But as the One Beyond is sighted, any excessive compulsion for sex naturally fades into the background, assuming a normalized position in life. Unlike more modern and radical disciplines that ban sexual activity utterly, the Gita doesn't even mention it, because it is viewed as a perfectly normal activity. Sex could be considered one of the lesser gods of verse 12, which when worshipped bring quick results—temporary absorption—but whose benefits wear off quickly too.

Restraint is valuable in sacrificial practice, because vitality is accumulated over time. Sex at discreet intervals is more intense than if it happens over and over. Occasional evenings of drunkenness and debauchery can be uplifting, but continuous indulgence is enervating and stupefying. Going to church once a week is exciting, but every day it would drive you nuts. And so on. So don't feel you have to be constantly doing your practice, whether it is spiritual or secular. Down time lays the groundwork for better uptime later on.

28) Likewise there are others of object-sacrifice, those of austerity-sacrifice, those who sacrifice unitive discipline, and those

of self-study and wisdom sacrifice, who are (all) men of self-control and fully accomplished vows.

Krishna continues dispassionately listing favorite forms of sacrifice, ways people imagine they can be carried to the Absolute by what they do. While wisdom sacrifice is the best, all forms of freely chosen activity are endorsed, so long as they are suitable to the chooser. All require some degree of self-control and an element of intention.

The list begins with object sacrifice. It's normally thought of as placing flowers and fruit on altars or roasting a goat, but it can mean much more than that. The generous giving of material support includes charity (hey, the soup kitchen has a place here too!), financial donations, community involvement, down to pushing your neighbor's car out of a snowbank or feeding her puppy when she's on vacation, pretty much anything that takes time or effort and is outside your normal routine. There's no reason not to think of your job as an object sacrifice, either. Viewed in the right way, almost all tasks contain an element of service to the greater community. Whatever assistance you offer to anything beyond your personal space can be used to bring enlightenment, because it lifts you out of a unhealthy fixation on the limited self. People appreciate the actual help you give, because wishful thinking doesn't fill hungry bellies.

Tapas is translated here as austerity sacrifice, and refers to the heat generated by the effort to effect change. Quitting a drug habit is a tapas. Forcing yourself to practice your music lessons or study for a diploma is tapas. Housecleaning is tapas. Some types of yoga or meditation involve tapas, because you have to clear away your busyness and force yourself to sit there or carry out instructions. None of these happens without intention and a struggle. It takes a long time for them to become effortless, but gradually they do become easier as you go along.

Unitive discipline is Nataraja Guru's translation of yoga. In this case it likely refers to Patanjali's classic yoga exposition,

because it is flanked by austerity and self-study, two of Patanjali's primary practices (*niyamas*). When most people think of yoga, they conceive it as Patanjali does, dualistically, as a practice leading to a particular result. The Gita's yoga is nondual, but we can see that full acceptance is being granted to the traditional methods. If you have trouble accepting that you are the Absolute, it isn't so terrible to imagine that you are an ordinary person evolving into a higher consciousness, and that certain steps have to be taken to accomplish this. The joke is that the "higher consciousness" attained is precisely the nondual, unitive state that is there all along.

Self-study, *svadhyaya*, means becoming intimate with one's true nature. Guru Nitya has much to say about it in his commentary on Patanjali's Yoga Sutras, from which we select these tidbits:

The nature of the Self and the nature of the Absolute are not different. When you try to get into intimate relation with the nature of the Absolute, that automatically gives insight into your own nature. Thus, self-study (*svadhyaya*) manifests.... [It means] understanding your own resources and applying your abilities to the best advantage.

When you enter into the discipline of preparing yourself to achieve aloneness, the most appropriate questions to ask are "Who am I?" and "What is truly mine?" When people came to Ramana Maharishi and asked him for instruction, he always had one question to ask them, "Who wants instruction? What is it in you that says, 'I am' and 'Who am I?'" Whatever your question, need or problem, as a preliminary to knowing what is yours, you need to ask, "Who am I?"

Svadhyaya is studying "Who or what am I?" and "What is mine?" "Who am I?" is not a question that can be replied to with an answer that will remain intact throughout one's life. We live in a world of transient names and forms. The answer to "Who am I?" in one situation doesn't hold good in another situation. As relativistic conditions continuously change and

move, you need to know what the condition of the next moment will be. That is why it is said that a single answer does not solve the problem of samsara (phenomenal world). The vision of the Absolute is not static so that you can hold on to it. Only when the vision of the Absolute is continuous and contiguous is the merger into the eternal of any use.

Svadhya is generally recognized as the study of words passed on by seekers who have gone before. The records of the experiences of wise people are available to us as compendiums of great works. It is worthwhile to study those books every day. Further, it is very wholesome to spend at least some time each day with an enlightened person, listening to their word directly. It is not possible to gather wisdom all in one day, but each day you can learn a little. Wise persons teach with their words, their modes of action, their thought processes, and, above all, with their silence. Attuning to all these aspects will bring conviction.

When what you experience, what you hear from great people, and what is recorded in the scriptures from time immemorial all come in one line, then you can be sure that your svadhya has been profitable. (104, 152, 258-9)

Although it closely resembles self-study, the wisdom sacrifice has its own verse, 33, and will be examined there.

It's helpful to note the dialectical structure of this verse. Object sacrifice is outwardly directed, while austerity sacrifice involves pulling back from objects and redirecting the energy inward. The two movements are neutralized in the unitive discipline mentioned (yoga), which remains poised in between, neither outwardly or inwardly directed. A yogi should always examine behavior to note its direction and compensate for it in order to maintain a steady position in the middle ground.

The high of object sacrifice comes from appraising the benefit you are conferring on others, and the high of austerity comes from the benefit you confer on yourself. A yogi will

perform both types of activity, but not base them on any supposed benefit, but merely because they are the right thing to do at the time they are done. The yogi's high is not dependent on success or failure, but simply on the bliss of being fully alive.

29) Into the downward (inward) vital tendencies others sacrifice the upward (outward) one, and in the outward one the inward likewise; thus countering the tendencies, they remain ever as those (who resort to the way) of vital breath control.

Finally we encounter a reference to yogic practices of the modern imagination. This verse describes the essentials of pranayama, another branch of Patanjali's Yoga, known to the West as breathing exercises. The primary vital forces are called prana and apana, and associated with the ingoing and outgoing breath. Many abstruse practices channel these energies to various goals, and the power unleashed is great enough to require a knowledgeable guru for guidance.

It's hard to think of present-day equivalents other than physical exercises themselves. Exercise nowadays serves the purpose of regulating the body's energies, and provides a natural form of breathing exercise. Swimming and running especially require breath control and tend to even out the inhalation and exhalation. So I guess our modern pranayama yogis are mainly found among the athletes.

Everyone wants to feel good and get high, and that's the point of regulating the vital forces. When you feel good you can easily turn your thoughts to sublime matters like advanced problem solving or performance. A lot of pranayama is extreme and can be dangerous; the ego thrill of doing something exotic that few others know about is a perverse high all its own. The Gita recommends a simple balanced version to achieve a relaxed state conducive to contemplation, free from any desire to impress others. Basically, extroverted and introverted tendencies are juxtaposed to arrive at a dynamic neutrality. Such a simple yogic technique can be followed

without the guidance of a teacher, as it is unlikely to lead the practitioner into a blind alley.

30) Others, abstemious in food, make an offering of vital breaths into vital breaths. All these are connoisseurs of sacrifice who have gotten rid of evil through sacrifice.

Fasting and pranayama in combination is a forcible technique for attaining deep meditation. When the brain is starved for sugar and oxygen, all sorts of unusual mental states make an appearance. Some may seem very “holy,” but there are no guarantees. A lot depends on the mindset they are interpreted with.

This technique is part of a survey of general approaches to spirituality prevalent then and now, and while not disdaining them, Krishna is not especially endorsing them either. This is not an invitation to enter an occult mystical path. Stripped of its arcane language, the Gita’s advice is straightforward: it is helpful to partake in a healthy diet and regular exercise program as part of a sensible regimen for getting to feel good. As the good Dr. Bronner always said, “Health is our only real wealth.”

The idea of being sparing or thoughtful in food intake in a way that relates to spiritual practice is transmitted in the following apocryphal Native American story, Two Wolves:

One evening an old Cherokee told his grandson about a battle that goes on inside people. He said, “My son, the battle is between two ‘wolves’ inside us all. One is Evil. It is anger, envy, jealousy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego. The other is Good. It is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion and faith.” The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather: “Which wolf wins?” The old Cherokee simply replied, “The one you feed.”

“Connoisseurs of sacrifice” refers to the entire list from verse 25 to the first half of verse 30. We can detect a subtly humorous touch and gentle derision in Nataraja Guru’s translation that is not out of place, since a revised ideal is immanent. All other commentators translate the phrase accurately enough as “knowers of sacrifice,” meaning honest practitioners of useful actions. The evil referred to that is overcome by freely chosen activity may be thought of as dross or imperfections, including dullness or opacity. Ill health. The list in the Native American fable is not bad, either.

The overriding import of this section is that we do many things intelligently in order to arrive at a state of ease and comfort that is optimal for making rapid spiritual progress. We should use the resulting pleasant frame of mind to seek wisdom, yet all too often feeling good is taken as the goal itself. If we make this mistake, once we are comfortable we are content to laze around and enjoy superficial amusements. This is a tragic waste. When times get tough, we may be busy scrambling for our very survival, with nary a thought for philosophic matters. It is too bad that the unsurpassed material opulence of the present day has not translated into hordes of people willing and able to seek heightened awareness. The rarity of a true seeker will be lamented in VII, 3.

31) Those who partake of the immortal nectar of sacrificial remains go to the eternal Absolute. This world is not for one of no sacrifice. How can he have the next?

This is a revalued vision of what happens to the eaters of sacrificial remains mentioned in III, 13. The sacrifice now is a wholehearted and absolutist participation in the entire world. The yogi is expected to be “satisfied with chance gains,” in other words, content with the natural and fair portion “left over” from sacrificial or voluntary action aimed at embodying absolutist ideals. The “high” of the yogi is not dependent on external influences that need to be sought and appropriated. Likewise, scheming how to hang on to what should be freely shared is

contrary to the Gita's intent, and we are assured that it will maintain our separation from the Absolute. If we are interested in merger, we should adopt an attitude of generosity.

Serving food to the indigent is righteous enough, but if you take home a prideful attitude afterwards it has been done in the wrong spirit. Or if you imagine that it solves the problem of the unequal distribution of wealth, you are seriously deluded. Mother Theresa, saintly though she was in caring for the needy in Kolkata, was often criticized for dealing only with effects and not speaking out about the causes of the problems she ameliorated with such dedication.

The second half of the verse speaks of the "next world," seemingly in reference to the Absolute. Of course, the Absolute is not a world and its attainment doesn't lie in the future. Either it is a figure of speech or a wryly humorous goad to Arjuna, who may still be thinking in terms of future rewards. The point, though, is that the joy of living is associated with freely chosen activity, and if you don't have any, and just live your life out as a slave to the dictates of others or to the patterns laid down in musty tomes, you are squandering your birthright.

Our true birthright is the *amrita*, the immortal nectar of pure existence. *Mrita* is death, *a-mrita* is the opposite of death. Interestingly, amrita is associated with the soma plant that will be mentioned later as a "food of the gods," food that allows you to truly see. The Gita may be subtly advocating an actual soma sacrifice, where divine plants are eaten to induce visions of everlasting life, which to the ancients was religion at its best!

32) Thus, many and varied are the sacrifices spread in front of the Absolute. Know them all as originating in action. Thus understanding them, you shall gain release.

The rapid survey of general forms of sacrifice is brought to a conclusion in this and the next verse. The Gita, far from advising

us to pick a path and follow it, advocates release from the narrowness of all paths.

Reading carefully, the release comes not so much from actually performing the sacrifices, as from comprehending their overriding unity as more or less liberating forms of action. The release is that you no longer feel compelled to follow any particular line of activity, imagining it will lead you to the Absolute or heaven or something. They all are equally subservient to the mindset of the practitioner. We should directly enter into union with the Absolute through wisdom, and not imagine that any particular series of steps are required. Life is already the greatest miracle; all we have to do is live it to the full. This is the wisdom that spiritual seekers are meant to glean from whatever we choose to do.

Put practically, we do many things throughout the day, and in truth they are all admixtures of self-will and outside pressure in various proportions. If we merely go through the motions of carrying out predetermined actions, we may be accomplishing something but we aren't growing. We should also examine and question what we're doing whenever we have a chance to step back and take a look at it. In this way we can adjust our behavior, rectify faults, and discover new and better avenues for improvement. Probably even God had some additional thoughts after dictating the various scriptures, and wished she could have expanded on some of the points that caused confusion amongst mortals. In any case, if we haven't entertained second thoughts, we should be worried. It means our mind is closed.

We all know songs like Old Time Religion by Jim Reeves, which goes in part:

Gimme that old time religion
Gimme that old time religion
Gimme that old time religion
It's good enough for me
It was good for dad and mother

It was good for dad and mother
It was good for dad and mother
And it's good enough for me

The Gita is the opposite of old time religion: it advocates the fresh aliveness of spirit in dynamic interaction with the world. Truth does not fear questioning, because doubt only aims to depose falsehood. Truth abides through every upheaval.

33) Superior to any sacrifice with (valuable) objects is the wisdom sacrifice; all actions have their culmination in wisdom, Arjuna.

Now we can see why this chapter is called Jnana Yoga, Unitive Wisdom, even though it deals primarily with karma or action. The culminating or vanishing point of everything we do is wisdom, and conversely, wisdom emerges from what we do and how we comprehend it. We are here to learn and grow, not simply to consume food, reproduce, and die. The Gita slices through all programs of psychic development to urge us to understand, to examine and scrutinize, as a foundation for acting freely.

What exactly does wisdom sacrifice mean? It boils down to thinking profoundly about things, in order to seek and find a unifying vision of understanding. Attending a Gita class is a wisdom sacrifice. Spending time in introspection is a wisdom sacrifice. Reading, studying, listening, analyzing—it's all a wisdom sacrifice. The words only sound exotic and strange. So in whatever you do in whatever way you like, ponder the meaning of it and have your thoughts fine-tuned by interaction with your friends, and ideally with an excellent teacher.

The concept of the wisdom sacrifice being superior to ordinary sacrifices is similar to the comments on verse 21, where giving up possessiveness is seen as superior to simply giving up possessions. The contemplation of any process is more important than merely carrying out actual activities. Activities performed

without reflection are little more than slavish rule-abiding. “Actions culminating in wisdom” means that understanding the principle involved is more essential than the physical motions, and it confers expertise.

If we take ownership as a subject for wisdom sacrifice, this verse would read: “Superior to sacrificing your possessions, O Arjuna, is to sacrifice your need to possess, your possessiveness. Doing so will free your attitude, and foster a more global perspective. What really matters is your state of mind.” This technique could be applied to a wide range of subjects, with enhanced freedom and a soaring spirit as the outcome.

34) Learn this by prostration, by searching questioning, and by service; they will instruct you (duly) in wisdom—those wise ones who can see the basic principles.

The wisdom sacrifice is presented as a humble learning program with three important facets. Following this simple and very general template you will learn wisdom in a delightful way. You will learn what is called here *tat*—this, or That Alone. In other words, it will bring you face to face with the Absolute.

Prostration does not imply lying down and groveling, demeaning yourself before a superior person, it just means realizing you don’t know everything. You give up being a wise guy. You suspend your own sense of being in charge and look to a teacher as a source of wisdom. Otherwise you stay stuck in your current mental trammels. Arjuna followed this advice correctly in the beginning of the second chapter when he asked Krishna to teach him and then quieted himself down to listen. From his occasional questions we can see he maintains this attitude throughout his apprenticeship. Arjuna was a superior and respected person in his world, used to running the show, so his prostration—his humbling of himself—was especially significant.

Searching questioning means never being fully satisfied you know all the answers, but instead being open to new ideas and

even consciously incorporating them in your life. You don't just prostrate as an inferior person before the guru, you exercise your intelligence by digesting the teaching and providing feedback through incisive questions. The more intelligent the question, the more intelligent the response from the guru. The disciple's primary task is to ponder what has been taught and then to ask for more light in areas where the teaching isn't clear. This is actually a process that reveals new fields of truth to both teacher and taught.

Service means sharing what you've learned with others, and helping them in whatever way appears most appropriate. We tend to have a static view that service means doing tasks for other people's benefit, but the Gita is aiming to remove the sense of "other" from the picture. Service is a broad and open state of mind rather than a set of activities. It means putting into practice the wisdom you've gained, which serves everyone well. A small part of it might serve to free the teacher from some menial tasks so they can attend to more sublime matters. Everyone can wash dishes, but few can inspire life-changing resolutions in an audience. Therefore we do the guru's dishes for them.

These are the three attitudes to adopt with a guru, one who sees the essence of things and their basic principles. You first prostrate yourself to the teacher by realizing she knows more than you do. Your job is to ask questions, penetrating questions, which milks the wisdom from the guru-cow that otherwise would remain udderly out of sight. And you do little things for the guru, relieving her of some of the drudgery of life and freeing her for more quality time, such as helping people like you.

This is the only place that service is expressly mentioned in the Gita, so it is a bit of a mystery why so many commentators claim it extols selfless service as the high road to realization. That may come from a dualistic interpretation of sacrifice, which is often mentioned in the Gita but is not meant to imply servility in any form. The Gita clearly recommends service here, but a thoughtful and considered service. Not selfless, but self-full. You

should always offer your help as it's required—this will teach you flexibility and broaden your range. If you happen to have a program for your own particularized ends unfolding, being able to set it aside in an instant teaches freedom in action. Whatever you resent when this happens is a pointer to where you may be caught.

One precept from Christianity that has somehow become associated with the Gita is selfless service. Christians pray, "Oh Lord, make me an instrument of Thy will." Many Gita commentators likewise advocate selfless service as the high road to dissolving the ego and producing a consequent superstar status. It is a simplistic formula designed to provide an easy route to unitive action, and like all such formulas it is much less valuable than everyone would like to believe.

If nothing else, deciding to do selfless service is inherently contradictory, as in "I'm doing selfless service to attain my own enlightenment." Absurd, really. There is an awful lot of self in that. Actually, selflessness can be a diversion from the spiritual search, if not a source of raw egotistical pride. It is very important for the seeker to be focused on their own issues, and not be always paying attention to other people's problems. Breakthroughs and insights are always to be related to our personal situation, and are not to be flung in the face of those who we imagine might benefit from the wisdom we have unearthed. Other people have their own problems to address that are different than ours. Insights may certainly be shared between friends, but proselytizing is rude and counterproductive. It is almost invariably the mark of someone who is excited about an idea that hasn't been thought all the way through.

Bearing in mind that Krishna has just assured us that any path that someone takes with total dedication and involvement is just fine (IV, 11), what are the problems here? First of all, when you look outside yourself for direction, your actions tend to be only mildly dedicated and your involvement in them lukewarm. Doing somebody else's bidding is humiliating on some primal level, though it may have a minor salubrious effect in tempering

excessive willfulness. But exercising your own expertise is what can motivate you to the depths of your being.

The attitude of becoming an instrument of the divine will is fraught with peril. Are we to be like a cello sitting in its case, leaning up against the wall, until such time as a divine hand takes us up? Unfortunately, the divine will, whatever it may be, can only operate through our own will or be interpreted to us by other humans. Otherwise we'll just be like that dusty cello, waiting patiently throughout eternity, trying desperately to think of ourselves as available. If our strings are somehow set in motion, our selflessness puts us naively at the mercy of others who may have no qualms about exploiting our good intentions. The "armies of God" careening around the planet at the behest of some divinely appointed human or other are all the caution we should ever need in this respect.

When we go beyond the cliché to imagine what selfless service would actually look like, we can easily see its flaws. Primary is the idea that "I" am serving "somebody else." This dualistic purview is at the root of many if not all our problems, and the Gita is striving to do away with dualism, not encourage it. When there is an other there is bound to be conflict. We go off to serve them, but when things don't go well there is frustration, hurt, anger even. The imaginary walls divvying up unity tend to grow higher and thicker with time.

I can't restrain myself from quoting a letter by Guru Nitya to an American disciple, from his autobiography:

The Christian notion of mysticism is an act of surrender to do service to others as an instrument of God. The favorite examples are Joan of Arc in the battlefield, St. Francis among the lepers, and St. Teresa organizing charitable institutions. This is what Bergson calls the "model of the throbbing machine." The other variety is what is seen in the models of the meditating Buddha or Sri Ramakrishna or Ramana Maharshi in states of beatitude. In oriental mysticism, there is

no idea of the “other.” The so-called other person is seen as one’s own Self, so there is no dualistic sense of duty to do service to oneself or to another. Instead, they only keep themselves true to their own inner rhythm that flows in harmony with the universal rhythm.

In a country where for centuries people have acted because of environmental forces, such as mineral deposits and consequent gold rushes, no realization makes much sense without relating it to action. Tales of yogis and seers attaining God-realization, brought to this country through books and by word of mouth, have fired the enthusiasm of many people to seek God-realization. This has somehow created in the mind of most people an idea of a far off realm to which one has to move for realization.

There is no world other than this, and there is no experience that is removed from one’s earthly life. However, the idea of worldly responsibility should be changed to an understanding of the world in terms of the Divine. (Love and Blessings, 358-9)

Many people dedicate part of their week to feeding the poor or some other type of community activity. Some are motivated from the depths of their souls, while others are just copying a good idea so they can put a checkmark next to the “selfless service” category in their mind’s résumé. The very arbitrariness of it kills it, and any energy available to resolve hunger problems at their core is derailed. As usual, a self-critical wisdom sacrifice can separate honest motivations from the spurious ones.

Selfless service is all too often a formula for leaders to enlist well-meaning but unquestioning followers to their own selfish causes. In a world where mind and self are pretty much equated, we can substitute the former for the latter and have it read “mindless service.” That’s precisely what selfless service often turns out to be: mindless. Throw in the concept of picking one well-worn path and sticking to it, and you have a recipe for

zombiehood. It is crucial to think for yourself, even while performing “service”!

What’s really intended is for each of us to serve the divine within by developing ourselves to our maximum potential. We are to become expert in our actions, as infused with our finest intelligence. Action is not to be cut off from our personal thought process, it is to be informed by it. This is like an inner god using us for its instrument, but a god in no way separate from who we are, and who never gets tired of playing.

The Gita is very clear: unitive action should flow seamlessly from a well thought out program, intelligently conceived, that is in keeping with your dharma or innate predilections. What selflessness should mean then, if anything, is that you don’t segregate your self as a separate entity. Your self is enlarged to the maximum by being open to the Absolute in all its mysterious glory, both manifest and unmanifest.

35) Having known this, Arjuna, you will not give way to delusion thus any more; by this all beings without exception will be seen by you in the Self and thus in Me.

Knowing *this*, knowing That Alone, is the whole ball of wax. Once the Absolute is sighted one can never again think of beings as separate. All are part of the oneness of the Absolute. This is the essence of selflessness. The Gita will return to this liberating idea again and again.

All beings make up one part of the totality of manifestation, which is called the atman or the Self. It is a simple extrapolation to see everything as intrinsic to the Absolute, what sky-blue Krishna endearingly calls “Me” throughout. We must always remember to avoid the religious trap of thinking of a personlike being as the Absolute, and keep in mind that it is the Absolute that is appearing as a person for the time being. We are not worshipping a blue guy with a flute here, we are turning to the essence of all manifestation, which includes the blue guy.

The coloration or slant one gives to what is encountered has an important impact. We are in effect not seeing reality, but only a projection of our limited ideas onto it. This leads to circular interpretations where we see what we expect, ratifying our own misunderstandings. Over time the cumulative effect is to isolate us within a detached consciousness. The loss of a sense of unity and direct interrelation with the world has a devastating impact on the psyche.

Reconnecting with the Absolute restores the awareness of unity and breaks us free of the vicious circle of delusion to which our mind is prone. This is the total cure which trumps all partial measures in restoration of our natural harmony.

36) Even if you should happen to be among evil-doers the most evil-doing man, by the very raft of wisdom you will be able to cross over all sin.

This verse, along with the related verse IX, 30, is often quite shocking to most people, who are used to merit-based religious thinking. They ask, What kind of setup absolves terrible people from their sins? It isn't fair! Such thinking is common even within religions that profess absolution from sin.

With a little reflection, though, it is clear that an idea such as this is necessary to an Absolute that is attained, not through accumulated merit, but only via proper understanding. Since everyone is more or less flawed, absolution has to be available to all beings without exception. Evil actions may diminish the possibility of liberating insights, embroiling miscreants in chains of necessity, but they can never eradicate some degree of possibility for redemption. Nothing can block our access to truth permanently, because we are nothing but the Absolute through and through.

True Notebooks, by Mark Saltzman (New York: Vintage Books, 2004), chronicles his year teaching writing to juvenile criminal offenders, some of whom could well be candidates for

“most evil-doing man” status. Their writings reveal sensitive, insightful beings beneath their tough personas, hardened as they are by ugly chains of perverse circumstances coupled with lack of support during their formative years. This verse is trying to get the same idea across: no one is beyond hope if they sincerely want to pull themselves together. And we all require intelligent assistance to succeed.

Almost everyone has moments in their life when they despair, feeling that they are worthless wretches with no hope of redemption. At those times we need precisely the kind of encouragement Krishna is offering to Arjuna, to know that the Absolute accepts all beings equally and utterly. Even us.

If we adopt Krishna’s viewpoint, we will also extend potential forgiveness to everyone, no matter how venal. Our lives can become a helping hand to all, instead of a roadblock that adds to peoples’ misery by heaping on the punishments while taking away their opportunities for improvement. Sad to say, in many countries this drastically negative approach is the norm.

Thus ignorance, the cause of disasters great and small, should never be considered a permanent condition. Though temporary, it can be terrible and profound, and we all have heard of some of the horrific things humans do, so I’m not going to list them. It is almost inconceivable the depths of depravity we may fall into. But history has taught us that under pressure even very “normal” people are prone to the worst behavior. So our self-righteousness is misplaced, and an important spiritual step is to own that we can be wrong and even awful, something the ego is loath to admit. We may not even be aware when we are acting badly, because our minds are very clever to justify whatever we decide to do.

As a matter of fact, pretending that we are among the chosen people while others are sinners opens the door to a wide spectrum of injustice all by itself. Instead, we should realize that all humans share a common condition with differing degrees of seriousness, variously called ignorance, or sin, or stupidity, or meanness. The

antidote to all of it, according to the Gita, is wisdom. No magic wand or divine intervention is required.

I offer a meditation to throw some additional light on this mystery. Imagine you are gazing into a beautiful pond in a remote mountain wilderness. Fierce winds are agitating the surface so much that no reflection at all is visible. As you sit the winds begin to die down. At first vague shapes appear, fuzzy and distorted, but they become clearer as the winds abate. When the wind is reduced to gentle puffs you can begin to see a breathtaking scene reflected in the water. Despite the ripples, you can make out the general picture of snow-capped mountains, meadows and trees. Just at the moment the pond becomes perfectly still, the image leaps into crystal clear focus, and all the details can be discerned. However, it's still upside down because it is just a reflection, albeit a very fascinating one.

All humans without exception are enchanted by such a lake, because their consciousness is a reflecting pool for the world, shifting from clear to cloudy to completely obscured and back again, depending on the winds.

At any time the true scene could be admired by merely raising our gaze above the pond and looking directly at it. The degree of agitation of the surface of the lake does not impede our looking in any way; in fact, in some respects we are more inclined to look up when there is no reflection than when there is an enchantingly clear one. But for some reason we have come to believe that only the reflection is real, and so it's the only legitimate place for us to direct our attention.

The opaque surface represents the state of *tamas*, sometimes associated with evil, the agitated image represents *rajas*, active and distorted, and the clear reflection is *sattva*, the most true to life. Many religious people become so infatuated with being good, with clarifying their pond by remaining as still as possible, that they seldom raise their eyes to the breathtaking vista before them, but narcissistically admire their own beautiful reflection as the epitome

of holiness. In any case this is a universal condition: the way we humans, from the best of us to the worst of us, are constructed.

The mysterious impetus to turn away and lift our eyes to liberation, to “seek the Havens,” cannot be predicted. It comes uniquely to each person, by an act of grace or luck. Until then, even liberation is only an image. Therefore “holier than thou” attitudes are unjustified, if not downright damaging. They are stumbling blocks on the way to universal wisdom.

37) Just as fire when kindled reduces to ashes the fuel, likewise the fire of wisdom reduces all works to ashes.

Another shocking concept follows close on the heels of the previous. But this one only *sounds* shocking. It doesn't mean that all our best efforts become meaningless if we understand them from an enlightened perspective. The idea is that by closely examining actions—practicing the wisdom sacrifice—they are deprived of their ability to bind us. We see that we are not in fact the agent of action, and we see that we are not bound to act according to a rigid program. Thus the monumental force of necessary action is dissipated, to be replaced by fluidity and flexibility. Potential energy is converted to kinetic energy. This is likened in the Upanishads to the heat bound up in a log of wood being released as it oxidizes in fire.

We have a saying in America that someone is making a mountain out of a molehill, meaning that a person's emotional reaction to mundane events causes them to seem like huge affronts. Wisdom accomplishes the reverse of this by reducing a large pile of debris to a handful of ash. By taking a dispassionate view of the situation you immediately subtract the emotional coloration that is magnifying it. Once it is manageably sized, it is fairly easy to see it for what it is. Grasping the situation without exaggeration allows it to be categorized with many other incidents you have already experienced, and also to recall advice about them you have gotten in the past. Now the problem is much more life sized. Wisdom can

further reduce it by showing you the other side of the coin, which will make sense to you also. This is as far as you need to go in most cases, and isn't really all that difficult. More reduction is possible, however.

From a transcendental perspective, action is like the water or carbon cycles of the Earth. Water evaporates out of the ocean, drifts as clouds, falls as rain, and returns to the ocean as rivers. Carbon is split from organic matter by fire, permeates the atmosphere, and is reabsorbed by plants, and by animals via the plants. The plants and animals die, and their carbon is sucked up by trees to produce burnable wood. All that activity to get back to where you started! A philosopher can examine action in the same manner, and strip it down to its essence. This doesn't mean you don't have to do anything; that would be an unwarranted conclusion. It just means that action is a zero sum game. In playing the game we go from nothing to something and back to nothing, over and over again.

Children can sometimes be philosophers too. A girl we know was being coaxed by her parents to climb a mountain with them. She refused, protesting, "You're going to go all the way up to the top, look around, and then come back to this very spot. I'm here already!"

Life would be static if we didn't act, obviously, but it can be a lot more fun when the heavy, extraneous factors are removed. The girl's laziness, though perhaps cute in a child, is not the same as wisdom. We learn new things and see wonderful sights as we climb the mountain and make our way back to camp, but it's more pleasant if we travel light.

38) There is nothing indeed here so purificatory as wisdom, which same the man of perfection through unitive discipline discovers in himself in due course.

The claim here is that attunement with the Absolute naturally stimulates intelligent thinking. We don't have to force the issue in

any sense. As we become fascinated with the universe and its counterpart the mind, delighting in exploring its highways and byways, we will almost effortlessly grow in understanding. We may even become wise.

The process of close examination, of contemplating events from a calm perspective, is by far the best way to purify the psyche. Mechanical repetitive actions and rituals, prayers and supplication, even meditation techniques, are inferior to it. They may eventually provide something of value, but contemplation has an immediate and intelligent impact on every aspect of life. The Gita is unequivocal in its recommendation.

Many fairytales begin with a simpleton or a fool setting out to seek his fortune. When I first studied with my guru, Nitya, I had no idea why he was teaching such stringent, seemingly highly academic, kinds of classes. I conceived of realization as a groovy state of untroubled pleasantness, devoid of intellectual content, like a good drug high. I asked him what was the point of studying how the mind worked, and all this academic theorizing. He was probably fuming inwardly at my youthful insolence, but as always he kept a calm demeanor. "Some of us find it suitable, some don't," was all he would say. "It keeps life from becoming boring." Later, he threw me out of his very challenging class on Nataraja Guru's *An Integrated Science of the Absolute*, upbraiding me as an ignoramus, almost before I had begun to grapple with it. It was a highly educational shock to my ego, a stinging blow to someone with an impressive academic record in my past that I must have been unwittingly proud of. Along with some other encounters with the guru, it caused me to seriously doubt everything I had once been sure of about myself.

Through a turbulent discipleship I remained fascinated by something intriguing about the man, and his words continued to make eminent sense to me. Oddly enough, over the course of my life I have come to seem like something of an intellectual to my peers, because, like my guru, I now delight in decoding rather than dismissing life's enigmas. Most of the people I meet are like I was

in the beginning: more interested in ignoring problems than resolving them, not realizing that turning your back doesn't make them go away. They have to be addressed before they can be dispensed with properly.

The point of my story is to elucidate the "in due course" phrase in the verse. I started my quest as a simpleton, but in due course I learned a few things. I may still be a dummy, but not quite as spectacular a one as before. Thus there is hope for anyone and everyone: if a classic fool can begin to learn, the door must be open to all comers. And that's the claim of verse 36 too, isn't it? Even the worst of us can get it together, if we put our minds to it.

As an amusing aside, I found out almost 40 years later, from a disciple of Nataraja Guru, that he used *An Integrated Science of the Absolute* to terrorize new students, to separate the serious ones from the loafers. It's about as daunting a work as was ever written, so prospective disciples would either run away or get down to the business of their philosophical education. Until then I had had no idea that Nitya was merely employing the same radical technique on a few of his unsuspecting followers, including me.

39) A man of faith comes to wisdom being intent on That, with the senses subjugated. On obtaining wisdom he reaches without delay (the state of) supreme peace.

In the West we tend to think of a "man of faith" as a "man (or woman) of the cloth." The Gita's meaning is quite different, and does not depend on any outer trappings in the slightest. Sraddha or faith refers to a focus directed wholeheartedly to the Absolute, as it is essentially defined in the first phrase. When one is intent on That, the Absolute, one flowers into wisdom. It sounds simple, but the subject of faith is complex enough to have a chapter all its own, number XVII.

Faith is minimized in the Gita, but it is not wholly discarded. Much of traditional faith is embarrassing to modern humans, because we don't realize we've replaced the older fairy tales with

newer, and in some cases vastly inferior, ones. Ours may be more scientific, but they remain almost exclusively metaphors and analogies, like the gods of old. When we mistake our beliefs for reality, we hold on to them harder than we need to, and that's when we gradually drift into the past and become absurd. Because of this, unexamined beliefs are to be ruled out in contemplative life. And we must be aware that consciously clinging to an idea is not the same as examining it, though the mistake is routinely made.

That being said, some articles of faith can make life both more pleasant and more productive, as well as peaceful in the transcendental sense. The faith that things will work out and they are important averts the malaise of anxiety and hopelessness that is a major impediment for many people. Most critically in spiritual life, we have to have faith that our efforts will change us for the better, or why would we bother? This is the type of faith referred to here: a seeker seeks because they are assured that it will bring them wisdom and understanding, and they really can't feel truly peaceful until they have met the Absolute face to face.

The case for subjugating the senses, and in what sense, has been made at length in the present chapter. Suffice to say that all distractions are to be set aside to permit unhindered contemplation of the spiritual side of life. The assertion is made here (as if it were necessary) that the wisdom of merger with the Absolute produces "without delay" a peace that "passeth all understanding" (Phil. 4.7). There is no time lapse involved, because wisdom and peace are two aspects of the same state.

Supreme peace is the most exalted state in the Bhagavad Gita, and is undoubtedly worthy of some explication. *Param*, supreme, means beyond or transcendental, among many other shades of meaning. Thus supreme peace essentially stands for the state of blissful union with the Absolute, and is not dependent on any rearrangement of actual conditions. Supreme peace is like an ocean into which all the rivulets of doubt and currents of uncertainty release their agitation and become calm. The implications of this are many, and may be left for each seeker to

discover on their own. Rest assured that spiritual peace is a dynamic state that does not resemble death or ignorance in the slightest. It does not have to annul agitation in others to remain what it is; rather, it radiates a tonic calmness to everyone around.

In a unitive mentality cause and effect are brought together. That's why the verse admits no delay between attaining wisdom and becoming peaceful. One is not produced by the other; they are essentially the same thing.

40) The man who is unwise and without faith, with the Self held in (the conflict of) doubt, is destroyed; neither is there this world, nor the world beyond, nor can there be any happiness for a man (caught) in doubt.

Verse 40 poses the opposite case to the previous verse, where faith produced the wisdom to participate in the highest of human achievements. Here both faith, in the form of seeking attunement with the Absolute, and wisdom, in the form of finding it, are lacking, and the result is doubt: uncertainty about the direction you should be going in. The bottom line is that certitude in respect to the core of life produces happiness, while doubt, being an indicator of separation from the core or Self, exemplifies unhappiness.

Nowadays, regarding wisdom and faith, we are likely to think, "Who needs it? What's the point?" Because the old myths no longer speak to us, we have become pure skeptics, with no solid basis on which to stabilize our beliefs. We have few models of intelligent and grounded humans in our unmoored "marketplace of ideas." We idolize those clamoring for and being granted media attention, who, although talented enough, are pretty much all showmen and hucksters. Charlatans. Listening to them, even the purportedly religious ones, we have come to accept that we humans are alone in the world, soulless, mere rational husks running on an endless treadmill of necessity, with an occasional vacation thrown in if we are lucky. We have surrendered our sovereignty to invisible forces, either social or imaginary. Wisdom

is an abstraction from long ago and far away that doesn't touch our lives at all. This is actually a stupendous tragedy, one that most definitely destroys lives. Our true nature rebels at such a barren scenario, but we are bewildered regarding what to do about it.

If we are cut off from the inner nourishment provided by the totality of our being, we are forced to look to the outside world for our spiritual sustenance. The momentary pleasures that are available there are fleeting as well as debilitating. We can easily be caught in a vicious cycle of chasing after mirages and trying to impart meaning to them. So if we are going to be skeptics, we should nonetheless be looking hard for any kernel of truth hiding within the hullabaloo.

The subject of doubt is a primary thread throughout the Gita, with the end of this chapter bringing it to center stage. It is doubt that propels Arjuna into his spiritual search, but this is the first time it is directly addressed by Krishna. In a downward spiral, our apparent separation from the Absolute is brought about by doubt, and the doubt is aggravated by our gnawing sense of separation. Transcending this separateness to return to union with the Absolute is in a sense the overcoming of doubt. Thus it is a central issue in spiritual life.

Knowing when to doubt and when to believe is the crux of the matter. Very often we doubt what we should believe and believe what we definitely should doubt. Sri Aurobindo puts his finger on the essentials of skepticism to clarify the difference:

In the lower knowledge doubt and scepticism have their temporary uses; in the higher they are stumbling blocks: for there the whole secret is not the balancing of truth and error, but a constantly progressing realisation of revealed truth. In intellectual knowledge there is always a mixture of falsehood or incompleteness which has to be got rid of by subjecting the truth itself to sceptical inquiry; but in the higher knowledge falsehood cannot enter and that which intellect contributes by attaching itself to this or that opinion, cannot be got rid of by

mere questioning, but will fall away of itself by persistence in realisation. (Essays on the Gita, p. 183)

The Gita describes doubters as being not only unhappy but destroyed. The malaise is rectifiable only if we have not just the desire to correct it, but the courage to reject inadequate, sugarcoated solutions. Once the ego becomes addicted to misery and the rejection of happiness on the one hand, or the glib assurances of panacea peddlers on the other, it becomes a very difficult matter for it to pull itself out of the mire. Sometimes faith has to start simply as the unproven hypothesis that life is worth living, and it may require hitting rock bottom before the negentropic life-urge can rebound to the ascent, to affirm that life must indeed be worthwhile.

Humans have to combat our strong tendency to feel less anxious in restrictive, well-defined roles. We feel relief when we fall into a routine that allows us to drop our guard, but the routine itself is not necessarily the truth we seek. Yet most people are content simply to stop feeling bad, and spend their lives trying to block out painful feelings. Our higher potentials as a species are rarely explored, because we are always going the opposite direction, seeking surcease of sorrow rather than true nourishment.

Because our world contains any number of people who are ready and willing to exploit us, we must exercise great care in remanding ourself to someone's care, whether guru or therapist. But once the choice is made, there has to be a wholehearted enthusiasm for the process; otherwise the ego uses doubt as an insulating device to safeguard its stagnant self-identity.

The world is filled with people who have committed themselves to disastrous belief systems, but because of a twisted notion of faith or belief they are unable to break away even when disaster looms. The Gita by no means endorses such a tragedy. Knowing when to commit and when to release in spiritual affairs is one of the many fine lines the disciple has to walk, and one that makes a successful training program an all-too-rare event.

41) One of unitively renounced action, who by wisdom has sundered doubt and come to full self-possession, cannot be bound by works.

“Unitively renounced action” sums up the complicated teaching of the third and fourth chapters. Krishna has done his best to explain how the focal point of the Absolute can be used to unify action, conferring expertise in place of chronic hesitation and delayed reactions. This is the essence of yoga. The remainder of the Gita will show us the sublime heights yoga can take us to if we avail ourselves of it.

The “bondage of works” does not refer to the pressure of necessity, which the Gita recommends we comply with anyway. It means the way actions slow us down, the way we ponder and doubt and agonize over how to proceed. When we are in a yogic state of mind, action is exciting and full of spontaneity. We aren’t wondering what to do and how to do it; we know, and are eagerly carrying out our programs. Life has become the artistic masterpiece we are continuously engaged in bringing into existence.

Driven perhaps by a desire to simplify the Gita’s complexity, several commentators consider selfless service as the Gita’s “way” to realize the Absolute. This is a far more limited concept than unitively renounced action. Service is indeed briefly mentioned in verse 34 above, but it is primarily a Buddhist idea (not that that’s bad in itself): since the self or ego does not exist, just ignore it and it will go away. Selfless service in that sense means downplaying your ego and focusing on the needs of those who still think they have a self, primarily to convince them they don’t have one either. The difference between Vedanta and Buddhism is just here. The former accepts a divine, or at least miraculous, Self, and the latter insists there is no Self. Otherwise they have quite a lot in common. Luckily, realization is realization, no matter what beliefs are adhered to or the unique ways it is described.

As to selfless service as a technique, there are those less ethical than dedicated Buddhists who benefit greatly from manipulating the good intentions of others, and the minute you become “selfless” you are at their mercy. One glaring example is military service, denying your self-interest to serve your nation. People voluntarily surrender their autonomy for the greater good of their country, only to find that their steps are being directed by bellicose pragmatists, sociopaths, or various perverts, right up to religious zealots and paranoid psychopaths. They are trapped and unfree, even unto death. And yes, such patriotism has become synonymous with spiritual service for some religions, particularly of late, but all through history. Even the Gita was enlisted in the call for selfless service to the Indian Nationalist movement of the early twentieth century. This is a sordid and inexcusable perversion of a superb ideal.

The traditional protection from the abuse of selflessness is for the seeker to offer it only to a carefully selected teacher. This is certainly commendable, but in practice it can be difficult to tell a wise seer from a wiseacre. The tendency is to sign on with the most popular or best appearing candidate. Once you have abandoned your reasonable doubts, the ego will supply endless rationalizations to excuse the transgressions of the one you’ve chosen. The meltdowns of numerous cults and the mental breakdowns of soldiers who have finally seen through their illusions provide ample testimony to the danger in this.

Offering your selfless self to an invisible, intangible principle is also fraught with peril, since the imagination can be particularly active in projecting wishful thinking when there is no one around to expose its underhanded machinations. The yogi must be careful not to hang any unwarranted projections onto the perfect neutrality of the Absolute.

“I am doing selfless service” is a barefaced contradiction. On the other hand, thinking only of yourself is clearly not a spiritual state. If spirituality means anything, it is expanding your ego boundary to become more inclusive. Since everything “out there”

is also the Absolute, why not? It's just that your self has to be included in the service. It is service to everyone, including you.

The Gita recommends striking a balance in this, as in all things. It is helpful to have a teacher, and helpful to be awake to your own needs and talents and develop them rather than discarding them. Oversimplifying the complex issues of being sentient and mouthing clichés about them can only lead to further problems.

42) 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.

Krishna concludes the chapter with a call to greatness. He does this with a martial image that reminds us of the battlefield context in which the instruction is taking place. There is a certain heroic quality in those with enough intensity of purpose to overcome their habitual dualism by fixing their attention in unity.

The directives to stand firm and stand up underscore this epic element. Dualism can seep back into consciousness without our realizing it, since it not only permeates the culture we live in, it's the brain's normal mode of operation. It's very "seductive" in that sense. It must be watched for and firmly rooted out whenever it is detected. Moreover, we have to be brave enough to live the truth we perceive in the face of a society that likely will despise any hint of it. Freedom is the most subversive force on the planet in respect to social conventions, because at the back of their minds everyone craves it. When hostile or alluring forces pen us in and demand we abandon our good sense, we must stand up like the Statue of Liberty, holding high our flaming torch of love and compassion.

One of the more intriguing paradoxes in spiritual life is that we serve others in part by standing up for ourselves. If we merely accede to the demands of our fellows, we give them carte blanche to indulge their egos, selling ourselves short and opening ourselves to abuse in the bargain. On the other hand, when we are confident

of our legitimate place in the cosmos we can help normalize the other's relationship to us, while tending to our needs so no one else has to. Therefore standing up for ourselves as strong individuals cultivates win-win situations, while self-abnegation produces double loss.

The doubts of the mind are often valuable and should be heeded. Zealots and demagogues never entertain doubts, and the way they stand firm is the opposite of spiritual. Here we are being asked to take on the doubt lurking in the heart, which is another matter entirely. This is self-doubt, which undercuts our confidence and prevents us from standing up for what we have carefully determined to be right. It can be viewed as the awareness of our separation from the Absolute, from the truth of our core.

Doubt is inevitably dualistic: should I choose this or that option? Certitude is unitive. You know what to do and when to do it. Not what you have been *told* to do, but the best you can visualize for yourself. An improvising musician doesn't wonder which note to hit next, they know, and they get it just right. Otherwise the music doesn't sound seamless. A dancer doesn't have to think where to put her foot down, her body knows. Unitive activity is like soaring, while dualistic actions range between stumbling and strolling.

In keeping with the "sword of Self-knowledge" analogy, most commentators choose "sundering" for *chittva*, because it is appropriate to sword work. In the fifteenth chapter, Arjuna will be similarly instructed to sunder any remaining entanglements he has with the sacred traditions of his society. Chittva also means—more in keeping with the Gita's call to nonviolence, though still severe: "destroy, annihilate, efface," (MW). When one dispatches duality in favor of unity, it must be evanesced, like dew in the morning sun, not hacked away at, lest the very process enhance the dualism. To think, "I am rejecting this and moving to that," is pure dualism, and does not accomplish its aim anyway, because it represses important issues that will resurface later on. It's even worse to think of overcoming doubt as a pitched battle, since ferocious anti-

doubt can generate more ignorant behavior than uncertainty ever could. Unitive knowledge knits everything together rather than splitting it apart. All it does is remove the appearance of reality from that which has no basis in fact. It has no need to smash what is nonexistent to begin with.

Merely “standing up” to the situation is not usually enough. We also have to stand firm in a unitive vision, because hostile events continually try to knock us off our ground, and we may have to reclaim it over and over. Only rarely is a serious problem resolved quickly and completely, so there is real danger of becoming embroiled in other people’s confusion, if not our own. There has to be a way to step out of direct conflict and into philosophical detachment and enlightenment. Arjuna has much to learn yet in that arena, but he has attained enough wisdom now for Krishna to begin to teach it to him in the next few chapters.