

CHAPTER VIII: Akshara Brahma Yoga

The Unitive Way in Spiritual Progress

Vivid allusions pregnant with implications serve to draw the disciple deeper into the mysteries of union with the Absolute, in an orientation only slightly tilted away from the purely vertical vision of the ninth and tenth chapters.

The arch-like shape elucidated by Nataraja Guru adds another dimension to the wisdom transmission of this most sublime of scriptures. *Akshara* means imperishable, an apt adjective to describe the Absolute. *Akshara brahman* is thus “the Absolute that is unexpended, that knows no change,” (Nataraja Guru, *Unitive Philosophy*, p. 95). The Gita begins and ends with a focus on Arjuna the seeker, with his tumultuous horizontal problems of everyday life, while in the middle the orientation is completely verticalized toward Krishna as an epitome of the unchanging Absolute. In between there are various degrees of admixture. Here we are homing in on the nature of the mysterious ground of existence itself.

In this chapter the disciple is still present in the dialogue, but is now being directed to concentrate entirely on esoteric aspects of the Absolute. In the matching chapter at the same elevation of the arch structure, Chapter XI, Arjuna will be temporarily absorbed into Krishna’s imperishable nature, and it will change his outlook forever. The intense study program the Gita sketches out not only makes the transcendent vision possible, but protects the visionary from being damaged by its power. The final caveat of the work as a whole (in XVIII, 67) insists that this knowledge should only be transmitted to those who are serious about it. It is not intended for casual perusal.

1) Arjuna said:

What is that Absolute? What is the principle of the Self? What is action, Krishna? What is said to be the principle of existence, and what is spoken as the principle of divinity?

In this and the next verse, Arjuna fires off a burst of seven questions relevant to his spiritual understanding. The first three questions match the three categories mentioned by Krishna at the end of the preceding chapter, in VII, 29, and the next three match the categories in VII, 30. The final question is based on the last phrase of VII, 30, where the moment of death is mentioned. Far from being redundant, the incisive questioning reveals that Arjuna is hanging on Krishna's every word, and the outline provided by the Gita undoubtedly summarizes lengthy discussions of all the topics. Their meanings are to be fleshed out in our own meditations.

We should keep in mind Krishna's directive at the end of the last chapter, that the understanding of all of these questions taken together in a unitive spirit reveals the Absolute. No formula or piecemeal assessment, where ideas are addressed separately in linear sequence, is adequate to the task at hand.

2) Here in this body, what and how is (to be understood) the principle of sacrifice? Again, how are You to be known by self-controlled persons at the time of going forth from the body?

Arjuna's questions are extremely compressed, as are the answers Krishna is about to give. Although having them enunciated fulfills a methodological requirement, Krishna's one-word answers about the nature of the Absolute are not particularly revealing. We are meant to use them as a launching pad to ponder deeply on these matters, and our understanding of them can expand throughout our entire lifetime, ramifying each single term into a world of meaning.

Pat answers don't really tell us anything, they just give us a suggestive label. There is a real danger that unless a diligent effort is made we will inwardly nod and move on, imagining we know something but without really understanding the matter.

I know a number of people who have been diagnosed with a syndrome; in other words they—infininitely vast, hyper-dimensional beings—have been given a neat definition to “explain” what’s wrong with them, which they then take to be what they are. And, by the way, according to their physicians there is no possibility of resolving the predicament revealed by the diagnosis, though a little tinkering around the edges might take the edge off. My friends believe they are stuck with the label, branded for life. What a tragedy! You can see their self-esteem collapse, even as they feel superficially relieved at being handed a comprehensible token in exchange for the enigmatic mystery that they suspect themselves to be.

If we truly *are* the Absolute (and we are by definition, since the Absolute is all-inclusive), everything is possible, including much more than curing our mental ailments. From an absolutist standpoint even ordinary mindsets are forms of mental illness or dis-ease. All are curable, or at least vastly improvable, given dedication and assistance. Modern “therapy” often wallows in negative assertions that fix the problem in place, which is basically an invitation for the sufferer to become dependent for life on quack nostrums. The reason I’m insisting on this is that we should always see our present condition as a jumping off point for further expansion and insight. We must avoid predetermined conclusions based on facile definitions and formulas. This is not merely a yogic exercise, it is an essential feature of a healthy and happy life.

The Gita and the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali are closely related, as we have already noted. Eknath Easwaran describes the Yoga Sutras as having been written in a kind of lecture note style, with the expectation that each teacher will elaborate on them in their own way according to their personal understanding. Here we find a similar technique, where the teacher, or ideally even the student, needs to flesh out each technical term by first grasping it philosophically and then relating it to actual life situations. Having done so with each in turn, a holistic leap must be made to integrate them into a single vision. Guru Nitya puts it this way, in *Living the*

Science of Harmonious Union, p. 328: “The Yoga student goes from listening to instructions, to meditating on instructions, to finding in all external environments appropriate challenges to be accepted and converted into one's own natural counterparts in the process of evolution.”

Note that Krishna will carefully answer each question in order, since he's a very precise type of teacher. You, the reader, undoubtedly have other questions of your own, burning in your imagination, and you can ask your own guru for enlightenment about them. That's exactly what the guru (in whatever form it may appear) is there for. Integration must follow a process of atomization brought on by scrutiny. You don't learn anything by abandoning the search in advance in the name of hypothetical unity, though it's often claimed that you do. Yoga is an active dialectical process.

To paraphrase the seven questions in a more modern idiom, keeping in mind that God is a vernacular term in English for the Absolute, Arjuna is asking What is God? What is the collective consciousness (Self or *atman*) of humanity? How does what we do affect what we become, and does it even matter in the ultimate analysis? How and why are we alive, and are there immortal beings or only mortals? Is there an efficacious religious practice to connect us with the immortal realm? And finally, How does one separate the true God from fictitious mental imagery?

All these questions may sound like carping to a person schooled in reverential deference, but they are critically important, going straight to the heart of our dilemma as embodied beings. Abandoning our common sense is not a prerequisite for enlightenment. Guru Nitya reminds us, in answer to a question from a psychologist in *Therapy and Realization in the Bhagavad Gita*:

In the eighteenth chapter, when Arjuna said, “Now my mind is clear. Please tell me what to do, I shall do it,” at that time Krishna says, “Thus has wisdom more secret than all that is

secret been declared to you by Me; (critically) scrutinizing all, omitting nothing: you may do as you like.” Krishna is not asking Arjuna to obey him. A disciple is not supposed to obey his guru. The disciple should understand what the guru says. That is absolutely necessary. But you don’t have to be a slave of your guru. You are a free person exercising your own freedom of choice, but if you ask for the guru’s opinion through his wisdom teaching, then you are committing yourself to a serious responsibility. On your part you have to critically scrutinize all that he says. This is all that’s required. You may choose to touch the feet of your guru so that your ego won’t be tempted to jump up. This may look very crude and crass to the western world, but I am only speaking of an attitude. After humbling yourself, you should look for an opportunity where the guru is pleased to narrate. But beyond that the reverence stops. Thereafter, you put searching questions to the guru. You are not to just sit there like a dunce; you must ask searching questions. And when he or she speaks, you are not to lie down and accept it at face value, but you must critically examine every word. Scrutinize all that is said. Then afterwards you do what you like according to your best understanding, not what the guru likes.

Arjuna is given full freedom before the teaching of Krishna is closed.

For additional insight, Nataraja Guru examines Arjuna’s questions along with Krishna’s answers in mathematical detail in his book *Unitive Philosophy*, pages 93 to 105.

3) Krishna said:

The Absolute, perennial, supreme—(its) own nature is called the principle of Self. The creative urge, the cause of the origin of existent beings, is designated action.

And here is a modern version of Krishna’s brief and evocative answers. First, God or the Absolute is that which persists

while everything else comes and goes. A basic meditation for a disciple is to look for the unchanging aspect of life. Science has convinced us that seemingly unchanging things like mountains, stars, the sun, even the earth itself—the very symbol of immobility— are all gradually evolving and changing. Subatomic particles are much more persistent, but even they are thought to have a bounded existence. While these may symbolize eternity, we must look even deeper to know what is truly not subject to change.

As dedicated contemplatives, our core sense of self is the only thing we know that persists, even as our surface personality undergoes transformations, so we have to look to that core for any possible connection with the Eternal. Its supremacy derives from the fact of its being permanent. It stands out by remaining unchanged even as everything else undergoes changes. This is only true, of course, if we don't make the mistake of identifying our self with its outward reflections. Our essence is not the same as the superficial aspects we use to describe ourselves. This is an essential baseline measurement we can employ to correctly distinguish the changing aspects we *want* to identify with from those that truly are eternal, thus avoiding the common errors of partisan dogmatism or narcissism. We have to be sure to strike our ground on real rock, and not simply on mud that looks like rock.

Second, Krishna assures Arjuna that the collective consciousness or Self is identical with God's nature. This means existence and God are not two different things. Vedanta proclaims "That thou art." God (the anthropomorphized Absolute) is your nature. The apparent separation between the finite creature and the infinite Source is merely another illusion of perception. The aspirant is expected to meditate on this unitive idea until it is properly grasped and becomes a living foundation of awareness. In a world obsessed with "You are *not* God!" this is a major obstacle to overcome.

Understanding our self to be God is almost as perilous as being convinced we are not God. We are all familiar with megalomaniacs with hyperinflated egos, claiming "I am God." The

truth is we are all God, everything is God. That's an utterly different realization than I as a separate individual am God (implying *you* are not). Resolving this conundrum is an essential yoga dialectic: we have to neutralize the polarity "I am God" and "I am not God" to achieve the transcendent state that is the goal of Yoga.

As any psychologist knows, our mental framing gradually transforms to match the beliefs we hold. This means that if you believe in a hypothetical separateness, as was popular in nineteenth and early twentieth century science for instance, or lies at the heart of Western religions, the schism in your soul will become magnified over time. This framing has set our species on a course of man vs. nature that has severely damaged the environment, both inner and outer. Conversely, meditation on the unity of self and Absolute closes the gap and brings a sense of wholeness, healing the inner and outer wounds.

Third, the innate urge of God to manifest as innumerable things and processes is the source of all activity. The theory of white holes in physics is very similar—a point source ejecting matter in all directions and dimensions, which then becomes galaxies and solar systems and all that comprises them. The goal of action in general is to express new possibilities of becoming for the Absolute, (or the White Hole at the center of the galaxy if you prefer). Religious attitudes that everyone should act in a severely curtailed manner—often emulating a single legendary individual of the past—are stringently opposed to this creative Will of God. How dull that a single person's vision of right activity, no matter how cleverly conceived, should become the model for all God's creation to imitate! How boring to have everyone behaving the same way, following arcane and ill-fitting rules. What a tragic waste of potential! Luckily, no matter how much repressive pressure humans place on existence, its internal exuberance continues to positively pressurize every life, truncated or not. All attempts to permanently wall it up and neuter it have so far failed,

and will continue to fail, because creativity is primary while existence is secondary.

In our day science has discovered—actually rediscovered—the quantum vacuum, which is something very like the creative Absolute. Mathematically evident from the beginning of quantum theory, its stupendously powerful effects were discounted until recently because they were imperceptible, in much the same way that deep-sea fish take no notice of the pressure they swim around in. An assumption was made that there must be a flaw in the math somewhere, so its presence was intentionally omitted. That unjustified omission has only recently been rescinded.

The quantum vacuum is now posited to be a kind of template or information program for the evolution of all complex systems. The hypothesis it replaces, blind evolution, has been calculated by more modern mathematicians to be almost infinitely unlikely, and if successful to require millions of times longer to produce a living planet than has apparently been the case. The influence of previously imprinted patterns contained in the quantum vacuum may account for the difference. More will be found about this at IX, 5, and a wealth of additional details may be found in the book *Science and the Akashic Field*, by Ervin Laszlo.

4) The principle of existence is the transient aspect, and the spirit is the principle of divinity; what pertains to sacrifice is Myself here in the body, Arjuna.

Krishna's fourth answer is that existence is that which, unlike God, has an origin, a duration, and a termination. Everything manifested falls into this category, so the Absolute is always referred to as unmanifested even though it becomes all This.

Fifth, the infusion of God into existence is known as spirit. The convincing but unreal distinction of existence from God is called Maya in Sanskrit. Meditating on this paradoxical conundrum is an integral part of discipleship, and the only way to overcome the apparent schism between concepts like mortality and

immortality. Simply put, by turning to the spirit within each of us, we are turning to the Beyond. At heart there is no difference.

Sixth, contemplating God in all things in order to realize its universality is the essence of religious behavior, generally called *yajna* in the Gita, and translated as sacrifice. Such adoration or appreciation takes many forms, all of them acceptable, which Krishna affirmed in IV, 11: “As each chooses to approach Me, even accordingly do I have regard for him. My very path it is that all men do tread from every (possible) approach.”

Sacrifice occurs when the two poles in a reciprocal situation, namely a disciple and a guru or a seeker and the Absolute, approach each other. Vertically aiming at the Absolute and allowing yourself to become merged in it is the essence of sacrifice. This is “freely chosen activity”—our working definition of sacrifice—at its best. Amazingly, those who practice yogic sacrifice find that the Absolute always more than compensates for their relatively meager efforts to reach out to it.

Such sacrifice requires a great deal of preparation. The seeker must overcome all doubts before being ready to “let go.” The doubts are the ways we cling on to our small self when confronted with the greater Self. We have amassed them for our own protection, but they have separated us from our true nature. Being in a secure enough situation to abandon them allows us to make the supreme sacrifice of reuniting with our true nature, the Absolute.

When Krishna says that “I (the Absolute) am what sacrifice is all about,” this is a literal statement. Seeing the Absolute everywhere is both the goal and process of the sacrifice. This was spelled out in IV, 24: “For him the Absolute is the act of offering, the Absolute is the substance offered into the Absolute which is the fire, offered by (him), the Absolute, the end to be reached by him being even the Absolute, by means of his peace supreme of absolutist action.”

5) And he who, at the time of death, thinking of Me alone leaves the body and goes forth, reaches My being; herein there is no room for doubt.

Lastly, Arjuna is concerned about how he will know the Absolute—know whether he’s on the right track—when cast loose from his moorings by death, or any other time for that matter. Krishna sets his mind at ease: I’m there, I’m everywhere. You are inside the Absolute even if you don’t recognize it, so relax. There’s no outside anyway. The catch is that if you are not able to be totally absorbed, you should think of the most refined version of the Absolute you have been able to evolve during your lifetime, because lesser versions will draw you to lesser incarnations. Like an arrow shot from a bow, you will always go where you are aimed.

The Tibetan Buddhists have made an elaborate study of how conscious imagery leads the deceased to its next realm, incarnate or otherwise, described in their Book of the Dead. Krishna offers similar-sounding ideas in the next verse. But we aren’t necessarily supposed to take this literally, either. We can easily treat it as symbolic, since whenever we are fully absorbed mentally we are “dead to the body.” This chapter exhorts absorption in the Absolute, which automatically brings detachment from bodily obsessions and oppressions. We are to “die” in this sense while we are still alive, by cultivating an absorbing interest of an absolutist quality in a subject of our choice, one that is also in resonance with our dharma, our true nature.

In a reflexive universe, what you see is what you get. Or what you know is what you get. Happily, there is also a guiding light within the mysterium tremendum that leads us on despite our ignorance, because we don’t always grasp the whole picture.

6) Whatever manifested aspect a man might think of at death, when he leaves the body—that he reaches, whose thoughts always conform to that particular life-expression.

Krishna now points out that what you have habitually thought throughout your life will come up with renewed intensity at the time of death. Any hypocritical pretenses are swept away by the overwhelming fact of your immanent demise. All your good intentions to “get right with God” later on will have no effect whatsoever. Your actual mental orientation as you lived it day to day springs up in an epitomized and focused form, which directs you appropriately to your next incarnation.

The only notion in the Gita that comes close to merit is that what you truly know, not merely what you believe or wish, forms the basis of your self. The accumulated memories of a lifetime are consolidated as *vasanas*, incipient memories, compressed like the DNA in a seed, and these will be reborn when the seed is once again lodged in fertile soil. The fantasies, which comprise an embarrassingly large percentage of our thoughts and identifications, including religious affiliations, will vanish into thin air. “You can’t take it with you” includes thoughts and personal identity along with material possessions.

To whatever extent a person might be able to delude themselves during their lifetime about who they are and what they want, all is swept aside by any instant of concentrated consciousness, such as the state of mind of a dying person. Our meditations should also be as honest as this, but they too are often vitiated by wishful thinking and defensive ego-posturing. We prefer to imagine we know what we’re talking about, instead of admitting that our actual position is almost totally unknown, and we are relying on baseless speculation.

It may well be that “reincarnation” happens when we come to a point in our life when we realize we haven’t truly lived yet. We haven’t even begun to enjoy our existence, much less fulfill our potential. Instead, we have conscientiously put ourselves on hold for some hypothetical reasons that boil down to an elaborate social trap. Awareness of this, if it is acute enough, reignites the will to live, and so constitutes a real rebirth. If we can live again in the

present life, well and good. If this awareness comes when we are already at death's door, mentally or physically, we can only hope there will be another chance somewhere in another life. But this is a fool's hope, the last recourse for those who failed to wake up in this life.

An instruction such as Krishna's here can be used to hone our focus toward what is truly valuable. All the good intentions with which we postpone getting down to brass tacks are merely smug delusions, window dressing, empty promises. Knowing our life is sure to end sooner or later should spur us to make every minute count. The mention of death here is undoubtedly intended to spur us ahead in the present, as there is no spiritual value to holding on to any particular belief about reincarnation or anything else. Our aliveness does not depend on ideas about the hereafter, but on our acuity here and now.

T.S. Eliot commented on this verse in the same spirit in one of his Four Quartets (The Dry Salvages, Part III):

Here between the hither and the farther shore
While time is withdrawn, consider the future
And the past with an equal mind.
At the moment which is not of action or inaction
You can receive this: "on whatever sphere of being
The mind of a man may be intent
At the time of death"—that is the one action
(And the time of death is every moment)
Which shall fructify in the lives of others:
And do not think of the fruit of action.

Whether or not we are reincarnated as more evolved versions of ourselves is beside the point. We *will* become what we think, in this life or the next, so let's not waste time poisoning ourselves and our associates with negative ruminations or absurd fantasies.

I am reminded of my mother, a health nut and exercise enthusiast for her whole life, but who often used to say "I hope I

die before I become a burden to you children in my old age.” She died tragically young, having gotten the wish she made but hadn’t really meant. When the time came to go she was heartbroken about all she was going to miss out on, as well as resentful all the unhealthy people who were going to live longer than she.

The point of this verse is about as close to a Day of Judgment as Vedanta gets. Your life unfolds based precisely on your thoughts and actions, and there is no possibility of “cheating” the process though any kind of outside intervention or clever dissimulation. It is impossible to fool or hoodwink our very nature, after all. We are reminded in the next verse that the optimum course is to always bring the total picture—the Absolute—into our outlook, as a stabilizing and normalizing ground, and then there will be no need to pretend.

7) Therefore, at all times remember Me and fight; when your mind and intelligence are surrendered to Me, you shall come to Me; have no doubt.

The attitude introduced in the last verse as proper for dying is here recommended as proper for living as well. We will die in good time; meanwhile we are alive, and this study is about learning how to live to the best of our abilities. The Gita believes in life *before* death, as well, perhaps, as after. Meditation and death are similar in that we let go of all specific aspects of our being to participate in the general welfare. It’s just that in one case we come back to our familiar surroundings, and in the other we don’t.

Here we find yet another martial-sounding exhortation of Guru to disciple, echoing the instructions in III, 30 and 43, and IV, 42. “The fight” refers to the context in which Arjuna finds himself. We can generalize it to be whatever situation, conflicted or not, we happen to find ourselves in. The instruction is to be engaged in what we are doing, and also to keep in mind the universal Absolute in which the conflict appears to be occurring. When the attention of the seeker is fully attuned to the Absolute, activity (the fight) is

harmonious and efficacious. As we have often noted, this attunement is needed always, not merely at the time of death as the previous two verses might seem to imply. We should remember, with Eliot, that the time of death is alive in every moment. We are being called upon to put our energies into attaining awareness of the totality of our condition, which takes concentration and determination. We start gently by remembering what we've been taught, but then our awareness of the Absolute gradually comes to life as a vital and direct experience, and the training protocol is no longer necessary.

The surrender of our reliance on fixed programs is a logical consequence of the remembrance. To be aware of the Absolute is to be overwhelmed with bliss and love, which naturally leads to the opening up of the heart to its presence in everything and everyone. Specifically how the mind and intelligence are to be surrendered is touched on in the following three verses. Simplistic or trite notions of surrender are not intended, in any sense.

“Have no doubt,” is a double entendre, simultaneously a reassurance and a directive. Once again the disciple is counseled to not allow doubts to interfere with the delicate connection of the surrendered self with the Divine. Doubts, being unavoidably dualistic, necessarily push away and separate the self from the goal. At this advanced stage of instruction we have gone beyond the healthy doubts of a cautious seeker, and are preparing to take the plunge into full participation in creative life. In the realm of bipolar reciprocity, doubts only block spiritual unfoldment. Sooner or later the seeker has to learn to trust the preceptor, especially the one within.

8) Meditating, with the mind engaged in the yoga involving positive effort, undistracted by anything else, he goes to the supreme divine Person.

We enter a short section of three verses where the first person reference for the Absolute (“Me”) shifts to the third person

(“supreme divine Person,” or more familiarly, God). It’s as if the intensity and directness of the instruction is even too much for Krishna himself to bear, and he must deflect it away. We can clearly picture Arjuna having very profound meditations at this stage, which is a mini-peak before the next three chapters communicating the highest realization a human can attain.

A less than obvious implication of this change of person is that Arjuna as a maturing disciple is no longer so dependent on his friend Krishna, or even his Guru Krishna. He is now capable of diving deep into the transpersonal nature of the unqualified Absolute. The guru is a doorway into the infinite, and Arjuna is taking his first tentative steps inside. At this stage he must ward off distractions and maintain a resolute intention to go forward.

Once again positive effort is called upon. There is a heroic element in yoga which distinguishes it from slipshod forms of worship. Distractions are to be subdued with calm persistence.

Constant practice, *abhyasa*, was introduced in VI, 35 as a means to bring about control of the mind leading to yoga. It does not necessarily refer to any specific technique, but only means adhering to your principles. Whenever a negative or obfuscating impulse leaps to mind—and it happens all the time to everybody—you counteract it by bringing in an upgraded, intelligent determination. This allows you to plunge like an arrow into the core of the Absolute. If instead you latch on to the impulse, it will lead you off on a tangent and you’ll miss the mark.

The human desire to manipulate others means the world is filled with potential distractions that commercially minded enterprises have floated in front of us like fishing lures. We should not take the bait, but hold fast to our meditation, or our integrity. In addition, our native limitations make us fearful of the unfamiliar, and we can overcome the fear by reminding ourselves of the other’s commonality with us. If we cultivate fear of the unknown, we will run away from precisely what we have been seeking the moment it finally appears, as Arjuna will be tempted to do in Chapter XI.

This is a very practical example of what is meant by *abhyasa*, steadiness. The constancy of the practice means we don't hate or fear aspects of life during the week and then practice overcoming those tendencies for a couple of hours on the weekend. Our ideals will only become realized if we adhere to them day in and day out. If it sounds like a lot of work, it's not. Getting our heads straightened out should be our greatest pleasure and ardent desire. If it isn't we are very much in the dark and are not fit for yoga, among other things.

9) He who meditates on the Poet-seer, the Ancient, the Ordainer, minuter than the atom, the Dispenser of all, of unthinkable nature, sun-colored, beyond the darkness,

Verses 9-11 pass into the "ecstatic mode" of eleven syllables per line, instead of the ordinary eight, for the first time since the second chapter. We are now accelerating toward the cosmic vision of the Absolute of Chapter XI, where two-thirds of the total number of these special verses are found.

The images Krishna presents are merely suggestions of topics that could easily be the subject of fertile meditations. There is a mystical flavor to each one, and we are directed to meditate on them until they progress from hypothetical to vivid. There is some value to reading interpretive descriptions, but the real benefit comes from bringing them into a personal meaning through your own original contemplation.

Because of the known references to the Upanishads here, it appears that author Vyasa has gathered top-grade images from various sources for his list of excellent meditations. "More minute than the minute," is found in the Katha Upanishad, 2.20, while "sun-colored, beyond darkness," comes from the Svetasvatara Upanishad, 3.8. We can imagine some of the others being the subject of talks by gurus of the day, shared around the evening fires at gatherings across the land. Though archaic, they can all

speaking volumes to us. I hereby offer a sprinkling of thoughts to help precipitate your own meditations:

The Poet-seer—Words can inspire and uplift us, and they can confuse us and bring us down. They can unburden us of our illusions, and they can embroil us in a clinging web of fantasy. The poetic utterances of an enlightened seer call forth a correspondingly sublime vision in our hearts, which can lead us to the greatest heights of accomplishment. The Masters of historical memory have all shared great truths through their inspiring words, and these are their most important legacy, if not the sole record we have of their passing. It is therefore fitting that a meditation on the poet-seer has pride of place on the present list.

Of all meditations, sitting at the feet of a brilliant teacher is the most direct and efficacious, at least until one's own floodgates burst open.

A famous prayer of the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad is to lead us from untruth to truth, from darkness to light, and from death to immortality. The one who chants it may be addressing an abstract principle of enlightenment, but may just as well be offering surrender and openness to that same principle in the guise of an actual teacher facing them.

As with any form of surrender to outside factors, discrimination is important. The devil is said to quote scripture because it disarms people and brings them willingly into his fold. Like that, there are many teachers with highly persuasive linguistic skills, but whose instruction may lead into blind or destructive alleys. I have personally observed a handful of these. One that still bothers me is a young man with an enthusiastic following in my home town. I attended a satsang or gathering at the behest of one of his disciples. After a brief, cliché-ridden sermon during which those in the room often sighed with ecstasy (and which therefore must have been satisfying for them on some level), he invited anyone with problems to come and sit next to him. I thought, "Now we'll see his true mettle." People came up and presented real

and pressing difficulties, both spiritual and practical, and to each his advice was generic: forget your problems and just be here now. I thought of my own guru and the sympathetic and profound words he would have offered, in every case tailored perfectly to the person petitioning him, yet simultaneously germane to everyone present. He was a poet-seer of the highest caliber, while this half-baked lad was merely a clever parrot, imitating his predecessor (who he had never even met), but lacking the spark of spirit that miraculously can transform dead prose into living poetry. Perhaps he will grow into his assumed role over time, but my heart goes out to his unfortunate acolytes who are striving to repress and ignore their problems instead of solving them. They were being led into dead ends by a misplaced faith in a charismatic pretender.

The Ancient—Ancient here means really ancient: it was already ancient to those who are ancient to us. The coming and going of universes are sine waves in the ocean of eternity, from which they all emerge and eventually remerge. Time itself emerges from and reemerges into eternity. Eternity stands wholly outside of time and space as we experience them. Meditation on the difference helps break us free from bondage to static concepts and the temporal flow we take for granted. This is particularly valuable when we are abandoning the time-space continuum permanently at the onset of death.

Physicists are beginning to discover that time and space, like waves and particles, are constructs; handy ideas we use to make sense of the universe but that don't really exist. All ideas are in fact like that. The history of ideas common to humanity is like a ramifying tree: the tree of maya. It is an excellent meditation to pull back inside our mind from the welter of exteriorized branches, into the trunk, and even all the way back to the generating seed, the most ancient source of our being.

In *That Alone: The Core of Wisdom*, Guru Nitya suggests that Narayana Guru had a healthy attitude about such matters, not to negate exploring the cosmos but to keep it in perspective:

The more you take into account, the more complex the whole thing becomes. Eventually it seems to be nothing more than a vast, confusing flux. You can go mad trying to pin everything down.

The Guru says, “Don’t be silly, don’t break your head on this. The whole thing is a divine sport. Why do you worry about it? Whoever had the fun of making the world just did it this way. So take it easy. It’s only a joke.” (239-40)

The Ordainer—This one can be thought of as Fate or Chance. The word translated here means ruler, and most importantly for our purposes, teacher. Mitchell says Guide. There is apparently a strain of instruction built into the universe to prevent it from remaining static. It is always growing and changing. And yet it never comes out baldly and declares “Here is what I want you to know.” People who write scriptures are fond of such hyperbole, but the universe itself teaches through the more mysterious offices of Fate, of How Things Happen, or even, How Things Happen to Happen. It doesn’t look like any hyperintelligent being is pulling the strings of the universe, but that the very makeup of the universe is vastly intelligent. As my guru used to say, if you insist that the world was created by random chance, you still have to admit that your random chance is repeatedly constructing incredibly complex creatures from mere specks. It’s so astonishing that mere randomness can produce a Shakespeare or a Kalidasa! That means random chance is highly intelligent, or you could at least say well organized.

Speaking of which, quantum events are thought to be occasioned by chance. Chance thus attains even in science a causative status, an unpredictable impact or force very much akin to the concept of an Ordainer. We aren’t bound to interpret the concept in any trivial or superstitious manner.

I know of many cases where I or someone I know was browsing through a bookstore and just “happened” to pick up a book that spoke directly to a question that was bothering us. Or

someone will say something to you that doesn't make much sense, but then later the words are recalled in a different context and they have become the most germane advice you can imagine.

Occasionally I have even overheard a sentence fragment in a public place that seemed like a message from the universe to me. Certainly most of the new directions my life has taken were initiated by some outside factor, often a Chance element. The seemingly random evolution of systems and species exhibits a remarkable coherency when viewed from enough distance. Your meditation can undoubtedly offer many examples from your own experience, and the practice engenders a sense of reverence and openness to new learning situations that are highly beneficial to seekers of truth. Plus, it's nice to know that the pattern of our life is not as random as it appears in the thick of the battle—it too is coherent.

Believing the universe is out to teach us and help us grow produces a far different outcome from believing that the universe is a randomly hostile force opposed to our happiness. The first hypothesis is open and optimistic, encouraging loving kindness; the second, closed and pessimistic, engendering hate and despair. Which do you routinely meditate on?

Minuter than the atom—Atom here means the smallest particle possible, not the relatively gigantic object we currently label 'atom'. "Smaller than the smallest possible particle" means conceiving of another order of existence entirely.

Scientists have been actively meditating on smaller and smaller particles for some time, and they keep finding new ones. The latest reduction is the proposed Higgs field, which resembles an undifferentiated ocean that imparts mass to all the other particles. It is so elusive it took a major multi-decade effort to catch a fleeting glimpse of a minute piece of it. And now there appears to be another similar field to search for, one that looks a lot like consciousness.

When we pixilate the sensory world, which is mathematically very handy, we can divide it into ever smaller units, but the true breakthrough only happens when we make the leap from particles to the emptiness—or continuousness—where they reside. Physicists are beginning to suspect that particles, like the time and space they exist in, are mere suppositions, convenient theoretical bases for constructing a conceptual view of the universe. Meinard Kuhlmann epitomizes the current predicament:

Physicists routinely describe the universe as being made of tiny subatomic particles that push and pull on one another by means of force fields. They call their subject “particle physics” and their instruments “particle accelerators.” They hew to a Lego-like model of the world. But this view sweeps a little-known fact under the rug: the particle interpretation of quantum physics, as well as the field interpretation, stretches our conventional notions of “particle” and “field” to such an extent that ever more people think the world might be made of something else entirely. (Scientific American, August 2013, 41-2)

Kuhlmann adds, “one must conclude that ‘particle physics’ is a misnomer: despite the fact that physicists keep talking about particles, there are no such things.” Moreover, “quantum field theory cannot be readily interpreted in terms of fields, either.” (44) So the more we look, the more the perceived world dissolves into nothingness.

Pondering the relationship between matter and the space it occupies is a fruitful way to invert our ordinary perspective. In spiritual life, “nothingness” is supremely and permanently valuable, while manifested objects have only a circumscribed and temporary value. Subatomic or particle physics is the branch of science engaged in a very similar meditation. Many wonders have been discovered, but the discipline has only begun to predict an ultimate particle or imagine what might be beyond it.

The Dispenser of all—We tend to adopt the idea that we are responsible for our lives. However, on reflection we can see that most of what happens to us comes from our environment as a free benefit, or else as a gratuitous curse. In the final analysis we might be responsible for one percent of what happens to us. While this is an important, even essential, one percent, it tempers our conventional pride to appreciate what comes to us as a gift.

This meditation holds the key to why selfishness is an unsuccessful strategy. We delude ourselves if we imagine that we are able to amplify the natural beneficence in our favor, because we have much less impact than what shows on the surface. We leave out too much important information from our calculations. Selfishness leads to emotional and spiritual poverty, as we cut ourselves off from the 99 percent of existence that is outside our control.

A subsidiary meditation one could have is to visualize all the factors that go into some ordinary aspect of your life, like the light bulb over your head or the food you had for breakfast. Your part was to work at a job and make some money so you could buy the item at the store. But you did nothing to get it there. The light bulb is the product of a series of clever inventions, and is a convergence point for all sorts of raw materials, which are assembled in a very complicated factory. They are delivered to the store by people in vehicles from another type of factory, and sold to you by still others. The materials were mined in various locations around the globe, refined, and transported by ship and rail to the assembly point. In some amazing and poorly understood way, a myriad of potential uses are intrinsic to those materials, and they were scattered over the earth in places that are relatively easy to access. The current theory is that these elements were created in the heart of stars, which then exploded, spreading them through space, where they slowly collected by gravity into planets circling yet another sun. So on reflection that simple light bulb becomes a miraculous epitome of the universe.

An internal meditation is even more essential. Brain imaging studies have shown that our conscious awareness is merely the final stage of a lengthy ruminative process originating in the unconscious. This internal “dispenser of all” resides right within our own psyche, generating thoughts, actions and creative insights, even arranging circumstances to be favorable for our self-expression. By honoring it we open ourselves to its influence. On the other hand, if we imagine our conscious deliberations occur in isolation, awareness shrinks to a pathetic vestige of its potential.

Any aspect of our life that we normally take for granted may be examined in this fashion. When you realize that the tiny part you are acquainted with lies at the convergence point of so many vast forces, you cannot help but feel gratitude to the Dispenser of All and its helpful agents throughout the universe, accompanied by a concurrent deflation of your excessive self-importance. This often instills an urge to freely offer whatever humble contribution you are capable of making to the general welfare.

Of unthinkable nature—Much has been written about the incomprehensible nature of the godhead, Absolute, or Whole Shebang, and no one wants to argue with that. No partial interpretation can truly represent the whole of anything, so we have to be modest about what we think we know. Unfortunately, though, many people read a line like this and imagine they aren't supposed to think about the Absolute at all, spending their meditation time trying hard not to allow their mind to be active in any way. Yet this assertion of impossibility is not meant to dissuade us from thinking, only from thinking we already know everything we should.

The point is to keep in mind that thinking provides analogies; it *represents* the Absolute, and is not to be mistaken for it. Knowing this keeps everything in proper perspective and prevents us from getting a swelled head. Some mental experiences are so intense and exciting that it is hard not to imagine they are the real deal. But if we ever decide we have everything figured out, that we

“know God” or are certain how the universe works, we are on a steep slide toward bigotry and intolerance, or at the very least, bad science. This is a perennial reminder to always keep an open mind.

We have just had two verses, 5 and 7, where we are directed to put our best effort into thinking about Krishna’s nature, which is the same as the Absolute. Now Krishna provides dialectic balance so we know we both can and cannot think our way to realization.

Notice that the word is “unthinkable,” not “inconceivable,” which would pair with “conceive of Me and fight,” or “conceive of Me at the time of death,” in those previous verses. Krishna is talking about thinking that is not restrained by binding concepts. Conception is how we package reality, and so it is much more limited than thinking. Up till now we are only being asked to think of the Absolute, free of limiting concepts and percepts, to open ourselves up to our fullest potential.

It’s worth repeating that our humility is maintained by the certitude that even our best thoughts must fall short of encompassing the totality of existence. All knowledge is provisional and partial. It is also infinitely expandable. There is a widely held misapprehension that because the Absolute is beyond thought, we should stop thinking and just let things alone. Unless done with great finesse, this attitude leads to stagnation. Instead, Krishna is teaching that we can simultaneously reach out and remain aware of our limitations.

Humans are always eager to embrace an idea that lets them off the hook, allowing them to defer to someone else to pull their load. Nataraja Guru called those who waited around for spiritual experience to be handed to them on a plate, hobos. Lazy brahmacharis are on the lookout for any excuse to doze at their ease. Mellifluous, isn’t it? Hobos dozing at their ease.... Spiritual experience that comes from magical drug use, which delivers a temporary “free ride,” plays into such misconceptions. Our mind is like a vast castle, full of exotic rooms and secret passages to new wings. Staying in our favorite room watching TV will never lead us to the high tower with the stupendous view. We have to actually

find our way there, or all our vaunted experiences will be imaginary. So don't let the adjective "unthinkable" trick you into abandoning your quest.

The Great Mystery simultaneously encompasses and transcends our efforts. A scientist does not surrender her search, but closely examines an area of specific interest and begins to expand her knowledge of it. As she learns more, doors begin to open onto previously undreamed of fields of possibility. This is the best model for a seeker of truth.

Sun-colored—is a vivid image of the intensity of light involved in a meditation on the Absolute, communicating worlds. In the ecstatic mystical union of yoga, the consciousness is flooded with unbearably brilliant light. This is not an imaginary experience, but an achievement of undeniable reality, shared by many, many people. We are in fact made of light, of uncountable atoms spinning madly, radiating...bliss? When unleashed, the brilliance we are made of inundates the intellect, igniting the enlightened seer to become a shining beacon of truth, both to themselves and to other seekers as well.

As I write this I am alone on an archetypal island in central Sweden, sitting on a comfortable boulder adjoining a weathered dock jutting into the lake, very early on an achingly bright spring day, far from any artificial sounds. Virtuoso birdsong wafts from the surrounding forest, and the susurrations of light breezes and gently lapping wavelets completes the peaceful tone poem that envelops me. At random intervals an aluminum rowboat scrapes lightly against the dock.

I am meditating the way yogis have meditated since the dawn of contemplation. On all sides there are the beauties of a unique and artistic world. Below my rock is the reflection of the sun in the water, and over on the other side, near the mainland, there is an area of more diffuse reflection that is almost as bright. I don't dare look directly at the sun, but if I gaze into either of its images my vision is over-saturated and my awareness of the surroundings

fades into the background. It is as if they are all unreal, and only the sun-colored brilliance is real. But it is too bright. I can only look for a moment without hurting my eyes.

The same vision in my mind's eye is safe to gaze upon. Now and then a similar sun-colored light has burst through my ordinary dark and colorful images, erasing all peripheral factors and inundating me with magnificent intensity. Once I asked my guru about it. All he would say was that it showed I was born with a mystical streak in my psyche. When it comes, seemingly of its own accord, the vision is so all-absorbing that I wonder if I enter it I will ever return to this shadowy realm we call life. I have left word with my wife that if I can I am going into the light when it appears, possibly permanently. For now, though, it recedes at my approach. There is a trick to it I don't quite grasp. Regardless of what will happen, the mystical light within looks a great deal like the shimmering sphere of intense translucent "sun color" glistening before me on the lake's surface.

Beyond the darkness—This meditation goes hand in hand with the sun color that is always shining in the firmament of consciousness, sometimes visible, sometimes shrouded. The experience of learning anything, not to mention learning profound truths, is of emerging from a dark cloud of ignorance into a zone of bright light. We should seek the light in our meditations, but we sometimes have to go directly into the darkness to discover where it is hiding.

A cave may have been pitch dark for tens of thousands of years, but the minute we introduce a light the darkness instantly vanishes. Our deepest consciousness is just such a light, and we carry it with us always. It *is* us.

The solid world that surrounds us seems to have no light of its own. It only becomes visible to us when it is impacted by some external illumination. But if we could perceive its atoms, each of them is an extremely powerful, and nearly eternal, bundle of energy. Light is energy made visible to our sensory system. The

empyrean is flooded with light energy. Light and love are not two. The radiant sensation that we call love comes from the impact of energy on our inner being. It shines as brightly as any light. We are bathed in an ocean of light, which is love, which is consciousness, at all times, even when everything about us looks as dark as can be. If we come to know this deep in our souls, we can even pass through the valley of the shadow of death without fear.

10) who meditates at the time of departure with a steady mind possessed of devotion, as also of the strength that comes from yoga, well-fixing the life-breath between the eyebrows—he reaches that supreme divine Person.

Having sketched out these archetypal meditations for his disciple to practice, Krishna offers another tidbit of technique. The “life-breath” is prana, considered the vital force animating the individual. There are several ways to visualize it while watching the breath from the inside. Here, it is to be brought to the sixth chakra, above the bridge of the nose, and concentrated there with a cheerful and unwavering determination. The implication is that this opens the door to union with the Absolute.

“Time of departure” is generally taken to mean death, and there is a lot of value in staying calm and collected while passing through that portal. But departure should also be taken to mean the moment we turn inward and abandon external awareness in meditation. The word for departure here, *prayana*, also means “setting out, starting, advancing, progress,” and so on. Using analogies like those in the previous verse as a “point of departure” for your own meditations is probably the best way to take it. There Krishna suggested the most general ideas, and I have fleshed them out a little bit, but these are only suggestive starting points. Every sortie into the Unknown is unique, as it springs from the meditator’s storehouse of wisdom and experiences. Repetitive, mechanical practices run the risk of stifling this calling forth of liberated insight and replacing it with a canned program of

expectations, which, as we well know by now, is wholly contrary to the Gita's intent.

11) That imperishable (value) which the knowers of the Vedas speak of, which the self-controlled and passion free enter, desiring which they lead the life of the disciplined student—that state I shall succinctly describe.

The Imperishable as an aspect of the Absolute is the same as the chapter title, *aksharam*. It's an apt title, as Krishna is going to expound on it for the remainder of the chapter.

This verse matches the Katha Upanishad, 2.15, which may account for the positive spin on knowers of the Veda, who receive short shrift elsewhere in the Gita. By the way, “Veda knowers” is a pun in Sanskrit, since Veda means knower. They are spoken of disparagingly in several places, most notably Chapter XV, due to the taint of relativism they incorporate. Here and in the next chapter, however, they are accorded a more respectable status. Yet Vedic—meaning religious—knowledge ultimately falls short, as Krishna clearly reminds us in the final verse of this chapter. The contemplative who truly understands transcends all relative values.

The life of the disciplined student walking the path of the Absolute is called brahmacharya. Brahmacharya has already been covered extensively in VI, 14. The gist of the verse, then, is this. The wise speak of an imperishable among perishables, and those desiring to discover it follow a way of self-examination and exploration. The process calms the passionate tendencies that are based on partial understanding and repressed traumas. The science of the Absolute cures these tendencies in several ways, but the main purport is intended to be covered in this chapter.

Nataraja Guru points out that the importance of being freed of passion here lies in its being the sole qualification for spirituality, when seen as the result of self-control. This is a supremely enlightened achievement, and not merely the result of forcible suppression of instinctual and conditioned behavior.

12 & 13) Inhibiting all exits, holding the mind-factors convergent in the heart, vitality-functionings operating centered between the eyebrows, well-established in sustained unitive contemplation, uttering the one-syllable word AUM, which is the Absolute, while constantly remembering Me, he who departs, abandoning the body, treads the highest path.

Some esoteric meditation techniques are hinted at in this pair of verses, refined to their barest outlines. The wisdom of the Gita, however, does not depend on any special technique, but only on “well-founded reasoning.” If you practice some yogic technique, which can be very absorbing, make sure it doesn’t become a substitute for exploration of the unknown.

Again, there is an outward appearance of reincarnation here, in the phrases “he who departs,” and “abandoning the body,” following as they do on the earlier references to the time of death in verses 5 and 6. But that is not the real thrust of the instruction. We are to practice this form of death to superficial matters on a regular basis, while we are alive, by going into the heart of our fascination with what is loosely called the Absolute. This is one of the very few practical descriptions of meditation in the Gita, which for the most part is as unspecific as possible. Taken in the most general sense, abandoning the body can simply mean turning the attention elsewhere than sensible objects, of overturning the dictatorship of tangible factors when one is in meditation. This is the core meaning of “inhibiting all exits.”

It’s easy to miss the paradox of simultaneously inhibiting all exits and departing, abandoning the body. Krishna must mean an inner departure, into and beyond the heart as a focal point.

Aum is the mantra of mantras. Mantra science conflates certain sounds with certain effects in the psyche. Their repetition produces a state similar to hypnosis, and in some cases there can be powerful consequences. Like hypnosis, mantras depend on

belief—or at least the absence of resistance—to succeed. They are not efficacious in a hostile psychic atmosphere.

Now that the placebo effect can be studied using brain scan technology, remarkable findings are coming to light about belief, basically that it produces real, detectable neurological effects. So far the scientific method has only been applied to obvious cases of pain and pleasure response, as far as I know. Results show that sincere belief produces the anticipated effect because it convinces the brain to supply the appropriate chemicals to either block the pain or enhance the pleasure. More complex experiments are likely to reveal that all sorts of “faith healing,” including chanting of mantras, have real and positive effects on the brain. The brain is among other things the manager of a vast and sophisticated chemical factory in the body. Pharmaceutical medicines are mainly inexact and costly imitations of the body’s natural ones, and often pose serious side effects.

There is clearly a fine line to be walked here between true and false beliefs, credulity and healthy doubt. When and to what can we surrender our mental defenses, in order to benefit from certain practices? Your beliefs have to suit your personal makeup, and they have to be held with full confidence. But there is an epidemic of doubt fostered by partially developed and commercially motivated theories and systems that has disrupted our natural healing abilities on a species-wide scale. Scientific evidence that belief causes real effects may help reverse this trend.

Most mantra meditation falls into the category of seeking siddhis, powers, which the Gita advises against pursuing, as they are more or less peripheral to a proper direct relationship with the Absolute. Its final opinion is stated in several places, most harshly in XVII, 5 and 6, where the siddhis are definitely pursued for personal gain:

Those men who practice terrible austerities not enjoined by the scripture, given to hypocrisy and egoism, lust, passion and power,

torturing all the organs of the body and harassing Me, seated in the body—know them to be of demonic resolves.

Of course, chanting is far from a terrible austerity, unless taken to an extreme. The flip side of directed practice is presented more gently in XVIII, 53, part of the Gita's final summation of yoga:

Relinquishing egoism, power, arrogance, desire, anger, and possessiveness, free from ownership, and tranquil—he is worthy of becoming the Absolute.

In II, 48 the advice is to take both attainment and nonattainment as the same, in other words, to treat them neutrally. So we need to understand why the mantra Aum is permissible—even identified with the Absolute—when other mantras aren't.

Aum is the hum sound of the universe, the musical buzz of the vibrations that turn unmanifest potentials into manifold manifestations. In this sense it is unique, as well as absolute. Further, according to the Mandukya Upanishad, the 'a' is equated with the waking state of consciousness, the 'u' with the dream state, the 'm' with deep sleep, and the silence that follows with the indescribable state of being in the Absolute. Thus aum epitomizes the entire range of consciousness. Chanting it simultaneously centers the mind into the nondimensional point of the sixth chakra (between the eyebrows) and expands it into all aspects of existence. As such, it is a dialectical yogic practice, and so is not a directed, and therefore limited, mantra but a liberating one.

Dig this poem by W.S. Merwin, about the "one syllable" aum:

Utterance

Sitting over words

very late I have heard a kind of whispered sighing

not far

like a night wind in pines or like the sea in the dark
the echo of everything that has ever
been spoken
still spinning its one syllable
between the earth and silence

14) One without extraneous relational mental interests,
remembering Me day in and day out—to such an ever unitively
affiliated man of contemplation I am easy of attainment.

Throughout the work there is talk of easily attaining or reconnecting with the Absolute, but what exactly does it mean? The Gita suggests we relate ourselves to some universal truth within creation, up to and including becoming one with all of it. It is the very goal of the spiritual quest, but is it a chimera? Are there only disconnected particles of matter, with nothing to tie them together? Or, as the saints and sages of all ages and points of the compass have averred, is there a unity that embraces all the disparate elements and gives them meaning? Infinity is a necessary factor in any complete philosophy, but does that mean it actually exists as something or even as nothing?

As mentioned earlier, the universally present quantum vacuum is beginning to look a lot like what is called the Absolute. Wholly imperceptible, it nonetheless consists of nearly limitless energy which informs the development and evolution of beings through retention of successful patterns. In a sense it is a hyperconscious entity, omniscient as well as omnipresent and very nearly omnipotent. It may be that in a spiritual quest we are on the road to a more conscious participation with its seemingly divine energies. Though as of now its features are primarily speculative, science is moving rapidly toward acceptance of this surprising recent discovery, revealed primarily through mathematical calculations. Can this be what the rishis have been tapping into all along?

Whatever the exact scientific status of the universe may be, most of us can probably agree it is something. We can also probably agree that whatever that something is, its manifested aspect—all the stars and planets, dark matter, living entities, and so on—is in a constant state of flux or change. There is a state of Now in this flux, the condition of how things are exactly at this moment, right where each of us is positioned to take it in. Because we normally look outward for our ratification, we register other people's Now, which is subtly out of step with our own. But if we look within ourselves, the Now is thoroughly up to date. Although we are constrained by our relative placement in the time-space continuum, it appears possible to attain the Now at our own location, through meditation to return to our core self. Yet almost none of us are even aware of what that is any more.

When we perceive things with our senses, there is a delay in registering them, during which time the universal flux moves ahead slightly. When we further analyze the sense data, matching it with our memory stores in order to identify it, we fall even farther behind. The effect is summed up in the famous last line of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*: "So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past."

Early in life we develop our mental outlook and beliefs, and the incoming data becomes secondary to this fixed framework. We slip more and more into the past, as far as the present moment is concerned. We learn to live in our heads, and whatever scant new input makes it through the system is fitted snugly into a preexisting framework. We pigeonhole the data in our musty desk of preferred beliefs, to the degree that nothing new and therefore potentially transformative can ever get through to us. Once we have screened out all new perceptions and conceptions, and instead live timidly according to the tried and true rules invented by previous head dwellers, we have become "normal" and "ordinary." The deal works well enough if you are satisfied with a simple structure that meets your most basic needs, but man does not live by bread alone. Deep down we want to be more fully alive.

Something inside us remembers the excitement of relating to the world as an immediate experience, as we all once did in infancy. Occasionally the urge to enlarge our experience to reconnect with the Now impels us to seek what we glibly call truth, or even more glibly call reconnection with the Absolute. It's better to not call it anything, and not necessary to have a fixed idea of what it might look like. Fixed ideas are part of the problem, not the solution.

We can't really know in advance exactly what we are seeking; it is enough to know we are seeking something vital, and that whenever we conceptualize it we have lost it again. It also helps to know that something is both within and without us, both nearer than the near and farther than the far. We don't have to go anywhere to find it, which is why it is said to be easy of attainment.

Meditation and contemplation are techniques for coming alive. The Gita's recommended meditation includes setting aside thoughts as they arise, to sit poised in the present moment. The thrill of sports and the arts comes from the need to be completely aware of conditions at the moment they unfold and as we participate in them. Once upon a time the Merry Pranksters tried to catch up to the Now by psychedelic drug use, but no matter how fast they accelerated their psyches they could never quite get there, or if they ever did, they couldn't stay there. Quiet centering of the mind is a more efficacious technique than raw speed.

It is self-evident that exciting activities like sports or the arts do not automatically confer wisdom on the participants. We find a wide range of people engaged in every activity, from the most sensitive and thoughtful to the most boorish and abusive.

New experiences can break through our habitual stupor if they are different enough to not immediately be linked with data in the memory banks. The downside is that this further reinforces the illusion that happiness is caused by outside stimuli, rather than by something intrinsic to our nature, or at least something to be discovered through connection with the Absolute within.

The desperate search for new experiences drives the consumer society of modern day civilization. Its upside is that within fixed parameters it does stimulate inventiveness and experimentation, but it can never achieve the desired condition of permanent happiness because it is based on an illusory picture of how things work. Happiness cannot be attained through changing the scenery, but only through a change of understanding. Once we reconnect with the Absolute, which means finding the connectedness and meaning in existence, both old and new experiences are revitalized from within. Yoga is described as easy in part because no artificial means to happiness are required.

Some people limit their search for new adventures to the believable, while others include the unbelievable. Belief in something strange or outré causes sensations of newness by itself, although these could easily be characterized as ego trips in many cases. The desire for siddhis, psychic powers, is an extension of the absurdly trite motto of the sensation seekers, “He who dies with the most toys, wins.”

When we’ve used up all the new experiences that can be purchased at the store, we have to look for them elsewhere. The pursuit of siddhis can lure us into illusory territory due to our desire to break out of the ruts our necrotic mindset has gotten us into. The rishis recommend attaining wisdom, and if certain siddhis come as a matter of course, so be it. But wisdom, which is the same as immersion in the Absolute, comes only after you have given up the search for external means to happiness. The question of siddhis is specifically addressed in the next verse.

It would be counterproductive to define or name the Now, as in “my God,” because then it would become just another idea. We have to be careful of even calling it by neutral terms like the Absolute. It is best left as a mystery, but that shouldn’t stop us from learning how to become one with it. We seek to participate to the utmost in the ongoing mystery of the Absolute, as here explicitly advocated by Krishna.

15) Having attained to Me, they do not return to this transitory abode of suffering, having reached the highest attainment.

Attaining the Absolute is an accomplishment that irrevocably changes one's life and mental outlook for the better. It's just common sense that once you understand something, you don't forget it the next day and have to start over. It becomes a permanent part of your basic awareness. This is all the more true when the psyche is flooded with the light and wonder of the Absolute. The dark fingers of lurking doubts are dispelled instantly, and the yogi may even laugh out loud with relief. To emerge from a lifetime of anxiety and bafflement to the shining, love-filled openness of the Absolute is an ineffable experience.

The attainments referred to here, for which the Absolute is the ultimate, are called siddhis. Siddhis are graded powers obtained as the fruits of yogic practice. The primary ones from the Gita's time are: the ability to shrink to the size of an atom (*anima*); expanding in size (*mahima*); becoming heavy (*garima*); becoming light (*laghima*); the ability to penetrate everywhere (*prapti*); obtaining one's desires (*prakamyā*); dominance (*isitva*); and the power to subjugate others (*vasitva*). There are lots of minor ones too. All of them are limited, and like attaining to heaven are temporary high points in a dualistic life, fraught with potentially negative consequences associated with the abuse of power in general. But for those who think in such terms as openly as possible, as with worshippers of other "divinities" in Krishna's parlance, there is a possible culmination at the highest trajectory in the pure Absolute. This is a lasting achievement that transcends all grades and limitations.

Some siddhis will naturally come as a byproduct of a well-directed effort, but realization of the Absolute will not come as a byproduct of intentionally seeking lesser powers. Therefore we should bend our efforts to the supreme siddhi, and not dilute them by directing them to insignificant powers. After all, dilution and delusion are closely related.

Of the eight primary siddhis mentioned above, the last three are the most common in our day. Those adroit at obtaining their desires and dominating and subjugating others are daily vaunted in the media and entertainment programs. Some martial arts adepts practice becoming both heavy and light, and they can be quite immovable or hard to catch if they get good at it. The others strike me as very uncommon. Another siddhi I have heard of is where sexually renounced recluses become irresistibly attractive to the opposite gender, which must strike them as a major impediment, a kind of cosmic joke: you get it only if you truly don't want it.

The only real siddhi I have personally witnessed, expanding space in the vicinity, probably falls under the category of *mahima*. My guru would hold classes for twenty or thirty of us in spacious rooms, where we would have no consciousness of being crowded. After his passing I revisited a couple of them and they were inexplicably tiny! I thought they must have been remodeled, since we couldn't possibly have fit in them, but they had not. Somehow he brought a vast ambience, more like an extra dimension, into the cramped quarters in which we met with him. He never intended it to happen, it just did. There is a photograph in his autobiography *Love and Blessings* of at least seventeen of us in his room in Varkala in 1980, with Nitya sitting at a desk and bookshelves behind him. When I took it I was standing in the doorway, far enough back to include almost but not quite everybody. On a subsequent visit I learned the room is roughly 8 by 8 feet, barely big enough for the two cots it now holds. Look at the picture and you cannot square it with its actual size no matter how you strain your brain.

It should be eminently clear by now that Krishna has little respect for those seeking temporal powers. His role as guru is to guide the seeker to the highest realization, both positively as a supreme attraction and negatively by ruling out inferior indulgences. His exhortation doesn't mean that our psychic development shouldn't impact our life; obviously it should, and it invariably does. But that's precisely why not being satisfied with

lesser attainments is so critical. The “transitory abode of suffering” is not the whole world, as is often supposed, but the realm of unspiritual interests, where life is filled with anxiety and conflict over delusory pursuits. Since Krishna is presenting some secrets of meditation here, he wants to be assured that his disciple will always aim at the highest possible value, and not be distracted by the tawdry psychic powers that so often attract the gullible and the poorly informed. Jesus summed up the same idea in his query, “What shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?” (Mark 8:36)

Absorption leading to attainment has many specific areas it can be put into play, other than things like levitation or power-mongering. The poet is absorbed in a dance of words, the artist is absorbed in her craft of making her imagination visible, the scientist is absorbed in his tools or in pondering the meaning of a group of experimental results. A builder is absorbed in constructing a building in the proper sequence with nothing omitted. The medical researcher or doctor is absorbed trying to unravel the mystery of disease. And so on. The things these yogis of today accomplish are what may be called the modern *siddhis* or attainments. The magical sounding ones from ancient times are merely legends to us, but the attainments we have nowadays are significant and undeniably existent.

Such *siddhis*, wonderful as they are, share the downside of being limited. Their focal limitation is their strength, but it can also be a weakness. Few of these *siddhantins* (achievers) know absorption outside their area of expertise. They are concentrated in one aspect of life, and know relatively little about the other fields of absorption available. They may even be hostile to such fields. To rectify this, the Gita offers us the Absolute, which is the most general possible principle of absorption. All healthy roads traveled far enough lead to it, and so they are in principle equally valid. Attainment of an ultimate connection with the Absolute thus flows reciprocally back out into life in all directions, as a universalizing tide of insight or wisdom.

Over the next several chapters the Absolute will be described as being the highest or most central value in a wide range of specific instances. The process of revealing this began back in VII, 7-11, and its purpose is to draw our attention to the best part or central element of every specific instance. Because the Absolute is incomprehensible and intangible, it can only be conceived in asymptotic approximation, by ever-closer analogy. Therefore many analogies are offered from a wide variety of perspectives, to help us zero in on our goal.

16) All worlds, beginning from here to the world of Brahma, are subject to phenomenal repetition, but on reaching Me, Arjuna, there is not another birth.

Back in VII, 7, Krishna described the universe as a series of worlds linked together by the thread of the Absolute running through them. In modern terms we might think of a series of levels of consciousness, such as the atomic, molecular, unicellular, multicellular, through various increases in complexity up to humans, all of them interrelated.

Furthermore, there is no reason whatever to imagine that our crude level of sentience is the highest possible, the terminus of the series. Even within the human species we can descry grades of sentience, with Hypatias, Mozarts, Einsteins and Narayana Gurus as examples of what we are capable of achieving even in our current configuration. New forms will open new worlds of awareness, up to levels that may seem godlike from our present perspective. Henri Bergson only half-jokingly described the universe as a machine for cranking out gods.

Every world we conceptualize, including the divine, is structured of positive and negative elements in reciprocal patterns. Only unity with the Absolute transcends this limitation or constraint. Once again, the birth mentioned here refers to the creation of reciprocal sequences and consequences. When our actions are not in tune with the inner pulsation, they bind us to

further actions based on what we've already done. Only unitive activity avoids engendering further chains of necessity, symbolically referred to as birth and death.

The Brahma of this verse is the Creator, as distinct from Brahman the Absolute. Krishna is indicating a series starting from *here*—the world of manifold effects—all the way to Brahma, the ultimate Cause. All possible worlds are cyclic; otherwise there would be utter chaos, pure randomness. They cycle because internally consistent laws are always present, but they also bring forth an endless variety out of those laws.

What is created must eventually be destroyed. The Absolute alone is beyond phenomenal repetition, which is why it is described as uncreated, among other epithets.

Though “phenomenal repetition” may conjure up the antique concept of reincarnation, it could also apply to what Freud termed “the compulsion to repeat,” or the human tendency to make the same “mistakes” over and over again, most acutely in the realm of romance and relationships. We now understand PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) in a similar way: painful material is repressed from waking consciousness, but the sufferer plays it out over and over in an inept attempt to process it—in plain terms, to “make sense of it.” Krishna, then, is maintaining that yoga helps us to process our stuckness, our *samsaras*, and they only are wholly defeated when the Absolute is realized. Talk about positive motivation for therapy! Somehow we have to *know* this, or the repetition syndrome will continue.

One has to still the mind to become open to what is beyond it. The endless cycle of births and deaths spoken of refers to our initiating thoughts and ideas, interpretations, and their fading out to be replaced by another one. When we properly integrate our thinking we can stop the forced cycling, allowing ourselves to go with the flow. It's not an end to existence in death but the beginning of “eternal” life.

17) Those who know that the day of Brahma is a thousand unit periods in the cosmic cycle, and the night a thousand such units—they are knowers of the day and night (principle).

The day and night principle in a sentient universe refers to the alternation of wakefulness and sleep, of consciousness and unconsciousness, awareness and ignorance. While this verse and the next touch on an arcane cosmology, Krishna is using it in the Gita primarily for spiritual instruction.

Humans have invented a long list of theoretical explanations for the world we live in, with none of them being the final word, even today. At least we can all agree that we are aware of some things and unaware of others, and that is likely to be a permanent situation.... Perhaps the knowers honored here are different from ordinary humans because they are not only aware that they know, but also that they don't know. Since the ego defends itself by maintaining the illusion of total awareness, honestly admitting that on a fundamental level you don't know is a major spiritual breakthrough.

All manifestation consists of vibrations: electromagnetic signatures propagating as waves. We are familiar with the vast spectrum of the sine waves of sound and light. Day and night describe a still broader wave function. Less familiar are the sine waves of life forms. If the Unknown is conceived as a line or plane of neutrality, the sine wave of each life unit oscillates between life on one side of the line and death on the other, passing through the dividing line at the moments of being born and dying. Just as gravity bends light waves, life experiences affect the trajectory of individual life waves. This is the essence of the theory of reincarnation, that beneficial actions direct the life wave to more amenable future trajectories, while destructive and selfish actions warp it toward worlds of misery. Of course, this is as true in the present life as any future appearances.

Spirituality isn't merely a game of stretching the life wave toward heavenly future possibilities, but a striving to step outside

the realm of vibrations entirely, ultimately obtaining freedom from the tremendous impetus of the wave each of us has been identified with, driven as it is by instincts, desires and memories. There is a whole world of freedom outside of the vibrational one waiting to be discovered.

Even whole universes follow a sine wave of manifestation and dissolution, on an ultracosmic scale. Modern physics is beginning to suspect that the Big Bang, if it occurred at all, marked only the latest transition into existence of an eternal, pulsating universe, which may even be but one of an infinite number of universes. Krishna is maintaining that unless such a broad view is taken, a scientist's or yogi's perspective is flawed by its very narrowness.

The Day of Brahma represents the period of manifestation of the universe in each cycle, and the corresponding Night period of unmanifestation matches it exactly, as the next verse will indicate. Obviously, time as we normally understand it is irrelevant on such scales. The thousand unit periods just mean that each is hugely long, and not of any closely calculated duration. "Thousand" in ancient times simply meant beyond count.

Many philosophers have boiled down the essential question of philosophy to why is there something rather than nothing? In a similar vein, Einstein cogently stated that there are two ways to look at the world: either everything is a miracle or nothing is. He left it to us to discover that the closer you look, the more miraculous everything is. Possibly the greatest miracle of all is how a singularity that is omniscient, omnipresent and omnipotent can transform itself into a state of unawareness within a graded series of entities, which is a necessity in order to play out the game of evolution from total ignorance back to the original condition of total knowledge. Somehow it would have to veil itself from itself—a seeming impossibility, since even the veil must be made out of pure awareness. From the standpoint of the Absolute everything created is equally impossible. Therefore we can also conclude that if anything is possible, everything is possible.

It makes sense that if such a miracle as something appearing out of nothing were to take place, the resultant universe would expand from a mathematical point of zero dimensions almost instantly into a nearly infinitely vast four dimensions of space and time, plus all the unknown dimensions yet to be discovered. And as each separate entity evolved into greater numbers and greater sentience, the universe would keep on expanding even after such an initial hyperinflation. The physics of our time has had to postulate hyperinflation to account for the absurdly vast size of the universe we inhabit, which cannot be a product of normal expansion within the time calculated since it began.

18) From the unmanifested all the manifested proceed at the coming of day; at the coming of night they merge in that same, named the unmanifest.

Krishna now describes the ultimate cycle introduced in the last verse. Each cycle is a subset of a titanic sine wave of manifestation and dissolution within a nearly inconceivable time frame. The Original Urge that has caused everything to exist oscillates on and off. The 13 billion or so years since the last period of unmanifestation seems to be only the beginning of the present cycle. What is most astonishing is that ancient yogis with little or no knowledge of physics could somehow grasp the situation through contemplation alone. Here we see evidence that connection with the Absolute really does flood the psyche with knowledge as well as wisdom, or at the very least inspires bold speculation that transcends the dogmatic assumptions of the day.

Like the unconscious, the unmanifest can never be known, for there is nothing there to know it. It can only be named from the side of the manifest.

What appears to be naïve physical history in the Upanishads is actually the story of how consciousness awakens. In Vedanta, consciousness is primary and central while manifestation is secondary and peripheral. Thus verses like this one can refer to

much more than the macrocosmic history of the universe. They include birth and death, seasonal cycles of activity and rest, waking and sleeping, and even oscillations of awareness in the course of a single day or episode.

Dr. G.H. Mees, in his introduction to *The Key to Genesis*, reminds us that the ancients were not trying to write geologic history books:

The first Chapter of Genesis has been generally assumed to present an account or theory of the creation of the material universe and of the evolution of life. For that reason it cannot be a source of wonder that modern man, with his knowledge of material processes in the universe and of biology, has tended to look down upon Genesis as a poor product of an ignorant mentality. No doubt the people who knew the meaning of Genesis in past ages would have shaken their heads if they had come to learn of the modern way which tends to take everything at its face value alone and to interpret spiritual scriptures as if they were textbooks of astronomy, physics or biology. For Genesis does not describe cosmic and biological processes. Its purpose is more profound.

The aim of religion is to make man happier and to help him find peace and bliss, within himself and in his relation to the world without. It does not make anyone happier to know how the material world is created (assuming that such knowledge is possible at all) and how the physical processes take place and can be controlled. (9)

In this chapter, pairs of opposites are being linked up in a wide variety of aspects of existence, to produce a comprehensive vision of the All that will be elaborated over the next few chapters.

19) This very same aggregate of beings, coming into existence again and again, merges, subject to necessity, at the onset of night, and comes into being at the coming of day.

An interesting aspect of phenomenal repetition is that the same “aggregate of beings” reappears over and over, in cycle after cycle. Of course, if it consisted of a new set of beings, it wouldn’t really be a repetition. Aggregation means the whole shebang, and not necessarily its individual components. When we say we’re all in this together, this is its broadest sense. To remember even a small part of these immeasurable cycles would overwhelm and immobilize our minds, therefore in normal consciousness we are permitted to forget.

No matter what trajectory we are able to express in our life, we will necessarily follow the all-encompassing cycles that underlie existence. A fish can swim at will throughout its river, but is constrained to remain within its banks. It stands to reason that when the universe becomes unmanifest, we will too.

Dylan Thomas has famously written:

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light!

The wise yogi takes into account the natural despair at the terminable aspect of existence—the raving at the close of day—and unites it with the joy of the new dawn. Taken together there is full realization of the whole picture. Taken selectively or partially, there is helpless oscillation between elation and despair. The first is healthy detachment, where all is embraced. Unhealthy detachment requires ignoring or rejecting the unity of the whole, and it feeds directly into depression.

20) But beyond this unmanifested there is yet another unmanifested perennial existence, which among perishables itself does not perish.

Needless to say, the Ground of All must persist even through the unmanifest stage, or manifestation might never recur. At the very least what would reappear could not be connected with any previous cycle. Such an insight led the yogis to posit the triple unity of the Absolute, which will be expounded more fully in Chapter XV. For now it is sufficient to remember that any dual function cannot be equated with the unitive Absolute. It can be within it, but cannot be the whole of it.

The supreme Absolute is described in necessarily mysterious and contradictory terms in IX, 4-6 and elsewhere. Appended to That lie the manifested and unmanifested Absolutes, comprising the totality of each of those regions. While attunement with the lower Absolutes promotes harmony in life, the final release comes only from identification with the Supreme Absolute. The occult-sounding discussion in the upcoming section relates to this seeming paradox.

The Christian concept of the Holy Trinity personifies the three Absolutes of the Upanishads. The Son and the Holy Spirit represent the manifested and unmanifested Absolutes respectively, while the Father stands for the transcendental Absolute. In some mysterious way all are one and yet simultaneously distinct, like the Three Musketeers: All for One and One for All. For a yogi, only dialectical contemplation stands a chance of uniting them, after they have been apprehended separately.

21) That unmanifested is called the imperishable. That they speak of as the highest path, attaining which they return not. Such is My supreme abode.

The “they” under reference as authorities in these matters are the ancient rishis, such as those the writer of the Katha Upanishad was referring to, in 6.10-11:

When cease the five
[Sense-] knowledges, together with the mind (*manas*),

And the intellect (*buddhi*) stirs not—
That, they say, is the highest course.

This they consider as Yoga—
The firm holding back of the senses.
Then one becomes undistracted.
Yoga, truly, is the origin and the end. (Hume trans.)

Such language—“it is said,” “they consider,” and so on—is an admission that claims like this one about “the highest path” and “they return not” are a priori and cannot be considered perfectly scientific, as science is intentionally limited to the a posteriori. These claims carry weight because they are asserted by the most respectable sources anywhere in those days, the Upanishadic seers. Union with the Absolute via yoga makes sense, but it is not provable short of the direct experience of the seeker. Science doesn’t even accept direct experience as valid knowledge, because humans are famously easy to fool. But Vedanta does, because without it we are sure of nothing. That’s why a spiritual search has to include a concerted effort to remove distortions from the thought process, to insure that direct experience isn’t just mediated experience in disguise.

This is one of those verses that have to be read very carefully, because “those who tread the highest path do not return” sounds like we should ideally abandon life and find an alternative somewhere else. When life is hard, fantasizing about finding an escape and never again experiencing unpleasantness is a delicious indulgence. But Krishna’s teaching is far more subtle. The idea is that the imperishable unmanifest is what we truly are in our inmost being, and when we are grounded in it we don’t return to a wholly exteriorized point of view. We may or may not remain in contact with our fellow beings as a teacher, but we will continue to live in the world, and in a much more satisfactory fashion.

Many who harbor a latent death wish fantasize their ultimate extinction, and many of them are attracted to spiritual life as a

means to accomplish their fantasy. They may believe we have to die or have our ego destroyed in order to become immortal, but how can you have eternal life if you are dead? The Gita is a philosophy of life. The only thing we must die to is ignorance.

If the universe really is cyclic, there is no ultimate dissolution anyway. Everyone must return in each cycle, or the cycles would be something else. They would form a spiral, not a circle. At best non-return can only be a temporary affair. What is really meant is that once we are enlightened we don't return to our previous condition of ignorance and dualism. We are permanently changed for the better, at least until the game starts over in some purported next cycle. The spiritual adventure of growing from ignorance to wisdom, from darkness to light, and from death to immortality is just too delightful to ever abandon.

This verse must be read with the previous one, so we realize it is the transcendental Absolute under reference. The Unmanifested and Manifested, as twin "subsidiary" Absolutes, appear and disappear, thus "returning." By entering into the transcendental there cannot be return, lest it be something other than transcendental. In other words, if you return, it can only be from the lesser Absolutes. Whatever returns after a true merger with the ultimate Absolute is no longer "you" in the ordinary sense. You have become an embodiment of the Absolute itself, also known as a guru or bodhisattva.

22) This is the supreme Spirit, within whom all existences abide and by whom all this is pervaded, who is attainable, however, by devotion exclusive of all extraneous factors.

Here we have an unambiguous proclamation of the one supreme spirit, God or Absolute. Accusations of Vedanta and Hinduism being pantheistic are off the mark, at least in the sense that pious and arrogant outsiders often level them. Dr. Wendy Doniger admirably suggests the term *panentheistic*, meaning that

God (one Substance) permeates all of existence. That's clearly the sense given here.

From this perspective, the many gods of the several world pantheons, including the Hindu, Buddhist, Greek, Roman, Norse, and probably all the rest, stand for aspects of consciousness or nature. Worshipping them may strike us as silly, but admiring and studying them for instruction is quite valuable, if we understand the symbolism. What the gods represent is pretty much ignored in the light of human gullibility, being converted into static images to be unreflectively worshipped. That's typical of systems of thought in general: they begin as clever ideas, but over time their meaning gradually leaches away. Whether gods or ideas, people continue to pay homage to them without thinking about what they signify, and might even be willing to fight with outsiders who don't share the same ideas. But they no longer care to explain them scientifically, and resort instead to religious a priori assertions. The tragedy is that the bluster permanently obscures the kernel of truth, unless a philosopher is willing to dig through mountains of diversionary garbage to recover it.

Be that as it may, seekers of truth are hereby unequivocally instructed to relate directly with the One Absolute. This is very important: the only thing that matters in yoga is the actual personal contact with the Ground of All. Additionally we are advised to exclude any extraneous factors that draw us away from that direct heart-to-heart connection. But ah, those extraneous factors! Both internal and external distractions abound. Manifold are the diversions that disrupt the bipolarity of humans with their universal core, and these have to be overcome. Overcoming diversions to connect directly with the essence of life is exactly what "devotion exclusive of all extraneous factors" means.

Humans, being mammalian ape descendents, are easily distracted. Our minds are geared to attend to every new thing that comes along, so they must be taught to maintain focus on any single idea, especially something as elusive and nonmaterial as the Absolute. As we have seen in the Gita so far, a lot of effort goes

into learning to stay on task in Yoga. Distractions are the most obvious extraneous factors.

Another pernicious influence is the perverse instructions of religious leaders and ersatz gurus. Humans are born with a natural commonsense connection with their core, but they are taught to screen it out and attend instead to bombastic leaders who “know better” than they. As religions and their societies degenerate, the wise teachers they may have once honored are replaced by greedy and selfish manipulators of a trusting populace, intent on maintaining their comfortable seats at the top of the economic pyramid. The Gita is but one of many scriptures written in part to erase the parasitical influence of such corrupt arbiters of behavior, the Koran another. We cannot meditate fruitfully on the Absolute if we are listening instead to harangues from without, and trying gamely to adapt ourselves to their ideological demands.

History teaches us that sooner or later those in power go beyond verbal harangues and begin literal persecution of their rivals, ranging up to genocide. The emigrants seeking religious freedom in the New World were as much looking for freedom *from* religion as freedom *for* religion. In Europe they had been living in a nightmare world of vicious slaughter, where anyone could be tortured and beheaded for a slip of the tongue. That’s about as pressing as extraneous factors can get! In America a number of utopian communities were founded, with peace, goodwill and hard work at their core, and many of them flourished for a while. Unfortunately, the human tendency to become obsessed with codifying behavior sooner or later killed the spirit of fellowship in most of them and began the process of shackling freedom once again. In modern times we have seen several religious groups follow a similar trajectory, including the Rajneesh experiment here in Oregon. It’s not that you can play around with rules and regulations until you get it just the way God intended; rules themselves are a big part of the problem. In communal situations where they are essential to harmony they must be temporary and as flexible as possible. This explains why most yogis are antisocial: to

avoid the ever-horizontalizing mesh of structured institutions, and thereby becoming mired in external activity.

Probably the concept of “my” God is the all-time greatest perversion of the spirit. The minute you lay claim to the transcendental it is no longer transcendent, it has become an extraneous factor, one that divides rather than unites. You must surrender all claims, personal, impersonal, universal—every one of them. Here we enter the arena where they very act of specification, no matter how sublime, falls short of the whole truth. Opening ourselves includes relinquishing any and all specificity. A beginner usually prefers to rely on certain limits and fixed rules, but in order to become more evolved these have to be discarded. Later, when we consciously fashion our practical life, we can select those limits most helpful in ushering us beyond limits, and the last third of the Gita is a guide to that happy task. For now, we are only being introduced to the transcendental, and those who are ripe for the direct experience of it will soon, along with Arjuna, be invited in.

23) That (cosmological) occasion in which yogis go forth (causes them) to return or not return (as the case may be)—that temporal circumstance I am going to tell you, Arjuna.

The next series of four verses may strike the reader as a jarring contradiction and a throwback to Vedic dualism, which is definitely under reference here. After all the education we’ve had about unitive action and unitive wisdom, Krishna suddenly introduces relative factors. For yogis, the most sensible explanation is that the bright half he is describing represents conscious awareness, while the dark half represents unconscious impulses. If we make a breakthrough and are aware of it, it has an impact on us. It brings about a transformation commensurate with the insight gained from the encounter. On the other hand, when we “accidentally” have an unconscious contact with the Absolute, we seldom are able to hold onto it. There is no meaning derived from

the event. It is as if it never happened. Therefore the subtext here is a call for living consciously.

For example we can revisit Bergson's metaphor of the experience of entering Notre Dame cathedral. Virtually everyone who goes in will feel a tremor of wonder, a sense of awe. If we are alert, we will recognize that we are having a spiritual experience, and will treasure it and delight in the sensations and inspired thoughts that flood our psyche. There may well be an aftereffect of creative meditation, even including a reassessment of our ideas. But if we are a tourist thinking in terms of static "snapshots" and are busy checking off one more item on our itinerary, the surge of bliss is likely to be ignored. We will be obsessed with keeping up with the guide, or what we should do next, or what we are missing. When we come outside, we may feel a sense of loss or disappointment. A materialistically trained mind might imagine that the emotional impact is only a chemical reaction due to a change of perspective or temperature. The event is likely to merely reinforce our presently existing prejudices.

Spiritual experience lifts us out of our mental boxes; ordinary experience reinforces them. Return, in one important sense then, means going back to inhabit our previous conditioning. Non-return means breaking free of our conditioned, knee-jerk responses to sip the flow of nectar that characterizes the moment. In the context of the previous verses, return indicates merger with the lower Absolute, and non-return with the higher.

There is a further implication that the kind of realization that happens to us is at least partly dependent on the "cosmological" unfoldment. This means that, try as we might, some factors will always remain beyond our control. We can manage our response, but not the course of events. The mysterious "accidents" that impel us to seek truth or placidly acquiesce to our fate can only be accepted with grace.

24) Fire, light, daytime, the bright fortnight, the six months of the northern solstice (summer)—going forth on that (cosmological)

occasion, those people who can understand the Absolute reach the Absolute.

Krishna presents a graded series, progressing to ever more intense and longer periods of light, and his disciple will be opening up to the radiance as he meditates on his words. Fire is a point source, giving off a dim red glow. Krishna next mentions light itself, probably to make the subject completely clear. There follows the bright half of the day, the bright half of the lunar month, and finally the bright half of the year. Will Arjuna be led to permanent brightness by following this progression?

All these bright factors symbolize consciousness, which is essential for understanding. Attaining the Absolute can well be thought of as attaining understanding, or seeing meaning, in the ultimate sense. In order to see there must be light. Therefore the further implication is that light symbolizes intelligence. This is one of the most universal symbols we have as humans.

25) Smoke, night, the dark fortnight, the six months of the southern solstice (winter)—on that (cosmological) occasion, the yogi, attaining the lunar (relativist) light, returns.

A reciprocal sequence matches the previous verse's brightening progression with a darkening one. A yogi needs to be conscious of both sides of every polarity.

Shade has no reality of its own, but depends on light interacting with an object that can partially block it. Night and winter are forms of shade thrown by the earth, and smoke is the shady aspect of fire. Therefore a contemplative should consider the light as a direct experience, and the dark as mediated experience. When we describe or otherwise modify experience it becomes a mere shadow of its former glory. The reality of secondhand experience is held in thought alone, and so it can and will vanish like the morning dew. Because of this, those who depend on the interpretations of authorities are transformed only slightly or not at

all by their experiences. They must return again and again for instruction, because direct connection is essentially foreign to their personality as they have constructed it.

By contrast, the light of direct, unitive experience is transformative, to the precise degree of its intensity. When we truly experience something, it becomes a part of us, permanently. There may be a desire to return and repeat the experience, but there is no especial need to, because actual learning has occurred. This is most important in spiritual matters. Hearing about God or talking about realization are pale imitations of whatever reality might be associated with those concepts. People who argue about such matters invariably know only the hearsay version. They are fighting over ideas, not truths.

Nitya Chaitanya Yati gets to the gist of the difference between the bright and the dark in his Gita commentary:

Some people are active by temperament, and are prone to be led by their immediate interests, which are usually tainted by sensual or materialistic considerations. Their path is described here as the dark. The bright path is of those who are contemplatives and have turned away from the relativistic world with wholehearted devotion to the Absolute. (201)

Nitya's words recall II, 69: "What is night for all creatures, the one of self-control keeps awake therein; wherein all creatures are wakeful, that is night for the sage-recluse who sees." This inversion of common sense in regard to appearances lies at the heart of higher wisdom.

26) These, the white and the black, are known to be in this world the twin perennial paths; by one of them one attains non-return, while by the other one comes back.

Interesting that the relativist path is equally as perennial as the absolutist path. In a sense they depend on each other and are

not to be taken in isolation, as with any other dichotomy under the scrutiny of yoga/dialectics. A secret hint is available in Sanskrit, where the word for dark is *krishna*. The dark guru is teaching unitive wisdom to the bright disciple: Arjuna, the shining one.

I have characterized return and non-return as referring to either living out of habit or blazing new pathways. Closed or open mentalities. Both have their attractions, but since the way of return is nearly ubiquitous and the way of non-return so rare, it makes sense for Krishna to teach the lesser known alternative. No one needs to go to a guru to learn how to acquiesce to their default settings, their primitive or less evolved instincts, only how to break free of them.

A question to ponder in meditation: if one path leads to non-return and the other to return, what do both taken together lead to?

27) Understanding (the basic nature of) these two paths, one of contemplation is not confounded at all; therefore at all times, Arjuna, be unitively established in yoga.

By now we know just what the Gita means by not being confounded. The white and black paths seem to be in opposition, as with good and evil or all the other dualities. But the wise contemplative can see that they are intrinsically connected. Certainly, adhering blindly to one and rejecting the other is the cause of conflict in life. So they are to be treated as different grades or intensities of the same condition, as verses 24 and 25 aptly showed. The light is bright in one and dimmer in the other, but it is the same light in both cases. Its full intensity is absolutist, while its lukewarm association is relativist.

It is evident that if we think of ourselves as following one path or another, no matter how they are described, we are on the path of return. Arjuna is expected to make a leap from Krishna's teaching to an inner openness, without any need for self-description. The last of the preliminary teachings have now been

given, and Arjuna will be using them as a launching pad for his direct realization looming just ahead in the near distance.

And we can add this, from Nataraja Guru's *Integrated Science of the Absolute*:

The black and white paths can also apply to the paths of light and darkness. The dark or black path refers to the way of the ancestors (*pitriyana*), while the white or bright path refers to the way of the gods (*devayana*). No complete Science of the Absolute can accommodate within its scope two rival realities or values. To reduce them into unitive terms is therefore the first and foremost task to be accomplished. It is precisely this task that the Gita undertakes in all of its eighteen chapters. The whole of the Gita is an attempt to dialectically revalue the complete range of religious and philosophical thought in India. (ISOA, Vol. II, p. 190-191)

28) Whatever meritorious result is found implied in the Vedas, in sacrifices, austerities and in gifts, the contemplative who is unitively established, having understood this (teaching), transcends all these and attains to the supreme primal state.

A final summation of the broad outlines of religious thought appears here in the ecstatic meter. All meritorious actions, however admirable, fall short of the supreme primal state that transcends all attributes. Arjuna is now prepared for a total saturation in the Absolute, culminating in a hair-raising direct experience.

All religious or spiritual techniques, if allowed to become ends in themselves, fall into the dark category of return. In concluding his preliminary instruction, Krishna comes right out and says that the light path is the result of a transcendent impulse, and is not due to any particular structure of activity, no matter how excellent. We are not learning to hold to a special path, we are learning to let go.

As we have noted before, religion depends on an apparent separation between cause and effect, God and humanity. An infinite number of stages instantly spring into being between any two discrete points. Suddenly a need for guides, intercession, indulgences and other complicated and expensive claptrap arises, even though none of these can actually bridge the imaginary gap they are predicated upon. Reconnection with the divine is therefore made dependent on the completion of an endless series of meritorious acts, up to a supposed critical mass that promises but never quite delivers salvation. The Gita aims to erase all such mirages through direct realization of the supreme primal state, which is one without a second, and thus independent of merit, along with its codependent behavior, striving.

The “primal” element here is interesting. The Sanskrit word is *adyam*, which is very close to Adam, and they both mean first or original. Primal itself means prime or unitive, as well as fundamental or primeval. The state of oneness is therefore perfectly primal, the state of Adam before the Fall. We can also read between the lines and know that Arjuna is entering into the states that are being described, as we rise to the most sublime nuances of contemplation here. His preliminary preparation is nearly complete. Soon he will fully experience what has been described to him, and afterwards the second half of the Gita will show him how the mind-blowing insights he reaps can optimally brought to bear in his everyday life.

Sacrifice, austerity and gifting will be examined in detail in Chapter XVII. They are three broad categories of religious paths to the Absolute, in keeping with the subject matter of this chapter. As the Gita never tires of pointing out, a unitive orientation is all that’s required. All paths have innate limitations, but the one who acts unitively and without expectations about the outcome is not bound by any limits.