

CHAPTER VII: Jnana-Vijnana Yoga

The Unitive Way of Wisdom Synthesis

Many people imagine that wisdom comes from memorizing a program and following it; as a matter of fact this is the opposite of wisdom. Wisdom synthesis is a way of opening up to our inner genius, which has its own trajectory that is only impeded by attempts to fit it into known channels. It is the very energy that causes us to burst our bonds and expand our consciousness, always latent within us, but suppressed by our conditioning.

As we have noted before, Upanishadic philosophy includes a structural image like a cross, with the vertical parameter representing pure or abstract wisdom, and the horizontal parameter practical, specific knowledge, among other things. While these are to be distinguished, they are also to be reciprocally related in an integral fashion for harmonious living. We laugh at egghead scientists who can't remember to button their fly or find their way home from the store, and we pity the hardworking souls who are never able to lift their noses from the grindstone. The former exaggerate the vertical aspect and the latter the horizontal. Integrating wisdom and knowledge, jnana and vijnana, overcomes both kinds of travesty. More than that, it opens the floodgates within us to admit creativity and optimize our life.

1) Krishna said:

Having a mind attached to Me, Arjuna, joining unitively through yoga, and having Me as refuge, how you will know Me without any doubt, comprehensively, that do hear.

There is all the difference in the world between having clear ideas *about* God or the Absolute and actually experiencing It. Henri Bergson spoke of two ways of knowing a thing, either by viewing it from various angles from the outside or by grasping the whole from the inside. He used the familiar image of Notre Dame

Cathedral. A visitor could send any number of picture postcards to a friend, but no matter how many of those viewpoints were compiled they could never fully convey the profundity of the experience of being inside it.

Sanskrit distinguishes knowledge (vijñana) and wisdom (jñana) in just the same way. We are attracted to knowledge because it describes the actual world and appears to be undeniably real, but it is actually like Bergson's pile of postcards, or the flashcards of the academic student, a substitute interpretation overlaid on the real. Wisdom, on the other hand, is experiential, a knowing from within. Intuitive knowing and descriptive knowing are often at odds, but when they are commensurate they enhance each other. That is the goal of this seventh chapter, and it is a key aspect of spiritual progress.

Normally, humans are prone to distort reality to fit our preconceptions: the ideas come first, and then the experience is trimmed to fit. As in the Greek myth of Procrustes, who chopped up his visitors to fit his overly small guest bed, reality is massacred in the process. Wisdom enlarges the receiving bed, so to speak, so it can accommodate any and all visitors. From the opposite direction, some seekers of wisdom believe in utter detachment from practical concerns. Ranging through the mental cosmos unfettered by any ethical considerations, they may unintentionally leave a trail of devastation in their wake, in part because of the unacknowledged propensities for selfishness and violence lurking in the depths of the brain, or else simply by not caring, where paying attention would be invaluable. Not all inner inspiration is benign. This is where a reference with actual circumstances is essential, so that consequences can be considered and addressed. Because of this, a happy marriage of our inner genius with our outer awareness is the Gita's ideal.

Spiritually inclined humans spend much of their free time speculating about the Absolute, which is fine and interesting and uplifting as far as it goes, but only a few achieve the mystical connection that somehow provides a direct experience of it. Those

who do are transformed in every cell of their being; those who don't continue to speculate and entertain doubts, striving to amass an adequate description of the Indescribable. Because of all the time spent mucking about, they may imagine they are more in touch with the subject than they actually are, and so become exaggerated or even fanatical about their beliefs.

Doubts are useful to the extent that they prevent premature conclusions based on a limited compilation of external facts, but the certitude that arises from internal participation in the Absolute instantly sweeps them aside as no longer necessary. Needless to say, the Gita aims to bring about such a direct connection. It is not interested in depicting a particular state in contradistinction with some other state, based on clever arguments, but offers an all-encompassing, global realization to those aiming to go beyond limited perspectives.

2) I shall teach you the (pure) wisdom together with this (applied) knowledge, without any omission, knowing which there will be nothing more here left over that should be known.

As already noted, jnana is pure wisdom and vijnana is applied knowledge, just as today we have pure and applied science. The traditional distinction is that knowledge applied to liberation is jnana, while that applied to the world is vijnana. In Bergson's analogy above, the interior experience of the cathedral represents wisdom, and the piles of postcard snapshots are knowledge. Any proper dichotomy should divide existence in such a way that nothing is omitted from the picture, and that is what Krishna wishes to offer. It would take an extremely large book to include all knowledge of any significance, and luckily for us that is not his intent when he vows to leave nothing out.

A favorite analogy of the Upanishads is that if you know the taste of water in one place, you know the taste of water everywhere. In all cases, knowing the essence excuses you from personally investigating every single manifestation of it. The

essence is of course the Absolute itself. Taste is the most essential quality of the Absolute as its qualities are listed in this chapter, beginning with verse 8. “Seek ye first the kingdom of God and all things will be added unto you,” is the Biblical version of the same truth.

The middle third of the Gita, which begins here, turns our attention from Arjuna’s development to focus on the Absolute. This roughly corresponds to knowledge transitioning into wisdom as well; we might say Arjuna comes to the guru distressed by knowledge and Krishna offers him the salve of wisdom. The final third will explain how to integrate the two aspects into a life lived with expertise.

The Guru’s offer to freely teach comprehensive understanding in the language of the disciple is a perennial consecration. Many of the Beatles’ songs do the same, sometimes from the point of view of the worshipper, and sometimes from the One Beyond calling, calling, calling to us to arise to our full potential, as when we are welcomed by them as “Michelle”:

Michelle, ma belle

These are words that go together well.... [as name and form]

I love you, I love you, I love you

that's all I want to say

Until I find a way

I will say the only words I know you'll understand

I need to, I need to, I need to

I need to make you see

Oh, what you mean to me

Until I do I'm hoping you will know what I mean

I love you

I want you, I want you, I want you

I think you know by now

I'll get to you some how
Until I do I'm telling you so you'll understand....

And I will say the only words I know that you'll understand
My Michelle

3) Among thousands of men, one perchance strives for perfection. Even among the striving who have attained, one perchance knows Me according to proper principles.

No one should be surprised that grasping the Absolute is tougher than catching a greased pig at a county fair. There are many, many stumbling blocks to forming a more perfect union with the Ineffable, all of which will be discussed in various parts of the Gita. It seems Krishna wants Arjuna to think about them right here at the outset of serious instruction, so he doesn't lose his fortitude and become just another spiritual dropout. We could list some of the major barriers to enlightenment briefly as:

- projections (overlying imaginary values on worthless pursuits)
- distractions (changing horses frequently in mid-stream)
- complacency (laziness or smugness)
- image worship (fixating on stills from a moving picture)
- dogma (inflexibility and narrow-mindedness)
- improper instruction (pursuing tangential issues)
- sensitivity to criticism (a type of distraction where the ego seeks to repair its image rather than discarding it)
- interference by vasanas/samskaras (delusions upwelling from the unconscious strata)

It is very helpful for the serious student to really ponder what might go wrong along the path, so they can avoid at least some obstacles. It's like giving the navigator on the Titanic a radar screen to watch out for icebergs. Hitting any one of those babies will sink your ship if you don't watch out!

Most proposed solutions to humankind's problems merely seek to substitute a new set of rules for the old, and none of them succeed for very long. Our only hope is to rediscover our ground in the Absolute, thereby recognizing the unity of all creation and beginning to realize our own ability to act in harmony with that unity. Then we can think on our feet and meet every situation with our best effort, unhampered by inflexible strictures. These are the proper principles referred to in this verse.

Unfortunately, just as humanity is showing signs of such an awakening, entrenched religious, corporate, and governmental interests have redoubled their efforts to maintain the shepherd/sheep dichotomy; in other words, the sharp division between the rulers and the followers of their rules. You are forced to "go along to get along," as my midlevel bosses repeated often in my career. Thus it is that only one in a thousand dares to seek their own naturally unified state. Moreover, only one in a thousand of those seekers succeeds, because of the difficulty. With a united effort we could post much better numbers. But the fear of loss of income or prestige is a powerful motivator in favor of the status quo and the abandonment of liberty, no matter how stark the discrepancy with our ideology. We learn to suppress our normal feelings, to stay hidden in a metaphorical closet. Human cattle ranching is therefore a relatively simple enterprise, all too often uncritically abetted by the cattle themselves.

A lot of basic human development is necessary to prepare a person for a bipolar relationship with the Absolute. Krishna's final exhortation to "do as you please" at the end of the work can go seriously awry in an immature or selfish mind. The pool of candidates for seeking the Absolute is bound to be small, and includes only those who have achieved inner stability. A repressed personality suddenly allowed to channel the uncoiling springs of its bondage will careen all over the map, causing damage to itself and others and most definitely not growing well at all.

Parents usually find that their children need to become socialized before they can transcend the restrictions of

socialization. They need to learn how to cross the street safely, learn to read, learn to respect other people and property. Although children are born from the womb of the Absolute, remaining undeveloped is a recipe for disaster. Sadly though, after all the training, most kids merely acquiesce to their prescribed duties or role in life. Only a few will eventually look for the door of the prison.

Among those who have miraculously passed through childhood and social conditioning with a harmonious mind intact, or who have reached it through education and therapy, there is plenty of room to still miss the mark. Religious entrapment and charismatic charlatans pull many sincere seekers into blind alleys where they may reemerge only after some shock clears their eyes. Consumer advertising plays a similar role to religion in mesmerizing the sheep and fleecing them. The ego itself is a master trickster, capable of protecting its precarious perch as a mini-potentate by fostering self-delusion. No wonder the Gita advises finding a wise preceptor to help us overcome the myriad obstacles to knowing the Absolute “according to proper principles.”

The intent of this verse becomes even clearer if we think of the “Me” of the Absolute as equivalent to “understanding.” To “think of Me” then could be read as to “strive for understanding.” Only a rare person is interested in understanding, in either the specific or general sense of the term. That is, they aren’t interested in the details of why a particular thing bothers them, they just know it bothers them. Period. End of story. Or else they don’t care to look beyond the present circumstances to discern any overarching pattern, such as the reason things happen, the cause behind events. They don’t need to know that matter is comprised of atoms, for instance, they just take matter for granted. Most treat looking below the surface as a waste of time, or even as threatening to their peace of mind, which they equate with not rocking the boat, not uncovering too much of the seamy underbelly

of the world. They were taught to follow the rules, and that's all they need to do. Following rules is hard work, and it takes a lot of energy and a lot of compensatory recreation and medication to make it palatable. But all our training points in that direction, so we acquiesce. Breaking out of bondage is also hard work, but it becomes easier and easier as the seeker comes into alignment with their natural flow.

Of the small number who do find themselves interested in probing the meaning of what is taking place around them, they are still faced with a supremely difficult puzzle. Comprehensive understanding isn't simply lying around somewhere, neatly packaged, waiting for seekers to dig it up. It is a very subtle business, with only a remote possibility of being finally resolved. History shows us that very often one generation's facts are the next generation's fallacies. Some seekers of truth are content with only a superficial assessment as the final word; others accept what they are told by authority figures; still others lose heart or get distracted by happenstance. Ultimately, only one in a million achieves anything approaching a satisfactory level of understanding.

The first thousand under reference are the multitudes that busy themselves with mundane matters—getting and spending and all that. Only the rare individual wants to know the meaning of life, and how to detach from all that ceaseless and circumscribed activity. This is not at all surprising. It is the rarity of the second order of magnitude that makes us wonder.

Many of those who “seek the heavens” (Tolkien) or “dance to a different drummer” (Thoreau) initially feel superior that they are “far from the madding crowd” (Hardy). Unfortunately, the vast majority are merely looking to replace an old, outdated formula with a more modern, up-to-date one. Or a more ancient and venerable one. They believe that by learning a few rote phrases or ideas or following some prescribed practice they have accomplished all that is possible. But Krishna assures us that the Absolute cannot be reached by any formula. Only the rare soul

who dares to step outside all artificial barriers has the potential to meet it face to face.

There is a world of difference between the rare individual in touch with their dharma who truly marches to the beat of a nonconforming drummer, and those who only read or hear about it and then fantasize and dream about different drummers in a romantic way, but timidly stick close to the tried and true. The latter make up the 999 of the second thousand who don't know the Absolute according to proper principles.

A brief survey of history will show us that even the most perfect formula quickly becomes a stale cliché. Humanity preserves the best prescriptions the longest, but over time they lose their vital relevance and become empty strings of syllables. The second thousand is mainly made up of repeaters of improved slogans, but who are not striving to learn their meaning. There is really very little to separate them from their mundane brethren. They want a code of laws to cling to. They are not interested in real matters of the spirit, "written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone, but in fleshy tables of the heart." (2 Corinthians 3:1)

One in a thousand thousands is one in a million, the very phrase used today to indicate maximum rarity. If it were as common as one in a million, there would be more than 7,000 enlightened humans on earth at present. Probably the true figure is more like one in a billion. But Krishna is trying to teach something more than simple rarity. He wants us to avoid the easy pitfalls of spiritual egotism. We must ask ourselves if we are simply acting out our old habits dressed in fancy clothing, and thereby disguising our shortcomings from ourselves. Can we dare to stand naked in our own candid assessment? Or must we always dwell in a "culture of make believe," (Derrick Jensen) in order to validate ourselves in the eyes of others? Who will dare to make their life real?

If there is any scripture that should be viewed as not peddling a formula but recommending transcending all formulas, the Bhagavad Gita is it.

4) Earth, water, fire, air, sky, mind, reason, and also consciousness of individuality—thus, here is divided My eightfold nature.

Interestingly, but perhaps not surprisingly, the Absolute's eightfold nature is also *our* nature as human beings. The first five of these elements—the universal four elements, found throughout the ancient world, along with their unifying fifth or quint-essence—will be discussed under the next verse. For now we will examine mind and reason, along with ego, which in Indian wisdom simply specifies the awareness and maintenance of individuality.

Vedantins distinguish mind from reason or intellect somewhat differently than we do now. Briefly, mind is the material aspect and reason the nonmaterial, as in brain and thought. Mind is the master coordinator of sensory input, the part that creates a story to account for whatever happens and then presents it to awareness. Neurobiologists study the mind, while psychologists—at least of the old school—address the reasoning faculty and its adjuncts. The relation of mind to intellect is akin to that between the body and its performance. Just as a body without activity is dead, a mind without intellection is meaningless, or what the ancients called ignorant. The nonmaterial aspect relies on the material aspect, but animates it, brings it to life. Mind is thus a kind of launching platform for flights of comprehension and intuition.

What most people vaguely call the mind is broken down into four parts in traditional Indian psychology. Here in the Gita, *cittam*, memory, is blended into the other three, or else it was simply omitted because it didn't fit the meter. A "thought experiment" illustrates this fourfold process very well.

In a class I was teaching I got everyone to focus on me, and for the briefest instant pulled an apple out of my briefcase, held it up, and tucked it out of sight again. While it was held up I asked "What is this?" The entire process took about a second.

The students, working in pairs, each filled a whole page with ideas about what “this” was, which we then collected. These ranged from applelike concepts to mythological associations, urban legends and arcane references. My guess is there were also lots of thoughts held in check as to why we were spending time on something so trivial.

Here’s why: the process illustrates how the mind works. In the Indian scheme, *manas* or mind is the first stage, the questioning part of us that continually asks “What is this?” We are biologically hardwired as well as psychologically conditioned to direct our mental energy toward identifying our surroundings so as to avoid danger and seek pleasure and sustenance. (This can also be a technique to discover the Absolute, if “What is this?” is accompanied by *neti neti*, whereby all identifiable thises are subtracted from the solution; but that’s another story. We almost always focus on identifiable thises.)

In response to “What is this?” the *cittam*, the memory banks, recall similar items from the past. Nothing is ever forgotten, so every damn apple you’ve ever met is in there. This is only one of the astounding miracles of existence we casually take for granted, how those thousands of relevant memories are reactivated in the blink of an eye. If we didn’t zip ahead to the next step, they would keep parading before our mind’s eye indefinitely.

But very quickly *buddhi*, the intellect, kicks in with its identification. A name label is our handy way of epitomizing the identity of something. Though the process is too fast for anyone to notice, each class member had the nearly instantaneous answer to my question, that “This is an apple.”

And lastly, the *ahamkara*, the ‘I’ or ego sense, brings in its personal preferences and concludes “Apples are good. They are food. They are not dangerous. I like apples.” If we had had someone who had eaten a poisoned apple or was allergic to them, they would have concluded “Apples are bad. I don’t like them. I should avoid them.” A whole string of such associations are

incorporated into an emotional response that epitomizes them in the blink of an eye.

This fourfold process is going on all the time. Why do we care? Because it demonstrates how little of the actual world we are taking in, and how much of it is our highly refined and yes, prejudiced opinion. For most Americans, if I'd held up an Arab, for instance, they would have spewed negative associations for hours, because there was a war on. It wouldn't matter how saintly the person was, the memory links would have been lethal. And most of what we believe comes from propaganda conditioning. This is how we are prepared to fight. We don't have to be coerced, we just have to be convinced. Our own memories are the most convincing things around, but unfortunately the associations we have with them are anything but uncorrupted. It's precisely here we can experience what appears to be certitude, but what is in fact our own skewed opinion rising up to obscure our vision.

The actual source of our thoughts is hardly encountered at all after our first few years of life. This is true with everything, not just the bogeyman of the hour. If I had brought in a wax apple or even a red ball with painted streaks, our minds would have gone through the same process of interpretation and reaction, and identified them as apples. The modern world has piled false images on top of the already false system we operate under. Without a "hands on" examination, we might still believe we had seen an apple even if we hadn't.

If we are ever to emerge from spiritual death and come back to life, to use the traditional imagery, we must open ourselves up to something more than this static reactivity to our surroundings. We must relearn how to "see" the world. Could there be anything more important than this?

The key question is, does the apple really exist or not? Everything we "knew" about it was supplied by us, a tiny amount by our sensory system and the vast majority by our memory banks. Where is the actual apple in all this?

The Indian description of reality is that it has to be as real as a berry in the palm of your hand, in other words, irrefutable, axiomatic. After the thought experiment the apple was diced up and passed around. Since experience is dramatically mediated and truncated by our thoughts, such as “I am now eating an apple,” which brings in the millions of memories of previous apple eating, we turned off the lights and concentrated a moment before eating it. Hopefully there was a brief instant of true experience that transcended all our concepts. Certainly the what-it-was tasted very good and was undeniably eaten. For a millisecond it was “a berry in the palm of our hands.”

5) This is the non-transcendental. Know the other to be My nature, which is transcendental, constituting life, by which the phenomenal world is sustained.

Chapter VII begins with a survey of the main obstacles to unity with the Absolute. The non-transcendental aspects of our being are what we are made of, while the transcendental is who we are in essence. The former conduce to bondage and the latter to liberation. Yet there is an important synthesis here of the duality between nature and spirit (prakriti and purusha) in that both are said to be of the nature of the Absolute. There is no God versus not-God here: all is God. The distinction is between transcendental and non-transcendental, or non-material and material. This is a leap toward unity from the blatantly dualistic Samkhya system of ancient India, and is relevant today especially in contradistinction to the religions that insist that God is wholly Other than we are.

The five elements of the material aspect of existence were mentioned in the previous verse. They signify the first five chakras, along with mind as the sixth and reason as the seventh. Taken together they comprise the individual we take ourselves to be. Chakras, “wheels,” are energy centers vertically arranged along the spine, and tapped into for meditation. The five material elements are symbolic of major aspects of the life that is sustained

by the Absolute, and are listed from the most gross to the most subtle. We address them here because their limiting influence is under discussion. The meaning is barely touched upon, and it is incumbent on the disciple to expand on these ideas through penetrating contemplation.

Earth refers to our physical makeup, and is associated with the lowest chakra, centered at the base of the spine. We are very much limited by our need to fuel and maintain the body. Illness and injury frequently command our attention. To a significant degree we think of ourselves as being our physical body, giving us tunnel vision about who we are. And yet harmonizing the body is the first step in a happy life. We must have bread before philosophy.

Water, associated with the second chakra near the genitals, symbolizes our emotional constitution. Once the physical body is taken care of, our feelings are the next most dominant part of us, coloring how we see the world and ourselves, directing the course of our life much more than our rational thinking does, despite appearances to the contrary. Emotions are highly compressed packets of information that can be either supportive or detrimental depending on their degree of harmony. Our body's changing chemical makeup causes us to feel and act in certain predictable ways, and it is very difficult to live free of traumatized emotional colorations. Mood altering drugs are widely used to try to stabilize the personality and allow it to function uniformly, but they have many terrible side effects. If your life is dictated by drugs it is not free; you are dependent, at the mercy of something external. It is far healthier to harmonize your feelings through study and contemplation, coupled with a corrective course with a guru or therapist if you are fortunate enough to have that option.

Our rational mind is akin to the fire that springs from the fuel of our daily life. With it we take in sensory input and convert it to ideas that throw light on our world. The third chakra is in the region of the solar plexus, where food is digested. The mind similarly digests what is fed into it. We examine our surroundings

and identify their value to us, converting them from dead “logs” into flaming brands. Our mental fire radiates a lot of light if it is not obscured by the smoke of confusion. No one needs to be instructed as to how our mind leads us to do what we do: most of us believe that it is our sole motivator, until insight subverts its dominance. Then we realize we have been led astray by vast amounts of misinterpretation and misinformation. Self-help books and programs mostly work through redirecting the rational mind to healthier pathways. Retraining the mind to openness is a long and difficult process, punctuated by occasional leaps of comprehension, as when humanity finally discovered how the solar system works and volumes of faulty speculation on the movements of the heavenly bodies went instantly out of date.

Air is equated with our vital energies. The oxygen or prana we breathe vitalizes our entire being, and the fourth chakra is near the center of the circulatory system in the lungs and heart. When we live in polluted places, ingesting food containing toxic byproducts and beaming flickering electronic signals into our eyes all day long, our energies shrivel to a low ebb. We need access to fresh air and exercise. Or we artificially enhance our energies temporarily by imbibing “spirits” and other intoxicating substances, but these bouts are always followed by a “crash” of even lower energy. Pure water can flush out the sludge, but we may have to fight through a period of transitional “detox” before regaining our balance. Sadly, many seekers are turned back by the difficulties encountered at this stage of regaining health, and get caught in an interminable cycle of artificial highs and lows.

The sky symbolizes what we glibly refer to as spirit, what we know through intuition and insight. When properly attuned, our spiritual aspect is our direct connection with the absolute Ground, but we are also easily deceived by projections and fantasies originating in our own hopeful wishes. We have to sort out the true from the false and purify our inspiration, or we will be caught in a house of mirrors without an exit. Sky is space, and since it is “empty” we tend to project our own illusions onto it. Intuition

comes like a fresh breeze to quicken the spirit. But we must be careful not to heed false intuition. It is very difficult to distinguish true intuition from wishful thinking, and this is the primary challenge of this fifth chakra to the seeker of truth. Psychologist and dream researcher Stanley Krippner uses the term Newage (rhymes with sewage) to characterize trashy New Age beliefs that are nothing more than addled fantasies. When we speak of words that trip us up, we are referring to this chakra that resides near the larynx.

As noted above, the mind residing in this psychophysical system, symbolized by the third eye or sixth chakra, has four main parts, though the Gita lists only three, combining the memory factor into the mind. The mind is the questioning part: throughout our life we are on the quest of asking questions. We need to know “What is this?” to assure our safety. So the mind goes on asking “what is this, what is this?” endlessly. Out of our memory banks or samskaras we very quickly recover all the relevant associations, abetted by what are loosely called instincts. These are the vasanas, or the genetically programmed memories. Once a positive identification is made, we can relax, or in rare cases we can flee or fight. Assessment of the overall situation in context is done by the intellect or the reasoning faculty, located at the seventh chakra at the top of the skull. Finally, we assert our likes and dislikes in regard to the new input. Our preferences taken as a lump are known as the ego, or the consciousness of our individuality. We think we are who we are because of what we like and what we don’t like.

This system serves wild animals and others in simple survival mode very well. But the questing spirit rapidly becomes dulled by a mind that covers all new experiences with labels and shoves them into pigeonholes constructed at an early stage of life. The so-called midlife crisis occurs when the deadness of this type of living becomes oppressive to the spirit. We want to regain the sense of aliveness we knew as children that is anesthetized by our cleverness in identifying everything instantly. The crisis should

force us to learn how to transcend all our oppressive structures, but all too often we are taught to just put up with them. They are just “life,” after all. Perhaps a little prescription medication or a couple of drinks to make accepting a living death easier. Needless to say, the Gita urges a waking up to full aliveness, not a resigned acceptance of mediocrity.

In this light, we should consider the positive aspects of the chakras too. Their transcendental aspect is covered in verses 9 and 10, but their mundane aspect deserves a mention, as it can be rewarding in its own right. The physical level brings joy and health through sports activities and the art of dance, for instance. Walking is said to be the perfect exercise, gentle and harmonizing. Any physical exercise helps counteract depression. When our emotions are in balance, we feel happy and at peace with the world, and can much more easily participate in whatever endeavor we choose. Calm emotions allow our “ordinary” mind to much more easily tune in with its senses, raising us into a state of expertise, alert and awash with interesting input. Intuition draws forth our best and most artistic abilities. The improvising musician uses intuition to access original melodies and harmonies, the therapist intuits approaches to the patient’s blockages, and the scientist intuits new ways to study the mysteries of nature. Words and music soar when the fifth chakra is in tune. Poets are set free, orators can move crowds to initiate transformation, and great writers enshrine potent truths for all to appreciate. Finally, it is easy to see that when our wisdom and reason are harmonized, free of quirks and perversions, we become centered and happy. These few verses of Chapter VII dealing with the chakras point us to a world of growth that we can access both by meditation and by harmonizing them in actual practice through our living and loving.

6) Know that all beings have this as their common source. I am the becoming as also the dissolution of all this (phenomenal) world.

As noted earlier, the first third of the Gita, consisting of six chapters, focuses on the disciple and what he or she has to do to overcome initial problems. It constructs a theoretical basis for the wisdom of the Absolute. The middle third turns its eye on becoming unified with the Absolute, and the last third melds theory and practice together in a dynamic synthesis. Thus the very structure of the Gita exemplifies yoga dialectics.

Now that we are entering the middle section, we will begin to find examples of how Krishna as a representative of the Absolute is the essence of all things. The secret teaching is to look within all items of manifestation for their core value, which is the Absolute. Such an orientation is extremely profound, making the difference between a life filled with meaning and a meaningless one. Not just make-believe meaning either, but an electrifying, fully convincing, vivid experience of aliveness.

The middle third is therefore about actually tuning in to the Absolute. Arjuna has rejected his social milieu and is seeking a more valid norm on which to base his life. He wants living meaning in place of deadening prescriptions. He is listening intently for an adumbration of the Absolute, a different drummer, so that he might follow a life path grounded in truth.

There is, however, a major paradox in the notion of marching to a different drummer. Very often difference for difference's sake will produce a chaotic, unmusical, tuneless beat. We have to actually hear the invisible drummer of the universe, or else we are only being contrary, negating the tried and true but not yet incorporating anything valuably new. Some of the sterility of twentieth century music, for example, stems from this very contrarian paradigm. And yet, and yet.... Frequently this negation of normality is the first step on a journey of a thousand miles that actually gets somewhere important. Given enough time and development, that different drumbeat may be the wave of the future. It might be worth a try.

Emergent phenomena demonstrate the gist of this very well. Ants and bees have no leader to speak of—the queen is actually

just the egg-layer. Humans call her a queen because of anthropomorphic prejudice. Her importance comes from being the sole source of manifestation for the colony rather than ruling it. In any case, she doesn't give orders; the insects intuitively know what to do on their own. Individual ants are like individual synapses in the human brain. On their own they are essentially helpless and even stupid. But put them together and, leaderless though they are, they begin to march to that different drummer. Well anyway, a drummer. An emergent intelligence becomes palpable. The insects work together, following their inner promptings, to achieve astonishing things. If any ant decides to go their own way, they will either die or fortuitously start a trend in a new direction. It's impossible to predict, but the colony needs explorers of new terrain to increase its options and find new food sources. At the same time, depending on many factors, the contrary ant may simply become irrelevant, just wandering off to disappear.

From the standpoint of a detached observer, random ants broaden the spectrum of possibilities, extending the options and reach of the whole colony. From within the group, these rebels may look very "wrong" as they stray away from the tried and true path to the crumb pile. And they may turn out to be "wrong," or they may find a new treasure trove. One thing for sure, those who keep to the beaten path will seldom encounter serendipitous edible stockpiles. But there is a great perfection in having both antisocial explorers and social conformists. Either type by itself would not make for a healthy or dynamic species.

Humans need to act in concert with each other, as much as ants or bees, in order to maintain a complex society. The fantasy of the lone pioneer struggling wholly on his own against overwhelming odds or the hip chick who doesn't need anything she doesn't already have are just that: fantasies. Our lives are built on the provisions of others, to the extent that we very rarely contribute anything truly new ourselves. And this dependence, while more or less constraining, also frees us to do really wonderful things, because we are not occupied all the livelong day

with providing all our necessities from scratch. There is a subtle dialectic here that most people miss, becoming instead protagonists of one extreme position or the other.

The crux of the matter is that we want to be free of arbitrary social engineering of our lives, but only so that we can tune in to the harmony of the natural flow. The stream of our consciousness is quite wise when it is grounded in the Absolute, but it more often gets canalized by unwise manipulators in positions of power and authority. These latter have ever claimed that they take their orders from the Absolute or God, and their dictates might even work if such were indeed the case. But they are lying, as history amply demonstrates, and they will keep lying as long as it attracts willing slaves to their cause.

I am well aware that fascist dictators including Hitler have also been enthralled with the beehive analogy. Rest assured the Absolute is utterly democratic, embracing non-conformists and conformists without distinction. The most serious of the many flaws of dictatorship is to imagine you know all the factors involved in life. Invariably a few simplistic ideas are overlaid on the entire spectrum of possibilities, and anyone who doesn't fit the mold is treated very cruelly. Totalitarianism in any form is therefore a freezing of the human spirit, an incarnation of hatred. Chapter XVI includes a harsh criticism of such attitudes, the only place Krishna is so ferocious in the entire Bhagavad Gita.

We humans tolerate a lot of latitude in those above us in the pecking order because when wise leaders guide the colony well it produces a low-hassle social structure with a lot of freedom. So we're inclined to give them the benefit of the doubt. It's only when we come up against the blind king, the psychotic leader, or the morally bankrupt corporation, that we become painfully aware that power really does corrupt, and our allegiance is misplaced. Then, in order to regain a meaningful connection with the intelligent flow of the world—otherwise called evolution—we have to break our dependency on flawed leadership and tune in in new ways to beneficial undertakings. Sensitivity to the invisible side of life and

frank admission of our innate limitations will open us up to positive motivations as no absolutist monarch ever can. The example of the decentralized and leaderless ant farm or beehive that bustles or hums with meaningful activity can inspire us to take the plunge. They are truly democratic in ways the human race has barely begun to experiment with.

7) Nothing else is higher than Me. In Me all this is strung as a classified series of precious beads on a string.

The Golden Thread of the Absolute is the unifying factor in everything conceivable and perceivable, the vertical essence within all horizontal actuality. Without such a unifying factor, the many fields of interest would stand alone, unrelated to outwardly dissimilar fields. The vision of all things being related implies an absolute connection somewhere behind their surface appearance.

In the Cartesian system of horizontal and vertical coordinate axes, which looks like an equal-armed cross, the horizontal axis represents manifestation ranging from perceivable objects on the positive side to their corresponding mental concepts on the negative side. The vertical axis represents the essence of the perceiving and conceiving entity on its journey from inception or conception at the negative pole to full expression or realization at the positive end. Having no horizontal component, the vertical resembles the thinnest possible thread, yet it serves to knit the whole into a meaningful ensemble. Without it our life would be a series of disconnected incidents. With it there is continuity through life. In the English language this is even represented by a picture of the vertical axis: I.

When we examine our life history, we can easily perceive the thread of our I-sense that has continued through the millions of specific incidents that comprise it. Krishna has that same sense about the whole universe, and is describing it here.

In the Gita's philosophy the ego and the I-sense are not the same. The ego is the coordinator of personal preferences, the

ahamkara, while the I-sense is the self, the spark of the Absolute called atman. It is very helpful to distinguish between them.

There are many possible series within manifestation, possibly the best description of which is Narayana Guru's *Darsanamala*, a garland of Visions, where all aspects of life are divided into ten major psychological categories strung together on a golden thread like a flower garland.

If the context is overlooked and the present verse examined in isolation, it isn't clear what the 'this' is that is connected by the unifying thread of the Absolute. But Krishna has just enumerated the series in question in verse 4: it is the self. The first seven categories correspond to the chakras (somatic energy centers) from lowest to highest, and the eighth, the ego sense, can be considered a kind of overall binding, unifying agent. Ego as the present end product of evolution may be said to surpass even the intellect, which it employs to make sense of its journey. Selfish tendencies have given the sense of self a bad name, but in reality it is the miracle of waking up to existence that tops everything else and lends it meaning. All creatures know, but as far as we can tell, humans are the only ones who know that they know. It seems the sense of self is a unique evolutionary development on our planet.

The Absolute is a necessary concept to coordinate all disparate factors of existence. The mechanical/material view of the universe that held sway for a few centuries in the West treats everything as random evolutes of matter and energy, clumps of dust particles and quanta of energy in discreet packets existing in isolation. Each bead in the present metaphor could represent a particle or quantum or event. Without the unifying link of the Absolute, the beads only make meaningless piles of scattered debris. With the golden thread of the Absolute to support and organize them, they can form a beautiful necklace or other decorative or useful article. The Absolute is like a skeletal structure on which both the skin and meat of existence are stretched.

8) I am the taste in waters, I am the light in the moon and the sun, I am Aum in all the Vedas, sound in the sky, and the human quality in men.

Summing up, and using a graded scale of most solid or dense ranging to the most subtle, earth (first chakra) symbolizes the physical aspect of existence, associated with the sense of smell. Water (second chakra) stands for the emotional realm, connected with taste. Fire (third chakra) the lower mind (digestive thought, related to the senses), linked to sight. Air (fourth chakra) the higher, intuitive mind, connected with touch. Space (fifth chakra) spiritual insight, connected with hearing. Some systems have alternative correspondences with the senses, but in one order or another the lower five chakras are connected with the five senses.

Mind (sixth chakra) is considered the “sixth sense” that links and correlates the other five, integrating the organism with the environment. The intellect (reason, associated with the seventh chakra) is a higher order yet, incorporating abstract ideas not necessarily linked to sensory input. The final culmination of the series is the sense of individuality, without which none of this would be necessary.

Knowing this, Krishna’s listing of qualities in verses 8 and 9 makes perfect sense. Though jumbled, possibly for reasons of poetic meter, he is enunciating the eightfold nature of manifestation from verse 4 and providing the transcendental or absolute element in each. “Taste in waters” refers to the central value of the second chakra. Taste doesn’t just mean flavor, but the selectivity that springs from our emotional responses. The moon and sun are paired at the sixth chakra, and their light illuminates the mind. Consciousness is the light within the mental apparatus, and as such is its absolute or supernal value. Aum in all the Vedas—the essential Word among words—matches up with sound in the sky at the fifth chakra, and symbolizes the sense of conscious hearing. The human quality is none other than the sense of individualized self or ego.

9) I am the holy fragrance of the earth, and also the brilliance of the luminary (presence), the vital principle in all beings, and the (essence of) austerity in all ascetics.

Isn't it interesting that the transcendental aspect of the world is in its being sensed by an interpreting being? Earth is just matter, until it is perceived by a living entity. The perceiver doesn't take actual earth into the mind, but abstracts it, grasps its essence, and is only able to reflect on it in that rarified form. The conclusion is hard to miss: we are all agents of the Absolute, dealing all the time with essences with hardly a second thought. We abstract literally everything. Yet the "real" world is so convincing that we are certain we are dealing with concrete matter and not the rarified essence of it. This is a fertile source of confusion, what R. D. Laing calls the mystification of experience. We project the essence of our experience onto an apparent outside field of solidity.

In the ancient Indian science, smell is the essence of earth, associated with the first chakra. Here it is poetically termed the holy fragrance to underline its superlative value. Luminary presence is usually translated as fire, a source of light, and so it refers to the third chakra, connected to sight. Vitality in this instance is a translation of jiva, individuality, and so relates to the ego sense. In this case it does not, as we might expect, refer to the vital energies of prana, which are associated with air and the fourth chakra. Instead tapas, ascetic intensity or desire, the desire to connect with the whole, arises in the heart, the fourth chakra, and is connected with the sense of touch.

The somewhat chaotic list in verses 8 and 9 is thus a jumbled recitation of the seven chakras along with the overarching sense of individuality mentioned in verse 4, revealing each of their subtle aspects in relation to consciousness. The secret teaching for the seeker to grasp is that by meditating on each chakra a connection with the Absolute may be established, via the essential quality listed. This does not have to be done in any particular order,

apparently, though it is often practiced from the base to the top and back to the base again.

10) Know Me to be the perennial seed of all beings; I am the reason of the intelligent, and I the brightness of (those who are) the brilliant.

Verses 10 and 11 foreshadow a lot of upcoming material where Krishna lists his quality as the essence of everything, thereby calling us to turn toward the light within. Each of the examples could be used for a deep reflection on the meaning of one aspect of life.

We have already talked about the pulsation model (in III, 22, 38 and 40), where existence, both individual and collective, is understood to begin from a point source, expand to its utmost extension, and then consolidate back to a point. A seed grows into a mighty oak, which in turn produces new seeds that fall into the earth to begin the cycle over again. The Absolute represents the overall impetus that energizes the entire process, while as individuals we embody one cycle—or perhaps one cycle at a time. Meditating on the relation of an individual expression with the total dynamic is fertile ground for insight.

Chapter V introduced *vasanas*, the gene-like seeds of particular potentials within each person that develop into many-branched trees of expression, and instructed us to select those most favorable to our spiritual growth and downplay the rest.

Every person has a mystical streak within them, but the potentials or predilections for it remain untapped as deeply buried seeds in the unconscious. They must bide their time until outward circumstances are favorable for their expression. It is too early during youth, although many mystical-type events pass almost unnoticed, taken for granted by the unreflective child. Spiritual *vasanas* are not often amenable to flowering during the school years, or in job performance or mating rituals that dominate the first half of our lives. Although some few with exceptional gifts

exhibit their abilities early on, generally it is somewhere past the preliminary stages of development that people begin to make room for their unique forms of inner expression.

Once a person is secure enough in meeting basic needs to have unprogrammed space in their life, allowing them to turn to peaceful activities like contemplative reflection and meditation, the perusal of enlightening books, the study of human and natural mysteries, fellowship with seekers of truth, and so on, it is as if the mystical seeds have begun to be watered and fertilized. Soon they sprout and develop in concert with the unique shape of the individual in which they have gestated. In this way they are like any other seed of the human psyche, all of which grow and flower in their appropriate time.

The subtle development of each person's mystical potential can take many routes, some being beneficial and some deleterious. Frequently they are treated as embarrassing deviations from normal behavior and stifled, or they may be trotted out as curiosities, dried out and tacked to the wall for public admiration. Very often they are channeled into previously existing forms of religion, where they are either reinforced or repressed. There is a real danger here of the unbridled ego over-fertilizing them, catapulting the temporary vessel in which they reside into power trips. They need to be gently kept in bounds with respect to the innate self-interest of the person they inhabit. Hence the importance of a guru or trusted group of friends to provide corrections for any exaggeration. If they are nurtured only in secret, they can easily become twisted and deformed, so long as they are hermetically sealed off from healthful interactions and conscious pruning. As always, the optimal course will balance public and private time, with plenty of both, each fine-tuning, feeding and energizing the other.

The most intrepid humans continue to forge their own paths and open up new fields of awareness, without requiring any structured system. Systems tend to become static and therefore limiting. These independent souls are kept harmonious by a

heartfelt interest in the good of all. Whether or not they are embraced by some religion or other institution is purely tangential. They are the embodiment of the Absolute at its best, uplifting themselves and those they encounter by their own inner radiance wherever they roam.

Once upon a time “primitive” societies supported and venerated the mystical seeds within their members and fostered their beneficial development. As a result, strong and healthy individuals were not uncommon among them. In the modern world, with its increased emphasis on material necessity featuring anthill-like work habits from birth to death, full-fledged humans are becoming an endangered species. It requires personal bravery and an iconoclastic streak, not to mention good fortune, to free a person to truly become at least a significant fraction of what they are capable of. The delicate process of becoming a real Adult, not just in years but in wisdom, should be fostered and nourished by all well-intentioned members of a society.

As to the Absolute being the reason of the intelligent (or literally, the intelligence of the intelligent), it’s a wonderfully liberating notion. Habitually we give credit to particular individuals for their ideas, but where do they get them? If they are honest about it, they have no clue. While they may be extremely clever at manipulating data and seeking more of it in far-flung places, true inspiration comes out of a mysterious inner darkness into the light of their awareness. Their genius is to know how to handle it when it comes, not to create it. Ownership of truth is a distraction, adding a layer of ego to what is available to everyone, at least in principle. The wise know they have only discovered what was there all along, and so the real credit goes to whatever packed those stupendous potentials into the very fabric of the universe in the first place.

We so easily take our intelligence for granted! We think of ourselves as plodding, ordinary beings just acting out the next step we envision. But where does that vision come from? The seeds of the Absolute, the vasanās, bubble up into consciousness, and when

they make their appearance we follow what they show us, imagining we are “in charge.” Here we are instructed to regain a sense of the true wonder and majesty of the light that leads us through what we have learned to imagine as “mundane” activity.

Isaac Asimov’s essay *The Eureka Phenomenon* presents his views on how we hapless mortals glean many important revelations from our unconscious. He believes it is the source for most of our scientific advances, as well as artistic and literary insights. Asimov, an arch-materialist, was basically saying the same thing as Krishna here.

The idea of “brilliant” intelligence goes way back, apparently. Krishna is associating his essence as the source of all existence with the intellect here, underlining its importance in upholding coherence in creation. What shines or radiates from an alive person is also not in any way caused or created by that person, it is an intangible glow, which is the Absolute. It may also be called our true nature, our whole being, or something similar. We tend to view intuition as the occasional influx of extraordinary inspiration. Yet if we stopped believing that the Absolute is only found in the unusual and the artistic, we could be aware of its presence at all times and in all circumstances.

With each of these descriptions by Krishna, we are taught to let go of personal clinging and reverse our viewpoint to honoring what is all around us as the source of everything that matters. In the process our egotistical sense of self is gradually replaced with a global sense of Self.

11) I am the strength of the strong, devoid of desire and passion. In beings I am desire which is not contrary to righteousness.

A bit of the mystical aspect of wisdom transmission may be noticed as this section on the chakras is finished up. In the previous verse, Krishna touches the highest chakra (intelligence) then here the lowest (strength, earth), before settling in the middle (proper desire, heart). The vertical dialectic of yoga is experienced by the

reader, probably without any awareness of the invisible movement involved.

The first line asks us to distinguish spiritual strength from ordinary strength. This refers to strength of character, not strength of muscle. Being devoid of desire and passion, it is not dependent on any outside force to press it into action, but is a rock of stability. When we are grounded in the Absolute, mere force cannot move us off that central stabilizing truth.

Prior to later revisions and degradations, the Gita's philosophy could not be mistaken for one of those modern puritanical religions where all positive urges are to be squelched. This is a philosophy of life, not death. The second line implies that there is such a thing as desire in accord with righteousness or one's true inner nature (*dharma*). Mundane desire is a distraction, but properly oriented desire, desire for truth or realization, is a beneficial aspect of life. Here a righteous determination is treated as a positive impulse.

Desire in tune with righteousness is a very important concept. Krishna taught throughout the preliminaries that desire is the enemy of the wise, and similar assertions are found in most religions. If desire is taken as the thesis, most disciples then adopt a hostile attitude toward desire as the antithesis, and in the process spend a lot of time struggling to try to suppress their own desires and preferences. But the true dialectical synthesis of yoga is to transform desire into an engine for positive growth by uniting thesis and antithesis. It is a desireless desire, because it springs from a state of calm, of nongrasping. The desire that accords with our dharma or our special gifts propels us to put in the time to actualize our potential. Linked to our svadharma, our true calling, desire is a positive factor.

12) Even sattva, rajas and tamas—know those manifestations to be My own. I am not in them, but they are in Me.

The theory of the three gunas, sattva, rajas and tamas, is one of the Gita's major contributions to psychology, and it will be covered in depth later on. Briefly, consciousness is said to be transparent, translucent, or opaque—clear, active or fixed—generally in rotation, though one or another tends to predominate in people. Being aware of them helps us judge the accuracy of our thinking. Krishna will teach Arjuna a lot about them, while assuring him that the Absolute itself is not subject to the cycles. They are strictly part of manifestation. That's what he means by, "I am not in them, but they are in Me."

When seers speak of truth, they mean something more than the factual truth of ordinary physical objects or the socially accepted norms of behavior and perception. It can be described as a state of wholehearted attunement with the present moment. The dichotomy between seer and scene is abolished, and they become one. Specific items and facts are irrelevant to this type of absolute truth.

When the individual reasserts their sense of separateness, truth becomes increasingly colored or conditioned in direct proportion to the schism. At best, with minimal distortion, there is an unbiased openness to the environment on its most subtle level. In this state, all input is taken for precisely what it is most likely to be and not run through any interpretive process to determine its value to the percipient. It is easy to see how everyone and everything will be impacted, and to act in concert with the greatest possible good. Such a state, often compared to a clear and highly polished mirror accurately reflecting what falls upon it, is called sattvic.

Most of the time we digest data for its relevance to our personal condition. Our preferences and dislikes, hopes and expectations, all tinge the mirror with the colorations of our emotional states associated with them. A million psychological studies have been performed to demonstrate the surprising degree to which our mental predisposition affects our perception. Such interpretations cause us to react in our own personal interest.

Because self-oriented (“selfish”) desires affect truth to a significant extent, this state, predominant in the transactional world, is often compared to a cracked mirror of colored glass. Images are seen with varying degrees of accuracy, and it takes a serious analysis to reconstruct the truth of events from the partial and distorted representation of it in such a mirror. This state is called rajasic.

Eventually a self-absorbed person may become bogged down in their own feelings to such a degree that any outside input is irrelevant. Emotions and obsessive thoughts, usually heavy and intractable, completely eclipse the actual world around. Opinions override facts. As an example, psychological studies reveal eye-witnesses to be right in identifying a suspect less than one quarter of the time, despite feeling confident about it. Addicts are classically tamasic, as no amount of logic or heartfelt appeal can break their fixation on their favorite substance. Our mind is sometimes like a mirror painted black or coated with iron. This is the tamasic state.

Sattva, rajas and tamas are found in all people, in varying degrees. The gunas, or modalities of nature as they are sometimes called, cycle and overlap. For instance, in the morning we might wake up calm and refreshed, and usually have a little quiet time before launching into the busyness of the day. Then we go to work and tend to the many chores our life demands of us, as our calmness gradually ebbs. At the end of the day we may “unwind” with some alcohol or screen viewing, and then close our wakeful minds down entirely in sleep, completing one cycle of sattva, rajas and tamas.

While many religious systems aim to “polish the mirror” of the mind to perfect its reflection of truth, the Upanishads aim for a unitive state that surpasses the duality of the gunas entirely: the perfect attunement mentioned above as absolute. The rishis believe that basking in this Zenlike state automatically heals the defect of the mind acting as a mirror. Furthermore, no amount of polishing and cleaning will convert a mirror image into an actual thing. Hence, the repeated admonition to seek the Absolute (“Me”) first

and foremost. It allows us to stop reflecting the Absolute and start *being* the Absolute.

The mirror of the gunas is the world *in toto*, in which we strive to see our image. We typically look to others, our friends and relations, to tell us who we are. But they only know our exterior, and they are limited by their own prejudices. Their description of us is bound to be faulty. We are the only ones privy to our inner self. Despite this fact, we are taught—and have a natural proclivity—to look outward for our ratification. Very early in life we abandon our self-confidence and begin to build an image based on what other people perceive about us. So, for instance, the tint of our skin or the size of our nose or our grades in school becomes a defining characteristic, instead of our inner worth. This is the primary tragedy of the human race at its present stage of development. We might have a chance to remain comfortable as who we are if there was only a little idiotic feedback, but the pressure is wholesale and goes on for our entire life. Plus, we play into it. By the time we reach what passes for adulthood, we have been mesmerized by tens of millions of false impressions from the mirrors around us. Our core is almost certain to be totally inaccessible to us. We wander in an amusement park hall of distorted mirrors. Our dissociation from our self is the stuff of nightmares.

The cure is not to clean and patch the mirror. That would mean reforming our associates so they can give a more perfect reflection of us. The very attempt breeds the spiritual ego, the desire to be seen by others as we wish them to see us. Many are full of guile here, and they go on to become top dog gurus, because they show people what they want to see. It's a performance, a sham. The real cure is to realize the mirror is always going to distort who we are, it cannot be prevented, and to instead turn and face ourselves directly. This is why some seekers prefer to withdraw from society, trying to escape from its ubiquitous mirrors. But such extreme measures aren't necessary. Once we realize we are getting prejudiced feedback, we can start

immediately to resurrect our inner self from its tomb. We can become our own best friend. We can take the inspiring examples of the great teachers of history (or next door) and raise ourselves up from the dead by our own efforts.

We will always care what others think of us, but it no longer has to define us. We alone know if we are true, good, honest; or false, bad and deceitful. Everyone else can only wonder, or accuse. We can be amused at how much of what other people see in us is their own projection, and we can stop projecting our expectations onto others. This allows us at least a chance to come to know people for who they truly are, and it gives them the leeway to liberate themselves if they are so inclined. This is yet another way we can contribute to the welfare of the world. It is a win-win, a double affirmation, because by liberating ourselves we offer that possibility to others, and vice versa. As our world becomes less imprisoning, our own liberation becomes easier of attainment. It is even nearer than the mirror surrounding us.

Thus the Gita calls on us to transcend the dominating influence of Nature and its modalities to re-attain our innate freedom. This is not “mirror polishing Zen” or any incremental, puzzle-solving kind of path, but a total and absolute break with conditioned modes of thought. As such it is truly radical, going to the root of our mediocrity and hacking it off.

Guru Nitya puts this idea succinctly in his *Wonder Journey with a Wandering Guru*:

Do not look into the social mirror and then think that is what you are. You should have an inner estimation of yourself and the value of what you are doing. Of course, it is possible to be self-deluded and make mistaken judgments. In order to avoid that, you need a confidante who is detached. If you learn to strike a root in the universal order, that gives you stability.... When you sit firm on your own truthfulness, your own trust, you can face any encounter.

Chapters XIV, XVII and XVIII contain a detailed analysis of sattva, rajas and tamas; here Krishna is merely making a preliminary reference to them. As in II, 45, he wants us to know that while nature is dependent on the Absolute, the Absolute is not dependent on nature. It is not an end product of any evolutionary process of the universe, it is prior to and beyond all manifestation. The gunas are important and they affect us, but to achieve the highest we must know what is beyond their influence as well.

13) Deluded by these three manifestations of value, this whole world is unable to know Me, who am beyond them and unexpended.

Krishna puts his finger directly on the nub of our delusion. We are focused on mirroring and being mirrored by apparently external events, which sets up a duality of subject and object. Furthermore, the subject is continuously cycling through degrees of clarity from high to low and back again. In order to know the Absolute we must abolish this temporary bifurcation and reestablish a unified field through an intuitive, contemplative breakthrough.

The gunas or modalities cause the coloration of the psyche. When angry, it is as if a red cast is washed over the world, and everything will be interpreted as being a cause of the anger. Other emotions have their own “color” as well, which is overlaid on the situation. In English people are green with envy, blue with sadness, and yellow with cowardice, to cite a few examples. Sattva is prized because it is clear and doesn’t distort the scene with any color, though it is still an integral part of the mental/interpretive apparatus. Rajas is translucently colored, often red as above, by the prevailing state of mind. Tamas casts a grayish light, fading to black, of disinterest over everything. In such a state nothing is exciting or beautiful, it is deadened and sad. Clearly, the only hope we have of making an accurate assessment of life lies in sattva, yet that is only the beginning.

Back in IV, 14 I presented a metaphor of a mountain obscured by clouds. In terms of the gunas, *tamas* holds sway when the mountain is wholly obscured and all you see is clouds, *rajas* is when you can just make out the outlines through the shifting mists, and *sattva* is a clear day with the mountain plainly visible. On closer examination, though, it is only a reflection of the mountain in an invisible mirror or lake. That means that the mountain is you: you are the Absolute. As long as we look outside, we will always see only reflections, with differing degrees of clarity. We become so fascinated by the beautiful scene of clouds and mountain that we become deluded that this is all there is, forgetting that we are That.

14) Verily this divine illusion of Mine, made up of the manifestations of value (*gunas*), is hard to surmount. Those who seek Me alone pass over this illusion.

Yes, it's diabolically difficult to surmount duality, since our best efforts are "drawn back ceaselessly into the past" (Fitzgerald). The instant you take a photograph is now, but every time you look at it afterwards it is an artifact of the past. The mind works just like that. Everyone has brief moments of heightened awareness occasionally, but then we try to grasp them or define them or reproduce them, and we wander off the mark. Unlike a photograph, every time we recall a memory we alter it to our liking. The Gita advises us to hold fast to an absolute one-pointed state of concentration and unitive creative activity, beyond the *gunas*, to remain more steadily free of illusions.

The "divine illusion" of this verse is the famous *maya*, which is briefly referred to in this chapter and once again at the very end of the work. Despite its central place in Indian philosophy, *maya* is little mentioned in the Gita. Possibly this is because the notion of all creation as an illusory projection is vitiating to a seeker of truth. Why bother trying when our every effort is bound to go off course? We have to believe we can overcome all challenges, or else we

will just give up. Ultimately a unitive frame of reference does not distinguish between real and illusory: at its core, everything has the same status.

Maya does not refer to simply the impossibility of attaining perfect understanding with manifestation; it means manifestation itself. Anything created cannot represent the totality—it is necessarily limited. But it is also precious, and perfect within its limitations. Therefore maya is not something to be avoided, only taken into account. We have to accept that our perception is limited, but that doesn't mean the universe was a bad mistake, an affront to the Absolute. What has come into being is spectacular, an endless delight, with many more ups than downs.

Maya is the paradox right in the heart of existence that any contemplative quickly bumps up against. We possess an amazing yet imperfect perceiving mechanism with which to try to discern the meaning of our condition. Divine, natural, anthropomorphic, any way you look at it, we are caught in a wondrously clever conundrum in which the unlimited has become limited. According to the philosophy of the Gita, the only possible resolution is to discover the unitive Absolute beneath the chaos of the universe. When Krishna advises us to “seek Me alone,” it means that the resolution does not reside within the natural world, exactly, but beyond it and through it.

Maya is an implacable enemy of truth, and yet at the same time it is the only way we have for learning about it. It is a supportive friend of every seeker as well as a stumbling block. The yogi has to pair off the enemy and friend aspects to arrive at a transcendent neutrality that has some access to truth.

“Divine illusion” has several levels of implication, with the illusory nature of actuality being most commonly thought of. Scientists and religious philosophers agree that somehow, something has come out of nothing to create our universe, or what's increasingly being called the multiverse, an infinity of universes. Calling it Nature or God is just putting a face on the Unknowable nothingness before and beyond the beginning. While

the transformation of nothing into something is as real as real can be, there is an incontrovertible element of magic in it. If something was truly nothing, then nothing could ever come of it, which means that nothing must actually be something. Quite the paradox.

It's actually a wonderful thing that the mystery is, apparently, infinite. A trite or simple mystery would have been solved long ago, leaving us nothing to seek. But the mystery of the Absolute appears inexhaustible, so there is no danger of us becoming bored or complacent. Sadly, humans often prefer to reduce the mystery to a rote formula, trivializing the whole business. We should be happy to know that we don't know everything, instead of gamely pretending we do.

Sensory input, the fuel for our entire existence, is notoriously illusory. Various kinds of vibrations from objects impact the senses, where they are converted to electrical impulses to be delivered to the brain and reassembled into a rough approximation of the original object. Memories and habits become a significant part of the final image, not to mention our reaction to the meaning we assign to it. It's actually quite amazing that we can relate well at all with such a mishmash of illusory input. The fact that our interactions somehow work out, and we survive and even flourish through them means that we don't live in a completely blind illusion: the illusion is divine, meaning coherent. It sustains us, meets our needs, and expands at precisely the rate that our awareness expands. Think of the entire range of living creatures, with their widely varying sensory abilities, and how all of them live successfully in the world as they perceive it. It's incredible. So don't you be bad-mouthing maya!

Another way to read the phrase "divine illusion" is that the illusion gains an additional dimension of incomprehensibility from us treating it as divine. If we imagine that the essence of life is beyond our ken and belongs to a remote realm of divinity, we naturally will hold back from addressing it with our full intelligence. We will "kowtow" before the idea, which flings up all

sorts of illusory barriers to merger with it. In other words, the concept of divinity is one more aspect of illusion.

In case it needs further reiteration, the idea is not necessarily to seek Krishna as a god, since he is just another of the ten thousand (meaning infinite) poetic allusions in which the Absolute might be clothed. Whether or not to choose an allusion (illusion) to worship is discussed in detail in Chapter XII, after Arjuna has had his direct experience of the Absolute. There is some value in it, but it can easily degenerate into distracting fantasy. In the end, whether or not to worship a specific image is left up to the seeker. At this stage, though, we are shedding all conceptualizations as fast as we can, in order to remain in the present instant, attuned to the intuitive moment.

“Seek Me alone” is a secret teaching, repeated throughout the Gita. As long as you imagine a god out there and go looking for it, even in your mind, the illusion is insurmountable. You have to seek inside the Me that is You to discover the source of the reflections that mesmerize your attention. The fragment of the Absolute that you are in contact with is your very Self. As the Upanishads say, It is nearer than near and farther than far. That thou art.

15) Foolish evildoers, lowest among men, do not attain Me, their wisdom being distracted by illusion, affiliated as they are to the demonic (or non-intelligent) aspect of nature.

Well, since we all must confess that our wisdom occasionally gets distracted by illusion, it looks like we are all in the category of foolish evildoers, lowest of the low! Sometimes a guru has to be a bit harsh to press the disciple to wake up. We tend to find ways to become satisfied with our half-baked reality substitutes, which we then pad with defense mechanisms. That’s why it is valuable and even necessary to have a guru to whom we grant permission to shake us out of our stupor.

The sad fact is that when our dharma is suppressed we become either masochistic or sadistic, or say, self-deprecating or conceited. Or both. The thwarted energy that is initially available for harmonious life expression becomes twisted and corrupt. Instead of fighting for our own liberation we internalize the negativity in our own psyche or else hurl it onto others. Life becomes a shriveled vestige of its promise.

Masochism manifests less often as straightforward reveling in pain as in drug addiction and depression, usually accompanied by the conviction that you will never succeed. You think of yourself as a victim of uncaring circumstances. Sadism bides its time awaiting the next war, maintaining itself through meanness and deliberate sabotage of other people's happiness. It never has long to wait. It is convinced it will succeed, and it occasionally does, though the rest of the world wishes it wouldn't. It comes into full flower when unleashed in battle, with its aftermath of rape and pillage. A never-ending war on terror with torture as a tactic is the fondest wish of sadists come true.

The really frustrating part is that these unwholesome and self-defeating urges are lodged deeper than consciousness can reach without a committed program to root them out. We don't have to believe in them. They function independently. Psychologists think of them quite literally as the demonic aspect of our psyches, and they are perhaps the greatest challenge in therapy.

It also takes a concerted effort to realign the psyche to do away with the projection of an interested and willful god looking over our shoulder, an illusion that even atheists experience. It's probably an iteration of parental guardianship. As already discussed in detail, when we are children we internalize a way of acting that is based on how our caretakers want us to behave. We consciously and unconsciously pattern our thoughts and actions on what some large external beings want us to think and do. Soon we come to believe we are living for their happiness, and our own happiness can only be indulged in in secret or not at all. As adults we transfer those feelings to the authority of the State and

especially to God, but they are not far removed from the immature beliefs of the child. The schizoid state of modern humanity embodies the gap between our internal needs and feelings and the imaginary face of the society we are supposed to be pleasing. If we're "well adjusted" it's hard to know the point of anything if we aren't doing it for someone else, especially God. An uninterested Absolute is absolutely unnerving. How dare we accept that we—we ourselves—are the reason for this life? On reflection, the point of life must be happiness and interest for us—all of us—but we can't know this until we stop living for some imaginary other. Creation is its own reward. It should be grasped whole and loved completely.

We learn to deny ourselves and live for God, but then we wait in vain for our imaginary God to smile on our efforts. Because there is nothing harder to do than suppressing our own nature, it becomes a lifelong struggle. What a tragic waste of time! It stems in large part from the indoctrinated belief that we are born sinners. The innocence of fresh life is unconsciously resented by people who have lost their own innocence, and so it must be punished and destroyed. Needless to say, this is not the way to recover our innocence, or anything else. Instead, we must dare to be alive. Creation is an unfolding process, and we should reclaim the unfolding expression we have lost in the process of abdicating our souls to a hypothetical external enjoyer. To do this safely we must give up our selfish will along with our belief in God's will. Exteriorized will disrupts the unfoldment of our life. We posit the Absolute as a neutral ground so that we can eliminate or at least deflate all unhealthy forms of will, and instead center ourselves on the flow of who we are. When we are that, things go well, and when we lose it, we go on tangents. The Triumph of the Will can become a Nazi holocaust.

16) Among doers of the good, four kinds are intent on Me: the distressed, the seeker of knowledge, the seeker of the goods of life, and the wise.

Four broad categories of seeker are introduced as those who do good. We may at first imagine that the categories range from pathetic to excellent, but shortly Krishna is going to refer to them all as honorable. If we look more closely we can see what he means.

“Doers of the good,” is used in contradistinction to the previous verse that spoke of “foolish evildoers.” As we have often noted, most of us oscillate between doing good and bad things throughout our lives, despite intending to be good consistently. When we are distracted by illusion or “embroiled in maya,” we screw up on a regular basis. We get tripped up by the rotating gunas, and mistake our imaginings for reality and our selfishness for altruism. Therefore we should not presume that we are comfortably in the “doers of the good” category and only far off bad people are the foolish evildoers. What is meant here by “doers of the good” is those who dedicate their lives to spiritual or edifying purposes, while “foolish evildoers” are those who don’t. All of us are flawed, however.

The first category of seekers of truth is the distressed, and Arjuna himself is an excellent example of it. For many of us, only when the house of cards we have carefully constructed crashes down do we turn inward to seek salvation from our limitations. Our health might fail, or a loved one die or become seriously ill. We lose our job and worry about homelessness. We discover we have been living a lie, or barely living at all, and we suddenly confront the emptiness of the life we are caught in. Our self-respect is shattered when our props are knocked out from under us by such circumstances. When things like this happen, the majority of people try to find ways to reconnect with the ordinary course of life. But the one in a thousand who “strives for perfection” looks inside to seek the Absolute, usually under one of its many pseudonyms, like God, Allah, Jehovah, Shiva, etc. We make a bargain with our favorite form of God: “I will do anything you ask, if only XXX can be rectified.” “Please make XXX well, and I’ll

spend my life worshipping you.” You’ve probably done something like this yourself, so I don’t have to list any more examples. Even inveterate atheists call on something like this at times. They might name it Chance or Luck or the Unknown, but it’s the same thing. Inwardly we all pray for a lucky break.

As Krishna assures us, in whatever way we relate to the Absolute, it responds in kind. Luck can save as efficiently as Jesus, and it often does. In some way, motivated by distress we pray inside for a connection with a higher power. Who knows if it is just a part of our unconscious, or an actual divine being we are visualizing? And who cares, if what we imagine works. To the degree it is possible, a dialogue with the mystery under any name makes a difference. It can bring us back to life, wake us up to a wider purview.

A lot of people hope for bizarre miracles, based on symbolic allegories found in scriptures, and that can lead them into massive self-delusion. Sorry folks: natural laws are as miraculous as it gets. Raising the dead is about *spiritually* restoring people to life, not reanimating corpses. Restoring sight to the blind is about bringing back *spiritual* vision. Some medical operations can actually restore lost senses, vision especially, though recently hearing too, but that isn’t what the stories are talking about. They are dealing with reconnecting with the Absolute to reanimate the corpse of what was meant to be a life. Your life.

If the drive to know the Absolute because of distress is sustained, it is as good as any of the four types of seekers. But frequently the desire to attain the Absolute wanes as the immediacy of the tragedy wears off and the normal routine is resumed, which is why the category of the distressed is not rated as excellently as the wise, who remain ever united with it.

“Seekers of knowledge” refers to those of us with an unquenchable curiosity. The challenges of life have convinced a part of us that by understanding what is going on better, we will have more fun and avoid some tragedies. Life is a great game if we know the rules. We discover we have been punished or at least

restricted under a system of half-baked beliefs that don't hold up under logical analysis, so we want to find something that makes intelligent sense, to hitch our wagon to. I remember my infinite frustration as a child, wanting to know Why things were the way they were. My father would always tell me, "Because I said so." That was the end of the argument, and it drove me nuts. I was willing to go along with any rules, as long as I understood why they were in place. But most rules are arbitrary or have veiled purposes. Religions have the same mulish bottom line: "Because God said so." "Because that's the way it is." That whole attitude is so frustrating! These are not reasons at all, they are unquestioned assumptions. They are used to disguise an inherent inequality or injustice. Intelligent people want intelligent reasons for things, and asking questions does not automatically imply rebelliousness. Eventually though, in normal life we become pacified. We learn to accept the dictates of our family or religion and stop asking uncomfortable questions. The questions are uncomfortable because the person we're asking learned in their turn to stop asking the same things and just accepted what they were told. They fear they will lose their insecure footing if they readmit their former curiosity into the picture. After all, "curiosity killed the cat." There's a fine adage to get kids to shut up and deny their natural urge to wonder.

So here Krishna is welcoming seekers of knowledge to question and to doubt, because they lead you to grow, to refine your relation to life. But if knowledge in the form of piling up bits of information becomes your modus operandi, then it is another form of death. We must not stop when we have replaced an inadequate formula with a better one. Our quest should take us to the highest plane. Of course, if we stop part way, our rewards will be perfectly proportional to how deeply we've delved. Almost all of us stop part way, once we find our level of satisfaction—or our level of incompetence per the Peter Principle. Ergo, this category is listed as second best.

The third category is a little problematic. “The seeker of the goods of life” sounds like those enamored of possessions, which is categorically denounced by the Gita. This is evaded in several translations by saying things like “seeker of the good,” “seeker for good in the world” (Aurobindo), or those desiring “to serve humanity” (Easwaran).

The word in question is *artharathi*, which MW translates as “desirous of gaining wealth, desirous of making a profit, selfish.” The *artharathi* is one whose goal is *arthartha*, which means “effective for the accomplishment of the aim in view,” getting us closer to some meaningful sense. Both come from a doubling of *artha*, with its wide range of meanings, including ‘meaning’ itself. Also “aim or purpose; cause, motive, reason; and substance, wealth, money.” *Artharathi* begins to look like “those who find meaning or purpose in being skillful at what they do.” *Artha* is undoubtedly the source of the word ‘art’, along with its relatives like ‘artifice’. My Random House Dictionary describes art as “the quality, production, expression or realm of what is beautiful, or of more than ordinary significance.” I love dictionaries! How hard is it to define a word in the most cogent and succinct manner? And they do it as a matter of course. They are very artful at what they do. A relevant definition of art is the ninth: “skill in conducting any human activity.” I think this gets us to the gist of the *artharathi*, who thus becomes a seeker of skill in the conduct of life. That does indeed sound honorable.

We seek the Absolute to make us skillful and excellent in our daily life. Once again this can have an upside and a downside. It may benefit the world and our place in it, or we can indulge in a lust for power so we can stand out, heightening our ego and doing damage to our surroundings. When Krishna calls this class of seekers honorable, he is of course referring to the former type.

Power-mongers are easy to write off, but many of us engage in a subtle version of it to some degree. An important motivation for many people in spiritual life is to become highly knowledgeable about their chosen religion or practice, in the belief

that other people will admire them for it. Secretly we doubt ourselves, but we think that if we just learn enough about a subject and can remember it, people will be drawn to us. We don't believe we are special but our favorite teaching is, so we adopt it as our stand-in. We don't so much lust for this type of power over others as long for it, impelled by the sadness of a neglected soul that craves love but doesn't get enough. It is not necessarily a bad thing, if the resulting stature is handled wisely, but because it exacerbates a schism in the psyche between who we are and who we want to be, it has the potential to go awry. In any case, it is sad whenever a person longs for love but has a hard time finding it.

Finally, the wise are intent on the Absolute because that is the very nature of life. They see that all are one, and doing good is the most natural response to such an awareness. There is an infinite potential to foster happiness, understanding and joy in living through meaningful participation with the people and situations you come in contact with. With so many possibilities, why languish in confusion? Perfection can only be enhanced by participation. Mistakes are opportunities to learn and improve, not occasions for chagrin. The wise are motivated by the needs of the whole picture, not by selfishness, and this puts them at the top of the list.

17) Of these, the wise man, forever united and unitively affiliated with the Absolute, excels, for dear to the utmost limit am I to the wise one, and he is dear to Me.

This is a lovely sentiment, and an acknowledgement of the superior status of wisdom indicated in the previous verse, but we should temper it with Krishna's assertion in IX, 29: "I regard all beings equally. To Me there is none hateful or dear." Both of these are true, by the way. The Absolute regards everything as equal, and yet within that equality there are grades of excellence. It's one of the more elusive paradoxes to grasp in this business, but also one

of the most important. It answers the pressing question “Why should I care?” and its corollary “What should I do?”

Here the dearness marks the affinity of a unified attitude with the Absolute. The first three types had grades of selfishness or self-interestedness in regard to the Absolute, which necessarily produce duality. The wise have no incentive to separate themselves from who they are in essence, and so think and perform actions unitively. They do not seek boons of any kind, being simply motivated by the joy of admiring and participating in life.

18) Honorable are all these, but My firm opinion is that the wise one is the Self itself. He of unitively established Self indeed remains in My path, which has nothing higher.

Nataraja Guru notes that “honorable” is mentioned in the sense of damning with faint praise. Expanded, the word implies something like “Yeah, sure. Those inferior attitudes are all right, but the *correct* attitude is....” In verse 23 these peripherally honorable folks are referred to as having little intelligence, making the snub as clear as it needs to be. They are honorable because some circumstance has pointed them toward the Absolute. The wise, though, are wise precisely to the degree of being aware of their unity with the whole. They do not need to be goaded into it.

We can read this as Krishna urging Arjuna (and therefore us) to go for the highest wisdom, and not to be satisfied with mediocrity, which is a legitimate exhortation for a guru to employ. A little poke from a pitchfork in the rear end can stimulate a remarkable clarity of mind sometimes. We should not need to have any sort of reason to affiliate ourselves with the Absolute: doing so is simply the best thing that can be conceived of. In yoga we are trying to break free of all extraneous motivations to allow our inner impetus to come through.

19) After many births the wise man attains Me. Such a Great Self, thinking Vasudeva to be all, is rare indeed to find.

Vasudeva, another name for Krishna, similarly stands for the Absolute. When seeker and sought become merged as one, duality is abolished, and nothing is seen anywhere but the Absolute. It is easy to imagine that this is a rare event, as expressly mentioned in verse 3 earlier in the chapter.

The problematic aspect of this verse is that it can be taken to imply that realization is the end product of a long series of struggles, which goes against a core principle of Advaita that realization is independent of causal factors.

The popular picture is of spiritual seekers growing wiser in the course of many millions of lifetimes, with a culmination of unity with the Absolute after the last. Spirituality then becomes a kind of race that invites odious comparisons between participants. While this appeals to our sporting blood, it seems relatively trite compared with the profundity of the wisdom teaching Vyasa is offering us. Still, there is something to it. If we totally rule out learning, spiritual striving makes no sense. There has to be an element of transition implied in it, so long as we are already mired in duality.

My preferred interpretation of reincarnation as presented in the Gita, is that repetitive, habitual actions are repeated “incarnations” or manifestations of certain mindsets. If we accept that “many births” refers to the various attitudes we adopt at different stages of maturity, then Krishna is saying that a wise person is one who has thought through many challenges to arrive at an optimal assessment of the nature of reality. The distressed, the seekers of knowledge, and the seekers of expertise all have to progress through a hierarchy of increasingly refined attitudes before they can rest easy in a unified state. Essentially they have to relinquish the selfish aspects of their thinking, from the obvious ones to the many subtle layers beneath. And this is perfectly honorable.

Nataraja Guru feels that this verse establishes a link with the Bhagavata religion that became popular around the time of the

Gita's writing, and is a nod toward its doctrine of ecstatic worship of a God Krishna, which is unabashedly dualistic. Additionally he thought (as I do) that "many births" would be better expressed as "long experience." That sounds more satisfactory: "After long experience the wise ones attain to Me." The Guru's comments are quite germane here:

Krishna in the Gita represents the Absolute, and the man of wisdom, when he sees the whole of this universe and the Self as being unitively comprised in the Absolute as represented by Vasudeva, the superior Guru of this teaching, becomes finally and unitively established in wisdom, without any trace of duality between disciple and Guru—not to speak of worshipper and worshipped....

To see the principle that makes Vasudeva represent the Absolute is a very rare possibility of *mahatmas* (great Selves) alone. Not only is such a *mahatma* (great Self) rare to find in this world at a given time, but such a perfected one of supreme wisdom must be the product of a long experience, when we speak of it in a workaday language. (337)

As noted earlier, reincarnation is a speculative doctrine with many weaknesses. For it to be useful we should remember our past lives, but we don't seem to. Most claims to the contrary look a lot like wishful thinking, or even outright insanity. We shall discover what is in store for us when we die, and whether we retain consciousness beyond death, but it is foolish to pretend certitude in the face of such paltry evidence as has so far come to light.

The primary weakness of a simplistic idea of reincarnation is that it leads us to think that there will be millions of lives yet to come, so there is no need to do anything now. All will be taken care of in due time. That amounts to an abdication of our opportunity to realize truth here and now, which is the real doctrine of Vedanta, and it coaxes us to accept unacceptable conditions. As such it resembles religious beliefs in heaven, which have the same

effect of pacifying a servile class, and denigrates the wise one to the level of the lesser categories of either the distressed or the seeker of the goods of life mentioned in verse 16. That is most certainly not what the Gita has in mind.

20) Their wisdom distracted by such or such (other) desire counterparts, they attain to other divinities, committed to various obligations belonging to each, prompted by their own particular nature (in each case).

Abruptly Krishna starts referring to those who follow a vision of less than pure absolutism. It is important to note the abrupt change from the ideal seeker he has been praising to the relativist versions he is criticizing. It marks the difference between pure spirituality and formal religion.

Religions have definite patterns that determine their existence, which their votaries are required to adhere to. Religious attractions require certain rules to be followed, and these subtly divert the true believer away from a unitive vision. In the vast majority of cases, following rules sooner or later puts an intrepid intellect to sleep.

In a compensatory universe, what you give and what you get, what you believe and what you see, have an innate correspondence. The Gita appropriately calls these pairs “desire counterparts.” By contrast, the unalloyed Absolute has no such limited requirements, and its compensation is equally unlimited. The very fact that it is “without form and void” prevents it from becoming an object of desire.

The section beginning here and extending through verse 23 is notably similar to IX, 20-23, and curiously even their numeration is the same. The thrust of both is that attuning the whole consciousness with the Absolute is perfect and all that is necessary, but the majority of seekers of truth fall somewhat short of this exalted ideal. They choose instead a form with certain definite characteristics and related rituals—what are called in shorthand a

god and a religion. And let's not leave out the religion of Science and its god of Nature, or the materialist gods of wealth, fame, erudition, sports, the arts, and the like. Any such religion or path cordons off certain areas and highlights others, so that the benefits are commensurate with the limitations. Let's face it, though: this can be a blessing as well as a curse. Giving shape to one's beliefs can be beautiful and can energize many excellent activities. Artists become great from "worshipping" and practicing their chosen art form. The sad testimony of history, however, is that specialization just as often produces conflict between adherents of different forms and nomenclatures. It is appropriate that Krishna reminds us that, philosophically at least, this is second best. Unitive connection with the Absolute is best. If any partial aspect is selected, no matter how excellent, it automatically becomes dualistic, demoting us from impartiality. Only neutrality avoids pairing downsides with upsides.

The Gita's all-embracing attitude is that if we are aware that we almost always focus on a partial aspect of the whole, and that everyone else does too, we have no need to fight over who is "right." We can accept and appreciate the slice each person selects as unique and particular to them, even while using it as a reminder to strive to go beyond all limitations. Your god is right for you and mine is right for me, but the best is to simultaneously know and relate to what is beyond them all.

Chapter XII deals definitively and practically with the question of how to worship or focus with impartiality. It is a question that does not require an answer, but one that motivates us to continually revise and refine and expand our vision. An answer would mean becoming frozen in some stage of the journey. The Gita exhorts us to continually melt the ice of static ideas with a fresh influx of creative heat.

21) By whichever particular form such and such a devotee with faith wishes to worship, each to his own faith I confirm.

The Absolute is fully reciprocal, so output exactly matches input and vice versa. Here we have the Gita's version of the Golden Rule, found throughout the world, and not excluding the Golden Rule according to physics: for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. The Absolute is not changed in any way by the reciprocity, it is merely the ground where actions and reactions counterbalance each other. Thus "The all-pervading One takes cognizance neither of the sinful nor the meritorious actions of anyone." (V, 15)

A key implication here is that the devotee should intelligently decide what to worship. Most of our important choices are not made freely: we are pressured and cajoled into them, and we acquiesce without considering the ramifications. A major portion of spiritual practice is to weed out the exterior forces that we have substituted for self-determination. We believe we are choosing freely when what we're really doing is experiencing the relief of going along with the crowd. Reclaiming our integrity may well be the single most important step we can take in life, as well as the most challenging.

No true teacher would say theirs is the only way, but charlatans don't have a problem with blowing their own horn. It's a tried and true method to entice good-hearted souls into joining a mob. A certain way may work for some particular person, but the Absolute is so munificent as to endorse every honorable path that anyone chooses. Dishonorable ways too, though they lead to dishonorable ends. The world is sprinkled with wise folks with much to offer, so fear not that there is some arcane "right" way, and just act according to your best comprehension at the time, combined with whatever assistance you can obtain from those around you. Fear of making the wrong choice is a holdover from being punished as children for disobedience. Krishna would have us transcend that traumatic influence.

A helpful way to look at reciprocity with a neutral entity is in the way observers interpret abstract art. Take a complex piece of music, which is probably the most abstract art form that humans

regularly create. If it isn't program music that narrates a story, it may have no particular "meaning" even to the composer. It just "is." Yet everyone will get out of it, precisely in proportion to the energy they put into it, an experience commensurate with their understanding. An atheist may hear an evocation of the emptiness of existence, while a religious person might hear a stern god instructing his followers or a loving god beckoning, and a scientist an ingenious description of the natural world. A depressed person might hear angst, or else a soothing voice calling out, while someone in a happy mood might find the music humorous and lighthearted. No two will have exactly the same impression, and their reactions may well differ at different stages of their life, or even two different performances, depending on their state of mind. None of the interpretations is especially right or wrong: some may be more sophisticated or intense than others, but the response tells us more about the listener than the original music. In this sense art acts as a mirror for the soul.

Program music, or any blatant art with an "obvious" message for that matter, still leaves a lot of room for interpretation. The parameters are narrowed, but they are never totally rigid and fixed. There is far too much variability in the human psyche for anything to have one simple meaning for everybody. And even more than with art, religion is a reflection of the desires and level of understanding of the votary. The Gita is wholly open and tolerant about our unique perspectives in all fields. The universe was made to celebrate diversity, not to enforce uniformity.

22) He, endowed with that faith, seeks the worship of such a one, and from him obtains his desires, the benefits being decreed by Me.

We need to remember that Krishna is speaking deprecatingly of those who fall short of the ideal here. Many commentators, mesmerized by terms like 'faith' and 'worship', make this and the previous verse out to be expressions of praise. They totally miss

the point. Seeking and obtaining our desires, even those symbolized by the gods, is the major diversion from being open to the inner guidance of our true nature.

This is by no means “Our God is better than your God,” which tends to characterize religion, and which was actually publicly proclaimed by a top-ranking US general in Iraq a few years back. The one God in all religions is the Absolute until proven otherwise. Different languages quite naturally have different names and concepts associated with it, that’s all. Any God that isn’t all-inclusive is a lesser god. Here Krishna is speaking of the lesser gods, who when worshipped with faith provide benefits that are less than absolute. He is trying to direct us away from such lures and toward the ultimate.

It is helpful to think of this in terms of one of the non-religious gods, to avoid the defensiveness usually appended to matters of faith. A good example is the god of wealth. It is worshipped by many people, who dedicate their lives to its propitiation. Its devotees follow certain rules of business or exploitation, legal or illegal, always keeping faith with their goal, which is as immaterial and mysterious as any god: an endlessly receding mirage. Day in and day out they fashion their lives to strive to obtain what they imagine they want, which is why such activities are called “pursuits.” And of course tangible wealth, the “benefit” of the worship, is famously terminable for most people, as Krishna reminds us in the next verse. The real clincher is that when one obtains wealth it does not automatically induce happiness, or wisdom. It may display a lot of outward evidence, like a big house or fancy clothes, but it is not a magic formula. It is only what it is, nothing more. The benefits as decreed by the reciprocity of the Absolute are always less than what the worshipper imagined, goading them to further entanglement.

Very often, the disappointed worshippers of lesser gods blame themselves for the failure, rather than the goal itself, and redouble their misdirected efforts. They imagine that *more* wealth will make them happy, or more service, or more time in the

temple, more prayer, more exercise, more practice. This notion is what's categorized as "small intelligence" in the next verse. In place of the inner reorientation taught by the Gita, away from the terminable and toward the eternal, they seek a harsher, more stringent version of their original myopic vision. Instead of giving up they become fanatic, and often turn the blame for their failure toward others before they are finished.

23) Terminable indeed is the benefit accruing to these of small intelligence; sacrificers of the divinities go to the divinities, but My devotees surely come to Me.

Here is ample proof that Krishna is not a mere divinity. He can only stand for the Absolute, otherwise he would have to be included among the lesser divinities sought by those of small intelligence. History records numerous Krishna cults comprised of those who didn't grasp the distinction.

In any religion there is a smattering of mystics who seek the transcendent form of their chosen name of God, and a great multitude of those who seek particular favors from a lesser concept of God, who in such a limited form becomes a mere divinity to be propitiated.

Because children are taught to behave according to the whimsies of their caregivers, they learn early in life to abandon their personal integrity and do what they're told. Unfortunately this attitude often persists well into adulthood, where it can ally itself with all manner of hooliganism. True adults are those who have made the transition from childhood and taken up the cross of guiding their own lives, but these are few and far between. The Gita is encouraging us to add one more to the world total of free souls by becoming independent ourselves. The alternative is to remain trapped in eddies of consciousness, stagnating, or worse: becoming a member of a sect loudly proclaiming its affiliation and wanting to eradicate anyone with a different set of beliefs.

This is not mere prattle. Alice Miller, a psychologist who has studied fascism in depth, determined that the most important precondition to the social acceptance of oppression was the teaching of obedience to children. Kurt Vonnegut agrees. In *Timequake*, (p. 42) he writes, in respect to World War II, “I asked the late great German novelist Heinrich Böll what the basic flaw was in the German character. He said, ‘Obedience.’” Among many fundamentalist religious types the enforcement of blind obedience amounts to a mania. Sadly, it invariably invokes a static conception that leaves the obedient one a mere empty shell, unable to cope with matters outside of a fortress mentality. He or she becomes a mere “sacrificer to the divinities,” kowtowing to idols and keeping well clear of the living spirit. Catholic theologian Thomas Aquinas gave a strong motivation for not accepting the assertions of authority when he said, “True and false will in no better way be revealed and uncovered than in resistance to a contradiction.”

Yoga has its share of fundamentalists. Radhakrishnan writes, in his Gita commentary, p. 169:

Blind obedience to an external authority is repudiated [by the Gita]. Today there are several teachers who require of their followers unthinking obedience to their dictates. They seem to believe that the death of intellect is the condition of the life of spirit. Many credulous and simple-minded people are drawn to them not so much by their spiritual powers as by the publicity of their agents and the human weakness for novelty, curiosity and excitement.

This is as true in politics as religion, as history eloquently attests.

In a reciprocal universe you find what you seek. Therefore we are enjoined to seek the most universal, unlimited, free conception, which is merely epitomized as Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita.

24) Unreasoning persons consider Me as the unmanifest come to manifestation, not knowing My supreme existence (value), unexpended, with no superior.

In case there is a possibility that Arjuna or a reader of the Gita might mistake Krishna the charioteer for the supreme Absolute, Krishna lays down an unequivocal distinction. He is God in the sense we all are God; moreover, he is an able spokesperson for It. He is a guru nonpareil. But for us to think “This here, this person, is the Absolute,” or even “he is a god,” is off the mark.

It’s an easy mistake to make. When we are touched by a sense of the numinous and our spirit soars, the immediate impulse is to worship the external source of the contact. This is totally understandable. It only becomes absurd when it is continued over time, bringing about the birth of yet another religion, yet another version of God to plague humanity. The antidote is implied in the words “unreasoning persons” do this. This tells us that reason, which is the technique of yoga according to the Gita, must be brought to bear. If we don’t add this dimension to our understanding, we’ll be stuck with a limited vision. And when the initial impact wears off, we’ll spend the rest of our lives trying to get it back via the static conception we have formulated of it. It’s a recipe for failure.

Nataraja Guru provides a cogent analysis of this very deep and baffling verse:

Verse 24 here enunciates the overall character of the Absolute in terms of manifestation and non-manifestation. The verse admits of four possible ways of ruling out predications about the Absolute.

First it denies that the manifest is the Absolute, though derived from a prior unmanifest. Second, it rules out the theory (which is more philosophical) that the unmanifest is the Absolute, although it attains to manifestation as the visible world. Third, it rules out the position where a philosopher

thinks that the manifest and unmanifest are dual aspects of the same Absolute, a position which Shankara... has taken so much trouble to refute. Fourth, as a final residue there is the possible predication which states that the Absolute is an entity to be included among entities abstract or concrete which the mind is capable of conceiving statically or existentially. Here the Absolute is not to be thought of as a thing at all. The Absolute belongs to the unique order of the Absolute itself which has nothing in common with things or entities, however subtle or perceptual they may be. The Absolute is the supreme and therefore above all, though comprehending all. Nothing can therefore be predicated of it, but everything that is predicated derives its reality from it.

The Absolute is simultaneously the supporter of all and the Beyond, and in fact the relationship of manifestation to the unmanifested is the supreme mystery as well as the theme of this chapter. Seekers of truth must contemplate the Thisness of the Guru (or Nature or Friend), and the Thatness of the Unmanifest, and unite them in the heart. Only then can they come to know the Absolute in full, without a bifurcated vision.

25) I am not revealed brightly to all; shrouded as I am by the illusive effect of negative reality, this deluded world does not know Me, unborn, unexpended.

The “illusive effect of negative reality” is maya, here termed Yoga Maya. Maya refers to the innately baffling nature of creation. It’s what keeps us on an infinitely long learning curve, instead of just knowing everything at the outset.

The Source of everything is not easily revealed through its creation, because our minds are caught by the stupendous exhibition of burgeoning reality as it bursts into being. After all, according to quantum mechanics as well as ancient insight, our entire universe is being emitted every microsecond.

Comprehending it is like trying to climb up Niagara Falls: we are battered back down by the sheer volume spewing over the lip. If we are to ascend to the Source we have to transcend the influence of the welter of perceptible events that have totally saturated our attention.

Just why maya is here called Yoga Maya is anyone's guess, if you read the various commentaries. Shankara thought this meant the union of the three gunas, and this makes sense, as Krishna has already exhorted us to transcend them. Nataraja Guru thought this:

[In Yoga] there are two poles to be distinguished methodologically. These poles interact and, to the extent that duality persists in the product of this bipolar interaction, it only succeeds in confounding. Thus this form of *yoga* (union) tainted by dualism, tends to confuse our judgement in regard to the supreme value of the Absolute. In this sense *maya* (illusion or error-principle) and *yoga* (union) go hand in hand to defeat the purpose of wisdom.

It's a good point, but possibly stretches the original intent. We can only add our own speculation, or else treat it an elaboration of plain old maya.

If it hasn't already been made clear, it is valuable to know that the world is deluded regarding the Absolute. All generally held beliefs and assumptions are an amalgam of falsehood and truth, and we would be wise to separate the one from the other before charging off to seek our fortune. The simple version of maya is that it is the sum total of the imperfections that throw our pure intentions off course. If we merely "follow our nose," led by appearances, we will sooner or later find ourselves in a dark wood.

It is our own choice whether to laugh or cry over the tragedies of life engendered by maya. In Shakespeare's *A Midsummer-Night's Dream*, the amusing aspects are highlighted. When Puck, an imp who is the very incarnation of maya, has bamboozled several simple souls into misdirected love, he gloats,

“Lord, what fools these mortals be!” It’s hard to believe anyone would be so stupid. But then, all of us are. In an infinite universe, ignorance is inevitable. Puck also provides the magical antidote to wake the foolish mortals back up to their more plausible wishes. It may well be that maya embodies our hope as well as our despair.

However, yogis can’t wait around expecting to be sprinkled with waking powder by a divine messenger. They do their best to stay awake at all times. That means pondering their experiences to critically distinguish how falsehood is perverting their perceptions.

Because this kind of intelligent discrimination is a lengthy process, wars (both large and small) tend to be fought by children, who have not had time to confront the popular falsehoods of their era. Those who survive usually begin the discrimination process in earnest after they discover what they’ve been coaxed into. If you are going to manipulate people into worshipping delusory ideals, you have to get to them early on, as tyrants have always known. Understanding this provides a powerful incentive for us to seek to penetrate the veil of Yoga Maya as quickly as possible.

26) I know the beings that are past, present, and to come, Arjuna, but no one knows Me.

A truly global vision includes all of time as well as space. Beings of a limited duration in a specified location have a correspondingly limited viewpoint. Humans have always struggled to universalize their limited purview, usually but not always with negative consequences. Instead of replicating a static world view, we would be better served by opening our small selves up to the totality as much as possible.

The Absolute is not a static entity. Winds of change are eternally blowing through it in billowing waves of beauty. To be able to respond and appreciate it, we need tremendous flexibility. Static belief systems are inadequate. Life itself is therefore the supreme art form. The Bhagavad Gita is an anti-system that

teaches the art of life via individual fluidity in matching ourself to the onrushing waves of the Absolute.

There is no point in stipulating in advance what any experience signifies. That will be determined moment to moment in each seeker's life. To give the Absolute a defined meaning is to kill the spirit and reinstitute dead imagery. Freedom is the necessary prerequisite for embracing the ever-new flow of joy in existence. The proof of the pudding comes as an increasing sense of blissful orientation that banishes anxiety with an intelligently radiant awareness.

Subsuming oneself in a surrogate parent figure through politics or religion may also be blissful, in the sense that "ignorance is bliss." It is for each to decide the path that suits them best. In the final analysis, our choices are a matter of predilection.

The world is filled with those who proudly insist they know God and you don't. Or they know truth and you don't. They all have an air of hostility and aggression that rebounds on them with repulsion. At heart it is a defensive display. Here we are being invited to substitute a humble attitude of openness, based on an awareness of how little we do know and can know. As we gain self-awareness we can shed the defenses that pervert our intelligence, and adopt a truly worshipful attitude where all beings, no matter how flawed, are worthy of love and consideration.

27) From the delusion of the pairs of opposites arising from attraction and repulsion, all beings, on being created, are subject to confusion (of values).

Krishna goes on to explain why we are unable to know unitive reality. I mean, why is this so difficult? Shouldn't we be able to just naturally know our own reality? Why don't we, then?

A newborn infant resides in something akin to a unitive state, if not in a perfectly unitive one. The radiant glow they emit testifies to the excellence of the life within, but they are just barely able to interact with our world. Slowly but surely they learn to

respond to their environment and communicate with it. During the learning process, their original state of oneness with everything is gradually overlaid with a set of specific relationships with pleasant and unpleasant objects and conditions. As this development occurs, the child inevitably loses touch with its core reality and identifies instead with the passing show of “objects of sense-interest,” which are judged to be good or bad, useful or detrimental. A dualistic assessment of everything takes the place of the former unitive acceptance, which in the short term is undoubtedly essential for the well-being of the child.

Because of the complex challenges of seeking sustenance and avoiding hazards, it is usually not until maturity that a person begins to notice the absence of contact with their core nature. The sense of missing something essential can be quite painful, as the superficial nature of dualism is revealed. Things supply our wants, but they don't nourish our soul. Once the vagaries of the dualistic outlook lose their fascination, an alternative is sought, but the search is often misdirected. We need to reconnect with our original unitive state, which has never gone away, but only languished in the shadows. Reconnection is possible, so long as the person isn't convinced that there is nothing but duality. But not knowing of their blissful inner nature drives many people to despair, with consequent anxiety or drug addiction or dolorous resignation. The healthier ones throw themselves into their work or their recreation, imagining that redoubled immersion in their favorite activities will resurrect their happiness. Yet the Absolute, being infinitely subtle, resists all efforts to be nailed down. It can only be accessed by a qualitative, not a quantitative, change.

Our happiness is not dependent on what we conceive and perceive, it is the very substance we are made of. Objects and subjects derive their joyful or terrible aspects as reflections of our inner state. Thus realignment with the Absolute infuses what we experience with exactly what we are seeking, and what we already are aware of in the depths of our souls. The confusion of values Krishna is referring to is the projection of meaning onto the outer

world and the simultaneous dismissal of our own intrinsic value. We need to turn that formula around, not only for our personal happiness, but now, it seems, for the very survival of our species. Our true nature is bliss. We do not need to rip the earth apart to root it out in obscure places.

Attraction and repulsion can be used as measuring rods for distinguishing the unitive from the dual, as our reaction to events, pro or con, is an accurate measure of how attached to them we are. Moreover, the attraction to truly absolute values is not accompanied by feelings of disgust or any emotional letdown afterwards. If something attracts you and then after enjoying it you feel depleted, guilty or hung over, you can be sure your attraction was dualistic. By contrast, heeding the call of the sublime spirit leads to unalloyed happiness, with a lingering sense of contentment and appreciation. Only dualistic matters have an upside and a downside.

When we want something we are very clever to furnish all sorts of rationales for having it, which is a further extension of the confusion of values mentioned in this verse. Our desires infiltrate our intellect, warping it and enlisting it to offer its imprimatur to dubious undertakings. One doesn't have to go very far from home to hear criminals and misfits of all stripes rationalizing a whole range of dastardly deeds. In the USA presently there are swarms of self-described religious people cheering for torture, for example. We dehumanize our enemy to make inhuman treatment acceptable. We cite God's words in some ancient text to justify the destruction of our habitat and the fouling of our own nests. The seeker can and should think of a hundred examples to help them to steer clear of such avoidable and spiritually bankrupting tragedies, to aid in rectifying their value system. We can easily imagine the Judaic God demanding, in a voice like thunder, "What part of *Thou shalt not kill* don't you understand?"

28) But those persons of pure deeds, whose sin has come to an end, freed from the conflict of pairs of opposites, adore me with a firm resolve.

Babies have always symbolized the purity of the childlike state of unity. Ivory Soap used to advertise with a baby and the slogan “99 and 44/100% pure.” One of the primary reasons for the success of Christianity is undoubtedly the protolinguistic image of mother and child and the deification of said child. In case that message missed a few who relied more on metalanguage than protolanguage, it was spelled out in Matthew 18.3: “Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.” The innocent beauty of babies reaches out to hearts everywhere, with no need for explanation, resonating with our dormant but still living sense of wonder.

For us there is no going back to infancy, but the aim of a spiritual quest is to reintroduce that youthful unitive state of bliss into our adult awareness. Yoga integrates the horizontal practicalities with the vertical sublimities, and the result is expertise.

Sin, if it means anything here, is what blocks our purity, in other words the attractions and repulsions of dualistic understanding. It does not come to an end by negating every instance one by one, but by a wholesale transfer of the multiplicity to unity. Speaking of soap, this is the idea where Narayana Guru taught that you shouldn't try to wash the lather out of soap, because it never stops lathering. That's its job. Just accept that it will have lather, and you'll be fine. Like that, the world will always froth and fume. Don't try to stop it to achieve peace. That is not how sin comes to an end.

This, if it doesn't come across in translation, is an example of Narayana Guru's sense of humor. It's funny, as well as instructive.

The mention of firm resolve reminds us that there is effort involved—in this aspect at least—of contemplation. Potential attractions and repulsions continually dance in front of the senses,

and without concentrated effort they can easily catch hold of our attention. Intense focus on the Absolute is necessary to obviate their ability to distract us. This type of transcendental awareness achieves what the more ordinary, one-sided approach—cultivating repulsion about attraction—cannot.

As we know, sin is not a tenet of the Gita, although it acknowledges its place in the common dualistic frame of reference. If there is anything like sin, it is duality. Being free of conflicting pairs of opposites is therefore seen to be the definition of the end of sin, which is the same as purity. Unitive actions that do not throw the actor off balance into dualism are pure. One of the Gita's main formulas for purity in action is to act without expectations.

29) Those who, resorting to Me, strive for liberation from decay and death—they know That, the Absolute, all that constitutes Self-knowledge, and everything pertaining to (ritualistic) action.

The final two verses introduce a batch of abstruse philosophical concepts that Arjuna is going to ask for elaboration on at the start of the next chapter. Being a good disciple he doesn't just sit like a bump on a log when his guru reels off some incomprehensible gobbledygook, especially when it bears the prelude, "Anyone who is seeking liberation (like you) knows the following...." He is bound to ask for enlightenment about these matters. While it may be a simple literary technique to continue the dialogue through the teaching process, it shows how a guru and disciple work together to transmit wisdom. Even if Arjuna were to say, "Oh yes, I know all about those," the guru would then ask him to explain, and then would improve on any weaknesses in the explanation. Any good teacher would do the same if they had the chance to work one-on-one with a student.

"Decay and death" in a yogic context can be taken to refer to the degeneration of mind that occurs in habitual thinking and conditioned behavior, something we truly *can* liberate ourselves from.

30) Those who know Me, taking together what refers to existential, hypostatic, and sacrificial aspects—they know Me in a unitive spirit, even at the time of their departure.

In the very first verse of this chapter, Krishna promised to present a “comprehensive” overview of everything of importance in attaining the Absolute. He has now fulfilled his promise, though the education of his disciple has plenty more of importance to home in on within that overview. Interestingly, the entire life span has been covered as well, from the moment of creation in verse 27 to the moment of dissolution in this one.

Death sweeps away all pretense, and so is a great teacher in its own right. We all know people who have been converted by their awareness of mortality from frivolous or dogmatic posturing to sincere, direct and open lovers of life. As long as we imagine life is infinite we are prone to take it for granted, but every moment becomes precious when we comprehend there are far too few of them. There is so much of value to be learned that we must not waste any of our golden opportunity as sentient beings through procrastination. And now we are well-instructed sentient beings.

Hypostatic is a favorite term of Nataraja Guru, referring here to *devas*, divinities as a general group, where other commentators simply use ‘divine’. In his structural scheme he places the hypostatic realm at the turiya, the upper pole of the vertical axis. The corresponding lower pole is the hierophantic, the priests and worshippers who reach upward toward the hypostatic. Here they are referred to as the sacrificial aspect. Seekers strive upwards, and grace from above rains down upon them.

It is likely that Krishna is mentioning these integral parts of the total picture to counter any tendency toward complacency on Arjuna’s part. When you have a great guru teaching you, it is very comfortable to sit and listen. Without any special effort, you begin to feel like an enlightened being by induction. You may even imagine you are wise.

Then suddenly the guru asks you to explain some subtle idea. You experience a rush of adrenaline, along with a jolt of embarrassment as you cast about for a response and come up empty. Better not fake it with a canned answer! You are much safer to realize how much you have yet to learn, and ask the teacher for further elucidation. If you are clever enough, you can add a small bit of insight to your request, to show you aren't *completely* stupid. The ever-hazardous spiritual ego is gently tamed in such an exchange. Consider yourself fortunate if your inflated ego doesn't require sterner measures than this!