

CHAPTER X: Vibhuti Yoga

The Unitive Recognition of Positive Values

The highest point of the arch of the Gita marks the transition from theoretical to actual values in the study. Arjuna wants to know the Absolute directly, and asks his teacher to show it to him. A transcendental experience like that is almost never occasioned by a seeker struggling in isolation, as it's too easy for the ego to masquerade as divine inspiration. Krishna responds to Arjuna's request by first presenting the Absolute as it suffuses all aspects of creation as a principle, in preparation to providing the direct revelation that comprises the following chapter.

In the Gita's day, a psychedelic substance called *soma* was frequently employed to bring about the direct experience of the Absolute. When later the medicine either became extinct or else fell out of favor, a number of ascetic practices were developed in order to attain the same exalted state, with varying degrees of success. In the present chapter Krishna continues to refine his verbal explication, laying the last groundwork for the soma trip that lies just ahead. The better prepared Arjuna is, the less likely for him to fall apart when he finally takes the plunge.

This chapter used to strike me as the most static and even boring part of the entire Gita, and to call it dated is a magnificent understatement. Half of it consists of lists of names mostly forgotten outside of specialized circles. In order to properly appreciate what's being presented here we definitely have to read between the lines and bring the imagery up to date. Having done so, however, the vibhutis or sublime values listed are restored to their revelatory stature.

To try to save it from misinterpretation the Gita is methodologically required to contain a description of the Absolute in its core, and this is it. Despite this, misinterpretations remain wildly popular, unfortunately. The description Krishna offers is nothing more than a suggestive sketch, which each of us must clothe with our imagination. When you think about it, this is the

best way to do it. The more you describe the indescribable, the more ridiculous the effort becomes. The less said the better, but something must be said. The essential thrust is to see the Absolute everywhere, which loosens the ego's hold on our imagination. It imparts a less fearful and more open attitude critical to a spiritual relationship with life.

In what sounds a lot like a later addition of an exasperated scribe, Krishna himself concludes the chapter by saying, "But what use is there for you, Arjuna, in this pluralistic knowledge?" While valuable up to a point, we must definitely go beyond it, and the following chapter will show us how.

1) Krishna said:

Again, Arjuna, listen to My supreme word, which I, desiring your well-being, shall tell you, so dear (and favorably disposed).

Right away we see an indication of the changeover from theoretical to practical between the last chapter and this. Chapter IX started with the disciple having full trust in the Guru. Here the arrow is reversed, so to speak, with the Absolute pouring out its beneficence on the disciple. The universe actively *cares* about its parts. It is by no means an aloof, blind, accidental place, and what it imparts is *meaningful*. Krishna has been waiting for Arjuna to understand and accept his teachings, and now he is ready for the flow to begin.

Here Krishna acknowledges that like the Absolute, Arjuna also cares, and the caring is what has brought about the bipolar affiliation that permits the transmission of realization.

Priyamanaya can mean either that Arjuna is dear to Krishna or that he is favorably disposed to what Krishna has to offer. Nataraja Guru has thoughtfully included both meanings in his translation.

As we have often noted, humans tend to take their manifold blessings for granted, but if we stop to think about them, they are legion. Mathematical models have demonstrated that blind evolution would take vastly longer than what we suspect has taken

place, which must therefore be infused with intelligence, or at least information. Virtually all of our bodily processes, for example, function admirably without our conscious awareness or participation. Clearly something is directing their operation, but what? Calling it the unconscious is merely a cop-out. All these processes are highly intelligent, yet not consciously so. As modern neuroscience has revealed, our conscious apperception is the last stage of a lengthy process of unfoldment. It's merely a matter of semantics whether we describe this flow of energy as coming from our own subconscious or the Absolute. If we are indeed the Absolute in essence, as Vedanta affirms, it amounts to the same thing anyway.

Physics is inching ever closer to the Upanishadic vision of the universe as presented in the Gita. Now some principle of "directedness" seems to be necessary to make the whole thing hang together. In a study summarized in the Scientific American of July 2008 titled The Self-Organizing Quantum Universe, three scientists (Ambjorn, Jurkiewicz and Loll) present their epochal discovery. All the previous theoretical crusades of modern physics have based their extrapolations on a blind or random set of principles. When those sets were at last finally able to be modeled by supercomputers the results did not match the known universe. As the scientists put it, blind parameters "make the entire space crumple up into a tiny ball with an infinite number of dimensions. In such a space, arbitrary pairs of points are never more than a tiny distance apart, even if the space has an enormous volume. In some instances, space goes to the other extreme and becomes maximally thin and extended, like a chemical polymer with many branches. Neither of these possibilities remotely resembles our own universe." So a search was mounted for the missing factor or factors. They continue, "We finally hit on the crucial idea, the one ingredient absolutely necessary to make the stir fry come out right: the universe must encode what physicists call causality. Causality means that empty spacetime has a structure that allows us to distinguish unambiguously between cause and effect." Stephen

Hawking and others who dispensed with time (an essential element of cause and effect) hoped causality would appear as an emergent phenomenon at a later stage of evolution, but the computer simulations only possible in the last few years have showed that it did not. When Ambjorn, Jurkiewicz and Loll ran their simulation with causality built in from the beginning, however, the result was a four-dimensional universe that “worked” like all aspects of the known universe. The authors conclude, “It was the first time anyone had ever derived the observed number of dimensions from first principles. To this day, putting causality back into quantum-gravitational models is the only known cure for the instabilities of superposed spacetime geometries.”

What physicists have a hard time admitting is that causality (akin to the well-documented cosmological constant, or what Nataraja Guru calls “a slight positive pressure”) is not different from the benignity of the Absolute or even the Will of God in a highly refined sense. Somehow something must cause causality to be part of the “stir fry” and randomness to not be part of it, and Brahman is as good a name as any for this element of intentionality. In fact, the same issue of *Scientific American* reviews a new book by complexity theorist Stanley Kauffman called *Reinventing the Sacred*, which apparently does cough up the G word. Noting that the universe consistently amazes scientists with its evolutionary leaps of emergent phenomena and is likely to continue doing so, he claims God “is our chosen name for the ceaseless creativity in the natural universe, biosphere and human cultures.” He contends that the creative process of emergence “is so stunning, so overwhelming, so worthy of awe, gratitude and respect, that it is God enough for many of us. God, a fully natural God, is the very creativity of the universe.” The Gita adds that one of the most creative emergent aspects of the universe is the way it transmits wisdom in fresh ways to each generation of new minds, via the principle of the guru.

2) Neither the hosts of the gods, nor the great sages know My origin; for I am indeed in every way the source of the gods and the great sages.

No matter how subtle or supreme any aspect of manifestation might be, it is nonetheless manifested and therefore at least one degree away from perfect neutrality. Zero (like infinity) has a unique status that cannot be attained by any actual number. In this chapter, Krishna starts with the neutral zero and then traces its manifestation outward into creation. Without beginning from absolute neutrality the entire expression would be skewed, so it is the crucial starting point. Notice that this affirmation comes right at the center of the work, which also represents the neutral Source, almost as if there was an invisible “chapter” in between the ninth and the tenth.

There is a good reason zero came late to mathematics: it is a metaphysical concept: everywhere you look, you don't see nothing. Along with the Absolute, zero is in the front rank of useful abstractions.

In our own psyches we would be well advised to begin with a neutral zero before erecting the edifice of our personality. Otherwise our attitudes will be warped by whatever prejudices or leanings form the foundation of the system, which become more exaggerated as we build on it. We all started from a zero point in the womb, so we intuitively know it. But soon after birth and long before our conscious memories began to be laid down, we had to devise tentative compensatory programs to cope with the demands of becoming an individual. Our persona is in fact a strategy devised by an infant, clever but flawed. The flaws ramify into all the quirks we carry around, imagining they are our true nature, but they actually screen us off from who we really are. Social pressures constrain us to identify only with our flaws and abandon our neutral center, and we almost always capitulate. Yet it's no wonder part of us—the part that remembers—rebels.

Neutrality is like the hub of the wheel of our life. A perfectly balanced wheel runs smoothly and with a minimum of effort. If it is off-center the wheel will bounce and be more prone to breakdowns. We can perform a crude balancing from the perimeter, but starting with the hub in the exact center makes everything much easier. This can only happen if we are able to dig down to the root of our accumulated perspectives.

Each person's life is constructed on the basis of some absolute value, such as truth, nature, God, matter, and the like. The most common value, unfortunately, is the avoidance of pain, accompanied with the assumption that the world is a hostile place, always poised to inflict suffering on us. Often the individual's relation to their core value is largely unconscious, and taken to be "right" without question, as axiomatic. When Socrates asserts an unexamined life is not worth living, discovering the absolute principle we have built our life upon is exactly where the examination will have the most salubrious effect. Since we almost certainly did not start our conscious lives from a neutral standpoint, we have to rediscover it and realign our lives to bring neutrality to the center. Doing so strips away the tensions and mental blocks that are necessary to maintain a false personal image, along with the fear that made it necessary in the first place. It's a supremely satisfying voyage of discovery.

Familiar examples of misleading axioms in humans are "I'm doing what God (or society) wants me to do," or "I believe what I see," or "My country right or wrong." The Gita wants us to find our own center, which will make us infinitely stronger than if we are dependent on external influences. Having gained our true native strength, we are then free to offer our allegiance to any and all deserving entities.

3) He who understands Me as unborn and beginningless, as the great Lord of the world—that man, undeluded among mortals, is absolved from all sins.

Paired with the neutral zero of ultimate reality is the consciousness that appreciates it. This is the ideal state of contemplation. As we look into more and more manifest aspects of creation to descry the Absolute, it is in a sense watered down, and there are increased degrees of what is here termed delusion, meaning attraction to extraneous matters. The more we take into account the farther we are from zero, which is fine most of the time for our adventures in life. But philosophically it is good to connect with the source as well, and to retain the connection. We need to keep that aspect in mind or we will sooner or later wander off into serious derangements, mistaking the forest for the trees, as it's put. If there is anything that could be called sin, this is it.

The Gita teaches that sin has an impact insofar as it confuses the individual, but not that it is toted up in any account book or scorecard in heaven or anything. It is good to recall the categorical statement in V, 15: "The all-pervading One takes cognizance neither of the sinful nor the meritorious actions of anyone; wisdom is veiled by unwisdom; beings are deluded thereby." Wisdom here is knowing the Absolute unalloyed with any conditions. Unborn, so to speak. Once you start to pile on the descriptive adjectives, such as God is like this and this, you are giving birth to delusions.

We should also remember that Arjuna was obsessed with sin when he first presented himself for instruction, as is typical with many seekers of truth, so it is only right that it be mentioned here as well. Reading carefully, we see that sin is extraneous to someone with direct understanding of the Absolute. It is part of the give and take of manifestation, and only becomes relevant as values grow increasingly horizontalized.

Nataraja Guru mentions several important ideas about sin in his commentary on this verse, including "Liberation from sins must therefore be understood more correctly in that the question of sin or virtue does not arise at all, that one is lifted out of the context of both, and not in the sense that one gains virtue as against sin, which interpretation would be against the spirit of the chapter."

4 & 5) Reason, wisdom, non-delusion, patience, truth, self-restraint, calmness, pleasure-pain, becoming and non-becoming, sense of danger and security, non-hurting, balance, contentment, austerity, benevolence, fame-shame, are the various distinct attitudes arising from Me alone.

The descent into practical values begins with a hefty list of broad, mostly positive qualities, many of which are discussed in detail elsewhere. Straightforward as they are, they are useful here at the moment the Absolute reveals its splendor more by what they omit than for any new information. The picture of an angry, jealous, vengeful, remote, spying God concerned with managing a favored slice of humanity is notably absent. Anything exemplifying such partial characteristics would necessarily be at best a demigod, or more likely a figment of some overwrought prehistoric imagination.

As is usual, there is a descending order in the value of the qualities listed, and pondering the order can be an illuminating meditation in itself. For instance, reason precedes wisdom, whereas we tend to think of it as being a subsidiary aspect of it. Krishna is referring to a broader definition of reason: “well-founded reason” as elaborated in Chapter II as a supremely important quality, thoroughly grounded in the Absolute. Its expression in specific instances is called wisdom.

A few of the values enumerated are comprised of pairs of opposites, which the Gita teaches arise together and need to be treated as a unit. Some of them will be addressed specifically later. Pain and pleasure are the most common example, mentioned throughout the Gita. Their unitary status is noted in V, 22: “Those contact-born pleasures indeed are the sources of pain, having a beginning and an end, [therefore] the wise man does not take pleasure in them.”

Being (non-becoming) and becoming are addressed in the Gita mainly by implication, though they are tangentially referred to in Chapter II and XVIII, 20 and 21. As the first division between

the one and the many—the unmanifest extrapolating into the manifest—in a sense they include all the other categories mentioned in this pair of verses. Their importance for yogis is in always discerning being within becoming. Non-yogis see only becoming, in the form of the play of events around them, while contemplatives also perceive their source in pure being. Doing so allows them to remain steady in the midst of chaos.

The one unique pair here is the sense of danger and security, *bhayam* and *abhayam*. *Abhayam* is translated as fearlessness in XVI, 1, which is similar to but easier to grasp than a sense of security. Nataraja Guru converts the pair to fear and courage in his commentary, though not in his verse translation. The closest other reference to this dichotomy is in XVIII, 30, where it is said to be sattvic or pure knowledge to know the difference between what is to be feared and what is not to be feared.

Fear is certainly *the* primal sense or emotion, which marks the dawning of awareness of the individual's separation from the whole. Courage or the desire for security due to the protection of one's life is the natural response to the threat of destruction, and thus marks the beginning of the universal urge to self-preservation. It is hard to imagine any emotional network that goes deeper into the primal brain than this. Fear and a self-assertive reaction to it are the first response of a manifested being to the distinction between being and becoming, or life and death.

The list ends with fame and shame, emotions evoked by the reactions of the outside world to us. Uncompromising absolutism does not take those kinds of qualities into account at all, so we can discern a subtle indication that our interaction with the world is not insignificant from the Gita's perspective.

It is of more than passing interest that fame and shame are said to arise from the Absolute, when they seem to be purely social values. Beneath the social surface level, however, lies the profound mystery of how any number of people can work selflessly for the greater good, yet only one among them will become a successful catalyst for change and thus gain fame, while the rest toil on in

obscurity and often with minimal results. Likewise, a majority of the scoundrels who scrounge and scheme in life's backwaters get away with petty criminality—even being honored for it in the case of politicians and other charlatans—while one unfortunate soul among them is sent to the gallows or ridden out of town on a rail. Great literature is filled with examples of honest souls whose lives and reputations are unfairly tarnished and evil characters who rise to positions of power and influence.

Though the rich regularly buy propaganda, and truth and justice are up for sale in a materialist society, in honest, spiritual terms fame and infamy are beyond the purview of ordinary mortals. Somehow the topology of the Absolute beneath the surface influences who the fickle finger of fate falls upon. Fate, Chance and Luck are terms that indicate the hidden hand of the Absolute in temporal affairs. Because of this arbitrary or inscrutable factor, a wise rishi will never get a swelled head (or a shrunken head) in matters of fame or shame, praise or blame. Even less will they be inclined to join the rat race in seeking to gain approbation and comfort via dishonest means.

6) The seven great sages of old, as also the four law-givers, are born from My own process of becoming and mind, and from these all progeny in the world.

The basic dichotomy the Gita is concerned with, reason and action, reappears personified as the seven sages and four law-givers. The specific elaboration of these mythical people is not particularly important, mainly that they stand for wisdom on the one hand and its practical application on the other. That reason outnumbers action may give a hint that a slight emphasis is to be accorded to it, since ordinary life tends to favor action over reason.

All the various sects, beliefs and religions that abound on earth—poetically lumped together here as progeny—are made up of varying mixtures of these two overarching categories. Mystical paths tend toward contemplation and meditation and produce

sages, who exemplify reason in its expanded sense; while service-oriented religions emphasize the importance of action and inevitably generate rules and regulations enshrined as laws. Some degree of the opposite pole will be found in all of them, as there is nothing that could justifiably be called either pure reason or pure action. Reason must interpret events or it has no basis for what it propounds, while action has to have some *raison d'être* or it is merely random and ridiculous. It is impossible to imagine action without some reason behind it. Ideally these should be blended in a harmonious confection, along the lines of the Gita's first definition: "yoga is reason in action," given in II, 50.

Mad-bhava is usually translated as "my nature" but Nataraja Guru has it as "my own process of becoming." Becoming means unfolding or manifesting, referring to how the essence or "being" of anything is expressed in the world. Thus the traditional translation "my nature" is somewhat misleading, since Krishna has taken pains to distinguish his absolute nature from all the things that manifest within it over time (see for instance IX, 4-6). While the distinction may be subtle, it is nonetheless important, and indicative of how translators can unintentionally weaken a text by catering to imprecise habits of language.

There is a further subtlety to be gleaned by associating the great sages of old with the eternal beingness of the Absolute, while the law givers are linked with its specific manifestations. Sages seek to unite themselves with the transformative impulse of the universe, as in the Bergson instruction, "A true mystic just opens his heart to the onrushing wave." Achieving such a state is inhibited by any attempt to direct the course of the wave through one's thoughts and desires, in other words to define laws and consequent structures. Yet a society—at least as we currently conceive it—cannot consist solely of surfers, of wave riders. After the "ride" there needs to be a time for reflection and reassessment, so as to integrate the experience into day-to-day life. This is the time of the law givers. Thus there is a sine wave alternation that holistically integrates reason and action.

Because the correlation of inspirational energy with relatively static life forms is bound to be imprecise and is necessarily attuned to specific times and places, it eventually goes out of date and needs to be recast. Throughout history, important truths have been restated in bold and radically new ways, and the reinvigorating of spiritual truths seems to wax and wane periodically. Not too long ago was a major flowering of psychic exploration. We can think of Timothy Leary's "Turn on, tune in, drop out," and "You can be anything you want to be, this time around." The Beatles sang, "All you need is love," and "I get by [and high] with a little help from my friends." The comfortable flocks of religious believers have been supplanted to a significant degree by individual seekers of truth who have no need for exclusivity, and who do not accept the authority of the establishment. While none of these New Age ideas are really new, they are just as challenging as ever to the status quo, and have had a powerful impact on our world. Yet we can already see some of them becoming clichéd and watered down. The Gita is firmly on the side of the innovators and free thinkers, despite contrary claims by some conservative factions, who want to set it in stone and suppress its message.

We can draw the logical conclusion that even if all the religious "progeny" of the Absolute spring honestly from it, and are not merely invented by schemers, at least some of their laws are bound to clash with the laws of other progeny. The more specific a law is, the more likely to be inapplicable to a broader context. So long as participants understand the difference between absolute becoming and its particular specifications, there will be no need to come to blows over doctrinal differences. Then the sages and the law givers can work together to optimize life on earth.

7) He who understands according to fundamental principles My unique value together with its unitive balance, by non-wavering contemplation attains union. In this there is no room for doubt.

Ah! And just what are those fundamental principles of understanding? This means that you experience the Absolute directly, and not as a theoretical idea from a book or based on common superstition or belief. Quoting the Bible or the Quran, chapter and verse, or even the Gita or Narayana Guru, is unarguably secondhand knowledge. It may be good enough for grandpa, or good enough for academia, but it isn't fundamental or primary, and therefore it isn't good enough to attain union with the Absolute.

Non-wavering contemplation means we are to remain centered in primary attunement with the Absolute, and sublimate the urge to have recourse to analogies and comparisons. We have arrived at the moment of realization. Descriptions limit the illimitable, and are to be transcended. Obviously, pursuing chaotic urges is the opposite of non-wavering concentration, and in our quest has long ago been given up.

Earlier Arjuna was taught to meditate by noticing himself wandering and bringing himself back to a focused intensity, for instance: "Whatever causes the changeful, unsteady mind to go out (again and again), from each such, restraining it (again and again), it should ever be led to the side of the Self." (VI, 26.) By practice, the wandering becomes less and less, though it only very rarely disappears completely. An excessive desire to become unwavering is likely to produce more wavering, so a natural ease is the best approach.

"In this there is no room for doubt" is a double entendre. At first blush it sounds like Krishna is assuring Arjuna that his steady concentration will undoubtedly bring union with the Absolute. The second sense is that union with the Absolute leaves no place for doubt to exist. Doubt is a form of wavering, and it requires separation from what is being doubted. When one is merged in something there cannot be the separateness anymore that could be called doubt. As in the last chapter, where Arjuna was praised for having gotten over his mistrust, here the same fearful holding back is called doubt. As already mentioned, doubt is good up to a point,

but for final merger in the goal it is to be given up. Its last trace vanishes of its own accord, as there is no room for it in an ecstatic state.

8) I am the Source of all; from Me everything moves outward; understanding thus, the wise adore Me, endowed with the intuition of pure becoming.

In some respects life is like a Christmas tree, broad at the base and tapering through layer after layer to a single point on top, where a star or angel symbolizes the Source of the ineffable Absolute. All over the tree hang lights and ornaments, symbolizing the various values and events of the life cycle. However, like the inverted tree with its roots in the air described in Chapter XV, creation emanates from the topmost point and spreads in all directions to the base.

Contemplatively speaking, the point source of the Absolute is within and expands outward. Consciousness resembles the Big Bang theory of physics, with all its potentials compressed into a singularity called a zygote that explodes into manifestation with a period of hyperinflation followed by normal inflation.

The universe, too, began from a singularity, and expanded rapidly to form what we now believe we know, a mind-bogglingly vast space drowned in incomprehensibly timeless time. We imagine the natural laws we observe here are true for the entire universe, because somehow they must have been contained in that original seed or singularity. Otherwise, how does everything happen with such uniformity? What makes the atoms spin, the planets revolve? What is life and what is consciousness? Were they too contained in the original impulse, or are they accidental afterthoughts of creation? A little reflection reveals that it is the greatest miracle that we exist at all, and the universe is miracle piled upon miracle, one after another, erupting in an endless, exuberant stream.

Regardless of how we conceive of it, the Absolute permeates existence at all levels, from the most subtle to the most gross. It can therefore be accessed at all places and times. As actuality moves out from its unique point of origin it becomes more horizontalized and less ideal. It's like a river, which at the stretch close to the ocean is likely to be sluggish and muddy and even polluted, but very useful for transportation and recreation. As you travel upstream it becomes faster flowing, cleaner but less "useful" for human enterprises. Ascending toward the source, it becomes fresher and purer, and smaller. Before long it is a tiny brook in the high mountains, and soon it disappears completely, into the ground or a snowfield. You cannot say exactly where the source is. It is impossible to pinpoint the exact place the river originates. Each of us has our preferences in relation to the river. Some love the broad and mighty stretches where huge fish lurk, and others the playful rapids or the mystical springs amidst frozen peaks that initiate it all. To each is granted the adoration best suited to them.

The objective world moves outward from the observer in time as well as space, accounting for the perceived passage of time and the recession of galaxies. At heart it is merely an eternal situation, in which consciousness itself is the true Source. The Many pour from the One, worlds without end.

9) With their relational minds affiliated to Me, their life tendencies penetrating in Me, enlightening each other and ever conversing about Me, they are content and rejoice.

A beautiful picture of life among enlightened beings is sketched here. Everything is to be consciously related to its inner essence. When we retrace transactions to their source, it imbues them with meaning and significance. Likewise, the life tendencies—the pranas or vital forces—are to be seen as aspects of the total energy field. Instead of merely acting out our urges blindly, we harmonize and direct them to healthy ends, taking into account the feelings of others and the optimization of the common

good. This is difficult to do in isolation, but is a natural consequence of being flooded by the ambrosial bliss of the Absolute, such as Arjuna is now beginning to experience.

When we are interested and available to each other to help out during times of struggle or darkness we are enlightening each other. There is nothing didactic about it, though sometimes in a classroom situation that might be the case. Enlightening each other and also conversing reminds us that the Absolute operates both beyond the reach of words as well as within them.

“Ever conversing about” the Absolute should not just be considered bald-faced talk about God, which could be tedious or preachy. Subtlety is highly admirable. Poetic and scientific descriptions of all aspects of creation and imagination are not to be ruled out. The indwelling bliss of contact with the Absolute makes communication and observation delightful. Discontent is a healthy urge to seek one’s true nature. Once grounding in one’s Self is regained, the discontent naturally resolves, replaced by a state of joy.

Nataraja Guru offers a sweet commentary on this verse, in his characteristically dialectical style:

The normal occupation of a person steeped in the Absolute is not unconsciousness or abnormality of any kind, but a normal state in which he not only teaches others but is taught by others, while the mutual exchange of wisdom gives both parties the characteristic joy which comes from interplay of teaching and learning. They are both content and positively happy in this normal kind of life.

Too often we read of trances and other abnormal states as evidence of spirituality in mystical or yogic literature. Symptoms of blood pressure, of depression or exaltation, not to speak of childish forms of emotionalism, all pass as expressions of the contemplative life.

The Gita here presents a sober picture which suffers from no exaggerations. God-consciousness is a healthy and normal

state as portrayed here. This does not mean, however, that abnormal states do not have any element of spirituality at all.

10) To such (wise ones) established in unbroken unity with affectionate adoration, I grant that kind of unitive understanding by which they attain to Me.

It's easy to miss the secret of this chapter, because it has to be described verbally but it transcends word power. What's really going on here is that the inspiring energy of the Absolute is pouring from Krishna into Arjuna. Arjuna has worked his way up to a perfect bipolarity with his guru, passing through levels of doubt and questioning, to arrive at trust and openness. This does not occur in a vacuum. Once the doors of the heart are open, the spirit of the Absolute—or whatever you want to call it—floods in. It totally transforms the life of the aspirant, at first subtly, then with more and more influence right down to the most mundane aspects of existence. The second half of the Gita charts this infusion, through increasingly exteriorized aspects of life. Most of it is very practical, but here at the beginning it is still largely nonspecific and invisible.

It would be strange for Arjuna to be describing this process of mystical infusion, and would have an oddly detached tone if narrator Sanjaya were telling it. So it is right for Krishna to be the narrator of this invisible transmission. Instead of baldly stating “I am doing this to you,” he presents it poetically and in general terms inclusive of everyone. If you try to imagine the difficulties of communicating such an inner event, you will be more sympathetic to how Vyasa has handled it. Arjuna's own description of his experience of the Absolute occurs in the next chapter. His reaction to the waterfall of divinity cascading down on him, precisely because it *is* a reaction, is properly one chapter removed from the mysterious intangible blast hinted at here.

The important thing is to read between the lines, to sense the divine joy pulsing into Arjuna—and us—from the achievement

of realization, for which we have been aiming and struggling for a long time. We have arrived. We can embrace the pure bliss of truth as it pours into our system. Each verse in this chapter is a jumping off point for the experience of “affectionate adoration,” which aptly describes the effect of union with the Absolute.

It is wise to keep in mind that this religious-sounding experience is open to all, theist and atheist alike. Hard-nosed scientists are as likely as sentimental worshippers to feel the rush of excitement that accompanies an insightful appreciation of existence, and both types can be cold and hard-hearted when the wonder is forgotten. The more we learn about nature the more astounding it is, and the more humble we will feel about our part in it. It is not surprising then that the reverse is also true: mean-spirited people prefer to close down their awareness and adhere to a parochial vision that eliminates contradictory information, whether in religious or scientific contexts.

11) Specifically because of compassion for them I, abiding as what has become the Self, destroy the ignorance born of darkness by the shining lamp of wisdom.

As we noted earlier, the universe seems designed to promote breakthroughs. Time and time again the evolutionary aspect of it that we are calling the Absolute ultimately removes our ignorance, often through the intermediary of a human guru. Though we strive and aspire, we are incapable of making any leap beyond our natural limits without assistance. Transcendence has to be transcendental, in other words it must raise us out of our limited terrain. It is not the byproduct of highly organized matter. Matter may provide the vessel, but consciousness or spirit fills it to the brim. When it overflows, matter scrambles to build a bigger vessel.

Frequently in the Gita we hear of the Absolute being compassionate, a seemingly non-neutral state for the epitome of neutrality. We have to be cautious not to produce an imaginary, static picture of some loving entity leaning over us to give us

consolation. That's surely a flashback to our childhood with mom and dad or grandpa and grandma. We are talking about principles or forces of nature which far outshine any specific manifestation, more like electromagnetism or gravity.

The word used for compassion here is *anukampa*, which carries an inner sense of vibrating or trembling together. A cosmic force can induce a more intense vibration in an earthly entity, so long as they are both made of similar stuff, in our case waves of particles, or wavicles. Or consciousness. It is expressly stated in this case that the induction is imparted by the lamp of wisdom.

Wisdom is ever linked with the light that dispels the darkness of ignorance. The whole meaning of evolutionary development is to bring more light to bear upon a dark and mysterious universe. And the light brings delight. Each expansion of our awareness makes for more bliss, more appreciation of the amazing complexity and harmony of the universe and all its parts. Ignorance is not bliss; wisdom is bliss.

Of the several paths to attain light, the Gita specifically extols wisdom. There is no call for intentional ignorance as is demanded by many religious and social strictures. We are not asked to believe that only Krishna is wise, and we are as lowly worms. We are invited to imbibe in wisdom and expand our consciousness to its maximum potential, which is vast if not infinite.

The image of the lamp is a classic analogy with many variations. The oil might be likened to our subconscious proclivities, with the wick representing the effort that brings them up to the surface, or perhaps the senses. The flame that burns as a result and throws light all around is the 'I'. We don't usually spend our time staring at the lamp, though. We use its light to see all around, and until the flame starts to flicker or the oil runs out, we don't pay it much attention. What we can see because of it is absorbing enough for a whole lifetime. Only someone like a yogi turns around to examine the source of the illumination.

I feel a little ashamed describing this wonderfully powerful and loving verse in such straightforward terms. The words only

reveal the faintest shadow of what is intended. This is a verse for mystical meditation, in which we strive to open ourselves up to the mystery while not conceptualizing it at all. The universe is so amazing we shouldn't need any cheerleader to help lift us up; it should be automatic and effortless. It is only because we have habitually shut out the light through our own ignorance that we have to seek assistance.

12 & 13) Arjuna said:

You are the supreme Absolute, the supreme Abode, the supreme Purifier, the eternal divine Person, the primal Divinity, the Unborn, the All-pervading—
all the sages say this of You, the divine sage Narada, so too Asita, Devala, Vyasa, and you yourself confirm it to Me.

Arjuna seems to go a little over the top in assuring Krishna of his loyalty in accepting his wisdom. We should keep in mind that the words are hinting that he is being intensely stimulated by the outpouring of energy coming from his guru. Reading between the lines, Arjuna is continuing to verbalize the “affectionate adoration” that is his side of the bipolar interchange with his guru. Vyasa has expressed it as a poetic rhapsody.

In addition, Arjuna is acknowledging what Krishna told him in the last chapter, where in verses 16-19 he listed a number of his supreme attributes, including Purifier and Abode. Arjuna is not simply responding in kind, he is putting it in his own words, demonstrating that he is not parroting his teacher but has made the ideas his own. Then he follows it up with the supporting testimony of several famous seers. The importance of this response is enunciated by Nataraja Guru:

It takes two sides to make a statement of truth complete, especially in a dialogue of this kind. It must be stated by one who knows it and understood by the hearer who is capable of grasping it. If there is such a recognition on the part of the

hearer, the case for the verity stated may be said to be fully accomplished.

In the three verses that follow Arjuna gives full credit to and accepts the teaching of Krishna. He is no longer a doubting questioner full of mistrust. His conversion in principle to the absolutist standpoint is complete. But there are matters of applied wisdom on which he still needs clarification. (430)

We can think of Verse 13 as a literary flourish to introduce other perspectives than Arjuna's into the dialogue. This is much more subtle than if the narrator just baldly stated, "Yes, folks, and a host of famous rishis from your history books agree, Krishna is top dog. He definitely represents the supreme Absolute! We are not talking about just another deity here."

The authoritative lineup cited by Arjuna does merit a passing mention. Narada is the Indian equivalent of Hermes, an intercessor and intermediary between gods and humans. The rest are all "dark" characters, including Vyasa, who stands for the ne plus ultra of sages. Krishna of course means black, and MW informs us that Vyasa was sometimes also called Krishna because of his black complexion. As noted earlier, the Vedic crowd was the white skinned Aryan conquerors, while the original inhabitants, darker and more unitive in outlook perhaps, were the subjugated. The Gita is among many things a philosophical body blow to the dominance of the invaders, and the notion of the Absolute, properly understood, undermines the entire construct of higher or lower peoples, favored or unfavored status, and so on. Even in this transitional verse we can hear a subtle note of spiritual emancipation being struck.

Vyasa means "author or compiler," akin to "anonymous," and most of the major Hindu scriptures were written by one version or another of him, including the Vedas. He is the "last word" of writers.

Narada reappears in Verse 26 of this chapter, and Vyasa is mentioned again in Verse 37.

14) I believe that all this that You say is valid, O Krishna; neither the divinities nor the demons know your unique nature.

Everyone believes they are uniquely in possession of the truth of the Absolute, the One Reality, yet their versions differ and may lead to conflict. Thus it is important to remember that no limited account is “right,” all are more or less inadequate, and yet we are all talking about the same thing. Arjuna now realizes that everyone else’s interpretation comes to him as a secondhand experience, and, while valuable in its way, he thirsts for something more personal, more intimate. Probably he is already experiencing the Absolute more directly now, and this is how Vyasa chose to write about it. Still, there is at least one more level of very direct experience, mind-blowingly direct experience, which Arjuna will be engulfed by in the next chapter.

It may not be too far a stretch to interpret the reference to divinities and demons as subtly referring to the conflict between the usurpers mentioned under the previous one: those bringing with them the Vedic divinities, i.e. the Aryans, and the pre-Aryan inhabitants they displaced. The word for demons used here indicates the ones who opposed the Vedic divinities. While we’re on the subject, the conflict between the Kauravas, the grabbers of wealth, who took everything legitimately belonging to the Pandavas, Arjuna’s immediate family, may well symbolize the same historical tragedy. Arjuna’s statement indicates his neutrality regarding this very important source of conflict, the one he is currently immersed in, demonstrating that he has learned his lessons well.

Be that as it may, the Gita weighs in here as always as a neutral witness. Neither side in any conflict can know the uniqueness of the Absolute while clinging to its lopsided position. At the outset of his learning process, Arjuna was counseled not to fight or flee, but to seek and know the middle ground, the sentinel-post of wisdom. Here he is able to see the flaws of both positions,

which separate partisans from their true nature. His perspective is an amplified echo of that long ago time in the first chapter where he stood in the middle of the battleground and quailed. Now he stands firmly in the middle as a wise seer, fully prepared by Krishna to reach the heights of understanding.

15) You Yourself indeed know Yourself by Yourself, most high Godhead, presiding Principle of elemental expression and of becoming, Light of Shining Ones, Lord of the universe.

When all is said and done, only the Absolute can truly know the Absolute. All the rest is asymptotic approximation, speculation and projection, partial beings making semi-educated guesses. It's the best we can do, but nothing to get up in arms over. In fact, Arjuna is demonstrating a measure of humility that is a mark of spiritual advancement. Admitting that he doesn't know and *can't* know is an important attitude that opens him up to new realms of possibility. Earlier he was confused and seeking answers, but here his awe of what his guru represents is expanding dramatically. As his appreciation of Krishna's grandeur increases, the arena of his search expands commensurably. The guru is a kind of mirror revealing the disciple's hidden expanses. Krishna has gone from a simple friend to a charioteer to a teacher, and now something immeasurable that cannot be confined to a body. The rest of the chapter will be stretching the envelope in a number of categories, setting the stage for the next chapter, in which Arjuna's mind will be completely blown open.

Dnyaneshwar Maharaj puts our predicament very nicely, as expressed by Krishna: "You have the capacity to grasp the inner meaning of things. I am standing before you, but in reality it is the great Brahman, who is here to embrace you. In seeing Me here, remember you see the universe. Before Me, the Vedas are dumb; life and intelligence are unable to encompass Me." (Gita Explained, 137)

Religious apologists may take this group of verses as being pro-Krishna as a deity, singling him out as special. But we should look closely at what Arjuna is really saying here. His neutral, open attitude dispels all forms of superstition and ungrounded beliefs. He is dismissing any kind of borrowed knowledge, in preparation to seeing for himself. He thus stands on the brink of true realization, with no need for any theoretical crutch. In short, he is addressing the Absolute *through* his guru, and not being arrested by that specific version of its manifestation.

Superstition is not just a fault of others, distant heathen bowing before strange idols. All of us are far more superstitious than we realize. Whatever we take on faith is a form of superstition. The idea of living an examined life is to replace our unquestioned beliefs with valid understanding. Yet much of our understanding is provisional, a stopgap set of premises part way to a full realization. Life is so full we are forced to take much for granted, or we wouldn't get anywhere. We must regularly reexamine our presumptions so they don't lead us astray. Physicist Max Tegmark is one scientist who is willing to admit that this is a universal problem:

No matter how emphatically we scientists claim to be rational seekers of truth, we're as prone as anyone to human foibles such as prejudice, peer pressure and herd mentality. Overcoming these shortcomings clearly takes more than just talent for calculating. (Max Tegmark, *Our Mathematical Universe*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014, p. 50)

Here's a favorite example of mine of modern day superstition, trivial but instructive of the principle. A dear friend, a devout New Age Buddhist and excellent in every respect, has somehow come to believe that her computer can only be waked from sleep safely by touching the space bar, that all other keys can cause damage to her expensive and incomprehensible machine. When I stayed with her for a period of time and had to use her

computer, she was very clear about this. The computer of course is absolutely indifferent to which key is pressed, but she worries frequently that she or someone else will hit the wrong key and disaster will ensue. When I carefully explained that it would actually be okay, she listened with thinly veiled scorn and insisted that I use only the space bar no matter what I thought. She was certain, and nothing I could say or do was going to change her belief. I even demonstrated it once by pressing a random key. She was horrified and felt she was lucky that time that nothing went haywire, but it didn't change her attitude one iota.

You can laugh, but the bright young man who maintains my computer, a Mensa member and utter rationalist, has a similar superstition: it's dangerous to leave folders open. Part of his systematic care is to huffily close all the ones I have left open since his last visit—open for convenience because I use them all the time. I don't know the source of his superstition, but he usually gives me a lecture about always closing them when I'm done. So far, no computer illnesses have ensued from my blasphemy.

The real point is not that other people have superstitious beliefs, but that we do too and don't recognize them. Yogis strive to stay awake to all the assumptions they make, especially the nontrivial ones. And we can practice by noticing the silly ones.

Many systems of our planet resemble a computer in having a surface that does not reveal how they actually work. Not only technology, but life itself and life after death are two prime examples. We are actually guessing much of the time about many subjects, and as often as not coincidences lead us to imagine things that are simply not true. Unlike in these examples, frequently there are proselytizers who will gleefully provide you with false facts and reinforce your misunderstanding so it accords with their schemes. The spiritual seeker should strive valiantly to keep an open mind, because some of our superstitions can lead us far afield or even turn deadly. In a sane world we would laugh about them together, but we've got a long way to go for that.

Death is the area where raw speculation and unfounded belief most runs rampant. We stand next to a corpse and are certain that they are going to one imaginary place or another, depending on certain actions they took in the past or certain words that were spoken over them just before or after they passed away. Or we insist equally dogmatically that nothing happens at all. Who is honest enough to admit we have no idea what transpires? You won't draw a congregation by that route, for sure.

“Light of shining ones” is more commonly encountered as the Light of lights. The Sanskrit word is usually translated as “God of gods” by the more religious-minded. We can ask ourselves what makes a god a god, or a light a light. Gods we can only imagine, but light stands for energy, which we can experience to a degree, and even put to use. In any case, this is the stage of the Gita where we are called upon to dig beneath the surface and try to grasp the hidden meanings. Most of the rest of the chapter will present various essences, the implications of which we can bring alive in our meditations.

For instance, you might think of a photon as representing light. Photon is a word that conjures up a mental image, and we can manipulate the image in our imagination. It can be a wave or a particle, zooming through space or bouncing off objects. But scientific or not, all this is pure abstraction and bears little or no resemblance to actual light. However, if we dispense with our mental imagery in meditation, we may very often come to a perceptible inner light that is more than an idea. It is a living reality. It is the Light of lights, the essence of the idea.

16) Be pleased to tell me without omission of the divine perfections of Your own Self, by which specific expressions You pervade these worlds, while remaining apart.

Arjuna now sets the stage for the last part of the chapter, where specific examples of the Absolute within manifestation are given. He is dying to know how the mystery can be grasped, how

something can be intrinsic to everything and yet distinct. How can something that is everything be so elusive? Why is our mind continually drawn away from realizing the Absolute to become hypnotized by the play of events? The fact that Arjuna doesn't simply accept the words he has been taught but is driven to know first hand, impels him to the ultimately direct experience of the next chapter. Many seekers might close their notebooks and go home at this point, but Arjuna has "an incurable need to understand," as Rene Daumal puts it in *Mount Analogue*.

Nitya Chaitanya Yati presents a perfect rule of thumb for knowing that the Absolute (here called God) is suffusing your life, in his Gita commentary, p. 241:

Situations presenting themselves to us without any initiative on our part and as a result of our most natural and correct behavior, should be taken as the will of God. That very feeling will give us a sense of our togetherness with God. Even though a situation looks difficult and beyond us, this trust in the Highest will give us new hope and courage, and unsought aid coming from all directions will enhance our trust in God's grace. When this trust and consequential fulfillment increases day by day, we know we are on the right track and we progress. In such a case no one will have any doubt in their mind of what is happening.

Anyone allergic to the loaded term God can of course replace it with Nature, Randomness, Chance, or some other favorite supreme principle.

"Pervading the worlds while remaining apart" reprises the mystery from Chapter IX, verses 4-6, from Arjuna's standpoint. A major paradox in philosophy is the relationship between the unmanifest and manifest, otherwise known as the transcendent and the immanent. From a rational perspective one appears to negate the other. Only with dialectical integration can any two antinomies

such as these be reconciled. To do so requires intelligent neutrality in the attitude of the seeker.

In discriminating the general and the specific, or the transcendent and the immanent, we tend to give preferential credence to one over the other. As with all horizontal and vertical factors, however, both are essential to producing an integral understanding. 'Integral' in fact refers to this very integration of seemingly disparate elements.

Humanity provides a fine example. Its general aspect is where we are all alike, a mass of beings with nearly identical genomes and behaviors. Viewing the species from this angle is useful for social and philosophical matters, among others. "All are equal in the eyes of the law," and so on. But of commensurate importance is the fact that each person comprising the mass is unique and cherishable. The more we move toward awareness of the specific aspects of someone, the greater the possibility of personal connections developing, and the greater the impact on our own life. Our delight in reveling in the serendipity of individuality dances its dance on a background of universality, as simultaneously the transcendental becomes evident in the infinite variety of its immanent manifestations.

17) How shall I, constantly meditating on You, know You, O Mystic Yogi? In what particular expressions are you to be cognized by Me?

This verse is much more important than it might seem at first, being basically an invitation for Krishna to recount the highest values pertaining to the Absolute, as he is about to do. The enumeration is ordinarily taken to be almost a kind of boasting. But if we start with the premise that serious, meaningful wisdom is encoded in every verse of the Gita, we will discover much more of value.

Humans are very easily deluded by plausible but distracting claims of all sorts. Not only potential voters, but meditators and

worshippers are routinely drawn far afield from truth to ally themselves to all manner of bizarre projections and fantasies. The Biblical Book of Revelation is a prime example, fostering beliefs in magical future events that have mesmerized millions of people and turned them enthusiastically against the tenets of their own religion, replacing universal love with partisan hatred. Arjuna quite rightly begs his guru to keep him from drifting into fantasies, so he can remain locked in to reality in all its magnificence. We would do well to follow his example.

The phrase “constantly meditating on You” needs to be understood correctly. The picture we are likely to call up is of Arjuna sitting cross-legged chanting Aum as he meditates in the classic fashion, day in and day out, forever. But Krishna has taught him how to see the Absolute in everything he does, in all his encounters and all his thoughts. This is the meditation of being fully aware of the absolute nature of existence as you go about your normal activities. There is no segregated part of life where attunement with the Absolute is facilitated. With the right attitude it happens all the time in every setting. The common conceit that the wise sit around meditating and doing advanced yoga practices all day long is one more way to push realization into a distant future backwater and reinforce an image of ourselves as unenlightened.

Nitya Chaitanya Yati puts this beautifully in *That Alone*:

You cannot get rid of all the waves and just have a pure ocean. That is what everybody is trying to do—sit firm and close the eyes so that you get rid of all thoughts and ideas, and then finally you are left with the pure, pure ocean of the Self. Narayana Guru says this is like someone taking a cake of soap to the washtub and trying to wash all the lather out of it. No matter how much you wash, it cannot be done. The more water you pour and the more you rub, the more the lather comes. Trying to get rid of all the thoughts and ideas in the mind in order to come to pure consciousness is like that. It is in and through all this that you have to see pure consciousness. It is not that you kill everyone in the world and

then find peace. Let your good neighbors be there. Their dog may bark, but you can still be peaceful. See how it works for you today. (343)

Notwithstanding this insight, Arjuna not surprisingly wonders if there are any special forms of manifestation where the Absolute may be more readily thought of. The eternal paradox here is that while all things are equal in their core composition, certain insights are more conducive to realization than others. The Word of the Guru is the most conducive of all, and now that he is fully prepared Arjuna would like nothing better than to sit at Krishna's feet and imbibe it endlessly.

Our comprehension oscillates back and forth between perceiving the unity and seeing the separation, between oneness and multiplicity. Arjuna is asking one of the most essential questions here, how to not get carried away by the play of maya (nature) but to realize the Absolute at all times. We get sucked in to reactive behavior when we forget we are a piece of the continent and instead believe we are a disconnected island, as John Donne would have it.

The string of compliments that Arjuna has given Krishna in this section culminates with calling him a Yogi with a capital Y, so to speak. That which brings union or is ever united is the best possible aspect of manifestation.

Nataraja Guru has added the epithet "mystic" to emphasize the profundity of the yoga in question along with its value as a topic for meditation. The wide range of yoga practices as conceived in the popular imagination are not what is meant. William James has listed his own version of the essential features of a mystic, which help elucidate the intent:

1. A feeling of being in a wider life than that of this world's....
2. A sense of the friendly continuity of the ideal power with our own life, and a willing self-surrender to its control.

3. An immense elation and freedom, as the outlines of the confining selfhood melt down.

4. A shifting of the emotional center towards loving and harmonious affections, towards 'yes, yes' and away from 'no', where the claims of the non-ego are concerned.

(Varieties of Religious Experience, New York: Doubleday, pp. 249-250)

George Thadathil, in his book *Vision from the Margin: A Study of Sri Narayana Guru Movement in the Literature of Nitya Chaitanya Yati* (Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 2007), has highlighted an intriguing difference here, while not quite appreciating the value of dialectic integration:

There is a subtle distinction between the Artist and the Mystic. Both strive for promoting order and experiencing unity. Yet, the routes both take differ even when they rely on similar means like *yoga*. The artist's perception of unity is not exclusive but diffusive. The mystic's perception of unity is exclusive through a process of centering. In other words, while the mystic concentrates on the Oneness of the many, the artist immerses in the many-ness of the One. (116)

The Gita aims to inspire us as artistic mystics and mystical artists. While we may well emphasize one aspect or the other at various times, bringing them together in *yoga* is the true mystical achievement.

18) Tell me again in detail of your balanced perfections and specific expressions, for I am never tired of hearing Your words of ambrosial immortality.

The ecstasy of spiritual awareness is flooding through Arjuna, and he can't get enough of it. He wants Krishna to keep showing it to him. It will take the rest of the work before Arjuna

truly realizes the Source is within himself, and no longer needs to visualize it as emanating from his guru.

Those fortunate enough to have known a true guru will be familiar with the intoxicating delight of sitting at their feet and raptly listening as wisdom flows forth from the fountain source that they are. Regarding the preceding section spoken by Arjuna, Nitya Chaitanya Yati offers the following:

No love or adoption is complete or perfect unless the reciprocity of the counterparts are of equal admiration and sympathy, understanding, and dialectical togetherness. In the whole of the ninth chapter and the beginning of the tenth, we have been seeing the great concern of the guru for his disciple, the initiative being taken by Krishna out of sheer compassion. In these verses we see how it is reciprocated by an equally strong feeling, deep love, and profound admiration on the part of the disciple. There is nothing that satisfies and rewards the guru more than to see the bright face and pacified heart of his disciple. A thorn in the disciple's heart is equally annoying to the guru also. So there has to be an open assurance given by the disciple that he is benefited by the teaching. Arjuna here refers to the wisdom as the ambrosia that gives immortality, and adds further that he will never be satiated. This remark is significant. The love between guru and disciple is not born of a craving for companionship, nor for the satisfaction of any physiological or psychological urge. It is the coming together of the counterparts of a wisdom situation in which they burn together as a single flame in the fire of the Absolute. In a burning flame the fire is fresh every moment, and it never becomes tired of burning. So this love should not be likened to the sentimental attachment of kith and kin, or of couples where gross indulgence or horizontalization of relations make one soon get on the nerves of the other. (Gita, p. 242)

Immortality is a very interesting concept. The common assumption is that it means living forever, but that is actually a literalistic misinterpretation. Immortality is the opposite of mortality, of death. Spiritual or psychological death occurs when we become docile victims of the social tides, conditioned to accept our lot without question. Rebirth is when we wake up to our inner sense of purpose, and in the process break the chains that bind us to the rock of unquestioned assumptions. Immortality, then, means reawakening the divine intensity, the divine fire burning within us, which ignites our enthusiasm to live well and fully for however brief a span we are physically alive. Krishna's words are eliciting Arjuna's inner passions, bringing him back to his finest qualities, and that's what he is appreciating.

19) Krishna said:

Ah! I shall recount to you the bright, glorious values that pertain to Myself, (graded) according to their importance, for there is no end to the elaboration of items pertaining to Me.

The highest achievement of individual striving to comprehend the Absolute, a.k.a. the meaning of life, is to experience it everywhere and in every thing. Arjuna's long apprenticeship to wisdom has now brought him to that happy state. The list that follows over the next twenty verses is an exposition of this realization in symbolic terms. Each verse typically has four loosely related categories, though a few have three and the structure breaks down late in the chapter.

Since it is our true nature, some type of bipolarity with the Absolute is a necessary condition for Self-realization. Luckily the guru principle is present in all endeavors, not just as a spiritual preceptor in human form. Few of us will ever sit at the feet of a wise teacher for an extended period, but we can apprentice ourselves to the wonders of Nature at any time. We can struggle to discover the guru in our interactions with the panoply of people and situations we find ourselves immersed in. We can even discern

it in our own heart. The following portrayal of the Absolute in various aspects of life encourages us to enjoy enlightenment wherever we roam. We do not have to be affiliated with a certified, properly dressed teacher or live in an ashram to learn and grow.

The beginner sets out imagining the Absolute as something remote and rare, but with increased insight it becomes known as the reality that is ever present here and now. When one sees nothing but the Absolute everywhere, unity has become established. This lays the groundwork for Arjuna's direct experience of the Absolute described in the next chapter. Whether or not such a transcendent event takes place in a seeker's life, from the apex of one's bipolar affiliation to unalloyed truth there is a gradual descent into or reintegration with the workaday world, incorporating the highest values into the mundane, spiritualizing the whole of life. The value of the reintegration process is not limited to those who have had extraordinary experiences; it is beneficial for everyone.

If the Absolute is to have any actual significance, it must be as a series of wonder-inducing superlatives woven into the very fabric of life. Similarly, zero is theoretical and abstract standing by itself, but takes on specific meanings when it is located midway between a positive and negative number, or aggregations of equal absolute value.

In VII, 7, Krishna spoke of manifestation as resembling jewels strung together in a garland. In the following section a selected number of typical jewel-like values are presented, so that the student may discern the absolute element within apparently "ordinary" reality.

Nataraja Guru points out that the expression translated as "Ah!" possibly indicates reluctance on the part of Krishna to elaborate specific values. Divinity is shy of being nailed down. It may lose its flexibility if certain associations are insisted upon. Such an unhappy fate has befallen formal religions over and over, as we have frequently noted. So take this as a guide to good sense, and never as a set of hard and fast rules.

At the end of the chapter, Krishna will pointedly ask Arjuna what the use of all this specific knowledge is. Specifics tend to drag the psyche down and limit it, while generalities free it to fly high. Neither on their own is adequate. Generalities need to be linked to actual examples to be meaningful, and, as Krishna is about to demonstrate, specific aspects of life need to be kept in the proper perspective of a sensible general system. The Absolute is the most sensible principle to unite all disparate items coherently.

Humans being creatures of habit, they all too easily become attached to their favorite form and intolerant of the favorite forms of others when they are different. Yet due to Arjuna's insistence, and with the caveat duly registered by that Ah!, Krishna will once again concede to his disciple's eagerness. As usual with the Gita, he lists the vibhūtis (values) from most to least important. The adjective he uses for these values is usually translated as 'divine' but Nataraja Guru prefers the more descriptive "bright and glorious." I agree that the word 'divine' is vague, unscientific and overused. It is mainly invoked as a cliché by mediocre thinkers (including me when I'm being lazy).

For those with a curiosity about all the specific mythological creatures listed here, which are very far from present day knowledge, Nataraja Guru's commentary allots a paragraph to each. If you aren't lucky enough to have a copy of his book, it is available online at <http://www.advaitavedanta.co.uk/>. For my part, I'm going to strive to translate the gist of them into modern concepts. Wish me luck!

20) I am the soul seated in the heart of all beings; and I am the beginning and the middle and even the end of beings.

The heart is the core or center, and the Absolute is there in *all beings*. The Absolute *is* the core; in fact it is everything. There is not the least favoritism here as between chosen and forsaken, holy and unholy, saint and sinner, believer and infidel, and so on. All spring from the same source, though it is named differently in

different traditions. By listing it first, the Gita honors this as the most important of all values. The awareness that we are all one in our hearts is the most transformative, blissful awareness anyone can have.

We might think, “Isn’t that sweet!” when we read a verse like this, but it is conveying much more than a sentimental notion. Unity is crucial to our well-being. The most dangerous religious fanatics have a similar “pulsation model” to Vedanta, describing how action manifests from a point source (usually addressed as God) and radiates into the outside world. With generous motivations, fanatics are simply seeking to bring God’s will into the world to make it better. From their own perspective they are agents of the divine. So what goes wrong? Why do they become intolerant, manipulative, angry and even genocidal?

The short answer is that the ego is very clever to disguise its predilections in the most admirable terms. We have all learned that our personal wants are selfish, but that doesn’t teach us how to restrain the ego. It piously projects its desires into the dictates of an unimpeachable entity—God, country, tribe, creed, or what have you—and then pretends to carry them out as its sacred duty. The ego does this so seamlessly that the individual feels not a quiver of doubt, only the pride and honor of doing exactly as they are supposed to. Even killing helpless “enemies” can be rationalized as divinely sanctioned behavior.

This is an example of how duality can be lethal. The first duality is between God and man. Once God is taken out of the world and made separate, splitting it in half, so to speak, mayhem ensues. Religious and political fanatics operate on the dual principle that there are a few chosen (themselves and their associates in particular) and the rest are ungodly sinners who need to be “repaired” or else swept out of the way of God’s plan. Leaving aside the fact that we are only channeling ourselves, not any god, by our actions, these people would act perfectly well if they believed that the entire world was divine. But they split off a part and then wage war with it. We are all alike in being sparks of

divine creativity, and we all fail similarly when we allow our egos to draw a thick line down the middle of the world, with us on the good side and those we hate on the bad. It doesn't matter that the others are just like us, because the dividing line *produces* the hatred. Differences don't engender hatred, hatred engenders differences, as numerous psychological studies have demonstrated.

The Gita asserts over and over, in various ways, that the Absolute is in the heart or core of every being. If you grasp that essential unitive principle, you know that we are all working together toward a common goal of happiness and peace. If you fail to grasp it, you might be tempted to use draconian means to justify the end you long for. The bottom line in spiritual life is this: The world does not need fixing: you do. There is plenty of work to be done on that score, too. Do not concern yourself with other people's "sins." They will reap what they sow as surely as you will. We must attend to our own faults, and not get distracted by all the problems that the world will always be filled with.

It takes a very advanced contemplative to realize how we twist our vision and pervert it, with the best of intentions. The devil—who is our own ego—is ever striving to capture our attention with peripheral details, in order to distract us from our goal of realization. We must resist it wholeheartedly, and the Gita shows us the easiest and gentlest way to do so. All we have to comprehend is that we are all one. We are in this life together, brothers and sisters of a common source. There are no enemies. A dear friend of mine, Johnny Stallings, expressed it well in a brief poem: "My foreign policy: there are no foreigners."

Uncharacteristically, but for ease of understanding, Nataraja Guru translates *atman* as soul here. Usually the term used is Self, since soul is such a loaded word. In theological terms the idea is "the soul is God." Only in the most refined sense does this match "the Self is the Absolute" of the Gita.

The Katha Upanishad (2.20) likewise locates the soul or *atman* in the heart of creatures.

The soul or Self originates in the core and expands out to become all this. The heart beats out time, each beat being a natural “second” regardless of how fast the rate as measured by mechanical devices. The consciousness generated in the core of the Self flows out to embrace all time and all space, epitomized here as the beginning, middle and end of all creation, as well as the center of everything. This is evidence that the concept of spacetime as comprising the whole universe definitely preceded Einstein.

The heart that is the true Core of our being is ever associated with Love, for the nature of the Absolute that resides there impacts us as Love. The tough muscular organ that pumps blood is something else altogether, since spirit is not confined to any one spot. This verse may be said to address aspects of Life and Love, and the following one Light.

21) Of the Adityas I am Vishnu; of luminaries the radiant Sun; I am Marici of the Maruts; among the stars I am the Moon.

Immediately following the immanent indwelling of the Absolute is a verse dedicated to light. Now Krishna begins enumerating the best of each category as being the Absolute, but of course the Absolute is in all things. It *is* all things, and all things are it. And as we already noted, while there may be some significance in meditating on the best or brightest element in a group, Krishna will dismiss all these divisions as irrelevant at the end of the chapter.

The Adityas are spiritual suns that shine in succession, with Vishnu being the last, at least up to the Gita’s time. They are therefore nearly identical with the Absolute, a conception of the original holistic emanation similar to the modern Big Bang. In the Hindu pantheon, Krishna is one of Vishnu’s ten incarnations.

Of course, the sun stands by itself as a source of light in all its frequencies. In the pre-telescopic world, it put all other celestial lights to shame. Even knowing it is a middling small sun compared

to some, its effect on us is vastly more significant than all the other lights of the universe combined.

The Maruts are the Shining Ones, the devas or gods. In this context we can think of them as localized bursts of illumination. Marici, oddly enough, means a particle or a ray of light. It surpasseth understanding that the ancient rishis would know of photons, our modern light particles, but apparently they had a similar notion long before electromagnetic science came along and identified them. Nowadays photons are our Absolute in respect to light, and that would be how to read this phrase. Perhaps as: "I am the photon in the laser" or "I am the electron in the computer." Computers are increasingly godlike in their power, yet without electricity they are inert heaps of metal and plastic. Our devas are different than they were in 500 BCE, but the idea of an animating principle within can easily be transposed.

The moon alone of all the lights in the sky is a symbol of consciousness. Just as our mind reflects upon the world and is animated by its reflections, the moon reflects the light from the solar source. Not only that, but it waxes and wanes cyclically, just as our interest and energy do.

When we view a bright moon over the ocean, we see a narrow band of light below it on the water, like a shining pathway aimed directly at us, while the rest of the ocean looks dark. This is a perfect analogy of how the light of our consciousness illuminates what it is focused on, while everything else remains in the shadows. It looks like the light is aimed solely at us, but in truth the ocean is ablaze with moonlight everywhere. Someone standing a mile to our left or right will see their own personal swath of light, and our part of the ocean will look dark to them. This reminds us how our perspective is skewed when we limit ourselves to just our own point of view. Even though everyone is seeing the same source of light in essentially the same way, we fail to appreciate that our own perspective is unique and all others are more or less invisible to us. Yet it should be a simple matter to look out into that darkness and realize that other people are receiving their own

personal light in it, that it is only dark from our limited vantage point.

22) Of the Vedas I am the Sama Veda; of the divinities I am Indra; in respect of the senses I am the mind; and of life-expressions I am pure Intelligence.

Although the Vedas, standing for religion in general, have been regularly lambasted by the Gita, they appear here in Chapter X quite early, near the top of the list. There is much of great beauty and wisdom in religious sentiment. The brickbats have been aimed more at their bastardization in the service of an oppressive class than at any particular inherent faults. Pure religion, pure philosophy and pure science all merge together at the upper end, and only drift apart as tangential or selfish issues obscure their essence. Indeed, the four aspects of the Absolute mentioned here may be taken to represent religion, consciousness, science and philosophy, respectively. In ancient times these were aspects of a single field, the search for truth. That they have become separate and distinct—gated communities of the mind—is a measure of the parochialism of the present age.

It's well worth quoting Nataraja Guru on the importance of the Sama Veda in the Science of the Absolute:

The three Vedas represent those branches of learning which adorn a brahmin, who represents a spiritual man. One versed in the *Rigveda* gives importance or primacy to *devas* (deities) and one versed in the *Yajurveda* gives primacy to man. The *Sàmaveda* on the other hand, praises *soma* (some juicy potent ontological principle) side by side with *pitris* (ancestors). It represents a compromising, synthetic middle way in spiritual learning, the passages in it being drawn from the other two Vedas, and as *Sàma* also suggests song, or chanting, it represents also an element of ecstasy. All these mark the

unique distinction of the *Sàma* alongside the other two Vedas.

Indra, the most glorious of the Vedic gods, held a position similar to Zeus in the Greek pantheon. He is also called the Lord of the Senses, the *indriyas*. The mind is likewise the Lord of the senses, being the receiver and coordinator of their messages. So Indra's position is quite apt, midway between the Vedas and the human neurological structure. Curiously, Indra is also associated with soma, so that psychedelic subtheme continues to run through the text. His elephant vehicle makes an appearance in verse 27.

Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth Sikh Guru, wrote the following ode to the Absolute as Indra (or by any other name):

Those who wish to meet God will find Him in the Word.
He who has no form, features, class or caste,
He who belongs to no community,
He who has no color, no complexion, no mark, no garb,
No one knows what He is like.
Immovable, self-refulgent and all-powerful,
He is the Indra of millions of Indras,
He is the king of kings,
He is the sovereign of the three worlds of demigods, human beings and demons.
The jungle and the woods remember Him every moment.
How can one call Him by all His Names?
The wise give Him Names according to His manifestations.

If the mind is too intensely focused on an object, it loses track of the context, and there are serious consequences. There has to be a conscious effort to connect the part with the whole. For this reason, mind is listed a little way down the scale from the unwavering contact with the Absolute extolled in verse 7.

Actually, extremely high intelligence often exacerbates the inability to see the forest for the trees. It can intentionally disregard

the forest to spend its days going into minute detail on one tree. The disastrous impact of technology is frequently and legitimately laid at the door of pure research that does not take into account possible impacts on the environment, for instance. Upholding a specious definition of purity in science has led to excluding anything but the immediate focal point of the investigation. True purity would always include examining the ramifications of any enterprise. Therefore, the Absolute as Intelligence is not the same as being the sharpest mind in the room. It must mean a holistic intelligence rather than a merely acute one.

23) Of the Rudras I am Shiva; of the Yakshas and the Rakshasas, Vittesa; of the Vasus I am Pavaka; and among heights I am Meru.

Now we come to the stretch where the modern seeker is likely to feel at sea, swamped by unfamiliar references. We will have to ponder deeply to access their meaning.

Rudras, storm gods, may be thought of as misfortunes, and Shiva represents the total, implacable destructiveness of Fate. He is considered auspicious because tragedy is very often more instructive than comedy. Humans easily become complacent, but opposition has the potential to bring out the best in us. Storms come as forces of nature beyond our control and cause mayhem and disruption of routine, but they prompt us to build shelters that will withstand the blast, or better yet, new ways to ride the wild winds. When Shiva appears he wipes the slate clean with a perfect storm, preparing the ground for the next cycle of birth and growth. In his incarnation as Nataraja, Shiva pulverizes the ego with his frenzied rhythmic dancing.

In his autobiography, *Love and Blessings*, Nitya Chaitanya Yati relates how the Shiva principle, personified by his guru, continually goaded him forward on his path. Once when he had an exciting platonic love affair going, Nataraja Guru arrived and blasted it apart. Nitya concludes the tale by saying:

This wasn't the first time Guru had come into my life like a destroying Shiva to separate his disciple from the snare of karmic entanglements. Wherever I proved to be successful or was becoming admired, he had a knack for sabotaging the situation. Once I asked him why he was doing this, and he told me his name was Natarajan [an incarnation of Shiva] and he was only doing his duty, adding "If Shiva doesn't demolish, Brahma won't get a chance to create again." I have to admit that whenever he intervened to get me to terminate a program it always led to another program of greater spiritual value. (207)

Apropos of this, one of my favorite sayings of Nataraja Guru is, "When you get fired, it's a promotion." So take heart.

I know in my life that the death of our infant son, despite the valiant intercession of modern medicine and all the care we could give him, taught me compassion firsthand. Before that I was somewhat callous to the feelings of others; afterwards I became hypersensitive, not wanting to impart the slightest hurt to anyone. Causing pain to anyone reopened my own wounds, and I haven't wanted to injure even the most lowly insect ever since. I cannot bear the baseline of meanness and cruelty that pervades modern cinema, not to mention the unwitting brutality in everyday transactions of adults to children and the so-called dumb beasts. I had always believed in compassion as an ideal, but the actual tragedy made it come to life in me as a direct reality.

There are legions of examples of how adversity has brought out the best in individuals and societies, though there is no guarantee that it will. Great art often springs from great suffering. Cities destroyed rise from the ashes with myriad improvements. We can even see that in natural history the periods of mass extinction are followed by life roaring back with redoubled energy. Without "Shiva" clearing away the existing scene, newly evolved creatures would have a much harder time finding a foothold.

The Yakshas and Rakshasas are demons and demigods, and Vitesa is the Lord of Wealth. Back in Chapter III we learned that the gods embody desires and predilections of the psyche. Yakshas and Rakshasas are constantly boiling and moiling and fighting each other for supremacy, symbols of unrestrained, unenlightened competition. The winner of this free-for-all often becomes wealthy, which again can cut two ways. Wealth can either mean false comforts gained at the expense of others, or truly valuable things like loving friends and family, diplomatic expertise, skill in healing, a knack for teaching, generosity, and so on. Wealth, in short, is the attainment of whatever we long for and put our energy into, so it is not unreasonable for the Lord of Wealth to be preeminent among the embodiments of desire.

The Vasus represent the elements, and Pavaka is Agni, the god of fire. He is often considered an aspect of Shiva. Fire purifies by burning away the dross, and the ash it leaves behind is spread on Shiva's forehead. Remember from II, 23 and 24, that the Absolute is not burnable. Therefore anything consumed in a fire is not the absolute essence.

Mount Meru is the Indian Mount Olympus, home of the gods, the highest of the high and the hub on which the universe turns. It may be joined to the group because it is Shiva's home, but it also represents the ultimate of challenges: the spiritual equivalent of climbing Mount Everest or K-2, in a sense epitomizing the complete spiritual journey. Meru symbolizes the Absolute because to climb it is to go all the way to the top.

24) Even in the case of the household priests, know Me to be the chief, Brihaspati; of the generals I am Skanda; in respect of lakes I correspond to the ocean.

Brihaspati is a "celestial priest" of the Vedas, with certain mythological features, but the gist here is that he is the top guy in the religious context of the time. For us in the twenty-first century, we could rephrase this to read "of the Jews I am Moses," "of the

Christians I am Jesus,” “of the Muslims I am Muhammad,” or “of the Sikhs I am Guru Nanak,” “of the Taoists I am Lao Tzu,” and so on. Each religion starts with someone who is thought to be of divine origin, and afterwards the priests pass on the message and tell tall tales about the founder. Priests tend to purvey secondhand knowledge, while the Absolute represents firsthand experience as epitomized by the initiator of their lineage. Moreover, every member of a religion intuitively senses the *qualitative* difference between Moses and the local rabbi, or Muhammad and the local imam.

Skanda is the god of war, who stands out from ordinary generals just as Brihaspati stands out among ordinary priests. War is a negative absolute instance of Fate, and any Absolute worthy of its name must encompass both positive and negative factors. It is of more than passing interest that the god of religion and the god of war appear in the same verse, as they are two sides of a coin. Religion represents our social mask of goodness, and its negative shadow side of warfare leaps forth at regular intervals to nullify its good intentions with strife and violence. Skanda was born to fight and destroy evil, a mantle often donned by the religious faithful as they head off to the next round of slaughter.

Krishna has admitted to doing battle with evil too, in IV, 7 and 8. It does seem that when evil becomes all-powerful it is swept away by some inscrutable force. In the story of Devi, Vishnu describes the trajectory of *asuras*, evildoers, eerily reminiscent of the power mongers of our day:

Every asura who acquires power goes through the same set of actions, of tormenting the gods, encouraging evil, and enjoying the pleasures of the senses. In addition to all this, they are strong-minded, intelligent, and capable of offering arguments to establish that they are righteous, and all others are evil-minded.

They succeed—but, as all the gods here are aware, only for awhile; sooner or later they are overcome.... Each one of

them [is] capable of putting out the sun. (Gods, Demons and Others, retold by R.K. Narayan, New York: Viking Press, 1964, p.53)

Religion and warfare are alternating cyclic outbursts of human intentionality. That's why the Gita asks us as sincere seekers to defeat evil through the yoga of wisdom and compassionate action, not through direct confrontation. We are not the ones who cause power to wax and wane like the moon. That is purely a function of nature. Arjuna is learning the middle way between fighting and retreating in diffusing hostilities. Becoming united with the Absolute doesn't necessarily mean taking on all its innumerable exterior attributes, either.

Nitya Chaitanya Yati, referring to Narayana Guru's teaching, expresses perfectly what we have learned in the intervening 2500 years since the Gita was composed, with its advocacy of *ahimsa*, non-hurting:

Nobody wants to have factionalism, but even as you are attempting to bring unity, you become part of a faction. It is in the name of unity that you are creating all these factions in the first place....

So the true knower of this secret withholds from all disputes. [Narayana] Guru made this so central to his teaching because it is in the name of this one dispute that we have been killing each other since the dawn of human history. There has been more blood shed in the name of religion than there is water in the seven oceans put together. It is such an important question for all mankind. If the dignity of man is to be enhanced, we need to find a solution to this eternal riddle of man killing man in the name of an opinion. (*That Alone*, p. 322)

Nitya's reference to oceans brings us to the third analogy of this verse. Krishna is an incarnation of Vishnu, who reclines on the

cosmic ocean, sustaining the universe. It is the ocean of substance, of the underlying reality that permits everything to exist.

The ocean is the absolute of lakes in that you can pour all the fresh water in the world into the ocean without changing it to something else. But there are a few nuances we can think of to make this especially meaningful. The ocean is seemingly infinite; lakes are finite. If you travel across the ocean you can keep going forever, around and around the globe, even if you occasionally bump into the fringes of dry land. By contrast, lakes are bordered on all sides by sharply defined limits. Lakes support the lives of a relatively small number of animals and plants, while the ocean is the source of all life on Earth. Like that we can nourish those who make up our immediate surroundings, but the Absolute nourishes everyone everywhere. And the ocean is the ultimate receptacle for all the waters that flow into it, while a lake is a temporary resting place for the waters of a single river system. All these aspects are good meditations to lift the mind from the mundane to the sublime.

25) Of the great hermit-sages I am Bhrigu; of articulated words I am the one-syllable (AUM); of sacrifices I am the sacrifice of silent repetition; of immovables I am the Himalaya.

Bhrigu is one of many Prajapatis (see III, 10-15), an ancient sage who popularized sacrificial offerings. Not least of these is his association with soma, the psychedelic juice of the gods that was one of the most important sacrifices in days of old. Connection with soma is a major feature of a significant number of these Vedic representatives of the Absolute, since the Vedas are enthusiastically pro-soma. Despite being harshly criticized elsewhere in the Gita, the ecstatic and beautiful elements of the Vedas are being honored throughout this section, so it must be the oppression of ordinary seekers by a priestly caste that merits the condemnation, as well as the common religious fault of substituting the map for the territory. As with science and

philosophy, religion can either liberate or suppress its followers. The Absolute obviously stands for the liberating aspect.

Aum is discussed in VIII, 13. It is the original vibration out of which all vibratory existences spring. Since everything in our universe vibrates, it is also the mantra of mantras.

The *japa* meditation of silently repeating mantras or chants is described here as the epitome of sacrifices. The boisterous and noisy group hullabalos of some sects are thus given second place status, exciting though they undoubtedly are to those caught up in the frenzy. A peaceful and quiet bipolarity with truth as an inspirational light to be followed is more the recommended meditation, reminiscent of the Biblical advice to relate to the inner realms inwardly and not outwardly, as in Matt 6:1-7:

1] Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them: otherwise ye have no reward of your Father which is in heaven.

2] Therefore when thou doest thine alms, do not sound a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward.

3] But when thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth:

4] That thine alms may be in secret: and thy Father which seeth in secret himself shall reward thee openly.

5] And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward.

6] But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly.

7] But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking.

The advice to not use “vain repetitions” is well taken. Repeating mantras leads to a form of self-hypnosis that can make you feel “high” but also make you susceptible to all manner of bizarre projections and suggestions. It may have a certain value in the early stages, by drowning out and calming an overactive mind, but once the seeker learns to be still the technique is no longer useful. It is very easy for the ego to take pride in any outward display for its own sake, and quietly internalizing the action helps mitigate this. Elsewhere (IV, 28 and 33) the Gita extols the wisdom sacrifice, where the attention is brought to focus on the Absolute with intelligence, as the highest practice.

The Himalayas are the epitome of tangibility, so solid and seemingly eternal. Nothing can move them, and their very sight imparts a sense of awe and wonder. Solidity comes from being grounded in truth. We can be flexible when we stand confidently on firm ground, but if we don't have that basis we tend to compensate for it with personal rigidity. If we base our lives on shaky ground, they may fall apart. This is as true in the sociopolitical sphere as the personal. Jesus made the same point in his Sermon on the Mount after spelling out his spiritual advice:

24] Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock:

25] And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not: for it was founded upon a rock.

26] And every one that heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them not, shall be likened unto a foolish man, which built his house upon the sand:

27] And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell: and great was the fall of it. [Matt. 7: 24-27]

Again, this is not about literal houses, but about the philosophy that underpins our outlook. When we meet with trying circumstances, faulty beliefs do not hold up. The great fall that often ensues, as with Humpty Dumpty in the nursery rhyme, can smash our psyche to pieces.

Another way of putting this truth is expressed in a quote by Nitya found on page 30 of Gurukulam Magazine (1987, first quarter), part of a terrific series by Nancy Yeilding, entitled *Wonder Journey with a Wandering Guru*, filled with practical advice:

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

26) Of trees I am Asvattha, and of divine sages, Narada; of Gandharvas, Citraratha, and of those of psychophysical attainments, Kapila the recluse.

Asvattha is the holy fig tree of South Asia, found in many temple compounds. There is a celestial Asvattha tree under which the gods gather in Hindu mythology, which will be touched on in Chapter XV. The celestial tree represents the ideal, while all the trees we encounter in real life are actual. Plato extolled ideal values, while his more materialistic disciple Aristotle insisted there were only actual things, with no ideal to be found anywhere. It is

perfectly true that there is no actualized Absolute anywhere, either, despite the list we're in the middle of. Like the ideal triangle that may be thought of as the mother of all actual triangles, the Absolute must remain an ideal, at most a template, from which actual items are derived. Any actualized ideal becomes limited by its very actualization, if that is the aspect attended to, which it normally is. Although Krishna is specifying many seemingly actual things here, they are all legendary and thus represent the ideal to which the actual items can be referred. Even if some of these beings actually existed at one time, as historical ciphers they are nothing more than abstract constructs.

Narada was said to have been visited by Vishnu when in meditation, becoming a devotee of Krishna/Vishnu afterwards. Being a celestial musician, he is usually depicted playing a vina (similar to a sitar). It is fitting that music receives an accolade as a special creation of the Absolute, since it has the power to transmit joy, bring poetry to life through song, make us dance, harmonize our minds in chanting, and much more. Music activates global regions of the brain, and can catalyze even those with advanced dementia back into temporary sanity. Brain scans show that musical exercises are excellent for growing new neurons and developing new connections between existing ones.

Citraratha is the chief of the Gandharvas, who are semi-divine beings, also associated with music. They are keepers of the soma plant and appear to get high pretty much all the time, either with music or the juice. Or both. They love the sensual life.

It is easy to imagine union with the Absolute as being a kind of ultimate high, especially for neophytes. Eventually we learn that the Absolute transcends all dualities, including high and low, near and far, fun and dull, and the rest. But before realization, why not go in for high, near and fun? Certain especially refined highs, like a spiritual soma experience, show us how to transcend many basic forms of conditioning, but they can also add new ones that are even stickier. We should learn what we can from them and move on, toward balance and equanimity and Himalayan steadiness. If

the next Chapter describes a soma trip, as it appears to, we can see that it has to be a temporary experience or Arjuna would become permanently unhinged. It's simply too intense.

Finally, as to psychophysical attainments, siddhis, the main ones were listed and the subject discussed back in VIII, 15. Kapila is the purported originator of the Samkhya or rational philosophy that underlies much of ancient Indian wisdom. It's actually very interesting that a thoroughgoing rationalist should be noted as the highest exemplar of psychic attainment and thus a proper representative of the Absolute. Let's see why.

The most dramatic psychic attainment of all, better than ESP, teleportation, shrinking, expanding, and all the rest, is the ability to see things as they are. What with relativity, the uncertainty principle, and the findings of neuroscience and psychology that what we see is colored by what we believe, arriving at a cogent understanding of a situation is a supreme achievement. Anything less leaves us wreathed in doubt. The ancients well knew how exceptional it is to see clearly, and why we usually don't. They studied the problem with scientific precision.

When an event occurs, what actually happens is the absolute truth of it. We can't be sure if the event *knows* itself, or only *is* itself, but regardless, that's the absolute as far as that particular circumstance is concerned. Someone participating in the event or witnessing it experiences a time delay in processing the sensory input, as well as a partial perception of what occurred. The unbridgeable chasm between the event and its perception and interpretation is called maya or ignorance in Vedanta.

Most of us are familiar with the feeling of disorientation in the midst of a new experience. Because you are sure of so little, your brain is surging with energy to try to accumulate enough data to assign what's happening to a known category. Only afterwards, after you have pigeonholed the event, do you feel "in control." Arjuna will have the ultimate disorienting experience—a vision of the Absolute—in the next chapter, and will spend the rest of the Gita reintegrating it into a comprehensible and usable form.

Notwithstanding the extent of your ignorance about the new experience, you will sooner or later feel confident that you “know” what happened first hand. This very knowledge is invariably secondhand, however. After the initial impression the event can only be held in thought, in other words, by the cogitation of memories. The event becomes ever more secondhand as it is analyzed and regarded through analogies. Communicating it to another person requires a further major reduction in its substantiality. Very quickly, little of the original event—its absolute truth—remains. And yet it can be very inspiring even in its “managed” state, if it is framed intelligently. The trick is to maintain contact with the original, and not simply invent convenient fictions.

Historical events are unavoidably many generations removed from their source. Writing can bridge the time aspect of the gap to some degree, but many stages of reduction remain unavoidable. Charlatans therefore must claim they are in direct contact with truth, and they succeed in enticing followers because of the thirst for truth found in so many people wandering in the desert of secondhand experiences. Or they claim that their scripture was written by God Himself. Anything to make secondhand information appear to be firsthand perception. Oddly, there seems to be an innate urge to believe among humans, even in the face of ominous anomalies. Often an outrageous claim will easily trump common sense.

When secondhand opinions hold sway, arguments ensue as to which opinion most closely approximates truth. A clear-headed rational assessment would show that most opinions are based on the faintest whiff of direct experience padded out in all directions with prejudices. Yogis, on the other hand, are seekers of truth, not seekers of benefits. They are not trying to be popular or play on the winning team. They are seeking the siddhi extolled in this verse, clear seeing, and attaining it is a rare and momentous achievement. Therefore they must sweep away as much false information as possible, and in meditation and contemplation try to apprehend

some fragment as closely as possible to what it truly is, without interpretation or analogy. No wonder yogis are so circumspect in attempting to describe the indescribable!

Yoga is not a ratification of naïveté, but many of its adherents seem to believe it is, as if not thinking about things excuses you from having to understand them. At its best yoga is a method of transcending the muddy turbulence of transactional life so we can see clearly. The drama is partly our own hysterics, and the Gita has already addressed these at length. However, a significant part of our confusion comes from the intentional disruption of the field by external forces. It is easy to see how the political and economic spheres are dominated by those with a vested interest in skewing the truth to match their own desires. Corporations regularly reinvest a portion of their profits to manipulate public opinion as a matter of standard business practice, and they are very good at it.

Followers of Machiavelli, Leo Strauss, and other pragmatic philosophers, not to mention ordinary advertisers and propagandists in general, have a stake in managing perceptions in their favor. All are aware that the typical human is very generous in giving the benefit of the doubt to others and trusting in their benign motives, and this very trust is their best friend in perpetrating deceptions large and small. The disinheriting of the kindly Pandavas at the hands of the craven Kauravas, the main theme of the Mahabharata epic in which the Gita appears, is an ancestor of them all.

Tremendous energy and planning goes into disguising various rip-offs as being patriotic or even divinely approved. A dedicated yogi can intuit the real intentions behind the flimflam, and resist being taken in. Sometimes serious meditation and fact-finding are required to get to the bottom of it. The facts about the use of propaganda are abundant, but many seekers of truth choose to ignore them because they suspect that thinking about problems actually causes, rather than alleviates, them. It's true that some dogs can be safely let lie, but anyone who is fervent in a cause

should carefully examine the motivations and attachments of those they are inspired by.

The naïve proposition of “ see no evil, hear no evil and speak no evil,” allows people to be led into all sorts of heinous blind alleys, and frequently produces an ugly form of insular attitude that is the opposite of compassion. We should be very careful to not go off half-cocked, based on half-baked thinking and misplaced trust, but to hold off until the correct distinguishing marks (the *lakshana*, very important in Vedanta) have been ascertained. This often requires being open to ideas that at first hearing appear to be outside the range of acceptability, because that range is almost always the product of well-planned propaganda in the first place.

The most critical factor here is that matters often appear certain when we should still be in doubt. We are only privy to a little bit of information, and presume the rest based on good faith and optimism. If our certainty is actually a hallucination grounded on wishful thinking and manipulated by composed imagery, we will get into trouble. We may even charge off to war against everyone’s best interests. As Thomas Merton warns in *Faith and Violence*, “Our idols are by no means dumb and powerless. The sardonic diatribes of the prophets against images of wood and stone do not apply to our images that live, and speak, and smile, and dance, and allure us and lead us off to kill.” (153) Doubt is an honest condition that keeps us reined in until all is known. We can’t know everything, but it is relatively easy to know a lot more than we do. Until then, we should be glad to hesitate to act rashly. We can look to the ideal of Kapila the recluse for inspiration in calmly and clearly assessing our circumstances.

27) Know Me among horses to be Uchchaihsravas, born of the ambrosia of immortality; of noble elephants, Airavata, and of men the king.

We descend another step to arrive at the level of mammals: horses, elephants and (no better than third place?) people.

Ucchaisravas, the seven-headed flying horse, belongs to Indra, the Lord of the Senses and King of the Gods, which are two ways of saying the same thing. It was born out of the original churning of the Milk Ocean, symbolic of the deep original state of absolute unconsciousness. When milk is churned, butter gradually appears. Like that, when the quiescence of unconsciousness is agitated, forms appear, and with them arises consciousness. Agitation produces stimulation, which is registered by the mind via the senses, and the universe comes into being.

As noted earlier, Indra symbolizes the mind, that which controls and coordinates the senses. He is also very fond of swilling soma and generally living it up. Soma is the ambrosia of immortality that gives birth to his flying horse. Immortality, as we have pointed out earlier, does not mean living forever. It means being fully alive as long as you are alive. Alert minds relish variety and adventure: they love to go on rides. Only in relatively recent times has suppression of the spirit come to be considered spiritual.

The ancients considered the horse to be the ultimate example of unrestrained spirit, a stunning incarnation of the energy of the Absolute. The number seven hints at the chakra system, the hierarchical synergic centers in the body that when activated allow us to soar through the cosmos. So we get the sense in this verse of the power of the Absolute descending to humanity through the soma sacrifice, first through wild horses and then through the race of elephants.

Airavata, the many-headed white elephant, is Indra's vehicle, and considered the prototype of the noble and compassionate elephant species. One of his nicknames is "brother of the sun." Possibly because elephants can suck up water and squirt it with their trunks, Airavata is associated with life-giving clouds and rain. He also emerged from the primeval Milk Ocean.

The king is the hub on which the entire wheel of society turns, the focal point of all social references. Community energy radiates outward from the king in the form of leadership, and its fruits gravitate back toward the king from the community as the

wealth it produces. While the age of kings has faded out since the Gita's time, the principle remains the same: within all systems the most central value stands for the Absolute in manifestation.

Whether a government is democratic, socialist, communist, oligarchic, kleptocratic or kakistocratic, there is central leadership and peripheral followership. This is as close as the Gita comes to referring to patriotism anywhere, except as a delusion.

When I first visited India I was amazed at the overwhelming chaos, and yet somehow everyone was getting their basic needs met. I sensed an overriding force that was somehow making it all work, what we now call an emergent property. All these random individuals were part of a greater whole, whether they wanted to be or not. Right then I thought, "This proves the existence of God!" I was only half joking, and now I'm not really joking at all. The organizing force that regularly produces emergent behaviors that are eminently successful at maintaining and evolving forms of life could easily be considered a higher power.

Let it be acknowledged that the degree to which the people of a community are harmonized around higher values determines the health of the community. The best system fails with selfish participants, while a flawed system thrives with dedicated members. Thus it is not the system but the broad-mindedness of those involved that matters most.

28) Of weapons I am the thunderbolt; of cows I am the milk-yielder of all desires; of progenitors I am the god of erotics; of serpents I am Vasuki.

Vasuki is definitely the absolute of snakes. When the milk ocean was churned, he allowed himself to be wrapped around a mountain in it. The gods took hold of the head and the demons took hold of the tail, and their tugging back and forth spun the mountain and churned the ocean into the nectar of immortality (*amrita*). This is how soma was made. It is also a superb metaphor for the birth of consciousness.

In this verse we have anger, desire, carnal love, and a rather phallic fellow to stir the broth. These emotions make the world go round, as we say. Humans oscillate between good and bad impulses, selfishness and unselfishness, anger and kindness, and this keeps the churning flux of happenstance very much in play. There is little chance of us returning to the quiet stillness of an unchurned ocean anytime soon.

The Absolute doesn't side with one aspect over another; all are supported by it without preference. If human folly didn't arise, the grand play of history wouldn't take place. Both fall and return must be part of the picture, what the pious call "God's plan." We can't attribute the fall to humans and the return to God without leaving out the Absolute, thereby becoming all the more embroiled in the fall.

Anger, desire and the urge to reproduce are general categories, and so, like the abstract triangle mentioned earlier, they are ideal rather than real. Specific instances of each emotion are particular manifestations of them, while the general term covers an unimaginable range of possibilities. Krishna is presenting the most spectacular instances to symbolize the general or absolute principle behind all of them.

The advice boils down to the seeker looking for the absolute core of every experience of hatred, desire or erotic interest. The third category isn't called lust here, because lust is merely an aggressive form of greed. Erotics employs pleasure to lure creatures to reproduce. The Gita expressly uses the word 'progenitors' to indicate that the subject is reproduction.

The very continuity of life is dependent on the principle of erotic attraction. It is very godlike in that it absolutely must remain independent of all human efforts to suppress it. Its perennial success mocks our puny attempts to lock it out. Just think: every being alive today is the product of an unbroken line of successful reproduction since the beginning of life on earth some three or four billion years ago. Not once in those millions and millions of generations did any of our ancestors fail to have offspring. It seems

impossible from that angle, and yet it is universal. Truly astonishing magic!

So Krishna is instructing us that for instance in erotic activities, which are among the most pleasurable of all forms of enjoyment, we are not simply to enjoy but also to look for the essence of the bliss we're having. Bliss is a preeminent quality of the Absolute. There are all kinds of peripheral aspects to eroticism, like who you're with and what you're doing, but right in the middle of all that is the kernel of ecstasy that impels you in the first place. We can either act as unwitting victims of our impulses, or we can consciously discern the motivating principle we are responding to, which is divine in almost every sense of the word. One side benefit of this is that we will learn that bliss is our very nature. It isn't an outside factor that must be greedily sought, with better or poorer outcomes. It is who we are in essence. Knowing this is vitally important, saving us from innumerable detours up blind alleys.

Yoga can be used to block pain as well as produce a baseline state of joy. At long last modern neuroscience is catching up with the rishis on this, in that it is now becoming well established that pain and pleasure do not reside in the affected body parts, but are supplied by the mind. Very often the reaction is observed to happen in advance of any actual stimulus. We have a lot more control over our mental states than we have been led to believe by uncritical thinkers.

Moving right along, it's interesting that the thunderbolt has been wielded by several primary gods elsewhere on earth, notably Zeus and Thor. As a weapon it is several orders of magnitude beyond arrows and spears. Continuing a theme from the last verse, it is also Indra's weapon, and it was created by the gods to make them invincible against the proliferation of weaponry and pervasive nastiness on earth. Most interestingly, Indra's vajra or thunderbolt was created through perfect *selflessness*. Since power diminishes in proportion to the percentage of *selfishness* in its makeup, the converse must also be true: power expands

exponentially as the selflessness of attunement with the Absolute is realized. The thunderbolt of the Absolute is forged at the instant the “curve of binding energy” of spiritual expansion reaches infinity. Obviously then, the power of brute force is directly proportional to selfish intentions, but spiritual power is inversely proportional to it. Anyone who has attended a spiritual community has undoubtedly felt this, as the qualitative difference between the two types is tangible. The power of cruelty presses for its agenda through fear, whereas the power of a spiritually upright person is inspiring and attractive, achieving change through willing cooperation. Need it be added that this is the basis for nonviolent political action?

Many of us have been fortunate enough to know a spiritually gifted teacher at some point, and, however brief our acquaintance, chances are they have remained influential for our entire lives. Brilliant scientist Robert Oppenheimer embodied these guru qualities for a generation of physicists in the twentieth century. The following is from the excellent biography, *American Prometheus*, by Bird and Sherwin, (New York: Vintage Books, 2005). Oppenheimer was the civilian head of the crash program to design and build an atomic bomb:

[Oppenheimer] rarely gave orders, and instead managed to communicate his desires, as [one physicist] recalled, “very easily and naturally....” [Another] recalled that Oppie, “never dictated what should be done. He brought out the best in all of us, like a good host with his guests.” [Another] felt similarly: “In his presence, I became more intelligent, more vocal, more intense, more prescient, more poetic myself. Although normally a slow reader, when he handed me a letter I would glance at it and hand it back prepared to discuss the nuances of it minutely.”

[Oppenheimer] had a remarkable ability to absorb things so rapidly....” Even when there was disagreement, Oppenheimer has an instinct for preempting arguments. [A philosophy

student] had many opportunities to observe his boss in action: “One would listen patiently to an argument beginning, and finally Oppenheimer would summarize, and he would do it in such a way that there was no disagreement. It was a kind of magical trick that brought respect from all those people, some of them superiors....” (218)

General Groves of the army was in charge of the overall project. He exemplified the military, fear-based technique of persuasion:

If [Oppenheimer’s] style of charismatic authority tended to breed consensus, Groves exercised his authority through intimidation. “Basically his way of running projects,” observed [a chemist], “was to scare his subordinates to a point of blind obedience.” [Another] thought that with Groves it was a “matter of policy to be as nasty as possible to his subordinates.” (225)

Try as he [Groves] might, he could not even get the most responsible and senior scientists to cooperate.... Groves eventually came to realize that at Los Alamos the rules of science had trumped the principles of military security. “While I may have dominated the situation in general, he testified, “I didn’t have my way in a lot of things.” (226)

While the authors of the biography felt that both methods had their advantages, and both were probably necessary, it’s a bald fact that no real guru ever uses the military model, because the natural charisma emanating from one grounded in the Absolute is already perfectly and voluntarily compelling, as well as bringing out the best in well-intentioned associates.

In the Indian model a student is required to ask questions of the teacher. The teacher or Guru is merged in contemplation of the Absolute, and so only addresses the cares of the world when a question draws them out. This is the meaning of “the milk-yielder of all desires.” The image often invoked is of a milkmaid milking

the great divine Cow, Kamadhuk, which supplies all spiritual nourishment. To be a worthy disciple you have to deeply desire that nourishment. You must pull on the udder to get the milk. If you don't pull, the milk stays where it is, out of sight, and there is just an ordinary-looking cow standing there. It is a perfect symbol of the relationship between guru and disciple. Pondering deeply in order to come up with a germane question is the sacred duty of the disciple. Guru and disciple are therefore bound to each other in a dialectical, reciprocal dance, and one is not superior to the other. Both are equally nourished in the process of question and response.

Modern-day superstition regards Kamadhuk as a magical cow who grants all desires, not limited to the quest for enlightenment. Like degenerate prayers that beg for materialistic boons, such notions fall udderly outside the bounds of spirituality.

29) And I am Ananta of Nagas; I am Varuna of the denizens of the deep, and Aryama of the ancestors; I am Yama of controllers.

Nagas are ancient serpent spirits, featuring human faces on cobra bodies. Ananta, meaning endless or boundless, is the king of them all, forming the bed in the Milky Ocean of the universe on which Vishnu reclines. Endlessness is one of the uniting factors in this verse, and Ananta symbolizes time as the eternal present or pure duration. The mysteriousness of duration has been probed in depth by philosophers like Bergson. Most of the familiar aspects of time are based on mechanical movements like the earth's rotation or the incremental advance of timepieces, but beneath all these is an absolute "lastingness" to existence that does not conform to any measurement. Or rather the measurements are only arbitrary in relation to the steady state of duration. In meditation we can abandon our fixation on artificial minutes, seconds and hours and bathe in the eternal bliss of pure existence, pure duration, which is the Absolute of time.

Varuna is the Poseidon of India, the god of the watery depths. Whether or not such a creature actually exists or is a lovely

symbol, humans are connected with their constituent cells similarly to the relationship of the putative sea spirit with its own denizens of the deep. Cells are quasi-independent entities, and there is no evidence that they have any awareness of the overall being they inhabit. But they are grouped like shoals of fish and coral reefs into a mega-being that exists separately but dependently on them. There is a mysterious coordination between all the parts that permits the emergence of a new dimension or level of phenomenality, certainly in us but likely in other systems as well. In short, we are all “denizens of the deep” united in some mysterious way in the Absolute, symbolized in this case as Varuna.

The ocean certainly seems to have a soul or spirit of its own, completely different from the creatures that dwell within it. Sailors especially are familiar with what are widely known as the “moods” of the sea. Of course, for meditation sitting by the side of the ocean and listening to the pulsing music of the waves or scanning its boundless horizon are hard to beat.

One of Vedanta’s favorite analogies is the ocean and the wave, which are related in precisely the way that individual beings are related to the Absolute. Waves are ocean through and through, and are not capable of a separate existence in any sense. They are merely temporary forms that the ocean assumes, and they come and go without affecting the stability of the ocean in the least. Yet an ocean without waves would be boring and featureless. Nature does not permit the ocean to remain waveless even for a second: its baseline structure generates waves endlessly as a matter of course. All outside forces would have to cease for the ocean to be absolutely calm. Yet once you dive below the surface all the agitation disappears. These are just a few of the meditations possible when you look at the ocean as a symbol of the Absolute.

Both times I attended musical comedies that my daughters acted in with their classmates at around age 14, my mind’s eye visualized their generation as a wave that was just beginning to crest. I knew that my generation’s wave had already peaked and broken, and was now rolling in toward the beach, which of course

would be where each wave finally expired. Older generations were very near shore and their waves were small and weak, while huge swells were rolling in from out beyond the breakers: the energetic children of today. It was a wrenching and profound vision that I have carried in my heart ever since.

Aryama is the chief of the ancestors, who along with the Nagas gives this verse a decidedly retrospective cast. The past, like the present and the future, is ananta, endless and boundless. Ancestors affect us mainly through stories, and only the most exciting or useful stories are preserved by humankind. A very good meditation is to try to revivify the past in the imagination, and then compare it with how the same era is currently portrayed. History as it's taught turns out to be more about manipulating the present than accurately reproducing the past, and realizing this allows us to question much of its undue influence over us and on our society. Happily the best of historians know this and work hard to break through the crust of managed assumptions.

Nevertheless a vast, almost absolute sense of meaningful direction presses on us from our historical heritage, and that seems to be true of all cultures. Without the past we have no sense of who we are. We would be like the emu, a giant bird that apparently experiences each moment as if for the first time. It has virtually no memory, no context. The same occurs in senile dementia. So the current fad for elevating the here and now to divine status is overdrawn. We need a sense of the past and the future, even if they are inevitably experienced only in the present.

It is well known that each person recapitulates the history of evolution in their development in utero. We actually incorporate, quite literally, everything that has gone before, and according to the rishis and some psychologists, do this mentally as well as physically. This means that each of us is like a very long snake, with our human head just at the front tip, barely skin deep. Like a Naga, in fact. A kind of cosmic memory causes us to unfold from the beginning to the present, exactly as if there were a blueprint being followed. Meditating on this process brings a profound sense

of gratitude and trust in the beneficence of the universe, and it makes us optimistic that the future will also be a part of our authentic unfoldment.

Brainwave imaging studies have shown that remembering the past and envisioning the future use the identical neural networks, which demonstrates that we use our learned models to predict and adjust to upcoming events. Anticipating what may happen to us is a likely survival benefit, and we mainly do this by using our memories, refined by our intellect. In all such processes we should be grateful that some extremely powerful aspect of life does most of the work, and leaves us to immodestly take credit for the entire outcome. Call it the Absolute, Aryama, Evolution, the unconscious, or what have you, there is a guiding force creating continuity in life, of which we are the semi-witting beneficiaries, and our hubris will be tempered by being cognizant of it.

One of the most striking of all the categories of this chapter is “controllers,” of which Yama, the Lord of Death, is said to be the absolute element. Controllers refers to guides or directors of life, and with a little reflection Death will be seen to be preeminent among factors which shape our expression. We have discussed how the fear of death impels a lot of human behavior in, for instance, II, 40. It is a good meditation to imagine what we would do if we suddenly had only a short time to live. We would throw off all irrelevancies and embrace life with a passion. I know of many examples of people who only came fully alive after they realized their impending demise.

One of these is my father, who did not approve of my liberal morality or what he considered my frivolous behavior. We had a cool and distant relationship from my teen years on. Then one day his doctor told him he had two massive brain tumors and had only a week to live. After he adjusted to the shock we became fast friends, and he actually survived about six months. Every day we talked for hours very frankly about many subjects that were formerly taboo. There was no more playing games; there was no time for it. Without the death sentence I wonder if we would ever

have been able to be close. But he implicitly realized that all the social niceties and moral strictures, all the blocks he was tied down with, were getting in the way of the love that was vastly more important to both of us. It is only too bad that this isn't known to everyone from the earliest stage of adulthood, because we can make it happen just by thinking about it.

Carlos Castaneda's fictional guru Don Juan taught that death was your best ally, and you should always feel like it was looking over your shoulder. That way you are not prompted to waste your life on trivialities. You want to make every minute count. Similarly, early in our relationship my wife shared one of her "mantras" with me. She was always pondering to herself, "What if you got to the end of your life and you realized you hadn't done anything important?" It made her try to crystallize what she really thought was valuable. All these are ways that Death teaches us to live life to the fullest, and not to spend our lives as if we are already deceased.

Death embodied as Yama is the well-known Guru of the Katha Upanishad, which perhaps of all the Upanishads is closest in spirit to the Gita.

30) And I am Prahalada of the Daityas; among bases of measurement I am time; of beasts I am the lord of beasts, and Vainateya of birds.

Regarding Prahalad, I can't do better than quote my friend Gayathri Narayanan, who has a son with that name:

"ahalad" means joy/delight and the prefix "pr" adds full of/boundless to it. So I like to translate Prahalad to mean "boundless joy". Sometimes when people ask me what Prahalad means, I take some poetic license and say "boundless bliss" - the ecstasy that comes from deep devotion - because in the mythological story, Prahalad is

depicted as the perfect devotee/bhakta of Vishnu. The story is rich in symbolism and offers several layers of interpretation.

The most valuable layer of interpretation I can think of is that the Daityas, including Prahalad, are demons. Prahalad was thus born among unsavory characters, yet he remained true in his heart to Vishnu, the loving sustainer of the universe. In some sense we are all living in the midst of demonic types in any age. (Certainly the people who know us are associating with at least one demon: us!) Because of being surrounded by demons, I believe that every human being carries some degree of PTSD, post-traumatic stress disorder, due to the stresses and strains of growing up in an ignorant, if well-intentioned, social milieu. It is a miracle—and happily a fairly common miracle—that anyone can find their true center in the storm of social life while saddled with the burden of moderate to severe psychic damage. Prahalad calls to us through the ages to discover a direct connection with the Absolute—with a normative principle—and thereby to transcend all the limitations and traumas we endure as a part of “normal” life.

Buckminster Fuller, inventor, architect, philosopher, and much more, was a champion of personal integrity in the twentieth century. He used to say that the free individual was unique in not having to ask anyone’s permission to undertake a project, and he would rail against the pat answers and decaying beliefs foisted on students by their teachers as destructive of the inventive genius natural to them. He came to this insight after he was a “failure” as a young man, and realized that it was due to trying to satisfy the demands of others instead of staying true to himself. He resolved to regain his integrity, as he called the attunement to his svadharma, and he spent two years in silence reassessing his every thought to determine its provenance and legitimacy. Once he had rediscovered his true self, his life became an explosion of brilliant spiritual and practical ideas.

Fuller was passionate that if we can shake off the prison of outside opinion and stay true to ourselves, we can help bring about

utopia on what he called Spaceship Earth. After reading this far in the Gita, we can easily see how Prahalad and Fuller epitomize the enlightenment of the individual and the transcendence of social oppression. That this can have an overarching value in simultaneously improving society is shown, not only by Fuller's contributions and others like him, but by the fact that Mahatma Gandhi was inspired early in life by Prahalad's mythic example. Gandhi is the poster child of success through holding to truth, *satyagraha*. Being engaged in useful, beneficial work in tune with our native abilities releases the boundless bliss or joy signified by the name Prahalad, and this is what our world needs more than anything.

Like the Absolute, time is intangible, incomprehensible, and endlessly mysterious. The more we learn about it, the more mysterious it becomes. Philosophers and physicists have famously beaten their heads against it. So it is an apt symbol for the Absolute in all respects.

As noted in the previous verse, pure duration is the essence of time. It is what allows everything to exist; without it things would disappear instantaneously. Duration and being are thus closely allied. Our ordinary conception of time is based on mechanical marking of increments within pure duration, and such mechanical devices are much more spatial than temporal. This is fairly obvious with clocks and similar timepieces, but even the "natural" time of day and night is simply the movement of the Earth in respect to the sun. Once you rise above the ground far enough, the alternation of day and night disappears and there is only eternal light.

Pure duration and eternity are interchangeable terms, which is why we can have the "eternity in an hour" of William Blake. Within the eternal ocean of time, individual events strut and fret their hour upon the stage, as Shakespeare would have it. Events come and go sequentially, waves on the surface of eternity. So, like the Absolute, time has a manifested and an unmanifested aspect,

seemingly related and yet with an unbridgeable gulf between them, too.

Time played a crucial role in the philosophy of Henri Bergson, who wrote a book called *Duration and Simultaneity*. With him, time is related to intuition, and is not measurable in regular increments like spatial items are.

The Gita's author, Vyasa, must have realized that spatial measurements are purely relative, so he appointed time as the Absolute of measurements. Cubits, spans, pecks, quarts, parsecs—and zaytoons for that matter—are not based on any fixed chunk of matter somewhere. Interestingly, spatial measurements nowadays rely on time. For instance the meter is defined as the distance traveled by light in free space in $1/299,792,458$ of a second. Our closest approximation to an absolute standard is the atomic clock.

Krishna will describe himself again as Time right in the middle of his revelation to Arjuna in the next chapter, in verse 32.

The Absolute as “the lord of beasts” evokes an image of peering into a tangle of forest undergrowth. Mysteriously, our attention is drawn to a particularly dense area. We stare hard at it. Gradually, with dawning recognition, we make out the face of a tiger! Its nearly perfect camouflage has hidden it in plain sight! Now, knowing it is there, we can't help but see it. Gradually we begin to make out more and more of it, until the whole tiger stands revealed.

The root of the word for the lord of beasts means to hunt, seek or pursue, so the implication is that this “creature” is the most valuable thing to search for. The idea calls to mind the famous Zen story of the search for the Bull, which goes like this. I have heard of a great bull living far off in the jungle. I search for it constantly, pulling aside the reeds along the river, wandering everywhere, peering into thickets. Ah, there is its footprint in the mud! I follow it. Sometimes it is plain and sometimes it is hard to find. I pursue it for many days. There! Something is rustling in the bushes. I approach. I capture the Bull! I mount it and ride it back to the

village, proud and triumphant. I dismount. There is no bull. There is no village. I am not there, either.

Vainateya is a legendary bird that Nataraja Guru likens to the phoenix, symbol of the eternal present. I can find almost nothing about it. We'll just have to imagine that the avian sense of soaring above the fray, and floating on the currents of the sky, are the absolute elements implied.

31) Of purifiers I am the wind; I am Rama of bowmen; of fishes I am the makara; of streams I am the Ganges.

Fire is the acclaimed purifier of Vedanta, but here wind is accorded the title. We can easily observe how the wind blows away smoke to clear the air, but it is just as likely to bring in clouds of dust. The real purifying wind is the breath. The bloodstream carries the byproducts of metabolism up to the lungs, where the carbon dioxide and other gases are exchanged for oxygen brought in by this vital wind. Thus the breath is essential to keeping us clean from the inside out. If we introduce contaminants via this wind, as with smoking or living in a polluted environment, the cleansing process is dramatically reduced. For optimum efficiency we want to keep our internal machinery clean and well oiled. A classic meditation is to watch the breath and mentally follow the cleansing process as it draws unwanted chemicals from every part of the body and exhales them, to be replaced by fresh, pure air. Ionized air from next to a stream or waterfall is particularly refreshing and delicious.

Rama, the hero of the world's best-known epic, the Ramayana, is a literary character who represents the Absolute. He is the equivalent of William Tell or Robin Hood in demonstrating that skill in any field, in this case archery, approaches an upper limit that is almost magical. We "worship" the Absolute by refining our skills and talents, and yogic expertise is the merger of who we are with what we are capable of, which might well be referred to as union with the Absolute.

Sports heroes, musical prodigies, mathematical and artistic geniuses and the like serve the same role as Rama: to show us what we human beings are capable of. They inspire us to run faster and leap higher, or make our fingers do what they have never done before, or to grasp elusive concepts. They open up new fields of possibility everywhere. Being a spectator can either be inspiring or it can be simple entertainment, either a stimulus to self-development or a cure for boredom in a thwarted life. Even the Gita is read by most as a kind of ratification of the status quo, despite its intent to serve as a textbook for radical change. Nevertheless our languishing talents are stimulated and sometimes even activated by tales of heroism and exceptional abilities.

An inward conviction about what is possible permits us to make tremendous strides. Very often a new musical piece will be considered unplayable until someone who has worked long and hard finally performs it, after which it rapidly becomes playable by many people. The same goes for “impossible” mountain climbs. Possibly the most famous example is the four minute mile barrier finally surpassed by runner Roger Bannister. Today, if you haven’t broken four minutes, you might as well not come to the meet. Such achievements are even now spoken of as “legendary.” Rama epitomizes their inspirational value as a quality of the Absolute, eternally luring us on to the quest and challenging us to excel.

One weakness of atheism is that since we become what we believe in, if we believe in nothing, that’s what we’ll become. Atheism has a tendency to become negative and view life as empty and pointless. A belief in evolution or human improvability can easily be as motivational as a belief in God. Theists risk the same negativity as atheists when they believe that only God matters and they don’t. It makes sense then that from the standpoint of the Absolute, theism and atheism are flip sides of the same coin, with their proponents butting heads over irrelevant issues.

The makara is a kind of sea monster, with the front half crocodilian and the rear half serpent. MW assures us that it is only mistaken for the ordinary crocodile that commentators like to

invoke. It must be that mere fish are not especially evocative of the Absolute, so only a legendary beastie will do. The makara is akin to the Loch Ness monster or the Abominable Snowman, which have been actively sought by a few intrepid (or deranged) souls, but sought in the imagination by many. We long to discover new and strange creatures currently unknown, and we like to believe there is more to life than the bland pronouncements of biology textbooks. And there is, there is! We should never forget that in the nineteenth century, many scientists were convinced that everything was known, and all that was left was a bit of tidying up around the edges. No more makaras. Wow, were they ever wrong! So we can use this reference to the absolute of fish as a reminder that there is always much that is beyond our knowledge and understanding. And that is a fine definition of the Absolute, like Nataraja Guru's response to a challenge to define God: "That which is right when you are wrong is God."

The Ganges is not only a spectacular river, but it is imagined to be pouring out of Shiva's matted hair at the top of the Himalayas. It is thus a direct conduit from the Absolute to the human realm. Rivers seen from the air resemble the capillaries and veins of our circulatory system, and similarly distribute their largesse to every corner of the world. Seeing this makes it easy to imagine the Earth as a unitary living being, in which each creature is a cell. The Ganges would be the aorta of the Gita's time; nowadays it is known to be but one of several major arteries.

Despite being the recipient of all kinds of refuse, including sewage and corpses, the Ganges stands as a symbol of spiritual purification. Bathing in it is said to wash away all sins. Recent chemical analysis has proven the uniquely purificatory ability of Ganges water. Something, perhaps benign bacteria, actually consumes pollutants and restores the water's purity. Considering what goes into the river, they must be some very busy germs! This characteristic links the Ganges with the wind as a purifying force.

32) (In the structure) of cantos (or chapters) I am the beginning, end, and also the middle; of the sciences I am the Science of the Self; I am the dialectic of preeminent dialecticians.

Most translators have Krishna as being the beginning, end and middle of creation or creations here. The interesting Sanskrit word in question was discussed in V, 19, where it is translated as “creative urges,” though in its form here it can also mean books, chapters or cantos. Nataraja Guru defends his translation as being in keeping with the other elements of the verse, and he reminds us that Krishna has already described himself as the beginning, middle and end of beings in verse 20 of this chapter. Books are certainly an extraordinary bundle of creativity in their own right. Note the dialectical ordering of the sequence, where the extremes counterpoised bring us to the middle.

As far as books or cantos go, the Absolute element corresponds to the meaning they contain, which doesn't necessarily come through easily. It has to be uncovered with effort, but it is in there somewhere. As noted, the ananda that is the effect, as it were, of the Absolute, which is commonly translated as bliss or joy, has been modified in my Vedantic lineage to include the idea of value or meaning, so as to not rule out the intellectual side of enlightenment. A good book or poem may bring us much joy, but for the most part it is the pleasure of insight and sympathetic understanding, not some visceral high.

The gist of all three elements of the verse is dialectic, inasmuch as the science of the Self is implicitly a dialectical endeavor. Thus, in the logic of a well-written paper, you first present your thesis, then you test it from one or more contrary positions, and finally you arrive at a unified or synthetic conclusion. Ideas presented as a one-sided diatribe are offensive to intelligent people, yet even if we disagree with a well-crafted argument we might still be satisfied if our own point of view receives an honest appraisal.

The science of the Self, *atma vidya*, which is what the Gita is, follows the same structure. Self is capitalized because the universal Self, not the personal self, is under reference. To summarize the dialectical yoga of the Gita once again, Life presents us with a series of confrontations or experiences. We grapple with them, come to grips with their significance, and then counterbalance them with an opposing perspective. In doing so we are lifted out of our normal, provincial state of mind to attain to a higher level of understanding, called Self knowledge or union with the Absolute. Realization of the whole Self is one important distinction between a wise person and a knee-jerk reactionary.

Anyone who has come this far in the Gita is well aware that knowing who and why you are is the most important, central knowledge, and all else is window dressing. Krishna more or less *has* to reprise the idea here, but he isn't telling us anything we don't already know, at least in principle.

Nataraja Guru emphasizes the dialectic in the last part of his version of this verse, while most translators tend toward reason, pure and simple. In a discussion, reason or logic triumphs over quarrelsome partisanship, at least from the standpoint of the detached observer. The Sanskrit words used here are related to the wisdom dialogue cited at the end of each chapter, which I have omitted, but many books retain. Although I'm no Sanskrit expert, I'd like to add one aspect that I haven't seen mentioned by anyone else. The phrase in question could very well mean, "of speech I am the prophetic aspect." The Sanskrit literally means to "speak forth," which is identical to pro-phetcy, forth-speaking. Prophets are the voice of God, meaning that they are somehow able to speak truth that transcends their personal bias. But what exactly does that mean?

Brain scans allow neuroscientists to observe that much is going on in our minds prior to our conscious awareness of it. By one measure, decisions are made up to seven seconds before we become cognizant of them. It is likely that this subterranean aspect of speech is very wise and direct, and could be of great value to us,

if we allowed it to be expressed. But our conscious minds have an agenda of their own, and the raw data from the unconscious is very often discomfiting to that agenda. Thus what eventually does emerge from our mouths is a carefully crafted perversion of the original impulse. My sense is that Krishna is distinguishing here between this personal craftiness and the universal honesty that resides buried in our hearts. If we could begin to hear, like the prophet Elijah, that “still small voice,” we would be listening to the word of the guru within. But most of the time we drown it out with the wind of our idle talk, and the earthquakes and fires of our tantrums and passions.

Much of what passes for prophecy is mere raving, and it is a subtle art to distinguish between inspired wisdom and the siren call luring us to wreck our ship on rocky shores. Consistent discrimination and reason are to be brought to bear in the face of all persuasion, especially the promptings of our own inner voice. Remember, this is not about other people, it is about us! Krishna is assuring us that in the midst of the maelstrom dwells a note of truth that we are to single out and pay heed to. We are free to suppress the reptilian urge to tell that cop what we really think of him, or to stomp off the job in a huff, because prophesy isn't about the transactional world, and it is dangerous to imagine that it is. Prophecy is for spiritual instruction, and should be given its moment in the sun in quiet meditation, far from the madding crowd.

33) Among syllabic letters I am the A, of compounds I am the paired-compound; I am also unexpended time; I am the maintainer, universally facing.

In Sanskrit and its family of languages, all the letters are pronounced with an A sound on the end, kah, tah, mah, and so on. Moreover, vowels are simply the A pressed through different embouchures, so it is only logical that the A is the absolute value

in speech. Without it nothing can be said, and with it everything can be said.

The Gita is filled with paired compounds, which are a specialty of Sanskrit. Examples are pain-pleasure, eternal-transient, true-untrue, and the like. They are perfectly suited to dialectic reasoning, in that both sides are as equal as the two sides of a coin. When we learn to treat superficial aspects of life as being on a par with their opposites, we are ready for the leap to attunement with the Absolute. This was dealt with in depth in V, 15-22.

Duration seems to be getting more than its fair share of citations (also in 20, 29 and 30), perhaps because so many spatial elements have had their day. The specific quality mentioned here is that time doesn't run down. Existence is an eternal, cyclic game, and all conceptions that compare it to windup clocks or entropy-riddled events fall short of the mark. The second "law" of thermodynamics is only a hypothesis rather than a law, provable only within limited parameters.

The meaning of the Absolute being the maintainer of all creation, universally facing, is not immediately obvious. The only way to face universally is to be within every smidgen of what there is. It is difficult for those raised on belief in an external god to think of it as being within everything, but if it is imagined to be outside, then it must necessarily look at you from a single perspective. You cannot conceive of a separate god seeing in all directions, even if you pay lip service to the idea.

When we contemplate how much is going on in the universe, vast as it is, that kind of god has got to be extremely busy to make it all happen, zooming trillions of light years every nanosecond just to be in attendance on all the births, not to mention needing to spend a little time coaxing each creation forth. That's going to be a tough job! But if the principle of divinity, of guidance and harmonious expression, is understood as emanating from within every part, as being built in to the very fabric of the universe, then there is no rushing about by anything. It is all happening right where you and I are, everywhere at once.

34) I am all-engulfing death, and the Source of all things that are to be; and of womanly values, fame, grace, speech, memory, will power, firmness and endurance.

Women are specifically mentioned here because of their natural association with the creative Source, in which they are free to participate more readily than men. The ancients liked to sort values into male and female qualities, but of course this should never be treated as a limiting factor. All categories of people can and should participate in all positive values to the degree best suited to them. It would be absurd to think of memory being the sole province of females, for instance. These are simply absolutely important values selected out of a huge pile, any one of which would make for an excellent meditation or series of meditations. A number of them are discussed in detail elsewhere.

As we discussed in III, 35, humans consist of a blend of male and female chemicals in almost equal measure. A very slight preponderance one way or the other accounts for our gender, such as it is. It's hardly the stark black and white delineation non-contemplatives make it out to be. The English language does not have sexualized nouns, and English speakers tend to be baffled that a pen would be considered feminine, say, and a pencil masculine. There is a welcome trend in humanity toward neutrality regarding gender, and the Gita's philosophy generally supports this. There may be a subtle effort at play here to counterbalance the heavily male-dominated society of ancient India.

Linguistic studies have shown that the "gender" of a noun has a very real impact on the perception of what the object in question is like. This is but one of the many kinds of psychological colorations built into every culture that provide ongoing impediments to an unbiased assessment of the world, and against which the yogi must eternally struggle.

Of greater interest than gender disparity here is the dialectical pairing of death and life, of creation and dissolution. An intense

adjective, meaning all-engulfing or all-devouring, is used to indicate the wholesale nature of the process. The universe is being ejected forth and swallowed up simultaneously and continuously. Every cubic centimeter of it. The process is not a blind, materialistic force, but the absolute be-all and end-all of existence, so to speak. It is “what it is,” writ large. We can also see how the idea of it flows naturally from the previous verse: this is what a universal maintainer is bound to be occupied with doing. Overlapping the two verses we have an implication of the Vedantic trilogy of creator, destroyer and sustainer: Brahma, Shiva and Vishnu, which taken all together are a favorite way of conceiving the Absolute.

35) Likewise, of hymns I am the brihasama; of meters I am the gayatri, of months I am margasirsha, and of seasons the flower-abounding.

And now we have a group of gentle, even—dare we say it—womanly virtues as a segue from the previous verse....

The hymn in question is the Sama Veda, one of the fountain-sources of Indian culture, already discussed in detail in verse 22. The Sama is meant to be sung, especially at the Soma ceremony. This is the only specific reference to music in Krishna’s list, though we did have a couple of musicians back in verse 26.

The Gayatri mantra is also Vedic in origin, and it has been a central chant since earliest times. It definitely has a “divine” ring to it, radiating confidence and power. Guru Nitya has translated it several ways, two of which come readily to hand:

That great splendor belonging to the sun,
Belonging to the gods and illuminating our intellect
That light is at once the impulse and aim of every thought
and action.
May our intellect be fired and inspired.

And a looser version:

Fill me, fill my senses with light.
Let my sense organs be disciplined.
Let me be purged of darkness.
Give me great inspiration.
This must have come from Something so Perfect. From that
Reality has this Reality come. If I am You, it will still
remain. Name and form will vanish, but the Source will
remain. Aum.

The month in question falls around December, often a very pleasant time in India. In several of the categories mentioned the Absolute is clearly being listed as the best of the group, but as we know the Absolute is everything on and off the list. Krishna has gone to great pains to instruct us that the Absolute is qualitatively different from specific items, and is not just one among many. And yet, something special comes through on a great day or great month, a billowing fountain of joy in our hearts. When the rush comes unbidden, seemingly from the world around, it teaches us where to look for the continual, steady state of happiness, the unending bliss of the Absolute residing within us.

Poets have sung the praises of spring flowers far beyond the limits of immoderation, and yet the urge to celebrate the rebirth of life will not die. As children we felt the joy of being alive every day throughout the year, and knew the special explosive bliss of spring. Sadly, for most of us the joy of greeting the day has faded, dwindled to almost nothing as our brains have habituated to the drudgery of life on earth. And yet... and yet. Not far below the surface those exquisite feelings lie dormant, biding their time until the proper alignment of circumstances coaxes them to burst forth in a riot of color once more, surging up to spend yet another season nodding and basking in the sun.

36) I am the chance-risk of (irresponsible) gamblers; I am the brilliance of the brilliant people; I am victory; I am decisiveness; I am the goodness of those established in the real.

Chance-risk is a convoluted term for what we often call luck or fate. It is a manifestation of the invisible shape of things, perhaps longed for in advance but only revealed to us mortals by its expression in the present. The luck of gamblers; the roll of the dice; how the yarrow stalks fall to be decoded by the I Ching; who lives and who dies in the bomb blast; patterns of seeming randomness—these are the topology of the Absolute. Its precise configuration cannot be predicted in advance; we read it as it appears to us in the form of “here” and “now.”

Virtually every commonplace action demonstrates fate to us. For instance, if we could calculate exactly the weight and velocity of the dice, their orientation, the friction between them and the table, taking into account air density and humidity and all other variables, we could exactly predict which dots would come out on top. But we don't have to busy ourselves all day with pencil and paper, because “chance” or “luck” always gets it perfectly correct every time. After throwing them (which is critically important) all we have to do is read ‘em and weep, as the gamblers say; in other words note their position and cope with how it affects the game. We can register the result “in real time” for every event, and read the writings of fate therein. The only thing that alters such determinism unpredictably—the fly in the ointment, so to speak—is individual choice based on personal preference. In other words, consciousness. And as much as materialists would dearly love to find a way to make human consciousness predictable, it deftly eludes every attempt to kill its randomizing spirit.

The interjection of gambling into the list has puzzled commentators, and legitimately so. Yet *sannyasa*, renunciation, a central theme of the Gita, is itself a kind of gamble. You have to cast yourself at the mercy of the good offices of the invisible. You don't know where you are going or how you're going to get there,

but you set out nonetheless, hoping for the best. The opposite of this attitude is to hold back and try to channel your life through rational guidelines. The Gita is ever in favor of bravely launching forth to meet your fate. Little or nothing will be learned by hiding from the myriad possibilities life has to offer, whether cloaked in respectability or not. And as carefully as we craft a predictable existence, life has a way of turning the tables right at the moment we begin to feel secure. Upsetting the apple cart appears to be part of its educational program.

Herman Hesse is one Western writer who grasps this idea. In *Demian*, first published in 1919, he offers this:

There was no duty for enlightened people, none, none, except this: to seek themselves, to become certain of themselves, to grope forward along their own path, wherever it might lead.... I had often played with images of the future, I had dreamt of roles that might be meant for me, as a poet, perhaps, or as a prophet, or as a painter, or whatever else. That was all meaningless. I didn't exist to write poetry, to preach sermons, to paint pictures; neither I nor anyone else existed for that purpose. All of that merely happened to a person along the way. Everyone had only one true vocation: to find himself. Let him wind up as a poet or a madman, as a prophet or a criminal – that wasn't his business; in the long run, it was irrelevant. His business was to discover his own destiny, not just any destiny, and to live it out wholly and resolutely within himself. Anything else was just a half-measure, an attempt to run away, an escape back to the ideal of the masses, conformity, and fear of one's own inwardness. Fearsome and sacred, the new image rose up before me; I had sensed it a hundred times, perhaps I had already enunciated it, but now I was experiencing it for the first time. I was a gamble of Nature, a throw of the dice into an uncertain realm, leading perhaps to something new, perhaps to nothing; and to let this throw from the primordial depths take

effect, to feel its will inside myself and adopt it completely as my own will: that alone was my vocation. That alone! (107-8)

Nataraja Guru has added the adjective ‘irresponsible’, which is only implied in the terms used, but it makes the puzzle even more delicious. If you’re responsible, you must not be really gambling. “Responsible behavior” is often the very thing risked in gambling. If your mother would approve, it takes all the fun out of it, not to mention the opportunities for evolutionary leaps. The Guru gives the example of a sailor who leaps into the sea to save a drowning man as a gambler in the best sense. We can imagine that in risking one’s life for a cause there is a heightening of intensity throughout the whole being. In such cases it would seem to be at least semi-responsible gambling. Irresponsible gambling is when you bet the baby’s food ration at the corner card game. Perhaps the very irresponsibility of it heightens the excitement, but it would be strange to consider this an absolute value. It’s the abandoning of personal control in favor of the “roll of the dice” of Fate that is the essence here. But the sailor who leaps in the sea had better be able to swim!

Anyway, if we think of the gamble as being like a firefighter rushing into a burning building to save a child, then it is easy to link this with the brilliance of brilliant people, whether entertainers, scientists, athletes or what have you. At their best, all are acting at peak levels, with decisiveness, and are experiencing different kinds of victory. The adulation of others is secondary to the exhilaration of the successful outcome, and is often felt as detracting from rather than enhancing the bliss of the pure act itself. Krishna is recommending a life with that kind of expertise brought to bear frequently.

Decisiveness means you are making decisions, deciding for yourself, and thus is the opposite of gambling. Both factors figure in a complete life at different times or in different combinations. A slipshod kind of spirituality leaves everything to chance, leading to degeneration and mediocrity. When outside factors are

overwhelming, it is easy to imagine that they are too powerful to combat, so you simply give up and go wherever the winds of fate take you. Surprisingly this is a model of spirituality for many people, even those who haven't been taught such an attitude by their religious preceptors. It even retains the possibility of success, though it more often leads to failure.

Seeming somewhat out of place here is the goodness of those established in the real. It had to be tucked in somewhere, and the other values of this verse also relate to reality in a similar sense. But it stands alone: when one has successfully allied one's psyche with the Absolute one becomes established in the real. Goodness in the unitive sense is the natural expression of this merger. Further, we don't have to be good to become established in the Absolute, we have to become established in the Absolute in order to be good, at least regarding good unmotivated by any temporal or otherwise limited considerations.

37) Of the Vrishnis I am Vasudeva; of the Pandavas, Dhanamjaya; of the recluses I am Vyasa; of the poets, the poet Usana.

After mentioning the real, Vyasa now introduces the "real" characters in the Gita's wisdom dialogue. Vasudeva is Krishna, Dhanamjaya is Arjuna, and Vyasa is the author himself. We can only guess why the best of poets is mentioned; perhaps Vyasa is saying modestly that there is a better poet than he is, who is his inspiration. Usana was a demon poet, and as everyone knows, that's the best kind.

We have learned over the course of the Gita study that Krishna and Arjuna epitomize the archetypes of guru and disciple. The epitome of anything represents the Absolute. We are not simply reading about a couple of people, these characters stand for the meaning of the entire business, and therefore the study is eternally valid and significant.

And we can remember that Krishna is saying this to Arjuna, so he's saying by way of wrapping up that he and Arjuna are also the Absolute, as is the author of their tale. The central truth of Vedantic wisdom is that we are the Absolute. It would be a methodological error to omit this fact at this critical juncture.

This verse also serves as a kind of imprimatur, or a bow to the cheering crowd. Anyone who has read this far will certainly concur: this is the most astounding of poems, with layer after layer of meaning. It is a guru, a remover of darkness, in its own right.

38) Of rulers I am the scepter; of those who seek victory I am the statesmanship; in esoterics I am silence; and of knowers I am knowledge.

The scepter is the symbol of regal power, while the individual ruler is its more or less flawed wielder. It is very important to distinguish the difference.

Rulers have crushed a lot of legitimate opposition by claiming that they ruled by divine right. When you look at history, the more inbred, sick, deranged and even insane the king or queen became, the more they harped on their divinity. Any truly great ruler doesn't need an excuse to wield power, but a shoddy imposter does. We even see this now in supposedly secular America, where the President is slyly portrayed as standing at the right hand of God. What's more amazing is that people actually buy it! Then they presume that no matter how bizarre their activities, the ruler must be blessed from on high, so everyone should just put up and shut up. Or side with their leader and loudly blame the victims.

As with any Absolute principle, in practice the wise exercise of power is only approached. Some rulers fall far short, while others come impressively close. Pragmatists believe that since perfection is impossible, they might as well not even try for it, leaving them free to take advantage of every situation in any way they can. Krishna is reminding us to cleave to the ideal, and not be led astray by honorable principles being dragged through the mud.

The idea that intelligence or wisdom, applied as statesmanship, is the best way to solve disputes, is clearly nothing new. Apparently the orc-like thugs of corrupt administrations in the early twenty-first century have not yet heard the word, but the Gita unequivocally weighs in here in favor of balance and reason. Justice and fairness have been implicit or explicit in its teaching from the start, but it never hurts to state it plainly for those who don't yet have ears to hear.

For contemplative balance in this verse, silence immediately follows statesmanship. Many words are meant for problem solving, which is ever a horizontal business. For penetrating the vertical essence of existence, words are more often stumbling blocks. At least their implications must be pondered in silence. The idea of silence being the absolute of esoterics is that stillness can penetrate beyond the veil, whereas specific techniques merely manipulate the veil in various ways. Spiritual programs are valuable insofar as they harmonize the veil of words and thoughts and make it less obscuring, but silence effaces the whole garment. Profound words emanate from a core of silence. Verbiage can be visualized as a pyramid, with silence at the apex, sublime poetry and other inspirational communications in the upper reaches, descending to more horizontalized directives toward the base. The bottom level consists of the meaningless chatter many people use to ward off their fear of quiet.

In statesmanship, it is not who is doing the talking or thinking, but the content of the thought that matters. A wise person may be ugly or handsome, repulsive or charismatic, but their wisdom has nothing to do with qualities like those. This is also Krishna's point about knowledge being the important thing: knowers are blessed by knowledge but they don't bless it themselves. It's the same as the idea of the scepter or other symbol being the most important element of leadership. A leader may have many personal flaws, but they are not necessarily relevant to their ability as leader. They fall into a separate category entirely. This is recognized in civilized societies, where the sex lives of politicians,

for instance, are ignored as irrelevant to the policies they implement. If we require only flawless people to be our leaders, there will not be anyone to fill the bill. That is somewhat the position we find ourselves in in the present day. With spy agencies knowing every detail of everyone's lives, as well as being able to manufacture utterly credible fictions, politicians are now totally at the mercy of an invisible government. If we citizens cannot focus on the essence of leadership, we will be handily manipulated by character assassinations.

Mahatma Gandhi demonstrated how silence and speech can work together in statesmanship. When confronted with a dilemma he didn't offer any instant response, but would sit in meditation over it, for as long as it took to sift through to the essence. Then he spoke words carefully chosen to be in harmony with his insights. He never let the words themselves carry him away. By contrast, many politicians seem to believe that they can get away with murder by clothing it in misleading descriptions and specious arguments. And, to our undying shame, they very often do.

39) And further, what is the seed of all beings, that I am, Arjuna; nor is there anything moving or unmoving that can exist without Me.

Krishna's list continues to shrink, until here at the last it dwindles to a point, a seed. The Absolute is the unitive source of all creation, pure and simple. The rishis' conception of the universe is very similar to the Big Bang theory, except that it is beginningless and endless, a series of Bangs. Present-day physicists speak of a *singularity*, where everything that is to be is scrunched into an almost infinitely dense mass. Just like a cosmic seed. For no reason at all, as far as we can tell, our local singularity suddenly sprouted into an entire universe.

Supposedly, there was nothing in our universe that wasn't already inside that singularity in that proto-state. And everything is still inside its expanded evolute. "Moving and unmoving" entities

are the same two categories as living and non-living, covering the whole panoply of what we have here. Without the ground of totality, dependent aspects couldn't exist at all. They are all part of what is, whatever that may be.

Appreciation of the implications of Krishna's assertion would put an end to genetic modification, which is threatening to bring an end to life on earth, at least of the more complex forms. The Absolute is the seed itself, the point source of manifestation. Happily it is perfect, in harmonious balance. When humankind tinkers with the seed, the ramifications are unknowable and unpredictable. Lured by unbridled greed, some people are willing to cast the fate of everyone into a witch's cauldron of homemade life forms.

Here is the bottom line, courtesy of Wes Jackson of the Land Institute: humans should stay out of the nucleus. Minute changes there have vast repercussions. Just because we are able to alter a nucleus does not mean we should. Respect for our Source is not just a good idea, it's the Law.

This verse is a summing up of what we have been going over in this chapter, because we are about to move on. The time for an evolutionary leap has arrived. We should gather our consciousness into a singularity and get ready for the next big bang.

40) There is no end to My divine unique values, Arjuna. What has been said of these unique values is but indicative of their possible extensive elaboration.

As Krishna has already noted, the Absolute is everything, so it's a little bit absurd to list its divine unique values. Yet I hope I have demonstrated the usefulness of such an absurdity with some updated examples. While knowing full well that everything is the Absolute, we can also strive to be the best we can be. Mediocrity doesn't do the miracle of existence justice. It is essential to not fall into the trap of assuming that since everything is the Absolute,

nothing matters, that there is no difference. This paradox has run many a caravan into the ditch.

It would be equally deleterious to actually search for legendary creatures like makaras and vainateyas as a path to enlightenment. Those seem absurd because we don't believe in them anymore—we've never even heard of them!—but we should be careful to not be lured into tangents by modern day fantasies that are widely subscribed to. Jesus and Buddha come to mind, as well as shamans and gurus of all stripes. We are suckers for illusory panaceas. A large percentage of Western movies solve their intractable problems with miraculous endings. Magic and divine intervention are invoked as substitutes for real solutions due to our inclination to avoid responsibility. So keep in mind that tall tales may be somewhat useful for their inspirational value, but are not to be taken literally. The best of them were meant to inspire us to get to work, not to escape from it.

We have to also be careful that in the process of freeing ourselves from imaginary beliefs we don't become cynical and negative. We shouldn't long for the poisoned arrows we have painstakingly pulled out of our flesh, we should revel in our newfound freedom from their influence. Sometimes I call the negativity we are prone to the Santa Claus syndrome, when our belief in something sweet and beautiful turns out to be baseless, or at least very different from what we originally thought. I still remember the sense of betrayal I felt as a child in finding out dear Santa was a myth, and it was hard navigating my children through the same transition. But in both cases I was able to recast the story in a way that preserved at least some of the magic.

Recently a friend sent me a hilarious video of Bruce Lee playing impossible ping-pong with a numchuck. I already knew the video was a fake, and that pretty much anything can be done with visual images these days. But my friend was crushed when I told her. It makes a huge difference whether you believe something or you think it's a lie. The film was the same before and after she found out about it, but in one instance she got joy and amazement,

and in the other it might still have been amusing but it was a pale imitation of what she felt before she was disillusioned. The glow imparted by false beliefs is inevitably tarnished by the truth. Is that why we so often cling to our favorite falsehoods?

So should we disillusion ourselves, or try for better and better illusions, the way many of us do? Does wonder and delight depend on illusion, and are we better or worse off after disillusionment? Should we leave it to someone else to dismantle their own illusions, or is it fair to help them out? These are legitimate questions at the heart of a spiritual quest. The questions are much bigger than any Bruce Lee video. Think of the 911 cover story and other false flag operations used to paint Muslims as evil and worthy of destruction, the JFK assassination that was in fact a military coup to end democracy in the U.S., the global financial meltdown occasioned by actuarial smoke and mirrors. We believe in falsehoods all over the place, and we don't like it when they fall apart. We may well be marginalized in society if we do pierce the illusion, because illusion is big business.

Spirituality in the true sense requires the kind of bravery that can withstand both illusions and disillusionments, and the attendant social rejection. Arjuna's mettle is about to be given the ultimate test in the next chapter: a direct confrontation with the Absolute, shorn of all hypothetical and analogical trappings.

41) Whatever entity is unique in perfected values, in grace, or in radical strength, understand that to have manifested itself from a mere fractional spark of My brilliance.

Listening to a pianist whose fingers are ablaze on the keyboard while heavenly sounds pour forth, it seems an impossible achievement. How can that dancer leap in the air and appear to be suspended for a breathtaking moment, defying gravity? When that teenage skier leaps off the cliff and does a double summersault before landing perfectly on the steep slope at high speed, our heart leaps into our throat. Whatever induces that thrill in us is but one

example of the infinite possibilities of our open-ended universe. Like the expanding universe itself, we are called upon to expand our world physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually.

As we develop our expression and compassion and appreciation of others, we should always relate each instant to the Absolute that is making it possible. That way we can ease away from the pinch of egotism or the blight of narcissism. The performer is worthy of our admiration, but so is the ground or the stage on which the performance takes place. The more we expand our gratitude in all directions, the looser the bonds become that fetter us to our tethers.

The very thought should make our hearts soar.

42) But what use is there for you, Arjuna, in this pluralistic knowledge? Supporting this whole world by a single fraction of Myself, I remain still, as ever.

Exactly so: focusing exclusively on the many in place of the one risks conflict and partisanship. We could endlessly grade aspects of the world in terms of how holy or godly they are, but it would have no spiritual benefit whatsoever. Paradoxically then, turning to the Absolute turns us back to our own life, because the Absolute is everywhere. We don't have to seek it in a special tree or elephant or even a special god.

Absolute consciousness is said here to remain perfectly still within the tumult of creation. An analogy I'm fond of and have mentioned before is the swarm of subatomic particles that fills the universe from end to end. Consciousness is beyond particles, but the universal dispersion of both of them is similar. We see a stupendous variety of forms, but just below the surface are about a hundred types of atoms, of which a dozen are by far the most prevalent. All atoms consist of three parts, and these are in turn made up of a small handful of types of subatomic particles. If we extend this only slightly farther, these quarks and their charming friends are comprised of a single substance (consciousness) which

thus undergirds everything. Likewise, there are a handful of primary forces filling the universe, and the search is on for the unifying energy at their core. Discovering that electricity and magnetism were aspects of one type of energy single-handedly revolutionized human life. Similarly, the Upanishads say the Absolute is that, knowing which, all else is known.

While there is much to be gained from examining the multifarious parts, finding the unifying field at the core is the Holy Grail of physics. It's as if we know all the numbers except 1. The 1 establishes the relationship between all the other numbers, and without it they are adrift, floating in isolation. Once we discover the 1 we can relate all the others properly with each other, because now we have a normative reference: 1 is the distance between each number and its immediate neighbor. Until then, we can't be sure exactly how everything fits together.

Philosophically, we need to know the Absolute—God or the Unified Field if you prefer—in order to have a normative reference for all the multiplicity of existence. And we can't access oneness or unity through multiplicity, it is a quantum leap through a mysterious and inexplicable intuition. To accomplish it, the Gita recommends bipolarity with a guru. Krishna the guru is about to remove the barrier for his now well-tuned disciple in the next chapter. Arjuna is going to meet the Absolute face to face.