

CHAPTER XII: Bhakti Yoga

Unitive Devotion

Bhakti is often translated as devotion or even service, but at heart it means conjunction with light. Included in its broad net are all the various ways devotees relate themselves to the light. Bhakti is defined by both Shankara and Narayana Guru as continuous contemplation on the Self. For some, continuous contemplation and conjunction with light are two ways of expressing the same concept.

Continuous contemplation does not mean sitting in meditation all day long, as some imagine. It means being continuously aware of the subsurface level of the apparent world, the Absolute or light. This includes not being fooled by appearances, by being intelligently attuned to the context in which events take place. This chapter presents a fascinating reevaluation of the seeker's relation to their surroundings.

Most people consider their spiritual aspect as not overly important, more of a sideline to the important business of making a living. They find brief periods here and there to wonder if there is more to life and what it might entail. "Continuous contemplation" implies that these priorities are reversed: that everyday concerns move into the background, taking on a supporting role, while delving into the meaning of life moves to center stage, driven by a passionate thirst for truth. Back in Chapter VII, Krishna has already admitted that only a rare person is motivated enough to make the necessary effort.

The joy of being well fed and housed is undeniable, but there is more to life than gathering our daily bread. The most satisfying bliss comes from expressing our full range of creative abilities, be they artistic, intellectual, intuitive, entrepreneurial, empathetic, or what have you. Arjuna has just glimpsed his untapped potential and is eager to make it a continuous part of his life. Hopefully you have too.

This is the chapter that most delights religious-minded readers, as bhakti has widely come to be viewed in religious terms, where the idea is to become overwhelmed by some intense emotion and imagine that that links you with God. For highly constrained people such activities can certainly be therapeutic, providing them opportunities to overcome their inhibitions. While this may well lead to some blissful experiences, its undermining of the intellect can promote religious partisanship and exclusiveness. The duality implied in ordinary worship has a tendency to bite back in the long run. In any case, Bhakti Yoga is not the same as mere bhakti in the popular sense. Rather than trying to lose yourself in some form of worship, the aim is to remain “found” in some way such as Arjuna achieved in the preceding chapter. The frenzy of uninhibited bhakti, similar to Arjuna’s rampant vision, is to be cooled down and made a permanent, sustainable state of mind.

Indian philosophers do not speak of love, exactly. Bhakti is one of the words that comes closest to describing that mysterious and delightful state. Regarding bhakti and its practices, Nataraja Guru comments in his *Integrated Science of the Absolute* (III, 61): “Emotion and Self-knowledge have the same difference as blind and true love.” The distinction is the same between ordinary bhakti and Bhakti Yoga.

1) Arjuna said:

Those devotees who worship You ever unitively, and those again who meditate on the Imperishable and the Unmanifested—of them which excels in yoga knowledge?

Arjuna has just had a direct experience of the divine, or what could be called his whole being. As he emerges from the profound absorption brought on by the soma Krishna recently gave him in a sacred ritual, an infinite range of new possibilities beckons to him. He naturally wants to know how to remain permanently in contact with such an extraordinary state.

Taking soma every day is not an option. Psychedelic medicine only reveals the possibility of union with the Absolute, and it does a very good job of it. Yet anything that comes and goes cannot be the Absolute, so using drugs to zoom up and then spiraling back down as they wear off is automatically disqualified, not to mention debilitating in the long run. Many popular forms of bhakti, and not just psychedelic medicine, are intense and transient, and thus produce a high rather than yogic equanimity. While undoubtedly fun and even educational in moderation, the yogi treats them as only a single preliminary step and moves on before they can become a snare.

Inevitably, Arjuna's intimate experience of the Absolute is now an event of the past. Memories of cosmic events have a significant but limited value. They can have a tremendous impact, opening the mind up to many of its hidden potentials, but at the same time if treated in a doctrinaire manner they can actually become inhibiting to further direct experiences. "You can syndicate any boat you row," as the Beatles sang, meaning you can institutionalize your insights, but you'll be losing a great measure of your freedom in doing so. Cosmic memories must somehow be kept in perspective, lest they either swell or unduly shrink the ego. Integrating them into the present is a complex endeavor, for which Arjuna is extremely lucky to have an able helper close at hand.

Arjuna is asking Krishna whether he should he imagine the Absolute as a deity and worship it, or should he visualize the Absolute as devoid of all attributes, intangible, like pure light or love. In either case, after the very real intensity of his experience it would be difficult to characterize it as emptiness or nothingness. Something is definitely there, but is it a god or merely the way things are by themselves?

This question is very much on the front burner in our day. Science considers the miracle of existence to be intrinsic to the nature of things, while religion posits it as brought about by an outside agency that can be invoked. As Krishna has often affirmed, whatever way you view it has a commensurate value. Moreover, if

you take any perspective to its logical limit, it converges with all the rest.

The two main approaches to Whatever It Is may be generalized as the positive and negative paths. The positive is affirmed by the mantra *asti asti*, “and this and this.” You know that the Absolute is the essence of everything, so you relate lovingly to everything you encounter. “Love thine enemies,” “The guest is God,” “My house is your house,” and “We are One,” are some of the related mantras from other traditions. The scientific version is to see how everything affects everything else in measurable ways.

Neti neti, “not this not this,” expresses the way of negation. You are striving to go beyond all forms and names to contemplate the transcendental reality in its raw unmanifested state. You accept all the stuff that exists, but you pry your mind away from it by reminding yourself that it is not, in itself, the Whole Shebang. Everything created is inevitably limited. Early Christian hermits exemplified *neti neti* when they went deep into the desert to escape social oppression and forcibly suppressed even their bodily needs. Scientists use complicated and expensive tools to peer farther and farther below the surface. As Krishna notes below, this is the hard way. *Asti asti* is easier and gentler. More of the nuances of these two paths will be discussed throughout the chapter, and again in Chapter XV.

At first blush, *asti* appears to be the more unitive approach, because it treats the light as being within everything. *Neti* runs the risk of presuming that the light is somehow separate, setting up a more dualistic viewpoint. Yet, as with all philosophical paradoxes, it is not quite so simple. *Asti* can ensnare you more easily, as when you mistake the form for the substance, and *neti* avoids that trap. Luckily, they are not mutually exclusive. A seeker can and should look at the world from both perspectives, though not always at the same time. Dialectically uniting them opens the mind to the full mystery of the Absolute.

Is God part of or separate from creation? Is everything God, or is nothing God? Is the world real or unreal? Arjuna’s

uncertainty is one of the ultimate philosophical conundrums, and as with all profound paradoxical propositions it doesn't have a pat answer. A yogi aims to integrate these conflicting possibilities into a single vision, finding a way to treat them inclusively.

2) Krishna said:

Those with minds entered into Me, who unitively meditate on Me, with a fervor pertaining to the Supreme—those according to Me are the most unitively attuned in yoga.

Krishna obligingly offers Arjuna a definite preference: that he should meditate on a personified version of the Absolute. He is going to immediately qualify this as being due to its simplicity. The harder path, that of seeking the unmanifest essence, is equally capable of bringing understanding when carried out correctly.

A guru must instruct appropriately in keeping with a disciple's inner tendencies. Arjuna is not a particularly mystical type, and he was uncomfortable with the direct transpersonal connection with the Absolute he has just had. It sounds like Krishna is expressing a general preference for a positivist mysticism, but very soon its negative counterpart will be embraced as well. The path should suit the traveler, else it will be full of unnecessary bafflement and difficulties. Krishna will presently assert that in the ultimate analysis both paths are equally effective.

The oneness at the heart of the Absolute is in the process of becoming actualized in a duality consisting of spirit and nature, or in modern terms, consciousness and matter. This produces a triplicate Absolute—transcendent-unmanifested-manifested—that will be examined in detail in Chapter XV. But for now, the Gita is examining an approach to the transcendent via either a manifested or an unmanifested methodology. Note that in this chapter Krishna's use of "Me" signifies a personified image, whereas for the most part we take it as standing for the transcendent Absolute.

Nataraja Guru translates *sraddha* here as fervor, not just because it suits the sense well but also to avoid the more loaded

term, faith, which is its more familiar meaning. (Sraddha is accorded its own entire chapter, XVII.) In his comments he emphasizes that this faith or intense love is directed specifically to the Supreme or the Beyond, and does not refer to mere religious devotion focused on an object. Nonetheless, right now Krishna is definitely speaking about love directed to and through a conceivable entity. In the next verse he contrasts this with love for the inconceivable. During the course of the chapter these two polarities are subsumed in a transcendent synthesis, demonstrating that we don't have to exclusively adhere to one or the other. As we already know, Krishna is inclusive rather than exclusive. A yogi unites rather than selects and defends a side.

At the same time, we are free to choose in keeping with our personal inclinations. We are drawn to what interests us most, and all honest paths lead to the supreme realization of the great mystery. And, as with wisdom and action and all other dualities, a yogic understanding brings them together as aspects of the same underlying reality. Nataraja Guru puts this very well in his comments on verse 4: "When properly understood there would remain nothing to choose between the two cases." Realization is not ultimately dependent on the way taken to achieve it, and it is fully independent of how we conceive of it. Lucky for us, and lucky for it!

3 & 4) But those who meditate upon the Imperishable, the Undefinable, the Unmanifested, the All-Pervasive, and the Thought-transcending, the Firmly-Established, the Immobile, the Constant, having restrained all sense-aggregates, regarding all with equalizing understanding, interested in the well-being of all creatures—they reach Me too.

Here we have a fine list of non-religious meditations for the skeptically inclined. If deeply pondered, any of these categories will lead you to a state of wonder and awe. They are clear enough

to not require much elaboration, though I'll offer a little later on. You can just sit down and try to think what any one of them means, and they will lead you straight to the Absolute itself.

We can imagine that in ancient times the question of how to meditate on the Absolute was hotly debated, between the two positions mentioned in verses 2-4. Should the focus be on an object, or averted from anything tangible or definable? An object could be ridiculed as being overly specific and therefore limiting, but meditating on nothing could equally be ridiculed as wool gathering. So which one is right?

Somewhere around the time of the Gita Buddhism was being born, syndicating the side that held meditation on the unmanifest superior. Of course, over time, and following the trends of other religions, in Buddhism the Unmanifest became stereotyped as various images, the most familiar being the depictions of the Buddha himself. Early artists only dared to show a footprint or empty throne, but those were too abstract to remain popular. Soon magnificent statues of the Buddha were everywhere, designed to be worshipped as manifesting Earth's most human god. At the time of the Gita's writing, however, such revisionism was still in the future.

The Upanishads too are mostly, but not exclusively, in favor of the unmanifest, even as it fills the manifest. But most regular folks tend to lean more towards the manifest for their meditations, and prefer involvement with worldly activities over solitary withdrawal. In ancient times, many people worshipped creation itself, not any god necessarily, even though, again, it amounts to the same thing on analysis. The Gita begins Chapter XII with a preference, but soon embraces universal values dear to both camps. We can notice a sincere effort throughout to bring both sides together in amity. The premise is that we are all just trying to figure out what's going on here, since it's so amazing.

The bottom line is that whichever attitude you adopt, as you penetrate deeper into a contemplative understanding the more you realize they are the same in essence. Strictly for example, let's say

you begin by worshipping the Absolute as manifested in Jesus Christ. You start with all sorts of nice simple ideas about what that means, a guy in a robe holding out his hand or prying open his chest to reveal his heart, and you begin to address him as a person in your prayers and in your everyday life. As you study and learn more, you discard some notions as simplistic and replace them with upgraded ones. You hear other people speak confidently of him, and sometimes it reinforces what you think and sometimes you get the feeling that people are really gullible to have such ideas. The concrete image begins to be more rarified and subtle. You ponder more. If you are really devout, you may have encounters with something like an image of Christ. After playing out this process for some years, you may begin to realize that your images are wholly in your mind, and they are relatively trite in comparison to the richness meant by the reality he proclaims. What you seek is an unknown truth beyond the boundaries of what you can imagine based on ordinary concepts. You still call on Christ, but now you set aside your images and try to receive something directly from the Unknown itself.

Oddly, if you follow the more philosophical path of relating to the Unknown as an abstraction, your trajectory will follow essentially the same path. You begin with an image of what “no image” would look like, and have a relationship with it. As you refine your understanding, you become aware that imagery itself is the block, and you strive to shed it for direct contact with Whatever It Is. No matter whether you prefer to address something tangible or intangible, what your spiritual development really amounts to is a process of opening up from a small conception to an all-embracing one. Of course, if you become insistent on guarding your entry-level conceptions, it is a simple matter to block all spiritual growth, but those cases lie outside the thrust of a work designed as a textbook for sincere seekers. The Gita was never meant to be an evangelical tool.

In any case, in both approaches of what may be called the original duality, the Ground of existence is the same. There can

only be a single truth at reality's core. The difference is that one person likes a friendly face on the search, and another one doesn't require it. It's simply a matter of personal preference. The line "they reach Me too" means that both paths are the same from the absolutist standpoint. Both bring the devotee to the state of realization. In the next verse, Krishna admits that his preference was based on easiness, not on any metaphysical superiority.

Readers will certainly have noticed that my commentary treats Krishna as a mystical symbol rather than a concrete embodiment of an absolute principle. The Gita does not support personalized deities, beyond the concessions made here. In Chapter XV we will learn that the true "Krishna" is beyond both the manifested and unmanifested aspects of the universe. Worship of a deity invariably converts a transcendent reality into a conceptualized (and thereby manifested) form. So, along with my gurus, I lean toward the more complex approach of Krishna's second option, of relating to the transcendent via the unmanifested. Again, though, the more you think about the differences, the smaller they become.

Krishna does offer eight pithy aspects of the universe for the philosophically minded seeker to meditate upon, which are wholly in keeping with the spirit of the Upanishads. The first one, *akshara*, even has its own chapter, number VIII. I'll sketch out some sample ideas for meditation on each in turn. Keep in mind that meditation is supposed to be blissful. We do it because it brings us delight, and it should never be forced or repetitive. The idea is to grow and gain insight, not to numb the mind with stereotyped rituals. Depending on your personal inclinations you will be drawn more to a scientific or a devotional shading, and that's perfectly fine. Recall IV, 11, which reads in part: "My very path it is that all men do tread from every (possible) approach."

The terms Krishna mentions are ways to comprehend the incomprehensible, or to otherwise merge with the blissful nature of the Absolute as it truly is. We can even notice a subtle continuity

from one to the next, showing that this is by no means a random listing, but is extremely well thought out:

Imperishable: Science has postulated that the universe was suddenly created out of nothing, and eventually it will die out and at least be close to nothingness again. Is this logical, or must there have been something before the Big Bang to provide the impetus for it? If there is truly nothing, we should expect nothing to come of it. So what exactly is this non-thing that persists above and beyond the coming and going of temporal events, up to and including the birth and death of the whole universe? What aspect of this universe, if any, stays with it for the entire cycle? No self-respecting materialist should turn their back on questions like these, and physicists are in fact beginning to address them now. In fact, at the end of 2010 the British mathematician Roger Penrose reported the first scientific evidence of a universe predating the Big Bang, and the discovery was greeted with widespread relief because everyone can now admit they knew all along that a unique Big Bang was philosophically untenable.

A related question is, how is such vast energy imparted that the working parts of a universe can go on spinning energetically for at the very least trillions of years? No known process can last anywhere near as long. What's going on, that the underpinning of everything seems to be continually renewed or never depleted? Is the creation and dissolution of our universe simply one more anthropomorphic projection of tepid minds? Try to grasp how, beneath all the changing landscape, something permanent is providing the ground for it to take place. What could that be?

Undefinable: Imagine, what would something undefinable look like? How could you even conceive of it? Study how your mind naturally takes a situation and gives it a definition, and how that definition is invariably less than the actual situation. You will very quickly grasp that, while intellectually satisfying, cutting life down to fit even the best definition is very much a reduction and often a disfigurement. Knowing this, you should find a way to be

comfortable with life being greater than you can ever conceive, and honor it for that ability. Definable things are subject to opinions, pro and con, but indefinite things are not. The best we can do is simply appreciate them.

Unmanifested: The Gita frequently treats the Absolute as Unmanifested and Imperishable together, since only things that manifest can then perish, to return to their native state of being unmanifested. The minute something Unmanifested takes a form of any kind, it becomes definable by that form. Try to visualize being without form, and it will lead you into the depths of your mind, at the very least. And always keep in mind that all specific manifestations are not the Absolute, though they may be said to be in it and of it. That's the reason you're not satisfied with gods in the first place, right? They are too limited to be what some like to claim they are. But an unmanifested god is identical with a natural principle or law, and, like gravity, is unlimited.

All-Pervasive: It's actually easier to think of Nature as being all-pervasive than any god. Try as you might, a god always has some sort of boundaries, but Nature is unbounded. Like atoms, or better yet, the space between atoms, there is nowhere the Absolute is not.

As you meditate on the necessary all-pervasiveness of the essential Substance of the universe, realize that if it is everywhere it is also in you. The very human tendency to think of gods or the Absolute itself as having an existence far out in space somewhere is strictly a delusion. If it is everywhere, it must be here also. Especially here, within one of the high points of local evolution: namely you. As you start to grasp that you are the Absolute, your life begins to normalize. You begin to realize you must do your very best to love all aspects of life and enjoy whatever time you are allotted in it, because the Absolute couldn't possibly be interested in regimentation or banality any more than you are. The energy that created the whole vast, amazing game is coursing through your consciousness.

Thought-transcending: A perfect, Zen-like exhortation, to think of something that isn't a thought, or ponder the imponderable. Yet, on reflection, thoughts have definite forms similar to material objects. One of the great paradoxes is that we have to use thoughts to go beyond thinking. If we try to grasp something that is all-pervasive, for instance, we will be lifted out of our normal channels of conceptualization. Yet if we don't think at all, we will remain very limited. We need to have a fully developed capacity to think, and then use it to go beyond what we know, to step outside of thought forms. Probably this is the point of many traditional bhakti practices: to use an intense furor to temporarily sweep away the thought processes. But the same can be accomplished quietly and peacefully, sitting alone on a seat, and there is significantly less danger of it becoming a way to reinforce and amplify our ignorance.

Firmly-Established: Life in its greatest sense is real. Everything about it is real. The universe is undeniably existent. So it is a wonder that humans are prone to curse the unreality of the world, while getting so confused by it. We should look to the solid basis of the vast, swirling maelstrom of which we are the tiniest part. When we sit on our seat and let go of our petty thoughts, we become firmly established in our true nature.

Sure, there is a measure of illusion in everything. Whenever something is produced out of nothing, it is bound to seem a little bit insubstantial, deep down. But everyone agrees there is definitely *something* going on, and the joy of existence is to explore what that is. Ultimate truth is not possessed by any illusory item per se, but it is nonetheless real. We can't do better than recall Krishna's presentation of the mystery in IX, 4-6:

By Me all this world is pervaded, My form unmanifested; all beings have existence in Me and I do not have existence in them. And further, beings do not exist in Me; behold My status as a divine mystery; further, Myself remaining that urge behind beings, I bear them but do not exist in them either. As the great (expanse of) air

filling all space has its basis in pure extension, thus you should understand all existences as having their basis in Me.

Immobile: Movement makes up the measurable universe, the part of the whole that science focuses on. Our sustenance as moving beings depends on consuming other moving entities. But what if the unmoving part was also important, maybe transcendently important? Ancient science postulates that an unmoving solidity supports and upholds the movement of manifested entities strutting and fretting their hour upon the stage. In fact, it *is* the stage. Is it possible that we are focusing on the wrong things, and excluding something really essential? Could actors act if there were no stage to stand upon? Pondering the immovable aspect of the universe brings the mind to a similar depth to the other meditations Krishna is suggesting.

Constant: Constancy is similar to immobility, but it adds the time element to the former's spatial orientation. We are continuously supplied with all our basic needs of life, and this alone is a great miracle. If we were nothing more than fluctuating beings in an absolutely random universe, we would not survive for long. Even beyond our physical needs, we are supplied with interesting situations and dear friends, gorgeous entertainment and the possibility of overcoming sorrow. There is no end to the information our minds can take delight in when we examine our world. Instead of being like spoiled children and going off in a huff because we aren't getting everything we want handed to us on a silver platter, we can look for the constant support upwelling at all times to keep us flying high. We should cultivate an attitude of appreciation rather than dissatisfaction or disdain.

When you take all these cosmic meditations together, they are as good or better than any mythology or religious belief system. At the same time, the half-baked speculations that pass for materialism these days fall far short of their potential as liberating insights. Happily, the forefront of science is discarding them and standing on the verge of the wonder embedded in the very essence

of a universe pulsing with life. And when taken to the depth the Gita is advocating, all the various approaches turn out to be different ways to understand the same spectacular mystery.

5) The difficulty of those whose relational minds are set on the Unmanifested is greater, for the way of the Unmanifested is very hard for the embodied to reach.

To sum up this section, Arjuna has asked Krishna how to integrate the vision he just had of the Absolute with his life. Should he worship the manifest or the unmanifest? Hindus tend to work more with the manifest and Buddhists the unmanifest, though the distinction is certainly not as clear as it was when the Gita was penned, long before those nineteenth century terms (Hinduism and Buddhism) had even been imagined. In a similar schism of a common root, modern Christianity leans heavily on literal imagery, while Islam decries any fixed conceptualization. Krishna says here to go for the manifest, mainly because it's easier. It is so easy to love your friend, your pet, your spouse, or your home, and much more subtle and difficult to have the same profound experiences of love in relation to what you can't see, hear or touch. The intellect is forever bringing up substitute images to clothe the unmanifest, and they run the gamut from dry and lifeless to luscious and enchanting. Getting past that is very difficult, but if you can it's just as good as overtly and equally loving your neighbor and your enemy. Nitya Chaitanya Yati puts this nicely in his booklet on bhakti:

You don't have to think of a Supreme God sitting somewhere in a far-off place and of one day reaching him so that bhakti can begin. No, bhakti is operating all the time. The very person next to you now is a symbol of the Unknown whom you are seeking. If you can see in this person the manifestations of truth, the manifestations of beauty, the manifestations of goodness—to that extent you are moving

towards fulfillment. Your realization is at hand, not as a distant promise but as what is presented here and now. (14)

Gods are actually more akin to the formless void than to the loveable aspects of the world around us, though we often reverse them in our minds. Despite people having fairly definite images for their favorite god, any gods there might be are in fact noncorporeal. Metaphysical. It is not too much of a leap to realize they exist primarily if not entirely in the imagination of their devotees.

The world is full of people who love the divine simply and without pretense. They may worship a garish or weird image of their favorite deity, but it is not necessarily idol worship. The idol is a reminder of the love radiating to them at all times from the core of the universe. They may be scorned by materialists, but they may well be more pure of heart than those who scorn them. No one has a lock on how the universe works, and the barren philosophy of negation without any unifying principle to replace what is negated is responsible for devastation on all levels: personal, cultural and planetary. On the other hand, loving gestures reciprocated by loving gods have stimulated much of the kindness and care that perennially nurtures the world. So perhaps the derision is misplaced. For an intellectually-minded person, such simple gestures are pretty much out of reach anyway. For them, Bhakti Yoga is an excellent means to restore the purity of an honest way of relating to the universe.

Of course, there are those who are much happier screening out the world around them and diving deep in their search. If their preference is in tune with their dharma, and is more than the fantasy of a damaged ego in need of healing, there is no problem. For that matter, if healing is not available for a damaged ego—and it often isn't—then withdrawal into a cave or other remote fastness can serve that type of seeker very well.

6 & 7) But those who worship Me, renouncing all actions in Me, regarding Me supreme, meditating on Me by that yoga exclusive of all else, for them whose minds have entered into Me, I become ere long the savior out of the ocean of death and repeated cyclic existences.

Verses 6-10 are an elaboration of the highest teaching of the Gita, as stated in IX, 34 and XVIII, 65. Both those verses begin: “Become one in mind with Me; be devoted to Me; sacrifice to Me; bow down to Me.” They end slightly differently, first: “unifying thus yourself, you shall surely come to Me, your supreme Goal none other than Me.” Secondly: “you shall come to Me alone; I promise you, in truth, you are dear to Me.” In the first case the merger is seen from the side of the aspirant; in the later case it comes from the endearment of the Absolute. In both cases there is a final unity of the seeker with the Absolute like a drop of rain falling into the ocean, or the ocean pouring into a raindrop.

The Gita being fond of graded series, Krishna now spells out these different ways to stay attuned to the Absolute, particularly after a cosmic vision of reacquaintance with it such as Arjuna has just experienced. The correspondences are: verses 6 and 7, become one with Me; verse 8, be devoted to Me; verse 9, sacrifice to Me; and verse 10, bow down to Me. Verse 11 is what to do if all else fails.

The first way is to maintain the contact directly, as stated in verses 6 and 7. Next best is to become intellectually absorbed in understanding the Absolute (v.8). If you can't retain the mental vision, the next recommendation is to practice yoga (v.9) to return to it. Remember the Gita's yoga is a vast and open system of uniting the mind in neutrality, not some kind of exercise. If you are too flaky to follow that way, then dedicate your life as an instrument of the divine (v.10): always imagining the largest possible coherent analysis in every action you undertake will raise you to perfection. But if you can't even be bothered to do that, at the very least cast yourself on the mercy of God (v.11). This is the

modern Krishna consciousness and Christian model, among others, including the twelve step program for substance abuse. You can't do it yourself, you are not good enough. Only God is good enough. So you practice self-abnegation in hopes that there is more than fantasy in your picture of the divine. Notably, this is the only program for which Krishna provides no assurance of a successful outcome. Since the Gita is about being fully alive and free, it should come as no surprise that such attitudes are foreign to it. Even though, as we know, people surrender to the Gita or something similar all the time. Hey, it might work. Maybe. Anything is possible. Krishna is willing to keep an open mind about it. From what I've seen it's a very perilous path though. You can as easily get stuck in negativity through self-denial as you can through rampant egomania.

Whatever your path, the Gita next sums up the state of mind that is best for attaining the Absolute, in verses 13-20. Firstly, having no hatred toward ALL creatures, then being friendly and compassionate, and so on down the line. The kind of worship that imagines "we" are good and "they" are bad will bar the door to the Absolute as long as it is practiced. It is utterly self-defeating, what Nataraja Guru called a one-legged argument, bound to topple over.

Even within the present two verses, the Gita presents us with a graded series, beginning with the best option where all the energies of the seeker are directed toward merger with the Divine to the degree that the Absolute and the individual are identical. The seeker puts all their effort into achieving union, while the Absolute embraces them with showers of loving grace.

As stated in the introduction, bhakti is often translated as devotion, but at heart it means conjunction with light. Becoming conjoined with the light of the Absolute is not different from what this pair of verses describes in detail. The specific instance in question is the disciple becoming united with the guru, who is literally the remover of darkness. When darkness is removed, the light stands revealed.

A multi-pronged strategy is recommended here for the disciple, including “worship,” *upasana*. The word has the same root, *upa*, as Upanishad, which means to sit near a teacher to receive instruction. The Gita’s picture of worship is of a disciple sitting near a guru and listening to their words of wisdom with profound trust and intelligent attention. It may also reflect a range of values even extending to flower offerings and religious rituals, but at the core it’s about the bipolarity between teacher and taught in the context of wisdom. The Upanishads—for instance, the first part of the Kena Upanishad—are very clear that any manifested thing that is worshipped is not the Absolute. One must rise above the known and even the unknown to enter into it.

“Renouncing all actions in Me” means that actions are done for the greatest good and not for selfish benefit. The yogi even gives up the very thought that “I am doing such and such,” and simply allows the action to unfold, confident that unselfishness and connection with the Absolute go hand in hand. Narayana Guru pointedly makes this attitude the centerpiece of his teaching on ethics. In verse 23 of his Hundred Verses of Self-Instruction, he avers: “For the sake of another, day and night performing action, having given up self-centered interests, the compassionate person acts; the self-centered man is wholly immersed in necessity, performing unsuccessful actions for himself alone.”

Modern society is based on a premise that selfishness is the optimal motivator for human beings. While it’s hard to deny that it is a powerful motivator, the devastation it wreaks is becoming more evident with each passing day. It is to be hoped that the substantial body of people who comprehend the value of pulling together unselfishly will yet have its hour in the sun.

“Regarding Me supreme” is a technique for mitigating the sense of agency in the three dualistic attitudes, to wit “I am the doer,” “I am the knower,” and “I am the enjoyer.” Visualizing the Supreme as doer, knower and enjoyer expands the field of experience from that of an isolated individual to the broadest possible amplitude. It is absolutely essential that the Supreme be

thought of as sane and beneficent. If it is visualized as jealous, angry, vengeful, punitive and so on, it leads to disastrous consequences. Whether the divine is a reflection of us or we are a reflection of the divine, somehow we unconsciously exemplify what we believe.

“Meditating on Me by that yoga exclusive of all else,” of course, is the practice taught throughout the Gita of one-pointed dialectic thinking. Paradoxically, such exclusive yoga is all-inclusive, since the Absolute contains everything in the mysterious way described in IX, 4-6. The “all else” to be excluded includes confusion, distraction, muddle-headedness, and so on: all the blocks to universal inclusiveness.

The goal of these practices is to unify yourself. If you are conceiving of a god and you as two separate entities you are not unified. It’s a way of thinking you have to get over.

The act of becoming fully united with the Absolute extricates you from the cloud of confusion that had previously dominated. A small nod to the time factor is included here, in the words “ere long.” This makes it sound as if the Guru saves you at the end of a process, but that’s not quite right. In the nondual conception of the Gita, the seeker has simply evolved to become unified. Confusion and so on are the result of dualistic thinking, and they automatically dissipate when a unitive attitude is attained.

This is the only mention of salvation as such in the entire Gita. Since there is no damnation, there is no need for salvation as an antidote. But since Krishna is offering himself here as a manifestation to be worshipped, it is not logically inconsistent for him to be viewed as a savior in that context.

The impact of regaining your divine heritage of joy is initially overwhelming. In Chapter XI, Arjuna was terrified of the experience and begged for a return to normalcy. It takes a little time to adjust to the new outlook and calm down. Only after incorporating the mystical “onrushing wave” into the psyche can you settle into the bliss of peaceful enlightenment. Hence the

savior aspect emerges “ere long” from the chaos occasioned by the sudden flood of wisdom.

8) Place your mind in Me only, let your higher reason enter into Me; you shall without doubt thereafter live in Me.

Verse 8 equates with the phrase “be devoted to Me.” The popular image of bhakti as mad uncontrolled dancing and chanting or fervent outbursts of ecstatic loving sentimentality is not found in the Gita. This secondary stage is for those who can’t quite put their whole personality into merger with the divine. Instead, an intelligent effort is made to fully grasp the Absolute, with all its nuances. The Gita calls this a wisdom sacrifice. Vedanta philosophy is filled with insights of experienced wisdom sacrificers that can help seekers avoid many pitfalls and misdirected efforts. Anyone’s initial efforts are bound to be tainted with some misguided notions that are serious stumbling blocks in their own right. One of the main uses for the intellect is to figure out the difference between helpful ideas and those that hinder.

Krishna says here that intellectual endeavors can be very successful in liberating the thoughtful seeker. To me, this has always been what makes Vedanta stand out. Many of the problems of life are the result of cloudy thinking, and they can be resolved by mental clarity. It’s as if we reach adulthood tied up in knots, and Vedanta is the science of untying them.

In the old Western movies, one scene always had the bad guys tying the good guys up to a chair or desk while they made their escape from justice. The heroes had to struggle mightily until they could reach the knots with their fingertips, and then oh so gradually work them loose. Then they would jump up with ropes flying every which way and rush out the door to save the farm or stop the train. Silly as those “oaters” are, it makes a good spiritual metaphor.

With knots, the first one is often the toughest, and once it is untied the rope becomes loose enough to whip through the rest.

The mind is like that too. We are perpetually in a state of traumatized denial, which ties us in knots and bars our freedom, and we can't make progress until we shake it off. We have to learn to face ourselves as we really are, instead of how we would like to appear. Vedanta appeals to our inner being through logic and common sense to persuade us to overcome our obstacles. It isn't based on faith or threats, but on intelligence and careful observation.

A wonderful visual image of what it feels like to be liberated from the ties that bind may be found at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tcXU7G6zhjU>. Some researchers came upon a humpback whale that was totally immobilized by fishing nets, and upon the point of death. Ever so carefully the crew cut the nets and tugged them off. Once the whale was free, it swam away to a safe distance and began just about the most wonderful display of grateful exuberance ever filmed, leaping in the air over and over in an excess of joyful release. It reminds us that conjunction with light is identical to conjunction with life: bhakti is the bliss of being fully alive and free of fetters.

9) If you are unable to fix your thoughts steadily on Me, then by means of unitive ascent seek to reach Me.

Next we have the elaboration of "sacrifice to Me" as unitive ascent through dedicated search. Many seekers of truth need and want a program to follow in order to feel close to the numinous. They are not capable of the initiative required by the first two cases of merger and intellectual inquiry. They believe in *something*, but are not sure enough of themselves to find their own way. So there are many stepwise paths available for them. Most of what is called yoga in the modern world is in this category. Buddhism has many carefully worked out programs of study or practice to attain specific goals. Though somewhat clumsy in respect of attaining unity with the Absolute, these can be perfectly suitable as

beginning stages of study. While charlatans thrive on such trusting and dedicated souls, their openness is appreciated by honest guides as well. Naïve energy can be directed into very helpful endeavors such as caring for those in need, building houses, tending soup kitchens, and the like.

The four stages of Krishna's initiation also loosely correspond to the four varnas, popularly known as castes. The brahmin or dedicated mystical seeker wants to become wholeheartedly united with the Absolute, while the kshatriya or philosopher is happiest being intellectually united with it. The vaishya or managerial type, corresponding to the stage of the present verse, efficiently incorporates the principles of the Absolute into everyday life. They are the most practical, the ones who manage the ashram, or who bring food supplies to the hungry, clothe the naked, and build shelters for the homeless. The modern world of practicality prizes the vaishyas the most. The sudra, the follower, bows down to the Absolute in the sense of doing the legwork, such as growing the food to be shared with hungry people, delivering the goods, etc. Driving a truck full of vegetables to the soup kitchen may not be considered particularly spiritual by some people, but it is equally essential to the entire enterprise. Krishna reminds us that this kind of activity is the most eminently suitable for certain types of people, and these are invaluable and just as honorable as any of the other types. All the other programs are in a sense dependent on the sudras.

Eager disciples may initially be treated as sudras by gurus, to be employed in whatever the guru sees as necessary for the maintenance of the ashram or the local community. As they gain expertise and wisdom, they can be promoted to managers, who may become philosophers, and who may, in due course, become united with the Absolute in the purest sense at the terminus of their discipleship. So these "castes," if we should even employ the term, are meant to be flexible and temporary, more like stages in a process of unfoldment. They fit well into a stepwise conception that is very much in keeping with the practical sensibility.

10) If you happen to be incapable even of practice, then become one whose every action belongs to Me, the Supreme; even doing work for My sake you shall attain to perfection.

This verse corresponds to the phrase “bow down to Me.” Krishna spells it out here: even doing work for the sake of the Absolute can bring perfect harmony. And never forget, we are all the Absolute. Work is an integral and essential part of life that helps to keep us balanced and sane.

We learned earlier that wisdom and action are not two separate things. Only simple-minded people think they are different (V, 4 & 5). Repetitive work can be used as a harmonizing meditation practice. Certainly we all have to clean the house and work to support ourselves. It is a tragedy to think of these things as unspiritual, as blocks to proper living. All aspects of life can be spiritualized, converting drudgery into ecstasy, or at least into a time for meaningful reflection.

This verse should teach us to not disparage menial tasks and those who perform them at all. Every aspect of life is spiritual. It's not so much what you do, it's how you do it that counts. From a yogic standpoint, looking down on anything is divisive and thereby counterproductive. Instead we are to spiritualize every aspect of our lives, intelligently and compassionately.

Doing work yogically, we should remember, means merging fully with the activity. If we are busy thinking, “I'm doing this as a step to enlightenment,” or “I'm being good,” or “Now I'm worshipping so-and-so,” or any of the other ways of rationalizing what we do, it knocks the spirituality right out of it. The ego is busy affixing the territory to itself that should be left untethered. Once our course of action has been chosen, either by intelligent selection or fate, we should throw ourselves into it wholeheartedly and without possessiveness.

11) If you are unable to do even this, then seek refuge (for your individuality) in My unitive Being, renouncing the benefits of all actions, as one of controlled self.

The easiest possible approach to the Absolute, if you are incapable of any directed spiritual effort at all, is to follow a simple formula, any formula, that lifts you out of an egoistic obsession with your self at the expense of others. Belief in God or godlike beings as saviors falls into this category. The Gita's favorite ideal is to not worry about the results of your action, but act for the sake of the joy of being alive. Worrying about the fruits ushers anxiety, shame and uncertainty into the Garden of Eden. In lieu of active decision-making, you can just fall back on tried and true maxims and try to hold to them.

Maybe this last verse in the series should be paraphrased "Abandon yourself in Me." Even if you have no energy to dedicate to a search for truth, you can at least rest assured that you are a spark of the Absolute. Doing so assuages the despair of feeling dissociated from life, so there is less need to long for the benefits of actions, which can never satisfy anyone anyway. Future payoffs are too remote, though we are often lured away from present happiness in hopes of attaining them.

The critical point that makes even this simplest option a challenge is that it has to be a wholesale abandonment. A small amount followed by endless second guessing or regrets will bring us to a miserable stuck condition. Most educated humans are not capable of releasing their sense of self to another entity, imaginary or otherwise, barring some kind of psychological disaster. We carry so many built in stumbling blocks that we wind up trying to suppress our intelligence with drugs or other stupefying behaviors and just go in circles. Needless to say this is a failed policy, despite its popularity. If you can sincerely surrender your whole being to the Absolute, go for it, but if you hold anything back it will just be a farce and a disaster. You are better off to choose one of the more engaging options listed earlier.

In general, surrender to an absolute principle for guidance should make life easy and reasonably satisfying. Unfortunately, it is more common to surrender to a power position masquerading as an absolute principle, which produces enslavement and degradation. Therefore the Gita prefers that we become intelligently engaged in living our lives, and not allow ourselves to be taken for fools.

The self-control mentioned here means restraining selfish urges. This is the most simplified spiritual effort of all. Our so-called animal instincts are based on purely selfish considerations, and they must be tempered with a wisdom that addresses all aspects of the situation. Any observer of the human condition should be able to discern that when people act unselfishly their communities thrive, and when they act selfishly their communities disintegrate. Stepping out of the small ‘s’ self and into the capital ‘S’ Self called the Absolute can and should be practiced at every level of life, beginning with the immediate environment of friends and family and extending to the whole world. Fear is all that is holding us back; the antidote is bravery. It takes courage to act unselfishly, to invite the world outside our comfort zone in.

The human race has actually been toying with self-annihilation for many decades, as the logical end of selfishness. It seems we would rather destroy ourselves and God’s green earth rather than convert to unselfish actions based on wisdom. Sadly, those who wield the most power generally have the biggest stake in this suicidal game. It has turned out to be very simple for vested interests to perpetuate the destructive behaviors that keep them in the upper berths of a sinking ship. They can successfully engineer the fruits of actions for their personal benefit, but at a stupendous long-term cost.

The rich grasp harder—much harder—than the poor for their greater-than-fair share of fruits. The drive for wealth emerges from a tremendous sense of insecurity. I often recall my multi-millionaire uncle, who took me out to lunch one time as his guest and then “allowed” me to pay the bill. I was employed as a

firefighter and penniless at the end of every month, but I could tell it was another feather in his cap to consider he had gained ten dollars in the deal. Never mind that he came off as little more than a brute. It certainly taught me that generosity was not a natural consequence of wealth. Later I became aware that no values are consequent to wealth, they are consequential to the development of a spiritual attitude that is very much independent of financial stature, though perhaps more likely to be stimulated by the pressures of insecurity.

12) Better indeed is knowledge than practice; than knowledge, meditation is superior; than meditation, renunciation of the benefit of action; after renunciation—peace.

In summary, the previous sequence (become one with Me; be devoted to Me; sacrifice to Me; and bow down to Me) is presented in reverse order here, except renunciation of the benefit of action has been moved from the lowest to the second highest category, possibly to fit the meter. Renunciation is a technique that can be applied at every level of existence, as long as it is properly understood.

Practicing any form of activity by rote is deadening to the soul, unless it is accompanied by understanding. If someone knows why they are asked to do something, it makes all the difference. It doesn't matter whether the practice meant here is yoga practice or employment or just attending to the details of being alive, all are enlivened by intelligent participation. Practice without awareness is simply bowing down or knuckling under, but doing it intelligently is sacrificial in the broadest sense. For instance, digging dirt gets boring pretty fast, but if you know you're digging a trench to lay pipe for a water line to your village, it helps a lot. It gives the task meaning. Being aware of the big picture is not the same as longing for fruits, either. The Gita is not trying to rule out having goals, only being dragged out of our normal state of happiness on their account. Goals motivate us, and unity with the

Absolute is in a sense a goal, as we have noted in X, 18. The rule of thumb might be expressed as it's okay to use goals to overcome inertia, but once you get going you can maintain an open attitude about what may happen next, and doing so invites the involvement of innumerable unknown potentials.

Knowledge also has its limitations. It is meditation that puts it in context, and also stabilizes it. Individual items of knowledge can just be a burden unless they are fitted into a coherent scheme of correlation, and this is where meditation or contemplation comes in. The specialization of knowledge of the modern day alongside political propaganda has led to rampant dissociation from meaning, with a number of unfortunate aftereffects, from personal confusion to global devastation. An accelerated culture doesn't take the time to reflect. The modern world is witnessing a disintegration of meaning as the old paradigms are exposed as arbitrary, but with nothing of value being mooted to replace them, beyond slogans and sound bites. Mental chaos leads to isolation and random acts of violence. Yoga cures these ills, from the individual outward to the environment. The stabilization of knowledge in meaning is related to devotion to high values, so meditation here corresponds to "be devoted to Me."

And finally, as the Gita has preached since the second chapter, relinquishing the benefits of action allows for better concentration on unitive activity. If you desire to complete your meditation because you will then become enlightened, you aren't really doing meditation at all. You need to put all such considerations out of your mind in order to be completely present in whatever you are doing. When this is accomplished, you naturally "become one with the Absolute." That thou art, *tat tvam asi*, and all that. The result is peace, or the "lonely final happiness" of XIV, 27.

Peace is the normative notion here, the absolute principle in which all the factors listed converge. If what you are doing brings peace, you are doing it right. If it makes you agitated because you

need outside factors to be altered to suit your prejudices, for example, you haven't studied your Gita enough!

This verse is reminiscent of one from the Tao Te Ching, by Lao Tzu. From Gia-fu Feng's translation:

When the great Tao is forgotten,
Kindness and morality arise.
When wisdom and intelligence are born,
The great pretense begins.

When there is no peace within the family,
Filial piety and devotion arise.
When the country is confused and in chaos,
Loyal ministers appear. (v.18)

13 & 14) He who has no hatred toward all creatures, who is also friendly and compassionate, who is free from possessiveness, and egoism, who is equalized in pain and pleasure, and forgiving, such a unitively disciplined one, who is always contented, self-controlled, firmly resolved, whose mind and reason are dedicated to Me—he, My devotee, is dear to Me.

We begin a series of verses delineating what is particularly dear to the Absolute, in other words, states reflecting union with the Absolute or particularly conducive to union. Nowadays we would say something like they are sign of mental health: these are the indicators of having our act together, of keeping our cool, being settled in our understanding. This section marks the end of the middle third of the Gita, focusing primarily on the Absolute, and begins a transition to the final third where the attunement with it is brought to bear on our everyday life. From now on Krishna will present a fascinating and little-known framework to help Arjuna become solidly established in the excellent states of mind that are listed here.

All the attitudes he mentions are generally the outcome of an equalized, globally inclusive awareness. Applying them separately as tasks or rules to be followed would be tedious and clumsy. But when a vision of the Absolute has been experienced, they are a natural state of mind to effortlessly remain in. We should recall II, 59: “Even the residual relish [for ordinary dualistic mentality] reverts on the One Beyond being sighted.”

It’s worthwhile to take a brief look at the seemingly obvious categories given in these verses.

The very first point is that a yogi must not harbor animosity toward any creature. It never fails to astonish how angry people can get over their beliefs. The list of stupidities mouthed by those who consider themselves devout would fill volumes per day. Probably to head this off, Krishna makes an unambiguous statement: you are attuned to the Absolute if you have no feelings of hatred to anyone and are naturally friendly and compassionate. We can certainly grasp that their opposite numbers are disqualifying emotions. Lest we forget, Krishna hits it hard in Chapter XVI, calling those who hate the worst of men.

When adults harbor immature feelings of anger and hatred, they prefer to dress them up in a fashion that lends them an appearance of legitimacy. Thus gods and such are invoked who (surprise!) have the very same biases as the person hurling the calumny. Usually there is no awareness of the hypocrisy or projection on the part of the devotee, either. Hostile emotions easily erase common sense. Part of their power lies in convincing us we are completely legitimate in holding them. As Saint Francis de Sales (1567-1622) expressed it, “There was never an angry man that thought his anger unjust.”

There is a second level where intelligent people feel they are justified in hating other people: because they are “bad.” Not knowing the secrets of yoga, they don’t realize that polarizing always makes the schism between good and evil, which feed off each other, more irreparable. The solution is to move toward neutrality, not toward self-righteousness, in order to mitigate evil,

which is always relative no matter how extreme it appears to be. There can be no such thing as absolute evil or absolute good. The harder we combat evil the greater it becomes, because it is the combating itself that is the evil.

So there are haters moved by blind frustration, and those who add to that an inviolable intellectual justification. This is one more case where the Isa Upanishad's truth is apparent:

Into blind darkness enter they
That worship ignorance;
Into darkness greater than that, as it were, they
That delight in knowledge. (v. 9)

If everyone had a benchmark value that hatred and similar states are on their face opposed to spirituality, we could begin to reduce the corrosive tension these emotions engender. It's so simple! And yet, nearly impossible. Like the Absolute itself, its achievement is both very near and very far away. It seems hatred is never far from the human mind. Listen for its mild form, in the endless complaining that so many prattle on with all day long, as though it justified something. Krishna assures us hatred in all forms is the first thing we have to get over.

Nataraja Guru has translated *mamah* as possessiveness, while it is usually rendered more literally as "mineness." But the next term, egotism, covers the same territory as the sense of what is mine, so his nuance is eminently justified. When we want to possess something for ourselves we unconsciously set up a division between what is ours and what isn't. The awareness of division inescapably draws us away from the unity of the Absolute, which is precisely what Arjuna is striving to preserve. Therefore he has to stop thinking in terms of what is or is not his. The wise are just as happy that someone else owns something as that they do, because they identify with the whole.

Possessiveness is not actually the same as ego, though there is some overlap. It's more of an animating principle of the ego.

Instinctive self-preservation is deeply embedded in our psyches, and as such is very difficult to completely dispense with. Only an overwhelming blast such as Arjuna has just had can do the trick. Absent that, we have generous maxims to practice that can help wean us away from possessiveness, such as those mentioned in the comments on the first verse.

The spiritual reason for de-emphasizing the ego is that it myopically identifies itself with objects of interest, setting up a dual perception of subject and object. One can hardly function without this, but it is nonetheless a block to remaining in a state of unity. Vedanta asserts there is only consciousness, within which there is a certain topology that provides the basis for making distinctions. We are trying to retain the sense of oneness and carry its blessings over into everyday life, hoping that it is not essential to abandon unity and cast ourselves wholly at the mercy of duality. And it is possible, but only if we downplay the divisive aspects of our psyche.

The ego thinks, “I know,” “I perceive,” “I want,” “I do,” and all the rest. The sense of wanting to possess is a secondary effect of separating ourselves from the whole. We push something away and then we desire to get it back. Thus intentional possessiveness is a subset of ego. Going beyond it is an impossible hurdle for most people, who are perfectly convinced that, “Of course I do. Of course I know. Of course I need.”

The ego is in charge of our preferences, directing us to move toward pleasure and away from pain. This would be fine except that many very good things have elements of pain in them, while many pleasurable items are dangerous or unhealthy. Pleasure, it turns out, is not a proper basis for decision making. So the advice to equalize pain and pleasure so they don't pervert our intelligence covers the whole gamut of ego preferences and is extremely efficacious.

Many readers of the Gita imagine that this chapter at least endorses the frenetic forms of religious worship that are called bhakti in India. Yet religious ecstasy induced by various types of

strenuous behavior actually presses the pleasure pedal to excess. The high involved is like any intense exercise, pushing the body to pour out endorphins, followed by an aftermath of ego gratification and subsequent deflation. It's like a full-body orgasm. While it may be a lot of fun, it is not what the Gita recommends by any means. Here highs and lows are to be offset with one another to achieve a steadiness that attains the Absolute. It is a quiet intensity, very subtle, with little or no outward evidence.

15) He who does not disturb (the peace of) the world and (whose peace) is not disturbed by the world, and who is free from exaggerations of joy, hate and fear—he too is dear to Me.

Here we have one of the key ideas of the Gita, that spirituality is not a matter of having an impact on the world, other than possibly fostering its inherent peacefulness. Nor is it a product of any way that the world impacts us. So many take up the cross of living a spiritual life, and then define it in terms of how you go about changing the world. Often there are tragic repercussions. War and genocide are ways to “improve the world.” True spirituality is about changing ourselves, which is the only practice that has a lasting positive impact. Sadly, many people wage war on themselves and consider it a way to improve the world also. Soon they become major misery makers for everyone around them. It turns out that our world is a reflection of who we are, albeit a reflection that most of the time is very difficult to discern and not the least bit obvious. When we are attuned to the Absolute we become linked with the natural order, which is perfect as it is, as opposed to the separatist tendencies of an ego-driven individual or group.

I like Radhakrishnan's version of the first phrase: “He from whom the world does not shrink, and who does not shrink from the world.” Everyone else says basically the same thing as Nataraja Guru. But shrinking from the world or not recalls Arjuna's original urge to flee from the battle. Plus, when we are out of balance, the

world sometimes seems to reel away from us nightmarishly, as though all its good parts at least are avoiding us on purpose. In the house of mirrors that is consciousness, the two movements occur in tandem. Yoga brings us to a state of equilibrium where we are in the world and able to remain completely steady. As early as II, 48 we were told, “In sameness consists the unitive way.”

The three examples of emotional over-reaction mentioned in the second half of the verse—exaggerations of joy, hate and fear—are definitely related to disturbing the peace of the world of the first half.

“Exaggerations of joy” that we are asked to be free of would aptly characterize the well-known forms of bhakti worship, which aim to achieve transcendence by pushing ecstasy to the limit. In younger people who are full of energy, energetic approaches to the Absolute are reasonably appropriate. As we age we tend to move from crude action to more subtle contemplation, from agitation to calmness. There is nothing wrong with following a program that appeals to you, so long as it is not divisive. But humans being the frail creatures we are, getting high tends to unleash monsters from the id, that is, ugly urges lurking out of sight in the unconscious. I have often observed athletes in the midst of their sport, for instance, being very hostile and judgmental, and even coming to blows, because their intensity erases their inhibitions. Later they usually regret their hotheaded actions. Likewise, religious revivalists can be whipped to a lynching hysteria in the midst of a sermon on brotherly love. Sadly, we don’t often hear of them regretting their foul deeds, but they should.

I have often regretted that the intensity of the antiwar and civil rights movement I was a part of in the 1960s, coupled as it was with marvelous spiritualizing drug highs and over-exaggerated optimism, energized the much better organized rightwing reaction that has gotten such a firm grip on America’s civil life at present. Now we can only hope that by living and teaching peace we can make amends by rekindling a more balanced form of society.

Interestingly, the word *amarsha* can mean both hate and, as Nataraja Guru has it, haste. While editing his Gita commentary, I wondered if it was a misprint, so I checked, and it's also correct. Probably he did it because hate was mentioned already. The word does mean hate, but it also has the sense of impatience, which can lead to anger. So haste and hate are somewhat related. We have all probably experienced how when we're in a hurry our temper tends to be much shorter than it is when we are calm and relaxed. That would give a very good idea of what Vyasa has in mind here. Nonetheless, I have gone along with the more typical translation, hate, and altered the Guru's translation by subtracting one letter.

Marsha means patience or endurance, so *amarsha* correspondingly signifies impatience or volatility. Since the advice is phrased as a double negative, it is clear that the point is to not overreact to events but to sit with them quietly and calmly until you grasp their entire purport. Be patient. Take your time. There is an old adage, "Marry in haste and repent at leisure," which carries the same sense as *marsha* if we take the act of marriage to stand for actions in general. And there is another from Thailand: "Life is short, so we should act very, very... slowly."

So, how is it that impatience takes us away from attunement with the Absolute? Since patience can be a form of defeatism, perhaps impatience reflects a more wide-awake mentality? Does it have to be the face of hatred?

Certainly, impatience is hastier than patience. If we examine our impatience it invariably springs from some tension in ourselves. There is usually an outside trigger, but it releases our own preexisting exasperation and frustration. One of the first things a yogi learns is that permitting our happiness to be based on external events is an invitation to misery. The yogi's call is to be strongly grounded in the Absolute, so that the ups and downs of life, which for the most part are perfectly normal and predictable, don't knock us for a loop. They are more like storm waves crashing on solid rocks.

The third affliction mentioned in this verse, fear, is a state of mind we always seek to quell. Yet propagandists successfully use it as a technique to drive people where they want them to go. The shadow side of our mind seems to take a perverse glee in abandoning itself to intense emotions that temporarily short-circuit the rational faculty, and so we willingly go along with negative impulses if certain reservations can be overcome by persuasion. Many psychological studies have been done to gauge the impact of crowd behavior on normally sober citizens, and it's scarily significant. People permit themselves to do all sorts of vicious actions if they feel they have the approval of a peer group. This is because normally we merely repress fear because we are afraid to face it squarely and properly defang it.

Our best defense against all forms of unhealthy exaggeration is to train ourselves to examine situations coolly and intelligently, and not to give in to impulsive reactions. Opening ourselves to the onrushing internal wave of the Absolute requires a relinquishment that is curiously similar to abandoning ourselves to outside influences. It is quite possible that a lot of the histrionics of the modern political battlefields at least began as attempts to become instruments of a higher power. The Gita has been carefully instructing us how to avoid making this disastrous mix-up of frames of reference, but it's a very tricky business. Because intelligence has become a dirty word thanks to a number of factors, including the horrific excesses of rationalists in denying many truths that are perfectly obvious to the less well educated, there is a pervasive belief that intelligence has to be subtracted from the picture to permit spirituality to fill the void. The Gita, of course, extols intelligence wielded with expertise, which would include not erecting arbitrary barricades to common sense. The present chapter follows the same blueprint. It is about bringing intelligence to bear on the whole range of the problems of life, not at all about disconnecting the intellect via excessive emotionalism.

16) He who expects no favors, who is clean, expert, who sits unconcerned, carefree, who has relinquished all undertakings—he, My devotee, is dear to Me.

The first word of the Sanskrit, *anapeksha*, is most interesting. MW tells us it means “regardless, careless, indifferent or impartial.” It is the negation of *apeksha*, meaning in part, “looking round or about, consideration of, regard to, connection of cause with effect or of individual with species; looking for, expectation, hope, need, requirement.” In the negation of this there is an echo of the Gita’s theme of living without expectations of reward, and there is definitely the sense of not looking to circumstances to provide for your needs. Fully-established yogis are so present that there is no time sense and hence no cause and effect to worry about. They rely on the Absolute for sustenance—at least on the mental and spiritual levels, if not the physical—and all else is gravy. Several of the other terms relate to this idea also, namely the one “who sits unconcerned, carefree, who has relinquished all undertakings.” Since yogic attunement is the highest achievement, what else is there to do? This attitude, far from bringing works to an end, frees the yogi to act with expertise.

Nataraja Guru’s rendering, that we should expect no favors, uproots a large chunk of human vanity. Very many people relate to the divine realm as a provider of boons or an answerer of prayers. We are already richly supplied with incredible wealth on every level. Since everything comes to us as a “favor” anyway, longing for additional blessings is dependent on a basic ignorance grounded in selfishness. It’s a very subtle gesture to live in total reliance on the Absolute and yet not in any way be demanding, pleading, or hopeful of special dispensation from it. True poise means having no doubts whatsoever, nor any expectations, and only union with the Absolute can provide sufficient confidence to achieve it.

Obviously such a state cannot be led up to in stages. It is an all-or-nothing proposition. Nonetheless, as seekers of truth we are

impelled to try. Guru Nitya gives this advice, in *Living The Science of Harmonious Union*:

When we look at the lives of great people of mature wisdom we see that compassion wells up in them for matters that look insignificant to others, while they look unconcerned in matters of personal loss and on occasions when others would be agitated.... They are in a solid state with regard to their personal integrity. All the same they are receptive of the pains and agitations of the people around them. As they are moved to compassion, they dedicate all their time in the service of all sentient beings, [yet] they remain unmoved in witnessing the transient ways of the world.

A person who lives constantly in transcendence, such as one's guru, is also a human being. We are encouraged to watch how such a person overcomes situations that should cause agitation. Although in the beginning it may look as if we are only imitating our model, in the course of time our choices become habitual. Then it is no longer imitation but a spontaneous adherence to higher ideals and we also become established in the tranquility of a yogi. (123)

Cleanliness is mentioned frequently in the Gita, and is to be taken as referring primarily to spiritual purity rather than the simple physical version, though that also has its value. In most cases it's easy enough to wash the body and tidy up our room, but tidying up our psyche takes a bit more doing. We have to be careful not to treat spiritual purity as a refined version of physical cleanliness, where we merely have to act in a certain restrained way. We suffer from a condition that can't be disguised by a sweet smelling deodorant. We are called to dig deeply into our hidden stinkiness, to throw light into the murky recesses we prefer to pretend are not there, and really wrestle with any demons that spring forth. This is in fact one of the key markers of a spiritual life: boldly penetrating where ordinary mortals fear to tread.

The root of the word used for cleanliness and purity, *suc*, reveals a sense of radiance, of glowing like a flame, and even the agony of burning. Thus there is a kinship with the root *bha* of bhakti, light. The meaning of *suchi*, according to MW, includes: “shining, glowing, gleaming, radiant, bright; clear, clean, pure; holy, unsullied, undefiled, innocent, honest, virtuous.” So being clean means bringing light into areas that have previously been shrouded in darkness. If we harbor any guilty secrets we will have a hard time evincing *suchi*. Purity will be discussed in more depth in XIII, 7.

As a corollary, we can only be unconcerned if we have nothing to hide. Ordinary unconcern is often a feigned casualness to cloak secret tensions and derangements, a kind of false front. The Gita insists we confront those quirks of the psyche and lay them to rest. One of the most intriguing and baffling aspects of a realized person is how unconcerned they are, in palpably authentic ways, about matters that obsess the rest of us. And not just in a spaced-out, unworldly manner, by “not noticing,” but with full cognizance of the issue in question. They truly see that everything is traceable back to the One Beyond, the Absolute, and so it strikes them as being in perfectly good hands, so to speak. There is no emergency. Plus, as all manifestation is reciprocally related, an anxious attitude attracts anxiety-producing aspects of life, while a peaceful one leads toward peace. We can uncover precisely what our nightmares are by examining the factors that cause us to worry. So remaining unconcerned is at once part of the goal and an excellent tactic for achieving it, as long as it’s grounded in honesty.

Only if we are unconcerned is it possible to be free of care, *gatavyathah*. While being carefree and unconcerned might strike us as almost trivial, like the phrase “footloose and fancy free,” there is real profundity here. We keep throwing blocks up for ourselves as long as we try to suppress our continuously transforming nature, or screen out fearful awarenesses. We have to both accept things as they are and become more open to possibilities in order to

be carefree. It is easy for children, but supremely challenging for adults once we have lost our innocence. This is echoed in Jesus' phrase, "Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven." (Matt 18.3)

Carefree here can be contrasted with one of the "demonic" values mentioned in XVI, 11: "Engrossed with infinite cares lasting till doomsday." Being obsessed with never-ending trivial details is a hallmark of hell on earth, and the least we can do is struggle to slough them off. A lot of humans believe in staying busy so they don't have to think about anything; the Gita's philosophy is the exact opposite. Much of the instruction of the final third of the work is how to free ourselves from bondage by infusing contemplation into our actions.

Additionally, "unconcerned and carefree" is about as close as the Gita gets to advocating levity. One of the distinguishing marks of a worthy guru is their sense of humor. They evince the "laughter of the immortals." I know of so many examples I couldn't begin to relate them without bringing this commentary to a close right now, so I'll just quote Paramahansa Yogananda: "A saint who is sad is a sad saint." True understanding sweeps away morbidity and depression to reveal the amusing divine sport at the heart of creation.

Guru Nitya elaborates on this theme near the midpoint of *That Alone, The Core of Wisdom*:

The central teaching of the Upanishads can be given in one sentence: *tarati sokam atmavid*, the knower of the Self crosses over all pains. *tarati* means crosses over; *sokam*, sorrow; and *atmavid*, the knower of the Self. The mark of knowledge is *asokam*, having no sorrow. Where there is sorrow there is ignorance, and where there is no ignorance there is no sorrow. You can easily find out whether you are ignorant or not by looking at yourself. If your mind has sorrow, if you are sad or in misery, it means you are in a state of ignorance. (329)

Nataraja Guru wrote the following about this verse, apparently not suspecting that in later years he would be attended by a group of Western freaks more like pirates than monks:

The epithets *suchi* (clear, clean) and *daksha* (expert) do not suggest the sloppiness or slovenliness which is often condoned in the name of other-worldliness or mysticism. A man of devotion is not steeped in the negative state of inert ignorance. A contemplative is not a hobo type. The Gita here discountenances any type of spirituality which does not include being awake to the details of a given situation, without which no one could be described as *daksha* (expert), i.e. a man of savoir faire. (526)

It's one thing to be somewhat battered by the vagaries of life while striving to live without cares, and another altogether to ignore basic human dignity. Mental sloppiness is often an indication of either addiction or some other imbalance, a symptom for which a cause should be investigated.

The idea of relinquishing all undertakings has been dealt with in detail in Chapters III and IV. It does not suggest not doing anything, but means giving up the sense of agency that resides in the ego. Thoughts and actions arise from deep within our psyches, and are only witnessed at the last moment by our conscious mind. We should therefore join our conscious intelligence onto the inner surge of our respective talents, fostering the best and deleting the rest. Finding the perfect balance point between action and inaction, or leading and following an inner muse, is one of the toughest challenges before any aspirant, but the result is always spectacular.

Taken as a whole, the values depicted in this verse reveal a happy, amused, peaceful and wide awake participant in the wonders of life.

17) He who neither rejoices nor hates, nor grieves nor desires, and who has relinquished both the beneficial and the harmful—such a one, endowed with devotion, is dear to Me.

If you take this verse wrong, you might be led to believe that you aren't supposed to have emotions, or react to anything, or indeed, be alive in the human sense at all. A lot of people, misguided by a loose interpretation of scripture, strive mightily to thwart their normal functioning and imagine it's unspiritual to feel feelings. Always remember, the Gita teaches freedom, and freedom through expression, not repression. Thus if it seems to be asking us to curtail our natural expressivity, we have to reassess our interpretation. Conscious existence is not a mistake to be erased, it is the whole reason for being.

If we look closely, we can see that the states of mind we are asked to discard in this verse are in fact optional. That is, the states are optional, not the discarding of them. We may revel in our good fortune or curse our bad fortune, and it's possible to carry on nursing our reactions for a long time. But clinging to those states takes us out of our center, thereby reducing what the Gita refers to as union with the Absolute. They should be allowed to dissipate as soon as practicable.

We have to find ways to let go of our compulsive feelings instead of holding onto them. Dr. Taylor, the neuroanatomist, puts it this way, in *My Stroke of Insight* (New York: Viking, 2006):

Although there are certain limbic system (emotional) programs that can be triggered automatically, it takes less than 90 seconds for one of these programs to be triggered, surge through our body, and then be completely flushed out of our blood stream. My anger response, for example, is a programmed response that can be set off automatically. Once triggered, the chemical released by my brain surges through my body and I have a physiological experience. Within 90 seconds of the initial trigger, the chemical component of my

anger has completely dissipated from my blood and my automatic response is over. If, however, I remain angry after those 90 seconds have passed, then it is because I have *chosen* to let that circuit continue to run. Moment by moment, I make the choice to either hook into my neurocircuitry or move back into the present moment, allowing that reaction to melt away as fleeting physiology.

What most of us don't realize is that we are unconsciously making choices about how we respond all the time. It is so easy to get caught up in the wiring of our preprogrammed reactivity.... (146)

This is a modern version of exactly what the Gita is recommending. All of us are buffeted by events, and it is easy to feel that we are victims of circumstances and become overwhelmed by them. But the wise yogi checks them out—experiences them, if you will—but then as quickly as possible returns to the calmness of neutrality that alone permits full conscious awareness. The experiences themselves do not require a cover up; in fact it is much healthier to allow them to happen for a little while. In the case of a serious tragedy, the rebalancing might take a long time, because it shouldn't be forced. The yogi never loses sight of the neutrality symbolized by the Absolute, but the invisible cords that produce the imbalances can only be released at the rate they become visible to the mind's eye.

This technique also accords well with modern neuroscience. Each time we relive a memory, it is reconsolidated into a new version. If we leave traumatic memories alone because we're afraid of them, they continue to fester and drive us unwittingly before them, like tumbleweeds in a gale. But if we recall them to mind, they can be rebuilt into less terrifying versions. Many traumatically terrifying events of our childhood seem much more bearable to an adult who understands what they mean. So the more we critically examine them the more our traumas lose their power as impellers of action.

To address the elements of the verse one at a time, let's start with rejoicing. Unlike unalloyed joy, which is the nature of the Absolute and thus ours as well, rejoicing is a kind of carrying on about joy. It often comes as a reaction to oppression, as soaring feelings of relief. While it's an undeniably wonderful sensation, nothing that is a reaction can be considered perfectly neutral. Moreover, when rejoicing is amplified with the intention of forcing the joy, it can transform into something else entirely. Most of us have known people who have lost their grip, so to speak, and who cover up their discomfort by desperately trying to appear joyful, but under the surface there is something ugly driving them. Celebrants are often trying to run away from their unhappiness, not knowing that the harder they try to evade themselves the greater the consequent misery will be. Pure unalloyed joy comes only after we quit all escape mechanisms and soberly face the music.

The Sanskrit word translated as rejoicing, *hrishyati*, adds the sense of astonishment or surprise, and is related to the word for the hair standing on end as in fear. Recall that Arjuna experienced this physiological reaction when he sank into despair in the first chapter, and again when he gained a mind-blowing vision of the Absolute in Chapter XI. It is apparently a more superficial state than the joy of union praised throughout the Gita. Needless to say, the whooping it up of Krishna worshippers falls well within the scope of pressing for an excess of joy. In a reciprocal universe, taking the good in opposition to the bad, or joy in opposition to sorrow, inevitably reinforces the negative side along with the positive. A yogi seeks to bring all such conflicts to an end by joining, not dividing, the polarities.

Which brings us to hate, making its third appearance in the chapter because it is the flip side of rejoicing here. Many unhappy people love to foster hatred. There is something attractive about it, something very satisfying to the gut instincts. It's like a carnivore bringing down its prey after a chase, and then tearing it to pieces and devouring it. There is a wild joy in it! Rejoicing and hatred really do form a dialectical pair, with each implying its opposite.

Hatred is not always obvious. It can be disguised in many ways, even as humor. Humor is often victim-oriented, done at someone else's expense. In those cases the funny reveler is compensating for serious resentments. The transcendental humor referred to in the last verse is of a different order entirely. Since we are all in the same boat, it invites us to laugh with, not at, the butt of the joke.

By addressing our problems as outside ourselves we may believe we are being terrifically clever, but we are actually being terribly divisive, unintentionally energizing destructive forces. Most totalitarian societies were designed to solve problems, but of course they always create far more difficulties than they solve. Even close to the Gita's home, we see in the modern world that a segment of those who identify themselves as Hindus—heirs to the very womb and nursery of non-hurting and universal tolerance—are becoming increasingly belligerent and even violent. When people allow themselves to blame others for their own miseries, instead of addressing them right in their own hearts, tragedy is sure to follow.

When we see how syndicated solutions go awry we might be tempted to abandon all efforts and just run away, but this is exactly what the Gita unequivocally countermands from the outset. Instead, these are opportunities for serious self-examination, keeping in mind that the solution begins within us, not outside.

Laurence Gonzales reminds us of the importance of keeping a close eye on our own unconscious motivations, in his book *Everyday Survival*, (New York: Norton, 2008):

What we think we're doing and the outcomes of our actions are often strangers to each other. (99)

When we are not living examined lives, when we aren't paying attention, when we are not practicing self-reliance, other forces slip in to dominate our lives, our behavior, and ultimately our fate and our future. Relying on others and losing our own abilities has made ours a fearful and

vindictive society. Societies, like individuals, build emotional systems. Shocks to the system can accumulate and lead to overreaction. (141)

Gonzales cites a number of famous psychological experiments that show that humans like to fight. We select our identity to underscore our hostility, while imagining we are defending that identity from destruction. We would do better to remember Narayana Guru's advice:

The many faiths have but one essence; not seeing this, in this world, like the blind men and the elephant, many kinds of reasoning are used by the unenlightened who become distressed; having seen this, without being disturbed, remain steadfast.

By fighting it is impossible to win; by fighting one another no faith is destroyed; one who argues against another's faith, not recognizing this, fights in vain and perishes; this should be understood. (*Atmopadesa Satakam*, Verses 44 and 46)

Grief and desire are paired to remind us that they also are a polarity, which is not so obvious. Their relation was made clear in Chapter II, verses 62 and 63: "Meditating on objects of sense-interest there is born in man an attachment for them; from attachment rises passion; in the face of passion (frustrated) arises rage. From rage is produced distortion of values, from distortion of values memory-lapse, from memory-lapse comes loss of reason, and from loss of reason he perishes." In short, grief arises from frustrated desires. In addition, they are an inward reflection of the more outward-aimed rejoicing and hating, so verse 17 reveals a fourfold polarity stemming from our attempts to superficially manipulate our environment.

It's safe to say that most spiritually oriented people would assert that we should be beneficial and not harmful to the world, so the Gita's advice to shrug off both will be a bit baffling. The key is

that our judgment of one versus the other is an assessment by the ego, based on inadequate information. It's very hard to say whether something is beneficial or not, and if we try to judge we will invoke the Uncertainty Principle, which tells us that the very act of observation interferes with what is being observed. As noted above, the most repressive societies begin with the desire to "fix" the world's problems, and the inverse proposition, that we should therefore not try to do anything at all, is about equally flawed. Somewhere in between these two extremes is the optimal path, mysterious and fluid.

Jesus' advice to judge not, and then we will not be judged, is the same mystical teaching, with a correct aim at ourselves instead of the world. A Sufi-style parable told by Catherine Heath on her website thehighestlove.com makes the idea eminently clear:

There once was a poor old man who owned a beautiful white horse.

Whenever noblemen passed through the village, they always noticed the horse and offered handsome sums of money for the stallion. But the old man always declined their offers, saying, "This horse is my friend. How can I sell my friend?"

One morning the old man awoke to find the horse was gone. The village people gathered and said, "Old man you were a fool not to sell the horse. You could have been wealthy! Now it has been stolen, and you have nothing. It is a great misfortune!" But the old man replied, "Don't go so far as to say that. Whether the horse was stolen or not, or whether it is a misfortune or a blessing, is unknown. All we know is that the horse is not in the stable."

Some days later the horse returned, bringing with it several beautiful wild mares. Again the village people gathered, and they said, "Old man you were right! The horse was not stolen, and it was not a misfortune. It was a blessing, and now you have many fine horses!" But the old man replied, "Again you go too far. Don't say it's a good thing, don't say it's a bad

thing. Just say the horse is back. Whether it is a blessing or a misfortune is unknown.”

Some days later the old man’s only son began to train the wild mares, but he was thrown and trampled, and one of his legs was badly broken. Again the village people gathered. “Oh old man, you were right! It was not a blessing but a great misfortune, and now your only son is lame! With a sigh the old man replied, “Don’t say it’s a good thing, don’t say it’s a bad thing, just say my son has broken his leg. Whether it is a blessing or a misfortune is unknown.”

It happened that a few weeks later the country went to war, and all the able bodied young men were forcibly taken for the military. Only the old man’s son was passed over, because he was crippled. The whole village was crying and weeping, for they believed their sons would probably be killed and never come home to them. In their grief they came to the old man and said, “You were right old man, your son’s injury has proven to be a blessing. Your son may be crippled, but he is with you, while our sons are gone forever! The old man simply shook his head and said, “Will you never learn? Only say that your sons have been forced into the military and my son has not. More than that is not known.”

Emulating the old man’s unitive attitude is what is described in this verse as devotion to the Absolute, or bhakti.

18) He who is the same to foe and friend, and also in honor and dishonor, who is the same in cold and heat, in pleasure and pain, and who is free from attachment,

Almost everyone is subtly prejudiced in favor of their friends and holds stronger negative feelings about their enemies. Yet prejudice of any kind is utterly foreign to the spirit of the Gita. Like a proper judge, the wise yogi strives to apprehend things as near to their true stature as possible. Adding our own spin to

situations clouds the waters, not just in the world outside but in our own psyches as well. When we presume all faults belong to our enemies, a typical war mentality, we are heading toward conflict. We should be clear that all humans have good and bad aspects, and not polarize around our preferences. It's actually very blissful to remain neutral in the midst of conflict, and this can never happen so long as we take sides. This is the essence of the Gita's vastly liberal philosophy.

It's hard to see how honor and dishonor differ very much from censure and praise, found in the next verse. In this case, the words translated as honor and dishonor refer to our own inner judgments about outer situations or people. Censure and praise, on the other hand, are judgments rendered on us from without, mostly by people who don't know us very well and are primarily projecting their own faults and expectations onto us. While essentially the same, the directional arrows are reversed.

We are trained early in life to make judgments based on admirable versus unacceptable behavior, and this is fine as far as it goes. A lot of pedagogues go overboard with it, however, even to the point of obsession. We can fritter away our lives making judgments about the relative merits of other people, and adjusting our identity to bring us in contact with those who share our prejudices while demonizing those who don't. Unconsciously we are imagining that by holding the correct, gold-plated opinions sanctioned by God or our segment of society, we are assuring our well-appointed afterlife or that our side will prevail. Sometimes we imagine that by putting others down we are raising ourselves up. All we're really doing is spreading misery and hardship using our attitudes and actions for weapons. To the Gita, this is all a sick waste of time, a form of veiled hatred.

Yogis, like everyone, experience natural urges to judge and interfere with the people they encounter. Like the startle reflex when you nearly step on a snake, it's virtually impossible to do away with the immediate reaction. The difference is that a yogi doesn't simply act on the urge, but lets it dissipate so they can

examine the problem dispassionately. The ego would have us believe that our knee jerk responses are divinely or at least intelligently inspired, which places them above reproach. The wise yogi anticipates that snap judgments are likely to be tainted with a lot of personal baggage, and introduces intellect into the mix. It's nearly always true that first impressions are a far cry from settled understanding. In fact, it's a good meditation to recall some instances where your initial impression turned out to be radically different from your feelings after becoming better acquainted with the person or situation.

Cold and heat do not refer to actual temperatures, though again literalists sit in the snow or walk on coals and call it yoga practice. People have cold or warm attitudes, and we should not be deflected from our neutral ground by how they feel about us. If they are cold, let them walk away without trying to hold onto them. If they are too warm, gently push them back a couple of feet, so you have a little breathing room. And coming as it does right after honor and dishonor, this pair also refers to our feelings about others. We should not either snub anyone or come on too strong, based on our preexisting feelings. A yogi does not nurse a grudge or secretly cherish anyone, either. When the extremes are brought to the mean through yoga practice, it becomes easy to maintain a kindly and open attitude to all, and so to treat people as they are instead of how we wish they were. More on this subject will be found at VI, 7.

The pleasure-pain duality has received a lot of attention ever since the second chapter. Attachment is closely related to this pair, since we are hardwired in our brains to avoid pain and seek pleasure. If we want to be free, we must learn to see how our wiring impels us to act and react and not be unduly influenced by such urges.

In Indian philosophy, the ego is the part of the mental system that becomes attached to preferences, usually associated with pain versus pleasure dichotomies. The ego is a normal and healthy part of our makeup, as long as it is kept in bounds by a measure of

detachment. Even microscopic flatworms move away from painful stimuli and toward food rewards. The yogi seeks to rise above such automatic, predetermined behavior by yoking intelligence with action.

19) to whom censure and praise are equal, who is silent (in manner), content with whatever happens to come, having no fixed abode, mentally constant—such a man of devotion is dear to Me.

On paper, censure and praise, similar to the fame and shame of X, 5, might strike us as relatively trivial. It might seem a simple matter to take them in stride, since they are “only words,” but if you’ve ever had to deal with their effects in any significant fashion you must have felt their bite, as Krishna pointed out in II, 34-36. The power of words is well known in Vedanta, as Guru Nitya points out in *That Alone*:

A word is like a bomb. When I throw the grenade of a word to you it bursts into your mind, with the result that a meaning is evoked. In Sanskrit this bursting aspect of words is called *sphotam*.... We are shooting at each other with the bullets of words. They come and hit us and we react to them. So our world of conscious activity is caused by the bullets of words. (286-7)

The actual words hurled at us are merely the skin of a very formidable beast, and underneath them are pointed barbs of various emotions, including hatred or toadying. It can be hard work indeed to weed out our sensitivity to what others say to allow for a state of equal-mindedness. The more usual path is to merely numb ourselves to what others say, either by hypnotic meditation practices, drawing a dark veil of *tamas* over them; or in the case of sycophants, believing the lies they tell us. A true yogi does not consider any of these to be viable solutions.

The ancient Greeks recognized this situation in the myth of the Sirens, whose songs lured sailors off course to wreck on the

rocks. The allure of the songs was so powerful that the sailors had to seal their ears with beeswax lest they be either lured to destruction or otherwise deflected from their proper course. The solution offered is more a forceful shutting out of the input than yogic finesse, however. The Gita wants to teach us how to hold to our course with our ears wide open, more like Odysseus only without having to lash ourselves to the mast.

Our attachment to censure and praise begins very early in life, when as little children we scheme for the affections of our parents or caregivers. As we move toward adulthood, we learn to orient ourselves to the world in terms of other people's opinions of us, both positively and negatively. This energizes the bifurcation of the world into those aspects we like and those we despise, in other words, delineated by our ego preferences. The moment we become reactive instead of active, paradise is lost.

Because of its sting, censure usually makes us pull inward and stifle ourselves, and to look for a psychological hiding place. To instead stand firm and take the criticism, openly admitting our faults while discountenancing any false accusations, is an act of bravery. It is not learned in a day. We should not admit to more than our fair share, either, which is what the bruised ego often does, out of despair. Reeling in pain, we decide we are no good at all, that every possible fault is ours alone and everyone else is perfect. Some religions prey on this very common attitude of the injured or immature ego, reinforcing the beliefs that the individual is irrevocably sinful and holding out their particular sect as the only antidote.

Bullheadedness can also deflect blame, but it is a purely defensive position to begin with, not at all the same as countering it with wisdom. Pointedly ignoring or blasting back at criticism is far inferior to being like a vast pool in which any stones thrown into it make barely a ripple.

Praise is almost more insidious, because we don't usually take an attitude of opposition to it. It goes right past our defenses, to inflate our egos. We welcome it, and quickly and subtly learn to

manage our actions to invite more of it. But managed actions are not unitive in any sense. We become like an actor playing primarily for applause, and can easily lose ourselves in the process. Ulterior motives are subversive of inner harmony.

To give an example, I am an amateur pianist who has loved the instrument from birth. In early adulthood, while in the tumultuous beginning stages of my relationship with my guru, Nitya, I was rededicating myself to learning to play well as a form of yoga. While meditating at the piano one day, I had a vision of my parents and grandparents gathered around and listening to me perform as a child. They were enthusiastic and encouraging, but what this revealed to me was that I still retained lingering deleterious influences from those occasions. In the back of my mind I was still playing for my relatives' approval and attention, which was an inferior motivation and a distraction. It was turning the music into a way of proving I was okay, making it a compensation for insecurities that I was theoretically discarding. The realization was an aha! moment, where I could laugh at myself and easily let go of those ghosts. As an adult I realized that my grandfather at least would have been miserable to have to listen to a kid play the piano, and any enthusiasm on his part would have been feigned. It was quite freeing to begin to play solely for the optimum expression of the music and my own joy. I am still happy to share beautiful music with anyone who cares to listen, but there is no longer that unconscious compulsion in it, no need to attract attention to myself.

Compliments touch our secret hopes for being worthy and admired, and they make us glow inside. Most of us hear more criticism than praise in our lives, and it often feels like a knife in the heart even when we know it is wholly unfounded. All of us have good and bad qualities, but in our core we are not those qualities. It takes a strong connection with this awareness to deflect either kind of input and hold to a neutral evaluation of ourself. Practice helps. Knowing that you will undoubtedly react to outside

opinions prepares you to examine your reactions and let them go when it happens.

Since in real life censure and praise can be serious obstacles, difficult to overcome, in many cases a yogic technique such as the Gita's is required to lay them to rest. In practice this means they are to be matched one against the other in order to attain the sameness in which their effects are transcended. If someone praises you, you should think simultaneously of your unsavory qualities, and vice versa. As much as our egos would love to be treated as all good, everyone is a unique amalgam of many degrees of the good, the bad and the ugly. Over and above this give and take, you should know you are not really either honorable or dishonorable. You are the Absolute.

The effects of both praise and blame are more difficult to detect in ourselves than in others, so a guru can be a big help in this area. They very often can "read" your state of mind and will provide a counter to it. This can be shocking or surprising, to whatever degree we identify with our state of imbalance.

This reminds me of another story. In the first Portland Gurukula in 1971, Nitya was very active in counterbalancing everyone both personally and as a group. In a wild and chaotic group of young people, I could see him in my mind's eye as moving around psychically to maintain a dynamic equilibrium, preventing our collective consciousness from getting out of hand. It required him to be more extreme than he would have preferred to be, I'm sure, because we were all over the map, experimenting with breaking every rule in the book. One time during morning hatha yoga, he gave evidence of how he was personally helping each of us to be equal minded, as well. I'm not too flexible, and had been struggling with a number of the postures, though making slow progress. One morning I was finally able to do a successful "plow," which is a shoulder stand with the legs brought back behind the head to touch the floor. In those early days, naïve people like me imagined that enlightenment was dependent on being able to get into certain poses. I felt a rush of satisfaction as I

finally attained the awkward position. Upside down, I heard Nitya say, “Look at Scott.” I thought, “Wow, he sees what I’ve accomplished and he is going to praise me. This is great.” Nitya went on, “For a big man, he is so stiff and rigid. He really isn’t very good at yoga at all.” All the air went out of my balloon. But I laughed to myself, because I got his message loud and clear: “Be unitive. Don’t gloat. And I’m right there with you, inside your head.” Where I expected praise, he delivered mild criticism to bring me back to a neutral position.

We should also note here that the Gita offers us yet another dialectical pair, albeit a subtle one. The expression of sameness and groundedness in the Absolute moves outward to foe and friend alike, cited in the last verse, and it is matched by inbound feelings of either approval or disapproval, likewise from friends and foes both. We may imagine we have isolated our self-image from other people’s opinions, but when we hear real words describing who they imagine us to be, it hits us in our secret ego-nest. It can cut us to the quick or make us puff up like some ludicrous fish. It doesn’t much matter that other people know very little about us, true or not what they say has a powerful impact.

When a devotee of the Absolute becomes strong and free, they are likely to meet a lot of resistance from frightened souls ground down under the boot heel of conformity. There is a lot of resentment of freedom by those who have unconsciously abandoned theirs. Some Christians, for instance, are taught that yoga is a trick of the devil that brings enslavement. Ludicrous, but apparently they believe it. You must be prepared to hold to your own dharma in the face of mean-spirited opposition. It helps to have compassion for those who resent someone doing what they would secretly love to do too, since an invisible hand of punishment hangs over their heads all the time, stifling their own expression.

The gist then, is this: a yogi’s state of mind should not be determined by other people’s opinions, pro or con. Nor should those opinions be pointedly ignored. They should be scanned to

see to what extent they reflect the reality of the situation. A yogi must not allow their ego to block valid criticism. There is bound to be a kernel of truth in almost any opinion, and sometimes a bushel of it. The yogi takes it for what it's worth, consciously discarding the tangential part while taking helpful suggestions to heart.

The silent manner recommended here is utterly different from the modern practice of making a big racket and calling it bhakti. Getting worked up and celebrating are fun once in awhile, especially for youngsters, but they are at base merely bodily events. Because of the advice accompanying this advocacy of quietude, especially the next line, "content with whatever happens to come," we can detect the need for openness within the silence. It is not a turning away from, but an opening up to, the world. Paradoxically, if you are busy loudly chanting and ringing your cymbals, you are deaf to everything outside your immediate performance. The quieter you are, the more you can hear.

Many people who lack grounding in their true nature feel a desperate need to prove their existence. They feel compelled to make noise and move around a lot, as if that was somehow proof they were alive. Our most essential nature is, after all, devoid of perceptible content, so it can be unsettling to the untrained ego. If you can't relax into the emptiness, you might be compelled to chatter incessantly, not realizing that the emptiness is completely full. Paradoxically, the stream of hot air passing over the vocal cords with nothing to say is ample proof of the emptiness of the talker. The Biblical "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity," refers to the same. In the original sense, vanity means emptiness.

Speaking of the Bible, Jesus' Sermon on the Mount also weighs in in favor of a quiet and restrained relationship with the Absolute: "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. 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." (Matt. 6:1, 2) The ego would prefer to

strut like a peacock and be admired by onlookers, but there is nothing spiritual in it, only the joke of a naked emperor on parade.

“Having no fixed abode” does not mean a yogi has to be homeless, although moving about does have a certain value in averting mental stagnation for some people. Your abode is where you hang out in your mind. We often build dens of self-reinforcing ideas and struggle not to break free but to stay well inside them. The phrase means a yogi must be flexible, willing to step outside their web of cherished beliefs and opinions to meet a new friend or idea with an open mind. When life shows us we are wrong, we shouldn’t defensively cling to our beliefs but lightheartedly give them up in favor of the better way that has been revealed. You can learn this important lesson without going anywhere.

This verse offers an interesting dialectical pairing, of movement and immobility together. The yogi is mentally constant, grounded in truth and reliably steadfast. There is no wavering based on doubt or premature notions. At the same time there is flexibility and continual movement from one abode or frame of reference to the next.

Perhaps surprisingly, it is an aspect of bhakti or devotion to the highest ideals that brings this dichotomy to unity. Steadfast grounding in love engenders absolute confidence based on trust in the Absolute, which in turn allows us to reach out and embrace the unanticipated without fear. It no longer matters where we are, because we are always at home.

This is another piece of advice, similar to the beliefs about possessions reviewed in IV, 21, that is very often taken too literally. In consequence whole phalanxes of sannyasins take to the highway, vowing to never stay in any fixed location for more than two days, or three during the monsoons. Many of them undoubtedly cling to their beliefs as fixedly as ever, priding themselves all the while that they are doing God’s bidding by becoming nomads. Literalism is itself a fixed abode, and therefore exactly what we are advised to shun here. And while moving about is to some degree charming and educational, it is far from a

requirement for true sannyasa, true renunciation. We have only to look at Ramana Maharshi to have an example of the best of renunciates never wasting a minute going anywhere.

20) But they who cherish devotedly this righteous immortal value, as stated, endowed with faith, with Me for the Supreme—these devotees are exceedingly dear to Me.

We come to the most unitively attuned state, the “dearest of all.” Sri Aurobindo interprets this to refer to those who make the Absolute their one supreme aim. Most of us field a part time interest level, but a few are continually dedicated to attaining wisdom. For them, every aspect of life is dredged for meaning, and applied to new growth possibilities. Those are the ones who stand out and perennially win praise from their peers, but we shouldn’t forget that the more ordinary types are equally important in our own way. The continuum of seekers of truth is valuable throughout its entire range.

Nataraja Guru makes much of the shift from the third person singular to the plural here, with all the “he whos” abruptly becoming “they who.” He has a somewhat different take on it than I, but for both of us this seems to indicate an openness toward the generality of dedicated seekers. The Gita is telling us that the most important quality is the focus on the “righteous immortal value” of the Absolute, and all other attributes are secondary. Verses 13-19 present a yogic pairing of opposites; here we have a single unitive value as their ultimate realization.

We have arrived at a synthesis of the bifurcation present in the early verses of the chapter, where the dilemma is whether to relate oneself to a personal or an impersonal conception of the Absolute. Krishna began by lauding the personal, specifically because it is easier, but then assured Arjuna that both were equally efficacious. Here at the last, both are reduced—or better, exalted—to their essence as conjunctions with the light that is the Absolute. When such a merger becomes accomplished, any hypothetical

distinctions made previously between personal and impersonal become irrelevant. They are subsumed in the real.

This brings the middle third of the Gita to a close, the part concerned primarily with the Absolute itself. As we settle back into our ordinary consciousness through the final third, the immanence of our union with the Absolute will slowly fade into the background. The certitude of direct experience begins to be substituted to a degree by faith, but by no means an empty faith. We know what we saw and where we were, and we know it is us, so our faith is unshakable. It has nothing to do with other people's claims; rather, it comes from our own clear memory of a definite experience. That's the kind of faith everyone has without even trying: significant recall of the events of our life, and the belief that all of them are an integral part of who we are. Such certitude will always remain a rock solid foundation in our lives.