

## CHAPTER VI: Dhyana Yoga

### Unitive Contemplation

Despite forming the background of much of the practice of yoga, meditation as such is little mentioned in the Gita, mainly in the title here and in three verses: XII, 12; XIII, 24; and XVIII, 52. It makes a negative appearance in II, 62, as meditating on objects of sense interest. It is of passing interest that the word Zen is descended from the Sanskrit word for meditation, *dhyanam*, and the intense burst of focus characteristic of that discipline is implied in the original as well. As Nataraja Guru puts it, “Yoga is a streak of lightning inside you.”

Meditation itself means different things to different people. The subject can perhaps be generalized as whatever mental activity is directed toward ideal, or vertical, aspects of life, as opposed to that directed toward horizontal needs and transactions. As such it is a subtle form of action, and is treated that way in the Gita. Contemplation is an essential part of meditation, and its outline is sketched in the middle of this chapter. Guru Nitya clearly delineates meditation and contemplation in page 368 of his commentary on Narayana Guru’s *Darsanamala*:

In our own times, meditation and contemplation are used as synonyms: both the terms have lost their precise connotation and have become vague in meaning. So it has become necessary to revalue and restate the terms ‘meditation’ and ‘contemplation’. Sequentially, meditation comes as a prelude to contemplation. The way to know something, as Henri Bergson puts it, is not by going around it, but by first entering into it and then being it. Meditation is an active process of applying one’s mind to make a total ‘imploration’ of the depth of whatever is to be known. The state of actually being it is what is achieved by contemplation. It is a passive but steady state.

Thus, while meditation is taken for granted and not specifically designated in the Gita, nearly every verse is a perfect gem for the meditative process of initial exploration and subsequent imploration. Many verses present more than one pithy idea, any one of which would bear looking into more deeply, following the train of thought it inspires to uncover its more subtle implications. The Gita is like a garden's worth of seeds. Scanning the contents is moderately amusing, but planting some of them and encouraging them to grow into a mature ensemble is truly spectacular.

The term *atman*, the Self, is a major component of Chapter VI. It refers simultaneously to the individual and the totality of consciousness that might be called something like God. In the ultimate analysis of Vedanta there is no difference between the individual soul and God. Yet for practical purposes they may be distinguished. In English we differentiate the two poles of atman with a small 's' for the individual and a capital 'S' for the collective, but Sanskrit does not have that ability. In the sense of this chapter on meditation, our practice is to reunite the self with the Self in mystical conjunction, in the process discovering that there is no such thing as otherness.

1) Krishna said:

Without depending on the results of action, he who does necessary action is a renouncer and also a contemplative, not he who has (merely) given up the sacrificial fire, or who (merely) abstains from ritualist (or other) action.

The chapter begins by recapitulating the gist of what has been previously taught, that both thoroughgoing abstinence and simply avoiding opportunities for beneficial action are contrary to contemplation, rather than being prerequisites for it, as is often thought. The golden mean of yoga is achieved by the one who takes care of the requirements of life as they arise, but who is not

pulled off center either by useless reactions or by expectations of specific future attainments.

Krishna's reference to "giving up the sacrificial fire," has an archaic tone, but the idea behind it is still relevant to the modern sensibility. When the Gita was composed, repudiation of Vedic ritualism and the overthrow of caste distinctions were in full flood. Priest-led ceremonies centering around the fire sacrifice were being abandoned by the new radicals because they had become tools of oppression of the middle and lower classes. Although he is supportive of such steps, Krishna is cautioning that it is not enough to simply discard the old forms. Truly unconditioned action can not be based solely on rejection of externalities. Vacating the status quo may remove some of the fetters, but it still remains for the radical contemplative to dive deep or soar high.

In our day repudiation of consensus reality is still a popular attitude, in part because it gives the appearance of being a well-defined position. Yet rejecting falsehood is barely half the battle, and the easy half at that. There also has to be a movement toward a meaningful realignment to give the psyche substance, and combining both currents in a single stream is a supreme challenge.

"Giving up the sacrificial fire," in modern terms could also be taken to mean "dousing the spark of personal initiative." We are confronted throughout our lives by staunch resistance to our individuality, and most of us eventually capitulate, abandoning our preferences for someone else's. When an intrepid individual learns to "behave" acceptably, they repress their personal aspirations in favor of doing what they're told. This is often represented as spiritual, or certainly religious, and in some respects it brings a great feeling of satisfaction. You are no longer bucking the headwinds of conformity, you are being swept along by them. You can let down your guard, and just merge into the madding crowd. Until we get used to the responsibilities of freedom, they are stressful, breeding doubt and anxiety, and a well-worn track is much easier to follow. But for those with a passion to live an excellent life, it is easy to see that group conformity tends to be

destructive, focusing on short-term gains at the expense of sustainable independence. We need to build our own sacrificial fire of passion for living a life in tune with the tremendous abilities inherent in our very being, while not distorting them with willful desires based on absurdities, as addressed in the next verse.

2) That which people call renunciation—know that to be yoga, O Arjuna; one who has not given up his willful desires for particularized ends never indeed becomes a yogi.

Yoga in essence is the union of the individual with the universal. One way to bring this about is for the individual to relinquish the sense of agency in action. All the “elusively subtle” instruction of the past three and a half chapters is meant to guide the seeker to thoroughly yet safely abandon the particularizing beliefs “I am the doer, “I am the knower,” and “I am the enjoyer.” When this happens in the correct way, the universal impetus is conjoined with the individual person, bringing a flood of bliss and a harmonized direction to life.

There is a subtle distinction to note between “giving up sacrificial fire” and renunciation. We contain a level of personal greed and a level of universal beneficence, and we must not mistake one for the other. It is essential to exorcise selfishness from our self-interest. Thus yogis mentally attune with the entire range of any subject. Instead of limiting themselves to a particular preference, they open up to the subject as a whole. They are satisfied with the “chance gains” (IV, 22) that come to them, and avoid the directed actions that so often throw their world off kilter. Viewing the world as a series of continuums allows them to embrace the absolute totality and find peace. When limiting expectations are relinquished, wonderful and unexpected things start to happen.

Krishna is not insisting on any particular direction here, merely pointing out that if you want to pursue partial goals such as wealth, power, and fame and so on, you are automatically outside

the sphere of yoga. Yoga means combining prevailing conditions with their opposites in order to find the median neutral value, and then adhering to that. For instance, power viewed neutrally reveals the stress and soul-killing demands of wielding it, along with its negative impact on other people and the environment. The opposite pole, powerlessness, permits people to be manipulated by other people and circumstances, thereby forfeiting their independence. A yogi should artfully occupy the arena in between these two untenable positions, allowing for the fullest possible freedom combined with the gentlest impact on the surroundings. Such neutrality is actually more powerful than either extreme.

In the wisdom context, there are many who are drawn to religion and mysticism as sources of pleasures and wealth that are even more compelling than the ordinary versions. They desire “powers and abilities far beyond those of mortal man.” (This is a line from the old 1950s TV series, *Superman*.) If anything, these siddhis (psychic powers) are more imaginary and misleading than the regular versions. As an example, levitation is an ever-popular draw. Lots of folks spend big chunks of time trying to attain the knack, thinking they’ll be able to do something no one else can, and so be loved and admired far and wide. But even floating up in the air would get boring after awhile. Astronauts do it as part of their job. It makes them throw up a lot. Then after you get used to it, it’s undoubtedly kind of fun but it doesn’t produce any enlightening insights of its own accord. Leaving earth does seem to inspire a few people to appreciate how rare and wonderful life is, and dedicate themselves to waking up, but the floating around isn’t really the inspiring part. You can get a taste of levitation even on carnival rides, and no one gets enlightened on those! Krishna doesn’t doubt that you will get some version of what you wish for, but reminds us that any and all such directed desires place you outside the domain of yoga. Yoga accesses spiritual insights directly, not as a byproduct of physical or mental gyrations.

Krishna will examine the full spectrum of action in this chapter and sum it up at the end by recommending that Arjuna

become a yogi. Here he starts out by separating those who are legitimate aspirants for wisdom from those who are merely siddhi wannabees. Nataraja Guru makes an excellent point about this:

Without some form of relinquishment there is no true yogi. *Sankalpa* (will involving personal intentions for particular desired effects) must be shunned both by the sannyasin and the yogi. The usual yogi tends to retain too many desires as natural or necessary and the usual sannyasin tends to live in a vacuum without any of the natural outlets for his energies. The *via media* between the two is again upheld in this verse.

3) The yoga of a man of self-control who is still an aspirant, is said to have action as its motive principle; for the same person, when he has ascended to the unitive state, tranquility is said to be its motive principle.

Unitive understanding does not require any program or learning curve in order to bring it about. It always *is*. Any transformation we go through is merely coming to realize this fact.

In the early going, a curious paradox baffles all aspirants to unitive wisdom: you aren't supposed to have any goal in mind, yet if you don't have any particularized desires, any direction, you won't get anywhere. Words and thoughts have to be used to transcend words and thoughts. As with an inoculation, a measure of the disease must be used to effect the cure. There is a provisional or interim state where ordinary attitudes are bent to extraordinary aims. Such a paradox has been illustrated in traditional cultures as using a thorn to remove a thorn lodged in the foot. After you have removed the thorn with the thorn you throw them both away. The state of tranquility referred to in this verse is like not having any thorns embedded anywhere.

Beginners always want to know What Am I Supposed To Do? There is nothing particularly to be done, but if the guru doesn't give them something to do they will go find someone who

will, someone peddling a special technique to achieve levitation or the precipitation of a new car or something equally tantalizing. The paradox is that only if they are already fairly enlightened will they be able to accept the state of neutral tranquility and be content. The typical seeker is motivated by discontent, just as Arjuna was at the opening of the Gita. Krishna's challenge is to interest Arjuna (and the rest of us) in wisdom pure and simple, unadorned with lurid attractions. Most of us don't realize how valuable that is. Jesus put the same idea this way: "Except ye see signs and wonders, ye will not believe." (John, 1.48)

As to signs and wonders, my own guru ran the Institute for Psychic and Spiritual Research in New Delhi for a few years in the mid-1960s. A very few—but some—of the yogis they tested were able to perform feats outside of normal parameters. And really, only a little way outside. As far as siddhis (powers) go, a lot is being made of what are essentially fantasies. Yoga is a technique for harmonizing and centering the mind, to achieve happiness and wisdom. It is curious that materialistic adjuncts are treated as being of more value than happiness itself. Even Paramahansa Yogananda, who turned many of us on to the Bible quote above, and who extolled a beautiful and loving philosophy of life, sprinkled his autobiography with all sorts of putative signs and wonders of dubious veracity. As a teenager I was almost sexually aroused by those stories. But Jesus made his comment as a criticism, not as a recommendation.

What most of us miss every minute of our lives is the miracle of life itself. While longing for an unusual talent to make others admire us, we ignore the wonders and signs of everything taking place in our vicinity. Existence is the greatest miracle of all. Our wisdom journey is to arrive right here, in our heart center, where our relationship with what exists is direct and unclouded. Almost the first thing Krishna taught Arjuna was to stop fantasizing about what might have been and start digging into what actually exists: "What is unreal cannot have being, and non-being cannot be real; the conclusion in regard to both these has been known to

philosophers.” (II, 16). Consciousness expanding into the realms of the unconscious is the real story of spiritual growth within creation. We are not yet so far advanced above worms that we should rest on our laurels!

Whatever could anyone want more than this magnificent universe, with a lease of life and a consciousness to take it all in? We reveal our own ignorance when we trample the pearls of transcendent beauty into the mud of our truncated visions.

No matter how many of our fellow fools subscribe to certain beliefs, there are no guarantees. Breaking our brains trying to make the unreal real is a waste of time. Instead we should use our wits to appreciate every moment of our life in this particular universe, to vivify everything, to begin to express our full potential, and in the process share our love with all the other sparks of the Absolute that fill the air around us.

4) When, however, one finds attachment neither in the objects of the senses nor in actions—such a man, who has renounced all willful desires for particularized ends, is said to be one who has ascended to yoga.

The last of the four verses reviewing the essentials resolves the duality of motion versus tranquility of the previous verse, to arrive at the yogic state. It echoes verse IV, 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.” The substitution of tranquility for inaction here is particularly fitting, as it evades the paradoxical intentionality of trying to remain inactive. Synthesizing these seemingly absolutely contradictory principles is an incomparable achievement that this chapter aims to make progress on. Dhyana, contemplation, is grounded in a unitive attitude that will be increasingly carefully delineated as we proceed.



The Isa Upanishad addresses the same mystery of dialectical synthesis from the slightly different angle of knowledge and non-knowledge. Verses 9 and 11 read:

Those who worship ignorance enter into blinding darkness. Those who are delighted in knowledge itself, they enter into still greater darkness, as it were.

He who knows these both—knowledge and ignorance—together, such a person, having overcome death with ignorance, enjoys immortality with knowledge.

Aspirants for wisdom who are attached to the senses and their consequent actions and reactions are referred to as ignorant. Yoga is not about coming up with neat explanations, but leaping beyond ordinary understanding, and the Gita is very clear that this is not the result of either cumulative accomplishments or mere negation. But it is often the case that religious zealots suppress their senses and severely channel their activity, and then imagine that they have achieved a spiritual state. Their self-satisfaction with what they believe prevents them from seeing beyond their own narrow and repressed condition, making it extremely unlikely that they will break out of it. This is why knowledge entails greater darkness than ignorance: an ignorant person may still be open to improving their awareness. Once you believe you know it all, your mind becomes closed to any input that doesn't square with your beliefs.

There are fundamentalists of materialism equal to the fundamentalists of religion, who throw the baby of unknown possibilities out with the bathwater of superstitious nonsense. Notwithstanding that the guru principle of the universe is constantly offering fresh fragrances to appreciate, with new insights routinely producing expanded comprehension, the attitude that you are secure in your conceits erects an iron curtain which excludes much if not all the serendipity that is continuously being

presented to you. This is apparently the normal human condition we hope to rise above in any search for truth.

A key point here is that willful desires have the same impact on the psyche whether they are positive or negative. Intentional restraint is therefore not really different from indulgence. A spiritual path that places morality as its central focus is actually merely glorifying socialization.

Only when the limitations of both these perspectives are well understood can a person sit quietly in a state of peaceful openness conducive to fruitful meditation. Continuing the practice of “borrowing” Nataraja Guru’s best lines:

Ascent in yoga is not so much something culminating in a supreme effort as might be suggested in other books, but in the Gita, which is a *yoga shastra* (a scientific textbook on unitive discipline), it consists rather in neutralizing opposing tendencies, where no effort at all is involved even in its last stages. Intentions, actions and the attractions of sense objects have merely to be discarded for a man to attain the highest in yoga as understood here.

5) By the Self the Self must be upheld; the Self should not be let down; the Self indeed is its own dear relative; the Self indeed is the enemy of the Self.

This section could just as easily have small ‘s’ self throughout, where Nataraja Guru has used capitals. Both versions of self and Self are implied in the term atman, since they are simultaneously the same and different. The former refers to the individual and the latter the collective whole, which is equated with the Absolute. In essence the self is the Absolute. That paradox forms the basis of a rich mine of contemplative speculation. This verse and the next present the paradox in an exemplary way, with the unitive Absolute interacting with itself as if it were made up of

parts. It works equally well if treated as straightforward psychological advice.

Chapter VI has several seemingly “secret” instructions on how to meditate—secret because they are not obvious and require careful examination, not that they are prohibited or reserved for a select few. The Gita’s view of meditation is an open and dynamic one, with only the broadest practices encouraged. Verses 5 and 6 present the first one.

The key instruction here is to visualize everything you encounter as yet another aspect of the Absolute, of your Self. The Buddha is supposed to have said that everyone you meet in this life was in a past life a dear mother, father, brother, sister or child of yours. If you treat everyone and everything with that kind of familial or parental love, the richness of the world opens up to you. The same point is here stated in a more unitive form: “the Self is its own dear relative.” In the spirit of yoga dialectics we are reminded that the Self is also its own worst enemy at times, and not only when we accidentally get ourselves into hot water. If we hate parts of the world we are only hating ourself—or our former father, daughter, son, etc., and that can wither the world and make us sick. It is definitely a case of loss of love or loss of soul.

We could offer many corollaries, though it is a good exercise for each person to independently try to imagine some of them. One we might mention is that how we treat the world is how we will experience the world. Our love and good will (or hate and ill will) don’t just come back to impact us later, it is what we experience now. Clearly, though we may be helpless to effect large-scale events in the world, we have a significant effect on our immediate neighborhood. This can be contemplatively imagined, but it can also be directly experienced in practical matters. Our perception of the world changes dramatically when suspicion, hatred and fear are replaced with loving kindness.

A most practical way to read this verse is in relating to one’s inner voice. All of us have an “on scene narrator” sitting in our minds and providing a running commentary on life and our relation

to it. Very often we have learned to hold a negative slant on our place in the picture, and this voice is the jail keeper that keeps our spirits in check. We go around telling ourselves “no” or criticizing ourselves after we transgress some internalized rule. A blustering few have developed positive defense systems that resemble a blowfish: they puff themselves up so as to seem much bigger than they actually are. This mechanism masks a self-image that is shrunken and frighteningly weak.

Either way, the self is being distorted by the self itself. It has become its own greatest enemy, magnifying the harmful impact of events. Modern psychologists know that we learn to take on the role of self-curtailment as we grow up. We internalize the external training we receive as children. A “normal” person no longer needs a policeman or a pastor to tell them what to do—they have an internalized one in their head, judging and grading everything that happens. This would be fine if the running commentary was accurate and positive, but it is almost invariably seriously flawed. And no matter how good the original template, new circumstances demand new and fresh eyes. Templates are too inflexible to serve us well in the long run. At the very least they should be upgraded regularly.

So what the Gita is recommending here is that when events send you reeling, instead of running yourself down or becoming furious with some bystander, you should support yourself with kind and understanding words from your inner voice. This is a technique that can be easily learned. Watch how you carry on after you are stung by a chance remark or accidental occurrence. When you begin to criticize yourself and magnify what happened, spending lots of time on it and making yourself depressed, switch over instead to a consoling voice, assess the situation clearly, tie it up with a bow and drop it in the nearest garbage can. Then forget about it. If your grievance needs to be redressed, you can now take calmly considered steps to respond appropriately. In this way the self has become your greatest helpmate, like a supporting friend or lover.

However you deal with it, if you can examine the claims of the inner voice dispassionately, you will see they are often false, based on old assumptions that are no longer valid. Let them go. Replace them with something better.

6) The Self is dear to one (possessed) of Self, by whom even the Self by the Self has been won; for one not (possessed) of Self, the Self would be in conflict with the very Self, as if an enemy.

When we know that our true nature is the Absolute itself, ineffable love floods the system, but the loss of this awareness is the source of endless conflict and despair.

Unfortunately, the understanding that the universe is unitive and not dual—in other words that God and man are not somehow separate—is treated with hostility in many religions. Admittedly it is counterintuitive and undermines the authority of those who make their living from interpreting scripture, but these are not adequate reasons to discard truth.

Most religions begin in freedom from vested authority by recognizing this inner unity, but over time become corrupted by those who manage to wheedle their way back into power by denying the connection. The Gita mentions the perennial need to renew the spirit of unity in IV, 8.

In his autobiography, Carl Jung reminds us that “according to the ancient Christian view self-knowledge is the road to knowledge of God.” (*Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, p. 325.) This is especially striking because the current hyper-egocentric version of Christianity claims that focusing on one’s self is diabolical, that one must deny one’s self and cast oneself at the mercy of a grim and pitiless god. Moreover, practices like yoga, far from reaffirming your essential connection with God, allow terrible demons to enter your being, because by stilling the mind you open yourself up to Satan’s ministrations. The only hope is to surrender yourself to a remote God, preferably via his self-anointed moneychangers on earth.

Surprisingly, this view is ever more popularly held in the oddly misnamed Age of Reason. There is a widespread belief that evil is lurking in the invisible realms, just waiting for its chance to steal your soul. This may well be mostly a huckster technique to keep the faithful in line, but there is a more important factor for the seeker to consider. Surrendering yourself to what you imagine to be God—usually as sketchily presented by someone else—is precisely how a person gets led astray to wander in the corridors of confusion and dissociation. You are relating only to an image instead of seeking and finding the actual divine realm within.

By following teachings like the Gita's and holding firm to neutrality, well grounded in your own hard-won certitude, you can easily resist any forces that aim to use you for their own purposes. Most or all of such forces are in plain sight, not hidden, so there's no need to spend time imagining imaginary beasties. From this perspective, the exhortations of Christians or other religious types to avoid the self because it is somehow diabolical are the real attempts to steal your soul. To stop being yourself is the only real loss possible. Once you give up your grounding in good sense you are an easy mark.

A Zen saying echoes the dialectic here: If you wish to see the truth, you must give up holding opinions for or against anything. Zen masters expect you to already know that upon examination virtually all beliefs turn out to be unfounded opinions.

Jung speaks of the fear of the unknown as part of the myth-making side of humans, through which the unconscious is brought into awareness. He counsels a dialectic approach to the upwelling of material from the unconscious: "Cut off the intermediary world of mythic imagination, and the mind falls prey to doctrinaire rigidities. On the other hand, too much traffic with these germs of myth is dangerous for weak and suggestible minds, for they are led to mistake vague intimations for substantial knowledge, and to hypostatize mere phantasms." (MDR, p. 316) Plenty of both sides are out there: we see both the rigidity of those self-described scientists and true believers who wish to shrink reality to "dead"

matter, and the fantastic wishful thinking of those who sense the wasteland of that attitude but are uncertain of what could replace it.

7) To one of conquered Self, who rests in peace, the Supreme is in a state of neutral balance in heat-cold, happiness-suffering, honor-disgrace.

The result of taking Krishna's suggestions in the preceding couple of verses is to allow your natural balance to reassert itself. When you speak kindly to yourself and stop holding onto trivial events like a drowning man clutching at straws, you are not tossed here and there, up and down, by events, and you can become calm and steadfast. This is the attainment that allows you to finally begin your real life, which previously had been obscured by a shadowy existence of reactivity and conditioning. Your dharma will naturally emerge as the junk is swept away.

If by this stage the middle way between extremes hasn't become "a consummation devoutly to be wished," then this commentary has failed utterly. Yet I suppose we should examine each of the pairs given here in turn.

Heat and cold are usually taken literally as physical sensations, but the Gita is seldom so trivial. This is not about attaining room temperature in your mind. A/C specialists are not perforce the yogis of today. Heat-cold is a poetic way of saying like-dislike or attraction-repulsion or even love-hate. When we are ardently fond of something we are "hot" for it, and when we turn our back on it we coldly reject it. Each of these attitudes represents a polarized extreme. A yogi learns to be open to whatever comes along. Everything is loved and admired in its turn, but nothing is clung to or lusted after. Nor is it despised out of hand. Knowing that justice permeates this innately reciprocal universe, everything will arrive at its just desserts without any additional demonstration of personal ratification or opprobrium. Need it be added that the neutral attitude allows for a much greater appreciation of life than being thermally attached to one's own opinion?

It's very likely that we have all known people who are really high one day and really down the next, who are totally caught up in their experience of either happiness or suffering. Nowadays they are thought to have chemical imbalances and are treated with medicines. Unfortunately the even-mindedness achieved by such techniques is all too often the deathlike neutrality of psychic numbness. In any case, such remedies have not been available for the major portion of history, and they should be avoided if at all possible. They may mask symptoms, but they don't cure the problem.

No one but a zombie escapes being battered by the vagaries of existence, and it is not a terrible disease to react strongly to either pain or pleasure. It is normal. But as we grow up we learn to exaggerate our feelings, first as a kind of game and later as an unconscious compulsion. If the seeker of balance refuses to magnify either the ups or the downs of life with misguided enthusiasms or displeasures, equal-mindedness can be gradually achieved. It is another widespread but false belief that the joy of life comes from exaggerating the extremes. Extremes are intense, it cannot be denied, but the Gita and many other philosophies recommend the more sublime and lasting intensity of the contemplative center.

We've already dealt with honor and disgrace extensively in Chapter II. It is a contemplative art form to progress from needing external assurance to having self-respect. Learning to love yourself unconditionally is a necessary prerequisite for wisdom acquisition. Clinging to honor or rejection from outside sources merely postpones the date of reckoning with your own sense of self. Because we want very much to be loved, and strive hard to be lovable, we are easily beguiled by praises. At other times, false accusations resonate with our own degraded sense of self-respect, and we allow ourselves to be brought down by them. In both situations we are drawn out of our grounding in the truth of who we are by external influences.



It is especially artistic to be able to honor yourself when those around you despise you for who or what they think you are. Minorities in every context—racial, sexual, religious and all the rest—have had to struggle to maintain their dignity in the face of persecutions, ranging from mere contempt to outright genocide. There is nothing simple about dealing with disgrace, be it earned or unearned. The least we can do is stop persecuting people for being different than ourselves. Knowing that everyone is doing the best they can with what they've been given, and that they too are filled with the Absolute to the very tips of their fingers, we should ever be prepared to help, not hinder, our fellow humans.

Life is hard enough without exacerbating other people's problems. Overcoming obstacles to a normalized sense of self may be said to be a major theme of the spiritual quest, and the entire Gita is a textbook on the subject. Everyone has some kind of opposition to overcome in their life. The Gita does not compound anyone's existing problems by setting up artificial barriers of the saved and the damned, the "okay" and the "not okay." More on this all-inclusive attitude lies just ahead.

8) That yogi whose Self is satisfied by (synthetic) wisdom and (analytic) knowledge, established in unchanging immobility, who has gained full control over sense-attachments, is said to be unified—one to whom a lump of earth, a stone, and gold are the same.

The eighth verse offers a beautiful paean to equality, no matter how you take those three mineral symbols. They can mean rich, poor and middling; beautiful, ugly and plain; attractive, repulsive and indifferent; or any other threefold discrepancy that ordinary people vaunt their prejudices over. The message is crystal clear: a yogi doesn't play those games. The sameness the yogi is convinced of is that all are equally dear.

Nataraja Guru's parenthetical adjectives denote the difference between knowledge and wisdom. Analysis breaks down

whole systems into their component parts, while synthesis knits them back together. The two go together as the pulse of life: horizontal knowledge and vertical wisdom interweave with one another, symbolized by the cross or the Cartesian coordinates. Further, knowledge relates to the identification of things while wisdom gives them meaning. One without the other is patently absurd, if not tragically delusional.

The unchanging immobility mentioned here does not mean being frozen in one position, afraid to let go, it refers to the neutral balance and the resting in peace of the previous verse. It's just that you don't ride the ups and downs. They happen, but you are unshaken and unstirred. It is in fact the most dynamic state possible, because all the energy stays at home instead of flying off into the Great Beyond. Lao Tzu put it this way:

In the pursuit of learning, every day something is acquired.  
In the pursuit of Tao, every day something is dropped.

Less and less is done  
Until non-action is achieved.  
When nothing is done, nothing is left undone.

The world is ruled by letting things take their course.  
It cannot be ruled by interfering.

(Tao Te Ching, chapter 48, trans. Gia-fu Feng)

The sameness perceived by the meditator here is not exactly the same as the sameness mentioned in V, 18. There the different grades to be unified were akin to the *varnas* or castes. Here, the three solids represent the *gunas*, the modalities of nature, in the order of *tamas*, *rajas* and *sattva*. A lump of earth is as basic or *tamasic* as you can get. It is even possible that the author was thinking of night soil. Stones can be used to build roads, homes

and temples, and construction is rajasic. And of course sattvic gold is ever symbolic of purity and the highest possible value.

The attitude of the wise seer is that the gunas do comprise the world, but the ultimate reality is something even beyond that. Earth, stone and gold all have their uses and gradable values, but wisdom simultaneously includes and transcends them all. We don't lust after gold and reject earth and stones, we honor the rightful place of all of them in the scheme of things.

Recall Krishna's advice in II, 45, a verse with a close kinship to this one: "The Vedas treat of matters related to the three gunas; you should be free from these three modalities, Arjuna, free from (relative) pairs of opposites, established ever in pure being, without alternately striving and resting, (unitively) Self-possessed." The idea is that when we are stabilized in a unitive state of mind we will not be led astray by the relative merits of the gunas, even as we observe their presence in us. This is particularly important to remember when we come to the last two chapters, where a number of categories are analyzed in terms of the gunas. There the Gita is coming back to a very practical focus in its teaching. When we leave our sitting-still meditation and seek applications for what we've learned, as we surely must, discriminating between sattva, rajas and tamas has significant relevance. Here in meditation it does not.

Oddly, in trying to avoid discrimination there is a tendency to treat the gold as if it was a lump of earth, instead of the other way around. It is easier for us to demean things than to exalt them, to raise them higher in our estimation. Democracy as it is all too often practiced aims at the lowest common denominator, where it could just as easily uphold shining ideals of perfectibility. Sadly, it stands to reason that mutual degradation would be our default tendency, after having our spirits bashed into submission by society. We feel it's fair to believe we're all sinners, but it's unfair to be free and easy. This of course is a classic self-fulfilling prophecy.

Nataraja Guru's interpretation of this verse is that it depicts three stages of spiritual evolution. The clod of dirt is unformed,

symbolic of the raw novice. Yet it is a yogic novice, one “who has gathered his thoughts into a certain compact unity,” as the Guru puts it. A rock indicates the stability of the well-founded philosopher, and gold implies the transformation of the alchemists, that is, base material changed into something transcendent. Viewed in this way, the verse would be cautioning us not to pay attention to rating our level of spiritual progress, as is done in many religions and occult associations. Having a fixed idea of where you stand in some hierarchy is definitely dualistic and a limiting factor in following your finest instincts.

9) As between dear well-wishers, friends, enemies, those indifferent, those in-between, haters, relations, and also as between good people and sinners, he who can maintain an equal attitude, excels.

Now here is a place for practice! There is nothing symbolic about this verse. Interactions with everyone around jostle the psyche, pulling us out of our burgeoning equanimity. Personal slurs sting, and drive us to retreat and build walls around our inner self. Compliments likewise can stimulate exaggerated positive feelings. Either way, the neutral balance we are aiming for is disturbed.

Once we are grounded in the oceanic mind, the comments of others can have no significant effect. When this is not yet the case, we can practice yoga by silently counterbalancing the input with a larger perspective. Add the opposite, and the sum is zero, a dynamic neutrality. If you are complimented, recall a situation where you failed to rise to the occasion. If insulted, bring to mind times when you were kind and helpful. Slowly, over time, your mind will steady itself and become more independent of the opinions of others.

The bottom line is that no one knows very much about any situation. We judge mainly on superficial appearances, and based on our own prejudices. Therefore the advice we give is inadequate.

When examined dispassionately, it is much more relevant to us than to the person we are bestowing it upon. We should always remember the world is a somewhat distorted mirror in which we are seeing ourselves.

The same is true for other people as well. They judge us on fleeting impressions, and criticize or praise us based mainly on ignorance. We can learn from them, but we should take what they say with several grains of salt. It's much easier to stay centered that way. Nor do we have to block their advice out of some misplaced gambit of self-defense, because our grounding makes us confident.

We wander out of our center by being attracted to pleasure and avoiding pain, in trying to be good and not bad, right and not wrong. If we had enough faith in ourselves such posturing would be irrelevant, but a seemingly hostile world demands we pledge allegiance to such external idols. In the process we may gain the whole world, but lose our souls. (It's lucky that we *are* our soul, and so can only lose it in our imagination, else we'd be in serious trouble.)

The balanced attitude recommended here is predicated on not holding harsh judgments. If you are addicted to ideas like sin you will see it everywhere, and it will always shake you up. The Gita is teaching a higher form of reasoning that transcends or unites all pairs of opposites. That's why it counsels that good isn't any more helpful than evil in knowing the Self.

10) The yogi should constantly gather his own Self unitively, established in a place where he can be by himself, alone, with relational mind and Self under control, without expectations and without possessive intentions.

The whole technique of meditation according to Krishna is spelled out from verses 10 through 14, giving the chapter its name. Here we have as succinct a definition of meditation as you'll find anywhere: just sit somewhere quietly and gather your many parts

into one whole. Of course, the whole is much more than the sum of its parts. We know “the many” very well; we just have to add awareness of the mysterious “one” to transform our knowledge into wisdom. Unity is the essence of meditation.

Most of these ideas have been introduced earlier, but aloneness has not. To explore the depths of consciousness in meditation we have to remain undisturbed for a stretch of time. Interruptions by other people, even more than those by our own intrusive thoughts, automatically pull us out of the requisite centered state of mind. In a noisy or chaotic environment, meditation degenerates into a resistance to external stimuli, making neutrality nearly impossible. So we need to find a quiet, peaceful place to practice. After unity is established, however, the yogi can cope with any situation without becoming unbalanced. Meditation then becomes a fulltime practice, because the true aloneness (all-oneness) of the Absolute has been established as a continuous presence beyond any doubt.

The phrase “without expectations,” in addition to its overarching importance in the Gita in general, means not thinking of future gains from the meditation practice. Meditation is all too often made into a goal-oriented program as an incentive to keeping up the effort. But meditation should never have to depend on artificial stimuli—the desire to meditate should come naturally from the yogi’s grasp of its importance to their sanity and happiness. Goals, no matter how beautifully imagined, are a distraction to equal-mindedness, and have a tendency to feed the ego. Proper meditation is all about being here and now. After you get up from your quiet seat you can plan your plans and hope your hopes, but they must be set aside for the duration or it isn’t meditation at all.

*Aparigraha*, non-possessiveness, makes another appearance after its detailed discussion under IV, 21. Nataraja Guru says of it here, that non-possessiveness “releases the yogi from the tension of thinking of getting something, which is a natural disposition commonly found in man. When the mind is thus released from

horizontal affiliations, the ascent in yoga becomes facilitated.” In case you’re skipping around and didn’t read the earlier material, this isn’t about giving up possessions as such, it’s about letting go of the desire to accumulate things, to make them “mine,” which can easily obsess the mind. Non-possessiveness includes relinquishing at least the horizontal aspects of goal-orientation, and thus is closely related to meditating without expectations.

There are lots and lots of programs that rope in practitioners with ludicrous claims of all sorts, of grandiose material, mental or spiritual accomplishments. For the most part they are harmless, though embarrassing, trading on people’s weaknesses and insecurities. Even in the Gita’s time it must have been normal to see people flocking to the charlatans, while the real rishis sat quietly by themselves, ignored by all but a lucky few. We are so easily lured by lurid claims! It is very important to reduce our hypothetical incentives to the minimum, so we can spend our time on things that are truly meaningful. Developing a direct relationship with the Absolute is the only effort that has a lasting value.

Radhakrishnan presents a nice capsule summary of meditation on page 198 of his commentary:

Only the single-visioned see the Real. Spiritual life is not prayer or petition. It is profound devoutness, silent meditation, the opening of the consciousness to the innermost depths of the soul, which connect the individual self directly with the Divine Principle. Those who learn this art do not require any external assistance, any belief in dogma or participation in ritual. They acquire the creative vision since they combine absorption with detachment. They act in the world, but the passionless tranquility of the spirit remains undisturbed.

11 & 12) Having established firmly in a clean place a seat for himself, one neither too high or too low, and covered respectively with cloth, skin and grass,

there having made the mind one-pointed, and with relational mind and sense-functions subdued, (duly) taking his place on his seat, let him unitively engage in yoga for transparent Self-consciousness.

These verses are routinely taken literally, which is fine as far as it goes. But any sincere reader of this commentary should by now anticipate that they are also metaphorical, instructing the yogi to compress all their previous learning into a seemingly simple stable state. It is a gesture in which the churning multiplicity of ideas already transmitted by Krishna is made quietly unitive.

There is nothing wishy-washy about yogic meditation, therefore the yogi brings a well-established firm intention to the practice. The clearly delineated intent is to attain “transparent Self-consciousness,” meaning to attend to the Absolute without adding any distortion based on ideology or self-indulgence. “Establishing a clean place,” means shedding all the accumulated garbage of daily life to allow for maximum openness.

Keeping a place even literally clean is a practice requiring firm intention as well, since the world seems to favor the accumulation of dirt and insects over the artificial cleanliness humans prefer. Whatever catches and diverts your attention is “dirt,” including on the physical level. Part of one’s meditation practice is to firmly beat back the tide of sloppiness or dissolution with the integrative energy of will power.

The “seat” mentioned twice is the asana, popularly used to refer to physical postures. In hatha yoga, certain callisthenic exercises are used to calm the body in preparation for meditation, although in modern usage they have come to be seen as an end in themselves. Where once the body was considered merely a vehicle in which the mind and spirit rode through the world, the modern view is that the mind is an accidental evolute of the body, and spirit is an imaginary conception of the mind. Whatever their exact relationship, the essence of the ancient worldview is that the mind and its supporting body are evolutes of spirit. Therefore the posture or asana in question is not a physical one, it is a mental state of



alertness, openness and enthusiasm. It usually takes a reasonably strenuous program to achieve a suitable mental state for meditation.

In addition to a healthy mental asana, a physical asana should be adopted which permits the yogi to sit without the body intruding into the meditation or interrupting the careful listening to the words of the guru. Those of us who have sat through a long disquisition, no matter how fascinating, are familiar with the many distractions the body can provide. You move to relieve a tired muscle and realize with chagrin that you've missed a sentence and broken your train of thought. By the end of the talk you may be attending to the body's complaints full time and barely hearing the guru at all. It's the same in solo meditation. Once you find yourself paying undue attention to the body the meditation is already over.

A seat neither too high nor too low is yet another example of yogic dialectics, and refers to a state of mind more than the proper height of any actual seat cushion. The Gita is not pointing out minor details of meditation practicalities, but guiding the aspirant to a balanced orientation at every level. The meaning is that if you think of yourself as a great yogi, or alternatively if you think of yourself as unworthy of greatness, or an interloper, such thoughts are nothing more than impediments to a steady state of mind. Stop judging and rating yourself, and simply do your best to attune to your inner potential. Throw off self-assessment whenever it rears its ugly head, and you will naturally be sitting at the right height.

Credit goes to Nataraja Guru and Guru Nitya for shedding light on the mysterious reference to cloth, skin and grass here. Cloth, being simple, unpretentious and durable, is favored by renunciates, including Jain and Buddhist monks alongside traditional sannyasins. Skin probably refers to India's ancient Shiva worship tradition, since he is often depicted sitting on a tiger skin, and the grass is kusa leaf, used by Vedic brahmins in their fire rituals. These were the traditions that the Gita was revaluing and uniting under a common vision, by suggesting they should all be "sat on" at the same time. Sitting on them implies they are the

support, the ground, on which the enlightened yogi is stabilized, and yet the one meditating must also rise above any particularities contained in those traditions to attain the requisite unity.

Some misunderstanding attends the phrase about making the mind one-pointed. Occult practices often focus on an object of meditation like a flame or crystal or mandala. Reading more closely and including what is yet to come in this chapter, such as verse 25 where we are instructed to think of nothing at all, we can see that the idea is to be one-pointed about settling into a state of concentration on yoga. Yoga means the offsetting of polarized ideas against each other, to arrive at a neutral state where all thoughts can be transcended. This produces what is called transparency of vision or a transparent state of awareness, where events pass through the mind without being snagged for interpretation. In modern terms this is known as “going with the flow.” It is simultaneously active and passive, moving and still.

13 & 14) With body, head and neck held evenly and in immobile poise, looking at one’s nose tip and not perceiving the (actual) directions (of space), with tranquil Self, with fear gone, established in the vow of a brahmachari, having mind subdued, related to Me through contemplative thought, he may sit, united, having Me for his supreme goal.

Verse 13 carries the only advice in this chapter that should be taken more or less at face value. The traditional goal of asana is to be able to sit upright and still for meditation, with the spine in alignment. It is believed that spiritual energy courses up and down near the spinal chord, through subtle channels called *nadi*, and any twists or kinks in the spine block the proper flow of this kundalini force.

Krishna says to (inwardly) look at the nose tip, which is somewhat misleading. Tip here means the uppermost part of the nose. The inward gaze should be at what we would call the base of

the nose, the ajna or “third eye” between the eyebrows, and it feels very relaxed and comfortable to do this. Holding the eyes crossed to look at the nose is an irrelevant strain.

Most commentators say something like “not looking around” instead of the more literal “not perceiving the directions,” but the intent is the same. The yogi looks into the depths of consciousness, taking a break from the distractions of scanning the visual field. While it’s true that everything perceived by the eyes is the Absolute also, the specific limitations of manifested objects tend to conceal rather than reveal this truth.

Verse 14 mainly recapitulates familiar ground, except for mentioning the vow of brahmacharya that is taken by the brahmachari. Its ideal: “Having Me (the Absolute) for the supreme goal,” was introduced in V, 17, and will be repeated often hereafter, including the ultimate conclusions found in IX, 34 and XVIII, 65 and 66. We will reiterate that a supreme goal cannot be a god among gods, such as Krishna the incarnation of Vishnu, or Krishna the ideal Guru, but must refer through him (or a similar symbol) to the unlimited Absolute.

The term brahmachari has come to have very specific implications within certain sects of Hinduism, where it refers to the state of chastity of the seeker of truth prior to entering the householder stage as a married person. It has come to mean sexual celibacy almost exclusively, but that is a more recent development, mainly promulgated by Shankara and his group toward the end of the first millennium CE. Arjuna, among many exemplary brahmacharis, was married himself. Nonetheless, it is an undeniable experience that for most people sex temporarily depletes their energy, and meditation is virtually certain to be more effective if that energy is allowed to build up for a period of time. The dualistic view that enlightenment is the end result of the accumulation of energy in the body is foreign to true Advaita Vedanta, however. The breakthrough is not the result of any cumulative factors.

Brahmachari literally means “one who walks in the way of the Absolute.” The Gita having its own unique style and content of instruction, we can take direction from it as to how it is meant here: the vow of a brahmachari is an inner resolve to relate to the Absolute in all things and at all times, to consistently move from the perception of specific items to their relation with the all-pervasive ground in which they exist. Such instruction is found in many guises throughout the work. Nowhere does the Gita deal specifically with sexuality or its repression. Because this has become an important issue in more recent times, I’d like to offer a quote from an unpublished letter of Guru Nitya’s to a disciple in 1976:

There was no violation of Mary’s virginity when Jesus was born. She is still the eternal virgin and universal mother. But no mention is made anywhere of God’s celibacy. Of course it would be a contradiction to say “the only begotten son of God.”

Krishna had two legally wed wives and sixteen thousand and eight gopis who claim to be his girlfriends. But he is worshipped as a brahmachari par excellence. Brahmachari means celibate. The great prophet Mohammad in his infinite compassion married the widows of all his brave disciples who gave up their life for Allah, but nobody makes an issue of it. The Buddha was a married man with wife and child. Real virginity is not recognized in terms of one’s marital status. The Indian word for celibacy given above as brahmacharya means walking in the path of the Absolute. A deviation from the path of the Absolute is called a *vyahicharya*, which is the same as prostitution. A person is either one who walks the right path (brahmachari) or one who walks in the wrong path (*vyahicharya* or prostitute). One can ask oneself Am I a prostitute or am I a virgin? No one else can decide it except oneself, because as Jesus says “A man who looks at a woman with lust has already wronged her in his mind.” This guilt is

known only to the person and not even to the one who is wronged. There are married men who are very faithful to their wives, but the relation with the wife comes under the category of prostitution because of their unilateral imposition of sex on their partners. This kind of right and wrong [is] obvious and known in our hearts....

A seed bull is very spiritual and sacred when he can successfully mate with a certain number of cows a week and calve all of them. But a contemplative man who turns inward to get into communion with the most sublime in the cave of his heart becomes a worthless stupid if he opens his eyes to steal a glance at an external object (person) with erotic overtones. A man who has entered into the most natural and sacred covenant of sharing the bed with his wife, if he inhibits himself and thereby turns cruel to his spouse after having roused her, he also becomes as worthless as the contemplative who has falsified his covenant with God of his own sincere choice.

To my knowledge there is very little scientific data on the effects of celibacy on human beings. What there is shows that sex offers health benefits, both mental and physical. There is a clear link between prostate health and frequency of orgasm, and a possible one for longevity. Celibacy then has a tendency to be a negative factor for the body. The main benefit of sex for women is that the prospect generally makes men more civil to them. (This is a joke, sort of.) As to mental health, author Heather Wokusch reports:

Numerous studies have documented that "no sex" societies are often plagued by acts of rage. A cross-cultural investigation by American psychologist J.M. Prescott, for example, found that societies which punished premarital sex tended to have higher rates of crime and violence. Prescott also linked sexual repression to aggression, insensitivity, criminal behavior, and a

greater likelihood of killing and torturing enemies.  
(<http://www.heatherwokusch.com/index.php?name=News&file=article&sid=53>)

Spiritual schools that insist on celibacy make themselves evolutionarily irrelevant. They remove some of the brightest souls from the current of human genetic evolution, and leave the door open for the less sublimely inclined to fill the gap. While no one can deny that some spiritual movements have had an impact at least on the theoretical side of human development, the flow of practicality continues on essentially untouched by their influence. Routine assassinations of exceptional human specimens add to the tilt in favor of ignorance. It is as though as a species we are intentionally selecting for the lowest common denominator.

While restraint of sensual feelings for a period of time is important to contemplation, and to intellectual pursuits in general, codifying this into an outright ban on them is the height of folly.

Probably the best argument for celibacy is that what you spend your time doing is what you will accomplish. If you have a burning desire to accomplish something, then minimize extraneous factors. But there is plenty of call for variety in life, to keep us interested and therefore alert and alive. We can do a lot of things, including deep meditation, and still have time for sex. In some forms of Tantra, sex *is* the meditation.

Genius is certainly not linked to celibacy. Beethoven and Brahms were famous bachelors among Europe's great composers, but Bach fathered twenty children. Three gurus of my lineage were all celibate, but never made it mandatory for their disciples. Narayana Guru insisted that married couples be included in the Gurukula movement that bears his name. Nataraja Guru toyed with the idea of marriage until he turned sixty, after which he gave himself up to continuing his life of abstinence. And my immediate guru, Nitya Chaitanya Yati, while being an advocate and practitioner of celibacy, admitted that for most people it could easily cause derangement. It must be handled expertly, with

conscious sublimation of the tremendous energy involved, else you will go mad. Most people use repression instead of sublimation, bringing misery to themselves and their associates. The sexual abuses of Catholic priests that have recently made headlines are a perfect example of how repression leads to perversion. It is highly likely that the tortures of the Inquisition were also outbursts of repressed sexuality. It goes without saying that such acts are by no means limited to one sect. Human repression and its consequent explosions are nearly ubiquitous. There are many causes of derangement, but sexual constipation gives them all an added boost.

It seems to me that walking the path of the Absolute—that very Absolute that invented sex and lavished it on virtually all creatures on our planet as a means of rapidly proliferating the possibilities of their expression—must include sexual joy in a loving context. Sex that is a form of violence or cruelty, selfish and denigrating, fulfills the definition of abandoning brahmacharya. But sex with love is a beautiful experience, profoundly intimate, deeply spiritual, and sometimes even evolutionary when a new being is created.

Everyone needs a lover, but as the song says, most people are looking for love in all the wrong places. What they crave is an intimate relationship, but that essentially spiritual urge gets diverted into a plethora of tangential issues. Of course this sublimated or repressed eroticism beautifies the world in any number of ways if it breaks out as artistic or civic activity. A lot of our best and most original art has been produced by frustrated lovers and tightly closeted homosexuals. But the same frustration can just as easily lead to wars and other violent behavior. One way or another, in personal love or artistic expression or both, the ananda factor needs to be present in life for it to be meaningful.

A yogi's love relationship could be with a guru, or even simply the universe. Most of us find it in interpersonal relationships like friendship or marriage. Beneath the surface of many seekers is a craving for a loving companion, and often when

that is secured the seeking ceases. The subterranean motivation of a craving for love needs to be brought into conscious awareness, or the suppressed eroticism may derail the seeker's intent. Christians used to speak of becoming brides of Christ, and Krishna himself was famous for his erotic attraction that drew innumerable milkmaids to him. While these are symbolic of attraction to the most sublime state, symbols can and should be more than abstract. If they don't interpenetrate the Real, they are meaningless.

The bottom line is that life is created or happens in order to express infinite potentials, and its motivation is joy. Therefore a brahmachari's vow should be to embody and share the joy of creative living. A joyless universe might as well not exist. We are drawn to create joy by our spirit of fun. Spiritual life is supposed to be more fun than sex, even. If sex is more attractive, then something is missing in the spiritual endeavor. We should be naturally drawn to the transcendent joys of wisdom, as implied in II, 59: "Objective interests revert without the relish for them on starving the embodied of them. Even the residual relish reverts on the One Beyond being sighted." This means you can only get part way to renunciation through denial; to go all the way there has to be an overriding interest, which is the bliss of realization. Becoming absorbed in something thus has two senses, both of them relevant.

As is repeatedly taught in the Gita and Vedanta generally, realization does not come as the end product of any series of actions or inactions. Nowhere do these philosophies cater to the human tendency to wish for a simple list of behaviors to follow to achieve enlightenment. Only by meditating and contemplating deeply on the Absolute does the bipolarity between seeker and sought come about. It is the only goal which is not a goal.

15) Thus, ever unitively joining the Self, the yogi whose mind is subdued enters into that peace which abides in Me, which has as its ultimate phase total effacement.



Effacement is one way of describing nirvana, which was explained in detail in the last chapter. A concession is made here to unfoldment over time, to a loose version of a spiritual path. The meditating yogi repeatedly merges in the Absolute, and the peace of that merger gradually becomes more overwhelming until it becomes permanent. The saints and sages we know are those who brought the peace of the Absolute back to share with their associates in the world we live in. Those who merged totally disappeared with barely a trace. Narayana Guru struck a perfect balance between merger and involvement, poetically presented in verses 11 and 12 of his *Subrahmanya Kirtanam*, in a free English translation by Guru Nitya:

All discernible forms disappear where light is not paired with shadows, and all imaginations cease where beatitude reigns supreme. Such is the resplendence of your supreme state. It is as if your brilliance has swallowed the sun and the moon. Your lotus feet rest in the brilliant fire of the wisdom of the third eye. Oh Lord, reposed on the colorful wings of the phenomenal peacock, my supplication to you is not to disappear.

The moon has gone beyond the horizon. With it also have gone the fantasizing dreams of the night. The sun has risen in the firmament. The moon and the shimmering stars are no more to be seen. It is a good time to immerse deeply into the depth of beatitude. Alas! That does not befit the occasion. It is not the time to be lost in spiritual absorption. Look, here is the world drowning in the dark ocean of misery. In body and mind millions are diseased. By drinking they have increased their torpor. These unfortunate wretches are to be roused from their drunken madness. Oh ye people, wake up now! It is time for you to enter into the cleansing river of eternal wisdom and perennial joy.

Narayana Guru's ideal was to stop just short of total effacement, to get as close as possible to the void without losing the ability to act. Those who can remain in that ideally balanced state are the most effective transformers of humanity.

16) To be sure, there is no yoga for a glutton nor for one who fasts, nor is it either for one who oversleeps or is (over) wakeful.

The middle way—finding a happy medium—is extolled throughout the Gita and applied here to ordinary activities. Though fine as far as it goes, this verse has more value when taken symbolically.

Eating is used in the Gita to symbolize what we take in, what we imbibe, intellectually and emotionally as well as physically. There are those who rush around cramming in as much as they can in their allotted time, striving to maximize their experiential input. They are gluttons for action. Contrasted with them are those who withdraw into hermitic isolation, treating all events as disturbances to their peace or threats to their well-being, who are fasting in respect to action. Krishna would have us participate normally in our life as it unfolds, calmly yet with alertness. Thinking that you should be doing more, or less, is one more way of not being fully present. Balance allows for openness. Three square meals of activity each day should be about right.

Following similar logic, the second part of the verse tells us that having our mind turned off is not helpful, but we don't have to be maniacally wide awake all the time, either. Our relational mind must be subdued in meditation, but it has to be alert in other activities. Consciousness has phases like the moon, and a spiritual person rides the tides with good grace. It would be tedious if the moon stayed full all the time, or was always dark.

There is a gentle corrective here for all those who believe that acting in a certain way will bring them to the unified state of yoga. Performing austerities on the one hand, or being a whirlwind of activity on the other, are not central to yoga. If they accord with

your true personality, your dharma, fine. But the tendency is to develop a spiritual ego about whatever program is adopted, and it is very important to avoid this. A self-satisfied ego is possibly the greatest stumbling block in spiritual life. So relax, loosen up, and don't take yourself too seriously. Realize your program is but one of many possibilities. Then give it your best shot, calmly and without exaggeration.

17) To one of proper food (habits) and recreation, who engages in activities in proper moderation, who sleeps and wakes in a well-regulated way, yoga takes its course painlessly.

Here we have the inverse of the previous verse, presenting the positive way of balance after the earlier negative of going to extremes. The message in both is that intelligent moderation is the best way to do whatever you do.

This verse makes it clear that there is no occult, secret path in yoga. Yogic attunement is in every sense the essence of normalcy. The problem is that what passes for normal in society is actually severely abnormal. People lost in abnormality have a difficult time discovering the happy medium or norm. They imagine that spirituality means becoming even more abnormal than they already are. But yoga is to be practiced right in the midst of our everyday activities as well as in quiet meditation. The image of the guru sitting on a mountaintop or deep in a cave is romantic, but we practice yoga in the workplace, in family and friendly relations, in the queue at the sports stadium, while driving a vehicle, and all the rest. Krishna has firmly asked Arjuna to stay and face the situation with which he is confronted, and not to run away to the Himalayas.

Yoga taking its course painlessly underscores that yoga happens spontaneously in the midst of exactly what you are doing. It's not about forcing yourself into unfamiliar or exotic channels. Just becoming balanced in whatever you practice is the easiest, not to mention most correct, way to be. In fact, we are approaching

one of my favorite lines of the whole Gita, verse 28 below, in which the yogi “enjoys easily happiness that is ultimate.”

18) When the subdued relational mind stays in the Self itself, desireless of all desires, then it is said to be united.

Especially in reading the next section, we must keep in mind that this chapter is about meditation. Sitting quietly and opening up to a greater reality is one very important part of a fulfilling life, but it is not the whole ball game. The Gita is often read as if we are supposed to spend eternity contemplating our navels, but that is not its ultimate intention. Far from it.

People somehow come to believe that by totally restraining themselves they are being spiritual. Yet only by creatively expressing their dharma can they begin to be what they are capable of. We admire and even worship those who are quiet, calm, well-behaved, withdrawn, and so on, but there is no guarantee that is an authentic condition. They may have snuffed the spark inside to be that way. Even if they are in tune with their dharma, by merely emulating them we run the risk of damping out our own spark. Imitation may be the highest form of praise, but it’s only a preliminary step in self-discovery. We learn to dance by first following a template, and after we get the hang of it, cutting loose. Improvising. Liberation transcends imitation.

Spiritual instruction is intended to allow us to become what we truly are, which in all cases is a vast and unique being. Examples are intended to stimulate creativity, not channel it. The universe wasn’t created to limit uniqueness, but to allow it to blossom into myriad possibilities. We must remember that subduing and restraining ourselves means that we should curtail our chaotic peripheral interests, to allow for clear concentration and focus. It doesn’t mean that *everything* is to be restrained at all times!

That being said, this is the stage of the study after the initial instruction, when the mind can be brought to an intense focus on

the core of consciousness, which we call the unitive state. It is visualized as different analogies by different people. In the Gita it is the Absolute in the form of the Self, creatively engaged with rather than submissively worshipped.

19) As a lamp set in a windless place does not flicker—such a simile is thought of in regard to a yogi who has brought under restraint his (relational) mind, (ever) uniting thus in the union of the Self.

We are coming to the end of the preparatory third of the Gita, and are on the verge of discovering where yoga will take us. That will be into union with the Absolute, which subject comprises the bulk of the middle third. As we have noted before, the final third presents the practical integration of union with the Absolute into everyday life.

Nataraja Guru has added ‘ever’ to the idea of union, which can be misleading, although it does add a poetic touch. For most people most of the time, unity oscillates back and forth with duality. Union at this stage is achieved through purposeful meditation, and in the early stages it may fade into the background during ordinary activities. Only in very rare cases will it be a permanent condition from the start.

The lamp of thousands of years ago was an oil lamp with a cotton wick or wicks. Any disturbance in the air, imperfection in the wick, or foreign substance in the oil was revealed by a flickering of the flame. It makes a ready analogy—here clearly indicated as such—for the yogic state. Thoughts are like the wind, and restless moving around creates a breeze as well. Stilling these movements allows the flame of realization to burn steadily. The wick is like the yogi’s determination, well made and neither too long or too short, and the oil is like the reservoir of wisdom that feeds into it. Just as erroneous ideas inevitably find their way into any philosophy or religion or science, bits of crud taint the oil and make it pop and sputter as it burns. The yogi should strain the

pollution out of the teaching with a discriminating intelligence, calm the mental and physical winds, and keep the determination perfectly adjusted. Then the light will shine brightly and evenly of its own accord. Guru Nitya puts the same idea nicely:

A flame that flickers has on one hand the flame itself, and on the other hand the wind which makes it flicker, as something extraneous. In a windless place, however, where the extraneous factors causing the flickering are absent, the flame just burns on. Establishment of unity is a similar state. It requires only the removal of what is extraneous to the situation. (Gita, 164)

The next four verses are a single sentence that succinctly defines yoga. This is the culmination of the first third of the Gita, which consists of “introductory” material that you should have been taught in school—but weren’t. Be sure to read the four verses together, even though we will necessarily have to examine them one at a time.

20) (That state) where the (relational) mind attains tranquility, restrained through continued cultivation of a yogic attitude, and where also the Self by the Self in the Self enjoys happiness,

The tranquility mentioned here harks back to verse 3, although a different word is used for it. At the beginning of the spiritual journey there is focused activity, which soon paves the way to peace and stability. Krishna reminds us that we have to keep doing the simple things that free us up continuously, that an occasional stab at it doesn’t have enough force to effect change. When yoga is practiced as a matter of course, it becomes second nature, and really begins to have an impact. This is not an onerous demand. Unifying the psyche with yoga is actually much easier than polarizing everything into ‘mine’ and ‘not mine’. Happiness is

a more enjoyable and pleasant state than fear, doubt, anger and all the rest.

Striving for happiness is the basis of all our motivations, and so yoga should be a pleasure and a joy to practice. Uncovering level after level of meaning as connection with the greater whole ripens is a delightful way to live. What should lead us to yoga and inspire us to ever greater dedication, is that it solves problems and soothes the misery that mainly stems from our sense of dissociation.

Just for review, the yogic attitude is the one that sees everything as united in the Absolute, as graded polarities within an all-encompassing unity. A non-yogic attitude sees everything as separate particles, unrelated and even hostile to each other. The wise person recognizes the hostility as our perception of polarized factions maintaining their compensatory sparring.

We've had some earlier definitions of yoga, most notably II, 50: "yoga is reason in action." The present one adds a lot to that extremely condensed maxim.

21) that in which one cognizes the ultimate limit of happiness which can be grasped by reason and goes beyond the senses, and established wherein there is no more swerving from the true principle,

The true principle is maintaining focus on union with the Absolute. We "swerve" from it when we lapse into forgetfulness, caught up in the attractions of sensory input and the demands of everyday life. Again, as we spend more time experiencing the all-pervasive existence of the Absolute, we gradually become permanently established in it.

The "ultimate limit of happiness which can be grasped by reason" is a delectable, open-ended invitation. Keep in mind that happiness and pleasure are not the same thing at all. The Gita envisions no heaven full of great sex and feasting and other assorted pleasures. Happiness stems from conjunction with the

Absolute in the present, in other words, the knowing of divinity within every aspect of creation. Since its essence is bliss, the more we know of the Absolute the more blissful our life becomes.

Interestingly, we are invited to cognize this condition in a way that transcends sense-based thinking. This means that when we are attracted to a pleasure based on a temporary situation, we should refer it to the eternal Source of all joy. We use our ordinary joyful experiences to direct us to the ultimate joy, ascending from the things that are fun for awhile and then become tiresome, to That which is eternally delightful. From that standpoint the attractions of the senses seem meager indeed. At any rate, an intelligent mental effort is essential to this type of yogic meditation. As the Katha Upanishad (III, 12) says, in the Hume translation, which uses “He” for the neutral Absolute:

Though He is hidden in all things,  
That Soul (Atman, Self) shines not forth.  
But He is seen by subtle seers  
With superior, subtle intellect.

22) and which, having obtained, there is no other gain thought of which could be greater (in value), in which, when established, there is no swerving even by heavy suffering

To some extent it is a redundancy that union with a perfectly all-inclusive concept leaves nothing left over to be desired. And yet, very often we pull back from our efforts because of what the Gita calls in the next verse “spiritual regret,” the feeling that we are missing out on something crucial by following our guiding star.

Regret or dissatisfaction reveals inadequacy in our conceptualization. We need to craft a vision that really does include everything of value. The highest value embraces all partial values within its ambit. Exclusive ideas of the Absolute fall short of perfection in exact correlation with the degree of their exclusivity. The Gita’s wisdom is thus a far cry from religions that



proudly proclaim a jealous or intolerant deity, or for that matter a science that cannot accept the validity of differing perspectives.

I just witnessed a motley band of Christian extremists holding up signs by the roadside insisting “God hates the USA!” “God hates you!” “God is America’s terror!” and so on. A loving God who hates is a philosophical absurdity. All the storm and fury is beside the point.

Holding fast to truth in heavy suffering is much more of a challenge if what you are holding onto is false. If it is real, then it is the best possible consolation for any and all suffering. The reason is boldly stated in the next verse, presenting the last part of the definition of yoga: suffering is a state of mind that is transcended in yoga.

That being said, for all but the most renounced yogis suffering has an impact, because they care about their world, and it affects them. The measure of their realization is how quickly they regain their equanimity in the midst of heavy suffering, rather than whether or not they notice it. Non-yogic people tend to magnify their suffering, for a variety of reasons. Yogis minimize it and relatively rapidly regain their stability, because they realize they have nothing to gain by carrying on.

The real danger for yogis here is that the ego is content to suppress suffering and pretend it has been transcended, which is a real feather in its cap. But that does not cure the disease; in fact it makes it more virulent. Moreover it is callous and cold hearted. The impending definition of yoga is “disaffiliation from the context of suffering.” Healthy disaffiliation is brought about by affiliation to a positive principle of total knowledge, so that our idiosyncrasies lose power rather than gain it through tunnel vision. This means we have to be very careful not to allow the slippery slope of suppression of symptoms to carry us away from a dynamic engagement with whatever problematic situation we find ourselves in.

I don’t want to in any way minimize the intensity of suffering that many people experience at some point in their life. I have had

my own measure of heavy suffering, with the death of a child, and realize that until true tragedy strikes we have no idea how awful it is. Throughout the worst of the experience I held hard to a philosophical orientation, but was nonetheless wracked by almost unbearable pain. The severe shock lasted for at least a year, and the aftereffects—which I know will never entirely disappear—were very pronounced for at least fifteen years more. I can't imagine anyone being so detached from reality that they would not be devastated by something like that. The philosophy was little more than a straw to a drowning man, but it was enough. I knew if I was truly consoled by philosophy it would be an insult to my integrity. The important thing was to be fully present with the devastation, and not seek any way out of it. So I didn't swerve into any escape, and did not divert my attention. Please do not read this verse as an invitation to escapism, which Krishna is utterly opposed to. Yoga is not a way to avoid conflict, but to grapple with it to the best of our ability. That's where the philosophy helped me most: to hold my ground, to stand and fight rather than flee. In the ultimate analysis, it is not possible to get away. And we must never "regret" that we are not happy, as if the tragedy we're facing was some fault of someone, any more than we should welcome it. It's not that "spiritual" people don't suffer and the rest do. We just remain present and work through it, staying as strong as possible for ourself and any others who are affected by what is taking place.

23) —that should be known by the name of yoga: disaffiliation from the context of suffering. Such a yoga should be adhered to with determination, free from spiritual regret.

A clear and unequivocal statement of truth here forms one of the most important ideas of the Gita. Virtually everything taught by Krishna up to this point comes together to inform the meaning of this simultaneously straightforward and elusive instruction.

"Yoga is disaffiliation from the context of suffering." This operational definition provides a major climax in the work.

Keeping in mind what the Gita has already said about detachment, note that the disaffiliation is from the *context*, not from suffering per se. So what exactly is the context of suffering from which we are to become disentangled? Simply put, it is called duality. Duality is the bifurcated outlook that turns every family gathering into a battlefield, to use the Gita's overarching metaphor, where factions form in opposition to other factions based on apparent differences. The context in which suffering occurs is the condition of duality where "I" am separate from the object I am observing. Subject/object duality provides a basis upon which suffering can take place. There must be a recognition, a thought like "I am suffering," for a person to be miserable. Unitive mental states, on the other hand, take things as they come and don't add any mental embroidery to what happens. Suffering will certainly happen, as will delight, but it is not enlarged beyond its actual value, which is much less than a dualistic thinker is likely to presume. Then we are free to be fully present in our life.

We all know people who play up their misfortunes and carry on endlessly about them. That this yoga is to be adhered to with determination means that there will be many times we may be tempted to indulge in wallowing in our unhappiness, and these must always be forcibly discarded.

Once we have given ourselves over to dualistic thinking, it is very hard to get back out. It is much easier to ease into the unitive state from a position of happiness and equipoise than from the chaos of unhappiness. Yet the unhappy state paradoxically provides motivation that is often missing when we're happy and content. The human brain is naturally a bit lazy, and often does its best work in trying to mitigate discomfort.

Modern neuroscience has finally caught up to the rishis' keen insight that we are aware of our world only as a depiction staged in our mind's eye. That means that every bit of what we perceive is an intrinsic part of our being. Since it is all us, it is tragic to treat some of it as loathsome and despicable. That's the context of an internal schism where we are in conflict with our very self, the

exact opposite of yoga. Yet the staging is so compelling that we have a very hard time accepting that that's what it is.

Ah, and to be free from spiritual regret! We kind of miss those good old days when mom comforted us after we had skinned our knee or been humiliated in school. Part of our secret darkness wants to draw that kind of attention from someone—anyone—who can reactivate that fabulous feeling from childhood. A godlike father or mother figure dedicated to protecting and caring for us would be perfect. The Gita is suggesting this kind of puerile longing comes to consciousness as a tinge of spiritual regret and is unseemly, not to mention retrogressive. It's a less conscious form of embroidering suffering because we believe we'll enjoy it. We cherish a sore heart because God didn't come take care of us when we really needed it, like our mom used to.

Regret is always tied up with the past, either lamenting its passing or wanting to rearrange it. All too often our minds subtly rewrite history in our favor, disguising important truths about who we are. Or we excuse ourselves because of things that already happened to us. If we come to think of ourselves as victims of hostile and uncorrectable forces, we will become discouraged, which will allow us to remain comfortably sloppy and mediocre.

The dictionary adds for the word translated as regret (*nirvinna*), “despondent, depressed, sorrowful, afraid, loathing, disgusted with.” *Cetasa* is “consciousness, intelligence, heart or mind.” All these add shades of sense to Nataraja Guru's apt “free from spiritual regret.” Mahesh Yogi has it as “heart undismayed.” Barbara Stoler Miller has “without despair dulling his reason.” Most other translations I've seen are vague or merely offer clichés. The dictionary prompts us to add “untainted by loathing or disgust.” Many otherwise spiritual people feel a lingering hostility toward the context of suffering which they have rejected, and moreover feel justified in retaining their negativity. Such attitudes play into spiritual egotism, with its “holier than thou” attitudes. Krishna is teaching pure neutrality, and so counsels us to be generous and let go of any rejections we may be harboring. We are

not asked to pluck the mote out of others' eyes, but only to attend to our own substantial heap of lumber. Most importantly, we have to let go of our identification with the context of suffering absolutely, which is not the same as pushing it away. The former leaves us free while the latter retains a degree of negative attachment.

The biggest thing though, and one we have to constantly remind ourselves of, is that disaffiliation from the context of suffering does not mean retreating into non-association with the world. Otherwise Krishna would have endorsed Arjuna's desire to become a hermit when he was overwhelmed by difficulties at the outset. Instead he directs him to stay in touch with his problems. He made this explicit back in Chapter IV, verses 4 and 5:

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

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

Krishna's real plan is to assist Arjuna to become a wise participant in the world, which an inactive person can never be. Over the last few chapters, Krishna has presented the antidote to dualism—unitive action—succinctly and in detail. As a side benefit, unitive thinking dispels the illusion of meaninglessness, that there is no point to life, certainly the most erosive belief humans have ever adopted. We can only participate well if we know why we are doing what we're doing.

Our ancient reptilian brain wiring of "fight or flight" kicks in when a dire situation first arises, as is only prudent for the longevity of the organism. If we decide it isn't safe to fight, our next impulse is to run away. But the wise person should refrain from that also—we must neither fight or run away, so long as the

situation isn't immediately life threatening, of course. (In that case, run like hell!) Instead, we should listen to our inner promptings and thoughtfully assess the circumstances, which will illuminate a range of options that are not immediately obvious. The less the excitement, the more level-headed will be the conclusions. What we call intuitive or instinctive urges are the refined emotions that encapsulate plenty of intelligence. We need to move toward those and away from raw fear or manic attraction. Yoga is nothing if not a way to become even-tempered in the midst of problems so that our well-developed inner wisdom—somewhat inaccurately called reason—can be brought into play.

Occasions that pit one side against another, so that there is a winner and a loser, or good guys and bad guys, are dualistic. If the same occasion is treated harmoniously, all participants are winners, in the sense of enjoying and coping with their part in the game. Games in fact are a perfect example of the difference between unity and duality. How frequently do we see a stress on “winning the championship” or “setting the record,” which produces one success and multiple failures? But games played unitively are done purely for the enjoyment of the activity. If you join the fray with that attitude, there is no context of suffering. But if you have to win or be the best to be happy, plenty of disappointment lies ahead.

Yoga, then, is unitive participation in everything you encounter, by which the *context* of suffering does not even arise.

24) Abandoning completely all desires originating in the will for particularized ends, curbing the collection of sense-functionings on every side

The next two verses form one sentence epitomizing the yogic technique of active meditation.

Discarding “desires originating in the will for particularized ends” is a way of stating the familiar central tenet of the Gita, that we must relinquish specific desires for the fruits of actions, by

abandoning all expectations about outcomes. That doesn't mean we can't be optimistic, only open to unknown possibilities.

Curbing the collection of sense-functionings means curtailing our attention to sensory input in order to free the mind, which has also been presented earlier. Krishna, having just sketched some preliminary guidelines and succinctly defined yoga, is now teaching Arjuna how to meditate in earnest. All that is extraneous is pared away, leaving only the barest essence.

25) —slowly, slowly, activities should be brought to a standstill by reason steadily applied, establishing the mind reflexively in the Self, without thinking of anything whatever.

Bringing activities to a standstill via the steady application of reason is the kernel of the Gita's meditation practice. Activities don't stop by themselves; it takes conscious intention to settle them down to a minimum. There is no particular technique required to accomplish this; it is just something you put your mind to. Krishna already gave Arjuna instruction in this toward the end of the second chapter.

Ordinarily we act to correct imbalances, but very often we overreact to them, and so perpetuate them negatively. Instead of "rushing off half-cocked" in this manner, we are instructed to take a dispassionate look at the entire context. To do this we must disengage from our initial impulse, shrug off our compulsive need to always be right, set aside our habitual prejudices, and calmly examine the situation from every imaginable perspective. At first this depletes our actions of their hysterical or neurotic energies, and as we gradually become more centered, the need to intervene to alter the inherent rightness of the world drains away entirely.

The writer Franz Kafka describes this aspect of meditation most poetically: "You do not need to leave your room. Remain sitting at your table and listen. Do not even listen, simply wait. Do not even wait, be quiet, still and solitary. The world will freely

offer itself to you to be unmasked, it has no choice, it will roll in ecstasy at your feet.”

Nataraja Guru has translated this verse's *atma samstham* as “establishing the mind reflexively in the Self,” correctly giving the sense of the Self perceiving the Self, as described in verses 5 and 6 above. Despite having forgotten our true nature, we are not in any way alien to it. Most translations have something like fixing the mind on the Self, or holding fast to the Self, as if it were other than us. The dictionary gives the sense of residing or dwelling in the Self, and includes “standing together; standing or staying or resting or being in; belonging to, based on; partaking or possessed of; in the presence or midst of.” All these senses are germane. By emphasizing the reflexive aspect, Nataraja Guru wants to preserve the sense of dialectic resonance, where we are drawn into the Self by our natural affinity with it, and not as invaders or explorers of a foreign land.

Most seekers strive to hold onto certain thoughts, or at least have some direction in mind, while meditating. We gain much more by opening ourselves completely to whatever influence the Self has to offer, by not thinking of anything at all. Our thoughts automatically limit the range of our meditation. While actively thinking and analyzing are valuable and important in a healthy discipleship or field of study, we optimize our meditation by temporarily emptying our minds to the maximum extent possible. Afterwards we can assemble the inspiration into a comprehensible structure, if we are so inclined, and that can be very helpful in our daily life.

26) Whatever causes the changeful, unsteady mind to go out (again and again), from each such, restraining it (again and again), it should ever be led to the side of the Self.

Here we find more technical advice. Only a very accomplished meditator will sit undisturbed by thoughts and urges. Almost all of us have brief moments of quiet, which are quickly



eradicated by our mind “going out” to dwell on some object or idea. Before we know it we are in the kitchen rummaging in the fridge or thinking about walking out to our car, barely aware we were meditating a moment ago. The advice here is to gently set those “urgent” thoughts aside, if only for a short while, and keep setting them aside whenever they return. They can wait. Don’t forcefully suppress them, and by all means don’t get down on yourself for having them. They are completely normal, and may never have been restrained before in all your long life. It will take patience and forbearance to settle them down.

In Indian psychology, thoughts and desires have power of their own. As noted earlier, superficial ones based on conditioning in this lifetime are called samskaras, and deeper-seated ones from the genetic history or perhaps past lives are called vasanas. They resemble bubbles rising up in a carbonated drink to burst at the surface. The surface is what we call the waking state of mind; the drink is the unconscious. There are uncountable numbers of these bubbles. Just as there is no point in waiting for your drink to “go flat” and stop fizzing, which would take many days and leave you with an insipid and unpalatable residue, vasanas and samskaras are not going to cease pressuring you to find the means for their expression. The best (and the worst) of them are expert at getting your attention and making you do things.

During your meditation period, though, you can examine them more or less dispassionately, if you can separate yourself from their influence. Try to view them as external forces rather than identifying with them as being the “real you.” They are worthy of admiration, because they are so good at what they do, which is animate your whole system based on past events and habits. If you don’t learn to recognize them they will go on driving your train forever. But as you look at them and see them in isolation, they begin to loosen their grip on you. Before long, as they come up you will begin to recognize them. You will see them as old habits and not as commands that must be obeyed. After meditating on them you are more free to promote the healthy ones,

those that passed the test of your examining them scientifically and dispassionately. But for now, ask them to wait a bit, so you can sit still.

27) Such a yogi, verily, of calmed mind, of pacified passion, who has become the Absolute, free from all dross, comes to supreme happiness.

When we are properly meditating, we enter a state where all the junk has sloughed off. Dross—waste matter or crap—is by definition extraneous, or at best secondary. When we come out from under all the junk that clogs our life, the calm, peaceful state of supreme happiness is our natural condition.

Happiness must be understood unitively, not as the polar opposite of unhappiness. In our translation we generally use pleasure and pain to refer to the polarized conditioned of temporal happiness and unhappiness, leaving happiness, joy or bliss to stand for the eternal, unconditioned state. This is a classic dialectical structure, with pleasure and pain (happiness and suffering) as the thesis and antithesis, and supreme happiness as the transcendental synthesis.

Paradoxically enough, unity cannot be the polar opposite of duality, else it would not be unitive any more, but it does emerge from the uniting of opposites in dialectical wisdom. Krishna uses the adjectives supreme here and ultimate in the next verse to differentiate the subject from ordinary pleasures. These adjectives are necessary because Sanskrit has the same ambiguity as English, where one word must be used for two different types of happiness or joy. Here the word *sukham* is employed, which is the polar opposite of *duhkam*, pain or suffering, hence the need to qualify it as supreme.

Unlike some religions, there is no supreme or eternal pain or unhappiness in this system, though it might appear that way when you're suffering.

Though the trivial pastimes of modernity are legendary, it is not just modern man who is confronted with the glittering attractions of dross or detritus. *Pastimes* is the exactly appropriate word, by the way. For those who imagine the hereafter to be the only reality, activities are used to pass the time until death welcomes them into its arms. Actions don't mean anything other than a ticket to heaven, because life is meaningless except as a steppingstone to death. But yoga meditation is about being alive here and now, and the Gita has already made it clear that if we desire to attain happiness through seeking out pleasurable experiences we are not fit for the practice.

Meaning is a projection of our inner state of mind. It is absolutely essential to be aware that true happiness is not the byproduct of any temporary object or event, and that it is discovered as the very essence within us. Once the bliss of the Absolute is realized, all objects and events become intensely meaningful as they bask in the glow of that supreme happiness.

Krishna has already proved to us that our true nature is of the Absolute. The famous great dictums (*mahavakyas*) for Upanishadic meditation boldly assert this truth, which can only be self-evident. We are instructed to ponder, in order: I am the Absolute; This Soul or Self is the Absolute; Everything in the Universe is the Absolute; That Absolute You Are (I am). The dross of our life is linked up with our seemingly separate identity, and when we pacify this illusion we return to our intrinsic nature as the Absolute.

When you stop to think about it, of all the manifold impossibilities with which the universe is rife, creating something that is not itself is the most impossible. How does substance create non-substance, or how can particles produce non-particles? How does sameness produce otherness? Or, for that matter, how and why does nothing create everything? It's a fitting subject for meditation. Comprehensible or not, we are all the Absolute through and through, which, in order to know itself, has become all

this. It has veiled itself from itself to create the endlessly fascinating panoply of existence.

28) Ever uniting thus the Self, that yogi, rid of dross, having contact with the Absolute, enjoys easily happiness that is ultimate.

As I mentioned earlier, one of my favorite phrases anywhere is “enjoys easily happiness that is ultimate.” Hard to beat that. The easiness is because we don’t in any way have to make it up or create it. It is our very state of being. As long as we’re in touch with our true nature (“uniting thus the Self”), we are in touch with ultimate happiness.

It’s worth noting that in the last verse the yogi had merged with the Absolute, but here there is simply contact with it. The next four verses continue in the same vein, following a descending or externalizing trend, with the yogi knowing and extrapolating the Absolute but not remaining merged in it exactly. This is a foreshadowing of the overall scheme of the second half of the Gita, where Arjuna first has an experience of merger with the Absolute and then has to sort out what it means and apply it in his life in increasingly realistic stages. In this group of six verses Krishna is cleverly tying up all our states of mind with the Absolute ground, showing Arjuna how to relate to the Absolute from every possible perspective.

29) One whose Self is united by yoga sees the Self as abiding in all beings and all beings as abiding in the Self, everywhere seeing the same.

A primary realization is repeated in this chapter on meditation, because it is meditation that brings it about. All beings without exception are expressions of the Self, which is the Absolute. Knowing this, it is impossible to have a completely hostile attitude toward anyone. Sure, we have to be careful, because some people are dangerous and even deranged. No matter

how weird, however, nothing can ever be truly Other, since we all spring from the same source. Knowing this not only diminishes fear, it has a decided impact on the surroundings, which definitely resonate with a person's mental state.

The eye of the yogi sees that the many emerge from the One, and cyclically return to it. A religious person might conceive of the One as God, while the scientifically minded prefer to picture it more along the lines of the quantum vacuum, or possibly as the ocean of atomic and subatomic particles that comprise the substratum of the perceivable world.

The rishis apparently had some awareness, long before the invention of microscopes, of the atomic nature of reality. We now can be quite sure that all complex matter is comprised of molecules, many of which are identical in widely divergent entities. Molecules mainly consist of a small handful of the 92 naturally occurring atoms in various combinations, and atoms in turn are made up of only three factors, protons, neutrons and electrons. While these can be shattered into several subatomic particles, there is an overarching tendency to move in the direction of an intrinsic universal substance or oneness as the microcosm is accessed. One might imagine the space that particles reside in as being that universal singular condition equivalent to the Absolute, unvarying within all the variables. While it may not be intelligent in any human sense, it is clever enough to fashion a universe of well-functioning, complex entities, linked in a stream of meaningful coherence. That's not exactly stupid, either!

In the human realm, both the Hitlers and the Gandhis share a common structure. Their sharp differences are plainly visible, but the eye of the yogi adds the dimension that they are also very much the same in essence. This permits yogis to act appropriately and with understanding, because they can perceive the essence of people beneath their surface variegations. Understanding and consequently compassionately tolerating is not the same as approval. Always remember that proper understanding is unitive, while approval is dualistic, the flip side of disapproval. Those who

mentally flee from people they are afraid of or disapprove of tend to run into the arms of equally malicious “friends,” compounding the problem rather than resolving it.

30) He who sees Me everywhere, and sees everything in Me, to him I am not lost and he is not lost to Me.

Here we have a particularly fine example of the Gita’s reflexive language. When pairs like these are used as thesis and antithesis in dialectical meditation, the synthesis revealed is “Me,” the Absolute. “I am not lost and he is not lost to Me” sounds like a tautology; however, it is spiritually significant, because contrary directions are implied. They are to be contemplated as negating each other in order to arrive at a neutral state of mind.

Obviously, if a seer sees the Absolute, the Absolute is not lost to them, unless they happen to be gazing on a false image and mistaking it for the real thing. A proper course of instruction is intended to insure this doesn’t happen. On the other hand, a person is never lost from the Absolute, except to the extent that they likewise fail to perceive that everything (including themselves) is the Absolute and the Absolute is everything. Many religions speak of lost souls, or of irrevocable separation from God, known as eternal damnation. Here Krishna is assuring us that this is impossible. It may work as an exhortation for keeping church members in line, but a contemplative quickly realizes there is nothing more to the claim than hot air. This is really a very beautiful and touching assertion of Krishna. Earlier, in IV, 36, Krishna affirmed, “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.” It means our numerous shortcomings and mistakes do not ruin us in any sense that cannot be repaired, so we shouldn’t let them get us down, only try to do better next time. Before long, in IX, 30, he is going to reassert the same idea, because it is an extremely important realization, one that replaces despair and hostility with hope.

The Gita does use the word ‘lost’ several times, and it can sound devastating in English, but here it merely indicates the state of not seeing the Absolute. All disasters are worsened by ignorance of brahman, but the condition is eminently rectifiable. How we get lost was detailed as early as II, 62 and 63:

Meditating on objects of sense-interest there is born in man an attachment for them; from attachment rises passion; in the face of passion (frustrated) arises rage. From rage is produced distortion of values, from distortion of values memory-lapse, from memory-lapse comes loss of reason, and from loss of reason he perishes.

Similarly, Nataraja Guru used to make the drastic assertion that those who weren’t interested in delving into the mysterious meaning of life were spiritually dead. But turning to the wisdom of the Absolute resurrects the dead, bringing them back to life. That’s exactly how it feels, too. In the ultimate analysis, this verse uses a double negative to assert a positive truth: that we are in every sense the Absolute and can never be permanently separated from it.

In this series of verses we are no longer united. Now we are “seeing” the Absolute, understanding its implications. There is one degree of separation. The next two cover first a worshipful attitude and then a dutiful one. Krishna wants to be sure all valid perspectives are covered, in descending order of unification.

31) That yogi who honors Me as abiding in all beings, established in unity, remaining as he may in every possible way—he abides in Me.

Here the somewhat more casual yogi is merely asked to honor the notion of the Absolute and this will have effect of unifying their mind. Honor of course means more than the inattentive nodding of the head we sometimes associate with the term, as with a military salute or something equally formal and

ritualized. Typical mundane honors in this context include the various forms of religious ritual and worship, such as placing an offering on an altar, or literal obeisance. The honor here described by Krishna requires much more than pro forma behavior. There is a sense of reverence, or at least intelligent appreciation, implied. Our attitude has to spring from the heart to have the requisite effect of linking us with the Absolute. The meaning here is if we treat all beings as divine, it will be easy to remain universally kind and considerate to everyone. Ahimsa, non-hurting, springs from this aspect of relating everything to its transcendental core.

I know so many ostensibly kind-hearted people who balk at this simple idea. They think of examples of despicable people and draw a thick line of rejection around them. The problem is then they are no longer “abiding” in the state of realization. They are polarized. Krishna has tried to obviate this impasse by assuring us that everyone without exception is built out of the Absolute, no matter how abased they may happen to be in their life. This is definitely a different perspective than the deeply engrained duality of us versus them, which morphs into holy versus unholy and the saved versus the damned that so plagues the world with conflict. The ego thrives in this terrain.

We are not being asked to judge, or prove our innocence by scorning criminals. Yoga is a meditation. Only an attitude of total acceptance will allow us to sink into a neutral state where our higher self can be accessed. Negativity can never bring us to equanimity. Therefore we have to learn a more enlightened way of interpreting our environment. We should still not kiss the hissing cobra, if and when it appears, but sitting safely on our seat we can know it is just as divine as we are.

The most important feature of this verse is “remaining as he may in every possible way,” which means that there is no particular lifestyle associated with realization at all. Whatever you do and wherever and even whoever you are, you can have your mind absorbed in the Absolute. There is definitely no “army of God” here, no uniform, no prescribed activity of any sort. In fact,



those outward forms are a distraction, tending to become diversionary ends in themselves rather than turning the mind toward the ineffable.

32) By establishing an analogy with the Self, he who sees equality everywhere, whether in pleasant or painful situations—he is considered a perfect yogi.

This is the last of the series of six verses delineating states of decreasing absorption in the Absolute while remaining yogically attuned. They began with the meditator being equated with the Absolute, next touched on direct contact, then visualized (in two verses, the first seeing all beings in the Absolute and the second the opposite, seeing the Absolute in all beings), then honoring or worshipping, and here simply relating to it via theoretical analogy. Almost all of us experience each one of these grades of absorption at various times. It's not that we each are stuck in a single category, any more than that we are consigned to any particular caste. Sometimes we are deeply absorbed, and sometimes we find ourselves wondering if we have any knowledge of the Absolute at all. At times when we feel lost or disconnected, analogy can come to our rescue. We may not feel truth in our bones, but we can recall what it means in terms of how to live. It's purely abstract, but we are assured that this is what a perfect yogi does in such straits. In the fluctuating course of events, if we maintain our dedication we will return to the profundity of connectedness in good time.

The Upanishads are rife with analogies devised to throw light on the relationship of the One with the many, like the ocean and its waves for instance, or unformed clay and the pottery made from it. The analogy using particle physics, mentioned under verse 29, can work well. Actually, virtually any subject that is pondered will expand over time to include more and more territory and more and more insight.

Meditating in this fashion allows the yogi or the scientist to bring their mind back into heightened attunement, by readjusting

the imbalances imputed by specific aspects of existence. A religious person could trace an event back to the invisible cause called God, if they are so inclined, lending a numinous glow to seemingly ordinary matters. Such a meditation establishes an openness to harmony. Imperfect “yogis” such as religious fanatics create disharmony by emphasizing the differences instead.

Another analogy widely cited in Vedanta is of the sun in the sky and its reflection in myriad dewdrops. On a clear day we can't even bear to look at the sun, but we can see it reflected everywhere, in all grades of brightness. We might cherish the beauty of a glistening dewdrop, but we also know the light doesn't originate there. The whole ensemble is neither of the one sun by itself or the many dewdrops in isolation, but of both together.

Krishna is giving his disciple some very important material here for his meditations. Treating aspects of life in isolation is fine up to a point for scientific scrutiny, but it opens the door to factionalism and enmity, all manner of conflict. By establishing an analogy with the Self Arjuna can relate individuals to humanity as a whole, or fit separate creatures into life as a whole. He can even compare matter with the universe as a whole. He might ponder the relationship of a humble blade of grass to an entire meadow, or a tree to the forest. In every case the totality is made up of a conglomeration of unique parts, but it is also much more than that. There are so many pertinent forms that this paradox takes, all of them leading the mind back to the wonder of the absolute value at their core. This is the wisdom that harmonizes us with our world and reduces conflict.

A fairly new field epitomizing the one and the many, sameness and otherness, is the study of emergent phenomena. By itself a single ant is fairly mindless. It might even be called stupid. But gathered in a herd or flock or whatever you call a swarm of ants, they exhibit highly purposive behavior. Together they can accomplish a tremendous amount and demonstrate extensive complex collaboration. Something intelligent “emerges” from what is imagined to be their sheer numbers. Of course, if you pile up

sand on the beach it doesn't become intelligent no matter how much is there. That means there has to be more than a purely material explanation for the phenomenon. But at least with living creatures we can look to the totality as being intelligent, where the part is more or less deficient, or what Vedantins call ignorant.

People are not so very different from ants. The whole idea of democracy is based on the belief in emergent truth from a heterogeneous group in which each member may be a bumbling yokel or simpleton. The actual origin of the idea of emergent phenomena came from an examination of all the guesses made by humble visitors to a country fair on how much meat an ox would provide after it was dressed. The guesses varied wildly, and no single one came very close, but the average of all of them missed the actual weight by only a single pound. Subsequent studies guessing things like beans in a jar continue to show similar results, indicating that the collective mind is vastly more intelligent than its parts. At least it is when the guesses aren't manipulated by "expert opinion," which invariably skews the result. A group does much better when each person listens to their inner voice rather than going along with some pundit.

The yogi-scientist doesn't necessarily have to posit intelligence as the substructure of the universe, but it is hard to rule it out, either. Something even stranger would have to fill the void. The present verse invites us to meditate on it and cook up analogies, and just by wondering along these lines we will be absorbed once again into the mystery of the Absolute.

33) Arjuna said:

That yoga you have outlined as consisting of sameness, O Krishna, I do not see for this any stable foundation, owing to changefulness.

Arjuna once again demonstrates his excellence as a disciple by putting his finger exactly on the problem he has—everyone has—with what Krishna has just taught. Sameness is all well and

good, but where is it to be found? It is not something that leaps immediately to mind, because everywhere we look there is a changing landscape, seemingly with no solid underpinning. Arjuna has not yet done much meditating, so he hasn't spent enough time in the unified state to become familiar with it.

The type of changefulness Arjuna is referring to is the mercurial lack of concentration that besets the beginner especially, but which is an issue for all of us to face throughout our lives. The mind moves, while the Absolute stays stable—how can they ever be brought together? At the same time, the Absolute is ever in flux over time, while our concepts remain more or less rigid, so they can never be perfect reflections of truth. We appear doomed to always be out of step with whatever the Absolute is conceived to be. Because of this, many people—though not Arjuna, obviously—reject the very concept of an Absolute ground. Clearly, one essential element is to train the mind to concentrate and remain steadily in conjunction with the stable flux of the Absolute for longer periods, which is the purpose of the activity called meditation.

Lest change get a bad name here, we should also keep in mind what Guy Murchie writes in *The Seven Mysteries of Life*, (p. 268) describing the evolution of consciousness:

The first essential for consciousness is change, particularly noncyclic, irregular or startling change. And such a concept explains why mere knowledge, which is generally static even when not distinctive or inherited, is seldom very conscious (depending on your definition) while learning, which always involves change, is much more likely to be conscious (by any definition).

The type of change called learning is very desirable and linked to the development of consciousness, and is of a different order than static knowledge. Thus knowledge is not adequate in itself, but should always provide a solid launching pad for new

flights of fancy and incorporation of information, known as learning. What is coming in for correction here, on the other hand, is the inability to pay attention and stick to the subject. One aspect of intelligence is nothing more than the ability to concentrate and remember what is being concentrated on. It is a lovely paradox that the more we can stay firmly attuned to a subject—the more we are absorbed in something—the more we can flow along with its unfolding revelation.

34) The mind is changeful indeed; it is agitated, forceful, and imperative (in character); like the wind, I consider its control difficult.

This verse is an echo of something Krishna taught Arjuna back in II, 67: Still moving amid sense interests, that item to which the mind submits draws away the reasoning as the wind does a ship on the waters.” Beginners and even veteran meditators are constantly having to let go of impulses that pull them away from meaningful probes and into superficial attractions. There has to be a sincere resolve to shrug off distractions, and this is indeed difficult. Sooner or later they regain their dominance.

We cannot easily control the wind because it comes from a distant source and is just passing by. Like that, our vasanas, our latent predilections, originate deep in our psyche, far beyond conscious access, gain momentum out of sight, and by the time they are consciously apprehended they have achieved gale force. With effort we can deflect them, or better yet harness them constructively, but they cannot be totally prevented from blowing. Despite this, there is a widespread misconception that they are to be squelched rather than sublimated.

While it’s hard to quiet the mind because of all the suppressed vasanas shouting for attention and expression, as they are directed to healthy outlets it becomes a much simpler matter to stay steady. When you are engaged in a project of absorbing interest, mental chatter becomes less and less disruptive. Thus,

expressing our natural inclinations once they have been intelligently sorted out is the ideal meditation, simultaneously unforced and constructive.

In the west we are taught to identify with our mind, so we come to think of the wind blowing through us as who we are. In Indian philosophy the mind is treated more as a tangential factor, the coordinator of sense impressions, and only one aspect of our true beingness. This makes detachment from the winds of chance much easier, and the seeker is less likely to feel guilty about the natural upheavals that periodically rock the psyche.

Some of those winds are our natural talents expressing themselves as our dharma, and some are destructive reactions to our ongoing struggle for existence and the traumas we have endured. The yogi learns how to distinguish them and weed out the impediments, allowing their best qualities to flourish.

35) Krishna said:

Doubtless the mind is difficult to control and changeful. By practice and by dispassion it can be held together.

Practice and dispassion are *abhyasa* and *vairagya*, respectively, two of the primary principles of yoga extolled in Patanjali's Yoga Sutras, one of the other foundational texts of Vedanta. *Abhyasa* is practice in the sense of repeated efforts, and *vairagya* is often translated as detachment, though dispassion comes closer to the Gita's idea. Patanjali teaches that these are the primary techniques to restrain the influence of memory on our actions, otherwise known as conditioning.

By practice Krishna is not referring to any arcane physical or mental secret here, merely the adherence to the suggestions made earlier in this chapter. These include the simple meditation sketched out in verses 10-14, moderation in behavior, and cultivation of a yogic attitude, covered in verses 20-33.

It should be clearly understood that dispassion is not the suppression of passion. It's being so absorbed in love or joy that superficial attractions no longer interest you. Without love or some other meaningful stimulus of enthusiasm, dispassion is only a kind of living death. Calmness is not an end in itself, it is the ideal platform for dynamic alertness.

This particular confusion of values is very common, and it manifests in curious ways. For instance, many disciples feel apologetic about asking questions in a spiritual setting. After all, how can you have questions if you are being dispassionate? Doesn't questioning imply doubt? Isn't it disrespectful or a sign of ignorance? Doesn't detachment mean ignoring the questions that come into your mind? The answer is no. You should ignore the silly thoughts that are the way the mind plays games with you, but at the same time you should be diligently digging below the surface to unearth questions of real import. There is much to be learned. In the Indian model, at least, the sishya or student is required to ask questions of the teacher. The teacher or Guru is merged in contemplation of the Absolute, and so only responds when a question draws them out. The image often invoked is of a milkmaid milking the great divine Cow that supplies all nourishment. You must pull on the udder to get the milk of wisdom. If you don't pull, the milk stays where it is, out of sight. Pondering deeply in order to come up with a germane question is the sacred duty of the sishya. Guru and sishya are therefore entwined in a dialectical, reciprocal dance, and one is not superior to the other. Both are equally nourished in the process of question and answer.

Let's not press the comparison too far, but even with an ordinary teacher something like this has to take place. And we are all teachers as well as students. The point is that well thought out questions are central to the learning experience and the bipolarity between student and teacher. Even when some go off on tangents, sometimes the tangents reveal new aspects to the topic that otherwise would not have come to the surface. I have found that

almost all of the questions I've been asked bear some relation to the subject, even those that initially appear far from germane. It takes a wise questioner to ask the perfect question, and wisdom flowers forth when questions are encouraged.

In one of my classes, someone with a Buddhist background got up the courage to ask why the Gita was recommending that we suppress our enjoyment of life by detachment. It turned out that practically everyone had a similar misconception, and it inspired a long discussion to clarify the issue. If no one had questioned the way the Gita spoke of curbing the excess of joy, we wouldn't have dealt with the confusion we all have around dispassion, and we might have all spent the rest of our lives keeping ourselves bottled up and dead. Thank goodness it came up!

I have included a definitive assessment of the role of passion under XVII, 5.

36) By a Self uncontrolled yoga is hard to attain; such is my opinion; but by a Self which is its own support, endeavoring, it is possible to reach through the means (indicated).

Those lucky ones who have had a transcendental experience by accident spread the word that it can only be attained by not trying. And yes, striving can block any number of possibilities from spontaneously springing up. But we lay the groundwork for wisdom by bringing our intelligence to bear, and bringing it back when it wanders. Without that effort, we become sloppy and unfocused and little or no transformation will take place.

Neuroscience studies using MRI and other brain scans have revealed much about the workings of our most complicated organ, and these studies show that the ancient rishis were spot on in their assessment of how we think. It is now known that the brain uses a substantial portion of its capabilities in performing various functions. The old saw that we use only ten percent of our brain is false. It's true that we are only *conscious* of far less than ten



percent, but many recondite parts are busily humming along much of the time without our even knowing it.

The brain is also coming to be recognized as being far more flexible than was previously thought. At any age, new cells can be grown, old ones enhanced, and new connections forged. This supports the rishis' contention that we are capable of vast if not unlimited redirection and expansion of our awareness. If we can expand, why shouldn't we?

What the fMRI studies show about this verse includes that we have trouble learning new subjects and behaviors, and ridding ourselves of entrenched habits, because our brain reinforces what we use it for. Therefore if we decide to change, we have to overcome a lot of inertia gathered behind our former ways. This is crucially important to a spiritual aspirant. A lot of effort is needed in the beginning, but as new neural pathways are forged the momentum grows. Of course this can work for or against us, reinforcing debilitating notions as easily as healthy ones.

Novice practitioners often make the mistake of trying to suppress old habits in hopes that the new ones will find a foothold in the vacuum created. Actually, suppression acts mainly as a negative reinforcement of the bad habit. Pro or con, you are still focused on it. It is far more efficacious to step completely out of "the context of suffering" and put energy into a new vision, building up positive aspirations that naturally draw energy away from the old.

When the Gita says that "the residual relish reverts on the One Beyond being sighted," (II, 59), it is in harmony with the same conception. Perversely, the "relish" is secretly maintained by the suppressive efforts, but when the attention abandons old ruts to embrace the Absolute, or any other replacement paradigm, the relish is no longer fed, positively or negatively, and it fades away as new neural connections are formed.

The concept (if we may even use the word) of the Absolute as beyond means that it is outside of any and all neural limitations. To open our minds to the fullest possible extent we must use the

most unfettered possible replacement paradigm. If we are satisfied with a limited pattern, our meditation and our thinking will be compromised in exact proportion to the limitation.

I can't do better than to close this section with an excerpt from *That Alone*, by Guru Nitya, that paraphrases this exchange:

You bring about oneness through wisdom, compassion and fellowship. At this juncture in the Gita, Arjuna says to Krishna, "This all sounds very fine, but I have to actually live it. My mind is not under my control. Like a wild wind it comes. Sometimes a ship lying quietly on the sea will be caught by a wind which drags it away and batters it and breaks it to pieces. This is exactly what my mind does to all my decisions and good intentions. I take a good resolve, but like a typhoon the mind comes and whips it away and wrecks it. What can I do?"

Krishna agrees. "That is so, my dear Arjuna. Mind cannot be forcibly controlled. Sometimes it is like a whirlwind. But don't you see that the mind is not a whirlwind all the time? Your mind may be restless for a little while. It may smoke and fume. But after some time it calms down, and when it does you have access to it. That is the time to show it the right way. When the mind is sitting calmly, show it there is no need to boil. Your true nature is divine, and everything is a manifestation of the Divine. Don't feel agitated. Deep down the mind understands. The next time it raves, somewhere it will know that this is not the right thing to do and it will settle down faster than the previous time."

In this way Krishna shows how to gently tame your mind by detaching yourself from the things with which you are infatuated. Also how, by continuous *abhyasa*, continuous practice, you can make it learn to love everything as aspects of the one Being or the one Supreme. How, by maintaining *vairagya*, detachment, and doing *abhyasa* continuously, you

will one day be able to make your mind fully in harmony with your vision of oneness.

The meditation of this verse [Atmo 38] is to watch for the many tendencies to close down or become narrow in your vision. Instead, enlarge your boundaries and thus find your release. Only then will the functional reality of seeing oneness become a persistent way of life. (267)

37 & 38) Arjuna said:

He who is unsubdued (but) endowed with faith, whose mind has deviated from yoga, not reaching to yogic attainments—what path does he take?

Is he not fallen from both like a riven cloud, destroyed without a mainstay, confounded regarding the path of the Absolute?

The word ‘both’ is rather mysterious, not having a specific referent here. Arjuna is thinking of a concrete (horizontal) world and an ideal (vertical) world as separate, with a gulf that needs to be crossed to go from one to the other. This is the classic conundrum of the self confused by duality. I, a sinner embroiled in the world, am here, and God, the unbounded, is over there, and never the twain shall meet. Arjuna has not yet grasped the secret of unity that the guru is striving to impart, and he fears that he will not only not reach God but he will have abandoned worldly wealth and pleasures in the attempt, leaving him with nothing.

Such a dualistic outlook brings Arjuna back time and again to the idea of merit. Somehow the horizontal world must be refined and perfected, and then it will open the gates to the vertical essence. In a unitive scheme, the horizontal and vertical aspects are not mutually exclusive but mutually complementary. We are not trying to go from one to the other, we are trying to join both together. Or rather, they are joined, and we are striving to appreciate exactly how that works.

The truth is that realization is not only of the special and spectacular, it includes the ordinary quotidian side of life too. Every bit of existence is miraculous, and it's only because we have become dulled to it that we long for "signs and wonders." Instead of looking for something far away, we should bring our attention to the here and now, and accord it its full measure of wonder. But because of this very typical confusion, Krishna will console Arjuna in terms of a path, assuring him that he can never be lost. In yoga, no backsliding is possible. If you really learn something, it stays with you.

This is without doubt confusing and difficult to grasp without profound reflection and contemplation. No wonder Arjuna is growing anxious and sounding desperate. He's been studying for a reasonable amount of time, and yet he still doesn't get it. This is not a theoretical question: he pictures himself as the fellow who's tried hard and made progress, but nonetheless falls short of the mark. He is philosophically making a non-personal example of his personal fears, which is admirable and quite appropriate for an advanced student to do. A raw beginner talks in personal terms; a more advanced seeker is able to generalize the problem.

We can modernize Arjuna's question by putting it this way: I've been blessed to sit at the feet of a great guru and I've learned a lot. Still, I have not been able to let go of my sense of separateness to completely become the Absolute. If I'm reborn, will I have to start over from the beginning? Or if not, will I simply disappear at death, not having identified myself with that which persists when all else perishes?

I'm sure most of us have wondered along these same lines as well. Having lost faith in imaginary heaven worlds and gods, just what *is* in store for us? Arjuna will at last be convinced by the intense soma ceremony he will experience in Chapter XI. Until then he will continue to voice his doubts and fears so that Krishna can address them, as is only fitting.

39) My doubt, O Krishna, you should dispel completely. Other than you there is none to be found to dispel this doubt.

Arjuna reiterates his faith and dependence on his guru. He is still confused, but his trust is getting deeper all the time, and it will soon culminate in the perfect bipolarity that allows Krishna to reveal his nature as the Absolute to him. This will be discussed in detail at the opening of Chapter IX.

Arjuna's doubt is a measure of what he still doesn't quite understand: unity with the Absolute. He is eagerly asking for more wisdom from his guru, and is by no means desiring to dispense with doubt simply because it causes him distress. This latter notion has somehow become a spiritual cliché of our time. Seekers are taught to relinquish their doubt *at the beginning*, as if it were an end in itself, and not after using it as an essential tool to achieve their own insights. This can and frequently does have disastrous consequences, enshrining dullness, or worse, allowing manipulative characters to assume management of the seeker's life. This holds true just as much for soldiers, employees, spouses, and many other types of citizen. Doubt should be extolled as a high virtue of a healthy life, not as a fault to be corrected.

Doubt, after all, is what propels progress—positive change—both individually and collectively. Systems that disallow doubt rapidly become petrified, and frequently petrifying, as they tend to enforce stasis through violence, or at least passive aggression. Since manifestation is always in a state of flux, severe measures are required to suspend it in an unnatural state of rigidity.

Doubt is a normal, healthy process by which outmoded beliefs and theories are dispensed with, opening up room for fresh embodiments of the Absolute to flood in. It is the way falsehood is discovered and subsequently swept away, thus making it one of the key spiritual attributes. Lack of honest doubt means that illusions are allowed to hold sway long past their expiration date, clung to by desperate believers.

There is a world of difference, though, between respectful, thoughtful doubting, and contemptuous doubt. The latter seeks to degrade and destroy, not to establish truth. It is rampant in the modern world, due to lack of any norm in people's psyches. Because they are certain of nothing, they presume no one else can be either. They deny the possibility of knowledge in their anguish, thus cutting themselves off from any chance of resurrecting a healthy and untroubled state of mind. They are left with the vain hope that they can raise themselves up by running everyone else down.

The kind of doubt discountenanced by scripture bears little or no resemblance to the healthy doubt of an inquiring mind. What it is supposed to mean is that once you have chosen a course of action you should put your whole heart into it. Attaining to one-pointed concentration is the road to success in any complex endeavor. Doubt at that stage is merely the whining of a lazy ego trying to preserve its stature as king of the couch potatoes. If you have decided to meditate, for example, there is no benefit whatever if you just sit there thinking, "This is silly," "It won't work," "Why bother?" "How about something to eat?" and so on. Such irrelevant doubts should certainly be cast aside as stumbling blocks, no matter where you've decided to put your energy.

Arjuna is very fortunate to be able to present his honestly felt doubts to a wise preceptor on whom he knows he can rely. Such mainstays are rare, and of inestimable value. Doubts that are not met with intelligent responses often spin out of control, and lead to bitter dead ends. Krishna will immediately provide the necessary reassurance to protect his disciple from this unfortunate fate.

Some sects cite this verse to bolster a claim that Krishna is the only divine being, the only one capable of magically dispelling doubts, which is ridiculous. For Arjuna, he is the man of the hour, but each of us must find our own teacher or confidante. Krishna is an excellent example, and his recorded words can help us immeasurably, but none of us will meet him outside of tales and

legends. The same is true of the protagonists of other religions. Guru Nitya has a beautiful passage speaking to this in *That Alone*:

We have not seen the Buddha, we have never met Jesus Christ, nor Socrates. We have never seen Kant or Spinoza, Shakespeare or Shelley, Kalidasa, Valmiki, or the philosophers of far-off China. Bach, Mozart and Beethoven were isolated within a tiny section of our planet. Still, our human heritage is molded by the brilliant thoughts of all these wonderful people from all around the world: the poets, storytellers, those who made the myths and legends, the inventors, composers, scientists and discoverers. Whatever they have contributed is still present in our lives, guiding us, teaching us, and helping us every moment. But they are not here. Only the friend next to you is here, the friend who exemplifies and incorporates all those wonderful qualities and insights. And we can all share this tremendous inheritance and even more, with each other, to make life an ecstatic and joyful experience. (140)

40) Krishna said:

Arjuna, neither here nor hereafter is there destruction for him, for none of good deeds ever goes to perdition.

Krishna instantly moves to counteract Arjuna's fears, and the strength of his assertions tips us off that Arjuna was having a major crisis of doubt, much more than we might have suspected. It is par for the course to have periods of doubt or loss of nerve when penetrating into unknown territory. Many turn back or abandon the search. Yet it would be highly unsatisfactory for Arjuna to quit now and leave us in the lurch. He will have to go all the way, so that we too may see what lies in store for us if we press on. Without Krishna's help he would be at a loss. Very, very few of us have the gumption to go it alone.

Verses 40-45 constitute a curious sort of anomaly, introducing merit where we have come to expect its absence. A

Careful reading of the entire work, though, gives us the key. Within the transactional, horizontal world, merit exists in myriad forms. We are only cautioned that it doesn't get us any closer to or farther from the Absolute. According to V, 15, the Absolute does not take cognizance of the meritorious or unmeritorious deeds of anyone. Merit is a reciprocal process within actuality, and it is undoubtedly helpful in some respects, but it is beside the point and even an impediment to realization. Grasping the Absolute is a unique accomplishment not dependent on any outside factors.

In II, 50 Krishna said, "Affiliated to reason one leaves behind here both meritorious and unmeritorious deeds." He is talking about a process of verticalization. Questions of merit dominate simple minded people and children, who have to learn to be "good" to abide with society. As reasoning is brought into the picture, the selfish motivations involved in thinking in terms of merit are revealed. They are what isolate us, reinforcing our sense of separation. "Yoga is reason in action," (also II, 50) means that intelligence is a superior motivator to either desire for attainment or fear of punishment, because it reunites us with our environment.

In II, 40 we read: "In such (a path) there is no forfeiture of any merit, nor is there involved any demerit by transgression." That assurance means that it's not so much that merit doesn't exist within the path of yoga, but that it doesn't ever go away. Our default setting is meritorious. And anything we learn stays with us. For instance, if you are truly compassionate, you can't later become uncompassionate (barring neural degeneration). If you do, it's because you weren't really compassionate in the first place. You were faking it.

Krishna has taught Arjuna not to be motivated by merit, to find a better reason for his actions. For now he is going to reassure him by asserting that nothing truly gained will ever be lost. Arjuna is panicky and needs some encouragement right now. A guru leads you into the Unknown and is there to hold your hand if you draw back in fear or confusion. Stepping outside your comfort zone



takes some getting used to. But Arjuna has barely begun. Many more terrifying growth spurts lie ahead.

41) Having attained to the worlds of the righteous, and having dwelt there for eternal years, he who deviated from the path of yoga is reborn in a house of the pure and well to do.

In this world, to be both pure and well to do is quite rare. Purity in just about any large-scale economic system is all but a guarantee of poverty, and being well to do almost a guarantee of corruption. I say this in part because this section of the Gita is rather anomalous, introducing all sorts of dualisms into its unitive message. So there is definitely a relativistic infusion here. If we were going to guess at whether some verses had been added later by religious enthusiasts, this one, and even this whole last section, would be a prime candidate. It probably passes muster mainly because it assuages peoples' egos. Nonetheless, its thrust does provide stimulating food for thought.

Throughout the Gita, Krishna goes on and on about how we must stand above the conditions of our life, remaining equal minded through the best of times and the worst of times, but now he's implying that doing good works brings us better circumstances and a happier future? It's a jarring contradiction.

Doing good for any future purpose, selfish or not, makes it contractual rather than artistic or unitive. That suits the horizontal world just fine, but is inimical to more subtle, vertical aspirations. Krishna must be confident that Arjuna is not making the mistake of obsessing about his fitness for realization, but is simply learning how to *be*, without any pretenses or external motivations, otherwise this would be misleading information he is giving him.

To maintain the requisite balance we should consciously invert the last phrase of the previous verse, which read, "no one of good deeds ever goes to perdition." No one of bad deeds ever goes to perdition, either. We are all part of a very long evolutionary unfoldment, made interesting with innumerable ups and downs but

from all appearances arcing toward enlightenment. The Gita has made this abundantly clear in several places already. There is no more unequivocal statement than IV, 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.” Still, it must make some difference in how you act, mustn’t it?

The word for perdition is *durgatim*, which literally means bad or difficult path. Arjuna specifically asked *kam gatim*, what path? in verse 37, so Krishna is responding to the exact wording of Arjuna’s perplexity. As a guru, he would naturally offer solace and support to any of his disciples in their moment of doubt, but Arjuna is a stalwart and honorable fellow and his goodness is not in question. So Krishna is not simply cheering him up with a vote of confidence, he is offering a more meaningful kind of reassurance: thinking clearly and practicing the yoga of equal-mindedness makes your path easier, while following your unrestrained impulses makes for hard going.

Still, it can’t be totally reassuring, because Arjuna is wondering if he’s going to make the grade or not, but here Krishna is speaking of someone who has *almost* made the grade already, who has been righteous for a long time. It’s rather mysterious. In the final analysis, our actions do have some influence on our path, but the yogi treats them as incidental, attending instead to inner challenges. Non-yogis treat them as being of preeminent importance, and focus their energy on altering outward conditions. It is easy to get caught up full time in tinkering with the details of living comfortably, so yogis are advised to at least drop the subject regularly for periods of contemplation, if not entirely.

Noncontemplative readers of this wisdom text have sometimes succumbed to the temptation of dualism, and overlaid their ill-considered prejudices onto the Gita’s teaching. They reason that if this sort of divine karmic justice is so simple and infallible, then anyone who is having a hard time must have caused their own difficulties and so deserves what they get. The fact that some other people’s karmic impulses may have led them to abuse,

manipulate or take advantage of these unfortunates—not to mention invisible forces like germs, pollution, fate and so on that have their own trajectories—is never brought into the equation. It's all their fault, period. This is a harsh and pitiless attitude, based on an oversimplification of the world's complexity.

Karma is so complicated there never is any one-to-one correspondence between cause and effect. The impulses to action are more like swarms. Among many other things, this means that just because you are having a tough time in this life does not mean you were bad in a past life. There is nothing more disgusting than self-righteous condemnation based on fantasies that don't take the complex circumstances of life into account. Science has ever tried and failed to link intelligence and so on with racial and other hereditary factors, and thus codify existing inequalities, but they remain indeterminate, because there is no connection. Luck cannot be predicted scientifically. But bigoted snobs don't need proof, they can just believe what they want and attribute it to God's unerring judgment. Discrimination thrives best where intelligence is banned. It's so much easier to imagine that people bring all their troubles on themselves than to investigate their complex causes, allowing you to turn away with a "clear" conscience—meaning a conscience walled off from reality—rather than lending a hand.

Such narrow-minded attitudes stand in harsh contrast to the Gita's open and all-embracing philosophy. Its message includes confronting problems face to face, rather than pushing them away with an insular mindset filled with disdain. Spiritually speaking, those qualities we spurn in others are very likely ones we are suppressing in ourselves, and being suppressed have to find new ways to get our attention. They come to us disguised as others.

Nataraja Guru evades the puzzle of "well to do" by pointing out that in the Vedic sense it would mean spiritually well to do, not just materially. Yet that aspect is covered in the next verse. Regardless, the idea is that as you make progress in a spiritual endeavor, your environment (in all senses) becomes more conducive to furthering your progress. Dedication produces its

own momentum, which reinforces the dedication, and so on in an endless feedback loop. On that we can all agree, I hope.

42) Else he is born in a family of wise yogis only. A birth like this is very rare to obtain in this world.

Being pure and well to do is a rare enough combination for anyone's family, but wise yogis are as scarce as hen's teeth. Since the widespread institution of chastity for monks and yogis, which mainly took place after the Gita's time, being born among wise yogis must have become vastly more rare. If people truly believed in reincarnation, or evolution for that matter, it would seem they would encourage saints to reproduce.

Actually, living with saintly parents as a child would most likely be terrible, because they would be too busy to pay much attention to you. The real optimal childhood would be among simple but open-minded folk who had a lot of time to interact with you. People who love children. Being a wise yogi must include loving and caring for children, then. This indicator obviously favors mothers, whose love for their offspring is supreme, as the wisest yogis among us.

One hundred people will have at least ninety different notions of how to raise children, and many of their theories will be polar opposites of good care. The more we want to craft someone else's life for them, the more damage we may do. The more doctrinaire our ideas, the more they engender a mismatch with a child's actual needs. Even the best-intentioned parents are frequently unaware of how much pressure they put on their children and how much pain they cause by trying to channel them into the "right" path. Thus happenstance seems to be as good a program as any for optimal child development.

Beyond these somewhat tangential considerations is the nub of the matter. *Kula* is the word used here for family. A *kula* of wise yogis could well refer to the family of a guru, a *gurukula*, rather than a birth family. Knowing how children like to reject what they

think their parents' interests are, this is probably the kind of family meant here. The birth referred to then must represent the moment when we discover and accept our true spiritual family, which often follows a substantial contemplative gestation period, and not our physical birth as an infant. We enter our family of wise yogis when we are ready to benefit from the adoption, usually as adults. Life does seem to work that way—when we are ready to take a step in our spiritual development, circumstances will favor it. If we are welcomed into a cogent and supportive community, it is one of the rarest and most beneficial blessings we could ever hope for.

43) There he obtains that union with reason, pertaining to a previous body, and strives thence again for perfection.

At the beginning of the next chapter, Krishna will note the extreme rarity of dedicated seekers of truth. We may wonder why those few are driven to probe for truth in the first place. Where does that impetus come from? This section provides one possible answer.

It is certainly mysterious why some people are drawn to ponder the Absolute while most are too busy coping with the demands of everyday living to give it more than a passing thought. Beyond the workings of Luck, Chance and Fate, past life impetus is a reasonable speculation. The very souls who have put a lot of energy into connecting with the Absolute in a previous existence may find themselves impelled by curiosity welling up inside them. When a force emerges from the unconscious like that, it is only reasonable to attribute it to some cause beyond conscious selection. The concept of *vasanas*, dealt with earlier, covers this idea.

Becoming united with reason, *buddhi*, means that the *vasanas* or unconscious urges from past experience are able to resonate with the intelligence to bring about a conscious program of action. These are the kind of *vasanas* that we need to support and enhance rather than suppress. We are fortunate indeed if the vagaries of fate align with us in this endeavor.

Enthusiasm is the rare quality that impels us to strive for perfection in any field. The word comes from the Greek *en theos*, meaning “the god within,” or “possessed or inspired by a god.” Similarly, the new term for psychedelics is entheogen, meaning “generating or accessing the god within.” These terms are reminders that our inner determination and enthusiasm to seek truth, bliss, or any other form of excellence, erupt from a mysterious depth inside. Enthusiasm is far from a conscious choice. It is almost as if there were a separate divine being taking possession of us, but the Gita, like modern rationalism, treats it as an integral part of who we are in a holistic sense. The god within is who we in fact are.

While it’s difficult to generate enthusiasm once it has been extinguished, with effort it can be revived. It is a kind of reservoir, biding its time until it is invited to pour forth once more. Knowing there is a tremendous potential somewhere within us is of inestimable value. All the same, much of our enthusiasm is not dependent on how we conceptualize it. It takes a lot of hard work to damp it down. If we are born into favorable circumstances, our environment will support us in enthusiastically working toward perfection rather than demanding we bottle it up and become submissive.

The word *genius* has a similar derivation, originally referring to an attendant spirit or deity specific to each person. Modern theories of genius accept a powerful inner drive common to all healthy human beings, which is eventually suppressed in most but continues to burn as a bright flame in a few. Spirituality can be seen as the set of attempts to rekindle the spark of genius within and fan it to a roaring blaze. As Krishna says in IV, 11, there are many ways to do this, and sooner or later we will hit on the one best suited to us: “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.”

44) By the former practice itself he is drawn on, though disabled; as one merely desiring to know of yoga, he transcends the Absolute of sound.

Continuing the theme of the previous verse, it is very curious how some people are drawn to investigate yoga or read books like the Gita, and others have no such inclinations. Getting to the point where investigating the meaning of life is not only intriguing but of overriding importance is probably the first essential step on the spiritual path. Inscrutable though it is, it can readily be attributed to past life efforts, as is done here. For that matter, our early childhood is remote enough to qualify as a past life for most of us. However we conceive it, enthusiasm wells up from the depths and impels us to develop our expertise. It seems like it must be coming from far away, from outside of us. It should make us very grateful to the currents that carry us along despite our ignorance of where we are going.

The phrase “though disabled,” probably meaning “as though disabled,” is intended to indicate that there is an inner pressure that impels the former yogi to move into supportive circles, without any conscious deliberation. The stories of how spiritual seekers came to their chosen path are filled with sweet “coincidences” and “accidents.” Mozart and other geniuses at birth are the poster children for such inexplicable fortunes and abilities, but we may all benefit—or suffer—from some kind of karmic impulse that we don’t seem to deserve. Positive opportunities are appearing all the time, to everybody, but we mostly let them slip by unheeded.

I recall a friend of mine who was doing poorly in her high school math class. She used to skip the class and go to the library instead. One day she stumbled upon a copy of the Bhagavad Gita. There was nothing like it in all her experience, but she read it eagerly, even though it made almost no sense to her. Years later that karmic seed burst into growth when she happened to see a notice in the local newspaper that someone named Swami Nitya was going to teach a class on the Gita. She immediately decided to

attend, and quickly became one of his closest disciples, and that stimulating connection turned out to be the most important part of her life by far. Someone else lacking her inner preparedness would most likely have taken one glance at that book on the shelf and quickly moved on to something more familiar. What was it in her that guided her hand to that book? We can call it her inner guru, but that doesn't begin to explain the phenomenon, it's just a name for it. At least Krishna's lesson should make us more alert to the possibilities swirling in the air around us.

Transcending the Absolute of sound (*sabdabrahma*) calls for an explanation. In Chapter XV we will meet three Absolutes: a manifested, an unmanifested, and an utterly transcendental Absolute. Sound being considered the highest form of manifestation in Upanishadic times, Krishna must be referring to the first of these. The manifested Absolute is roughly equal to the usual concept of God, or the totality of creation in the materialist view. Heaven worlds would reside in it, and Krishna is forever counseling that the seeker go beyond such intermediate stages.

Radhakrishnan says that the *sabdabrahma* refers to the teachings of the Veda. This verse then fits in perfectly with the Gita's theme of transcending the teachings of religion to attain the Absolute. The Maitri Upanishad (VI, 22-23) discusses the Sound Absolute at length. It says that there are two Absolutes, sound and non-sound. The Sound Absolute is Aum, and one uses it to go beyond to the higher, non-sound state. Also, by closing the ears and meditating on the sound one hears in the space of the heart, one goes beyond it to the ultimate peace. The Maitri teaches we should reverence both the sound and the non-sound Absolutes, the lower and the higher, together. More of Krishna's discussion of the manifested and unmanifested will be found in Chapter XII.

45) But the yogi who strives with perseverance, purified from evils, and perfected by many births, then reaches the supreme path.



If gently drifting with the currents will eventually carry the lackadaisical yogi to the highest goal, how much more efficacious is it to strive, to put energy into the prospect?

Krishna is speaking in Arjuna's terms still, with the reference to a path. In the next chapter Krishna makes it plain that being established in unity with the Absolute is the highest path. In Chapter VIII, the Imperishable is called the highest path. We can only conclude that the highest path is not a path at all. It is the state of union with the Supreme. It can only be called a path because life doesn't stop with realization, it continues, blazing with light. The path resembles the wake of a ship that is cutting its own path across the waters.

If we think of evils unitively, they are merely instances of ignorance, blind spots that trip us up of our own volition. They are our own weaknesses, not afflictions from without. We will never overcome them if we blame them on external forces, which is a clever way our ego diverts attention away from anything that threatens its imaginary dominance. We have so many tricks to avoid self-correction! Possibly the single most important effort of the yogi is to invert all the energy expended on outward criticism to inward examination and reform instead.

Continuing to skirt the speculative (and diversionary) issue of physical reincarnation, the many births Krishna mentions can be easily thought of as epiphanies in our present life, flashes of insight that lead us out of the valley of the shadow. Every time we forge a previously unprogrammed mental connection or firmly renounce one of our faults, it marks the birth of a new version of ourselves. The evolution of our psyche is like a series of deaths of our old self, to be replaced by a revised version. Superficial changes are mere window dressing, but transformations that are substantial enough to rewire our neurology are significant steps toward the ideal of perfection, which in this context means union with the Absolute. We have a long way to go—many, many births, in this very life—but that's a good thing.

46) The yogi is greater than men of austerity, and he is thought to be greater than men of wisdom, and greater than men of works; therefore become a yogi, Arjuna.

The three main paths to enlightenment in the popular mind are listed here as inferior to the Gita's version of psychodynamic yoga. Krishna is wrapping up his bolstering of Arjuna's confidence with an exhortation that he aim for the highest: "Since it is the best, become a yogi, Arjuna!"

*Austerity* calls to mind the multitude of practices, some of which are also called yoga, that are intended to improve the practitioner. Over time these have become less and less arduous, which is just as well. As previously noted, their main thrust is to suppress the ego through self-discipline, sometimes bordering on self-flagellation. Krishna is not denying their possible efficacy, only that they aren't as good as yoga in the form of unitive wisdom and action. They are generally unpleasant and relatively useless, and mainly appeal to people who have been taught to despise or at least undervalue themselves. Nonetheless they are widely popular. In healthy yoga, the ego is readjusted—either inflated or deflated depending on its starting posture—to become normalized. The I-sense has an important role in the overall scheme of consciousness, and both its suppression and its over-inflation are fraught with hazards. Only when it is just the right size does it settle into its modest and proper role, no longer imparting a spin of selfish bias onto every encounter.

*Wisdom* is usually translated here as knowledge, in order to make the subtle distinction with yoga easier. But the word is wisdom all right. Erudition guided by wisdom can be extremely beneficial, and hence the qualification that yoga is "thought to be greater" applied to this category alone. But wisdom in yoga is dynamic, while without yoga it can be academic, detached from a meaningful relation to life. Yogic wisdom actively engages with whatever arises. If wisdom in any way becomes an end in itself, dissociated from a sense of purpose, it falls short of its potential.

*Works* refers to ritual actions, or really, actions in general, where it is thought that simply carrying them out is all that is required. A lot of people think that doing something nice for someone else makes them a spiritual person. Religions like to suggest well-defined activities to foster team spirit. Many of them extol “good works” of one kind or another as the high road to holiness.

Well-intentioned actions are more or less admirable within a horizontal context, certainly, but they don’t have anything to do with enlightenment. At their best they are performed by those who are following the example of other enlightened beings, hoping that by following their footsteps they might attain the same exalted state. Their very arbitrariness blunts their spiritual value and makes the practitioner less flexible than they should be. At their worst, “good works” are a lightly veiled form of abuse and manipulation, as in evangelizing and charlatanism.

All three methods have their pluses and minuses, but they tend to be somewhat static, while a direct relationship with the Absolute is flexible and dynamic. Yoga is praised here as the best way to open yourself up to that dynamism.

One of my favorite comments by Nataraja Guru in his Gita is appended to this verse, and I take the liberty of reprinting it here:

Mere *tapas* (austerity) as it is known in the field of Indian spirituality, is a severe form of joyless self-discipline. The jnani is a wise man who might at best belong to the Samkhya (rationalist) or Nyaya (logical) philosophical schools, whose life is based on reasoning which generally ends up with sophistications and academic discussions, by themselves dry as dust. Likewise the ritualist tends to become ego-centered and harshly exclusive. Yoga generally understood is both a way of thinking and a way of life. The yogi is a dialectician who harmonizes old in terms of new and *vice-versa*, and is capable of giving fresh life to arguments which otherwise

would be dead or stale. The breeze of a fresh life enlivens the ways of a yogi.

Each of the types of spirituality referred to here, when they are taken according to a yogic method or theory of knowledge, become, as it were, transmuted. This verse states the superiority of such a yogic way in both practical and theoretical matters.

Krishna's simple and poignant call still echoes down to us through the ages: Don't settle for mediocrity! Become a yogi, O Arjuna.

47) Of all yogis, he who with inner Self is merged in me, full of faith, devoted to Me, is considered by Me the most unitive.

Despite their superlative character, the first six chapters are in a sense preliminary, laying the groundwork for the more nuanced discussion to follow. We are now properly prepared, and Krishna is summing up his teachings to this point. It should be clear that a deep affiliation with the Absolute brings about unity, with its consequently natural faith and devotion. Their use here is very far from being a religious cliché.

We have faith in what we know. As we come to know with greater clarity, a level of confidence that few people feel begins to grow in us. Knowledge that is oriented toward the Absolute rather than some will-o-the-wisp means it is intelligent. It is by no means the docile acceptance of truisms, but more like a sweeping away of all obstacles. We have faith that by overcoming our faults we can be happier and more effective. We have faith that by seeking we will find, that by loving our hearts will grow bigger. And so we do all these things with enthusiasm.

Similarly, devotion is not to be taken in the sense of bowing to some idol or fixed set of beliefs. Devotion means holding firm to the focus of our life, and not being constantly led off into tangents by all the glitz and glamour of the world. Artists are devoted to their art, businesspeople to their commercial

enterprises, athletes to their sport, religious types to their worship, and scientists to their research. If they can see or even merely visualize the unity blending all actions together in a web of life, it adds an extra, crucial dimension to their pursuit. Then no matter what field a person is drawn to, is devoted to, there is an excitement and dedication in them that lifts them to excellence.

In honor of the great teacher who made this present commentary possible, and whose spirit looms large within it, I'd like to close this chapter with another quote from Nitya's Verse 38 commentary in *That Alone*, (p. 265):

In the sixth chapter of the Gita Krishna says, "Be established in me. What makes a thing what it is, is its beingness. A thing becomes stable because of its beingness. Know me to be that beingness. Without me nothing can be, because I am the beingness. After having found it, feel devoted to it. Let your love flow toward it as the one beingness in all, as the one beingness which makes truth truthful, goodness good, beauty beautiful, love endearing."

You cultivate this through constant meditation. I am not speaking of meditation as sitting cross-legged with eyes closed, or some such. Life itself is a meditation. Everything passing in our life is a theme of meditation. When you say "this exists" and "this does not exist," what enables you to say it is that beingness. That is what we are asked to adore as the one God. It is up to your taste to call it God, or the Supreme Principle, or the one reality, or beingness, or what you poetically feel within you as the greatest empathy you can have, the sense of beauty you feel as an artist, the great love you feel as a lover. In all these there is a substantiality of beingness. You sense it from your heart.

Then the Gita says to see That as your own central reality. You are constantly saying "I am, I am, I am." What assures you of that "I am" is the light within you. "I am That" is just like saying "I am that I am." See it as the Absolute in you.

Thus, having found beingness as the reality of everything, and as your own reality, it is easy to see that the real in you and the real in all other things are the same. This is how you gain the secret of sameness, *samyam*. It will bring you great serenity, great peace.