

CHAPTER XV: Purushottama Yoga

The Unitive Approach to the Paramount Person

Chapter XV is in some respects the most theistic part of the Gita, as the Primordial Man is hard to distinguish from God. It presents about as straightforward a conception as possible regarding the godhead, or what we in the Gurukula prefer to call the Absolute. In fact this section can be very helpful in clarifying at least some of the decidedly vague concepts surrounding the term God. We prefer to take this loaded term as referring to a principle, and in fact here a triplicate principle, and not as a distinctly separate being of some sort.

The seemingly inescapable duality of purusha and prakriti—spirit and nature, or mind and matter—is not acceptable to a unitive philosophy or science. In the present chapter the Gita resolves their apparent divergence as aspects of an all-embracing unity called the Paramount Person, which is none other than the transcendent Absolute. Modern psychology and neuroscience have likewise found it impossible to draw a definitive line between the mind and the body, and are tending toward a unitive view.

The threefold scheme of this chapter is spelled out in verses 16-19. The manifestation of the Absolute has both an unchanging and a changing aspect, known philosophically as being and becoming. But the supreme unmanifested Absolute stands beyond while containing this dichotomy, and is thus a third state in a sense, though it isn't exactly a state. Krishna is especially identified with this transcendent aspect, while acknowledging that the other two are not separate from it.

Distinguishing three aspects of one overarching unity that is simultaneously singular and triune will be familiar to other traditions, particularly the Christian. Probably no one has ever adequately explained it, but Chapter XV is a valiant attempt that does bring a lot of light to bear. And there is psychological value in it remaining a mystery no matter how much we wrestle with it.

The final verse describes the purport of this chapter as a most secret doctrine. As we have seen, this means it is difficult to grasp, not that it is intentionally disguised. The secret is hiding in plain sight, but that doesn't mean it's easy to discern. We have to bring our most acute intelligence to bear to grasp what the chapter is offering us, which involves a conundrum that has continued to perplex philosophers throughout history. Until you grasp it, it remains a secret. It is likely that even after you grasp it, it will remain a secret.

The fifteenth chapter is a tough nut to crack. Within the arch shape of the Gita as a whole, it corresponds to Chapter IV, the yoga of the intellect, on the ascending side. Here on the descending side, the fifteenth chapter grounds the intellect in a coherent scheme of the Absolute, despite the inevitable paradoxes involved. The meaningful correlation between chapters at the same "height" is worthy of pondering, as discussed in the introduction.

Religious confusion abounds when these three different aspects of the Absolute are unclear in the mind. God the Supreme and God the Creator are not the same: the former mysteriously unattached beyond, and the latter "involved" to some degree with all beings. More will be said about this toward the end of the chapter. For now, the advice is to aim wholeheartedly for the ultimate one of the three, the transcendent Absolute. Getting stuck in the partial gods or aspects of the Absolute leads to arguing about which is better or "right," an irresolvable waste of time and energy.

So what is the point of all this? At the very least it's a mind-expanding exercise. As Nataraja Guru concludes, "The cyclic existence of relative life is the activity initiated by this Primeval Man. When the *purushottaman* (Supreme Spirit) of this Chapter is meditated upon as such a One behind, and not as part and parcel of relative existence, such an adoration cannot be considered as outside the scope of an absolutist way pictured here. The mythological reference does not compromise the absolutist character of the vision recommended." (*Gita*, p. 600)

Chapter XV is certainly mysterious, a puzzle that expands dramatically with each close reading. Barring the presence of a Guru of rare insight, the next best approach is to convoke a dedicated study group. The interaction of concentrated minds continually fills in gaps, questions unwarranted assumptions, and fires questing arrows into the heart of the mystery.

The bones of the chapter are a proper scientific/philosophic structure for Arjuna's mystical experience of Chapter XI. Nataraja Guru tells us that the vision as it was taking place "was not meant to be one given to philosophical insight." (594) In other words, when you're having such an experience you have to just go with it and worry about explanations later. The "later" has now arrived. During his vision Arjuna's mind was blown wide open, but now he has settled down and can begin to integrate the experience into his daily life. The last three chapters have taught him a great deal about how to keep a level head while pressing forward to investigate the grandest mystery of all.

The chapter opens with the tree of life, a nearly universal symbol of interconnectedness, of the way the many are joined together in a single ensemble. Most notably, Judaism also has a tree of life, which is central to its worship. The Jewish version is affirmative, exemplifying *asti asti*, "and this, and this," in contrast to the Gita's *neti neti*, "not this, not this." A yogi should realize these are not mutually exclusive positions, but poles on a continuum that is valid at all points. The aim is release from bondage, not the eradication of consciousness.

1) Krishna said:

They speak of an unexpended holy fig tree, with roots above and branches below, whose leaves are sacred verses; he who knows it is a Veda knower.

Krishna, the Guru of the Gita, opens with a reference to the upside-down holy fig tree of the Vedas, with roots in heaven, branches spreading downwards, and leaves—standing for the

widespread interests or sense contacts of life—everywhere. This is also a perfect image for the nervous system of a human being, with its roots in the brain and the spinal cord for trunk, with the endlessly ramifying nerves branching downwards and outwards from it.

It is almost as if the ancient seers could visualize the neural network projecting down from the root mass of the brain. I recently attended a museum exhibit that included an extracted human nervous system preserved in plastinate, and it looked exactly like an upside down tree. As noted in the next verse, the tips of the nerve branches are where sensations are experienced. The interpretation of experience in ecstatic poetic terms is here symbolized by the leaves, which spring forth from the twigs as “sacred verses.”

The “they” who are referred to as having spoken of this holy fig tree include the post-Vedic rishis of the Upanishads, recorded in the Katha (6.1) and Maitri (6.4). Though terse enough, the Maitri describes the branches as consisting of the five elements, earth, water, fire, air and space. The Katha further describes the root going upward as the Pure, Brahma, the Immortal. All worlds are entangled in the branches and no one can go anywhere it is not. In other words, it is the entire universe. No matter how high or low we go in our life, we can never escape the universe we are a part of—at least for the time being. Wherever we go, we take the universe with us.

The fact that the sense impressions are compared to sacred verse-leaves of scripture should not be casually passed over. Everything that happens to us, all that we perceive and comprehend, is to be treated as a sacred event. Life loses its deliciousness when contact with the environment is taken for granted. A dull attitude produces a humdrum existence, and vice versa. Once we appreciate the miraculous nature of what’s going on here, our cup will ever be full. This is true even though this chapter will advocate uncompromising detachment from sense interests. As we have discussed earlier (for instance, see XIII, 19),

detachment is not the same as pushing away sense interests and striving to live in a vacuum. The miracle of life is only tangentially related to the senses: it is lodged in the core understanding of who we are.

In a more abstract sense, the roots above draw their sustenance from the value world of the intelligibles, in other words, ideas, while the downward-penetrating roots of the second verse emerge from the world of visible phenomena. They meet in the middle to produce the complete world tree of manifestation. Matter without intelligence is meaningless, as is intelligence divorced from an intimate relationship with a subject.

Nataraja Guru has written, “The tree in mystical language stands for all ramified values, conceptual as well as perceptual, that claim attention or interest in a given field of consciousness at any given time. The stream of consciousness or flux of becoming is like a tree growing and putting out fruits or flowers, peripherally and horizontally.” (*Unitive Philosophy*, p. 184.) He goes on to describe how a dialectic treatment attains the neutrality of the Absolute.

We should also recall that Krishna described himself as a holy fig tree in X, 26. This is going to create a challenging dilemma when we get to the third verse, where we are asked to slash the tree away from its roots.

2) Below and above spread its branches, nourished by the modalities of nature, sense values its buds, and downward also there are ramified roots which bind to action in the world of men.

The holy fig or banyan tree sends out long branches, which then take root and start developing a secondary trunk at many new spots. This is an apt symbol for our interests, which reach out until they find a satisfactory location and then settle in to develop in earnest. Getting adjusted to a new job or locality is even in English called putting down roots. This is healthy when it is in keeping with our nature and predilections, but all too often a harsh and

uncaring social and economic environment forces us to take root in unsuitable soil. Then we may become fixed in place like a prisoner, though if we're "well adjusted" we will eventually come to love our gilded cage and even be passionate partisans of it.

The roots of sensation and worldly consciousness are above the body in the brain, but a different kind of nerve root reaches out like a vine to cling to pleasurable experiences. We become "rooted" in what we like and desire, as well as in how we conceptualize our experiences. Our inner promptings cause us to repeat scenarios over and over, due to our fondness for familiarity, and also perhaps because we have lessons to learn in that specific area. Unless we learn and expand from our interactions we will remain confined in a fixed framework.

As Rousseau described, we are like a tree that enters the world perfect and straight, but as it grows it becomes warped and deformed by the various environmental factors it is subjected to. Lack of nutrients stunts its growth, branches are broken off, and prevailing winds cause it to lean away from them. Ordinary therapy or the support of a group with vested interests often merely props up the deformed plant as it has grown. To restore its true nature one has to go to the root, prune away the necrotic and deformed matter through conscious awareness, and correct the environmental factors of false beliefs and poisonous attitudes. The result will be new healthy growth that if permitted to flourish will be symmetrically beautiful and might eventually provide shade and sustenance to others.

The branches are said to be nourished by the three gunas, which is a rather abstract concept. The gunas are therefore likened to the sap, a life-giving substance that flows throughout the tree, beneath the protective layer of bark. The idea is that the movement or rotation of the gunas is the invisible circulation of our embodied life, supplying it with nourishment. Even though the yogi is asked to transcend the gunas, which is part and parcel of severing the whole tree as insisted upon in the next verse, they have a

respectable place in the scheme of things, as Chapter XIV amply demonstrated.

Many spiritual practices aim to uproot our personal “tree” and leave it at that, content to annihilate all semblance of conditioned existence. The Gita is very different: it advocates a similarly radical intensity to prune out the dead wood, but only to allow newer, healthier growth to spring up and replace it. It doesn’t point us to somewhere else where there are no trees at all; it wants us to live our lives filled with joy, to be one-of-a-kind trees in a spectacular forest. The pruning has to be done with a wholesale enthusiasm, but afterwards we don’t disappear, we are reborn to a sublimely invigorated existence.

One of the main messages of the Bhagavad Gita is that unquestioned assumptions, expectations and beliefs cause us pain and confusion when they govern our lives. Many of these are instigated so early in life as to be totally unnoticed by us as adults, which is at least part of why they remain unquestioned and even staunchly defended. The Vedantic methodology the Gita presents is a process of self-examination aimed at paring down our illusions to the bare minimum, which occasions the rebirth of the spirit within, the finding and freeing of our true nature, or whatever you prefer to call it. Applying critical analysis on a daily basis is both the high road to happiness and the greatest contribution each of us can make to the health and sanity of the human species, if not the whole planet. Reawakening the bountiful forces of life within is the best thing we can do as a practice, making it possible to both delight in the bliss it instigates and to radiate it to others.

Carl Jung expresses this in psychological terms in his essay *The Stages of Life*, counseling us to confront and deal with our problems rather than simply trying to avoid them. Evasion is not a suitable form of self-examination:

Every one of us gladly turns away from his problems; if possible, they must not be mentioned, or, better still, their existence is denied. We wish to make our lives simple,

certain, and smooth, and for that reason problems are taboo. We want to have certainties and no doubts—results and no experiments—without even seeing that certainties can arise only through doubt and results only through experiment. The artful denial of a problem will not produce conviction; on the contrary, a wider and higher consciousness is required to give us the certainty and clarity we need.

(C.G. Jung, “The Stages of Life” in Complete Works 8: *The Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche*, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 388-389.)

Jung’s method of resolving problems is very similar to the yoga of the Gita, promoting higher consciousness by “shattering [its narrow confines] in the tension of opposites.” (393)

Verses 2-5 and 15 of this chapter are the last in the entire Gita emphasized with the exalted meter of eleven syllables per line instead of eight, marking them as being of outstanding importance.

3 & 4) Nor is its form here comprehended thus (as stated), nor its end, nor its beginning, nor its foundation. Having sundered this holy fig tree, with strongly fixed roots, with the weapon of decisive nonattachment,

then alone that path is to be sought, treading which they do not return again, thinking: “I seek refuge in that Primordial Man from whom of old streamed forth active relativist manifestation.”

The tree is not solely a metaphor for the nervous system or the universe, it also has a mystical aspect that is impossible to precisely nail down. Our conscious mind attends to a tiny fraction of the total sensory input at any one time, and the links from the past and future to the present are subsumed in the Unknown like roots diving into the earth. Our limited bubble of awareness causes us to grasp at chimerical straws of salvation and security held out to us by others, and we adopt programs like jobs and religions to ostensibly protect ourselves from what we imagine might happen

to us. So many ties have come to bind us that we have to be somewhat aggressive to break free. Only by untethering ourselves can we “go with the flow” and follow the optimal course of our life, as continually laid out for everyone by the absolute measuring rod inherent in them.

A person who is truly in tune must be free to follow their inner promptings that have been determined to originate in the Absolute, in other words, in a level of truth that transcends the surface mind. A freedom-loving person owes allegiance to no level of imprisonment, be it family, tribe, nation or religion.

The sum total of our entanglements is the metaphoric tree of this chapter, and since unbinding the psyche is the primary thrust of the Gita’s teachings, it should come as no surprise that Krishna counsels severing such a Gordian knot with the sword of decisive non-attachment. “Decisive nonattachment” is a paradoxical state of mind, both directed and undirected simultaneously. Pulling it off is an ineluctable dialectic challenge. Nataraja Guru, who was very short in stature, compares that kind of expertise to leaping onto a horse’s back: too little effort and you fall back where you started, too much and you fly right over to the other side. You have to learn what just the right amount feels like. Once you’re mounted atop your psychological horse, it’s relatively simple to keep your balance with a little inner adjustment. This corresponds to treading the path of verse 4.

It may seem strange that we are asked to sever not only the roots buried in manifested entanglements, but also those reaching up into the empyrean. The Gita is intentionally vague about which roots to sever, because if we wrestle with specific roots we aren’t actually being detached, we’re becoming more attached. Seekers bitterly wrapped up in self-denial demonstrate how far off-kilter this can take us. Rest assured that the roots that connect us to our true nature cannot be severed by anything we do. When we practice detachment correctly, many roots are cut off as a kind of byproduct of our unattached mental state. Those that fall away are the ones we should be free of in any case, and those that remain are

the ones that should and must be present to maintain our connection with the essence of who we are.

The “strongly fixed roots” are our religious and social—and we could certainly add rational and scientific—traditions, all of which form the basis of our outlook on life. The roots sunk by our individual struggles are strong enough on their own, but they are immensely reinforced by the much deeper roots that have been agreed upon by the stalwarts of society, seemingly since the dawn of history. Historians will remind us that most of these roots are far shallower than we have been led to believe, and are often the expediency of the moment cloaked in archaic-sounding dogma. The actual founders of our cherished institutions would probably not recognize them as they appear today, but they have a stronger hold on us when they appear to be based on the wisdom of our forefathers handed down from time immemorial.

The Gita is clear that detaching ourselves from the whole root mass is a prerequisite for treading the path of true liberation. Adhering to and advocating for a favorite root while denigrating other ones doesn't cut it, but that is the standard approach. All too often we cut off a few attachments and then redirect the liberated energy into making our cherished roots even stronger, as in the case of moralistic types who imagine they have achieved some religious triumph by resisting sensory temptations, and then mount a crusade to prove to the whole world how holy they are.

This being a default setting of human nature, decisive nonattachment is much easier said than done. Most of us settle for lukewarm nonattachment or none. Very few match the diligence of those old rishis and hermits any more, who dedicated their whole lives to the task. Nevertheless, most of us are capable of at least performing some surgical pruning. There's plenty of excess baggage we can jettison with a modicum of effort, and all of it lightens the load. The Gita itself is very intense and uncompromising, but we can draw a lot of benefit from it in a more mellow fashion. It has something for everyone, regardless of their

level of dedication to absolutist principles. We just have to be careful to retain our modesty about what we've accomplished.

The ferocious-sounding advice to chop off all of our life's garbage comes near the end of the Gita for a very good reason. At the outset of a spiritual search, most people are drawn forward by their fantasies. They imagine carefree future or past lives, or they want to learn to levitate or teleport or flood the world with peace and love. They want to eradicate injustice and bring happiness to all, especially to themselves. However flawed their initial motivation, it can still serve to lure them into a deeper study of the subject, which brings an ever more harmonious relationship with the subtleties of their search. After a long period of maturation a person becomes capable of working where it will have a real impact: on themselves in the present. That work includes jettisoning all the old illusions, no matter how high-minded, as products of a naïve and gullible outlook.

Once bipolarity with the ineffable has been established, those same siren songs that first drew the neophyte on may be viewed as a well of darkness instead of a guiding light. Residing only in the imagination they are generally to be considered false, impediments to a transparency of vision. They are like opinions, mental fixations that reduce flexibility and responsiveness. Recall the Zen saying: "If you wish to see the truth, then hold no opinions for or against anything." To be fully open, we have to relinquish even our most beautiful fantasies. And by now, with the Gita's eloquent instruction incorporated into our own burgeoning wisdom, this should be easy and "a consummation devoutly to be wished." It does not have to be forced. There can be a gentle transition from the allure of spiritual fantasies to absorption in the bliss of the Absolute. The latter resembles ordinary excitement in that it is utterly engrossing, but it cannot be called excitement exactly. It is of a totally different order of magnitude. In any case, as the blissful absorption takes over, the enticement of imaginary possibilities is gradually and naturally replaced by divine love or true happiness or whatever term you prefer for the unitive state. Fantasies of

future payoffs are dissolved in the bliss of the present, and wanting to be someone else is supplanted by the joy of simply being yourself.

The transition almost always has its moments of suspense. Not surprisingly there can be a lot of resistance when someone habituated to mental fictions is advised to take the leap into reality. Concepts and fantasies are a kind of mental womb of the disciple, out of which the spiritual birth or rebirth must take place. But unlike a physical baby, this birth admits a degree of volition, and there is almost inevitably some measure of hanging back or regret at the moment of transition. We have to supply that amount of willpower by evincing a determined attitude, which is our weapon of “decisive nonattachment.” Krishna is urging us to press forward and attain our spiritual birthright, to not become a “pillar of salt” like Lot’s reluctant wife, who turned back just when escape was immanent. If we become trapped in hesitation, we may not approach the abyss again for a very long time. We will resemble the caged bird that is content to remain inside even after the door to freedom is flung open.

Some thoughts on willpower

Paradoxically, when you sever the apparent connection with the roots of your individuality, you don’t just become an isolated tree floating in nothingness. Since you are in truth the Absolute, the Absolute is what you appear to become. I say appear, because you always were it, and it only appeared for a while that you were something else. Your identity was fixed on the tree, and severing it is a daunting and frightening task. If you are resolute enough to do it, the tree evanesces, but what is truly you persists. Your core reality remains, no longer tugged in a million directions by a canopy of ideational leaves but centered in itself.

It is quite astonishing the degree to which we identify ourselves with our superficial preferences. Our inner being having been apparently rejected by the outside world, we take refuge in

various cultivated attitudes, which we employ to find acceptance with others “of like mind.” One crucial step in a spiritual evolution is to release all those trivial identifications, replacing them with our long-suppressed inner being.

The weapon of verse 3, with which the severing is done, is usually presented as a sword or axe. The image of a slashing sword invariably brings to mind intense willpower, and many commentators wax rhapsodic about the will at this point. But note that the sword actually stands for detachment applied with great diligence. Instead of a bloody, violent amputation, the idea is more like the careful undocking of a space shuttle from its base station: with the faintest puff from the retro rockets the craft pulls away, and then with some more small bursts it assumes its new course. Where in the first case there is carnage all over the place to clean up, the second instance is quickly completed with no remainder, so it is actually more effective.

This teaches us that the will, which is most often a tool of the ego, has to be enjoined to a higher purpose than serving our ingrained survival mentality. Gentleness succeeds where brute force, by engendering resistance, is ineffective. Discerning an enlightened way forward instead of merely following the ego’s dictates is a subtle problem that almost certainly requires outside assistance. In a sense the call has to come from the beyond, else it is not a call at all. It is virtually impossible for us to be neutral in exercising our will. Yet we must try.

Unfortunately in this matter, most helpers are themselves stuck in a conventional mentality. How often is self-denial turned around in those with runaway willpower to mean sadistically enforcing other people’s chastity while secretly indulging their own aggrandizement?

Typical “spiritual advice” demands that we do battle with not just our proclivities for sensual indulgences but all our interests, and a favorite fantasy venerates those who spend long years in a cave or desert retreat forcefully curtailing all possibility of self-expression. Call it the Zarathustra complex, where years of

seclusion are supposed to culminate in a triumphant return brimming with wisdom. It might work in rare cases, but this is in no way the Gita's attitude. It is often the height of narcissism: a romantic indulgence where the ego-driven will battles the instincts to the death, at least in the imagination. In the fantasy a simple formula is given and the ego dutifully carries it out, endlessly suppressing the doubts that arise. How tragic! The Gita's thrust is to only prune back the psyche's impediments and obstacles, allowing our true self-expression to flourish, not to squelch any and all outlets of expression. We are here to express our unique capabilities with expertise. There will be enough solitary confinement in the grave, so why should we start digging it early?

The Gita's excellent advice about this is first given in II, 59: "Objective interests revert without the relish for them on starving the embodied of them. Even the residual relish reverts on the One Beyond being sighted." This means sure, don't run wild and imagine you're getting anywhere: go ahead and order your life intelligently. You can subtract pleasure from the world if you want, but your urges still won't die. The key is to cultivate an absorbing interest that is more attractive than petty indulgences and temporary highs. As in the space shuttle metaphor, we have to be more excited about traveling to a new destination than simply being content to unfasten the bolts from the old. The sense of direction puts it all in perspective, even though the proper goal is not to land on some distant moon, but on our very selves, right where we are.

I can give a practical example of what this means. Long ago I was a typical American youngster who drank alcohol and smoked pot regularly. My guru, Nitya, had assured me that these were stumbling blocks; over time I cut back a fair amount on their use and thought that might be good enough. Yet not too infrequently I'd "have a little fun," and who knows how that affected me in ways I was ill equipped to notice. Nitya believed it made all the difference in the world, but, much as I respected him, I couldn't bring myself to abandon my indulgences entirely.

All my life I have played the piano and worked very hard on difficult pieces. As the complexity of what I was doing grew, I began to notice that even a small amount of my favorite intoxicants was affecting my ability to learn and perform what I most loved. As my musical ability improved, I could discern the subtle ways that being even slightly high was making my efforts “fuzzy” and less effective than they could have been. The joy of a total engagement with what I was doing outweighed the pleasure of being artificially stimulated and just sitting there. The drugs began to feel like an unnecessary weight. Gradually the choice became clear to me, and the beauty of the music and the complexity of what I was doing more than compensated for dispensing with the artificial stimulants. Only after my system cleaned itself out for a few months did I realize how much those chemicals had kept me stuck in place. In fact, once I stopped debilitating myself, not to mention tuning in more intelligently to the guru’s teachings, I was so intensely happy that “getting high” felt like a major bringdown.

I’m not a particularly good pianist, and that isn’t even the point. I love to play and be challenged, and music is one of many arenas where infinite progress is possible. The impossible goal of perfection in our life is a form of “One Beyond” we can eagerly aspire to. Each person has one or more areas of expertise—or at least of potent interest—that they can find tremendously fulfilling, once they get over the juvenile notion that rolling joints or mixing drinks and then running them through their system is an artistic end in itself. Any form of replaying old memory tapes grows stultifying pretty quickly.

Will has been touched on earlier in several places, most notably in VI, 24-27. Chapter XVI covers will in its negative sense. The essence of the Gita’s teaching is found in VI, 2: “one who has not given up his willful desires for particularized ends never indeed becomes a yogi. “Particularized ends” is to be taken in its broadest possible sense.

5) Those who are neither proud nor deluded, who have overcome their selfish attachments, who are ever constant to that value which pertains to the Self, whose passions are withdrawn, who are beyond the opposing dual factors known as pleasure-pain, and who are non-foolish, wend that way of life which knows no decay.

A wonderful epitome of the Upanishadic vision assures us that by attending to a few key ideas, the confused tangle of our life will gradually become straightened out, leading to continuous steady bliss in place of alternating and decaying episodes of happiness and unhappiness.

We have learned that the holy tree of this chapter stands for our imaginary interpretation of everything: not only of what we interact with on the plane of actuality, but also—especially in the context of this chapter—of how we interpret the spiritual path on which we are walking. We have a huge, swirling vision of enchanted castles, fair ladies and handsome princes, dragons, soaring love, and stimulating adventures that are all in our imagination, and thus imaginary. Even the great masters of history exist in the present only in our imagination. Wonderful and transporting though these visions are, they can't satisfactorily sustain us. We have to shed their distracting influences before we can make progress in apprehending the real, which is even more satisfying.

Imaginary spiritual fantasies have a serious downside: they block our vision of truth. The Isa Upanishad compares them to a golden disk lodged in front of the sun, nothing more than a likeness of reality. Like the mythical Hydra, their very breath poisons our search, and as soon as we chop off one imaginary fantasy, another rapidly grows to take its place. If we aren't on guard we will be caught by the next or the next, or most certainly the one after that. Their personally-tailored attractiveness is precisely what catches us. We must grasp the principle that they all are false, and stop feeding them our eager attentions. Yes, these imaginary beings can teach us some valuable principles and inspire

our forward progress, but we have to wean ourselves from any unhealthy dependency on them, because they fuel both our pride and our delusions.

The Bible story of the rich man being barred from the kingdom of heaven presents a similar idea. In Matthew 19:24 we read: “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God.” The meaning isn’t about wealth per se, but about prideful arrogance. No matter what our social standing may be, we are rich in self-importance. The eye of the needle has been interpreted by scholars to refer to the gate of the temple grounds, which in those days was a low arch. Rich men often rode on camels or donkeys, and so they literally were unable to enter the holy precinct unless they dismounted. They had to come down off their high horse, so to speak. Jesus’ disciples realized the difficulty of achieving this psychologically, and wondered if anyone at all could possibly be saved. In climbing down from our posturing, our very self-image is at stake. Do we dare to let go of it, trusting that whatever we truly are will not disappear? Our existential stature is surely on the chopping block, and only the very brave will resist defending it. Surrendering is much easier if you are strongly motivated by what you think will happen as a result, and this is precisely where imagination can be a boon rather than a stumbling block.

What Chapter XV tells us in no uncertain terms is that there is an element of ferociousness involved in ceasing to indulge our fantasies so we can quietly venture ahead, searching inwardly for whatever flies free of our hopes, fears, aspirations and imaginations. Taking an axe to the entire tree sprouting all those distracting leaves is not too farfetched a metaphor.

Narayana Guru also speaks of a tree, in the ninth of his Hundred Verses of Self-Instruction, covered with clinging vines that reach out to ensnare anyone unwary sitting nearby. If a contemplative is not alert enough, they will be caught and held fast. Being observant means steering clear of all the tendrils on every side. As with Krishna’s teaching, it doesn’t suffice to be

half-baked about it and trust to the fairness of the vines; you have to give them your undivided attention.

This is such a rich verse it bears close scrutiny of each phrase. Not being either proud or deluded has been covered extensively already. Pride was discussed at length in XIII, 7, delusion in II, 72 and V, 20.

The text of this verse is one of the few that I have tinkered with slightly. The second clause, those “who have overcome their selfish attachments” is translated by Nataraja Guru as those “who have overcome the evil of attachment,” but he doesn’t mention any evil in his comments. Radhakrishnan similarly renders it as those “who have conquered the evil of attachment.” He may have been the source of this particular reading, in fact, as his highly regarded translation came out in 1948. Stephen Mitchell says “with desires extinguished,” once again weighing in as a Buddhist. I prefer the idea of dealing with and overcoming selfish desires or attachments, since they are rarely if ever completely extinguished. Krishna is speaking of a process, not a fait accompli. The breakthrough happens when the attachments no longer manipulate our life because we are strong and aware enough to hold them in abeyance.

Not all attachment is evil. There is also good attachment. For instance, the attachment beings feel toward their offspring provides for the continuation of life. And attachment to eating is merely necessary, though it can be “evil” if it becomes an obsession. There are many positive and neutral forms of attachment, and separating the useful from the burdensome is part of the wisdom sacrifice we all should make. Here the Gita is making sure we have freed ourselves of the detrimental types of habitual behavior. But please feel free to keep your beneficial attachments, except when the ego sneakily labels its faults as beneficial. Then it’s time to visit a guru or psychotherapist and get some correction. But if you’re in tune with yourself and having non-harmful fun, what’s the worry?

According to the Monier-Williams dictionary, the meanings of the Sanskrit words in the phrase in question are:

jita – overcome, conquer

dosha – fault, vice, deficiency, want, inconvenience, etc. [no mention of evil, per se]

sanga – sticking, clinging to, relation to. Meanings contemporary with the Gita are: “worldly or selfish attachment or affection, desire, wish, cupidity.” In case you’re not familiar with it, cupidity refers to strong desires like greed or avarice.

So *jitasangadosha* means overcoming the fault of attachment, or even, Gita-like, conquering selfish desires for particular ends. This is a follow up from the prior insistence, “Having sundered this holy fig tree, with strongly fixed roots, with the weapon of decisive nonattachment, then alone that path is to be sought.” The fig tree with its tenacious roots is the mass of *vasanas*, conditionings, both developed and undeveloped. As long as they direct and undermine our life we cannot be completely free.

It should always be kept in mind that the Gita is teaching a spiritual, contemplative way of life. For meditation or contemplation, attachments are a block to the free flow of intuition. In order to properly meditate on the Absolute, all attachments, good and bad, should be temporarily set aside. For instance, during that time we don’t eat and we find someone to watch the baby for us. But starting back in Chapter III, Krishna makes note of the compulsory elements of action, so that necessary action is not abandoned, but instead the attachment to it is transmuted to unattached performance of the same actions. Since this is easier said than done, Arjuna still has shreds of attachment clinging to his contemplative outlook that are to be finally discarded by chopping them off.

Looking over the whole work for related concepts, we find “Seers, their evils weakened, cutting themselves away from conflicting pairs of interests, who are self-controlled, who are ever kindly disposed to all beings, attain to self-effacement in the Absolute.” (V, 25) Later we read “Thus you will be liberated from

the bonds of action, whether its results are good or evil. With self-affiliated to unitive self-denial, as one thus emancipated you will attain to Me.” (IX, 28) Chapter XIII mentions “without intensely involved attachment.” Krishna has a final word at the beginning of Chapter XVIII. The implications of truly evil attachments are detailed in the next chapter after this one.

“Remaining constant to that value pertaining to the Self,” sounds mysterious, but it isn’t really. Value is meaning, and the Self with a capital ‘S’ is another way of naming the Absolute. The idea is that life becomes meaningful when we perceive the Absolute as its ground. Once we become infused with a spiritual awareness, all aspects of life are related to it as a matter of course. There is nothing that falls outside of a global vision. One of the pleasures of being engaged in life is contemplatively penetrating into the heart of people and their antics to understand how all the chaos comes about. This optimizes our involvement at the same time as it makes life abundantly rich, and even occasionally hilarious.

A lot of intelligent people believe that by denying the existence of any meaning to life they are only being truthful. Then they wonder why they are plagued with a nagging sense of emptiness and despair. One important meaning they should remember is that our attitude has a major impact on our state of mind. That means the despair is to some extent produced by our resistance to seeing any inner value, a case of willful blindness.

We don’t have to presume that just because many things are false, everything is. Removing falsehood reveals underlying truth, in the same way that a sculptor removes the extraneous stone or metal to reveal the work of art lying latent within.

Next Krishna extols those “whose passions are withdrawn.” While it is a common misconception that spirituality depends on some form of worshipful gushing emotionalism or the opposite extreme of otherworldly aloofness, the Gita has a very different view. It aims at liberation from all of the ways we can “lose our head,” including the extremes of sentimental excess or

unemotional sterility. In a sense total withdrawal is just another excessive passion to withdraw from.

Freedom is not bequeathed from afar; it is measured by our ability to make our own way, illuminated by the innate light that permeates the entire universe, including our inner being. The brilliant philosopher Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677) came to the same conclusion about tempering emotional intensity as the ancient rishis. In his *Ethics* he insisted that, “The impotence of man to govern or restrain the emotions I call bondage, for a man who is under their control is not his own master.”

Unfortunately though, the idea of quelling our passions has been taken to extremes by monks and nuns over the centuries. We can say that the human race has a passion for puritanism, for thwarting its passions. Suppressing the vital forces produces a range of intense weirdness, though it occasionally does result in a breakthrough akin to genius. It’s a matter of taste if you want to risk it or not, but rest assured that spiritual attainment is not dependent on extreme asceticism, any more than extreme bohemianism. An intense compulsion to withdraw most likely stems from a thwarting of a person’s innate potentials during the development process.

Withdrawing from passions does not mean not having any. It’s a question of not being exclusively guided by them. Emotions reside in more primitive parts of our psyche than our rational impulses, but the idea isn’t to discard them entirely. They are actually highly compressed forms of intelligence, and need to be integrated into our conscious decision-making. It’s not one or the other, but both together: emotional energy and rational steering. Passions are essential to our well-being, providing our drive and much of our joy, but the intelligence to channel them effectively is equally important.

Nataraja Guru championed Narayana Guru’s reintroduction of bliss in everyday life, and in the process shocked many of his bluenosed contemporaries. In his book *Dialectics* he comments, “If every kind of enjoyable experience is to be tabooed as sin or

belonging to the Devil, an insipid world of horizontal values would be all that is left.” (62)

Withdrawing from passions should not make us foolish, either, where the withdrawal is treated as an end in itself rather than a personal lifestyle option. Cooling our passions permits us to be even more awake and alive to the delights of existence. The idea is to not be deluded by or prideful of our emotions, but to keep them in a harmonious condition in concert with our reason.

Stephen S. Hall, in his book *Wisdom, From Philosophy to Neuroscience* (Knopf, 2010), examines the current science on this very issue. He devotes a chapter to emotional regulation, which he considers a prime attribute of wisdom. His conclusion is that “Emotion regulation may be the most powerful lens in human psychology; polished by time and curved by intimations of mortality, it allows us to see what is really important in our lives.” (78)

Hall writes that a team of researchers at the University of Wisconsin headed by Richard Davidson has done studies on this issue using fMRI and EEG. One of their findings was that:

Adults (the average age was sixty-four) who regulated their emotions well showed a distinctly different pattern of brain activity from those who didn't. Indeed, the pattern seemed to reveal a conversation going on between different parts of the brain, which, when weighted in one direction, kept negative emotions like anxiety, fear, and disgust in check. These even-keeled people—Davidson specifically refers to them as “emotionally resilient”—apparently used their prefrontal cortex, the front part of the brain, which governs reasoning and executive control, to damp down activity in the amygdala, those twin almond-shaped regions deep in the brain that process emotional content. In people who are unable to regulate their emotions, amygdala activity is higher and daily secretion of the stress hormone cortisol betrays a pattern associated with poor health. “Those people who are

good at regulating negative emotion, inferred by their ability to voluntarily use cognitive strategies to reappraise a stimulus, lead to reductions in activation in the amygdala,” said Davidson. He added that such regulation probably results from “something that has been at least implicitly trained over the years.” In other words, these people have somehow *learned* to regulate their emotions. (74)

So what has been commonly understood for millennia is at long last supported by hard science. Hall continues:

Wisdom may in part be a function of cognitive attention. The ability to maintain emotional balance, and to ignore extraneous or emotionally disturbing information, appears to be strongly correlated with the focus that often accompanies contemplation or reflection. (74-5)

Another way of looking at this is that passions are the promptings from the unconscious designed to produce conscious initiative; brain imaging shows the process begins up to ten seconds in advance of conscious recognition, which is an age in neurological time. The ancients called these promptings *samskaras* or *vasanas*, depending on whether they originated in present life experience or in the genetic code, respectively. They are the stimulus for actions and thoughts both wise and unwise, depending on how they fit in with the world they are emerging into. The role of the frontal lobes, home of the *buddhi* or intellect, is to promote the beneficial ones and deprogram the harmful ones. Without this essential factor, life would resemble a ride on an untamed horse, while with it the ride is more like cruising on a horse brought to the bit, so to speak. And depending on our expertise in taming, the journey can be like riding on a high-stepping show horse performing artistic moves, or a broken-down trail horse plodding along behind the rear end of the one immediately in front of its nose, or anything in between.

By now no one should need further elucidation of what it means to be “beyond the opposing dual factors known as pleasure-pain.” The impact of dualistic attractions and repulsions is similar to the passions in tingeing our reasoning with possibly unwise decisions. As noted elsewhere, this isn’t about stoically remaining impassive to happiness or anguish, but finding a calm state that is far more delightful than either the ups or the downs in isolation.

The final requirement of a yogic lifestyle presented in this verse is that we be non-foolish. Anyone who has spent time in spiritual circles has undoubtedly associated with people who exhibit ridiculous interpretations of even the most profound darsanas (wisdom presentations) of the guru. They resemble geese, honking mindlessly in place of pondering quietly. In a general sense they are responding haplessly to inner promptings that are better resisted than expressed. We are not called upon to instruct them or resent them, but to take their example to heart and make sure we do not share their foibles. We must not be the swine who heedlessly trample pearls of wisdom under our feet as we root in the mud for bits of nourishment. Modern neophytes raised to disrespect everything, need to learn to honor their teachers and cultivate a measure of intelligence before they will be able to make progress. There is a broad middle ground that must be cultivated between the two “foolish” poles of either unquestioning admiration or automatic rejection.

A lot of charismatic gurus and preachers have developed an art of manipulating their followers’ emotions by appealing to their wishful thinking and repressed desires. Many of their teachings are offensive to intelligent people, obviously violating common sense. To the extent that they believe their own gibberish they are merely foolish. It is well known that many of them take advantage of their followers intentionally, and secretly despise those gullible enough to believe what they tell them. Sadly, plenty of trusting souls flock to such charlatans. The same is true in politics as well. “Our country right or wrong,” like “Believe and be saved,” is a clarion

call for the credulous to ignore their healthy doubts and join the madding crowd.

In some quarters the image of the “grinning idiot” has achieved a cachet as the gold standard of spirituality, one which provides a sort of tabula rasa on which to project whatever you wish. Such a game is indeed foolish, if not downright insane, and it plays right into the hands of the manipulative types.

One of the most noteworthy attributes of the Narayana Gurukula teachers is that they are highly intelligent. Narayana Guru sent his brilliant disciple Nataraja Guru to the West specifically so he could be brought up to date with the rapidly evolving human language of science, and the Gurukula has upheld the practice ever since of incorporating the cutting edge of modern knowledge into its outlook. If truth is what it is claimed to be it must include all valid frameworks as they are revealed. The so-called conservative, traditionalist attitude that bars the door to new ways of understanding the world is anathema to the spirit of both the Gita and the Gurukula.

The fool has an honorable history in theater and royal courts, to reflect the asininity of popular assumptions back to the audience, who can then laugh at themselves and shed their conceits. Such fools are not foolish at all, but wise teachers in humorous disguise.

There is much good advice about fools and their foibles in the I Ching, Hexagram 4: Youthful Folly, which is well worth a visit for students interested in pursuing this idea further.

6) The sun does not illumine That, nor the moon, nor the fire;
That is My supreme abode, from which, having reached, they
return not.

As we know, “That” is the Absolute. The Upanishads often speak of three lights: the original source, its pure reflection, and its artificial imitation. Thus, sun, moon and fire. The sun symbolizes Being or Creation, the moon its reflection, meaning its

embodiment in conscious awareness, and fire its verbal and intellectual interpretation. Even the third intimation of primal light is warming and beautiful in its way, but none of the three are That alone. That is beyond manifestation.

This That, which is the “great white light” or “supreme light” spoken of in many traditions, is not in any way physical. It is not transmitted by photons, nor is it perceived directly by anyone other than the mystic who is experiencing it, though it supposedly can be subtly felt by sensitive people in the vicinity. To the mind’s eye, however, it is seen as a blindingly bright, brilliant beingness. We can recall XI, 12: “If the splendor of a thousand suns were to rise together in the sky, that might resemble the splendor of that great Soul.” Narayana Guru suggests ten thousand suns. Obviously, nothing manifested could deal with that kind of intensity, which can hyper-inflate entire universes in the twinkling of an eye. It has to be dialed down to our level so we can safely play the game. We have to carry on almost as if it didn’t exist, as if we were somehow totally separate from it, which is of course impossible.

Sun, moon and fire are also symbols for *sat*, *chit* and *ananda*, ancient India’s Theory of Everything, which we in the Gurukula translate as true existence, the conscious awareness of it, and its significance or value. The sun’s light is the source of all existence in our neck of the galactic woods. The moon reflects the sun’s light just as consciousness reflects the reality of the Self, mirroring it with a pulsating range between bright and dim while in no way generating its own light. Scriptures that speak of humans being made in the image of the gods are referring to this same duality of *sat* and *chit*. Consciousness needs a focus for it to spring to attention; without it, it is like the dark side of an airless moon: all potential and little if any actual light. Fire is a local, hearthside example of the first two great lights, and our assessment of meaning is likewise specific and limited. In a way *ananda* or meaning/value is like a torch we carry with us as we make our way through the dark, illuminating just what immediately surrounds us.

There is a dialectic revealed by the three lights mentioned here. The sun blazes downward onto the earth, and the fire blazes upward into the sky, almost as if they are reaching for each other. In between, cool and peaceful, is the gentle moon, not reaching for anything. It stands for conscious awareness (*chit*) midway between the pure beingness (*sat*) of the sun and the localized significance (*ananda*) of the fire.

In this highly mystical chapter, this verse presents the transcendental aspect of the Absolute along with its evolutes. As we will see, verse 12 is a close echo of it. Through verse 15 there will be an examination of the immanent aspect as a whole and how it is related to the transcendental. The inherent unity of the transcendental and the immanent is the original impossible paradox of any created universe being perceived by a finite mind. Verses 10 and 11 maintain that the foolish and unwise can't resolve the paradox to come to know the underlying unity, but the wise can. Conversely, the ability to do so is what defines wisdom.

“Having reached my supreme abode, they return not.” I have already given an interpretation of such familiar assertions, where it looks like the discoverer of truth leaves the world permanently and no longer reincarnates. This is the polar opposite of the eternal life that is often posited in the same breath. Since it seems like a crying shame to quit the game just when you catch on to how it's played, I take this as meaning that mindless repetitiveness is eradicated, and life continues to go forward unimpeded by the chains of conditioning. Still, the wording here really does appear to imply a kind of metaphysical Mt. Olympus or Mt. Meru, towering over the mundane world. As we emerge from unity into multiplicity in the descending half of the Gita, such modestly compromised perspectives become necessary in the interests of practicality.

Another way to read this verse is that the That in it refers to Death or the Afterlife. Call it the Beyond. The personality we inhabit certainly does not return through the one-way door leading to that place, even if our essence persists in some form and may even be reborn. When read in tandem with the next few verses,

dealing explicitly with Life, this makes a lot of sense. Keep in mind that unlike some religions where Death inhabits a dark and gloomy netherworld, the Gita has it as the most brilliant of bright lights. Our metaphysical journey is to find our way “from darkness to light, from untruth to truth, and from death to immortality,” as the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad so succinctly expresses it.

7) A qualitative unit of Mine, which is eternal, having become life in the world of life, attracts to itself the senses—of which mind is the sixth—which abide in nature.

Next the Gita revises the traditional view of reincarnation with the idea that it is the Absolute itself that incarnates over and over. This counterbalances the more commonplace orientation of an evolving self which over the course of millions of lifetimes develops into an enlightened, Godlike being. Our true nature is already perfect. Each stage of development is perfect. All that is evolving is the Absolute’s ability to act and interact with itself in rich and interesting ways. In the words of the text, the Absolute enters the body and employs it to imbibe the essence of the values that are experienced by it. This attitude minimizes the ego aspect of reincarnation, while simultaneously allowing the beauty and wonder of life to expand exponentially. A nice trick of the contemplative’s art!

The term “qualitative unit” is typical of Nataraja Guru. Most render the word *amsah* as fragment or fraction; Aurobindo calls it the eternal portion, Easwaran and others, the eternal part. Unlike quantity, though, quality cannot be broken up into parts and portions any more than the Absolute can. Any part of the Absolute must be eternal in some sense, although the part-ness itself won’t be. Like the leaves of a tree, the parts come into existence, have their moment in the sun, and then die away, even as the tree remains. So, too, trees come and go while the Earth remains, and worlds come and go while the universe remains. We can surmise that ultimately even universes come and go while the Absolute

remains. The qualitative unit, what we might call the soul, is here proclaimed to be eternal in no uncertain terms. That qualitative core is the purusha or spirit, while the sensory trappings are of prakriti, the nature that is ever being born and dying.

I think Nataraja Guru used “qualitative unit” to distinguish the essence from the quantitative unit—the zygote—we ordinarily conceive of as the beginning of life. We begin as something even more subtle than the dot of the fertilized egg, an impulse of meaning, of intent, that progressively puts together a being comprised of elements of nature. The guru has added an important nuance to the verse with his highly original translation.

As noted earlier, mind is treated as a kind of sixth sense because it coordinates the input from the peripheral five. Fed with a dazzling array of neural vibrations, the mind assembles a coherent picture of the world, with aspects carefully graded according to their importance in respect to the well-being of the organism. This is a stupendous miracle that we usually take utterly for granted.

Contemporary science is moving toward realizing the transcendental nature of life, but for the past several hundred years it has relegated consciousness to a cheesy status as a non-transcendental epiphenomenon of matter. This was likely a useful postulate to delete a lot of excess baggage from humanity’s early history that was inhibiting our ability to expand our collective consciousness, but it has largely run its course, at least among those who are brave enough to sever the roots of formerly prescribed thinking. Scientists now admit that the multiverse is probably infinite, and it is only a matter of time before the implications sink in: infinity is not simply a matter of size, of endless humdrum existences, but of unlimited potential for the complexity and profundity of consciousness as well. Rather than being at the end of conscious development, we humans have barely scratched the surface.

That being said, it is only when we experience a disruption in the normal functioning of our brain-mind that we realize how

thoroughly dependent we are on it to interact with the universe in which we are placed. All those billions and billions of neurons are like feelers penetrating the substance in which we are steeped, and when any area malfunctions or dies the soul or “qualitative unit” loses that connection. The urge for contact may remain at the level of the ego, but the mechanism can’t cooperate. The lesson is that much of what we think of as “us” is really part of nature, prakriti, and it is subject to demise. While it is good to revel in our embodied life, it is also good to know who we are in our very essence, because if anything survives the death of the body it will only be this most subtle part.

Knowing that we identify with our mind as a matter of course, the Gita warns us here that that part of us is doomed to destruction, while only the core of the Absolute is eternal. To achieve eternal life (however long that might last) we must turn away from the transient aspects and reestablish our identity with what persists. This is one place to do serious work. We delude ourselves if we believe that a few simple words of faith in a deity will accomplish the transformation, or some saint can rewire us simply because we are willing to let them. As Easwaran rightly puts it: “There is no reference here to any external or supernatural power. My growth is entirely in my hands; your growth is entirely in yours. The continuous improvement we are able to make in the quality of our thinking is what decides our lives.” (III.186) We are called to discover who we really are, which is the definitive method to improve the quality of our thinking.

8) When the Lord takes a body, and when He leaves it, He takes these (mind and senses) and goes, even as the wind gathering scents from their retreats.

Verses 8 and 9 touch on the pole of immanence, in contradistinction to the transcendental aspect of verse 6. They employ a highly poetic image of the Creator as a kind of invisible force or wind scented with the perfume of sensual experiences.

The wind here symbolizes prana, the vital or life force that animates everything. The notion has been covered in a number of places, most notably IV, 29; V, 27; and VIII, 10. The easiest way to visualize it is in the difference between a corpse and a living body. Barring any damage they might have suffered, both possess all the material attributes necessary for life. While invisible and intangible, what sets them apart is at the same time undeniable and obvious. Our state of health is thought to depend on how much prana is invigorating the system, and there are exercises and activities that can increase it, including such things as physical exertion and living at high altitudes. It is closely associated with breathing, so air purity is also important.

The Gita does not include a treatise on pranayama, the science of increasing the prana in the body, in part because it is not something that should be learned from a book. It must be studied with a competent teacher. All we have here is a beautiful image of how prana links our physical aspect to the Absolute, which can help us to transfer our identity from its fixation on the senses to something more central and profound.

The scents that we gather as we go through life are the meanings, the loving contacts, the learning and growing. A life lacking these is barren, fragrance free in the sense here. A life not worth living. When we offer our friends the subtle perfume distilled out of our contemplative insight, in the shape of loving communion, they are free to offer us the same, and the interchange is mutually uplifting. Everyone benefits. Remember, the “Lord” in the Gita’s sense is all of us, not just some single remote deity having experiences unilaterally. There is a geometric expansion of meaning through the interaction of everything. For instance, the universe contains perfect reciprocity, in that every action has an equal and opposite reaction. That’s simply how it’s made.

The wording of this verse might lead us to imagine that a godlike Lord travels around with a little gizmo consisting of mind, nerves and senses, plugging it in whenever he enters a body and yanking it out and taking it along when he moves on to another. By

no means! The last verse was clear that the Lord—the sentient wind or energy—comes to preside in a body already equipped with this spectacular arrangement of aptitudes. When the Lord, which is us, is present, sensory input is registered, and when absent it is not. In other words, the mind and senses are just as dead as the rest of the body without the animating principle of conscious life, which is much greater than their sum total. That which knows and experiences is not an epiphenomenon of matter, but a spirit that can interact with nature via this circuitry, and presumably it can appreciate the more complex abilities afforded by wide awake beings with well developed nervous systems over the dull repetitions of rudimentary creatures.

We must remember not to anthropomorphize this Lord, particularly by claiming the title ourselves; it remains a “qualitative unit” of the Absolute: formless, nameless, incomprehensible. If we conceptualize it, we make it less than what it is, and so in a sense we would be killing it. Whenever we formalize our conception of the Lord, we simultaneously truncate what we are.

Although most Gita translators eagerly add “Lord” all over the place, the word for it in this verse, *Isvara*, has only appeared twice before, in IV, 6 and XIII, 28, In the first instance Krishna said, “Although I remain ever unborn as the never-diminishing Self, while I am the Lord of Creation too, grounded in my own nature I assume being through the negative principle of my own Self.” Other than its connotation as the Lord, as the Master who reigns, *Isvara* means (MW) “able to do, capable of.” Clearly the Absolute as a manifesting reality is what is meant by the Lord reference in Chapter IV. In Chapter XIII, the reference is likewise to the immanent aspect: “He who sees the Lord seated equally everywhere... attains the supreme goal.”

Isvara is the name for the supreme Absolute used by Patanjali in his core textbook on Yoga, but in the Bhagavad Gita it is accorded to the embodied aspect alone. This is one notable difference between the two generally compatible systems. The

Gita's Lord is not the transcendental Absolute, but refers to the manifested Absolute, that which interacts with nature. As we have asserted in our introduction, the idea of a ruling Lord is anathema to the Gita. In fact, the term Isvara as it appears in XVI, 14, is clearly the boast of a deranged egomaniac.

The only other remaining references to Isvara are in XV, 17 and XVIII, 61. The former speaks of the principle that pervades and sustains the three worlds of manifestation. In the latter, Krishna tells Arjuna "The Lord dwells in the heart-region of all beings, causing all beings to revolve through the principle of appearance, as if mounted on a machine." Undoubtedly a distinction is being made between an immanent Absolute and the transcendental Absolute Krishna is attempting to describe in this chapter.

Guru Nitya Chaitanya Yati reveals another implication of the verse's imagery in his commentary on the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad:

The individual soul's love for the Absolute is like a great attraction. When the fragrance of a flower comes from a distant place on the wind, bees and other insects and birds are all attracted to go in the direction from which the smell comes. Similarly, when a teacher of superior wisdom speaks, the fragrance of the meaning of the words comes like a cloud [to lead] us. It floats towards the teacher and the aspirant naturally follows the direction of the cloud. (96)

9) Presiding over the ear, the eye, touch, taste, smell, and also the mind, this One avails himself of the values relating to the senses.

The schism between spirit and nature is widened into an abyss in this verse, prior to revealing their underlying unity as the chapter unfolds. The eventual synthesis will be greatly enhanced by the process of analysis.

Probably the most striking thing here is that the ancient rishis recognized that what we see and otherwise perceive with our senses is not truth in itself, but it is converted in the mind into a meaningful gestalt that we then read as truth. A spiritual or scientific investigation is required for us to realize that we are living off of this kind of secondhand experience, which should prompt us to try to turn away from it toward firsthand experience. It demands an ability to doubt our own convictions, remembering that we see what we believe, and not so much the other way around.

This means if we remain complacent with the *appearance* of unity, we will actually stagnate. We will be captivated by our familiar but misleading mental constructs and insist on them as the truth. We have to avidly apply our intelligence to pare away whatever is added on to the input, which leaves an incisive clarity in place of the comforting outlook we have come to have faith in because it meets our expectations.

The next chapter will explore how far into madness we can be drawn if we rely solely on an egotistical modeling of the incoming sensory data. There is nothing trivial about this matter: our very sanity depends on it.

Intellectual investigation based solely on analysis separates and isolates everything, obscuring the wholeness that is our natural state. If that is as far as the digging goes, it won't penetrate beyond the level of the untrained or simplistic mind that is dependent on appearances. Our intelligence is also capable of reuniting all the individual dust motes into a living whole once again. Buddha, the Awakened One, is awakened to *buddhi*, intellect, in this sense. Buddha really means the one of awakened intellect. That type of intellect gathers everything back together.

Interestingly, the ceaseless pulsation of separation-synthesis-repeat is a growth process. Knowing only unity can be static and interminable. The separation of constituent parts through analysis introduces us to new possibilities, and these in turn enrich the meaning of the underlying unity. It's only when the unity is

forgotten or disregarded—when there is only analysis and no consequent synthesis—that things go haywire.

An example of what I mean by ‘static’ is the sacred art of Hindu and Buddhist iconography. While incredibly intense and moving, testifying to a number of awesome inspirations more than two thousand years ago, it has remained essentially frozen ever since. Until very recently, it was a sacrilege to innovate, so artisans contented themselves with reproducing exactly what had been done before. The result might be pretty, but is it art? In any case it isn’t particularly creative. Our minds nod off when confronted by the same thing over and over, and simply substitute a stereotyped mental image for an alert, artistic interpretation.

Our mentality follows a similar pattern whenever religious reverence inhibits creative experimentation, which is often legitimately energized by a separative or even rejectionist urge. The message here is that we must tolerate and even encourage ways of thinking and acting that are outside our comfort zone. Historically the human race has perpetuated endless misery by failing to accept what it doesn’t yet understand.

Synthesizing the results of analysis is especially critical in the field of psychotherapy. Analytic psychotherapy seeks to identify specific traumas, and is often content if the patient develops anger and resentment about them. All this accomplishes is to make the patient angry and resentful. But synthetic types of therapy, such as those taught by yoga and Vedanta, go well beyond anger and victimhood to comprehend the entire context, after which real forgiveness and healing is possible. When all is said and done, forgiveness isn’t granted for the benefit of the perpetrator of the trauma as much as for the victim. It is a way to get beyond anger and resentment to reestablish a healthy mental state free of painful attachments. The one who forgives from a transcendent perspective reclaims a state of genuine happiness.

Synthesis without analysis is equally as bankrupt as analysis without synthesis, offering only a pollyannaish resolution, a make-

believe happiness. Forgiveness has to be based on the actual situation, faced fearlessly.

Possibly the greatest tragedy of all in psychological terms is the abuse of children. If an adult is led to become angry over the traumas that were inflicted on them as a child, it is a good first step, but it freezes in anguish if that is as far as it goes. The adult should additionally be able to see how their tormentor was in their turn an abused child who had been traumatized by an adult, who was in their turn abused, and so on back into the mists of time. At what point do we relinquish sympathy for the child and replace it with hostility toward the adult they grew to be? Recognizing there is no such demarcation breeds sympathy for everyone involved. The awareness of a shared fate empowers the sufferer to take charge of their own life and work to break the cycle of anxiety and diminished expression that abuse engenders.

Obviously, forgiveness is only one element of a total recovery from the inevitable traumas we suffer in the process of becoming an adult human being. In the course of its eighteen chapters, the Bhagavad Gita offers a complete recovery program; one of the most comprehensive holistic healing courses recorded anywhere, addressing every aspect of the personality.

In a less egregious example to highlight the importance of analysis, anyone learning a skill, whether in business, performing arts, gardening or what have you, must first deconstruct that skill and work on it bit by bit, before “putting it all together” and presenting it as a seamless whole in which the parts are subsumed. In a play, for instance, the performance is dependent on the quality of its parts—unlike the Absolute—but the audience is moved primarily by the overall impression of unity, and only secondarily by the fragments that have been assembled to produce it. Nonetheless, performers are not expected to be able to stage a full-blown performance without a lot of work having gone into it in specific areas. Running a business requires similar attention to the myriad separate tasks involved. If the parts are not synthesized correctly, the result is mediocrity if not outright failure.

Probably the most famous example of analysis and synthesis is in the first book of Genesis in the Bible, where God first separates the light from the darkness, up from down, and so on, permitting life to begin to happen. The proliferation of life on earth in Genesis depends on the prying apart of an original unity into polar opposites. Deep in our genetic memory of this “original sin” we are always struggling to return to our unified source.

In the same vein, Bruno Bettelheim, in his fantastic study of fairy tales, *The Uses of Enchantment*, (Vintage Books, 1977) points out that in them characters are either good or evil; the nuanced reality of each person is intentionally left out:

The figures in fairy tales are not ambivalent—not good and bad at the same time, as we are in reality. But since polarization dominates the child’s mind, it also dominates fairy tales. A person is either good or bad, nothing in between. One brother is stupid, the other is clever. One sister is virtuous and industrious, the others are vile and lazy. One is beautiful, the others are ugly. One parent is all good, the other evil. The juxtaposition of opposite characters is not for the purpose of stressing right behavior, as would be true for cautionary tales.... Presenting the polarities of character permits the child to comprehend easily the difference between the two, which he could not do as readily were the figures drawn more true to life, with all the complexities that characterize real people. Ambiguities must wait until a relatively firm personality has been established on the basis of positive identifications. Then the child has a basis for understanding that there are great differences between people, and that therefore one has to make real choices about who one wants to be. This basic decision, on which all later personality development will build, is facilitated by the polarizations of the fairy tale. (9)

This is a perfect example of how we have to begin with an analytical separation of individual elements, which facilitates

rather than impedes our development into a deeper understanding that can ultimately unite the elements.

Bettelheim immediately adds, “Furthermore, a child’s choices are based, not so much on right versus wrong, as on who arouses his sympathy and who his antipathy.” This echoes the ancient rishis’ assertion that morality is a secondary virtue with little or no bearing on developing spirituality. Learning through intuitive identification is far more profound than the rote memorization of rules.

In this light the mystery of Jesus’ parable of the prodigal son is resolved. The good son who stays home and does exactly what he is supposed to hasn’t learned anything. The one who rejected the role prepared for him and made his own experiments before returning to the fold has enriched his life much, much more. The fact that he “squandered his inheritance,” from a Vedantic rather than a financial perspective, means he eschewed familial, tribal, or other deadening obligations to liberate his authentic self. No wonder his father was overjoyed to see him!

As long as we conceive of the Absolute (or God) as being other than us, it’s difficult to conceive of it “using” us to imbibe value essences. If it *is* us, though, how could there be a problem? The One spoken of in this verse is exactly that: us. It means that our core sense of self is the same as the Absolute. Our presumption that we are not the Absolute is a temporary, though hopefully educational, state crying out to be restored to its equilibrium of oneness.

10) Whether departing, staying, or experiencing, conditioned as they are by the modalities of nature, the foolish cannot see; the wisdom-eyed can see.

Being able to “see” spells the difference between wisdom and ignorance. So what does that mean, exactly? We tend to be convinced we are seeing perfectly well all the time, and only other people are the fools who don’t get it, but that’s how they feel about

us also. Therefore we have to have a measuring device for wisdom that is independent of our personal impressions. Here the Gita offers a unique and eminently practical guideline for how to judge our own perceptions and inclinations: if they are subject to the gunas, the modalities of nature, then they are less than optimal. To really see clearly we have to shake off their influence with a transcendental vision.

So how is it that the gunas blind us and turn us into fools? Foolish humans go by the appearances created by their sensory system within the theater of their mind's eye, but the wise can additionally intuit the animating principle behind the surface play. They know that what they are seeing is an imaginative display projected within their own brain. Instead of retaining the detached wisdom of our inner "transcendent Lord," who knows nature to be a conditioning factor only partially perceived by the mind, foolish people mistake their cerebral passion play for reality itself. Once this happens, they are likely to be trapped by their convictions, and what they see is then further warped by the funhouse mirrors of the gunas, sattva, rajas and tamas, cycling between differing degrees of obfuscation.

By the way, almost all of us are foolish in this way pretty much all the time. The Gita's advice is not given for anyone else; it is for our benefit alone. And the second half of the Gita, the practical half, is heavily weighted toward helping us to become detached from the gunas, which as moderns we can understand to mean the dictates of our mental imagery. Everyone lives in a universe of their own making, and yoga is the process by which we can pry ourselves free of it, to some degree at least.

Most of us are pretty sure we know what's going on, but in fact we are only perceiving a small sliver of the total picture. We mistake the part for the whole, and then make all kinds of ridiculous amplifications and extrapolations of the original error. Our egotistical sense of certitude impels us to do it, and we often get away with it, but that doesn't make it true, only functional. In the long run it leads us down a path of derangement.

The proper perspective—which transcends even the idea of perspective—is to perceive the unitive value within every situation. Our surety that we are right when we actually aren't blocks this type of vision, which has to be opened up with humility grounded in an unexaggerated acceptance of our shortcomings.

Nitya Chaitanya Yati epitomizes the process in his study of Patanjali's Yoga Shastra:

Nature is said to have two inverse impacts on our minds. One is the concealing of truth and the other is the precipitating of imaginary pictures that are easily taken for true. The veiling principle is called *avarana* and the projecting principle is called *vikshepa*. Eliminating the *vikshepa* from our mind will automatically pull off the veil. Every moment is thus a moment of challenge to decipher the mystery of life presented in the form of enigmas, paradoxes, and conundrums. That is why it is said that there is no holiday in spirituality and no one can act as a proxy. (59-60)

He goes on to add, "In India, this straight and honest approach to life has been watered down to the level of puerile snobbishness in the name of devotion (*bhakti*). Many spend hours chanting and singing and getting nowhere other than into hysteric frenzies and raising their blood pressure." The idea is to actively think, and not to just superstitiously hope and pray for wisdom to pop into your head.

The final two chapters of the Gita will detail specific aspects of our nature as they are impacted by the three gunas. For now, we need only recall the general scheme of transparency, translucency and opacity. Sattva is a reasonably clear understanding of the situation; rajas involves bending the situation to support your beliefs and desires; and tamas stands for the utter misalignment of reality with its perception. We fools are often blinded initially by a sattvic attraction, leading to active (rajasic) manipulation to maintain the attraction, and ending in loss of the original impulse

and grief over its absence. After a period of regret we start looking for the next attraction that will raise our spirits once again, and the cycle continues.

Fools are also divided in this verse into those who depart, those who stay, and those who are glued to their immediate experiences. Humanity consists of those who are striving for liberation, those who strive for domination within the world, and those who only react to the incessant flow of necessity.

The Sanskrit word for departing can mean either dying or going out, stepping out, mainly in the sense of transgressing the normal rules, deviating from propriety. There is a sense of eccentricity to it. Staying comes from a word associated with spiritual stability and solidity, very much concentric. Experiencing means enjoy, use, possess, consume, and so on. These three can be loosely connected with the gunas, in the order of sattvic (free to move about), tamasic (fixed) and rajasic (actively engaged in living). There also seems to be an implication that every mental state is colored by all three gunas, in various permutations. An apt meditation would be to reflect on how each state changes depending on the relative strength of the gunas at various times.

The bottom line here, though, is that true seeing requires wisdom as opposed to delusion. The schism between wisdom and foolishness will be expanded upon in the examination of demonic delusions in the next chapter. Nataraja Guru translates the word *vimudhah* as ‘foolish’ instead of the more common ‘deluded’, but it is not meant to be trivial. The dictionary adds stupid, confused, bewildered, senseless and unconscious. The root is the same as back in verse 5, where non-foolishness was extolled as a key attribute of the authentic spiritual aspirant.

How often have you felt confused by a complex and occluded situation and wished you knew all the ins and outs behind the appearance you are privy to? Wouldn't it be great to have a kind of divine or cosmic perspective that could replay all the parts as they happened, so we could really know what was going on? Yoga at least begins the process, where the idea is to make an

intuitive leap out of our partial perspective and into such a global awareness. This cannot be accomplished by mere wishful thinking or bombast. The next verse underscores the intense effort involved.

One subtle implication of verses 10-12 is that there is a kind of seeing that transcends individual limitations. Our ego is surrounded by darkness, but our intuitive intelligence is bathed in brilliant light that illuminates a much wider area. In consequence, almost anyone who has had an intimate relationship with a guru will have credible stories of their being able to read minds. Gurus are astounding at how they can put their finger on exactly the crux of a disciple's psychic block with very little factual data. In fact, this is the main reason to seek a proper guru. There are plenty of therapists available who ask much less of their patients than a guru does, basically playing a game of two presumably intelligent individuals shooting in the dark. That may have some value, but for the real dawning of wisdom, insight is needed. The guru can actually see more about you than you can about yourself. Once wisdom has been revealed to you in an inward dawning, you can begin to see with a similar clarity of insight.

11) The yogis, striving, also perceive this One established in the Self; though striving, those yogis of imperfected Self, lacking wisdom, do not see this One.

Hard work combined with wise support achieves the goal of mental clarity. The Gita is ever striving to have us unite our actions with our intelligence, our karma with our jnana. It is no mystical secret that intelligence can be either developed or stifled, depending on how it is treated.

The common conceit that effort is contrary to yoga is merely one of many delusions that prevent the seeker from attaining realization, or seeing the One as it's put here. Sure, much ordinary effort is actually counterproductive, as in Bishop Berkeley's famous assertion that philosophers kick up dust and then gripe about their clouded vision: "We have first raised a dust and then

complain we cannot see.” Ordinarily, action is less than intelligently carried out. In everyday life we can get away with mediocrity, but in spiritual striving we aren’t fooling anyone other than ourselves. We have to bring our best game to the field, and not just fall for the same delusions that have plagued humanity for millennia. We sit at the feet of a wise teacher or ponder the words of an insightful text in order to free ourselves from our delusions. When stripping off binding chains, the freedom we achieve is commensurate with the effort we bring to bear.

Everybody strives in their own way. When you are confronted with a dilemma or problem, the way you deal with it is your striving. You bring in everything you know to resolve the issue, so your whole life is a preparation for meeting what you are facing now. The key issue is whether your efforts are directed toward liberation or toward defending your bondage. We can easily delude ourselves that we are putting energy into honest self-examination when what we’re really doing is rationalizing our faults or subtly steering ourselves away from them. Many people prefer some repetitive ritual they can carry out mindlessly, for instance, so they can rest assured that they are making progress when they aren’t doing anything that would actually alter their state of mind. Or they withdraw from challenging situations thinking they are not “spiritual,” when in fact they are unique opportunities to realize the self and how it interfaces with its environment.

This means that one of the ways a yogi must strive most diligently is to discern and disarm the subterfuge by which our internal self-protective mechanisms undermine our conscious intentions. I have known many people who made a decent start on their spiritual work, but as soon as they encountered a serious challenge they stopped digging and “moved on” to something else. Psychologists know that in the ego’s view our so-called inner child—our tender and delicate spiritual core—is to be protected at all costs, and so we embroider many layers of defenses around it. As often as not these defenses lead us to avoid conflict, even

though it might well help us to grow. We wind up sabotaging our spiritual development, but project the fault out onto the situation or person who, as a remover of darkness, is shaking the comfortable foundations of our stasis. As Robert Frost put it, in his poem *Mending Wall*, “before I built a wall I’d ask to know / what I was walling in or walling out.” His point is that Nature doesn’t love psychological walls, but that we erect them in the misguided belief that they serve us, even when they don’t.

Some kind of guru or therapist or trusted friend can be critical in guiding us past our blind spots, if they are brave enough and sufficiently inspired to cope with our defenses. If we haven’t gone out of our way to invite such good fortune, we must make our way as best we can. The Gita will conclude with the proviso that working through a text like this, as a form of wisdom sacrifice, is exactly the kind of striving that pays off magnificently. But however it’s done, the key is to be awake and ponder, fighting off the chains of complacency and small-mindedness which beckon us with the allure of a false nirvana.

As always, the Gita is generous and tolerant. Where many scriptures carry on endlessly, harshly condemning those who don’t agree with their version of God as infidels and worse, the tone here is that everyone will know the One eventually, it’s just that not everyone is there yet. In other words, the world isn’t made up of good and evil souls who are destined to battle each other forever, only of more or less flawed or unripe people, all of whom have the Absolute as their core. Everyone is on a continuum to ripen, but various confrontations and diversions interfere with our healthy development. Imagine how much less strife and violence there would be in the world if this premise was more universally accepted!

12) That brilliance which reaches the sun and brightens the whole world, that which is in the moon and the fire too—that brilliance know to be of Me.

This verse echoes verse 6, where the three realms of manifestation, symbolized by the sun, moon and fire, are themselves illuminated by the pure colorless light of the Absolute. In the Gita's perspective, consciousness, which is the very essence of the Absolute, is primary, and the material world is a dependent outgrowth of it. The Absolute is not a conglomeration of material bodies added together, an epiphenomenon of matter. Matter is an epiphenomenon of consciousness. As we have often noted, this perspective reveals a coherence in the universe that is absent from any materialistic, atomized version. And where materialism leads to despair, the unified theory of a holistic science leads to the opposite, elation: an affirmation of "everything which is natural which is infinite which is yes" in the words of E. E. Cummings.

In verse 6, the transcendent Absolute was the subject; here it is its *brilliance*, in other words the quality that emanates from it. The original unadulterated light is divided into the polarity of light and darkness, brilliance and dullness, as it enters manifestation.

If we are able to remerge the duality into its underlying unity, the resulting brilliance is enchanting and fascinating. The brilliance of the Absolute is pure meaning, *ananda*, and the impact of meaning on us is bliss or happiness. Knowledge takes the form of light as awareness dawns. When we are excited about something, we are "lit up" about it.

The hidden message of this verse is that all our favorite things bring us bliss, and so we want to have more of them, but actual things invariably fade away or die. If we link our happiness to the things themselves, then, we will become unhappy when they are not present. But the true source of the bliss isn't in the things; it comes from the Absolute within us, which we project onto the things. The ground of all does not ever disappear. Thus a key to sustained happiness is to recognize the Absolute within our experiences, no matter what form they take. Simply put, the joy of things comes from us, not the things themselves. Once we identify the true source of happiness within, our dependence on externals will vanish.

Such an enlightened attitude prevents us from becoming small minded and exclusive as well, because each person is turned on or lit up by different things, in accordance with their dharma (their innate talents), and their svadharma (their creative passions). Once we realize that the bliss of interest resides within each of us, and is merely projected onto objects and situations we have been trained to appreciate, our appreciation will expand to include the whole universe. True yogis carry their own bliss with them wherever they go, and in consequence everything becomes blissful for them. And if everything has meaning, everything—good, bad or indifferent—becomes an educational experience contributing to our spiritual growth.

13) Permeating the earth, I sustain all elemental existences by My vitalizing heat principle, and become soma, identical with sap (or taste); I also nourish all herbs.

Like the Gita, modern science considers the elements to be energized by the equivalent of heat, which is a measure of their vibrational rate. This type of heat is more properly called thermal energy nowadays, but heat is still a convenient term for us lay people. The Sanskrit word for heat here is *ojas*, which can simply mean energy, or also vigor, power, and so on. Nataraja Guru underscores the idea of it as living energy by rendering *ojas* as the *vitalizing* heat principle.

Heat is mysteriously associated with life, particularly in warm-blooded creatures. Yet any form of motion is indicative of heat. Absolute zero is the hypothetical temperature where all motion stops, which, in the manner of all absolutes, can be ever more closely approximated but never quite attained through any effort. Within manifestation it is impossible to have perfect motionlessness and effort at the same time. It is easy to see how thermal energy, then, is an absolute principle in its own right.

There is only a semantic distinction between the Absolute or “God” as the source of all living energy, and the quantum vacuum

as the infinite or nearly infinite invisible source of all living energy. It depends on how you like to visualize your universe. And remember, such a principle does not strike people dead with bolts of lightning based on their preferred style of visualization, which is a symbol that has been wildly misinterpreted. It's only that due to its reciprocal nature, the universe responds commensurately to every distortion created by our limited capacity to understand. In large measure we "know not what we do," and so are shocked when the reciprocal effects of our actions come back to bite us like a bolt from the blue.

This is the last mention of soma, the sap or essence of plants that provides their medicinal or spiritual value. Because of its special treatment in the Gita as a key gateway to realization, it is only appropriate that it takes a final bow. The idea is that the life impulse, which registers as sentience in complex animals and instinctive urges in simpler creatures, is equivalent to the nourishing quality in plants. Or, it can be taken to mean that sap in plants is their version of a nervous system, as science is now beginning to investigate. Either way, plants have a great deal to teach us, and they frequently communicate it via their juices.

This section of verses recalls the enumeration of qualities in Chapter X. Krishna is providing a finalized description of the Absolute in the best possible terms, and begins by reminding Arjuna of the Absolute's relation to creation as its activating, yet transcendental, principle.

The vitalizing heat principle of this verse morphs into the fire of life in the next, offering us a kind of three-dimensional visual transformation for contemplation.

Verses 13-15 reprise the chakras in all their spiritual glory, yet another secret in plain sight. Here are the sustenance of earth and the medicinal potency of water; in the next verse are the digestive fire, and air, carrier of the vital energies or prana. Verse 15 refers to the fifth chakra, akasha or the potential space, as the seat of the guru principle in the core; the mental functions of the

sixth, and “what is to be known” as the door of liberation that is the seventh.

In this chapter the Absolute was first shown to be the source of light, and then the source of the seven chakras as the epitome of life itself. As we have seen, taking aspects of existence at face value makes us dull and semi-awake at best, while discerning the animating principle within ratchets us to a heightened awareness and appreciation of everything. Krishna never tires of reminding Arjuna that right in the midst of the play of life is a spectacular and infinitely intelligent stratum just waiting to be revealed by our attending to it.

14) Having become the fire of life and resorting to the body of living creatures, uniting with the ingoing and outgoing vital energies, I digest the four kinds of food.

The “fire of life” brightly burning in our bodies is the most perceptible aspect of the Absolute, being that which differentiates living organisms from inanimate objects. As the next chapter will emphasize, life itself should be worshipped as the Absolute. It should be treated as sacred and worthy of great care and love. Callous or unfeeling people identify life with inanimate matter, thus subtracting the meaningful part and leaving an insensate remainder they can comfortably abuse, free of the constraints of conscience.

The Absolute is also described here as being the essence of prana, the ingoing and outgoing vital energies. Pranayama is a long and detailed study that requires a guru’s guidance to safely undertake, but the essential idea is comprehensible enough to any yogi: equilibrium in our physical, mental and spiritual vitality comes about through the balancing of opposing tendencies. Often this is thought of in terms of breath, but it can just as well refer to things like diet and exercise or afferent and efferent sense impulses.

Afferent impulses are the sense inputs that move from the periphery to the core, from the sense organs back to the brain. Efferent impulses are less well understood, but are beginning to be studied by neuroscientists. These originate in the brain and are projected out onto the world, and as such are even more prone to being shaped by the desires and limitations of the perceiver. Both afferent and efferent impulses have their inevitable drawbacks, to keep psychologists and yogis baffled and amused. Efferent distortions are generally called hallucinations when they are noticed, but there is no comparable term for afferent distortions that I am aware of. Treating them as hallucinations is misleading at best. Regardless, when ingoing and outgoing sensory stimulations are quieted down, the mind is freed to dive deeply into the essence of the Absolute or the Supreme Being or the *Purushottama*, as it is called in this chapter. Unfortunately, this inspirational experience is also often confused with hallucinations, and subsequently interpreted as being meaningless. Sorting out these three aspects of being is a central challenge in spiritual life.

Writing about musical hallucinations in his 2007 book *Musicophilia*, Oliver Sacks mentions the “discovery” of the efferent (or retro) aspect of the senses by Jerzy Konorski:

The impression has long remained both in the popular mind and among physicians, too, that “hallucinations” mean psychosis—or gross organic disease of the brain. The reluctance to observe the common phenomenon of “hallucinations of the sane” before the 1970s was perhaps influenced by the fact that there was no theory of how such hallucinations could occur until 1967, when Jerzy Konorski, a Polish neurophysiologist, devoted several pages of his *Integrative Activity of the Brain* to the “physiological basis of hallucinations.” Konorski inverted the question “Why do hallucinations occur?” to “Why do hallucinations not occur all the time? What constrains them?” He conceived a dynamic system which, he wrote, “can generate perceptions, images,

and hallucinations... the mechanism producing hallucinations is built into our brains, but it can be thrown into operation only in some exceptional conditions.” Konorski brought together evidence—weak in the 1960s, but overwhelming now—that there are not only afferent connections going from the sense organs to the brain, but “retro” connections going in the other direction. Such retro connections may be sparse compared to the afferent connections, and may not be activated under normal circumstances. But they provide, Konorski felt, the essential anatomical and physiological means by which hallucinations can be generated.

Konorski’s idea was that normal sensory input overrides the efferent, “hallucinatory” impulses, but if we suppress the input enough the hallucinations will become perceptible, and they will strike us as being the same as normal perceptions. Many psychologists surmise that these so-called hallucinations are in fact the symbolic language of the unconscious mind as it attempts to interpret and describe the world of conscious experience in its own terms. Explorers in sensory-deprived environments, in particular, can attest to the truth of this. Sacks continues:

Konorski’s theory provided a simple and beautiful explanation for what soon came to be called “release” hallucinations associated with “de-afferentiation.” Such an explanation now seems obvious, almost tautological—but it required originality and audacity to propose it in the 1960s. There is now good evidence from brain-imaging studies to support Konorski’s idea. (77-8)

How much more originality and audacity to propose the idea in 500 or 1000 BCE!

We can also see that merely restraining sense impressions opens the door to projective hallucinations, so it is essential to inhibit the projective functioning of the mind at the same time, by

constraining it to reasonable, comprehensible interpretations. Much of the mental imbalance suffered by overzealous meditators stems from the unilateral release of projections untempered by the normalizing effect of sense impressions. Because of their perfectly convincing nature, the person having them is likely to insist on their reality, even if no one else shares their perceptions. Some form of dialectics or yoga is therefore crucial to continued sanity on any spiritual path. Restraint must come about through the equalization of counterparts rather than by repression, particularly selective repression. Typically, repression tends to be one-sided, stifling either the afferent or the efferent aspect of the sensorium, and thus unintentionally exaggerating the other side.

Nitya Chaitanya Yati sketches the broad outlines of a healthy spirituality that avoids repression in *Love and Blessings*, where he describes working with a young American student:

Another subject for our efforts was management of the sex drive. While Plato speaks of the two kinds of Eros, the divine and the earthly, the young people of the West have little or no training in sublimating their sex urge for spiritual purposes. Few seem to realize that the divine Eros takes you to higher realms of sublime values such as the artistic, poetic, or mystical, while the earthly Eros leads to sex only. I gave several talks on the subject, pointing out how the urges and emotions come in a regular pattern, like a figure eight of intensity and relaxation, actualization and fantasy. The first step is merely to observe how the pattern operates and runs its course. Only when it's consciously appreciated can we begin to concentrate on it and eventually to regulate it. But regulation must never be repression, which usually causes significant mental aberrations. Repression thwarts and stunts what is natural to the body. Only when we understand our natural rhythms can we sublimate them, making the eroticism one of the spirit and not one of vulgarity.

Intimate personal relationships should also follow the figure eight pattern, with coming together and going apart, speaking and remaining silent. If the partners simply unleash all their energies upon each other at once they burn themselves out, but the more subtle approach of alternately coming close and backing off continually rejuvenates. When they come together sexually it should be with such understanding that they feel the divine is personally presiding over their union.

Spiritually renounced men have historically scorned women as temptresses. But temptation doesn't come from another person, it emerges from a person's own inner desires. Its source is ananda, which can cause infatuation. Ananda leads us on and on, into more and more Becoming, but at the very end it arrives at nirvana. Then it is no longer Becoming but Being. So the negative attitude towards women, which has caused so much misery throughout history, comes from a crucial misunderstanding and is completely irrelevant if not an impediment to spiritual progress.

Virginity is to be taken in a wider and deeper sense than just the physical. It means keeping up the freshness of the soul from moment to moment in everything one sees, thinks or feels. It is the newness with which you open yourself up, like the blooming of a flower bud. You don't allow yourself to be spoiled by the experiences of the past; whatever has happened to mar the beauty of the soul is pushed away as irrelevant. You are always on an onward march, and each day you realize yourself anew. You don't look behind in remorse. In the Bible, Lot's wife is said to have become a pillar of salt because she looked back. In spiritual life there is no turning back; all the bridges behind you are burned and you go forward forever.

Without this attitude the spiritual ego can gain a stranglehold on seekers, twisting and warping their devotion into an exercise in vanity. They become cognizant and prideful of all the good they do, while conveniently

overlooking the bad. Virginity must be restored to their souls, not by becoming unaware again, but by being fully conscious while at the same time no longer singling out the 'I' as anything special to take pride in. (291-2)

The four kinds of food may refer to the four elements—earth, water, fire and air—which comprise the material aspect of the universe. The digestion mentioned is similar to the gathering of scents of verse 8. In digestion, the body's organs extract the life-supporting essence from the gross material passing through it. Here the process is compared to the Absolute, which extracts meaning from gross experience, in a manner of speaking. Gross experience requires infinite time and space to contain it, but its essence does not. The retention of memory is more like a non-dimensional holographic image than a filing cabinet stuffed with folders.

15) And I am seated in the heart of all; from Me are memory and positive wisdom and its negative process; I am that which is to be known by all the Vedas; I am indeed the Vedanta maker and the Veda knower too.

Verse 15 is the last of the entire Gita in the ecstatic mode, underlining its exceptional importance. This is the third of four occasions where the Absolute is said to be located in the core or heart of all things; whether in every entity taken separately or all together is not specified. It is once again asserted that knowing the Absolute is the goal of every spiritual endeavor. Connecting seemingly disparate aspects of reality via their core unity infuses them with meaning and value, and is therefore the essential quality of an examined life worth living.

Hard heartedness blocks the inner connection with the Absolute. An open heart is a "soft" heart, not guarded and defended by a timorous ego. In a hostile world you must be brave to be tender-hearted. Conversely, those who are tough and mean tend to be compensating for a fearful, terrified smallness of spirit.

One of the main ways humans go off course is to imagine that they must adopt the vicious ways of their enemies in order to protect their own inherent goodness. Only when you realize that your very essence is the Absolute itself, can you become brave enough to cease playing the game of offense and defense that so hardens the heart.

A number of texts on spirituality posit memory as an impediment to realization. But there are many kinds of memory, most of which are essential to a healthy state of mind. In addition to the well-known categories of short-term and long-term memories, there are emotional, musical, somatic, procedural, episodic, and several other kinds of memory that have been identified so far. All of them are complex and are centered in different areas of the brain. Additionally, there may well be a deep-seated “spiritual memory,” a gut feeling of our essential divinity beneath all the mundane accumulations of other recollections. It is located in the heart, which is to say the core of consciousness, wherever that may be.

In a sense, memories are the scents that the One has gathered in its time in the present body, and their shape determines a great deal about who their possessor is, for the time being. Ultimately we are much more than who we think we are. But on this plane at least, our coherency depends on a continuum of memory. Our memory, then, makes us who we appear to be, to ourselves and others. Clearly a blanket condemnation of memory is off the mark.

Memories do impede our freedom and flexibility when they color our awareness of present circumstances, and so we must make an effort to hold them in abeyance to some extent and at certain times. They are often a distraction during meditation, for example. But they are very much linked with how we perceive the world, and without them we would see like a baby, all vague and unfocused waves of sensation without any definite meaning. While perfectly appropriate for an infant, such a state quickly becomes boringly monochrome, if not horrifyingly restrictive, for a sentient adult. Imagine if we realized we were confined in a womb during

our first nine months! Claustrophobia to the nth degree. So being memory free for a while is very valuable, but it isn't the be-all and end-all of existence. In meditation, suppressing memories allows us to mentally expand our field, but then we should integrate the new territory with the old ground we already occupy, which includes our memories.

Spiritual seekers do a lot of work to dislodge traumatic memories, which are the real target of memory work. Generally, bringing the light of adult scrutiny to bear on them transforms them from menacing shadows into vehicles of learning and growth. For the rest, hold them lightly and with honor, but prepare to watch them melt away at the time of death.

Nataraja Guru qualifies wisdom here as positive, to heighten the contrast with the next term. The negative process mentioned as a counterpart to positive wisdom is *neti neti* (not this not this), the technique of negating or pushing away all falsehood. The word used for it, *apohanam*, is often taken to mean the erasure of memory and wisdom, but Nataraja Guru is on to something by making it an additional yogic talent. In addition to "removing," the dictionary has "reasoning, arguing, denying." Where positive wisdom builds on itself, the negative process removes misunderstanding to reveal underlying truth. In a world such as ours where we are up to our noses in fallacious notions, the subtractive process is at least as important as the additive one. The point of making it a process is that many people would like to believe that simply ignoring problems makes them go away, but that is seldom a successful strategy. Untruth must be actively exposed, to our inner eye at least, and then cut out using the same sword of wisdom with which we began the chapter.

The last phrase is an example of advanced dialectics. Vedanta considers knowledge to be of supreme importance in Self-realization, while the Vedas primarily resort to ritual actions to achieve their goals. Their qualifying adjectives are thus switched from what would normally be expected. By the crossover the Absolute is described as being the "knowledge maker" and the

“action knower.” Our activities in life should direct us to become wise, and this wisdom should embrace and incorporate action in its purview. Both must be taken together to reveal the state of yoga.

16) There are two Persons in the world, the Changing and the Changeless; the Changing comprises all beings, and the mysteriously fixed is called the Changeless.

Krishna, representing the Absolute, claims to be three cosmic persons: two manifested ones—a changing and an unchanging person—and, in the next verse, one that transcends both. The two manifested persons boil down to the universal dichotomy of spirit and nature. Most of us have no problem with conceiving of Mother Nature as a paramount or transcendental person symbolizing the laws of the manifested universe, and are able to comprehend her as a unified field that is ever changing. This leads to an interesting analogy: just as our bodies are made up of billions of independently functioning cells which likely have little or no awareness of their role as part of a human being, so each of us is a single cell in the person of Mother Nature.

Our “cellular role” in the grand scheme of things must not be treated as something that can be dictated by any self-appointed agent of the Absolute. Our proper place has to be discovered by a diligent search that each of us is called to make for ourselves. If we simply accept the harness held out to us by our social entanglements, we face a lifetime of quiet desperation, as Thoreau so aptly expressed it. But we can investigate who we are with confidence, because Nature doesn’t tolerate anything irrelevant or meaningless. We each have our special purpose, known as our dharma, and it is up to us to find out what it is. Until we do we will be propelled forward by a kind of anxiety, which is one of nature’s motivators. Medicating our worries away merely allows us to abandon the search and accept the harness.

One of the upbeat corollaries of this cellular image is that each of us is doing the maximum possible for the whole by

independently functioning happily and effectively. This doesn't mean we have to withdraw from society and become hermits: for most of us our most effective place is right in the midst of everything. Once again we must remember that things that matter don't just take place elsewhere, they are happening right here in us, all the time. Believing we don't matter is one of the ways we have been conned out of our birthright as a full participant in life.

The changeless is most familiar as our core sense of self, which stays more or less intact throughout our whole existence. This too is a spark or cell of the whole all-embracing Spirit, the intangible counterpart of Nature. Because of the veiling magic of tamas we sparks of the Absolute are able to experience an imaginary separateness for a period of time, which permits the drama of evolutionary existence to occur. Modern neuroscience has discerned the likelihood that even this sense of self is a construct of brain functioning, rather than the ultimate truth it appears to be. We can infer from this verse that the ancient rishis intuited this secret, and knew that the ultimate Absolute must transcend individual self-identity.

17) That Paramount Person, however, is another, called the Supreme Self, the eternal Lord, who, pervading the three worlds, sustains them.

The Supreme Self, beyond both the manifested and unmanifested Absolutes of nature and spirit, is the truly Paramount Person, and the fact is that no matter how we conceive of it, we cannot fully describe it. Any description is bound to be inadequate, though seekers of truth are compelled to keep trying, because it does make a difference, and the conceptualization can always be improved upon. The Gita itself has described the Absolute in various and sometimes in contradictory ways throughout. Guru Nitya Chaitanya Yati has clarified the three aspects quite succinctly in his Brihadaranyaka Upanishad commentary:

To begin with, the undeclared hypothesis is the Absolute. Then, for the convenience of inquiry, the Absolute is conceived of as having a negative undifferentiated aspect and a positive undifferentiated aspect. The undifferentiated nescience is postulated to be beginningless, infinite in its range, and to exist as the unknown and unconscious. The positive undifferentiated aspect of the Absolute is the foundation of science. It is also vast. It has a beginning by which time and space are recognized as existential actualities belonging to the intuitively apprehended reality of truth. The Absolute and its two undifferentiated aspects have no form, name, or action. When nescience and science begin to manifest, they present names, forms, and activities. (I.55)

Ideas, like words, are only symbols. We have to regularly convert our best ideas into living realities, and only then is the secret—the true meaning—of them brought to light. As an example, composers convert the cosmic music they hear in their heads to symbols on paper. We can admire the pages of sheet music, and see how the lines and dots make a pretty picture, and even collect stacks of them. But not until a musician performs what is written does its true meaning stand revealed. This is the task of all seekers of truth: to reanimate our most creative ideas by actualizing them in ourselves.

Attaining a glimpse of the transcendent Absolute, however, is qualitatively different from any performance or accumulation of knowledge. It is revealed by the cancellation of opposites, in the practice known as yoga. When the manifested and unmanifested Absolutes are brought into harmonious equation, their synthesis reveals the One Beyond.

The Gita's Absolute-Spirit-Nature is a Trinity that is akin to Christianity's Father-Son-Holy Spirit. Science has its own Holy Trinity: Nothing-Energy-Matter. Of course they're all related, since the universe doesn't change its structure simply because

people have different mental images of it. The ideas and nomenclature may differ, but not what they attempt to represent.

18) Because I transcend the Changing and am even superior to the Changeless, therefore I am celebrated in the world and in the Veda as the Paramount Person.

Part of the secret of this chapter is the dialectical structure of the universe it reveals. Spirit and nature, the unchanging and the changing, are the thesis and antithesis of this most central of all dialectical relationships. Their synthesis is the Paramount Person, the truly supreme non-condition. This shows us a subtle methodology to become one with the Supreme: by conjoining nature and spirit, or consciousness and its ground, a kind of quantum leap is made to a state transcending both. The resulting mysterious and blissful state is not describable in terms of either nature or spirit.

In fact, the attempt to describe the indescribable is where both science and religion perennially fall short. Religion struggles to describe the transcendental Absolute in terms of spirit, while science does the same in terms of nature. Both can be expressed more or less well, but neither is able to reach beyond its own constraints. The conflicts arise when the proponents of each side falsely assert that they are privy to the whole picture. This is a perennial failing of both science and religion. Only if they can dare to admit uncertainty will a complete understanding ever be possible.

A helpful way to treat this primary duality that should be acceptable to both camps is as the conscious and the unconscious. The unconscious is an unchanging unknown mass, which transforms into changeable and perceivable forms as bits of it are annexed by consciousness. Somehow the Absolute is revealed at the interface between the two, or better yet, by the mutual enhancement that takes place when the poles of the situation are brought together. The daydream state midway between sleeping

and waking is a good example of the location of this heightened awareness, and several traditions direct the seeker into this twilight zone. Simple meditation does the same. As conscious awareness is brought to bear on the unconscious, therapeutic and educational elements from the unconscious can have an impact on the conscious, while the sublimated conscious intention simultaneously probes into the dark secrets of the unconscious, opening up new territory.

The dialectic of conscious and unconscious elements is very challenging for us to synthesize. Usually one aspect or the other dominates. Only when they are truly in balance does the quantum leap we like to describe as merger with the Absolute take place. When there is favoritism one way or the other, it fosters the exaggerated and often bizarre twists that so often pass for spirituality among the uncritical. Typically in our day consciousness dominates, with its fantasies and desires for certain predictable and desirable outcomes. The process where expectations are projected onto the screen of the unconscious and appear to manifest as if from some external source is known as self-delusion. Most religious visions, with their gods and miracles, are of this type. When the unconscious predominates, the sense of self is severely diminished, and without proper grounding the seeker may “lose their grip.” This method flirts with insanity, and is also a fairly common failing of otherwise well-meaning efforts to plumb the unknown. There is no guarantee that what comes up from the depths will be purely benign. It is quite likely to be an echo of a weird traumatic memory, which is why the conscious mind has to be kept vigilant to separate the wheat from the chaff, promoting the beneficial and de-energizing the malicious. If it abandons this role, whether through weakness or intentional suppression, some profoundly negative passions may come to rule the roost.

The conscious mind and the sea of the unconscious it floats in—recalled in the archetypal image of the god Vishnu reclining on Ananta, the endless serpent of time, in the vast Milky Ocean—

achieve their true glory when working in harmony. They are cosmos and chaos, the latter inspiring and energizing the former's patterning, and the patterns providing a medium for the raw energy to manifest. The yogi seeks to dwell in the evolutionary interface where they overlap.

The fact that most people choose sides and so miss out on the crowning achievement of synthetic integration is one reason the Gita describes this as a most secret doctrine. That it remains a secret even after having been spelled out in more or less plain words is an additional mystery and an eternal challenge to our finest aspirations.

The two sides in concert can provide mutual benefits at a much more pragmatic level than what we usually imagine "revealing the Absolute" to mean. Many famous discoveries in the practical realm have been presented by the unconscious to the conscious minds of inventors, composers, and other creative types. This doesn't normally happen by accident, though occasionally it does. Even if we aren't a Mozart—the poster child of natural genius—we are still capable of unleashing a bountiful measure of our shackled creativity. In seeking a new path or formula or technique, we have to ponder deeply on the matter, but often it is only when we give up or take a rest that the solution arises from the unconscious depths as if by magic. (I have written extensively on this technique already at II, 66.) This, by the way, is something everyone can and should do on a regular basis, because it is so effective and does not require any special talent, only a mild faith that helpful insights are readily available in our own unconscious. All we have to do is open ourselves to them.

A composer may hear cosmic music welling up within, but they must also have a keen and well-trained intellect if they are to be able to write it down or otherwise retain it so it can be shared. An artist may behold sublime inner landscapes, but without the skill to render them into their favorite medium no one else will have an opportunity to enjoy them. A visionary without a means of expression is like a lost soul searching for its body. Unrealized

dreams and insights may drive us mad if they are not actualized in some fashion, and the more exquisite and original the better.

It is spiritually crucial to ground our visions in some form of actuality. In his gem of a book *Mount Analogue*, Rene Daumal argues that *of necessity* a bridge must exist between the manifest and the unmanifest, the conscious and the unconscious, or call them the everyday and the spiritual or inspirational realms. Such a philosophical certitude goes a long way toward stabilizing the psyche, counterbalancing the intermittent periods of despair that arise from its being pressured by unrealized dreams. Daumal's character is speaking of an old article he once published:

I had written in substance that in the mythic tradition the Mountain is the bond between Earth and Sky. Its solitary summit reaches the sphere of eternity, and its base spreads out in manifold foothills into the world of mortals. It is the way by which man can raise himself to the divine and by which the divine can reveal itself to man. The patriarchs and prophets of the Old Testament behold the Lord face to face in high places. For Moses it was Mount Sinai and Mount Nebo; in the New Testament it is the Mount of Olives and Golgotha. I went so far as to discover this ancient symbol of the mountain in the pyramidal constructions of Egypt and Chaldea. Turning to the Aryans, I recalled those obscure legends of the Vedas in which the soma—the 'nectar' that is the 'seed of immortality'—is said to reside in its luminous and subtle form 'within the mountain'. In India the Himalayas are the dwelling place of Siva, of his spouse 'the Daughter of the Mountain', and of the 'Mothers' of all worlds, just as in Greece the king of the gods held court on Mount Olympus. In fact it was in Greek mythology that I found the symbol completed by the story of the revolt of the children of Earth who, with their terrestrial natures and terrestrial means, attempted to scale Olympus and enter Heaven on feet of clay. Was not this the same endeavour as that of the builders of the

Tower of Babel, who, without renouncing their many personal ambitions, aspired to attain the kingdom of the one impersonal Being? In China people have always referred to the 'Mountains of the Blessed', and the ancient sages instructed their disciples on the edge of a precipice....

[Because all these well-known mountains have been climbed repeatedly] all these summits have therefore lost their analogical importance. The symbol has had to take refuge in totally mythical mountains, such as Mount Meru of the Hindus. But, to take this one example, if Meru has no geographical location, it loses its persuasive significance as a *way uniting Earth and Heaven*; it can still represent the centre or axis of our planetary system but no longer the means whereby man can attain it.

'For a mountain to play the role of Mount Analogue,' I concluded, *'its summit must be inaccessible, but its base accessible* to human beings as nature has made them. It must be *unique*, and it must *exist geographically*. The door to the invisible must be visible.' (32-4)

This analogical mountain, with its ruggedly triangular or conical shape, is a pictorial representation of the dialectic that synthesizes our at-one-ment with the Absolute, what we like to call the quantum leap into creativity. Its widely separated sides come progressively closer together the higher you climb, until at last they meet at the summit.

19) He who, undeluded, thus knows Me, the Paramount Person—he, the all-knower, adores Me in all aspects, Arjuna.

In this old fashioned and decidedly mysterious language, Krishna is hinting that the creative expression our innermost being craves is liberated by union with the Absolute. Hopefully by now the student of the Gita will have a pretty good idea of what is meant by this.

The word translated as ‘worship’ or ‘adore’ (also enjoy, possess, share in) is *bhajati*, which is related to bhakti. The gist is a merger of the self with the Self, or the self with the Absolute. Recall VI, 27: “Such a yogi, verily, of calmed mind, of pacified passion, who has become the Absolute, free from all dross, comes to supreme happiness.” The key is not only to admire but to *become* the Absolute, to be restored to our Absolute nature. We should not read this as a bald-faced instruction to adore the Absolute from a distance, so to speak, which is off-putting for many perfectly dignified people. It is, rather, an invitation to unleash our creativity by opening ourselves to the wonder within all of creation.

Nataraja Guru has a somewhat different reading of *sarva bhavena* than other commentators, and it reveals a lot. His interpretation is that the term refers to the Absolute, which is immediately adjacent to it, whereas everyone else relates it to the all-knowing seeker from earlier in the verse. This leads him to render it as knowing Krishna “in all aspects,” signifying that one who properly knows the transcendental Absolute adores it within all of its manifestations. The dictionary definition is “with the whole being,” and is more typically taken to refer to the individual. Radhakrishnan epitomizes the norm with the seeker who “worships Me with all his being (with his whole spirit).” We can see that Nataraja Guru is trying to avoid the dualistic attitude of modern bhakti worshippers, and keep the reading unitive, which is more in line with the Gita’s Chapter XII, on Bhakti Yoga. Popular displays of bhakti and bhakti yoga are by no means the same thing.

It goes without saying that if one sees the Absolute everywhere, their whole being will be naturally be absorbed in it, and vice versa. When we come to be aware of the amazing miracle residing within the very heart of every aspect of the flux of life, it elicits spontaneous adoration as a normal response.

Working within the cortical confines of what we think we know, however respectable it may be—such as an image of a deity or a scientific principle—is something other than pure creativity. It

is more the manipulation of the known. It can be clever, useful, intelligent and even expansive, though it can also go terribly, terribly wrong. For a real breakthrough, we are called to repeatedly transcend such limitations and incarnate the empyrean instead of manipulating the mundane.

Still, breakthroughs are rare in any life, and for the most part we do manipulate the familiar, though a yogi always tries to avoid habituating to set patterns, especially deleterious ones. But how we are to live as creatively as possible is a question with no easy answer. As the Gita becomes ever more practical in its focus, a lot of light will be thrown onto this matter. The question “What do I do?” is gradually brought to a unitive resolution at the end of the work, which remains one of the finest elucidations ever penned of how to live creatively and well.

One very practical approach is to think of something you love, something that especially moves you, and see how it attracts you. Perhaps it is a great book or something artistic, the innocence of children or the elderly, your favorite game or sport. Instead of treating it merely as a sensual display, look for the Absolute meaning at its core. What is the true attraction? Contemplate the universal reverberation within each specific item of interest, and how it surfaces repeatedly through your life as well as throughout human history. See how each item can be expanded into an entire universe of connections. It’s sure to bring you to a deeper appreciation of what you love, of what moves you.

All of us already know some form of adoration. Adoration is limited in direct proportion to the boundaries of what we adore. Therefore if we perceive the boundless Absolute in the heart of everything, our ecstatic experience of adoration will likewise know no bounds.

20) Thus this most secret doctrine has been taught by Me; understanding this, one becomes wise, and one who has done with all works, O Sinless One.

And such a secret! All the world over people are rapt by their imaginary versions of truth, in a sense dream-walking right past the Absolute as it stands smiling at them, because they are preoccupied with their supposedly enlightening thoughts. The ultimate secret is to shake off all those postures and stand naked and open to the sky on all sides. Immediately there comes the transformation of obligatory duties and ignorance into joyful activity brimming with awareness.

But all the vested interests of religion and self-help programs and psychiatry and so on militate against this simple realization, lest their livelihoods be lost. The yogi is very often pitted against an inimical status quo that subverts every effort to reclaim independence. It is not uncommon for any struggle toward freedom, whether individual or collective, to be branded as selfish, diabolical, unpatriotic or sinful.

The idea of sin is a very interesting one. We each contain an instinctual level in our minds that unerringly guides us early in life, but we learn to ignore it as we grow and differentiate as individuals. In its place we substitute a rational, truncated guidance system that is prone to all manner of shortcomings and failures. The schism between our inner guide or guru and our conscious decision-making is the measure of our sin, in its original sense of “missing the mark.” Restoring a respectful attitude toward our internal guidance system is a critical step in establishing wisdom in our life, and this is what Krishna is directing Arjuna’s attention to by addressing him as a sinless one.

I have in many places warned that our “sinful” self-interests can masquerade as divine messages, and simultaneously block our openness to genuine instinctual or creative impulses. Thus our creativity remains “secret” to us even as we carry on a pretence of welcoming it. The Absolute remains a secret only because of our inability to recognize it. Stripping the blindfolds from our eyes remains a primary challenge for yogis.

The dilemma boils down to this: we are animated by inner promptings all the time. Some of them are important messages

from our inner guidance system, while many are simply peripheral urges and desires. Because they are presented to consciousness in the same way, it is very difficult to distinguish the useful from the useless, the valid from the trivial. Mostly we learn to turn our backs on the whole chaotic, seething mass of inner promptings, and stick to a commonly agreed on version of physical reality. Certainly this prevents us from being led astray by certain negative impulses, but we are at the same time cutting ourselves off from the fountain source of our inner life. The yogi works hard to preserve the positive impulses while shrugging off the negative ones. In this matter the Gita stands apart from some other systems, such as Patanjali's Yoga, where both positive and negative modulations are to be discarded.

In order to help us distinguish valid inner promptings from invalid ones, the Gita presents in the next chapter a vivid picture of the ones we should keep well away from. It is astonishing how our most venomous qualities are even now exalted as virtues in some circles. As W.B. Yeats famously wrote in his poem *The Second Coming*, "The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity."

Being done with works does not mean that you cease acting, only that the actions are no longer obligatory. They no longer determine the direction of your life, you do. Moreover, there is no belief that actions build on top of each other to achieve a remote goal. You are There. There is Here. Nothing needs to be done to get you anywhere, once you know this.