

## **CHAPTER XIV: Gunatraya Vibhaga Yoga**

### **The Unitive Way of Transcending the Three Nature Modalities**

Chapter XIV should become familiar to all seekers of truth, as Vyasa's delineation of the three gunas or nature modalities is an excellent lever to pry ourselves out of our mesmerization with the physical world. Just knowing about the gunas helps us to look on aspects of nature we once thought were integral to our being as outside factors which constantly drag us into less than optimal states of mind. By mentally backing up and extricating ourselves from them, we are able to sink into our own true nature, which is famously blissful. It is our divine birthright, the gift the prodigal son turns away from to wander in the desert of materialism, bent on sampling its tawdry pleasures. The metaphors are thick about this in all mythologies, but the scientific exposition of the gunas is a unique contribution of ancient India. Unfortunately this excellent tool has not yet been adopted outside of Vedanta, and is poorly understood even within it.

In spiritual matters we often get the solution to our problems exactly backwards. We think of "God" as an external attraction that trumps all lesser external attractions. Having done so, we probe deeper and deeper into our favorite hypothetical realm searching for It, all the while getting farther away from ourselves. The Gita reminds us that simply being in tune with who we are is the most direct route to recovering the divinity we are made of. All that's required is to withdraw from our fixation on cyclic manifestation (the gunas) and there we are. Once we have reacquainted ourselves with the Absolute within, we can return to our lives with a much healthier perspective that unites rather than divides, spreads happiness instead of misery, infuses justice into injustice, and all the rest.

Obviously, some things that sound simple prove to be somewhat more difficult in practice.

Speaking for myself, I'm content that the mystery of our being is so profound it doesn't easily give itself away. Unlike cheap potboiler novels you read once and throw away, this one keeps coming up with new twists and surprising crosscurrents. It is fabulously inventive, totally absorbing, and achingly beautiful. It is truly a lifelong challenge as well as an undiminishing inspiration.

1) Krishna said:

I shall again declare that superior wisdom, the best of all wisdom, by knowing which all sage-recluses have passed to transcendental perfection from here.

At first blush it seems that the doctrine of the three gunas cannot possibly represent the best of all wisdom, but it does epitomize the gist of the Gita very well. In the last chapter, Krishna described the knowledge of the field and the knower of the field as *the* knowledge. In the one before that, the characteristics of a dedicated yogi were extolled. Now the discussion of the gunas is described as the key to understanding. Luckily we don't have to decide which is best. All these apparently diverse ideas are closely related, and are not contradictory at all. It's just a literary flourish to give each chapter a high mark, so we don't imagine we can skip to the end without missing anything of importance.

All of what Krishna has taught so far can be brought to bear to treat the present subject with right understanding. As with any number of pieces of advice from earlier chapters, it is asserted that the state of the Absolute is achieved through the application of well-founded reason. We are now moving gradually back into practicalities as the rainbow arch of the Gita sweeps toward its final horizontal contact with ordinary reality. Our reasoning, now firmly grounded in the Absolute, will be increasingly directed to the practical actualities we all have to deal with. Unlike our first attempt as children when we abandoned our true nature in deference to pressing social demands, this time we are going to maintain contact with it as we carefully reenter the swim of things.

The gunas are categories of nature. The value in knowing how they affect us is to teach us how not to get caught up in mundane matters by discovering how much larger we are than them. Now that we have learned that not everything *is* mundane, we have all the inspiration we need to rise to the occasion.

The Sanskrit phrase *param siddhim* is most often translated as “highest perfection,” even by Sri Aurobindo. Yet the yoga of the Gita is transcendental, meaning all considerations of high and low are to be discarded. Union with the Absolute is not just the best of all siddhis, it is unique and qualitatively different from anything else. Therefore Nataraja Guru’s version, “transcendental perfection,” is more in keeping with the spirit of the Gita. Because of the attraction siddhis or attainments have for many beginning seekers, Krishna is reinforcing his earlier assertion that union with the Absolute is the only worthy attainment, while all other goals are mere distractions. I have discussed this in detail in VIII, 15.

2) Having resorted to this wisdom, and having attained to conformity in (express) features pertaining to Me, they are neither born at creation nor are they adversely affected at dissolution.

Nataraja Guru’s translation of *sadharmya* as “conformity in (express) features” is a little clunky, especially since we are wary of the word ‘conformity’ in respect to the freedom advocated by the Gita. Since the Guru was such a nonconformist himself, it is doubly odd. Most translations say something like “when they have become of like nature to me,” which is a more literal reading. The intent here is that the wise yogi has merged with the Absolute, and thus their actions will effortlessly accord with the absolutist way of life.

We must always keep in mind that the more deranged some people become, up to and including killing their fellow beings or desecrating the environment, the more they imagine they are doing the “will of God,” or something similar. The Gita has been very

careful to specify right behavior in detail so that a yogi can never fall into such a trap.

Nevertheless, the type of absolutist action meant here is not at all based on deliberation. When one becomes correctly immersed in the Absolute, there is a natural expansion of what could be called a loving attitude toward all beings. It requires no forethought. If it did, it would not be unitive. That's why we are to seek the Absolute first, and not worry about minor details of prescribed behavior. Likewise, "seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you," per Matt. 6.33.

An image that springs to mind is of two sine waves that have been gradually brought together until they coincide exactly. When they are out of phase, as in a guru and disciple in the early stages of wisdom transmission, there are all manner of ups and downs as the waves reinforce or cancel each other. With fine-tuning, they begin to oscillate in harmony. Whenever they are in accord—and this is undoubtedly an uncommon achievement—it can then be said that the guru and disciple or the seeker and Absolute are "as one."

The last line, "they are neither born at creation nor are they adversely affected at dissolution," poetically restates the truth about unitive action, that if we relinquish the "minor details" of expectations, hopes and fears, our actions will not impel us into endless repercussions. Ordinary actions lead to reactions, which require us to attend to further actions, and so on without end. Thus are "born" endless cycles of duties and necessities. To whatever degree we are attached to our actions, when they or their objects die out we are "adversely affected" by regret, sadness and despair. Our entire study of the Gita has aimed to train us to remain in a neutral, balanced state of mind no matter what transpires, up to and including physical birth and death, which are only tangentially implied in this metaphor.

3) My womb is great Brahma; in that I place the germ; thence is the birth of all beings, Arjuna.

Not to be mistaken for Brahman, the Absolute, Brahma, the God representing the creative aspect of nature, is oddly conceived as male most of the time, though here he has a womb. The fecundity of creation is much more commonly visualized as female, as with Mother Nature. Partisanship for one gender or the other tends to follow sexist lines. It would be far gentler to view the process as a neutral unity that divides into dualities of various sorts. Still, if there is anything that is almost exclusively female among higher forms on our world, it is giving birth.

In this and the next verse, Krishna affirms that the Absolute provides the procreative impetus, symbolically expressed as a male activity, and every inch of manifestation translates that impetus into the exuberant proliferation of all life forms. As such all creation may be thought of as female. Likewise, Christianity, despite a ferocious inherent paternalism, considers its devotees to be brides—potential or actual—to the groom of Christ. There too, both men and women are female from an absolutist perspective.

The initial impetus to create something out of nothing has been called the Will of God or the Whim of God. Physics has its Big Bang, and now proposes an infinite sequence of Big Bangs. Physicists themselves may have been slyly whimsical in choosing this name, since in English a bang is yet another synonym for sexual intercourse.

Whatever impels a bang to bring about a universe may never be directly known, but without it none of this would have been possible. Some singular event precipitated “the whole shebang,” as science writer Timothy Ferris described our universe in one of his books. Physicists believe that all the natural physical laws of our universe were laid down in the first couple of nanoseconds, or perhaps picoseconds, and absolutely everything followed logically and inevitably from that initial impulse. The only difference between that story and that of the ancient rishis is there is a degree

of personification of the latter process, which is probably only metaphorical or poetic anyhow. The rishis and today's scientists are very much in accord, and there is no doubt that modern scientific discoveries would have been welcomed by at least the more progressive of the ancient seers. They were not afraid to modify their stance when presented with new information, as is typically the case with small-minded vested interests, like the keepers of the faith in fantasy-driven religious sects.

4) Whatever tangible forms are produced in all the wombs, great Brahma is their (common) womb, and I am the seed-bestowing Father.

Brahma or Mother Nature, impregnated by the Absolute, produces an unending and exuberant array of offspring. While spectacular and miraculous, each specific instance is nonetheless limiting in its own way. Nothing finite can fully express the Infinite. Yogis study their limitations in order to find ways to transcend them to the maximum extent possible.

Is there any spiritual benefit to imagining creation in sexual terms? To the extent that it exaggerates a pro-male or pro-female attitude, none at all. In fact the Gita's intention is exactly the opposite: spirituality must temper exclusive and partisan trains of thought wherever they arise. Therefore a macho male should contemplate how he, as part of all creation, is in some sense brought forth from a metaphorical womb. Females can ponder how nothing is birthed without first being conceived, mentally or physically, and there is nothing wrong with viewing that aspect as male, even in themselves. Both sexes can see how input and output are intimately related, and that all beings have aspects of both in their makeup. As discussed in past chapters, there are few hard and fast lines of demarcation in nature. A great many organisms are fully hermaphroditic, and the human chemical imbalance that produces what we perceive as maleness or femaleness is very slight, a mere appendage of the whole person.

Meditating on our commonality as children of the One Womb of Brahma or Mother Nature will certainly heighten reverence for all life and lend support to many spiritual values. Scientists in particular should recognize that sexual division is evolution's greatest invention to date for exploring new avenues of manifestation, vastly accelerating the natural process of creation.

The one and the many in general can be meditated upon in the act of proliferation as well as any single aspect of creation taken in isolation. Uniting the multifarious species and categories, all furiously busy replicating themselves, into a single overarching principle of reproduction, breeds a sense of kinship and benignity. The reference to all tangible forms here demonstrates that the rishis were not simple rustics: they were well aware that even planets and mountains and oceans were not eternal, and were produced in some cosmic forge, with an inevitable return to intangibility in their distant future.

5) Sattva, rajas and tamas—these nature-necessity born modalities bind the imperishable embodied One.

One of the Gita's prime contributions to understanding the human condition is its explication of the three gunas, or what we call the modalities of nature.

The theory of the gunas gets a lot of attention in the Gita from here on out. It must be treated unitively with careful discrimination, as it is often misused as a religious formula for stereotyping and typecasting.

Guru Nitya provides a general definition of the terms in *Therapy and Realization in the Bhagavad Gita*:

Sattva is an all-pure and clear way of mirroring anything presented to it. Rajas is kinetic, it is a way in which the mind is not just seeing, it is doing, it is reacting. The first is a pure state of perception and the second occurs when that initial perception moves you to action. The third modality, tamas, is

when you don't want to move away from a stable foundation, and you are holding on. That is, inertia. The inertial state is always trying to maintain itself; it is opposed to the kinetic rajas. There is an interaction here. The two opposing forces are both working, one wanting to retain the status quo and the other wanting to change. The change can be in conformity with a pure vision, the change being for the good, or the change can be leading to a diversion, where it is going to be pathological. You either grow or you pathologically malfunction. To understand this one should have a clear notion of how sattva operates in you, rajas operates in you, and how tamas operates in you.

The three gunas are considered to be an original contribution of the Samkhya philosophy that makes up a major portion of the Gita. Another sketch of their differences is found in the *Samkhya Karika*, by Isvara Krishna, the oldest extant work on Samkhya, from around 500-1000 years after the Gita. Here are verses 12 and 13, demonstrating the kind of moralistic twist the gunas are often accorded:

The modes have a joyous, grievous, and stupefying nature. They serve for manifestation, activity and restraint; they mutually subdue and support each other, produce each other, consort together, and take each other's condition.

Goodness (*sattva*) is considered as light (or subtle) and enlightening (or manifesting); passion or foulness (*rajas*) as exciting and mobile; darkness (*tamas*) as heavy and enveloping (or obstructive, *varanaka*). Their action, for the gaining of an end, is like that of a lamp.

When one sits in front of video screens imbibing toxic mental chemicals or mopes about aimlessly, that is tamasic activity. When one roars around with a great sound and fury, signifying nothing

but “getting a lot done” that is rajasic. But when you gather together, alone or with friends, and make a probe into the meaning of meaning, that clearly would be called sattvic activity. Even the agitated or dull moments in such an endeavor have their value, but all three gunas in the ultimate analysis bind or condition the unconditioned original state. Krishna is unequivocal that they are to be transcended, even as we journey among them.

Seldom do the gunas occur alone in isolation. All three are generally combined in various proportions, and none predominates forever. Still, for study it is useful to examine them individually. A disciple should observe the rotation and interplay of the gunas in the various dimensions of life. This includes much more than the merely personal, as their colorations are overlaid on external events as well. This is epitomized particularly well in love affairs.

When you first meet that “special person” there is a rush of excitement, often called falling in love. For a while everything is easy, and blissful events flow one after another without effort. This is the stage where sattva predominates. After the initial rush dies down, actualizing the relationship requires a lot of hard work and careful planning. It might even include a marriage, one of humankind’s most complex and binding rituals. Here rajas is dominant. After the passage of years it is almost inevitable that the relationship becomes more or less predictable and static, repeatedly treading the same well-worn channels. Tamas is impossible to entirely avoid, even if we want to. If the relationship becomes cloying enough, many people give up and begin to seek elsewhere for a new infusion of sattva; others find ways to revive the sattva and energize the rajas within the existing relationship; and some merely accede to the tamas and live out what’s left of their relationship by going through the motions, living lives of quiet desperation, as Thoreau so aptly put it.

As another example, organizations are usually kindled by a shining good idea (sattva) that then gets implemented by lots of hard work and hard thinking (rajas), and which over time almost inevitably becomes static and fixed (tamas), unable to adapt to

changing conditions. When organizations become obsolete or inflexible they can only be revived by a fresh dose of sattvic vision, but humans being what we are, we get very comfortable with the old patterns and so cling to them with every ounce of our strength. Businesses, governments, religions, schools, all go through this process. The ones that are successful are able to change with the times, in other words they can anticipate and admit new bursts of sattva. This process is theoretically built in to some progressive businesses, but in fact once something is codified it is already partly tamasic. Invisibly, resistance to change creeps in. Tamas fears sattva and rajas beyond all reason, so almost by definition, sattva only appears where it isn't expected. But how can we expect, or at least encourage, the unexpected? A real openness to the influx of the new, and constant reassessment of the status quo, is the correct preparation for any lasting project. Krishna teaches us that transcending the context rather than working within it is the high road to inviting creative change.

The rotation of the gunas touches every aspect of life. On the mundane side in the present, tens of thousands of guys (and five women—women tend to have their infatuations with other things) became enamored at some point in their life with a certain kind of car, Camaro, '57 Chevy, Corvette, whatever. There was some thrilling event it was part of, like a romantic association. They had a sattvic experience with a car, and vowed to rebuild one thoroughly in their garage as a means of prolonging and reliving the happiness. Lots of rajas is involved with the actual restoration project, measured in years if not decades. It's a very complicated and absorbing endeavor. At some stage a large percentage of the car enthusiasts slipped from rajas into tamas, and the interest in the project drained away, to be replaced first by a sense of obligation and later by dread. Finally, the guilt-ridden mechanic shuts the mental garage door and the project is abandoned, replaced by some new enchantment. All over America, half-restored cars are sitting solidly up on blocks, symbolizing the tail end of yet another rotation of the gunas. Even the ones who persevere and finish their

projects eventually lose the passionate interest they started with, reviving it occasionally when they have the opportunity to show off their accomplishment, but otherwise turning to other interests.

6) Of these, sattva, from its purity, causing brightness and expressing normal well-being, binds by pleasure conditioning and by knowledge conditioning.

Sattvic states of mind are associated with peace, happiness and spirituality, so they are probably the most difficult to see as binding rather than liberating. We're very comfortable with them. The Gita exposes the fact that we can be conditioned easily by pleasure and knowledge, and these are sattvic values. Without such instruction we would most likely be satisfied to linger in the soft, sweet chains of the most respectable guna. Many commentators fall for this error, promoting sattva either mildly or unabashedly, which reveals that they themselves are bound by their knowledge conditioning. One who doesn't is the thirteenth century rishi Dnyaneshwar Maharaj, who put it definitively, even for our era:

Satva (thought attribute) lays for one the trap of happiness and knowledge. For the individual (Jiva), who feels elated at things, which he gets to know, his glorification itself is his bond. He takes pride in the fact that he is more lucky than others and that he has more comforts or more pleasurable experiences. Learning produces in him an over-rated self-esteem. Instead of feeling miserable, that he has lost the sight of true wisdom, viz., the realization of Self, he is puffed up with the knowledge of physical things. It is like an emperor in a dream begging and rejoicing when he gets a little more. An individual self identified with the body must go through all these experiences. He is clever in activities, clever in rituals, he is well-informed, he compares himself to others and rejoices in his excellence. He belauds his own intelligence. All this joy and knowledge itself become the bond of the

Soul. It is like a lame person leading an ox. (*Gita Explained*, 205)

Later he does admit, though, that “Satva lays the foundation of knowledge, just as the sun causes the day.” (208) Within the ambit of nature, sattva is the freest aspect, and so worthy of respect. Actually, we are going to learn how to respect them all, but just not get stuck in them.

*Striving* for pleasure is rajasic, so that is a different matter from just being in a pleasurable state. When we are in a pleasant frame of mind we tend to become relaxed and complacent, and it is easy to let things drift along of their own accord. We don’t feel we need anything. Many teachers remind us that while striving does not achieve the Absolute, neither does not striving. This paradox was addressed in detail in Chapters III and IV. A dynamic tension of neutralized opposites is the truly liberating state of mind, according to the Gita.

Likewise knowledge can become an end in itself. Learning is fun, and making sense of the world helps lift us out of childhood anxieties about things we don’t fully grasp. Most graduates of schools and colleges are conditioned to subtly (or blatantly) compete with each other regarding the quantity and quality of their knowledge. Many of them are not made happy by this, because knowledge should be a means to become happy rather than an end of its own. This part of the equation is seldom taught, even being intentionally omitted from many schools, while being perverted toward religious idolatry in most of the rest. “I know better than you,” and “My God is better than yours,” are typical deviations where sattva changes into rajas. The gunas rotate despite our every wish, and usually in a negative direction. Bursting out of tamas to regain a sattvic impulse takes a lot of energy and intelligence, which tamas inhibits. But it happens eventually to anyone who is able to view their actions from a detached perspective.

Needless to say, the acquisition of either knowledge or pleasure can easily consume an entire lifetime, since both are

infinite fields. Only the rare individual who glimpses the glittering trap they lay will be able to take the next step of transcending sattvic values. The Gita is going to present many examples of sattva, rajas and tamas so that we can learn to transcend them all.

The artist Friedensreich Hundertwasser has written a short piece that reveals the difference between artistic expression through unitive action and ordinary activity based in what we recognize as the three gunas. Creativity demands breaking free of familiar methodologies. The essay is included in the book *Hundertwasser*, by Harry Rand, (Benedikt Taschen, Koln, 1993), p. 29:

For me pictures are gateways through which—when I succeed— I can burst into a world which is at once very close to us and very distant; a world to which we have no access, where we find ourselves, but which we cannot perceive; a world which is opposed to the real world. Our parallel world, from which, in a sense, we alienate ourselves. And this is paradise. We are inside it, we are imprisoned in it, and yet some inexplicable power denies it to us.

I have managed to open some windows onto this world. How I have managed it is difficult to explain. It certainly wasn't by force, not by selection, not by intelligence, not even exactly by intuition, but almost by a kind of sleepwalking. The work of an artist is very difficult, precisely because it cannot be done by force, with diligence, or with intelligence. I mean, you can do everything else in life using strength and application and intellect, but in art these things produce absolutely no result.

7) Know you that rajas is of the nature of attachment, conditioned by thirst for life and the adhering tendency; it binds the embodied One fast by action association.

Rajas is the modality of action. Actions have good and bad impacts, but that isn't the point of the study. The Gita doesn't teach ethics. The idea is to see how we're caught by different aspects of our life, in this case our actions, and so lose our freedom. From a spiritual standpoint we can be just as bound by excellent activities as we can by criminal ones.

Rajas is the easiest guna to study, since the complications of our activities are usually in plain sight. The other two often "hide behind" rajas, because busyness is so obvious. Rajas is where we focus our surface attention the most.

If we set out to build a shed, for example, the precipitating idea, the sattvic part, doesn't seem particularly onerous. But then we have to design the structure, buy the materials, gather the tools, and spend a lot of time actually putting it together. If we give up at any point the project doesn't get done, so we are bound to proceed step by step through the entire process. Action is like that, one thing leading to another. Once the shed is built, tamas presides over it sitting there year after year, freeing us to move on to the next project.

The Maitri Upanishad (3.5) includes a summary of tamas and rajas. Unlike the Gita, it does not treat sattva as a binding quality at all, proving that even Upanishads can have their drawbacks. Here's what it says about rajas:

The characteristics of the Passionate Quality (rajas)... are inner thirst, affection, emotion, covetousness, maliciousness, lust, hatred, secretiveness, envy, insatiability, unsteadfastness, fickleness, distractedness, ambitiousness, acquisitiveness, favoritism towards friends, dependence upon surroundings, hatred in regard to unpleasant objects of sense, overfondness in regard to pleasant objects, sourness of utterance, gluttonousness. With these the elemental soul is filled full; with these it is 'overcome'. Therefore it undergoes different forms—yea, it undergoes different forms!" (Hume translation)

It's certainly a list that leans heavily on the negative side of action. The more positive side of rajas includes the energy to accomplish beneficial acts and to pursue the investigation of questions both scientifically and philosophically. Rajas has a dark side when it is linked to *tamas* and a bright aspect when allied with *sattva*.

8) But *tamas* is born of ignorance, deluding all embodied beings; it binds by delusion, lassitude and somnolence.

The ignorance spoken of here is the simple ignorance of not knowing, or knowing only a small part, as opposed to the universal condition of ignorance due to separation from our true being, which underlies all three *gunas*. *Tamas* thrives in minds that willfully prefer not to know what's going on around them. "It was good enough for grandpa, and it's good enough for me," is a classic *tamasic* attitude, insisting that a few shreds of prejudice are much more comfortable than an educated grasp of the situation. People oppressed by *tamas* often insist they are right, even in the face of overwhelming contrary evidence. Like *sattva*, *tamas* can be exceedingly comfortable, because it is so restful and uneventful that we can even ignore its claustrophobia-inducing environment. *Rajas* can impel us to break out of our complacency, but if *tamas* is dominant enough there may not be enough energy to overcome its powerful gravity.

Here is the *Maitri Upanishad* (3.5) on *tamas*:

Now, it has elsewhere been said: "The characteristics of the Dark Quality (*tamas*) are delusion, fear, despondency, sleepiness, weariness, heedlessness, old age, sorrow, hunger, thirst, wretchedness, anger, atheism (*nastikya*), ignorance, jealousy, cruelty, stupidity, shamelessness, religious neglect, pride, unequableness. (Hume translation.)

Holding a one-sided view of part of our nature makes it harder to let go of, not easier. Even *tamas* has a positive aspect, despite what the *Maitri* says. It steadies the psyche, holds on to established truths, provides continuity and grounding, and much more. So, if we work on *tamas* at all, as opposed to simply aiming at transcending it, we can move away from anger and stupidity toward appreciating the steadiness and stability *tamas* supplies. Having our basic needs covered can free us to turn our attention to more interesting experiences.

Rather than outright rejection of the *gunas*, balanced transcendence means accepting them and watching them as they continue to pass through the psyche in various permutations. Transcending them does not mean that they stop happening, only that we are not unduly encumbered by their influence. As we proceed, we will have plenty of opportunities to examine many more examples of how this plays out.

9) *Sattva* conduces to pleasure and *rajas* to action, while *tamas*, shrouding wisdom, conduces to delusion.

Here we get the shorthand version of the three *gunas* for ready reference. The binding nature of pleasure has been discussed in verse 6, and *rajas* as signifying action hardly needs elaboration. We should, however, take a close look at how *tamas* brings about *pramada*, translated by Nataraja Guru as delusion.

Usually rendered as heedlessness or dullness, and also negligence—certainly mild enough faults—the dictionary has it correctly as madness or insanity. Nataraja Guru says it means “mistaking one value for another, or getting confused generally through appearances and not being guided by realities which correct knowledge alone can bring.” We’re talking about real derangement here, as with Orwell’s Party Slogans from *1984*: War is Peace, Freedom is Slavery, Ignorance is Strength. *Tamas* directs us to cause harm in the name of redressing injury. It refuses to

admit outside opinion, but overlays a thick repository of prejudiced projections onto whatever it encounters. Krishna is not talking about forgetting to pick up milk at the store or accidentally insulting your spouse. Tamas can kill. In isolation it mostly affects the tamasic person and their immediate environs, but linked to rajas it becomes activated to spread its malaise far and wide. The union of church (tamas) and state (rajas) is but one egregious example of how it can play out, with Inquisitions and Holy Wars and a whole variety of pogroms. The Science of the Absolute is not just a sweet philosophy, it is a lifesaving state of mind that is desperately needed by a humanity that is prone to becoming dangerously delusional.

Tamas also stops us from examining ourselves spiritually or psychologically. (Actually, I can't think what the difference would be between psychology and spirituality, but some people do distinguish them.) For example, say a person becomes dissatisfied during a midlife crisis, which is a normal stage of life that employs anxiety to induce us to reexamine our priorities to bring them more in line with our adult intelligence. But tamas leads them to blame their condition on their partner or spouse or boss or the president instead of taking themselves in hand with a frank self-assessment. They are convinced that "I'm sad because that person doesn't love me enough," or "The boss has it in for me." Hostility is not treated as a symptom of unhappiness to be addressed within, but is gleefully unleashed on the outside world. Many a relationship has been destroyed by this snare, and it's hard to imagine how it could be in any way helpful to the one who fails to see where the real problem lies. The projecting of inner disturbances onto outer realities is the very definition of delusion, and only a hair's breadth away from madness.

After all, madness is seeing something other than what it is. In tamas, we project a fixed mental construct onto reality and insist we are right and reality is wrong. Or anyone else's version is wrong. Obviously there is a range of misunderstanding here that runs from amusing to devastating.

It is well to recall Krishna's position on the gunas, which he stated clearly in VII, 13 and 14. Note that all three gunas are delusory, and not just tamas:

Deluded by these three manifestations of value, this whole world is unable to know Me, who am beyond them and unexpended. Verily this divine illusion of Mine, made up of the manifestations of value (gunas), is hard to surmount. Those who seek Me alone pass over this illusion.

Dyaneshwar Maharaj expands on this eloquently:

It is Brahman, Who, assuming the attributes of the three Gunas, acts in accordance with their peculiar characteristics. Just as when a king is dreaming of a foreign invasion, he is both the victor and the vanquished: therefore, the high, the intermediate and the low attributes are merely a matter of appearance; otherwise there is nothing but pure Brahman. It is the prowess of Brahman that makes visible in the body the threefold attributes.... So the Soul gets bound through its connection with the body and mind to the three Gunas. This thralldom does not, however, interfere with the process of liberation at the hands of the sages. These three attributes might appear dominant in the body. Yet they do not affect Brahman, Who is beyond them. The Soul is untouched by these three attributes and the dawning of wisdom indicates the Soul as separate from the body. In fact, it is like waking up from a dream. (208-9)

10) Now sattva dominates, overpowering rajas and tamas; and rajas prevails over sattva and tamas; likewise tamas over rajas and sattva.

All of us have all the gunas as part of our makeup. The gunas are three aspects of one condition, the condition of being bound by

nature and not completely free. We should not be misled by the fact that they are invariably introduced individually, for the sake of clarity. They are all present and all churning all the time, but at any moment one will likely be dominant. When we say someone is sattvic or tamasic, it only means that that aspect is slightly more pronounced than the others. As with sex distinctions, a slight bulge here or there can make all the difference.

I'll give one example of how this predominance plays out. When we're at work on a project, the inspiring part of it is sattvic, the actual effort is rajasic, and the mindlessly repetitive parts are tamasic. During the course of our involvement we will rotate between being excited and interested (sattva), carrying out the legwork to actualize our vision (rajas), and sometimes plodding along like a mule in harness, knowing what we have to do and just doing it (tamas). In the tamasic stages we might be thinking of other things or planning ahead for the next step. All of these aspects will be present most of the time, but in different relative strengths.

It would be valuable for you to take the time to apply the same principle to other aspects of life, like your love relationships and your spiritual practice. We want maximum freedom in these areas, but don't realize that the rotation of the gunas is actually binding us. Usually we want to enjoy the sattvic part and avoid the tamasic, "down" stages. If we can see how each one affects the neutral purity of our mental state, we can begin to see how to shrug them off to be optimally present.

If we are upset we are usually aware, at least by the time we are adults, of how our misery clouds our thinking and even our perception. The world takes on a negative cast no matter how innocent or pleasant it might seem on another occasion. Sometimes we are able to pull ourselves together, and as our thinking clears the upset recedes and the clouds part. Sattva and tamas alternate reciprocally like this all the time. And very often we can become absorbed in our work or making our art, and both intellectual excitement and negative projections are stilled for the time being.

This is probably the source of the social mania with busywork that pervades modern life: When rajas is dominant a lot can be accomplished and much misery avoided. Hard work or exercise can help pull you out of the doldrums. For this reason, very many people think of spiritual practice in rajasic terms: just keep doing what you're supposed to and eventually you will become enlightened. This is actually rajas with a big dollop of tamas mixed in. According to the Gita, the unified state is an entirely different proposition. It is not in any sense a matter of carrying out a program.

The common term for the selective function of consciousness that this verse describes is "being preoccupied." Our preoccupation screens out a lot of irrelevant data, as well as some relevant data too, inevitably. But the term is very apt. We occupy a certain familiar territory, and stake a claim to it. Because of our expectations, we in a sense occupy it beforehand, we pre-occupy it, because we bring a mental picture to the scene and enshrine it there as what we imagine to be real. Unfortunately we become accustomed to our habitat (related to the word 'habit') and become closed off to newness. For this reason the Gita recommends we step outside the habitual terrain of the gunas whenever possible.

Later on the gunas will be correlated with the varnas or castes. In both cases, castes and gunas, it is essential to admit flexibility into the scheme, which is after all just that: a scheme. It is a way to understand, to make sense of a complex situation. It should not be taken as gospel to oppress anyone. We each exemplify all aspects of caste as well as guna in our lives, and the healthier we are the more balanced are the factors. This scheme should be used to free up frozen or static conditions, getting the wheels to turn and the gears to rotate. Stasis is the same as tamas, so all fixed systems are ipso facto tamasic.

Yet tamas is a great opportunity, not just something to reject. First of all, if you kept getting higher and higher all the time, you'd burst. Tamas is the consolidation phase, when you can soberly assimilate what arrived as an inspiration in sattva and was acted

upon in rajas. There are no glamorous vibrations to upset the steadiness of your mind. And after all, misery is the perfect stimulus for stopping to think about things, since if you felt good you'd probably just go on to the next provocation. Insight, experience, followed by consolidation (sattva, rajas, tamas), what a perfect setup!

11) When light, which is wisdom, streams forth from all the doors of the body, then it may be understood that sattva is predominant.

In VIII, 12, the meditating yogi is directed to “inhibit all exits.” At that stage an element of retention was required, where somatic energy was stored up to make a breakthrough. Now that the yogi has achieved a degree of wisdom or enlightenment, the radiant energy must be allowed to shine forth.

The doors or gates of the body are the senses, including their outgoing as well as the incoming aspects. Thus intelligent speech and harmonious activity outwardly reflect a sattvic state, while from the inside the light seems to be pouring in through all the apertures of sensory awareness.

The projection of film in old-fashioned movies provides an excellent analogy for the three gunas. Our life is a lot like looking at a movie screen. We are the projector and what is projected, but we forget that and become fascinated by the play on the screen, which is a kind of inverse reflection of our inner processes. Sattva resembles a film with little or nothing on it, so the image on the screen is a bright light. Rajas is the typical brightly and complexly colored film with lots of variegation, and tamas is like unexposed film that is very dark, revealing if anything only vague and murky images. Armed with this analogy, we can easily assess our overall state of mind by reading whether the world appears bright, fractured or dark; otherwise described as transparent, translucent or opaque.

Sattva at its best is very similar to transcendence, and at this stage it might seem like quibbling to worry too much about the distinction. But the disparity between the source and its reflection is everything. In transcendence there is not only no film to interrupt the light, but we have redirected our awareness to the source of light itself, and no longer look for its reflection on the screen on the far wall. A screen filled with white light superficially resembles the source, but the fact that it is a reflection makes all the difference: it is dependent rather than independent.

12) When rajas dominates there arises greed, activity, initiation of works, impatience and covetousness.

Rajas stands for the busy side of life, which often gets out of hand. For many, being busy defines existence, and all else is meaningless. A perfect example of the rajasic lifestyle came in today's mail, in *The New Yorker* magazine of April 26, 2010, where a clutch of a noted author's letters are introduced thus:

When urged to write his autobiography, Saul Bellow (1915-2005) said that there was nothing to tell except that he'd been unbearably busy ever since getting circumcised—busy with the making of novels, stories and the occasional essay; with love, marriage, fatherhood, divorce, friendship, enmity, grief; with the large-scale events of history and the small-scale events of literary life; not least, with writing letters.

We can only hope he had enough sattvic moments to distill and appreciate the value of all that motion.

The modern human might well ask why we should prefer a blank screen to one filled with action, mystery and adventure. Only because light is blissful. The more light, the more bliss, even if it is only a reflection. The bliss of our being undergirds all our states, whether we can feel it consciously or not, and is the motivation behind all of them. In the “less is more” category, less clutter

means more bliss. Our essential nature is blissful, so the less it is blocked by extraneous distractions, the more we are homed in on our dharma, which is the ideal course of our life and the true source of happiness.

Somehow we have come to believe that this is not true, that we can only achieve happiness by continuously being engaged in activities, performing set programs. Yet because lasting bliss is not dependent on what we do, once one project is completed we have to dredge up another, then another and another. While we might have a pile of money as a result, say, or an impressive résumé, it doesn't really make us happy. So we think along the lines that we don't have enough money yet to make us feel good, and the solution is to get a bigger pile. Anything that stands in the way of our goal or holds us up is considered a hostile force. We go crazy with impatience to sweep it away, and what we have already accumulated is coveted and must be guarded assiduously. Thus the whole game looks more like a complicated trap than the high road to happiness.

The word translated as covetousness also includes envy, desiring, and longing for. We feel a craving for what we don't have. Certainly, acting on the basis of such raw and selfish emotions is going to be less salubrious than acting from a calm and serene state grounded in self-knowledge. The extreme chaos in contemporary governance stems from unbridled rajasic tendencies, which are universally worshipped and advocated. Yet as the individual goes, so goes the state, and vice versa. So our contribution to the whole begins with curing our own manias and distortions, which stem from learned feelings of inadequacy and need.

To a rajasic person it is impossible to distinguish between sattvic and tamasic types. Anyone not busy is considered worthless, so great souls are lumped with deadbeats. Sattvic motivations are seldom seen as having any relevance to "real" life. Sattvic people can only prove themselves by looking busy, in other words by becoming rajasic.

13) When *tamas* dominates, dullness, lack of initiative, delusion and infatuation arise.

I'm sure we are all familiar with people who have given up all higher motivations and wallow in the static state known here as *tamas*. In a modern society where the basic needs are easily met, it is possible to be incredibly lazy and tuned out, content with fleeting pleasures. Dullness and lack of initiative are obvious features of such a life.

The "fatal flaw" in humans, if there is one, is that the more ignorant we are the more we are convinced that we are in sole possession of truth, and conversely, the more we can honestly assess ourself, the more we will be aware of our inevitable limitations. This means that the more bull-headed we are the more we are likely to muscle ahead with an ill-considered program full of tragic defects, and the less open to constructive criticism that would help us improve our trajectory.

*Pramada* was discussed in detail in verse 9, where it was defined as delusion, but infatuation is an interesting aspect of it also. In the sense of being wildly and unstopably in love, infatuation is more of a *rajasic* condition, and this lighter version is lampooned by Shakespeare in his *Midsummer Night's Dream*. It is likely to be very amusing to outside observers. But infatuation can also have a much darker side, the one that permits soldiers to revere a Hitler and do his bidding. We are prone to an inexplicable madness that blinds us to truth and leads us into the most tragic stupidities. A wise yogi must always be alert to not be lured by misguided desires, whether self-generated or implanted by others.

The vast majority of people are either primarily *tamasic* or *rajasic*. They are either as busy as can be, or reeling from all the busyness and seeking serious escape. A healthy and freeform participation with being alive is much more rare.

Implied in these last three verses is the solution to the problem of the non-initiation of works that first surfaced in III, 4.

How can we live a successful life if we don't think up programs and enact them? We have to have a kind of faith that harmonious actions arise from a much deeper level than our conscious mind. Those that begin on the surface are trivial and usually flawed, which is okay up to a point. But we are searching for ways to optimize our life. The best action potentials arise out of a profundity that some call God, Vedantins call the Absolute, and scientists visualize as the unconscious. The kingdom of heaven is literally within us, as the source and inspiration for our art, joy and love. We have only to welcome it in, or more correctly put, welcome ourselves into it.

With tamas there is the fault of a lack of initiative, of giving up before you begin, but with rajas the problem is the excessive initiation of works, of always taking the initiative. It's a classic yoga dialectic. We are called upon by the guru of the Gita to neither begin actions or not begin them. The sattvic solution is to be wide awake and engage in actions as they intuitively come to you in the light of your best wisdom and levity. Truly, action is initiated by nature; it is more joyful and less frustrating to realize our incidental participation in the ongoing drama than to feel that the weight of the world is on our shoulders.

The state of being of one who has resolved this paradoxical dilemma is presented by Krishna in verses 23-25 below.

14) If the body bearer goes to dissolution when sattva predominates, then it attains to the pure worlds of those who understand the best values.

The next two verses indicate the psychological trajectory crafted by each guna. These are prime examples of how the Gita's philosophy is routinely trivialized, but a careful reading can open up worlds of insight.

No one will deny that our state of mind is a major factor in determining where we are headed in the present life. Here the Gita seems to be including the next life also in its reckoning. If it is

assumed that life is never-ending, it would be perfectly logical that our psychic orientation would impact future lives as well as this one. But there is an important spiritual truth to be learned here, and it has nothing to do with whether or not this life is all she wrote.

Since no one knows what awaits us after death, it is wise to leave the subject open. Insisting that there is no life after this one is a tamasic attitude, based on pure closed-mindedness, just as surely as imagining all sorts of fantasy realms, like pearly gates perched on fluffy clouds. All of that is a waste of time and a distraction from giving the present moment our most complete attention. Further, mulling over any possible future existence is a form of expectation of the fruits of action, which the Gita discourages in no uncertain terms. See for instance VI, 24, which begins with the admonishment to “[abandon] completely all desires originating in the will for particularized ends.”

*Pralaya*, dissolution, means more than just death. Consciousness dissolves in sleep and reconstitutes when we wake up, as also in meditation or during a psychedelic trip. It dissolves when we get drunk or high or go into a coma. There is nothing surprising that when we come back to ourselves, we are essentially the same type of person we were when we left. Not necessarily exactly, but essentially.

Thinking back to the sixties, when sitting down together to smoke some pot we used to say, “Let’s get destroyed!” The aim was to erase our conscious mind so we could dive into the joys of the subconscious. It was a lot of fun. The downside was that when we sobered up we hadn’t changed very much, because consciousness has to be involved for positive transformation to occur. If we merely block consciousness we can access the unconscious, but then we come back to the same unenlightened state. Only when we take our consciousness with us into the unconscious can we successfully carry out a housecleaning.

My sense is that the Gita is addressing imprinting here, that how we respond to what happens to us leaves a lasting mark. In PTSD—post-traumatic stress disorder—for instance, the way the

trauma is dealt with has a powerful impact on its repercussions in mental health. Group talk therapy is very beneficial, but intractable PTSD requires something that can't be so easily trivialized, because a traumatized person's ego wants desperately to shut out every memory of what caused the misery.

The efficacy of psychedelic medicines in laying those traumatic demons to rest is that they irresistibly carry consciousness deeper than the experience, to touch the ground of being. Doing so dissolves the blockage and restores the individual to their less traumatized, happier self. An exceptionally deep meditation or other transcendental experience can have the same effect. After all, that's the very meaning of transcendence: to go beyond what you're stuck in. But in most cases the mind's extremely alert and clever defenses redirect consciousness right around the trauma, leaving it intact. Avoidance seems like a sane enough solution, but as we know the trauma continues to assert its corrupting influence from behind the barricade. Psychedelic medicines, unrelenting mindfulness, or yoga at its best overwhelm the defenses to bring the trauma out into the open, where it can much more easily be put in perspective.

The latest theory I'm aware of as to the efficacy of psychedelics in psychic healing has evolved from experiments using psilocybin mushrooms to ameliorate PTSD, post-traumatic stress disorder. Most of us handle our traumatic experiences adequately because sooner or later they are converted into long term memories. The harrowing effects of PTSD may be driven by unprocessed experiences that were not converted to memories and so continue to seem just like present reality, threats that are happening now. By paradoxically reawakening the traumatic experiences, psychedelics allow them to be processed into ordinary, long-term memories.

From this perspective we can read these two verses as *recommending* dissolution, not in the form of death but as a curative effort to erase the ugly graffiti scrawled on our mental walls. *Getting high* means getting as far up the vertical axis as

possible, by releasing the weighty bonds of conditioned consciousness that pin us down. If we do this as sattvic philosophers, we can be restored to “the pure worlds of those who understand the best values.” In the next verse, the less salubrious rajasic and tamasic versions are presented, in which we either come back anxiously driven to keep busy or compulsively averting our gaze from anything relevant. Or both. It’s so exciting that these verses, typically read as referring to life after death, can be reduced to commonsense parameters of a healthy and practical psychology.

Our spiritual heart presses us to seek a higher state of mind in which its pains will be eased. The sattvic approach is through yoga, meditation, clean living, psychedelic exploration and the like. Rajas seeks dissolution through activity, through throwing ourselves into the fray, and “giving it everything we’ve got.” Quite a few spiritual, or at least religious, programs offer dissolution through busyness, through works or service. Tamas makes the mistake of numbing the brain for release. As the next verse points out, when we come back down we are still tamasic, and our energy will be directed to renumbing ourselves with yet another soporific medicine. Such a misdirected path quickly leads to addiction, because each dose offers only temporary relief without resolving anything.

We can readily observe that where we put our energy has a surprisingly powerful impact on the kind of life that unfolds for us, that there is a lot more going on than pure randomness. We don’t find philosophers living in situations barren of intellectual stimulation, or perhaps we should say that philosophers find intellectual stimulation wherever they are. Likewise, active types do not usually sit around pondering the higher meaning of their actions—though they may for awhile—but dive into them with enthusiasm. Sports stars aren’t found in desk jobs, and sedentary types aren’t found on the playing field, at least professionally. Somehow our lives are crafted so they match our inclinations, and the less alignment there is, the more unhappy we become, which impels us to take steps to correct the disparity. Sure, you can find

exceptions, where people force themselves to adapt to a poor fit, but this rule is generally true of healthy individuals. I hope it is true for you.

Finding our svadharma, our personally aligned way of life, does not require that we wrestle our circumstances into a preferred shape. Mysteriously, our interests are reinforced, challenged, augmented, drawn out, and amplified, naturally. It's downright astounding that everyone takes this for granted. This is because we really have very limited imaginations: we believe that our tiny smidgen of awareness is a complete grasp of everything. Not so! It just seems that way. Our higher self does this out of compassion, to mitigate the painful awareness of our own limitations. Amazingly, in the face of our monumental ignorance, the universe continues to honor our integrity. In terms of satisfaction, it gives us what we need, but not necessarily what we want, because we really don't know how causes and effects are related. If everything was actually in our hands, we would likely make so many bad decisions that our physical dissolution would come far too soon.

This might be one of the most significant facts about the universe that everyone should be aware of, but isn't. If we knew that how we thought and acted really did result in the actual shaping of our world, we would be much more careful about what we thought and did. Here the Gita is making it perfectly clear that we are trapped in something like a grand computer game that has infinite variables, programmed to respond appropriately to whatever input we give it. This is a crude but perhaps oddly accurate analogy. In any case, we have tremendous power and influence over what we think and do, despite the hampering of our conditioning. If we truly realize our power, we will begin to use it wisely, because we are affected more than anyone else by our use of it.

We have to keep in mind that it's our whole being that has this effect, while our puny conscious mind is relatively helpless. Arjuna's mind has been opened wide, enhancing the participation

of his full potential, and that's the example we are meant to emulate.

There is an apparent contradiction here, that what we do undoubtedly has an effect but at the same time we shouldn't anticipate any effects of what we do. Are we flying blind or aren't we? The key piece of the puzzle is that our conscious awareness is not the whole of the mind, it is only a tiny blip on its surface. We actualize our lives best when we open ourselves to the greater part and flow with it, whereas intentions have a tendency to stifle the flow. Harmoniously integrating the conscious with the unconscious is the essence of yoga.

Life is not an ant farm eagerly watched over by divine beings intent on doling out punishment for false moves. The actions and reactions of karma stem from the inherent structure in which they take place, which leaves any divine beings free to ignore us and spend their time partying and inventing new delights. The fear of scrutiny and punishment by the gods is a carryover from childhood, where unreflective parenting instills toxic feelings on an unconscious level. It's no wonder fundamentalists advocate beating children, because it provides the next generation of "true believers." We should know that the universe is its own feedback system. Humans have used religion to theoretically "cheat" on karma, as with buying absolution, but the bill is ever closer to coming due. We cannot treat the Earth's finite resources as infinite, for example, or overload her capability to recycle wastes. We can't be vicious and cruel and expect benign treatment from fate.

The scheme presented here should never cause us to assume that those people who are victims of terrible circumstances are the sole cause of their own misery. Many fine folks have been dealt a very bad hand, yet even an excellent hand can be agonizingly binding. The biggest tragedy is that whatever our circumstances, we have been led to believe that we can't do anything meaningful about them. Just cope; medicate and cope. The secret message of this and the next verse is that we are at least capable of working on our inner state, and how we do it makes a tremendous difference in

the long run. The urge to give up in the face of hostile forces is tamasic; to fight back is rajasic; but to try to understand and thus liberate ourselves once and for all is sattvic.

15) Meeting with dissolution when rajas predominates, it is born among those attached to action; and likewise if dissolved in a state of tamas, it is born in the wombs of the foolish.

Continuing the theme from the last verse, where we dispensed with the next life fantasies, the other two gunas are shown to have commensurate impact on how our life plays out. Active types will encounter life as a series of challenging situations requiring active solutions, and static types will find ways to get by with a minimum of involvement. Each will tend to find themselves in the company of like-minded individuals. Nothing makes tamasic types more uncomfortable than energetic people, and vice versa. Both steer clear of meditative types who want to ascribe meaning to every aspect of existence and who suggest we can be anything we want to be, this time around.

The simplistic interpretation of this and VI, 40-44, that there is a one-to-one correspondence between cause and effect, and we can therefore manipulate effects by applying certain causes, is woefully inadequate. Reality is incredibly complex, and therefore unpredictable. Scientists like to boast that if you knew every detail of the present moment you could predict the future, but that's a ludicrously tall order even if you presume the universe consists of nothing but simple propositions. We are aware of only a tiny slice of the action around us, and don't even begin to realize the full impact that what we do has on the present, much less the future.

Luckily for us, life is a kind of read out of the sum total of effects generated by however many causes are impinging at the time. That's how nature works. Our intentionality, grounded as it is in ignorance, is a wild card much more likely to disrupt the flow than to channel it salubriously, unless it is harmonized with the totality.

As an example of the unacknowledged complexity surrounding action, it seems like the Gita is propounding the idea that good people will be reborn in a family of the rich and wise, and bad people find themselves in degraded surroundings when they pop out of the womb. From my experience, though, kids reject whatever their parents stand for. Those who have philosophically minded parents crave raw action, while those who have bustling parents prefer to stop and think. We want what we don't have, want to know what we don't know yet. Wealth may as well foster laziness as cleverness, while poverty may stimulate insightful thinking as readily as corruption. A full range of options is available no matter what our external circumstances happen to be.

The whole subject is brimming with paradox. Comfortable circumstances encourage laziness, while uncomfortable ones goad us to action. The immoral behavior of the minister's offspring is legendary. A measure of rejection is, after all, stimulating to our development. As Shakespeare puts it in Macbeth, "Security is mortals' chiefest enemy." So we really have no idea what might be the most beneficial place for anyone to land. Some people's struggles are more in the mental sphere, while others suffer physical ailments, but everyone has problems. No matter what they are, if we are motivated by some notion of a future payoff for our good behavior, we are putting up yet another barricade to direct appreciation of the pure basis of existence, what is referred to in philosophy as the Absolute.

Humanity's saints have sprung from all walks of life, and their holiness cannot be traced to their outward conditions. Having foolish parents and unpleasant surroundings might well inspire a person to seek liberation sooner than having a secure setup with no worries.

Moreover, the idea that we will be flung into the next life in the same state of mind as the one we're in at the moment of death is absurd on its face. Few of us are at our best when we die. We may well be in great pain or be freaking out, struggling to see what we can do to save ourself. We may be in a coma, after a lifetime of

good works, or have lost our mind due to organic decay. If you took these two verses literally you should kill yourself while you are young and full of energy, with a clear mind. That would get you the best future deal. But there are no guarantees beyond this moment, so please read between the lines. If we take scripture literally, we are in danger of misreading it entirely.

What we can be sure of is that the traumas inflicted on developing egos are very hard to overcome. They tend to be repeated from generation to generation. The eminently sane Native Americans accorded seven generations to heal a psychic wound. In our vastly less coherent societies, seven thousand generations may not be enough. It behooves us to mount a sincere effort to minimize the damage of our passing through this spectacular yet delicate corner of the universe.

16) The benefit of good action is said to be sattvic, while the benefit of rajas is pain, and ignorance is the benefit of tamas.

Now Krishna gets more blunt, asserting that life in its manifested aspect is a series of effects stemming from causes that we participate in and are bound by. As we work our way back, in these later chapters, to a healthy, practical way of life, we should know that our thoughts and actions are critically important to what our lives are going to be like. Most of the time we are given vast quantities of false and misleading instruction about how to live, and so our behavior wobbles all over the map. If we can learn some eternally valid principles such as are taught here, we can spare ourselves from sashaying up a lot of blind alleys.

At the beginning of every cosmic cycle, mysterious forces create a universe perfect in every respect, free and ecstatic. As soon as the created part becomes aware of its surroundings, it begins to devise ways and means to truncate itself, to limit and define itself within boundaries. This is perfectly normal and necessary for finite comprehension. The Absolute—a catchall term for the totality of those mysterious forces—is incomprehensible in

its entirety to any finite being, so every attempt to conceive of it makes it out to be less than it is. Over time, the conception becomes smaller and smaller and eventually can even disappear from consciousness. When it does, we make the mistake of assuming our limited ideas encompass the whole, and rapidly accustom ourselves to the tight fit.

What began as a colossal expanse is reduced by the demands of survival to a shorthand caricature of itself, an empty husk that preserves the form but is devoid of meaningful content. On a more mundane level, governments and institutions suffer the same degenerative process, becoming increasingly corrupt and inflexible as they age. So too the individual, who begins life as an unconditioned bundle of energy, but then progresses to a stasis wholly occupied by complying with the demands of its surroundings.

At least with governments, corporations and humans, a chilling form of cheerleading often accompanies this degeneration under the influence of the gunas. All peddle a partisan patriotism that ignores shortcomings and inflates the hypothetical benefits of separatism. “My country right or wrong,” “go along to get along,” “put up and shut up,” and “my way or the highway” are some of the clichés used to maintain support long past the point where spiritual dynamism has vacated the premises.

The individual correlate of these tamasic attitudes occurs when the ego clings to a static definition of itself. While not so often accompanied by slogans, at least consciously, there are deeply guarded fixations that attempt to hold a disintegrating entity in some form of idealized fantasy vision. The more they feel threatened the more intensely their ego clings to them: “This is exactly who and what I am.” Time and again I have had people tell me that they are not capable of changing, that their troubles are due to faults that they insist are set in stone. It is as though they secretly want to revel in their flaws. They definitely know how to hold tight to their current position, even as they pretend to wish they were someone else.

Despite their assertions, almost everyone is capable of vastly more than they imagine, and the reason we don't live up to our capabilities is all those self-imposed barricades in our mind. To be accurate, they are barricades inflicted by others and at first only grudgingly accepted by us, though eventually they become oddly comfortable. When *tamas* holds sway we defend our faults and habits as the real "us" and resist with bitter gusto any suggestion that they are not legitimate. We identify with them, and so our life becomes mired in rigidity. The group version, where those sharing a similar set of limited attitudes reinforce each other's prejudices, is called a behavioral sink. Even if you try to escape up the slippery sides of the sink, gravity (*tamas*) fights you at every step.

Ethologist John B. Calhoun coined the term behavioral sink to describe a fascinating and relevant phenomenon he studied for his whole lifetime. He constructed various utopian living situations for rats and mice, which thrived for a period until their environment became overcrowded, after which they behaved aberrantly, rapidly lost the capability to reproduce, and went extinct. In over two dozen experiments he was unable to set up a situation where the colonies did not die off. A more apt term for this would be behavioral collapse, and I'm going to appropriate *behavioral sink* for what it seems to me to indicate: the gravitational black hole of popular assumptions from which we not only don't stray, we can't even conceive of straying from.

Calhoun attributed the cause of his behavioral collapses to overpopulation, but it seems equally possible the real culprit was lack of incentive: the rodents never had any challenges to cope with. Everything they needed was readily supplied. They lost their sense of purpose, and tried to recover it through bizarre behaviors (a kind of *rajas*), and ended up in utter resignation (*tamas*), after which they didn't even care for their offspring.

Opposition stimulates something in us that is essential to our well being, and life is kind to provide a seemingly endless supply of it. Humans have to dig down deep to find themselves, and

without any incentive we tend to simply vegetate. We might even forget to have children.

This could teach us that “becoming sattvic” and avoiding rajas and tamas is akin to living in a utopian community without challenges, a kind of fool’s paradise doomed to ultimate collapse. Yogis should welcome nature’s challenges as stimuli to hone their intelligence and avoid stagnation. Without it we might be little better than deflated balloons.

If we meet disappointments in life—and we always will—there is a temptation to give up and resign oneself to what strikes us as an evil fate. Here is where tamas grabs us by the heart and squeezes, thwarting our spirit and sapping our energy to carry on. Certainly it may take some time to heal the wounds we have suffered before we can jump back into the fray, and that’s fine, so long as we are still willing to make the necessary effort eventually. After a healing period, we may have to rev ourselves up with some simple rajasic activity before we can regain our optimum state of mind once more. Rightly directed, rajas can lift us out of tamas, even though the process is likely to be painful and breed resistance.

The normal state of mind is to accept the limitations others have saddled us with, and to slog through life bent down or broken by them. Once in a while a rare individual is able to step back and realize they are caught in a psychic death spiral. They wonder how to extricate themselves from the madding crowd rushing toward the cliff’s edge or the graveyard. They recollect moments of joyous inspiration in their lives and long to make those the basis of their existence once again, to fling off the encircling shrouds and dance again beneath a diamond sky.

The Bhagavad Gita is a textbook for those people.

17) From sattva arises wisdom, as also from rajas, greed; both delusion and infatuation and also ignorance arise from tamas.

“Arise” is the key word here. Our mental states arise from nature and are part of nature. We are not our mental states, though

they are part of us. We like to take credit for what we are, but nearly one hundred percent of it is utterly beyond our grasp. In the Gita's philosophy, nature itself arises as a kind of magic show, as though it were composed of nothing more than mist. Science has come to the same conclusion, where a scattering of tiny particles lends an appearance of solidity to the virtually infinite emptiness that underlies the perceptible universe. We are merely witness to it: even if we are emperor of the galaxy we cannot lord it over existence.

Therefore if we imagine that by following a sattvic pattern we will sooner or later become wise, we are deceiving ourselves. Wisdom is shy of such conceits. And of course no one reading a book like this imagines themselves as either rajasic or tamasic. Those describe other people, the fools! But greed arises in us quite naturally, as does ignorance. We have to own it all, otherwise we are deluding ourselves, and delusion is tamasic.

Psychologically speaking, rajas quotes the motto "I can and I will!" and wades right in. Tamas insists "I can't and I won't!" and finds plenty of excuses to prove the assertion. Both of them are egotistical and limiting. Sattva finds the mean between these extremes, allowing for flexibility as well as expertise in whatever action the situation calls for. But there is still a vestige of "This is how I do it." "I'm in favor of the sattvic way." "My meditation program is really great." When the Gita calls for us to step outside of the influence of the gunas, it means that we should relinquish the selfish fixation that inevitably perverts the natural purity of our life. All these attitudes interfere, in one way or another, with uninhibited, pure action.

18) Those who abide in sattva go upward, the rajasic dwell in the middle, and the tamasic, abiding in the function of the lowest modality of nature, go downward.

The life of an individual as an incipient adult resembles a lighter-than-air balloon. It starts out deflated by the shock of

adolescence, and as it gradually fills with the exuberance of being alive it begins to rise off the ground. Onlookers, because of jealousy arising from their own bondage, cannot bear the balloon's natural tendency to vault into the sky, so they load it down with all manner of ties, chains, guy wires, ballast and detritus to pinion it to the earth, to keep them company. Vedanta is nothing more or less than the systematic untethering of the balloon so it is free to fulfill its normal inclinations to soar into the empyrean.

Kurt Vonnegut, in the short story *Harrison Bergeron*, depicts a society where heavy weights are locked onto people to force them to struggle to move. The more athletic you are, the more weight you are assigned. They also wear headphones that regularly blast startling sounds into the ear to disrupt their trains of thought, making them equally stupid and obedient. The story is a vivid portrayal of the pervasive negativity of society, with all its built in impediments. It looks ridiculous, and yet, with a second glance, it is eerily familiar.

Fundamentalists might interpret this verse as implying some sort of heaven and hell, the classical exaggeration of up and down. Guru Nitya Chaitanya Yati deals with this notion definitively in his commentary on the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad:

The substance of what we have said so far is that for each one of us there is only one world. That is what we each call "my self." That world is an actualization of the total creative energy of one's manifestation, i.e. the *prajapati*. In that, one cluster of attitudes makes one divine, another set of attitudes makes one a human, and a third set of primitive urges makes one a demon. However ugly those urges are, out of them the most sublime aesthetic sensibility and spiritual wisdom are to be evolved. Looked upon this way, there is no hell outside, no heaven outside, no world outside. All pluralities organically belong to the unity of one's being.

Now we can see how the false fabrication of heaven and its denizens, the earth with its sociopolitical histories, and hell

with its wildest screams of fear cause millions of people everywhere to undergo excruciating pain, shame and misery. All these are manmade hypotheses which have become the most deplorable concepts of theology, religion, science, sociology, political economy, and every kind of belligerency. To clear the board of all such misconceptions we should make a valiant attempt to go through the entire maze of conceptualized beliefs.

A deep psychological analysis is to be made to understand the images we generate inside, the emotional energy source that generates imaginations that can foster sustaining faith in us, the energizing value which is fed into images, and the shifting values that intrinsically belong to the inner dynamism of personality formation. (Vol. III, 40-41)

This verse is telling us that evolution is not a blind process. We have an impact on it. We can either improve ourselves and our environment, jog in place on a treadmill, or let ourselves fall apart. There is no static place to which we constantly return; all is in flux, and change is the norm.

Narayana Guru was well aware of the effect our actions have on our life. His verse 23 of *Atmopadesa Satakam* goes right to the essence: "For the sake of another, day and night performing action, having given up self-centered interests, the compassionate person acts; the self-centered man is wholly immersed in necessity, performing unsuccessful actions for himself alone." Thus, generosity and compassion on the one hand, and selfishness on the other, are the two poles encompassing all of morality. In his scintillating commentary on the same verse in *That Alone* (pp. 165-66), Nitya elaborates on the negative influence of selfishness:

The person who is basically selfish has to limit the world around him to make himself secure. The more he thinks of himself, the more glaring is the contrast with what is his non-self. An increasing strangeness comes between him and the

rest of the world. He becomes suspicious of the outside, which brings feelings of insecurity. The suspicion and insecurity compel him to build a fortress around himself. As this becomes exaggerated, he becomes paranoiac. He needs to always cover up, to do things secretly and calculatingly. He holds his cards away from others and secretly senses what profits everyone is going to make. Then he wants to play tricks, as his only concern is how to gain. He does not believe others, and so others do not believe him. As he is feeling insecure, he cannot be open with others, and this lack of openness makes him unacceptable to others. Thus every day he is losing some ground. He makes his life more and more difficult by shunting himself away from others. Ultimately his life becomes very shallow. He cannot have any real truths or any great culture or tradition. There is no sublime height to go to. His world of interest is very cramped.

We see millions and millions of such unfortunate people all around us. It's just terrible. They live within their own prison walls, incarcerated by their own selfishness. I see hundreds and thousands of families who live this kind of wretched life—no meaning, no value before them. All day and all night long they think only of their eating and drinking and their one particular family's interest. Everyone else can go to the dogs. They are always in trouble. Each day they further cut off their vital links with the rest of the world. Such miserable beings.

19) When the seer beholds no other agent than the modalities of nature, and knows that which lies beyond the modalities, he attains My state of being.

So how does knowledge of this process help the spiritual aspirant? The key point Krishna makes is that your true nature is beyond the gunas, beyond the playful interactions of nature. If you're just watching them and not getting sucked in, you are fit to become the Absolute. As Nitya says in his quintessential exposé of

the gunas in verse 88 of *That Alone*, our nature is sat-chit-ananda (truth-awareness-value), but when we look out into the world we see sattva-rajas-tamas (good-undecided-bad). We become fascinated by this projection of our happiness onto things outside, which is fine until we forget (which we already have) that the things are not the source of our happiness, but a reflection of our state of mind. Once we forget, when the thing goes away (which things always do), we imagine our happiness has gone away with it. We spend our energy trying to recover the lost object or recreate something like it. Eventually something else does come along, and the cycle begins again. That's what "normal" life is all about—getting and spending and laying waste our powers, as Wordsworth would say. Do it if you like. But the Gita is about ending the cycle of rebirth of the object of happiness, to attain what it calls immortality. Meaning, instead of your happiness dying every time the object goes away, it stays alive forever, in every situation, every contingency, because you keep its flame alive within your heart, your core. You don't limit it to just this handful of selected possibilities, you're excited to see it and experience it in everything that comes along.

I think we're all aware how much a consumption-based society depends on people associating their happiness with external objects. Its advertisers have a trillion ways to catch our attention and fix it on things. It takes intelligent withdrawal to get its claws out of your flesh, but the effort is worthwhile.

Guru Nitya has masterfully described the binding nature of the gunas as they act in pairs in his Yoga Letter three (now found in *Living the Science of Harmonious Union*, p. 337-38)):

The consciousness in an individual is not mere passive knowledge. It is a knowledge that is always giving directions to seek ways and means by which the individuated consciousness can assert its power over objects of interest and can manipulate the tools available to it to perpetuate and precipitate ever so many possibilities, filling the

consciousness with a sense of contentment and self-sufficiency.

In other words, what we have termed in the second letter as *sattva* is taking advantage of the kinetic energy of *rajas* to be self-assertive. The coming together of these two aspects of nature bristles with many problems. If the *prakhya* or *sattva* (clear knowledge) is not extremely brilliant, the translucency of the kinetic energy of *rajas* can dampen its clarity and the supremacy of the lead may even become shifted from *sattva* to *rajas*. When such a thing happens, the horizon of your personal interest shrinks from being altruistic to the sorrowful state of naiveté, conceit, and self-centeredness. You might have noticed the highly aggressive and conceited nature of very intelligent people who are incorrigibly egoistic. This is the case of *sattva* losing its game when bracketed with *rajas*. The only way to keep the superiority of the leadership of *sattva* is by making it intimately loyal to the pure light of the Absolute.

Apart from *sattva* and *rajas* there can be three other kinds of pairing. Your sense of urgency and passion for pleasures, which arise from *rajas*, can find their associate in *tamas*. Here you become shut off from the wisdom of *sattva*. This is a very dangerous situation where you lose the discretion to be virtuous. The hard-heartedness and cruelty of people with criminal tendencies come from the unhealthy combination of *rajas* and *tamas*. An even worse situation arises when the negativity of *tamas* becomes the ruling power of the mind. In such a state you feel like you are sinking into a great depth of total opacity or bleakness. You see nothing but hostility around and are filled with a sense of wretchedness and helplessness. The third possible pairing is between *sattva* and *tamas*. Such cases are diagnosed by modern psychiatrists as schizophrenia. There are moments of cheerfulness and love and creative ideas, which are immediately followed by a state of frenzy or catatonia.

Simply put, beneath and beyond and within the gunas lies the perfect neutrality of the Absolute. Yoga is about redirecting our attention from the surface play of the gunas to the deep calm of oceanic consciousness.

20) The embodied, having transcended these three modalities of nature, originating in the body, is freed from the sufferings of birth, death and old age, and enjoys immortality.

It really does help to know that the psyche is not static, that its level of awareness cycles through a figure eight pattern between high and low, sattva and tamas, powered throughout by rajasic energy. Many people become depressed when tamas holds sway. If they realized that this is not a permanent condition but part of a cyclic continuum, they would be less inclined to panic. The negative mental states associated with tamas can easily be enlarged by anxiety, causing the psyche to spend most of its time in that state. We are also capable of minimizing them if we so choose. The “immortality” spoken of here is that tremendous feeling of relief when all sufferings are at bay and our native bliss surges to the fore. If we can manage to avoid getting caught up in the ups and downs of daily life, it is much easier to remain in that enjoyable condition.

Obviously the Gita is not talking about “clinical depression,” which is likely to require medical intervention, but only the cyclic downheartedness that is the common lot of everyone.

The feeling of tamasic misery is greatly amplified by religious images of “eternal damnation,” wherein there is no hope the state will ever end. Sadistic types love to heap such feelings on their hapless victims. In reality there is no eternal damnation, only the temporary damnation of ignorance brought about by mental states occurring in rotation. While it lasts it feels eternal, however.

Nowadays the worst thing about a bout of tamas is that it may well invite a course of antidepressants, which are engineered

to keep their users under their influence. Tamas then really will become permanent. This trap has a high social approval rating too. You sacrifice your freedom and individuality on the altar of economic greed.

On the other hand, the sense of hope engendered by knowing sattva will return minimizes the tamasic state, supporting the patience and acceptance that help us keep centered.

“Idle hands are the devil’s playground” embodies the folk wisdom that by engaging in rajasic activity the passage through tamas is minimized. True enough, but unthinking parroters of the cliché also keep people busy for the passage through sattva, so the positive side of the equation is also minimized. A wise program for ordinary humans would perhaps mean staying busy through periods of negativity with preplanned tasks, while welcoming the return of sattva with periods of meditation, sharing, and pleasure-filled activities. Too bad that so many deranged religious types believe that enjoying life is a sin against God equal to despair, hatred and vindictiveness.

Introducing guilt into pleasure automatically changes it from sattvic to tamasic. This is a nearly universal form of psychic sabotage. It seems the aim is to create human beings devoid of sattva, busily cycling through higher and lower intensities of rajas tinged with tamas.

Krishna is doing his best to help us steer clear of all these negative traps baited with alluring inducements that fill human society.

21) Arjuna said:

By what marks, O Master, does he who has transcended those three modalities of nature become recognized? What is his conduct, and how does he transcend them?

After so much heavy and intense instruction, it’s time for Arjuna to show he’s paying attention. He wonders what differences there are between those who are caught in the gunas and those who

have transcended them. He may be like many of us, thinking “This is hard—maybe I can skip it.” Krishna invites him to hang in there with an excellent summary of the realized state, in one of the most soulful sections in the whole Bhagavad Gita.

Arjuna only uses the epithet *prabho* for Krishna twice, here and in XI, 4. There, at the outset of Arjuna’s cosmic vision, it is translated as “O Powerful One,” and here “O Master.” No other commentator I am aware of lends the term any significance, but it is extremely complimentary. Its use must indicate that what is to follow is of special importance.

22) Krishna said:

Light and activity and delusion, when present, Arjuna, he is not dissatisfied, nor does he hanker for them when absent.

Light, activity and delusion are descriptive of sattva, rajas and tamas, respectively. They affect us by inducing attraction and repulsion, likes and dislikes, and we are caught by becoming comfortable with our choices.

Everyone goes through cycles from high to low and back again. It’s completely normal. One of the most insidious gambits of pharmaceutical corporations has been to classify the low end of normal behavior as pathological, qualifying most of the population for expensive treatments of various sorts. People panic when they find themselves dropping into the depths, because they have been convinced they are suffering from a terrible malady. A healthy outlook such as the Gita offers would demonstrate that ups and downs are perfectly natural and normal to all people. Down times are a stimulus to move forward and grow, in other words to evolve. A life neutralized by chemicals is merely insipid and uninspired, while one dynamically balanced by yoga is charged with energy and insight. If you don’t want to call it yoga, just think of it as facing your problems. Leave out the exaggerations and colorations encouraged by money-hungry dope peddlers and wrestle with your demons in hand-to-hand combat.

It's very fortunate that Arjuna didn't have recourse to tranquilizers or antidepressants, or else the master dialogue of the Gita never would have happened. He would have just popped some pills and slunk away into the shadows, never to be heard from again and thinking himself lucky to have been "saved" by his medications.

The implied advice here is to not either combat or ignore the gunas, but take them as being simply the underlying structure of the world we live in. A lot of pseudo-spiritual energy is wasted cultivating sattva, and in tamas we may long for the return of either other state. If instead we focus with a detached attitude on what is going on with us right now, we could avoid being overwhelmed by it. True spirituality, as has been made clear, operates beyond the tidal surge of the gunas entirely, even as nature's dynamism continues to unfold.

23) He who, seated as a neutral, is not moved by the modalities of nature, realizing that they operate in rotation, who, standing apart, is unmoved,

The yogi is described as simultaneously sitting and standing, a rather amusing dialectic. As the advertisements say, don't try this at home!

While this neutral state may first be attained while sitting in lotus pose, the seat here really means a grounding in realization. The yogi is psychologically stable in the face of storms without and within, regardless of body posture. It is like standing at some remove from the action, even while sitting in the midst of it.

The light of awareness dies down and is continually reborn and modified by the interaction of the three gunas. Krishna's recommendation is for the yogi to adopt a witnessing perspective, knowing that the actions of nature follow their own laws and are not under anyone's control. Even the onset of death is an aspect of the rotation of the wheel of nature. Dread of the inevitable is at the minimum a highly egocentric attitude, not to mention futile. Rather

than pulling back in horror over our fate, we should be admiring the wondrous beauty of it all, going forward in ecstasy. The more we can maintain our inner stillness, the more ecstatic we become.

Conversely, while we tend to crave outward stability, life is continually in motion. It is very helpful to know this. When things look bleak you can fall back on an inner conviction that the scene will rotate and look different later on. It takes a little practice, but after a bit, even deep in the tamasic state where everything is viewed cynically, you can take heart from knowing this.

Looking on the world as an unfolding expression of the gunas enables you to keep a healthy perspective on your problems, thereby strengthening your identification with the witnessing state. We are trained to be plastered onto the imagery of our world, and we need to begin getting unstuck before we can take the first real steps in freedom. Ancient wisdom is very helpful in this regard for those with an inclination for it.

24) the same in pain and pleasure, at rest in himself, to whom a clod of earth, a stone and gold are alike, firm in attitude alike to loved and unloved, who regards his being blamed or praised equally,

Part of us can even stand apart from pain and pleasure, and is able to observe them from a detached distance. This part can be developed until we are no longer undone by intense bodily experiences. Recent neurobiological studies have shown that the sensations of pain and pleasure are created in the brain, not in the affected area of the nerve net. Certain messages are transmitted from “the colonies” and headquarters assigns a meaning to them: either that hurts or that’s nice. Make it stop or give me more. But Krishna has made it clear that we should never depend on such happenstance for our mental balance. The balance should be established in advance, a rocky bastion for the waves of sensation to crash against but not dislodge. Pain and pleasure alert us to attend to their demands, but they should not dictate our mental

state if we can help it. The bliss of the Absolute radiating from our core easily trumps incoming pleasures from the periphery.

Not only are a clod of earth, a stone and gold to be considered alike, they symbolize the theme of this chapter, i.e. *tamas*, *rajas* and *sattva* respectively. A clod of earth pretty much just sits there, and in fact the word has given us the clod as a derogatory term for a dullard. Dnyaneshwar Maharaj even implies the word used is a euphemism for a pile of cow dung. What could be more *tamasic*? A stone has many uses, and we could even think of it as a rolling stone in symbolizing *rajas*. Gold is the essence of ornamentation, so it aptly represents *sattva*. It was not known to be particularly useful until the computer age, but it has always stood for beauty and been prized for its untarnishability. It seems to shine of its own luster. As a symbol for *sattva* it is even better that its simple elegance turned out to also have an important value in coating electrical contacts and in many other industrial, artistic and medical applications.

Inert seeming as the soil is, it is the womb from which much life emerges. If we accept the idea of dung, an excellent fertilizer, this is even more true. Thus, even *tamas* is essential, the seemingly inert dust from which we all spring. Just because we treat the *gunas* as outside agitators, they are not to be rejected as inimical. They are how nature functions in the broadest sense, structural elements of profound magnificence.

While stones are often pushed with great effort uphill only to roll again to the bottom, they can also be used to build temples and monuments, protect villages from attack, and even crack open shells for food. Like *rajas*, they can be either useless or useful, depending on our intentions.

Gold holds a fascination that can inspire us to exaltation, reflecting the intense light of the sun into our eyes, but it can also inspire covetousness. Because it is a material substance, we want to own it. We believe it can protect us from losing our security, or provide us with security we don't have. Yet we can't eat gold.

Because it is where we grow our food, the tamasic soil is some respects more valuable than sattvic gold.

So all of nature is highly valuable, and not to be denigrated. Still, our spiritual aspect is another matter entirely. Pun intended.

The eye of the physicist sees all substances of whatever value to be made up of swarms of atoms. The scientist thus conforms to the qualifications of a yogi in at least one category. A similar call to sameness was made in V, 18, where all human hierarchical stratification was to be annulled, and everyone treated equally. Here, nature's hierarchy is also to be viewed as superficial. Krishna is careful to note that all substances are alike, which is not to say identical, only that their value is similar. Since the yogi is unaffected by them, their ultimate impact is the same in all cases.

One dialectic not highlighted except in Nataraja Guru's translation is that of the loved and unloved, *priya* and *apriya*. *Priya* means dear or beloved. We can take this as referring to people or objects, and either way it's a key element, especially in modern life. Love is a central and important value on everyone's lips these days, and one which is little mentioned in older expositions of Indian spirituality. It's nice that Nataraja Guru worked it in here.

Nataraja Guru has taught, "All of life is a love affair." He has also said, "Love is a vague term used by unscientific people about a feeling they don't understand." These are not necessarily contradictory statements. Think about it.

The Gita asks us to be firm in attitude about love. This does not mean to dismiss it or to coldly live without it. It most certainly does not imply pushing it away or having any negative emotional posture about it at all. My own guru, Nitya, considered everything as very dear, and he taught us how to see the world that way too. The idea of this verse is that we should overcome trivial attractions of love to discover it in an abiding form, everywhere.

Love or *priyam* provides a powerful unconscious compulsion when it is projected onto an outside object. If we know that the source is within us, well and good. Otherwise, we undermine our happiness by trying to build it up in the purported outside world. It

is as if our innate happiness is reflected in a mirror and then we bedevil ourselves in trying to reach out and catch hold of its reflection.

Narayana Guru addresses *priyam* near the very end of his Hundred Verses of Self-Instruction, in verses 91-93. In his commentary on this section in *That Alone*, Guru Nitya explains why this issue is so important:

What appears to be the final culmination of an experience is how we are affected by it, in other words the degree of happiness it brings us. And when we closely examine how we relate to things—how we envision and interpret them and how we select a stimulus or a group of stimuli—we can see that the consideration of happiness is to some extent an unconscious process....

In the structuring of any situation in our minds, we select certain of the aspects out of the multitude which are present. The criterion of selection is our happiness. If something promises happiness, our whole being is automatically attracted towards it. Even before our conscious intelligence decides that something is going to make us happy, an unconscious factor in us senses the possibility of happiness and we are drawn to it.

We also relate with other things which endanger the possibility of attaining happiness. A threat is negatively important because it concerns the removal of our happiness. So situations contain both attraction and repulsion, love and strife. Strife is only the negative aspect of love, while love is that which brings happiness. We don't love for the sake of love, but for that which brings us happiness....

The fundamental nature of the Self is happiness through and through. In individual cases we often stray away from our true nature and forget we are happy beings. As a result we become unhappy. We are on foreign ground. We are not grounded in our own true nature.

Any kind of grief, suspicion, distrust or frustration is an indication you have moved away from your center. You have left your native ground. Then you see some sign of happiness somewhere. It reminds you of where you belong, so you immediately move towards it. This is a natural law. The Guru says it is always operating, unexpended. (647-49)

Later Guru Nitya reveals another key implication, touching on the chaos arising from misunderstanding this law of nature:

A child may show great love for a doll it has, but if you show it a new one the novelty of it attracts the child's mind and causes an automatic detachment from the object to which it was previously attached. The mind is removed from its previous interest to a new one. In the shifting of interest the child doesn't know that the value it was seeking in one object has been shifted to another, because the value always resides in the self and not in the object.

When the mind shifts its interest it has no awareness of devaluing something and promoting something else. But in effect we can say the person no longer cares for this or that. In the life of an open society like this one we can always see that a certain person is endeared very much by another. Pledges and promises are made, but when bitterness comes that person is no longer dear. All the promises are void. They find interest in some other person. What actually happens is that nobody is loved for their own sake. It is for the priyam, for the happiness of our own self, that we get into situations of endearment. (663)

Blame and praise, as well as honor and dishonor have already been adequately discussed in II, 33-36; VI, 7; and XII, 18 and 19.

25) the same in honor and disgrace, taking no sides as between friends or foes, abandoning all initiation of works—he is said to have transcended the modalities of nature.

Not only is this good advice in general, Krishna is also addressing Arjuna's original fears. Because they are important ideals for externally-motivated humans, honor and disgrace are woven through the entire Gita. Recall II, 34, where Krishna warns, "To one used to honor, dishonor is worse than death." Bearing him out, the sting of disgrace has driven many people to suicide. As has been extensively covered already, we should rely on our inner alignment with the Absolute for our mental stability, not the opinions—favorable or unfavorable, accurate or not—of other people. Each of us knows best who we are, as long as we are trying to know and not to deceive ourselves. Our dependence on externalities is spiritually fatal, if not physically so.

Arjuna's original impulse to refrain from fighting because he was unable to distinguish friends from foes in the battle, instead seeing them as one giant family, is upheld here as a supreme achievement. Not taking sides, especially in the heat of conflict, is a feat requiring dedicated effort and insight. "If you can keep your head while all about are losing theirs," and so on. Violence has a perverse attraction for us, especially when we're young and hormonally challenged, and it takes a lot of time to rise above it, to replace our wild impulses with studied calmness.

The last requirement for transcendence, that of abandoning all initiation of works, bears a close scrutiny. Most commentators, including those in my own lineage, take this at face value, as an exhortation to withdraw from all activities. But this would be contrary to the Gita's own philosophy, as should be abundantly clear by now. Inactivity is tamasic, not transcendental.

Dnyaneshwar Maharaj may come closest to the Gita's ideal when he says of the realized yogi, "He never starts an action through desire. Desire for fruits never remains in his heart, because the fire of wisdom burns it away." Desire is the element that

throws action off balance, but this does not mean that action per se is to be discarded. If we refrain from initiating actions, we can still participate in those taking place around us.

In the 1960s, probably impelled by soma ingestion, a popular phrase was Go with the Flow. Soma taught us that there was a river of energy in our lives that we resist at our peril. Trying to buck the flow caused misery and confusion, sometimes on an extreme scale. If we could allow ourselves to go along with it though, life would remain blissful. A similar idea is contained in the advice of this verse to stop initiating works. There is both a harmonious mental flow and a flow of activity. Perhaps we shouldn't start anything, and we don't want to lose ourselves in work, but we ought to lend a hand in everything that comes our way, within reason. Certainly the suppression of our natural urges to express our abilities is damaging to the spirit. What is meant is not to let our selfish or perverse urges impel us to action. Restraining them opens us up to more authentic expressions from the depths of our being.

Our ability to study mental processes with the almost magical tools of modern day neuroscience reveals a rationale for this truth. We can observe that our thoughts begin many seconds before we are consciously aware of them. A life of only conscious initiation of works is going to be sterile, then, cut off from this hidden source within us. Our chaotic and decimated planet is evidence of the havoc this sterility can wreak. If we, on the other hand, abstain from initiation and instead simply participate in what comes along, it allows the best of our inner impulses to be expressed. The outer world, as a reflection of our inner harmony, will once again be allowed to flourish. The real mystery is how our inner guidance system manipulates the outside world to foster our potentials without our even being aware of it.

This verse's advice must not be taken too literally, then, or all human enterprise would come to a screeching halt. If you are a businessperson, go ahead and start your business. Or if you have discovered a new religion, go ahead and reach out to others and feel free to build your temple. The distinction to be made is

between the natural impulse arising from your true nature, and an act of desperation made by a conscious mind cut off from its roots, floundering around for something to keep it busy or bring in income. We should listen to our heart, as our unconscious depth is often called. That is where effective action originates. So action is initiated within us, but we only perceive it when it is already underway. We of course must consciously decide whether the impulse is healthy and of value, because many impulses are not at all of high quality. But if we choose wisely, we will be in tune with an astoundingly powerful and enlightened part of ourself.

26) He who also serves Me with a yoga of devotion, never deviating from the proper path, transcending these modalities of nature, is considered fit for becoming the Absolute.

Krishna continues to praise Arjuna for getting it right. His disciple is steadfast and true, and is devoting sincere energy to learning from his guru.

Devotion means more than paying lip service. You have to believe in something and spend time and energy carrying it out. As a disciple, your job is to ponder and ask questions and draw out your guru. Devotion doesn't mean lying on the floor with hands clasped, or anything like that. A dynamic bipolarity is essential.

A lot of advice presses seekers to follow the true path, meaning the straight and narrow route prescribed by others. The problem is, in the realm of the spirit there is no clearly defined path anywhere, but imagining there is one is a hugely inhibiting factor in the lives of most seekers. Constraining themselves to certain rituals or repetitive practices, they begin to subliminally feel like a rat in a maze, with some vast white-coated scientist looming above, watching them and taking notes.

When treading a path through the jungle, if everyone stays right in the middle, pretty soon the undergrowth creeps in from both sides and chokes it off. But if people walk on either side, it keeps the undergrowth beaten down, and the path remains open. So

at least a moderate degree of wandering should be encouraged. This holds for abstract as well as concrete avenues.

The Gita is primarily a textbook for explorers heading into uncharted territory, so they must make their own paths as they go along. The book is attempting to create leaders, not followers. The tone of servility in verses like this is not intended to remove our initiative but to enhance it. Becoming the Absolute frees us to be the best we can be as unique individuals.

27) For I am the basis of the Absolute, and the unexpended nectar of immortality, and the eternal way of right conduct, and of lonely final happiness.

The fourteenth chapter ends on a high note of poetic ecstasy, as well it should. Krishna's sublime secrets of how to live well should have freed us from innumerable misconceptions that have previously inhibited our enjoyment of life. We are well along in our preparations to go forward in freedom.

We can notice a continuum in the four aspects Krishna highlights in this verse. A basis is something utterly real and solid; a nectar is fluid or liquid, but still very real. Right conduct is more subtle but still performed in reference to actual life. Finally, lonely final or ultimate happiness is a spiritual state independent of actual circumstances. Perceiving this graded series is a big help in discerning the meaning implied here, that Krishna represents all possible types of devotion or orientation to the Absolute, from the most concrete to the most abstract.

In keeping with the theme of the chapter, the firm basis is *tamas* at its best, the nectar of immortality is the essence of *sattva*, right conduct is the best form of *rajas*, and lonely final happiness is the ideal state beyond the *gunas*.

In preparation for the next chapter, Krishna makes a differentiation between himself and the Absolute that has baffled everyone since it was first expressed. What is this basis for something that needs no basis? The best assessment seems to be

that Krishna, being a manifestation, is a door to the transcendental Absolute. Recall that in Chapter XII he recommended affiliation with a manifested form of the Absolute as easier, if nothing else, for one seeking the highest. Chapter XV is going to present three Absolutes: one manifested and one unmanifested in tandem, plus a wholly unitive and transcendent ultimate Absolute. It gets a bit confusing, but the confusion can serve as a stimulus to deep contemplation that can draw us beyond simplistic concepts.

I wonder, though, Sanskrit construction being what it is, if this couldn't be interpreted as meaning "I am the absolute Basis," instead of "I am the basis of the Absolute." Krishna has equated himself with the Absolute pretty much all along, and such a reading resolves the problem. It means, then, that the Absolute penetrates even into the actualities of life, that we can find it in everything we do, no matter how mundane.

The unexpended nectar of immortality pops up regularly in Hindu mythology. On its face it is a divine potion that can be drunk, and it should come as no surprise that soma is packed with it. Originally it may have specifically referred to the psychedelic brew itself, though now it is usually taken in a metaphoric sense. Regardless, it here represents the emotional aspect of spirituality, the loving joy. Bliss is one way to know you are in accord with the Absolute. Many types of bliss come and go, such as sex, drugs and rock and roll, but their unitive source abides undiminished.

The Absolute is naturally the eternal way of right conduct or dharma. Right conduct cannot be adequately spelled out in books or codes, it must emerge from a living understanding of each situation as it arises. Our actual conduct is invariably flawed to some degree, but we can only know this by having a reference point of perfection to relate to. The Absolute serves as such a reference point, and without it our life lacks coherence. Not that we should beat ourselves up for falling short of the ideal: that would be very bad conduct. But by always looking toward an ideal, we will grow in that direction, and we will certainly be prevented from grievous errors. For example, the alleged

commandment by God that Thou Shall Not Kill is an absolute ideal, and one would expect that those who found themselves busily killing other human beings would notice the disconnect and cease immediately. If our mind supplied a list of plausible excuses so that killing seemed justified, we could set it straight by noting the absolute violation involved. Right conduct will always defy the pressure of the powerful mob and the ego's persuasive arguments to lure us away from the best option.

The last term, *ekantikasya*, or "lonely final happiness," is particularly rich with implications, some of which Nataraja Guru puts into his translation. Usually it's rendered merely as absolute bliss, but the word modifies happiness by describing it as one-pointed or unitive. Absolute truth is one without a second; likewise its accompanying bliss. But in our version there is also a sense of solitude or loneliness, which most translators ignore. Nataraja Guru was very fond of Plotinus' "flight of the alone to the Alone," and that is surely what he had in mind here.

Many people don't realize that 'alone' is a contraction of 'all one'. The loneliness of realization is blissful, not tinged with the fear and isolation we sometimes experience as separate social animals. It may well be that the painful yearning we feel for companionship is our heart's longing to return to its source in the Absolute. As the Calhoun experiments with rodents demonstrated, overcrowded conditions actually interfere with our ability to form meaningful relationships. We have to have untrammelled space in which to nurture delicate connections.

The negative impact of overcrowding can be interpreted on many levels. All the relatives and authority figures crowding our consciousness squeeze our own authentic voice into a corner. We have to push them back to make room for who we are. We overcrowd our psyche with junk ideas and pursuits as well, which also need to be hauled to the dump on a regular basis.

When all is said and done, our relation with the Absolute is strictly observed in solitude. No one else is present when we "meet our maker." There are no intermediaries possible, no lobbyists or

advocating agents, no mom's dress to hide behind. When we are attached to our friends and family this can sound frightening and strange. That's why successful religious businesses peddle heaven worlds full of everybody you ever loved. But the Gita faces up to reality, that we are unique and separate as individuals, invisible to each other and mysterious even to ourselves. If we all merge together in the Absolute, it is not as our separate ego personalities but as an integral part of the Absolute itself. When understood properly this is a beautiful and inspiring vision, but like scaling the highest peaks of the Himalayas it is shocking and threatening to the part of us that craves comfort and security. All that clinging to "apron strings" has to be discarded, or we will abandon the climb as soon as it begins to change from a fantasy into reality.