

CHAPTER XVII: Sraddhatraya Vibhaga Yoga

The Unitive Recognition of Faith

Sraddha is what we believe in. Everyone with a healthy mind has a set of core beliefs that anchors their life. We are not simply rational beings that function best with nothing but stripped down linear facts to consider; we are holistic mega-systems in which rationality plays a small but essential part.

Our supposedly rational thoughts are wholly shaped by what we believe, however irrational it might be. Trying to think without beliefs is an interesting meditation, but in the long run it invites chaos and confusion, because our mind simply cannot function that way.

Beliefs can be liberating or binding, depending on whether they are open or closed, and it's the binding ones that give believing a bad name. Liberating beliefs should be cherished and shared, but many beliefs that purport to be liberating are actually binding. Before turning Arjuna loose on the world, Krishna wants to help him scrutinize his core beliefs so he can discard the restrictive ones while promoting the more expansive and valid kind, and consequently optimize his actions.

Sraddha is commonly but inadequately translated as faith, for lack of a better English word. Faith in this larger sense is intimately connected to our actions, and ranges all the way from abject servility to absurd notions to dynamic insight into the nature of reality. Fervently held ideas often provide motivation for an entire lifetime of dedicated activity, with some people even being willing to die for their beliefs. It is very helpful to know where on the scale of values (sattva-rajas-tamas) our ideas fall. Wasting your precious hours or even giving your life in service to an absurd or corrupt belief system is high tragedy, testament to a lack of clear thinking at the very least.

At its best, faith means giving full attention to the Absolute. Guru Nitya says, "What is prized most highly in the Gita is an unflinching attention to the Absolute, which runs through every

moment of life like a golden thread, giving unity to life and order to the world. This is called *sraddha*.” (342) He adds later, “*Sraddha* means one-pointed attention, perfect bipolarity, total acceptance, pure devotion, ardent faith, full sympathy, unconditional appreciation, and an attitude of loving regard which is continuous and consistent, like the unbroken flow of oil.” (373) Radhakrishnan says, “Faith is the inward sense of truth.” (343) They are speaking of the ideal *sraddha*, but in this chapter the Gita is also dealing with how it plays out in the world, so *sraddha* includes what you give your attention to as the vestments of the Absolute from your own personal angle. In other words, it considers faith from the broadest possible perspective, from true to false, sane to insane.

As we have noted before, the Gita is coming down to the ground again after soaring to the heights, focusing on practical considerations of how to express life as it is actually lived. The present chapter begins by asserting that everyone is shaped by—*nay is*—their faith, and (to maintain the dialectical balance essential to yoga) their faith is them. We might find this easier to accept if we word it that we are our beliefs, and our beliefs make us what we are. Either way, the infusion of metaphysical ideas into practical aspects of life is appropriately placed just prior to the final, fully grounded chapter.

Rational scientists, then, are as full of faith as anyone else. Their faith is in what they can perceive and measure; they believe in solid, material truth. They also have faith that what most people believe is false, and needs to be revised. At their best, they include themselves in that assessment. Often, they don't.

Freeman Dyson, writing about *Brilliant Blunders*, by Mario Livio, in the New York Review of Books (March 6, 2014, p. 4) notes a common theme in the history of science: “A theory that began as a wild guess ends up as a firm belief. Humans need beliefs in order to live, and great scientists are no exception. Great scientists produce right theories and wrong theories, and believe them with equal conviction.”

Faith is also the essence of religion, the hub on which its various practices whirl. Yet the converse is not true: religion is not necessarily the essence of faith. Knowledge or understanding is. Chapter XVII addresses religious beliefs in a general philosophic way, without promoting any particular form or creed. The Gita stands with Narayana Guru on this: whatever the religion, if it makes a better person it is good. There is no illusion that any kind of ritual will produce results beyond the performance of the acts themselves. At the same time, Krishna wants us to know that what we believe has a critical impact on how we live.

Like many scientists, I come to the subject of faith as one who thinks of it as a synonym for facile and delusory ideas, so the whole business of sraddha was initially hard for me to swallow, until I realized that my faith was nothing more or less than what I believed in. Then it made perfect sense. Our lives are directed much more than we realize by what we believe to be true, as the placebo effect clearly demonstrates. Our actions, naturally enough, are designed by us to conform to our expectations. Everything not directly connected with our senses, which is almost the whole universe, including most of our friends and family at any particular time, is present only in our memory. We believe—we have faith—that all those things exist, and have a past, and will have a future, but we have no concrete evidence for it. All is supposition. So we are profoundly shaped by our faith, our beliefs, even we doubters, all more or less to the same degree.

Perhaps to the wise our faith in imaginary constructs is risible, but nonetheless it's what we have to work with. We have to proceed from where we happen to be. An important corollary idea is that our views are subject to an influx of wisdom and understanding, and this changes who we are in an actual sense.

Because the Gita is increasingly focusing on everyday values, there are significant concessions to actual activities here that appear to contradict some of the more uncompromising views offered from earlier chapters. We need to relate these ancient categories to modern life, in order to make them relevant once

again. Scriptures become dead weights over time if they are not reexamined. Instead, their partisans often advocate a return to the “good old days” when they were written so they can become meaningful once again. Now THERE’S a facile, delusory idea, one that retroactively inserts one’s prejudices into the ancient document! The proper approach for a fearless yogi is to reinterpret—what Nataraja Guru calls to revalue and restate—the wise teachings of yesterday in terms of today. It’s an unfortunate and unnecessary leap of faith to insist we know exactly what those seers of long ago were thinking. But taken in good faith their words are poetic and generally applicable enough to how we view the world to still be valid today.

1) Arjuna said:

What is the status in faith, O Krishna, of those who, discarding scriptural injunctions, sacrifice with faith, sattvic, rajasic or tamasic?

Krishna has already made it clear as far back as Chapter II that scriptural injunctions are beside the point, and if you rely on them you’ve already lost your connection with the Absolute. Yet he concluded the previous chapter with a nod to the positive value of scriptural input. Now Arjuna is confused. Is it permissible to go outside of scriptural (religious) parameters or not? Is it really okay to face the Absolute directly, without scriptural authority or religious mediation? Can we be truly independent, or must we adhere to an established tradition?

The critical question here is, if we listen to our inner voice, how do we know it’s an authentic insight into truth and not just our own wishful thinking plausibly dressed up to lead us astray? Scripture gives us a touchstone to avoid delusion, but we still have to process our own interpretation of our intuition, which is literally our “teaching from within.” We want to channel “God’s will” in some form, but we see how it can go wrong when mass murderers invoke it to justify their insanity. This is an extremely delicate

question for someone who, like Arjuna, is not content to docilely repeat someone else's formula for enlightenment, but wants to come to light in their own way.

As already noted, *sraddha* means much more than 'faith' in the modern sense, though the word is acceptable if all its implications are taken into account. The one-pointed attention to the Absolute recommended by the Gita is called *faith*. As long as you are thinking of the Absolute, you have *faith*. When your attention wanders off and you forget, you have lost *faith*, but all you need to do to have it restored is to bring the mind gently back to focus on the Absolute, or whatever you call the core truth of your being. As opposed to the traditional loss of *faith*, where you don't believe in something any more because you have learned it was false, in *sraddha* you are already inwardly focused on the Absolute. All you stand to lose are your illusions.

The Absolute is what is true. We do not lose *faith* in truth; we only lose it when what we believed to be true turns out to have been a misunderstanding. This is why Vedanta pares down beliefs to their irrefutable essence. In the long run there is no spiritual benefit to clinging to misty romantic ideas that quickly evaporate in the sunlight. Side by side with Arjuna, we are searching for whatever will hold up under fire.

2) Krishna said:

The *faith* of the embodied is of three kinds, according to their predominant nature of *sattva*, *rajas* or *tamas*. About it hear:

In responding to his disciple, Krishna covers *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*—the Good, the Bad and the Ugly—in relation to several broad categories: food, austerity, sacrifice and giving. In the next chapter he will continue in the same vein. The scheme of these *gunas* or modalities can be very helpful in discerning the shape of our *faith* or beliefs and thereby having an impact on actual life situations. They have already been extensively described,

especially in Chapter XIV. Now Krishna is going to apply them to everyday life.

Whereas earlier Krishna instructed Arjuna to transcend the gunas to maintain his spiritual connection with the Absolute, from here on they are viewed as an inevitable part of life that cannot be readily left out, and so must be taken into consideration. Therefore, the sattvic attitude is presented as the best, conducing to happiness, while rajasic and tamasic attitudes lead to unhappiness and bondage.

This is in some respects an oversimplification, as the three gunas act like a tripod to hold up the world: all are necessary for stability. But Krishna is speaking of predominance, not exclusivity. All three modalities are always present, but each of us leans somewhat in favor of one or the other at different times, and the idea here is that by recognizing this we can learn a lot about ourselves.

The three gunas are what emerges when our unitive connection with the Absolute drifts into duality. They are part of nature; in other words, they are how nature unfolds. Once we forget we are nothing but the Absolute, we will tend to focus on the exteriorization of our inner Self in the game called life. This is by no means a bad thing: the Gita's thrust is for us to reconnect with the unitive state and then invite its influence into our inevitably dualistic daily life. By doing this the quality of our life is greatly enhanced.

All the specific aspects of life can be consolidated into the three general categories of sattva, rajas and tamas. The Gita first challenges us in Chapter XIV to see this as an integral system that we must rise above and detach ourselves from. Now that we are working more closely with actualities we need to be aware of the relative merits of each guna. On the actual level sattva is positive, tamas is negative, and rajas is activity aligned either positively or negatively. Pretty much every situation has both a positive and negative aspect, as well as an action dynamic.

While passing through this survey in terms of the gunas, we should keep in mind that all of them are binding. We are by no means striving to become sattvic at the expense of the others. That isn't even possible. All occur in rotation, or better, they dominate in rotation. We may emphasize one over the others, but they are all present in all situations. Honest seekers of truth will look for aspects of all three in their makeup.

The critical idea to keep in mind is that we don't become spiritual by exaggerating sattva. By becoming spiritual, sattva is usually predominant, yet all three gunas provide their rightful contributions as clarity, activity and stability, respectively.

No matter how much we'd like to hang on to sattva, our life includes plenty of activity (rajas) and stability or resting (tamas). All three can range between mindful and mindless. With rajas we can be busy for busyness' sake or we can intelligently direct our energy to valuable goals. In tamas we can be fearful or content, depending on our mindset. It's very easy for tamasic people to feel content, so long as their basic needs are met. Even with sattva there is a more vapid state and an engaged one where connections and insights prevail.

That being said, the gunas from here on resemble a rating system. Sattva, rajas and tamas are now being used almost as code words for good, tolerable and bad. In a spiritual context that means they are indicating degrees of awareness of the divine in nature, or the intrinsic unity of things: lots, little or none. It is almost like they are becoming a whole new set of terms, dualistic now in place of the former more unitive scheme.

3) The faith of everyone is shaped according to their true nature, Arjuna; man is made of his faith; of what faith a man is, even that he is.

The key idea of the chapter comes in here, where Krishna says, "man is made of his faith; of what faith a man is, even that he is." Quantum physics and neuroscience are now demonstrating that

on a fundamental level this is true, that the rishis are correct: our outlook is filled to the brim with unconscious selections that determine what we see and interact with. We become familiar with our favorite choices and block out other options all the time. And we identify who we believe we are with our habitual choices. Not only do our thoughts have a profound influence on our actions, the patterns of behavior we consciously adopt have an equally powerful effect on our thinking over time. Thousands of psychological studies have amply demonstrated this.

Exactly like a universe after its big bang, each person emerges from a point source at conception and expands in virtually infinite ways. We exemplify an exquisite combination of innate potential and environmental shaping. Words and thoughts, intimately related, are among the most important forms that our mental development follows. We come to thoroughly identify with our thoughts, and we take for granted that the product of all the complex interactions of our mind is a display of normalcy, that it is nothing more or less than who we are. Only when it is stripped away, for instance by brain injury, psychedelic excursion, or in deep contemplation, do we remember that all of it is an accretion upon our core nature. Until that happens, we go forward certain that this unbelievably complicated summation of multitudinous forces is us.

If how you think and what you believe determines who you are, at least in this incarnation, how should you approach a scripture, or indeed any book? First of all, with humility, the belief that you don't understand but would like to. A humble attitude opens up vast fields of insight from works of wisdom. All too often, people come to scripture with fixed notions and a conviction that they already know what they contain, and surprise! They find just what they expect, a reflection and endorsement of their prejudices and blockages. In this way our beliefs become a major part of the straitjacket instead of an unbinding force to free the trapped victims of ignorance.

This chapter is about recognizing the common forms of how we fix our outlook on the world, not to humiliate the ego but to be liberated from its unhealthy dominance. Once we recognize our habitual patterns we can make conscious decisions to relinquish them. This can assist us to gently wean ourselves away from ugly or divisive beliefs and in the direction of healing ones. The process is challenging, because the brain avidly substitutes new habits for old ones, but success can eventually be had. In this, perseverance furthers, especially when coupled with iconoclasm: the breaking up of fixed notions.

In his commentary Eknath Easwaran says that *sradha* includes “all the beliefs we hold so deeply that we never think to question them. It is the set of values, axioms, prejudices, and possessions which colors our perceptions, governs our thinking, dictates our responses, and shapes our lives, generally without our even being aware of its presence and power.” (Vol. III, 306) That’s exactly right.

Faith, then, refers to our total mindset. It isn’t just belief in some deity, which many religions consider the *ne plus ultra* of standing in the faith, and which amounts to little more than an identity badge. Becoming aware of the totality of our mindset is a complex and subtle endeavor that cannot be revealed by yes and no responses to simplistic questions like do you believe in God? Krishna here directs Arjuna to spend his valuable time in coming to know himself beneath the surface, so that he can be sure that what he values is significant and not merely based on whimsy or superficial desires.

We tend to examine ourselves in terms we already have accepted, and so we aren’t mounting a true assessment at all. As Nitya Chaitanya Yati puts it, “Religion itself has become the greatest snare to stop a person from the vertical ascent of spiritual pursuit.” (BU Vol. III, 174) We have to somehow get shocked out of our complacency in order to gain a fresh perspective. Krishna’s intense diatribe in the last chapter is intended to smash through every disciple’s natural smugness. We have to confront ourselves

almost as though we are visitors from another planet, seeing with unclouded eyes, or we won't even notice the defects we have grown accustomed to.

The powerfully transformative ideas expressed in this verse as well as in other scriptures, are regularly subverted toward wish fulfillment rather than self-discipline. In the English-speaking world, at least, there is a lot of hoopla about willing magical events to happen—so much that it is one of the most powerful impetuses for people to be attracted to purportedly “eastern” religions. From levitation to obtaining a new car for free, all you have to do is think hard about it or bend yourself into a pretzel and it will appear. If it doesn't, it isn't because such things are ridiculous or impossible but because you aren't doing it right. You're not “spiritual” enough. So buy the book or take the course.

If faith is indeed the measure of what we believe and how we think, failure to manifest material items reveals a lack of faith. But the premise here is false. We inhabit a substantive, existent world as well as a dreamscape. While realigning our mental state can have a significant effect on our attitudes, it has to be related to actual material factors in order to become real in any meaningful sense. Much of our mental discomfiture stems from our lack of connection to the everyday world in the first place. It is very important for our peace of mind, if nothing else, that we come out of our dreams and meditations occasionally and engage with the material world on its own terms. Even something as simple as taking a walk or digging in a garden can have a healing effect on a disconnected psyche.

Above and beyond any economic conditions, our limitations are mainly due to our deep-seated sraddha that we have to create whatever we are to get, we have to build everything from scratch. Beliefs like this leave out almost everything, and stem from a fundamental disruption between the individual and the whole, also known as a loss of reality. Actually, most of our needs are met with surprisingly little effort on our part. We feel various lacks primarily because we have lost touch with who we are in the most

profound sense. Better or cleverer ways of wanting new stuff simply exacerbate the dichotomy, not to mention coincidentally enriching the swindlers who sell them to us.

The most characteristic belief that humans grow to have, despite protestations to the contrary, is that love is a bad thing; consequently our natural feelings have to be mercilessly suppressed if we are to have a shot at being accepted as part of the herd. When some interpersonal or psychic relationship breaks through to liberate the dormant love, it is such a relief it can make you giddy. Much of the silliness of puppy love or the aftermaths of psychedelic trips stems from the intensity of long-suppressed feelings emerging once again into the light, however briefly. It is truly a shame that so few legitimate avenues for expressing love exist. Most are swept out of sight. It would seem that we should turn our attention to inventing new ways to share love and kindness, but some hangover from a puritanical past continually sabotages the opportunities that come along, twisting them into strange and forbidding shapes. Until society alters its view that the expression of love is bad, humans will continue to vaguely feel like criminals—outsiders in their own realm—for having feelings, because everyone knows in their heart that their essence is grounded in bliss or love.

Lurid desires to perform amazing feats or obtain what we don't have are the childish flailings of lonely egos looking for love in all the wrong places. Instead of running after such things, we should turn the arrow of our interest back on ourselves and try to discover why we are dissatisfied in the first place. The new car is likely to be a substitute for something much more valuable that we are missing. Could it be love? And can we give it to ourselves? Love is something that must be brewed within and not desperately sought in superficial attractions. We find it outside only after unveiling it where it always is: within our heart of hearts.

What the ancient rishis would have us understand is that we are already complete and fulfilled, and we need to redirect our attention to appreciating this truth. Instead of imagining that

something we currently don't have will make us happy, we can easily demonstrate to ourselves that we have more than enough, all the time. This doesn't mean accepting stasis in our life. We certainly can develop our talents and improve our circumstances, the pursuit of which are among the greatest joys and stimulations of a fully lived life. But the game will be much more enjoyable and less desperate if we inwardly thank the Source for our present riches at the same time as we move into new fields of interest and expression.

4) Worshipers of the divinities are sattvic; the rajasic incline toward the gods of eating and wealth and the gods of ferocity and violence; while the rest, the tamasic, worship the spirits of the dead and the hosts of elemental beings.

Even religion is addressed in the Gita, since after all lots of people are attracted to it. This is one of the places it pops up. After all, religion is about belief, right out front. Yogis are called to face up to both their professed beliefs as well as those they unconsciously take for granted.

First of all, we must remember that sattva, rajas and tamas, while serving as a handy way of sorting out material values, are all binding and are not in themselves the goal of the yogi. We should not read this verse as though we are directed to worship divinities. Not at all. From his detached, witnessing perspective Krishna is assessing the various ways people are caught by their form of worship, ranging from good to bad. Knowing this keeps us from getting snared along with them.

We need to expand these categories into ones that match our present mentality, and not presume they only refer to the beliefs of others in the deep dark past. Divinities, then, represent the living essence of our beliefs, while the gods of eating and wealth stand for materialistic attitudes that revolve around self-interest, and the dead and otherwise inanimate objects symbolize ignorance at its most intractable, where the form is mistaken for substance.

In that light, “worshipping the spirits of the dead” is a particularly piquant metaphor. It does not necessarily refer only to ancestor worship or some devilish cult of departed souls. Any belief, scientific or otherwise, whose day has come and gone could be considered dead. Religions, like cultures, tend to worship people and events long past, and historical scrutiny shows how far the present version has drifted from the original. Even science has a long lead time before new ideas are accepted. We are truly boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past. If we don’t regularly renew our understanding, it will become tenaciously stagnant.

If the living essence of a religion is worshipped, it is sattvic; to the degree it motivates supplicants to action it is rajasic; and when tangential ideas are clung to in tamas, they lead to hostility and conflict, or else morbidity. Obviously Krishna does not approve of substituting a graven image for a living truth, including in the way he is treated by his own followers.

The most burning religious question for many people is whether or not we should believe in a God, and the attitude taken is one that can be especially liberating or binding, affecting as it does every aspect of life. Does God want us to grow and find freedom, or is God an angry fellow who wants to dictate our every move? Does God want us to be kind, indifferent, or vicious? While our beliefs cannot affect God in the slightest, they can usher us mere mortals into states of mind resembling heaven or hell.

The biggest weakness with believing in a God is the tendency it promotes to shirk responsibility. Instead of rising to the daily challenges that constitute our life lessons, we blame God for the problems and do nothing. Or we screw things up and then leave it to God to fix them. If we insist on retaining belief in a God, we should at least realize that we are God’s agents on earth, and refuse to use the concept as an excuse to sit back and levy indictments. The desire to “do good works” is a respectable attempt to compensate for the shortcomings of believing that someone else is

in charge, but a truly neutral attitude does not need any hypothetical entity to bolster its position.

Religions are founded on a vision, usually of a single individual, very likely similar to the breakthrough event depicted in Chapter XI. Each vision of that profundity is unique, and it necessarily transcends the gunas. When a seer tells a small group of intimate devotees about the vision, they receive a sattvic version. The next generation, if the religion is going to survive and persist, gets busy building a meeting place for their gatherings, holds bake sales, proselytizes, and all the rest of the rajasic busy-ness involved with building up an organization. Inevitably the pure teaching of the founder is elaborated upon and amplified, becoming ever more remote from the original experience. Postulating a powerful presiding deity makes an excellent incentive. Sometimes threats of hell and damnation are added to pressure the workforce and intensify the recruiting process. Money is collected to turn the vision into reality.

After the passage of time, a successful organization becomes fixed, set in its ways. Rituals are spelled out and must be followed exactly. People come to depend on jobs provided by the organization. Buildings must be maintained. Charitable donations are prescribed to keep it afloat. This is the beginning of the tamasic state of the religion. Because there is little or no connection to the original vision—indeed, the vision has probably been reinterpreted many times over since the beginning—there is an insistence on following the letter of any hallowed writings coming down from the past. All writers know how impossible it is to express anything exactly, even something as mundane as dirt, so the words chosen have different meanings to different generations, and even to different individuals. Arguments ensue. Yet the more the meanings of the words are disputed, the more insistence there is on clinging to them. A fear comes that to change anything would be to stray from the original vision, enshrined as God's intent. Soon calls ring out that we must get back to the good old days; that anyone thinking in modernistic terms is a sinner and should be severely

punished. Rage and hatred toward anyone holding different beliefs take center stage. The religion is now so tamasic as to be literally frozen in limbo. You must not dare to disagree!

The strangest part of this process is that we tend to not recognize the transformation we're going through. At every stage of the descent we convince ourselves that our beliefs are exactly what the Creator intended all along.

The most recent major religion to afflict humankind is Capitalism. There is an unquestioned belief that markets miraculously solve all problems, which is the quasi-absolutist axiom at its core. No matter that mounting problems are the result of the practice of Capitalism, and always have been. The Market knows best. The Market takes All into account. Leave it to the Market. The Market has become God. Author Thomas Pynchon is one who has independently caught on to this:

It's not a religion? These are people who believe the Invisible Hand of the Market runs everything. They fight holy wars against competing religions like Marxism. Against all evidence that the world is finite, this blind faith that resources will never run out, profits will go on increasing forever, just like the world's population—more cheap labor, more addicted consumers. (*Bleeding Edge*, 338)

By the Gita's measure, this is a rajasic religion, the worship of the gods of wealth, defended by the gods of war. No one is allowed to not be busy in this religion. If you don't work you fail, to be ground under the boot heel of its implacable God. All blessings fall to those able to wrest profits unto themselves, legally or otherwise. Art, ideally a sattvic activity, must become rajasic too, and pay its own way. It must have a measurable, overt "value" or it is cast aside. Material considerations only need apply.

To take this verse at its simplest, sattvic people relate themselves to bright values, symbolized by the devas (gods) who

are the Shining Ones. Love and mutual care and concern typify bright values. Rajasic people relate themselves to a color-filled rainbow of interests and activities. Colors exist along the interface of light and shadow, participating in both. It is not accidental that anger is often depicted as red, jealousy as yellow, envy as green, repression or coldness as blue, and so on. Tamasic people find their joy in darkness, described here as worshipping the spirits of the dead. They are only happy when the light is shining somewhere else and leaving them alone.

Worshipping the hosts of elemental beings means craving simple, noncontroversial things. Tamas is content with stasis, and don't ruin its day by bringing in doubts. Actions and philosophy are complex matters, requiring too much energy. There is only a thin line between contemplating emptiness and contemplating nothingness, between sattva and tamas, and many who imagine they are being sattvic unconsciously slip into tamas.

In essence, all these attitudes are forms of relating to everyday life. To the eye of a contemplative they have a lot in common, even when they are taken separately and their ceaseless rotation ignored. At their core is the idea "I am like this; I am doing this; I enjoy this particular form of being." People do in fact predominate in one or another of the gunas. Contemplation is aimed at stepping back from all three so that they may be observed from a detached vantage point. Worshipping the Absolute has nothing in common with worshipping divinities, though this is by far the most common mistake in all of spiritual life.

5&6) Those men who practice terrible austerities not enjoined by the scripture, given to hypocrisy and egoism, lust, passion and power, torturing all the organs of the body and harassing Me, seated in the body—know them to be of demonic resolves.

The list of "demonic resolves" echoes XVI, 18, and reflects those who worship only as a superficial pretense. As noted there,

demonic attitudes pull us down to the lowest condition of ignorance. The Gita always distinguishes between the ridiculous or deadly beliefs of human hubris and genuine motivations from the heart.

We must keep reminding ourselves that harangues like this are not intended to create a schism between ‘us’ and ‘them’, the good guys and the bad guys. Krishna is talking about this because we all, without exception, are full of every one of these demonic characteristics along with our divine ones. The last thing we need is to feed our proclivity for spiritual egotism, smugly assured we are God’s gift to humanity. Such beliefs lull us to sleep, or worse. Gurus prod us to wake back up, but we have to take what they say seriously. Imagining their words apply to someone else effectively neutralizes their value.

We have already adequately examined all the items on the list of “terrible austerities,” and most of them are clear enough. Significant confusion surrounds the idea of dispassion, however, with many seekers believing that they must squelch their feelings in order to be properly spiritual. The Gita repeatedly advises being dispassionate, but that is not the same as tuning out our emotions. Here it is discrediting those who get carried away by their passions or who get their kicks by indulging in them.

People who are constitutionally unable to feel passions are severely handicapped in their mental processing, and are termed psychopaths. No one would mistake a spiritually enlightened master for a psychopath, and hopefully few psychopaths have conned people into believing they are enlightened masters, though that has happened. So it is very important for us to sort out the difference between dispassion and being emotionally dead.

Recent neuroscientific studies reveal that emotions are extremely positive aspects of the brain, essentially a means to communicate vast amounts of information almost instantly, without the tedious linear process of syllogistic logic and verbalizing. Our accumulated expertise is encapsulated in

emotions, which communicate nonverbally to the conscious mind how to respond to circumstances. It's an extremely efficient system, though it does require education if we are to use it well. Many emotions are warped by misunderstandings and traumas, making us overly defensive or insular, and the guna system is a way to sort through them to accurately assess their value.

Jonah Lehrer, in *How We Decide*, (Boston: Mariner, 2009), ably demonstrates that the widely held traditional belief that detached rationality is the high road to wise choices, is false. People with low emotional intelligence do poorly on tests that involve learning from mistakes. Rationality by itself is remarkably stupid, slow to notice its faults and change course. It needs something substantive to work with, and that includes the gigantic mass of unconscious processing funneled to it via emotional cues.

Lacking emotions forces us to cobble together a rational version of life to imitate the real thing, kind of a stick figure replica. Unfortunately, humans are easy to fool, and psychopaths can and do get away literally with murder. No matter how ghastly their actions, they do not feel anything, remorse, compassion, or any sort of caring. The parts of the brain that produce and process emotions simply did not develop.

The ability to care, after self-awareness, is the highest evolutionary achievement of humans to date. Being indifferent or dispassionate does not mean not caring, it means not being disappointed by events due to expectations, and consequently losing your ability to care. A calm person can be more in tune with their emotions, not less. Caring, whatever that means in terms of emotional impact, is at the heart of a spiritual and meaningful life.

Obviously, gurus have a vibrant emotional life and care a great deal. While anyone who is deep in meditation or a psychedelic trip is bound to be detached and remote at that moment, self-absorbed and not interacting with their surroundings, when they come out of it most of them are hyper-present as well, eager to share what they have learned with those around them.

When you think about it, humans have by far the richest repertoire of emotions of all the animals. Having feelings, then, is not an evolutionary mistake to be corrected, but a valuable skill to be perfected and further developed if possible.

So when the Gita advocates dispassion it does not mean we should stifle our emotions. It specifically states that our unhealthy passions arise from frustrated attachments. The implication is that when we are free of attachments—compulsive attractions to items of pleasure—we can act as free individuals with a high degree of expertise. Our passions then will not be deflected by frivolous longings, but will guide us to outstanding accomplishments.

Perusing the work as a whole shows that over its course the Gita talks about *restrained* or *pacified* passions, not their absence. The spiritual secret is to bring our emotions and rationality together dialectically to achieve an optimal state, which is much more than either aspect supplies separately. Pure rationality is sterile and dry; unbridled emotionality is often chaotic and misdirected, leading the passionate one astray. But when they are brought together in mutual respect, we get the best of both. In a nutshell that is what is meant when Krishna calls for dispassion. Not only is an unexamined life not worth living, an overly examined life isn't worth living either.

7) Even the food which is dear to everyone is of three kinds, as also the sacrifices, austerities and gifts. Hear you of the distinction between them.

If there was any doubt before, this verse makes it clear that the rainbow arch of the Gita is coming back down to address the basics once again, as practical matters begin to predominate over the theoretical. The Gita is like a sonata-form work where we return at the end to the original ideas, but they have been subtly transformed by the profundity of the development that has been going on since their introduction. Or like the famous Zen saying “Before enlightenment, chop wood and carry water. After

enlightenment, chop wood and carry water.” Outwardly nothing is different, and yet everything is different.

The four categories listed here (food, sacrifices, austerities and gifts) comprise the bulk of this chapter, and each will be closely examined in turn. Taken together in the broadest sense they cover the full range of life values. Krishna wants to explain how the spiritual experience we have undergone percolates into every aspect of existence, infusing it with new energy and wisdom.

Generally speaking, food is what you take in; gifts are what you dispense outward. There should be a balance in these two factors. That’s why, for instance, a disciple is expected to do something tangible in return for a guru’s instruction, to give something back for the feast they have been served. At the very least they should ask a cogent question to show they have been paying attention. Those who merely show up for classes and slip away into the night are a kind of spiritual voyeur. Reciprocation provides opportunities to practice what has been heard. The Computer Age slogan “Garbage in, garbage out” reflects this idea. Systems, whether living or mechanical, respond in kind to their input. Therefore we are enjoined by the very structure of Reality to be wise and kind and thoughtful, and keep things circulating. The aim is “high quality in, high quality out.”

Sacrifices and austerities form another pair of concepts. Here in the chapter about religion they can be thought of as outwardly and inwardly directed efforts toward union with the Absolute, respectively. *Tapas* is the word used here for austerity; later I have converted it to discipline, which is a more suitably up-to-date term. Nowadays spiritual efforts are less austere than in the old days, but hopefully, guided by intelligence, good discipline can be just as efficacious in bringing about a state of dynamic equipoise.

Lastly, it is important for us to recall verse VIII, 28:

Whatever meritorious result is found implied in the Vedas, in sacrifices, austerities and in gifts, the contemplative who is

unitively established, having understood this (teaching),
transcends all these and attains to the supreme primal state.

Krishna also tells Arjuna in XI, 53, after he comes down
from his trip:

Not by worship, nor by austerity, nor by gifts, nor by sacrifice,
can I be seen in this form as you have seen Me.

The Gita does not consider religious performances in themselves
as being conducive to or productive of realization. They are to be
performed without reference to any merit, according to the scale of
values that is about to be enunciated. Sattvic practices naturally
lead to positive outcomes, rajasic ones to mixed benefits, and
tamasic activities to negative results. Therefore, for a scripture that
advocates relinquishment of benefits, the gunas have to be
transcended.

8) The foods which promote life, vitality, strength, health, joy
and cheerfulness, and which are tasty, rich, substantial and
appealing, are dear to sattvic types.

This section on food is almost always taken literally, which is
all right as far as it goes. It is interesting that the Gita, centuries
before the onset of latter day food manias, may have made the
connection between one's state of mind and what one eats. But it is
much more valuable to think of food here in the larger symbolic
sense of what we mentally ingest, what we take in psychologically.
This covers our reading, our viewing, who we listen to, and so on.
In other words, what we imbibe, what thoughts we are drawn to
and take in and savor. What types of religious service we attend.
Such nourishment is clearly related to what we believe, our
sraddha. Thus food stands for information coming into the system,
and can be dialectically paired with gifting, examined at the end of
the chapter, which covers information going out.

The sattvic version of such “food” includes uplifting and inspiring art and literature of all stripes, sermons preaching the unity of all, loving words from friends (preferably in a nice restaurant...) and the like. Input that leaves you feeling loving and kind and generous, unafraid to reach out to others. We are tremendously blessed that our world is so rich in these types of food, and we should serve them to our friends whenever we can.

From the Gita’s standpoint, philosophy—the love of wisdom, or the wisdom sacrifice—is the most sustaining and delicious food of all, and Krishna has been serving Arjuna one of the greatest banquets in history. Food for eating is gone by the end of the meal, but ideas that are “tasty, rich, substantial and appealing” are perennially on the table. More than just the highest of sattvic pursuits, philosophy can go as far as to provide a launching pad for transcendence of all the gunas.

Actually, after becoming aware of the symbolic nature of the food being spoken of by Krishna, and how valuable it is to assess all our input on the basis of the three gunas, it is a little bit embarrassing to read commentators waxing eloquent about what literal food we should eat. It seems that they have missed the point here. The Gita is never trivial. Worrying about food often is, though, or else it is an obsessive form of self-indulgence. I think it’s safe to say that no meal however fabulous has ever approached the impact on the psyche of reading a great novel or attending an exceptional play or concert. The most memorable parts of even a literal meal are usually the conversations and perhaps the room it is held in, in other words the psychological trimmings, and not the actual fruits and vegetables.

Guru Nitya and Nataraja Guru, sensing this apparent triviality, felt that the food business in the Gita should be used for self-analysis and not taken as mere menu recommendations. Along these lines, Nitya, in his *Therapy and Realization in the Bhagavad Gita*, reminds us of an important caveat:

Suppose you don't give the dog food to the dog, but instead always give the dinner of the master to the dog. Don't expect that the dog is going to become the master by eating his food. This is a symptom only given here, a partial symptomatic study. By looking at the kind of food you eat, you can see what the nature of your personality is, your tendencies, characteristics, and so on. This is meant as a psychological insight into the personality type to which we conform, so that we might attain a spirituality that conforms to this type.

What was right for Ramana Maharshi could not be expected to be right for Mahatma Gandhi. Mahatma Gandhi wanted to fight the British nation. He wanted to establish satyagraha. He strove to do these things and much more. But if you go to Ramana Maharshi and say "Come out for a satyagraha," he will only go deeper into his meditation, because his nature is such. You should know what your nature is, and you should not work on a spirituality that does not agree with your nature.

9) Foods that are strongly flavored, sour, saline, excessively hot, pungent, hardened, and burning are liked by the rajasic, and are producers of pain, unhappiness and indisposition.

This too is a very broad category. Words and images underlining us/them dichotomies, that polarize people against others, inflaming feelings of hatred and anger, are the most obviously rajasic "foods." But there are also those that inspire us to get to work on some project, because of passionate feelings.

What differentiates the highest forms of rajasic food from the sattvic, even though the underlying topic may be similar, is that due to ego involvement there are negative repercussions with the rajasic, traceable to overt or covert selfishness. As an example, in the last chapter sacrifice was extolled as a positive value in the first verse, and then condemned as demonic in verses 15 and 17. The difference is that the latter was egotistically motivated—"I will

sacrifice”—and the former was performed unselfishly and for the benefit of all.

There are so many examples around us of people whose attitudes have made them sour, or bitter, or hardened to the suffering of others. Anger can burn spicy and hot. This is a self-diagnostic program, so we have to ask ourselves if it is necessary to feel this way, or if we are only copping an attitude because we've been convinced we should. Are we being led by the nose, or are we thinking clearly? Paradoxically, being led by others often drags us into selfishness, while thinking for ourselves can and should be unselfish. The role of clear thinking is to break us free of excessive self-indulgence. We need to reflect on whether there is truth in what we proclaim, or if it is based on what we've ingested from the media or our peers. Have we been spoon-fed a lot of junk? Most crucially, how much are our feelings influenced by the indigestion brought on by past traumas, or are we able to be fully present here and now, sporting a bountiful appetite for clarity?

I am old enough to remember a time in the United States (after WWII) when the mass media propounded a message of national unity and mutual support, which inspired a lot of people to work hard to reach out to others and share the wealth in many different ways. That was rajas at its best. More recently the US media harps on the schisms and hatred between identifiable groups, and hostility has become palpable all over the country. National unity is shattered, paving the way for the modern day Kauravas—the limited liability corporations—to usurp all the territory formerly held at least nominally by the community as a whole. The bitter, pungent dishes served up by these vested interests apparently have a strong appeal to large numbers of people.

This is rajas at its worst: angry idea-food is put on the table, and those who gobble it up execute a war dance in passionate response. Non-yogis can be coaxed into all kinds of transgressions against common sense by what they consume, while yogis know

better than to presume everything served at the buffet table is safe to eat.

10) That which is left over, which has lost its taste, which is putrid, stale, which is refuse, and unfit for consumption—such alimentary items are welcome to the tamasic types.

Part of us is attracted to dark tales that close us off from the world, that reinforce barriers and exacerbate our fears. Gloom and doom are as popular as ever. When we're in a tamasic state, well-defended, womb-like beliefs are very reassuring. All problems reside in other people, and therefore we shine by comparison. If that isn't enough of a trap, it turns out that blaming others not only shuts down our own spiritual growth, it is highly contagious.

Nowadays there is a study for just about anything you can imagine. Thomasnet.com, an industry newsletter, summarizes an article on research done on this very subject. It turns out blaming is about as contagious and harmful to the workplace as a bad disease. The article's conclusion is "a policy of transmitting blame leads to detrimental performance in accomplishing tasks, harms health and well-being and can lead to a damaged reputation." Authors Fast and Tiedens sum up an important finding of their final experiment: "By offering participants the opportunity to bolster their self-worth, we removed their need to self-protect by making external attributions for failure and, in so doing, eliminated the need to self-protect via subsequent blaming." (N.J. Fast, L.Z. Tiedens / Journal of Experimental Social Psychology 46 [2010] p.103.) Not surprisingly, the antidote to blaming—and tamasic attitudes in general—is restoration of normal self-esteem: feeling confident you are a welcome participant and not a pariah. Not only does it energize a courageous interaction with events, self-esteem helps you to be prepared to resist the tide of evasion and excuse-making that permeates our culture, based on fears of retribution, both real and imaginary. (For more, see

<http://news.thomasnet.com/IMT/2010/01/28/workplace-finger->

[pointing-is-contagious/](#). The article includes a link to the original research report. Accessed 3/15)

Most of us have felt that certain media editorials, with their gleeful demonization of, for instance, those striving to claim their basic human rights, are “putrid,” that they are “refuse, unfit for consumption.” Poisonous beliefs are much easier to spot in others than in ourself. Yet we have only ourself to work on, so the point is to turn our attention inward and see if we have been consuming and regurgitating garbage too. Blaming others should be easy enough to notice, yet many of us have a powerful blind spot regarding that activity. It’s so ubiquitous we take it for granted. We should use the examples we perceive in others as a mirror to check on our own weaknesses.

Unthinking adherence to scripture fits the bill of tamasic consumption. Some people insist that ridiculous ideas are true only because they read them in their favorite holy book. Fundamentalist Christians have a museum where dinosaurs and humans frolic together, and they continue to insist the world is about 6000 years old, despite a great deal of evidence to the contrary. A long list of the cherished absurdities of several religions, ethical as well as scientific, can be found at <http://www.skepticsannotatedbible.com/>. Tamasic believers have to erect walls of hate and intolerance in order to safeguard their untenable beliefs, which of course is the exact opposite of the yogic approach where falsehood is to be ousted as soon as it is detected.

Yet even some yogis don’t always follow the healthiest diet in what they consume. I have seen fascist tracts posted in Indian ashrams, alongside rants about how women are the cause of all the ills of mankind. Isn’t it nice that our problems can be blamed on somebody else, so we can remain smugly self-satisfied instead of changing for the better! And other things we should eat, in the form of inconvenient or embarrassing truths that would clean out our “digestive system,” we proudly refuse. Angry rejection of challenging ideas is a case of rajas defending tamas in our mental eating habits—a most intractable combination.

Probably the most potentially devastating of foods we imbibe, which should therefore be a central concern in a yogic search for wisdom, are termed drugs. There is no fixed line to distinguish between foods and drugs. They are simply the two poles of what we eat, indicating those that have less or more impact on our consciousness.

Psychedelic drugs used wisely to explore the psyche are the most sattvic of foods; used casually for entertainment they join other drugs like alcohol in being rajasic. Taken repetitively until the intelligence becomes stupefied, they become tamasic.

Non-psychedelic, mood-altering drugs used to treat mental disturbances are at best rajasic, while the majority are tamasic. We are just beginning to realize how tamasic—how devastating and destructive to the mind—these chemicals are.

The rapid expansion of the use of psychiatric medicines appears to be due to aggressive marketing for profit more than any actual widespread need. The pharmaceutical industry has taken a place high on the list of corporate criminals acting like the Kauravas on the battlefield of Kuruksetra in the Gita's historical setting, intent on conquering every bit of lucrative real estate they can. In this case, though, the real estate is the human mind.

The growing uneasiness that psychiatric drugs are actually part of the cause and not the cure for the exploding incidence of mental illness in the modern world is being confirmed scientifically. The shocking findings are detailed in several recent books, including *Anatomy of an Epidemic: Magic Bullets, Psychiatric Drugs, and the Astonishing Rise of Mental Illness in America*, by Robert Whitaker, and *The Emperor's New Drugs: Exploding the Antidepressant Myth*, by Irving Kirsch. The books and their subject are examined in two powerful articles by Marcia Angell in *The New York Review of Books*, *The Epidemic of Mental Illness: Why?* (June 23, 2011) and *The Illusions of Psychiatry* (July 14, 2011).

As with many spiritual paradoxes, cause and cure are often conflated if not reversed, and the most effective solution is to

excise the entire gestalt through wisdom insights. Taking any psychiatric medicine other than one that supports psychic liberation and enhances self-awareness is fraught with peril and likely to breed dependence on it. In other words, the cure turns out to also be the cause of subsequent illness and addiction, so discarding all such crutches is the high road to being fully alive. The lazy way is to hope against hope that the marketing lies are true and give yourself over to their tender mercies.

It is a titanic tragedy that drug peddlers exploit the brain's desire for quiescence and stability to insinuate their noxious substances into people's lives, primarily to inflate their income streams, though it's not hard to imagine even more nefarious motivations. The result is self-fulfilling prophecy. In Whittaker's words: "Prior to treatment, patients diagnosed with schizophrenia, depression, and other psychiatric disorders do not suffer from any known 'chemical imbalance'. However, once a person is put on a psychiatric medication, which, in one manner or another, throws a wrench into the usual mechanics of a neuronal pathway, his or her brain begins to function...*abnormally*." Like any addictive substance, the drugs produce the need and then satisfy it.

It is beginning to seem that any positive effect of this class of medications is due solely to people's belief in them, in other words, a placebo effect. Angell quotes Kirsch as saying that when you add up all the actual double-blind studies done on the effectiveness of psychiatric medications,

[It] leads to the conclusion that the relatively small difference between drugs and placebos might not be a real drug effect at all. Instead, it might be an enhanced placebo effect, produced by the fact that some patients have broken [the] blind and have come to realize whether they were given drug or placebo. If this is the case, then there is no real antidepressant drug effect at all. Rather than comparing placebo to drug, we have been comparing "regular" placebos to "extra-strength" placebos.

I don't want to understate the value of placebo, which is significant and even life saving in some cases. The more science examines consciousness in our quantum universe, the more it appears that everything is in some respects a placebo, or more correctly, either a placebo or the opposite, a nocebo. We find what we expect, and we overlook what we don't. The common insistence of meditators that the world is illusory reflects this insight. To a great extent our thoughts really do circumscribe our world, and this is why each yogi must be very careful to examine their beliefs, and not hold on to anything that isn't certified as reasonable, sensible and valuable. Tamas though, like an obedient child, docilely accepts what is handed to it, yet when challenged it tenaciously defends its convictions.

If there is anything that is "unfit for consumption," it is a pill that disrupts the brain's chemical balance while purporting to restore it, thereby engendering a lifetime of dependence on it. For whatever reason, tamas no longer has the strength to fight its own battles, so it pops pills that an opportunistic vendor promises will solve all its problems straight away. So simple! So convenient! And suddenly you are caught.

In case mature adults might see through the smoke screen of promotional chicanery, psychiatric drugs are now being aimed at children and the disabled elderly, who are incapable of mounting a defense before being sucked in. At least in children, the tamas is supplied by the medicine right up front, to "calm them down." Then, to preserve and prolong the deception, an aggressive disinformation campaign has succeeded in convincing a wide swath of the population that there is a scientific basis for their claims, when there is not. Elsewhere I have mentioned the class bully in my school who used to hit kids while insisting, "I'm not hitting ya—I'm not doing anything." He'd get a few extra punches in because the obvious disconnect between his claims and his actions immobilized his victims in sheer stupefaction. The pharmaceutical industry has adopted his technique. There may be no other arena where the stasis of tamas should be as valiantly

fought off, even as you are being steamrollered with false assurances.

The powerful and dynamic placebo effect might strike some as inherently tamasic, because it is based on what is patently false. But a placebo rings true to our unconscious, emphasizing that baldly rational truth is not the whole story. The point is that our mind *believes* in the placebo, and so it works; and it *believes* in the actual medicine and so that works, albeit with more serious side effects. This kind of belief is the same as having faith, and it is the essence of sraddha. No one should imagine they live without faith!

Few medicines are significantly more curative than placebo pills, and likewise the placebo power of religious pageantry to transform individuals is well known. The key in every case is you have to believe in it. From this standpoint, those who want to hang onto “old-time religion” have a point, but not too many twenty-first century citizens can legitimately believe in the musty myths enough for them to work. Luckily, spiritual awareness does not have to be static; it can refer to anything. We can enlarge what we believe in until it is all-encompassing, and then it will serve as well as any placebo. Isn't that what usually happens anyway?

We can learn what convinces our cells to work with us or not, but we have to be careful. Here in Oregon there have been several convictions of fundamentalist parents who tried to cure their children using faith healing, which didn't do anything. Their kids ended up either maimed or dead. Perhaps the parents believed with enough conviction, but the children didn't. Or else, when ideas are pitted against physical entities, they are almost never effective, because they exist in different contexts. This verse teaches us to not fall for a specious argument, but really know how to walk our walk. If ends and means do not line up, all the effort in the world will fail to accomplish anything. Our subconscious is a lot harder to fool than our conscious mind, so we have to always look for the largest version of truth we can find.

We come to earth to learn to operate the incredibly complex and versatile equipment we are born with, so we can go forth to

discover what it is truly capable of. We now know that the brain learns best by making mistakes and then correcting them on its own. How sad if after a few educational setbacks we give up, bewildered, or if authorities force us to abandon our quest by demanding our chemical neutering.

Depression sets in when our karma doesn't match our dharma—in other words, when what we do is not in line with our innate interests and talents. The rightful function of our discontent is to get us to work to bring our self and our world more closely together. If instead we mitigate the symptoms with a palliative medicine, we will cease struggling to grow and fulfill our calling, whatever it might be. Which not surprisingly makes the depression more profound and the need for the medicine even greater, in a vicious cycle.

The disinformation campaign on behalf of expensive mind-altering drugs is so convincing that my close friends who are on them believe the sales pitches more than they believe my implorations to take their fate into their own hands. That's *tamas* for you: ignore the facts and cozy up to the glib deceiver. It's the easy way out.

We can't help but believe what we think is true. It's only natural. But we also must realize we don't know everything and be eager to add to our meager store. Once upon a time it was perfectly reasonable to believe the earth was flat, but the minute we learned it was round the prior belief should have been relinquished. Instead, being a plausible but erroneous guess "left over" from the old days, it took centuries to lose its hold on true believers. Updating our knowledge doesn't disprove God, and only a fool would think it did. But *tamas* clings. It insists that what was good enough for Grandpa (or the grandfatherly doctor peddling dope on the screen) is good enough to satisfy it, even if it was never true; even if it is so stale an idea it has utterly lost its taste.

In a perfectly positive world, *tamas* would be like being on vacation every day. Unfortunately, greedy interests are delighted to take advantage of those who don't care enough to protect

themselves by keeping their eyes open. They take you by the arm and usher you into their lair on a rose-strewn path. Passing through the door is easy, and often you get a momentary sense of relief, but when you turn around the door has been slammed shut and locked. At that point you might as well resign yourself to your fate, eh? That's the tamasic response they anticipate.

It definitely does matter what we “eat,” what we take in for stimulation both orally and aurally, but to change the input before we change our mind can be strenuous and unsatisfying. It requires forceful intent, and takes time. After all, we are attracted to what we like. We need to go at it the other way round. If the change is leveraged in our understanding and appreciation first, then perhaps we'll be drawn to more sattvic types of fare.

For instance, if you go to the symphony but don't enjoy the music, it will only make you unhappy and resentful. You should listen to what moves you—if it's rajasic, loud, and makes you want to dance, that's fine. Some days you may prefer sad and wistful music that enhances your tamasic feelings. Whatever. Even today it's called your taste in music or your taste in art and so on, because it's food for the soul. That's who you are, at that moment. All the Gita is saying is you should know who you are and become who you are, and part of that you can learn by examining what you like. It is by no means urging you to do what you don't like because it's better for you, as many pundits have made out. Not at all. The Gita's ultimate conclusion isn't far off, and it's Do what you like. Scrutinize everything, but then do as you wish. It's the scrutiny that brings about the transformation. By scrutinizing what you take in as your soul's food, you might be prompted to alter your diet in a healthy way.

Moksha, wholesale liberation, may not be everyone's cup of tea. We have to follow our own light, because following someone else's light is how we are led astray. Eventually we will find out how essential it is for our peace of mind to maintain a suitable diet. However we come to it—and it has to be a deliberate decision that

also feels right—in the long run freedom is much more delicious than bondage.

11) That sacrifice is sattvic which is offered by those desiring no gain, having injunctive recognition in the mind, having become tranquil by saying to themselves that sacrifice is necessary.

Sattvic activity is neutral and harmonized in whatever form it takes. In the present verse regarding sacrifice, sattvic means free of any taint of being forced or enjoined by oneself or others.

The notion of sacrifice often calls up images of arcane religious rituals that are largely irrelevant today. But the Upanishads, and the Gita in particular, revalue and redefine sacrifice in a way that is still highly relevant: it is the way we channel our best impulses into productive expression. For instance, prayer is a kind of sacrifice. Sattvic prayer is that which is done freely with a broad desire to embrace the common good; rajasic prayer is performed ostentatiously or with a desire to obtain a well-defined outcome; and tamasic prayer is confused and weak, a call to have someone else handle our problems for us.

Raising children is a major sacrifice that most people make. Sattvic child rearing focuses on the benefit to the child itself, and artfully stays alert for optimal interactions with them. It is kind and gentle, but thoughtfully directed, and the parent gives without expectation of producing any specific result. When their nerves are frazzled by the unending effort attending to children requires, caregivers can tranquilize themselves by remembering that their sacrifice is necessary.

Rajasic parenting, on the other hand, shapes the child to a particular expectation, often in keeping with religious injunctions. Rajasic parents say things like “you’re gonna make me proud of you someday” or “do it for me (or God)” or “it’s true because I said so.” The child is warped to stick within the boundaries erected by the unrealistic hopes and thwarted desires of the parents, and often the results are sad, if not tragic. Even when it produces a

seemingly successful outcome, there is likely to be inner conflict because the child's innate proclivities are not being expressed, but subsumed in servile behavior. The emotional conflicts so common in family life are rajasic, and decisions based on them are often very destructive. Recent studies have demonstrated that because the brain learns by hands-on experience, parents who over-manage their children's lives significantly retard their development. And of course a rajasic person has no interest in tranquility at all. The aim is to find a way to fit in to an intense and demanding social setup.

Tamasic child rearing includes not only alcoholic or television-based parenting, but a lack of caring in general. Not providing structured ground rules and other forms of neglect are tamasic faults. Physically beating a child "for their own good" is certainly tamasic. Tamasic parenting produces negative mental states that are extremely difficult if not impossible to recover from. A kind of uneasy tranquility is obtained by ignoring the child, often with the assistance of stupefying substances.

So, many types of sacrificial activity can be analyzed in terms of the gunas. Earlier in the Gita, more general interpretations of sacrifice were covered, but now that we're in the nuts and bolts section of the work we are attending to the more practical aspects, and rituals are a big part of many people's lives. Religious worship including rituals was undoubtedly one of the main types of sacrifice Vyasa had in mind here. So what actually is a ritual? Generally speaking, it is something performed repetitively with a specific end—often metaphysical—in mind. Usually there is ceremony involved.

It's easy to see why the Gita has a problem with sacrifice as it is ordinarily understood: in unitive philosophy ends and means are identical, and separating them is dualistic. But at this stage we are able to tolerate a degree of dualism in our actions, so that we may bring intelligence to bear on them. That being the case, sattvic rituals are those that help us to concentrate on the subject at hand. When we chant or sniff incense or sit in a group and look at a candle flame or listen to music, our minds merge together and our

hearts are sure to follow. Or perhaps the ritual allows our minds to finally catch up with our hearts, which are ever open to one another. Even most staunch materialists will notice a sense of awe when entering a beautiful cathedral or temple, expressly designed to harmonize the mind.

Probably the most important benefit of rituals is to bring people together in a harmonious way. Materialistic (i.e. tamasic) rituals seem to end up with obedient goose-stepping soldiers in even rows and ranks, but in sattvic rituals a shared sense of the numinous elevates participants to proceed as loosely affiliated free individuals.

Sattvic rituals are those that we enjoy performing for their own sake. We do them because they are fun, exciting or edifying. If we have to be forced to sit through it, a ritual has become rajasic. Knowing ourselves well presumes we are substantially free of prejudice and open minded, which are part and parcel of spiritual development. I well remember being forced to listen to classical piano music as a child, and that my initial resistance turned quickly to amazement and passionate love for it. I hadn't realized what I was capable of. Ever since, I have been careful to actually give things a try before setting my preferences about them in stone.

We should be careful not to mix up the horizontal and vertical elements within rituals. Concrete steps will bring concrete results, but they are often imagined to achieve abstract triumphs. This is the case when we built a temple or light a fire to some god, and imagine it is pleased and will bless us. And abstract thinking can expand our awareness, but it won't bake any bread, so praying or meditating for a car or the ability to levitate is a colossal waste of time. Mixing contexts leads to futility and frustration, if not outright delusion. There is no need for such magical fantasizing: what actually exists is amazing enough as it is.

12) That sacrifice which is offered with expectation of return, or for egoistic show, know that to be rajasic.

We are all familiar with supplication that petitions God for gifts and blessings, or even worse, is a way of proclaiming one's holiness to others in order to impress them for one reason or another. Both types are specially excoriated in the Bible, but it is trickier than it might seem to pray without any trace of ego creeping in. This is yet another case where someone else's hypocrisy is much more noticeable than our own.

We should always keep in mind the converse, and realize how attractive an ostentatious Guru or priest is to us, but does that glamorous appearance cause us to miss the truly gifted teacher nearby who isn't calling attention to themselves? With a mindset based on superficial impressions, subtleties are easy to miss.

This verse strikes me as a very early intuition about what is now called countertransference, beating Freud by a couple of thousand years. A therapist's feelings should always be examined, with a baseline of absolute neutrality or sattva being the ideal. In rajasic therapy, unacknowledged desires taint the interaction. A great deal of counseling is done with a secret craving for appreciation, the hope for a warm response and even a breakthrough on the part of the patient or disciple, instead of strictly as a detached mutual exchange. In this case there is likely a hangover of the need for parental approval for a satisfactory performance, on top of a very natural desire to succeed. Although this isn't awful, and possibly inevitable, it must be consciously admitted to reduce its impact on the purity of the therapy.

Tamasic therapy occurs when the therapist is so taken with their approach that they apply it willy-nilly to every patient, while ignoring counter-indications. Procrustes, who could almost be considered a god of tamas, teaches us how devastating and even fatal inappropriate therapy can be. Recall that he cut down his visitors to fit his tiny guest bed, maiming or killing them in the process. Patients treated with inappropriate methods may go for years without improvement. For instance, if there is an organic brain disorder present, no amount of talk therapy will be effective. This is an occasion where chemical intervention might be the only

hope for improvement. Likewise, if a disciple is given a meditation that is out of alignment with their personality, they can spend a lifetime trying to force themselves to conform to it, in the process doing untold damage.

Cleanliness is a very different kind of example. Personal hygiene is a kind of ritual, often performed religiously—meaning daily without fail—in order to attain or preserve good health. With adequate knowledge it has been a godsend, but it can also be overdone, eradicating beneficial bacteria and making the immune system lazy, or of course ignored, with sometimes dire results. When rituals are intelligently connected with their ends, as is possible in horizontal matters, then they should actually produce the desired result much of the time. We put gas in the car so we can drive it somewhere. This is simple common sense. Where we tend to go wrong is by treating vertical matters as though they were horizontal. In the philosophy of the Gita, at least, there are no steps or rituals to follow to attain the Absolute. This despite the fact that commentators tend to promulgate their own path as though it was “what the Gita (or other scripture) really means,” especially if there is a financial incentive. Opening the mind is much more subtle than understanding a complicated mathematical equation or memorizing pi to 15,000 digits.

Successful religions almost never avoid the temptation to spell out simple steps to the goal of pleasing God, entering heaven, and attaining peace of mind. People find lurid promises attractive, without a doubt. Not being sure of the way themselves, they are happy to take the advice of a recognized authority figure, and the more the path is spelled out the better. The only problem is that delineated steps, no matter how excellent, don't lead anywhere spiritually, yet following them is a fascinating and all-absorbing trip. That means programs tend to lead away from their goal, not toward it. Horizontal goals are achieved stepwise, but vertical matters are much more mysterious. They cannot be nailed down.

Some visitors to the Gurukula are surprised when we don't hand them a list of prescribed observances, and move on to find an

outfit that does. The Gurukula helps people to learn to make their own decisions on the spot, and not to become dependent on anyone else. We presume there is already too much horizontal instruction, and put our energies elsewhere. But it is not the high road to popularity.

There is no doubt that keeping busy provides a veneer of spiritual enthusiasm, and there are times when we get a lot of benefit from engaging in mindless work, as it can shut off the chatter of the surface mind with its anxieties and empty fantasies. It makes a good holding pattern when we aren't feeling up to maximum intensity.

We live in a rajasic era, when every action is to be justified materially. The yogi is able to step outside the beehive mentality for a time—preferably often—to sit quietly and allow the inner light to percolate all through their psyche. Then they can retain a measure of unforced bliss as they tend to their quotidian chores.

13) The sacrifice which does not conform to scriptural rules, without food distribution, without sacred chants and token gifts meant for the Guru, and devoid of faith, they declare to be tamasic.

The image here calls up a traditional puja ceremony, but of course we want to think of it as being applicable to a wider context. The point is that a lot of what we do is actually a waste of time and energy. We may be intending to accomplish great things, or then again we may be just passing the time, yet either way it isn't so hard to misapply ourselves and get nowhere. Getting nowhere is the hallmark of tamas.

For tamasic people there are rules and regulations, and all they have to do is follow them and they'll do okay. But when tamas is really entrenched, people insist that they cannot even follow rules. They refuse even the most basic protocol, and then go sit in a corner and fume. On good days they feel miserable that they aren't getting anywhere, but they can never bring themselves to do anything about it.

Surveying the human race in our mind's eye, there are dedicated scholars and scientists digging into their chosen fields and unearthing valuable knowledge, and those are the sattvic types. There are vast numbers of rajasic people busily and effectively accomplishing all the nuts and bolts of civilized life, making things, growing things, distributing things, teaching things. Then there are those who struggle to make ends meet, whose every act seems guaranteed to immerse them further in the mire of debt, unhappiness, ignorance, and the rest. People may try to help them, but their gifts are taken and yet no progress seems to occur. They are like psychic black holes where even light goes to die.

Once a person falls into a tamasic mentality it is very difficult to extricate them from it, because they have no motivation. Almost anyone is capable of changing their life for the better, but if they don't want to it isn't going to happen. The army of people who arrive at adulthood already defeated by life's hardships are a sad and pitiable bunch. It's worth a great deal to avoid this trap.

The spirit rebels at stasis, so it must be suppressed to allow tamas to predominate. Krishna has detailed many of the ways that this comes about, in hopes that we will conserve a mental state where our spirit can thrive. Krishna's encouragement is pitted against a myriad of natural and social forces that combine to dull our enthusiasm for life.

We have to read beyond this verse to appreciate the Gita's means of extrication. Orthodox Hindus might figure they should mount a religious event with chanting of the Upanishads, followed by a food giveaway and a tip for the guru, and that might actually help get them going, but the rest of us will have to employ different strategies appropriate to who we are and where we live.

The essential thing is to combine a mental vision with some practical application of it. We cannot be happy living solely in either pure abstraction or abject materialism. Often a person has to get unbearably miserable before their inner resolve can begin to overcome their inertia. Sadly, misery more often feeds tamas by causing immobility. It is a certainty that our spirit can not be long

satisfied with getting stoned or watching TV all day, or working at a drudge job to merely get by. For a seriously tamasic type just going for a walk every day is a major accomplishment.

It is also a certainty that no one who is primarily tamasic will be studying the Gita in even a cursory way. But we all experience tamasic periods when we get stuck. So the concern has to be, is what I am doing effective, or is it based on wishful thinking? A yogi has to look closely at whatever they plan to do to be sure of the difference. There are many talented and intelligent people who are so mesmerized by ridiculous beliefs that they fail repeatedly to live up to their abilities. It is especially heartbreaking when they have occasional bursts of glory, showing how spectacular they truly are, and then go back to spending most of their time drifting aimlessly. The faith—*sraddha*—they need is faith in themselves, faith that they matter and can succeed. In the tamasic stratum of daily life, circumstances have conspired to convince them they don't have a chance. They have lost faith in their ability to make things happen, to interact with the flow of life around them.

We can say that expressing our talents well is the essence of spirituality, and most of the work we do is to remove the obstacles to effective performance. Part of that effectiveness ought to be convincing ourselves and our fellows that we should dare to be great. We are miracles. We can shine.

14) Worship offered to the gods, to wisdom-initiates, to spiritual teachers, and the wise generally, cleanliness, straightforwardness, the chaste ways of a wisdom novice, and non-hurting, are said to constitute discipline of the body.

Krishna next elucidates the practice of discipline, broken down into three categories of efforts related to the body, speech and mind. Later he will assess them in terms of *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*. I have used the less intense word *discipline* here. Nataraja Guru uses the term *austerity*, which is the most common translation; Radhakrishnan has it as *penance*, and Mitchell says

control (again more of a Buddhistic take). All these words tend to have negative connotations that strike me as alien to Krishna's intent.

The Gita is gracious enough to define its version of austerity or discipline in detail for us, as it covers a lot of territory. It was composed in a time when people did grotesque and bizarre things in hopes of achieving a higher state of mind, or simply to attract attention. Self-torture and mutilation were not uncommon. Still, the three categories are relevant even regarding the pleasant and comfortable "austerities" of today.

As noted earlier, the word in question is *tapas*, and it carries the implication of heating up: when you put energy into something it grows hotter. Its molecules vibrate more intensely. There are some yogic practices that produce literal heat, but the general idea is more like when an improvising jazz band is playing especially well together, it is said to be "hot" or "cooking," or when you warm up to a subject and really get into it. We feel warmly about something or someone we like, that inspires us. In spiritual life also, we put energy into the practices we use to produce a transformation. Guru Nitya expresses how important this is:

You have to bring your life to a white heat. Even in material things, such as splitting the atom or studying the depths of space, seekers have to make contrivances which look almost impossible, but they do it. And what do you gain by smashing an atom? If you want to know the least bit about a particle... you have to spend so much money and effort, keep a great vigil and constantly refine and sharpen your tools. Then, to know about the Absolute how much greater dedication should you have? How much more willingness should you have? How much more preparedness? (That Alone, 707)

There is an additional implication of pain or torment in *tapas*, which we often experience when striving for a breakthrough. It's not always easy to change states, and when we push ourselves it

can hurt. In ancient times the two aspects were frequently equated: the more torment, the more spiritual growth it was thought to bring about. Krishna, as always, stands for common sense and good judgment, and pain for its own sake does not fit the bill. Yet strenuous effort does. He certainly does not assert there is a one-to-one correlation between specific activities and spiritual growth. It's a very fluid process.

The discipline of the body listed here includes worship, cleanliness, honesty or uprightness, brahmacharya, and ahimsa or non-hurting. Worship is discussed here and in Chapter IX; the rest are covered in depth in XIII, 7, except for brahmacharya, which we discussed in VI, 14. A number of the categories in this section overlap Patanjali's Yoga, in his section on restraints and observances (*yamas* and *niyamas*). While they are all primarily mental disciplines, here they are related to the body, in other words, to active behaviors. Earlier they were discussed in general terms, but here we need to examine them as modes of action.

Worship, then, is not only one-pointed attention to gods, gurus and fellow disciples; dynamic interaction has to take place with whatever we worship. All three categories are to be treated with respect, and also intelligently responded to. The Gita never advocates lying on the floor and trembling, but a certain amount of deference is important. We need to remember we are always in the process of learning, and not swagger around as know-it-alls. For those of us who don't care for gods as they appear in the popular imagination, they can stand for ideals, archetypes, or essentials. As an example, if music is one of your gods, you don't just listen when fate happens to bring music to you, you go to concerts, support your friends who are musicians, perhaps even learn an instrument. You actively meditate on pieces that move you, going deeper into their meaning by careful listening. Worshipping music in this way sets you apart from the casual listeners who may not know much, but they know what they like, and who can take it or leave it.

Tagore has written a sweet line about worship of the dualistic stripe: “God waits to win back his own flowers as gifts from man’s hands.” The universe is pouring wonders down upon us all the time. What is it that you will do to reciprocate? Whatever you decide, if done with sincere dedication, is your worship.

Saucha, purity or cleanliness, especially in relation to this chapter, means not holding on to fixed ideas which impede the natural flow of life. It’s not about washing our hands: we have to scrub ourselves free of the clinging dirt of ignorance. Cherished beliefs direct us according to the ego’s preferences, with consequent disasters great and small, but spiritual life is only free when this type of habitual behavior is abandoned in favor of direct inspiration of the Absolute. Call it a deeper level of the mind than the ego if you wish. In a sense we must become transparent to the impetus of the inner wisdom. This does not mean just being a puppet on the divine hand, but it should energize a creative interaction between our highest abilities and the perceived inspiration from “within” or “beyond.” Above all, we must be free from our own prejudices in order to respond appropriately to every new situation. This is the antidote to the problem of verse 3, where we learned we are what we believe, and what we believe makes us who we are. Self-description is stultifying, constricting. Give it up, and make room for “an imagination of creative transparency” which will be put forward in verse 16 as a discipline of the mind.

Arjavam means not only “straightforwardness” but honesty and sincerity. Even if we pretend to inner honesty, we often assume a pose to convince other people that we are something other than what we are. That’s because we have learned to not accept ourselves as good enough, and that needs to be rectified. Aligning our inner and outer self-images is *arjavam*. It’s a tricky business. Being honest with ourselves is famously difficult, so a trusted advisor can be a big help in weaning us from our meticulously selected deceptions, and even some of our unconscious ones.

“The chaste ways of a wisdom novice” is a poetic description of *brahmacharya*, more literally rendered as “walking in the path of the Absolute.” If our spiritual transformation only takes place in our mind, it isn’t “real.” It has to be real-ized. Our relation to the Absolute should have an impact on how we act, such as by being more environmentally conscious and more loving toward our fellow creatures. Awareness of the feelings of other people and the coherence of their preferred systems enlarges our spiritual capacity, and what we do for them enlarges the space we inhabit, in a positive feedback loop.

As far as chastity goes, Guru Nitya Chaitanya Yati has written that purity of intent is chasteness. Prostitution, then, occurs when we trade our innocent motivations for temporal gains. Life continually forces us to decide between staying true to our ideals or compromising them for convenience. If our ideals are valid, we should hold to them without shame. This is the most central vow a brahmachari makes.

If there is a path of the Absolute for us to walk it implies there are other paths that lead away from it. If we are insecure or poorly informed, we may walk into bondage instead of freedom. Many binding factors masquerade as tools of liberation, convincingly praised by ardent proponents. A yogi has to examine them carefully to see how they might prove binding. Careful examination means listening with the heart as well as applying the well-founded intelligence we began developing in Chapter II.

Non-hurting, *ahimsa*, ranges from the simplest physical restraint from causing harm to the subtleties of optimal interpersonal interaction. One overlooked aspect of ahimsa is that we should include ourselves in those who we refuse to hurt. Many people believe it is their duty to suffer so that others can have their way. Learning to love and respect ourselves means both being kind toward our own feelings and resistant to the abuses some people feel justified in heaping on us.

Guru Nitya always tried to overcome simplistic interpretations of spiritual principles. Citing his ideal example of ahimsa as Jesus, with his anti-authoritarian intensity, he says:

Many people are capable of adopting a pacific attitude which is superficially very goody-goody. That is not ahimsa. If you apply ahimsa to yourself there are many weeds, parasites that live on your own spirit. They are all hurting you, draining the very sap of your spiritual life. In a lackadaisical atmosphere where you don't bother about them they will thrive. And the same thing is also happening to other people. To see clearly the spirit of one and the spirit of another, and then to remove those parasites from a person's life, the methods we resort to may sometimes look harsh. It goes against the grain of our understanding of a passive life. (That Alone, 703)

The Guru implies that all the aspects of spiritual endeavor must be meditated on so that we penetrate into their depths and take them to heart. Each of these terms represents a universe of meaning. Superficial attitudes toward them are anathema to yoga.

15) Inoffensive speech, which is truthful, pleasant and beneficial, and contemplative self-study, are named the discipline of speech.

A casual reading of instructions like this may inspire us to carefully craft our words, but that type of over-management is egoistic rather than spiritual, even if it is done with the best of intentions. That's not what is meant here. Truly inspiring speech comes as a reflection of our inner state of union. Brain observations have shown that thoughts coalesce below the radar for a long time before they burst into conscious awareness. Sure, we can do some last minute editing, crafting our words to the context or biting our tongue to avoid uttering some "zinger," but the yogic way is to harmonize our psyche first, so that what comes out of our mouths is like a flower fragrance from our well-tended

garden and not the stench of an uncomposted manure pile. Again, it's an opening up process rather than a cleverly applied conscious discipline.

To help insure we fully understand, Krishna qualifies inoffensive speech with three important adjectives: it must be truthful, pleasant and beneficial. Non-contemplatives stop at pleasant and call it good, but it is even more important that what we say is truthful and beneficial. If there is no benefit, we might as well keep our mouths shut.

Like ahimsa in the last verse, inoffensive speech isn't quite what it sounds like, that we are not supposed to say anything controversial or confrontational. For those who cherish wisdom, merely pleasant chatter itself is highly offensive, as they don't want to waste time on meaningless conversation. What is implied here is that since what we say has an impact, often a surprisingly large one, we need to take care not only that our communication doesn't inadvertently cause harm, but that it is a positive force, an essential part of the wisdom sacrifice. Stirring up a strong reaction can be highly beneficial, but it should never be done merely to give offense or as a punitive measure. A yogi offers it to bring about a change for the better.

As we mature we begin to realize just how powerful words are, so we restrain ourselves from flinging them around as wantonly as we did in our younger days. An ill-begotten sentence can send someone into a tailspin, while a well-chosen one can lift them out of the dumps. Pretty much everyone attains that much wisdom. But there is another dimension here which is often overlooked, that words are one of keys to explore the inner kingdom.

Self-study, *svadhyaya*, is the flip side of well-chosen speech, and they very much go together. What we say is incisive thought directed outwards, self-study is incisive thought directed inward. In both cases it is a flexible vehicle for exploring the terrain, not a bulldozer to level it.

There are some shocking translations of svadhyaya, such as taking it to mean chanting the Vedas, which is utterly alien to the spirit of the Gita. Svadhyaya is also one of Patanjali's observances, forming part of the second of his eight limbs of yoga. It is a critical enquiry into the nature of the self. Many ritualistic practices have been introduced over the centuries that purport to further self-awareness but actually divert attention from it. George Thompson's translation even changes 'beneficial' to 'kind', further sapping the pungency of Krishna's instruction. We wind up with kindly and pleasant cheeriness interspersed with bouts of chanting, in place of a dedicated and intense search for truth. In the Sixties we called that selling out.

I'm tempted to change the translation of priya from 'pleasant' to 'endearing', which is a better indicator of the piquancy intended. The words we hear or say should make us passionately fall in love with their content, not just smile and nod and go about our business.

Rather than cloak our negativity in pleasantries we should look at it directly. On the other hand, saying nasty things to people isn't only harmful to them, it's an indicator of our own problems, as in a Freudian slip. Speech is paired with self-study for this reason: we can trace back to who we are through the things that come out of our mouth. Once we have mastered our inner malformations, our upgraded state will be reflected in how we talk.

As far as consciously editing our speech goes, we have to know both ourself and the person we are addressing well, to be certain what we say is appropriate. The more we know about our inner mechanisms, the better decisions we will make in our communications.

It being difficult to monitor ourselves when we are speaking, the feedback of others is very valuable in letting us know when we have said something hurtful or idiotic. You've probably noticed how people who say mean things are in the grip of some powerful emotion and are hardly aware of what they are doing. Our ability to communicate will be normalized only if the underlying trauma

is healed. If we try to pretend to normalcy while still suffering, our slips will surely show.

Studying ourselves through what we say means that we have to sit in meditation and recall our conversations, taking critical comments especially to heart. In ordinary interactions, we hardly give a second thought to what we've said. But when we suffer the misery of a cleavage between a friend and us, it makes us ponder what went wrong. It's a real opportunity to dig deep into our souls. You may have noticed how each person will have a different recollection of what was said in an argument, which in itself reveals a great deal about their mental state. Non-yogis search for clever ways to make excuses and defend their faults, but yogis are brave enough to accept their misunderstandings and try to improve them. Doing so heals the rift as it reveals hidden areas of the psyche.

A master guru who has achieved self-realization utters words of such enchanting beauty that they bring healing. Gurus address the listener's situation intimately, because there is no extra weight attached to their own interests. They are like a conduit for the Absolute to shower its grace into the world. That's the kind of beneficial inoffensiveness Krishna is speaking of here.

16) Mental happiness, gentleness, silence, self-restraint, and an imagination of creative transparency, are named the discipline of the mind.

Krishna gives a classic description of a peaceable wise person here, gentle, quiet and happy. When aggressive types assert that the Gita is the scripture that advocates and legitimizes war, they are missing almost the whole point of Krishna's teaching. It's hard to see where belligerence might fit into this verse. Yes, there are rare instances where fighting is called for in life, but they are very much the exception, and they are to be met with the unitive attitude presented here, not with anger and hostility.

The three-pronged discipline given in verses 14-16 expresses the baseline attitude of the realized seer that Arjuna is learning to be. Disciplining the mind means wrestling it into the shape described, as always executed from the inside out, by changing our beliefs, our *sraddha*. The most important belief of all may be that we can change our life for the better if we work at it. Belief in hopelessness is a sure recipe for failure.

We have gone through the entire Gita with the conviction that a natural attunement with the Absolute brings about all beneficial states in direct consequence, and that is the sure way to self-discipline. Still, there are times when we have to work at it, when our connection with our *dharma* slips through our fingers. If we need to fall back on mechanical corrections, it doesn't hurt to have a blueprint of what an enlightened state of mind looks like. Then we'll have a good idea of what to do whenever we notice we're stuck. Nitya offers a simple analogy:

On your keyboard, if you make a mistake the next step is to consciously erase it. It won't go away if you just leave it alone. Then, with decision, after effacing the error, you have to type in the right thing. In our life also there has to be a reconsideration of each mistake followed by its resolute correction, before we go on with great resolve. Let us hope we will have the courage to make a determination in our own minds to start fresh and become more conscious of what we are doing. (That Alone, 707)

The verse is perfectly straightforward, except Nataraja Guru has a unique take on *bhava samshuddhi*, rendering it most beautifully as “an imagination of creative transparency.” The dictionary gives it as “purity of mind.” Since the Guru does not explain what he had in mind in his commentary, we have to bring what we've learned so far to bear.

“Imagination of creative transparency” means first of all that you have cleared the garbage out of the way in your life so that

your innate creativity can come to the fore. Transparency does not impede or distort what passes through it. Distortions occur when we overlay our personal quirks onto the situation; when selfish interests are dispensed with, we see things for what they are rather than what we can make from them. This brings great freedom to the mind, which then infuses every aspect of life.

The creative aspect is an important inclusion. All too often, purity is equated with emptiness. Here, the purity constitutes a liberation from obstacles, allowing enhanced freedom in contemplation and thought in general. You are not simply a ghost through which the winds of life blow, you are a participating co-creator who brings an optimized state of mind to whatever is taking place. While not distorting, you are meeting the situation with an open heart and an open mind.

Self-restraint is a very interesting topic. To many people, “effacing the ego” means suppressing the capacity and inclination to make judgments. But judging is one of the most essential contributions of the frontal cortex, the most distinctively “human” part of the brain, so suppressing it can be a serious mistake. It’s fine to bite your lip if you don’t like some characteristic of another person, but we need to judge our own actions pretty much continuously. Not doing so can lead to disaster. It’s true that wrestling your judging capacity down will give you a heavy workout, as your natural good sense repeatedly tries to stand up and be counted and you struggle to squelch it, but this is an excellent example of how effort alone is not the measure of spiritual worth. The essential point is that allowing our impulses to run wild, free of judicious restraints, is not the same as being harmonized with the Absolute, the celestial yearnings of youthful folly notwithstanding. Judging is how we decide the worth of everything, and just because the whole world is the Absolute at its core does not mean there is no difference between acting wisely and behaving stupidly.

What really needs to be minimized if not effaced by self-restraint is our egoistic talent for making excuses and rationalizing

what we do, and this is something we seldom feel guilty about. We are more likely to hotly defend it, in fact. Here's how it works. An action propensity is activated deep in the unconscious, in what we refer to collectively as the seedbed of vasanas or latent potentials, and various parts of the brain begin to arrange the local environment to make the propensity's expression not only possible but fruitful. The action gestalt becomes seasoned with samskaras—the neurological “shape” the brain has developed into—as it moves toward surface consciousness. When a potential is as fully prepared for as possible, it begins to actually unfold in the overt world, and as it does our conscious mind witnesses it and at the same time invents a plausible explanation for it that may bear little or no resemblance to the actual motivation. It just sounds good. If the action itself is called into question by someone, the ego tenaciously defends its explanation, employing various strategies to depose the challenge, even changing its cover story at will to divert the perceived threat. We defend most sanctimoniously the aspects of ourself we least want anyone else to be aware of. If we are comfortable with something, we have no need to defend it. Knowing this, we can overcome our inner traumas if we are brave enough to stand up to them. It helps to anticipate social disapproval from those of our peers who are afraid to take stands without cosmetic distortions.

Douglas Adams had a lot of fun with this propensity of the ego in his masterful novel, *Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency*. To demonstrate how the mind excels at making excuses for the most inexcusable actions, which is a major subtheme of the book, Dirk makes a post-hypnotic suggestion to a client to jump into a filthy canal and then find himself unable to swim, when he hears a certain code word. When they go out for a walk later on, Dirk says the word, and the man leaps into the canal and starts to drown. After Dirk fishes him out, the client has perfectly rational explanations for all of his actions, only we as readers know they have nothing at all to do with the real motivation, which was the hypnotic suggestion. And as Steven Heller maintains in *Monsters*

and Magical Sticks, we are all hypnotizing others and being hypnotized pretty much all the time. That means we are also defending ourselves with invented rationalizations pretty much all the time.

The very major idea here is that the proper restraint for the ego is to keep it from spinning its own self-serving tales to justify its absurdities, so that we can pay attention instead to the flow of genuine inspiration from the center of the universe inside our being. The cheesy story we are telling the world to justify our follies sells our soul short, very short. Disciplining the mind to be honest with itself promotes psychic expansion.

17) This threefold discipline, practiced with transcendent faith by unitively balanced yogis, without desire of gain, is named sattvic.

The sattvic mentality minimizes extraneous motivations. In a sattvic attitude there is no hidden agenda to gain something, as there is with the other two modalities, especially rajas. Actions are performed because they are delightful in themselves, as well as in accord with the person's deepest interests and proclivities. The disciplines of body, speech and mind are a most fulfilling way to live, because they go a long way in freeing us from our ailments on every level.

It's a curious paradox that by seeking rewards, life for the most part becomes less and less rewarding. Homing in on the essence of every act, free from the anxiety of craving a payback, opens the door to blissful existence at every moment.

The only addition this verse adds to the previous three is that they are to be practiced with transcendent faith, *paraya sraddha*. This is not the simple one-to-one faith that doing certain actions brings predictable results, automatically turning us into realized beings. Conversion remains mysterious and unpredictable. It's the faith of the seers in XI, 21, where "bands of great rishis and Perfected Ones hail You [the Absolute] with the cry 'May it be well!' and praise You with resounding hymns." Transcendent faith

means we acquiesce in the unfolding magical mystery tour of the Absolute, and don't feel like we have to make anything in particular happen. It's already happening; all we have to do is join the party.

18) That discipline which is practiced for gaining respect, honor, reverence, and for the sake of show, is named rajasic, changeful and insecure.

When we do what we do with others' opinions in mind we lose the sense of security that comes from being grounded in our deepest Self. There is always some doubt as to how other people are reacting to us. Are they buying our contrivances, or do we need to lay it on more thickly? Is their reaction sincere or are they merely feigning interest? Can I do more to win them over? And so on. When we rely on others—even great teachers—to ratify and guide our existence, our life is always “changeful and insecure” no matter how good the performance. We are forced to keep trying harder, but it's never enough. Or else, resenting the pressure, we give up and slide into a tamasic state.

I'm afraid what we have here is an incisive description of the human mentality, pretty much summing up the baseline angst of the isolated individuals we have all become. So sad!

Leaving aside the legitimate worries of those inhabiting the world of political intrigue, who quite rightly fear for their bartered lives, very few of us have established a sense of ultimate security based on the beneficence of the Absolute. Yogis are directed to cultivate confidence based on the continuous support that comes to them from seemingly out of nowhere, but this is hard to learn to trust. In its place we scheme and calculate, measure and compare, and always imagine we come up short in the deals we negotiate. Krishna has been doing his best to convince Arjuna that he can go forth in full assurance of his (Krishna's) support, that if he stops flailing in the river of life he will float quite naturally. This is the

great mental leap that sannyasa, the primary subject of the next and final chapter, invites us to make.

We have examined the root causes of insecurity in depth already: how when children are not taken seriously and treated with respect they decide they must invent substitute images that will command the admiration and cooperation of those around them. Regardless of whether these artificial personas work well or poorly, we who wield them always feel anxious, because we well know that they are false even as we insist on their veracity. Unlike the Absolute, which is our core inner truth, our creations are bound to be less than perfect, tailored as they are to limited circumstances, and when conditions change they no longer fit as well as they once did. We are eternally struggling to readjust our persona to fit new situations, or else bluffing harder and harder to convince our associates that nothing is the matter, that there is no disconnect between appearance and reality. The best way to slide out from under the cloud of anxiety this generates is to become ourselves again, jettisoning our dependence on a persona and accepting ourselves with all our flaws, steadfastly prepared to accept the inevitable criticism we will draw for doing so.

This doesn't mean we have to become uncivilized to be ourselves: that popular *sraddha* has caused oceans of barbaric behavior in hopes that rebellion itself brings liberation. But while rejection of conformity has some value, it is only a first step, because it's still tied to the original deadness. After breaking free of it we still have to turn to our own truth, and any posturing we adopt in the name of rebellion will be just as false as the contortions society demands. The yogic ideal is to strip away all affectations, at least in private.

We can continue to maintain a decent persona to placate the world's blissful ignorance, just so long as we give up the ego's attachment to it. It's our *identity* with a fake image that causes us harm, not so much the image itself. A great many people are afraid of honesty, and will hurt you if you are honest with them. At the same time they are easy to satisfy if you simply keep quiet and

smile. You can be yourself while those around you are sure you are someone else, and you can even be amused by how far off the mark they are. Our task is to cure ourselves, not anyone else.

The commercial world of cutthroat competitiveness is another perfect breeding ground for the rajasic charade described in this verse. If you are not securely grounded in your self, you can easily be swayed to the advantage of others. Overwhelmed by too much disparate information, everyday worries become magnified. Advertisers reinforce those anxieties and then prey on them, providing expensive and even harmful “solutions” to an ever-expanding array of invented problems. Where rishis of the past faced their challenges directly, modern day lemmings are more likely to think of themselves as helpless victims, and seek “expert” help. The syndrome is elucidated in the article *What’s Normal?* by Jerome Groopman, (The New Yorker, April 9, 2007):

Phillip Blumberg, a psychotherapist in Manhattan, told me, “Psychological diagnosis is, in essence, a story. If you have a mood disorder, there is the fear, the shame, and the confusion—the stigma—associated with it, so you want to grab on to the most concrete and clear story you can. There is something about the clarity of bipolar disease, particularly its biological basis, which is incredibly soothing and seductive.”

Blumberg... believes that advertising by pharmaceutical companies has influenced the public’s view of bipolar disorder.... [He] described recent ads, for drugs like Zyprexa, that include a list of symptoms characteristic of the disorder. “But, of course, we all have these symptoms,” he said. “Sometimes we’re irritable. Sometimes we’re excited and elated, and we don’t know why. With every form of advertising, the first goal is to make people feel insecure. Usually, they are made to feel insecure about their smell or their looks. Now we are beginning to see this in psychiatric advertising. The advertisements make frenetic, driven parents feel insecure about the behavior of their children.”

Blumberg noted that he had seen instances of the disorder in some children, and that it was a real and serious diagnosis. But he also cited the mounting pressure on children, particularly in the middle and upper classes, to succeed, first at private or selective public schools, and then at exclusive colleges and universities. “These kids become very well turned-out products,” he said. “They live to have resumes. They don’t have resumes because they live.” Parents may fear that children who behave in an eccentric way are at a disadvantage, and in turn pressure the pediatrician or the psychiatrist to come up with a diagnosis and offer a treatment. “Then an industry grows up around it. This, then, enters as truth in the popular imagination.”

Rajas is a hall of broken funhouse mirrors, home to endless wandering in confusion and doubt. The only escape is to turn away from the mirrors and into your self, where you can reconnect with the solid values of the Absolute. And we should offer our kids that option, instead of simply medicating them to conform.

19) That discipline which is practiced out of foolish obstinacy, with self-torture, or for the detriment of another, is named tamasic.

According to the ancient Laws of Manu regarding caste, the interpretation of austerity for brahmins was teaching and studying. For kshatriyas it was protecting the people and avoiding sensual indulgence. Bizarre austerities like those later practiced by Christian hermits and Hindu ascetics are nowhere mentioned.

At least we don’t hang ourselves upside down from trees for twenty years too often these days, though India still has a smattering of gory practitioners. What are the austerities or disciplines of the present? Whatever one does in the faith that they will lead to happiness may be called austerities. People work out at the gym to become healthy and attractive. Going to school is a very long term austerity. Food obsessions, including anorexia,

were already mentioned. Having a job is both a sacrifice and an austerity for many people. Going to church can be an austerity designed to prize you into heaven.

In all these you are paying dues now for gain later. Transactional matters do work that way, although we don't always get them right. Regardless, our spiritual well being does not depend on transactions. To the extent we allow them to, the gunas do come into play, however. When your focus is more on detached involvement with an actual activity, you are in sattva. If you love being in church for the uplifting sense of wonder you find there, it's a wonderful thing. When your focus is displaced into the far future it has become rajasic. You don't really enjoy church that much, but it's your ticket to eternal salvation. And when there is no connection between what you're doing and what will come of it, it is tamasic. You've sneaked into the back pew to avoid the cops.

The Gita offers these categories with the idea that each person will be making up their own mind in their own way. Indeed, as in the example above, what is tamasic for me may well be sattvic for you, and vice versa. None of this is fixed or obligatory; it is for us to find our own freedom, and that is guaranteed to be an individual proposition.

Foolish obstinacy! Who hasn't known something important and yet been unable to get it across to a stubborn opponent? You can recall your own examples to illustrate this verse. It seems the more warped the belief, the more rigidly it is clung to. We can use the stubbornness itself as a diagnostic tool.

I remember talking to a highly intelligent friend who exercised daily for an hour, about a recent study that the optimum amount of exercise was twenty minutes, three times a week, and that the benefits tailed off beyond that amount. He just kept saying no, no, no and shaking his head. In the US, we are saturated in a society that puts physical culture ahead of the life of the mind. This should have been great news, freeing up more time for other interests, but my friend took it as a threat to his ongoing program and rejected it out of hand.

Likewise, yoga has come to mean calisthenics and stretching exercises, and people look at you as if you're crazy if you suggest that it is anything else.

These are relatively trivial instances of unnecessary mule-headedness. Delving into more serious matters, how about the unshakable prejudices that draw nations into war, or that tempt politicians to dismantle their country's infrastructure based on dogmatic beliefs? Once upon a time the US built itself up into an economic and cultural powerhouse with community projects described as democratic. Then some clever ideologues started describing the same projects as socialist (a very dirty word in the US) and those programs were torpedoed with alacrity.

There are a thousand "spiritual" techniques guaranteed to bring enlightenment or levitation or wealth, and partisans spend countless hours chanting or gazing at this or that. Most of it is self-hypnosis or delirium, but they cling to it with full conviction.

We have talked at length elsewhere about child-rearing techniques that are punitive and crushing to the child, but which parents, often inspired by scriptural injunctions, inflict with a vengeance. The damaged children then grow up to similarly abuse their own offspring, keeping the vicious cycle ever turning. There is plenty of good information available that would help, but until foolish obstinacy is given up, such tragic scenarios will persist.

All these tamasic sraddhas call to mind the German poet Schiller's proclamation that "Against stupidity even the gods struggle in vain."

Jonah Lehrer, introduced earlier, describes how one of the brain's most debilitating faults is that an attitude of certainty causes it to block out alternative possibilities. This type of tamasic thinking is common to everyone, and needs to be consciously countermanded or we will find ourselves trapped in a kind of mental black hole.

Not only does the frontal cortex overlay its prejudices on the conflicting opinions of different parts of the brain, once it has done so the reward circuits kick in, flooding the brain with pleasurable

sensations. This kind of tamas is “sticky” precisely because it feels so good! Doubt and uncertainty make us feel anxious, as a stimulus for resolving problems, and if we don’t feel bothered we have no motivation for problem solving. This is the “medicated” solution.

On top of that, our neural circuitry can easily tempt us to jump to foolish conclusions and doggedly hold onto them. Psychopaths are especially prone to this, because they don’t even have many of the circuits that present contradictory information. They are literally wired to be tamasic, and yet they are far from stupid. Non-psychopaths have the neurologic option to at least consider alternatives, and they most definitely should.

It’s interesting that Krishna includes discipline practiced “for the detriment of another” here. Much of tamasic behavior is self-defeating, but some of it eagerly cultivates hatred and enmity, with elaborate plans for causing harm to others. There is black magic here and there, but that’s something few Gita readers are guilty of. More common to the average person is something akin to the gleeful sabotage of enlightened values that motivates the sociopathic personality. The lust with which public figures are torn apart when their personal shortcomings are held up to view is a perfect example. Often the rending is done by those who have piously read the parable of Jesus and the woman caught in adultery, where he tells the angry crowd, ready to stone her to death, “He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her.” (John 8.7) Tamasic people seek to shroud their own faults by becoming enraged at the transgressions of others, and they are apt to find themselves with plenty of company.

A subconscious urge for vengeance may very well color the ego. It is frequently seen in love relationships, where the surface is all sweetness and light, but behind the scenes there is backstabbing and undermining of the other’s happiness. In a perverse way the ego is begging for appreciation, opening a wound and then longing for the partner to soothe it. It can work either direction. The wound has to be kept open, so it is always being worried, and this keeps sucking the partner back into an unhealthy co-dependency.

I know we are all tempted to read these verses on the gunas as: sattva is me, rajas is about the average decent person, and tamas is totally about bad people. If that's true, these late chapters are a waste of time. This is exactly the kind of certitude we have to avoid. With a little insight, we can see how we are caught by all the gunas. Then the true value of these verses will shine for us.

20) That gift which clearly ought to be made, given to one from whom no return is expected, in the right place and time, and to a deserving person—that gift is sattvic.

A materialistic interpretation holds that a gift is something tangible given from one person to another. Yet although we only occasionally give away such solid gifts, usually to a charity or a close friend, we are giving away intangible “gifts” all the time to everyone we encounter. Just as our “food” is what comes in, whatever goes from us outward is a gift. We give best by being benignly present in everything we do. The ultimate gift in that sense is love, and loving kindness is “the gift that keeps on giving,” by restoring delight in every aspect of life. In verses 20-22 I'll focus on love as the best possible gift, but the ideas can be extrapolated to any area you choose.

Love is an aspect of our true inner nature that we are trained by social interaction to guard and suppress, though small amounts of it are tolerated in carefully selected, well-defined relationships, preferably out of public view. One measure of spiritual growth is the expansion of our capacity for love to embrace and infuse greater and greater spheres of actuality, until it becomes an all-consuming flame engulfing everything, reuniting us as individuals with the total.

In gifting it is essential that the gift be seen as part of an ongoing cycle, rather than an isolated incident donated from “me” to “you.” We begin by acknowledging the immeasurable amount we receive from the universe as a whole, and then it is only natural to offload some of the bounty. In a general way what is received

must in turn be passed on, if only to make room for the next infusion. “In giving we receive” enshrines this notion of a flowing continuum of the gift of love, which is often called grace when the gift flows from the unknown to us. If we were to catch it and hold it, we would kill it. It must be enjoyed but also shared, lest its blessings come to an end.

Lewis Hyde’s book, *The Gift*, has much to teach about the history of gifting around the globe. The key idea he discovered in nearly every traditional culture resembles the imagination of creative transparency of verse 16: to keep the energy moving, to never take and hold without giving back. Not necessarily directly back, but somewhere. Don’t hold on. Such continuous circulation is like the proverbial rising tide that lifts all boats.

Gifting takes place over time. There is a vertical passing on of love from generation to generation in the family. For the spiritual person the ideal family is everyone with whom one has any form of contact at all, potential as well as actual. That could easily include the entire world.

The subtext of gifting is the sense of community or relationship, much more than the value of any actual item involved. Unfortunately in our hyperactive world, we don't always stop to appreciate what someone else has done for us, and as a consequence may give offense when none is intended. One of the more practical lessons of the Gita is to really be present for your neighbor, to be aware of how they feel too, and be sensitive to their needs. Nothing radical about this teaching, but most of us are slow to get the hang of it. It's actually fairly subtle. I can't count the number of times I've walked away from someone, and later it occurred to me that I'd failed to express my appreciation, or worse, what I'd said in perfect innocence might have struck them as insulting or offensive. I hope that some day I'll get that flash *before* I open my mouth, or certainly before I walk away. Most people welcome a kind word even after the fact, if you eventually think of it, so all is not lost.

Sometimes we give without even realizing it, and those are the best gifts of all. When we have an intention to give, how we actualize it frequently backfires. Parents love their children, selflessly and without reservation. Gurus love their disciples selflessly and without reservation. In both cases their gift is what they teach. Such love is sattvic.

21) And what is given with a view to return benefit, or with gain in view, reluctantly—that gift is held to be rajasic.

The most common attitude about life is that it has a contractual basis: if I do something, I should get an equal (or greater) amount back. The law of karma is usually understood to mean just this, that there is an innate reciprocity in events. While this is true as far as it goes, there is more to life than its horizontal, transactional aspect, and we are only aware of a small part of the whole. Results are almost always different than what we expect, because there is so much more involved.

In gifting, a central problem is that we tend to exaggerate the value of our contributions and downplay what we receive. If we were to be objective, a vast amount of essential, life-sustaining gifts are continuously pouring into us, and yet our ego tries to convince us that we are maintaining parity by occasionally lending a friend a hand and fulfilling our duties at work. What we are being given every minute should make us fall on our knees in gratitude, and search our souls for a way to begin to repay our cosmic debt to the universe. Instead, we unintentionally skew the accounting, magnifying what is subtracted from our score and minimizing the additions. No wonder we find ourselves isolated and begging for a better deal. The solution isn't to grab more and better stuff, but to open our eyes to the real values raining down on us.

Manipulative scheming in love is rajasic. In place of a blissful and undemanding sattvic love, rajas makes for contractual arrangements that may start out being beneficial to all concerned, but soon lead to a tug of war with each person vying for a bigger

slice of the pie. The problem with contracts is that the ego is always measuring them, and its naturally selfish perspective warps our viewpoint. Rajas insists our skewed perspective is accurate. One trick for compensating for this is to presume you should always do somewhat more than your fair share. If you do, then the equation will come out about right, so long as you aren't relieving someone else of their opportunity to do their part.

If we imagine what we are giving “belongs” to us, then there is an intrinsic reluctance to part with it. Giving up that kind of sequestering attitude is a central tenet in spirituality. The world doesn't belong to us—we belong to it. When our perspective is reoriented in this way, we are easily converted from rajas to sattva, or even to the released attitude of a true yogi.

Whenever selfish motives take precedence, the desire to receive exceeds the altruistic urge to give, and a feeling of reluctance begins to pervade the relationship. It's hard to even call this carefully measured and constantly assessed thing love. It's more of a business arrangement. Unfortunately, the objectivization of love creeps into many relationships without anyone being aware of it. Marriages and other partnerships become fixed and stereotyped over time, at the expense of joy and freedom.

22) The gift that is given at a wrong place or time, disdainfully, and patronizingly, to persons unfit to receive it, is said to be tamasic.

Not all these criteria have to be met for a gift to be a tamasic. Any one will do. And you can probably think of others that didn't fit the rhyme scheme. A lot of giving has been subverted over the course of our lives into stereotyped actions performed out of habit or compulsion. Guru Nitya writes of a typical instance in the first Portland Gurukula (*Love and Blessings*, p. 358):

We celebrated Aya's birthday with four fanciful cakes purchased in a hurry and presented almost in a mockery of

enthusiasm. I was a little sad and indignant that such a dead formality was foisted on the unwilling minds of our inmates, who were more enthusiastic about their dinner than their sentiments.

I don't believe in these external expressions. Spiritually there is no birth day or death day, though the moment of one's spiritual birth and final realization could be a real day of rejoicing. However, this was an occasion to observe how each person is wrapped up in their own thoughts and emotions and becomes oblivious to other people's feelings. I wish everyone could be more sensitive to the finer elements that are burning inside each soul like a gentle flame....

In oriental mysticism, there is no idea of the "other." The so-called other person is seen as one's own Self, so there is no dualistic sense of duty to do service to oneself or to another. Instead, they only keep themselves true to their own inner rhythm that flows in harmony with the universal rhythm.

Those unhappy souls who weren't given respect and affection as children, or who cling egotistically to what they receive without passing it on, bring the natural flow of love to a halt, and soon cease to experience it in any form. Those in whom love is repressed or warped may be seen everywhere, as common criminals as well as sociopaths at the highest levels of business and government. Noisy and popular preachers often bear no trace of the love they espouse, instead hurling it like a bitter curse. Under the aggressive tumult and cynical scheming hide terrified souls crying out for what they have lost.

Humans become inured to a seemingly loveless world, and pass through it with shoulders hunched, blocking out everything, hostile or beneficial. Unless they find a way to give something meaningful of themselves, the tamasic ice will remain frozen in their hearts.

Tuning into the unity of the Absolute, symbolized by Krishna, reawakens the flow of love in us. On rare occasions a

spiritual teacher or unusual event brings about the breakthrough, but most commonly it is children, born brimming with unmitigated glory, who regenerate and renew the cycle of love that has grown dim in adults. The efficacy of psychedelic medicine experiences to blast *tamas* aside and reactivate our loving core cannot be minimized, as it is a safe and easy option that can succeed with almost everyone, given a proper set and setting. Whatever the route taken, the main task of a seeker of truth is to find some way to bring themselves back to life, to rejuvenate their loving heart. Probably a combination of careful preparation leading up to a peak psychedelic experience to open the door, followed by an enthusiastic lifetime of sincere effort to integrate the renewed love in daily life—in other words, the way Krishna has instructed Arjuna—is the perfect choice. In a belief system that rejects the very idea of enlightenment, however, the conscious preparation usually begins *after* the peak experience opens the door, but that's okay. Better late than never. No matter how a revivifying experience is brought about, it is preferable to the living death of closed-mindedness. It's truly tragic that the spirits of literally billions of people could be immensely improved by the use of psychedelics, but the portal is ferociously barred both legally and socially.

When love no longer springs spontaneously from a person, they must seek to rekindle it themselves. The weight of *tamas* can convince us that we have to accept lovelessness as the inevitable condition of human beings. These verses on gifting can and should be read as instruction for how to reanimate our love. In the reciprocal nature of life, what you give away grows more plentiful inside you. By giving love freely and without expectations, it is experienced more and more in every situation.

23) *Aum tat sat*: this, threefold, has been known in the past as designating the Absolute. The scriptures called *Brahmanas*, the Vedas, and sacrifices also, by this were prescribed of old.

The chapter closes with a study of the mantra *Aum Tat Sat*, (Aum, That Alone is). It is given as the essential definition of the Absolute. The first word, aum, often spelled om, is neutral and all-encompassing, the Word of the Absolute, the same as the Biblical version of John: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” Tat, That, refers to the beyond, or say the virtual or metaphysical aspect of reality. Sat, This, adds the physical or realistic dimension. This “great dictum” or *mahavakya* is thus a beautiful word-picture of dialectics, with tat and sat, that and this, as the thesis and antithesis and aum as their synthesis.

Recall that Chapter XVII opens with Arjuna’s questioning whether scripture was necessary or not. Krishna answers him here that true scripture is set down by seers who have a direct relationship with the Absolute, making it a supreme form of communication, invaluable to the extent it draws our attention to the Absolute. Krishna is not talking about the low-grade screeds that pass for scripture among the non-discriminating. Religious zealots who aggressively tout scripture always imagine they have a direct line to God, when as likely as not they’re listening to chaotic broadcasts from their own “bombastic inner narrator.” But there is a legitimate type of writing which can help us cut through the static to tune into the pure music of the original broadcast that created the universe, and Krishna is emphatic that we should avail ourselves of it.

It’s worth recalling that back in Chapter II, which corresponds to the present chapter in being one step removed from the ground of everyday experience, the Vedas were denigrated as unnecessary and limiting (v. 42-46). Here they are reconsidered as valuable because of tradition. There is an apparent contradiction in the two versions, but I think we can sort it out.

On the ascending side of the Gita’s arch, the emphasis was on attaining a clear perspective on the here and now, and traditional beliefs were treated as impediments to that direct experience. Now, as Arjuna is preparing to ease back into the

actual world he inhabits, there is a nod toward the social context he is reentering. Because he has become fully grounded in the Absolute, Arjuna can engage with tradition without sacrificing his aliveness. When traditional forms come before individual spontaneity and suppress it, they are to be discarded. But it is also possible for them to promote and enhance our understanding, if we relate to them as free men and women.

II, 46 reads, “There would be as much use for all the Vedas to a Brahmin of wisdom as there could be for a pool of water when a full flood prevails all over.” Now that the full flood prevails in Arjuna, he can appreciate the well as an earlier source of the same water he is immersed in, and even smile as he sees the simple, thirsty people crowded around it. He himself is not dependent on it, but he can empathize with those who are.

The Brahmanas mentioned in the verse can either refer to the scriptures of that name or the brahmin caste. The more philosophically oriented translations choose the former, for obvious reasons. At the moment Krishna is drawing a direct line connecting the Absolute to actual life at its best. Caste distinctions, which in their pure form are said to be derived directly from the Absolute (see IV, 13), will be addressed farther down the line, taking their final bow in XVIII, 41-45.

There is a graded descent from this chapter on, until Arjuna is set down firmly on the solid footing of actuality late in Chapter XVIII. First there is the consecration of sacrifice, giving, spiritual discipline and necessity. Then follow in order: relinquishment, knowledge, action, and ultimately the actor. As subsets of the actor, there are reason, firmness or “stick-to-itiveness,” happiness, and finally, vocational calling or caste. In the context of the personal fulfillment being taught, “caste” means finding a livelihood suitable to our temperament and interest. Sustaining the body-mind complex and contributing to the general welfare are the reciprocal outward manifestations of an enlightened state of mind of someone in tune with their dharma. At this point we’re still a

little bit up in the air, so Krishna must be referring to the Brahmanas as scripture, not caste.

24) Therefore, uttering *aum*, sacrifice, giving, austerity, and action enjoined by scriptural ordinance always begin for those who represent the doctrine of the Absolute.

Krishna goes one step farther and instructs Arjuna to chant the given mantra as the first stage of every dedicated act. The thirteenth-century seer Dnyaneshwar Maharaj teaches that it's the clarity of mind with which the chant is uttered that makes all the difference. Speaking of the acts listed—sacrifice, giving, austerity and scriptural injunction—he says, “All these actions might themselves constitute bonds, but it is the utterance of the syllable ‘Om,’ which makes them the means of attaining liberation.” (*Gita Explained*, p. 250)

Aum is the sound that often emerges at the onset of a psychedelic trip, emanating from everything because everything has been converted to consciousness and the illusion of an external world has been vaporized. The instantly familiar tone is often the first thing noticed after the initial queasiness. On a modern-day trip, the Word gets drowned out and forgotten as soon as the music is turned on, but it never goes away. It is always thrumming along in the back of our minds.

Realizing that the aum sound is the vibrational Word underpinning all of creation lends an added dimension to the just-mentioned opening sentence of John in the Bible. John's vision was more likely to have been activated by fasting and dehydration than soma medicine, but he must have had something unusual going on. He didn't say what it was. And like Arjuna, he had an extremely supportive guru as his guide.

When someone achieves cosmic consciousness by whatever happy combination of fortune and effort, one of the most pressing thoughts in the immediate aftermath is how do I reactivate that amazing state? Recall that that was Arjuna's first question after he

came down, at the opening of Chapter XII. You can't keep taking the soma, because it's too intense and eventually wears you out. Many of the psychoactive molecules are similar to adrenaline, which is exhausting, pushing the system to extremes. They are designed for brief bursts only, to push the door open but not hold it open permanently. You want to discover the technique where the optimal mental state is naturally activated with minimal stress.

I can't help but think that aum has been chanted for centuries in the hope that it will magically reestablish the peak experience in which it is clearly heard as the vibration of the universe. It may well be that many rituals are faint echoes of the transcendental state, and only coincidentally connected to it. Rituals may actually forge some link with the Absolute, approaching from the outside, so to speak, but union with the Absolute more readily comes from the inside out. In those who have already had a vision of the Absolute, though, chanting aum definitely activates a kind of cellular memory, rapidly bringing on a profound meditative state.

The buzzing hum of our mental gears turning is called aum and is made outwardly audible by chanting it. The Mandukya Upanishad reveals the structural secret of aum, where it stands for the fourfold states of consciousness. The first line of the Mandukya asserts that aum is the whole world, implying that consciousness is of the essence. In brief, 'a' symbolizes the wakeful state; 'u' the dream state; 'm' the deep sleep state; and the silence that follows and envelops them is the fourth, the turiya, representing the Absolute. The four states are depicted in Gurukula philosophy in the shape of a cross or Cartesian coordinates, with 'a' the horizontal positive, representing the objective world; 'u' the horizontal negative, standing for subjective comprehension; 'm' the vertical negative or alpha, from which the unfoldment of life springs; and silence as the vertical positive or omega, the ultimate goal of life. Note that 'a' is chanted with the mouth wide open, 'u' with the mouth half closed, 'm' with the mouth closed, and the turiya has no reference to physical production at all. There is a tapering down from multiplicity into unity, sound to silence.

Further explication may be found throughout the writings of Nitya and Nataraja Guru. We do not use the more familiar ‘om’ because that spelling does not convey the symbolism.

Always bringing in the total context—the “whole world” of aum—in which our activities reside, is the key to liberation. When we grow lazy and allow our awareness to shrink, we move toward selfishness, and our connection with the Absolute grows fuzzy. Saints and sages of all ages and religious orientations insist on taking the entire expanse into account, discarding selfish interests, for exactly this reason: it allows us to maintain our affinity with the Absolute. Paradoxically, unselfishness is where “enlightened self-interest” leads us. Aum is chanted to pay homage to this truth.

25) With *tat*, excluding all values of gain, various acts of sacrifice and austerity, as also giving, are performed by those who desire liberation.

Summing up the content of the chapter, which includes all possible spiritual actions, Krishna directs us to relate them to the Absolute as the means of liberation. Actions fall short when performed without reference to the central hub of existence, but they excel when they do. Because this is so essential, it is going to be harped on. Verse 5 and 6 in the next chapter present Krishna’s “settled conclusion” about these primary activities:

The acts of sacrifice, giving and austerity should not be relinquished, each should indeed be observed; sacrifice, giving and austerity are the purifiers of rational men; but even these actions should be done leaving out attachment and desire for result; this is My decided and best conviction.

“My decided and best conviction” is equivalent to a double underline, reinforcing this key moment in the teaching.

Relating to That Alone (*tat*) is the inspiration for sincere seekers to do all the things they do. They selectively orient their

life toward goals, perform appropriate disciplines, and offer helping hands to those in need. These can be lumped under the general term spirituality. As befitting a broad-minded scripture, no specifics whatsoever are given. They are merely referred to as various acts. Each person is expected to engage with and respond to their environment in an expert fashion, based on their own wisdom and abilities. Since every occasion is unique, spiritual training must be designed to prepare the disciple for any eventuality. By no means should the training inculcate habitual, preplanned responses. Obeying a list of commandments is fatal to the freedom of spirit. Freedom by its very nature runs counter to a legalistic milieu where hard and fast rules are assigned to everything that can be nailed down. Such regulations have their place in the horizontal realm of practicalities, but invariably stymie the vertical quest for understanding.

Like the chanting of aum, acting in reference to a central truth is expected to lead toward enlightenment. The transcendental state is not wholly other than the world we live in, it is an integral and most excellent part of it.

26) This term *sat* is used in the sense of existence, and of goodness; and likewise, Arjuna, to all laudable actions the expression *sat* is usually applied.

The definition of *sat* given here needs little or no elaboration, other than to note that excellence in action is shepherded into the *sat* camp. It's not just that rocks and suns and dark matter have existence, but the interactions of beings too, with all their strutting and fretting on life's stage.

Sat (truth or valid existence) is the first term of *saccidananda*, or *sat-chit-ananda*, the Vedantic "holy trinity." *Chit* means awareness, and *ananda* is the value of what is known, though it is usually translated as bliss. I wrote a haiku about it:

Something exists, you know

that it does, it has meaning—
saccidananda!

As far as contemplation goes, rocks and rivers are okay, but the search for reliable understanding from within the astounding and as yet little explored complexity of the human mind is an even more intriguing subject. As Carl Sagan liked to point out, the number of different patterns of synaptic connections of the human brain is far larger than the number of electrons and protons in the entire known universe, and that “These enormous numbers may also explain something of the unpredictability of human behavior.” (*The Dragons of Eden*, New York: Random House, 1977, p. 42) Recent estimates (per *Scientific American* magazine, February, 2015, p. 59.) agree that the human brain is capable of some ten million billion operations per second. How many of them are *you* aware of?

The essential point is that our meditations should be on aspects of reality, and not drift into fantasies. Realization pertains to the world and how we live in it. Unhappy people tend to dream about idealized heaven worlds in hopes of escaping their problems, but Krishna does not see that as a healthy option. Our being draws its meaning and satisfaction from a tangible relation to the magnificent and terrible world we find ourselves in. That it abounds in problems and challenges is actually a blessing, prodding us to seek higher wisdom, once we overcome the kneejerk urge to simply escape.

Nataraja Guru introduces us to this rich subject for contemplation in his essay *Value Gives Stable Content to Existence and Vice Versa*, in *Unitive Philosophy* (39-40):

Brahman or the Absolute is the highest of human values in Vedanta, and if existence is to be thought of as belonging to the context of the Absolute, the notion of existence must, by implication, indirectly at least, have reference to this high value. Anything non-significant and inconsistent with the

highest aims of man, having no reference to the Absolute, becomes *ipso facto* non-existent in principle, although it might be an actuality in the merely empirical context.

This way of interpreting the meaning of existence is supported by the theory of indirect meaning that Shankara accepts and adopts, when explaining the three attributes of *satyam, jnanam, anantam brahma* (the Absolute is existent, knowing and infinite). The connotation of any one of these is to be looked upon as modifying the others, till they refer to the Absolute in a total meaning-content. This semantic principle of indirect meanings (*lakshanartha*) applied to one Absolute, without any contradiction between component terms, is one of the secrets of Vedantic exegesis. This same way of giving significance of reality of *sat* (existence) is seen employed and explained in the Bhagavad Gita (XVII, 28).

All truth, reality, or fact must satisfy the three tests of (1) being a significant value in human life here or hereafter; (2) being valid according to reason; and (3) being conceivable as existent, at one and the same time. This will apply equally to actions, gifts, things or properties dealt with in transactions between man and man. Vedantic methodology, epistemology and axiology have thus to be treated together in order to yield the integrated unitive wisdom which it is meant to represent.

27) Steady loyalty in sacrifice, austerity and giving is also called *sat*, and so also action so intended is called *sat*.

Taking *sat* a bit further, Krishna employs it as a compliment for steadfast practice and even for honorable intentions that haven't yet borne fruit. This is nice, since most of us have relatively few successes in our lives, but we do have our hearts in the right place. It's a very sweet affirmation: don't feel like a failure if you try hard but not too much happens. The attitude is the most important part, the alchemical retort in which transformation

takes place. Becoming loving and wise isn't easy, and there is a lot of resistance to it out there.

Your authentic attitude, by the way, is wholly based on your *sraddha*. The last two verses thus unobtrusively wrap up the chapter's subject.

Krishna is speaking of the truth of who we are, which is our spirit. His course of instruction for Arjuna is to rescue him from his phony superficial ego identity and restore him to his true ground of being, his true self.

When we believe deep in our hearts that what we're doing is right, and it accords with the wisdom found in scripture, or better yet a top-notch teacher, it is easy to keep to the path we choose. The three categories of spiritual activity listed mean freely chosen activity performed for the joy of existence (sacrifice), efforts at self-improvement (austerity or discipline) and assistance offered to others (giving). Again, we can discern a subtle dialectic here, with internally and externally directed action as the thesis and antithesis, and an ongoing sacrificial dedication as the resultant synthesis.

History is filled with examples of fanatics who deeply believed in doing terrible things to others, and who interpreted selected aspects of scripture to validate their derangement. Our brains have a tendency to promote information that accords with our beliefs and screen out that which doesn't. If we don't intend to change, we have more than enough defenses to prevent it. If we do, *sraddha* is a most crucial subject, worthy of dedicated investigation and contemplation.

28) Whatever is sacrificed, given, or done, and whatever austerity is gone through without faith is called *asat*, Arjuna; it has no value here or hereafter.

The chapter offers one final verse to convince us that what affects us is real and what doesn't is not—a baldly existential assertion. It's a corrective for all the dead ends we waste our time obsessing about, redirecting us to what is most important. Krishna

is saying, don't sweat the small stuff, because only things that really matter, matter. Living a meaningless life is meaningless. Stop worrying about things outside your purview (although your purview is very much larger than you may think it is).

The essence of faith is that there has to be a meaningful connection with your actions. A vision of what life is about motivates you to do what you do. Being "without faith" means you are just going through the motions, accepting someone else's stale exhalations as good enough. It is possible to live a whole life like that, but it is tragic in the extreme, a total waste of potential. Wise teachers are ever striving to help people to wake up from such sleepwalking. We are called upon to understand, and then act with understanding. You can fool a lot of people, but you can never fool your self. Well, you can, but you shouldn't.

On the most obvious level, *asat* refers to false beliefs, of which the most glaring are religious. Killing in the name of the god of love, and all that. It is easy to observe how fanatics justify any atrocity by tailoring scripture to their predetermined mindset.

Yet science is not immune to *asat*, even as it searches diligently for *sat*. Mathematics is purportedly the most rational of systems, although like religion it is based on a number of assumptions that cannot be proved but must be accepted on faith. Quite a few constrictive ideas have come from trying to model life mathematically, a Procrustean reduction if ever there was one. It would be far better to expand mathematical logic in terms of life than reduce life into mathematical terms. For example, music in a sense is mathematics brought to life. Dots on a page or imagined structures are made vividly audible by music. But something is lost (though something else is surely gained) when sound is recorded. Digital sampling, a mathematical reduction, does not tell the whole story in sound reproduction, as audiophiles will readily concede, and reproduction is always a more or less tarnished image of the original in any case. This tells us that any kind of interpretation or retention is not quite the whole truth.

The unquestioned assumptions of mathematics are in fact highly questionable, though at least they are recognized and listed at the very beginning, which does put it ahead of the competition. Even as simple a concept as $A = A$ is actually not a sure bet. It calls into question just what 'equals' means. There are two different A's there, but they are highly similar in some ways, shape, symbolic quantity and so on, but they're not the same. In an equation, each of those A's is usually quite different, but they do add up to the same number. So what exactly is equal about them? Not so much. Calculus too, is based on an assumption I could never quite bring myself to accept, that an asymptotic curve that approaches a limit ever more closely but never reaches it, can be assumed to actually reach it when it gets infinitely close. When something gets really close to something else, does it become it? There are many practical benefits to assuming that it does, but that doesn't make it the ultimate truth. Calculus should be recognized for what it is: a mystical or metaphysical aspect of the most rational of sciences. There is no quantity of any kind that is infinite: infinity is wholly beyond the concept of numbers.

Jonah Lehrer reports that the worship of rationality that has dominated science for over two thousand years is coming to be seen as incapable of coherent organization on its own, without an emotional and even a moral underpinning. Detached rationality is splintered off from its subject, and because of this it has to affix itself to arbitrary theories that invariably are full of fallacies in order to maintain its self-respect. The science of the Absolute aims to discern the core beliefs we pin ourselves to, which are often only vaguely recognized if at all, and make them as fallacy-free as possible.

Detached rationality is under assault on many intelligent fronts these days. Lehrer cites an extensive study of so-called "pundits" done by Philip Tetlock of UC Berkeley, where people who made their living giving political or financial advice were asked to rate the likelihood of various possible future scenarios. Not only did they on average perform *below* random chance, the

more eminent and self-confident ones did worst of all. Tetlock observed that the more convinced you are that you are right, the more you suppress evidence that might challenge your conviction. Lehrer sums up:

Tetlock writes, “The dominant danger [for pundits] remains hubris, the vice of closed-mindedness, of dismissing dissonant possibilities too quickly.” Even though practically all the professionals in Tetlock’s study claimed that they were dispassionately analyzing the evidence—everybody wanted to be rational—many of them were actually indulging in some conveniently cultivated ignorance. Instead of encouraging the arguments inside their heads [which presented contrary evidence], these pundits settled on answers, and then came up with reasons to justify those answers. They were, as Tetlock put it, “prisoners of their preconceptions.” (209-10)

Such notions are not new. The ancient rishis knew to call their assumptions into question and listen to their “hearts,” their deeper wisdom. But in large measure due to the outlandish asat of “true believers,” philosophers and scientists have cultivated pure rationality as the only conceivable antidote, and are equally monomaniacal about it. The whole business is turning out to be much more complicated than a simple rational/irrational division, as our beliefs definitely have a measurable impact on “objective” reality.

The modern understanding of rationality’s proper role is more as the final safety check on the rocket launch of action, with the trans-rational parts of the brain furnishing the fuel and most of the rocket itself. Without the deeper connections, mere abstract thinking cannot successfully get off the ground. Yet lacking a well-designed rational guidance system, many of our lift-offs go haywire. If you’ve ever seen a film of launch failures, (for instance, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=McbCwSW2moo>) it’s for all the world like a visual cautionary tale for ill-prepared

ego ventures. A very slight wobble at the beginning quickly amplifies into a spectacular disaster. Visualizing it makes for an amusing meditation.

Reassigning rationality from emperorship to ministerial status is happening in the nick of time, as civilization more and more resembles an out of control rocket soaring toward an explosive finale. These findings about the most sacred of scientific sacred cows caution us that many of our hallowed beliefs, those we regard as beyond question, are likely to turn out to be flawed, and will have to be superseded by better ones. We need to remain open to that eventuality.

The good news in the same scientific reassessments is that we now know our brains are unobtrusively compressing a vast amount of intelligent analysis into what we experience as “feelings,” much more information than our limited rational cortex can deal with quickly, so it’s really a very efficient arrangement. Compressed knowledge equals emotion. This tells us we shouldn’t try to divorce our rational thinking from our intuition, but only use it for steering. The “irrational” parts of the brain are turning out to be profoundly rational in their own way, only they speak a different language than our rational consciousness. If we listen closely we can decode their secrets, and they have much to teach us.

From a more mystical perspective, *asat* is an apt description of the persona, the disguise we craft to pass through life unchallenged. To our spirit, the persona is a fiction, but as we desperately force others to believe in it, we come to believe it ourselves. Our ego buys into it. We pin our faith, our *sraddha*, to the false image we have constructed, starting as infants. Our essential nature, which is the Absolute, is the ocean on which the flotsam of this projected self-image floats. The Gita calls on us to restore our identity with the oneness of our oceanic nature and put the detritus in its place. It has a valid role in bamboozling those we must interact with, but it is nonetheless false. It can and should be

minimized. We must turn to our truth, our *sat*, in order to be all we can be, to find lasting happiness and meaning.

As small children we were terrified by the threat of exposure of our true self, so we put a lot of energy into constructing the perfect costume. But once we are out from under the close scrutiny of our parents and other authority figures, we could dismantle most if not all of our disguise if we remembered what we had done and felt safe enough to try it. Unfortunately, by adulthood we have usually become the biggest believer of all in the construct, cocksure that we *are* our persona. This is the core of misguided belief. We can spend a lifetime trying to live up to our fantasies, because they aren't real. It's like trying to walk on a cloud. There's nothing to hold you up. You just have to pretend.

Alternatively, we could dare to become reacquainted with our true selves. Since most people see only what they expect, we don't have to work at fooling them: they are busily fooling themselves. What a relief to withdraw our energies from the game of charades called the transactional world! We are then free to bring forth our talents in truly valuable and creative ways.

The bottom line is that our *sraddha*, our beliefs, must be grounded on solid truth. We must build our house on a rock and not on sand, because a secure foundation is our only recourse when the storms rage. Nor should we forget that charlatans and hucksters are busily passing off their sand as prime foundation rock, and be darn sure to check its veracity out for ourselves. Only when our beliefs are aligned with an un-socially mitigated vision of the Absolute will they become a force for liberation.