

## **Chapter XIII: Kshetra-Kshetrajna Vibhaga Yoga**

The Field And The Knower Of The Field, or  
The Unitive Understanding of the Distinction Between the Actual  
and the Perceptual

Chapter XIII covers the Yoga of the field and the knower of the field. Closely following the last chapter, the all-pervading unity of the universe is split into two complementary aspects for purposes of analysis. The ancients were fond of down-to-earth metaphors, and here the universe is pictured as a cosmic person. The field is its body, which includes the physically manifest universe, and the knower is the conscious spark of the Absolute “particularly located in the hearts of everyone,” that is able to perceive this body or field. What we call ‘I’ is an integral part of the totality, and relearning this is considered by the guru, Krishna, to be THE knowledge, since it is what holds all separate items of knowledge together in a meaningful and coherent form. Although it sounds simple enough, we are so distracted by the continuous buzz of the senses that we tend to forget our core connectedness and become caught up in a variety of conflicts within the field.

In the overall scheme of the Gita, the direct experience of the Absolute in Chapter XI is unitive, the next chapter on devotion is still unitive but the unity is viewed from two different perspectives, so in a sense there is the inception of duality. The present chapter on the field and the knower of the field introduces the full-fledged duality of spirit and nature, mind and matter, or what have you. Chapters XIV and XV present a triune system. As we progress to the close, the Gita’s focus is gradually exteriorizing more and more, emerging step by step back into the multifaceted, multidimensional world. This balances the progressive interiorization that took place during the first half of the work. At the end we will be right back where we started, standing on the actual battlefield of our life, but this time strengthened and heartened with a profound unitive understanding. The process is echoed in the sonata form of classical Western music, where an

exposition of an idea is explored and developed, afterward returning outwardly unchanged but with an intangible extra dimension of meaning infused into it by the journey.

It will be helpful at the outset to briefly recapitulate the Gita's psychology. In the course of becoming separate individuals, early on we begin with a balanced inner nature, but soon we learn to move toward our likes and away from our dislikes. Here is where imbalance becomes possible within the overarching equilibrium of the absolute ground of our existence. We soon discover that we can't always escape what we don't like and we can't always secure what we do like. Frustration sets in, followed by manipulation and scheming to try to obtain our preferences. A cascade of action and reaction ensues. Pretty soon in the process of pursuing our likes and avoiding our dislikes we lose sight of the connecting link within the dual back and forth movement. We perceive good and bad as separate and mutually exclusive. As soon as we are no longer conscious of the inner harmony, and only view ourselves as the sum of our exterior parts, we have become "normal" as it is commonly comprehended, identifying ourselves as nothing more than an ego promoted and shielded by a personality. We know only the manifested world of separateness. We are "lost" in a sense, though we can never truly be lost. Forgetting our connection with the universal ground doesn't make it cease to exist, fortunately for us.

One element of being out of touch with our inner coherence is that we continually relive the same experiences over and over, causing our world to shrink drastically. Either we like something and seek to repeat it, or we are drawn to it but only partially understand it, so we keep coming back until we do. This may well be the rebirth the ancients talk about transcending. Surely if we are immortal beings we will be reincarnated forever in some form. No surprise there. What's to be avoided is the reincarnation of hatred, cruelty, indifference, stupidity, things like that. If we are convinced that something outside us holds our happiness in its hands, we will

soon forget it is our intrinsic dharma, our destiny, to be happy, and we will endlessly revisit inferior substitutes.

The Gita's method of correction for this loss of connectedness is to maintain a neutral attitude about our egotistical preferences, which allows us to face the stream of life directly and without fear. We have to stop wanting to have everything exclusively our way, and instead open ourselves to what the innate impulse of life is cooking up for us. Dialectical analysis as the Gita teaches it neutralizes the imbalances that continue to arise for a while via our habitual preferences, even after we have consciously surrendered them to a greater vision of the whole.

As well as being an essential philosophical exercise, attaining neutrality can be treated in an entirely practical manner. For instance, Nataraja Guru always made a point to imagine the opposite of what he'd just said: It's This, but it could just as well be That. Guru Nitya similarly recommended keeping the opposite in mind in the midst of any experience: when he was praised he would recall his faults, and if he was being excoriated he would remind himself of his many beneficial qualities. Chapter XII offers several more examples, if this isn't already clear.

Once neutrality is restored, a flow of energy arises between the individual person and the Source that is most beneficial and expansive. Being alive becomes a joy, a delightful adventure. Yet any psychic imbalance blocks this two-way osmotic interchange, and we literally have no one to blame but ourselves. We hold the key. Giving in to our immediate impulse to blame someone else doesn't restore the balance we intuitively seek; it heightens the imbalance. There will always be unfairness in the world no matter what we do about it, so the best venue for our work is within ourselves, and there we can make real progress.

At any rate, the duality of this chapter gives way to the triple states of the nature modalities in the next. Krishna is trying to bring us back into the world without having to abandon our hard-earned wisdom. If it works we can retain our jubilant harmony in the thick of life. Chapter XIII contains some supreme examples of

the dialectical balancing act the Gita recommends as the high road to peace. It begins with Arjuna's invitation to his guru:

Arjuna said:

Nature and spirit, the field and the knower of the field, knowledge and what is to be known—these I should like to know, Krishna.

Likely a later addition and of minimal importance, merely opening the door for Krishna's instruction that comprises the rest of the chapter, this verse is generally not numbered, so that the total of verses in the Gita is 700. We can at least discern that Arjuna is speaking in dialectic pairs, evidencing his hard won philosophical perspective.

In Nataraja Guru's integrated scheme of horizontal and vertical correlates, nature, here called the field, is the horizontal aspect, and spirit, a.k.a. the knower of the field, is the vertical. The integration of horizontal and vertical factors in the form of a cross or Cartesian coordinates achieves a realistic model of the complex balance of the manifested world. Further explication of horizontal and vertical elements can be found throughout most of Nataraja Guru's works, especially *Unitive Philosophy*.

We now enter the final third of the Gita as a whole, where the horizontal and vertical aspects of life, personified by Arjuna and Krishna respectively, will be united into an integrated, blissful realization. Guru and disciple will become as one in their mystical marriage.

1) Krishna said:

This body is called the field, and he who knows this, thus they call, who know, the knower of the field.

The body Krishna is speaking of as the field is the aggregate of all entities that comprise what we call the universe. Like modern scientists, the ancient rishis considered the mind to be an integral

part of this field. Yet unlike current theories, mind is not only part of the field but the very field itself. To the ancients, matter is an epiphenomenon of mental processes, and not the reverse. In any case it is an unprovable a priori assumption, so we are free to adopt it as a hypothesis and see where it leads.

There have been frequent references to the body of Krishna before this, of which we could especially note those from the vision of Chapter XI, where verse 7 reads in part: “Now behold here in My body the whole world, including the static and the dynamic, unitively established.” Sanjaya immediately refers to this as “the supreme Godly Form,” adding “There Arjuna then beheld the whole world, divided into many kinds, unitively established in the body of the God of gods.” In Verse 15 Arjuna says “I see the gods, O God, in Your body, and all specific groups of beings.” So we can see the body is a metaphor for manifestation as a whole. Nowadays we call it Nature. Nature is the field.

The aspect of creation that is *aware* of all the individual items, what we usually call the witnessing consciousness or simply consciousness, is referred to as the knower of the field. A clear distinction is to be made between the mind or brain, and the consciousness that employs it. Consciousness as such is not material. Despite vigorous efforts to define it as an evolute of matter, it retains an immaterial status.

Science is coming more into agreement with the unitive view of the ancients that consciousness and matter arise together, as two sides of a coin. You cannot have one without the other. Material complexity and the capabilities of awareness are evolving in concert; in essence they are not different. Yet it is certain that our potential is far greater than our actual range of accomplishments. Arjuna was shown that in a big way in Chapter XI. The psychedelic soma he took in a sacred ceremony convinced him beyond a shadow of doubt that he had only scratched the surface of his full beingness. The spiritual calling is to bring ever more of our potential into actuality, a performance that has no final curtain.

The distinction between the field and its knower occurs at the moment the underlying unity sprouts into duality, and is thus a primary conundrum for philosophers and seekers of truth to address. Chapter XII asserted that it doesn't really matter whether you treat the Absolute as personal or impersonal. Now that practical matters are beginning to intrude, however, confusion between the actual and the perceptual can have far-reaching implications, as when we project a false interpretation onto situations and grossly distort them.

The primary division here has been described in various ways, such as the one and the many and the transcendent and the immanent. In the time-honored Samkhyan philosophy the Gita roughly follows, the two aspects are called purusha and prakriti, spirit and nature. In more modern terms we might say consciousness and its objects, or the knower and the knowable. While "field and knower of the field" may sound arcane, Krishna is speaking of a perplexing paradox common to all of us, which he will immediately begin to clarify.

2) And also know Me as the knower of the field in all fields. That knowledge which refers to the knowledge of the field and the knower of the field, is, in My opinion, *the* knowledge.

Probably if you only knew one single thing, the fact that you are the Absolute is the one that will take you farthest. The great dictums of Vedanta encapsulate this realization, such as *tat tvam asi*, That thou art, and *ayam atma brahma*, the self is the Absolute. This is precisely what Krishna means when he tips off Arjuna that he, Krishna, is the knower of the field in all fields. Every bit of our personality and individuality is part of the field, but the knower is the Absolute enjoying the show.

Pondering this mystery is enough to lead us to the highest wisdom and deepest insights, and it has lain at the heart of Arjuna's search throughout the entire Gita. "My core being is the Absolute" is the answer to the perennial question "Who am I?"

The essence of the spiritual search is to learn that we are indeed the Absolute, by attaining union with it. By the same token, the false and fiercely defended belief that we are *not* the Absolute, that we have somehow been expelled from true reality, lies at the root of most of our delusions.

Krishna rates the subject of this chapter as the most important of all. Why on earth would a seemingly obscure aspect of philosophy receive the top rating from the archetypal guru, who is often taken to be God Himself? There must be something unique in the relationship between the field and the knower of the field to make it especially valuable. And here it is: the most critical question we are eternally faced with is how to discriminate truth from falsehood. This is an ongoing process, essential to our survival as well as our psychological well being. Moreover, getting one thing right doesn't mean you will automatically have everything else figured out, though this is a common conceit of superficial seekers, who are content to switch on the cruise control after having one or two good insights. Truth is ever elusive. We need a well-crafted frame of reference so our batting average goes up. Most frames distort reality and lead us to miss the mark much of the time, to mistake falsehoods for truth. Here we are striving to come up with the best possible model so we are not led astray by a mismatch between what is and what we believe about it. Even more, we are striving to retain our direct living connection, because we well know that all frames of reference are less than perfect. It is in this sense that *brahmvidya* is considered a science, even though it lacks tools and provable hypotheses. It is a careful process of uncovering the essence of things as they are rather than as we wish them to be.

One interpretation of the Gita's teachings is to learn to actually be IN the space we occupy. When we abandon the field we abandon ourselves. We do this by creating imaginary frames of reference and then becoming stuck in them. Since all frames are only approximations, all humans should be ready if not eager to upgrade them to a better one. A truly dedicated spiritual seeker

should be prepared to upgrade them to Nothing, to That non-frame which is beyond all approximations, i.e. the Absolute. Only then are we able to actually and fully be ourselves.

One of the supreme paradoxes is that the more we peel away layers of falsehood from our self, the more we become both universalized and at the same time centered in who we are. Our uniqueness is heightened in concert with our merging into the oneness of the Absolute. Conversely, when we surround ourselves with barriers of selfishness we tend to become indistinguishable from the mass, and to lose our individuality.

As noted before, having a wise preceptor for a teacher is of inestimable value in the game of sorting out truth from falsehood. The Gita can serve as a kind of pocket Guru we carry around with us in our journey through life, but as we know, scriptures are notorious for regularly being warped to fit almost any belief. The Gita is no exception. Absent a human guide, the only really reliable possibility for us is to switch on our own light of wisdom. We will be the discriminators of everything we encounter throughout our whole life, so we have to internalize an understanding that will not be sabotaged by our petty desires and prejudices, or those of others.

I could make a long list of examples of how false frames have disastrous consequences, but Nataraja Guru has already done so quite ably in his commentary on this verse. These should suffice for anyone to be able to extrapolate their own list:

The relation [between the field and the knower of the field] is a very elusive one, and lack of understanding of this relation leads to many errors of judgement in almost every department of intelligent human life, many of them with grave and disastrous consequences.

In the name of spirituality people often pamper or torture their bodies, hoping to get salvation or wisdom. One man cannot drink medicine for another's ailment. This sounds simple enough, but many serious religious doctrines, such as

vicarious suffering, for which people are ready to be martyred, depend upon this same kind of confusion. In recent years in India itself, we know the case of how the simple change of name of a certain region (now Pakistan) led to large-scale genocide. Though communism and democracy have many principles in common, these names are used to fan the war-mentality between very powerful nations. That pomp and pride cannot walk hand in hand with true spirituality, which is derived from a higher source, is unfortunately not recognized even by intelligent men who dabble in spiritual values. By burning a Joan of Arc or crucifying a Christ, the spiritual value that each of them might have represented is not killed. When we come to religious and political wars, intelligent politicians still talk of exterminating races or of wiping religions out of existence.

The sins of the father cannot be attributed to the son, and in large-scale warfare there is also large-scale slaughter of innocent noncombatants, which is also a disaster and an injustice arising out of the same confusion. Here hatred is misapplied when people suffer from mass war-psychosis. To expect from Caesar what God alone must grant is another of the absurdities of common life. Proverbs such as “a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush” refer to the same common error of wrongly transferring values between the actual and the perceptual. These instances could be multiplied from the most commonplace to the gravest in human existence.

Guru Nitya weighs in on this subject in his commentary on Patanjali’s Yoga Sutra I:9, which includes the following. He has just described how erotic attraction blinds couples to the reality of their partner’s shortcomings, concluding “Thus, a family unit is very often erected on a false foundation; disillusionment comes when the couple starts living together and facing the facts of life.” He continues:

Similar situations arise when mass hysteria is whipped up by politicians who incite the imagination of the potential voters of a constituency with many false promises. Soon after the election is over, people sadly discover the emptiness of words. This can lead to political discontent, strife, and even civil war. Much more disastrous are the false imaginations that priests create in the minds of their congregates. Imaginary hells and heavens are painted in such vivid colors that even a man of science can be tempted to give the benefit of the doubt to the imagination-monger. Another terrible field of imagination is the advertising of consumer goods with fascinating media techniques such as of musical and colorful movies. Thus, the world of *vikalpa* [false cognition] can be considered our number one social as well as personal enemy. Like junk mail, from all sides we are bombarded with stimuli for indulging in false imaginations. They can adversely affect our creativity and the social reality of the situation in which we live and work. (44)

So it looks like Krishna is right after all, that this is a very critical area of spiritual inquiry, leading to the most valuable knowledge we can obtain. Where many people believe that ignoring such issues makes them somehow spiritual, the Gita takes the opposite tack. We must actively confront our ignorance or it will remain firmly in the driver's seat.

3) That hear in brief from Me: what the field is, what it is like, of what it is the modification, and whence and which it is; also what the knower of the field is, and what is his specialized resulting expression.

Any person who has had a similar kind of overwhelming experience as Arjuna has just had in Chapter XI, where he came face to face with unmediated reality, is likely to be initially stunned and a little bit disoriented. Distinctions are no longer clear-cut,

since they have all been temporarily erased by the plunge into the unitive soup of the Absolute. In the long run this is all to the good, since many of the previous distinctions were undoubtedly not only false but intrinsically negative. Sooner or later they need to be replaced with an intelligent understanding. For most people, remaining in an undifferentiated state eventually becomes hazardous to their mental health. Wise yogis are very sharp, and never fail to amaze their acolytes with their acute insights. They don't act spaced out or confused, fumbling for words.

By contrast, lacking an adequate and definitive explication of how the whole game works, the recently returned traveler may spend a lot of time in a dreamy, vague state of mind where they can easily be led into blind alleys. The world abounds with charlatans seeking souls to entice into their service, and many can be very persuasive to an uncritical listener filled with love and assuming everyone else is too. Arjuna is extremely fortunate to have a trusted advisor to set him straight at this critical stage of inner growth, one who has his interests at heart and no axe to grind. In response to this implicit need of his disciple for a sensible reorientation, Krishna is about to lay out the whole game in no uncertain terms.

Philosophically speaking, the knower and its field are the same as the more familiar concept of the one and the many. In addition to being psychologically valuable, distinguishing the one essence from its pluralistic expression can be very practical. It is even more valuable to see how they are intrinsically related, that in reality there is no schism between them.

We group similar items and events into classes so that we don't have to start from scratch every time we encounter new conditions. For instance, if we decide to love everyone we don't have to judge each person individually to determine whether they merit our love or not. If we decide to practice ahimsa, non-hurting, we don't have to worry whether it applies to the present context or not, because we are going to apply it all the time. Sure, everyone can think of one or two rare exceptions where it might not be the

best option, but that doesn't invalidate the general principle. We must also avoid being dogmatic and insensitive to extenuating circumstances, because that helps keep us from becoming closed-minded, not to mention safe.

Philosophers practice unification through focusing on the common factors in outwardly diverse conglomerations. By grouping groups and then grouping groups of groups, we can go all the way to the all-encompassing super group of the Absolute. Everyone and everything is linked together by this common substratum, so nothing can anymore be viewed as foreign. From this perspective we are one huge family, and as we may recall, that is exactly what Arjuna realized when he began looking carefully around on his own battlefield.

Our awareness pulsates between oneness at the core and multiplicity at the periphery, infusing each with each and enriching every aspect of life. Fixation on one pole or the other makes for a lopsided philosophy. We need to keep both in mind throughout the entire cycle of pulsation.

4) Sung by rishis in many ways, severally and distinctly, in different meters, and also in the aphoristic words of the Brahma Sutras, replete with critical reasonings and positively determined.

Krishna tips his hat to other wise preceptors and their scriptures. The wisdom extolled by the Gita can be attained by anyone through reasoning and reflection. It is not some arcane and counterintuitive set of beliefs, it is the open science of consciousness. In a sense Krishna is only helping clarify and codify the wisdom of many previous seers. We are inclined to tip our own hat in turn to the anonymous author Vyasa who so brilliantly organized and poeticized those profound and uplifting visions into the Gita, the cream of the Mahabharata epic, itself the cream of the ancient wisdom of India.

That the wisdom in question is verifiable by critical reasoning simply means that it makes intelligent sense, and the fact

that it is positively determined means you can see the results for yourself. The outcome of the study isn't hidden in some far away heaven world, remote in time. Realization is a here and now phenomenon.

The Brahma Sutras, aphorisms on the Absolute, are one of the three cornerstones of Vedanta philosophy, the others being the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita itself.

5 & 6) The great elements, ego sense, reason, and also the Unmanifest, the ten senses, the one (mind), and the five conceptual aspects of the senses, wish-dislike, pleasure-pain, the organic aggregation, vital intelligence, firmness—this, in brief, is the field, with modifications named.

The field as presented here roughly corresponds to the Samkhyan system, though not exactly. We can recall that verse VII, 4 reads: “Earth, water, fire, air, sky, mind, reason, and also consciousness of individuality—thus, here is divided My eightfold nature.” The first five are the great elements mentioned here. Interestingly, Krishna has also added the Unmanifest, otherwise, minus “the senses,” this verse is a reasonable match to the earlier version.

The “ten senses” include the five we usually think of, plus five others associated with movement, which vary in different sources, but include: walking, manipulating, breathing, digesting, reproducing, speaking, and so on. The five conceptual aspects of the senses are hearing, sight, touch, taste and smell. These align with the five main sensory organs to interpret the sense data they provide, and are most noticeable in our preferences, such as what we do and don't like to listen to, what we enjoy or avoid eating, etc., which determination is the purview of the ego. The mind is the overall coordinator of the senses, directing the organism to actively seek out pleasure and sustenance and avoid pain, as well

as identifying the positive or negative implications of everything encountered.

We actually have far more senses than the famous five. Guy Murchie includes two whole chapters on various senses in his wonderful book *The Seven Mysteries of Life*. During a detailed study of all life on earth, he listed 48 senses, which he later pared to 32 by combining the closest of them. These include time sense, pressure sense, temperature sense, and fear sense, most of which have been shown by modern physiological studies to include their own nerve systems or sensors. The “field” thus grows ever more complicated the more closely it is examined.

Verse 6 covers duality very briefly, using paired compounds. Like and dislike are the most inclusive of categories, and are based on the perception of pain or pleasure, which we have already covered in detail. The “(organic) aggregation” and “vital intelligence” are better understood by moderns as the duality of matter and consciousness. The intention is “the aggregate of all this stuff” and “that which is aware of it,” akin to nature and spirit, which will be brought together later in the chapter.

The final, unpaired term meaning firmness or steadfastness refers to the holding together of the opposites that is central to yoga. It was most recently elucidated in the last eight verses of Chapter XII. Thus the yogic attitude, the resolve of the determined seeker of truth, is seen to be an integral part of the very makeup of the universe. Our milieu is more than a static bowl of chemical soup. It contains in addition the urge to transcend all limits, the impetus to perfection, or, since everything is in a sense perfect to begin with, the impetus to actualize the innate perfection of the field, or what we call the universe.

Having succinctly described the field, Krishna goes on to describe the knower of the field. In the next five verses he will elucidate wisdom in detail, indicating ignorance only by default. The dialectically matched pair of wisdom and ignorance are understood to together comprise the dimensions of the knower.

7) Freedom from conventional pride, unpretentiousness, non-hurting, non-retaliating forbearance, straightforwardness, loyal support of the teacher, purity, steadfastness, state of self-withdrawal,

Verses 7-11 in Chapter XIII, ostensibly describing wisdom, actually present the proper attitude to take in learning from a teacher or the environment. The delicate mental balancing required to bring wisdom into the heart is laid out in a graded series, as is usual with the Gita. While all these are important, the list begins with more specific virtues, or more accurately practices, and continues on to more broadly applicable ones. In keeping with the thrust of the final third of the Gita, the ideas here are eminently practical, constituting the spiritual path in miniature. Though today you may just read through them, they are the foundation stones of a spiritual edifice. They deserve to be pondered deeply one at a time, and made a part of your everyday orientation. I'll start with a list of the Sanskrit terms from this verse, for ready reference:

*amanitvam* – freedom from conventional pride

*adambhitvam* – unpretentiousness

*ahimsa* – non-hurting

*kshanti* – (non-retaliating) forbearance

*arjavam* – straightforwardness

*upasanam* – loyal support

*acharya* – teacher

*acharyopasanam* – loyal support of the teacher

*saucham* – purity

*stairyam* – steadfastness

*atma vinigraha* – state of self-withdrawal

*Amanitvam* is translated as freedom from conventional pride. I'm sure Nataraja Guru added 'conventional' to distinguish it from the valuable and necessary pride that instills a baseline of self-worth. Downtrodden people often accept their fate because they

are convinced they deserve to be doormats to the world, and a modicum of pride can act as a corrective.

In Sanskrit the prefix 'a' negates whatever follows it. *Mana* means to measure; *tvam*, you or yourself. *Manitvam* is measuring yourself. The advice is thus to stop measuring yourself, stop defining yourself narrowly. When you decide you are just so, what you leave out appears alien to you. You block many possibilities because they're not "you." The idea here goes along with one of my favorite mottoes, "self description is stultifying." You should leave matters open. Admit that your self-image is not yet fully formed. Hopefully it never will be. If it ever is, you will become stiff and static, and your growth will stop. This is a challenging problem in a society that constantly demands to know who you are. "Halt! Identify yourself!" Whatever you reply is a limitation of your absolute nature. The worst question an adult can ask a child is "What do you want to be when you grow up?" It encourages a fixed vision adopted from outside suggestions, which shuts down the search for one's true dharma, as well as implying you are unacceptable as you are now.

On reflection, defining ourselves within narrow limits is a major impediment to intelligent understanding, not to mention creativity. Every generation in every country clings to certain identity characteristics, mostly concocted by the media or from unexamined prevailing habits. In reality we know only very little of what is possible, so we should keep our options open and refuse to docilely join the local herd.

A classic example is the proud declaration of late nineteenth century science that everything was now known about physics, and all that was left in the field was simply a matter of adding a few obscure details. The inventor of quantum theory, Max Planck, was told exactly this by a physics professor who urged him not to bother with the subject. Anyone accepting this would not have been searching for the new fields that were on the verge of opening up, such as relativity, quantum mechanics and nuclear physics. In

hindsight such an attitude seems ludicrous, and yet its analogues are still with us today.

The concomitant belief of the same era that life emerges from nonliving matter, as if piling sand grains high enough would magically bring consciousness about, demonstrates another downside of *manitvam*, of measuring our world using inadequate parameters. How much existential angst has that severely limited hypothesis engendered! All of a sudden life has no meaning, is nothing more than a cruel joke played by accidental circumstances. It's hard not to feel despair deep in your soul when you carry such ideas and guard them with your false pride. But you don't have to adopt any arbitrary belief to dispel the misery, just realize that there must be more to the game than you currently know. Then you will be energized to search in new directions. The inventor of inflation theory, Alan Guth, is quoted in the April 2011 *Scientific American* (Inflation Debate, by Paul J. Steinhardt, p. 42) as saying, "In an eternally inflating universe, anything that can happen will happen; in fact, it will happen an infinite number of times." We learn that new things are possible every day. Put that in your pipe and smoke it!

Obviously there is no single word in English that fully conveys the meaning of *amanitvam*. The following poem by Narayana Guru, written during a visit with Ramana Maharshi in 1914, carries the spirit of it:

Five Verses on Final Emancipation  
(trans. Nitya Chaitanya Yati)

- 1) What is your name? Your caste? Your work? Your age?  
From questions such, when one is free, he gains release.
- 2) Come! Go! Don't go! Enter! What are you seeking?  
From questions such, when one is free, he gains release.
- 3) Departing when? When arrived? Whither and even who?

From questions such, when one is free, he gains release.

4) I or you, this or that, inside or out, or none at all,  
From such cogitations, when one is free, he gains release.

5) To the known and the unknown equalized, without difference to one's own or to that of others, even to the name of such indifferent,  
From all such considerations, who is freed, he himself becomes the one released.

Next comes *adambhitvam*, unpretentiousness. *Dhambha* is deceit, fraud, hypocrisy. Coupled with *tvam* you are fooling yourself. It's bad enough to deceive others, but when you deceive yourself you're in deep trouble. You not only believe the arbitrary image you've made of yourself, you take pride in it. It will be very difficult to break out of once you have a stake in the manufactured persona you're peddling. When Krishna counsels against such attitudes, it is no more than saying we must come to know our dharma, our inner nature, as it is and not as we wish it to be based on social pressures or the desire to be loved and admired. All other aspects of wisdom flow from the premise of maintaining total honesty in self-assessment.

When you become unpretentious, when you stop imagining yourself as the center of the universe, you can begin to have compassion for the rest of manifestation. This is the bare minimum requirement for adulthood, something immature adults do not attain. Maturation may be conceived as a continuum beginning with the totally self-interested infant, gradually broadening its horizons until it becomes a wise adult capable of universal compassion and empathy. One technique for abetting this process is when you have a hostile urge toward anything, instead of acting on it you trace it back to the knot inside yourself that produced the feeling, thereby dissipating the hostility and evolving in the process. Such an important spiritual leap forward is called *ahimsa*, non-hurting, the next term on the list.

Ahimsa is practiced in concert with *kshanti*, forbearance. Our own hostility usually surfaces in response to a provocation from “outside.” After assuring our own safety from the provoking event, we should examine our reaction as dispassionately as possible. It usually takes some intense work to settle down and get a grip on yourself. But only after doing so can you learn the lessons life is trying to impart through the event. Anyone can act beatifically when conditions are serene. It’s when there is conflict that our true mettle is tested. Life in this sense is a battlefield, and we are warriors who, like Arjuna, are walking the high road of peace instead of wallowing in bloodshed.

The Biblical injunction to turn the other cheek is a version of *kshanti*. Jesus instructs his disciples: “But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also.” (Matt. 5:39) In that region of the world, a slap on the cheek was an insult, an act of humiliation. As in the Gita here, the act of non-retaliating forbearance is simply indicated, sketched out in briefest terms, and its complicated practice needs to be elaborated by a teacher. Allowing yourself to be struck or humiliated without retaliating is relatively easy, but attaining the depth of compassion that embraces the whole situation while not giving in to any provocation to act with stupidity is a supreme achievement. One would hope that the meek disciple would do much more than suffer in silence, instead using the opportunity to teach and heal, replacing revenge with mitigation of the problem. The brute idea of justice as “an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth,” for any crime is a far cry from the spiritual stance.

Dialectically, responding in kind (or in kind plus a dividend) is a thesis, and not responding at all is its antithesis. A dynamic synthesis brings wisdom to bear, so that any action taken will be appropriate to the actualities of the situation. Jesus was trying to teach people how to reduce their violent tendencies by not fighting back, but that is only the first step. Once the urge to lash out is under control, we have to learn how to live together in amity, as

brothers and sisters. Jesus then taught how to respond to hostility with loving kindness.

One of the magically mystical aspects of life is that it presents us with exactly what we need to work on next. Our spiritual development is anything but haphazard. The inherent guru-principle within us coaxes us along, often against our will. If we can comprehend that the world is a reflection of our own mental state, we will gratefully accept challenges as opportunities to grow and change.

*Arjavam*, straightforwardness, is a subtle and excellent tactic for living well. It includes openness and honesty, and an advanced discrimination of truth from falsehood. The moralistic exhortation to always tell the truth, like most simplistic pronouncements, falls far short of the ideal. In his masterwork *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain demonstrates beyond any shadow of a doubt that there are times when a lie is vastly superior to all parties involved than guileless honesty. A muddle-headed thinker might require an easy-to-remember slogan for guidance like “always tell the truth,” but the yogi is expected to live as an expert, bringing wide-awakeness to every situation, and acting impeccably according to their best judgment. Following rigid guidelines will never do.

The world is filled with people trying to pass themselves off as something other than what they are. In the political arena, every sow's ear is glowingly described as a silk purse. Religious posers make whatever guarantee will convince you to sign on to their program, fishing for suckers. For instance, while the New Testament contains no less than seven warnings about false prophets who will deceive even the elect, vast hordes of Christians eagerly flock to the banners of the most diabolical spouters of hatred imaginable. The amazing part is that even knowing all this, we have a devil of a time sorting out what's really going on. Part of us wants to take the easy road of agreeing with prevailing opinion, even if our inner conscience smells a rat. Psychologists

have demonstrated this in a million well-known experiments, and we still can hardly break loose from the compulsion.

The syndrome has never been better depicted than in Hans Christian Anderson's brief tale *The Emperor's New Clothes*, which should be on every aspiring yogi's must-read list. In it, two swindlers promise to supply the best garment in the world to the Emperor, which has the special feature that it cannot be seen by anyone unfit for his post or just plain stupid. Of course, clothes represent the persona, the opaque fabric we wrap around our souls to hide our naked flaws. Like all non-yogis, the Emperor's psychological wardrobe is his primary interest, so he eagerly orders one. The swindlers then weave an imaginary cloak out of nothing at all. Everyone, including the Emperor, is afraid to admit that they cannot see it, as that would prove they were either incompetent or stupid, so instead they praise it to the sky. When it is "finished" the Emperor parades around in it, but no one dares admit what they can plainly see. Courtiers vie with each other to describe the Emperor's clothes in the most glowing terms. It takes a child, with his *arjavam*, his straightforwardness, to shout out the truth: "He's not wearing anything! He's naked!"

*Acharyopasanam* means loyal support of the teacher. This does not mean that the yogi should become a partisan of one particular sect or unquestioningly accept dubious propositions. One of the subtle blocks to spiritual growth the ego supplies is to always stay frivolous and on the periphery. As soon as a study gets serious and begins to root out embedded faults, the undisciplined ego finds an excuse to move on and start over from the beginning with a new teacher. For a set of ideals to be transformative it must be valiantly adhered to, particularly when it conflicts with one's conceits. You must earnestly ask yourself if you are leaving because the subject is not helpful or if you are simply evading discomfort, knowing full well that the ego is a clever dissembler that knows just how to con you. If you haven't decided in advance to hold fast to your chosen practice, you will abandon it when things get tough. Expect in advance that some of your sacred cows

will be tipped over, and that breaking out of static mindsets may well cause agony. “No pain, no gain,” applies to much more than physical workouts.

Purity, *saucham*, is usually associated with so-called moral behavior. But striving to always be good and pure feeds the spiritual ego like nothing else, leading to intractable problems. Spiritual purity is actually a totally different matter. When we latch on to certain static states, such as when we feel ashamed or upset or guilty, and especially when we think we have solved all our problems and are right where we’re supposed to be, then we aren’t open to the next thing that comes along. Our vision becomes clouded whenever we cling to the familiar, because we are not free to be open to the next moment. To stay in the flow we have to release our hang-ups and fixations. Whenever we get stuck, particularly in emotionally charged states, that is precisely where we need to do our work, to restore our fluidity.

When purity becomes a part of us, we will see life as *lila*, a divine sport, where all meaning occurs within the unfoldment of events just as the tree develops from the seed. Such an attitude allows for easy detachment and the flexibility to let go when the flow threatens to sweep you away from what you cherish or cling to.

Early Christian scholar Elaine Pagels had the lost and unorthodox Nag Hammadi scrolls fall in her lap, certainly an “act of God” if ever there was one—and was unsullied enough to realize their value and bring them to the attention of the public, starting with her book *The Gnostic Gospels*. If Pagels had had a stake in the status quo of the Christian Church, she might have done what others have often done before her and buried the scrolls in some musty college basement, or even destroy them. But she was unattached, and so able to act with purity of intent. Her courageous work has led to an avalanche of fresh and valuable perspectives on the human history of the planet.

If you are pure you can set aside your egoistic desires and act for the greatest common good, which includes your own part in it.

This is very different from the Puritanical notion that purity means not breaking social rules, or not having any fun, such as enjoying sex or imbibing psychotropic substances. Dr. G.H. Mees succinctly corrects this in *The Key to Genesis*:

In Europe and America there is a strong tendency to identify morality and spirituality. But anyone who has common sense and looks around, is aware that there are a great many people who are moral saints, but lack inner peace and do not know true happiness. In the East the identification of morality and spirituality is as a rule avoided.

Speaking of soma, anyone who has taken psychedelic medicine has almost certainly learned the importance of *saucham*, purity. On a trip, any and all extraneous thoughts are like catching a wave wrong in surfing: you instantly wipe out and get rolled under in the churn. Worse, what you imagine or fear manifests instantly as a palpable vision, so if you conceive of something awful, that something will immediately become your experience. As far as you can tell, it is just as real as any other “normal” experience. You really believe you’re dying, or being cut in pieces, or being raped, or what have you. So it is absolutely incumbent that you remain in the neutral zone and don’t let your mind wander into projections. As soon as you become pure in that way the trip becomes ecstatic, effortless. This typical experience is the source of the certitude that what you think becomes your reality sooner or later, “what you see is what you get” as the old song goes. Ordinarily there is a time lag so it’s much harder to notice that what we imagine is being played back to us as our experience, but during the soma trip the feedback is instantaneous. Purity includes not initiating such negative chains of events by cooking up harebrained schemes.

*Stairyam*, remaining steadfast in the face of opposition, is an important quality for the seeker to remember. Holding steady means much more than simply repeating one’s exercises day after

day without fail. The spiritual search is not all delicious desserts; it includes a lot of battling one's inner demons, of pulling out poisoned arrows and healing the wounds. In the thick of the fray, it is very tempting to think that the mere absence of conflict is enough, and look for an escape. The relief one experiences from retreat is so great it can appear spiritual in its own right, but it is in fact a defeat, or at best a respite. Soon the ego will learn to replace facing itself courageously with a shrewd avoidance of conflict. When Nitya says in the quote below that this is where most people's lives go off on a tangent, this is what he means. There are very, very few who can bear the intensity of true self-examination for long periods. The rest find little niches in which to incubate and, imagining they have already found their dharma, their life's calling, build insular nests from which they can look down on everyone else.

The usual translation of *atma vinigraha* is self-control. It is a little bit misleading to translate it as a state of self-withdrawal, since we cannot and should not withdraw from our own self. What Nataraja Guru means is a state of withdrawal *into* the Self, away from the separate self and into the Self that is one with all. By restraining outgoing tendencies, one's energies are redirected into Self-discovery. Because this is a positive effort, Nataraja Guru used self-withdrawal to avoid the negative implications of self-control, such as its emphasis on repression of desires.

Throughout this commentary we have emphasized the distinction between holding back for deeper insight and holding back in a blanket suppression of one's dharma. The subject is worthy of much reflection, since so many spiritual seekers are satisfied with concealing all outward evidence of their inner chaos or vacuity. Self-control is a means to unleash the yogi's potential, not curtail it.

It's great to end suffering—after all, one of the Gita's definitions of yoga is disaffiliation from the context of suffering—but what are you going to do afterwards? Becoming free of pain permits you to act at your highest capability. This last third of the

Gita explores how to maximize your potential according to your natural gifts and inclinations. Realization is treated as the beginning of the journey, not some kind of finalized position.

At the expense of making the commentary on this verse way overlong (it's practically a booklet in its own right), I can't help but include Guru Nitya's brilliant take on it, from a seminar for psychologists given in 1975 in Sydney, titled *Therapy and Realization in the Bhagavad Gita*:

The Bhagavad Gita gives a list of things or changes that are expected in the disciple. These can also be used with advantage by the psychologist. The first in the list is called *amanitvam*. *Manitvam* is wrong identification. When you give up wrong identification, what takes place is *amanitvam*. *Mana* means measurement. You measure yourself: "I am this." It is a measurement which you make constantly. If the value that you have given yourself is something which you want to stick to, then in some new situation or context where you could function differently, the lucidity is lost. You have become morbid with your fixed notion. You have become rigid. If this ossification and fossilization that can come to a person's ego is removed we say that *amanitvam* has come to him. It means breaking away the morbidity of yourself, of that feeling "I am this. I am this."

When you have *dambha*, that kind of feeling has become worse and difficult to change. You have taken pride in being so and so. You are being proud of yourself and you don't want to give it up. This attitude keeps the *mana* rigid. If you want to break the one, you must break the other. The dynamics of identity is the exaggeration of the value that is given to it in the form of pride. This pride you must give up.

If you want to give that up, you have to cultivate a compassion—not a pity—born of an understanding of your oneness with others. Sometimes in the Gurukula, when

newcomers arrive, I ask them to do some work. When they do it, they generally do it in a clumsy way. Another person will show his preference to push that person away and do the work himself. I stop him from doing that.

Why did he want to do that? He will say, “I am better than he is. I can do the job better.” But if you allow the other man to do it two times, he’ll also be better. Yet you won’t allow it. Your pride that you are better than him gets in the way. Instead, you could become compassionate and understand that he has never done this before. Give him some time. You have to hold yourself back. In spite of your superior knowledge you hold yourself back and allow the excellence of the other person to come through more and more. You estimate that another person will become better and better. The result will be that it becomes habitual for you to keep up this reverence for all persons, all beings. This culminates in what is called *ahimsa*.

The counterpart of *ahimsa*, non-hurting, becomes manifest when there is provocation. The individuation becomes stronger when it is being provoked. If you see what is going on and yet refuse to be provoked, you have then demonstrated a greater understanding of the manifestation of your own being and also of the other person’s being. When you realize that you and the other person are both molded out of the same stuff, you are not provoked by him. You realize there must be some reason for that person to behave like that. In Sanskrit we call this *kshanti*. *Kshanti* is not mere forgiveness, it is born of an understanding of your mate’s, your friend’s, your neighbor’s, or even your rival’s life situation as a whole.

There are some classic examples given in Indian epics like the Ramayana. When Rama gave the final death blow to Ravana and he was breathing his last, Rama saw what the world was going to miss because of the death of Ravana. Rama called his brother Lakshmana, and said, “My brother,

we are going to miss a great statesman. Will you please go to Ravana and ask him to be kind enough to teach you statesmanship? There is not much time left. He has this great worth of being a statesman, will you please learn it from him?” He was asking his brother to learn from the very man who had wanted to cause his death. Lakshmana went and knelt before Ravana and said that he wanted to learn statesmanship from him. Ravana said, “My time is nearing, but I want you to be benefited by this for the sake of the world.” And so Ravana gave his knowledge of statecraft to the very person who was his enemy. Such large-mindedness is a classic example of *kshanti*.

When Ravana died his wife put a curse on Rama that he would also come to know what grief is when one’s lifemate is separated from one. The curse did not annoy Rama. He thought, “This is a deserving curse, that I should get. I really deserve such a curse for what I’ve done.” He could only sympathize with the wife of Ravana. When you come upon this in the Ramayana, you cannot read it without tears coming to your eyes. If there is one book from which I cannot read more than ten verses at a time, it is the Ramayana. I feel my heart is breaking, my eyes are getting wet and my throat is choking. I cannot speak. The higher values are so much highlighted in it.

Then comes *arjavam*. The name of Arjuna suggests he is ever wakeful. A person who is a student or a disciple has no holiday. He can never be on vacation. All the time he has to be vigilant and watchful to see how he is progressing, how wisdom is coming to him, how the guru is enlightening him, how the world around him is taking shape, and what his role in it is. He has to be ever vigilant, watchful and wakeful. That is called *arjavam*.

For that he should give himself entirely to the situation. We call that *acharyopasanam*. That does not mean you are washing the clothes of your guru or that you are drawing his

bath for him. That is also good. But that is not what is meant here. You are giving yourself entirely to the situation, to the context. For that, one has to be pure, *saucham*.

What is this purity we speak of? There is an environmental cleanliness that makes us feel a sense of sacredness. So the environment should be clean. The body should be clean. The action should be clean. Ideation should be clean. Meditation should be clean. There comes this cleanliness all through. Today when this young friend came and asked me about discipline this was in my mind, but I did not say it at the time. But this is what we call discipline. It is an act of vigilance which you are manifesting in the form of a discrimination on the level of your own life.

For that there has to be a steadfastness, *stairyam*. You succeed when you are steadfast, but that is defeated by the body going weak, the senses being disturbed, the mind being assailed by fear. Here arises the need for the correction of the mechanism. When functional and structural defects hinder the process you must turn to someone who can handle that with care. Most people stumble at this point, and their life goes off on a tangent.

Throughout, one has to keep the nucleus of his being as a state of pure consciousness which is not fully identified with this image or that image. That has to be a continuous process of reflection. (p. 72ff)

8) detachment in respect of sense interests, absence of egoism, insight regarding the pain and evil of birth, death, old age, and disease,

Continuing the exposition of wisdom factors, we have a constellation built around sensory perception and consequent life experience. All three of these topics form a close-knit group that extends into the next verse. At the time of departure from sensory orientation—temporarily in meditation or permanently in death—it

is critical that we don't hold on to what we are leaving behind, no matter how dear it is to us. From a transcendental perspective, involvement in worldly matters is binding and filled with difficulties. Buddha famously was shocked to learn about the existence of disease, old age and all the rest of the ways humans suffer when he emerged from his cloistered life, and it motivated him to seek a cure. Learning to let go of what we desire is at least one important factor in rising above tragic situations. We should practice letting go in meditation, because when death comes to claim us we will no longer have the option of holding on.

Krishna is directing us toward affiliation with the Absolute, which is the one thing that does not die, that is always present when everything else goes away. While our surface consciousness may know intellectually that all things are the Absolute, it is not capable of grasping the one and the many—that is, the Absolute and its manifestations—simultaneously. Because of this we have to detach ourselves from the attractions of the Many to rediscover our unity with the One.

Detachment from sense interests is an idea that is often way overblown in spiritual circles, resulting in repressions great and small. In a sense there is an attachment to a trite conception of detachment. The pursuit of sensory experience looms large in ordinary life, and is often treated as the whole point of existence, particularly by younger people. As the psyche matures, it realizes that such matters are relatively unimportant compared with the great questions of life and death: how to live well, the meaning of it all, how to cope with its problems and challenges, and the like. As these preeminent matters increasingly engage our attention, the preoccupation with physical stimulation is naturally displaced into the background.

There is actually a very fine line between erotic attraction and religious ecstasy. It's safe to say that a goodly portion if not most of every kind of interest, including the spiritual impulse, is erotically based. Many seekers of wisdom are satisfied once they find a loving partner, and their spiritual practice turns out to have

been a temporary substitute for that kind of fulfillment. Others worship with abandon, redirecting their sexual energy toward concepts and idols. Well managed, there is nothing wrong with it, but the violent rage we see in certain religious circles bears an uncanny resemblance to frustrated lust.

Sexual involvement is as widespread in renunciate circles as elsewhere, and its prohibition may actually serve to heighten the enjoyment for some. While sexual adventures are extremely alluring, seeming—especially to the excited person in the grip of exquisite hormonal frenzy—to be the perfect expression of divine and universal love, there is nearly always a powerful potential beneath the surface for the development of attachment. Attachment is of course the opposite of detachment. Humans are rarely capable of sex solely for the fun of it, but have a hidden agenda of dispelling their loneliness. Because of this shall we say tendency to adhere, there is a time-honored principle for therapists and their patients, gurus and their disciples, to abstain from physical indulgence. When the sex begins, at the very least the teaching situation comes to a close. Yet the erotic attraction can and should be maintained, lest the participants lose interest and go seek it elsewhere. Trying to purge the learning situation from all emotional overtones will leave it dead and pointless.

When we think of a wise person, our image is likely to be of someone content to be who they are, perhaps sitting quietly and blissfully discoursing on aspects of consciousness, rather than someone rushing around greedily trying to cram in as much excitement as possible to make up for what they lack. A seeker of wisdom ponders and is attracted to the mysteries of life, while those to whom wisdom is uninteresting remain attached to obtaining the basic necessities and mundane enjoyments of life's surface layer. That's basically all the Gita is saying.

Detachment isn't only negative either, in the sense of holding back; ideally it allows you to go forward more lightly encumbered. For instance, I have a friend who is a good writer and is trying hard to express herself clearly in prose. She recently wrote an essay on a

topic of general interest that would have been perfect in the newspaper, but she was afraid to submit it. She imagined someone she knew would read it and complain to her husband's boss and he might be fired. She asked her husband about it, and he wasn't the least bit concerned, but she still couldn't bring herself to dare the exposure. So she lost an opportunity to take a step forward as a writer, and the paper's readers lost an educational and well-written article. This is also a fine example of how very often it's not even social pressure but the *fear of imaginary social pressure* that inhibits us. This is a woman who has studied in the Gurukula with us for a number of years too, but the inhibitions to living our dharma are very tough demons to exorcise. She needs to adopt a more detached attitude about the "country club wives" she pictured reading her essay and reacting with hostility. The fact is she will almost certainly never know who reads her writing or how they feel about it. Her attachment is only to projected mental fantasies, but they are nearly as crippling as if there were actual angry crowds massed outside her house.

After detachment the Gita addresses one of the central conundrums of spirituality: how to manage the ego. The ego is considered a coordinator of reactions to events, so we must be clear that the absence of egoism doesn't mean the absence of the ego itself, which is a normal and essential aspect of the mind. What is always meant is the absence of *excessive* egoism, the exaggeration of self importance. The Gita is calling for an unselfish attitude that embraces each situation as a whole, without any scheming as to our own personal benefit at the expense of others. The whole is to be taken into account, with the self as an equal partner in it. This is the yogic attitude to be maintained even in the midst of a swarm of unfulfilled egos vying for dominance on every side.

On first reading, having "insight regarding the pain and evil of birth, death, old age, and disease," makes it sound like being born and everything subsequent to it is an evil condition filled with suffering. We might as well jump off a bridge and get it over with.

That is not the point here, not at all! Many religions do take that attitude, but the Gita is hardly about rushing as fast as possible toward extinction. What is meant is that life has painful parts as well as pleasurable ones, and there is plenty of evil mixed in with the good. The insight in question is that we are much more than either the body or the mind, the parts of us subject to the suffering. Due to a faulty belief system, we have come to identify ourselves with our mind and body, particularly the body. The body will be squeezed through a pelvis at birth, it will be battered and torn and made to do many unpleasant things throughout its existence, and it will eventually break down and die. If we believe that is the whole measure of who and what we are, we are guaranteed severe disappointment.

Instinctively, our immortal soul or self rebels at the thought that we will cease to exist. We have an inner certitude that we are not destined to be terminated, that we are more than just our outward manifestation. This area of certainty should be examined closely, since what remains after our wishful thinking has been subtracted is a solid ground for us to stand on.

Wisdom here is to know that whatever befalls us within “the valley of the shadow of death” we cannot be separated from who we are. We cannot lose our souls, as the superstitious imagine. Our soul is not an appendage, like an arm or leg. We are it. Where it goes, we go.

It is not easy to retrain ourselves to realize we are not just the body. It takes more than repeating the words, though that may sometimes help. We need to scrutinize our life by shining light into our depths, constantly shaking off the doubts and limited notions peddled by mediocre thinkers ever ready to offer us bad advice. Only by doing so can we free up the insight that will bring detachment from the maelstrom in which we are tossed every day.

9) without clinging to, and without intensely involved attachment to (relations such as) sons, wives, (and property such

as) houses, and having a constant neutral mental attitude in respect of desirable and undesirable happenings,

Once again the Gita is not saying that we shouldn't have wives or homes, only that we shouldn't obsess about them. We should try hard to keep the whole game in perspective. Clinging is childish and in any case ultimately futile. We have to look inside our self for the support we so desperately yearn for. Remembering we already have it is a major step forward in spiritual life. Krishna underlined this idea in VI, 5: "By the Self the Self must be upheld," adding that if we lose our sense of self-support we become our own worst enemy.

For most of us, our immediate surroundings are the most natural playing field for fine-tuning our psyches. Family and intimate friends elicit responses that we ordinarily suppress in more guarded situations with strangers. Making the whole world out to be like a hostile stranger is merely another ego defense for maintaining the status quo of psychic immobility, and our collective egos have reduced the human race to a horde of tensely bound individuals estranged from everything. The Gita is aiming to invert this attitude and convert everyone into being treated as our dear friends. Still, we don't want to overdo it and bond too tightly with our associates, because excessive attachment in that direction is nearly as stultifying as isolation.

I'll call on the Guru once more regarding clinging. In his *Therapy and Realization in the Bhagavad Gita*, Nitya says:

But why do you want to hold on to something? Our mind is sticky. In Sanskrit we say *sakti*. Once an impression is made, it sticks. The guru is *asakta*. It really is wonderful to live with a guru. He fondles you in great affection and shows great love. Believing that to be so in the next moment also, you walk towards him. Now he seems a total stranger. He shows no emotion. He shows no love. He shows no recognition. You wonder, "Was it the same person to whom I was just

speaking with so much understanding and joy? Now he is showing the same love to another person as if I don't exist." Then both these people are pushed away and there is yet another person. What's going on? The guru has no attachment, and he expects the same from us. There can be no *sakti*, no clinging.

This may sound callous, but it isn't. It's how a guru teaches independence and self-reliance. Love is the transformative factor: the love of the Absolute passing through the guru is what coaxes the lost soul out into the light. Without the loving interchange with the guru nothing significant happens, it's just an exchange of pleasantries, a game of surface masks. The problem is that the thirsty soul craves that supreme love, and once having tasted it projects it onto the guru instead of realizing it as blazing forth from a source within. It wants the guru to always activate the love, but the guru is demonstrating that it isn't exclusively anywhere. And the guru's love is for everything that comes along, not just one or a few people. It cannot linger, but is always moving ahead with the newness of the present moment. Until the disciple lets go of the outward clinging, the inner source of happiness will remain hidden.

The seeker can only have "a constant neutral mental attitude in respect of desirable and undesirable happenings" when the love of the Absolute is realized within the heart. As long as it's projected onto outer objects, up to and including a guru, it waxes and wanes in response to their comings and goings. Once it is found to be the very Source within, it burns steadily, shining its own illuminating light equally onto desirable and undesirable events as they pass by.

Beyond a shadow of a doubt, family relationships have the most profound effect in binding the individual. Intimacy is a powerful influence on us, as is habituation. Most of us cast ourselves wholeheartedly into our associations with our family members, especially as children, volunteering for as much

attachment as possible. Even those who begin a marital relationship based on mutual respect for separateness find that over time all sorts of invisible but tangible threads have grown to bind them tightly together. Maintaining an unprejudiced outlook in such conditions is at the very least a high art form.

Even the dear home we abide in slowly ushers us into habitual modes of behavior with the potential of being both freeing and conditioning. Because of this, some sannyasins adopt rules like never staying in one place more than three days in bad weather, two in good. This certainly induces a flow of unattached living, but at the same time precludes many activities that depend on a chunk of time for their expression. Ceaseless movement should therefore be considered optional rather than mandatory.

When the Gita speaks of not clinging to family and avoiding intensely involved attachments, it is by no means discouraging the loving states that spring naturally from family relationships. When our children are born, a great fountain of love surges up within us: a reawakening of the love we ourselves were born with and trained to suppress as we grew up. But why should that love be limited to a small group of family members? It should be broadcast far and wide, infusing every contact with all creatures great and small.

What we're being cautioned against is not that love but the mania that overdoes it, that turns it into something desperate. Modern humans have become so fearful of the world that they won't let their children out of their sight, well into adolescence. They sign them up for one programmed activity after another. There is no room at all for kids to make their own mistakes and learn from them, to fight their own battles and deal with the inevitable emotional trials of a free life. All randomness—a key factor in evolution—is banished. Because of this they can never experience independence or know what self-determination means. They arrive at adulthood with little or no experience of the actual world, and often end up seeking a well-defended and sheltered existence to maintain their precarious stability.

Moreover, many parents long to experience success through their children, in sports or academics or the arts. They push and channel their kids into what they, the adults, secretly crave. Kids who are busy pleasing their parents during key stages of development seldom get a chance to investigate their own proclivities. The frustration and psychological blockage this causes is one of the main issues the Gita addresses: how to unburden ourselves from social and parental demands and emancipate who we truly are.

To whatever extent possible we should encourage children under our care to become independent, to think for themselves, to try new avenues of expression. We should most definitely examine our own motivations and subtract any self-interested ones. Very few people will grow up to be Olympic champions, but we can and should all be satisfied with our natural level of competence, able to score perfect tens in self-expression, with our own unique trajectory of development. A neutral mental attitude is the Gita's well-reasoned recommendation to ensure this admirable result.

10) devotion to Me to the exclusion of everything extraneous, and never straying from the direct path, preference to dwell in a place apart, distaste for crowded living,

Many people have an aversion to lines like this one, where Krishna asks for “devotion to Me to the exclusion of everything extraneous.” Elsewhere he says bow down to Me, worship Me and so on. I have the same aversion. You feel like slamming the book shut and tossing it away. This sounds like unadulterated religious worship of some god.

It's very important to remember that the Me here is the Absolute, so it only means “Krishna the particular manifestation” of the All. If you take it as being exclusive, there's no difference from insisting that Christ is the only Way. But it doesn't have to be taken in such a limited fashion. Here's where an explication can be very helpful.

This is not about a deity, but a universal principle. Deifying a principle is called superstition, and is never the Gita's intent. The idea behind these negatively associated words, including "never straying from the direct path," is for us to see and know the unifying value of the Absolute at all times in everything we do, see, and touch. The minute we forget the uniting factor we are subject to confusion, conflict and suffering. Training our minds to focus on the Absolute within the welter of "all else" requires a devoted effort. As taught in the chapter on meditation (VI, 26), we have to bring the mind back again and again to attend to the core value, as it continually drifts off toward whatever attracts its attention.

What is it about humans that we imagine tangential details are more important than essences? Our mind is always looking for the new so it can assess its threat level, while assuming what it already knows is safe. Assessing danger is an obvious evolutionary benefit, but we are perfectly capable of moving beyond that important surface function, instead directing our attention to the essence while downplaying the haphazard events that surround it. The goal is to allow the plethora of specific experiences to always be taken in context.

Practically speaking, when someone or something upsets you, it means that you have forgotten your connection with it and are treating it as separate, or extraneous as this verse puts it. Once you redirect your attention to the unifying factor, your discomfort changes into compassion and a desire to be of assistance.

Elsewhere we have discussed the mature way to understand prostration before the Absolute as an inner dedication that does not normally involve bodily lying down in the dust. We should keep in mind that Krishna is saying this because Arjuna has asked how we are to know Him as the Absolute. We are also welcome to wander off: in IV, 11 Krishna said that whatever way you go is fine with him. Just know that an academic approach leads to an academic understanding, a religious approach leads to a religious understanding, and so on. An absolutist orientation leads to the

Absolute. Narayana Guru and his offshoots recommend a direct relationship that does not require any extraneous mumbo jumbo. As you directly contemplate the Absolute, you merge slowly into it. Since it's your true nature, how could it be otherwise?

It looks like “preference to dwell in a place apart, distaste for crowded living,” is a diversion from the graded series, a bit on the light side. Perhaps it should be thought of as a result of yogic contemplation, rather than a requirement. When we dive deeply into the cool waters of the firmament, it imputes a profound calm throughout our being, which becomes a very attractive place to hang out. Chaos and noise obscure its peace, just as people talking at a music concert make it harder to hear the orchestra. Naturally we prefer undisturbed quiet to listen to the grand performance.

Delicate surgery is not performed in bus stations or the market. The surgeon needs to have the attention focused absolutely on the task at hand. Poets cannot compose their rhymes while someone is talking to them, but must withdraw into a quiet place so they can attend to their inspirations.

People who crave distraction are at heart terrified of discovering themselves. They have had their own dharma beaten out of them by their “caregivers,” and so live estranged from themselves, anxious to insure that their true being will never show through their defenses. Their spiritual life begins when they resolve to regain their true nature. One of the first steps—and it can be a big one, even including a leap of faith—is to mitigate as many distractions as possible.

Stepping back from the transactional world has ever been seen as an integral step in the process of becoming yourself. Only after regaining your own ground can you safely renormalize in the rough and tumble of civilized chaos.

As with the familial detachment of the previous verse, distaste for crowded living doesn't mean we have to be hermits, only that we need enough freedom from distracting junk so we can maintain high quality in our thoughts and relationships. Being in

close proximity to too many people keeps our interactions on an unsatisfactory, superficial level.

11) everlasting affiliation to the wisdom pertaining to the Self, insight into the content of philosophical wisdom—this is declared to be wisdom; whatever is other than this is ignorance.

Everlasting affiliation to wisdom does not imply a lifelong struggle full of hard work and drudgery. Wisdom isn't some artificial and arbitrary way of interpreting the world, as it is sometimes made out to be, it is a clearheaded comprehension of every aspect of existence, combined with the confidence to act joyously and harmoniously within it. When we finally understand spiritual truths, we will willingly and with little effort affiliate ourselves with our intelligent appraisals. At the same time, we will see that straying from wisdom leads into a dense thicket of darkness and confusion, engendering conflict, with plenty of really hard work to simply stay afloat.

When we are young we have a similar everlasting affiliation to our mother's breast. Not that we have to suckle all the time, but that we will come back to the source of our nourishment regularly and eagerly the minute our hunger pangs return. This is a closer analogy than it might at first appear to be. Wisdom is spiritually nourishing, and when it flows into us it enables us to grow healthy and strong.

The bottom line is that wisdom is delightful and attractive. The more we affiliate with it, the more joy we have in holding it in our hearts. People learn to hate it because all too often unwisdom is passed off as wisdom. That's exactly why Krishna is going to such great lengths to delineate their differences.

It always astonishes me how humans enjoy carrying on about meaningless things, and not just in the realm of gossip and chatter, either. University philosophy departments, for instance, often look down on the pursuit of meaningful extrapolations, preferring mental gymnastics performed in as close to a vacuum as possible.

Granted, that's one way of remaining "pure" in a limited sense. It's also dry as dust and deadly dull. Similarly, over the years much of Vedanta has been boiled down to mind-numbing rote learning, where the thrill is long gone. In the face of this our souls cry out for relevant and meaningful knowledge, otherwise known as wisdom, that will teach us how to live well and have fun doing it.

One of my primary attractions to the gurus of the Narayana Gurukula is their emphasis on the transformative power of wisdom, and their insistence on a practical aspect within even the most abstruse theoretical investigations. Only when a complicated idea can be understood in terms of a person's life experience, does it really make sense. As those ideas are employed to free the mind, problems are eradicated and life becomes more enjoyable. It is one thing to repeat the wise thoughts of others, and another to have pondered them until you have really made sense of them. This is exactly what is meant by the phrase "insight into the *content* of philosophical wisdom." We are not asked to be trained parrots, but rare birds capable of expressing truth in a unique way.

It's hard to say whether the list of qualities in these last five verses is as comprehensive as Krishna claims, but it's undoubtedly an excellent and extremely useful batch. Probably we can all come up with some additional wisdom factors, but they might well be closely related to the ones here. In any case, the idea is to put these into practice, and not to quibble. If you think of another key spiritual quality, feel free to think about it and exemplify it too.

12) I shall declare that which is to be known, knowing which one gains immortality: the beginningless, having Me as its supreme culminating factor, the Absolute, which is said to be neither existence nor non-existence.

"That which is to be known" is of course the Absolute, often referred to for simplicity's sake as That, with a capital T. Krishna's phrasing here should be taken simply as meaning that he is about to give his definitive description of the Absolute. Nataraja Guru

compares the Gita's "I shall declare," to the "verily, verily I say unto you," of the Bible, being a kind of underlining of the special importance of what is to follow.

"Gaining immortality" is a concept we have to be careful with. Since in some sense we are already immortal, immortality is not something that has to be gained, or that could be gained. But, as Krishna points out, we do become *aware* of our immortality when we rediscover our true nature as the Absolute.

The eminent scholar Wendy Doniger understands that the ancient concept of immortality does not match our modern belief:

By "immortality" the ancient sages meant not an actual eternity of life—even the gods do not live forever, though they live much longer than we do, and they never age—but rather a full life span (usually conceived of as seventy or a hundred years). [*The Hindus, An Alternative History* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2009).132-3]

Academics, unfortunately, seldom bother with the spiritual or psychological implications of their material, so while what Doniger says is true, there is more to the story. Immortality is a natural result of interest being redirected from the things that are born and die to That which does not. The implication is that we must reawaken our divine intensity of purpose, the divine fire burning within us, which ignites our enthusiasm to live well and fully for however brief a span we may be physically alive. It does not mean living forever, it means being abundantly and deliciously present as long as we are alive. We experience a tremendous sense of deliverance when all our sufferings are at bay and our native bliss surges to the fore. If we can manage to avoid getting tangled in the ups and downs of daily life, it is much easier to remain in that enjoyable condition.

When any aspect of existence is closely examined, it resolves into its ground, which is the Absolute. While the Absolute is all that is, it appears to be different so that we can play with it and

evolve within it. The Absolute is the supreme culminating factor of everything within this beginningless universe, or more correctly multiverse, an endless ejaculation of universes.

Earlier we gave the example of the allegedly material world, where upon examination solids turn out to be comprised of molecules, which consist of atoms arrayed with plenty of space between them. Looking closer, atoms turn out to be as proportionally filled with empty space as our whole galaxy, with minute elementary particles vibrating through near-nothingness. And these so-called elementary particles are themselves comprised of infinitesimal specks whirling through profound emptiness. There does not seem to be an end to this possible reduction, so from an Absolute perspective we can predict that everything is comprised of Nothing, or Very Nearly Nothing. No wonder our universe could inflate at many times the speed of light: there is nothing to inflate! It's all only an appearance. Still, even the most enlightened scientist or philosopher continues to perceive solid matter in all directions. Maybe the something created out of nothing is not an egregious error, but the main point after all.

To give an example, we can analyze a tree we are admiring. What looks so monumentally imposing and also beautiful is the impression of light waves on our own neural system. The agitated neurons vibrate in part of the brain, and the brain composes a picture for our convenient interpretation. We are not seeing any tree as such, but only an image in our mind's eye, and if we look at the brain through a microscope we will not be able to discern any tree there. Yet, knowing this, we still cannot run forward without crashing into whatever it is. The tree has become an unknowable mystery, yet one that has a definitive impact on us that we ignore at our peril. And mystery or no mystery, why should we deny ourselves its nourishing fruits, protective shade, and useful lumber, as if it was somehow wrong for it to spring from nothing?

Small minds insist that the perception of solidity is the only reality, but the wise know there is much more to the story. The whole business can be seen to culminate in the Absolute ground,

which is somehow distinct from both existence (solidity) and non-existence (emptiness), being neither while comprising both.

In verses 13 through 17 Krishna is going to do his best to describe the indescribable, with a brief compilation of some of the best analogies that a long tradition of intense contemplation by many penetrative thinkers has bequeathed the human race. His hope is that by meditating on them we will redirect our awareness from the superficial to the profound, and in the process become wise ourselves.

13) With hands and feet everywhere, with eyes and heads and mouths and hearing everywhere—in the world, That remains, enveloping all.

Back in Chapter XI, Arjuna saw That in the same way as Krishna is now describing it, as manifold body parts scattered all over the place. And whose hands and feet and eyes and mouths is he speaking of? Each person's, and all of us together. It would be an oversimplification to think that the Absolute has a body as such, but as Krishna has made very clear, all the manifold beings of the universe *are* in a sense the body of the Absolute.

The Gita does not intend a dualistic conception of a divine substance spying on an undivine world. Divine and world are not two. The miraculous expression of the Absolute through its creation is revealed to itself through its own consciousness. *Tat tvam asi*—That thou art—means we are the agents of cosmic awareness also. Everywhere that there is awareness, That is known. Where there is no consciousness, That is unknown. We are the eyes of the universe through which it sees, the mouths through which it speaks, the hands with which it caresses.

This makes each individual infinitely precious to the whole, because no one else experiences the universe in exactly the same way, and no one can possibly substitute for another. Each of us is vastly unique. We are unique every instant, and we are all made up of billions and billions of instants. This makes life especially

interesting. We are the very sensory and mental apparatus by which the universe sees itself and knows itself from our personal perspective. While we bear many generic resemblances to each other, in terms of specific experiences there is infinite variety. We begin to diverge at birth, and follow our own path ever after. So there is much to be shared, and we shouldn't waste any time about it. Later is too late!

The universe, then, perceives itself through the senses of all sentient beings, and yet it is much more as well. No agglomeration of parts can ever equal the whole in this setup. Henri Bergson's analogy of the Absolute as the gold coin which no mound of copper pennies could ever match in value, is the same concept. The Gita would also have us also remember that each "penny" is nonetheless infinitely valuable. An even better analogy is of the sun being reflected in millions of jewel-like dewdrops. Or really, the actual world with all its different types of sentience is the best analogy of all!

This verse and the first half of the next are identical with the Svestasvatara Upanishad, 3.16 & 17. Of many curious theories about the Gita propounded over the years, one is that only the first two chapters are the original, and the rest was added by Christian saboteurs late in the first millennium of the Common Era. Someone wrote a whole book about it, and it even got published. The theory is based in part on a vague resemblance between Hindu and Christian doctrines, but originated in the fact that an old Gita text was found in Indonesia consisting of only the first two chapters. Taking into account how bulky the old Pali manuscripts were and how time-consuming they were to copy, it's very possible that a shortened version was shipped off to the colonies. Better evidence that this theory is false is the several places throughout the Gita where the Upanishads are cited in a highly erudite fashion, and occasionally quoted exactly, as here. Christian missionaries would have to have been supremely clever forgers, and moreover been directed by God to know in advance that in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the Gita would emerge as the

preeminent work of all the many ancient sources of Indian wisdom. Despite some similarities that will inevitably be found in scriptures, there are many significant differences between the Gita and the Bible. This verse itself conveys a most un-Christian notion: that God is everyone and everyone is God. It is thus easy to add that particular book to the mountain of sensationalist trash that annually finds its way into print, and thus may even wind up in your local library, as it did in mine.

14) Shining by the specific characters of the senses, devoid of all sense attributes, unattached, supporting all, without qualities yet perceiving qualities,

Keep in mind that much of the Gita's material is presented in matched pairs for yogic or dialectic unification. Chapter XIII proceeds as a song of mystical dialectical wisdom. Ideas and their opposite, plus and minus, are taken together. Each of the next few verses presents three paradoxes, any of which would make for an excellent meditation, which they are undoubtedly intended to serve as the basis of. Arjuna would be expected to flesh out each bare-bones idea in his own mind.

The first of these paradoxes is "Shining by the specific characters of the senses, devoid of all sense attributes." The Absolute is comprehended by us in manifestation via the senses, which are literally in Sanskrit "the shining ones." The mind is the coordinator of the senses, so in this regard all our thoughts are sensory in nature. Because we have a mind, there is a comprehensible aspect to the universe. And this is true of each individual sense: because we have eyes to see, there is a visual aspect to manifestation; because we have ears to hear there is an auditory aspect; and so on. Yet this transcendental reality is beyond all sensory interpretation. There is a degree of uncertainty separating the Absolute from any observer. Every assessment we make is therefore only an estimate, an asymptotic approximation. Yogically combining sense data with the realization of the

Absolute's inviolability to sense interpretation yields the optimum understanding.

Simply stated, in seeking the truth or the Absolute we are trying to perceive the unperceivable, so we have to rise above mere perception. Perceptual arguments are all beside the point, although they are our inescapable starting point.

The next pair is "unattached/supporting all." How something completely unconnected can nonetheless bring everything into existence and sustain it for eternity can only be appreciated dialectically. At the same time, when we observe all this manifestation we should remember it is dependent on the Unknowable for its very existence. The immeasurable cloud of virtually immortal atomic particles that temporarily yet repeatedly takes form as various seemingly independent beings is as good an analogy as science has yet invented for this paradox.

Lastly, this qualityless reality must somehow be able to observe qualities, or the essences of things, for them to be known. Manifestation itself must therefore *be* the observer. As Teilhard de Chardin puts it, "The history of the living world can be summarized as the elaboration of ever more perfect eyes within a cosmos in which there is always something more to be seen." What a wonderful meditation by which to attain intelligent union with the Absolute!

Each of these mysteries should bring us to a state of exaltation and wonder. They are not presented as resolvable problems or dilemmas, but as springboards to new fields of comprehension. They are meant to break us away from our habitual assumptions. Being both true and impossible, our hearts should burst open with gratitude that we can even exist in this sea of paradoxes. Scientifically-minded readers can always substitute Nature for the Absolute, and all these dialectic descriptions will still make perfect sense, ideally instigating a similar state of non-anthropomorphic reverence.

15) without and within beings, immobile and mobile too—  
because subtle, That is unknowable; That stands far and near also.

This verse bears a close kinship with verse 5 of the Isha Upanishad:

That moves; That does not move.

That is far; That is near.

That is inside of all these.

That is outside of all these.

Each of the pairs of attributes listed in this section is paradoxical and their synthesis is numinous and very nearly inexplicable. They are meant as guides for mind-expanding meditations, and not as bald statements of fact. For instance, when you sit and contemplate what is inside and what is outside, quite quickly the distinction dissolves. It depends solely on your perspective, since my inside is your outside and vice versa. And as with borders between nations, there isn't any actual line dividing one from the other. If you hold tightly to your limited perspective you can make the divisions seem very real, but the conflicts that arise when arbitrary barriers are erected between sides are naturally resolved by this meditation.

One of the most liberating elements of a typical psychedelic experience is the total erasure of the sense of distinction between your inside and outside. I remember laughing uproariously at such an odd notion, nowhere to be seen in my condition at the time. Absolutely everything was “inside” itself, and nothing was outside. Pure consciousness does not have differentiations, though partial consciousness is filled with them. And that's what marks *their* inexplicable difference, which is a further paradox.

How can the Absolute simultaneously move and stand still? It is everywhere, so it has nowhere to go. Movement would imply somewhere it is not, so it literally cannot move. And yet it is filled with bodies in motion. A mountain or even a house sits there so

solidly, seeming eternal, and yet we know it is made up of madly whirling particles. At the present time even the particles themselves are coming to be viewed as mere hypotheses, with no real existence. While this vacuity is impossible for us to perceive with our senses, it is relatively simple to bring the poles together mentally in meditation.

As with all yogic dynamism, the poles have to be combined for a complete picture to emerge. It is not true to say the Absolute is only in motion or only at rest, or that it is only outside or inside. Both are always true at the same time, and the Absolute transcends them too, not actually either resting or moving.

Spiritually speaking, we know we are the same person day after day, and yet our lives are filled with change. We grow and expand our comprehension, while many ideas and memories become obsolete and are cast off or replaced. Yet within this constant change we sit steady, knowing we are always who we are. Even when our familiar surroundings are blasted apart by some cataclysm, we remain ourselves. Such a wonder!

Nothing can be more subtle than an immaterial substance, which must be finer than the finest subatomic particles that will ever be discovered. And because we only know “things” and the Absolute is not made of things, it cannot be known in the way we know specific items. It can be imagined and surmised and so on, entered into as Krishna puts it, but it can never be nailed down with a scientifically verifiable “this is precisely what it is.” Human minds naturally recoil from all attempts to “know” the mystery. The Upanishadic rishis felt they had made a breakthrough in recommending yoga in the form of a cancellation of opposites as a method to reveal this unknowable substratum, and indeed they had. The ancient Greeks knew the same secret, only they had a different name for it: dialectics.

When the Upanishads describe the Absolute as farther than the farthest and nearer than the nearest, they are basing the thought on this same principle of subtlety. The One is in fact what we are made of, beating in our heart and pulsing in our veins, so nothing

could possibly be nearer. At the same time, if we try to build up a picture of the Absolute from any number of stages or particles, they will always be too few, so it will always remain beyond our conceptualization. If we go outward in search of it, it will continue to recede beyond our reach. Krishna has made it clear as early as II, 40 that the Absolute is not attained through any cumulative process. Once again, these impossible conundrums should make our hearts expand exponentially with gratitude and delight. If we are frustrated by them, we are taking the whole game too literally and too seriously.

Our minds have been trained to add bits and pieces together to arrive at the big picture, which works fine in mechanical systems, but the technique will not attain anything transcendental, by definition. Similarly, religious certainty always fails because it is energized by a partial grasp of the whole. We should instead be certain that we don't know it all, and so always be willing to listen and learn, and to meditate on impossible yet necessary paradoxes, uniting them in our heart.

16) And undivided, yet remaining divided, as it were, in beings, supporter of existence, and That which is to be known, holding back and releasing for expansive becoming,

The mystical purport of Krishna's teaching is brought to a high intensity as he wraps up his delineation of wisdom factors, collectively "that which is to be known." The subtleties here do not yield their secrets to casual readers, but must be contemplated in depth.

We have already addressed divisions under the last verse. If something is all, how could it be divided into pieces? Divisions imply a part that is not all. This is, however, the exact paradox of incarnate beings: we are at once all and merely a tiny part of it. It is only a line drawn in the sand, more like a line drawn in the ocean, and yet it's as actual as anything. Like maya, existence both is and

is not. Trying to wrap your mind around this one will really stretch your neurons!

One way to contemplate the division of the undivided is to picture a pond, through which swirls and eddies are moving. Each disruption of the calm has its own characteristics, but when all is said and done it is only water. Similarly, we live in an eternal ocean of atoms that regularly gathers itself into all of the forms and beings we interact with. My suspicion is that the ancient rishis had some intuitive inkling of what the electron microscope has revealed to us. What could be more spiritual than an ocean of energetic particles that completely saturates everything and causes shapes to appear and disappear?

Next is an unusual dichotomy, that the very thing that permits us to exist is a mystery we have to discover. As the verse puts it, it is to be known. You would think that we would easily know our essential nature, but it turns out to be the most elusive subject of all.

Implicit in the second paradox is the question of why we should have to go searching for that which holds us up, which supports us. Of which are we made, support or mystery, the conceivable or the inconceivable? What is the point of a scientific attitude, of wanting to discover new aspects of reality? In one sense there is nothing to learn and nothing to be gained. And yet, without the search, we are stagnant, dull, insipid. All our inventions and detailed knowledge of the universe are in a sense unnecessary, because life is perfect at every stage. Yet these seem so integral to who and what we are, to our evolution, that it would be a shame to live as though they didn't matter. We don't want to remain insentient, so we are impelled to go searching for our very makeup. Again, like our atomic structure, what we are made of is not visible to our unaided eyes, only its outer sheath. It took centuries of technological development to achieve the ability to see beneath the surface in even a purely physical sense.

There is a strong tendency in humans to throw off the mantle of progress and dwell in brute ignorance, and the natural support of

the universe makes even this possible. But another force within us drives us to press for ever greater awareness. These two forces oppose each other, and life revolves and evolves in response.

A prime example is the perennial urge in humans to participate in wars. Over thousands of years we have accumulated hard won knowledge that should make war utterly outmoded. And yet each generation has to learn what their predecessors knew all too well: that other than making a few bitter souls rich, there is no benefit whatsoever and a vast downside to warfare. In the same way, the loving unity of the Absolute has to be discovered by each person anew. The Supporter within is invisible, intangible and inaudible until you start to wake yourself up. Or else tragedies conspire to wake you up.

When I was once in Greece, it occurred to me that strewing islands around a beautiful, calm sea so that they were just barely visible from the neighboring islands was the perfect way to goad humans into inventing boats, and thus initiate complex technology. They seem to burn with an invitation to explore, to abandon complacency. Deep in our psyches, and possibly built in to the very structure of our universe, we long for distant shores, which beckon to us and mock our ordinariness, challenging us to invent new strategies to find our way to them.

Probably the most mystical of all the meditations in this list is the third, holding back and releasing. There may well be secret yogic practices implied here related to pranayama, the harmonization of vital energies. As these require the direct guidance of a master, there is not much to be said about them here.

Prana is the general term for the various energies that constitute life, that differentiate a living body from a corpse. Some people have more energy than others, and spiritual masters have the most of all, often stupendous amounts. In a general sense, we can say that the life energies or pranas tend to accumulate like rain in a barrel. If there is no barrel to hold it, the rain just pours out on the ground and disappears. So it must be contained. But what is conserved must also be used to release its value. Water is

important to us when we drink it or cook with it or bathe in it. Just like spirit. So, as with many things, there is a delicate balancing act to be performed between conservation and use.

Elsewhere the Gita advocates using words sparingly, which has the same impact as saving up water or prana. Those who chatter on constantly are driven by an unconscious need to ratify their existence by producing a tangible verbal mirage. Mirages being what they are, they have to be constantly re-invoked or they evanesce into thin air. It doesn't much matter to the insecure ones how trivial most of it is, so long as hot air is passing over their vocal cords. By contrast, the wise know perfectly well that they exist, so there is no need to prove anything. They rest at ease in their own nature, their dharma. Anyone who has done a silent retreat will attest to the power that gathers the longer you hold back from emitting words. It helps focus the mind as well. Deep contemplation comes with much less effort to those who dwell in quiet. Then when they finally release their restraint and speak, it is with carefully chosen, potent words, about matters of importance.

How much more potent it is if, in addition to holding your tongue, you can restrain the chattering inner voice in order to gather your energies?

The famous quote from Ecclesiastes beginning "To every thing there is a season," includes "a time to keep, and a time to cast away." This is the inverse version of a time for saving up and a time for spending, or as this verse puts it, holding back and releasing. The Gita assures us that the value it brings is "expansive becoming." We gather our forces and direct them to great ends, in place of frittering away our lives on trivial pursuits. The former leads to growth and the latter to stagnation. Richard Wilhelm says the following in his comments on I Ching hexagram 58, The Joyous, Lake:

True joy... rests on firmness and strength within, manifesting itself outwardly as yielding and gentle.... The joyous mood is infectious and therefore brings success. But joy must be

based on steadfastness if it is not to degenerate into uncontrolled mirth. Truth and strength must dwell in the heart, while gentleness reveals itself in social intercourse. In this way one assumes the right attitude toward God and man and achieves something.

On the subject of expansiveness, William James had this to say of American poet Walt Whitman:

Walt Whitman owes his importance in literature to the systematic expulsion from his writings of all contractile elements. The only sentiments he allowed himself to express were of the expansive order; and he expressed these in the first person, not as your mere monstrously conceited individual might so express them, but vicariously for all men, so that a passionate and mystic ontological emotion suffuses his words, and ends by persuading the reader that men and women, life and death and all things are divinely good.” (*Varieties of Religious Experience*, New York: Doubleday, p. 84)

17) the Light even of lights—That is said to be beyond darkness; knowledge, the knowable, and what is to be reached through knowledge, particularly located in the hearts of everyone.

One of the most beautiful verses in the entire Bhagavad Gita, it is humbling for me to attempt to comment on the soaring poetry with which Krishna concludes his description of what is to be known, i.e. the Absolute. I am whatever you would call the opposite of a poet, prosaic I suppose, so I’ll just point out a few details, and then you can poetically turn the words into flights of insights in your own meditations.

“The Light of lights” goes back at least as far as the first Upanishad, the Brihadaranyaka (IV, 4, 16). The concept is implied even earlier, such as “This light has come, of all the lights the

fairest,” of the Rig Veda, referring to the ineffable blush of dawn. References to a special light—often a dawning light—are found scattered throughout the Upanishads and are central to many of the world’s religions. What the Light of lights means is there is a principle of light, and there are innumerable specific examples of light. No specific instance of light can equal the principle of lightness, which thus transcends them all. At the same time, a principle is merely an abstraction until it becomes manifest in some form. So the principle is intrinsic to every occasion of light happening and yet it is distinct as well. It requires some actual object to manifest it. If we are philosophically inclined, each example can direct our attention back to the universal principle from which it springs. It’s a wonderful way to ponder the mystery, because the paradox is dialectically embraceable when examined in this way.

Consciousness is the preeminent example of light that shines by its own power. It is not and cannot be illuminated by other lights, but they do help it to see and know beyond itself. Expressed in individual beings, there is a whole continuum of brightness in consciousness, and none attains to absolute total awareness, all claims aside. Likewise, a consciousness that is totally dark would be no consciousness at all. The inescapable conclusion is that we are the little light bulbs and campfires that in our own unique fashion incarnate the infinite light of the Absolute. We are simultaneously the same and different from That.

The Light of lights is beyond darkness. Krishna expresses this quite humbly: the supreme Light *is said to be* beyond darkness. In Vedanta, one of the sources of truth is valid verbal testimony. Krishna here honors the numerous other references to this idea in the Upanishads and even the Vedas. Since it is rare to know this light firsthand, we may be guided by the encouragement of those who have gone before and seen it for themselves.

Darkness and light are both absolute principles. If there were only one or the other, nothing would be visible, so both have to be present. When they mix in different degrees of manifestation, they

produce the multifarious intermediate stages we recognize as the universe. Beyond this ordinary polarity is a Light which transcends and yet encompasses the whole. This mystery will be examined in another way in Chapter XV, with its three Absolutes.

The next part of this verse is universally translated so that “knowledge, the knowable, and what is to be reached through knowledge,” are listed as qualities of the Absolute. But grammatically they could be just as easily read as being included in the list of what the Absolute is beyond. Thus the verse could well mean that the Absolute is “beyond darkness, knowledge, the knowable and what is to be reached through knowledge.” After all, just two verses back the Absolute was characterized as unknowable. In IV, 24, the Absolute is described as the end to be reached, but that is through sacrifice, in other words, “by means of his peace supreme of absolutist action,” and not by any accumulation of knowledge.

Just as the visible universe is an admixture of light and darkness, knowledge is inevitably tainted with ignorance. The flip side of what we know is always what we don’t know. As we know only a part of the whole, knowledge does not attain the Absolute. We can have more or less light in comparison to darkness, but pure light would flood the system and wipe out all distinctions. There is a leap involved from knowledge to union, or from knowledge to Knowledge, which we call wisdom.

I’m not saying that all those commentators are wrong. I only wish to add another perspective that has some value in contemplating this mystery. Krishna assures us in IX, 2 that the benefits of wisdom are objectively verifiable, and in IX, 17 that he is the Holy One who is to be known. In XI, 18 Arjuna agrees that the Absolute is “the Supreme that is to be known.” So it is clear that it is knowable in one sense and unknowable in another. Guru instruction often has a contradictory or paradoxical aspect, to keep disciples from becoming complacent. The minute you think you have truth nailed down, it wriggles out of your grasp. The Isha Upanishad (10-11) puts it this way:

Other, indeed, they say, than knowledge!  
Other, they say, than non-knowledge!  
—Thus we have heard it from the wise  
Who to us have explained It.

Knowledge and non-knowledge—  
He who this pair conjointly knows,  
With non-knowledge passing over death  
With knowledge wins the immortal.

References to the Absolute residing in the hearts of everyone are also found at X, 20; XV, 15; and XVIII, 61. Interestingly, these are all in the second, more practical half of the work. Heart references in the first half, covering the approach to the Absolute, begin with pain and doubt and rise to harmonious conviction. In Chapter I there is the battle cry piercing hearts, Chapter II reveals Arjuna being faint of heart, and Chapter IV ends with Krishna calling on Arjuna to overcome his ignorance-born doubt residing in the heart. As greater yogic insight is achieved, Chapter VIII extols meditation by holding the mind-factors convergent in the heart, and finally Arjuna achieves wholehearted faith affiliation with the Absolute in the ninth chapter. When examined as a sub-theme, the tale of the heart parallels and epitomizes the arching trajectory of the Gita as a whole.

We should not need to underline that the Absolute is in no way exclusive. It resides in the core or the heart of everyone: those you hate equally with those you love. Therefore unless you love everyone as manifestations of the Absolute your understanding is faulty.

18) Thus, the field, and wisdom, and what has to be known, have been briefly told; My devotee, having known this, attains to My state of being.

In case we have been reading the Gita as if it was just another book, Vyasa wants to remind us that meditating on these ideas and understanding them brings us into tune with the Absolute, which is the most delightful state possible. If we scan the words and nod our heads and pass on, nothing will change. But these are the very concepts that bring wisdom and enlightenment, so please don't give them short shrift. They need to be pondered and brought to life in the depths of our being.

19) Know that nature and spirit are both beginningless; and know also that modifications and their intrinsic modalities are born of nature.

The second half of the Gita begins in unity, and gradually progresses to duality, triplicity, and finally multiplicity, returning us to what is glibly called normality. At this point a transition occurs from the duality of manifested/unmanifested or field/knower of the field to a threefold conception. Perhaps you noticed that the last verse slyly introduced three categories in what has been a manifestly dual presentation up to now. We began with the field and its knower, and suddenly added to them is "what has to be known," or the Absolute as the presently unknown. These correspond to the manifested, unmanifested and transcendental Absolutes we will encounter in Chapter XV.

Prior to that discussion, the field itself is described as having three aspects also, namely the modalities or gunas of nature: sattva, rajas and tamas. They have been mentioned before in II, 45 and III, 5, 29 and 37, but from here on they will have a prominent place in the discussion, including center stage in the next chapter.

The implication in the present verse is that since the modalities are born of nature and nature is eternal, the modalities are likewise eternal. Anything eternal has an absolute status.

We can see that exactly like modern scientists, the rishis of the Upanishads were striving to describe the essential structure of the universe, elucidating the simple laws that undergird the vast

complexity of manifestation. The primary difference is that today's scientists leave out the spirit part and focus solely on the material aspect, the part that can be accurately described mathematically.

Erring in the opposite direction, the traditional religious misunderstanding regarding the gunas is that they are to be transcended by a detachment that leaves only spirit. In simple terms, material nature is bad and spirit is good. So as they are presently constituted, science and religion are locked in a wrestling match to discredit the other side's home turf, yet they will never be complete until they arrive at an accord. Spirit and nature, subject and object, are a matched pair, indeed a unity, separable only in the imagination.

The Gita would like to point out that the creation of the universe is not a mistake to be rectified, but a glorious burst of infinite expression that makes everything possible. It is to be reveled in rather than disdained. Recall that Arjuna's first impulse was to drop out of the game and withdraw, but Krishna wouldn't allow it. He insisted that he get back in as a full-fledged participant, just as soon as he had assimilated a goodly dose of philosophical enlightenment.

It's true that Krishna unequivocally stated back in II, 45: "The Vedas treat of matters related to the three gunas; you should be free from these three modalities, Arjuna, free from (relative) pairs of opposites, established ever in pure being, without alternately acquiring and enjoying, (unitively) Self-possessed." This is a very subtle problem. Nature consists of its modalities, and so it cannot be separated from them, but there is a way for the knower of nature to appreciate and even participate in it without becoming mired in its ups and downs. As neophytes we are bound tightly in nature's clasp, and as we learn wisdom we gradually rise above it to a state of balance that is truly liberating. Yet it would be wrong to simply reject nature and imagine we could live as pure, detached spirits. "Pure being" takes place in concert with nature, not in its absence.

The Gita's revaluation of this schism is to harmonize nature and spirit in a yogic, dialectical equipoise, where each infuses the other with its essence to such an extent that the duality is wholly abolished. Arjuna, representing a more or less ordinary human, was previously so caught up in nature as to be unaware of its spiritual aspect. Substituting one extreme for the other, he then wished to focus completely on the spirit and turn his back on nature. His guru is now instructing him on how these must be united at all times. Nature without spirit produces suffering and ignorance; spirit without nature is empty and meaningless. Their mutual participation, on the other hand, produces a bountiful life of great value that optimizes every experience.

The bottom line here is not that there are two worlds, there is only one. The apparent solidity of matter is an illusion, and the apparent mistiness of spirit is also illusory. This illusion has two sides, and if we set them up in combat we will be confused all right. There is only one essence, from which spirit and matter emerge as a polarity, and truly knowing this dispels our confusion.

20) In what concerns the agency of cause and effect the motivating factor is called nature; in the matter of the experiencer of pleasure and pain the motivating factor is called spirit.

On the surface this is a straightforward verse that accords well with the modern sensibility. Material nature consists of endless chains of cause and effect relationships, which can be traced back in time to a purported Big Bang, for now at least the scientists' First Cause. These interactions can be and often are thought of in purely abstract terms, as though "blind" or accidental, requiring no intelligence. Sensations, on the other hand, need a conscious subject or spirit to experience them. A dead body or a rock does not feel either pleasure or pain, as far as we can tell.

Notwithstanding the verse's noncontroversial wording, the complex and subtle relationship of spirit and nature, the vertical and horizontal, is presented very cleverly here, so that their

intrinsic unity is not violated. If anything, nature is shown to be primary and spirit secondary, a mere experiencer of nature. This is the opposite of the Vedantic norm, where consciousness is the precursor of matter, and more akin to the modern view. The only possible explanation is that consciousness is equated with the Absolute, out of which arise both the individual experiencing self and its material world. In that case we will have to take care to observe the subtle distinction between unitive consciousness and spirit. Absolute consciousness does not focus on pain and pleasure, but the individual consciousness does. The difference is the same as that between Self and self, which have a practical distinction that dissolves into sameness in realization.

Although we speak of spirit as the vertical factor and nature as its horizontal proliferation, here their roles are reversed, counterbalancing our prejudice to better reveal that each participates with the other. They are not really separate at all. Any distinction between them is only a tool for clarity of comprehension, and is at its core extraneous.

Cause and effect are vertical factors, implying an elapse of time. The causal seeds lodged at the vertical negative pole sprout upwards toward the transcendental, positive pole as their expression unfolds. At the same time, they progressively manifest as horizontal displays. Pleasure and pain mark the parameters of the horizontal in terms of their impact on the experiencer. In a way this verse is saying that nature is the motivating factor for spirit and vice versa, and this is exactly right. Like yin and yang, their separation arises simultaneously, energizing the whole to rotate or oscillate, with each side containing a seed of its opposite at its core. The horizontal drives the vertical and vice versa. Nature motivates spirit and spirit motivates nature. Thus, spirit is energized by its attractions and repulsions to the world, and nature evolves toward perfection drawn forward by the attraction of the possibility of spiritual exaltedness.

It's important to always remember that the Gita is not peddling one side over the other. Most religions emphasize spirit

over matter, and most sciences emphasize the reverse, but in the unitive vision, these are not two. The point, then, is not to delineate their differences, but to demonstrate that in a contemplative outlook they are united to produce our universe.

I have changed Nataraja Guru's wording of the verse slightly. Instead of the motivating factors being "said to be" nature and spirit, it now reads that they are "called" nature and spirit. Krishna does not mean to be vague here; he is quite definite about his instruction. What he is pointing out is that nature and spirit are merely names for factors or forces of vast potency. We should not be satisfied with names, but look to what they stand for, and enter into that.

When my future wife, Debbie, was in India with Nitya in 1971, she bought a beautiful green sari. She was wearing it one day to go into Trivandrum, when they went to say goodbye to Nataraja Guru. He looked over her outfit and commented, "They call that color green, don't they?" Debbie's mind was blown. All her life she assumed green was green, an unassailable fact. Surely her dress *was* green. The Guru had exploded that notion and shown her that green was only a name, and, as is well established, an arbitrary name at that for an experience that may be completely different from anyone else's perception of it. Similarly, Krishna is reminding us that spirit and nature are merely names, not things in themselves. They are interpretive tools, and the true experience of what they are is much more than any word can signify. To really know them we cannot be satisfied with simply giving them names.

21) The spirit, seated in nature, appreciates the modalities born of nature; association with the modalities is the cause of births in good or evil wombs.

The message of this verse is simple: we are drawn to what we like. Then we become attached to what we like, and that determines the direction of our lives, and possibly even our future lives. It's a very straightforward proposition.

Unlike some religions, Krishna's wording evidences a very open and nonjudgmental attitude. We aren't faking what turns us on. Why should we? It's just that bluenoses of all ages have uncaged their sadistic natures by trying to squelch other people's happiness, and they've been very successful. This can only be because they have been denied joy in their turn, and are secretly jealous. What they rail against is what they inwardly crave. Because of all the false moralizing in virtually every society, we are forced to undertake a detailed yogic recovery program to return to our native state of joy. It's really a shame and a waste of our precious time, but we have no choice.

When the psyche is disrupted, the disturbance is passed onto the next generation and the next. Restoration of true equipoise is a rare and excellent accomplishment. Because of the compounding of negative effects, the process of recovering our true nature is like swimming upstream against a strong current.

Over the last third of the Gita we will be exploring where the modalities take us in the myriad departments of life. There would be no point in this if we couldn't change our trajectory using will power. The main thing to remember is that in the Gita's philosophy we should stand above the whole range of nature modalities. We want to be free to decide the course of our lives, and the modalities tie us down to habitual ruts. Even the best of them are binding.

Not only reincarnation can be seen to be implied here. Events are born and die too. Beings are drawn to the types of experiences for which they have an inclination based on vasanas and samskaras, or in English, unconscious drives and acquired tastes. No matter what happens after death, in this life our proclivity for certain activities disposes us to certain outcomes. A retiring bookworm is unlikely to be trampled to death in a soccer stadium crowd surge, for example.

Our vasanas—our genetically seeded potentials, or we could even call them the wombs of our actions—direct our lives to develop particular opportunities for their expression. Those we enjoy we like to reproduce. Those we find baffling we make

multiple attempts to unravel. If we unintentionally hurt others, we repeatedly try to alter our behavior to rectify the situation. In so many ways, life allows us to practice for our performances. Actions, both good and bad, spring from the crucible of our total personality buried deep inside. It is for all the world as though they are being born out of a womb in the center of our being.

Association with modalities means that our intentions are essentially benign and selfless (sattvic), activist (rajasic), or selfish and stagnant (tamasic). The modalities our actions spring from—and we express varying combinations of all of these at different times—determine the type of “children” we “bear”, in other words, what action offsprings we produce.

To give brief examples, if we associate with a spiritual or philosophical study group, contemplation and gentleness become the sattvic womb from which our decision-making arises. If we enter business or politics or sports, rajasic activism will surround us. And if we are drawn to hate groups or criminal enterprises, the tamasic milieu will act like a gravity well to keep us tightly bound. Psychologists call the tendency to warp reality to support our personal beliefs “confirmation bias.” Timothy Leary and Robert Anton Wilson called these smugly unchallenged outlooks “reality tunnels.” We are all stuck in our reality tunnels, until we recognize them and proclaim our independence. So we should regularly ask ourselves, what mental environment am I ensconced in, and is it the best I can do?

Whereas pondering our possible future incarnations has little or no spiritual value, an awareness of how our actions affect the world around us is central to a happy and meaningful life. It seems very likely that that is what Krishna is trying to get across here.

22) Supervisor, and Permitter, Supporter, Experiencer, the Great Lord, also called the Supreme Self, is the supreme spirit in the body.

For many, many years I made the typical mistake of picturing all these qualities as pertaining to some divine being way out there somewhere. I'd nod and quickly read on. But now I'm spending time with this verse I can see how far off the mark I was.

Krishna is speaking of the supreme spirit that *inhabits the body*. That's you and me, dude. We are the great Lord, the supreme self, and all these roles pertain to us. All of us, without exception. If we abdicate them, we will be consigned to "lives of quiet desperation" as Thoreau put it. So let's see what the implications of this verse really are.

First and foremost, we should intelligently supervise our life. We need to oversee everything that goes on, manage our resources, budget our time. In the ultimate analysis, we are directly and wholly responsible for what we do, within the outward constraints that are beyond our ability to overcome. Many people try hard to avoid this responsibility. Directing your life is definitely harder than drifting with the currents. Those who are trained from early in life to obediently follow orders, learn to defer their own judgment to others in putative positions of authority. Since being engaged in our life is intrinsic to our nature, it is not easy to squelch. Yet it is done all the time. Our brains have to learn to ignore our inner spiritual impulses. Self-hatred is very helpful in this regard, and a wide range of medications is available to stifle our spirit and keep our dharma at bay. Or perhaps we can join a religious order that preaches loss of self, and spend years denying our innate urges for expression. In the Gita's bright and uplifting light, all methods of killing yourself before your time are dark and tragic. Krishna wants you to be fully alive, to live long and prosper.

Next listed is the permitter, the deciding wing of the supervisor. We are the ones who give ourselves permission to act, based on our own best assessment of each situation. No one else encounters things exactly as we do, so we are the best judge of what is acceptable. But after a lifetime of asking permission from others for everything, even for going to the bathroom, our innate authority is seriously atrophied. Our divine confidence has been

converted to uncertain doubt. The Gita's training program is designed to restore us to our full capacity in being responsible for our actions and competent at making good decisions.

There is a long learning curve here. We see many young adults who go on a wild rampage once they wriggle out from under the severe restrictions imposed by their parents. They leap from having no ability to give themselves permission to having no restraints whatever. Achieving a healthy balance can be elusive for many years, during which time some very bad habits may take root. Learning how to be wisely in charge of your own life is an overlooked area of the education of children all over the globe. Parents imagine that repeated exhortations punctuated with the occasional whack are enough, but it takes a different kind of "hands on" practice to really get good at living, one more or less free of external threats. Life offers plenty of intense feedback without anybody needing to add an extra dose.

Being our own supporter is very important, and getting it right is a rare enough achievement. Recall VI, 5, which reads in part, "By the Self the Self must be upheld; the Self should not be let down." Again, our early experience trains us to be dependent and look outside ourselves for support. We begin life weak and helpless, and very often the way we are raised perpetuates this state for much longer than necessary. Parents and teachers are reluctant to grant us independence. When we depend on others for our support and then they die or we move away, its like having the rug pulled out from under us, or falling in quicksand. There is not very much useful training in how to become our own best friend, but thankfully the Gita is one source.

Chogyam Trungpa taught that practically the first step in the spiritual path was to befriend yourself, and that's a great point. We learn early on to be self-deprecating and to defer to others. If we don't go beyond that attitude to having faith in ourselves, we will remain dependent and needy, inwardly crying and hoping for salvation. Needless to say, charlatans thrive on such people.

All sorts of unhealthy syndromes creep in when our authentic nature is denied. A prominent example is the sense of being a victim that plagues many people. If we imagine ourselves to be driven by winds of fate, instead of being in command of our own ship of state, we feel powerless to impact our life. We withdraw farther and farther from the helm, and the disappointment our spirit feels at not going the right way makes us bitter and mean spirited. We may blame others for a blizzard of real or imaginary evils, becoming filled with hate. The solution is not to try to blast all those evil people to smithereens, but to regain this verse's quartet of essential qualities that restore a healthy balance to our individuality.

The fourth category is the most puzzling, in a way. The Gita calls for us to be the experiencer of our life. Don't we all do that? Well no, actually we don't. Our brains are designed to classify our encounters by matching them with previous experiences. Fairly quickly we run out of obviously new experiences that defy categorization, so we live a life of shadow events that always call up labels printed in the past. Our life becomes padded, cushioned, and eventually divorced from immediate experiences. One of the prime causes of depression and other mental derangements is a lack of fresh contact with our surroundings. It's somewhat all right to live in a world of imagination if we're narrating a healthy fairytale, but all too often the mind veers off on tangents that carry it far away from the world in which it is lodged. Returning to some healthy types of direct experience is essential to our mental stability. The spiritual seeker is called upon to try hard to break through the crust of projected expectations, to see things as they truly are. It turns out that everything is a new experience, but making it familiar dulls the zest. Once we learn to restrain our labeling proclivity, life regains its freshness, and we become more flexible and correctly attuned to each situation.

Krishna is describing the supreme spirit within, and we should not forget that it is something other than the ego. When the ego assumes these roles it does a far inferior job than when we let

the whole of our being weigh in. The ego's proper role is in an advisory and channeling capacity to harmonize the inner wellspring of creativity with external constraints. We have to be on guard to make sure the ego doesn't take over the entire management program, as it naturally inclined to do. Once the ego resumes command, authentic development is almost unnoticeably converted to sham spirituality.

The "supreme spirit in the body," which inhabits each person without exception, is called here the Great Lord and the Supreme Self. Nataraja Guru points out that the former has a cosmological or theological coloration, and the latter a psychological one. Thus they cancel each other out. The idea is that even though we are divine, and the realization of this fact may well enrapture us and make us temporarily giddy, we have to keep our cool. Everyone else is just as divine as we are. We are special, just like every other being. So use this insight to lift your soul up from the depths to where it rightfully belongs, but no farther. We are only becoming normal. Normal is spectacular, but it's also ordinary. This is not a license to act weird, it's a license to come alive, to come back to life. Once again, referring back to Chapter VI, this time verse 7, we read, "To one of conquered Self, who rests in peace, the Supreme is in a state of neutral balance." We are that Supreme. Tat tvam asi.

23) He who thus knows spirit and nature, together with the intrinsic modalities, though he may happen to be leading any kind of life, is not born again.

The essential meaning of this verse is that if we truly understand how we fit together with our world, no matter what we are doing, we are free. This cannot come from abstract knowledge. It has to be a practical, working understanding. Moreover, false knowledge, no matter how fervently believed, magnifies our bondage.

Whatever your role in life, if it is lived with understanding it does not embroil you in further demands. Actions done in wisdom

are complete in themselves and do not call for any follow up, nor do they produce a craving for a repetition of the experience. Rebirth means that the same situation comes around again and again. By enjoying but not craving, through knowing the whole picture, the bondage of repeated activity comes to an end. Only in this way are entities free to engage fully with life as it flows through them.

You must die in order to be born again, so if you stop dying you don't have to be reborn.

The new scientific attitude about the brain based on direct observation via functional MRI is coming into resonance with the ancient wisdom of the rishis. When we perform repetitive, habitual activities, our brains stagnate and grow dull. By changing up our routines and adding new ones, we grow new neurons and forge new synaptic connections, keeping our "mental muscle" healthier, and even warding off senescence. Variety is not only the spice of life, it is the main course.

Even seemingly repetitive activity, if done with the mind centered in the Absolute, in other words, focused on the essence, is seen to be fresh and engaging at every moment. Our mind can be lazy about paying attention, and part of us would just as soon walk in traces like a pack horse in a train. Once we open it up, however, we become aware that we are never stepping into the same river twice, as Heraclitus once pointed out. This should not be taken as endorsing the acceptance of demeaning, degrading labor, especially chattel or wage slavery. Many belief systems have endorsed servitude, to their undying shame. Instead, there can be a simultaneous acceptance of oppressive circumstances at the same time as we work to change them for the better. Improving the living conditions of ourselves and our fellows is one of the most compelling aspirations that gives meaning to life.

Every effort should be made to make all aspects of life, including that of one's fellow employees, varied and interesting. In work situations where the actions themselves may be less than

artistically rewarding, the interaction with other people can provide adequate stimulation.

We should also note the repetition of one of the Gita's main themes here, that works per se have no bearing on attainment of unity with the Absolute. Verse 23 states this truth in reverse, that no particular behavior and no amount of merit or demerit can detract from the wisdom gained from properly integrating horizontal and vertical factors. Wisdom is open to all without exception, and it is in no way dependent on what you happen to do to pass the time in your body. Since this is worthy of being underlined for a species that has yet to catch on, let's turn to Nataraja Guru once again:

The expression *sarvathà vartamàno 'pi* (though he may happen to be leading every kind of life) in effect states that no orthodox mode of life is recognized in the Gita. A man can be a profligate, a gambler or publican, but if he is wise he will be saved. To think that a mode of life in keeping with Vedic orthodoxy alone will lead to the goal implied in the Gita is wholly discredited by this verse.

Most of us don't worry about Vedic orthodoxy, so we have to know that this refers to any kind of orthodoxy, any kind of following rules and directives in hopes that they will bring salvation. There is no right way as opposed to a wrong way; there is only the way you yourself go.

24) By meditation some behold the Self in the Self by the Self, others by samkhya yoga, and others by karma yoga.

In keeping with the threefold division of nature that is moving on to center stage here, Krishna describes three main paths or orientations that culminate in the reintegration of the psyche in the Absolute. In plain terms these are meditation, reason and

action. A fourth category, those who devotedly follow a wise preceptor, is added in the next verse.

Unitive action, unitive reason and unitive meditation have all had definitive treatment in Chapters III, IV and VI. Here they are lumped together as being equally efficacious. It isn't that one should be chosen over the others, as this verse might seem to imply, because all of us alternate between the three states, with one more dominant than the others at any particular time. In all three central aspects of our well-balanced life we should never lose sight of the Absolute value that is their hub and reason for being. This is what distinguishes unitive action from ordinary action, and so on. And the more unitive you are, the more the different categories merge with each other, until they all become one too.

It would be egregious to behold the Absolute in meditation, but not include it in our reason or our actions, for instance. The familiar observation along those lines that many churchgoers only think of God on Sunday and then live like the devil the rest of the week, is utterly foreign to a yogic philosophy. There is no point in any separation whatever between thoughts and deeds. In fact, the whole idea is to not be separated, to not have a compartmentalized life that includes schizophrenic disconnects between the compartments. No true yogi could ever meditate on brotherly love one day and lynch someone or torch their home the next.

Unfortunately it is not uncommon for people to think of themselves as being yogis or otherwise devout, and yet continue to be selfish and even violent in their relations with others. One of the most essential elements of spiritual development is to infuse our actions with the vision of the wise seers, who exemplify how to live well and manifest loving kindness. Yoga helps us to dismantle the mental barricade humans employ to separate what we pretend to believe from what we do.

Here's a valuable reminder from Nataraja Guru about yoga, from his comments on this verse:

Yoga implies a certain method of equalization or cancellation of counterparts which we have tried to explain. It is as when two factors are cancelled one against the other, that we come to something which is unitive. Whether in the world of values that might belong to the field of necessary action or of rational life, or of Self-realization, the unitive value which results from the cancellation of counterparts is the same. Thus it is stated here that some attain to the supreme value of the Absolute Self by cancelling the subjective aspect of the Self against the objective aspect of the same. In other words, as in verse 17, there is an all-inclusive wisdom representing both these aspects.

We might note in passing that the idea of seeing the Self in the Self by the Self bears some resemblance to Abraham Lincoln's famous line from the Gettysburg Address, that a free nation enjoys "government of the people, by the people, for the people."

25) But others, not knowing in this way, worship, having heard from others; they also cross beyond death, depending on hearsay.

This is a pretty amazing claim, that wisdom can actually be taught to us by a wise person if we pay close enough attention. Of course, if we are really listening, we are bound to begin practicing unitive action, thinking and meditation, so this isn't really a fourth category after all. Everyone needs proper instruction.

To reiterate an essential idea, acts that are repeated mindlessly through attachment are "dead." The Gita is about coming back to life through ever-renewed joyful interaction with the world. While yoga is extolled in the Gita as the best of all approaches to accomplish this, here and elsewhere a generous bone is thrown to the dogs of simple folk who aren't particularly inclined to independent thinking. Their heartfelt faith in the teachings of the wise is enough to bring great meaning and beauty into their lives. They listen carefully and act on what they are told

to do. When their leaders are wise, there is nothing wrong with this. Sadly, there is no guarantee that they are. In the present day, it seems that everyone with a bone to pick or an axe to grind can attract a devoted following.

We tend to hear a lot about the generality of religious followers who are driven mad in various ways by the exhortations of egomaniacal leaders, because they make a lot more noise than the quiet and loving types. The Gita has a very different attitude toward their kind of ministrations, which will be spelled out in Chapter XVI. But here the presumption is that we are listening to a rare and excellent teacher who has our best interests at heart. Everyone should be so lucky.

26) Whatever is produced, the unmoving or the moving, know that to be from the union of the field and the knower of the field.

This sounds like mystical jargon, but it really isn't. Nowadays we use terms like matter and energy in place of "the unmoving or the moving." The Samkhyan terms, introduced in verse 1, are nature and spirit. Several other pairs are familiar, such as inorganic and organic, unconscious and conscious, inert and active, yin and yang, and so on. The next verse adds perishing and non-perishing.

This verse asserts that the union of the two primary antinomies produces our world, or, more locally, our individuality. From the yogic perspective, the uniting of opposites is the key to all creation and creativity.

Usually when we hear words like the ones in this verse, we think of a remote god producing the universe, but that is the exact opposite of the Gita's intent. We are the ones who invent our world, both by how we are aware of it and in shaping it with our actions. In a sense, we are co-creators with God, or God's production arm. This is all about us, how we think and how we relate to our environment. The universe is expanding at precisely the rate we perceive it to be. In other words, it is expanding with

our perceptions and conceptions of it. This verse thus turns out to be extremely important, and one could write a book about its implications.

We are only beginning to emerge from the thrall of a world view that presumes that everything is comprised of inert matter, up to and including life and consciousness. This purely materialistic outlook has abetted the destruction of the planet at a breathtaking rate, accompanied by a soaring rate of mental illness and depression. That proves that even if it were true it would be false! It replaced an earlier notion that there was only spirit, that the gods ran the whole show. Because of the major disconnect between the ideal and the actual, this earlier state of mind also had numerous devastating impacts, such as believing that some God authorized your tribe to wipe out your neighbors and take all their stuff.

Needless to say, both these perspectives are partial and inadequate. The Gita proposes that a union of the two poles produces a much superior way of living. The actual impact of our actions must be mated with our ideals, so that the best solution is always selected. We can't pretend that our planet has unlimited resources, for instance, when it obviously doesn't. They only seemed unlimited when we didn't know much about them, and didn't use them excessively.

A prime example of imbalanced materialism is slavery, with its long and sorry history. Employing slaves requires the employer to treat sentient beings as if they were insentient. This is necessary for the inhuman treatment involved, otherwise the slave owner couldn't bear the guilt of it. But once you are convinced that some people are no better than dumb brutes, anything goes. You can even ignore obvious evidence that contradicts your attitude, because beliefs effortlessly trump reality. For that matter, many humans also wrongly believe that animals are insentient, and so often release their pent-up frustrations in sadistic treatment of them as well. Yogis and others with their eyes open can plainly see that both humans and animals have very complex psyches, with rich

emotional and even rational lives, and it impels them to treat all creatures with loving kindness.

An example of imbalanced spirituality is more subtle, but still significant. Lurking within the attitudes of most seekers of truth is a deep-seated belief that they are striving to join a pre-existing fraternity of divine beings. Either there is a spirit world somewhere they are traveling toward or a heaven they will later be admitted to. Such an attitude undermines their relationship to the world around them, making it seem like it is of secondary importance, or no importance at all. In this way a lot of positive energy that could help make the world safer and more fun to be alive in is misdirected toward nonexistent fantasies. This is not only a tragic waste; it also forms the basis of a number of schisms that are used to propagate wars, and other forms of conquest, as with religious evangelism.

Consciousness is the knower of the field, and it works with the field to produce all its products. If it abuses the field, the field will cease producing what the knower needs. Simple. And yet, the human race as a whole has yet to catch on. Our intelligence needs to be brought to bear in meaningful ways with the realities of our planet, or we will absent ourselves from the world stage. The rishis probably didn't foresee such an apocalyptic possibility in their day, but the principle is definitely implied in this verse. There have always been examples of untethered idealism or rank materialism leading people astray throughout history. The consequences are just that much greater in our time, because humans now dominate the Earth and wield tremendous power.

27) He who sees the supreme Lord abiding in a state of equality in all beings, within the perishing as the non-perishing—he sees.

Verses 26 and 34 underline the importance of clearly distinguishing the field and the knower of the field. In between them, Krishna supplies a number of analogies to help clarify those relationships. The first two include a lightly used term in the Gita,

*isvarah* or supreme Lord. Isvarah is the Absolute of Patanjali's Yoga, but Krishna himself is the Absolute of the Gita. Krishna fanatics use Lord about every third word, and as noted, that strikes me as extremely off-putting and counterproductive. I avoid it whenever possible, but here it has a purpose. The sense of the word is the doer, that which makes things exist. The fact that things come into existence from a neutral, unaffected ground is the original miracle of all miracles. A similar idea is the starting point of philosophy, "Why is there something rather than nothing?" Mostly we are ignorant of just how nothingness produces something, and just accept that it does. Krishna assures us that a true seer understands the process. It is not quite completely mysterious. Properly apprehended, we are capable of seeing that supreme principle within everything.

Perishing and non-perishing are most dynamically understood as referring to people and ideas we either agree or disagree with. Depending on how their position strikes us—as fatally flawed or worthwhile—we treat them entirely differently. The most obvious examples are the thick lines drawn between those who disagree about politics or religion. These polarizations are the basis of all civil conflicts.

By this point in our study, the concepts of this verse should be quite familiar. The Whole Shebang is the Absolute, and it's just fine as it is. It doesn't need fixing up, or any complex method for communicating with it. No part of it has to be brought into line with some other part. We embody It, and It is just happening.

Knowing this has a very important impact. A lot of metaphysical thinking consists of complaining about other people's shortcomings and blaming them for just about everything wrong. Anyone who gets upset about all the inferior things that other people are busy doing doesn't understand the Gita's message. They are only seeing the surface and not the core. Moreover, they are unconsciously trying to prevent the teachings from impacting them by diverting them toward others. We should listen to our complaints about others as they pop into our mind, and take them

to heart—for ourselves. They are after all how our inner organ speaks to us.

One aspect of the Absolute is a very busy creative furnace, cranking out vast oceans of experience, and not in any way seeking your approval for it. You have enough to do dealing with your own life, which often resembles a blade of grass in a flash flood. While your example may influence others, caviling and complaining will erode your peace of mind, and have zero impact where it is needed.

So don't feel you have to pass judgment on everything that comes into your awareness. You will lose your balance. Nataraja Guru instructs us:

Inequality of status in value is not conceivable when the value implied in all entities is understood to be that of the Absolute. Each category of entities might have a normative value belonging to its own frame of reference, but over and above all such frames of reference there is the absolute value equally implied in all of them. The subtlety herein justifies the expression “he who sees . . . he sees.”

In plain terms this tells us to rectify all our exaggerated notions by referring them to a neutral concept. For instance, our complaining, no matter how “legitimate” within a limited context, ultimately does not have to do with anyone else, it is an imbalanced state within our own mind. We need to pull back and assess ourselves in order to reclaim our balance. If we persist in being mesmerized by what appears to be outside us, our imbalance—anger, jealousy, disdain and so on—will continue unabated. Only someone who is mentally in balance can be called a seer.

28) He who sees the Lord seated equally everywhere, destroys not the Self by the Self; and so he attains the supreme goal.

Krishna makes it a little more clear that not seeing the Absolute as the unifying element in everything breeds conflict and

animosity. When you hate, it is in a sense the Absolute hating the Absolute, which is schismatic and paradoxical. We don't have to go far to see this playing out in the world in a big way. On all sides self-righteous, holier-than-thou types are routinely amplified by a craven media. This type of bombast marks the spiritual ego, of all personality defects the hardest to see in ourselves and the most resistant to amelioration. The antidote is of course to see the "Lord" seated equally everywhere, especially exactly where you aren't seeing it at the moment. Bring it back and humble yourself to its all-pervasiveness, and your ego will return to its normal size.

"The supreme goal" always sounds high and mighty, but here it merely means achieving a state of peace that is not drawn away by any illusory calls to arms. Simply knowing the Absolute is the supreme attainment.

Again, many people firmly assert they know God, and yet what they believe in is an intangible abstraction that cannot be demonstrated. As we know, this can lead to all manner of confusion. The Gita here weighs in that the Absolute, whatever you like to call it, has to be right here in the middle of everything. In other words it has to be real, and not some pie in the sky fantasy. The Gita is not asking us to believe in something we can't philosophically justify, affirming in no uncertain terms that to do so is very destructive.

29) He who sees that all actions are done by nature alone, and likewise that the Self is actionless—he truly sees.

This verse foreshadows the next chapter, which deals with the actions of the modalities of nature, or gunas. All through we should keep in mind that Nature, like God or the Absolute, is not some remote monolithic entity, it is the essence of who we are. The entire mechanism of our neurology produces our action program, and then runs it past our conscious awareness for its imprimatur.

Neuroscientist David Eagleman likens our conscious mind to a stowaway on an ocean liner, crouched deep in the hold with

virtually no awareness of the rest of the ship. We are certainly unaware of the vast majority of our true nature, but we do have an important role in rendering the final decision on the plans generated in the depths of our being. To accept a stowaway's role would be to abandon ourselves to every impulse, not all of which are beneficial, even to ourselves. Our conscious mind is more like an advisor to the captain stationed on the bridge, relied on to add one more thoughtful perspective about where we are headed. Still, our conscious awareness is extremely limited. A reverent attitude about the impulses emanating from the core of our being is a way to open the doors of creative input and harmonize our role in our personal ship of state.

An important aspect of reentering the state of nonduality includes relinquishing the illusion that we are in charge of what happens to us. We are neither in charge, nor are we hapless victims. We are dialectically beyond both of these positions, equal-minded participants playing along with skill, but retaining a sense of detachment, and filled with gratitude toward all the additional forces around us.

If nothing else, your level of frustration plummets when you let go of the need to control everything and learn to accept it for what it is.

We do what we can to improve the lot of our fellows, but it can't be denied that the world will not be changed significantly by any of us. The question to the seeker then becomes: should we stop trying to understand who we are until everyone lives in satisfactory conditions? The answer is clearly no. If we wait we'll wait forever. Yes, we are more privileged than most, but only if you are a Buddha should you throw it all away and slip into the forest. Most of us are more like Arjuna: we need to do whatever is possible in the circumstances in which we find ourselves, while remembering that the Absolute is all This. There is much to learn, and one of our privileges is to be gifted with the incisive thoughts of some wise exemplars of the human race, enabling us to make substantial evolutionary progress.

Our life calls for us to use some measure of will power much of the time, but in meditation we may go all the way to the condition described here, where we are solely passive witnesses to the passing show. At those times we can sit in complete neutrality, observing the play of events within the field. We can see how they all have their own trajectory based on their history, and induce their own predictable reactions. This is not an either/or proposition. The field we are observing includes us as individuals, stumbling through the scene, and witnessing ourselves gives us additional perspective on our life. Self awareness is, after all, the benchmark measure of sentience.

The danger of such an outlook if taken too far is that you may begin to treat your existence as being subject to an implacable fate, and become listless and indolent. There is a fine line to walk as a creative participant who nonetheless recognizes the inevitability of horizontal forces. Our best course is to harmonize with the flow and not try to hold back the current, so to speak. The subtleties of this approach have already been discussed in detail in Chapters III and IV.

30) When he perceives the disjunct existence of beings established in the One, and from whence also their expansion, then he becomes the Absolute.

At the end of this section on “he who sees,” the seeing transforms into being the Absolute, which is of course what true seeing is in the first place. Though similar to the previous few verses, there is more specificity in the present one. We are asked to note the differences in each separate example of creation, and then trace them back to their origin. This includes their evolution or expansion, meaning simply, how they got to where they are now, and where their characteristics will lead them to if unaltered. We are not only understanding that we are all one, we are becoming expert psychologists and physicians to both analyze and tend to ourselves and our fellow beings.

Every speck of misunderstanding leads us off on tangents, and these can compound and reinforce each other until we become completely lost. A wise guru can see how such entanglements are formed, and offer advice on how to untangle them. With insight they can see not just the apparent mass, but discern the first few misapprehensions that have precipitated the entire gestalt. Working on these is the only way to finally resolve the problem. If you focus on the “downstream” manifestations and don’t correct the source errors, every improvement will only be temporary. That’s why gurus always insist their disciples go to the root. Krishna himself will put this in graphic terms in Chapter XV.

Neophyte seekers often view other people’s difficulties disdainfully, imagining that they are due to a lack of wisdom or some karmic fault. They would prefer to ignore their own problems too, hoping that will make them disappear. They believe that we should only pay attention to the highest expressions of perfection, and presume that nothing else matters. But turning your back on something doesn’t make it go away. Beneath the self-satisfied surface this is an ugly and demeaning attitude, which partly arises from a fear that ignorance is somehow contagious, and that by examining it you will become mired in it. Once we become well grounded in the Absolute, those fears will be seen to be baseless. We have all contracted full-scale ignorance already. Everyone has a résumé of strengths and weaknesses, which they have little or no control over until they buckle down and really get to work. We have a lot to accomplish at home before we should dare to criticize others, and we do not rise by putting others down. Quite the contrary.

One of the most common tales that disciples tell of their gurus is how they seem to be able to read their mind, how they offer them advice about exactly what they are struggling with at the moment, even though they have not yet brought it up. Usually the advice is a key to solve the problem, or at least a way to begin to deal with it. A guru treats even seemingly ridiculous problems

with compassion, and the advice is almost never “just ignore it and it will go away.” That’s the kind of advice quacks give.

Being around a guru is like being naked in public, and it takes some getting used to. Once you feel that your thoughts aren’t totally screened off from everyone, you begin to examine them in earnest with an eye to cleaning them up. I recall several times when Guru Nitya read my mind, and whenever I was around him it felt like he was right inside my head with me even when he was busy with other matters.

One time, long, long ago, we were doing a series of morning and evening classes at Hall Street in Portland. In those days I smoked pot sometimes, although I knew that Nitya strongly disapproved. Usually I was very careful to not be high when I was around him, but one day I had been indulging and lost track of the time. With a start I realized class was about to begin. I didn’t want to miss a minute of his fabulous talks, so I headed up to the Gurukula trying desperately to make myself as unnoticeable as possible. I figured I’d just slip in at the back of the room and hide behind the crowd.

I’m sure I was emanating all sorts of uptight vibes, as we used to call them. Nervous energy. The more you try to stay anonymous, the more you stick out. Within a few seconds Nitya nailed me with his laser beam look, gentle and deadly, even as I lurked behind several people. He stopped his talk abruptly and said, “In this world there are Gandharvas, beings that go around smelling the roses, indulging in sensual delights. They walk always a foot off the ground. Scott... [dramatic pause and look] is one of those.” Then he went back to his talk, having demolished any pretense I might have entertained that I could hide my mental state from him. That moment of exposure has stayed with me vividly for my whole life. While I took another decade to fully give up smoking pot, I made darn sure to keep it well separated from my work with him. Although distance didn’t always offer protection either....

Summing up, Krishna is not asking Arjuna to dissolve in a gooey state of isolated oneness. He is training a spiritual philosopher who can bring healing to his own disciples, just as Krishna has been doing for him. For that he has to know as much about the structure of the world as possible. Real gurus will spend time with their disciples and intelligently help them to grow. Charlatans will offer a trite formula or platitude and charge a fee for the privilege.

31) Having no beginning, having no attributes, this supreme Self suffers no decrease, though dwelling in the body, Arjuna. It neither acts nor is it tainted.

After all we have been through, this verse hardly needs any explanation. The eternal principle or unified field—here called the supreme Self—remains the same even as all the changes of an unfolding universe occur within it. As observers we regularly become mesmerized by the transformations that happen around us, and forget our true eternal status. Unfortunately our body is doomed, as every part of the field is born and dies. It behooves us to develop a relationship with what lasts, or perhaps more accurately, transcends time. Narayana Guru expresses this poetically in his *One Hundred Verses of Self-Instruction*. Here are verses 5, 6 and 12:

People of this world sleep, wake and think many thoughts;  
ever wakefully witnessing all this shines an unlit lamp,  
precious beyond words, that never fades;  
ever seeing this, one should go forward.

One has to wake up, then go to sleep,  
has to eat food and embrace;  
thus, in this way, many life urges come;  
therefore, who realizes the one changeless form?

See the skin, bone, dirt and inner urges which end tragically to which the I-identity is conjoined;  
this which perishes is the other; oh, grant the cherished boon that the great I-identity increases to perfection.

Once again we are reminded by both the Guru and the Gita that the Absolute is within our bodies. It is not something remote and strange; it is us. Since science focuses exclusively on observable facts, this is a scientific, rather than a religious, premise. To go a step beyond Descartes, “We exist; therefore we are.”

Recently, some revelatory EEG studies have been done of infants, where they wear an unobtrusive little cap filled with electrodes and have their budding brains observed. [See Charles Fernyhough, *A Thousand Days of Wonder*.] Obviously some degree of surmise is inevitable, since the babies cannot confirm what scientists speculate is happening in them, and my interpretation is quite different from the mainstream, if there even is such a thing yet. The EEG shows that the subcortical or preconscious parts of our brain are in control until around the end of the second month. At that time the cortex, the field of what we think of as conscious awareness, begins to come online, initiating a tug of war for dominance it almost always wins. During the transition there is a period where the control vacillates between these two aspects of mind, the unconscious and the incipient consciousness. The EEGs show first the old subcortical system, and then the newer cortex taking turns in calling the shots. This has previously been observed to be reflected in the eyes, where the so-called sticky fixation may be due to the infant’s loss of control due to the struggle taking place. Scientists now think the loving stares that babies lavish on their caregivers at this age are really just faraway looks caused by the perplexing changeover in their guidance system, leaving them unable to control where they are gazing. Science is ever uncomfortable with the idea of love!

It may also be that the original “guide” residing in the older parts of the brain is “reluctant” to turn over the helpless person it

has been caring for to such a poorly informed entity as the neonatal cortex. Whether or not this is true, all transitions require an overlap in which information is shared. More than a power struggle, I read this momentous event— nothing less than the mental birth of the child—as perhaps a fond farewell of the old wisdom after its long, amazing stewardship of bringing another being into existence, now aware it is no longer at center stage, its loving guidance transferred to a more outward-facing structure. It could be offering a final psychic embrace to the new sojourner before its being subsumed behind the chaos of yet another trek into the uncertainties of conscious life. Who knows if the new owner will ever even remember this nurturing part of itself, always present but largely unnoticed? A “still small voice” if you will. It is very possible that the inner fountain of joy and direction we each possess and owe our lives to may languish unheeded in the back of our mind for the rest of our days.

Still, this is a really exciting discovery, implying that our initial existence even after birth is guided by an inner genius that maintains our basic functions and directs our development. Here is the visible intrusion of the Absolute into our bodies, the intelligent force that shields us from chaos and orchestrates the infinitely complex assembly of our physical structure, until we are ready to begin to assume conscious control of it ourselves. Oh yes, and science doesn't like the idea of intelligence, either, since it's indefinable. I should have said something like “innate propensity” instead. Instinct.

Early in our history, then, our conscious mind wrests the steering wheel away from the instinctual part of us, and off it goes. To our misfortune, our conscious mind loses touch with this master choreographer, and in its stead learns to steer by the dim light of its own ignorance penetrating only a short way into the darkness, defined for it mainly by other semiconscious entities. Spiritual enlightenment may mean nothing more than forging conscious contact with this primeval part of ourselves, and geniuses may be those who have retained some measure of the connection all along.

After all, writing down the symphony that you are hearing in your head is child's play compared to building a complete human being from scratch using a few simple molecules.

So what we are witnessing with the help of electrodes is the footprint of our inner fountain source, the Absolute potency that bubbles up in everyone. It is not some subtle, intangible nothingness, it is real. It's just that we have turned away from it in our fascination with the outer world. The cortex is like a speculative blanket woven to interpret our surroundings, which we then sit on as heavily as we can, while the fountain continues to gush up, struggling to find an opening. Some of the water of life must make it through, because our lives exhibit an inexplicable coherence and unity despite our best efforts to sabotage it.

This pristine source of the Absolute pours out from a point within every living thing, including subatomic particles I suppose. Animals that live by "instinct" simply haven't developed enough cortex to override their inner fountain. It serves them well. But despite some New Age thinking, we are not destined to go back to living by pure instinct, though we definitely should welcome more of it into our lives. The cortex is a relatively recent feature of the local universe, one that introduces a vast range of previously inconceivable possibilities for evolution which have as yet been only modestly explored. Let's find out where it can take us. We will go the farthest by intelligently hitching it to the rest of our equipment.

Like the water that is the same in every pool and fountain on earth, notwithstanding the chlorine, coins and garbage that often find their way into them, the Absolute information program or universal natural law that powers all of us is the same, but it is tempered and shaped by our individual genetics and unique environment. The universal becomes particular as it is expressed. If it is incorporated correctly so it can infuse the cortex with its instinctual intelligence, that may well be the intuitive source of genius in all of us. An only partially successful mix may contribute to degrees of autism and other developmental problems.

In any case, spiritual perfection or yogic accomplishment then means that we reconnect our detached surface consciousness with our dharma-voice residing in our most ancient parts, and letting the two learn to work in concert. This illuminates the familiar Vedantic premise of the transcendental and the immanent interpenetrating each other. Our conscious mind is concerned—quite rightly—with immanence, with all the stuff happening to us, and we want to be really alert about it. Our deeper brain/mind houses the transcendent factor that gives meaningful structure to our life over time, the unfoldment of our potentials and all that. It is the source of our enthusiasm for living. If it has a weakness, it's that it is utterly naïve about the world it lives in. We optimize our life, then, by bringing both sides together.

What we have often thought of as a right brain-left brain dichotomy makes even more sense in terms of old brain-new brain. Barring injury, both sides of the brain are turned on pretty much all the time, though they do have somewhat different functions. This is a very exciting perspective, and it reinforces one of the Gita's main teachings: how to yoke our boundless energies to a meaningful course of life.

32) As the all-pervading, subtle space-principle is untarnished by reason of its subtlety, so the Self, seated everywhere in the body, is untarnished.

Space is *akasha*, otherwise known as ether. Akasha provides space for everything to exist, and is measured in terms of the constant speed of light. It is subtle enough to not be physical at all. The famous Michelson-Morley experiment was misinterpreted to discount the existence of the ether, but what it actually did was discount it as a *physical* medium. After more than a hundred years of confusion, the ether is coming back into physics. Simple logic tells us that since the speed of light is a constant, independent of motion, so also would be the property of any propagating medium.

Ether and light, among other things, teach us that the universe is not solely a physical phenomenon. From Wikipedia:

As late as 1920, Einstein himself still spoke of a type of ether that was not a “ponderable medium” but something of significance nonetheless:

*“...More careful reflection teaches us, however, that the special theory of relativity does not compel us to deny ether. We may assume the existence of an ether... Recapitulating, we may say that according to the general theory of relativity space is endowed with physical qualities; in this sense, therefore, there exists an ether... According to the general theory of relativity space without ether is unthinkable; for in such space there not only would be no propagation of light, but also no possibility of existence for standards of space and time (measuring-rods and clocks), nor therefore any space-time intervals in the physical sense. But this ether may not be thought of as endowed with the quality characteristic of ponderable media, as consisting of parts which may be tracked through time. The idea of motion may not be applied to it.”*

It looks like the rishis weren't as far off as some have thought!

Of course, the Gita isn't trying to establish the existence of space as a non-physical principle. It assumes that such a concept is obvious to anyone, and is merely using it as an analogy for the Self. The idea is that pure space is not affected by the things occupying it, and just like that the absolute aspect of the Self is not affected by things either. Krishna is giving Arjuna yet another handy way to contemplate his mysterious universe.

33) As the one sun illumines this whole world, so the Lord of the field illumines all the field.

After a rather scientific presentation via the string of analogies, the Gita brings the chapter to a close with a classic image. Meditating on the universality and beneficence of sunlight is very close to how the Absolute strikes us.

If you're like me, whenever you hear this metaphor you think of the sun up there beaming its radiance down onto us. But the intent is to see ourselves in the place of the sun. Our consciousness is the source of all we see. Out from our core radiates the vivifying light to bathe whatever is out there. We perceive what the light falls on, while empty space appears dark. And we don't see what is on the far side of each "planet," until it rotates around toward us, figuratively speaking. So always remember, we are the sun in the center of our personal galaxy, and not just a remote ball of dust circling around the periphery of something else.

34) Those who by the eye of wisdom perceive the difference between the field and the knower of the field, and (its bearing on) elements-nature-emancipation—they go to the Supreme.

We live in a species that is beset by unshakable fixations on the field: the craving to satisfy all the needs of the body. Even religion is often reduced to a magical promise to fulfill bodily needs. It is not surprising that misery and despair are widespread, when the field is all that's known. When you add the greater awareness that goes beyond necessity to embrace the true nature of all, you "go to the Supreme," which is the Gita's way of lumping peace, happiness and wisdom all together. We are very fortunate to live in a time when many necessities are taken care of by our social setup without too much fuss. We have learned to substitute wants for needs, but we could also learn to minimize our wants. Then we would be free to go to the Supreme continuously.

After all, the knower *is* the Supreme. When it is mesmerized by the field, it forgets. When it knows its true status unbound by what transpires in the field, it is said to be emancipated. From this

perspective Krishna was right to call this knowledge the most important of all.